Agency and Becoming Strategic

A child must have some version of, "Yes, I imagine I can do this." And a teacher must also view the present child as competent and on that basis imagine new possibilities.

DYSON 1999, PP. 396–397

If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. I call this feeling a sense of agency. Some teachers are very good at building a sense of agency in children, and in this chapter I describe how they do it.

The spark of agency is simply the perception that the environment is responsive to our actions, and many researchers argue that agency is a fundamental human desire (Bandura 1996; Bruner 1994b; Harre and Gillet 1994; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell 1998). They base this on the fact that even young babies notice and express excitement when their behavior appears to have an effect. They get excited if the mobile above their crib moves when they wriggle. Mothers foster this development when they are responsive to their baby's actions. If mothers are unresponsive to their babies, however, as often happens with depressed mothers, babies lose interest. This desire for agency persists throughout life and is so powerful, that when people feel there is no relationship between what they do and what happens, they become depressed and helpless (Seligman 1975; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell 1998).

Having a sense of agency, then, is fundamental. Our well-being depends on it. But building this sense does not depend simply on a coincidence between our actions and an event, as it does for babies. For much of what we do there is a delay between our action—such as writing a good lead—and its consequences—drawing people into our writing. Not only is there a delay, but often the consequence is not immediately obvious. People like what we have written, but we have to figure out why; it could have been just a lucky break. This is where the mediation of teachers' language becomes crucial, and where human beings' propensity for storytelling fits in. Teachers' conversations with children help the children build the bridges between action and consequence that develop their sense of agency. They show children how, by acting strategically, they accomplish things, and at the same time, that they are the kind of person who accomplishes things. In Chapter 3, I describe how children might come to think of themselves, for example, as poets. But for the identity to become viable, they have to convince themselves, and others, that they are in fact poets. To do this, they have to convincingly do poetlike things and generate narratives with plots that have them as the poet doing things that poets do, with the anticipated consequences.

The storytelling part gets a boost from the fact that human beings are natural storytellers. We constantly tell stories about ourselves to others and to ourselves, and the stories shape who we think we are. In a sense, we experience ourselves in narrative form, or, as Catherine Riessman (1993, p. 2) puts it, "individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives." To solve the many problems I will encounter as a writer, and to persist through the many revisions I will face, I have to weave myself into a narrative in which I am the kind of person who encounters and solves problems with text. I develop this belief through a history of conversation with others around my writing.

To understand children's development of a sense of agency, then, we need to look at the kinds of stories we arrange for children to tell themselves. For example, I expect that a child who has a history of telling himself stories about being a failure in writing is unlikely to face a new writing challenge with, "Yes, I imagine I can do this." Similarly, just as we can put ourselves into stories in which we are the active protagonists, the ones with agency, we can plot ourselves in the same story and attribute the agency to another, as in, "The reason my poem was good is that the teacher helped me." Telling such stories in which we

relegate ourselves to a passive role is the inverse of agency. Jerome Bruner (1994) calls it "victimicity." Teachers who have worked with students classified as learning disabled will recognize this kind of story as Marie Clay pointed out in her classic paper titled "Learning to be Learning Disabled." There is no question that the way we tell these stories influences academic achievement (Johnston and Winograd 1985; Nicholls 1989; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girus, and Seligman 1986).

The problem for us to solve, then, is how do we arrange for children to tell many literacy stories in which they are the successful protagonists? The heart of a good narrative is a character who encounters a problem and by acting strategically, solves it, usually (but not necessarily) attaining a goal. The following examples of teacher comments are likely to influence the sense of agency children experience in the stories they tell about themselves as literate individuals.

✿ *"How did you figure that out?"*

Asking children this question when they have successfully solved a problem invites them to review the process, or strategies, used to accomplish a goal or solve a problem. The question insists that a child respond with something like, "First I tried to. . . ." In other words, it requires the student to position himself as a storyteller with himself as the protagonist in the story. Aside from the strategy review this provides, it insists that the student adopt an agentive position in the retold narrative. Such a narrative invites a sense of agency as part of the child's literate identity.

