Student Agency Reconsidered: Political Dimensions and Implications

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The definition of student agency has been approached from multiple angles in educational research, yet scholars do not yet fully comprehend this concept (Klemenčič, 2023). Given the lack of conceptual clarity, debate is ongoing regarding the methods educators should employ to cultivate agency in the classroom. One popular approach is rooted in the notion that educators should cultivate students' beliefs about themselves and their capacities; in other words, teachers should encourage students' motivation and self-directed behavior (Mercer, 2011) and their opportunity to engage with class instruction (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). In addition to explaining student agency through an emphasis on self-beliefs, studies on student agency have concentrated on methodologies for how teachers should nurture student agency through various pedagogical tools in the classroom, such as, for example, by involving students in their assessment (Rämö et al., 2022). Alternatively, other research studies focus on promoting collaborative practices where students and teachers jointly implement instructional methods and teachers empower students to take the lead in deciding how these methods are applied (Zeiser et al., 2018). In these accounts, the cultivation of agency is perceived as being confined to the space of the classroom, emerging solely through the immediate interactions between teachers and students, and not extending beyond this setting.

In this paper I argue that it is time to rethink the notion that student agency is cultivated solely through interactions between teachers and students within the confines of the classroom. That is because this perspective overlooks the fact that the cultivation of student agency, in addition to involving interaction between a teacher and a student, also involves the negotiation of power within the institutional space of the school beyond the classroom walls. The negotiation of power, which is a key aspect of agency, occurs not only between students and teachers but also between students and educational institutions. The complex political dimension of this negotiation of power between students, teachers, and institutions, warrants greater attention from educators who want to foster greater agency for students in higher education. To cultivate agency, educators need to consider not only the dimensions of agency that can be cultivated within the classroom, but also its political dimension, since student lives are inextricably embedded within the institutional spaces of school or university.

The perspective of student agency I am suggesting is essential for effectively empowering students and promoting active participation in their education. This is especially true when it comes to empowering students from underrepresented minority groups, such as students from racially minoritized, low-income, disabled, or LGBTQ+ backgrounds. While fostering positive self-beliefs and providing a positive learning environment in the classroom is undoubtedly important, educators also should remain sensitive to restrictions and institutional structures that affect agency within educational institutions marked by distinct institutional histories, and which shape a range of possibilities in which they can cultivate their desires, goals, and intentions. In other words, the approach to student agency I propose involves engaging with institutional policies within the university, rather than focusing only on classroom practices or the development of student perceptions about their abilities.

Finally, I will focus on the development of student agency in Canadian higher education institutions. I hope that drawing attention to the political dimensions of agency will help to decolonize learning in educational institutions, and that this discussion will be useful for all educators, especially teachers like myself who are interested in reducing and eventually dismantling institutional barriers for students from underrepresented groups.

Political Dimension of Student Agency

Understanding how institutions of learning exert power is important because of the politics behind them which ultimately impact how students can exercise their ability to affect their learning. For example, the exertion of institutional power "can silence students' voices and perspectives, hindering schools' understanding of their needs and harming youth's well-being and potential" (Taines, 2014, pp. 156-157). Clearly, students from underrepresented minority groups are most vulnerable to such risk.

Toshalis (2015) posited that students have agency when "they can translate their intentions and desires into actions that have real consequences for themselves" (p. 47). Besides translating intentions to real consequences, he emphasizes that agency also manifests as the ability of students to challenge teachers' biases and unfair school practices; in other words, to challenge teachers' power in the classroom. In this view, agency of students also has a political dimension (Toshalis, 2015). When students make their voices heard and influence their own university experience, they not only exercise their student agency, but they also express their political agency; for example, students might demand more rights for student representation (Klemenčič, 2024; Raaper, 2024). If we conceptualize agency as the ability to translate intentions into consequences and the ability to shape and transform students' college experience, then political agency is an important dimension of students' agentic expression that should not be neglected.

Exercising political agency in higher education institutions involves negotiating power dynamics. In order to understand this political dimension of agency, consider how teachers commonly exercise power in the classroom when they create order and make assignments, design syllabi, and set class rules. Similarly, the university sets policies, rules, and regulations. For students to assert their agency, teachers and administration leadership must carve out space in which students can exercise their autonomy and influence their own learning. Taines (2014) points out how the power dynamic within the classroom frequently assumes a unilateral disposition. This is because teachers and educational institutions often exert influence over students in a singular direction. While this unilateral power can be beneficial for creating order in classrooms and college campuses, the issue arises when it prevents the development of a more balanced, reciprocal relationship. Ideally, a more equitable distribution of power in the classroom would allow students to be regarded as partners and contributors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of instruction. In reality, the extent to which students can exercise their agency is often contingent upon the amount of agency granted to them by their teachers, in other words, agency is "bounded by contextual factors, including power relations and discourses" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61).

