



Empowering Teachers: Cultivating Agency in a Post-Pandemic Educational Landscape

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Abstract

Creating an environment where teachers feel trusted and responsible is not just a suggestion but a necessity. In this essay, I underline the indispensable role of school leaders in balancing autonomy and accountability and acknowledge the fact that empowered teachers are the cornerstone of engaging and successful learning environments. I discuss the crucial role of teacher agency in fostering effective education and strongly advocate for the primacy of trust building, collaboration, tailored professional development, and teacher leadership within schools and districts. It is expected that restoring teacher agency will yield positive student outcomes like clear goal setting and expectations, supportive feedback and evaluation, and ongoing professional learning. Leadership initiatives that prioritize trust, collaboration, teacher autonomy, and tailored professional development contribute significantly to the restoration of teacher agency. This essay underscores the significance of restoring teacher agency in the interest of building resilient and adaptive schools to meet diverse student needs in the ever-changing educational environment. A commitment to valuing educator expertise, dedication, and leadership is a crucial step in shaping the future landscape of education.

Keywords: *agency, empowering, teachers, post-pandemic, teacher exodus*

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Introduction

The United States is facing a persistent and multifaceted teacher shortage, which poses significant challenges to the public education system. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation, as some educators left the profession due to health concerns or the complexities of remote learning, and the shortage of substitute teachers added further pressure. Additionally, with a substantial portion of the teaching workforce approaching retirement age, attracting and retaining new teachers has become more critical than ever (Bill et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Gillani et al., 2022; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Merrimack College, 2022, 2023).

Reasons for Teacher Exodus

Amid the aftermath of the global pandemic—and a heightened focus on cultural conflicts in schools and society—teacher satisfaction is significantly declining as indicated in the *First Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results*. This survey states that over half of the participating K–12 teachers (1,178) said these factors would have dissuaded their younger selves from choosing the profession (Merrimack College, 2022). Many educators also perceive themselves as overburdened, under-compensated, and undervalued—potentially signaling a significant once-in-a-generation transformation in the profession. For instance, it was recently found that only 12% of teachers express high job satisfaction, and over 40% report a high or moderate likelihood of leaving the profession within 2 years (Merrimack College, 2022).

Dissatisfaction, compounded by challenges posed by the pandemic and societal tensions, intersecting with the issue of low pay, has contributed to the exodus of teachers from the profession. When teachers feel undervalued and financially strained, the allure of better compensation in other sectors becomes increasingly attractive. Job dissatisfaction is leading to a loss of experienced educators and exacerbating the already prevalent issue of teacher shortages. Therefore, addressing the systemic problem of low pay is crucial not only for retaining current educators but also for attracting new talent and ensuring the stability and effectiveness of the education system (Koerber et al., 2023).

According to the *First Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results* (Merrimack College, 2022), only 26% of teachers believe they are fairly compensated for their work. This finding is a noticeable decline from 35% of teachers who reported in the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents, and the Economy* (MetLife, 2012). This sentiment is particularly strong among educators with 3–9 years of experience, female teachers, those unhappy with their jobs, and those contemplating leaving the profession within the next 2 years.

According to a study by Allegretto (2022), teachers' wages and compensation have persistently declined over the past 15 years when compared to other college graduates. This financial disparity means teachers are paid less and receive fewer benefits than similarly educated professionals. Low pay with fewer benefits discourages college students from entering the teaching profession. Inadequate compensation also makes it difficult for school districts to retain current educators. Consequently, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers has become increasingly challenging.

While better pay is clearly needed, school leaders are often constrained by budget and funding limitations; therefore, enhancing teacher autonomy may offer a crucial alternative approach to teacher retention. Allowing teachers more control over their curriculum, instructional methods, and classroom management may significantly improve job satisfaction. By empowering teachers to make more decisions about their teaching, schools can create a more supportive and fulfilling work environment, which may help mitigate the negative effects of inadequate compensation. Recent research aligns with the *First Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results* (Merrimack College, 2022), emphasizing the crucial role of supportive leadership in teacher retention and the need for teachers to have more autonomy and input in decision making at both the classroom and school levels.

