

4246 words

(Add Johnston, P.H. (1999, 2004). *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*: Stenhouse Publishers 1571103899 Paperback)

We need to get Three As– Appropriate Agency for All.

Chris Watkins

In this chapter I aim to bring together evidence and understandings to show that schools classrooms and learners have one thing in common when they're at their best – they're in charge of themselves and encouraging the same in others. I'll be expanding the key "when they're at their best" to mean when they're learning-focussed, with all the other benefits this brings. There are many strong and important connections between the core concept of agency and learning at every level – from individual learners to nations.

Where to start?

It's important to start with a particular focus, but one which schools rarely adopt - learning. Plenty of research (for example Lodge 2002) indicates that it's rare to find talk about learning in classrooms or schools - mainly because it is squeezed out by much more dominant themes: talk about teaching, talk about performance, and (in the classroom itself) talk about "work" (Watkins 2003).

But when a conversation about learning is initiated (as I am privileged to do in a range of settings) an important and engaged exchange results. For example, I often invite people (pupils, teachers, parents, others) to remember and consider their best experiences of themselves as a learner. I invite them to choose a time when their learning seemed to be going well - in any domain, or any context. After a while during which they remind themselves of the story of that occasion once again, and perhaps tell the story to a neighbour, I invite them to indicate how much that experience matched with these elements:

You had some sort of Goal, more or less well-defined, anywhere between "clear" or emergent

You were knowingly trying out your Approach / Strategy

You were getting Feedback, either directly from your own observation, or interpreting others'

You were adding Variations to what you were doing

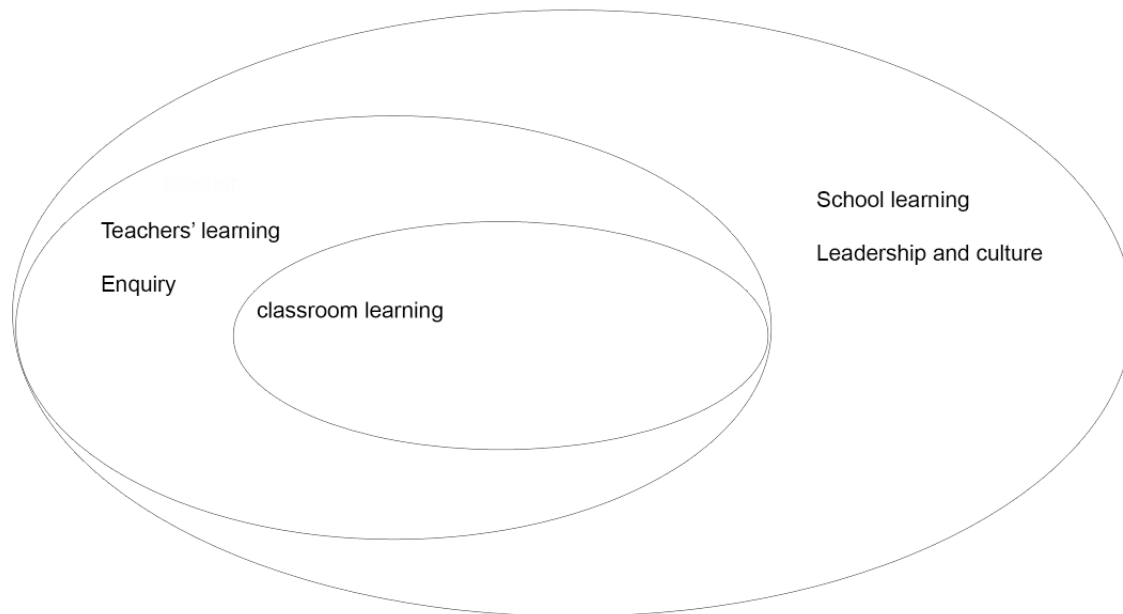
I regularly find everyone indicating a high degree of match between these elements and their best experiences. These elements come from much research which uses terms like "the self-regulated learner". These studies remind us that learning is something that learners do for themselves rather than something that is done to or for them. And no-one else can do your learning for you. They may be able to support your learning by the way they manage an environment, or the way they talk with you, but they can't do it for you. And perhaps the other side of the same coin is put by B. B. King (American musician, b.1925): "The beautiful thing about learning is nobody can take it away from you". So the learner is always at the heart of the process, no matter how it goes. And in the current concerns and pressures loaded on our education system, it's important to know that for thirty years research has shown a positive link between being a self-regulated learner and performance in school (Thomas, 1980; Pintrich, 1990; Vukman, 2010).

