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Fostering Agentic Engagement: Working toward Empowerment and Equity through Pedagogical Partnership

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Abstract

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Keywords

agentic engagement, pedagogical partnership, empowerment, equity

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Cover Page Footnote

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Fostering Agentic Engagement: Working toward Empowerment and Equity through Pedagogical Partnership

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An established body of research details the faculty role in promoting student engagement. Newer scholarship on agentic engagement foregrounds student-initiated engagement in classroom learning. Our SoTL project explored how participating in student-faculty pedagogical partnerships supported two undergraduate students in expanding agentic engagement to encompass student empowerment and equity both within and beyond the classroom. We draw on the students' autoethnographic accounts of three interrelated experiences: (1) joining a pedagogical partnership program as pedagogical consultants and developing confidence in, capacity for, and commitment to supporting student and faculty learning; (2) carrying that confidence, capacity, and commitment into the courses in which those students were enrolled to enact agentic engagement in their own and in support of others' learning; and (3) expanding the agentic engagement they developed in the first two instances beyond classroom learning. This study has implications for classroom instruction, faculty professional development, and student advising and retention.

“When students are given the opportunity and ability to recognize their voice and the power they have to create actionable change within the classroom, this instills a sense of confidence and agency with a far-reaching impact.”
– Allard (2021)

“The agency that I cultivated through my partnership...extended far beyond what I felt I could do for students I was advocating for in my partnership—and even beyond my own classes—to how I could make the college a more inclusive and equitable place.”
– Marcovici (2021)

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that engaging students actively in their learning experiences can be transformative (Bryson, 2014; Kay, Dunne, & Hutchinson, 2010). The primary focus of much research on student engagement, however, is on forms of teacher-initiated and teacher-guided student engagement as those enhance learning in traditional classroom settings (Bandura, 2006; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The newer concept of agentic engagement focuses on proactive, intentional, collaborative, constructive, student-initiated contributions to learning, which have been shown to improve students' classroom functioning and learning (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). While the literature on agentic engagement affirms the benefits of students being more proactive within teacher-defined and teacher-controlled spaces and practices, we argue that agentic engagement has even greater potential: to expand notions and practices of engagement to encompass student empowerment and equity both within and beyond the classroom and across disciplinary contexts.

Our interest in this potential was catalyzed by an analysis of how pedagogical partnership enhanced students' agentic engagement in a course in which those students were enrolled (Thomas & Reynolds, 2020) and by our own experiences in pedagogical partnership programs. Alison Cook-Sather is director of

a pedagogical partnership program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges; Bill Reynolds is director of a pedagogical partnership program at Florida Gulf Coast University; Elena Marcovici (class of 2021) was an undergraduate student partner in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford program; and Samantha Allard (also class of 2021) was an undergraduate student partner in Florida Gulf Coast University's partnership program. Pedagogical partnership in our programs is defined as “a collaborative, reciprocal process” through which faculty and student partners “have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7). Our programs support semester-long, one-on-one pedagogical partnerships between faculty members and undergraduate students not enrolled in those faculty members' courses.

These partnership programs position undergraduate students as educational developers (Felten et al., 2019), and the SoTL project upon which we report here enacted one of Felten's (2013) five principles of good practice in SoTL: “that inquiry into learning be conducted in partnership with students” (p. 123; see also Felten et al., 2013). We open our discussion by elaborating on the brief definitions of agentic engagement and pedagogical partnership we offer above and by defining student empowerment and equity. Next we present our method: Allard's and Marcovici's autoethnographic approach to studying their experiences. Our full-team analysis, which draws on the core data provided by Allard's and Marcovici's self studies, focuses on what these two student partners' reflections reveal about the potential of developing agentic engagement for empowerment and equity through pedagogical partnership within our own contexts as well as across disciplines and international contexts. We conclude by pointing to the implications this work has for classroom instruction, faculty professional development, and student advising and retention.

AGENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Much research on engagement does not devote sufficient attention to the identities of students, the inequitable conditions under which they learn, and the power relations that shape education (Quaye & Harper, 2019; Westman & Bergmark, 2019). The well-established forms of student engagement in the classroom—behavioral, affective, and cognitive—typically initiated, guided, and reinforced by instructors, are most certainly informed by, if not analyzed in relation to, these realities of identity, condition, and power dynamics. Agentic engagement refers to students contributing actively and constructively to their own “learning, developing, and performing” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 151; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). In focusing on “what students say and do to create a more motivationally supportive learning environment for themselves” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 151), this form of engagement draws on and inspires positive motivation and links that motivation with the capacity to act. Our extension of this notion adds an equity focus, allowing us to address the inattention to inequity characteristic of most discussions of engagement.

First researched in the middle-school context, agentic engagement has since been applied at the primary level in relation to negotiated curriculum (Fitzpatrick, O’Grady, & O’Reilly, 2018) and in relation to students’ investment in their school activities (Pineda-Báez, Manzuoli, & Sánchez, 2019). At the tertiary level, research on agentic engagement has explored students developing resilience and capabilities to deal with new and challenging situations as part of preparation for becoming the professionals and the people they want to be (Peach & Matthews, 2011). Research has also focused on how negotiated curriculum within a Sustainability Education classroom can improve both agentic engagement and student learning (Thomas & Reynolds, under review) and on the role of agentic engagement in the relationship among psychological capital, learning empowerment, and engagement in college students in Korea (You, 2016).

In relation to pedagogical partnership, research has explored how self-determination theory can explain the motivational dynamics related to the satisfaction of “the three basic psychological needs”—“autonomy, competence and relatedness”—involved in student-faculty partnerships (Kaur & Mohammad, 2019, p. 1). Partnership supports autonomy and competence through positioning students as those with motivation and capacity to act and through striving to provide an environment that supports both motivation and action, since some institutional environments as well as systemic inequities can restrict or prevent action. Partnership supports relatedness—“connectedness, interpersonal bonding and a sense of belonging among individuals” (Kaur & Mohammad, 2019, p. 2)—through foregrounding respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in analyses and support of teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP: PROGRAMS, PRACTICES, POSSIBILITIES, AND PERILS

As a “uniquely proactive and reciprocal type” of engagement (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 151) that strives for a bidirectional flow of teaching and learning in the classroom (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve, Cheon, & Jang, 2020; Thomas & Reynolds, under review), agentic engagement is particularly congruent with pedagogical partnership, which is enacted through “an ethic of reciprocity”

(Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a, p. 181). Partnership programs encourage agency and responsibility in student partners by creating structures and practices that position students as legitimate interlocutors about and co-creators of pedagogical practice. Our two programs provide guidelines to student and faculty partners (see Cook-Sather, Bhati, & Ntem, 2019, for a sample of the guidelines), but each student-faculty pair develops their own approach.

Since 2007, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, situated in the Mid-Atlantic region of United States on the land of the Lenape, 5 miles outside Philadelphia, have sponsored a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program under Alison Cook-Sather’s leadership. Created to support faculty in developing more inclusive and equitable practices (Cook-Sather, 2018b; Cook-Sather, 2019), the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program has supported more than 280 faculty and 200 students in over 400 pedagogical partnerships. It has also supported student partners in taking on leadership roles in the summer and fall of 2020 in developing trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches and in the spring of 2021 exploring equitable approaches to assessment. Students earn hourly pay for their work, including visiting the faculty partners’ classrooms weekly, taking detailed observation notes, meeting weekly with their faculty or staff partners, and meeting weekly with other student partners and Cook-Sather in her role as SaLT program director.

