

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

LEARNER AGENCY

What is Learner Agency
and how can schools
develop it?



BY JAMES ANDERSON



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Now in plain English.

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INTRODUCTION

Learner Agency is a term educators are hearing more and more about. It appears in educational policy documents around the world, and school leaders are being told the importance of creating environments that promote “Learner Agency”.

If schools are to empower this idea, it is essential that we are able to answer the following questions:

- What does Learner Agency really mean?
- Why should school leaders care about it?
- How do we support teachers to increase agency in learners?
- What tools do we use to guide and measure the impact of our work?

Learner Agency relates to a student’s ability to navigate their way through life and positively impact their circumstances. It’s about ensuring they are the master, not the victim, of their circumstances, and it is about students being powerful, not powerless, in the face of adversity.

“ When schools understand and harness the idea of Learner Agency, it provides a vehicle for meeting some of our biggest educational goals: preparing students to take *effective action* in an uncertain future.

Unfortunately, despite the increasing use of the term “Learner Agency”, policymakers have only vaguely defined it. Not having a clear definition has led to many well-intended, but ultimately shallow and ineffective interpretations. As I’ll explain, one of the most common interpretations relates to “student voice and student choice”, which frequently *simulates* Learner Agency; but does not *build* it.

It is important for educators to understand that Learner Agency is not something we can *give* to students. It is a capability that needs to be developed by, and within, the learner. Ultimately, learners must carry and continually build their agency throughout their life, and this highlights our second problem: that despite the various guides produced in some jurisdictions, there is a broad lack of teacher understanding of what Learner Agency is and how to effectively implement it in the classroom.



The definition I describe below provides a clear picture of what Learner Agency is *and* a practical pathway for schools to develop Learner Agency. This definition demands that schools attend to three interrelated and equally important aspects of Learner Agency.

If, as school leaders, we are to address the development of Learner Agency effectively, then we must address these three elements:

1. The **ENVIRONMENT** to act.
2. The **WILL** to act.
3. The **POWER** to act.



DEFINING LEARNER AGENCY

The study of “agency” has a long history that dates back to the 17th century. Social sciences define agency as *the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live*.¹ This definition is concerned with a deeper philosophical question related to the human capacity to exercise free will, and the degree to which we have the ability to choose our own path in life.

In education, we are witnessing a renewed interest in the idea of agency. We recognise that the world of the 21st and 22nd centuries will be characterised by volatility, uncertainty, change and ambiguity (VUCA). By developing Learner Agency, educational leaders ensure students have the capacity to shape and control this uncertain future rather than become victims of their circumstances.

“ To this end, educational institutions have adopted a variety of definitions of Learner Agency, all of which connect to an individual’s ability to shape the circumstances in which they live.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines Learner Agency as a student’s *ability and will* to positively influence their own lives and the world around them. It is about acting rather than being acted upon.²

Harvard University’s Achievement Gap Initiative defines Learner Agency as the *capacity and propensity* to take purposeful initiative. It is the opposite of helplessness.³

The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) defines Learner Agency as *the power to take meaningful and intentional action*. It acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of the individual, supporting voice, choice and ownership.⁴

The Victorian Department of Education describes agency as giving students the power to direct and take responsibility for their learning, creating independent and self-regulating learners.⁵

In New Zealand, Learner Agency is embedded in *The New Zealand Curriculum* key competencies as “the capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities”.⁶



The above definitions, although varied, share three key elements. Firstly, there is the implication that students are in an *environment* in which they can act. Secondly, students have the *will* to act. Finally, there is the capacity or *power* to act in a way that positively influences their world. I expand on these key elements below.

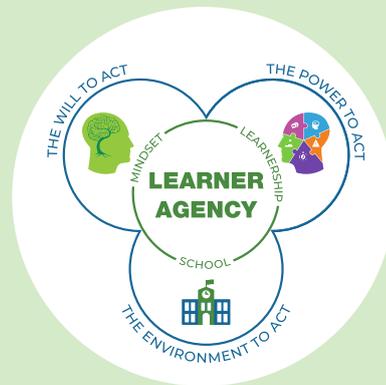
It's important to note that while these definitions focus on what Learner Agency is, they do not give us clear direction on how to develop it. An educationally useful definition must not only describe Learner Agency and how to recognise it when it exists, but it must also guide schools in how to develop Learner Agency.

I offer the following definition to help guide educational leaders in their efforts to develop Learner Agency:

“Learner Agency is the degree to which an individual is able to take initiative to meaningfully influence their world, particularly in the face of challenges. It involves three interrelated and equally important elements: the environment to act, the will to act and the power to act.

– JAMES ANDERSON

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To develop Learner Agency, schools must provide students with an environment free of undue restraints. They must ensure students understand their choice to act and they must equip students to develop the power to act. Further, schools must recognise that agency is not something students can simply be given. It is capability that all students can further develop, and must be continually built upon.

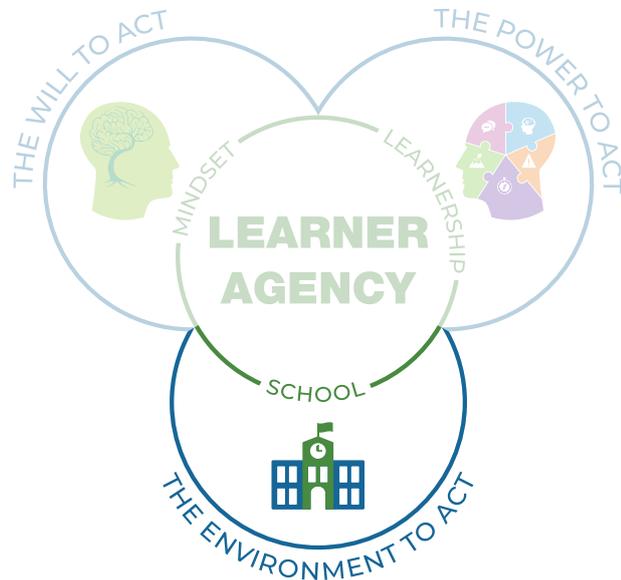


THE THREE ELEMENTS OF LEARNER AGENCY

The Environment to Act – The School

Central to the concept of Learner Agency is the idea of *choice*, expressed as the will or propensity to act. To have agency is to be free to choose your actions.

