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College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

CARDINAL GIBBONS CASE STUDY REPORT

20
23

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

04

Executive Summary

05

Introduction

06

The Intervention

07

Timeline

08

Methods

10

School Profile

11

Findings

30

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

32

References

33

Appendices

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Fall 2022, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation partnered with Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh, NC to pilot two free online professional development courses for educators. The courses, *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*, received funding support from the Oak Foundation and were developed by the Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) Team at the Friday Institute.

Cardinal Gibbons staff had opportunities to receive professional development as well as hands-on learning opportunities from Friday Institute staff, many of whom are current or former educators. By piloting this program with a subset of teachers, Cardinal Gibbons will expand its Learner Agency professional development to the rest of the school staff in the coming years.

When trying to understand what factors are important to consider during implementation, researchers noted the importance of providing time and space for professional development, including scaffolding for all learners, the specific school environment, the voluntary nature of participating in the pilot professional development, the differences in curricula, and the context of transitioning out of the pandemic.

Analysis of the data also showed three major findings for engaging all learners. These included using physical space to alter classroom dynamics to encourage putting learners on the same level as the teacher, incorporating learner activities that encourage students to pursue their own interests, and implementing more options for choice in classroom work and assignments.

INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2022, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation partnered with Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh, NC to pilot two free online professional development courses for educators. The courses, *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*, received funding support from the Oak Foundation and were developed by the Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) Team at the Friday Institute.

Together with the PLLC team, the Program Evaluation and Education Research (PEER) Group reached out to its contacts at Cardinal Gibbons to discuss a partnership between the two. After initial discussions, the professional development leader at Cardinal Gibbons enthusiastically agreed to launch the Learner Agency courses on a voluntary basis with educators at the school. The PLLC team led two information sessions in September, and the PEER Group led two “Lunch and Learns” at the school for those who were interested in participating in the pilot program. Educators were encouraged to join, and they were provided with incentives to complete the courses, including continuing education units (CEUs) and a \$1,000 stipend, paid out between the Friday Institute and Cardinal Gibbons.

Thirty-one teachers enrolled in the Learner Agency pilot program, which lasted between October 2022 - June 2023. Throughout the partnership, the PLLC team led an additional three professional development sessions. The goals of these sessions were to understand educators’ progress, answer questions about learner agency and the online modules, and encourage them to reflect with one another about what they had learned and how they were implementing what they had learned into their instruction.

During these professional development sessions, members of the PEER Group observed and took fieldnotes. Additionally, the PEER Group conducted classroom observations on seven days between January and May. At the end of the academic year, the PEER Group conducted three focus group and one one-on-one interviews with educators enrolled in the courses as well as one focus group interview with a class of students. Educators were also given the opportunity to complete a survey to share additional thoughts about their experiences in the online course.

THE INTERVENTION

Educators at Cardinal Gibbons participated in two separate learning modules related to Learner Agency: *Foundations of Learner Agency* and *Learner Agency in Practice*. Below is a brief overview of each of the two courses.

FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNER AGENCY

This online, ten-hour course accessible through the Friday Institute's [The Place](#) platform, is free for participants. Its purpose is to help educators build an understanding of what learner agency is and to help them make their own meaning of the term. Further, as the PLLC describes on the website, incorporating learner agency into the classroom "is of particular importance for our students of color and historically marginalized students." Throughout the course, educators have opportunities to learn mindsets, skills, and contexts that contribute to learner agency, and they are provided with options for how to incorporate learner agency-centric practices in their classrooms. They are encouraged to try different strategies with the understanding that it is okay to fail.

LEARNER AGENCY IN PRACTICE

This second online, ten-hour course is also accessible through the Friday Institute's [The Place](#) platform. It is a follow-up to the *Foundations of Learner Agency* module, and it has the goal of helping participants take what they learned from the first course and apply it to their classrooms. Further, participation in discussion forums is highly encouraged so that educators can learn from and respond to other educators from around the country/world who are also enrolled in the course. During this course, participants learn about putting students at the center of their own learning; asking for direct feedback from students about ways they see learner agency impacting their own learning; and growing their understanding of how concepts like power, agency, and bias work together. Finally, participants are highly encouraged to self-reflect on how the changes they made regarding learner agency impacted their instruction and their students' learning.

TIMELINE

September 2022

- Learner Agency modules launch

November 2022

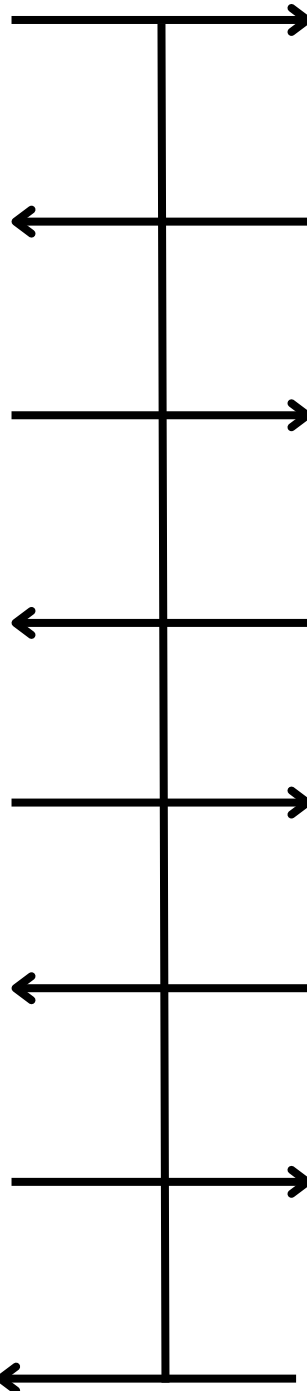
- Professional development session with the PLLC team

February 2023

- Classroom observations continue

April 2023

- Focus group interview with students
- Focus groups and one-on-one interviews with educators



- Cardinal Gibbons professional development day
- Lunch and Learn #1
- Lunch and Learn #2

October 2022

- Professional development session with the PLLC team

December 2022

- Classroom observations begin

March 2023

- Professional development session with the PLLC team
- Classroom observations continue

May 2023

METHODS

CASE STUDY METHOD

The research team used a case study methodology to complete this study. Case study research aims to understand and comprehend the context of a phenomenon within real-world conditions through the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data (Schoch, 2020). According to Merriam (2007), “by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study focuses on holistic description and explanation” (p.29). Case study emphasizes the idea of “bounding a case” where defining the time, place, activity, and/or context of the research is necessary to describe the unit of analysis being studied (Tight, 2017).

