

Mutual agency of teachers and students in odds-beating high schools

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Introduction

- Little research addresses the relationship between teacher and student agency
- This study draws on qualitative case studies conducted in seven schools identified as odds-beating (achieving better-than-expected graduation outcomes among diverse student populations)
- Findings suggest that agentic teachers use their enhanced agency to foster a sense of agency in students.

Agency in Schools & Society

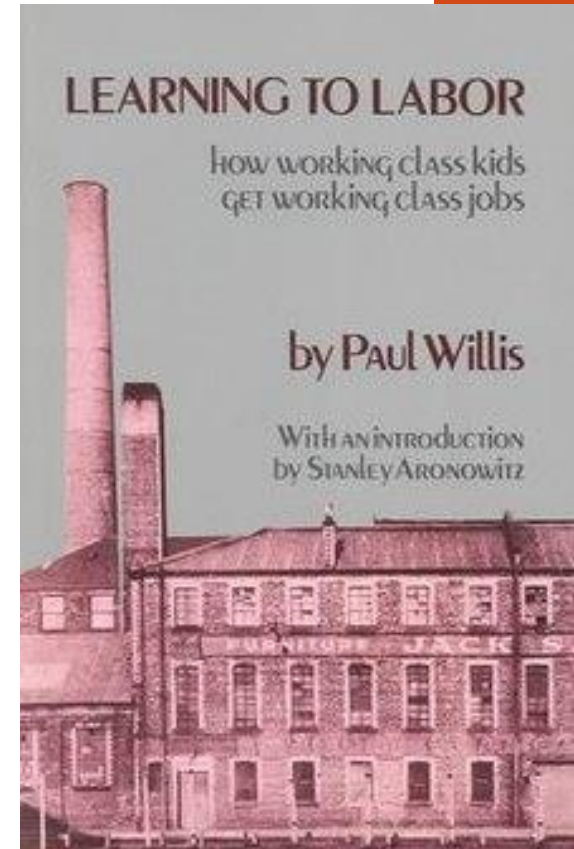
- Agency can be understood as the dynamic interplay between intended actions and the structural conditions in which such action is pursued or “the socially-mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p.112)
- Agency is an iterative process of interaction between intentions and constraints whereby structures are negotiated and remade (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992)

“It is just as true and just as untrue to say that collective actions produce the event or that they are its product”

(Bourdieu, 1977, p.82).

Agency in Schools & Society

- Agency is an alternative to deterministic portrayals of schools where teachers and students have little power over the conditions in which they teach and learn (Levinson & Holland, 1996)
- Teachers interpret policies and assert professional judgement despite accountability regimes may undermine and weaken their agency (Buchanan, 2015; McNeil, 2000; Robinson, 2012)
- Students actively influence their experiences in school through variety of actions (Gutstein, 2007; McLaren, 1998; Willis, 1977).



Mutuality of Teacher and Student Agency

- Teacher and student agency typically analyzed in isolation rather than as in mutually-constitutive relationships (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2016).
- The ways in which individuals understand their identities and roles in school is closely linked to their will and capacity for agentic action
- Crucial to understand how teachers and students are “positioned” as well as the ways in which those positions are inhabited, transformed, or refused (Gee, 2012; Holland et al., 1998).

Research Questions

- What are the relationships between teacher and student agency in odds-beating schools?
 - In what ways do teachers in odds-beating secondary schools express forms of agency?
 - What are the affordances for their agentic behaviors?
 - To what extent (and in what ways) do agentic teachers, in turn, foster student agency?

Methodology

Selection Criteria

Regents Graduation Rates
Advanced Regents Graduation Rates

Populations

African-American/Black
Hispanic/Latino
English language learners
Economically disadvantaged

