Transcend

IGNITING *Agency*

in **Early Elementary Learning Environments**

CONTENTS

An Evolving Resource

This resource was started to support forward-thinking schools that are striving to make agentic learning the norm for even their youngest learners. It has evolved over the past year thanks to the support, feedback, and thoughtful inspiration provided by the following people and organizations. Thank you for helping us craft a more impactful resource.

2021-2022 Transcend Early Agency Collaborative

Lindsay Unified School District, Cinnamon Scheufele & Tom Rooney

Red Bridge, Orly Friedman

Yu Ming Charter School, Sue Park

Researchers & Organizations

Center for Innovation in Education, Jenny Poon

Committee for Children, Erin Lynn Raab, PhD

Early Education Equity, Lisa Kaplan Shaanan, MS OTR/L TMHP

Mindset Works, Lisa Blackwell, PhD & Kendra Coates, PhD

Teaching Lab, Sarah Johnson, PhD

Transcend Design Community, Staci Jasin

Silicon Schools Fund
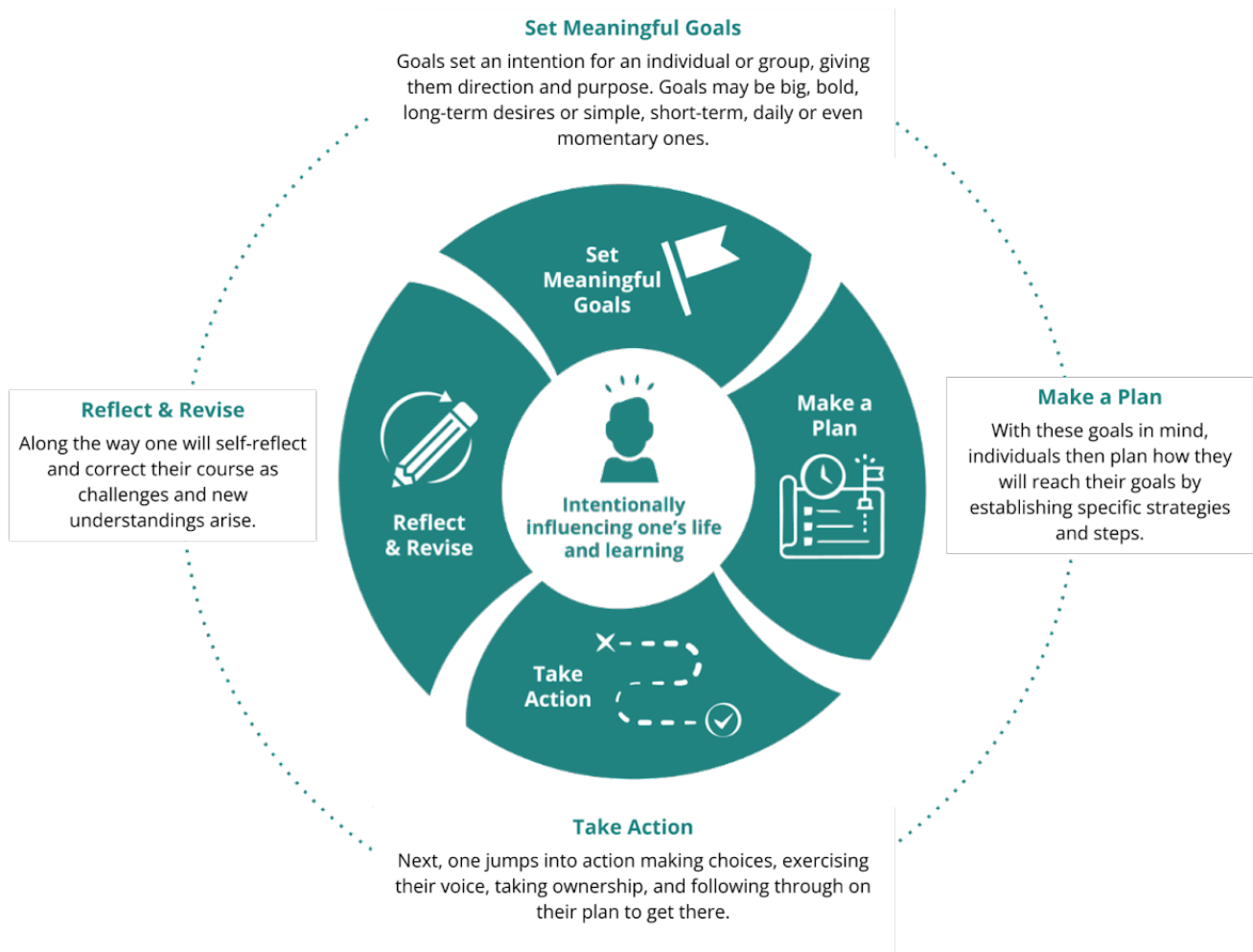
Schools & Systems

City Garden Montessori School, Christie Huck

Creativity Challenge Community, Brent Applebaum

Colegio Fontán Capital & Learning One to One, Eduardo Yepes Salgado

Concourse Village Elementary School, Alexa Sorden, EdD

Long-View Micro School, Lisa Zapalac

Kyrene de las Manitas, Innovation Academy, Sarah Collins, EdD & Julie Cleveland, PhD

Metropolitan Arts Academy, Claudette Trujillo

Montessori For All, Sara Cotner

St. Paul School of Northern Lights, Carole Hendricks

The Forest School & Institute for Self-Directed Learning, Tyler Thigpen, PhD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agency is increasingly viewed as a key ingredient for both personal thriving and collective transformation of our world. Yet, the very DNA of schooling in the United States often positions children as passive, compliant vessels to be filled instead of active participants with perspectives to contribute. *Igniting Agency in Early Elementary Learning Environments* will help you and your community understand what agency is, why it's critical to begin igniting agency early in a child's life, what enables it, and how to design a supportive learning environment.

What is Agency

Agency is the ability to intentionally influence one's life and learning. It entails a continuous and dynamic process of setting goals, making plans to achieve those goals, taking action, and reflecting and revising along the way.

Set Meaningful Goals

Goals set an intention for an individual or group, giving them direction and purpose. Goals may be big, bold, long-term desires or simple, short-term, daily or even momentary ones.

Reflect & Revise

Along the way one will self-reflect and correct their course as challenges and new understandings arise.

Set Meaningful Goals

Make a Plan

Reflect & Revise

Intentionally influencing one's life and learning

Take Action

Make a Plan

With these goals in mind, individuals then plan how they will reach their goals by establishing specific strategies and steps.

Take Action

Next, one jumps into action making choices, exercising their voice, taking ownership, and following through on their plan to get there.

Why Prioritize Agency with K-2 Learners

Agency is an essential ingredient for thriving in and transforming the world. However, it often isn't a centerpiece of young children's experiences in school. Here are some powerful reasons why *it's never too early to deliberately focus on agency*.

Agency involves a variety of skills; young children are capable and ready to start building these skills and enacting their agency.

Agentic classrooms can promote curiosity, engagement, and academic achievement, which is critical as the transition to school is a time when many children have *fewer* opportunities for agency.