With learning as our starting point there's a very strong link with the other not-so-used word in the title of this chapter: agency. It refers to the human capacity to act intentionally, notice one's effects and make a difference. Straightaway that is a capacity which many take for granted (and perhaps don't talk about as a result), but others struggle to develop. So it's important to recognise that although agency is a core human capacity, it is something which

is achieved/developed – and that’s where one’s experience and environment come into the picture. This in turn brings in the quality of school experience which can be very important.

Schools are about more than individual learning

Having started with a focus on learning, apparently from an individual perspective, many schools lose it when it comes to their classrooms and their organisation. The great challenge for schools, as the complex organisations they are, is to keep the best of what we know about learning in the picture for all of their activity. Having started with stories of individuals’ learning at their best, we have to grapple with a lot more than that in a school. And as a way of making that more manageable we can think of school practice at a number of “levels”:



This diagram could be read in a way which I do not intend, which is as a necessary sort of hierarchy, with leadership influencing teachers influencing classrooms through top-down power. This is an increasingly dominant and increasingly destructive practice in England’s secondary schools. As one young teacher in a North London academy wrote to me recently: “One of the Senior Leadership Team has the responsibility for teaching and learning and has rolled out a rigidly proscribed format for the first ten minutes of every lesson, which cannot be deviated from. The decision making process which she used to create this plan was not clarified and pedagogically it is not always appropriate to follow, particularly with the more difficult classes however we have no choice over the matter. Each lesson must start with a PowerPoint slide with date, title, lesson objectives and a starter which all must be copied down silently. The boring nature of this and its unsuitability for a range of learning styles stifles my learning relations with colleagues”.

So the notion of levels is a means of analysis, not an assumption of hierarchical power. Of course the “larger” levels may affect the others, but by the same token the “lower” levels can maintain a life of their own despite what goes on “above”. The challenge is for these levels to be well-connected. If there is to be appropriate agency at all levels, then the effects will not be top-down compliance, but connecting the culture in everything the school does. Let’s see more about this starting at the key place:

The classroom

The classroom is one of the most crowded and complex situations on the face of the planet, yet the dominant way of viewing it does not recognise any of that. Since classrooms emerged on the planet over 5000 years ago, the dominant way of viewing them has been as though they are all about teacher control. This does a disservice for the agency of learners, and indeed for the agency of teachers. The researcher who did 40 years of detailed studies on classrooms, using hidden video cameras and pupil microphones concluded that the cultural image of the effective teacher was a major constraint as it did not include an orientation to

explore with students their learning and the teacher's contribution. "These images that we all have of effective teaching, are not about learning" (Nuthall, 2004).

But again, despite these dominant patterns, nearly all of the people I meet have experiences when the *learning* in a classroom was great. And when asked to remember these occasions and then indicate how much their experience matches four headings which I quickly introduce, the match is again very high. The headings are:

Active. Are learners invited and helped to:

Plan their approach to any activity, review the activity, make meaning from the experience and think ahead to other situations?

Collaborative. Are learners invited and helped to:

Complete tasks which require higher-order thinking, necessitating something different from all, develop their collaborative skills through prompts and review, operate in a range of participant structures?

Learner-driven. Are learners invited and helped to:

View themselves as driving the learning, contribute their own questions, strategies and explanations choose their challenges, develop their criteria, and assess their progress?

Learning-focused. Are learners invited and helped to:

View themselves as learners, notice their own learning, story and discuss their own experiences of learning, share their best approaches in order to improve learning review their learning and its progress over time?

These four headings were developed from a lot of thinking about research on learning in classrooms (Watkins et al, 2007) and are intended to reflect what we know about environments which can promote self-regulated learners. They promote agency for learners.

But the four headings have some important priorities when it comes to the journey from teacher-centred classrooms. *Active* develops the recognition in learners that it's their actions which are central to learning. *Collaborative* develops the recognition that peers can be an important resource in their learning. *Learner-driven* develops the skills of planning, monitoring and reviewing their learning. When these three are in place we can describe the classroom as learner-centred, and the students in such environments may actually think of themselves as learners (as opposed to listeners, performers, behavers, etc). It's only when a good degree of learner-centredness is in place that we can authentically develop the fourth one, learning-focussed. The contrast which I often see in schools is to try adding a language of learning to a classroom which is still predominantly teacher-centred - it will not stick, or have positive effects: students who are still at a low level of agency will be sitting there, probably thinking "hello, teacher's been on a course".

