

Teacher as Facilitator: A Case Study of Enhanced Student Agency

by

Alexander Corey

B.Sc, University of New Brunswick, 2007

B.Ed, University of New Brunswick, 2009

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Memorial University of Newfoundland

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Approval

Name: Alexander Corey
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Ethics Statement

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way participants were treated , you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Abstract

This research investigates an enhanced agency classroom. A small class of 12 grade-six students undertook a two-week unit in which they could exercise their agency by choosing what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to learn it and how they wanted to be assessed. Qualitative data was collected in the form of a journal, written by the teacher-researcher who made detailed observations of his role, the role of the students, and the overall effects of providing such a classroom. Ultimately, the enhanced agency unit acted as a polarizing tool where some students were able to embrace their agency and increase their sense of engagement, motivation and academic outcomes, while others found the lack of structure and routine difficult to cope with. Recommendations for further research and how to more effectively enhance student agency are also made.

Keywords: Student Agency, Teacher as Facilitator, 21st Century Learning

Dedication

This would not have been possible without the love and support of my parents, Beth Corey, Craig Smith, Mark Jardine and Marina Ostertag-Smith. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

I have had the overwhelming feeling as an educator that despite significant improvements to our current education system, it is essentially the same approach that has been used for over a century. In fact, the US public education system, and by proxy many aspects of the various Canadian systems, are still structured similarly to what was developed by the Committee of Ten in 1892; that all students would study English, Math, History, Science and Civics over a twelve-year curriculum (Ziegenfuss, 2010). Despite the many advances made in the last one-hundred and twenty-six years, our educational model is still based on this concept of dividing learning into separate subjects and sub-components that are determined and taught in a top-down fashion. Students have little to no say with regards to what they are learning or how practical they and their parents feel this knowledge will be to their success in life.

Given the strides that have been made over the last century, and how important education is to a society, it is time we took a hard look at the present system and start to implement changes that make sense for 21st-century learning. With the advent of technology in its current form and the plethora of information that is not only available, but that is also launched at us over various social media platforms, it has become imperative that the role of the educator change. The educator's role must now develop from that of an information provider of knowledge to that of a facilitator of student learning.

Background

I have had the pleasure of teaching students from over twenty nationalities ranging from ages six to fourteen and across three different continents including North America, South

America, and Asia. In this time, I have observed that, despite the many differences that exist among human cultures and experiences, there are many more similarities. From these experiences, I have learned that many desires are universal and transcend perceived cultural, linguistic, and traditional barriers. Parents love their children and want the best for them, successful teachers are passionate, talented, and act as dedicated professionals and, most importantly, all students want to learn. There are exceptions of course; the teacher who should no longer be teaching, the parent who is distant and uninvolved, and the student who comes from a social situation that makes learning far more difficult than it should be. But as a general observation, I have noted that in every country, school and classroom I have been in, we are all working together towards the same goal: To help students become happy, active and contributing members of society.

With this in mind, I have worked to be the best teacher I can be. I used best practices learned through my B.Ed. and subsequent professional development. I was doing whole class teaching introductions with good “hooks”, “checking-in” throughout the lesson using personal whiteboards and formative assessment. I was assigning students to differentiated activities that were tailored to different learning styles and wrapping it all up with a plenary and exit slips. It wasn’t working, however. I found students still needed constant reassurance; they often reverted to old, comfortable ways of doing things rather than trying something new or different. I have had moderate successes by encouraging students to take chances, and seeing their eyes light up when they accomplish something new and different independently, but these moments are few and far between. I have had students working over a six-grade range of abilities and have not been satisfied that every student in my class was achieving all they could.

In addition, it often seems we have taught students to be terrified of being wrong, and thus scared to take a chance – scared to “fail” in the process of learning. This causes students to be disengaged and unmotivated to learn for themselves or become better learners. Instead,

they obsess with always being right or, worse, with getting a high grade as the be-all and end-all of their education. For these students, “learning” was not a process of continuous improvement and growth, it was the pursuit of a constantly “good grade” that needed to be maintained at all cost, even, ironically, at the cost of authentic and meaningful learning. From these experiences, I came to realize that my struggle wasn’t with teaching the curriculum, it was with trying to convince students to become learners. Something had to change.

Statement of the Problem

The world has changed in drastic ways since the Committee of Ten originally set up the skeletal framework of the education systems used today by many developed countries. The committee was established by the National Education Council to address the perceived need to standardize the curriculum across the many different educational approaches being used at the time (Ziegenfuss, 2010). Many aspects of those century-old recommendations still guide our current systems, including the core subjects still taught (i.e., Math, Sciences, Civics, and English) and the prescribed twelve-year programme (Littky & Grabelle, 2005; Ziegenfuss, 2010).

Despite the many changes that have been made to educational systems, developing from single room schoolhouses to sprawling multi-campus complexes with tech integration; for many schools, the core framework remains. Even with changes such as the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs), differentiation, tech integration, education 2.0 and a plethora of other buzzwords, Littky and Grabelle (2005) ask why we still use a traditional and outdated structure to teach 21st century students? Others simply note that the structure of the US system (as an example) is less than effective (Boone, 2015).

Though the majority of my career has been in international schools, my experiences lead me to agree with and extend Boone’s (2015) observation beyond just the US system. I find that students from a multiplicity of nationalities and backgrounds are scared to be “wrong” because

they have acquired a stereotypical understanding of the subject matter in schools. Students from primary and secondary regularly approach me and claim they don't understand a topic we have just discussed, yet their paper is blank. They do not even attempt to solve the problem or explore the topic before claiming they have no understanding. Furthermore, after some coaxing, students attempt the problem and often demonstrate they do, in fact, understand more than they realize. This indicated to me that many competent students doubt their understanding and decide it is best not to risk being wrong. Though this may not be a unique or intended result of how our system is set up, I believe it is undoubtedly a direct symptom of how schooling is currently practiced. I would surmise that part of the issue lays with the inherent incongruence of the foundations on which we have built our current system. As highlighted by Littky & Grabelle (2005) and Ziegenfuss (2010), this phenomenon is a result of what schooling was designed to accomplish in the past as compared with what schools should be designed to accomplish now.

In short, I became deeply aware of the effects of formal education on my students' sense of independence, creativity, and problem-solving as well as being concerned that their individual needs for learning were not being met (Good & Mishra, 2016). Because of this, I wanted to find a better way for students to become independent problem solvers, risk takers, and people who enjoy learning for the sake of learning. To achieve these outcomes, I began to consider developing a systemic and trustworthy approach to enhancing my students' sense of agency for learning as the best course of action to address my observed shortcomings of the current system.

Brown (2012) asserts that the biggest hurdle to overcome is that the current system stifles innovative learning practices. When we look at the factory based economic structure and social homogeneity of the 19th century, and compare it to today's information-based economy coupled with the growing diversity of cultural interests, it becomes clear that a structure designed to meet the needs of learners in the one system will not meet the needs of learners in

the other. It is time to recognize that “new frameworks of education in the 21st-century call for the reinvention of a system that is outdated and often disconnected from a technology-rich, networked world” (Ziegenfuss, 2010, p. 5). It should also be noted that I do not subscribe to the concept that education is solely to prepare students for the job market but, rather, to prepare them for living a meaningful life, something many students feel the current curriculum is detached from providing (Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015).

There are also concerns at some schools that the current approach alienates certain students (Kerr & Dyson, 2016). I agree and, in addition, have observed that the current strategies and adaptations we have implemented are at best less than effective, or at worst counter-productive to the development of independent, problem-solving, and genuinely engaged students. There is immense pressure to meet the diversity of needs and interests of today’s student body, particularly with regards to the cultural and linguistic diversity encountered by today’s teachers (Cole, David, & Jiménez, 2016). Even if a teacher were successful in addressing cultural and linguistic challenges, there remains a variable cornucopia of other areas to be addressed such as learning style, multiple intelligences, behaviour issues, home situation, socio-economic circumstances, mental health, and physical health. Essentially, we are asked to welcome students with many backgrounds and interests into our classrooms and are then asked to “fit” them all through the same size holes at the same times. From talking with colleagues, it is clear that I am not the only educator to feel conflicted by this approach to teaching and it is a relief to find that others had already articulated what I was feeling. I admire and respect the teachers I have the privilege of working with and learning from. Yet, I know we can do better. If we had more freedom within our curricular expectations, we could then transfer that freedom to the students, allowing us to work together more efficiently in helping students create meaningful learning for themselves and for their futures. Given the structure of schooling, however, this is not an easy task to accomplish.

Returning to my teaching experience, for example, students who entered my classroom in mid-elementary school had already learned not to take risks with their learning. This observation is consistent with research that predicts decreases in critical thinking and risk-taking in schools that do not embrace more creative practices (Good & Mishra, 2016). Schooling had taught students that their choice in academic work is either to get it right or not try. This sense of dependency or apathy was also pervasive in project work where, despite having seen examples of exemplary work and being provided with rubrics, students would constantly seek feedback asking questions such as, “Is this OK?”, “Is this right?”, “Am I doing it right?” and my least favorite, “Will this get a good grade?”. Ironically, I had often provided students with the very tools they needed to answer the questions themselves including, but not limited to, success criteria, rubrics, and checklists. The same behaviour would happen in a social situation where students needed adult intervention to solve minor issues such as who would get to sit on a cushion or refusing to give a pencil back after borrowing one. These issues would arise even though well-established classroom expectations and routines were in place to provide a clear means of resolving such issues. Instead, students would overlook these resources and guides and defer to the teacher’s opinion and authority. It seemed that students were concerned more with grades than learning and/or making teachers and parents happy rather than speaking their true thoughts and solving issues themselves. It seemed we are leaving students with no means of resolving problems – those they currently face and those they will certainly face in future. To compound that, we have taught them to rely on us, to not take chances, and to defer to their teachers and parents when they should be learning how to negotiate and resolve problems of both a social and academic nature.

In response to the sense of reticence and overdependence I see in my students, I strive to create an environment that nurtures and fosters independence, risk-taking, and the use of different resources. Ultimately, however, my efforts are limited by working within the current

system. I have a fixed set of outcomes to meet in a fixed length of time with multiple children with different learning styles and different life experiences. Under these constraints, I often resort to practice as usual – tinkering where I can but having no systematic approach for addressing my concern for students as independent learners.

In addition to my concerns regarding a sense of ownership of their learning, I find many students are arriving in my classroom with gaps in their learning, some of whom are operating many grade levels below their peers. I address this problem by using differentiation in my teaching practices: “Differentiated instruction’ is a philosophy of teaching purporting that students learn best when their teachers effectively address variance in students’ readiness levels, interests, and learning profile preferences” (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 263). However, I find I can never quite get a perfect “variance” for every student and, though there are many different ways of differentiating instruction, one of the key components is that student’s attitude towards themselves and towards learning is of the utmost importance (Tomlinson, 2005). Motivated by these firsthand observations and consistent challenges, I set out to learn which other practices I can incorporate into my class in order to enhance my student’s agency for learning and for maintaining positive relationships in the classroom.

In beginning to explore the potential of student agency, I found that much of the research aimed at improving teaching tends to focus on one specific area or practice. It also focusses on one type of approach, generally, that stays close to the typical classroom routines that help define our current system. This makes sense for several reasons:

1. Many teachers working in North America are in the public system and are accountable to mandated curriculums. It is much easier for a teacher to work with an idea that can be implemented into a current system, rather than change a system.
2. Many teacher leaders who try new things feel that “their efforts have been met with apathy or resistance. Their initiatives have encountered unexpected

obstacles” (Toll, 2017). Thus, it is more reasonable for teachers to focus on small, incremental steps.

However, I propose to group a set of similar and related approaches to innovative teaching under one research umbrella and then use these approaches to substantially alter my teaching practice to see what the effect is on the agency of my students. This will serve the dual purpose of shedding light on where deficiencies and conflicts between the standard and the new approaches may lay, as well as highlighting the extent to which various approaches may be effective for enhancing student agency. I feel it would be easy to stick with the safety of a small, incremental change that some may consider a “mere sop to agency” (Goodman & Eren, 2014, p. 125) – a change that would not rock the boat, but that would also not adequately empower students. Any changes I make would need to divert from normal pedagogy, while remaining under an umbrella of approaches that have been shown to help students be more responsible for their learning while developing 21st century skills.

I propose the umbrella that the various approaches would be gathered under could be labeled enhanced student agency. In order to effectively enhance student agency, I will need to make significant changes in the learning environment, especially with regards to the traditional power roles within the classroom. I will need to disrupt this power imbalance because “effective empowerment and engagement requires a change in the learning environment, which has predominantly been within the domain of teacher control. Learner agency was fostered...by negotiating the power of who made decisions in the classroom” (Ryerson, 2017, p. 308). By allowing students to make more decisions in the classroom, and by taking on more of a facilitative approach I hope to see improvements in the level of risk taking, responsibility and ownership of their learning.

My aim of granting students enhanced agency could help students recognize that they are capable of attempting work they are not 100% sure of, to embrace mistakes as a vital part of

the learning process, and to take responsibility for their learning. I feel it could also help teachers recognize when a student is unsure of themselves and is only avoiding risk taking, versus being legitimately in over their head. To know when a student is genuinely struggling to learn, versus when they are simply trying to get a good grade with the least amount of effort. This is an important part of understanding the role of both students and teachers in enhancing student agency in the classroom.

Research Purpose

Based on a review of the available academic literature, I believe it is possible to provide a classroom environment where the teacher steps back and allows students to find their own pathway and drive for learning. In creating such a classroom, I would need to ensure that expectations were high and curriculum outcomes would be met and, more importantly, that students would be engaged in learning independently and able to find and use resources to help them achieve their goals. I also realize a pivotal part of studying this classroom environment involves a need to identify and redefine the role of the educator. The educator's role, as such, is actively changed from delivering the curriculum to acting as a facilitator and guide for student learning. For my study, this involves giving students greater agency over their learning and assessing the effectiveness of new pedagogical practices on motivation and comparing the students' sense of agency and motivation to standard, or more traditional forms of instruction based on AERO (American Education Reaches Out) and Common Core State Standards. AERO "is a project supported by the U.S. State Department's Office of Overseas Schools (A/OPR/OS) and the Overseas Schools Advisory Council to assist schools in developing and implementing standards-based curricula" (Welcome to AERO: American Education Reaches Out, 2019). It is the framework that is currently used at my school and it is based on the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards were developed to help align between-state learning expectations and eliminate the discrepancies of when and what

students should be able to achieve in the individual state standards across the U.S. (“About the Standards | Common Core State Standards Initiative,” 2019). AERO is hosted by the National Governors Association, whose members are the Governors of the 55 states, territories and commonwealths of the United States, and the Council of the Chief State School Officers, whose membership is comprised of “chief state school officers in each U.S. state, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions.” (“Welcome | CCSSO,” 2019).

With these initial considerations in mind, the purpose of my research is to assess the possibilities for creating a classroom environment that enhances student agency in the context of my own class, school, and curriculum standards. I will investigate how students respond to this opportunity to explore their own passions and interests in a meaningful way and ascertain whether learning in this way can be meaningfully assessed. I will explore the feasibility for the teacher to be able to relate student interests and learning back to the curriculum, and further identify where empowering students and encouraging student agency is appropriately balanced with maintaining a learning environment that is safe and effective for all.

These aims involve exploring practices that may support such an enhanced agency environment and discovering the current routines and strategies that need to change. Additionally, I will need to develop new strategies that will enhance student agency in a meaningful way, but that also work within the confines of school schedules, relational norms, and curriculum standards. Furthermore, this research will explore the concept of informal teacher leadership and how classroom teachers can inspire change within a larger system. By disrupting the inherent relational norms of who controls information and responsibility for learning in the classroom, and empowering students with an enhanced level of agency, I hope to find strategies that may translate into other classroom settings, help to shed light on potentially unknown obstacles to student agency, and better define the role of a teacher in such

a classroom. Moreover, I will examine the impact this research has on me as a professional teacher and informal leader trying something new to enhance learning within a traditional school system. In this sense, the final aim is to explore my own sense of agency as a professional educator seeking to make a difference in student learning.

Research Questions

In order to fulfill the purpose and structure the activity of my research, I formulated four central questions:

1. What is “student agency” and how is it defined in the context of my research?
2. What degree of student agency is reasonable for classroom settings and what effect will enhancing student agency have on students?
3. What is the role of the educator in an enhanced agency classroom, and how are high expectations and student accountability maintained in such an environment?
4. How can teachers lead meaningful changes for facilitating student agency at the classroom and school level?

To reiterate, my initial reasons for undertaking this research are that the world is a changing place and, although education has been modified, the basic model of schooling is still that of one hundred and fifty years ago. In this regard, students remain too dependent on teachers and students quickly learn that being wrong is bad and, consequently, that taking a risk when learning is not worthwhile. If schools are to succeed in preparing today’s youth for tomorrow’s problems, teachers need to arm the next generation not only with relevant knowledge but also with the ability to inform themselves and to act effectively on that information. Students will need to go further than we have, to solve the problems left to them by

preceding generations. They will be confronted by problems we cannot even fathom – the future will demand continuous effort to improve the human condition.

In response, teachers need to foster environments that allow for an individualized experience while also building independence and problem-solving skills. They need to determine what the role of the teacher is in a system that fosters such ideals and how it would affect and relate to other stakeholders in the greater community. In short, teachers must determine what is best for student learning at present and for securing our mutual interests in future. I believe this is a matter of enhancing student agency.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

There is an abundance of research on learner and school improvement, and growing documentation of successful strategies for enhancing student agency (Altobelli, 2017; Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015; Thomas, 2004; Tishman & Clapp, 2017). I want to add to such research by enhancing student agency even further. Having reviewed the literature, however, I found that part of the challenge in writing this thesis is the difficulty of articulating in words or even thoughts, precisely what I envision as “facilitative teaching and learning”. Frankly, an initial review of the literature only complicated my understanding of this idea. Though there is a plethora of research on facilitative and independent learning (Carrier, 2015; Ertmer & Simons, 2006; Boardman et al, 2016; Good & Mishra, 2016; Thomas, 2010; and Haworth, 2016), I have found few articles that demonstrated a cohesive concept that has or could be applied across the K-12 platform. The research tends to focus on small aspects of agency that fit within the general area, but each aspect is ultimately isolated from other facilitative practices.

In contrast, my sense is that student agency could be an umbrella concept that allows different strategies to have a cohesiveness that is currently lacking. Based on my review of the literature, the conceptual and practical aspects that would be most relevant to a fully integrated and successful facilitative learning environment in K-12, a learning environment that would enhance student agency, are: Proper use and integration of technology, elements of self-determinant theory, self-directed learning, Project-Based Learning concepts, and the role of the teacher as facilitator. In addition to these considerations, a central theme of this research is focused on the informal leadership of teachers for driving change from within the school system. Leadership by teachers without any formal administrative authority in enacting change at the system level is still a crucial part of enhancing student agency. As teachers have pedagogical

control in the classroom, documenting teaching practices that enhance student agency has the potential to promote outward change from classrooms to schools to districts and beyond.

Teacher Leadership

At the time of this research, I hold a middle management position as a “Team Leader” at a small, relatively affluent school in Venezuela. The primary job descriptor for my position is that of acting as the “learning leader”. The day-to-day implications of this descriptor remain vague, however. My regular duties generally include setting up and running a weekly meeting, organizing events for the Middle School and attending occasional Team Leader meetings with school administration. In addition, I am also the facilitator of the school’s Assessment, Grading, and Reporting (AGaR) committee. Ironically, I sometimes find that my formal title hinders my ability to implement changes. This may be explained by the fact that teachers are less likely to reject new information or ideas when they feel they have control over what they learn and how they learn it (Toll, 2017). Instead of my ideas being viewed as interesting suggestions offered by a colleague, they may be interpreted by some teachers as directives from a superior – although this is never my intention. For this reason, I was very careful and forthright in explaining that my agency research focuses on my teaching and interest in pushing pedagogical boundaries in the classroom; there was never an expectation for anyone else to do the same, but they were welcome to embrace any new practices that appealed to them. The other middle school teachers were supportive and curious but chose to wait until the project was over before making any decisions about adopting new methods.

From this experience I learned there can be great value in informal, teacher leadership for driving change. The curiosity and support from my peers was not generated from a top-down directive issued by a formal administrator. Rather, they arose from observing a peer teacher trying something new. This distinction is a vital part of understanding the effectiveness of

teacher leadership. Over the last decade or more, teacher leadership research has had a resurgence coinciding with an increased and intense focus on accountability. Particularly within the U.S., teacher leadership has been drawn into the research spotlight as many teachers fulfill multiple roles as coaches, mentors, and coordinators (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) in order to bolster scores on standardized tests.

Conceptualizations of teacher leadership are not particularly well defined and tend to vary greatly (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Ryerson (2017), for example, asks how students and teachers can act as catalysts for school change and discusses the benefits of teacher researchers. Though some studies allude to or even explicitly mention the informal side of teacher leadership (Muth, Browne-Ferrigno, Bellamy, Fulmer, & Silver, 2013; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) the focal point of the majority of research remains on the formal roles of teacher leadership. For the current research, I have adopted a more generalized definition that sees teacher leadership not as a role but as a practice. This is consistent with Muth et al. (2013) who note that “teacher instructional leadership involves the formal or informal responsibility to influence other teachers' professional practice in ways that are expected to increase student learning” (p. 127). I have adopted this conception and amended it to reflect my personal views, and to better suit the parameters of this research. Teacher leadership, as such, is the formal or informal responsibility or desire to potentially influence other teachers' professional practice in ways that are expected to increase student learning and sense of agency.

