



## A Review of The Concept of Agency: An Eye-Opening Term Involved in Educational Research

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### ABSTRACT

The current review article aims to inform and provide insights with regard to the term *agency* and its implications in national and international research studies in the field of education. By doing so, a systematic analysis was carried out in order to scrutinize articles from recent years that addressed and inquired about agency. As a result, it was possible to attain a holistic view of what this term implies in some educational settings, as well as, its significance when it is linked to different approaches and where diverse social agents are involved.

**Key words:** *agency; education; social change.*

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## **Una Revisión del Concepto de Agencia: un Término Revelador Involucrado en la Investigación Educative**

### **RESUMEN**

El presente artículo de revisión tiene como objetivo informar y proporcionar conocimientos sobre el término agencia y sus implicaciones en los estudios de investigación nacionales e internacionales en el campo de la educación. Para ello, se realizó un análisis sistemático con el fin de escudriñar artículos de los últimos años que abordaron e indagaron sobre la agencia. Como resultado, fue posible obtener una visión holística de lo que implica este término en algunos ámbitos educativos, así como de su significado cuando se vincula a diferentes enfoques y donde intervienen diversos agentes sociales.

***Palabras clave:*** *agencia; educación; cambio social.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The process of going through a master degree required to develop certain academic skills and knowing different concepts and terminologies. With so many aspects to consider in their professional lives, some educators find it complex to contextualize terms and approaches when elaborating or understanding academic papers. As stated above, as an educator I have been dealing with many issues during my own academic development, such as discovering new definitions and dealing with different academic realms. By doing so, I found the term *agency* while I was reading an academic article; this word was new for me, but not in the context of research. Even though the term *agency* is mentioned in several research articles, it can still be examined under different perspectives. In this sense, this review article has the intention to explore and unveil the word *agency* and its usage in different research studies, as well as to provide a better and clearer view of its implications in the field of education.

Therefore, this review article is divided into three different sections. Section one corresponds to a background of the term *agency*; it attempts to explore its definitions, and it implies an analysis and a review of some theories around the term itself. Section two deals with the implications of the word *agency* and the way in which it is addressed in some national research articles. Section three analyzes and describes the perspective and relationship to the concept of agency offered by different international researches. Likewise, a final reflection regarding the term *agency* from the author's own experience is presented; this, in order to better understand and raise awareness of this term among educators so that they become interested in it. Finally, a conclusion is included, which shows how the term *agency* would be better understood if there were more research and analysis on this type of context.

### **Section one: background of the term *agency* an attempt to explore its definitions**

Reading different research papers requires a critical sense and a process of analytical reflection, especially when academic papers bring new terms and concepts to the readers. In relation to this idea, the term *agency* is mentioned in different academic papers, and it deserves to be analyzed due to its

different perspectives provided by researchers. For instance, the word *agency* can be found in many research articles. A good example are Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020) and Gallagher (2019) who address this concept for their research purposes and lead readers and researchers to an analysis of the word itself.

Thence, the context of agency lets us consider different theories about it and explore its uncertainty in terms of various definitions. In this regard, it is valid to share Martin and Clarke's (2013) perspectives, since they affirmed that the term *agency* lacks explicit operationalization all over the varied approaches, such as critical ethnography, discourse analysis, and symbolic interactionism. Thus, there has been a lack of coherence in its research usage. In other words, the concept of agency has been assumed as a factual term, and it has not been analyzed according to its characteristics and uses. Consequently, there is a variety of implications and meanings when it is cited in studies or research papers.

Based on what has already been argued, it is appropriate to declare that giving a static concept to the term "agency" appears to be challenging; due to its different underpinning relations with other domains. For instance, Emirbayer & Mische (1998) have highlighted that "the concept of 'agency' has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought" (p. 962). This, despite –or, perhaps, because of– the long list of terms with which it has been associated. That is to say, agency implies vagueness when looking for its definition, since the term has been linked to other words as a way to create different theorizations to accomplish research goals. Thus, agency becomes the source of everything, but it creates confusion when it is contextualized independently. For that reason, it is necessary to carry out larger analyses in different realms that can be useful to have a global vision of what *agency* is and to offer a better synthesis of it. Hanmer & Klugman (2015).