The Student-Faculty Partnership Program (SFPP) at Florida Gulf Coast University, in the southern region of United States on the land of the Calusa, began in 2018 and is modeled on Bryn Mawr’s SaLT program. It was created under Bill Reynolds’ leadership in collaboration with faculty at FGCU’s Lucas Center for Faculty Development as a means of integrating faculty professional development with a new student success initiative that started at the university around the same time. In preparing the SFPP pilot, facilitators found research by Cook-Sather and others (Cohen et al., 2013; Cook-Sather, 2014) to provide persuasive evidence that participation in partnership work favorably impacts student agency and sense of belonging, and this effect may be even more pronounced in students from underrepresented groups (Cook-Sather, 2015). For these reasons, SFPP facilitators have been deliberate about collaborating with staff in Student Affairs offices (such as Multicultural and Leadership Development) and TRIO (a federal outreach and student services program), which provide support for first-generation and other underrepresented students. In weekly cohort meetings, student partners are encouraged to reflect not only on how their partnership work is enhancing teaching and learning but also on the ways in which they are growing as both learners and advocates for effective teaching and learning.

Among the possibilities of such partnership work are deepening engagement and enhancing learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Kaur & Mohammad, 2019; Matthews, Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017). Furthermore, partnership work is often either explicitly or implicitly equity work (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem, 2019; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, Marquis, et al., 2019; de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, et al., 2021). Many students who participate in partnership programs are committed to creating more equitable and inclusive classrooms, institutions, and wider societal practices. Their participation empowers them to find ways to contribute

tangibly to greater equity and provides avenues for acting toward that goal.

There are also perils to partnership work. Faculty concerns regarding having ‘observers’ can evoke “the anxious expectancy of classroom observation as a (real or perceived) form of benevolent surveillance” (Reckson, 2014, p. 1). Students have reported feeling vulnerable to their faculty partners, frustrated with non-partnership frames and practices, and hyper-responsible as a result of increased awareness and capacity. Additional challenges include managing everyone’s complex schedules and lives, differentiating teaching assistants and student partners, considering diversity of identities and roles, and acknowledging and managing the emotional labor involved in partnership (see Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem, 2019).

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND EQUITY

In asserting the potential of agentic agency to foster empowerment and equity, we embrace a notion of empowerment not as the conferring of power but rather as “the exercise of power in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others exercise power” (Gore, 1992, p. 59). In our case, that attempt focuses on positioning students as educational developers (Felten et al., 2019) and supporting students in making decisions that affect their academic lives (Mawani & Mukadam, 2020). This attempt can achieve the hoped-for effects that student partners describe, such as feeling “like I could create change or make an impact because I was working as a partner alongside those that are typically viewed as having the power [faculty]” (Student partner, quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). It also has “unforeseeable and contradictory effects” (Gore, 1992, p. 60), noted below.

Equity for students means assuring that all students are provided what they need to succeed and to thrive, not that all students are provided the same thing. Partnership work for equity is in keeping with calls for “reciprocal engagement” of students and educators (McNair et al., 2020), and pedagogical partnerships “create the space necessary to address with students how issues of equity and inclusion affect their classrooms and fields” (Perez, 2016, p. 4). Because pedagogical partnership work has the potential to redress epistemic, affective, and ontological harms perpetuated by higher education, it has unique potential to contribute to equity and justice for students (de Bie et al., 2021).

A commitment to fostering empowerment and equity can be interpreted by some colleagues, institutional leaders, and students in our U.S.-based educational contexts as unproductively disruptive of hierarchical power arrangements and responsibilities. Traditional-age college students in the U.S. commonly experience elementary and secondary educations that are highly transactional, ones in which decision-making and the establishment of classroom norms reside solely in the purview of teachers and administrators. When these students matriculate, their internalized expectations around classroom power dynamics are often maintained. Disrupting this dynamic can be destabilizing to students and educators alike. The weekly meetings Cook-Sather and Reynolds hold with student partner cohorts provide support, guidance, and reassurance regarding the complex and sometimes challenging work of partnership that positions student partners at the intersections of these commitments and makes space as well for student partners’ own empowerment and equity goals. Beyond the U.S., there are additional challenges to this balance; see the

section later in this article called “Developing agentic engagement for empowerment and equity across contexts.”