Study Design

Multiple Case Study

7 odds-beating

3 typically performing

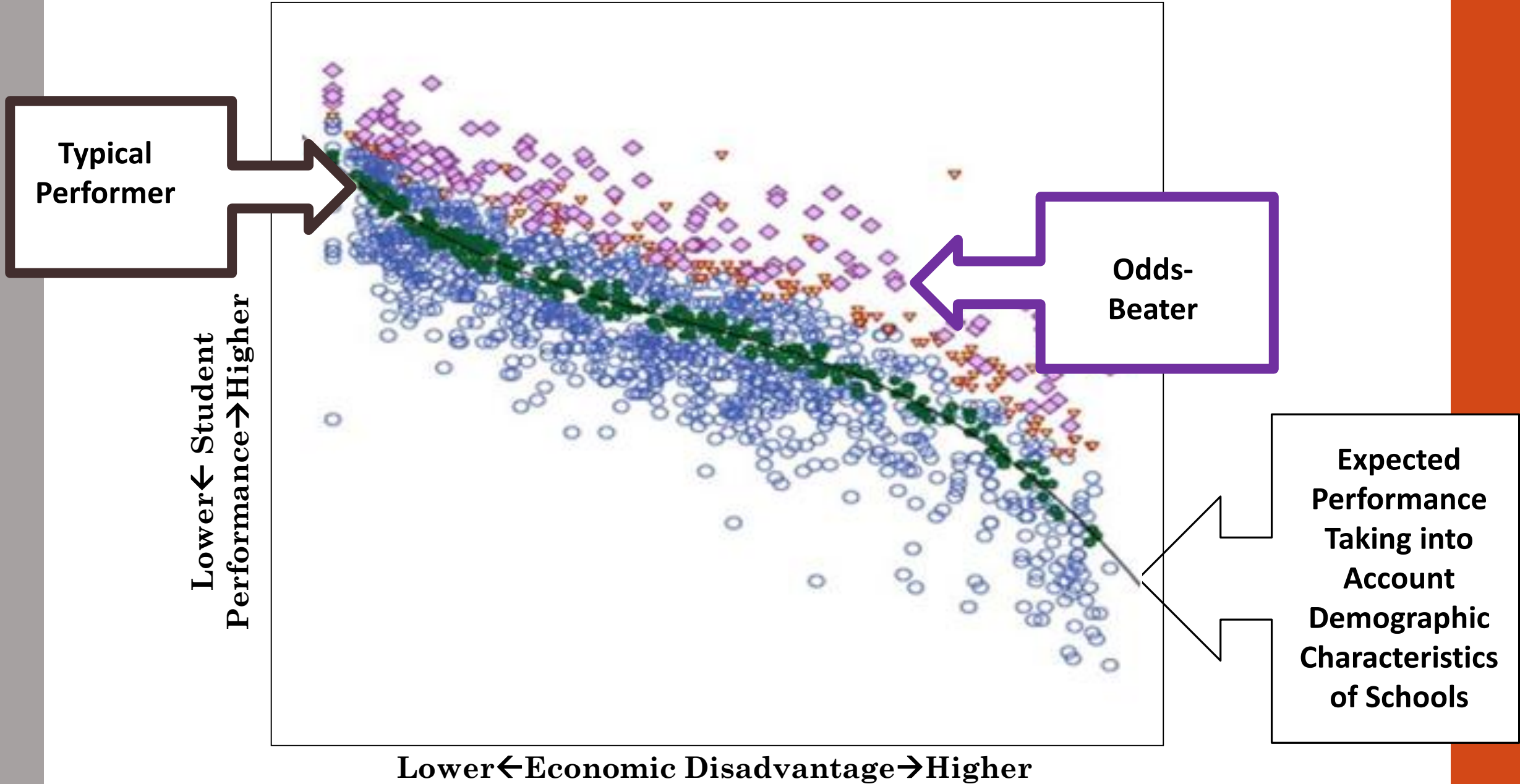
• Data Collected

- ✓ Interviews: 63
- ✓ Focus Group: 68
- ✓ School Tours: 10
- ✓ Surveys: 411
- ✓ Documents: 77

• Participants

- ✓ District Leaders: 40
- ✓ School Leaders: 26
- ✓ Teachers: 124
- ✓ Support Staff: 57
- ✓ Specialists: 55

What is an “Odds-Beater”?