This "how did you" invitation to an agentive role is particularly important. We hear a lot about teaching children strategies, but we often encounter classrooms in which children are being taught strategies yet are not being strategic (Ivey, Johnston, and Cronin 1998). Teaching children strategies results in them knowing strategies, but not necessarily in their acting strategically and having a sense of agency. Marie Clay (1991) raises this problem when she talks about teaching *for* strategies rather than just teaching strategies. Teaching for strategies requires setting children up to generate strategies, then reviewing with them, in an agentive retelling, the effectiveness of the strategies they generated, as in, "You figured out that tricky word by yourself. How did you do that?" As children do this, they are in control of the problem-solving process and are asked to consciously recognize that control in an agentive narrative.

This strategy of arranging for a student to figure something out independently, without full awareness, and then reflecting on it, has been called "revealing." Courtney Cazden (1992) contrasts this with "telling," in which the teacher is explicit up front and then the student practices what he has been taught to do by someone else. I suspect that revealing is more difficult than telling because it requires taking into account the child's current understanding. Its benefit is that the child actually does the constructing or problem-solving, which, again, makes possible the development of a sense of agency. Telling, on the other hand, produces metacognitive awareness, which is often quite useful. However, the metacognitive awareness that comes from telling is not always immediately useful. As Clay (2001) points out, "Most things we do as readers need to operate below the conscious level most of the time so that fast and effective processing of the print is achieved and attention is paid to the messages rather than to the work done to get to the message" (p. 127).

The side benefit of the "How did you . . . ?" question is that as children articulate their strategic action, they teach their strategies to other students without the teacher being the authoritative-source-from-which-all-knowledge-comes. It arranges for instruction without hierarchical positioning. Naturalizing this sort of conversation opens the possibility that students will continue such conversations among themselves, thus increasing the level of "explicit" instruction without increasing the extent to which children are being told what to do.

"Sounds good," you might say. "So how do we increase the opportunities to have this sort of conversation?" That's where the next question comes in. To set up agentive narratives, children have to face problems.

✿ *"What problems did you come across today?"*

When asked as a predictable question this implies that it is normal to encounter problems. Everybody does. This, in turn, makes it normal to talk about confronting and solving those problems. It also helps students identify problems and view them as places to learn, and it sets up the possibility of asking, "How did you solve that problem?" as an invitation to construct an agentive narrative. We can also expand the conversation to "Has anyone else had that problem? How did you solve it?," "How else could we solve it?," and "This is what I do when I have that problem," each of which further expands the agentive possibilities. Of course it is possible for children to answer that they asked someone else how to

solve the problem. However, this can be retold asserting the agency of having done so and the need to remember what was learned, before inviting consideration of other options when that one is not available. "Asking someone is a good way to solve a problem; then we know how to solve it ourselves next time. What other strategies could we use?"

Prompts that help children internalize these options will also make them more portable. For example, when a child encounters a problem, asking, "What can you do?" has several benefits. It reminds the student of her agency—"I can do something"—and asks for an exploration of possibilities without actually insisting that they be tried. It is a very different prompt from "Sound it out" or "What would make sense there?" in that it requires the child to be in control of the exploration and selection of strategies, not just the exercise of them. This is part of teaching toward the development of "inner control," freeing the strategy use from the teacher's support (Clay 1991).

✿ *"How are you planning to go about this?"*

Planning means organizing for a productive narrative. It is the most conscious part of being strategic because it happens before we get into the middle of things. It is a very agentive thing to do. Notice that the way this particular question is asked assumes that the student already has a plan. Some students, not having a plan or even having considered the possibility of planning, find the question slightly puzzling, but generate a possible plan and begin thinking about what it would take to enact it. However, planning is not always approached as directly as this. For example, "We need to check our science experiments and our math today. How much time do you think you'll need to finish editing your letters?" This at once models planning—planning is something we do all the time in this class—it gives the children choice over their use of time (although not over what needs to be done), and it requires them to mentally engage in the task analysis that is essential to planning. It really invites them to co-construct a plan for the rest of the afternoon. Planning is imagining a possible agentive narrative that can later be rehearsed through the "How did you . . . ?" and "Did your plan help you?" questions, or in between with, "How are you doing with your plans to . . . ?"

