Module 4:
Fostering Student Agency, Voice and Autonomy

JCSH School Well-being Toolkit

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Module Overview

This module is intended to provide educators with an introduction to perspectives and practices associated with fostering student *agency*, *voice* and *autonomy*. Concepts foundational to student-centred approaches are presented focusing on agency and the underlying themes of student voice and autonomy support. Subsequent sections delineate the benefits and potential impacts associated with student agency, practical strategies for amplifying student voice in the classroom, home and community, as well as the impacts of intersectionality and Indigeneity on voice and agency.

Objectives of this module are:

- To understand the unique roles of agency, voice and autonomy support in student-centred learning

- To recognize the benefits of student agency and its relevance to academic engagement, learning and well-being

- To become acquainted with a range of strategies related to the promotion of student voice and autonomy-support practices.

Student-Centred Learning Approaches

Student agency, voice and autonomy support are concepts that are foundational to the development of student-centred learning approaches. Although these concepts are interrelated, they each have a unique emphasis and focus: *agency* is a broader concept reflecting independent actions encompassing voice and autonomy support, whereas *voice* focuses on expression and having points of influence, and *autonomy support* denotes a basic motivational or well-being need.

Student Agency

Student agency implies having freedom to make choices that are purposeful, as well as the imperative of being a participant in decision-making processes that support self-determination and reinforce students' identities as capable learners.

Incorporating student agency underscores the belief that students should be invested partners in their learning (Bruno, 2021).

Student Voice

Student voice also underscores the themes of being active participants in decision-making at school and in shaping their own educational and learning experiences. It is more than *having a say* or *being heard*. Student voice is about being *valued* and *respected* for personal perspectives that contribute to meaningful and successful learning experiences. Actively engaging student voice in classroom, school and learning interactions:

- Allows students and teachers to design solutions together
- Increases engagement in learning
- Builds connections and a sense of belonging
- Creates positive learning environments and school cultures
- Develops the personal and social capabilities of students (NSW, 2023)

Autonomy Support

Closely aligned with student agency and voice is the notion of *learner autonomy*. For many students who struggle to remain engaged with the learning environment and its routines, the provision of opportunities to practice greater autonomy in planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluation processes may be one factor that encourages retention, connectedness and academic progress. Educators use autonomy-supportive instructional practices in creating space for student agency and voice within inclusive learning approaches and classroom environments. Autonomy support is a core psychological need alongside relatedness and competency, which are central to student well-being and intrinsic motivation (Germani & Palombi, 2022).

Student Centred Concepts: Agency, Voice and Autonomy Support

Concept	Definition	Key Features	Unique Aspects
Agency	The capacity of students to act independently and make choices in their learning environment	Involves choice, goal-setting and active participation in shaping their learning	Broadest concept includes autonomy-support and voice but also extends to student ownership for their actions and learning
Voice	Students having expression and influence in decisions that affect their learning and experiences at school	Focuses on participation in dialogue, giving perspectives and impacting classroom learning and approaches	Emphasizes communication, influence and collaboration
Autonomy Support	Efforts undertaken to create learning environments that allow students to make meaningful choices and decisions	Involves fostering a sense of volition, encouraging the development of independent problem-solving	Centred on practices and strategies to cultivate independence and intrinsic motivation

Benefits and Impacts Associated with Student Agency

Enhanced Engagement and Intrinsic Motivation

Self Determination Theory (SDT) asserts that intrinsic motivation is particularly enhanced by the satisfaction of the need for autonomy. Support for autonomy occurs when educators are open to students' perspectives, use non-controlling language, provide explanatory rationales for requests, recognize challenging affect and offer choice in learning routines (Germani & Palombi, 2022).

Enhanced Relationships and Learning Environments

Autonomy-supportive instructional practices enhance both student engagement and the quality of student-teacher relationships. The application of autonomy-support methods in the classroom contributes to a wide range of positive interactions among students and educators related to intrinsic motivation and learning. These exchanges may include inquiry, discussion and problem-solving interactions, as well as demonstrations of learning or accomplishments and scaffolding conversations. Over time, these exchanges strengthen student-teacher collaboration and contribute to the formation of a positive learning environment. *(Kunni, 2021)*

Improved Academic Achievement

Wei, Zhang, and He (2020) reported a positive relationship between students' perceived autonomy support from their mathematics teachers and their achievement in mathematics. Students with reported higher autonomy need satisfaction improved their achievement outcomes at a faster rate than those who indicated lower levels of this psychological need satisfaction.

