

STUDENT AGENCY IN PE

HOW MUCH SAY DO YOUR STUDENTS HAVE IN THEIR PHYSICAL EDUCATION LEARNING?

**Marisa McKay, Primary physical education advisor
Physical Education New Zealand**

What is student agency?

Students have a sense of agency when they feel in control of things that happen around them; when they feel that they can influence events. This is an important sense for learners to develop. They need to be active participants in their learning.

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“One way of thinking of learner agency is when learners have the ‘power to act’. When learners move from being passive recipients to being much more active in the learning process, and actively involved in the decisions about the learning, then they have greater agency.”

<https://edtalks.org/#/video/ten-trends-2014-agency>

Agency in physical education

We know learner agency is embedded in The New Zealand Curriculum key competencies as “the capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities” (NZC, Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38). And we often see opportunities for students to develop, experience and demonstrate agency offered in most other learning areas within the curriculum. However, some teachers still tend to see things differently when it comes to physical education.

Learner agency is achievable in physical education when teachers acknowledge it as a learning area and see it for more than just playing games, sport, or getting the jiggles out. When teachers understand that they do not have to control the games, rules, or the learning in physical education they can give students agency over their learning and become their guide, supporter, and facilitator for learning and a learner alongside them.

Student agency is not ...

- a student free-for-all of many games and activities going on in chaos
- unstructured learning where students choose to do (or not do) whatever they want
- teachers stepping back and not playing a role

Student agency is ...

- students having a voice and control within planned learning
- a flexible programme that allows students to drive inquiry
- teachers who are prepared to become learners on the journey

What can you do to promote student agency in physical education?

Take little steps

- Invite students to suggest games, sports, and contexts to participate in (even our youngest students can participate at this level).
- Allow students to make choices around the equipment they choose to use to allow them to have the most success at the chosen activity (rather than having teacher identified equipment, where everyone uses the same)
- Encourage them to have ownership over how the game develops through questioning – let them suggest and trial rule, strategy and game play modifications and encourage them to reflect on their effectiveness. Do your best to let them experience the failures in some of their suggestions, even though your adult brain already understands this, and can see what will happen.
- Allow students to create games and share them with others. This gives them agency over how a game develops. They will also learn the importance and necessity behind rules and boundaries for effective play.

Take bigger steps

- Encourage discussions with the students about their needs – what do they feel they need to learn (suited to older students Yrs 5-8, and will take some coaching of the process).
- Share the curriculum with older students. Physically give them the achievement objectives and discuss them as a class. Help them to make the connections between what their needs are and where this fits in the curriculum. Sharing this demystifies what they're learning and why and gives them agency over the direction they're headed.
- Be explicit about what the learning is so students can have agency over tracking their learning and are able to critically reflect and evaluate their work and talk about their learning.
- Pose or discover a genuine problem that the students can be a part of helping to solve. It could be that the students have noticed that there are no organised opportunities for them to engage in at lunchtime. It could be that when it rains, they have no dry space to participate in physical education. They may be aware that their local kindy down the road has an aging playground that needs upgrading. Students can then take part in the journey to make change and solve real issues that are directly affecting them or those in their communities.

For more on student agency ...

- <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/NZC-Online-blog/Learner-agency>
- <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/agency/>