METHOD

Allard and Marcovici wrote autoethnographic accounts to capture their lived experiences and to illuminate the workings of broader cultural realities through self-reflexive insight (cf. Griffin 2008; Anzaldúa 2015). These student autoethnographic accounts, or self studies, became the basis for further reflection and praxis, thereby building a recurring cycle of reflection and revision.

Allard’s and Marcovici’s self studies focused on their experiences of: (1) joining pedagogical partnership programs as student partners and, in and through partnership work, developing confidence, capacity, and commitment in relation to their own and others’ learning; (2) carrying this increased confidence, capacity, and commitment into their own classes and enacting agentic engagement as learners; and (3) extending the agentic engagement developed in both into contexts beyond formal partnerships and courses. Their accounts were so inspiring that we decided to devote an issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* to their reflections as well as to invite student partners at other institutions to offer their reflections (Cook-Sather & Reynolds, 2021).

Striving to balance sharing insights from their autoethnographic accounts with keeping the confidence of those with whom they worked, Allard’s and Marcovici’s reflective essays—and our analysis in this discussion—focus on key moments and related insights rather than particulars of Allard’s and Marcovici’s interactions.

Analyzing two undergraduate student partners’ experiences of agentic engagement

Allard’s and Marcovici’s autoethnographic accounts of mutually reinforcing experiences of agentic engagement both affirm findings from existing research and open new possibilities for understanding and developing agentic engagement. We draw on points Allard and Marcovici make in their reflective essays regarding developing agentic engagement within their partnerships, in the courses in which they were enrolled, and beyond their partnerships.

Developing agentic engagement in and through partnership

Both Allard and Marcovici describe feeling uncertain early on in their partnership work—“fumbling around in the dark” and as “a leap of faith,” as Allard (2021) puts it. Similarly, Marcovici (2021) was “surprised and nervous by how unscripted the work was,” and she initially distrusted her observations. These are some of many emotional dimensions of partnership (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019; Felten, 2017) that most student partners experience and that require recognition and support. Within the supportive and affirming structures of the partnership programs, both Allard and Marcovici developed the capacity to contribute constructively to their own “learning, developing, and performing” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 151) in their roles as student partners. The support and affirmation they experienced were not prescriptions, however; they allowed Allard and Marcovici to engage in what Allard (2021) characterizes as “formative growth that evolved as I learned to trust myself” and what Marcovici (2021) describes as developing “confidence in my abilities to contribute to the partnership and

the perspective to recognize how crucial reflecting on and delving into setbacks was to progress.”

What Allard (2021) calls “the natural progression of the relationships” that she formed within partnerships enhanced her agency to grow the more she was engaged in partnership. Marcovici (2021) also notes a progression in how she understood her agency: “I was able to reframe success in my mind to be the pursuit of and effort in creating change rather than change itself.” Both student partners developed more comfort with the discomfort of learning required and catalyzed by their roles and more confidence in their agency within those processes. Similarly, both recognized the opportunities for engagement in partnership and took those up, replacing uncertainty regarding their capacity and tentative dynamics with their faculty partners with a sense that they could be constructive collaborators with faculty in supporting learning.

The weekly student partner meetings are essential spaces for student partners to develop language, confidence, and capacity to engage in this partnership work (Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019). These meetings allow students to share frustrations with their work in partnerships and also collectively discuss how to navigate situations in which faculty or administrators are resistant to student agency. Student partners receive support from each other as well as Reynolds’ and Cook-Sather’s guidance on how to approach complex situations, reassurance that their work is valuable regardless of tangible progress, and perspective to help reframe what feels like failure as an educative part of the process.

The agentic engagement student partners experience in their work with their faculty partners and the weekly student partner meetings positions them to support those faculty in extending opportunities for agentic engagement to students enrolled in the courses that are the focus of the pedagogical partnership work. The active role student partners take in gathering enrolled student feedback is a powerful example. This can be a formal process, such as Allard (2021) describes, through which she and her faculty partner developed a survey. The survey included questions such as: “What changes could your professor make that would help you learn better?” and “Is there anything in this class that disrupts your ability to succeed?” (Allard, 2021). As a part of the process of gathering feedback in this formal way, Allard prompted students to share their thoughts with her through an open conversation without the professor present (see also Cook-Sather, 2009). Gathering feedback can also be less formal, such as inviting enrolled students to talk about their classroom experiences in informal meetings, as Marcovici (2021) describes.

This creation of a space for student voice and agency can, as Allard (2021) notes, “change the traditional narrative” through which students have little voice or agency in their learning. It also disrupts the “you said, I did” feedback model reinforced by many traditional teaching evaluation approaches (Woolmer, personal communication, 15 March 2021), and it supports enactment of an “ethic of reciprocity” (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a, p. 181). Faculty who take up this approach point to ways in which it fosters enrolled students’ agentic engagement and a sense of collective ownership of the course: “I definitely feel like there is more of a sense that we all own the class a little more” (faculty partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2009, p. 237). Student partners concur: “Students are working with faculty to build courses, to build their learning experience” (student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, 2009, p. 237).

Formal partnership between students and faculty both foster agentic engagement in student partners and inspire partnership practices in those faculty members’ classrooms (Cook-Sather, Hong, Moss, et al., 2021; Thomas & Reynolds, under review) informed by “reciprocal causation” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 153). Pedagogical partnerships built on respect, trust, and reciprocity in turn inspire those features in faculty members’ classroom practices.

Developing agentic engagement in their own courses

When students who have worked in pedagogical partnership practice agentic engagement in the courses in which they are enrolled, they try to “work collaboratively with the teacher to foster a more motivationally supportive learning environment and teacher-student relationship, one that becomes more able to create need-satisfying, interest-relevant, and personally-valued learning experiences for the student” as individuals (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 152). Thomas and Reynolds (under review) note that controlling or indifferent pedagogies create a need-frustrating (as opposed to a need-satisfying) environment (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016) and lead to need dissatisfaction and student disengagement (Reeve, Cheon, & Yu, 2020). This experience is intensified for students who have worked in pedagogical partnership and thus know what their level of agentic engagement could be. At the same time, their increased sense of agentic engagement developed through partnership equips students to counter these experiences and feelings. As Marcovici (2021) explains, “Instead of continuing to struggle through the material on my own” in one class she found confusing and unengaging, she “went to office hours and asked for certain practices that I thought might improve my own learning, something I would previously not have thought to do.” Similarly, when Allard (2021) realized, in her words, “My growth required presence, adaptability, and a willingness to be uncomfortable,” she advocated “for myself and others as I began to navigate my education while considering the relational dynamics of our lives.” For example, Allard (2021) explains:

One of the most valuable things I did when working with my partners was to question why things were being done and wonder if they could be done differently. I started to look for opportunities outside my formal partnerships to ask these questions and make room for myself to voice my ideas. I noticed the professors in my classes who engaged with students in this manner, and I was able to find a research mentor who fostered my confidence, learning, and abilities in a new arena. By developing relationships with faculty, I became comfortable creating deeper connections with my professors and, in them, gained valuable resources and mentors along the way.

Agentic engagement can foster “an ongoing series of dialectical transactions between student and teacher” (Reeve, 2013, p. 580). However, in contrast to some of the literature on agentic engagement that suggests it is contingent on “how responsive the teacher (or learning environment more generally) is to the student’s initiative” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 153), Allard and Marcovici did not need or wait for teachers to extend invitations. Rather, they took their own initiative catalyzed by the motivation, capacity, and relatedness they felt. Because of their partnership work, they were cognizant of what teaching requires, and they developed capacities to communicate about learning experiences

and insights with their own teachers. Allard and Marcovici intentionally drew on that awareness and their capacity in the courses in which they were enrolled and relationships with the professors who taught those courses. Specifically, they drew on their awareness of how much thoughtful and intentional work goes into teaching and the skills they developed in structuring conversations and using language so as to encourage dialogue rather than prompt defensiveness. Marcovici (2021) captures this form of developing agentic engagement:

One of the primary ways my experience impacted my academics was in prompting me to reaffirm my purpose in my own classes. Through my partnership and in conversations with other student partners in our weekly meetings, I was able to refocus on how fundamental student learning and experiences are to what college is for. While professors play a large role in creating classroom environments that maximize student learning, both professors and students have the responsibility to enact inclusive learning. For me, this meant acknowledging that I had to prioritize my own learning in my own classes and to the best of my ability, “partner” with all of my professors to help produce it.

Developing agentic engagement beyond partnership and courses

While a student might enact agentic engagement in a classroom through taking action before and during a learning experience “by making suggestions, offering input, and expressing preferences,” the hope is that the teacher “will take his or her suggestions to heart to then bend (i.e., adjust, calibrate) the lesson in a direction that becomes more relevant to the student’s interests and goals” (Reeve & Shin, 2020, p. 152). When student partners extend their agentic engagement beyond their own classroom learning, they seek to influence the ways in which teachers and other educational leaders conceptualize and enact their approaches as those affect a wider group. As Allard (2021) notes, she “learned to lean into my wisdom as well as communicate freely with others to gain wise counsel,” approaches that she “readily extended into other areas of my life.” Likewise, in conversation with faculty about responding to concerns raised by Black, Indigenous, Students of Color striking against long-perpetuated institutional inequities, Marcovici (2021) “recognized my responsibility to speak up for myself and other students because I knew that we could not create better learning without listening to and voicing concerns.”

When students who have worked in pedagogical partnerships practice agentic engagement in contexts and relationships beyond their formal student-faculty partnerships and the courses in which they are enrolled as students, they work collaboratively to foster environments and relationships that create need-satisfying, interest-relevant, and personally-valued learning experiences for a diversity of students. When they “see institutionally,” they learn that “the university is both an idea and institution worth learning about, worth participating in, and worth caring for as part of a collective project to re-value higher education” (Peseta & Bell, 2020, p. 109).

In reference to a context beyond the university, Allard (2021) reflects on how, as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), she works in local hospitals and, with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, she became a frontline healthcare worker. “The mental and emotional toll” that this work took on Allard and other dedicated healthcare professionals inspired Allard (2021) “to advocate

for our experience” through participating “in town hall meetings with hospital leadership to help obtain adequate protective equipment, safer working conditions, fair compensation, and recognition for the work we were all doing to support the community.”

Marcovici (2021) also experienced agentic engagement beyond the classroom. As she explains, the “mutually reinforcing forms of agency” she experienced “led me to feel greater agency in working toward a more equitable Haverford” in the particular context of a student-led strike in the Fall-2020 semester “that was largely born out of a frustration with the continued discrimination and racism faced by Black, Indigenous, Students of Color (BISOC).” Marcovici (2021) elaborates: “This call for and pursuit of equity coincided well with the work we were doing in SaLT partnerships. Consequently, that continued work in partnership, along with the positive reception to my suggestions in my own classes, gave me the confidence and skills to share a student’s perspective on the strike with professors.”

Developing agentic engagement for empowerment and equity across contexts

Beyond formal partnerships and beyond the classroom, and once students have developed the confidence and capacity to embrace agentic engagement, success can be defined more broadly—not just as an individual achievement but as confidence, agency, and advocacy that become empowering and contribute to equity work, even if the change students seek is not always immediately realized. Both Allard and Marcovici experienced empowerment through their partnership work that inspired them to (further) strive for equity. Allard’s (2021) “questioning the ethics’ behind the university’s decisions on the students’ behalf” to re-open the university under pandemic conditions demonstrates the link between agency and activism. Allard (2021) describes her experience:

My partnerships have taught me to work collaboratively towards the goal of student-learning and success. The dynamics of my partnerships provided the mold for how I wanted to work with FGCU to ensure that students were safe and provided an equitable learning experience. I took the time to send out emails voicing my concerns, resulting in a video conference with university leadership. In these communications, I stressed the need for a student and community-focused approach to return to in-person classes. I argued that the university would need to be cautious in their decisions and readily offer students other modalities to receive their education. Ultimately, this meeting’s outcome was disappointing, but I learned from the encounter and grew more self-assured advocating for and through my experience.

Similarly, Marcovici (2021) reflects on how, during the student-led strikes, “sometimes, professors seemed to want me to affirm that their practices were inclusive.” She notes that: “Without all the work I had done in partnership, I might have decided that pushing back against this desire was not worth the conflict it might generate.” Because of the agentic engagement she experienced through partnership, Marcovici (2021) “could communicate honestly” regarding areas in which she felt professors created inclusive classrooms as well as areas for improvement.

These choices, catalyzed by Allard’s and Marcovici’s experiences of agentic engagement, are consistent with those made by other student partners. For instance, student partner Ana Colón García (2017) describes how she chose to “use my experience as a student with certain needs and learning styles to advocate

for others who might be in similar positions” and “[advocate] for more exercises like the ones that empowered me to feel confident in my sense of place in the classroom.” In relation to her experiences in courses in which she was enrolled, another student partner explains: “I started to think of myself more as an advocate within classroom spaces for my peers. I began to feel I had a lot more agency and could be an agent of change within my classroom spaces” (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2018a, p. 929). And finally, regarding her experience beyond formal partnership or in classrooms, another student partner asserts:

Being a Student Consultant gave me voice as a person of color when I was not in the role of student consultant...by reinforcing that not only did my perspective, assessment skills and commitment to make spaces safer for underrepresented groups deeply matter—they could drive important transformation in classrooms and in the student-teacher relationship. (Quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, pp. 277-278)

Such empowerment and equity work is the explicit goal of pedagogical partnership work not only in the U.S. (e.g., Smith College—see Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019) but also in the bi-cultural country of Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020), in Canada (Chukwu & Jones, 2020), and as part of the institutional commitment to equity and justice for the Jewish and Bedouin populations in the Be’er Sheva, Israel (Narkiss & Naaman, 2020). Student partners in these contexts articulate how partnership positions them to have agency and pursue equity. For instance, a student partner in a pedagogical partnership program at McMaster University in Canada explains:

As a Black woman in academia, I have had many conversations about thriving in spaces like the academy that are not necessarily invested in my success and have been deeply interested in how—through course creation, citational practice, and curriculum design—all educators can engage in radical pedagogy that centers students from minoritized groups whose specific experiences and lives are rarely acknowledged....The partnership was a transformational point for me in transitioning from seeing myself as a student whose role is to absorb knowledge from teachers/professors who hold all the knowledge, to envisioning myself as knowledge holder and producer. (Chukwu in Chukwu & Jones, 2020, p. 14, p. 18)

This partnership work for empowerment and equity is equally powerful across disciplines as well as across contexts. For instance, a student partner working with a faculty member in biology reflects on how such partnership work “has had a major impact on my thinking about my own experiences as a student, my coursework as an education major, my pedagogical goals as a future educator, and my positionality as a white woman in higher education” (Weiler in Weiler & Williamson, 2020, p. 7). This student partner specifies how she will act on the empowerment she has experienced: “I plan on continuing this process of critical reflection, learning, and growth as I continue gathering the tools I will need to be an anti-racist educator and adaptable, thoughtful, and empowering member of the academic community” (Weiler in Weiler & Williamson, 2020, p. 7).