Typical Performer

Lower ← Student Performance → Higher

Odds-Beater

Expected Performance Taking into Account Demographic Characteristics of Schools

Lower ← Economic Disadvantage → Higher

Schools

High School	Enrollment ¹	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged ²	% ELL	% Hispanic Latino	% Black/African-American	PPE ³
Alfred-Almond	198	7-12	Rural	42	0	1	0	\$18,497
Crown Point	77	K-12	Rural	62	0	0	0	\$21,644
Freeport	2,229	9-12	Suburban/Urban	66	16	64	29	\$22,314
Malverne	548	9-12	Suburban/Urban	51	3	22	57	\$30,539
Maple Grove	239	6-12	Rural	30	0	1	1	\$17,922
Port Chester	1,436	9-12	Suburban/Urban	69	18	77	6	\$19,941
Sherburne-Earlville	374	9-12	Rural	51	0	1	1	\$22,507
NYS	N/A	N/A	N/A	55	9	26	17	\$23,361

Data Analysis

- Inductive and deductive cross-case analysis and methods of triangulation and member checking to ensure credibility
- Qualitative software program used to code transcripts using a priori categories generated from larger study's literature review
- Teacher and student agency emerged as salient themes and for this embedded analysis; a second phase of coding was done using categories developed from the initial coding

Findings

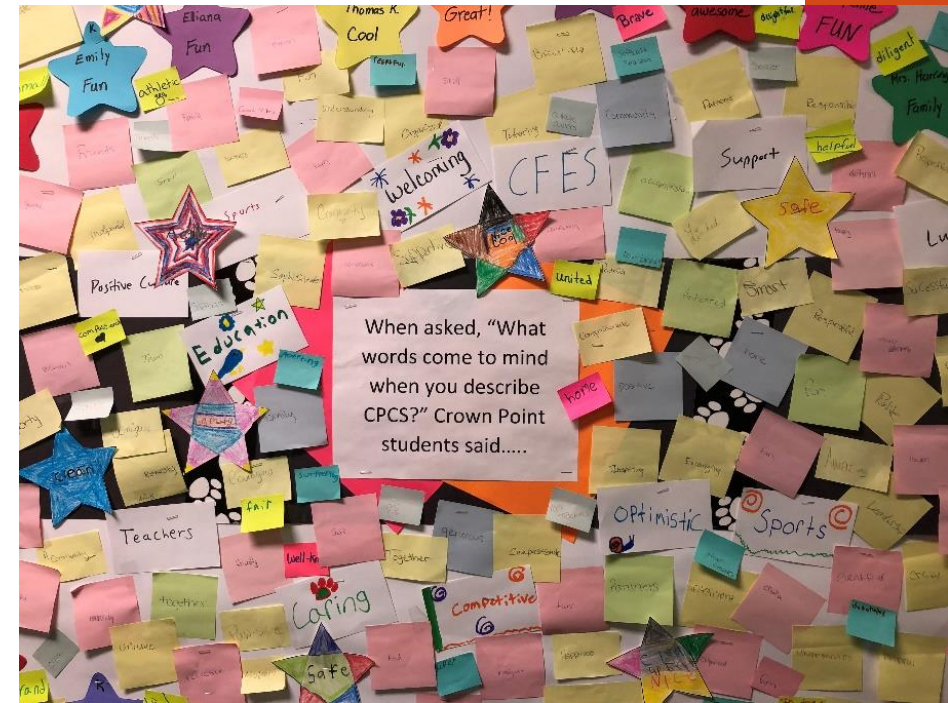
- Teachers' agency is enhanced when constraints are weakened or mitigated by school and district leaders.
- Agentic teachers are well-positioned to support and facilitate agency among their students.
- These findings illustrate the relational nature of teacher and student agency.