In a simplified sense, this means to be free of restrictions. For example, under a totalitarian government, many freedoms are removed. Restrictions are put in place to limit an individual’s choices, and as a result, people have less agency (or less control) over their lives.



This “fewer restrictions” understanding of agency has led some in education to discuss Learner Agency as being about *giving* students more choice. They feel we give students agency if we allow them to choose what or how they are learning, or by allowing students to contribute to the school’s decision-making process. While allowing students to contribute to decisions that impact their lives is an element of agency, as we’ll see below ...

“ We cannot simply “give” students agency.

This type of “student voice” interpretation of Learner Agency is a poor imitation of what agency is really about. Removing external restrictions simply simulates true agency, making it appear as if students are shaping the circumstances in which they live. But by allowing students to choose what they will learn or giving them a voice in the school’s decision-making process, we do not give them the *power to choose*, we merely give students the *permission to choose*.

To draw on an analogy, imagine a baby elephant. Under normal circumstances, it is free to choose where it goes. If we shackle the baby elephant to a stake, we limit its ability to move. It does not have the capacity to break its shackles, so it is no longer free to move. It can see the choice to move, and it likely has the will to move, but its ability to act on that choice has been restricted by the keeper.



In this situation, the baby elephant understands that although it has the choice to move, it cannot act because of its shackles. Understandably, this external restriction leads to feelings of frustration and helplessness.

If the keeper removes the shackles, the baby elephant is free to move (or not) as it chooses. *But the elephant itself has not changed.* The keeper has not given the baby elephant the power to choose, and he has not made it capable of breaking its shackles. The keeper has only given the baby elephant permission to choose by removing the restraint he had placed on it.

In many ways, this type of *giving choice* is disempowering. That's because the "power to act" lies with the keeper removing or reinstating restrictions; it does not lie with the elephant. The elephant is still controlled by the keeper's choice to use, or not use, the shackle.

Similarly, the "voice and choice" interpretations of Learner Agency can ultimately disempower students, who come to learn that the only reason they have a choice is because the school has granted it to them. Thus, it is the school, not the student, that holds the power. Students must ask for permission, or hope that the school provides opportunities for them to choose. But students are no better *equipped* to shape the circumstances of their lives. They may have been granted agency but they have not built it.

Recall that our definition of Learner Agency is concerned with students taking the initiative to meaningfully influence their world, particularly in the face of *challenges*. If schools remove restrictions simply to give students more choice over easy tasks, they fail to build agency. Like the baby elephant, we *permit* students to do something they already could have done if we hadn't placed restrictions on them in the first place.

“ To build agency, schools need to provide learners with an environment in which they cannot easily succeed.

An environment filled with decisions they can't easily make. An environment that pushes them outside their Comfort Zone, where they must develop new capacities and build the power to act.

This "removing restrictions" version of agency does play a role in providing an environment where students can act. But on its own, it does not prepare students to confront *new and more difficult challenges*. It does not build their *capacity* and *propensity* to act, and it does not increase the degree to which students can choose their path through life. It only increases their *opportunity* to act.



After all, we are not merely trying to give students the “feeling that they have agency” in their lives. This narrow focus risks trading a short-term “sense of agency” for the long-term goal of preparing students to positively influence their world as adults.

Learner Agency is not something that can be *given* to students. Simply implementing policies to give students “voice and choice” in education only gives them permission to act, not the power to act.

“ Agency is something that resides within the student. It must be developed and owned by the student. It is earned, not given.

That students’ choices, and therefore agency, can be limited by placing restrictions on them points to another, potentially more profound, way that their agency can be limited. And that is through Mindset.



The Will to Act – Mindset

Recall that the widely used definitions of agency speak about the *will* or *propensity* to act and that this work’s philosophical underpinnings relate to the human ability to exercise free will. In the definition I’ve provided, I capture this idea by saying that agency is the degree to which an individual chooses to act.

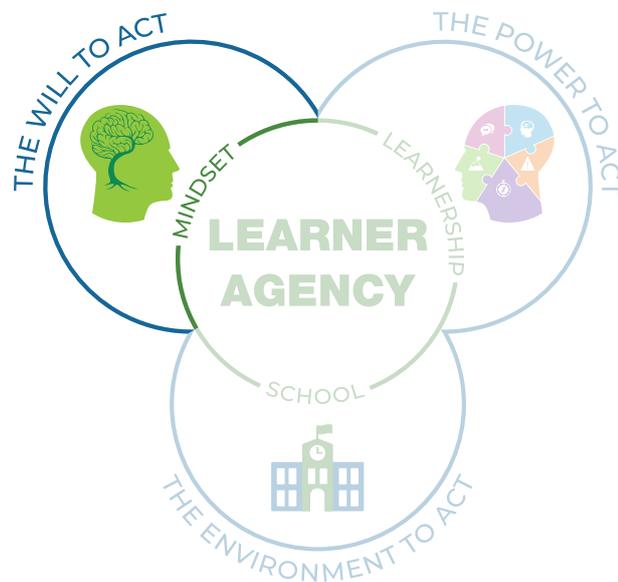
Although it might seem obvious that a student would choose to act to positively to influence their world, this is not always the case. Professor Carol Dweck’s work on Mindset describes how a learner’s response to challenge is based on their beliefs about their ability to change their most basic characteristics, such as their talents, abilities and intelligence.⁷ Dweck’s research shows that individuals will often choose not to act if they believe their basic characteristics are fixed.