To deal with those aspects, it is necessary to provide a definition of the concept of agency itself, by means of various author's perspectives on the topic. One great example of this is the definition of *agency* stated by Basu (2008) declared, "I describe agency as purposefully considering and enacting both small-and large-scale change in personal and community domains, based on one's beliefs and

goals” (p. 891). In this sense, agency is seen as an instrument of change in which agents of a society can modify different dimensions and settings of their surroundings and create new domains. Hence, agency is a way of behaving both personally and collectively, in which individuals share different concerns and common goals and beliefs. Along similar lines, Stenalt (2021) states that “Agency is understood as something that actors always have; however, the possibility of fulfilling personal goals is conditional on external structures” (p. 54). That is, a personal search for achieving goals despite the social circumstances a person may face. In other words, *agency* is implicit in any individual, however, only when a real stimulus occurs it becomes possible to evidence it.

Furthermore, Barton and Tan (2010) show that “agency is at once the possibility of imagining and asserting a new self in a figured world at the same time as it is about one's identity to imagine a new and different world” (p. 192). Consequently, agency is taken as the actions of individuals with the aim of finding new versions of themselves as well as new ways of acting in their social contexts. That is why, people become more aware of their self-identities and start to look for a possibility of improving and creating a better and different world within their own social setting. Take, for example, Hanmer & Klugman (2015) who attempts to connect *agency* and *empowerment* declaring that “Agency and empowerment is central to the gender equality agenda” (p.257). In their statements it is possible to perceive the implications of empowerment to enact *agency* and the chasing for new possibilities and social transformations, as in their article, the empowerment of women in developing countries.

In regards to the educational field, Sharma (2007) defined *agency* as a student's capacity to change and to establish patterns of classroom communications; that is, abilities that students have or develop in order to find ways of changing their communication in different circumstances. The above exemplification serves as an example of positive change in the educational field since students can see themselves as agents of social transformation who can easily adapt to change. Besides, educators who seek ways of engaging students in social awareness; should consider new pedagogical practices

to promote agency to a local level. To do so, educators can investigate different paths to achieve such as goals.

In the same fashion, Jääskelä et al (2012) mentioned “we construe student agency as empowerment which is afforded via access to and employment of student-experienced resources”. (P.3). As it can be seen, educators can adopt their own approach to unveil *agency* in the area of education. Hence, agency can be linked to many fields; for example, in terms of “student agency” educators can propose scenarios in which students are intrinsically guided to confront actions in which agency can be enacted. In light of that, it is evident that agency can represent a natural intention of taking action in which people reflect about certain issues within their surroundings. No doubt there are more concepts and even approaches related to the term *agency* that look for the theorization of new definitions and interplays between various terms.

What is more, Duff (2012) stated that agency is people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and pursue their goals as individuals, leading to personal or social transformation. Once again, the concept of agency appears as an element inside individuals that, properly stimulated, leads people to take action and make decisions about the transformation of different circumstances and other individuals. It implies, in terms of education, a possibility to make students aware and critical towards different domains and to promote decision making so that students are able to change their own realities.

Nonetheless, real agency and social change may depend on the procedure and intention proposed by researchers. So far, we have covered some authors' definition of the term *agency*; however, I am aware that it is just a fragment of its theoretical views. Although not all of the definitions follow the same approach, those can help academic researchers to see the various perspectives about term *agency* and its implication in the educational and academic field.

## **Section two: implications of the term *agency* and the way it is addressed in some national research articles**

It is important to take a look at the usage of the word *agency* in different national research papers, and how it is conducted among other terms and approaches. At this point, it is worth mentioning that a few national articles have tackled agency in their research articles in 2021 and 2022. Therefore, describing agency in theoretical terms becomes the first step to understand its complexity and thus to have a holistic picture of its usage in academic studies. That is, in the case of national research articles; it can be noticed that the notion of *agency* is seen as a state of being, reflecting about being, and taking action to improve different aspects of the world.

To illustrate, a research article that covers a similar line is the one written by Paredes et al. (2021), whose academic paper explores the concept of agency from the perspective of authors such as Duff (2012). Indeed, in their paper, they present agency as a means of making decisions, supporting others, and providing solutions based on the taking of actions. The following transcriptions illustrate these perceptions “Throughout the exploration, agency was enacted in the classroom as a process of self-awareness and decision-making” (Paredes et al., 2021, p. 137). In other words, agency is an internal process in which students become conscious of themselves throughout their decision-making; in which they seek to make their realities better and different.