Development of Life Skills

Cronin and colleagues (2019) carried out a cross-sectional study to examine students' perceived autonomy support and its relationship to SDT basic psychological needs and students' development of life skills in Physical Education (PE) studies. The findings of this study revealed that teacher autonomy support was correlated positively with students' basic need satisfaction as well as life skills development in PE. Life skills development areas included teamwork, goal setting, social skills, problem solving and decision making, emotional skills, leadership, time management and interpersonal communication.

Getting Started…Tips for Promoting Student Agency

Structure opportunities for student autonomy: The provision of sufficient structure is critical in the implementation of autonomy supportive instructional methods. Such efforts provide clarity to students regarding avenues for exercising agency and voice, as well as ways for accessing educator support for student learning through scaffolding.

Scaffolding in education is an instructional strategy that personalizes support to students as they develop understanding and acquire skills. Grounded in Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development,* scaffolding places emphasis on fostering student agency and voice by encouraging learners to actively engage in their own learning process, receiving support and guidance at strategic points as educators and peers accompany them on their learning journey (Puntambekar, 2021).

Explain reasons or rationale for student learning: Invite students to explore the connections to and relevance of learning themes and their application to daily routines and relationships. When learning makes sense and is meaningful to students, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to be participants in the learning process (Bruno, 2021).

Situate learning themes and approaches for students through culturally responsive practices: The use of culturally responsive practices emphasizes engaging personalized aspects of students' cultural backgrounds, identities and experiences within the learning context. These efforts contribute to more inclusive instructional practices that communicate value and respect for students' voice, inviting greater student agency in the learning process (McQueen, 2022).

Cultivate Engagement Through Open-ended Exchanges: Use conversation starters and open-ended questions to encourage students to share their thoughts and approaches about learning. Questions such as: "What worked well today?"; "How did you approach solving this problem?"; "What challenges did you encounter?"; and "How did you respond?" assist students in explaining, clarifying and gaining insight into their own experience of learning. In addition, offering choices in how students share or celebrate their learning accomplishments with others according to their personal preferences further facilitates their engagement in the learning process (Aziza, 2021).

Establish a classroom culture of inquiry and creativity.

Creating a learning environment that fosters inquiry and creativity requires time, patience and flexibility to adapt to the diverse needs and strengths of students. Learning approaches that are flexible ensure multiple pathways to learning and demonstration of knowledge within the classroom and school environment (ISM, 2022).

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Make Time for Student Feedback on Learning: As students progress toward their academic targets, feedback or reflection can be generated through ongoing interactions between students and educators. Feedback may take the form of blogs, journals, websites, videos, social media posts or the sharing of experiences as a social norm within the classroom (ISM, 2022).

Share Practices for Fostering Student Agency and Voice: Zhou (2019) underscores the potential impact of *collective teacher efficacy* on student learning and achievement. When educators share practices, learn from one another and undertake collaborative practices to set the conditions for enhanced agency and voice, students "have a more coherent learning experience that reinforces the types of agency, efficacy and empowerment that every student needs and deserves" (Bruno, 2021, p.1).
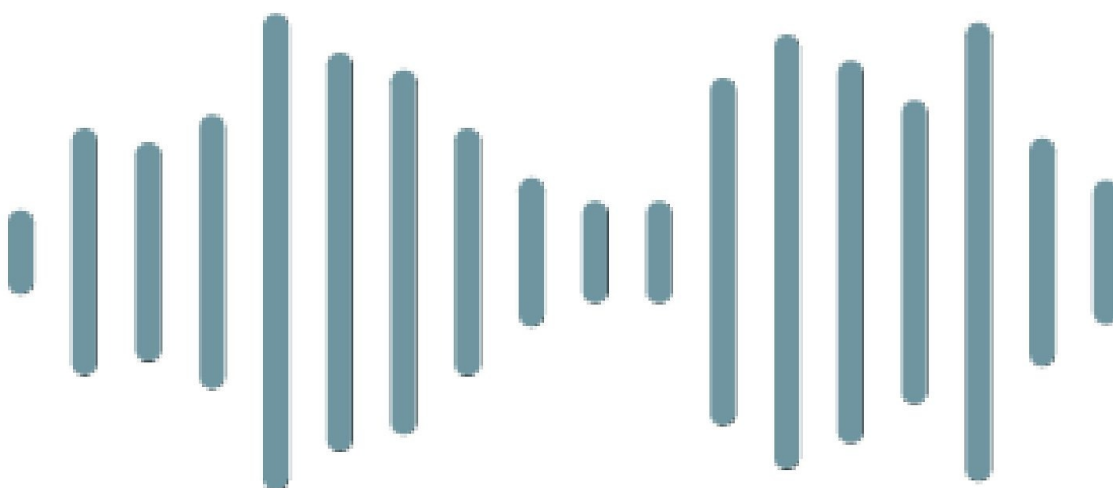
Student Autonomy Support Practices: Q & As