On this understanding, teacher leadership is a dynamic process that can encompass any attempted actions, outcomes or practices that drive change within teaching teams, Professional Learning Communities, schools, districts or systems. As front-line practitioners, teachers are the educational actors that are expected to implement many changes to the school system. It has been demonstrated that teachers can be the drivers of change beyond just their classrooms “with adequate support to build research capabilities” (Ryerson, 2017, p. 312) even

when they are not given formal leadership positions. If teachers can drive change without formal roles and acknowledging that informal teacher leadership can be an important aspect within school systems (Muth et al., 2013; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), I propose a shift in thinking away from teacher leadership as a formal authoritative role and toward a practice-orientated approach to leadership for better teaching. In this way, teacher leadership becomes a periodic, informal practice that can empower teachers to inspire others within their school community to pursue new methods and ways of thinking about their professional practice.

It is also important to address the relationship between teacher leaders and teacher researchers because these two roles are inherently linked and underrecognized within the research realm (Ryerson, 2017). As teachers are on the frontline, they can implement changes directly and observe any outcomes in situ. Though there is certainly immense value in the outside-in view of the researcher, there should be just as much value placed on the inside-out view of the teacher. Though valuable, the role of a teacher-researcher does come with challenges, particularly with regards to how one person has to balance two different roles (Tabach, 2011). However, within the informal leadership role played by teachers, I think there are two possible approaches to help mitigate the issues that make it difficult to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001). First, the gap could be bridged by working with formal outside researchers as a valued part of a collaborative approach to the research. Second, teachers could conduct research themselves which would “help[s] teachers not only develop skills and pedagogical understandings, but is also instrumental in helping them to connect theory to practice...” (Falk, 2004, p. 82). Such research shows that “through their leadership, teachers can help build their school’s capacity to improve” (Sinha, Hanuscin, Rebello, Muslu, & Cheng, 2012, p. 12), and that teacher researchers can help bridge the gap between theory and practice (Falk, 2004; Korthagen et al.,

2001). Therefore, I should be able to conduct research as a classroom practitioner and help develop my school's capacity for improvement without necessarily occupying a formal position of leadership. In fact, when implementing a new curriculum, informal leadership is a crucial factor in its ultimate success, even though teachers often do not consider themselves to be "leaders". (Sinha et al., 2012). Though we as teachers already shoulder the responsibilities of a demanding profession, it is important for us to continue to improve through ongoing research (formal or informal) and to share findings with our colleagues (formally or informally).

Broadly speaking, then, all teachers who work in earnest to continually improve are leaders. They lead their students through complex and often overly saturated curriculums as well as hidden curriculums (Wren, 1999) on a daily basis. They lead their peers through support, sharing of ideas, content knowledge, resources and best practices and; they lead their schools by continually developing their practice and convincing administration to initiate new practices and programmes to further student learning (Muth et al., 2013; Ryerson, 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). While these informal leadership roles may be hard to identify and/or qualify they are vital aspects of teachers' work.

In keeping with this understanding of teacher leadership, my research focuses on the experiences of one teacher as I negotiate my way through complex systems of change. It will review the initial beliefs and motivation behind the desired change and explore the leadership that was necessary in terms of relating to students, peers, administration, and parents. It will explore the phenomenon of informal leadership and delineate teacher leadership from formal leadership. In doing so, I recognize the role that teachers play in driving and leading change within classrooms, schools and districts without any formal administrative authority, responsibility, titles or compensation. Despite the lack of formal recognition, teachers are able to conduct informal, practical research that can and does drive change. As such, the current

research will focus on both my journey to enhancing student agency as a classroom teacher and the impact of my teacher leadership on students, teachers and administrators at my school.

What is student agency and what practices enhance it?

Student Agency

There are three basic aspects of student agency that are most applicable to the current research: student choice around learning, the power of students to act on their choices, and social forces at work in the classroom. Some seem to highlight the aspect of choice as being the prominent feature of enhancing student agency, often termed student voice. It is noted, however, that minimal forms of choice “such as giving students the opportunity simply to air their opinions or work independently” (Goodman & Eren, 2014, p. 125) are only token gestures towards enhancing agency.

This is mitigated by the second aspect of student agency indicating that “agency is the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness” (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015, p. 1). This highlights that having power, the power to act or take strategic action, in making change or reaching a goal determined by the student (Griffin, Eury, & Gaffney, 2015; Ryerson, 2017) is an important aspect of student agency. Moreover, the power that is necessary for students to enact their choices in exercising their agency is related to the social forces of the school, classroom and environment. Going beyond choice and action in order to empower and engage students “requires a change in the learning environment, which has predominantly been within the domain of teacher control. Learner agency was fostered across study schools by negotiating the power of who made decisions in the classroom.” (Ryerson, 2017, p. 308). In this manner, enhancing student agency will not only require a change in how students approach their learning, but in how I, as the teacher, need to approach teaching. Building on this aspect of student agency, it is also important to note that

“agency acknowledges the space between the power of social forces and individual decision making.” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 14). This recognizes the important factor of social forces – a factor that has been acting on students throughout their academic careers. I suspect many, if not all, students do not feel like they have any say in what they learn, how they learn or how they are assessed.

To reiterate, the three defining characteristics of student agency for the purposes of this research are: student choice, the power to act, and the need to address the social forces of the classroom environment. In recognition of the first and second relevant aspects of agency, students will have a relatively free choice in deciding how and what goals they pursue (Tishman & Clapp, 2017; Williams, 2017) and will be given the power and authority to act on them. In recognition of the third aspect, that of social forces at play, students will be able to explore those goals and concepts that are of individual interest, with a co-negotiated power balance between the teacher, each student and their peers (Ryerson, 2017). More specifically, for the purposes of the current study creating an environment for enhanced agency will be defined by the following conditions:

1. Students will have the freedom to exercise their interests over standard curriculum by choosing what they want to learn about, how they want to learn about it, and how they want to demonstrate that learning. It will be the responsibility of the teacher to align student interests with curriculum standards.
2. The power imbalance highlighted by Ryerson (2017) will be ameliorated by allowing students to choose where they sit in class, who they sit with, the amount of homework (if any) they decide to do, and by being able to call the teacher by their first name (if they choose). However, it will be made clear that the classroom environment must be kept safe and that the teacher maintains the responsibility to keep it that way. Situations that

arise will be dealt with appropriately while respecting the dignity of students and exploring the power dynamic that may be present in both a traditional classroom setting, and a setting designed for enhanced student agency.

3. Though students will be able to exercise enhanced agency with regards to their interests and the power (im)balance within the classroom, the teacher will still play a pivotal role in guiding and facilitating students with regard to appropriate depth of a subject knowledge, timelines for learning, organization of learning and advice/feedback in order to facilitate students being able to present their learning in the best possible way. In this manner, students may explore their enhanced agency while I still adhere to legal, moral, and professional standards and responsibilities.

By addressing choice, power and social forces (Griffin et al., 2015) in designing the classroom, students should be able to exercise their enhanced agency for exploring concepts that interest them on an individual basis, within a disrupted power balance between themselves and the teacher. To achieve this, expectations and routines will need to be co-negotiated in a manner that ensures the academic integrity of student work and a safe environment that values consideration for others. The safe environment and consideration for others is an important addendum that acknowledges differences between enhanced agency and total anarchy in the classroom. Though they may be understood as ideals of agency, freedom of choice, power, and social force in the classroom must be balanced by an exercise of agency that is educationally meaningful and relationally positive. This approach should also help to address some of the discomfort that can be experienced by teachers and students alike in an environment where responsibility for learning is redirected from teachers to students.

When enhancing student agency, although there is no single approach that works best for all situations, there are certainly facilitative approaches to teaching that are generally

beneficial to learning (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Good & Mishra, 2016; Hains & Smith, 2012; Haworth, 2016; Thomas, 2004, 2008). Though acting as a facilitator of student learning can raise difficulties in implementing new pedagogical strategies, it is ultimately worth the effort (Hains & Smith, 2012). However, I feel that if I can maintain a semblance of normalcy, it should help students transition from a traditional classroom to one with enhanced student agency. I will do so in two ways. First, the enhanced student agency unit is based on pedagogical approaches that are familiar to many students such as the use of technology and personal learning environments, and project-based learning. Second, I will implement small parts of other concepts such as self-determinant theory and self-directed learning/heutagogy in a one-on-one manner so the students feel supported and more likely to embrace the mixtures of these pedagogies necessary for enhancing student agency.

Technology/Personal Learning Environments

There has been profuse growth in technology since the commencement of public education in North America, and one might think this technology would have increased learning opportunities and accessibility. However, the application of technology in education has been focused on superficial applications such as web browsing and word processing (Ziegenfuss, 2010). In addition to this lack of meaningful technology engagement at school, there is indication that technology's importance is growing at higher levels of education and outside the classroom:

That lack of competition, special interests, and outdated, district-based school governance combine to cripple schools' and families' ability to make the best use of digital learning, even as similar technology plays an increasingly important role in institutions of higher education. (Brown, 2012, p. 1)

The current widespread use of technology does not translate into useable technological skills within the education system or at the market level (Boone, 2015; Brown, 2012; Littky & Grabelle, 2005; Ziegenfuss, 2010). Furthermore, Good and Mishra (2016) state

their agreement with this finding by noting that: “technology alone does not change a curriculum, classroom, or epistemology without careful consideration of what new affordances and constraints that technology provides” (p. 3).

Though the advent of technology such as iPads, Chromebooks, laptops, Wi-Fi and online learning platforms have not necessarily been used as effectively as they could be, they are tools that could support a facilitative and personalized approach to education. I believe these technologies are instrumental in any agency enhanced classrooms that allow for successful personalized learning. By using technology to create shared learning experiences that extend beyond school, we create situations that mimic real world situations and problem solving (Rowe, Bozalek, & Frantz, 2013). There are numerous ways to accomplish this, either through Personal Learning Environments, which are Web 2.0 technologies that now allow students to manage their own learning (Haworth, 2016), or through something as simple as the use of podcasts to support learning in the classroom (Ng’ambi & Lombe, 2012). A more in-depth definition of personalized learning is:

Personalized learning can be thought of, at the ‘classroom’ level, as a sociocultural authorisation of individual freedom, community interactivity, and flexibility of time and space. This characterisation draws of generative accounts of agency, social learning, self-regulation and autonomy, and collective intelligence and distributed expertise (Deed et al., 2014, p.67).

Although technology has the potential to allow for personalized learning, it needs to be used in conjunction with the other agency enhancing strategies in order to be effective. Technology is merely one tool that can allow teachers to pursue a facilitative approach that is so essential to enhancing student agency. It should be noted, however, that implementing technology well can be conceptually difficult and demanding (Mckenney, Boschman, Pieters, & Voogt, 2016) as the teacher needs to be technology literate in general, as well as specifically for any technologies being used in class. Knowing what technology to use, where to find the it and how and when to use it effectively are well-documented concerns for teachers (Labbo, Leu,

Kinzer, Teale, & al, 2003). Such findings are consistent with my professional experience and I would argue that the pace of development and use of technology in education continues to increase those concerns and challenges. For these reasons, teamwork and collaboration are vital in designing how technology is used in the 21st century classrooms, to help ensure that the technology being used within a classroom, teaching team, school or even district is the best one for the demographic and learning at hand. One important consideration is not to simply use personalized learning environment technology for the sake of using technology. It is crucial to note that technology is only a tool (Labbo et al., 2003) and that the teacher is essential in ensuring the tool is used appropriately and effectively. Additionally, students will require training in both the routines and skills of how to use technology effectively in the classroom (Haworth, 2016).

A key aspect of enhancing student agency is in promoting meaningful choice for students. In this regard, the teacher must be able to stand back and not dictate what all students are expected to learn, but simply ensure that all students do learn. Technology has reached a point where it is now feasible for a teacher to manage a class where each student is exploring and learning about something that genuinely interests them. By shifting the burden of responsibility from teaching (and the teacher) to learning (and the students), the teacher can take on the roles of support and facilitation. Current technology allows the teacher to maintain a bird's-eye view of each student as they walk their individual and potentially unique learning path. Teachers can use technology to guide students and help them decide how best to overcome individual learning obstacles as help is needed rather than trying to lead all students down the same path. If students are to choose what they learn, how they learn, and how they will be assessed then technology can prove to be a key ingredient in facilitating student agency (Ark, 2018). Technology gives students the ability to choose subjects related to their individual curiosity, and to explore and learn about that subject in their own chosen way. The teacher can

stand back and help students navigate issues, suggest resources and clarify confusion for a variety of topics and projects in one class session. This allows an unprecedented number of students to exercise an enhanced level of agency over their learning.

Self-Determinant Theory

Self-determinant theory is a broad motivational framework stating that all humans have basic psychological needs of relatedness, competency, and autonomy, and that social environments play an important role in the actualization of these needs (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that people who practice positive agency in their lives are self motivated. This, in turn, is facilitated by competency, autonomy, and relatedness. Self-determinant theory also claims there is a spectrum of motivation ranging from amotivation at one end with intrinsic motivation residing at the other (Chue & Nie, 2016). The middle of the spectrum is occupied by the three types of extrinsic motivation: external regulation, introjection, and identification. In my experience, school systems often rely on the extrinsic types to motivate students. In response, one of the main goals of my research is to increase student agency in my classroom by creating a learning environment that supports intrinsic motivation. In other words, for students to be truly independent in their learning requires an environment that evokes intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, there is a substantial body of research that supports the idea that intrinsically motivated learners learn better: “In recent years, findings regarding SDT [Self-Determination Theory] in the field of education has shown that a higher level of self-determination leads to positive educational outcomes, i.e. deeper engagement, better conceptual learning and higher persistence” (Chue & Nie, 2016, p. 680). Rewards and consequences are hard wired into the very fabric of the education system and, although there are different systems and schools of thought, students are often rewarded for “good” work and held accountable for work deemed “unsatisfactory”. In a purely academic sense, students are

motivated by good grades, recognition such as student of the month, or even simple praise. All of which would fall in the extrinsically, and thus less effective, band of the self-determination continuum. Though well meaning, I believe part of the reason for this dependence on extrinsic motivation is because developing towards a higher sense of intrinsic motivation requires that an individual's need of competency, relatedness and autonomy be met (Deci et al., 1991). The current school system, as such, does an adequate job of fulfilling the first need and touches (or attempts to touch) on the second. It is in the area of autonomy, however, that the system is lacking and holds students back from increasing their potential as independent learners. The current research asserts that this deficiency in the school system could be addressed by classroom teachers in creating the conditions for enhanced student agency.

Self-Directed Learning, Self-Determined Learning and Heutagogy

Though self directed learning, self determined learning and heutagogy are all related but distinct ideas, there is a good deal of confusion regarding them (Hase, 2015). Firstly, there is confusion in how the concepts are related to each other. Hase (2015) claims that self-directed learning is a subset of self-determined learning, and that heutagogy is essentially self-determined learning, with a more explicit acknowledgement of universal human agency. Furthermore, there is confusion with self-directed learning and autonomous and independent learning. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to the three concepts under the umbrella term of self directed/determined learning (SDL) as elements from all three are relevant to this research, but a narrowly academic delineation of them is not.

There is, however, an important distinction between independent and autonomous that is relevant to the research. Autonomy is often used synonymously with independence, a buzzword in education ever since I entered the field in 2008. However, the path to effective, independent learning is not easily walked (Carrier, 2015). Furthermore, there is a subtle yet important difference between independent and autonomous. As a teacher, I recognize an

independent learner as a student who can get on with their work without much help or supervision. It is noted, however, that there is a “consensus in the literature that independent learning did not merely involve students working alone; teachers have a key part to play in enabling and supporting independent learning though, for example, structuring group work” (Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, & Faraday, 2008, p. 2). This appears to overlap with, but not completely satisfy, the concept of an autonomous learner in which autonomy has been defined as “the ability to initiate and regulate actions. It is the feeling that one’s central actions are consistent with one’s basic needs, inclinations, and values” (Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015, p. 952). An independent learner would have much in common with an autonomous learner, including: an awareness of their learning, collaboration with the teacher with regards to their learning, and self motivation (Meyer et al., 2008). Yet, there remains an important distinction. This distinction is best captured in the sense that an autonomous learner need not be isolated, but can choose when to give up some of their autonomy when required, though not ever surrendering ultimate control over the learning process (Moore, 1972). From this perspective, it is possible to see that, although an independent learner will be a collaborator in their learning who adopts responsibility for what they learn, the truly autonomous learner has more control of when to surrender their autonomy and when to maintain it. While this distinction continues to be refined in the literature, it is clear that granting students more autonomy and/or independence is linked with an increase in motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Meyer et al., 2008).

History is replete with successful people who lacked formal education but who still found success in many fields including Math, Philosophy, and the Arts. Haworth (2016) attributes these successes to Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and defines it as “the practice of studying a topic with little or no direction from formal education” (p.359). There are three important factors that need to be met in order for students to achieve self-directed learning. Students need opportunity, environment (tools, technology, etc.), and intrinsic motivation (Haworth, 2016).

Providing an environment that addresses a student's basic psychological needs including autonomy can lead to deeper engagement and higher persistence (Chue & Nie, 2016). Self-Directed Learning is clearly a fundamental approach for teachers wishing to become more facilitative of student learning. Its success is dependent on a variety of factors including intrinsic motivation and the creation of an environment conducive to facilitative teaching and self-directed learning. Though Hase & Kenyon (2001) write about a specific form of self-directed learning (or "heutagogy" in their vernacular) that builds from a focus on adult education, many of the central ideas apply to education in general:

A heutagogical approach recognizes the need to be flexible in the learning where the teacher provides resources but the learner designs the actual course he or she might take by negotiating the learning. Rather than the teacher who decided what the learner needed to know, heutagogy acknowledges the world in which information is readily and easily accessible and the need to learn comes from the learner (Hase and Kenyon 2001 p.2).

The key factor separating heutagogy and SDL is that heutagogy is even more learner centered than SDL – to the point where the teacher becomes almost unnecessary (Haworth, 2016).

It should be noted that, although I agree in a theoretical sense that heutagogy would be an educational ideal, it also represents a classic example of the theory-practice gap (Kinyaduka, 2017). That is, a ubiquitous gap between the ideal and what is possible and will work in most concrete endeavours. Though heutagogy offers an inspiring goal, in a public system it will be necessary to constantly guide, manage, update, hold accountable, and even directly instruct (in some instances) our students.

Similarly, Haworth (2016) also indicates that cognitive constraints need to be taken into consideration within formal education and this has implications not only for how SDL should be implemented, but also where within the K-12 system it may be most appropriate. From the idealistic perspective of SDL, the goal for teachers should be to work ourselves out of a job.

Practicality demands, however, that a teacher will always be necessary. Creating more autonomy and focusing on facilitating rather than instructing in classrooms will have dual benefits. Students will be better prepared for a dynamic 21st century world, and teachers will have more autonomy themselves in providing interventions and help in a time-challenged curriculum.

Project-Based Learning and Role of the Teacher

Project-based learning (PBL) is often synonymous with learning by doing, student-centered learning, and student autonomy (Assaf, 2018; Fan, 2018). In this sense, PBL refocuses the role of the teacher into a facilitative role where “the teacher is to provide resources, give guidance on safe tool use, push student thinking through questioning and feedback, and provide organizational support through the use of project checkpoints and structured reflections.” (Rodriguez, Allen, Harron, & Qadri, 2019, p. 52). This change in pedagogical approach in turn creates a shift in the relationship between students and teachers. This facilitative approach has traditionally lent itself naturally to outdoor education and has been studied in depth by Thomas (2004, 2008, 2010). The relationship that develops when teachers take on a facilitative role can determine the success or failure of the project and associated learning (Thomas, 2008). It is important to know thyself in order to help build group cohesion in getting to know each other (as a class) and building trust (Fernandez-Rio, 2016). It therefore becomes vital to understand how facilitative teaching would apply to one’s teaching philosophy and practice.

In broad terms, “a facilitator is commonly defined as a substantively neutral person who manages the group process in order to help groups achieve identified goals or purposes” (Thomas, 2010, p. 1). It becomes obvious that this definition needs some further thought when applied to education. This is obvious since educators have a specified curriculum and responsibility for content, knowledge, skills and safety (Thomas, 2010), and they are vested in

the success of their students. This reminds me of an insightful distinction told to me by a teaching mentor. My mentor advised me that I should be “friendly, not friends” with my students. Here it seems it can be adapted to read “facilitative, not facilitator” implying that although providing a certain degree of autonomy, there are still factors that the teacher is ultimately responsible for as an invested and professional member of the class. It is important then, that I as the teacher and the children as students know their respective roles and responsibilities.

For the purposes of this study, students will have freedom regarding what they learn, how they learn and how they will be assessed. Even though this may disrupt the power dynamic between student and teacher in a traditional sense, “safety, instruction, observation, facilitation, raising issues in the group, and clarifying statements and issues are the responsibility of the leader” (Martin, Breunig, Wagstaff, & Goldenberg, 2018, p. 148). It has become clear to me in preparing for this research that, although there is no single, universal approach, there are certainly facilitative approaches that are beneficial to learning (Ching & Hsu, 2013; Good & Mishra, 2016; Hains & Smith, 2012; Haworth, 2016; Thomas, 2004, 2008). Though there may be difficulties in implementing some strategies in the context of formal education, they are ultimately worth it in the end (Hains & Smith, 2012).