✿ *"Where are you going with this piece [of writing]?"*

This question, like the previous one, is about planning and is forceful because there is no way to answer it simply without accepting the prem-

ise. In this case, the premise is that you are in fact going somewhere with the piece of writing (something that might not previously have occurred to you); you have a goal, and possibly a plan. Answering the question requires an agentive narrative. A child faced with the question might not yet have considered the possibility that going somewhere with a piece of writing is something one does. However, the question opens the space for him to imagine such a possibility for this piece, and in the longer term the possibility of acting in that way. It also opens the next step in the agentive conversation, such as, "What are you going to do next to get there?" or "How are you planning to go about this?"

✿ *"Which part are you sure about and which part are you not sure about?"*

This question, addressed to a student who was aware he had spelled a word incorrectly, redirected his attention to the successful part of his efforts and then focused his problem-solving on the unsolved part, making the problem more focused and thus more tractable. When it was followed by, "How else could you spell that part?," he was able to try options and then recognize the correct version, thus successfully spelling the word. Following this with, "How did you figure that out?" would invite an agentive narrative and a rehearsal of the strategy used.

The first part of the question, though, "Which part are you sure about?" is yet another version of drawing attention to the partially successful and reminds us that the experience of success necessary for developing a sense of agency is partly a matter of perception. Two children might misspell the same word and one will view it as a success and the other as a failure, depending on whether they focus on the erroneous or accurate part of the spelling, or whether they focus on the fact that it had the desired effect on the reader. The language we choose in our interactions with children influences the ways they frame these events, and the ways the events influence their developing sense of agency.

✿ *"You really have me interested in this character [in your writing] because of the things he says, and if you show me how he says them and what he looks like, I will get an even stronger sense of him."*

This statement, again, draws the child's attention first, and *specifically*, to what has gone well. In particular, though, it shows what went well through its *effect* on the audience, showing the agency of authorship.

This gets around the need for praise, which can build dependencies, and allows the developing writer to understand how to tell for himself whether his efforts were or will be successful.

However, pointing out to a student what worked well is not enough. Teaching requires moving beyond that to what is next for the student's development. Knowing the importance of this second step, we are inclined to say, "You really have me interested in this character [in your writing] because of the things he says, but you haven't. . . ." In this construction, the one word, *but*, effectively undermines the first piece of feedback. It is the *and* in the first part of the quote that is critical. Notice that not only is the affirmation in the first part left intact, but that the remainder of the sentence is likely to be "and if you, . . . then . . ." In other words, this structure sets up a possible future, including an audience consequence, a strategy that leads to it, and a narrative with the student in the position of protagonist or agent. At the same time it opens this door, the conditional *if* does not force the child through it. The one word, *and*, changes the entire structure of the interaction, affecting the motive for actually engaging the feedback and the implications for the child's identity.

This is not to ignore the value of *but*, which has a different function, one of presenting a conflict for resolution. For example, "*went* would make sense (affirmation), but what letters would you expect if it were *went*?" Such prompts are intended to pose a problem for the learner to solve, often requiring some reorganization of cognitive processing (Clay 2001). Notice, though, that the affirmation still comes first. Notice, too, that although the affirmation has some of the qualities of praise, it is quite different. It attributes the source of the productive aspect to a warrant (makes sense) that the child is assumed to have used. Whether or not the child used the warrant, the retelling implies it in a way that makes the attribution difficult to reject. Actually, warrants like this are a critical part of persuasive storytelling, and some children need serious persuasion to desert their old unproductive stories. Perhaps you have come across this in parts of your own life.

