



## Student Agency Should Be Encouraged Not Feared

July 2, 2022 by Educator Barnes

Some teachers fear the students they are supposed to teach and help grow. When teachers fear students, student choice and agency cannot thrive. Agency is the ability to be in control and make choices that best suits the person. Giving students agency means teachers must loosen the reins and give up some control. Loosening the reins, many times, strikes fear in teachers' hearts, but it should not.

Many teachers' experiences as students involved sitting in rows and sitting there silently. As students, they were expected to listen to the teacher lecture, take notes, and then produce good academic results on assessments. Unfortunately, some teachers' classrooms look exactly like the classrooms they sat in as children. Students are expected to be seen and not heard. But why?

Every good college program teaches pre-service teachers to give students choices. These pre-service teachers make creative and wonderful lesson plans. They might even implement them during student teaching, and they might even go well. Then, when they implement them without the backing of a mentor teacher, the plans fall apart. The class is out of control. Instead of being reflective and analyzing what went wrong, they go back to the comfort and order of their childhood.

Giving students choices is only the gateway to student agency. It is not full agency. If teachers cannot get student choice right or activities that involve group work or cooperative learning, they will never get to agency. For agency to exist and thrive, teachers must learn to turn into facilitators and coaches of learning and move away from the lecture podium. Before I continue, let me address this. Direct instruction is necessary. No teacher should completely abandon it; however, students also need opportunities to learn outside of direct instruction.

When teachers become learning facilitators and coaches, they are like a conductor leading an orchestra. In an orchestra, many instruments work together to create pleasing music. Teachers can create a pleasing classroom of learning in the role of facilitator and coach. I assert that this is more taxing than lecturing but it is worth it. When teachers are in this role, they must have a game plan. Like a coach coaching a sport, the moves must be practiced. The game plan has to be thought out from beginning to end. Kids must practice, practice, practice. Once students can choose activities to do and complete activities in cooperative learning, then the teacher can invite agency. My own son experienced this in preschool when he was four.



May 2016 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Play at Saint Monica Catholic School

He asked his preschool teacher if they could do a play. Instead of the teacher scoffing at the idea, she thought about how to make it happen. You might think they would have done a simple play one day in class, but they didn't. It ended up being a play for parents to attend. They acted out Eric Carle's book "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." Guess which character my son was? He was the caterpillar, so he was in every scene of the play. When students have the agency to make suggestions and the teacher finds a way to make it happen, it builds stronger relationships between the students and teacher. Additionally, it helps students learn on a deeper level.

Teachers should not fear a class getting out of hand because they are implementing an idea from a student. They may find themselves trying to implement more than one idea at the same time ... which is why teachers need a good handle on directing their classroom like a symphony.

Teachers, put out a suggestion jar, and let students take the wheel and help drive their own education.