Summary

Despite the changes in education over the last decades, there is concern we are not adequately addressing the needs of 21st century students (Boone, 2015; Good & Mishra, 2016; Littky & Grabelle, 2005; Ziegenfuss, 2010). I believe it is possible to address some of these concerns by approaching the issue from both the teacher’s perspective as well as the students’. Firstly, by encouraging informal teacher leadership and research. Though there is an abundance of research regarding teacher leadership, it is not well defined and definitions tend to vary greatly (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). This research identified most with the concept that

teacher leadership can be formal or informal, and aims to influence other teacher's practice in order to increase student learning (Muth et al., 2013). By acting as a teacher researcher with the goal of increasing my students' agency, I hope to informally influence the practice of other teachers in embracing practices that help enhance student agency.

Secondly, I feel we can adopt practices that enhance student agency. I have identified three core concepts in the literature that I feel are most important in enhancing student agency: choice (Goodman & Eren, 2014), the power to act on that choice (Ferguson et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2015), and addressing the social forces that perpetuate student dependence within the classroom (Ryerson, 2017). I have identified several practices that appear to offer help for enhancing student agency, and that align with my teaching philosophy which will allow me to easily integrate them into my lessons.

By using project-based learning as a vehicle for enhanced student agency and borrowing facilitative concepts from education that focus on creating a balance between student agency and teacher responsibilities, the aim of this research is to co-create an enhanced agency environment for students that is also safe and productive. For the purposes of this study, enhanced student agency is defined as students being able to exercise their autonomy for exploration of curriculum content that is of individual interest, with a co-negotiated power balance between the teacher and each student and the student's peers.

The enhanced student agency unit designed for this study follows a project-based learning (PBL) framework with elements of self-determinant theory (Deci et al., 1991), self-directed/determined learning (heutagogy) (Chue & Nie, 2016; Hase & Kenyon, 2001; Haworth, 2016), elements of facilitative educational practices commonly utilized in outdoor education (Fernandez-Rio, 2016; Thomas, 2010), meaningful technology integration (Rowe et al., 2013), and personalized learning (Deed et al., 2014). Students will work with the teacher as a

facilitator, using technology to “emphasise tools that facilitate enhanced communication and interaction between teachers and learners” (Rowe et al., 2013, p. 595) to help explore their enhanced agency with regards to their new learning environment.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

“In educational research, a qualitative approach often focuses on an in-depth probing of peoples’ beliefs, assumptions, understandings, opinions, actions, or interactions” (Doyle, 2016, p. 4). The purpose of this study is to explore the potential for enhancing student agency in the modern classroom. Specifically, it seeks to explore and extend our current understanding of student agency (Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015; Reitenauer, 2017; Tishman & Clapp, 2017) to assess effects on students, parents, and the teacher. To this end, the study examines student perceptions on the amount of agency they feel they have and their subsequent sense of engagement. Parents will also have the opportunity to answer similar questions about their perception of their child’s sense of agency and level of engagement in the unit. I, through my experience as a teacher, am journaling my observations, feelings and issues that arise during the enhanced agency unit, the effects it has on me, and the perceived effects it has on students. Additionally, the study seeks to explore teacher researcher and informal teacher leadership (Muth et al., 2013; Ryerson, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As such, the primary focus of the research is on my experiences and observations as a classroom teacher intent on enhancing student agency and the main research method used for this purpose is journaling.

However, when I began this research, I also thought it may be of value to collect survey data on the student and parent experience as this could serve not only as data for triangulation, but also to collect data on how they experienced a learning unit with enhanced student agency .I suspected that the frustrations and triumphs I was likely to experience would be mirrored by students, but I wanted to hear it from them and from their parents in order to have data to challenge or confirm my own views. For this data to be pertinent and reliable, it needed to be honest feedback from both students and parents. As the teacher conducting the research,

however, there is the undeniable power issue of my position and authority (Ladkin, Sharnae, 2017; McCroskey, James & Richmond, Virginia, 1983). It is, therefore, necessary for me to separate myself as much as possible from the data collection. To address this, I decided to collect anonymous quantitative and qualitative data via online surveys, to keep any teacher-researcher bias at arm's length. (see Appendices A and B). However, due to the small sample size and very low rate of response, this survey data was not significant in informing the research findings.

As a qualitative approach became the main stay of this research, it is important to describe the context from which to understand and view the information generated by this study. This information shows the unique environment in which the research was conducted and provides opportunity for the possible transference of the findings. The school was established in 1998 and has a total population of approximately 130 students from pre-kindergarten to Grade 12. I teach Grade 6 and 7 English Language Arts and Social Studies and Grade 7 Pre-Algebra. The school has an excellent reputation in the local community and between other international schools in the region. Though we are small, we have a vibrant and active community involving all stakeholders. We routinely hold large whole-school events, celebrate success and support each other through difficult times. Half of the school facilities are older and are renovated from an old three-story monastery built in the 1960's. There is an outdoor gym with a roof and netting and small field separating the secondary school from the primary school and Cybrary (a combination of technology area, maker space, and library). The elementary school buildings on campus have been built over the last decade. They are relatively simple brick buildings, supported with green beams throughout. The top half a meter of each classroom is shaded glass which runs parallel to the roof line to allow for natural light. Renovations and maintenance regularly occur to keep the school updated in terms of both education and security. The latest major addition was an indoor cantina area.

The country that the school resides in, Venezuela, is currently facing some civil difficulties and the security needs of the school are always being updated. Despite the local unrest, our school operates as a “bubble” where children of all ages are excited and happy to arrive in the morning; sometimes literally running at full speed through the gates. There are lots of open-air spaces and students must transit outside from class to class. Given the small size of the school and the fact that there are many siblings, most students and teachers know each other. Parents and teachers often greet each other with the traditional kiss on the cheek, even before meetings that may involve tension. In many ways, it is a family more than a school community. It is a place where students and teachers like to be, and it often acts as a respite from the turbulence of exterior local issues.

Though the school is often described as a bubble by staff, students, and parents, it is important, as part of a qualitative study, to describe what students, teachers, and all stakeholders are being insulated from. A major issue which has set off a cascade of other issues is the hyperinflation being experienced by the country. Some news articles have reported it to be 18,000% as of April 2018 (“Venezuela crisis,” 2018). What this means on the ground is that peoples’ wages become nullified almost immediately. There were price controls in place, but this led to massive shortages of basic items needed by everyone (“Venezuela’s Collapse,” 2018). As a result, many of the price controls have been relaxed. However, since the government controls the exchange rate and does not have easy access to hard currency, it has created a situation where goods are priced in black market dollar equivalents and wages are in Bolivars that soon become valueless. To offer some perspective, I often spend on a meal an amount that is multiple times many peoples’ monthly salary, including many of my local colleagues.

Though the school is non-profit, there are still relatively substantial fees. As such, our student body is largely composed of families that are insulated to some degree or another by

having access to dollars through multi-national corporations or business connections. Even though the student body is largely composed of more fortunate local students (most of the international families have left the country), they still need to deal with crumbling infrastructure and difficult (or impossible) to find basic items. Additionally, our students and their families span the political spectrum and though this has become very divisive outside of the school walls, it is remarkable how much of a non-issue it is inside them.

The students across the school are generally just plain wonderful. The biggest behavioural issues for teachers at our school are students not completing homework or speaking out of turn. There is very rarely any kind of physical altercation or more serious issues, particularly in middle school. Class sizes are small. My middle school classes range from eight to twelve students. There are ten students potentially participating in the study who are aged ten to twelve (6 female and 4 male). Most (90%) of the students are native Spanish speakers, but many have been instructed in English from an early age and often perform better on the MAP and WrAp scores (common standardized tests utilized in the USA and many international schools abroad) than their North American peers.

I am a thirty-one-year-old male who holds a B.Sc and B.Ed and have been teaching for nine years. My interest in this study evolved from a change in my teaching practice in the previous years and is an attempt to document perceived success in similarly applied strategies developed over my time teaching. I generally have a friendly, though vigilant, relationship with the students. During last year's transition day (where the Grade 5 students come to middle school for a day), I was described as the funniest but strictest teacher. I am known to have high expectations and encourage students to try something first before offering them substantive assistance. My initial assistance is generally a series of questions to the student, rather than instructions. Although this enhanced agency study took the independence of my students to a new level, student agency has always been a key component of my teaching philosophy.

There are many factors that influence the environment of a school and classroom. My class and I are fortunate in many ways. We have a supportive community. My administrators, for example, offered insight and permission in order to conduct this research, and parents and students were excited and eager to try something different. We have small class sizes, an excellent teaching staff and are a well-resourced school. On the other hand, the situation outside of the school walls can be dire, or quickly and drastically changing for our students and their families. Many are looking for ways to leave the country, many have already left, and the school is facing high attrition rates as a result. Students are not sure if they will be returning, and some are not even sure if they will remain the whole year. I feel it is also important to indicate that the project is being carried out over the last two weeks of school before Christmas holidays which may influence both myself and the students in terms of motivation and patience. Again, in keeping with a qualitative case study, I hope description of the research setting provides meaningful context for later data analysis, discussion, and possible transferability of my conclusions.

Methodology

Methodology is the point at which method, theory, and epistemology come together in a way that allows the researcher to investigate some specific educational moment (Doyle, 2016). The parameters of my intended research would dictate that I utilize a case study methodology. Creswell (2012) states that a case study is appropriate when a “researcher seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the case by collecting multiple forms of data” (p.465). A case study also investigates a real life in context, uses multiple sources of evidence (including qualitative and quantitative) and looks at an in-depth examination of a single event over time to investigate or build a theory (Doyle, 2016). For my case study, I am exploring the experiences of the teacher and students throughout a traditional type of educational unit and one designed to

enhance student agency. In addition to collecting observations and journaling my experiences, I am also seeking to collect student opinions on their experiences with each unit.

This poses a challenge to my research, however. The parameters of the small, intimate group dynamics and my direct involvement with the study coupled with the fact that I am the students' regular classroom teacher all present interesting challenges. For both practical (in terms of the credibility of findings) and ethical (in terms of power relations) reasons (Creswell, 2012; Doyle, 2016) it is vital that I minimize my influence and authority as teacher as much as possible when collecting student opinions. I originally decided, therefore, that I could best collect the data via an anonymous survey. This survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data at the completion of both a traditional unit and an enhanced agency unit. The survey sought to collect students' thoughts and feelings, as well as measure how much agency they felt they had, and the perceived impact of agency on their learning. I also sent a similar survey to the parents at the same time to ascertain their perceptions about the amount of agency their child had and the effects thereof for both units.

In this way, my research was originally designed to give access to a variety of information that would include qualitative data collected via a journal and observations by myself, survey data from parents and students as well as open-ended questions as part of the survey. It is often the case that quantitative designs use tests and closed-ended questionnaires in order to gather data. However, qualitative research methodologies mostly make use of interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observations and open-ended questionnaires in order to "derive deep insights regarding them [participants] and the research context" (Savenye & Robinson, 2005, p. 68) . In addition, mixed-method research designs usually use a combination of closed-ended questionnaires (numerical data), interviews and classroom observations (text data) to collect information (Zohrabi, 2013). Though there is a quantitative component to the

current research, the overall epistemology, purpose of the research, and focus on my journaling places my case study squarely in the realm of qualitative research.

Methods

Permissions, Sampling, and Participants

The process of collecting qualitative data is lengthy and involves direct, prolonged contact with people and explores and records personal details. It is thus vital to get permission from all requisite institutions (Creswell, 2012). In the case of this study, the requisite approval from the institutional Research Ethics Board (REB) at Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), was initially sought. After receiving permission from the REB, I approached my Principal and Superintendent to meet with them to discuss the study and possible concerns and feasibility. After clarifying any questions or concerns, site permission was granted. Although the previous permissions are necessary and ethical, the ultimate permission will come from the students and parents themselves. As a member of the community, I felt that the permission phase of the research went beyond the ethics of an outside researcher as it is an environment in which I am deeply embedded. However, it is also vital that I avoid any possible conflict of interests as a teacher/researcher and divest myself of the entrenched power imbalance, not only for ethical reasons but also because of the impacts that power imbalance may have on student agency. If I want students to explore their agency, I need to relinquish power, and disassociate the researcher aspects from the teacher aspects and vice versa (Tabach, 2011). As such, students received an informed consent form to collect their parent's permission to participate in the study. In addition, students were instructed to return the consent form to a third-party teacher and choose for themselves whether to complete the survey. This choice was to be made without my knowledge or the knowledge of their peers. The survey was made available in our school Library during a lunch/advisory period and without me being present.

It is worth noting that the epistemology and purpose of my research are in line with qualitative methodology and thus purposive sampling would also have been appropriate. Ideally, therefore, I would have liked to have used a maximal variation sampling approach and then furthered that research with a follow up of extreme case sampling investigating the cases of perceived successes and failures. However, given that I am an international teacher working in at a small international school in a country that is currently experiencing a grave economic crisis and that I wanted my experiences as a teacher/observer to run concurrently with the students experiences, my sampling options were limited to a convenience sampling method (Creswell, 2012).

For the purposes of recruitment, a standard recruitment letter (Appendix B) was emailed to parents explaining the research and emphasizing that the survey data would be collected anonymously, and that participation was voluntary. I also emailed a letter of informed consent to parents as well as having a summarized version of the consent form included as a mandatory section of the surveys. These emails were also sent to the students and I explained to them that the research project was something the whole class would be doing as a unit of study. Students were also informed that the survey was something they could choose to do or not do with their parents permission. Students and parents were both excited and supportive of the research.

Resources and Survey Instrument

Though ultimately not a significant part of the research to due to a low response rate, I sought to collect quantitative data that could support, contradict, or illuminate the qualitative data. The quantitative collecting instrument was in the form of a questionnaire to measure students' sense of agency and their perceived level of motivation. Though instruments existed that measured motivation and instruments existed that measured sense of agency, I found no instruments available that measured both simultaneously with a focus on education and students. The survey instrument used in this research was, therefore, developed (see Appendix

A) by adapting questions from two established questionnaires. Polito, Barnier, & Woody's, (2013) Sense of Agency Rating Scale (SOARS) was adapted and combined with the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). It was reasoned that combining relevant questions from two established instruments would produce data pertinent to this research. Questions were adapted from the SOARS for measuring the sense of agency the students would report and questions from the SIE were used to gauge the amount of motivation students felt as a result of enhancing their agency. The resulting survey also contains six open-ended questions which allow students to share any other thoughts or feelings that they believe are relevant to their sense of agency (Creswell, 2012).

With regard to content validity, my survey instrument was developed by adapting two well-recognized and validated survey inventories. Additionally, the initial drafts of the instrument were reviewed and commented on by my supervisor until it was felt I had an appropriate instrument to “fit” my specific research objectives. While valid survey instruments have strong evidence suggesting they measure what they intend to measure, reliable instruments are consistent across groups. The two concepts are related in complex and varied ways (Creswell, 2012). Since the idea of developing my own instrument with proven validity and reliability was beyond the scope of this project, I adopted and adapted my survey designed. from surveys that have strong evidence of validity and reliability (Appleton et al., 2006; Polito et al., 2013). Though adapting the instruments may affect the validity and reliability, it was felt that for the purposes of triangulation with the qualitative data it would give me a better sense of what the students were experiencing. Furthermore, Creswell (2012) identifies three factors that can result in unreliable data: questions on survey instruments are ambiguous and unclear; procedures for survey administration vary and are not standardized; participants are fatigued, are nervous, misinterpret questions or guess (Rudner, 1993 as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 159).

Given that the questions on the instrument used were derived and adapted from valid and reliable instruments, the first factor is minimized. As all the students were in the school library (“Cybrary”) during a designated time and a colleague at the school volunteered to oversee administration of the survey, the procedural conditions may be considered standardized. As for the third criterion, I was not present during the testing and students had full opportunities to participate or not. Another teacher was there supervising for safety reasons and was informed they could clarify questions for students. Given the calm, familiar environment, the absence of the teacher/researcher, and the choice of anonymously completing or anonymously not completing the survey, the nervousness of students should have been at a minimum. While the process of survey design and administration was painstakingly undertaken, it should be noted that the focus of the current research is (and was intended to be) mainly qualitative in nature. In this sense, the quantitative survey data collected was intended to play only a supporting role in the analysis. Nevertheless, the fact that an insufficient number of surveys was completed to allow for reliable quantitative analysis is highly disappointing. I sincerely believe, however, that my development and use of a survey instrument was a very valuable learning experience

Journaling

Journaling is the primary research tool utilized over the course of my study. In the current research, journaling is used as a method to record observations, feelings, and reflections on events that transpire in the classroom. Journaling takes place before, during, and after the enhanced agency unit, reflecting the mood, thoughts, concerns, and role of the educator during these three important time frames (Ulusoy, 2016). Though journaling has relatively recently become a “serious component in qualitative research projects”(Janesick, 1999, p. 506), digital journaling has been shown to be a valued and flexible approach for qualitative data collection (Dillon, 2010). Journaling is a recognized and commonly practiced pedagogical approach in

education with regards to improving learning and practice (Ewald, 2012; Hubbs & Brand, 2010; Humble & Sharp, 2012, 2012). Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson (2012), for example, note that journaling is well accepted as a valid way of collecting rich qualitative data. Although they are writing from a medical research point of view, it is reasonable to argue that journaling can also be a rich source of data for educational research. Consistent with this approach, journaling is becoming a common and respected data source in the study of educational practice (Beeman-Cadwallader, Buck, & Trauth-Nare, 2014; Kim, 2011; Mayes, Montero, & Cutri, 2004; Ulusoy, 2016).

For this research, I kept a journal that recorded my observations of student behaviour, the classroom environment, and my personal insights and thoughts regarding how I experienced my shift of role into a more facilitative practitioner. Though Mayes et al's. (2004) research is focused on the issues faced by multicultural students and teachers, they also used journals as a primary source of data. They further discuss the importance of not simply focusing on the students. It is also highly informative to gain insight into the "teacher's *own* internal and institutional dilemmas as he helps his students makes sense out of theirs" (p.2). Although this article is dealing with very different contextual issues, it highlights three important similarities with my study that inform journaling as a research method:

1. Journaling offers unique and important insights into the research, and can provide valid, rich qualitative data.
2. The role of the educator is an important part of the overall picture of educational research. Their unique and shared experiences with the students offer different perspectives and insights which could add new value to the research base.
3. Teachers and students are both shaped my internal and institutional dilemmas. In Mayes et al's. (2004) research, these dilemmas were centered on issues of

race/culture discontinuity, whereas in my case, the dilemmas are focused on *academic* culture discontinuity.

Though using journals as primary data sources is gaining in popularity in educational research and in other disciplines, it is still challenging to find articles that have a direct overlap with my research. Still, work such as that of Beeman-Cadwallader et al. (2014) offers helpful direction and support for journaling as a source of primary data. In this sense, their work in particular has three relevant similarities with this case study: the research was a self study, whereby the educator was part of the research; journaling was a primary source of data and formed a major part of the results and discussion sections of the article; the journal was related to shifting to a more facilitative approach in an educational setting, observed both the teacher and student reactions in terms of where responsibility for learning rests, and documented how students react to enhanced agency.

An important area of difference, however, is that Beeman-Cadwallader et al. (2014) are studying university level students from a professor's point of view. Also, as opposed to my thematic analysis, the authors chose to conduct a critical events analysis. However, as large portions of the journal are published in the article, I can glean other similarities from the research to be discussed in Chapter 4. This point highlights the importance of including journal entries in my results section. Doing so increases the potential transferability of my conclusions as the primary source of information for my study is made accessible to other researchers and practitioners.

In considering an appropriate medium for recording my journal, not only does an electronic journal provide "an artifact that may be revisited later for deeper understandings and to review hypotheses, ideas, and research methods—whether accepted or discarded in the formal work" (Hai-Jew, 2015, p. 699), it can also be analyzed and interpreted by anyone else

who takes an interest in the research topic. This provides an historical artifact available to be revisited by those intimate with the research and by those with a more distant or objective view. This improves the potential richness of possible data available to add to the research topic and helps support the credibility of journaling as a primary source of data in qualitative research. Interestingly, found research regarding the importance and usefulness of journaling that was presented in the format of diary entries by Janesick (1999). That is, her article was presented as it would have appeared in her personal writing log which highlighted the historical importance journals have played in understanding experience, as well as how they can be implemented meaningfully in qualitative research. Given the precedent of journaling in previous research, and the similarities between my research and other peer reviewed research utilizing journaling, I concluded that it was not only an appropriate but a preferred method of primary data collection for my case study.

Comparative Description of Standard and Enhanced Agency Units

The research treatments were two units of study differing in their pedagogical approach. The first unit (Unit A) consisted of teaching students about Ancient Egypt. The students had no choice in the content of the lessons, of how the content would be learned or presented, nor on the quantity and types of assessments. This pedagogical approach is reflective of me wielding full “institutional power” as vested in my authority as a professional teacher (Reitenauer, 2017). My authority, as such, involved choosing what students would learn and how they would learn it. This included assessing their final product based on criteria selected by me and the school administration using the AERO and Common Core Curriculums as assessment guides.

At this stage of the school year, each eighty-minute block of the class is split between forty minutes for Social Studies and forty minutes for Language Arts. A typical Social Studies class begins with assigning different sections of a chapter to a group of students. These groups are assigned randomly using a built-in randomizer of a popular classroom management tool.