Agency fuels lifelong learning, achievement, and is vital for navigating the challenges of a complex, uncertain future.
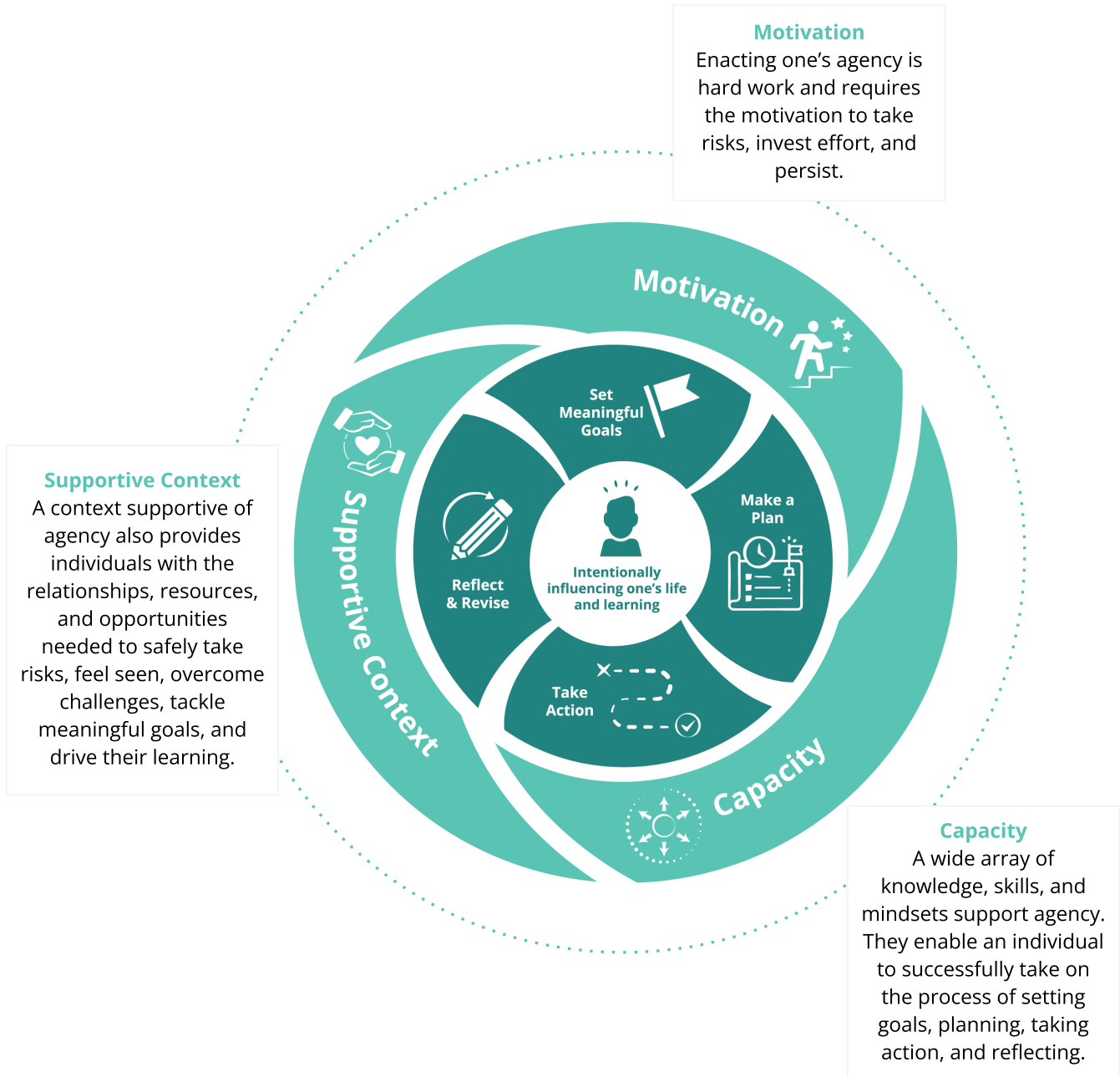
Agency must be a part of *all* learners' lives in order to disrupt and dismantle oppression and move toward equitable, extraordinary learning.
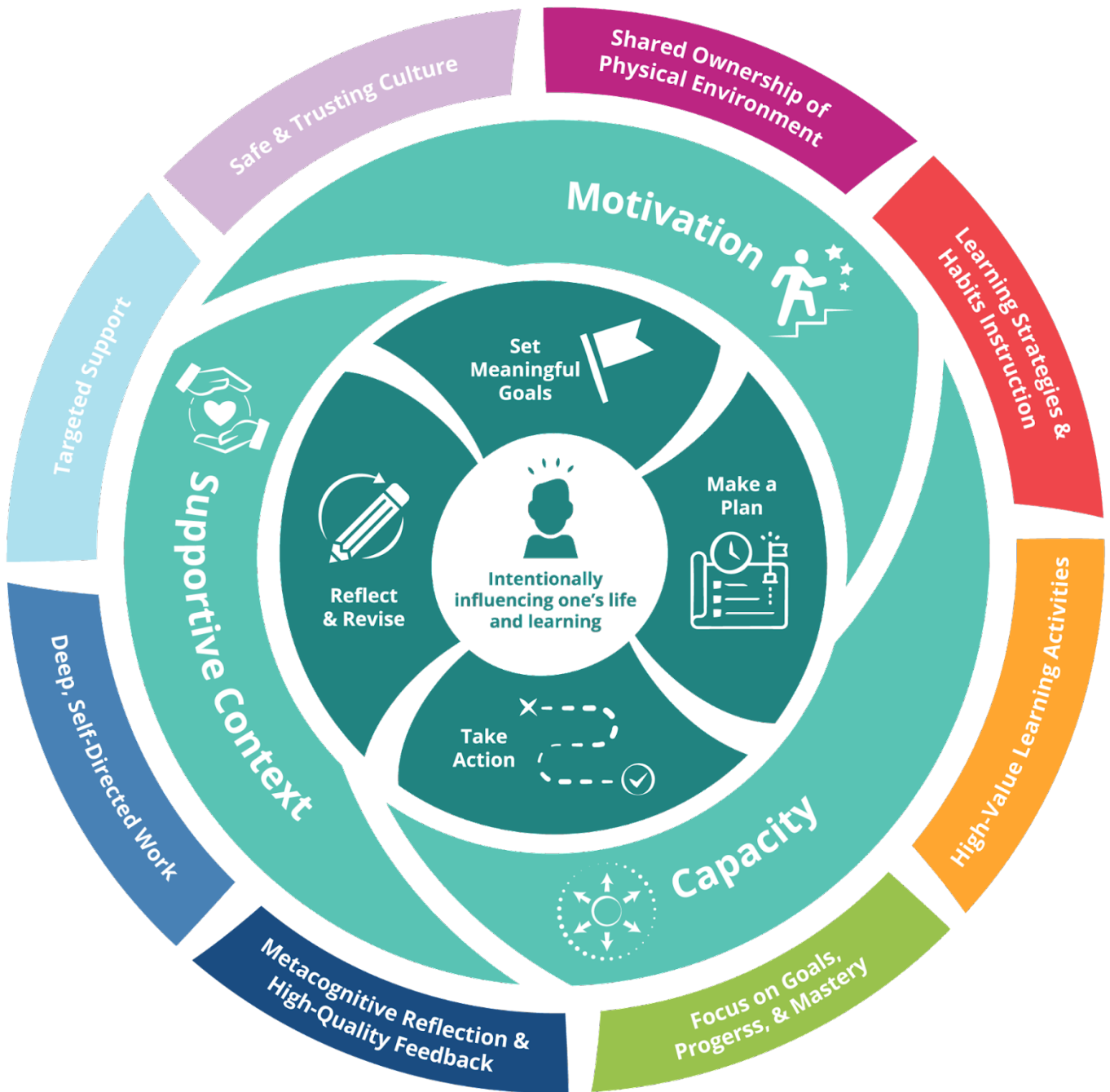
What Drives Agency

There are three drivers of agency: Motivation, Capacity, and Supportive Context. The relationship between these drivers is dynamic, and when present, they enable individuals to intentionally influence their life and learning.

Motivation
Enacting one's agency is hard work and requires the motivation to take risks, invest effort, and persist.

Supportive Context
A context supportive of agency also provides individuals with the relationships, resources, and opportunities needed to safely take risks, feel seen, overcome challenges, tackle meaningful goals, and drive their learning.

Capacity
A wide array of knowledge, skills, and mindsets support agency. They enable an individual to successfully take on the process of setting goals, planning, taking action, and reflecting.

Motivation

Supportive Context

Capacity

Set Meaningful Goals

Make a Plan

Take Action

Reflect & Revise

Intentionally influencing one's life and learning

Agentic School Practices

There are a variety of ways to cultivate agency in early grades. We have identified eight agentic school practices that align with the research on agency and K-2 development and with what forward-thinking schools are doing to support agency development in their youngest learners.

Safe & Trusting Culture

A safe and trusting culture creates the context in which learners' voices, wonderings, and needs are respected and responded to proactively.

Shared Ownership of Physical Environment

Structures that encourage and embolden learners to navigate, care for, and shape the physical learning environment help create the conditions for agency to flourish.

Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction

Through instruction on learning strategies and habits, learners master new skills that support them to drive their own learning.

High-Value Learning Activities

High-value learning activities seamlessly integrate learners' interests and curiosities with standards-aligned content and skills in developmentally appropriate ways.

A Focus on Goals, Progress, & Mastery

A focus on goals, progress, and mastery makes children's learning and the process that got them there visible.

Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback

Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback help learners engage in the self-evaluation needed to reach one's goals now and in the future.

Deep, Self-Directed Work

When engaging in deep, self-directed work, learners build perseverance and do the "heavy lifting" for their own learning.

Targeted Support

Targeted support provides avenues for learners to identify the need for help, self-advocate, and receive additional support when needed.

INTRODUCTION

Agency, or the ability to intentionally influence one's life and learning, is increasingly viewed as a key ingredient for both personal thriving and collective transformation of our world. It is the centerpiece of the OECD's Learning for 2030 framework (OECD, 2019) and the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Yet, the very DNA of schooling in the United States often positions children as passive, compliant vessels to be filled instead of active participants with perspectives to contribute. The Covid-19 pandemic further revealed many schools' emphasis on compliance over self direction (Arnett, 2021) along with the negative influence this can have on engagement, learning, and wellbeing (US Department of Education, 2021). Instead of opportunities to enact agency being the baseline, these opportunities are typically viewed as things that must be earned *gradually* over the course of a learner's education and even then are only typically made available to a small, privileged group of wealthy, older, and often white learners. This both stifles learners now, and hinders them from building the muscle to be powerful agents of change in the future.

But what is the alternative? How might we rethink and redesign learning so that all learners, *including our very youngest and most marginalized*, are able to enact their agency and recognize their power?

Igniting Agency in Early Elementary Learning Environments will help you and your community answer that question. It is divided into four sections:
- **Section 1: What is Agency -** This section lays out a detailed definition of agency and the actions involved.
- **Section 2: Why Prioritize Agency with Young Learners** - The next section focuses on four big reasons agency is an important aspect of K-2 learning.
- **Section 3: What Drives Agency -** This section explores the science of agency, specifically how factors drive or enable agency with a focus on K-2 learners.
- **Section 4: How to Support Agency in K-2 Learning** - The last section offers eight agentic practices that can act as inspiration when redesigning learning to advance agency in early grades.

