Human agency, learning and leadership in schools
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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 BBC Radio 4, the UK's dominant news and current affairs show, you will hear it often. It is usually used to refer to something like people having the freedom to act or simply having a voice. In such discussions, pundits never stop to explain the term and so the meaning drifts and the muddle is endlessly recycled.

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. It involves making choices and acting upon the world or the environment. You may think that other living beings do this, but what is distinctively human is that we do it knowingly and can reflect on it. The awareness of self has been the subject of philosophy since the ancient Greeks. It is also peculiarly human to construct narratives about what we have done and engage in self-evaluation (Bruner, 2002). This can be sometimes painful, sometimes self-congratulatory. Such reflection invariably includes consideration of efficacy, value and morality. Was I any good? Did I benefit? Was it the right thing to do?

Agency in leadership and learning

Human agency is an important concept in our understanding about both learning and leadership. In both cases, there is the need for the individual to engage actively with intention and purpose.

Regarding learning, we know that it is possible to persuade, cajole or compel young people to engage in activities which are supposed to result in learning. In the age of performativity (Ball, 2003), we know that we can rehearse students in ways to answer questions in the various tests they have to face. However, if real learning involves changes in understanding, skills and knowledge – changes that don't dissipate as soon as the exams are finished with - the learner's agency has to be ignited. The phrase 'life-long learning' is often associated with adult education provision or extramural studies but to have a more developed understanding of young people's learning, it is more helpful to see it as the development of learning capacity. This is to focus on the process of learning as explained by John MacBeath:

> ..in his book The Educated Mind, Keiran Egan (1997) outlines a theory broadly developmental in nature but also recursive so that, he argues, whether as children or as adults, we constantly revisit ways of knowing, building not so much on what we know but how we know. As what we know becomes more deeply layered and more finely textured by the mental modes which we engage, we become more insightful and sophisticated in the way we apprehend and process knowledge – in other words we get better at learning how to learn. (MacBeath 2009: 11)

Learning how to learn is surely the essence of life-long learning. It opens up the possibility of further learning whether that be learning new skills in the workplace, learning a new language, taking up scuba-diving while on holiday or enrolling for a part-time doctoral programme in middle age. Taking ownership of learning in the way described by John MacBeath draws upon the capacity we call agency. It suggests choice, but also the determination to pursue a path of learning which may sometimes be exhilarating and sometimes challenging.

Regarding leadership, it is possible to observe people occupying formal positions of responsibility in institutions without necessarily engaging in what we might call leadership practice (Raelin, 2011). Leadership can be conceptualised as 'providing direction and exercising influence' (Leithwood & Rheil, 2003). This is echoed throughout the literature on leadership in organisations (e.g. Yukl, 2010). In the education context, there is evidence that leadership actually makes a difference to a school's effectiveness, as measured by the assessment of learning outcomes (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004). I want to argue that improving effectiveness requires transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) which involves processes such as vision-building, direction-setting, restructuring the organisation and staff development (Day & Sammons, 2013). Clearly, the practice of leadership is necessarily agential.

The term 'teacher agency' has appeared in academic literature in recent years. It was talked about for example in the Flip the System book (Kneyber & Evers, 2015) 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 and I have no quarrel with its central thrust:

> The book joins the call for an emphasis on nurturing individual agency, participation self-efficacy and voice amongst educators and their students, to enable mutual benefit and human flourishing. (Durrant, 2020:2)

What I do find problematic however is the term 'teacher agency' which might be misunderstood; taken as referring to a particular kind of agency and thus limited. I have a similar concern with the term 'teacher leadership'. I use it often myself but with a degree of apprehension in case it is construed as suggestive of a particular type of leadership, one which

is limiting for teachers. For me agency is part of the human condition; it is a capacity which enables teachers to exercise leadership; 'teacher leadership' is merely a useful term for that.

I started by saying that agency is crucial in our understanding of both learning and leadership. 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: could a person have an abundance of agency but do things that are totally self-serving and immoral?. The philosopher John Haldane argued that every action is morally significant (2011). Agency enables you to act but then you have a moral choice to make and, as argued earlier, it is also human to reflect on and evaluate our own actions. What is interesting to consider is the social context in which we make choices and how this can influence them.

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. I summarise this here. 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.
>
> <div align="right">(Bandura, 1989: 1182)</div>

In the same paper, he argued that achievement and well-being require an 'optimistic sense of personal efficacy'. To succeed, you have to believe that you can do whatever it is you seek to do. Of course, we all experience setbacks when we fail at something, but what really matters is the speed of recovery of our 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. Both learning and leadership can be challenging, but

fortunately the capacity to regulate our emotional response is also part of the human condition. For these reasons, structured reflection, for both students and teachers, enables self-regulation and can 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 which featured in some sociological accounts (see for example Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Instead, he 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)

Here we see the layers of self-awareness that characterise humanity.

So, what are the implications for leadership and learning? Norms are powerful and may appear to be immutable. For example, 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 part of the human condition, should it be seen as a fixed commodity? I suggest that this is not the case. Actually, agency can be constrained and diminished. For example, autocratic and over-bearing management can lead to colleagues' mere compliance – the bare minimum – rather than 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 (Elliott & Zamorski, 2002). 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 optimistic note, agency can also be enhanced and nurtured. 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 work methodology for which I have argued for many years (Frost & Durrant, 2003). In this context, the workshop activities embedded in the methodology 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 most 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.

Concluding remarks

Let me finish with two points about what I believe is the key to nourishing and enhancing agency.

First, it is important to take action to strengthen the agency of everyone in the process of their learning and in their leadership. This may be, for example, a matter of providing opportunities and creating spaces for making choices and participating in decision making.

Second, I think we can go further by *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 (Frost, 2018). Getting the scaffolding or facilitation right takes considerable effort and ingenuity but if successful, it can result in agency being radically enhanced. For teachers, this can lead to greater 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-regulated. It is obvious perhaps, that this will inevitably result in higher levels of academic performance and self-actualisation for all.

The above arguments are based on my experience working with teachers and schools but, since agency is a dimension of what it is to be human, the principles of empowerment through facilitation can be applied in other contexts. Human endeavour within social settings,

whether they be a business, a community group, a church or public service, requires the mobilisation of agency in the way described above, if success or even excellence is to be the outcome.

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