The students are provided a textbook and assigned a chapter to read as a group. They are then instructed to use the section review as a guide to create a Google Slide presentation of that section. This divides the chapter amongst the students so that each student has an opportunity to act as a content expert for one part of the chapter. Individual students are then positioned to produce a section summary for the benefit of others. The result is a presentation that allows all students to learn the most important aspects of each section of the chapter, while only reading one section in depth. They are graded on the quality of their content and by how well the other students can answer the section review questions asked on a summative quiz. There is also a grade by design element, such as use of space, color and amount of text for the presentation slide. In addition to this and random pop quizzes on sections that had been covered, there are chapter tests that are derived from the section review questions. Throughout this standard unit, students have no choice in the content, sources of information or types of assessment. This process is designed to take place over two weeks of classes, a standard unit length in my typical classroom schedule. Throughout Unit A, I recorded my observations about student engagement, motivation, amount of agency I see exercised, and their response to that agency. I also reflect on my role in the classroom over the course of the unit.

The student agency unit (Unit B) is designed to enhance student agency to an unprecedented degree in a middle school classroom, allowing students to choose what they will learn, how they will learn, and what qualities of their learning they would like to have assessed. The only parameter in which students do not have a choice is that there will be a public showcase of what they have learned at the end of the unit. The students are held accountable by a planning form made in conjunction with the teacher where we co-develop an essential question they will try to answer. As well, students are challenged at various points to envision their final product and the steps they will need to achieve in order to be successful. My role is to

help focus their learning, act as a facilitator, and find curriculum outcomes that the student will be naturally achieving over the course of their Unit B learning.

The enhanced agency unit began at the end of the standard unit with a group brainstorming session about possible topics of interest to students. The students were encouraged to think about what they would really like to learn. On the preceding Monday, a planning form was distributed to students. The first part of the form has students envisioning their final product, basing it on the essential/driving question of their curiosity, and determining the steps necessary to accomplish a satisfactory outcome. Students also created a timeline as well as designed a rubric to be used to assess their work.

My role in Unit B is varied and mostly consists of challenging students on details, realistic timelines, and the overall scope of their projects. For example, some students may choose projects that are overly ambitious or vague, while others are too specific and easy to accomplish. Through a variety of whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction and guidance, students fine-tuned their projects into something we both thought achievable and challenging. My role became much more ambiguous after this initial phase of Unit B.

The next phase of the project consisted of me conferencing on a one-on-one basis with each individual student. Given the variety of projects chosen, my role in these conferences included being a pedagogical expert over various platforms, technology expert, and facilitative expert. Students were encouraged to refer to me on a first name basis, sit where, how and with whom they wanted, and decide whether they would complete homework. I encouraged students who I thought were behind to complete tasks at home, but if questioned on whether homework is mandatory or if they will get a “homework strike”, I conceded that it was their decision. I also ensured that each student was aware of their timeline, the date of the presentation, and the amount of time available to them in class in order to complete their projects.

The final few classes had the same basic approach as the rest of the enhanced agency unit with students finalizing their projects and presentations. As Unit B concluded, the Cybrary was booked and classes, teachers, parents, and administrators were sent email invitations to join us for the student presentation. On the day of the presentation, students are set up in various locations around the Cybrary and visitors were free to roam and visit each station, completing a feedback rubric. The rubric was specifically developed for each project by the student in conjunction with me and was the only summative factor in determining the student's grade for the unit.

At the end of Unit A and Unit B, students and parents were emailed the informed consent letter as well as a digital link to the online survey. This link is only open for a set amount of time that encompasses the last few days of each unit until the following Sunday at midnight. For example, it was open the last few days of the standard unit into the weekend after that unit was finished. It is then closed before the enhanced student agency unit begins to ensure there is no overlap or confusion regarding survey responses. Another survey link is then shared over the last few days of the enhanced agency unit and closed two days after the end of that unit.

Procedures for Analysis of Data

Data was intended to be collected from three sources. First, from a student surveys designed to measure the students' sense of motivation and agency during a standard unit of study as well as for a unit of study designed to enhance student agency. Second, from a parent survey to measure similar perceptions based on how much agency and motivation parents believe their child has for each unit. The student and parent surveys also asked open-ended questions to give respondents more latitude in expressing any other emotions or thoughts they may have. Unfortunately, due to a low response rate from an already small number of participants, a valid analysis of the survey data was not possible. The survey and its limited production of data will be further addressed in Chapter 4.

However, the third and main data source, my professional journal, proved to be a very rich source of data. I used my journal to observe and chronical the experiences, behaviours, feelings, and attitudes of myself and of the students during the enhanced agency unit and during the standard unit. In keeping with ethics approval, my journal entries were written and stored using a password-protected digital word processor.

A thematic approach was taken with regard to analysing the journal data as “a thematic approach includes extensive discussion about the major themes that arise from analyzing a qualitative database” (Creswell, 2012, p. 274). Thematic analysis is a widely used method within qualitative research and offers an excellent first method for use by qualitative researchers. It provides a strong foundation for further types of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis also “assumes that the recorded messages themselves (i.e., the texts) are the data, and codes are developed by the investigator during close examination of the texts as salient themes emerge inductively from the texts” (Neuendorf, 2019, p. 212). In this case, the journal entries were printed to paper and themes were identified, coded, and compiled for analysis by hand. This approach was more appropriate than using a computer programme as I worked with a small database and I wanted to “be close to the data and have a hands-on feel for it” (Creswell, 2012, p. 240).

The journal text was analyzed in two phases. First, a preliminary exploratory analysis was carried out in order to generate some general ideas and initial sense of organization before continuing to coding. “Coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in data” (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). Some authors have recently begun to provide step-by-step directions for performing thematic analysis in order to ensure it is conducted in a rigorous manner. For example, Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017) identify six phases for performing thematic analysis: become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report.

Creswell (2012) also identifies six similar steps for analyzing data thematically: build a sense of the data, choose one document (in this case a single journal entry), begin coding by identifying text segments, reduce overlap and redundancy by grouping similar codes, review and revise by re-visiting the data to see if it “fits” or if new codes emerge, and finally reduce codes to between five and seven themes.

Both methods follow a basic pattern of collecting textual data, becoming intimate with the data, revisiting the data and distilling the major or important qualitative aspects down into a relatively small group of themes. In this case, I initially read the journal text and highlighted phrases or terms that stood out to me, and I applied a consistent code to all similar text. Different codes were highlighted with a different color. After my first few initial reads, the coded text was compiled to produce approximately twenty themes. I have since reduced this number to five by grouping related themes and blending of redundant ones. This solidification of distinct themes was rendered by the third in-depth reading of journal text during the thematic analysis process.

From Reliable and Generalizable to Credible and Trustworthy

Traditionally, reliability, validity, and generalizability are the standards to which quantitative studies are held. However, there are equally important research concepts that may be viewed differently when conducting qualitative research (Trainor, 2017). Though the survey used consisted of Likert-type scale measures traditionally associated with quantitative designs, the purpose of the surveys in this case study was to provide a method of generating internal validity. This would be done by triangulating what the teacher felt and observed with what the students and parents perceived. In this way, the observations that I noted in my journal could be checked with what the students and parents thought was happening. While this was the intent, the primary data for this study and its subsequent findings have now been drawn from the journal entries. This marks a distinct shift in the study to the realm of qualitative research.

There have been many prospective terms proposed and utilized over the years attempting to characterize and describe the interpretative and often content specific nature of qualitative findings. These include but are not limited to: trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, accuracy, dependability and transferability (Creswell, 2012; McAllister & Rowe, 2003; Savenye & Robinson, 2005; Zohrabi, 2013). With regard to the qualitative aspects of research, Zohrabi (2013) notes that “the principles underlying naturalistic and/or qualitative research are based on the fact that validity is a matter of trustworthiness, utility, and dependability that the evaluator and the different stakeholders place into it” (p. 258). My essential understanding is that qualitative research should provide enough detail on the context, participants, processes, data sources, and analysis in order to allow others to gauge the quality and credibility of the research, and the accuracy and relevance of the conclusions. Some theorists recommend following six basic strategies to help ensure quality research (Doyle, 2016; Zohrabi, 2013): triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination, participatory modes of research, and awareness of researcher bias. Others focus on only three primary forms of validating qualitative research: member checking, auditing, and triangulation (Creswell, 2012).

Given the relatively unique situation of my being part of the research while other participants remained anonymous to me, renders the ability to member check and engage in genuine participant modes of enquiry mute for practical and ethical reasons. As for auditing, the practice of systematically submitting my work to my supervisor and ultimately to a review committee acts as an external audit of the research. As previously noted, the possibility for triangulation was lost due to low survey completion rates. This leaves long-term observation and being forthright and open about my “assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation” (Doyle, 2016, p. 30) as the most appropriate and plausible further strategies for establishing trustworthiness.

Having been a teacher for nine years, I have spent thousands of hours in classrooms across three continents and have taught students from dozens of nationalities. Though the current research was focused on a small case study of my current classroom practices, the inspiration for the study was a result of long-term observations of similar traits across curriculums, nationalities, and classrooms. Though this research is specific to the students I teach at this time, I think the issues, challenges, and experiences of this specific group extended to many other schools, classes and students. They are certainly representative of other students I have taught. Moreover, the interests of this study coincide with those expressed in many lengthy discussions I have had with colleagues over my career. Though there are undoubtedly differences from one setting to another, I believe the results of this long-time observation and details shared within the research will ring true with other educators. In this sense, the current research satisfies what Zohrabi (2013) refers to as the utility criterion, stating that the “endeavor generates enough information for the decision-makers with regard to the effectiveness and appropriateness of the program” (p.259). It is my belief, therefore, that other educators and decisions makers will be able to use the information generated here to inform and inspire their decisions and practices. My journal and observations are intended to capture my interpretation of the phenomenon occurring in situ and thus there “is no absolute benchmark by which one can take repeated measures and establish reliability in the positivist sense” (Doyle, 2016, p. 30). Credibility of qualitative research is not about being able to reproduce the same results but, rather, that based on the data collected “the findings and results are consistent and dependable” (Zohrabi, 2013, p. 6). Given the specific nature of the study, it is hoped that the “the user of the study (and not the researcher) can determine the extent to which the study is useful in his or her context” (Trainor, 2017, p. 40).

Audit Trail

Although triangulation, disclosure of potential researcher bias, and clear explanation of the researcher's position relative to participants are important factors in ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative conclusions, so too is the audit trail. An audit trail has the researcher describe in detail how data was collected and analyzed as well as how themes were derived and results obtained with the purpose of allowing others to replicate the study (Zohrabi, 2013). Simply stated, "An audit trail is essentially a log of how the data was collected and analyzed. This can be kept in the form of a research journal, or in records memoranda written by the researcher" (Trainor, 2017).

For the current study, I offer the following as a concise summary of my audit trail. The introduction and literature review give the reader a background understanding of my involvement as well as my potential bias as a researcher. Detailed accounts of what data was collected, how it was collected, and of the participants are given in the methodology and methods section. The journal and record of observations as well as their date are stored electronically in their raw format and, as there was a relatively small data set (one journal over a two-unit period), manually coded, compiled, and themed. The journal was created and maintained in Microsoft Onenote. Once the manual analysis was completed, I was able to use Microsoft Onenote's digital inking capabilities to highlight and annotate directly over top of the journal entries in order to create an electronic record of my thematic analysis. The electronic document has been stored as the finished journal with my annotations directly on the journal entries.

Summary

This research was initially born out of concern for a perceived lack of motivation and ownership with regards to students learning. Thought and consideration towards designing the

research were constrained by practical and ethical matters such as the time available with students and my being part of the research. I attempted to glean as much information, from as many different perspectives as possible over the course of the research. It was important to maintain responses as anonymous but also, to ensure the anonymity of those who participated in the survey portion of the research. In other words, it was important that I not only ensure that I could not link specific responses to specific students or parents, but also important that I would not be able to determine whether a student or parent participated. The student and parent surveys both had closed-form Likert style questions as well as open-ended questions. These were only open for responses for a set time period near the end of each unit, ensuring there was no overlap in responding. I intended to use the survey results and my journaling results to triangulate insights regarding my research questions vis a vis student agency. As this was not possible, I used qualitative methods of analysis focused on my journal text to complete a credible study. The results regarding student agency, the role of the teacher in an enhanced agency classroom, and how they relate to teacher leadership are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Presentation of the Data

Introduction

This research was conducted as a case study that investigated both the teaching role and informal leadership role of a teacher during an enhanced agency unit. The investigation sought to collect both qualitative and quantitative data related to my four research questions:

1. What is student agency and how is it defined in the context of my research?
2. What degree of student agency is reasonable for classroom settings and what effect will enhancing it have on students?
3. What is the role of the educator in an enhanced agency classroom, and how are high expectations and student accountable maintained in such an environment?
4. How can teachers lead meaningful changes in facilitating student agency at the classroom and school level?

Question one was investigated throughout the literature review and refined for my intended research. Data for questions two and three were collected from journal entries documenting class observations and my thoughts, feelings, and reactions as a teacher in an enhanced agency environment. Additionally, a survey was used to solicit both student and parent perspectives on the amount of agency and motivation they felt they had in both a traditional unit and an enhanced agency unit. The fourth question was explored throughout the literature review and analysis of journal entries.

Survey Results

One set of surveys was designed to be answered by students in order to measure their sense of agency and motivation during a traditional unit, and another set to measure the same during an enhanced agency unit. A similar set of surveys was also made

available for parents, in order to discern the amount of agency and motivation they felt their children had or demonstrated over the course of the different units. However, collection of survey data proved to be difficult for both practical and ethical reasons. As part of the research, and as the students' teacher, it was paramount that I not be able to identify student or parent responses, or even if a particular student or parent had responded. This allowed for some separation between me as the teacher and me as the researcher. This meant students and parents would have a limited window of time to respond to the email in order to avoid overlapping the two data collection periods. In addition to the small class size and limited timeframe, there is very little reliable internet available in the community. I believe for these reasons, and others discussed in Chapter 5, there was a very low response rate. Given the low number of responses, there was no possibility of drawing significant or viable conclusions from the data. With this in mind, I have made the survey data that was collected and analysis available in Appendix C. Though not statistically significant, the data hints at interesting insights that could be of some value when considering conclusions drawn from my journaling.

Journaling Results

With the use of journals as data sources becoming more common in educational research (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014; Dillon, 2010; Mayes et al., 2004), I felt that it would be an ideal data source and research tool for the purposes of my study. Journaling took place over the course of three weeks in November and December of 2017. The journaling commenced with a reflective entry on the traditional unit of study that I had taught in previous years. In order to ensure detailed journal entries, I decided to log entries whenever I felt particularly motivated by either my observations or emotions. There were six detailed journal entries logged over the 12 teaching days of the Agency Unit, and one final reflective entry two months after the unit had ended. This was due to the fact that, in retrospect, I had been very emotionally close to the research and my frustration at times was clear in my journal entries. I

decided that it may benefit the research to make one last entry after I had time to reflect and distance myself from the agency unit. Additionally, it allowed me to make any observations of small changes in the students' day-to-day habits as we returned to more traditional units.

From analyzing and coding the data as discussed in Chapter 3, four themes emerged: engagement, teacher's role, authority, and environment (see Figure 1). From the data, Engagement was the most often entered theme (48 times) followed by Teacher's Role (20 times), Authority (17 times), and Environment (5 times).

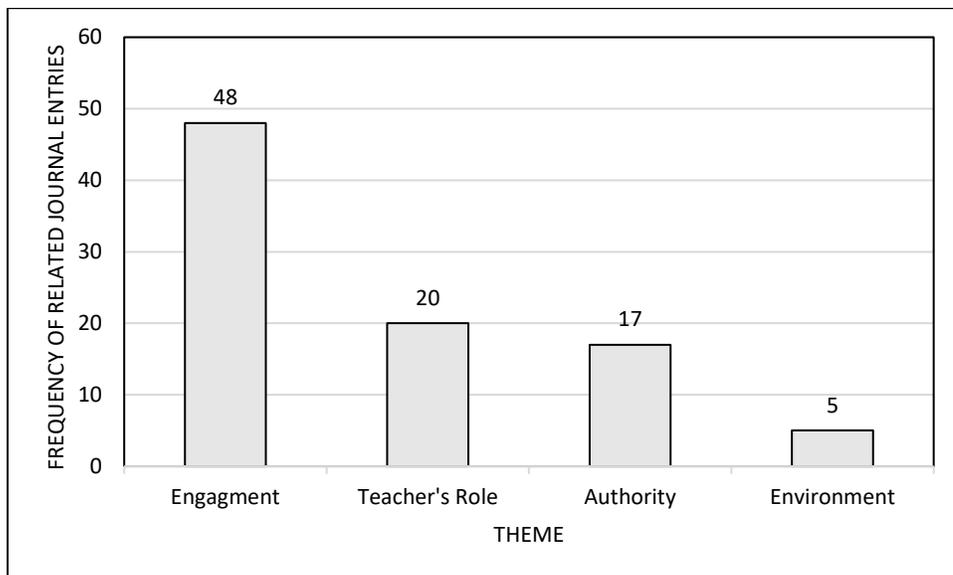


Figure 1: Frequency of coded entries identified by thematic analysis of the journal entries recorded during the enhanced agency unit.

Engagement

Of all the themes that emerged during analysis, engagement was the one most often identified (see Figure 2). There were three main categories that were identified within the engagement theme: aspiring to complete only the bare minimum, polarized engagement, and engagement in and of itself. Though these elements did overlap at times (some entries having

been coded for all three), they also registered distinct entries related to students' overall engagement. Interestingly, many of the engagement themes that emerged occurred in the first three journal entries or first week of the two-week agency unit. In fact, 35 (or 73%) of the total 48 entries coded for "engagement" occurred in that time frame.

Out of the 48 instances of entries coded for engagement, fully 24 (50%) were related in some way to students aspiring to the bare minimum or trying to get something done as quickly as possible, rather than trying to get something done well. The first instances occurred at the end of the traditional unit. In the shared accountability exercise students decided that, instead of reading a whole chapter themselves, they preferred to assign sections to everyone and then create a slide to help teach each other the most important parts of each section.

At the end, there were still a significant number of slides that did not adequately fulfill the three criteria. They were also weary of the shared accountability aspect of having to rely on other students, and rightfully so as some of them let them down in a big way. The students found this hard to articulate, stating things like "But I did my part and Timothy didn't do his, it's not fair". However, when I asked them if I had just assigned the whole chapter to them (approximately 5 sections or ~25 pages), most were appalled at the idea, with an almost unitary gasp of "No!". It was interesting that the students were happy to accept the benefits of teamwork, but not the potential risks. (AC Journal Entry, November 27th,2017)

It is clear that some students felt that, since there was a shared workload, it was an opportunity to "slack off" and that, if they were the only one not to do their work, everyone could still do well. Unfortunately, when more than one person had that thought, it suddenly became a larger issue and many of the students (who had done their best) felt let down. By the beginning of the agency unit, there were some students I was concerned about. There were two that I was most preoccupied with:

Student 1, who we will call Matt is a capable student who has mastered the art of doing just enough. It is evident that they are not usually keen often asking (more to themselves) "Why do we have to do this?". Though this student hands in good work, it is clear that they have no interest in doing more than what is necessary. The other student who was leading this charge, Tim, is routinely off task, disruptive

and often hands in work well below both expected and potential levels. (AC Journal Entry, December 1st, 2017)

Though I was concerned with these students, it was vital that I give them the space they needed to exercise their agency. Unfortunately, on the first official day of the project, it was clear that for some students, freedom of choice was not a level of responsibility that they seemed ready for:

We explored the philosophy of the project as a class on Friday and students were supposed to come to class on Monday with ideas. Though they were excited, a few neglected the purpose/philosophy and came woefully underprepared. It is evident with a couple of students in particular - It is clear that the idea they are sharing is one that was last minute and seemed to be generic. The project idea was suspiciously similar to the unit we had just covered, almost as if the student saw this as just another school project. I am not sure if this is because they don't really believe me in terms of the freedom of choice, if they are playing safe, if the recent unit is still in the mind, or if they feel it will be the easiest way of accomplishing the project. (AC Journal entry, December 3rd, 2017)

Over the course of the rest of the week, the journal entries are peppered with phrases that indicated that I perceived students to be aspiring to the bare minimum or worse. I noted that students often perceived the project as a barrier, rather than an opportunity, and my emotional reactions become more evident as well. "It has been a stressful week...Thought students were excited about their projects, it became evident that some of them were still looking for the easy path and saw it as "just something that needed to get done"" (AC, Journal Entry, December 7th, 2017).

As I attempted to facilitate projects, it was clear that my journal entries were largely focusing on the negative aspects of what was happening. When I gave feedback, students would often ask if they had to incorporate it. I would suggest that they do, but that ultimately it was their choice. Often, a sub-group of students opted not to incorporate the feedback:

They see guidance, advice and suggestions as things that since they do not need to do it, why bother? This small subgroup has routinely ignored any feedback (whether written or verbal) and frankly, I feel are using the lack of stringent, clear parameters as means of being lazy...[Using it as an] opportunity to slack off...[and]

approach school just wanting to go through the motions. (AC, Journal Entries, December 12th, 2017)

This would ultimately lead to the other two sub-themes of engagement. One of the sub-themes was engagement in and of itself and the second was the perceived polarization of students with regards to their engagement. It seemed that students who were normally engaged were now more engaged, and students who were traditionally not engaged were now less engaged. This was most likely due to the lack of norms and routines used to hold them accountable in a traditional unit. It was clear from the onset of the project that there were two general reactions to the practice of enhancing student agency. Students either put more effort into their projects than I would normally see, or they would put in much less effort:

The idea that they were responsible for something abstract produced a spectrum of emotional responses. Some were excited, elated or intrigued. Others seemed to have a laissez-faire about it, just another box to be ticked. A small group even seemed to be initially semi-hostile, with pouting faced, accusatory glances of disbelief that I wasn't going to tell them exactly what to do, or when. The first class was...trying. (AC, Journal Entry, December 3rd, 2017)

Here we see that, from day one, some students saw it as an exciting opportunity to expand their learning and explore something new, while others saw it as a difficulty and barrier.