Empirical research on agency and K-2 development is expansive. This resource is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the literature; rather, we seek to summarize key insights regarding cultivating agency in early grades in ways that are accessible and actionable. Here, we synthesize research on agency, child development (check out Appendix B), and agency-promoting practices from communities.

WHAT IS AGENCY

We define agency as *intentionally influencing one's life and learning* and view agency as a multistep process that involves establishing goals, planning, taking action, and reflecting and revising one's plans along the way. Agency may be enacted alone to achieve personal goals. However, it can also be enacted with others—a process often referred to as collaborative agency or co-agency—or to advance shared goals and responsibilities, often known as collective agency.

We arrived at our simplified, teacher and learner friendly definition of agency through a review of definitions used in agency research and the common themes that emerged across them, as well as extensive community input.

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of agency (Adair, 2014; OECD, 2019), experts focused on the topic have set forward definitions such as:

- "The ability to make intentional choices about and take an active role in the course of one's own learning" (GripTape, n.d.).
- "The satisfying power to make our own decisions and choices, take meaningful action, and see the results in our own development and learning" (Cushman & Baron, 2017).
- "To influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura, 2006).
- "Being able to influence what and how something is learned in order to expand capabilities" (Adair, 2014).
- "A person's capacity to leverage resources to navigate obstacles and create positive change in their learning and life" (Kundu, 2020).
- "The capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change" (OECD, 2019).

> **Shared Agency Definitions:**
> - **Co-agency:** "Interactive, mutually supportive relationships—with parents, teachers, the community, and with each other—that help students progress towards their shared goals" (OECD, 2019).
> - **Collective agency:** "Individual agents acting together for a community, a movement or a global society" (OECD, 2019).

Across these definitions a number of themes are apparent. These themes suggest that agency involves:

- Responding to one's context and the opportunities and obstacles it presents;
- Acting in alignment with one's understanding of oneself and one's purpose;
- Shaping one's development, environment, future outcomes, and life circumstances;
- Identifying goals, steps, resources, and processes to get there; and
- Working alone and/or with others to advance (shared) goals.

The Agentic Cycle

Enacting agency is a process. This process involves setting meaningful goals, making plans to achieve those goals, taking action, and reflecting on progress in order to maintain, or correct, course. In this resource, we call this process: *The Agentic Cycle.* Each stage of this cycle is briefly explained in the paragraphs that follow and depicted in the visual below.
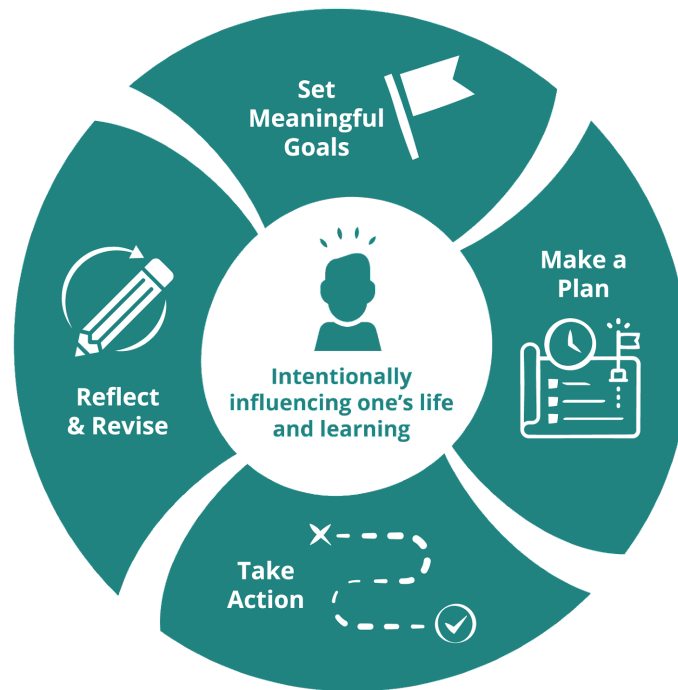
Sources: (Poon, 2018a). The components of learner agency used in this graphic draw heavily from those outlined in Jenny Poon's article, [Part 1: What Do You Mean When You Say "Student Agency"?](#).

Set Meaningful Goals

Goals should be advantageous and worthwhile to the individual (Poon, 2018a). They can be big or small, individual or collective, long-term or immediate. An example of a big, collective, long-term goal could be: "We want to plan, plant, and sustain a community garden on school grounds." Alternatively a small, immediate, and individual goal could be: "I want to put my jacket on by myself."

Make a Plan

With these goals in mind, individuals then plan how they will reach their goals. Here, one might break bigger goals into smaller goals, plan out the steps they need to take, assign a task to a specific block of time, create a timeline, and/or identify the support they might need to achieve their goals. Additionally, when making a plan of action, individuals may, informally or formally, define metrics of success: *what would it look like for me to reach my goal?*

Take Action

Next, individuals act toward their goals, making choices, exercising their voice, taking ownership, and following through on their plan to get there. Part of this process requires that one try out different strategies to accomplish goals, be open to real-time feedback and consequences, explore topics of interest, and even diverge from their peers (Poon, 2018a).

Reflect & Revise

Agentic individuals also self-reflect and correct their course. As challenges and new understandings arise, individuals know how to use their reflections and feedback from others to persevere, make adjustments, and continue building their agentic capacity. Reflection and revision requires that individuals answer questions such as:

- Did I meet my goal?
- What did I try today?
- What might I try next time?
- What resources or support might help me?

It is important to note that these stages are not rigid. Instead, the process of enacting one's agency is more dynamic and often happens out of sequence. In addition, the stages may happen in quick succession and become more informal and intuitive, especially as someone gains more experience enacting their agency. Even before starting school, many children experience this cycle as they play and figure out new things from rotating a door knob to building a fort.

Later on in this resource we discuss three drivers of agency: Motivation, Capacity, and Supportive Context (Jump to What Drives Agency). In that section, we discuss why each driver matters for agency, how it works, as well as related K-2 developmental insights.

Culture, Power, and Agency

Agency will look different across cultures, contexts, and stages of life. Research suggests that understandings and expressions of agency vary across cultures and contexts (Adair, 2014; Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Hernandez & Iyengar, 2001; OECD, 2019). Western and non-western cultures have differing understandings of what acting with agency looks like (Hernandez & Iyengar, 2001). Taking Japan as an example, the culture generally puts great importance on making decisions by consensus, "where the whole idea of the individual as agent is problematic" (Leadbeater, 2017, p. 7). In fact, *agency* does not even have a direct translation in the Japanese vocabulary.

In the US in particular, "we must also seek to disentangle our understanding of agency from historical and hierarchical dynamics of power" (Poon, 2018b, para. 16), build a culturally-responsive understanding of learner agency, and interrogate practices that privilege some expressions of agency over others. More specifically we must consider:
- How the privileging of white, male ways of being shapes expectations of what it looks like to enact agency;
- How our country's history of racism, sexism, ableism, and classism influences who is *allowed* to enact agency and, more importantly, who is *not allowed* to or is even *punished* for it; and
- How our diverse learners and their families experience these systems of oppression and privilege and the ways it may influence their expectations, hopes, and fears for their children.

Additionally, agency will look different across one's lifespan (Leadbeater, 2017).

Agency isn't solely individualistic. The idea that agency is shared, influenced, and co-regulated among learners, peers, teachers, parents, and communities is sometimes referred to as "co-agency" (Salmela-Aro, 2009, 2017). "Co-agency is when educators and learners become co-creators in the teaching and learning process. The concept of co-agency [recognizes] that students, teachers, parents, and communities work together to help students progress towards their shared goals" (OECD, 2019, p. 2). Co-agency stands in contrast to the idea that agency is solely about independence and free choice; *co-agency is also about interdependence and joint influence.* It is the lens that schools and educators should use when designing agentic learning environments (Leadbeater, 2017; OECD, 2019).

Not everyone is equally positioned by society to enact their agency. We live in an inequitable society and the close relationship between agency and power means there may be real risks for individuals who enact their agency in settings that seek to oppress them. Indeed, parents have voiced this fear. For example, in focus group interviews, Latinx and immigrant parents in Texas voiced their concern with agentic learning experiences present in their children's classroom. This concern was not because they believed their children weren't ready for such experiences, but because they worried that the practices might have negative consequences or make it "difficult for their vulnerable children to get what they need at school" (Adair & Colegrove, 2021, ebook location 1977). These fears voiced by parents of color should not be ignored. School systems and educators should take time to understand the complex sociocultural factors that may be running counter to agentic behaviors in the classroom, and work to address them (Jenny Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021).

WHY PRIORITIZE AGENCY WITH YOUNG LEARNERS

Agency is an essential ingredient for thriving in and transforming the world. However, it often isn't a centerpiece of young children's experiences in school. Here are some powerful reasons why *it's never too early to deliberately focus on agency.*

Agency involves a variety of skills; young children are capable and ready to start building these skills and enacting their agency.