For example, a student with a Fixed Mindset may believe they are not musical. They think that because they lack musical abilities today, they cannot gain musical abilities in the future. In this situation, they are likely to choose not to take music lessons, even if the school provides them with an environment and opportunity to do so.

“ On the other hand, someone with a Growth Mindset understands they are capable of changing their talents, abilities and intelligence.

They know that abilities are something they can develop. So, things they may not be able to achieve today will become things they can achieve in the future as they develop new talents and abilities. Consequently, they are more likely to choose to initiate actions that bring about those changes.

To continue our elephant analogy, when the elephant grows larger and stronger, it has the power to break free of its shackles – but it doesn’t. Its earlier failed attempts have led it to believe that it can’t break its bonds, so it *no longer tries*. This is the power of belief, and it is far more debilitating and pertinent to the idea of agency than “giving choice”.



Schools can provide students with an environment where choices exist, but like the grown elephant, if students believe their choice will be ineffective, they may choose inaction over action and will therefore fail to take purposeful initiative to positively influence their world. Consequently, the student with a Fixed Mindset will lack agency. They feel limited and are likely to become the victim of their circumstances, unable to see a course of action that could change those circumstances.

“ We cannot adequately address the issue of Learner Agency without addressing the issue of student Mindset.

How well a student understands their ability to change their most basic characteristics, such as their talents, abilities and intelligence, directly influences their will to act.

As we work to ensure students develop Learner Agency, we must recognise that students don't have either a Fixed or Growth Mindset. Instead, their Mindset falls somewhere along a continuum between these two extremes. Our role as school leaders is to ensure our actions, and those of our teachers, consistently move students towards the growth end of that continuum. I have developed the following Mindset Continuum™ for school leaders to recognise and describe this change.





The Mindset

CONTINUUM

Going beyond "Fixed V's Growth" to a deeper understanding of Mindsets

By James Anderson

	FIXED	LOW GROWTH	MIXED	GROWTH	HIGH GROWTH
 WORLD VIEW	Sees themselves as UNCHANGING AND UNCHANGEABLE. Life is about discovering yourself and searching for where you fit into the world.	Change and GROWTH IS VERY LIMITED. See themselves as "not cut out for" some domains. Amount of growth possible in other domains is limited.	Limited Growth Mindset – believes they are capable of GROWTH IN A LIMITED NUMBER OF DOMAINS. Life offers only limited choices.	Sees themselves as CAPABLE OF SIGNIFICANT GROWTH in most domains. Sees great choice in life. May see themselves as restricted from significant growth in some domains.	Understands they can CHANGE THEIR MOST BASIC CHARACTERISTICS. Life is about deciding what you want to be and creating the abilities required to reach goals.
 CHALLENGES	AVOIDS CHALLENGES. Sees them as a potential threat.	Takes on EASY CHALLENGES that they believe they are likely to succeed at.	PREFERS CLEAR, IMMEDIATE GOALS that aren't too far out of reach, or in an area they find difficult.	ENJOYS BEING CHALLENGED by more open-ended tasks, even if not always immediately successful.	EMBRACES CHALLENGES even when path to achievement is not immediately clear.
 ENCOUNTERING DIFFICULTY & OBSTACLES	GIVES UP IMMEDIATELY when they encounter difficulty.	TRIES FOR A WHILE, but gives up if not progressing easily. May try a few alternatives when encountering obstacles.	PERSISTS WHEN SEEING PROGRESS. Is developing a repertoire of strategies for getting past obstacles.	EXPECTS EVENTUAL MASTERY. Understands new learning is meant to be difficult so sticks at tasks for long periods.	PERSISTS FOR LONG PERIODS even in the face of setbacks and when new skills need to be learnt to achieve mastery.
 EFFORT	EFFORT IS ASSOCIATED WITH FAILURE and inability, so is seen as bad. Expects things you can do to come easily.	Recognizes that effort is sometimes required. SUSTAINED EFFORT IS A BAD THING. Misunderstands that all types of effort produce growth.	EFFORT IS NECESSARY, but usually not enjoyable. Likely to prefer to do it easily. Recognizes when effort is being ineffective.	EFFORT IS A GOOD THING. Has experienced success as a result of effort in the past. Associates Effective Effort with growth.	Understands EFFORT AS PATH TO MASTERY. Actively works on developing strategies for more Effective Effort.
 FEEDBACK & CRITICISM	IGNORES useful negative feedback. Sees feedback as a list of their faults.	Accepts some direct feedback when corrections can be made quickly and easily. TENDS TO FOCUS ON POSITIVE FEEDBACK.	FORMATIVE FEEDBACK IS SEEN AS USEFUL, as long as it is targeted and achievable.	Accepts and LEARNS FROM FEEDBACK. Positive feedback is seen as recognition of the effort and process that led to the achievement.	REQUESTS CRITICAL FEEDBACK from targeted expert sources in order to improve both process and outcome.
 SUCCESS OF OTHERS	FEELS THREATENED by comparisons to others and avoids competitions, as these may highlight perceived deficits.	MAY MIS-ATTRIBUTE SUCCESS of others to luck or natural ability rather than growth achieved through effort.	ENJOYS PERSONAL SUCCESS, so will engage in competition and comparison when these make them look good.	FINDS LESSONS AND INSPIRATION in the success of others. Admires excellence. Enjoys the challenge posed by competition.	SEEKS OUT MASTERS AND EXPERTS in an effort to "learn their secrets". Competition is seen as a way for both competitors to push themselves to improve.
 MAKING MISTAKES	Actively HIDES OR IGNORES mistakes.	MAKES EXCUSES for mistakes. Looks for quick fixes. May attribute blame to others.	Expects to make mistakes and understands MISTAKES CAN BE CORRECTED.	Recognizes mistakes made are SIGNPOSTS FOR LEARNING opportunities.	Deliberately stretches themselves so errors have HIGH LEARNING POTENTIAL to facilitate further growth.
 OFFERED HELP AND SUPPORT	URNS DOWN help and support. Feels requiring help highlights their own deficits.	TOLERATES help when given. Disinclined to ask for help. Doesn't like to be seen to need help.	ACCEPTS HELP and support when offered. May not continue to seek help, if difficulties are persistent.	Expects feedback and recognizes it as DESIRABLE to help them grow.	SEEKS OUT help and support from specialized sources.