What are the benefits of supporting student autonomy?

✓ Enhances students' intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, positive emotions and psychological well-being

✓ Promotes increased curiosity, persistence and self-regulation

✓ Leads to better conceptual understanding and outcomes for students across all developmental levels and from diverse cultural backgrounds

✓ Builds a greater sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction among both teachers and students

What teaching styles support student autonomy?

✓ Listening and integrating student perspectives into curriculum themes and methods

✓ Actively inviting and welcoming input from students through discussions and the development of personalized learning strategies, projects and initiatives

✓ Validating students' feelings, interests, strengths, preferences and needs, and recognizing them as opportunities for enhancing student engagement and motivation

✓ Making explicit rationales and explanations for learning activities, taking time to check-in and encourage, providing flexible support and scaffolding when it is need or invited.

Does student autonomy support mean no structure?

✓ Autonomy-supportive teaching requires sufficient structure to support students in understanding expectations and how they will achieve them.

✓ Structure may include communicating expectations and standards, establishing goals, introducing strategies and procedures, providing directions, making models available to emulate and giving feedback.

✓ Structure includes explanatory rationales and is open and flexible to negotiating perspectives, balancing both student and teacher input.
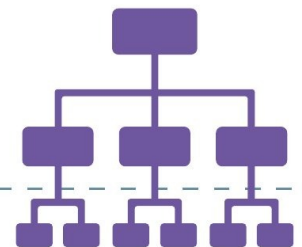
Avoid Controlling Interactions

Controlling styles prioritize teacher perspectives, impose rigid deadlines and focus exclusively on grades. Indirect control tactics include guilt, shame and withdrawal of approval. Such methods diminish intrinsic motivation and engagement compared to autonomy-supportive instructional practices.

How do we develop an autonomy-supportive style?

✓ Inquire, explore and incorporate students' perspectives into instructional and curriculum methods.

✓ Create a welcoming and psychologically safe classroom environment where students can express their thoughts and feelings about learning.

✓ Discover and engage the motivational potential of students, including their interests, strengths, preferences, personal goals and values, as well as activities and themes that fulfill their well-being needs (relatedness, competency, and autonomy support).

✓ Be aware of students' withdrawal, resistance, pushback or lack of interest. Use such observations as constructive information to help realign students' intrinsic motivation with classroom learning activities.

✓ Ensure ongoing support for autonomy during learning tasks by scaffolding with students, providing prompts, asking questions and posing ideas. Use these interactions to promote students' self-efficacy as independent learners.

✓ Encourage students to monitor and evaluate their own work by collaborating, asking questions and sharing ideas.

Student Agency in Action

The following resources will support teachers in creating learning environments that encourage student agency, voice and autonomy. These resources include teacher reflection forms for self-assessment, student reflection forms on agency and voice, and strategies for amplifying student voice in the classroom, school and community.

Downloads
Teacher Reflection on Student Voice
Student Reflection on Learning and Voice
Ways to Amplify Student Voice

Strategies for Agency in the Classroom

These strategies encourage and support **agency in the classroom.** Activities can easily be adapted according to the age and level of development of the student.