Agentic classrooms can promote curiosity, engagement, and academic achievement, which is critical as the transition to school is a time when many children have *fewer* opportunities for agency.

Agency fuels lifelong learning, achievement, and is vital for navigating the challenges of a complex, uncertain future.

Agency must be a part of *all* learners' lives in order to disrupt and dismantle oppression and move toward equitable, extraordinary learning.

Agency involves a variety of skills; young children are capable and ready to start building these skills and enacting their agency.

Children build important skills and deepen their learning through opportunities to enact their agency in early elementary contexts (Adair, 2014; Adair & Colegrove, 2014, 2021; Colegrove & Adair, 2014). Adair (2014) argues that agency in early grade contexts "helps children take advantage of the unique developmental stage they are in and expands their capabilities beyond simplistic understandings of content and basic learning skills" (p.238). Indeed, in observations of agentic learning environments researchers observed young children building their ability to clarify information, collaborate, lead, and much more.[1] In these contexts, content knowledge and learners' curiosity act as a vehicle for them to build upon and reinforce these types of skills (Adair, 2014; Adair & Colegrove, 2021).

Literature also suggests that young learners do not need to master specific academic knowledge and skills—such as literacy skills—before practicing agentic learning and decision making (Adair & Colegrove, 2014, 2021; Stixrud & Johnson, 2018). For example, research indicates that learners as young as five are, with teacher support, able to set goals (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). In fact,

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[1] To see the list of skills that grew when young children could regularly express their agency at school, check out Appendix A.

cultivating self-determination early gives young learners more time to develop their choice-making, goal-setting, decision-making, and problem-solving capacities—essential skills needed for self-determination in later stages of life (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). It also sets a strong foundation for being an agentic learner throughout school because children at this stage are still internalizing what being a "learner" means (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

> Young learners do not need to master specific academic knowledge and skills—such as literacy skills—before practicing agentic learning and decision making.

So, while young learners will need support from teachers, parents, and peers to set goals, make decisions, and enact their agency, they *are* ready. As Stixrud and Johnson (2018) put it:

> It doesn't make sense to wait until your children's brains have fully matured before entrusting them with decisions, or you would be waiting until their late twenties or early thirties. The brain develops according to how it's used. This means that by encouraging our kids...to make their own decisions, we are giving them invaluable experience in assessing their own needs honestly, paying attention to their feelings and motivations, weighing pros and cons, and trying to make the best possible decision for themselves (ebook location 958).

Agentic classrooms can promote curiosity, engagement, and academic achievement, which is critical as the transition to school is a time when many children have *fewer* opportunities for agency.

Children are naturally curious. Prior to school, children spend much of their time asking questions and engaging in imaginative play. However, when children enter school, questioning and curiosity typically decline (Engel, 2011; Engelhard & Monsaas, 1988) and children may retreat, behaving less independently than before (Whitington, 2014). Additional research suggests this pattern generally extends throughout school with engagement declining as learners get older (Calderon & Yu, 2017; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012).

> When children enter formal schooling they often have fewer opportunities to feel in control and enact their agency. For young children the transition may be especially hard as their opportunities to play and make their own choices decrease.

Why does this happen? While research doesn't provide a single definitive answer, part of this decline likely relates to many schools' culture of compliance and a lack of opportunities for agency. It's well documented that when people feel *in control* of their behaviors, decisions, and goals they are *more motivated*

(Deci & Flaste, 1995; Hattie, 2009; Transcend, 2020). However, when children enter formal schooling they often have fewer opportunities to feel in control and enact their agency. For young children the transition may be especially hard as their opportunities to play and make their own choices decrease (Whitington, 2014).

Decades of research also shows motivation is critical to learning (Hattie, 2009). In addition, more recent research shows curiosity in particular may be a critical and underemphasized factor (Shah et al., 2018). The study found a statistically significant relationship between curiosity and academic achievement, and this relationship was *greatest* for children in lower socioeconomic status homes. All of this suggests that schools must focus on *nourishing, not extinguishing* learners' curiosity and motivation; agentic learning is a step in this direction.

> **Agency fuels lifelong learning, achievement, and is vital for navigating the challenges of a complex, uncertain future.**

Opportunities for children to use their agency in early grades can build their capacity for achievement (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). People who are able to enact their agency are equipped to gain mastery over challenging academic content, overcome roadblocks, redesign their environments to achieve desired goals, and persist while learning (Bandura, 2006; Martinez & McGrath, 2013; Zimmerman, 1990).

> People who are able to enact their agency are equipped to gain mastery over challenging academic content, overcome roadblocks, redesign their environments to achieve desired goals, and persist while learning.

Agency will not only support learning now, but for a lifetime—and this is vital for navigating a complex, uncertain future. Demographers expect today's five-year-olds to live 100 years. As people live longer, individual capacities practiced in early childhood such as self-efficacy and curiosity "become the emotional toolkit for longevity," better preparing them to navigate the challenges of adulthood, from career changes to financial hardship to illness (Stanford Center on Longevity, 2022, pp. 33–34). In just 10-12 years, our youngest learners will graduate high school and enter a world we can not fully predict. Yet, if current trends—like the rise of automation and the rate of scientific advancement—persist, our learners will need a different set of skills that enable them to be self-driven, autonomous, and able to make decisions that fit their unique needs and goals (Transcend, 2021a). Additionally, our children will become adults who face complex challenges like inequality, climate change, and political division, as well as challenges we cannot currently predict. Facing these challenges will require collective agency—the ability for individuals to come together for a shared purpose, movement, or society (Leadbeater, 2017; OECD, 2019).

Agency must be a part of *all* learners' lives in order to disrupt and dismantle oppression and move toward equitable, extraordinary learning.

Our educational system prevents most children of color from expressing their agency in school contexts (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Instead, agency has been reserved for privileged—typically white and higher-income—children. Current research highlights how early in their schooling students of color are taught to comply, while white children from privileged backgrounds are taught to take risks, demonstrate leadership, share their ideas, discover, and enact their agency (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). This difference in opportunities reflects the inequitable and low expectations society holds for children of color.

Denying our children of color their agency or requiring that they "earn" what others enjoy freely at school is racist and reproduces existing inequalities (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Adair and Colegrove (2021) remind us "agency is a component of racial justice and related to personhood and humanization" (ebook location 203). In order to build a more just, inclusive, equitable *future* we must focus on the experiences our learners are having *today*.

> Denying our children of color their agency or requiring that they "earn" what others enjoy freely at school is racist and reproduces existing inequalities.

WHAT DRIVES AGENCY

This section describes three drivers that enable agency. These include both an individual's *motivation* and *capacity* as well as the support that characterizes their surrounding *context* (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Transforming Education & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017). The relationship between these drivers is dynamic—for example, an individual can become more capable of agency over time as new capacities develop and can also feel more capable, as well as motivated, in one context than in another.
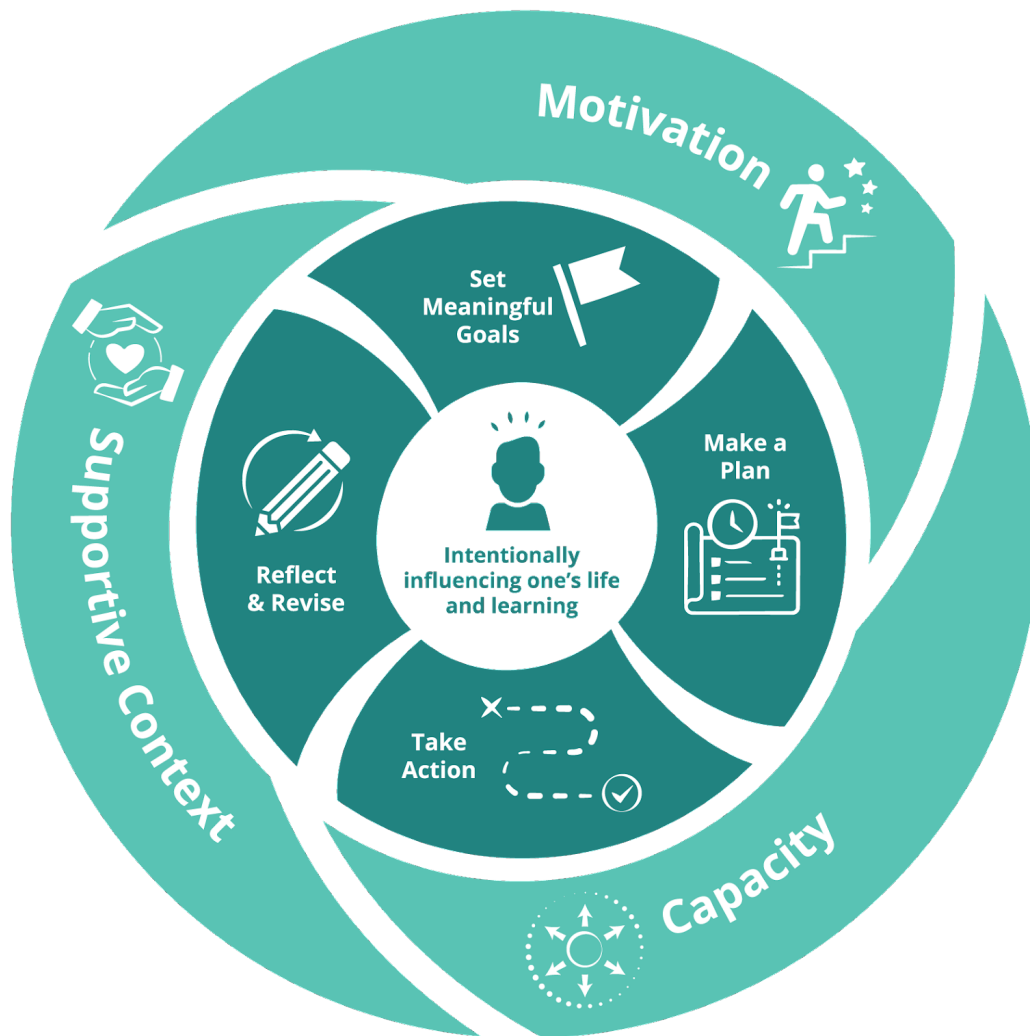
Sources: (Bandura, 2001, 2006, 2018; GripTape, n.d.; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Next Generation Learning Challenges, 2017; Poon, 2018a; Transcend, 2021b; Transforming Education & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017). The components of learner agency used in this graphic draw heavily from those outlined in Jenny Poon's article, Part 1: What Do You Mean When You Say "Student Agency"?.