This theme would reappear over the course of the project as seen in the following journal entry:

Ultimately, the students who are struggling with putting together a strong, challenging project that will produce a quality outcome are the same students who struggle in my traditional classes. At this point in the project, I would actually probably rate them as being less engaged and that having less structure (even with me acting as a guide and facilitator) is having an overall negative impact on that subset of students. On the other hand, the students that are normally engaged are even more engaged. It seems as though this project has just pushed everyone further into their default mode. Engaged/curious students are more engaged/curious. Those who see school as being boring and just as a set of chores to accomplish are approaching this project the same way, but without the structure and routine of normal lessons. (AC, Journal Entry, December 7th, 2017)

However, by the end of the unit, the frequency of these entries had dropped off. In the last journal entry of the project, there are two brief sections related to engagement and zero

related to polarized engagement. The most substantive journal remarks near the end of the unit occur in the second to last journal entry:

I suppose if I am being honest with myself, I am disappointed in the lack of enthusiasm that has been shown by the majority of students. Though students were initially interested and excited about their projects (and many have enthusiastically embraced them), it did not have the impact on the more disinterested learners as I had hoped. There remains a small group of students (approximately 20-25%) who have almost no motivation or ambition... A couple of students (who had been struggling with traditional units as well) have continued to struggle. Where as the traditional units at least presented clear hoops to jump through, this project has left them wandering no where quickly...[but] Other students have a refreshingly enthusiastic take though. Some have embraced their fears, striving to conquer their fears of performing in public. Others have stepped outside their academic focus in order to pursue art and I have discovered some have a particular hidden talent for videography. (AC, Journal Entry, December 12th, 2017)

There were signs from the beginning of the unit that there would be issues with engagement, particularly with regard to the agency creating a polarization of students. Some would embrace freedom and responsibility while others would embrace the lack of routine and structure. This issue intertwined itself the other emergent themes of authority, the teacher's role, and the environment.

Teacher's Role

The first journal entries related to the theme of teacher's role that emerged were tied to the issue of authority from both the students' point of view and from how I planned to deal with it: "What do you mean, I have to think of something, that's your job... The first class was...trying... But I am confident that through conferencing, I can steer them in the right direction." (AC, Journal Entry, December 3rd, 2017)

Clearly at this point, I felt my role was going to be relatively straightforward. At this stage, I clearly felt that if I provided guidance for students, coupled with the freedom of learning about something interesting, then they would learn. I didn't anticipate at this junction that some students may choose to explore their agency by not engaging in their learning:

It has been a stressful week... Though students were excited about their projects, it became evident that some of them were still looking for the easy path and saw it as "just something that needed to get done"... On the positive side, it seems like it was different students at different stages driving my frustration. For example, students that did not have an idea (or good idea) prepared for Monday seemed to take off when we were able to identify one and really got engaged in their topic. Others who had a great idea (and driving question) earlier in the week seemed to hit a wall and started trying to take some shortcuts... For me, I would say that this project has been both more stressful and more rewarding... The stress is the normal stress confounded by students being off task, and ignoring guidance. (AC, Journal Entry, December 3rd, 2017)

It seems clear now that though I felt my role would be relatively clear going into the project, it quickly became apparent that there were no simple delineations for my new role. The purpose of the unit was to enhance student agency and I felt that each exertion of authority would erode that agency. As students explored their agency, it became difficult for me to accept that, when given freedom to learn about things, their natural curiosity would not necessarily override a tendency to waste time. At the outset of the project, I felt that when given avenues to explore their interests, they would choose to do so. I felt that being off task was a result of a boring curriculum that did not interest them. A lack of power over their decisions is what drove them to avoid doing their best. It was difficult and evidently frustrating to realize that this was not necessarily the case.

Interestingly, my journal entries revealed a shift in my own focus and concern as the unit progressed. The majority of the engagement entries occurred in the first half of the unit (35 of 48 or ~73%) and the majority of entries related to the teacher's role occurred in the latter half (11 of 17 or ~65%). It is clear that I was frustrated, but having reflected later on the matter and revisiting my journal as a researcher (Tabach, 2011), I noted the following:

I suppose this makes sense and I shouldn't really have been surprised. How could two weeks of comparative agency compete with 6-7 years of relatively authoritative environment? Since their schooling began they have been told when to take breaks, when to eat, where to sit, what to do, how to do it and to please the teacher and/or parents. Looking back now as a researcher, I suppose I am surprised that any student actually trusted this freedom and chose to exercise it at all on a purely instinctual level. Even for those that embraced it, it must have been terrifying,

having the responsibility of so many decisions being thrust upon them where so few had been before. Remarkable. (AC, Journal Entry as Researcher, December 12th,2017)

When I was able to step back and look at the issues through the lens of a researcher, I appear to have become much more objective about the reason for some students' lack of responsibility for their learning. As a teacher, I was obviously passionate and sure that students would stop putting in the minimum effort if they were able to learn about things they were interested in. My observations seemed to indicate otherwise for at least some students. This realization was frustrating for me as a teacher, and I think it is good that I gave myself some time and space before coming back to look at the data as a researcher. The distance allowed me to get past my frustrations as a teacher and look at potential reasons for that frustration as a researcher.

Also, as most of the class worked through the engagement issue, I began to question more deeply what my role was as teacher/facilitator – especially for the students who were still struggling with engagement:

The agency provided to them has proven to be frustrating for me, blurring my line between facilitator/authority figure and too much rope for them. They see guidance, advice and suggestions as things that since they do not need to do it, why bother? This small subgroup has routinely ignored any feedback (whether written or verbal) and frankly, I feel are using the lack of stringent, clear parameters as means of being lazy... It also continues to blur the line of my role in the class... If the student feels that working on the project at home is a better means of completing it, does that not fall under the parameter of exercising their agency in "how" they learn? This is especially pertinent for this student as they are not generally a behaviour problem. Though off task in class, they do not distract others. Shall I wait to see what is ultimately delivered?... It is difficult as I don't want to push them towards something and I worry that is what they are waiting for. I'm concerned it is still less of "What do I want to learn about" and "What do I want to learn about that will make my teacher happy". As time runs out, the pressure is on both of us and I continue to balance my role of being facilitative without dictating explicit goals. I have found that by asking questions and avoiding declaratives to be a good way of guiding or pulling rather than dictating/pushing... I am reminded of a graph to success I want saw that invariably had a large dip before success and I feel I am there now. It was ambitious of me to have delved into this agency project this far into the semester as it is a demanding role, but it is how the timing

worked out and I want to challenge my beliefs in authentic ways. (AC, Journal Entry, December 12th, 2017)

It becomes clear that the agency unit was a more demanding approach to teaching and learning than the approach required for a traditional unit. As the project continued, however, I was able to get comfortable with my role and balance my authority with the enhanced agency of the students. That said, my journal entry from the day of the project shows I was not completely satisfied with my new, facilitative role:

Today was mostly a success by outsider standards, but if I am honest with myself, I ultimately feel disappointed. It is clear that some students appreciated being able to explore topics of interest to them, but as an observer I would not say they were full of passion towards it...They delivered a project, but when I think of the hours available to them just at school, I feel....underwhelmed. In addition to this, it is obvious that many students put in very little effort at home - If it wasn't assigned by a teacher, there was no way they were going to volunteer to do something even remotely related to school... I am...relieved that it is over without having been a complete disaster and it has honestly changed some of my more idealistic notions regarding agency and motivation and just where on the spectrum might be appropriate for my Middle Schoolers. (AC, Journal Entry, December 14th, 2017)

Ultimately it is clear that, although I was able to get more comfortable in my facilitative role, I was left with as many questions as answers. This is particularly true for students who were largely disengaged despite my guidance and encouragement. Going into the agency unit, I felt that giving students autonomy to explore their interests would help motivate them to learn (Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015). However, my focus on being a facilitator in tandem with my hesitation to hold any aspect of class in a traditional teacher-as-expert structure may have actually stifled student agency (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014; Williams, 2017), at least for some students. Though some researchers have noted that students embrace chances for enhanced agency (Goodman, Hoagland, Pierre-Toussaint, Rodriguez, & Sanabria, 2011), others find that creating the environment to do so can be a challenging balancing act of knowing when to facilitate and when to teach (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). I now think students had no reference point for exercising their enhanced agency as most of their schooling has been under autocratic rule without much authentic voice (Goodman et al., 2011; Ladkin,

Sharnae, 2017). This left them with an inability to understand how the new classroom environment would work. When I focused on acting only as a “teacher-as-facilitator, students did not actively accept control over their learning” (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014, p. 82). It seems that in spite of my fears of me taking control early in the lesson impinging on student agency, it has been noted that beginning a lesson with the teacher exercising authority and gradually releasing responsibility for learning to the students has a greater and more positive impact on student agency (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014).

Whereas Ladkin and Sharnae (2017) indicated that the inherent power imbalance between student and teacher lead to apathy, Beeman-Cadwallader et al. (2014) found that too much of a facilitator role played by the teacher produced a similar outcome. While these findings indicate that a shift towards addressing the teacher-student power dynamic is important for enhancing student agency, they also show that any changes should be incremental and context sensitive. These conclusions align well with my personal observations as I worked to redefine my role in the classroom. Through this experience I’ve learned that it is possible for teachers to act as authoritative experts and as facilitators of agency for student learning.

Authority

Though engagement had the highest frequency of entries (48), the first emergent theme to appear was that of authority with a total of 17 entries. It became clear early in my journaling that my authority carried certain expectations. Students often were uncomfortable when responsibility was shifted from me explicitly showing them each step in the learning to them learning and exploring how to apply concepts. This was highlighted in the second sentence of my first journal entry:

I have been surprised at how comfortable students are with direction. Students have even commented that they are more comfortable with me telling them what they need to know and having them simply regurgitate it. They are incredibly

uncomfortable when asked to complete a task that is not explicitly laid out in the most detailed manner. (AC Journal Entry, November 27th,2017)

This theme of students needing everything to be explicit and to come from an authority figure has been rife throughout my teaching career. It was interesting to me how many students could have so little interest in in a topic but still carry out what I asked of them. It is clearly tied to many possible themes within education, but there is an undeniable link to the authority that exists between student and teacher.

It is rather strange to me how little resistance there is from the kids. None of them seem particularly interested in Ancient Egypt and yet they (mostly) dutifully carry on with their work, stressing about grades and tests. (AC Journal entry, December 1st,2017).

It seems slightly counterintuitive to me that we are expecting students to develop 21st Century skills such as collaboration, problem-solving and communication without first addressing the effects of the student-teacher dynamic within the classroom. Unfortunately, the research seems to find conflicting results about the effects on the teacher's role and student agency. Some research shows that "learner agency was fostered across study schools by negotiating the power of who made decisions in the classroom" (Ryerson, 2017, p. 308). This indicates that relinquishing some of the innate power and authority of the teacher can enhance student agency. Other research, however, suggests that the teacher taking on a more direct approach did not actually have a negative impact on student agency, particularly from the perspective of the student. In other words "students do not necessarily equate teacher-as-expert with their own disempowerment" (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014, p. 82). The same research goes on to indicate that beginning a lesson as an expert, and gradually shifting towards a more facilitative approach in the same class session seemed to have the greatest result of enhanced student agency.

I have chosen to extend myself as far down the spectrum as I feel possible while still maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment. As such I have relinquished much of

my traditional authority, and remitted it to the students, not in a belief of it being a greater pedagogical approach, but rather to determine how much student agency is feasible.

Fortunately as we transitioned from the traditional unit, I encouraged students to share their thoughts and concerns with me and a couple obliged and explored their agency by challenging my authority.

Some students, thankfully, at least came to challenge me, asking "why do we need to learn about Ancient Egypt? and "how that was going to help me later in life?". Interestingly, the two students who derailed the conversation with this question (of which I was happy to explore) are probably two of the more...disengaged students... Interestingly, other than the disengagement factor (Which Matt deals with much better), these students differ greatly - One is quiet and introspective and the other is outgoing and likes to be the center of attention. Both have siblings, but one of them is the younger sibling and the other is the elder. One has been at the school most of their academic career and the other a relatively recent addition. Academically speaking, the most obvious thing they had in common was a strong desire to know what the point of learning Ancient Egypt was and difficulty fully engaging with the material, particularly when it was challenging in any way. (AC Journal entry, December 1st,2017)

The above clearly illustrates many of the numerous themes that emerged over the course of the research but it also marked the first moment in the research where students challenged my authority in some way. The two students mentioned are students I was concerned about as they were often ones who would aspire to the bare minimum. Yet, it was precisely those two who first trusted me when I sought honest feedback and explored their agency in challenging my authority.

It seems that the comfort with authority and relative lack of agency over students' academic choices has potentially had a negative impact on their engagement. Student submissiveness to adult demands, routines and expectations, without over resistance, has produced a student body that takes an apathetic approach to their learning (Goodman et al., 2011). In my experiences as the teacher, I was making observations that students were comfortable with me being in control of their learning, but, as a result, they were not engaged with their learning but doing the bare minimum. Though this tendency of many students to strive

for the bare minimum is distinct from the authority sub-theme, it appears related. This relationship is best highlighted by the following journal entry:

This sets an interesting paradigm to address and highlights the vicious catch-22 I feel we have devolved into. It seems the kids don't want to learn things that I (The man/The system etc.) want to make them learn, but if I don't make them learn it, they will choose not to. By over-prescribing what they learn about and how they learn it over the 6-8 years of their academic career, it seems we have come to an agreement of quiet, but minimal acquisition. Almost as if they are collectively saying "OK, we will do this, but not one bit more than we need too." (AC Journal Entry December 1st, 2017)

This phenomenon of quiet acquiescence to learning the prescribed curriculum seems to present some tension when I first introduce the agency project. It seems that students are so accustomed to things being assigned by an authority figure that when presented with autonomy, the responsibility becomes uncomfortable.

Some seemed to have the attitude of something along the lines of, "What do you mean, I have to think of something, that's your job... A small group even seemed to be initially semi-hostile, with pouting faced, accusatory glances of disbelief that I wasn't going to tell them exactly what to do, or when. (AC, Journal Entry, December 3rd, 2017)

The above quote shows the subtle elements of both the authority theme and the effect it has on students' agency, as well as offering some indication of what my role as the teacher/facilitator would be in such a class. The entry above demonstrates a scenario where the student is uncomfortable with fully exercising their agency. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there were moments when student agency was difficult for me to accept.

I have decided that as students have a say in how they learn, they can choose where to sit in the class. Many students choose wisely, but some insist on sitting with friends and wasting time. It is difficult to respect that agency as a teacher. I gently remind them by asking if they think they are making a good decision, but tell them it is their call. One student in particular has been continually off-task. I engage the student by asking if they feel they are getting the most of their time and they acknowledge they aren't. I push it further (aware of my facilitative role) asking if they think sitting there is a good idea? They say "Errrm, probably not". I suggest it may be more productive if they move, but when they ask me if they have to, I say, it is your choice. The student decided to stay where they are. They acknowledge

it is not a good decision, but still sit there. It is not easy to accept that as a teacher. (AC, Journal Entry, December 12th, 2017)

The relationship between these two themes that emerged, demonstrating that the students' comfort with authority coupled with my inherent comfort with authority made my role as a facilitator challenging. I struggle with determining my role as a teacher/facilitator. Issues of students choosing to work at home rather than in class confound me and knowing when I should step in and reassert my authority is challenging. With no one in danger, I resolve to not supersede the students' choices, though I do make recommendations. Obviously, for safety and law-related matters I still have responsibilities and the authority to make sure that all students are in a safe environment that promotes learning. I have no issue with making clear-cut decisions in that area. However, a situation in which a student is sitting quietly at their desk, isn't disrupting anyone and states they want to work at home instead of in class presents me with a challenge. Especially when they claim that the necessary materials for the project are at their house and they could not bring them into school. This represents just one of many grey zones created by changing the power dynamic and traditional authority of a teacher in order to create an environment conducive to enhancing student agency.

Environment

Though there were only five entries related to environment (~6% of total coded entries), it was an important theme as it describes the emotional, physical and structural space in which student agency was to be enhanced. Environment encompassed two distinct but interrelated components: The emotional environment of the class and the physical space occupied. Analysing the emotional and physical environment occupied by the students and me is important because these set the tone of the lessons and, ultimately, the project. A third environment that I did initially consider, and which arose as an issue over the course of the unit, was that of the home environment. The physical environment relates to where and how students would sit, (at desks, in groups, on cushions, etc.), who they would sit with (people with similar

projects, alone, with friends, etc.) and what the student agency routine would be. I decided that the routine would consist of initially setting students up with a backwards planning guide and walking them through it. After the initial days of the new unit, the routine would consist of me wandering around the classroom and stopping to have one-on-one conference with students as they or I saw fit. The emotional environment would consist of the general feeling and emotional ambiance of the class. That is, the overall positive or negative experience and emotions felt by the students and me. The final environment that was part of the enhanced agency unit was the home environment. I failed to take this into consideration at the outset of the unit. This initial oversight would later pose challenges to the enhanced agency unit in terms of how much of the unit could be carried out at home and ensuring students did the homework and not a parent or guardian.

The first coded entry for environment demonstrates the desire to shift to a more facilitative educational role, rather than a teacher-centered one. It also hints at how students and teachers are both comfortable with a more traditional approach.

Admittedly, when I first began[teaching], I believe the idea of being the centre of attention appealed to me...I liked being the centre of attention and I was good at it. This was reinforced by students' reactions. As I continued though, the concept grew old and I was beginning to tire of carrying the constant weight and responsibility of "tell teaching" instead of "learn teaching". I see "tell teaching" as me being the centre of focus, distilling knowledge/skills into small, edible bits to be easily managed by students. I see "learn teaching" as students being responsible to either discover, apply or adapt their learning. I may guide them, but they are the ones managing the size, shape and speed. (AC, Journal Entry, November 27th, 2017)

This entry reflects the dynamic shift in the pedagogical, managerial and emotional environment that I wanted to create by enhancing student agency. It has been suggested that even though there is overlap between pedagogical, managerial and emotional constructs, the emotional should be treated as a distinct component (Evens, Harvey, Buckley, & Yan, 2009). However where Evans et al (2009) indicate the emotional environment is centered on the

relationship and transactions between student and teacher, my research identifies it as the personal and aggregate emotions experienced by students and teacher. This theme would be related to observations of frustration, apathy, anger, fear, discomfort, confidence or any other indicators of how students and teacher alike were feeling at any point over the course of the units. Students being responsible for their learning is challenging and uncomfortable and this helps explain some of the tension and difficulties experienced with engagement and other emotional responses, particularly at the beginning of the enhanced agency unit. The enhanced agency unit represents a significant change in the class environment. Even where previously student-centered activities were common, there was always an expectation of teacher-driven content and structure. This change was not only student-centered but student-driven and represented a new and unknown environment for the students. In turn, this uncertainty created a new dynamic in my relationship with some students. "I have been surprised at how comfortable students are with direction. Students have even commented that they are more comfortable with me telling them what they need to know and having them simply regurgitate it" (AC, Journal Entry, November 27th, 2017).

Though many students were apprehensive about the new responsibilities being thrust upon them, they readily accepted some of the changes, chiefly with regards to the physical environment. This is demonstrated in the journal entry below:

I have decided that as students have a say in how they learn, they can choose where to sit in the class. Many students choose wisely, but some insist on sitting with friends and wasting time. It is difficult to respect that [use of] agency as a teacher. (AC, Journal Entry, December 7th, 2017)

The above is a great demonstration of how the layout and use of physical space is related to the pedagogical, managerial and emotional constructs of environment noted by Evans et al (2009). Respecting student's agency with regards to how they used their personal space created less than optimal learning conditions, thus affecting the relationship between student peers and with me as the teacher.

Many journal references previously explored in this section portray the issues encountered from my perspective as a result of enhancing student agency. However, there was one post that also provides a glimpse into both my thinking at the time and how students may have been feeling. While speaking about some of the engagement issues I noted, “perhaps this was partially as a result of taking on an ambitious project the last two weeks before Christmas holidays” (AC, Journal Entry, December 7th, 2017).

Most teachers, parents, students, and researchers would be aware that the end of a school term can be quite challenging at the best of times, and I feel it is an important and relevant fact that this unit occurred during this time period. The timeframe before Christmas holidays can affect both the emotional and physical environment of the students. Physically, there are often changes in timetables to allow for special projects or school presentations. There are decorations and references all over the school that serve as a constant reminder of one of the most exciting times of year for young students. This time period marks the end of a the 2nd quarter and 1st semester where students are often physically and emotionally drained. However, It is not just students who are affected by the approach of Christmas holidays. Teachers, parents and administration are all looking forward to holidays as the traditional slew of final exams, presentations and report card comments can be a stressful time for all. This may provide a pivotal perspective from which to view my journal entries. As a teacher I am not immune to the stresses of a final exam week, nor the anticipation of the approaching vacations. It has been shown that stress levels during normal classes continue to increase, while weekend recovery ceases, near the end of the 1st semester (Kinnunen & Leskinen, 1989). Therefore, choosing the two weeks preceding Christmas holidays may have been a particularly poor time to implement the disruptive changes inherent in the enhanced agency unit. This build up of stress in me during the journal entries may have affected my observations, and general interactions with students who may also have had heightened stress levels themselves.