In this regard, the term *agency* works as a functional element that can be fostered in the classroom while having the right conditions. Indeed, it can be evidenced in many articles. One of them is *Developing children’s agency within a children’s rights education framework: 10 propositions*. In this paper the authors recommended several tools to tackle and develop student’s agency within schools’ curricula. In this sense, Jerome & Starkey claims that:

Once children have the right to express themselves and influence decisions that concern them, they may be said to have agency, that is a sense that they may be able to engage with the structures around them and have some control over their own lives. (Jerome & Starkey 2022, p.440).

This illustrates how *agency* interplays in the lives of individuals as they get involved in different decision-making. That is, everyday lived experiences can even lead to agency since “Agency is not binary. It is not something that is achieved or not.” (Jerome & Starkey., 2022, p.449). By this we mean, that agency is something that cannot be ignored or suppressed because it is an implicit part of every individual. Moreover, *agency* can be interwoven with different concepts and approaches that allow researchers to inquire about its nature, especially when conducting educational studies.

Similarly, Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020), in their research article, tackled the term *agency* as a way of developing through community-based pedagogies. In relation to this, agency is taken as a state of being that appears with giving conditions. Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020) affirm that “agency does not simply flourish ex nihilo, and that there are certain conditions that facilitate its appearance” (p. 110). In other words, their article suggests developing agency by means of implementing community-based pedagogies; thus, combining both approaches serve to generate the right conditions to promote the state of being and the attitude of *agency*. Moreover, community-based pedagogies allow Hernández and Gutiérrez (2020) to stimulate agency in students through the development of different projects in which their awareness took place, accompanied by the sense of taking action towards social situations. A feature that stands out here is the fact that agency can be linked with many terms and approaches, but keeping a similar perspective regarding awareness, identity, action, change, reflection, among others.

Another research relevant article was *From awareness to cultural agency: EFL Colombian student teachers travelling abroad experiences*, written by Viafara and Ariza (2015), which presents a view of agency aligned with the term *culture*. This not only shows a definition of agency, but there is also a contrast where the term becomes “cultural agency”. In this research article, the authors explored the intercultural learning of 50 participants who went to work abroad as a way of improving some learning aspects. In this study, agency is perceived as the result of participants' awareness as a result of their lived experiences and challenges when they were abroad. That is, agency is related to the



experiences individuals have to face and how those experiences can transform their own beliefs as they break and transform different paradigms of their social setting.

An example of the above dynamic is the following excerpt: “the most common quality referred to tolerance and involved other traits such as flexibility, patience, respect, open-mindedness, and understanding to avoid light of judgment of others” (Viafara and Ariza, 2015, p. 134). Consequently, cultural agency is seen as the process of being aware of one’s own culture when confronting other cultures' domains. Then, it is valid to say that, again, agency is related to the act of being aware, reflecting and taking action towards different issues or lived experiences that challenge individuals to make fast decisions of their current circumstances. In other words, this shows the purpose of agency as an inner act of both individuals and collectives who become aware and seek for social change.

In the same line of thought, Carson (2012) mentioned that agency is the ability of individuals to reflect and be aware of themselves in order to make decisions and take responsibility for their actions. It has to do with the idea of agency as a state of mind towards reflection. It implies that agency is closely related to the educational dynamic in which educators intend their students to be active and conscious agents of their own realities. In sum, the ideas portrayed in this section may be understood as possibilities to approach the term *agency* from the perspective of its usage in different national research papers, and as a starting point for those who feel interested in exploring the concept itself.

### **Section three: analysis of the perspective and relation to the concept of agency provided in different international researches**

The purpose of presenting and analyzing international research articles is to unwrap and reflect about some of the perspectives related to the term *agency*. Indeed, the concept of agency tends to be more common in international research in comparison to national research papers. In fact, in international research articles, the term seems to be a very common concept.

To begin with, in an exploratory study, Yang et al. (2020) investigated agency in a group of students of a master’s in education when facing problems to construct their research design. In this paper, agency was related to students' attitudes and abilities to transform educational challenges and conflicts

to sound decisions for the benefit of their work progress. This was very similar to Rodríguez's (2013) perspective towards agency, along with other terms such as power; individuals deal with social aspects, their own abilities and action-taking. Finally, this also provides an insight on how *agency* may interact in different ways; for instance, teacher agency, student's agency, research agency, among others.