Students towards the fixed end of the Mindset Continuum™ have less agency. They see little possibility to change themselves in a way that would allow them to act. They consider their abilities – and therefore, what they can achieve – as fundamentally limited by who they are. They lack the will to act because, like the adult elephant, they don't believe those actions can change their circumstances.

As a result, students towards the fixed end of the Mindset Continuum™ find themselves the victim of their circumstances. When confronted with life's challenges, they believe they are powerless to change themselves in a way that would allow them to overcome those challenges. They become helpless in the face of adversity.

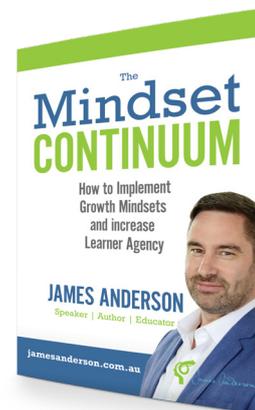
As students move towards the growth end of the Mindset Continuum™, they begin to better understand their capacity to develop their talents, abilities and intelligence. They subsequently have more agency, as they are more likely to have the will or propensity to choose to act.

To address the issue of Learner Agency, one of the key elements we must focus on is the will to act, which directly relates to a student's Mindset.

“ We must ensure our students understand that when they are confronted with challenges, they can act in a way that will develop their ability to shape and control their circumstances.

I have written extensively on how to move students along the Mindset Continuum™. Unsurprisingly, the strategies that make a difference go well beyond catchphrases such as “not yet”, praise effort, change your words and teaching *about* a Growth Mindset. You can find out more by downloading my free e-book, [*The Mindset Continuum: How to Implement Growth Mindset and Increase Learner Agency.*](#)⁸

A Growth Mindset is a critical part of developing Learner Agency. It gives students the will to act. However, there is another aspect of Learner Agency that is just as, if not more, important. And that is the *power to act*.

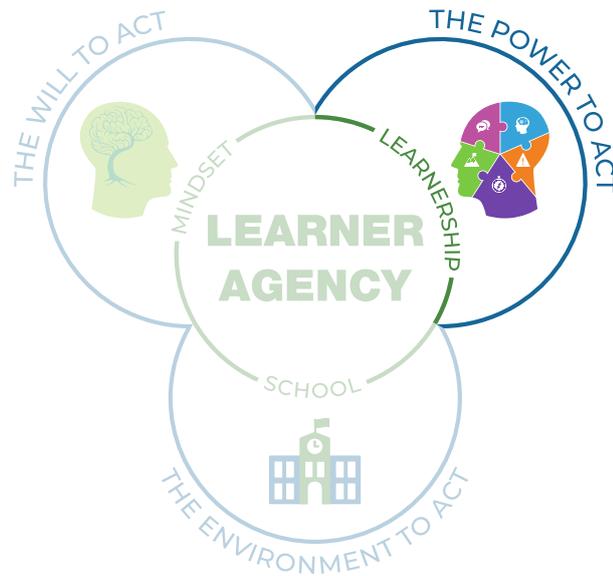


The Power to Act – Learnership

Agency relates to the ability to take meaningful action. We must choose to act and take action that has *the power to achieve the results we desire*.

This raises an important question: “What do we have the *power* to choose?” Clearly, there are many challenges beyond the power of our students to successfully achieve today.

So, the question becomes:



“ How do we help students develop and increase that power so they can achieve more in the future?”

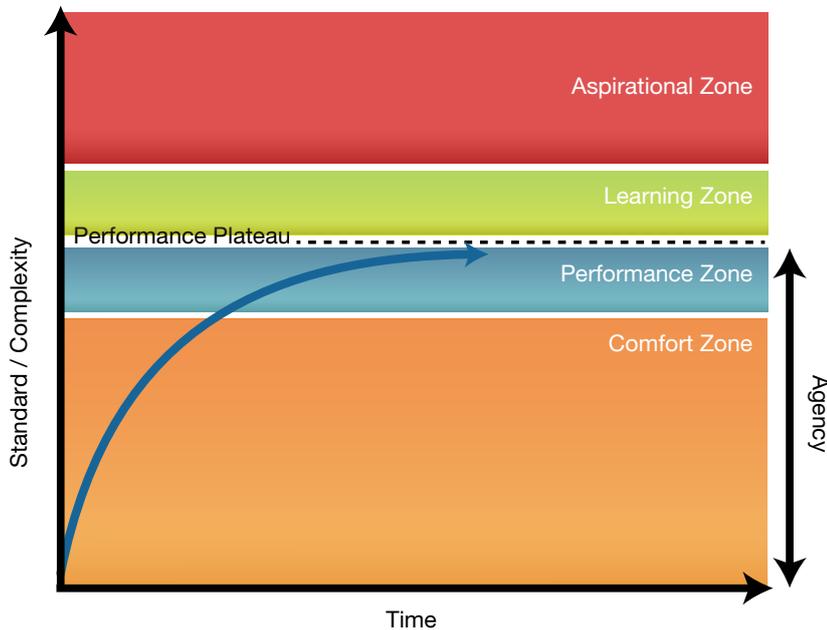
The short answer is that students only have the power to choose and meaningfully influence challenges that are within their current abilities.