I should not leave the quote without also describing the importance of *if* ("and if you . . ."). There is a real difference in a writing conference between saying, "If you were to add information about the cat, where would you put it?" and "Put in more information about the cat" (Graves 1994). One leaves open the choice of actually doing it, but insists on rehearsing the thinking behind it (the important instructional piece) and

the other leaves no choice—and a reduction in agency. In fact the question and the imperative have very different implications for motive, agency, and identity.

✿ *"That's like Kevin's story. He started off telling us his character is a lonely boy to get us caring about the main character. You [looking at Kevin] made a conscious choice" (Johnston, Bennett, and Cronin 2002a, p. 155).*

The key word in this fragment is "choice." Choice is central to agency. Making a choice requires one to act—preferably to deliberate and act. Often we do things in particular ways, or see things through particular perspectives, forgetting that there are options. This particular comment has even more to recommend it. By connecting his work to that of a published author whose work the students admire, it clearly announces Kevin as an author, showing evidence for the parallels that support the connection, and reminds Kevin, and the class at the same time, that authors make decisions and should consciously contemplate them. It invites the class to treat Kevin as an author and to break down any barriers between other, more published authors and authors like Kevin. While valorizing Kevin as an author, with agency and power, this is not simply praise. It is information provided in a way that makes public recognition possible without some of its side effects. In public settings praise for an individual always runs the risk of "unpraising" others. "Good" can be praise, but when it follows "wonderful" to another student, it can be "faint praise."

The "choice" aspect of the comment also leads to a productive narrative about the nature of the choosing process. For example, "I notice you chose to write about this as a poem. How come?" insists on a narrative about the grounds for an authorial decision, requiring an articulation of something that might have been an unconscious process. At the same time, it requires the student to don an author's identity to give the narration, and opens a broader conversation with the class about choices among genres, and the grounds for making such choices.

Choice is important to foreground in classroom interactions because sometimes children behave in unsatisfactory ways. The first step in rehabilitation for the long term is to remind them that their behavior reflects a choice, and to help them think through the alternatives and their consequences. Imagining making different choices helps a lot. Sometimes children do not see something as a choice because they

cannot imagine the options. It's just something that they do. This is when we pose "Suppose . . ." or "What if . . ." possibilities for them, or open new possibilities by connecting them to other sources. For example, we might ask, "How would [familiar author, respected other, etc.] handle this?," "How about [another familiar author, respected other, etc.] . . . ?" These questions turn children's attention not only to the need for conscious choice, but also to possible sources for imagining options. This kind of conversation is directed toward building and connecting what Jerome Bruner (1986) calls the "dual landscapes" of consciousness and action.

✿ *"Why . . ."*

"Why" questions are the essence of inquiry. Once young children latch onto "why" questions, they come to see how useful they are for getting to the bottom of how (some) things work and finding the limits of others. Aside from being the basis of at least one side of science and of logic, "why" questions also develop children's persuasion and argumentation abilities, and logical thinking. They have the potential to help children balance emotional and rational dimensions of literate life.

"Why" can also be applied to the logic of behavior and decisions as an invitation to review and make conscious a process and its associated values. Asking why children do or say the things they do helps them develop the consciousness and hence ownership of their choices. It brings to consciousness the feelings, intentions, relationships, motives, logic, values, and plans that lie beneath action and are the hidden levers of narrative. "Why" questions have the same effect when applied to the actions of characters in books, particularly when deliberate connections are made to the child's own life, as in questions such as, "Why do you think she would do that?" The same principle can be applied to classroom discussion of critical incidents, which gives the added advantage of increasing the available interpretive frames from which to choose. Perhaps more important, they can also be applied to authors in general, as in the next question.

✿ *"Why would an author do something like that?" (Johnston, Bennett, and Cronin 2002a, p. 155).*

This question asks students to view writing as fundamentally intentional and rife with decisions. Naturalizing conversations about the intentional nature of writing provides the grounds for critical literacy. It

opens the possibility of making word choice, ideology, and private interest important when reading. It also requires the child, as a reader, to imagine himself into the writer's role, building a bridge between reading and writing that helps to generalize what is learned in one to become useful in the other. Imagining oneself into another writer, however, requires a social imagination, to which I will return presently.

