



An agentic perspective in assessment and evaluation of play-based learning

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 18, Issue 1, 5-11, 2021

PAUL CROWHURST

Papatoetoe East Primary School

In recent times, play-based learning has become more prevalent in New Zealand primary schools. The notion of learner agency has also emerged as a priority for educators. Learner agency is underpinned by a strong foundation of theory that has the potential to find synergies with play-based learning. Based on research across three primary school classrooms, this contribution conceptualises learner agency as occurring on three separate levels in the classroom: type of learning, direction of learning, and evaluation of learning. It is the evaluation of learning where play-based educators may benefit the most from an agentic perspective. Primary classroom teachers seeking to evaluate play-based learning may, it is suggested here, adopt a dialogic approach to evaluation based on asking questions that are focused on the four key properties of agency: ideas, planning, action, and self-reflection.

Play-based learning is firmly on the radar of many primary school leaders and teachers in New Zealand today. As Hedges (2018) states, play is "...the new educational trend sweeping the country" (p. 60). It is well established that play is linked to higher motivation (Hurwitz, 2003), greater well-being (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005), more effective executive function (Diamond, 2014), and—unlike some learning experiences in school—play finds little resistance from learners. Given that engagement in play enhances social, cognitive and well-being dimensions, and is generally regarded as enjoyable, it stands to reason that for primary-school leaders, classroom teachers, and the students they serve, play-based learning offers exciting potentialities. I will suggest in this reflection that there are synergies between play-based learning and theories of human agency, and that, when explored together, the potential for enhanced teaching and learning to take place increases. Specifically, a theory of learner agency could be useful to support educators in their efforts to enhance assessment and evaluation of play-based learning.

Presently, New Zealand primary educators seem willing to move beyond prevailing standards-based measurement, to embrace a less narrowly focused curriculum. In the junior primary years, I have found that many practitioners seek a pedagogy that provides a start to school that is high in oral language opportunities and low in academic pressure. The notion of play in classrooms is a long way removed from the data-driven paradigm of standards-based learning popular in recent times. Introducing or increasing the emphasis on 'play' can, however, be problematic for school leaders and teachers charged with monitoring the effectiveness of student learning, if they still rely on assessments

that focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes, and whose parent community may have certain expectations about school-based learning. Therefore, how should educational leaders and teachers evaluate play-based learning? One answer to this question can be found in theories of human agency.

HUMAN AGENCY

According to Bandura (2006), to have agency is to shape one's surrounding social structures, rather than be passively shaped by social and environmental forces. Paris and Lung (2008) suggest that as people function in the world, they are not merely passive entities directed by the circumstances around them. They can also actively influence and contribute to the social realms in which they function. Therefore, persons who are able to shape their surrounding social structures are said to have agency.

Bandura (2001; 2008) defines agency by four properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. Each characteristic describes something of what makes a person able to act purposefully in their circumstances. *Intentionality* refers to the way that people have ideas (intentions) about how they would like their future to unfold. These intentions might be referred to as goals or ambitions. Agentic people are intentional people and know what direction they want their lives to take and what goals they want to achieve (Bandura, 2006; Klemencic, 2015). Those people who have low levels of agency hold fewer aspirations and less clear intentions about how their future, whether immediate or long-term, might look like (Paris & Lung, 2008). Added to these intentions are some clearly developed plans for what needs to happen to realise them. Bandura (2008) referred to these plans as *forethought*. A forethoughtful person thinks coherently about the future leading to clearly visualised goals and how they can be reached (Bandura, 2008). To influence the direction of their life, agents must move beyond having internally held perspectives and goals and actively construct and implement action plans in the world around them. This process is referred to as *self-reactiveness*. The notion of self-reactiveness describes a vital piece in the description of agency because it underlines the necessity of bringing thought to action. The fourth attribute of agency is *self-reflectiveness*. According to Bandura (2006), reflecting on one's thoughts and actions is the core property of agency. The ability to think critically about past and currently unfolding events allows the individual to adapt to changing and unexpected circumstances.

Bandura's description of agency is reflected by Hewson's (2010) three properties of agency—intentionality, power, and rationality. Essentially, agency is a person's ability to have deliberate intentions for their own lives, plan to bring these intentions to fruition, act to make these a reality, and to think about their actions purposefully. In *Table 1* Bandura's four attributes have been revised in simple language terms to provide a set of properties that describe an agentic person.