- When changes to classroom routines are expected, take time to discuss the purpose and importance of the changes with students. Providing opportunities to discuss upcoming transitions demonstrates respect for student voice and experience.

- At the beginning of the school year, work with students to identify three or four practices that they could use during group work (e.g., encouraging others to share their ideas or perspectives; restating what they have heard in their own words).

- For selected projects or learning activities, invite students to decide how they would like to communicate or present what they have learned to others in the classroom (e.g., speech, video, music, artwork, role play).

- Provide a suggestion box where students can share their ideas on how to structure learning activities or group work.

- Develop and hold a workshop for students on practicing active listening skills.

- Invite students to brainstorm ideas on ways to improve school climate.

Strategies for Agency at Home

Using strategies for agency at home encourages positive interactions and conversations among students and their parents / caregivers and other family members. These conversations contribute to parents' knowledge of their child's involvement in school routines and activities.

Strategies to promote agency at home:

- Have students brainstorm ways to make the school and their classroom more welcoming to parents and family members. Assist students in formulating four to five questions that they could use to record the perspectives of their parents or family members.

- At different points throughout the school year, invite students to identify a point of success or accomplishment that they would like to share with family members. Facilitate discussions on ways that each student could share their accomplishments or aspects of learning. Consider incorporating and highlighting these success stories within parent meetings or special school events.

Strategies for Agency in the Community

Generosity includes actions that contribute to the quality of life of others without necessarily receiving something in return. Generosity can involve strategies to recognize and respect the voice and autonomy of others, not only in school but also in the community.

❖ Organize a discussion with students on the theme: "What makes a healthy and positive community?" Following the discussion, help students to create a survey of six to eight questions about steps for building positive communities that they can ask friends, family members and others. As a follow up, review the responses in small groups and discuss ways that we can all contribute to the well-being of our communities.

❖ Work with students to create a presentation (e.g., musical, multimedia, artistic) to promote the importance of respecting the voices of others. Preparations can be integrated into classroom learning activities, but the final product should be part of a presentation to the community. It is important that this presentation be designed and delivered by the students.

Intersectionality, Indigeneity and Student Agency

"All people hold multiple cultural, social and political identities in the areas of gender, race, sexuality, ability, age, class, language, family structure, education levels and other areas. These identities impact how people perceive themselves, how others perceive them and how they are treated in the world. Each of these identities carries historical and contemporary experiences of power, privilege and oppression. The intersection of the way these identities impact individuals and their experiences of discrimination and oppression is known as "intersectionality."
(BC ICY Provincial Support Office, 2023)

Teachers should be aware of and sensitive to the impact of identity, culture and colonization on First Nations, Métis and Inuit students' agency, voice and autonomy. *Educators' conversations around agency with First Nations, Métis and Inuit children may differ from those with non-Indigenous children.*
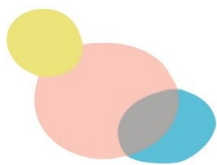
As educators prepare for meaningful engagement with and understanding of their First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, schools can provide support by orienting new staff members to the importance of voice and agency from a cultural perspective.

BC's Indigenous Relations Academy, under the leadership of founder Bob Joseph (Chief name K'axwsumala'galis), provides training and support for individuals seeking to work more effectively with Indigenous peoples. Several tips and strategies for schools and districts are identified, including:

✓ Establish a relationship between Indigenous communities and the school so that they learn from each other.

✓ Ensure all teachers have a thorough understanding of the residential school system and an understanding of the impact of colonization.

✓ Ensure all teachers have read the Executive Summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

✓ Include an acknowledgement of the First Nation territory on which the school is located, in the language of the territory over the front door of the school; if the school sits on overlapping territories, include both languages.

✓ Ensure the library has a broad range of relevant Indigenous books and resources.

Click here to visit the full list of Tips and Strategies for Teachers.

Digging Deeper

Relationship between Autonomy Support and Students' Well-being
Germani & Palombi 2022

How to support student autonomy and enhance motivation
Vicki Hargraves 2020

The Role of Agency in Learning
The Education Hub

How to Build Student Agency
Jacob Bruno, NWEA

Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future
Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

References