The final entry related to environment incorporates elements of the physical environment during the presentations, raises the question of the home environment, and provides insights on the emotional environment:

We were set up in our school's "Cybrary" - A mixed media library that is appropriate for hosting such events. It is possible to set up stations where there is lots of natural light and space to move around, but bracketed by books. I enjoyed the subtle hint of knowledge that permeates the physical space. Students were dispersed throughout and were set up depending on what their projects were...I also question how much parental involvement part of some of the kids' projects was. For example, one student who is known to have a tutor rarely had any kind of progress to show at school. At one point, the most they had completed was the printing of some necessary objects for their project. However, on "D-Day" the child arrived with a beautifully organized and painted project - From observation it was arguably one of the more visited and utilized projects. If the student truly did it with minimal help at home, they should feel proud of what they were able to accomplish... (AC, Journal Entry, December 14th, 2017)

The physical space used for their presentations was able to provide each project with its own presentation area in which to demonstrate learning. It also alludes to the home learning environment in addition to the classroom learning environment. Though both spaces were used by students, I was not able to observe how students exercised their agency in the home environment or the effects it had on their final project. The lack of effort at school combined with promising final projects delivered by some students could indicate they received a lot of help from others, but there is no way of knowing. I believe further research could address the issue in one of two ways. The homework environment could be minimized by having students complete their projects only at school; or, if possible, the work completed in the home environment could be observed in some fashion.

Though there were a small number of entries related to the environment overall, I feel it provided a pivotal background aspect to the project. The "space" that was occupied by students both physically and emotionally was distinct, but inseparable from the unit (Evans et al., 2009). I also make note of the home environment and how much work was done there by students, and how much help they may have had. This belays an interesting observation with regard to

student agency, how much agency is appropriate, and where we can draw the line as facilitators. I believe a student choosing to work at home is a good use of agency, but a student choosing to work at home because they are receiving a lot of help is a different matter. I found that students who were engaged in class also completed work at home. I find it harder to believe that students who were apathetic in class were miraculously engaged and motivated at home. However, with no way of knowing how much support was given in the home environment, I have only suspicions based on past experiences and would not be able to draw any conclusions. This observation makes it clear that in further research with regard to enhancing student agency, the home environment is a key factor that should be involved in the research.

Summary

Over the course of the enhanced agency unit there were four themes that emerged through an analysis of my journaling. Though the four themes (engagement, authority, teacher's role, and environment) were all distinct, it would be impossible to separate them completely as they are inherently interconnected. Each theme also has a number of sub-themes that demonstrated the different subtleties of interaction that occurred over the course of the unit. Ultimately, the project demonstrated that my enhanced agency practices tended to polarize student attitudes and, though the unit demonstrated some positive potential, the research ultimately tempered my more extreme views on just how far agency should be enhanced and the role of the educator in such a classroom.

For engagement, an analysis of my journal showed a polarization in students when their agency was enhanced. Some students were motivated by the freedom of learning about something of interest to them, while others seemed to struggle with the lack of structures and boundaries (Williams, 2017). There are also references to many students wanting to do the bare

minimum and I believe this is tied to the theme of authority and student dependence.

Traditionally students seem comfortable with having me making educational decisions for them and showing them exactly what they needed to do. During the enhanced agency unit, all students demonstrated discomfort, and some even outright rejected the idea of making decisions or answering questions with no “correct” pathway. Ultimately, disturbing the power balance proved to be challenging as the students and I were use to and comfortable with my authority dictating the terms of the class environment.

This leads to the theme that emerged of the teacher’s role in an enhanced agency classroom. I was initially concerned with the autocratic nature of the traditional unit impinging student agency (Goodman et al., 2011; Ladkin, Sharnae, 2017) and worked to disrupt the power balance of the class. I worked hard to only make suggestions, to facilitate rather than instruct and to minimize negative consequences for anything that was not safety related. However, my observations tended to align with findings that students do not equate a teacher as expert as impinging on their agency, but that too much of a facilitative role can have a negative impact on student agency (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). This is strong evidence that while enhancing student agency is important, it is perhaps more important for the teacher to balance that agency with their role as an instructor and expert.

The final theme to emerge was that of environment. There were three distinct, but interconnected environments identified: the physical space which dealt with how the class, seating arrangements and presentation day were organized; the emotional space which encapsulated the individual and collective emotions experienced by students and the teacher and; the home environment which was not observed, but may offer unique insights into how students used or abused their opportunity for enhanced agency. While some discomfort was expected, this could have been tempered by not enhancing student agency to such an extreme

and by keeping some routines and boundaries in place to help ease students into a wise use of their agency.

While research is beginning to highlight the importance of enhancing student agency (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2011; Hagay & Baram-Tsabari, 2015; Reitenauer, 2017; Ryerson, 2017; Tishman & Clapp, 2017; Williams, 2017), there is still no clear consensus on how much agency is appropriate for a specific setting. While some researchers feel that the autocratic nature of schools results in student apathy (Goodman et al., 2011), others have found that a facilitative role that honors student voice and choice can also result in apathy (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). My findings would agree and disagree with both sets of claims. I found that many students were motivated by their new found freedom to choose what and how to learn which aligns with Goodman et al (2011). However, I also found that that enhancing some students' sense of agency resulted in a lack of engagement, motivation and poor choices with regard to their learning, a result that corroborates what was seen by Beeman-Cadwallader et al (2014). It seems that some students are more apt to utilize their agency to engage in positive learning experiences when given the opportunity, while others may not be ready to accept the responsibility that comes with enhanced agency. The act of empowering the students' sense of agency coincided with the removal of common class routines, homework checks and detentions that may have provided structure for some students. It seems these students may have historically relied on these systems in order to be successful and were not ready to assume responsibility for their learning. By pushing the boundaries of agency to the extreme, however, I am now better able to understand appropriate levels of agency for my middle-school students.

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate the outcome of enhancing student agency to a relatively extreme point on the spectrum but within the confines of my own classroom, school, and curriculum. Data was primarily collected via journaling which detailed my thoughts and observations both of myself and my students and was analyzed by thematic analysis. This chapter will discuss conclusions presented in Chapter 4 with additional insights and thoughts with regard to my journal, reflections, and overall experience. The organization of this chapter follows the order in which my research questions are presented in Chapter 1. I also provide further discussion of possible bias, limitations of the study, directions for future research, and concluding comments.

Research Question One

What is student agency and how is it defined in the context of my research?

For the context of this research, student agency was defined as allowing the students to choose what they would learn about, how they would learn it, and how they would be assessed. I insisted that the only concession they would need to make is that they would have to present whatever they learned to a semi-public audience. I thought this would be the only boundary, outside of those needed for safety, that I was imposing on students. At the time, however, I did not consider the effect that five to six years of previous schooling would have on my students' sense of agency.

Living under autocratic school rule, they have partly adapted to the adults' demands for obedience by staking out a territory of disgruntled, resentful submissiveness without overt resistance... out of persistent discouragement, have established their equilibrium through a veneer of indifference... Those remaining

reluctantly comply with routines. The apathy tragically reflects an acquired weakness of will, at least in academic settings. (Goodman & Eren, 2014, p. 134)

Though my findings were less extreme, I did find a milder, more overtly benign, but only slightly less damaging result of our school system lingering in some of my students. The school system is still largely organized in a manner that minimizes student agency. Students are told where to be when to be there, when they can eat, and when they can use the bathroom. Teachers have been there to make most decisions for them in terms of what they will learn, how they will learn it, and how and when they will be assessed on it. I did not consider how comfortable students would be with this relationship and a mere two weeks of agency were not enough to override the process of schooling. Although at the time I may have been frustrated, I can now appreciate how terrifying that freedom and corresponding loss of structure must have been for some of them.

Summary Analysis

The current understanding of student agency revolves around the concept of how much control or action a student may exercise regarding their learning or actions (Ferguson et al., 2015; Goodman & Eren, 2014; Griffin et al., 2015; Ryerson, 2017). However, what is not well defined is the spectrum on which student agency is either limited or enhanced. It is my opinion, based on my research and previous experience that the current school system limits agency far more than enhancing it (Goodman & Eren, 2014; Ladkin, Sharnae, 2017). There may be some good reasons for doing so (such as safety and responsibility), but I feel tradition and bureaucracy are just as much to blame. Given that I work in a small school, have small class sizes, and that I enjoy a good relationship and reputation within the school, I was able to circumvent tradition and bureaucracy in order to explore student agency on what I would consider to be the more extreme end of the spectrum. For this research, students were able to choose what they learned about, how they learned about it, and how they would be assessed and graded (i.e., they developed their own rubrics to be disseminated to their audience and

collected for feedback), similar to the strategy used by Reitenauer (2017) of having students grade themselves. Limits on their agency were that they attend and abide by the general rules of the school and that they would have to present their learning in a semi-publicly setting.

Research Question Two

What degree of student agency is reasonable for classroom settings and what effect will enhancing it have on students?

In retrospect, the second part of this question should have been addressed first. The effects of enhancing student agency in this case study will serve as a “weather bell” for other teachers to determine what level of student agency is reasonable for them and their classes. Class size, relationship with students, and the interests of administration or other governing bodies are all factors which could affect how enhanced student agency could be deployed in other cases. For my study, I choose to use surveys and an observational journal to attempt to answer research question two.

Survey

Though there were indications that students felt more engaged as they were given more agency and indications that parents felt the same, there was a very low response rate to all the rounds of surveying. Given the low response rate, there can be no meaningful data analysis or conclusions drawn from the surveys. However, the low response rate in and of itself marks an interesting qualitative point and represents a common theme that arose in my journal, noting that students often chose not to do anything that was not deemed necessary. Perhaps, this observation represents the penultimate act of a student’s agency – the decision not to engage unless personally motivated to do so. In some sense, this could be a very important result as it affirms themes that emerged during my journaling; namely that student engagement is not a simple matter of offering unconditional agency.

Journal

As previously noted, there were four themes that emerged during my journaling related to the effects of enhancing student's agency: engagement, authority, teacher's role, and environment. Though all of these were inter-connected, they emerged as distinct themes which were the result of my observations and reflections on the enhanced agency unit. The theme that was identified the most in my journal was engagement.

Engagement

The effects of the agency unit on student's engagement indicated that, although the change generated some resistance, it also proved to provide freedom. Some students cautiously explored this newfound freedom while others complained that I was not there showing them each step of the way. Interestingly, I found that my more academically inclined students chose to pursue artistic endeavors that included fashion design, art, and dance. The choice of these topics seems to exemplify how students have natural curiosities they want to explore. Many others in my class were stuck on the idea of a simple presentation on something and kept asking if I approved. This suggests these students didn't really know what to do with their enhanced agency and were not up to taking any risk. My observation of this behaviour is contrary, however, to what others have found (Petra, Jaidin, Perera, & Linn, 2016). Invariably, there are going to be students who are engaged in a classroom and students who are not. This effect on my students was not what I hoped to find in my naïve understanding of student agency. Going into the agency project, I was sure that the freedom I was providing would inspire, motivate, and excite every one of my students (Williams, 2017), from the students who struggle in a traditional system to those who thrive in it. I imagined that unshackling them from the prescribed curriculum, standard expectations, power dynamic and pre-set course would free them to explore, discover, and embrace their passions.

Other teachers on my team were curious but had their doubts. Still, I had found support for my agency unit in the literature:

“Can it be expected that students long accustomed to demands for docility and obedience will readily accept the increased responsibilities that accompany increased voice? On the other hand, there now exists a substantial literature suggesting that students can and do accept opportunities for agency.”(Goodman & Eren, 2014, p. 124)

However, what I found was that enhancing student agency also enhanced the student's personalities and characteristics-particularly with regard to student attitude towards school tending to polarize behaviour in the class. Students who were high achievers were excited to be able to put their energy into new pursuits, scared, but excited. Students who struggled to find motivation in school now chose to explore their agency by exerting even less energy into school-based activities.

Much of the agency literature made reference to the social power dynamics of school and led me to believe that disrupting the traditional social forces would help students take ownership of their learning (Ferguson et al., 2015; Goodman & Eren, 2014; Griffin et al., 2015; Ryerson, 2017; Tishman & Clapp, 2017), thus enhancing student agency. However, I found that my results were more mixed and that, although some students were able to take responsibility and seize the opportunity to utilize their enhanced agency, others were not prepared for this change. Often the more facilitative I was, the more passive some of the students would become (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). This indicates that in order to effectively enhance student agency in the classroom, it needs to be enhanced in such a manner that students can use it well and accept the transfer of responsibility. In the context of this research project, however, I cannot offer a definitive answer as to how this transfer can best take place.

My reflection on the project lead me to many important considerations about the enhanced agency unit. I wondered if the students had been in a system that allowed freedom

from the very beginning would it have made a difference? Were my students who were less motivated and engaged displaying apathy as a result of finally not having a long list of to do items assigned to them by others? Did they see it as an opportunity to focus on other subjects that had more traditionally assigned material, that these subjects now took precedence? Was it seen as a “fluff project” project offered in the last two weeks of school before Christmas holidays? Having give their semi-public presentations underprepared, would some students have put more effort into choosing a topic and preparing better given a second chance? These are all questions I would consider addressing in further research projects. My study certainly led me to the conclusion that the next time I aim to enhance student agency, it will be more heavily tempered with me acting as a teacher and expert (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014) and planning to gradually enhance each student’s sense of agency over a more drawn out time period.

Ultimately, given the developmental level of the average student in sixth grade, the time of year during which we undertook the agency unit, and the discontinuity it gave to the previous 6-7 years of their schooling, I would conclude that the agency unit was a success. It was a (conditional) success because most students did decide to put effort into learning based on their interests. Many students completed extra work at home, even though there was no assigned homework. Many students did extra research out of curiosity, not because it was mandatory. And many students fought their fear of a relatively unstructured learning environment, where there was no clearly correct pathway or answer readily available. The main drawback occurred for students who were apathetic toward school and learning, and who, without the structure of routine and accountability, were unable to take advantage of the opportunity for learning. These issues are deeply connected to the second most noted theme to emerge from my journal, authority.

Authority

I began this research thinking that in order for students to have a voice and choice in their learning, it was necessary to enhance their agency. In order to do that, I felt it was necessary to disrupt the inherent power dynamic present in schools and my classroom (Goodman et al., 2011; Ryerson, 2017). By providing my students with a high degree of agency in this case study, I hoped to move my own practice, and the practice of others, towards a better understanding of how to enhance student agency. I now realize that students need incremental and progressive steps if their agency in the classroom is to be improved. I further agree that the common practices that revolve around student voice and choice tend to focus on allowing students to air their opinions. Students are stopped short, however, of making any changes within the school or school system (Goodman & Eren, 2014). We still dictated what the student learns, when they learn it, and how their learning is to be measured. These practices have often allowed students to demonstrate how they learned something, but even this choice is often limited to a select few options. In other words, it seems that even when current practices regarding student voice and choice (the most widely used best practice related to student agency) are used, education institutions “[exert] their power, both visibly and invisibly, by determining the nature, implementation, and outcomes of projects” (Ladkin, Sharnae, 2017, p. 38).

In order to address this issue, I decided that students would be able to choose what they learned about, how they would learn it and what they would like to be assessed on for their project. I also decided that instead of using directives, I would offer guidance and suggestions. I didn't assign homework but reminded students that they may want to consult their timelines that were made in conjunction with me and decide if they needed to get caught up outside of class time. I allowed students to sit where they wanted and work next to who they wanted. I made a

conscious decision that, outside of any flagrant abuse of this new dynamic, I would not issue detentions or negative consequences.

This proved to be the most challenging part of the research. When students were making poor choices, it was difficult not to revert to traditional mechanisms like warnings, strikes, or detentions. I was also weary of emailing home and simply trading one power dynamic for another. Or worse, have parents get directly involved with doing their child's work and learning for them. Also, even with parent emails, meetings, and support, apathy in students has been and remains an issue in education (Ginsberg & Coke, 2019; Goodman & Eren, 2014). As the adage goes, "a student who forgets has a parent that remembers". I felt that a student who always has someone else motivating them via sticks and carrots will never learn to drive themselves via the satisfaction of completing a difficult project well or the bitterness of receiving a less than satisfying assessment.

If I were to do another agency unit, I would spend more time building up to the same authority structure and I would focus more on preparing students to use their agency responsibly. I would also make sure there was more student accountability with more tangible steps and benchmarks for students to pass along the way to completing their project. I may invite parents, teachers or other classes in to review student work at the halfway point and have students walk visitors through what they had done so far. I suspect that once students truly appreciated the realities of a semi-public presentation, they would be more willing to accept my suggestions as an expert consultant, rather than having to do what I say because of an inherent authority structure. Interestingly, I recognize the challenge in wanting students to accept my suggestions, but also wanting them to exercise their agency. The challenge of striking the right balance between student agency and teacher authority leads directly to a discussion of what the teacher's role in an enhanced agency classroom should look like.

Teacher's Role

Given the foregoing discussion, it should be no surprise that the effects of enhancing student agency drastically changed the role of the educator, and change is rarely comfortable or easy (Donaldson & Weiner, 2017). Firstly, in order to change the environment, I had to change the authority dynamic (Ryerson, 2017). I empowered students to sit where they wanted, offered advice rather than consequences; offered suggestions rather than corrections; and guidance rather than directions. Relinquishing the power associated with my authority proved to be challenging and frustrating. Disrupting the usual power balance was important to truly empower the students, but I still had obligations to provide a safe and productive environment (Williams, 2017) where students were learning. Many students chose to acknowledge and receive my advice, but others chose to explore their agency in other ways. Unfortunately for some students, the prospect of the semi-public presentation was too far in the future to compete with their immediate interest in conversing, being "off task" or finding a distraction from routine boredom. If no one was going to insist they do something, then they were not going to do anything.

I did draw a line in ensuring a safe class and a supportive environment for those who wanted to be productive. I would offer advice to students who were not on task, but if they were not interfering with others, I would only advise. It should be noted that with a class size of 12, and at a school that generally has few behaviour issues, this transition would optimistically be smoother than other situations. However, after completing and analysing the agency unit, I still think it had elements that would have an overall positive impact in most traditional classrooms. One may need to adapt their approach based on what was learned from this case study, but I feel that educators can take on a more facilitative rather than authoritative approach in order to enhance student agency. This, of course, would be dependent on both the physical and emotional environment at the school and, more importantly, in the particular classroom.

Environment

Based on my experience, student voice and choice are a mainstream best practice that most teachers would be familiar with. However, “the current popularity of student voice can lead to surface compliance” (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 219), or, in other words, it is not a tool that is often implemented in a manner that truly enhances student agency. In order to do so, Williams (2017) contends that a “pedagogical stance that actively seeks and values student choice and voice fans the embers of student agency through building a sense of efficacy” (p. 10), but cautioning that the choices must be authentic and that students must be able to see that their opinions and actions can have a real impact.

It is here where I feel our current methods related to student agency need to be enhanced throughout the school system. My naivete was not in believing students’ natural curiosity could be leveraged and motivated by enhancing their agency; it was in believing that a single unit of study over two weeks would be able to challenge and overcome the deeply ingrained notion that the teacher is the master of learning and not the student.

There was discomfort in this transition for both me and the students. Students were used to the teacher making decisions for them, and providing clear, well-laid-out pathways for learning. I was used to having a system of authoritative control that I could fall back on in order to have students accomplish what I saw as important curricular outcomes. What I “wanted” for my students was derived from standards, benchmarks, programmes, and best practice, and, though I believed that my teaching always had the students’ best interest in mind, it was not student driven. In this sense, implementing the agency unit caused a significant shift in both the physical and emotional environment of the classroom.

Emotional Environment

The largest area of change was in the emotional environment. Students now needed to adjust to the fact that they were drivers of their learning – I would advise and suggest, but I would not provide authoritative guidelines on what, when or how something *had* to be done. Rather, I would point students in a possible direction where something *could* be done. I had to let go of the expectation that students would feel obligated to do what I said when I said something and really emphasize that they could do things their own way. It proved challenging to see students falter and make poor choices with regard to their learning because I was not doling out immediate consequences but, rather, remind them of timelines and the imminent semi-public performance. If I were to initiate another agency unit, this is one area I would modify. I would set timelines and have students come in for lunches if they fell behind. In retrospect, this would help ensure all students were better prepared and would have a minimal impact on their agency. In addition to establishing short-term timelines, if I were to do such a project more often, and build some of the agency enhancing concepts into the core culture of the class, much of the student apprehension and many of my frustrations could be mitigated. I would also change aspects of the physical environment and how I approached the use of classroom space in this case study.

Physical Environment

The biggest physical environmental change undertaken for this case study was to allow students to sit where they wanted and with who they wanted. The same desks, cushions, rocker chairs and class layout were largely maintained. When I next repeat this project, I will first have students design their workplace, and hold the work sessions in a different environment all together. This could be done by using a currently unused classroom, the previously mentioned Cybrary, or by completely re-designing the learning space within my own classroom. I think that by keeping students in the same environment for the agency unit, it inadvertently invited them to

engage in certain normal behaviours that were difficult for some students to avoid. That is, the physical environment did not reflect a new approach to learning, just one with less rules. By having students take greater ownership of the environment, it would help them to consciously and proactively prepare to have their agency enhanced.