Ingersoll and Tran (2023) analyzed national data to provide an overall portrait of teacher shortages and turnover in rural schools to understand the sources of and solutions to ongoing staffing issues. In their analyses, they document that the teaching force in rural schools—unlike urban and suburban schools—has dramatically shrunk in recent decades. These schools have faced severe difficulties filling their teaching positions, primarily driven by high pre-retirement teacher turnover. That study identifies the leading factors contributing to dissatisfaction-related teacher turnover in rural schools as dissatisfaction with the school

administration, accountability and testing, a lack of classroom autonomy, and a lack of teacher input into school decision making.

Moreover, data show that teacher turnover varies significantly between school types, such as being especially high in high-poverty rural schools and being closely tied to the organizational characteristics and working conditions of rural schools. Research by Chu et al. (2023) additionally highlights that school districts are grappling with challenges in attracting high-quality candidates, particularly for positions in hard-to-fill schools, as well as teachers for subjects like math, special education, and bilingual education. Similarly, difficulties persist in recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds.

Regarding retention, the pandemic and its prolonged aftermath have intensified teacher burnout. Educators frequently voice concerns about the excessively stressful nature of the job, including a lack of flexibility, a sense of isolation, and limited avenues for professional development outside of transitioning to administrative roles. Further, there is growing apprehension that the perception of teaching is undesirable or unsustainable as a profession and is dissuading young adults from pursuing careers in education, contributing to shortages in the field.

The Chu et al. (2023) study also underlines the importance of reimagining teacher roles. Districts are using innovative strategies to retain and attract teachers, as well as implementing distributed leadership practices, where leadership responsibilities are shared among staff to reduce teacher turnover.

Chu et al. (2023) examined district information and local media reports regarding teacher workforce strategies in 100 large and urban districts. Of these districts, 97 reported having at least one strategy to support recruiting or retaining teachers, totaling over 450 strategies across all districts. Upon reviewing the details of the 466 total policies, however, only 32% meet their criteria for a reimagined teacher role. These initial findings prompt an important question: Despite efforts by many large and urban school systems to address teacher workforce challenges, are these initiatives sufficient to elevate teaching into a more appealing and sustainable profession? Many districts continue to rely on longstanding strategies that often yield unsatisfactory outcomes, casting doubts on their effectiveness in addressing underlying issues.

Research conducted by Hill-Cloyd and Miller (2023) sought to understand teacher autonomy in Texas schools. Their research revealed a decline in teacher autonomy, which was attributed to an increased emphasis on standardized testing, the prevalence of top-down leadership and bureaucracy, and the adoption of third-party curricula and commercialized content. The researchers suggest these elements have collectively constrained educators' ability to innovate and adapt to the unique needs of students.

In a separate study, Olsen and Mason (2023) explored how the perceived autonomy of general and special education teachers is linked to job satisfaction and increased student outcomes. They found that a lack of classroom autonomy is associated with lower job satisfaction and higher teacher turnover. These findings underscore the importance of schools prioritizing and investing in supportive leadership practices as a key strategy for retaining teachers.

Solutions to the Exodus

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the role of teachers as stewards of knowledge who shape future generations and societies has never been more important. According to Day et al. (2007):

Teachers are the midwives of that knowledge society. Without them or their competence, the future will be malformed and stillborn. (p. XI)

Teachers need autonomy and discretion to develop their practice to ensure students' best learning outcomes. They must know that their voices matter in school decision-making. However, in today's highly politicized post-pandemic era, achieving this balance of agency can feel elusive. One survey participant expressed the following:

Teachers are not robots. We have feelings about what classes we teach, the curriculum, student behavior, district and school policies, etc. Often, the administration shares information about “changes” that are to be made without thinking of the impact it will have on an individual teacher's day. For example, I currently have three duties. A morning hallway duty, lunch duty, and bus duty. It is a recipe for burnout. When I came to my administration, they listened but made no effort to find a solution. I think administrators should collaborate with teachers to find solutions to what is impeding teacher health and happiness. In doing so, it will improve teacher retention. (Merrimack College, 2023, p. 22)

