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# Power to the Pupil: School Libraries and Student Agency

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Being the primary consumers of education and spending so much time in the classroom make students prime candidates to be evaluators of their learning experiences. Our education determines our future; let us have a say in our futures. (Boston Student Advisory Council 2012, 154)

This declaration represents the thoughts and feelings of students regarding their educational experiences. Students want more control over their learning. This statement and others have intrigued me and sparked my fascination with the concept of student agency. Reading through this issue you can discover the concept of student agency and concretely place it in your school library.

So…what is student agency and why is it important to our practice as school librarians? These two questions are the propelling force behind this issue of *Knowledge Quest*. The concept of student agency can be defined simply as students' ability to take ownership of their personal learning. Student agency is comprised of motivation, engagement, and voice (Toshalis and Nakkula 2012). This three-pronged approach comprises the lens that will focus this issue of *KQ.*

Motivation and achievement don't stand alone; they exist in an ever-changing environment that is dependent on our students' daily experiences. Intelligence is dynamic; this knowledge should be a part of the student experience along with opportunities for praise, self-determination, and feedback. Each of our students will have a personally unique path toward setting and achieving academic goals. To support our students, we need to become experts in their learning processes and customize the school library experience to meet them at the point of need.

Engagement has four areas of emphasis: academic engagement (time on task, problems attempted, homework completion); behavioral engagement (attendance, classroom participation, questioning); cognitive engagement (self-regulation, learning goals, and perceived relevance of schoolwork to future endeavors); and psychological engagement (feelings of identification or belonging, relationships, personal independence). When students are engaged, they will see benefit in their school library experiences and feel the value of the space and program.

Student voice can be understood as the communication and influence in co-constructing the learning environment. Student voice is the expression of allowing students to profoundly impact their learning environment and their learning. This can be the most challenging, provocative, and rewarding aspect of student agency. It has the potential to be personal and speaks to the heart of the art and science of our educational practice, as we open up to feedback on the school library program.

We are school librarians at an exciting and challenging time for the field, as a gradual paradigm shift from educator-focused to student-centered instruction is under way. In truth, we educators work hard to convince students that education is worth their attention, time,

and effort. Educators are being encouraged to cultivate students to be critical thinkers and makers. The movement to create critical thinkers and makers could stall if classroom teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders don't share our understanding that student agency fosters these skills and many other immeasurable impacts. Crucial information on how to improve our nation's school system might reside with those who will benefit the most: the students themselves (Rosenthal and Boser 2012). How can we begin to give students control of their learner experience in the school library?

Developing a culture of student agency in the school library can be accomplished in many ways. The following articles are dedicated to framing the concept of student agency and giving practical tips for encouraging student agency in your library. This innovative issue, *Power to the Pupil: Student Agency in the School Library*, features six articles with unique points of view and practical tips for student-centered library experiences.

Philip Williams gives an overview of the student agency concept in the library. This article is a passionate call to action for school librarians to advocate for our students and the school library as a vehicle for encouraging student control of their own learning with strategic guidance.

Joy Fleishhacker offers the opportunity to think of collection development as a way to foster agency by offering science-based books in a variety of formats, and then allowing students to chart their own personalized course through the process of acquiring knowledge.

Vivian Alvarez examines how engagement in the public and school library settings can be sparked and skills essential to lifelong learning can be fostered through the use of tabletop gaming. Capitalizing on this initial engagement can create greater opportunities for students to explore their own agency as they play and develop effective strategies and habits of mind.

Michelle Easley provides a practical look at existing programs focusing on student agency and personalized learning facilitated by the school library program and the library collection, especially its e-resources.

Crystle Martin prompts exploration of student voice as it relates to video gaming and coding. This is an excellent and timely vehicle for an in-depth look at student voice and linking students' personal interests to in-school learning.

Nancy Jo Lambert gives practical advice for creating genuine readers with student agency through the implementation of flexible scheduling as she recounts her own experiences with getting other stakeholders onboard with the implementation.

In an interview following the Western Kentucky University School of Teacher Education Summer Conference, which focused on student agency, I stated:

> There's a movement toward really engaging students individually and giving them that voice. The idea behind student voice and student agency is that our students can take control of facets of their own learning, and isn't it liberating to think that we could give that to our children? I want my kids to have it, and every educator I know wants all of us to have that.

Wouldn't it be amazing if school librarians became more articulate about their role in supporting the paradigm shift toward student-centered learning and recognized for the value of their school library programs? As school librarians we already do many things that promote student agency; now we have a label for it and a way to discuss these valuable efforts.

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