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Hi, everyone. This is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the education Table, a micro podcast where I answer your questions about inclusive education in ten minutes or less. In today's episode, we're exploring the difference between equality and equity and how learner agency fits in. I'll share a story about my journey as a baker and how it relates to understanding learner agency. So let's get started. One of my best friends, Kate, regularly blesses us with drool worthy confections. She is the ultimate expert baker. Every cupcake, cookie, and cake is perfection. Moist, crunchy, chewy, and just as it should be. I, on the other hand, am not a baker yet. My cookies are flat, my brownies are dry, and I would only make cake from a box. I know why. It is just not worth the effort for me. I rarely measure anything with precision.

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I don't invest in high quality ingredients. I just don't really like sweets that much. And early on, I decided cooking was not what got me excited. It may have to do with my family's lackluster reaction to the spaghetti pie I made in 7th grade, but I digress. As a learner, I recognize what's important to me, and when I'm committed and all in, I can set goals, create strategies, and monitor my progress to accomplish exactly what I set out to do. This is what learner agency is all about. It's important to remember that learner agency is not about being good at everything. It's about focusing on your needs, knowing strengths and weaknesses, and relying on support in areas where you're not as strong. It's about doing things the way you need to do them to reach the highest level of success.

01:49

If I wanted to be better at baking to join a cooking challenge, for example, I know I'm capable of doing it. I am self-aware enough to know I am not a natural at pairing ingredients. Recipes would definitely be my first scaffold. I also don't like having gadgets in my kitchen, which is kind of a barrier to baking. But I do recognize that investing in the right tools would definitely help me with mixing and frosting and all the decorating. I would definitely need to be more thoughtful and careful in my baking approach. No ingredient substitutions, sifting flour, even leveling dry ingredients with a knife. I know this because I've made so many mistakes with baking, and I've learned from those mistakes. So if I need to improve my skills, I have the tools to do that.

02:31

So what does the research and statistics say about how this analogy plays out? The classroom when we teach our kids, we often rely on a one-size-fits-all lesson plan. We teach for kids who are ready to learn, giving them equal treatment. But the fact is, not all kids are dealt the same set of cards. When we focus on equity, we provide kids with the supports they need to be successful. By removing barriers. Some kids will get more support and others will get less, but this is critical to ensure that everyone has what they need. Learner agency goes a step further to allow kids to have a say and the support and tools they need and allows them to focus on their needs and preferences as individuals.

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It is not just about changing the level of support, it's about changing the kind of support as well. Although equity is about providing everyone with what they need, it is an incredibly tall order for a teacher to figure out what every kid needs, as context is constantly changing. This is why it is so critical to support students in learning more about themselves as learners so they can be more independent and thoughtful about their learning. Learner agency is the missing piece that can bridge this gap. Educators can offer students a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate their knowledge, but we have to give students the time and the space to self assess, to set personal goals, to explore those different options, and then to figure out what actually works best for them.

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And this reflection allows students to make informed choices about the types of tools and strategies that are going to help them succeed. So if we want learners to build agency, we have to give them lots of opportunities to reflect and make decisions and learn from those decisions. So how are we going to do that? Let's dive into some strategies to foster learner agency. Consider the following strategies. First, facilitate self assessment and goal setting. Every time you have a lesson, encourage students to reflect on what they're doing and why they're doing it and what their personal goals are in alignment to those objectives. You can use tools like reflection journals or digital portfolios to help students track their progress, identify what they're great at, and identify areas of growth.

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So really think about fostering self assessment through an ongoing learning journal, whether it's in hard copy or digital. The next strategy is to provide choice and voice. Of course, we can offer students options and how they engage with material and demonstrate their learning, but this doesn't necessarily mean we're going to get the options right. Of course, we can give choices for projects, topics or presentation formats, or even assessment types, but giving students a voice to come up with some options really empowers them to take ownership of their learning. So don't feel like you need to do all of the planning. Instead, say, here's the goal, here's the non negotiable success criteria. How are you going to learn this? How are you going to share what you know or what you can do? The next strategy is to build in more opportunities for reflection.

05:37

We have to make sure that students have time to reflect on their experiences, to figure out if their choices serve their learning, or to think about if they need to do something differently. So encourage students to experiment with lots of different approaches and then learn from them. Ask students to share what was the goal, what they chose, and then ask them to think about did they reach the goal? Did they make progress? If so, why? And help them consider that context was successful. And if they did not make progress, or if they didn't choose something that worked for their learning, that's also a great opportunity because now you know that in this context there's something that might work better.

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So ultimately, fostering learner agency empowers students to take control of their learning journey and helps them to figure out exactly what they need, which is very aligned with our work on creating equitable and inclusive classrooms by understanding strengths and needs and setting their own goals and selecting the tools and strategies that work for them. And ultimately reflecting on those decisions helps students become more motivated and more engaged. And this also ultimately will lead to more balance for educators. Thank goodness for that. So our role is to provide the framework and support for this process, but it is so critical that we shift the reflection and the decision making to our learners to help them develop the skills they need to navigate their education. Thank you so much for joining me at the education table.

07:08

Be sure to check out the show notes for more resources on equality, equity, and learner agency. Until next time. Onward.