Summary Analysis

During the literature review, and in answering question one of my research questions, student agency was explored and defined for the purposes of this research. However, there were few publications that actually referred to the total possible spectrum of student agency. Goodman et al. (2011) indicated a minimal form of agency is relegated to actions such as students airing opinions or being able to work independently, while more ambitious actions would involve organizing protest marches or effecting real-world social change. The middle ground they suggested and explored was involved in making changes within the school but did not challenge current school structures. It is between voicing opinions and working independently, what Goodman et al. (2011) refer to as a “mere sop to agency”, and the middle ground of making changes within the school that tended to avoid challenging current school culture, where most student agency I have experienced within school systems takes place. As such, I decided to push the boundaries of student agency to a reasonable extreme. I would relinquish authority and mandatory standards, but still maintain a safe learning environment (Williams, 2017).

Clearly, there needs to be some overall direction and standardization when speaking about a system that educates millions of students each year; whether we are talking about North American public-school systems, those of other nations or international education in general. I am not advocating that the school system should be set up in a manner that allows students to have a constant say in what they learn, how they learn it and how they will be

assessed. Rather, I was intent on pushing the boundary of what could be done in a particular classroom to ascertain what level of responsibility for agency could be taken up by middle schoolers, and to inspire others consider possibilities for enhancing their students' agency. Keeping in mind, however, that each teacher should change their practice in meaningful ways and ways appropriate for their learning environments depending on factors such as age, district, school, and curriculum.

In this case study, there were four main themes that highlight the effects that the enhanced agency unit had on students and myself: engagement, teacher's role, authority, and environment. These effects, which are presented in descending order of frequency of appearance in my journal, had knock on and intertwined effects. The enhanced agency produced a polarized result for many students; some were keen and highly engaged (Goodman & Eren, 2014; Ryerson, 2017; Williams, 2017), while others found the lack of rigid guidelines difficult and became even more passive about their learning (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). This led to issues of how I could best use my authority without circumventing student agency and, ultimately, to the larger issue of what a teacher's role is in an enhanced agency environment. That is clearly related to the emotional and relational space that has been co-created between school culture, parents, administration, and, ultimately, between student and teacher. I also found that the physical environment had impacts related to the other emergent themes and would adapt my practice on this basis for future enhanced agency units. Given the complete change of class structures (academic and behavioural), and the short time period over which it was carried out, the case study ultimately had positive effects. Though having greater agency enhanced some negative aspects of some student behaviours, I feel those effects could be mitigated with minimal impact on student agency.

Research Question Three

What is the role of the educator in an enhanced agency classroom, and how are high expectations and student accountability maintained in such an environment?

The role of an educator in an enhanced agency classroom, as discussed above, is a shift from the traditional role as the driver of student learning using extrinsic means of motivation, consequences (both academic and behavioural), and an inherent top-down power and authority system. In my experience, all of these are used to benefit the child. I have had the pleasure of working with colleagues who teach within the system and attempt to do their very best for the kids, but I feel the system itself is a major driver of student apathy. This is best described by the “alienation gap” between students and teachers described by Goodman et al. (2011). Although their research focused primarily on urban schools in the USA, I noted many of the same issues of not completing assigned work, resisting in-class assignments and taking on the “role of a non-learner” in my private school setting – and this even with a relatively low teacher to student ratio of 1:12. Though it was only a minority of students who were outright not completing work on a regular basis, most students were not producing their best work on a regular basis; rarely, in fact, did students and I agree that something was the best they could do. Many students often admitted that they were handing things in that they knew were not anywhere near the best they could do, but they simply wanted to “get it done”. Given the similarities between what Goodman et al. (2011) describe and what I was experiencing, I decided that I would need to adjust my pedagogy within the classroom in order to enhance student agency and pay more attention to adjusting the authority structure.

I would address the pedagogy by allowing the students to choose their topics, how they would learn about them and the aspects they wanted to be assessed on during a semi-public presentation. It was my responsibility in turn to connect the curriculum standards to their

interests rather than the other way around. This was relatively easy for some projects, and more difficult for others; but in all cases, I was able to identify the potential learning and make assessment of at least three standards over the two week agency unit. There were four important steps that I guided students through to promote high quality for the final product.

1. Develop an essential question that the project would address.
2. Envision what the final product will look like.
3. Work backwards from the envisioned final project to set important milestones and develop a timeline to ensure it will be finished.
4. Meet with students on a regular basis to give support and suggestions, and to ensure the project was challenging but achievable.

The use of these steps ensure that by the third day of the project, each student had an essential question to tackle, a final project in mind that had been adjusted until approved by me, a set of standards they would be learning, and a timeline for completion. The timeline proved to be where my pedagogical approach and disrupted authority approach would become the most frustrating part of the project for me. Going into the project, I was able to temper, extend, modify, suggest and discuss with students so that all students had an essential question that I deemed would challenge them and allow for an achievable answer. I was genuinely excited and the kids who were initially hesitant seemed excited too. Unfortunately, when the “newness” wore off some students decided to explore their agency but wasting class time, and I had made some decisions with regards to authority that, in retrospect, made it more difficult to manage students. These decisions included that students could call me by my first name, students could sit where they wanted, students could work with who they wanted, I would not issue detentions as long as

students were not disrupting the learning environment or interfering with anyone's emotional and/or physical safety.

Most students got on with their projects well in class and many chose to do homework, even though it was not "mandatory". Approximately two thirds of the class fell into this category. However, the other third concluded that since they did not have to do anything, and that there would be no consequences, why should they bother. Of this group, I would often ask them if they were being the most productive they could be. They would answer "no". I would then follow up by asking if sitting next to the person they were sitting with was a good idea. They would answer "no". When I suggested then that they move and get to work due to the approaching semi-public presentation, they would hesitate and ask, "Do we have to?" I would hesitate and answer "no", and they would continue to waste inordinate amounts of time, but without disturbing others. In all cases but one, these students had final projects that were underwhelming, and I often wondered how much help each student may have had at home in order to complete the project.

In this sense, the shift in the authority dynamic posed (and still poses) challenging questions. In reflection, I wonder if it was necessary at all and if ultimately if I could have built on my already established positive relationship with my students with only the pedagogical change? If a student chooses to work at home rather than in class and that student is not disrupting anyone else, should that not be part of their prerogative? I know there are days where I make a conscious decision to take a break in the day, only to finish something later that night at home, and it seems reasonable to assume students may occasionally feel the same way.

In my final consideration, this is the area I would adapt and modify the most for my school and classroom. I already enjoy positive relationships in the classroom and I no longer think it necessary to completely disrupt the power dynamic, at least, not anymore than I already

naturally do as an experienced teacher. In order to maintain high expectations and productive class time, therefore, I would consider adding the following to my next agency unit: 1) consistent and clear consequences for wasting time (I would personally have kids come in for lunch and breaks if I found that they were not using their time wisely); 2) students would have to leave their projects at school (at least initially) as I went too long without seeing progress because students “forgot” their work at home; 3) students could have the choice of where to sit and who to sit with, but I would have the authority to intervene when needed; 4) I would include more semi-public presentations and on a regular basis as I don’t think it was “real” for some of my students until it was too late (this would help them immensely in being motivated to be prepared and with their presentation skills in general); 5) and I would still push the pedagogical boundary initially but maintain class structure and routines until students had proven they can exercise their agency more responsibly.

Summary Analysis

The role of an educator in an enhanced agency class will depend on the curriculum, school, classroom and the relationship between teachers, students, parents and administration. For this classroom, I took on a facilitative role in helping to guide students but stepped back as an authority figure to allow them to explore their agency. Some students were ready for this and others were not. I would modify my next unit with the suggestions above and ease students into the duality of having more freedom, but also more individual responsibility.

High expectations were maintained by having students come up with an appropriate essential question under my guidance, envisioning a final product and creating a timetable with milestones in order to achieve that vision. Additionally, I would assign the standards from the curriculum I felt a student had met, and we would discuss and agreed on how and for what the student would be assessed. Many students were able to find success under those guidelines. However, in order to support some students who struggled, I would re-

establish consequences for being off task, offer more regular semi-public presentations of learning, have them complete most of their project at school, and make clear that the choice of where to sit and who to work with is a privilege. With those modifications, it would be possible for me to enhance student agency in a manner that would allow students to grow familiar with their new responsibility for learning.

Research Question Four

How can teachers lead meaningful changes in facilitating student agency at the classroom and school level?

Teacher leadership is not a well defined concept (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For the purposes of this study, I have adopted the following definition that “teacher instructional leadership involves the formal or informal responsibility to influence other teachers' professional practice in ways that are expected to increase student learning” (Muth et al., 2013, p. 127). With this definition in mind, I understand that my influence as a teacher leader reflects and is consistent with the informal side of the spectrum. That is, as an informal teacher leader, I accept that my study may inspire other teachers, it may make them curious, or it may have little impact on their practice. In a real sense, therefore, it is the potential of my research to influence other teachers that aligns it with informal teacher leadership. My current role as a teacher-researcher may situate my leadership on the informal side of the spectrum but it nevertheless provides a concrete and authentic example of how teachers can be leaders in their school community.

As a Team Leader at my school, I have additional responsibilities but no additional authority – at least not in an official sense. However, I have learned that even with no official authority over my peers, titles and roles seem to carry weight. For example, I have been misinterpreted as speaking for the administration on numerous occasions when offering my

opinion as a teacher and colleague. For this reason, I made it abundantly clear to my team that they were welcome to join, observe and comment on the agency unit, but they were under no obligation to participate. I also made this clarification because teachers are less likely to reject new concepts if they feel they have some control over their acquisition and implementation (Toll, 2017). In essence, I wanted to lead by inspiring other teachers and showing them the potential for enhancing student agency, rather than directing them on the basis of my perceived authority.

Summary Analysis

Ultimately, though my colleagues and team members were supportive, and curious about the project, none showed any interest in adopting a similar programme during the research. However, I have noticed that other teachers, members of the public, parents, and students themselves are interested in the idea of student agency. That noted, I feel the current iteration of the agency unit did not inspire the amount of change I had hoped for. It has, however, tempered my view of what can be accomplished through informal teacher leadership and teacher-as-researcher projects. This is not to say that teacher-leader and teacher-researcher activities are not of value in education. I am, in fact, already discussing further units to team teach with colleagues where the focus is on enhanced student agency, making real-world connections for students, and advancing pedagogical change. Though my initial study did not lead to an immediate and general up take of student agency at mt school, it has allowed me to gain experience in what would be effective teaching for student agency and to create more successful projects in the future by working within the framework of informal leadership.

Bias, Limitations of Study, and Further Research

Bias

In order to be upfront and allow the research to be adequately reviewed and meaningful, it is important to address any areas of bias that may consciously or unconsciously have effected my study. I originally come from a scientific background and am relatively new to qualitative research methods; it also took quite some time to build an appreciation for this branch of educational research. In evaluating qualitative papers, I noted that papers that disclosed potential bias or particular interests tended to be of higher quality and more apt to add to my understanding in meaningful ways. Although I tried to remain as objective as possible in evaluating the impacts of the enhanced student agency unit, it is important that I note the following areas of potential bias:

1. Though the research focusses on informal leadership, the researcher does hold a middle management position, straddling both the teaching world and the administration world. In the experience of this researcher, having the title did not have any noticeable positive effects on whether new strategies were accepted, and classroom issues, solutions or ideas were shared equitably amongst the team. If anything, the researcher noted that the title could get in the way and build resistance to ideas if they were perceived as being driven from the top down - though this is rare and was not noted during the course of this study.
2. As previously mentioned, the main motivation for this research was born out of a growing recognition that meaningful change was necessary at the system level. Through the researcher's own experiences, observations and literature review the umbrella idea of student agency became a key framework for structuring and answering the research questions. As a teacher-researcher, I recognized that the

current school system resulted in students scared to take chances, who were heavily dependent on teachers, parents, peers or tutors, and who were more concerned with grades than with learning. Yet, I had a deeply held belief that students wanted to learn and did not need to be tricked or goaded into learning if we allowed them freedom to explore their interests. This research, as such, was designed to test this belief and my journaling and journal analysis should be read with this potential bias in mind.

Limitations of Study

In addition to the potential for bias outlined above, there were limitations to the research due to the situation, environment and circumstances in which the research was conducted. The research took place in a small school of approximately 130 students from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12. There are approximately 30 teaching staff, half of which are local (South American), and the other half (including administration) are foreign hire teachers from North America. It is a close-knit community and most staff have numerous roles and responsibilities for leading teams, being on committees, and organizing annual key school events. Given the small staff and class sizes, some research conclusions are necessarily limited.

For the purposes of transferability, it is worth reiterating that the class size for the agency unit was relatively small, I was part of the data generation and analysis, and the study focused on a very specific, two-week change in my teaching pedagogy. As I was responsible for most of the qualitative data and observations collected, my potential for bias as mentioned above should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, though I intended to collect quantitative data to triangulate my journal findings, practical and ethical considerations indicated it was important to make that data collection anonymous and to distance myself from the process. As students and parents largely chose not to participate in the surveys (thereby exercising their agency), very little quantitative data was collected.

With such limitations in mind, I made an honest effort to analyse the data and experiences as captured in my journal, and to evaluate the evidence with the goal of not simply proving myself right but of determining the feasibility of creating an enhanced agency classroom. Despite the potential for bias and general limitations of a purely qualitative study, the fact that my view of student agency has changed and been tempered based on my observations and journaling, is an indication of the credibility and integrity of the research. The final evaluation of this research and how it may apply to individuals, classrooms, schools or systems lays with the reader.

Recommendations for Further Research

Though there is growing interest in the area of student agency (Goodman & Eren, 2014; Goodman et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2015; Reitenauer, 2017; Ryerson, 2017; Tishman & Clapp, 2017), there still lacks a consensus on what constitutes student agency and how it can best be implemented. At the moment, most of these studies focus on agency in individual classes. I suggest we are now reaching a point in the knowledge base where we could expand what is known from the classroom-level research to a more school- and district-level study. In addition, most of the research resides in the qualitative realm but there are places where more quantitative data would help enrich the research pool and inform larger scale student agency programmes. For example, a medium-scale study (using multiple classrooms across grade levels and/or schools) could implement a modified agency programme based on Beeman-Cadwallader et al's. (2014) findings that teachers can still act as experts without suppressing student agency. Such a study could definitively show whether making smaller adjustments to current models and giving teachers choice over implementation can alleviate potential resistance and apathy toward enhancing student agency (Toll, 2017).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was born from growing concern I have about student motivation, independence, lack of problem-solving, dislike of challenges, and fear of being wrong. Specifically, I am struck by an overwhelming sense of student interest in receiving a “good grade” even at the expense of a genuine desire to learn. I decided to address these issues by attempting to enhance student agency in my classroom and assess the impact of my change in practice on students. The overarching purpose of the research, therefore, was to ascertain what student agency is, how and to what extent it can be successfully implemented in the classroom, what the roles of the teacher and the students are in such a classroom environment, and how I might inspire and lead others to make changes to enhance the agency of their students.

The study has been an eye-opening experience for both myself and my students. It immediately became clear that I may have been naïve in some of my ideal assumptions and this research has tempered my more unrealistic views and expectations. For example, I still believe that student agency is an important concept for addressing the issues with student learning that motivated this research. However, I now recognize that its implementation can not overcome years of systemic socialization in one two-week unit. Whereas some research described small enhancements as token (Goodman et al., 2011), others have found that maintaining an expert role as the teacher (or what I understand as an authority figure) is not inconsistent with enhancing student agency (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2014). In discussing my experience with colleagues, one of my peers noted succinctly that too much choice is just as bad as not enough choice. Although the ideal conceptualization and implementation of student agency is allusive, we could begin by introducing smaller enhancements such as choice and voice at younger ages, and develop and expand this process as students move through their educational journey. Though I agree that there is a power imbalance (Ladkin, Sharnae, 2017;

Ryerson, 2017) that can impede student agency, disrupting this balance too abruptly (even for perceived positive and empowering reasons) can negatively affect student learning and agency.

Though I feel the enhanced agency acted as a polarization tool on my students (engaged, hard working students becoming more so, and apathetic students becoming more so), I feel that the negative outcomes could be mitigated by enhancing student agency more often and beginning at the start of a child's schooling. This does not require a large change on the systems part, but perhaps many small changes over time. Instead of students losing their creativity and learning to focus on grades or fearing mistakes and waiting for teachers to solve problems for them, we can use student agency to recreate a system that motivates independence from the start.

It is my hope that this research inspires others to consider the importance of enhancing student agency in order to help students become motivated, independent problem solvers, and lifelong learners. Though many schools and districts claim these to be indispensable goals, my thesis challenges them to look at the power constructs of our modern-day education system - how we grade, assess, classify and control - and question the source of the resulting attitude toward learning that is exhibited by many of our students. I hope I have made the case that there is considerable dissonance between what we propret to achieve and the methods we use in doing so. Alternatively, I contend that enhancing student agency is a feasible means of achieving the central aim of a modern education system: preparing students to be happy and productive shapers of society.

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Appendix A

Appendix A1 – Student Survey Questions for measuring sense of Agency and Motivation

Thank you for agreeing to participate – your honest opinion is very important and I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

Choice of Learning Material/Content:

1. I chose what I wanted to learn about in this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree
2. I feel what I learned about in this unit will help me achieve my future goals:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree
3. My experiences and actions felt like they were self-generated (like it was my idea or desire) in this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree
4. I was mostly engaged (really into it!) in this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree
5. I feel what I learned about in this unit is important for my future:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

Choice of Learning Process

1. In this unit, learning was fun because I was getting better at something:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

2. I had a choice in how I got to learn about this topic (from the teacher, with friends, through discussions, using the internet, reading books, watching videos etc.):
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

3. I was active (like I was part of it) in my learning during this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

4. I feel most of my learning was self-initiated in this unit (I kept wanting to know more):
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

5. In this unit, I learned, but only because I got/will get a reward from the teacher or my parents:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

Choice of Assessment

1. In this unit, I checked to make sure I really understood what I was doing:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

2. In this unit, I checked my school work to see if it was correct:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

3. I chose how I was assessed (test, project, quiz, performance etc.) in this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

4. I had a say in what success looked like for me in this unit:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

5. When I was tested about this unit, it did a good job of measuring what I able to do:
 1. Strongly Disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Unsure
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly Agree

Thank you for completing this part of the survey. You're doing awesome! – I have just a few more questions for you!

Longer Form Response Questions

1. How much choice did you have over what you learned for this unit?
2. How did this level of choice make you feel about learning at school and at home?
3. How much control did you feel you had in choosing how (using the Internet, books, teacher, friends, reading, writing, discussing) you learned about this unit?
4. How did this make you feel while in school or at home learning?
5. How much control did you feel you had in choosing how you were assessed or what you got to create in this unit?
6. How did this make you feel while in school or at home being assessed?

Thank you very much for completing the survey!

Please, click the "submit" button before leaving this page... and thanks again!

Appendix B

Title: Shifting the focus from instructor to facilitator: A case study in enhanced student agency.

The following information is being provided to help you decide whether you and your child would like to participate in a research study. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw from the research at any time without affecting your relationship with the school administration, teachers, or community. The teacher-researcher conducting this study, nor any school personnel will be aware of who is participating, and all information will be kept anonymous and confidential.

The purpose of the study is to collect and analyze student and parent attitudes toward different parts of the learning process as well as to gauge how much agency students feel they have during each part of their learning and how engaged they feel during the overall learning process. Though remote, it is possible that some students could be uncomfortable answering some survey questions. Because of this possibility, parents will be sent the survey first and students may choose not to complete it. This email contains one link which will work for both students and parents. When the survey opens, one of the first questions will have you select “student” or “parent” within the survey, taking you to the appropriate questions. Please forward the link or allow students to open it on your computer at your discretion in order to complete the survey. The survey will be conducted online and will be accessible from a home computer.

The study will collect information from only those students and parents who volunteer to answer the survey. For a student to complete the survey, it will require the permission of both the parent and the student. To secure both anonymously, the survey link will be emailed to parents who will then need to forward the email and link to their children. The survey will be brief (no more than twenty minutes in length) and will be open on three different occasions. One opportunity to fill-in the survey will be given after students complete a conventional unit of study, a second opportunity will be given after students complete a unit of study designed to enhance student agency in keeping with curriculum standards, and a final opportunity will be given after another conventional unit is completed. All students in the class will participate in each unit as part of their usual school program. However, participating in the survey is completely voluntary. I will send out a reminder to the whole class each time a survey is open with this letter attached as a reminder of both when surveys will be open and of your right to voluntarily participate.

You are welcome to ask me any questions you may have by contacting me at ajc1063@mun.ca, sandy.corey@ciplc.org, or in person. A summary of results will be available from me for anyone who is interested once the research is completed. You and your child’s name will not be associated with the research in any way, and all information will be collected anonymously and kept confidential.

Possible benefits of this study include a greater understanding of how to enhance the agency and motivation of students for learning, better and more meaningful engagement of students in their learning, and helping students develop important life skills for their future learning and work. In addition, students and parents will be reflecting on the learning process to help deepen their own engagement in the learning process.