For this study, the learner agency online modules served as the particular case and intervention being evaluated. Through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, focus groups, observations, classroom documents, field notes, and open-ended survey responses, we aimed to capture the impact and implementation of learner agency in the classroom among educators and students.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

At the conclusion of Cardinal Gibbons educators’ participation in the online learner agency modules, PEER Group researchers conducted three focus group interviews and one one-on-one interview with twelve educators who participated in the program. This included classroom teachers as well as a member of the administration team, who led professional development for the staff. Interviews lasted between 32 and 49 minutes. Questions surrounded topics such as teacher learning, student learning, knowledge and appreciation of learner agency, changes to instructional planning, changes in instruction, student level changes, and module improvement. A copy of the focus group interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

It was important to PEER Group researchers to include student voice in this study, especially when looking at how teachers’ understanding and implementation of practices that center learner agency impact them directly. Therefore, the researchers conducted a focus group with students in a sociology elective, which lasted 25 minutes. Led by a full time Friday Institute staff member and a graduate research assistant, the team asked students to share their thoughts about how their teachers have incorporated aspects of learner agency in their class. It is important to note that while the class instructor was not in the room during this feedback session, another teacher remained to supervise. A copy of the focus group protocol can be found in Appendix B.

METHODS

ARTIFACTS

The team analyzed additional artifacts during this study, which included student work, teachers' lesson plans and assignments, and fieldnotes from classroom and PLC observations.

STUDENT WORK

Staff shared examples of their students' work. These projects demonstrated how educators had intentionally incorporated aspects of learner agency, which oftentimes included offering students the choice to select different topics that would interest them.

LESSON PLANS AND ASSIGNMENTS

During site visits, teachers shared different lesson plans or assignments with the researchers. They demonstrated how they had implemented aspects of learner agency within their classrooms. Teachers showed how they were intentional about providing students with various options of final products that they could submit.

FIELDNOTES

Throughout the researchers' visits to Cardinal Gibbons High School, they took extensive fieldnotes during classroom observations as well as during the PLCs led by the Friday Institute's PLLC team. Fieldnotes were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative coding software, which helped the researchers identify major themes in the data.

EXIT SURVEY

Educators were given a survey upon completing the learner agency pilot program. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, and these data supplemented findings from the focus groups and classroom observations.

MEMBER CHECKING

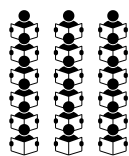
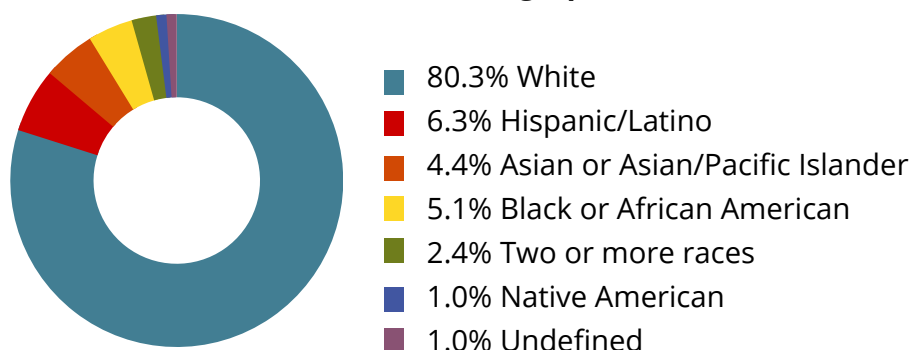
To ensure that the analysis of the data was an accurate reflection of the school's work in the learner agency modules, the researchers reached out to the school's main point of contact to provide feedback on the team's findings.

SCHOOL PROFILE

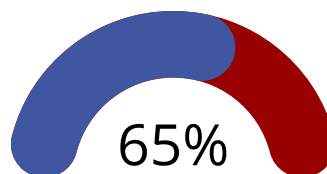
CARDINAL GIBBONS HIGH SCHOOL

Cardinal Gibbons High School is a private, Catholic secondary school in Raleigh, NC. With 1,601 students, it attracts kids from around the research triangle area. Data below come from Cardinal Gibbons (2023).

Student Demographics



15:1 student to teacher ratio



The school has 165 educators, 108 of which are faculty.

PARTICIPATION IN THE LEARNER AGENCY MODULE

The partnership between the Friday Institute and Cardinal Gibbons was mutually beneficial. The Friday Institute had opportunities to better understand how its online courses were used by professional educators. This knowledge is helpful not only for improving current courses, but also for developing new ones. Opportunities to directly work with educators and listen to their feedback allowed the Friday Institute to deliver useful and usable information to educators who work directly with students.

Cardinal Gibbons staff had opportunities to receive professional development as well as hands-on learning opportunities from Friday Institute staff, many of whom are current or former educators. Further, this year-long professional development opportunity aligned with the Cardinal Gibbons Portrait of a Learner, which describes that its students will be (1) purposeful, (2) inquisitive, (3) persistent, and (4) compassionate. By piloting this program with a subset of teachers, Cardinal Gibbons will expand its Learner Agency professional development to the rest of the school staff in the coming years.

FINDINGS

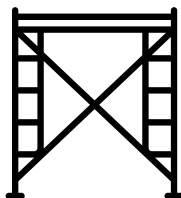
This section details findings from Cardinal Gibbons High School's participation in the online Learner Agency modules. While findings from this case study are not generalizable, they have the potential to help educators at other schools who are considering implementing a professional development focused on learner agency, or specifically, these particular online courses.

WHAT FACTORS OR INTERVENTIONS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNER VARIABILITY PROGRAM IN A SCHOOL?

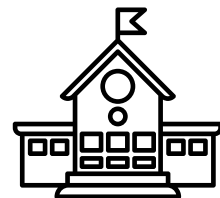
This study contained two aspects: program evaluation and research. As the PLLC team was piloting the learner agency online modules to gain an understanding of which aspects of the course worked and which should be improved, the PEER Group studied the learner agency program through the lens of program implementation and improvement. Specifically, the PEER Group hoped to gain an understanding of which specific components contribute to the successful implementation of the learner agency program at a school. Researchers noted the importance of providing time and space for professional development, including scaffolding for all learners, the specific school environment, the voluntary nature of participating in the pilot professional development, the differences in curricula, and the context of transitioning out of the pandemic.