This limit to our current abilities is sometimes referred to as “the bar”. Literature also refers to it as a Performance Plateau. (To learn more about this, read *Peak*⁹ by Anders Ericsson or my book, *The Agile Learner*.¹⁰) This limit represents the highest standard we can achieve with our current abilities. It’s the level of challenge and difficulty that demands our fullest attention and maximum application. It is our “*current best*”. (Refer to “Learning Zones” infographic on the following page.)

The bar also represents the limit of our agency. We only have the power to act below the bar, where our abilities are sufficient to allow us to positively influence our lives and the world around us. In other words, students can only be *successful* at taking on challenges and adversities at or below their bar – that is, within their current abilities.



LEARNING ZONES



Our Learning Zone and Aspirational Zone are beyond our current abilities. We do not currently have the capacity to succeed in these zones, so do not have agency over challenges that fall in these two zones.

Our Comfort Zone and Performance Zone are within our current abilities, below our Performance Plateau. We have agency over challenges that fall in these two zones.

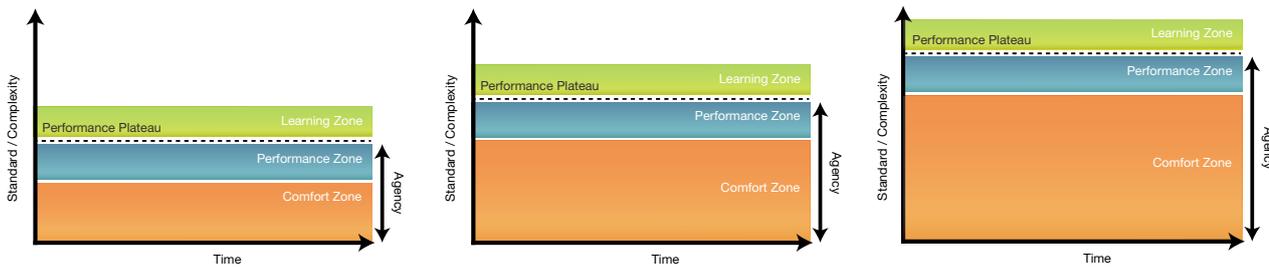
“ Students will undoubtedly encounter challenges beyond their current abilities. So, if we want to develop Learner Agency, we need to focus on what students are doing to increase their talents and skills. We must work on “raising the bar”.

Raising the Bar

The bar only represents the *current* limit of a student’s abilities. As they develop their talents and skills, they raise the bar, making previously impossible things possible. In doing so, students increase their Learner Agency.

Schools, of course, have always been in the business of raising the bar. We don’t expect early primary school students to immediately master the work of upper primary and secondary levels. Each year, the curriculum stretches students into their Learning Zone, slowly builds new talents and abilities, and enables students to master things that were previously too difficult for them.





Learners have agency only over challenges that are within their ability to achieve. As learners develop their talents and abilities, they become capable of succeeding at increasingly difficult tasks. This increases the size of their Comfort and Performance Zones, giving them greater ability to influence the world in which they live, and therefore greater agency.

As students develop their abilities and raise the bar, they increase their Learner Agency in two important but quite different ways. Firstly, they master something new and more difficult, eventually becoming an expert if they persist long enough and raise the bar high enough. Secondly, the transferable skills and Habits of Mind¹¹ students develop to raise the bar increase the size of their Comfort Zone, so the number of things they could do – the easy things they haven’t done yet – also increases.

However, there is a third and even more critical aspect to raising the bar that bears on our discussion of increasing Learner Agency. As school leaders, our job is not simply to prepare students for the challenges of today. It is also to ensure students can rise to meet new and more difficult challenges in an unpredictable future.

“ Our goal, then, is not simply to raise the bar but to give students the power to raise the bar for themselves!

Students won’t be able to meaningfully influence their world, particularly in the face of challenges, until they take charge of the learning process and raise their own bar.

There are no shortcuts to developing Learner Agency. As we’ve explored, permitting students to choose is not the same as developing a Mindset that leads students to understand they have a choice. Similarly, neither does raising the bar *for students* give them the capacity to raise it independently! Students must be taught how to raise the bar *for themselves*.



Learnership – Skilful Learning

To build agency so that students can take the initiative and act on things beyond their current ability, students need to take charge of the learning process. They must develop what I call “Learnership” – a term derived from the same roots as *leadership* and *craftsmanship*, meaning to engage in learning skilfully.¹²

“ It is entirely possible to learn and even raise the bar without being a skilful learner. But it is not possible to develop Learner Agency without being a skilful learner.

Students can learn by being led (or even dragged) through the learning process. They can be spoon fed, scaffolded and guided through the learning process in order to achieve growth. They can even achieve good results that see schools rank well according to achievement data without ever taking charge of the learning process for themselves.

But if control of the learning process remains largely with the teacher, students will not have true agency into the future. They will be limited by the abilities they possess when they leave school, unable to effectively meet the new and more difficult challenges they are likely to face as an adult.

Agency involves students having the power to take purposeful initiative to shape the world in which they live, particularly in the face of challenge. In other words, students need to *initiate* that change and raise their bar themselves.

The Learnership Matrix – Describing Skilful Learning

My Learnership Matrix helps educators and school leaders recognise how students are engaging in the learning process. It also guides educators’ efforts in assisting students to become more skilful learners. The matrix illustrates the learner’s progression of skilfulness as they engage in and eventually take control of the learning process. In doing so, they build Learner Agency.