While an extended analysis of the implications of this work for classroom instruction, faculty professional development, and student advising and retention is beyond the scope of this arti-

cle, grounded as it is in Allard’s and Marcovici’s autoethnographic accounts, we note that these are rich areas for further research. One productive approach might be to reread the significant body of literature on how pedagogical partnership can inform classroom instruction and faculty professional development within the frame that this expanded notion of agentic engagement offers. This would parallel the approach Cates and colleagues (2018) take to reframing Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten’s (2014) oft-cited partnership “themes of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in the more explicitly feminist terms of agency, accountability, and affinity” (p. 36). It would also parallel the approach that de Bie and colleagues (2021) take to rereading pedagogical partnership literature within a conceptual framework that suggests partnership has the potential to redress epistemic, affective, and ontological harms perpetuated by higher education. Similarly, a resituating of analyses of belonging as a critical component in student advising and retention (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Hunter et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; van Gijn-Grosvenor et al., 2020; van Herpen et al., 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007) in relation to agentic engagement could yield new insights in these arenas of theory and practice.

CONCLUSION

Existing literature on pedagogical partnership has highlighted agency as an outcome of partnership work. For instance, Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) argue that partnership represents a “sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement” because it “foregrounds qualities that put reciprocal learning at the heart of the relationship—such as trust, risk, difference, empowerment, inter-dependence and agency” (p. 17). Similarly, Barnes et al. (2010) have argued that students who engaged in national partnership projects experienced increased agency in shaping their learning as well as changes in the power relationships between themselves and faculty. Affirming these research findings, one student partner in the SaLT program reflected: “Being a student consultant gives me an agency in the classroom that never ceases to surprise me. In my interactions with professors, I have a newfound ability to discuss openly where I’m struggling and what I think I need” (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 40; see also Kaur & Mohammad, 2019). And as Cates, Madigan, and Reitenauer (2018) have noted, “agency is both an integral value and superlative result of collaborative learning that tasks each participant with ‘responsibility arising out of the relationships’ they share as members of a larger intentional learning community (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 14)” (p. 35).

Carrying this sense of agency beyond formal partnership work and classroom engagement can be risky, as we have noted. As one SaLT student consultant explained, “[I]t can be difficult to have a realm (this program) where you feel incredibly empowered and your voice is valued, and [to have other realms] where it is not.” This experience embodies the contrast between spaces that support agentic engagement and spaces that do not. As this student partner continued, it can be frustrating “when you feel as though in certain arenas your voice is valued and invited, and in others you may just have to sit back and grit your teeth some because your feedback is not invited or may be clearly unwelcome” (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011, p. 48). Thus, while the benefits of pedagogical partnership work for empowerment and equity are certainly worth pursuing, partnership program directors need to consider the intersection of institutional culture, norms and prac-

tices among faculty, and how these inform efforts to support the still-relatively-counter-cultural nature of pedagogical partnership work (see Matthews, 2019, for a discussion of resistance to partnership work). In particular, program directors need to consider how developing agentic engagement can empower students on the one hand but also place them in difficult situations on the other—when they find themselves facing complex power dynamics and possible repercussions for seeming, to some people, to have too much agency.

Our discussion of agentic engagement extends ways of thinking about agency in partnership and in students' lives. The clarity with which the relationship between partnership and agentic engagement is revealed by these stories bears further investigation and reflects how our programs have conceived of partnership. How can one deepen classroom-based agentic engagement and extend agentic engagement beyond the classroom in ways that pursue equity and justice while simultaneously managing the tensions and frustrations noted above? This is an area for further research that we hope to see taken up by others interested in the intersection of agentic engagement and pedagogical partnership. For those committed to fostering empowerment and equity at the intersection of agentic engagement and pedagogical partnership, it is important to consider the ways in which partnership participants and practices can redress the epistemic, affective, and ontological harms underrepresented students experience in higher education rather than reinscribe and exacerbate inequities (de Bie et al., 2021)—efforts that require careful consideration of context, history, and current participants' commitments.

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