Attached please find a detailed consent form that you may print off for your records. Consent will be collected via the first page of the survey to ensure anonymity. Meanwhile, please contact me if you have any questions. You can give your informed consent each time the survey is open by clicking “I accept” and completing the survey.

Thank you for your time,

If you have any questions about me or my project, please contact me by email at ajc1063@mun.ca, sandy.corey@ciplc.org, or by phone at +584248449194

Thank-you in advance for considering my request,

Alexander Corey

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix C -Survey Results

Table1: *Survey Data from Parents and Students Regarding Motivation and Sense of Agency Over the Course of two Units of Study.*

Traditional Unit (Parent)		Enhanced Agency Unit (Parent)		Traditional Unit (Student)		Enhanced Agency Unit (Student)	
Engagement Scores	Agency Scores	Engagement Scores	Agency Scores	Engagement Scores	Agency Scores	Engagement Scores	Agency Scores
4	2	5	5	3	4	4	4
4	4	5	5	5	4	5	3
4	4	5	5	3	4	4	3
4	4	5	5	4	4	3	4
4	4	5	5	*No Response	3	3	3
4	4	5	5	*No Response	5	5	3
4	4	5	5	*No Response	*No Response	2	4
	4		5		*No Response		3
Total = 28	Total = 30	Total = 35	Total = 40	Total = 15	Total = 24	Total = 26	Total = 27
Avg. = 4.00	Avg. = 3.75	Avg. = 5.00	Avg. = 5.00	*Avg. = 3.75	*Avg. = 4.00	Avg. = 3.71	Avg. = 3.38

*Excluding questions without response

Results above are from Likert-Style survey responses. Low scores (0-2) represent a low sense of agency or engagement, where as high scores (4-5) represent higher senses of agency and engagement. A score of three (3) represents a neutral sense. Results are compiled by Parent responses during a traditional unit and enhanced agency unit, and student responses after a traditional unit and an enhanced agency unit.

Likert-Style Survey Results (Parents)

If every parent completed both surveys, there would have been 48 completed parent surveys (n=24 potential parent responses per survey). In total, there was one parent response for the traditional unit and one parent response for the enhanced agency unit. It should be noted that due to the necessity of distancing the teacher from the researcher role, this data was collected anonymously. Therefore, it is not possible to ascertain whether it was the same parent who completed both surveys or different parents. The design was to compare the average of accumulated responses for each type of unit, to see if there were any statistically significant differences and compare this to my experience and observations as the educator. However,

given the response rate, it is impossible to make any statistically sound comparisons. There is, however, some interesting data. Of the fifteen Likert-style questions on the survey, seven were related to student engagement and eight were related to the sense of agency. The parent response perceived their child to rate a 4.00 (out of 5.00) average for engagement, and a 3.75 (out of 5.00) for a sense of agency. For the agency unit, the parent response indicated a response averaging 5.00 for both engagement and sense of agency. This is a marked increase in both, and more data is needed in order to clarify if all parents perceived the marked change that this data represents.

Likert-Style Survey Results (Student)

There was a theoretical possibility of collecting 12 survey responses (n=12) per survey. However, only one survey per unit was filled out, and not always to completion. Though there are still interesting insights to be gleaned from this and presented in the discussion section. Of the data collected, the students scored a 3.75 out of 5.00 on engagement and 4.00 out of 5.00 on a sense of agency. Interestingly, the student response for the enhanced agency unit noted a slight drop in engagement, 3.71 out of 5.00 and a more notable drop in sense of agency, scoring a 3.38 out of 5.00. Though it may seem plausible at first that the student may have confused the two surveys, though they were both only open at separate times, and well separated from each other. I believe another explanation exists to be further elaborated on in the discussion section.

Long Form Survey Results (Parents)

There were no long form answers completed for the enhanced agency unit and one set of long-form responses collected for the traditional unit. The questions regarding the amount of student choice with regard to what they learned about and how they learned it showed some positive insights such as “They had a fair amount” (Anonymous Parent Q.52, Survey A) or, “It increased his engagement” (Anonymous Parent Q.56, Survey A) as well as some negative or

neutral comments with regard to the assessment such as “[sic] didn’t make much difference” (Anonymous Parent Q.56, Survey A).

Long Form Survey Results (Student)

Out of the two survey responses collected, only one (50%) of responses included any long-form answers submitted. However, one response did seem to support one of the themes found in the coded teacher’s journal; that the enhanced agency unit seemed to have a polarizing effect, encouraging students who were generally engaged and decreasing motivation for students who usually struggled with engagement. This student respondent evidently found the unit enjoyable:

It makes [sic] me feel comfortable because it's better than only looking at a book or at a web page. It was something that I truly liked and didn't pressure myself as much to have it done because it was something that I could do for hours. (Anonymous Student Q.33 Survey B)

This seems to show that the student didn’t see the unit as a necessary chore, and indicating they did not feel pressure to have it done but could have spent hours working on it. This is the an indication that student’s motivation can be improved by enhancing their agency.

Appendix D -Journal

Nov. 27 -

We have been working on our first "traditional" unit now and are just wrapping it up. I have been surprised at how comfortable students are with direction. Students have even commented that they are more comfortable with me telling them what they need to know and having them simply regurgitate it. They are incredibly uncomfortable when asked to complete a task that is not explicitly laid out in the most detailed manner. As an example, I asked students to read a small section of text, guided by the review questions. I then asked them to complete a Google Slide that then answers the questions from their sections. They were to be graded on how well it answered the questions, whether or not it was easy to "study" and if they put where they found the answer (referencing). We looked over good examples as a class, critiqued as a class and then held personal/group conferences with me.

At the end, there were still a significant number of slides that did not adequately fulfill the three criteria. They were also weary of the shared accountability aspect of having to rely on other students, and rightfully so as some of them let them down in a big way. The students found this hard to articulate, stating things like "But I did my part and Timothy didn't do his, it's not fair". However, when I asked them if I had just assigned the whole chapter to them (approximately 5 sections or ~25 pages), most were appalled at the idea, with an almost unitary gasp of "No!". It was interesting that the students were happy to accept the benefits of teamwork, but not the potential risks.

Students expressed that they much rather would have had me at the front of the class delivering PowerPoint presentations indicating they are more comfortable as passive receptors of their learning rather than drivers of it. There has been a growing sense in since I first stepped

in the classroom. Admittedly, when I first began, I believe the idea of being the centre of attention appealed to me...I liked being the centre of attention and I was good at it. This was reinforced by students' reactions. As I continued though, the concept grew old and I was beginning to tire of carrying the constant weight and responsibility of "tell teaching" instead of "learn teaching". I see "tell teaching" as me being the centre of focus, distilling knowledge/skills into small, edible bits to be easily managed by students. I see "learn teaching" as students being responsible to either discover, apply or adapt their learning. I may guide them, but they are the ones managing the size, shape and speed.

Even today, when every once in a while I throw my entertainment-look at me!-I'm interested in this so you have to listen-high energy-antics scheme that is only a form of tell teaching dressed up, I get mobbed with questions/comments of "You should do that every lesson, mister!" or, "Why don't you do that every class, that was fun!". It breaks my heart because I know the truth...It's easy to be the white knight who "made it fun" or "made it easy"...but that I am not doing them any favors by making it easy. It takes much more self-discipline and self-confidence to step back and say, "No...I won't help you with that. We went through an example, now I need to see what you think", then it is to just take them under your wing and show them again and again. As the teacher, you feel good for helping and the student thanks you. On the surface, you both feel like it was a positive interaction, yet you just stole a learning opportunity from the student and the chance to develop resilience (at best) or the own self confidence (at worst).

1. What is student agency and how is it defined in the context of my research ?
2. What degree of student agency is reasonable for classroom settings?
3. What is the role of the educator in an enhanced agency classroom, and how are high expectations and student accountable maintained in such an environment?

How can teachers lead meaningful changes for facilitating student agency at the classroom and school level?

December 1st

Well, we wrapped up our final test today in our Social Studies lessons. It is rather strange to me how little resistance there is from the kids. None of them seem particularly interested in Ancient Egypt and yet they (mostly) dutifully carry on with their work, stressing about grades and tests. I am often asked questions like "What will be on the test", "Will this be on the test?", or my least favorite of all; "Is this good enough?". Some students, thankfully, at least came to challenge me, asking "why do we need to learn about Ancient Egypt? and "how that was going to help me later in life?". Interestingly, the two students who derailed the conversation with this question (of which I was happy to explore) are probably two of the more...disengaged students. Student 1, who we will call Matt is a capable student who has mastered the art of doing just enough. It is evident that they are not usually keen often asking (more to themselves) "Why do we have to do this?". Though this student hands in good work, it is clear that they have no interest in doing more than what is necessary. The other student who was leading this charge, Tim, is routinely off task, disruptive and often hands in work well below both expected and potential levels. Interestingly, other than the disengagement factor (Which Matt deals with much better), these students differ greatly - One is quiet and introspective and the other is outgoing and likes to be the center of attention. Both have siblings, but one of them is the younger sibling and the other is the elder. One has been at the school most of their academic career and the other a relatively recent addition. Academically speaking, the most obvious thing they had in common was a strong desire to know what the point of learning Ancient Egypt was and difficulty fully engaging with the material, particularly when it was challenging in any way.

I explained the importance of history and connecting ideas, but in the back of my mind I was thinking there were probably individualized ways for each of those students that would drive deeper connections and meaning to themselves - Different ways of not only answering their question, but addressing the same issue (a lack of engagement/interest) in vastly different ways.

This sets an interesting paradigm to address and highlights the vicious catch-22 I feel we have devolved into. It seems the kids don't want to learn things that I (The man/The system etc.) want to make them learn, but if I don't make them learn it, they will choose not to. By over-prescribing what they learn about and how they learn it over the 6-8 years of their academic career, it seems we have come to an agreement of quiet, but minimal acquisition. Almost as if they are collectively saying "OK, we will do this, but not one bit more than we need too". Hardly the stuff that inspired the great minds of old and I doubt the new...Is it too late? Will the agency project inspire them to explore their passions? Will they even be able to identify their passions? Will they see it as an excuse to slack off? I have high hopes it can spark something in them.

December 3rd

Well, I seem to have received only one survey response. Though more than a few parents mentioned the survey to me and seemed excited/interested, it appears not quite interested enough. At one point a parent, an older gentleman of approximately retirement age was adamant about filling in the survey. He was genuinely excited and curious and was stated clearly in Spanish something to the effect of "I can't wait to fill it out, but when I tried I could not". I had to explain that though I had sent out the requisite informational consent forms, the actual survey would not be available until the end of the unit. He seemed to understand and reiterated he would be happy to fill it out. Perhaps he was the sole person who did, but as I have gone to great lengths to distance myself as much as possible, I have no way of knowing. It does

seem that the technology and window periods (necessary to avoid overlap or confusion as to which unit the survey is about, agency or normal), it is a potential issue.

On the positive side, the kids seemed really excited when I told them about the project last week...Their minds were racing with the ideas and I was inundated with "Can I do this? What about this?" types of questions. Interestingly enough, I found that the students who were generally more preoccupied about their grades and doing well in the traditional unit were more excited. One girl in particular could not believe it. This girl comes from a wealthy family, is mature for her age and is generally an excellent student. Her eyes lit up with disbelief when I clarified that yes, she could do something related to drawing. She was not quite sure what she wanted, but "something to do with fashion and drawing". You could see the wheels turning behind those lit up eyes, going over the possibilities. There was an air about the class of, well, relief almost is the best word to describe it.

However, to my disappointment it was clear that there were also some students who saw it as a burden - "I don't know" said in an almost blaming way. Some seemed to have the attitude of something along the lines of, "What do you mean, I have to think of something, that's your job". The idea that they were responsible for something abstract produced a spectrum of emotional responses. Some were excited, elated or intrigued. Others seemed to have a laissez-faire about it, just another box to be ticked. A small group even seemed to be initially semi-hostile, with pouting faced, accusatory glances of disbelief that I wasn't going to tell them exactly what to do, or when.

The first class was...trying. We explored the philosophy of the project as a class on Friday and students were supposed to come to class on Monday with ideas. Though they were excited, a few neglected the purpose/philosophy and came woefully underprepared. It is evident with a couple of students in particular - It is clear that the idea they are sharing is one that was

last minute and seemed to be generic. The project idea was suspiciously similar to the unit we had just covered, almost as if the student saw this as just another school project. I am not sure if this is because they don't really believe me in terms of the freedom of choice, if they are playing safe, if the recent unit is still in the mind, or if they feel it will be the easiest way of accomplishing the project. I will have to keep my eye on it.

On the other hand, many students came with rich, original ideas to build off of. I do worry that the students seem to be stuck in some kind of "Science Fair" mode, or in the "just get something done" mode that I am trying to get them out of with this project... But I am confident that through conferencing, I can steer them in the right direction. So far, some of the standout ideas are: A fashion show, a dance choreographed and performed by a student

December 7th, 2017

It has been a stressful week...Thought students were excited about their projects, it became evident that some of them were still looking for the easy path and saw it as "just something that needed to get done".

Perhaps this was partially as a result of taking on an ambitious project the last two weeks before Christmas holidays. On the positive side, it seems like it was different students at different stages driving my frustration. For example, students that did not have an idea (or good idea) prepared for Monday seemed to take off when we were able to identify one and really got engaged in their topic. Others who had a great idea (and driving question) earlier in the week seemed to hit a wall and started trying to take some shortcuts.

Ultimately, the students who are struggling with putting together a strong, challenging project that will produce a quality outcome are the same students who struggle in my traditional classes. At this point in the project, I would actually probably rate them as being less engaged

and that having less structure (even with me acting as a guide and facilitator) is having an overall negative impact on that subset of students.

On the other hand, the students that are normally engaged are even more engaged. It seems as though this project has just pushed everyone further into their default mode. Engaged/curious students are more engaged/curious. Those who see school as being boring and just as a set of chores to accomplish are approaching this project the same way, but without the structure and routine of normal lessons.

For me, I would say that this project has been both more stressful and more rewarding. I am genuinely excited about the driving questions/projects the students are undertaking. There have been some really rich learning experiences already where we have explored human emotion, designing surveys and using functions in Google Sheets.

The stress is the normal stress confounded by students being off task and ignoring guidance. For example, I have decided that as students have a say in how they learn, they can choose where to sit in the class. Many students choose wisely, but some insist on sitting with friends and wasting time. It is difficult to respect that agency as a teacher. I gently remind them by asking if they think they are making a good decision but tell them it is their call. One student in particular has been continually off-task. I engage the student by asking if they feel they are getting the most of their time and they acknowledge they aren't. I push it further (aware of my facilitative role) asking if they think sitting there is a good idea? They say "Errrm, probably not". I suggest it may be more productive if they move, but when they ask me if they have to, I say, it is your choice. The student decided to stay where they are. They acknowledge it is not a good decision, but still sit there. It is not easy to accept that as a teacher. As a researcher, it is fascinating...It is a form of rebellion? Is it a question of exploring their new-found freedom to determine where the boundaries lay? Is it a question of them not being engaged or interested in

the project and they would rather be social? Most likely a combination of those factors, but an intriguing prospect nonetheless and an indication of where the ideal amount of agency lays.

December. 12th -

I suppose if I am being honest with myself, I am disappointed in the lack of enthusiasm that has been shown by the majority of students. Though students were initially interested and excited about their projects (and many have enthusiastically embraced them), it did not have the impact on the more disinterested learners as I had hoped. There remains a small group of students (approximately 20-25%) who have almost no motivation or ambition. The agency provided to them has proven to be frustrating for me, blurring my line between facilitator/authority figure and too much rope for them. They see guidance, advice and suggestions as things that since they do not need to do it, why bother? This small subgroup has routinely ignored any feedback (whether written or verbal) and frankly, I feel are using the lack of stringent, clear parameters as means of being lazy.

A couple of them have good project ideas that can still be turned into great, deep, challenging and impressive projects if they can pull it together in the next couple of days. For example, one student has decided they want to design a board game under the essential question of "Can learning be fun?". I wholeheartedly felt this was a great grade level question that would not be easily answered, but that was concrete enough to eventually design a system or means of arriving at a fairly reasonable answer. However, after one week, the student has not brought any of their work to school to share. I suspect it is because they are getting a lot of help at home, which ultimate is at odds with the spirit of this unit (as a teacher) and research (as a researcher). It also continues to blur the line of my role in the class...If the student feels that working on the project at home is a better means of completing it, does that not fall under the parameter of exercising their agency in "how" they learn? This is especially pertinent for this

student as they are not generally a behaviour problem. Though off task in class, they do not distract others. Shall I wait to see what is ultimately delivered?

A couple of students (who had been struggling with traditional units as well) have continued to struggle. Whereas the traditional units at least presented clear hoops to jump through, this project has left them wandering no where quickly. It is difficult as I don't want to push them towards something, and I worry that is what they are waiting for. I'm concerned it is still less of "What do I want to learn about" and "What do I want to learn about that will make my teacher happy". As time runs out, the pressure is on both of us and I continue to balance my role of being facilitative without dictating explicit goals. I have found that by asking questions and avoiding declaratives to be a good way of guiding or pulling rather than dictating/pushing.

I am conflicted on the other ~3/4 of the students. I am not sure if I am also burnt out at the end of this semester and thus more prone to being negative, or if my expectations were set high to due the initial excitement of the students and myself. Though there are exceptions, it seems that the students who came to class the first Monday with a clear idea of what they wanted to have continued to excel, while it seems others have just seen this as an opportunity to slack off.

It is disheartening at this stage and it is challenging my long held belief that all students genuinely want to learn - It is becoming clear that some students still approach school as just wanting to go through the motions (at least at this stage) and are more comfortable with clear, explicit tasks to accomplish that are preferably easy. I suppose this makes sense and I shouldn't really have been surprised. How could two weeks of comparative agency compete with 6-7 years of relatively authoritative environment? Since their schooling began, they have been told when to take breaks, when to eat, where to sit, what to do, how to do it and to please the teacher and/or parents. Looking back now as a researcher, I suppose I am surprised that any

student actually trusted this freedom and chose to exercise it at all on a purely instinctual level. Even for those that embraced it, it must have been terrifying, having the responsibility of so many decisions being thrust upon them where so few had been before. Remarkable.

Other students have a refreshingly enthusiastic take though. Some have embraced their fears, striving to conquer their fears of performing in public. Others have stepped outside their academic focus in order to pursue art and I have discovered some have a particular hidden talent for videography.

I am reminded of a graph to success I want saw that invariably had a large dip before success and I feel I am there now. It was ambitious of me to have delved into this agency project this far into the semester as it is a demanding role, but it is how the timing worked out and I want to challenge my beliefs in authentic ways. The project presentations are in two days and we will see how it goes.

December 14th

Today was mostly a success by outsider standards, but if I am honest with myself, I ultimately feel disappointed. It is clear that some students appreciated being able to explore topics of interest to them, but as an observer I would not say they were full of passion towards it.

We were set up in our school's "Cybrary" - A mixed media library that is appropriate for hosting such events. It is possible to set up stations where there is lots of natural light and space to move around but bracketed by books. I enjoyed the subtle hint of knowledge that permeates the physical space. Students were dispersed throughout and were set up depending on what their projects were.

I also question how much parental involvement part of some of the kids' projects was. For example, one student who is known to have a tutor rarely had any kind of progress to show

at school. At one point, the most they had completed was the printing of some necessary objects for their project. However, on "D-Day" the child arrived with a beautifully organized and painted project - From observation it was arguably one of the more visited and utilized projects. If the student truly did it with minimal help at home, they should feel proud of what they were able to accomplish, but frankly knowing the student, I find it hard to believe. They are traditionally unmotivated, and they need to be constantly monitored in order to stay on task or accomplish any of their schoolwork.

They delivered a project, but when I think of the hours available to them just at school, I feel... underwhelmed. In addition to this, it is obvious that many students put in very little effort at home - If it wasn't assigned by a teacher, there was no way they were going to volunteer to do something even remotely related to school. Part of me wants to rant about technology, but if I am honest with myself, I am sure if it were me as a student, I would have been playing PlayStation or skateboarding, or watching TV or doing anything that wasn't related to schoolwork. Going back even further I am sure it would have been playing baseball, or hide and seek back, or hanging out in the field/park/store/diner etc. in my parent's time. I feel as though any kid, in any time period would have found a way not to do unnecessary "work" regardless.

Some kids really did do quite well, while it was obvious some did not. I am...relieved that it is over without having been a complete disaster and it has honestly changed some of my more idealistic notions regarding agency and motivation and just where on the spectrum might be appropriate for my Middle Schoolers. I have a lot to process and I will revisit this journal in a few weeks or more, when I feel I have some emotional distance from the project to sit back and reflect on it more.

February 2018

Reading back over those, it becomes clear how emotionally involved in the project I was, and I suppose ultimately highlights some of my own bias'. I am objective enough to step back and honestly say it probably wasn't the most successful project I've ever done as a teacher, but it was one of the projects I wanted to succeed the most.

I am also glad that I took time before coming back to this journal. It has only been in the last few weeks where I have noticed a change in the students. They are simply more confident in taking on tasks, better at solving their problems. I would guess that the agency project probably contributed to that, but there is only anecdotal evidence as best - as teachers we are also trying to effect change through numerous means. Just as there were many variables that could have affected the project success (end of a term, just before Christmas break), there is no way to definitely say if there was any causation or even correlation. I suppose ultimately and in an anecdotal sense though I found I needed to push myself further towards the support end of the spectrum, and the kids needed to push themselves further into the independent realm and we are starting to meet somewhere in between.