Students from underrepresented groups face distinct challenges in exercising their agency. For example, Black girls are more likely to face disciplinary actions in the classroom when their teachers attribute excess agency to them and perceive their behavior as a deliberate choice to act inappropriately (Lamboy et al., 2020). In the case of Black girls, their agency may be seen as a threat, because it is perceived as a propensity for negative behavior which can result in unjust punitive actions, perpetuating systemic biases within educational institutions. Further, women of color in the academy have to commonly negotiate their personal and professional identity in the institutional landscape and face microaggressions (Bannerji, 2000; hooks, 2003;

Hughes et al., 2012; Razack, 1998). For example, they may not be perceived as true citizens but instead as immigrants and outsiders to the campus community, or encounter disbelief when they display academic excellence (Williams et al., 2020). When it comes to Black female students, their intentions and desires can be delegitimized by preconceptions about their intelligence and competence making them feel less confident in their ability to translate their intentions and desires into actions that have real-world consequences. This negotiation of their place within school as well as negotiation of their agency goes beyond what happens in the classroom and beyond what happens between them and their teacher. While women of color are not merely victims and often actively foster their agency despite these challenges, facilitating this negotiation requires a deeper consideration of how their agency fits within the larger institutional framework.

Educational institutions also exert power over political agency when they set policies and university rules. This becomes evident in cases when student activists find themselves in conflict with institutional aims and values. In some cases, student activists can be perceived as threats by school leadership (Taines, 2014). In addition, there is a long history of student activism being suppressed on college campuses (Strong, 2013). University leadership can exert its power to restrict student agency when student agency conflicts with the aims and values of the institution through various channels, such as by portraying student activists as threats to the university community or punishing them academically. As Rhoads (2016) pointed out, research on student activism is often focused on student activists and their actions, while the institutional response to these activists' efforts is less discussed and explored in the research literature. Moreover, student activists of color encounter more challenges from school leadership. Cho (2018) discussed how higher education institutions "alienate student protesters and activists by minimizing their concerns, which insinuates a deeper level of colorblind racism" (p. 85). By minimizing their concerns through institutional channels, schools have the power to restrict or limit students' political agency. However, why should universities support political agency of students? As Klemenčič (2024) pointed out, students enact political agency when they:

> transform situational constraints and opportunities for agency achievement. In simpler terms, students often enact political agency to demand more rights for student representation. Stronger representation in higher education governance can, in turn, enable students to better advocate for their interests, such as for quality, access, and social welfare provisions, which in turn create better conditions for students to study and achieve desired self-formation. (p. 11)

While universities have a duty to support agency in terms of students taking ownership over their own learning, in an ideal case they would also support their political agency to help students transform constraints they encounter and create further opportunities for agency realization.

When thinking about the educational institutions in which classrooms and the students' lives are embedded within, it is essential to recognize the enduring legacies that are tied to education in Canada, particularly within the framework of "settler colonialism, white supremacy, prejudicial nationalism, land dispossession, and territorial occupation" (Gahman & Legault, 2019, p. 52). James (2010) described the effects of colonialism in Canadian society sustained by the social domination of whites over people of color. Consequently, higher education is commonly seen as "a political and educational site where power relations and social inequality are reproduced" (Wagner, 2008). Indigenous scholar Sandy Grande (2018) echoes these sentiments when she highlights the historical role of universities as an institutional nexus for the capitalist and religious missions of the settler state as reflecting "histories of dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, forced assimilation, and integration” (p. 28). Given these legacies, the discussion of student agency should be also contextualized into institutional structures that are products of these legacies. It is important to point out that the view that agency at school can be somehow “pure” or unaffected by external influences is a myth, as is the idea that agency is completely dominated by institutional forces (Toshalis, 2015). The task of fostering student agency is not just a psychological task of cultivating certain beliefs, it is a political task. To challenge the legacies of settler colonialism, land disposition, and white supremacy in schools, teachers embracing approaches that want to challenge these legacies must adapt their strategies for promoting student agency in accordance with their aims of dismantling the oppressive structures inherent within academia such as, for example, the influences of institutional racism (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I critiqued de-contextualized conceptions of agency which limits the discussion of student agency to classroom teaching practices. Teachers and educational researchers should pay more attention to the political component of student agency, particularly how institutions enable or limit it. This study emphasizes the political component of student agency, which is relevant given the long-standing historical legacies of Canadian higher education institutions. In the future, more research is needed to analyze institutional responses to students exercising their agency and to better understand how students' agency is enabled and constrained within higher education institutions in and beyond the confines of classrooms. Additionally, exploration of more concrete pedagogical steps is needed to support both political and student agency and to identify effective strategies for supporting the agency of students from all social groups.

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