When agency is shared and distributed in a classroom we are also building the key elements of a classroom as a learning community: "In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are crew, not passengers" (Watkins 2005: 47)

The development of these dimensions of classroom learning highlights another important issue about change: there is no package. For decades, people who have developed learning-centred classrooms have found that other people come along, package the developments, and in the process package surface procedures rather than the principles of learning. As one of the earliest writers to notice this put it: "Some modifications so depart from the original philosophy that they can be termed 'lethal mutations'" (Brown and Campione 1996).

By contrast, the evidence on what is effective in helping the development of learning-centred classrooms raises the issue of agency again - but this time the agency of teachers.

Teachers and teacher learning

In a recent large development and research project "Learning How to Learn", the project leaders, well versed in matters of learning-centred classrooms and the possibility of distortion (up to 80% in classrooms they studied) decided to investigate what had actually

helped those teachers where a learning-centred classroom had developed. Their questionnaire offered a range of the interventions and supports that the project knew of: the results showed that the only school practice which helped teachers develop an explicit focus on learning in their classrooms was inquiry (Pedder, 2006).

The message here is the direct contrast to the packaging of classroom change - it indicates that we have to be in an organisation that treats its teachers as learners too. Therefore teachers will be acting as relatively autonomous professionals making decisions about how learning is best handled with the students in their classes: this contrasts with an increasing tendency to treat teachers as merely people who apply some centrally decided techniques. And recent research has shown some of the benefits of teachers having autonomous motivation: it gives them a greater sense of personal accomplishment and less emotional exhaustion, and there are benefits for their students too because “self-determined teaching may lead to self-determined learning” (Roth et al 2007).

Additionally, in the case of teachers, the way that their agency is expressed through their students has a very important dimension. In teaching “We develop our agency by seeing those we have helped to learn succeed” (Schwartz and Okita 2009). Again this contrasts with lesser views of teachers, for example that they derive satisfaction from gaining control or from taking credit for their students’ achievements (a critical point when it comes to “payment by results” or performance pay).

As one long-standing Head of department noted from his research into his school in current times: “High agency teachers are actively engaged in the learning of their pupils, pursue improvement together and feel empowered to act on their professional judgement. Low agency teachers operate in a routine manner, unfocused on learning, lacking optimism about improvement” (Hudson, 2005). This makes another link: when teachers have a developed sense of agency they do not disappear behind the classroom door: instead they view collaboration positively and seek to develop together.

The current picture on teachers’ professional learning is not promising (Opfer & Pedder 2011), but a minority of schools do display many of the characteristics associated with effective professional learning. These are high performing schools, so our attention is drawn to school characteristics for promoting teachers’ learning.

Internationally there is a focus on how to develop teachers’ agency (Lipponen & Kumpulainen 2011) but in UK I have only found one study which compares schools in terms of the agency of teachers: that is focussed on teachers in initial training. Sawyer (2001) found that schools differed along the distinction which follows:

Low Agency	High Agency
Hierarchical mentoring by managers	Collaborative mentoring by peers
Ethos of compliance	Ethos of teamwork and professional judgement/growth
Novices judged by deficiencies	Novices treated as reflective learners

This study also showed that teachers in high agency schools were able to bring together pedagogical knowledge gained from a range of contexts: school, university, Overall the findings bring our attention to the culture and relationships which surround teacher learning in schools.

When teachers view themselves as lead learners, they share with each other their reflections and enquiries; they explicitly allocate time to furthering their own learning together. None of this would happen to any significant extent without the organization and leadership supporting it.

Schools and leaders

These are very demanding times in which to be a leader of a school. The narrowing of educational goals, together with the forces of pressure and compliance are very strong. In these circumstances it is not surprising that many schools have a sense of being driven rather than a sense of driving their agenda (Watkins 2013).

In these conditions leadership is under great pressure, and what passes for school leadership has been distorted. As one analyst put it: “the model that increasingly seems to be advocated by central government as leadership for schools is not really leadership. Leadership, as the moral and value basis of the direction of schools, seems to have been largely removed” (Wright 2001, 278). He describes the current situation as ‘bastard leadership’, a term he derives from historical parallel with bastard feudalism, rather than the abusive sense of the word.

Instead of viewing headteachers’ role as passing on government dictat, and having a formal hierarchy to pass it further, we need to have a more comprehensive view of leadership, and in this wider view consider formally-appointed leaders as only one part of the school picture. In the many contexts of school there are many ways in which leadership is expressed in each of them - and not limited to one person per context. The notion of distributed leadership highlights this (Harris 2008): leadership is exercised by many people appropriate to their context in school. And there is good evidence that when it is exercised in this way, “School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed” (Leithwood Harris & Hopkins, 2008). Or, in the words of this chapter, agency is exercised by many, appropriate to their role and context.

Returning to the current context and the challenge for headteachers, the analyst cited above puts it similarly: “The key question at this point is, it seems, the extent to which headteachers and their staff have space and inclination to exercise genuine agency” (Wright 2001, 278). Such exercise would involve taking charge of change rather than merely responding to others’ driving forces, and building an ongoing capacity for the school to achieve its core goal - making a difference.

In my experience of schools I have seen only one focus which supports highly distributed leadership and agency: it is learning. At this level too it can become distorted, so in some cases the phrase “leading learning” can sometimes degenerate into merely adding to the stereotype of teaching. By contrast, when learning is the task for all, is discussed by all and is improved by all, the effect is truly transformational.

It is also worth saying that “distributing” leadership is not some laissez-faire approach, merely “giving it away” and letting others do whatever they like. When focussed on learning, it is proactive in encouraging a learning orientation, reviewing it, learning more about it, and so on. And the formally appointed leaders do a great deal to create such a picture. Not least they have to use a key skill in the repertoire of headteachers nowadays: the skill of keeping at bay the dominant narrow views of learning, together with the messages of fear and compliance which accompany them. This is a key part of the ethical and moral role of leadership (Starratt, 2007; English & Papa 2010).

Linking the levels

What is it that can make the whole picture coherent? Is it fixed practices agreed and written in policies? No it is the culture - the language and relationships that spread throughout the organisation. In the current circumstances of disempowerment it is perhaps not surprising that many schools forget that they have continuing power over the key element which makes a difference - their culture. Many have become frozen or disempowered or fearful in the current context, and do not utilise that key power they have – to construct the school’s culture. – inside their walls, they are the architects of their own culture.

Some ways of looking at the idea of culture can have a disempowering effect: if we think it's the subterranean aspects of school, then we won't be likely to address them. But as anyone who visits numbers of schools will confirm, their difference is not at all subterranean.

So I prefer to use the definition of culture from a key anthropologist "the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Geertz 1975 page 448), This view helps us to be proactive in developing the language and relationships which constitute the culture. In secondary schools which have not fallen for the dominant approach of turning themselves into exam factories (of a not very effective sort) but have prioritised learning, what can we see in how they build and maintain a coherent culture?

And again, the evidence is that schools which make "second order change", in other words think differently about their task, and take actions which are a departure from the normative behavior in the environment, do so by leading the culture of learning. And they get better results (Taylor 2010).

A core illustration of the links between the levels is given when we ask the question "What helps teachers view themselves as learners?". A project group of 24 headteachers and teachers from Leeds recently answered the question as follows:

Aspects of the school's language and culture: an open and honest ethos which supports reflection

School leadership who view themselves as learners

Staff meetings more learning focused and less managerial

Peer-collaborative enquiry into teaching and learning, e.g. lesson study, professional learning communities

An open and valuing approach to teacher's practice being shared – show and tell during meetings, videoing lessons

Being encouraged to innovate, review, take what are perceived to be risks

A collaborative approach to the development agenda

Showing the children that you are a learner

The bigger picture

Schools are in a paradoxical position in those countries where politicians have intervened critically in the sphere of education. The politicians use a rhetoric of not trusting teachers, yet the evidence shows that (for example in UK) for the past 25 years the public has found teachers and doctors the most trustworthy professions, and politicians and journalists the least trustworthy (MORI, 2011). At the same time international studies of school systems show "In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better" (OECD, 2011).

And the link with learning is also clear. The two countries in which the Ministers for Education talk about learning are also the two countries which regularly appear at the top of international performance tables: Finland and Singapore. And the link with agency is also clear. Across the world autonomy-promoting schools are not only possible but desirable for many other outcomes (Reeve and Assor, 2011). Most widely it has been shown that the development of agency in schools is a key element in the health of democracy (Eggen, 2011).

Closing thoughts

In countries where education has been treated as a marketplace and controlling forces from central government are strong, we do not see so many learning-centred schools. We do see divisive education systems which maintain age-old stereotypes of teaching. They ignore

evidence about the positive effects which come from a focus on learning, and attempt to dismiss it as trendy, or similar.

My overall impression of learning-centred schools is about the overall feel of the organisation, especially the sense that one gains of the students. Their view of themselves and their activity, the relationships with each other and their relationships with teachers all give off an important sense which is a major reflection of the school's culture. It's a difficult thing to describe in a simple phrase, but the best that I have found so far about a range of learning-centred schools is that the students are *composed*. This is reflected in a range of everyday things: they don't act "interrupted" when someone like me appears in their classroom, they engage easily in conversation with a stranger, and at the end of the school day there's not the screaming rush out of the door that I witness in many schools - there's a quiet change in direction of their activity, with a trend towards travel home. I am confident that such composure carries its empowering effects into other contexts, and that it is a major achievement of school.

References

- Brown, A.L. and Campione, J.C. (1996) "Psychological theory and the design of innovative learning environments: on procedures, principles, and systems" in Schauble, L. and Glaser, R. (Eds) *Innovations In Learning: New Environments for Education*. Hillsdale NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Eggen, A. B. (2011) "Agency as the ability and opportunity to participate in evaluation as knowledge construction", *European Educational Research Journal*, 10:4, 533-544.
- English, F. W., & Papa, R. (2010) *Restoring human agency to educational administration: Status and strategies*: ProActive Publications.
- Geertz, C. (1975). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London: Hutchinson & Co.
- Hudson, M. (2005) "The links between collaboration, agency, professional community and learning for teachers in a contemporary secondary school in England", *Educate*~, 5:2, 42-62.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008) "Seven strong claims about successful school leadership", *School Leadership and Management*, 28:1, 27-42.
- Lipponen L. & Kumpulainen K (2011) "Acting as accountable authors: Creating interactional spaces for agency work in teacher education", *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27, 812-819
- Lodge, C. (2002) "'Learning is something you do to children': discourses of learning and student empowerment", *Improving Schools*, 5:1, 21-35
- MORI (2011) IPSOS MORI Veracity Index: 2011 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Veracity2011.pdf>
- Nuthall, G. A. (2004) "Relating classroom teaching to student learning: a critical analysis of why research has failed to bridge the theory-practice gap." *Harvard Educational Review* 74:3, 273-306.
- OECD. (2011) "School autonomy and accountability: Are they related to student performance?". *PISA in Focus*, October <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisainfocus/48910490.pdf>
- Opfer V D and Pedder D (2011) "The lost promise of teacher professional development in England", *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 34:1, 3 - 24.

- Pedder, D. (2006) "Organizational conditions that foster successful classroom promotion of Learning How to Learn", *Research Papers in Education*, 21:2, 171-200.
- Pintrich P.R. & De Groot E.V. (1990) "Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance", *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82: 1,33-40
- Reeve, J., & Assor, A. (2011) "Do social institutions necessarily suppress individuals' need for autonomy? The possibility of schools as autonomy-promoting contexts across the globe". In V. I. Chirkov (Ed.), *Human Autonomy in Cross-Cultural Context* (pp. 111-132): Springer.
- Roth, G., Assor, A., Kanat-Maymon, Y., & Kaplan, H. (2007) "Autonomous motivation for teaching: How self-determined teaching may lead to self-determined learning", *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99:4, 761.
- Sawyer, V.M. (2001) *The developing Agency of Novice Primary School Teachers Within Partnership Structures Between Higher Education Institutes and Schools* PhD Thesis: The School of Education, The University of Leeds
- Schwartz, D. L., & Okita, S. (2009) "The productive agency in learning by teaching", manuscript submitted for publication
- Starratt, R. J. (2007) "Leading a community of learners learning to be moral by engaging the morality of learning", *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 35:2, 165-183.
- Taylor, R. T. (2010) "Leadership to improve student achievement: Focus the culture on learning", *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 7:1, 10-23.
- Thomas, J. W. (1980) "Agency and achievement: Self-management and self-regard", *Review of Educational Research*, 50:2, 213-240.
- Vukman, K. B., & Licardo, M. (2010) "How cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and emotional self-regulation influence school performance in adolescence and early adulthood", *Educational Studies*, 36:3, 259-268.
- Watkins, C. (2003) *Learning: a sense-maker's guide*. London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers.
- Watkins, C. (2005) *Classrooms as Learning Communities: what's in it for schools*. London: Falmer/Routledge.
- Watkins, C., Carnell, E., & Lodge, C. (2007) *Effective Learning in Classrooms*. London: Paul Chapman/Sage.
- Watkins, C. (2012) "Driven or driving? Flat or flying? The state our schools are in", *School Leadership Today*, 4:2, 102-104.
- Wright, N. (2001) "Leadership, 'bastard leadership' and managerialism: confronting twin paradoxes in the Blair education project", *Educational Management & Administration*, 29:3, 275-290.
- Wright, N. (2011) "Between 'bastard' and 'wicked' leadership? School leadership and the emerging policies of the UK Coalition Government", *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 43:4, 345-362.