Motivation

Enacting one's agency is hard work and requires the motivation to take risks, invest effort, and persist. Motivation is dependent on a number of factors including an individual's self-efficacy, their sense of control, their emotional state, their connectedness to others, and the value they see in the work they are doing (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Hattie, 2009; Transcend, 2020). During early childhood, motivation to learn is naturally high and can be further fueled by tapping into learners' curiosities about the world, responding to their growing desire for autonomy and mastery, and building close relationships between learners and adults as well as learners and peers.

Capacity

A wide array of knowledge, skills, and mindsets support agency. These include learning strategies and habits, academic knowledge and skills, cognitive thinking skills, positive mindsets, a secure sense of identity, and more. When these individual capacities expand, young people are able to exercise their agency in increasingly diverse and meaningful ways (Adair, 2014). In early grades, young children are building foundational language, literacy, and numeracy skills; are starting to develop key cognitive skills and executive functions; and are beginning to understand themselves in relation to others. Learning environments can further build these capacities through a deliberate focus on skill building, encouraging reflection and help seeking behaviors, offering varied opportunities for practice, and more.

Supportive Context

A context supportive of agency also provides individuals with the relationships, resources, and opportunities needed to safely take risks, feel seen, overcome challenges, tackle meaningful goals, drive their learning, and more. These supports help an individual navigate challenges that crop up while working toward their goals (Brooklyn Lab Charter School, 2020; Kundu, 2020). In early grades, young children are beginning to form warm, trusting relationships with others, and so cultivating these relationships and supporting learners to seek help, and self-advocate, is incredibly important and developmentally appropriate. In addition to the support provided by relationships, learners also need the trust and opportunity to independently access the physical resources needed to reach their goals.

The Relationship Between the Drivers

The relationship between the drivers is dynamic; they work together to either further agency or impede it. For example, there is a self-reinforcing cycle between motivation and individual capacity. When a new skill is learned or used to succeed at a challenging task it increases self-efficacy, further fueling one's motivation to work hard and persist (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Hattie, 2009; Transcend, 2020). On the other hand, if one doesn't have the competencies needed in a

given context, it impedes motivation and agency. Additionally, opportunities to enact one's agency can be incredibly motivating, whereas extensive restrictions and requirements for compliance can decrease motivation. These opportunities also enable individuals to transfer and apply new knowledge, skills, and mindsets to different contexts, in turn strengthening their capacity.

In the section that follows we describe these key drivers in more detail. For each, we explain why it matters for agency, the science behind it, and related K-2 developmental insights.

Motivation

Why Motivation Matters

Enacting one's agency is hard work. It requires perseverance and dedication. For individuals to persevere they must be deeply motivated to do so. As a result, motivation—or the willingness to start, put in effort, and persist—is a key driver of learner agency. Motivation helps an individual take risks, make investments, try new things, and persist even when they confront obstacles.

Unpacking Motivation

A number of factors can drive or block one's motivation. These include:

- **Self-efficacy:** An individual's self-efficacy—or belief in their ability to succeed—influences their motivation. To build self-efficacy, individuals must experience success with challenging work, which helps them internalize that they are capable (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 1991; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). This type of productive struggle requires that individuals work toward goals that are challenging, yet achievable; understand their progress; and have multiple chances to try again and improve (Transcend, 2020).
- **Value:** Motivation is also high when individuals see value in the work they are doing (Clark & Saxberg, 2018; Transcend, 2020). This value could stem from learning being connected to young peoples' interests and goals or from the activities themselves being done in a high-value setting, such as with friends and important adults in one's life.
- **Sense of control:** A sense of control, or autonomy, also influences motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Transcend, 2020). To support motivation, learning environments can provide learners with appropriate autonomy and control over how, where, and even what they learn as well as remove any external barriers to learning (Transcend, 2020).
- **Emotional state and connectedness:** Motivation is also impacted by an individual's emotional state and connectedness to others (NAEYC, 2020; Transcend, 2020). Therefore, it is important for learning environments to cultivate positive relationships between learners and adults, as well as between learners and their peers; support constructive emotions; and establish warm, joyful spaces for learning with physical and psychological safety.

Motivation and K-2 Learners

Developmental research suggests that young children already tend to have a high level of motivation to learn because of the value they place in it, yet this motivation can be further fueled if they are provided with autonomy and supportive adult relationships.

Young children want to achieve mastery over new things, take pride in accomplishing tasks on their own, and have a strong desire to better understand the world around them (EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010). All of this means young children already see great value in learning and are often highly motivated. However, learning environments can still deepen motivation by designing high-value learning activities that connect to learners interests, curiosities, and goals. Additionally, a focus on goals, progress, and mastery helps make learning and the process that learners took to achieve their goals visible, which can fuel self-efficacy and motivation.

Young children also increasingly desire control and independence (EL Education, n.d.). So, early grade educators can further fuel motivation through deep, self-directed work and ensuring learners have shared ownership of the physical environment. Building children's learning strategies and habits is another great way to support their independence, as doing so further develops the skills they need to manage their own learning.

Finally, young children seek belonging and positive relationships with others. Strong teacher-child relationships are particularly critical at this age. K-2 aged children look to trusted adults as resources when they need help and to share interests (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). As a result, creating a safe and trusting culture where targeted support is available from caring adults can further foster the sense of value, self-efficacy, and constructive emotions that are so important to motivation.

Capacity

Why Capacity Matters

Enacting agency requires a diverse range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets. These capacities include the actions involved in agency—goal setting, planning, taking action, and reflecting—but also any specialized skills related to the goal or task at hand. For example, setting meaningful goals requires the skills of self-reflection as well as knowledge about one's interests, strengths, and weaknesses relative to one's "developing sense of where they want to go" (Poon, 2018a, para. 12). Similarly, taking action heavily relies on one's perseverance, learning strategies and habits, as well as foundational skills like literacy. Gaining new skills and knowledge directly enables and reinforces one's agency. As Jennifer Keys Adair (2014), PhD, a researcher focused on agency and young learners, puts it, "when children's capabilities expand, they can use their agency in more diverse ways, influencing more of what they do both as individuals and as members of a community" (p. 233).

Unpacking Capacity

The range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets that drive agency are expansive. At a minimum, they include:

- **Learning strategies and habits** used to effectively manage one's learning process. Examples of related knowledge, skills, and mindsets include: goal setting, planning, adaptability, help seeking behaviors, and more.
- **Academic knowledge and skills** across content areas and disciplines include literacy, mathematical knowledge and skills, world language, artistic knowledge and skills, and so much more.
- **Cognitive thinking skills**—which are higher order thinking skills that can be applied to solve problems, ideate, create arguments, and take action—include critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and more. These skills can be applied across a variety of disciplines and settings.
- **Positive mindsets**—such as hope, curiosity, growth mindset, and perseverance—include the "beliefs and dispositions that support a learner in making the most of their time, energy, and circumstances in order to grow and thrive" (Transcend, 2021b, p. 4).
- **Secure sense of identity**, or a constructive, consistent understanding of who someone is, serves as a guide when making decisions and engaging with the world around them. These knowledge, skills, and mindsets include self-awareness, self-efficacy, belonging, sense of purpose, etc. Sometimes this is called integrated identity.

Capacity and K-2 Learners

There is an incredible amount of learning and growth that occurs from birth to age eight across all spheres of development (NAEYC, 2020). During this pivotal time, young children build foundational skills needed for all future learning (NAEYC, 2020). While the range of development is broad, and varies across all learners, years of research offer important insights as to what knowledge, skills, and mindsets are beginning to blossom.[2]

In early grades, children begin to develop key learning strategies and habits needed to manage their learning process. They develop their ability to set a goal, make a plan to reach that goal, monitor their progress and evaluate their plan, and make adjustments as needed (Galinsky, 2010). Children also develop their ability to reflect and think metacognitively about their learning as they begin to understand their identities as learners (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). Learning environments can further the development of these skills through a deliberate focus on learning strategies and habits, setting and pursuing goals, and metacognition and feedback. Help-seeking behaviors also emerge. From an early age, learners know who they can turn to for help while learning (e.g., asking one adult to help them fix a broken toy and another to find a book on dinosaurs) (Galinsky, 2010). Building systems for tailored support enables learners to practice their emerging help-seeking skills.