Learnership focuses on five key learning characteristics:¹³

1. The student’s attitude towards **challenges**.
2. Their ability to engage skilfully and mindfully with their **Habits of Mind**.
3. How they make use of **mistakes** as they stretch into their Learning Zone.
4. How they gain insight from **feedback**.
5. How they distribute their time and energy and invest their **effort**.



Using these key elements, the matrix describes six progressively more sophisticated and effective ways of engaging in the learning process, from the Non-Learner to the Agile Learner.

Take a moment to review the Learnership Matrix before moving on. Reflect on your students and estimate the percentage of students you teach at each level of the matrix.

LEARNERSHIP: THE SKILL OF LEARNING

James Anderson

	CHALLENGE	HABITS OF MIND	MISTAKES	FEEDBACK	TIME & ENERGY
AGILE LEARNER	EMBRACES	CULTIVATES	DESIGNS	TAILORS	GROWING
INDEPENDENT LEARNER	TARGETS	DEVELOPS	USES	REQUESTS	STRIVING
DIRECTED LEARNER	ATTEMPTS	EXTENDS	CORRECTS	RESPONDS	PRODUCING
PERFORMANCE LEARNER	LIMITS	APPLIES	AVOIDS	SELECTS	PERFORMING
BEGINNER LEARNER	REDUCES	DESCRIBES	RECOGNISES	ACKNOWLEDGES	DOING
NON-LEARNER	AVOIDS	IGNORANT	IGNORES	DISREGARDS	WASTES

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To have agency in the world beyond school, students must be able to take initiative and meaningfully influence their world, particularly in the face of challenges. To achieve this, schools must equip learners to effectively take control of their own learning.

Only Independent and Agile Learners take charge of the learning process. They engage in learning in the most skilful ways. They confront challenges and independently initiate action that develops new abilities. In this way, they have the agency to shape the world around them as they confront new and increasingly more difficult challenges.

While other learners may gain some agency as teachers lead them through the learning process, only Independent Learners and Agile Learners can raise the bar and build agency for themselves. And, as we'll see below, it's the Agile Learners who are best prepared for the VUCA world.

“ As school leaders who seek to develop and maximise Learner Agency, our goal must be to move students up the Learnership Matrix and develop Agile Learners. ”



LEARNERS WITH AGENCY – AGILE LEARNERS

Agile Learners have the greatest agency. They not only understand they are capable of growth (a Growth Mindset), but they also understand how to skilfully achieve that growth.

Independent Learners are *responsive*. In the face of challenge and adversity, they recognise that they *need* to pivot or adapt – to raise their bar to meet the challenges in front of them. They set goals and develop their abilities in response to their needs. Although this gives them agency in their world, their responsiveness to challenge is one step behind the Agile Learner’s preparedness for challenge.

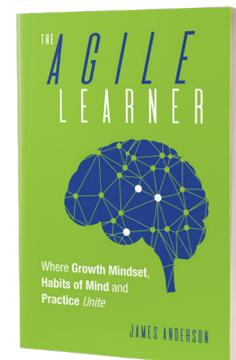
Agile Learners embrace challenges not because they *need* to but because they understand that challenges help them grow. They embrace challenges in the spirit of late US President J.F. Kennedy, when he famously announced that the USA would take man to the moon “not because it is easy, but because it is hard, because that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills”.

Agile Learners *proactively* prepare for an uncertain future. Their propensity to embrace challenges puts them on a path of true lifelong learning, where they consistently raise the bar.

Agile Learners recognise that they can’t predict the future. They know there is no way of knowing the exact challenges the future will bring. But although they can’t predict the future, they can prepare for an unknowable future.

“ In a world where the only certainty is challenge and uncertainty, the Agile Learner leverages disruption to raise the bar.

In doing so, Agile Learners not only master the challenge in front of them, but they also increase the size of their Comfort Zone, equipping themselves for a future of challenges. Consequently, Agile Learners continuously increase their agency in the world. (To read more about how Agile Learners prepare for an uncertain future, [download the first chapter of my book, *The Agile Learner*](#)).



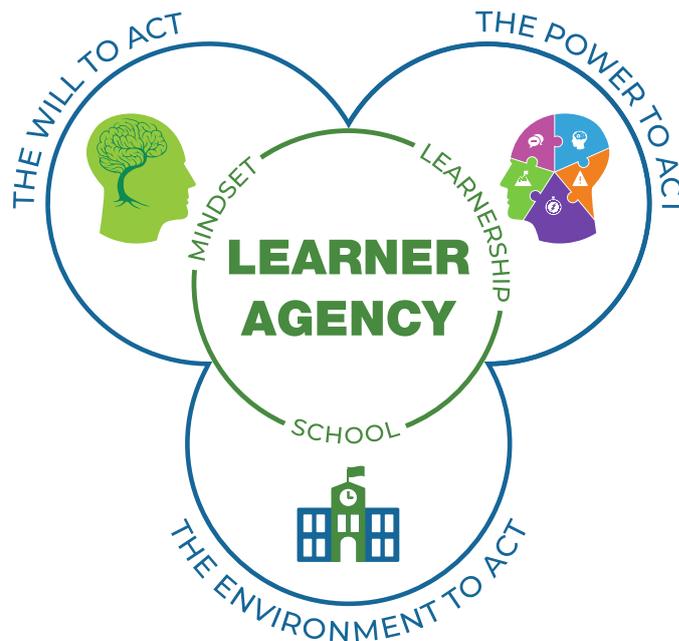
The Agile Learner's proactive approach to building agency results in them surpassing "resilient" to become "antifragile", as described by Nicholas Nassim Taleb.¹⁴ They not only survive but thrive in this rapidly changing world.

As school leaders serious about developing Learner Agency, equipping students to be the masters of their circumstances, we must actively give them the power to act in the world. And that means developing their Learnership to become Agile Learners.