Amidst top-down policies spanning federal, state, and local levels, and coupled with uniform professional development initiatives and prescriptive instructional directives, teachers often struggle to preserve their professional autonomy (Chaaban et al., 2021; Durrant, 2019; Hill-Cloyd & Miller, 2023; Yurkofsky & Peurach, 2023). In this essay, I explore the importance of teacher agency and present strategies to foster agency within schools and school districts. I examine how educational leaders at the school and district levels navigate the delicate balance of granting autonomy while ensuring accountability. Thus, this nuanced equilibrium, which serves as the optimal point between unrestricted independence and burdensome restriction, is the focal point of this paper.

Understanding the Significance of Teacher Agency

Before discussing how to cultivate teacher agency, it is important to understand why it is a fundamental component of effective education. Teacher agency refers to the educator's capacity to make informed decisions about their teaching practices and the learning environments they create. Agency encompasses the freedom to innovate, adapt, and customize instruction to meet the unique needs of students. Teacher agency benefits educators and improves the quality of education in public schools. Agency promotes a more dynamic and responsive educational system that supports both teachers and students, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Teachers who have agency are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and effective in their roles, ultimately leading to improved student learning outcomes (Durrant, 2019).

As a principal, I did not subscribe to a one-size-fits-all approach when leading my teachers. Instead, I applied a less prescriptive management style to dedicated teachers who deserved autonomy while providing a more prescriptive approach to teachers who were ineffective in classroom management. Based on my observations, experiences, and research, school leaders can cultivate teacher agency in schools through four key strategies: (1) Foster a culture of trust; (2) encourage teacher collaboration; (3) tailor professional development; and (4) empower teacher leadership. Following are explanations of each strategy for cultivating teacher agency.

1. Foster a Culture of Trust

Establishing a culture of trust within schools and districts is essential to empowering teachers and enhancing their agency. School leaders should demonstrate trust in teachers' ability to make informed decisions, as well as respect their professional judgment. Similarly, teachers must trust that their expertise and contributions are valued without excessive scrutiny or micromanagement.

Building a culture of trust requires consistent effort, clear communication, and a commitment to the well-being and success of all school community members. Such a culture is essential to creating a positive and

effective learning environment. Trust-building initiatives can include regular open dialogues between teachers and administrators, transparent decision-making processes, and opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative problem-solving. When trust is nurtured, teachers are more likely to take initiative, experiment with new strategies, and actively contribute to their own professional growth and the development of their students (Guhao & Sioting, 2023).

2. Encourage Teacher Collaboration

Collaboration among teachers also plays a crucial role in promoting teacher agency. When educators work together, they can share best practices, brainstorm ideas, and support one another in refining their teaching methods. This collaboration can occur within schools, across grade levels, and even extend to district-wide or national teacher communities.

Principals are pivotal in setting the tone for collaboration. By providing the necessary support, resources, and leadership, leaders can cultivate an environment where teachers and staff work together to enhance student learning and overall school success. To facilitate collaboration, principals should consider incorporating dedicated time into their master schedules for teachers to meet regularly, participate in professional learning communities, and engage in mentoring programs. These platforms allow educators to collaboratively exchange experiences, learn from one another, and develop innovative teaching strategies. When teachers work as a team, they feel empowered to explore new avenues and experiment with their teaching practices while also drawing on the collective wisdom of their peers (Guhao & Sioting, 2023).

3. Tailor Professional Development

Effective teacher development can help improve teaching practices and student achievement, but it is a dynamic process that requires collaboration, reflection, and adaptability. It should also be designed to meet the evolving needs of both teachers and students. One-size-fits-all professional development programs have long been a concern among teachers, and inadequate professional development programs often fail to address the unique needs and preferences of individual educators. Teacher professional development programs can often feel prescriptive, rigid, and irrelevant, which leads to disengagement and frustration (Durrant, 2019).