Imagining why an author made a particular choice opens the possibility of doing things differently, so that it is possible to ask, "How else could she [the author] have done that?" Of course this can also be asked with respect to the student's own writing, as in, "How could you have done that differently?" Both together build the necessary links between reading and writing. "Why did the author choose that word?," "What other words could he have used?," and "Do you think when he used that word to describe Rob [a character], it changed the way we thought about him?" are all part of a systematic attempt to insist that students take the intentionality and political nature of authorship as a given. Once this has been established, it becomes possible for children to read against the author's intentions. It becomes possible, and more likely, for them to read critically. Within these conversations, children can start to imagine what a writer has systematically left out—voices, perspectives, details—and to exercise control over their reading. Other children's perspectives routinely voiced in the classroom also have a powerful influence on this, as we shall see presently.

Powerful Narratives

The comments in this chapter are all invitations to construct a retelling of an event from an agentive position. Naturalizing such questions leads to the unspoken assertion that trying, struggling, noticing, and creating are normal, expected things to do. Underlying all of these conversations, of course, are relationships and evidence that support the narrative and make it trustworthy and persuasive. Students have to be convinced that our words are real and not empty flattery, and the evidence is in the details and in their manner of presentation.

Sometimes there is real risk in accepting agency. When a learner has built a narrative around his unsuccessful experiences in literacy that puts him in a passive role, there is no responsibility for failure. Accepting an agentive role can also be risky in the context of blaming conversations. This is a reason for building agency around successful

events initially, and why arranging for events to be successful in the first place is fundamental. Nonetheless, the handling of potentially negative episodes is crucial, too, because they often have a pivotal role in narratives. First, negative episodes must be thought of as expected and useful. This is why "What problems did you encounter today?" is so important to naturalize. But when a child tries something and does not succeed, we need to turn that event toward a narrative and identity that will be useful for the future. If children are not making errors, they are not putting themselves in learning situations.

It is common enough for children to produce writing drafts with no spelling errors because they do not want to risk what they think of as failure. We can limit this possibility by overtly valuing children's exploration of new tactics and possibilities. For example, "Did anyone try any new or difficult words in their writing today? . . . Great! Tell us about it. . . . That's what William Steig does when he writes—uses interesting words. Did anyone else try anything new or different?" We can also help students reframe the sort of story a negative episode represents—how it might play a role in their identity as a learner, writer, reader, citizen: "Yes, you did have trouble with that, but I really like the way you are challenging yourself." Drawing children's attention to their successes and showing them how their decisions and strategic actions were responsible for them increases children's perceptions of their ability and the effectiveness of their focused efforts (Pintrich and Blumenfeld 1985). Drawing their attention to their effort ("You worked really hard at that") or their intellect ("You are so smart") will not generate sufficiently useful narratives.

As teachers, then, we try to maximize children's feelings of agency. There are really three parts to this: the belief that the environment can be affected, the belief that one has what it takes to affect it, and the understanding that that is what literacy is about. An organized and predictable classroom helps a great deal with the first of these, as does arranging for children to be successful. However, we can affect both by ensuring that the narratives in which we immerse children emphasize the agentive nature of literacy, and their particular agentive roles. We know that this is effective because the most successful interventions for improving children's feelings of agency in academic domains have included not just teaching effective strategies, but also using attribution retraining in which children are helped to tell agentive stories about their performance. These interventions have improved not only chil-

dren's sense of agency, but also their engagement in and motivation for subsequent academic activities (Foote 1999; Schunk and Cox 1986; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell 1998).

It might already have occurred to you that children bring with them to school well-learned cultural narratives acquired in cooperatively retelling family stories from a very young age. These narratives hold models of the possible forms narratives can take, who is allowed to take which roles, and so forth (Pontecorvo and Sterponi 2002). Children have already learned some of the roles open and not open to girls, the feelings and actions that go along with those roles, and how certain behaviors should be understood, such as a boy who reads or a girl who argues. They have learned these aspects of agency in subtle ways. For example, mothers tend to retell events differently to daughters and sons, particularly when it comes to emotional events. An event reconstructed as invoking sadness for a daughter, such as having a toy stolen, is likely to be reconstructed to include anger for a son (Fivush 1994)—emotions with very different relationships to agency. In school, it is our job to help expand the possible agentive narrative lines available for children to pick up.

Boys and girls differ, too, in the stories they tell about success and failure. Boys learn to tell stories in which they claim agency for their academic successes but not their failures, whereas girls tend to tell stories with the opposite attributions. They experience success and failure through these powerful culturally derived narratives (Bruner 1994b). Our job is to change these narratives so that both boys and girls have a productive sense of the implications of the choices they make and the strategies they choose. We do this by foregrounding these in the agentive narratives through which we help them reconstruct the events.

Agency Matters

Developing in children a sense of agency is not an educational frill or some mushy-headed liberal idea. Children who doubt their competence set low goals and choose easy tasks, and they plan poorly. When they face difficulties, they become confused, lose concentration, and start telling themselves stories about their own incompetence. In the long run they disengage, decrease effort, generate fewer ideas, and become passive and discouraged. Children with strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in

their studies, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties than children with a weaker sense of agency (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell 1998). Feeling competent, these children plan well, choose challenging tasks, and set higher goals. Their concentration actually improves when they face difficulties, and in the process of engaging difficulties they learn more skills. Of course the whole process is cyclical because these relationships are reflected in their academic success, which then reinforces their sense of agency. When children decide that they have no agency with respect to their learning, their learning is limited in terms of both personal experience and potential trajectory. Performance differences between children with a stronger and weaker sense of agency continually diverge, particularly from fifth grade on.

The concept of agency in literacy and learning is not only central for the individual's sense of competence and well-being, and for his or her performance (Eder 1994; Ivey, Johnston, and Cronin 1998; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell 1998), but also indispensable to democratic living, though individual agency is not enough for that. As we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7, both individual and collective agency are important to develop because there are many situations in which an individual cannot have a major influence and because collective agency offers the possibility of developing an identity through affiliation. Both independence (an aspect of agency) and belonging are documented contributors to children's classroom engagement (Blumenfeld 1992; Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan 1996; Wentzel 1997).

Extension

Analyze the following transcripts in terms of their invitations to agency and see whether there are ways to enhance them.

Transcript 1

Bill: You worked hard on this page. Where was the tricky part? [*The student points to the word* through.] Look at the picture and tell me what she did.
Peter: She went over the fence.
Bill: It could be *over,* but check to see if what you read looks right.
Peter: No, it's not *over.*

Bill: How do you know?
Peter: There's no *v*.
Bill: Good checking. What would make sense?
Peter: I don't know.
Bill: Would *through* make sense?
Peter: Oh, yeah—"through the fence."

Transcript 2

Kathy: Today's story is called *Cat on the Mat*. Look at the last word in the title; that word is the same as your name, isn't it?
Matt: I don't know.
Kathy: Sure it is; your name is Matt, isn't it? And this word is *mat*, except this word only has one *t* instead of two *t*'s like in your name. I will read you the story and you read along. "The cat sat on the mat. The goat sat on the mat. The cow sat on the mat. The elephant sat on the mat. SSppstt." Can you sound out those letters?
Matt: *Ssssss. Tttt.*
Kathy: Good. I'll finish the book now: "The cat sat on the mat."

Both these transcripts are from the exceptional book *Partners in Learning: Teachers and Children in Reading Recovery* (Lyons, Pinnell, and DeFord 1993) pages 162–163 and 151, respectively. Although there are some productive examples of teacher talk in the first transcript, both examples are shown in that book to be problematic. The first is problematic because the teacher did not realize that Peter had lost track of characters and thought that *she* referred to the fox. The second is problematic because of the text/task difficulty and because of the teacher's conception of reading instruction—what she was trying to do. She was trying to get the student to recognize and sound out words that were beyond her student's capability rather than trying to arrange for him to take control of reading the book.