YOUR SCHOOL'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING LEARNER AGENCY

As we have explored, a school's role in developing Learner Agency can be thought of in three parts. To engage in a meaningful process of developing Learner Agency, schools must address all three elements. Let's examine what this looks like:



The Environment to Act – Removing Limitations

Schools must provide students with an environment in which to act. We must create an environment free of undue limits. Like our baby elephant analogy, we should try not to place undue restraints on students' actions.



This environment must provide challenges beyond the student's current ability – tasks that stretch them into their Learning Zone. If we provide opportunities to act that are new and unfamiliar, yet within the student's current abilities, we only give them permission – not the power – to act.

Providing an environment – even a challenging one – in which students can act is the easiest part of a school's work with developing Learner Agency. Sadly, it is also the part where many well-intentioned schools end their work. It's the part that can be done "to" the students as a school policy or classroom activity. However, if not backed up with the following two elements, it ultimately disempowers students.



The Will to Act – Developing a Growth Mindset

Any school initiative that seeks to significantly impact Learner Agency must have at its foundation the development of a Growth Mindset. As Dweck put it in her famous [TED Talk](#),¹⁵ a Growth Mindset enables students to see a “pathway into the future”. The helplessness of “I can’t” is replaced with the possibility of “I could”. Students better recognise that they can take a course of action that allows them to shape and control their uncertain future.



I describe the broad strategies and approaches required for schools to move students along the Mindset Continuum™ and develop more growth-oriented Mindsets in my free e-book, [The Mindset Continuum: How to Implement Growth Mindsets and Increase Learner Agency](#).

The Power to Act – Learnership

As educational leaders, we cannot expect students to go out into the world fully equipped to meet all the challenges they are likely to encounter. But we can prepare them to rise to these challenges on their own. In this way, we give them a critical aspect of Learner Agency: the power to act.



As students develop Learnership and become Agile Learners, they break free of the teacher’s control over the learning process. They engage in the learning process both skilfully and independently. This allows students to take charge of “raising the bar”. As they develop their talents and abilities, they make possible things previously impossible. This gives learners the power to act rather than being acted upon.

To develop Learnership, our classrooms must focus not only on what students are learning but also on *how* they are learning. The Learnership Matrix describes the attitudes and behaviours that become our educational goals as we seek to engage learners more skilfully in the learning process.



ARE YOU READY TO DEVELOP LEARNER AGENCY IN YOUR STUDENTS?

Did something in this paper resonate with you?

I support school leaders to reach some of our most significant educational goals. If you're ready to begin this work, I'd like to invite you to [book a time in my calendar](#) to discuss how we can work together to move your students along the Mindset Continuum™, develop Learnership and increase Learner Agency.

How I can help:

Whole-School Partnership

The most powerful way to work with me is to develop a long-term partnership. My bespoke programs are tailored to meet your individual learning needs, budgets and timelines. They include “train the trainer” options and access to online resources, and are the perfect way to ensure your team gets the targeted, long-term support required to facilitate sustained change in teacher practice.

[Contact James](#) to discuss your tailored Professional Learning Program.

Speaking

As a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) and experienced international speaker, I can provide both live and virtual tailored keynote presentations for your school or conference, focusing on:

- Learner Agency
- Growth Mindset and the Mindset Continuum™
- Learnership
- Habits of Mind

Find out more at [James Anderson – Speaker](#).



Teacher Professional Learning

My three flagship teacher workshops can be accessed by individuals, groups or whole schools. Delivered online or face-to-face, these workshops provide your teachers with the insights, resources and support they need to integrate this work into their classroom practice.

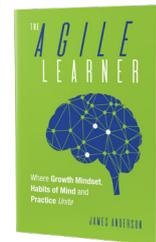
- [Growth Mindset Master Class](#)
- [The Learning Landscape](#)
- [Succeeding with Habits of Mind](#)
- [Learnership](#)

Further Reading

James Anderson has published the following publications and e-books to support your professional learning:

- [The Agile Learner](#)

The Agile Learner unites three powerful ideas: Growth Mindset, Habits of Mind and Virtuous Practice. In *The Agile Learner* you'll discover how to change your students' Mindsets by moving them along the Mindset Continuum™. Importantly, you'll learn how to engage students in the process and behaviours that achieve growth and the development of new talents.



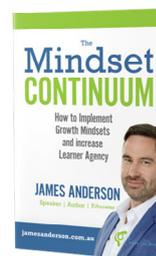
- [The Learning Landscape](#)

In *The Learning Landscape*, James Anderson outlines a powerful metaphor for visualising learning. Mapping the abstract concept of learning onto a physical journey in the real world, the learning process is made tangible and accessible to learners.



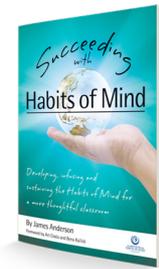
- [The Mindset Continuum](#)

In *The Mindset Continuum*, James Anderson gives deep insights into the practical application of Carol S. Dweck's work. He explains why most current Growth Mindset interventions are failing and provides clear and compelling direction for schools wanting to implement Growth Mindset strategies that work!



- **Succeeding with Habits of Mind**

Beginning your journey with the Habits of Mind is easy. Knowing where the next steps are can be elusive and more challenging. In *Succeeding with Habits of Mind*, you'll find practical guidance that takes you beyond introducing the Habits of Mind and helps you build deep understandings so you can succeed at developing, infusing, leading and sustaining the Habits of Mind in your school.



- **Educational Leaders E-book Library**

A comprehensive library of free resources for educational leaders, the Educational Leaders E-book Library includes the following:

- *The Agile Learner* e-book (section 1)
- *Getting Mistakes Right* e-book
- *Success with Habits of Mind* e-book
- *The Mindset Continuum* e-book
- The Mindset Continuum Summary
- The Learner Agency Summary

- **Habits of Mind Starter Kit**

Along with Art Costa and Bena Kallick, as well as many passionate educators, James has worked to infuse the Habits of Mind into schools, systems, classrooms and the wider community – with extraordinary results.