Along with their readiness to learn and use the skills mentioned above, young children are also increasingly ready to take action and persevere through challenging tasks due to significant progress in executive functioning and cognitive thinking skills, as well as the initial development of key positive mindsets. Young children are increasingly able to focus for sustained amounts of time on activities that are engaging and matter to them (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). Over time, they are also increasingly able to use deliberate and spontaneous strategies to remember information, and use knowledge of routines to think ahead. They demonstrate cognitive flexibility, adjusting to changed priorities, considering alternatives when problem solving, selecting new strategies, and correcting course as needed (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). They also begin to accept better ideas and incorporate them into plans when they emerge, exercise creativity when completing tasks, experiment and invent, and over time need less detailed instructions (Teaching Strategies, 2015). Problem solving skills also emerge and children are increasingly able to solve problems using a range of strategies, typically progressing to solve problems on their own before seeking help from a peer or adult (Teaching Strategies, 2015). Finally, young children are starting to develop positive mindsets, such as perseverance and curiosity, which are essential to initiating and sustaining effort. Learners can apply these new capacities by engaging in high-value learning activities and deep, self-directed work and by having shared ownership over the physical environment

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[2] For a more detailed overview of these trajectories across developmental domains, check out Appendix B.

Young children are also developing foundational knowledge and skills across disciplines, which provide strong foundations for learning (NAEYC, 2020). At this age, children develop early number, space, and object sense as well as their ability to think symbolically (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). Additionally, children develop foundational skills in language and literacy (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). They develop their voices as writers; develop phonological awareness, skills in phonics, and concepts of print and its uses; and typically progress toward using various strategies to make meaning while reading grade-level content (Teaching Strategies, 2015). Children increasingly develop their ability to express their thoughts and needs as well as engage in and extend conversations with others by asking and answering questions, responding to comments, and connecting ideas shared during the conversation (Teaching Strategies, 2015).

Lastly, young children are starting to build a foundational understanding of themselves. Children are increasingly able to recognize, name, and identify what caused their emotions; use words to express what they are feeling; manage their feelings and emotions using learned strategies; and take increased responsibility for their personal well-being (Teaching Strategies, 2015). Young children also become increasingly aware of their bodily movements as well as safe ways to move around spaces (Teaching Strategies, 2015). Also, most children, well before the age of 5, have developed rudimentary definitions and understandings of social identities, both their own and those of others (NAEYC, 2020). In early grades, children begin to develop positive associations with various aspects of their identities, often taking pride in these identities. Sometimes, children begin to challenge society's messages about various social identities and the societal value they hold (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2020). Engaging in high-value learning activities; deep, self-directed work; and metacognitive thinking further builds on and enables learners to understand themselves.

Supportive Context

Why Supportive Context Matters

Agency is influenced by one's context. Even when one is deeply motivated and has a wide range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets their context can either support or inhibit their ability to intentionally influence their life and learning. A context supportive of agency enables diverse expressions of agency, provides support and resources, and helps create the conditions for agency to flourish. In particular, a person's community, school, and family contexts—and the relationships, resources, and opportunities that characterize these contexts—all play a role.

Unpacking Supportive Context

Agency is shaped by a variety of contextual factors. These factors include:

- **Warm, trusting relationships:** An individual's sense of agency is shaped by their relationships with peers , parents, educators, community members, etc. (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Transforming Education & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017). Supportive individuals and communities empower individuals to take responsibility for their own learning, respect their decisions, and provide a balance between freedom and structure. They also listen to children and respond sensitively and reliably with questions, ideas, and actions. This helps children feel safe, heard, and cared for and supports the development of secure attachments (Whitington, 2014). When these close adult relationships exist, children are more likely to explore, take risks, experiment, and interact with others with confidence (Circle of Security International, n.d.; Whitington, 2014).
- **Resources:** Individuals also need access to enabling resources. Support systems, material resources, and various forms of capital help individuals navigate personal, structural, and/or institutional obstacles that they may encounter while learning (Brooklyn Lab Charter School, 2020; Kundu, 2020). Agentic individuals, when ready, will also leverage these resources to overcome challenges and accomplish goals that are meaningful to them and their communities.
- **Opportunities:** Contexts supportive of agency provide individuals with opportunities to enact their agency through choice, expressions of their thoughts and feelings, and flexibility, and minimize excessive restrictions and control over their actions and voices. Through *years and years* of access to opportunities to practice agency people develop their agentic capacity. Big and small opportunities to make choices, exercise their voice, explore, and self-direct enable diverse expressions of agency.

Supportive Context and K-2 Learners

Young children are highly motivated to take agentic action. However, they are also still building the foundational capacities needed for agency. As a result they need a high degree of support in the form of adult guidance, resources, and manageable opportunities for agency.

In K-2, young children are beginning to develop and sustain positive relationships with others (EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). Additionally, a caring relationship with an adult is extremely important for young children to feel safe in the classroom (EL Education, n.d.; NAEYC, 2020). Because of this, a classroom culture where all learners' voices, perspectives, and needs are heard, respected, and responded to proactively is incredibly important and helps create the physical and psychological safety needed to support agency and learning. At this age, young children also look to trusted adults when they need help and to share interests (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015). Given the importance of these close adult relationships for young learners, teachers must get to know learners on an individual level. Taking time to learn about their interests and goals is a great place to start.

Additionally, young children benefit from consistent routines and procedures that support them to seek help, self-advocate, and receive additional support when needed. Given that young learners may not yet have the awareness of when to ask for help, early grade teachers should be proactive in offering target support to them *before* or *as* they reach a point of frustration. Teachers should also prepare for a range of learner readiness and adapt routines and procedures to meet those needs, especially as they evolve over time. In general, routines, structures, and procedures can be incredibly important when supporting young learners to engage in all stages of the agentic cycle, from setting a goal to making a plan to reflecting. Structures to give and receive feedback can also create a safe, trusting culture that encourages each learner to produce their best work.

Lastly, opportunities for agency must be developmentally appropriate. It is important to provide manageable opportunities for young learners to make choices, engage in open-ended tasks, have ownership over their learning, follow their curiosities, tinker, try things out, and even fail (within a safe context). Play of all kids (e.g., guided, self-directed, imaginative, solitary, social) is an excellent vehicle to do so and is especially important for young children's learning and development (NAEYC, 2020). During play, "children are in charge" (Solis et al., 2021, p. 4), allowing them to make their own choices and take ownership over their actions (Ghapar, 2021; Stixrud & Johnson, 2018; Whitington, 2014). High-value learning activities and deep, self-directed work also provide opportunities for learners to enact their agency. Trust and opportunities for shared ownership over the physical environment, including independently accessing materials and resources is also developmentally appropriate for young learners.

The next section of this resource will further explore the practices and supporting structures that help cultivate agency among early elementary learners.

HOW TO SUPPORT AGENCY IN K-2 LEARNING

Cultivating learner agency in K-2 settings requires a thoughtful balance between support and independence. All learners, even the youngest, will have areas where they have strong agentic skills and other areas where they need more practice. *However, this does not mean we should prevent our young learners from enacting their agency based on their current stage of development and the competencies they do have.* Like reading, the capacities that underpin agency—and the ability to set meaningful goals, plan, take action, and reflect—are built over time and strengthened with practice. Because of this, our learning environments must provide these opportunities to practice and should do so through adult planning and support.