Time and space



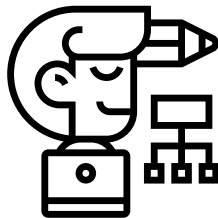
Scaffolding



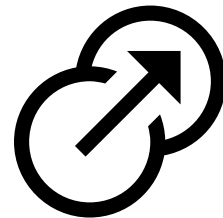
School environment



Voluntary



Curricular affordances



Pandemic transitions

TIME AND SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

Educators benefited from having dedicated time and space to engage and collaborate with one another about learner agency. They learned from each other about different practices that worked in their classrooms, and they could share stories to help each other learn. Collaboration also provided inspiration and motivation to keep trying out different learner agency strategies in the classroom.

Discussion forums. Multiple educators noted the usefulness of seeing each other's responses in the discussion forums of the online courses they engaged in, particularly in the *Learner Agency in Practice* module. Through these discussions, they could draw upon the experiences of others who were engaging in the same activities.

I love the discussion model ... this has been the best course for people actually discussing it. ... A lot of people, I felt like, spent extra time. You go back and read and post on three, four, or five different things instead just two, which was really helpful. That's where you got a lot of your, that was the ideas. These are concrete ideas, because when you're presenting a course like this, you can't present all the options. The concrete takeaways, you can have some fairly limited things that you can, especially if you're pitching at elementary two through high school. The discussion model is great. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

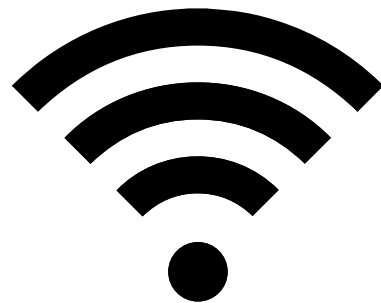
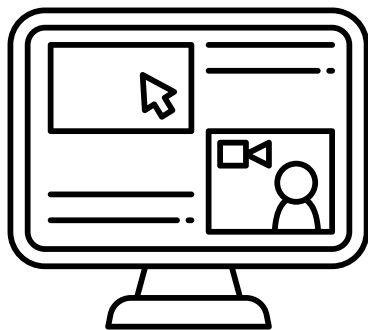
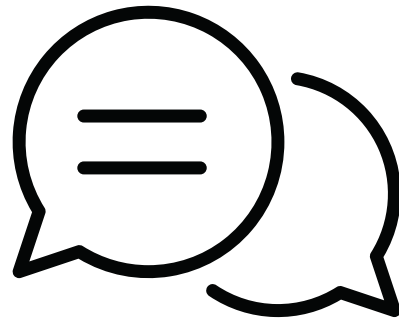
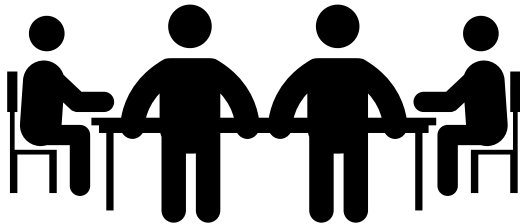
This teacher noted how important the online space was for learning from their cohort. Participants were extremely active, with the educator sharing how helpful it was that everyone was truly engaged in the work, responding to more than the bare minimum. Further, the teacher continues by saying that even though the online space was useful, it was even more impactful when it could translate into real, in-the-moment conversations in the same physical space:

Then [it] gave you a distinct person to go continue the conversation with when you would cross paths instead of just Not everything went on the discussion board sometimes, but it gave you someone to say, "Oh, hey, how did this work for you? Tell me more about," or there was once where I walked past, I'm like, "Oh, you rearranged things. It looks different." Have some of those conversations. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

TIME AND SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

Space for collaboration. Educators need physical space to work with each other and discuss their work. For example, conversations among staff can be generative and can provide teachers with feelings of community. Further, it is important not to discount the usefulness of dedicated, set-aside time together. At times, this provided classroom teachers with the energy to continue making changes to their classrooms, something that can be difficult when implementing something new on a voluntary basis.

And then just having the cohort in general, when we would get together, it was, ah, that sounds so corny, but it's a little bit energizing. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator



SCAFFOLDING

Teachers noted how it would be beneficial to them if the course provided more scaffolding options to use with their students. While they could see how learner agency worked in the examples they were given in the online modules, there were times when they were unsure of how to apply it to their own classroom settings. Reasons included teachers being unsure of ways they could account for special accommodations or how to adapt activities for students in different grade levels.

... you cannot teach a freshman the way you can a junior who is in an AP [subject] class. So maybe in the future, address it, this might work best with 14 and 15-year-olds rather than 17 and 18-year-olds. That's why I sort of felt lost. Lost may not be an appropriate word, but sometimes I feel that a lot of this information of coming from our educators and the people from NC State, that it's more geared, and I could be totally wrong, geared toward the AP students or the honors students or the older students. It's real tough to work, quote, unquote, with freshmen who are just coming in as they're essentially middle school students. How do you take them? And they're all coming from a variety of backgrounds.

– Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

While the course itself may include this in the future, it may benefit teachers to have time and space to engage in discussions with one another about ways to implement learner strategies in different contexts. Whether these conversations occur informally (e.g., quick meet-ups in the hallway) or more formally (e.g., professional development sessions), this is one area that could contribute to educators' success in their classrooms.

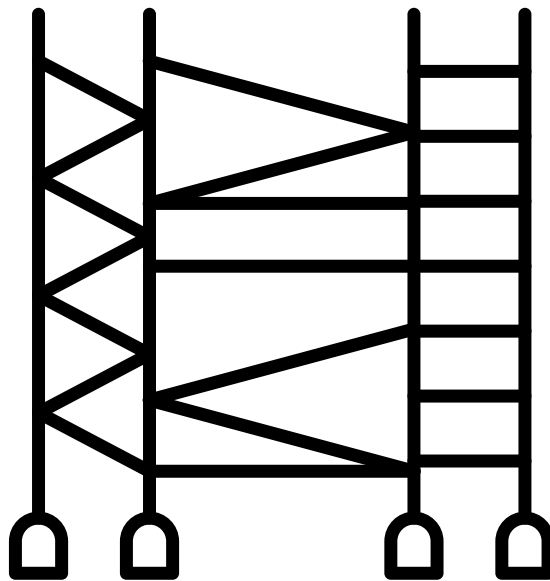
Additionally, educators may need reminders that this is a process that will take time. They should not expect to have immediate success after a single attempt at incorporating learner agency into their lessons. One teacher shared:

I gave decently inflated grades for some of that, because I knew that was me. I couldn't articulate for them what I wanted. That's the thing really about I think when you're thinking about project based learning is you have to refine that process over and over again. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

SCAFFOLDING

Educators also noted how they needed to take a scaffolded approach with their students. As was frequently noted by teachers throughout the fieldwork, students had limited experience with learner agency up to this point in their education careers. As their experiences in school had been grade-centric thus far, with students taking a more passive role in receiving their education rather than leading it, teachers realized they could not move too quickly or without enough structure.