The aforementioned insights combined definitions that involve different "agents" and terms; however, they maintain the common definition of agency in terms of reflecting towards realities, taking action, and making change. That is to say, agency has a wide range of possibilities to interplay and function with other approaches and notions. In that order, after comparing those two research articles, it is valid to say that the term *agency* is assumed and defined as a bridge that serves to complement and theorize about other terms and agents. For instance, as mentioned by Yang et al. (2020), agency by itself implies reflection and action; however, when exploring students, "agency, refers to the will and abilities of learners to act upon and transform educational activities and circumstances" (Rajala et al., 2016, p. 1). In this sense, agency is presented in the context of students as challenges that they have to confront in academic processes and how they transform those processes for the attainment of better outcomes. These instances are a sign of use of the concept of agency in some international research, and how it is assembled with different perspectives.

However, the process of agency is not exclusive to the analysis of student behavior but also allows us to see and analyze the teaching perspective and the scenarios that make educators manifest their own agency. Indeed, "agency involves a series of ostensible actions, which are expressions of the desired conduct, free of individual or contextual constraints" (Damsa et al., 2021, p.4). That is to say, actions that emerged from every individual based on their own lived experiences and a collective or individual analysis of diverse situations. Actually, it is a well-known fact that everyday educators face several challenges that force them to make accurate decisions based on what they have lived and experienced as part of the educational field. Nevertheless, "despite the fact that education is an

essential and promotive good, it is not always agency - or wellbeing enhancing” (MacKenzie & Chiang., 2022, p.7).

Finally, in Gallagher’s (2019) research article about rethinking agency for childhood studies, agency is perceived as an open and under construction concept, recognizing its main transformative potential. Instead of assuming a central position, this author seeks to analyze the distinction between children’s agency and human agency. This involves a different approach of agency, from the point of view of comparing and reflecting about agency along two different types of social agents. Nevertheless, these statements raise many implications.

In that order, the question of whether children’s agency is distinct from that of adults is unanswerable, because children’s agency is not a property of children, but an effect arising within relations between children and other beings (Gallagher, 2019). Clearly, the author's view towards those two differences is that children’s agency is something that appears when they interact with other people and the domains in their surroundings. Under such circumstances, *agency* is a term that functions by itself, but it also provides an opportunity to inquiry and research different dimensions when enacting other concepts, approaches and social agents.

### ***A reflection towards agency***

The term *agency* seems to be new for many educators when going through the academic process of researching. In my case, I have become aware of the variety of terms that can be found in different research articles and academic papers; especially when educators are new to the process of conducting research studies. As it was mentioned above, the word *agency* is one of those concepts that make people reflect about its theoretical dimension and social implications. In this sense, I explored the term *agency* based on different academic papers to attain a better understanding of its different definitions as well as its similar conceptions regards the educational setting; in order to provide a close answer to this theoretical concern.

Therefore, I can conclude, on the basis of what I found on the systematic analysis of different research papers, that agency can be linked with other concepts and approaches; moreover, agency by itself

offers the possibility to conduct research studies in several academic streams where analysis of individuals is pertinent. In view of that, in my own professional practice as an educator, I have recognized that, in different times, I have fostered my students' sense of agency. Nonetheless, at that time I did not recognize that those actions were part of the process of agency or that such actions could have been described in a single term. That is why, I hope this review article serves as a good starting point for educators who want to continue exploring and designing new academic research, where agency can be explored among its different representations and thus to create a milestone for future references.

Additionally, it is relevant to comprehend that there are different implications when agency interplays with more terms and approaches. As it was seen above, in the analysis of the concept of *agency* in different articles, there is a wide range of definitions and conceptions about the term, as well as a variety of attempts to enact agency with other realms. To do so, this paper sought to provide readers with a background of what agency is and its multiple implications in the academic field.

In synthesis, it has been described and shown throughout this review article that agency may seem like a simple word at first sight; but, in fact, it requires more inquiry and analysis to come up with a final conceptualization of it. Especially since the term “as a complex and multifaceted construct relating to such notions as volition, initiative, autonomy and motivation, agency is not easy to investigate” (Li Jiang & Jun Zhang., 2019, p.325). Also, considering that the current analysis of the term *agency* was tackled from different perspectives such as a sense of identity and self-awareness in which individuals can reflect, take actions and transform diverse situations, as portrayed in national and international research articles. It entails future researchers to keep exploring this concept and conduct studies in which agency can be enacted, evidenced and illustrated.

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