Table1: Bandura's properties of agency and revised terms

<u>Properties of Agency - Bandura (2008)</u>	<u>Revised Properties of Agency</u>
Intentionality	Ideas
Forethought	Planning
Self-reaction	Taking action
Self-reflection	Self-reflection

Bandura (2006) further explains that an agentic person is self-determining, motivated to act, and possesses high levels of self-efficacy. According to Noddings (2016), such notion of a person being free to pursue their dreams and ambitions is very much at the heart of democratic learning. Thus, by making agency an outcome of learning, school leaders are setting up students to function as democratic citizens in their world.

LEARNER AGENCY

In recent times, the notion of learner agency has grown in popularity within compulsory education sectors in New Zealand, with some schools and *kāhui ako* identifying learner agency as an important outcome within their key strategic documentation (Kohimarama School, 2021; Waipaparoa Community of Learning, 2018). While learner agency has seen a growing profile in schools, it has also received more attention on an academic level, including some critical considerations. Concerns have focused on learner agency and the individual freedom it espouses as being largely a middle-class virtue and embedded in the advancement of a neoliberal agenda (Charteris & Smardon, 2018). On the other hand, the self-determining nature of learner agency has been linked to promoting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and greater enjoyment in learning (Crowhurst & Cornish, 2020).

Agency encapsulates much of what educators are hoping to achieve through play-based learning, as play involves discovery and exploration that is self-directed (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; Grey, 2013). It can be said that play-based learning involves students shaping their own learning pathways. Therefore, learner agency is tightly aligned with the behaviour and values of play-based learning and should be considered by educators working with a play-based pedagogy as a possible supporting framework to their practice.

THREE LEVELS OF LEARNER AGENCY

In this section, I conceptualise that learner agency has the potential to exist at three separate levels of the learning experience. The first level is the *type* of learning that takes place and refers to whether learners have agency over what they will do. Type agency is rare in formal learning environments but—as an exception to this rule—is a feature of play-based learning, where students are often able to choose from a vast array of activity types. Students in

play-based learning environments can, for example, choose to engage in dress-up, builders bench, painting, and Lego, just to name a few options that might be made available to them.

The second level where agency can occur is the *direction* of learning. Direction agency refers to the approach students can take within a specific activity. If they have scope to choose multiple pathways within the learning experience, it could be said they are exercising direction agency. Again, as with the *type* of learning, play based learning gives students the freedom to pursue their own direction of learning. For example, they may be in the sandpit building castles but then choose to build roads or form water channels. The type of learning experience stays the same—sand play—but the students have agency over the direction that the activity can take.

The third level of the learning task where agency can be exercised is the *evaluation* of learning. Evaluation agency means two key things. Firstly, students' views are valued in the evaluation of a learning experience, and secondly, the teacher's role in the evaluation process recognises that learner agency is an integral aspect of the overall learning. It is at this third level that there is room to shift from standardised assessment outcomes and record keeping, toward a more agentic perspective on evaluation of learning.

A chief purpose of assessment and evaluation is to support further learning. Due to play-based learning being a pedagogical approach that makes room for high levels of agency in the type of learning and the direction that learning takes, it is important to adopt an appropriate perspective for evaluation that is congruent with the agentic nature of the type and direction of learning found within this pedagogy. Therefore, a move toward an agentic perspective in the evaluation of learning will enable some continuity of philosophy across the three levels of the learning experience.

EVALUATING PLAY-BASED LEARNING FROM AN AGENTIC PERSPECTIVE

Evaluation, according to Hattie and Timperley (2007), is about answering three important questions: (1) Where am I going?, (2) How am I doing?, and (3) Where to next? Adopting an agentic perspective in evaluation provides a connection between the philosophical ideas that underpin playful pedagogy and an approach to determining its value. It is suggested that specifically utilising questioning, based on the four revised properties of agency (see *Table 1* above), allows educators to answer Hattie's questions by: (a) determining a direction for learning that is aligned with playful learning, (b) determining progress toward these objectives, and (c) allowing a more agentic assessment of learning within play-based learning contexts.

Research I conducted across three classrooms over a six-month period (Crowhurst, 2019; Crowhurst & Cornish, 2020), found that there were simple yet clear teacher questions that allowed for reflection on a task and that led to further agency in learning. Examples of these questions are:

- What are you planning to do here? (ideas & planning)
- Do you think that was the best way of building that? (reflection)

These types of questions allow the teacher to follow-up with questions that might stimulate further agency. Examples of questions that might enhance agentic play could include:

- What do you think your next step might be? (planning)
- Have you thought about trying _____? (reflection)

The results of the research point toward the value of a highly formative approach to assessing learning. Teacher questioning in a formative way has been shown elsewhere to support learning as it is occurring (Black et al., 2002). Taking an agentic approach to questioning is therefore likely to be an effective mechanism for enhancing learner agency.

I argue that teachers implementing a play-based learning approach should embrace a dialogic approach to evaluation focused on simple questions, even though this may clash with the strong emphasis on record-keeping in current assessment practice. If there is a strong compulsion to record progress in some institutions, then I suggest a narrative approach, whereby teachers record learning stories and support these with anecdotal notes based on the learning conversations that have taken place. However, the focus of teachers should remain on developing strong conversational interaction with students that stimulates reflective thought by asking them to consider their own ideas, plans, and actions.

SUMMARY

The discussion about the value of play-based learning in junior-primary classrooms is well underway. Many educators agree that playful learning is valuable for students in the initial years of primary school. The framing of this pedagogical approach against the theoretical background of learner agency supports clarity of purpose and practice, particularly with regard to providing a meaningful process of assessment and evaluation. Educators, and educational leaders, seeking to foster play-based learning should consider dialogic questioning that encourages reflection, which can move learners toward more purposeful agentic engagement in their playful forms of learning.

Manuscript Submitted: July 7, 2021

Manuscript Accepted: July 9, 2021

REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2(1), 1-26.
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychology Science*, 2(1), 164-180.
- Bandura, A. (2008). Toward an agentic theory of the self. In J. Baer, J. C. Kaufman, & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *Advances in self research Vol 3: Self-processes, learning, and enabling human potential* (pp. 15-49). Information Age Publishing.
- Black, P. J., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2002). *Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom*. Kings College London, School of Education.
- Burdette, H. L., & Whitaker, R. C. (2005). Resurrecting free play in young children: Looking beyond fitness and fatness to attention, affiliation, and affect. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 159(1) 46-50.
- Charteris, J. S., D. (2018). A typology of agency in new generation learning environments: emerging relational, ecological and new material considerations. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 26(1), 51-68.
- Crowhurst, P. (2019). *Supervisory teaching and its impact on student agency in primary classrooms*. [Doctoral thesis, University of New England] <https://dx.doi.org/10.25952/5d8c60ec934c2>
- Crowhurst, P., & Cornish, L. (2020). Factors in agency development: A supervisory teaching perspective. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1). 10.14221/ajte.2020v45n9.2
- Diamond, A. (2014). Executive functions: Insights into ways to help more children thrive. *Zero to Three Journal*, 35 (2), 9-17.
- Dweck, C, S. (2006) *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Ebbeck, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2010). Perspectives on play in a changing world. In M. Ebbeck & M. Waniganayake (Eds), *Play in early childhood education: Facilitating learning in diverse contexts* (pp. 5-25). Oxford University Press.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Hedges, H. (2018). Play-based learning: Questions and invitation from early childhood education. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 3, 60-64.
- Hewson, M. (2010). Agency. In G. D. A. Mills, & E. Wiebe (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Hurwitz, S. C. (2003). To be successful let them play. *Childhood Education*, 79(2), 101-102.
- Klemencic, M. (2015). What is agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement. In S. B. M. Klemencic, & R. Primožic (Ed.), *Student engagement in Europe: Society, higher education and student governance* (pp. 11-29). Council of Europe Publishing.
- Kohimarama School (2021). Our learning approach. *Kohimarama School*. <https://www.kohimarama.school.nz/learning/our-learning-approach/>
- Noddings, N. (2016). *Philosophy of education*. Routledge.

- Paris, C., & Lung, P. (2008). Agency and child-centered practices in novice teachers: Autonomy, efficacy, intentionality, and reflectivity. *Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 29(3), 253-268.
- Waipaparoa Community of Learning (2018). *Waipaparoa Community of Learning Achievement Plan 2018-2020*.
<https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Investing-in-Educational-Success/Communities-of-Schools/AC/99127-ACHCHA.pdf>