I think too, you got to think about if you're rolling out a project based on them for the first time, you're not clear on what you want. You can kick that door wide up and be like, "Kids, your choice of topics, your choice of product. They're like, "Oh, God. What do you want?" You're like, "I don't know." When you get a little bit better at building rubrics, you provide that clarity. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator



This emphasis that the overall process will take time and patience frequently arose. By the end of the school year, teachers recognized that implementing and improving learner agency strategies would take more than one year for both teachers and students to adjust to. As one educator succinctly stated,

So they'd need time, I think, like you said, to get into how to make choices and how to use their time ... – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: TEACHERS

The school's history and context is important to consider when implementing a program that emphasizes learner agency. Cardinal Gibbons High School is a highly competitive environment where college-going is emphasized to its students. As the website boasts, one hundred percent of students who apply to college are accepted. With such a heavy emphasis on postsecondary education, implementing learner agency requires a shift in mindset for teachers, students, and parents.

Throughout the fieldwork, there was a noticeable change in the way that teachers spoke about learner agency. When the team first observed a professional learning community in fall 2023, teachers regularly used language such as, "students can't" and "students won't." The deficit language was in part fueled by frustrations from the pandemic, where it felt like students were behind. They noted how the students were ill-prepared to succeed in high school and complete work.

One person shared that some students don't even know how to make choices, so they get stuck.

– Fieldnotes from first PLC observation

Teachers shared that kids are doing a lot of checking in. More than ever, kids want to give you what you, as the teacher, want.

– Fieldnotes from first PLC observation

A teacher then shared that while they have students for 75 minutes at a time with the switch to block scheduling, they lost 1300 minutes with this switch. Things need to be done in an AP course. While they loved the piece about grading rubrics and agreed that students should be able to help develop the rubrics, students are behind due to COVID. Students don't have inquiry.

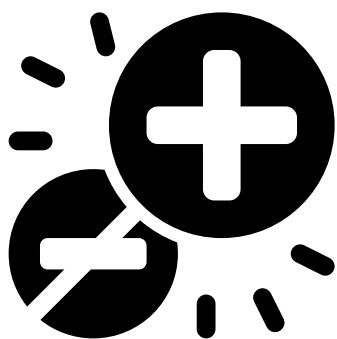
– Fieldnotes from first PLC observation

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: TEACHERS

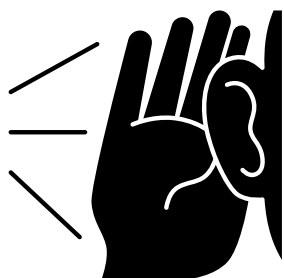
While comments about students' abilities continued throughout the academic year, there were shifts in educators' approach to their students. Sometimes it was in the words teachers used, being more positive about their students' approach to learner agency, and other times it was in the general attitude towards the students. When teachers showed the researchers the work their students had done during the second semester (after both teachers and students had more practice with concepts of learner agency), they spoke with pride about what their students accomplished. They were proud that their students had begun taking ownership of their learning, which oftentimes came in the form of choosing topics or the format of their final assignment.

Just from my experience, we've got a long way to go, I've got a long way to go, but I'm seeing a little light at the end of the tunnel. And I've applied some of that to [my] class, which is just kind of a fun class that kids want to take. And so they're doing a choice project right now and, "Can you just give me an assignment? Can you just tell me something to do?" So I've done three examples, very detailed assignments. You can pick from these if you want to, or you can develop the research and come up with your idea and do your sketches, and they're going different directions with that. I don't know. It's just my point, I guess, being that it takes us a long time to get there, but it's going to take the kids a long time to get there. But they will. I think they will. Just having this year with these experiences, and then if somebody is continuing that the next year, I think they'll get it.

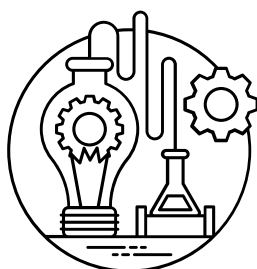
– Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator



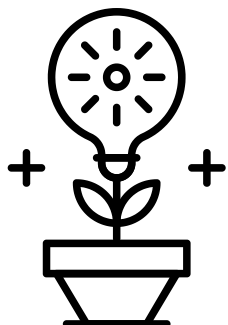
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: TEACHERS



Observations also indicated that teachers made efforts to listen to their students' feedback. For example, one freshmen teacher changed her assignment with input from her students. She began class by asking her students what form of the final project they wanted to present. The teacher then went into the rubric and made the changes. This provided students with a mixture of both choice and structure, which many teachers found difficult to find the right balance of throughout the year.



The efforts that school administrators made to encourage their teachers to experiment and be okay with failing was particularly noteworthy. During PLC discussions and classroom observations, administrators frequently noted how proud they were of their teachers who had jumped into the learner agency courses and were willing to test out different ideas. Further, when teachers attempted something new or different that did not go well, they were not scolded. Rather, classroom teachers were challenged to consider and reflect upon what could have gone better and why.



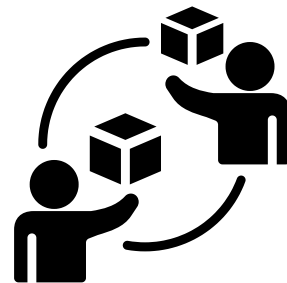
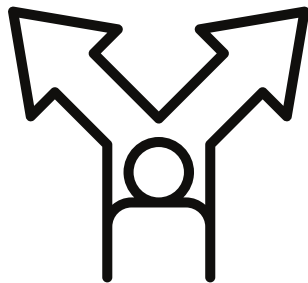
As Cardinal Gibbons is a place where many teachers remain for many years throughout their careers in education, it was particularly noteworthy when educators who had taught for multiple decades were embracing new ideas and instructional practices. While the research team was informed that the group who volunteered to be a part of the pilot project was mostly predictable, even the director of professional development was pleasantly surprised by some of the participants and the ways they challenged themselves to become better educators who centered their learners.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: STUDENTS

From the teachers' perspectives, students often struggled with learner agency. This occurred when students were given too many choices or when the assignments were not structured enough. At times, teachers noticed that as instructors, they were new to ideas of learner agency, and they recognized that sometimes their assignments were too open. They explained that they would need more practice to see what works and refine for the future.

One thing they noted that was important – and difficult for them to change – was students' transactional views of education. Teachers shared that many students had extrinsic motivations for completing school work, and students completed assignments because they knew they would receive a grade. As one educator reflected, he once tried to give an assignment for the sake of learning, and this confused the students. One student even refused to do it when she learned that she would not receive a grade.

A few years ago I did something in [class name]. I called it an unexam. I was starting to play with how to minimize the effective grades ... which is a big part of what I do. And I remember I said, "Well, this is an unexam," and I remember the blank looks of the faces. And they was said, "What is it? Is it an exam?" I said, "No, this is actually just a chance... It looks like an exam, but it's just a chance for you to show me what you know, demonstrate some mastery." But it was like, "So let me get this straight, there's not a grade?" I'm like, "No, there's not a grade." And she looked at me and said, "Why would I do something if there's not a grade?" That to me sums it up. And she in fact didn't do the unexam. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator



SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: STUDENTS

While we only interviewed one class of students, there were tensions between what the students and teachers shared. While teachers in the focus groups observed that their students did not know what to do when presented with too many choices, the students shared the opposite thought. When asked, “Have you ever felt like you were presented with too many choices in your learning,” they flatly responded with, “No.”

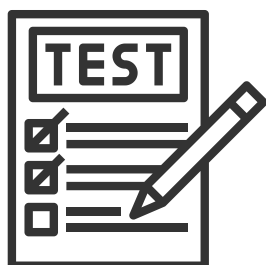
This particular class of students explained how important and meaningful it was to them when their teachers got to know them as people. When teachers took the time to develop a personal relationship with them, they felt like they were being listened to. When educators used the personal knowledge about each student and incorporated it into their instructional practices, students felt more engaged in the topic. In this way, teachers encouraged students to use their own interests to pursue course-related topics, and students felt like they could take control of their learning and apply the larger lessons into their understanding of the topic.

Well, we just did one we were talking about, we all picked a song and then connected it to, What was it called? Social Change. And we came up with examples, why we chose that song. Stuff like that. So when we have projects like that, it's so much easier to understand actually. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Student

We had to analyze different groups of people, so I analyzed gamers. Just talking about different values and social norms. And it's interesting applying it to something that you actually care about because it's such a sociology applies to everything in the real world. So being able to pinpoint areas that you are personally interested in really helps you understand as an individual. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Student

Once again, the context surrounding this particular group of students is important to consider. These students were from an elective sociology course, and they wanted to be there. Further, the educator wanted to teach this course and found it personally interesting, which could contribute to some of these findings, though they indeed do not account for all of them as this particular teacher was particularly talented at developing relationships with their students.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: PARENTS



Notably, teachers shared how the emphasis on learner agency faced pushback from parents who were unsure of how this would help their students gain admission into college. Parents were concerned that this type of learner agency work could impact which standardized test their student should take. They claimed that their child should take the ACT because it emphasized application of concepts, rather than the SAT, which emphasized memorization.

And I've had parents say, "How will these type of assessments," meaning self-directed assessments, "help my child on the SAT?" And then they've asked... I've always get the question, what's the difference between the SAT and the ACT, and one is using material and one is memorization. And then a parent said to me, "Well, after this kind of learning, maybe they should take the ACT because you've taught them how to learn to use information." – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

Educators shared how the end goal of parents was to set their child up for success for college admission, and they resisted anything that might hinder their children's success in this endeavor. Due to this, educators felt a bit challenged on how to implement tenets of learner agency as they had to explain to parents, who were pressuring their students, why they were doing what they were doing.



Yeah, one of the girls I was helping tutor, she was like, "Well, I need an A." We went through the numbers, and I'm like, "You're going to have a B or a B+." "That's good." "But I need an A." When you're talking to a 16-year-old girl that no matter how much you tell her about her own agency, and what she's doing, and how much she's growing, when they come back with, "But I have to have an A," it's really hard to try to figure out how to get that message to stick in a way that you can't tell them their parents are wrong ... – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

CONSIDERATIONS: VOLUNTARY

One issue that was both a challenge and a strength was the voluntary nature of this project. Piloting this course with a subset of teachers offers many advantages. Firstly, testing the course with a small group was a good trial run for seeing what could work if the school administration decides to implement it school-wide. Further, it helped to create a “buzz” surrounding ideas of learner agency with teachers starting to use a shared language with one another. By seeing examples of success in the pilot year, teachers not enrolled in the program who may have been on the fence, or even reluctant, may be more willing to participate. Additionally, as educators are often given new initiatives to implement every few years, piloting a professional development opportunity such as this provides a soft launch. This can be a way for administrators to demonstrate to teachers that they are willing to take the time to invest in a program and research it beforehand to verify its beneficialness.

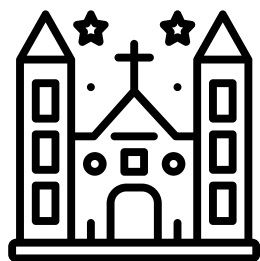
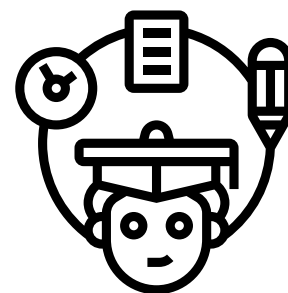


There were also challenges involved with having only a small group of teachers participate. For example, it could make collaboration among teacher- or subject-teams more difficult. If all teachers are not participating in the program, exchanging ideas from the course can be limiting. One teacher noted this difficulty when explaining how they tried incorporating this into their daily instruction, but they faced resistance from their teammates, who were not enrolled in the course. They shared, “I tried and tried to implement projects and things. The amount of pushback I got from my colleagues was ridiculous.” In the end, they said, “At some point, I just stopped trying. That’s where I was at.”

CONSIDERATIONS: CURRICULAR AFFORDANCES

The subjects that educators taught could act as either a leverage point or an obstacle to learner agency implementation. For example, certain subjects lent themselves to more flexibility, according to teachers. Educators noted the tight schedules and curriculum they had to follow for prerequisite or Advanced Placement (AP) courses was difficult.