The Habits of Mind Starter Kit includes; the Habits of Mind posters, *Success with Habits of Mind* e-book, *Insights into Habits of Mind* e-book, the Habits of Mind Summary Page, the Habits of Mind, Matching Game, and a Habits of Mind Quotes Compilation.



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ABOUT JAMES ANDERSON

James Anderson is an Australian-based international speaker, author and educator who is passionate about helping fellow educators develop students as better learners, a quality he describes as “learnership”.



Originally a teacher and school leader, for the past 20 years, James has been working with schools to make classrooms more thoughtful places. He challenges teachers to think deeply about their own Mindsets and how their beliefs are communicated to students in often subtle and unintended ways.

James’s work combines Growth Mindset with Habits of Mind and Practice to create Learning Agility. He puts the growth back into Growth Mindset! And, through creating and describing the Mindset Continuum™, he provides the cornerstone for effective Growth Mindset interventions.

James values the relationships he builds with the schools and teachers he works with, providing the “follow-through” that’s so often lacking in teacher professional development. His speaking, workshops and online resources provide not only the deep understandings required to do this work meaningfully, but also the tools and ongoing support needed to sustain it in your school and make a real difference to student learning outcomes. James will show you how to create your school-based Growth Mindset Style Guide to ensure your school consistently “nudges” all students towards an increasingly growth-oriented Mindset.

James is a Certified Speaking Professional and regularly speaks at conferences around the world. His previous publications include *Succeeding with Habits of Mind*, *The Agile Learner* and *The Learning Landscape*, as well as a host of e-books and other teacher resources. James is an international affiliate of Art Costa and Bena Kallick’s Institute for Habits of Mind and the creator of www.habitsofmind.org.

James can be contacted for speaking and consultancy work at www.jamesanderson.com.au.



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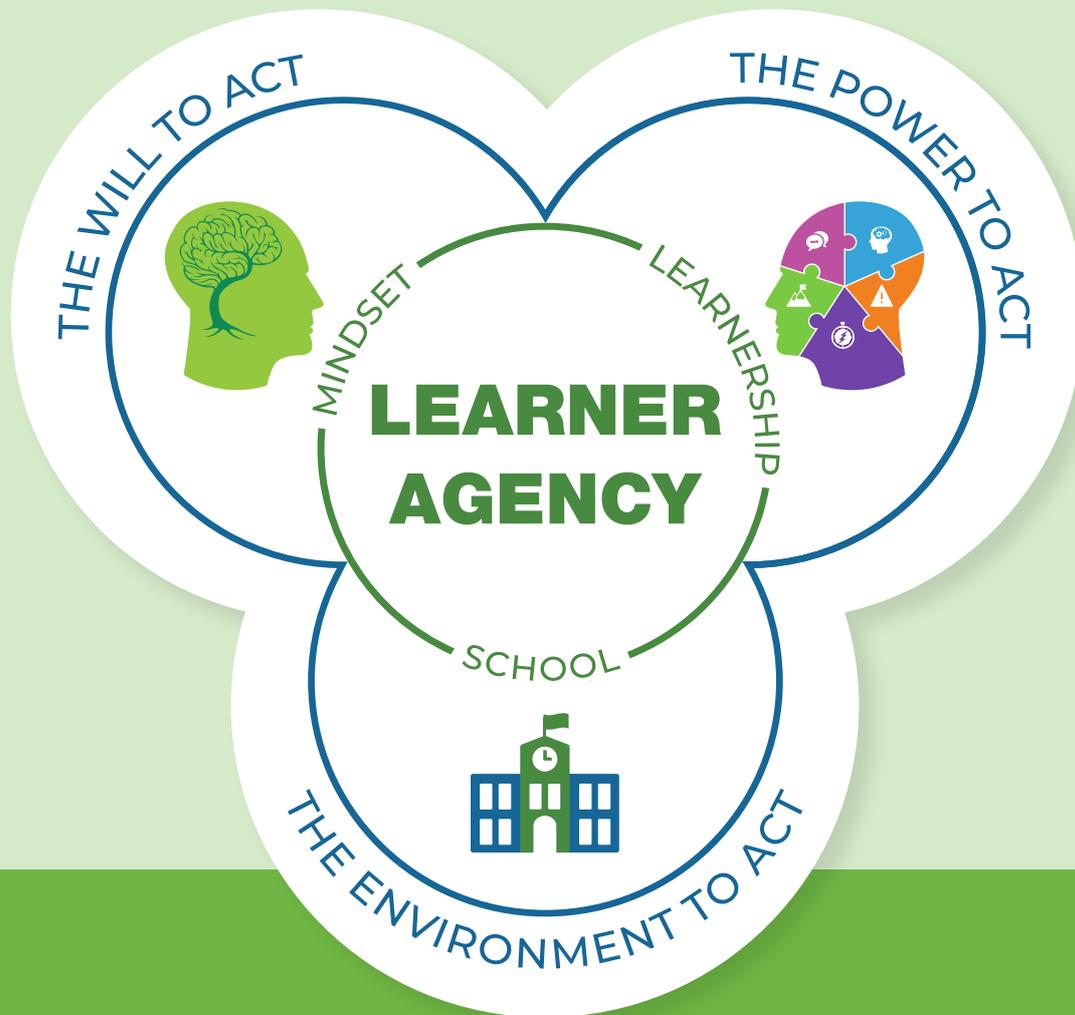


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LEARNER AGENCY

is the degree to which an individual is able to take initiative to *meaningfully influence* their world, particularly in the *face of challenges*.

It involves three interrelated and equally important elements: the environment to act, the will to act and the power to act.

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