In the following section, we present eight agentic school practices that can serve as inspiration when designing learning to foster agency in K-2 settings. We developed this set of practices by looking at what forward-thinking schools are doing to support agency development in their youngest learners and identified common themes. These practices have been refined over the past year as we learned from and with these schools. Each overview shares a short description of the practice, its alignment to the drivers of agency, and guidance for how you might get started.
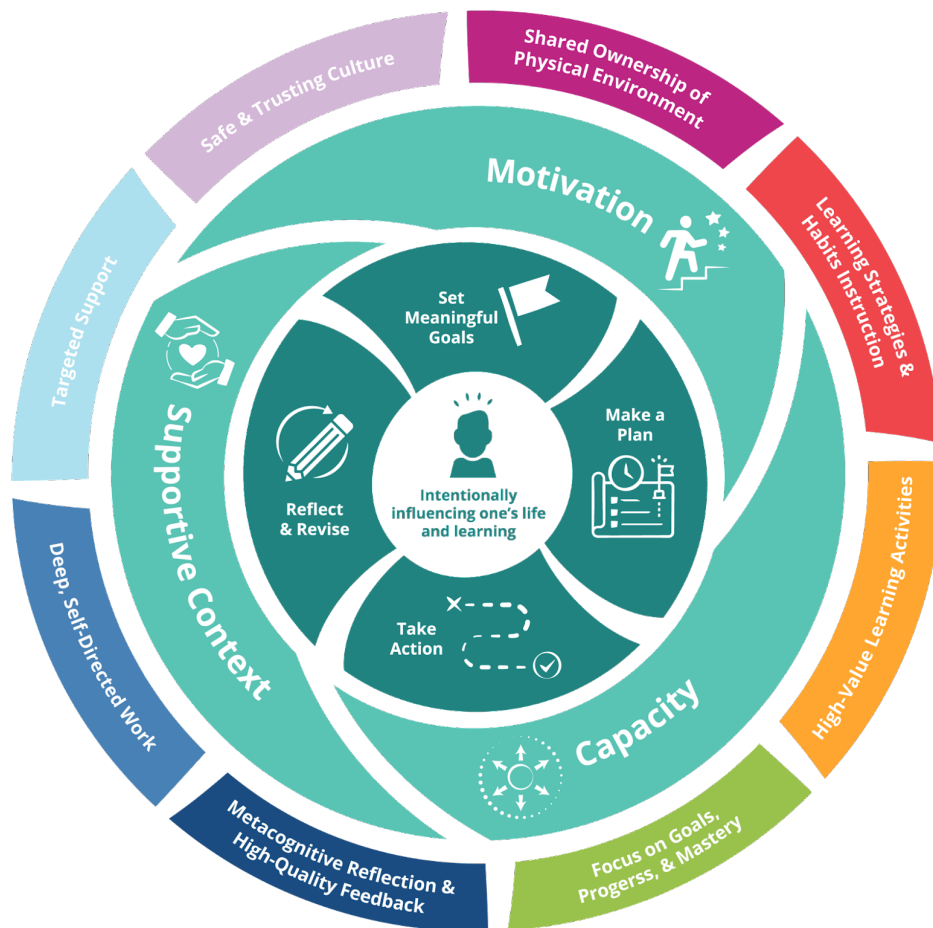
Agentic School Practices

Safe & Trusting Culture	A safe and trusting culture creates the context in which learners' voices, wonderings, and needs are respected and responded to proactively.
Shared Ownership of Physical Environment	Structures that encourage and embolden learners to navigate, care for, and shape the physical learning environment help create the conditions for agency to flourish.
Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction	Through instruction on learning strategies and habits, learners master new skills that support them to drive their own learning.
High-Value Learning Activities	High-value learning activities seamlessly integrate learners' interests and curiosities with standards-aligned content and skills in developmentally appropriate ways.
A Focus on Goals, Progress, & Mastery	A focus on goals, progress, and mastery makes children's learning and the process that got them there visible.
Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback	Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback help learners engage in the self-evaluation needed to reach one's goals now and in the future.
Deep, Self-Directed Work	When engaging in deep, self-directed work, learners build perseverance and do the "heavy lifting" for their own learning.
Targeted Support	Targeted support provides avenues for learners to identify the need for help, self-advocate, and receive additional support when needed.

Design Decisions: Things to Consider as a Site or Systems Lead

Redesigning learning to advance agency in early grades requires fundamental shifts in your school, and potentially system, design. It will require that you identify, create, and refine systems, structures, and/or routines to ensure cohesion for learners, and staff. Below we offer a list of some design decisions to consider as you embark on this journey with your community.

Shared Vision and Strategy
- **Agree upon and develop a shared set of learner goals,** inclusive of transferable skills like self-direction, self-awareness, perseverance, collaboration, trust, and more.
- **Ensure the system has a coherent design aligned to these goals**.
- **Support change management toward this long-term vision.** Provide support and accountability for the new goals and implementation of the new design.

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment
- **Create, adopt, or adapt a learning strategies and habits curriculum.** Having a consistent curriculum available will alleviate the burden on educators and support consistency for learners.
- **Ensure flexibility and spaciousness in the curricular scope and sequence**, enabling teachers to integrate learning strategies and habits into their instruction as well as opportunities for high-value activities, self-directed work, and more.

School Community & Culture
- **Build a safe and supportive climate for learners and adults**, diminishing barriers to success and prioritizing routines that create a sense of belonging among the learning community and a "safe to fail" culture.
- **Ensure the school's culture demonstrates an authentic, pervasive belief in all learners' ability to be agentic** and the benefits of cultivating their agency.
- **Celebrate staff for their learnings and goal accomplishment** in warm, authentic ways.
- **Set the tone for strong relationships within the school community** by getting to know each of your staff and creating opportunities to build relationships with each other.
- **Ensure behavior systems help learners take ownership of their emotions, words, and actions** as well as the impact they have.

Adult Roles, Hiring, & Learning
- **Offer ongoing professional development on agentic practices.**
- **Provide educators with agency**, emboldening them to shape their own work and the instructional design of their classroom whenever possible.
- **Create consistent systems and structures for adults to access support**.
- **Support teachers in becoming stable attachment figures for children.** Develop systems to enable teachers to build relationships with all children, and structures to support student-facing staff to maintain their own composure.
- **Develop new recruitment and hiring systems to employ educators who excel at fostering agency.**

Schedules & Use of Time
- **Audit and optimize use of time to accommodate, and prioritize, agency-rich learning experiences,** including high-value projects, play, choice time, and more.

- **Create a master schedule that is strategic and flexible,** enabling learners to seek and receive the support they need from adults and peers when they need it.

Community & Family Partnerships
- **Build understanding of and co-create a vision for learner agency with families,** including why it is important, how it looks to support agency for young learners, and what concerns and questions families have related to cultivating agentic behaviors.
- **Take time to understand the complex sociocultural factors that might be running counter to agentic behaviors in the classroom**, and work to address them (Jenny Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021).

Budget & Operations
- **Align your budget with your vision for agency.** Ensure that teachers have the resources and training to create agentic environments and experiences.

Space & Facilities
- **Create a school-wide physical environment that is welcoming and comfortable.**
- **Set school-wide norms for classroom set up.**

Technology & Tech Infrastructure
- **Create systems to manage learners' goals and progress toward mastery.**

Continuous Learning & Improvement
- **Develop metrics and systems** to understand progress toward fostering agency based on the experiences and outcomes of young people, families, and educators.
- **Model metacognitive reflection and create ways for staff and learners to experience high-quality feedback.**

Safe & Trusting Culture

A safe and trusting culture creates the context in which learners' voices, wonderings, and needs are respected and responded to proactively. In these settings, learners can take risks and enact their agency in meaningful ways. Positive relationships with others are an important factor in creating safe, nurturing environments. These environments ensure learners feel seen, known, and understood, and are spaces where they are able to talk about their feelings, emotions, and ideas without judgment. They are safe spaces for learners to practice their agency, help create a sense of belonging, and support learners to overcome challenges as they pursue meaningful goals.

Motivation

Creates a sense of belonging and connectedness to others that supports learners' risk-taking and persistence.

Supportive Context

Supports learners to navigate obstacles and access supports to accomplish meaningful goals.

Given the importance of close relationships for young learners, early grade teachers should get to know learners on an individual level. When they do, they are more equipped to cultivate a learning environment that makes learners feel safe, seen, and known. They are also better positioned to create "just-right" opportunities for learners to take social, emotional, and/or intellectual risks.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Co-create a classroom contract or set of community agreements.** These shared agreements help ensure all learners feel physically and psychologically safe. Consistently reinforce community agreements through setting and reinforcing clear expectations.
- **Develop a consistent schedule and routines.** Create an intentional daily schedule and (as much as possible) stick to it. Reinforce that each day has a predictable structure. Design, teach, and utilize classroom routines that prioritize safety and belonging while maximizing children's autonomy. (Check out: Consistent Routines from The Whole Child Model)
- **Serve as secure attachment figures for children.** Do this by being warm, consistent, and supportive. Work to maintain your composure and respond to children's strong emotions with empathy (Check out: Empathy & Maintaining Composure from The Whole Child Model)
- **Praise learners for their effort and the strategies they are using, not their personality**. For example, *"You used straight lines and curvy lines in your painting. You worked hard to show trees in your artwork!"*
- **Celebrate mistakes.** Create a community of learners where mistakes are seen as a valuable part of learning and where learners are encouraged to support one another.
- **Create opportunities for learners to talk about their emotions and work through problems as a group.** Explicitly teach ways to talk about emotions (e.g., "I" statements) and simple processes for conflict resolution. Anticipate when children may need check-ins, such as after recess, and ensure there is schedule flexibility to accommodate this.
- **Ensure learners feel seen, known, and understood.** This requires that adults get to know learners on an individual level, checking in regularly on how they are doing personally and with

regards to their learning goals. (See Practice: [Targeted Support](#))

- **Focus on growing positive relationships with learners, but also among learners.** For example, use team-building and partnering activities during morning meetings to help learners get to know one another and work together collaboratively. (Check out: [Strong Start Resources for Community Building & Purposeful Partnering from The Whole Child Model](#))
- **Promote and support perspective taking.** Help learners to notice, navigate, and resolve situations in which their individual perspectives may diverge from or be in conflict with the needs of others (Jenny Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021). In fact, trusting relationships provide a strong foundation for perspective taking (Galinsky, 2010).
- **Create consistent structures for learners to share what is on their mind and problem solve as a class.** While these structures can take many forms, they should be semi-regular and provide opportunities for learners to discuss any challenges they are facing and develop solutions collaboratively with their peers.
- **Use intentional language and tone to get children's attention, give clear directions, and narrate behavior that meets expectations.** This will require you to maintain composure at all times—remaining calm, empathetic, and assertive. (Check out: [Intentional Language & Tone from The Whole Child Model](#))