The curriculum is very, very defined in the courses that I teach. It has to be like that because of the kids taking their next courses. We kind of feed into them. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

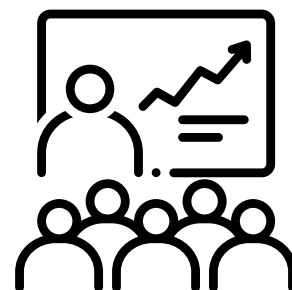


As educators at a Catholic school, theology teachers also had outside pressures to ensure they covered pre-approved curriculum from the Bishop of the Diocese of Raleigh. As one theology teacher shared:

But I have bishop guidelines, bishop that tells me that I have to have this material here for them. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

While particular classes and their related curricula were more rigid, incorporating learner agency may be more understandable or natural for certain teachers. Perhaps some may require more training and practice. As one theology teacher shared:

In the classroom, I have the luxury, I think. I think it's a luxury, because I teach theology, the course is loosely based on guidelines, as opposed to hard and best curriculum. It's been easier to try things. I can just kind of experiment and be like, "Okay, today this project is going to be completely project based." – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator



These differing experiences could indicate that more examples may be useful for some educators who are newer to the process of adapting their instruction to include more opportunities for learner agency.

CONSIDERATIONS: PANDEMIC TRANSITIONS

Returning to school after the pandemic presented challenges for students and teachers, which was not a surprising finding, but it was important for understanding the educational context in which the learner agency courses were implemented. Educators at Cardinal Gibbons spoke about how they were on the path toward incorporating more learner agency prior to the pandemic, but then many initiatives changed or were halted due to online learning and the chaos the pandemic caused. Notably, educators thought the work of learner agency after the pandemic took a lot of time. One teacher, who made many adjustments in her classes to meet her students' needs during the pandemic, reflected that there was light at the end of the tunnel. She had made efforts towards learner agency over the course of years, and she shared that while the first year might be difficult, incorporating learner agency and getting students engaged in these ideas becomes easier. Students grew accustomed to learner agency the more that they practiced. Educators noted the difficulties they faced when engaging students after the pandemic. It challenged them because students now had a different set of skills, which oftentimes was seen negatively by the educators. Teachers frequently lamented how students could not do certain things or did not want to participate in their education.

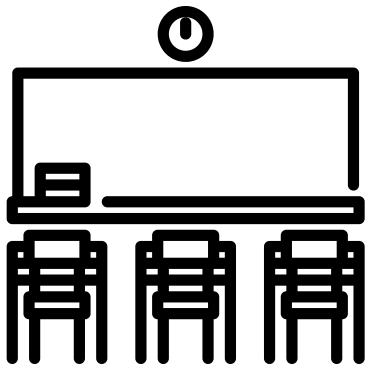
So it's that whole thing of it takes time for them to understand how to get through this. But it's not going to happen in one year, two years, three years, four years even. ... Because it's too ingrained in the culture of American education. But I think we can do little bits and pieces. So I'm looking at, with freshman theology, up to senior theology, there are small little increments or the entry science to the more advanced science. There are little increments we can take care of. Just from my experience, we've got a long way to go, I've got a long way to go, but I'm seeing a little light at the end of the tunnel. And I've applied some of that to the [NAME OF CLASS], which is just kind of a fun class that kids want to take. And so they're doing a choice project right now and, "Can you just give me an assignment? Can you just tell me something to do?" So I've done three examples, very detailed assignments. You can pick from these if you want to, or you can develop the research and come up with your idea and do your sketches, and they're going different directions with that. I don't know. It's just my point, I guess, being that it takes us a long time to get there, but it's going to take the kids a long time to get there. But they will. I think they will. Just having this year with these experiences, and then if somebody is continuing that the next year, I think they'll get it.

- Quote from Cardinal Gibbons Educator

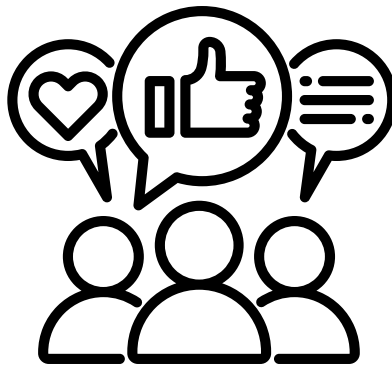
FINDINGS

WHAT ARE PROMISING PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS, IN METACOGNITION, AGENCY, AND ADVOCACY?

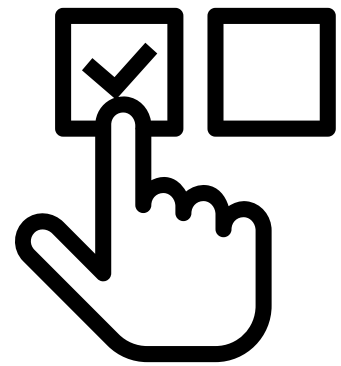
Throughout the classroom and PLC observations as well as during focus group and one-on-one interviews, several practices for engaging students and putting them at the center of their own learning stood out. The three major findings included using physical space to alter classroom dynamics to encourage putting learners on the same level as the teacher, engaging students in different ways to engage them in the learning activities, and implementing more options for choice in classroom work and assignments.



Managing physical space



Engaging students



Implementing choice

MANAGING PHYSICAL SPACE

One strategy emphasized in the learner agency courses was altering physical classroom space. Teachers found the strategy particularly useful, and students reacted well. During focus groups, teachers emphasized that they had implemented what they learned regarding physical space into their classrooms. Some shared how they did not use a podium, and rather, walked around the classroom.

I made sure I was walking around in the lab and checking things out and that kind of thing. When they were done, I sat down in an open spot, and kids would just come with questions and come with questions. A lot more than may normally have come formally up and said, 'Hey, I have a question about this,' or a question about that. It gave a lot better access.

Others explained that they did not use a typical teacher desk, instead opting to use a student desk. They emphasized the importance of being on the same level as their students so that it did not feel intimidating for them to ask questions or feel like there was a major power imbalance between teacher and learner.

A lot more than may normally have come formally up and said, "Hey, I have a question about this, or a question about that." It gave a lot better access. Some kids are like, "Hey, I don't want to stand out by going up to their desk and asking questions." A lot more kids than would normally. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

Overall, making small alterations to the ways they used space made noticeable changes in educators' relationships with their students. This was also a fairly easy-to-implement strategy that teachers throughout the school could make as long as their physical classroom space allows for adjustments.