Positioning Teachers as Agents

- Curricular and pedagogical freedom and flexibility afforded to them by school and district leaders.
- Weakening of structural constraints on teaching fostered a sense of agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy in teachers:

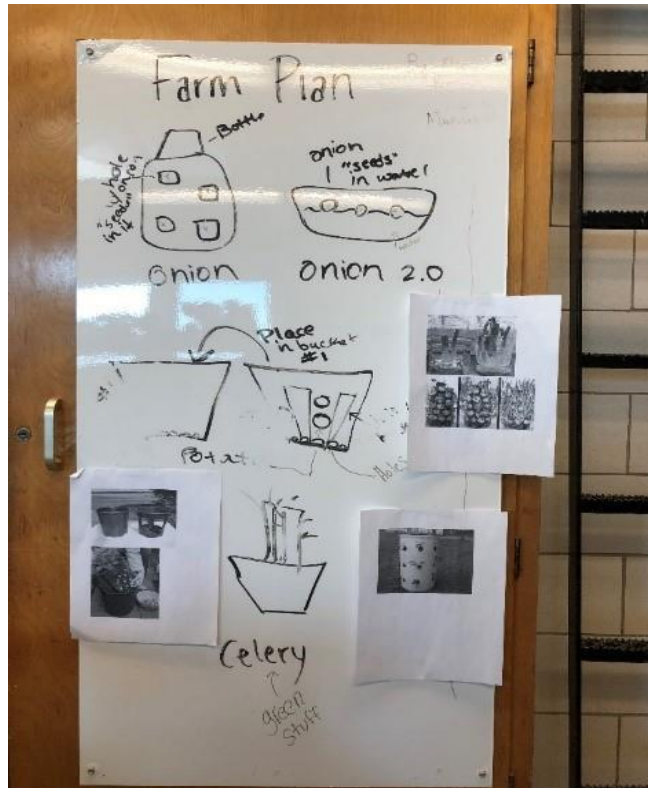
“I’m not held to a set curriculum... [leaders] trust that I’m doing what the kids need.” -
Bilingual US History teacher, Freeport

“[Leaders] let us teach how we see fit.” -
Teacher, Maple Grove



Bulletin Board at Crown Point Central School,
Crown Point, NY

Positioning Teachers as Agents



Plans for School Farm,
Maple Grove Jr-Sr High
School, Bemus Point, NY

- School and district leaders saw the value in fostering teacher agency and allowed teachers to freely express themselves:

“[Teachers] have leeway to think outside the box [here].” – School Leader, Malverne

“[I] don’t need to “micromanage [teachers] because these people are sharp.” – Superintendent, Sherburne-Earlville

Agentic Teachers, Agentic Students

- Teachers acknowledged the pressures of high-stakes exams, but did not allow them to dictate their pedagogies or be the sole way which student performance was measured:

“At the end of the year, I tell the kids when we grade Regents, hey, if a kid doesn’t pass a test, that’s not because of what he’s done all year.” – teacher, Malverne

“[P]ushing them to a higher level of thinking... should be the ultimate goal. I mean I want them to be successful on a Regents exam, but the ultimate goal is that they’re learners and problem-solvers by the time they’re done.” – teacher, Alfred-Almond



School Greenhouse,
Sherburne-Earlville Jr-Sr
High School, Sherburne,
NY

Agentic Teachers, Agentic Students



Student Artwork
Display, Freeport High
School, Freeport NY

- Teachers fostered student agency as a way to develop students into critical thinkers and active citizens:

“I like them to think for themselves and come up with their own ideas instead of saying, this is what you are thinking, this is what the module says.” – teacher, Crown Point

I try to point out to them that they already know so much. They don't look their own [first language] as a piece of knowledge. And, I want them to be proud of that and improve upon that and show them, 'Wow, you have all this before you even walked into my class.’” – teacher, Freeport

Discussion

- Agency helps move beyond deterministic notions of schools as sites of social reproduction or propagate oversimplified tales that valorize the abilities of individuals to better their circumstances despite real social constraints (Ortner, 2006)
- We have argued that while teacher agency and student agency have been highlighted in recent scholarly work, the two phenomena are often treated in isolation.
- Our findings draw attention to the mutually-constitutive nature of agency as it flows reciprocally from leaders to teachers and then on to students.

Conclusion

- Increased student agency is positively linked to engagement and self-efficacy; findings suggest that leaders and policymakers recognize the import of teachers as enablers of student agency and minimize the constraints which limit teacher agentic behavior (Anderson et al., 2019; Goodman & Eren, 2013).
- This analysis has provided insight into the association between teacher and student agency, but, nonetheless, requires additional research to further elucidate this relationship.

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- **Improve schools** through professional development in continuous improvement processes (COMPASS-AIM)

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