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Agree upon a shared set of graduate aims, school-wide agreements, and/or habits of work and learning.** Establish and train towards a school-wide practice where learners and teachers co-create community agreements every year.
- **Ensure behavior systems help learners take ownership of their emotions, words, and actions as well as the impact they have.** Deeply examine any systems that rely on or encourage external rewards. If external rewards are occasionally used, allow learners to have a voice in what these are.
- **Build a safe and supportive climate.** Ensure the norms, routines, and practices guiding the school culture focus on building a safe, supportive environment for all learners and staff.
- **Ensure the school's culture demonstrates an authentic belief in learners' ability to be agentic.** Ensure that the norms, routines, and practices guiding the culture reflect this belief and demonstrate trust in young people to drive their learning. Such a school culture holds a deep belief in the benefits of learners' building and enacting their agency.
- **Set the tone for strong relationships within the school community.** Get to know each one of your staff and create explicit opportunities for staff to build relationships with each other. Serve as a secure attachment figure for staff. (Check out: [Adult Well-Being from The Whole Child Model](#))
- **Support teachers in becoming stable attachment figures for children.** Develop systems to enable teachers to build relationships with all children (e.g., home visits, special time, daily check-ins), as well as structures and adult roles that provide space and support for student-facing staff to maintain their own composure (e.g., a call-for-help/tap-out system).

## Shared Ownership of Physical Environment

Structures that encourage and embolden learners to navigate, care for, and shape the physical learning environment help create the conditions for agency to flourish. When learners have real ownership over the physical space, adults and young people become co-agents. This gives learners the opportunity to practice their agency and make the learning environment their own, which can be incredibly motivating. Ownership also comes with increased responsibilities and accountability to others, which can build a range of skills such as initiative, organization, collaboration, and self-regulation.

Motivation
Provides a sense of control to learners and enables them to bring value to their surroundings.
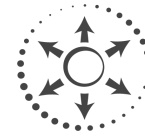
Capacity
Provides accountability and supported practice with initiative, organization, collaboration, self-regulation, and other skills.

Supportive Context
Creates an environment where learners can access support and enables independence.

Given that young children are beginning to explore and desire greater control and independence, providing ownership in the classroom can be an excellent approach. This includes ensuring the physical space enables independence *and* collaboration. Doing so gives young learners the opportunity to assert their power in ways that are meaningful to them.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Ensure the physical space is set up for different types of learning.** This includes ensuring diverse spaces exist for learners to choose where and how to work; having moveable, child-sized furniture; creating areas for collaborative and solo work; etc.
- **Organize the physical space in a way that enables independence and ownership.** This includes ensuring the physical space and the objects in it are accessible to young learners, giving them the ability to access materials, organize their belongings, etc. independently. Consider creating labels with pictures and words to facilitate clean up, alternative seating choices, and more to support independence.
- **Ensure the design of the physical space is warm and welcoming to young learners.** This includes the sights, sounds, smells, and feel. (Check out: Classroom Design from The Whole Child Model)
- **Decorate the learning space with learners' work**. This can be done by providing ample opportunities for learners to have a say in the look, feel, and design of the classroom, when appropriate. Work that is displayed does not need to be a final product. In fact, displaying work in progress (e.g., via documentation panels) helps learners see the progress of their work as a success and helps them understand they should take pride in where they are in the process. Additionally, consider having learners choose a theme at the beginning of the year to decorate the space; start the year with few if any items hung on the walls, and gradually reduce the use of commercially-made materials.
- **Seek learner input on how the room is set up and decorated.** Consider having learners

make meaningful parts of the classroom wall materials, such as alphabet letters for the word wall or icons for their birthday graph.
- **Act as a proactive curator and responsive guide during learning.** Doing so helps ensure the opportunities young people have and the resources available to them are accessible, are engaging, intentionally build capacities, and entail agentic action.
- **Introduce classroom roles or responsibilities.** Classroom roles can help build learners' sense of ownership as they become co-agents who are responsible for maintaining a learning space. (Check out: Classroom Jobs from the Whole Child Model)

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Create a school-wide physical environment that is welcoming and comfortable.** Consider the physical spaces such as staff lounges, offices, hallways, etc.
- **Set school-wide norms for classroom set up.** Add these norms to the teachers' manual. Have staff walk through each other's spaces and give feedback at the beginning of each school year.
- **Talk to teachers before investing in classroom furniture.** Make sure furniture fits the learners. Buy furniture that has multiple purposes and is easily maneuverable by children. In general, less is more.
- **Provide professional learning to expand thinking around the use of the physical space in learning environments.** Educators must have an opportunity to be on a learning journey themselves. Most educators have not had a chance to think about the strategy of the physical space in a classroom and how the design of the spaces sends signals to learners. This should be a place of wonderment. Encourage staff to learn from one another and be responsive to every group of learners, as they are different from year to year.
- **Hire educators who excel at preparing the learner environment.** Look for teachers who are strong at preparing the learner environment in ways that enable children to own their movement through the space and the materials within it.
- **Provide funding for teachers to create beautiful, welcoming learning spaces.** Make sure there are agreed upon parameters (both in terms of look and feel and school/district regulations), and then trust teachers' creativity and style.
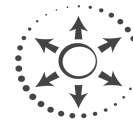
Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction

Through instruction on learning strategies and habits, learners master new skills that support them to drive their own learning. In short, they learn how to learn. While all kinds of knowledge, skills, and mindsets are supportive of agency, learning strategies and habits have a special role to play. Cultivating these skills directly builds learners' individual capacity, influences their sense of self-efficacy in positive ways, and gives them new abilities that are needed to enact their agency.

Motivation — Influences motivation through an increased belief in one's ability to succeed.

Capacity — Strengthens learners' overall capacity.

Young children in K-2 classrooms are ready to start building various learning strategies and habits. To cultivate these skills, young children need a mixture of explicit instruction, adult modeling, live narration, supported practice, high-quality feedback, and opportunities to reflect.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Clarify the learning strategies and habits you are trying to teach.** When available, these should be drawn from your existing graduate profile, school-wide Habits of Work and Learning, or curriculum that you are already using. Consistency of language and ideas will support learners in adopting these skills and applying them to various contexts.
- **Balance explicit teaching and discovery learning when building learning strategies and habits.** This requires making intentional decisions about what is explicitly taught and when discovery learning is used. Discovery learning is most effective when learners have adequate prior knowledge to make inferences and draw conclusions.
- **Model learning strategies and habits.** This can include modeling how to seek support when stuck, self-advocate, embrace mistakes as part of learning, set a goal and create a plan of action, reflect on progress toward a goal, adjust plans moving forward, and more.
- **Narrate your thinking.** Narrate your thought processes, reflections, or plans to correct course in relation to learning strategies and habits. This helps learners develop their inner voice and metacognitive thinking skills.
- **Explicitly address how learners might handle situations that do not encourage agency or even penalize it.** If this isn't addressed during direct instruction, then parents—especially parents of color—might feel that building learner agency is setting their children up for trouble or harm within a society that often demands compliance from BIPOC individuals (Jenny Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021).
- **Pair habit goals with academic goals in daily lessons.** Then, explicitly teach to and reflect on both.
- **Offer varied opportunities for learners to practice learning strategies and habits.** Young learners benefit from repeated opportunities to practice these skills and apply them to new content, contexts, and activities they find enjoyable. These opportunities should be playful whenever possible. They also do not need to be stand-alone lessons. Rather, look at

the lesson you need to teach as well as the structure (e.g., group work) and decide what is the learning strategy or habit that would support that lesson. For instance, you might teach a collaboration strategy before a group work lesson.

- **Use 1-1 and small group conferencing to teach, practice, and reflect on learning strategies and habits.** This is a time where learners can get tailored support on these habits and skills.
- **Provide process-oriented, high-quality feedback on children's learning and growth.** Feedback can come soon after a task is completed or during a task. For example, you might provide feedback to your class on how they collaborated after a group work activity, building a shared anchor chart on what went well, what didn't work, and identifying a possible strategy for next time. On the other hand, you might provide live feedback to a learner, offering: *"I noticed you two collaborating just now when you took turns listening to each other's ideas and then combined them into a new one."* (See Practice: [Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback](#))
- **Encourage self-reflection and metacognitive thinking.** Do this by asking learners questions about the strategies they are using in the moment, or what worked or did not work for them and *why.* Also, ask them what they might try differently next time. (See Practice: [Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback](#))

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Agree on and develop a shared set of learning strategies and habits.** This helps create school-wide alignment and consistency for learners and teachers across the site or system.
- **Create, adopt, or adapt a learning strategies and habits curriculum.** Expecting teachers to establish this curriculum on their own can be taxing. Instead, provide a learning strategies and habits curriculum at the school or system level that teachers can leverage and customize to best meet the needs of their learners.
- **Ensue teachers have the space and autonomy to integrate learning strategies and habits into their instruction.** