What is 'agency' and why is it so important?
David Frost
Director of HertsCam Network
and
Emeritus Fellow of Wolfson College

June 2022

It is not unusual for terms that have gestated within the social sciences to be brought into public consciousness by journalists. They are then bandied about until worn to a frazzle and used as a label for almost anything. The term 'culture' is probably a good example of this. In recent times this has begun to happen to 'agency', so when you listen to the Today programme on Radio 4, you will hear it often. It is usually used to refer to something like people having the freedom to act. Pundits never stop to explain the term, and so it goes.

The concept of agency is particularly significant in the context of education which is why I think it is worth exploring. Agency has to be seen as a dimension of what it is to be human. This involves making choices and acting upon the world / environment. You may think that other living beings do this, but humans do it knowingly. We construct narratives about what we have done and we engage in sometimes painful, sometimes self-congratulatory, self-evaluation.

Agency in leadership and learning

Some academic literature has featured discussions on the idea of 'teacher agency'. It was talked about for example in the Flip the System book a few years ago. Priestley et al. (2015) contributed a chapter called 'Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?'. More recently Judy Durrant's book has 'teacher agency' in the title. It's a splendid book but it focuses on only one side of the coin. (Another snag is that if you google it, you get companies that provide supply teachers).

In the Leadership for Learning project at Cambridge we developed a theoretical model in which the concepts of leadership and learning are both conceived of as 'activities' and linked by the common concept of 'agency' within a framework of moral purpose.

> Learning occurs in the flow of interaction among members of the learning community and therefore has social and emotional dimensions that are inseparable from the cognitive. This is where the connection between learning and leadership becomes so apparent, as learning is enhanced through opportunities to exercise leadership. For example, when children teach one another or collaborate to support each other's learning, the development and expression of human agency and moral purpose impel learning and discovery (Frost, MacBeath, Swaffield and Waterhouse, 2008).

A question often posed about agency and moral purpose is: surely a person can have agency but do things that are totally self-serving and immoral. The philosopher, John Haldane, has argued that every action is morally significant (2011). Agency enables you to act but then you have a moral choice to make. What is interesting to consider is the social context in which you make that choice and how this can influence your choice.

Perspectives from social science

During the project that resulted in the LfL framework I published an article about agency (Frost, 2006) in which I drew on both psychological and sociological sources to explain the concept and its implications for education. Albert Bandura, who regrettably died about a year ago, made a major contribution to psychology. He said this:

> The exercise of personal agency is achieved through reflective and regulative thought, …..that affect choice and support selected courses of action. Self-generated influences operate deterministically on behavior (in) the same way as external sources of influence do….. (so) some measure of self-directedness and freedom is possible.
>
> (Bandura, 1989: 1182

In the same paper, he argued achievement and well-being require an 'optimistic sense of personal efficacy'. You have to believe that you can do whatever it is. Of course we all experience setbacks when we fail at something, but what really matters is the speed of recovery of your self-efficacy beliefs. There are important implications here for learning and leadership. Self-efficacy beliefs are key to both leadership and learning, so we need to learn how to nourish these. Learning and leadership can be challenging, but fortunately the capacity to regulate our emotional response is part of the human condition. For these reasons, structured reflection for both students and teachers can enable self-regulation and strengthen beliefs in efficacy. These ideas feature heavily in the work of Carol Dweck (2006) and Guy Claxton (2007).

The sociological perspective on agency is well represented in Anthony Giddens' work on 'structuration theory' in which human agency is in dynamic relation to social structure (1984). Giddens rejected the tenets of determinism and instead argued that social structures are recreated in the specific moment of action. This means that we can choose not to recreate them and try to establish quite different norms instead. Giddens in characteristic sociologist speak said this:

> Human actors are not only able to monitor their activities and those of others in the regularity of day-to-day conduct; they are also able to 'monitor that monitoring' in discursive consciousness. (Giddens, 1984: 29)

So what are the implications for leadership and learning? It is clear that we have to recognise that norms are powerful and can feel immutable. Students often experience 'peer pressure' in negative ways. Teachers may feel anxious about risking their reputations or their standing within the team if they do something different. However, according to structuration theory

change is possible and we all have the power either to reinforce the status quo or to think and act differently.

Can agency be modified?

If agency is a part of the human condition, should it be seen as a fixed commodity? I suggest that this is not the case. Agency can be constrained and diminished. For example: autocratic and over-bearing management can lead to colleagues' compliance – the bare minimum – which masks a serious lack of commitment to the goals of the school. Also, we all know of students who perceive that the curriculum is not relevant to them and schools are not really designed for people like themselves. Unsurprisingly, they feel alienated from education and schooling. In either case alienation is just one possible negative outcome. Others might include depression or despair. The overall result can be that a person can lose the capacity to face a challenge and thus be unable either to learn or to lead.

On a more optimisic note, agency can also be enhanced and nourished. For example, in school, we can provide opportunities for voice and participation. This applies equally to students as it does to members of staff. Feeling that you are being heard and are able to participate in discussion and decision making can enhance agency. It is of course fundamental to the teacher-led development methodology (Frost & Durrant, 2003). In this context, activities empower and enable educators to become effective agents of change. Headteachers and School Principals can also use transformational leadership strategies to create an environment in which everyone, children and adults, see themselves as learners and can exercise leadership. This was explored eloquently by Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney some years ago.

> ..in a learning community, individuals feel a deep sense of empowerment and autonomy and a deep personal commitment to the work of the school. This implies that people in the school form not just a community of learners but also a community of leaders. (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000: 93)

A new edition of this excellent book came out in 2011.

Let me finish with a comment about what I think is the key to nourishing and enhancing agency. First I want to clarify that it isn't a simple matter of doing things to cause agency to be strengthened, rather it has to be about *working with* agency, drawing on it as a resource and providing the scaffolding that allows it to flourish. The key to working with agency then is *empowerment* which can occur in both learning and leadership contexts. If we can get the scaffolding or facilitation right, agency can be enhanced. Potentially, this leads to commitment to the teaching profession, to the schools we work in and to the development of education itself. For students it can lead to more intense engagement in the learning process with students being self-motivated, self-directed and self-regulating. It is obvious perhaps, that this will inevitably result in higher levels of academic performance and self-actualisation for all.

References

Bandura, A. (1989) Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory. *American Psychologist* 44 (9), 1175-1184.

Claxton, G. (2007) Expanding young people's capacity to learn, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55 (2), 115-134.

Durrant, J. (2020) *Teacher Agency, professional development and school improvement*. London: Routledge.

Dweck, C. S. (2006) *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Frost, D. (2006) The concept of 'agency' in leadership for learning *Leading and Managing* special issue on the Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning project, 12 (2), 19-28.

Frost, D. (2012) From professional development to system change: teacher leadership and innovation, *Professional Development in Education* (special issue on Teacher Leadership and Professional Development) 38 (2), 205-227.

Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2003) *Teacher-led development work: guidance and support*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Frost, D., MacBeath, J., Swaffield, S. and Waterhouse, J. (2008) The Legacy of the Carpe Vitam Leadership for Learning project, *inform February 2008 Number 8*, Cambridge: Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network. https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/networks/lfl/about/inform/PDFs/InForm_8.pdf

Fullan, M. (1993) Why teachers must become change agents, *Educational Leadership* 50 (6), 12-17.

Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mitchell, C. and Sackney, L. (2011) *Profound Improvement: building capacity for a learning community* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J. and Robinson, S. (2015) Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter? In R. Kneyber & J. Evers (eds.), *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Bottom Up*. London: Routledge. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42544019.pdf