By contrast, tailored professional development allows teachers to choose areas for growth that align with their specific needs and goals. Districts and schools can invest in personalized professional development by providing resources, time, and opportunities for teachers to pursue growth in the directions they find most valuable. This approach empowers teachers to take control of their professional development, remain engaged, and invest in their growth (Durrant, 2019).

4. Empower Teacher Leadership

Empowering teacher leadership involves giving them a voice in school decision-making and recognizing them as valuable contributors to continuous school improvement—not just policy implementers. Encouraging teachers to join leadership teams, committees, and school improvement efforts can profoundly enhance their agency. For example, as a school leader, I observed that when teachers have a role in shaping school policies and practices, they tend to take greater ownership of their work and feel a stronger sense of purpose, and they can influence decisions that directly affect their teaching environments and student outcomes. Teacher leadership can also foster a sense of camaraderie and shared responsibility among school staff, which enhances the overall school culture (Kilag et al., 2023).

To improve public schools, leaders should ensure that a proficient teacher is placed in every classroom every day, and a primary focus for all school leaders should be nurturing and developing teachers. Cultivating teacher agency and leadership is pivotal in driving school improvement and fostering a culture of excellence in

educational institutions. Empowering teachers to assume leadership roles allows them to leverage their firsthand knowledge of classroom dynamics and student needs to guide school improvement initiatives.

Teacher leaders collaborate with peers to develop innovative instructional practices, share best practices, and provide targeted professional development. These collaborations ultimately improve student achievements and create a more engaging learning environment. Moreover, teacher leaders serve as change agents who advocate for improvements in curricula, assessments, and school policies and contribute to the overall growth and advancement of the school. Teacher leaders' dedication to continuous improvement and their capacity to inspire and influence colleagues make teacher leadership indispensable in improving student outcomes and building a thriving school community (Berry et al., 2019).

According to the *Second Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2023 Results* (Merrimack College, 2023), teachers express higher satisfaction when they experience greater autonomy over their work. It is imperative to acknowledge that teachers are professionals who are capable of guiding school policies and determining their own schedules, including choosing the classes to teach and deciding whether—and when—to take on additional duties like bus supervision, committee participation, and curriculum development.

Balancing Teacher Autonomy and Accountability

Balancing accountability and teacher autonomy necessitates careful consideration and flexibility by school and district leaders. Principals should create an environment that respects teachers' professional judgment while also ensuring their accountability for the outcomes of their instructional decisions. This approach allows schools to strive for excellence and continuous improvement.

Although fostering teacher agency is critical, maintaining a delicate balance between autonomy and accountability is equally essential. The concept of finding the “sweet spot” emphasizes the need for a middle ground, avoiding extremes of absolute independence and stifling restrictions. Schools and districts should empower teachers to make informed decisions while also enforcing accountability for their actions (Nir et al., 2022). School leaders can achieve this balance through several avenues, including (1) setting clear goals and expectations, (2) providing supportive feedback and evaluation, and (3) providing ongoing professional learning, which are discussed in the following sections.

1. Set Clear Goals and Expectations

School leaders should establish clear goals and expectations for teachers that align with the broader educational objectives. Providing goals and expectations helps allow teachers to understand how their work contributes to the bigger picture. When teachers find themselves with a clearer sense of purpose and direction, they are more likely to use their autonomy in ways that align with the organization's mission.

Principals also play a crucial role in fostering a balanced approach to teacher accountability and autonomy. One effective strategy is to promote Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) among teachers. PLCs empower educators to set goals, share best practices, and experiment with innovative teaching methods. By aligning these activities with the school's broader educational objectives, principals provide teachers with a clear sense of purpose and direction. Within PLCs, teachers are granted the autonomy to exercise their professional judgment and creativity, which can lead to improved instructional practices. Moreover, the collaborative structure of PLCs ensures accountability as teachers receive peer feedback, engage in reflective practices, and collectively work toward achieving the school's mission.

Principals can further enhance this balance between teacher accountability and autonomy by facilitating individualized professional development plans for teachers. Professional development plans instill a sense of

ownership and autonomy by involving teachers in creating plans tailored to their unique professional growth goals while also closely aligning with the school's improvement plan targets. This aligned approach allows teachers to exercise autonomy in shaping their development paths while ensuring that teacher growth efforts directly contribute to schoolwide goals. Regular check-ins, progress assessments, and discussions with the principal are crucial to maintaining accountability. These measures ensure that teacher autonomy remains aligned with the organization's overarching mission and vision (Durrant, 2019).

2. Provide Supportive Feedback and Evaluation

Effective feedback and evaluation systems are vital to maintaining accountability and teacher autonomy in an educational setting. Accordingly, these systems should prioritize professional growth and development rather than punitive measures. Principals and administrators play a key role in this process by offering teachers regular constructive feedback to support and guide rather than criticize.

By emphasizing growth and improvement over a “gotcha”-type evaluation model, feedback and evaluation systems empower teachers to make informed decisions about their teaching practices. This approach gives teachers the autonomy to take ownership of their professional development, identify areas for improvement, and explore new teaching methods. For instance, a teacher might receive feedback on the effectiveness of their classroom management strategies and subsequently decide to explore alternative approaches to improve student engagement (Kilag & Sasan, 2023).

3. Provide Ongoing Professional Learning

Supporting ongoing professional learning is the cornerstone of the delicate equilibrium between teacher accountability and autonomy in the educational environment. The ongoing professional learning approach extends beyond standardized solutions and, instead, focuses on personalized development opportunities that embrace and cater to teachers' unique needs and aspirations. Essential components of ongoing professional learning include personalized development opportunities, a platform for teachers to engage in action research, space to experiment with new and creative teaching strategies, and opportunities to draw valuable insights from their experiences.

Personalized professional development acknowledges teacher individuality while respecting diverse backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. This personalized approach allows educators to select areas for development and align their professional growth with their unique teaching styles, subject areas, and career goals. For instance, a mathematics teacher may opt for professional development opportunities that explore innovative strategies for teaching complex mathematical concepts. In contrast, a history teacher may focus on incorporating technology to enrich classroom instruction and student engagement.

Moreover, encouraging teachers to engage in action research and explore new teaching strategies gives them the autonomy to experiment and innovate in their classrooms. By engaging in action research, teachers assume the role of researchers, actively seeking solutions to the challenges they encounter in their practice. In doing so, they can refine their methods based on empirical evidence and adjust their approaches to cater to their students' diverse needs. This iterative cycle of exploration and adaptation benefits teachers' professional growth and enriches their students' learning experiences.

When teachers continually learn and grow, they become better equipped to exercise their autonomy in ways that directly and positively impact student learning. Thus, the autonomy teachers gain through ongoing professional learning empowers them to make informed decisions about their teaching practices, explore new pedagogical approaches, and respond dynamically to the evolving needs of their diverse students. Through this fusion of teacher autonomy and ongoing professional learning, schools can cultivate an environment in which accountability is not a burden but a shared commitment to foster excellence in education (Shuls & Flores, 2020).

Conclusion

Teacher agency is the cornerstone of effective education, which enables teachers to make informed decisions that foster engaging and effective learning environments. Schools and districts must, therefore, prioritize initiatives like trust-building, teacher collaboration, tailored professional development, and teacher leadership to restore teacher agency and drive positive student outcomes. As school leaders play a crucial role in balancing teacher autonomy with accountability, they must use their positions to create an environment where teachers feel trusted and responsible. To do this, leaders must set clear goals and expectations, provide supportive feedback and evaluations, and promote ongoing professional learning.

In this era of change and uncertainty, restoring teacher agency is vital to creating resilient and adaptive schools that can meet diverse student needs. Teacher agency represents a commitment to valuing educators' expertise, dedication, and leadership in shaping the future of education.

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