ENGAGING STUDENT INTERESTS

Engaging students was noticeably important for successful implementation of learner agency. During focus groups and classroom observations, it was obvious that students were highly engaged when they were interested in the topic. However, it was not simply interest level in the subject, but it was also the strong relationships that they had formed with their teachers. Teachers made efforts to see what their students were interested in, and they used this knowledge to align the curriculum and classroom activities with students' passions.

...I spent a lot of time, I was redoing a little bit the [class name] curriculum. I put a little more effort into asking, "All right, these are the things we're going to talk about. What are you most interested in?" That I could try to lean into a little more or say, "We've got to cover this, but y'all said you were interested in this one." – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

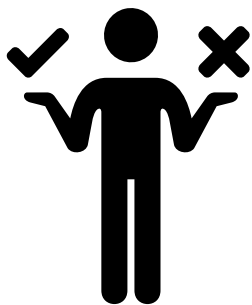
Teachers shared how important it was for them to be engaged in the process. Teachers' interest in the subject helped motivate the students. One student recognized the importance of teachers' passion for their subject as well as their motivation for teaching the class in general.

I think something that also helps ... is she's really, she teaches classes almost for fun. Her main job is student welfare basically. So I think she's more doing her job in that respect. So, she brings that into the classroom. Yeah. I think as amazing as she is, it is harder for other teachers to do that when they don't have the training and the awareness. – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Student

Educators' own interest level in the subject area is only one contributing factor to student engagement. The relationship between the students and the teachers was a key to success. When students knew their teachers were interested in them as people – not just pupils – students thrived. During the student focus group, students shared how they felt like they were cared for by their teacher and that because she knew so many details about them as people, she was able to target assignments towards their interests. This contributed to students' investment and engagement in their education.

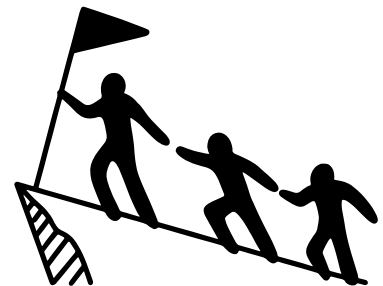
And specifically in this class, she makes a lot of projects targeted towards what we want. So we never really have to ask her to change anything. She kind of asks us first. And she gives us an idea. She'll be like, "This is okay?" I'll be like, "Yeah." – Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Student

IMPLEMENTING CHOICE



The research team noticed positive changes by educators at Cardinal Gibbons the more time they spent in the learner agency courses. Specifically, there was a slight but noticeable change in the ways that educators approached and spoke about their students. During our first PLC observation in fall 2023, it was clear that the pandemic had created many challenges for both teachers and students. During the first professional development session, we heard statements that often began with “students won’t” or “students can’t” when talking about what they would and would not do in the classroom. These statements were frequently related to ways the pandemic impacted how students approached and viewed school.

As time went on, however, we observed educators taking more chances to allow their students to lead their own learning. Specifically, we noted that students were given the freedom to choose their own topics of interest for certain assignments. Rather than a “students can’t” or “students won’t” approach, educators extended more trust to their students, having high expectations that they could rise to the occasion. Further, while only six teachers completed the end of course survey, it was notable that all six indicated that they provided opportunities for their students to design aspects of their own learning after the course, which was an increase by 50% prior to their participation.



In one example, we witnessed a teacher provide students with the opportunity to suggest the format of their final projects for the unit. In this case, she began her class by asking her students for suggestions, and she then incorporated those ideas into her official project instructions. It was experiences like these that reflected how teachers had meaningfully interacted with the learner agency course to make their students’ learning experiences more valuable to them and align with the way they preferred to learn.

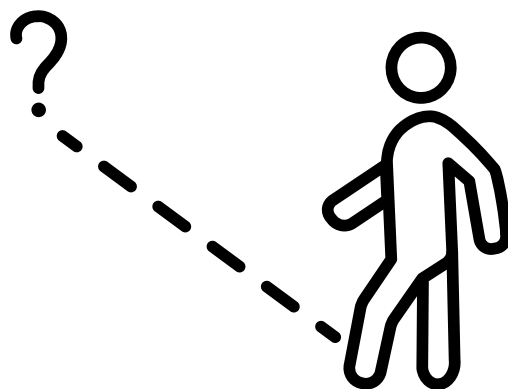
IMPLEMENTING CHOICE

As time went on, teachers saw improvements, or the potential for improvement, from their students. They noted how for some particularly high-achieving students, they still struggled with choice in their own learning. They preferred to be told what to do and be passive recipients of information.

I think it's sometimes easier for them to take the prescribed thing the teacher gives them and just do it. I tried with my unit on [topic names] to let them, instead of fill out a notes packet, I gave them blank manila folder and kind of like a project with a ton of resources and said, "You have to know something about [topic] and something about [topic]." And I said the kind of things that they needed to know, but they had to create their own study folder and to choose what resources they wanted to use. And lots of them did great at that. But a couple of the most bright ones and the smartest ones were like, "I kind of wish we had just done the notes. I don't feel secure in the fact that I know this for the test."

– Quote from Cardinal Gibbons High School Educator

Implementing choice appeared to be one of the go-to strategies for teachers who were incorporating more learner agency into their classrooms. While there was progress in this area from both teachers in designing their assignments and in students in how they approached the work, it will take more time for everyone to feel comfortable with these strategies.



LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

The learner agency pilot project at Cardinal Gibbons High School led to insights and suggestions for successfully implementing this type of professional development program in a school. Cardinal Gibbons and its teachers experienced many successes in putting learner agency at the forefront, and below are suggestions for ways to continue building upon that success in the coming years.



01 — Encourage teachers to consider what skills their students bring to the classroom.

As was noted, teachers had a difficult time seeing some of the positive skills their students had after the pandemic. As they saw their students as being behind and were frustrated with their progress, this led to deficit-oriented thinking and language. While frustrations were legitimate, encouraging teachers to reflect upon how they can use students' strengths, and reconsider whether weaknesses can be viewed as strengths or areas of anticipated growth, could help teachers and students buy into learner agency.



02 — Provide dedicated space and time to discuss lessons learned from professional development.

Throughout the PLC observations and subsequent focus group interviews, it was clear that educators valued having time to talk about the online course they were completing. While the online discussion forums that were part of the course were impactful, it was the in-person conversations that helped solidify implementation of learner agency in the classroom as well as how to adjust strategies that may not have been successful with students the first time around.

LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES



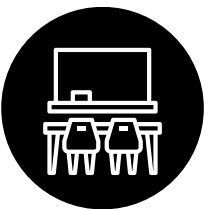
03 — Emphasize taking small steps during implementation.

Engaging in and applying course objectives can be intimidating when participating in a lengthy professional development program. Therefore, encouraging teachers to try out small adjustments to their instruction can help create small wins and encourage success. By starting out small, teachers may gain the confidence to begin attempting to implement more complicated strategies.



04 — Encourage activities that strengthen student-teacher relationships.

Data collection efforts showed how important strong relationships with teachers were for students. Students valued when their teachers took time and made cognizant efforts to get to know them as people. Students appreciated when teachers incorporated flexible learning activities and assignments, which gave them opportunities to demonstrate their own learning strengths as well as display their own personal interests in the subject matter.



05 — Use physical space to make small changes that encourage learner agency.

Classroom teachers noticed that their relationships with students changed when they adjusted their physical space to put their students on a more equal playing field with them. When teachers used student desks or walked around the classroom rather than standing in front of a podium, they noticed how students felt more comfortable and confident asking questions. This growth in confidence can encourage students to begin taking charge of their own learning.

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APPENDIX A

**NC STATE
UNIVERSITY**

College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation
fi.ncsu.edu

1890 Main Campus Drive
Raleigh, NC 27606
P: 919.513.8500

INTRO AND CONSENT

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet today. My name is [NAME], and I work as research staff at The Friday Institute, part of the NC State College of Education.

Today, we are seeking to hear from you all about your involvement in the two Learner Agency modules. We will use the information from our discussion today to inform the Friday Institute professional development team about strengths of the online modules, as well as opportunities for growth. Our conversation will center around ways educators have incorporated aspects of the online modules to meet their students' unique needs.

With your consent, we would like to record our conversation today to aid in my note taking. Recording the conversation allows us to fully capture exact wording and themes that come up in our conversation today. Our conversation should take about **30-45 minutes** and will be kept confidential, in that no identifying information will be shared with partners - only major themes taken from the conversation. Do I have your consent to record?

[HIT RECORD]

For the purposes of our recording, I am going to introduce myself, and then if we could go around and introduce yourself, that would be great!

EQ1. Implementation. What factors or interventions are needed to support the implementation of the Learner Variability program in a school?

Facilitate teacher learning

1. How has the Learner Agency course been implemented in your school?
2. How did you become involved with the Learner Agency course? Walk me through the process of your participation in the Learner Agency course.
3. Tell me about the PD and coaching you received as a part of the Learner Agency course.

Facilitate student learning

1. How have your students been involved with implementation of the Learner Agency course?

EQ2. Impact. What are promising practices for engaging all students, especially those from underrepresented groups, in metacognition, agency, and advocacy?

Increased knowledge and appreciation of learner agency (self)

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course changed your perception of teaching? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Changes in planning

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course impacted the way in which you plan instruction? Use technology?

Changes in instruction

1. Has your participation in the Learner Agency course allowed you to improve your classroom instruction? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Student level changes

1. In what ways has the implementation of the Learner Agency course impacted your students' learning?
 - a. Probe: Have you noticed a change in knowledge of and appreciation for their own agency?
 - b. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' self-awareness of learning strengths and challenges?
 - c. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' awareness and use of strategies to support learning needs?
 - d. Probe: Have you noticed a change in your students' communication to teachers and peers about learner agency?
2. Have you noticed a change in your students' ability to advocate for their learning needs? Explain.

3. What were the most beneficial instructional practices you will take from this course?
4. What strategies from the course can you use to engage underrepresented students?

Improvement

1. What was most satisfying for you as a learner?
2. What was most challenging for you as a learner?
3. What improvements to the module would you suggest?
 - a. Probe:What should we know about the user experience of completing this module?

Thank you so much for your time and attention today! We truly appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. Before we close, we'd like to open up the discussion for any final thoughts. Is there anything you would like to share that we didn't ask you?

APPENDIX B

**NC STATE
UNIVERSITY**

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INTRO AND CONSENT

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet today. My name is [NAME], and I work as research staff at The Friday Institute, part of the NC State College of Education.

Today, we are seeking to hear from you all about your experiences as a student while your teacher participated in two online modules about Learner Agency. During the course, your teachers were learning about how to put learning back in the hands of you all, the students. We are hoping to gain an understanding of any changes you noticed throughout the semester/year where you felt like you had more choice, or power, in your own learning.

We will use the information from our discussion today to help our teammates as they continue designing the courses that your teacher(s) participated in.

With your consent, we would like to record our conversation today to aid in my note taking. Recording the conversation allows us to fully capture exact wording and themes that come up in our conversation today. Our conversation should take about **20-30 minutes** and will be kept confidential, in that no identifying information will be shared with your teachers - only major themes taken from the conversation. Do I have your consent to record?

[HIT RECORD]

For the purposes of our recording, I am going to introduce myself, and then if we could go around and introduce yourself, that would be great!

Impact. What are promising practices for engaging all students, especially those from underrepresented groups, in metacognition, agency, and advocacy?

1. Have you noticed any changes in the ways your teachers talk to you or instruct you since they participated in the Learner Agency course? If yes, please describe.

a. Probe: What types of projects are you doing in class where you felt like you had a voice/choice in what you were learning?

2. Have you noticed any changes in the ways school administrators, such as the principal or vice principal, talk to you or instruct you since they participated in the Learner Agency course? If yes, please describe.

3. Before the Learner Agency course, did you know about metacognition, agency, and advocacy?

4. What have you learned about metacognition, agency, and advocacy?

Probe: How would you define agency? Advocacy? Metacognition?

Probe: What have you learned about student choice?

5. Have you learned anything new about yourself since your teachers began talking about learner agency? If so, what?

6. In what ways, if any, have you learned to take the lead in your own learning since your teachers have participated in the Learning Agency course?

Probe: Could you share some examples?

Probe: What has been difficult about this? What made it difficult? (e.g., importance of grades, too many choices, etc.)? Have you ever felt like you had too many choices?

Probe: What have been parts that you have enjoyed? Why?

7. What is something you wish your teacher knew about your experiences with learner agency in this class?

Thank you so much for your time and attention today! We truly appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. Before we close, we'd like to open up the discussion for any final thoughts. Is there anything you would like to share that we didn't ask you?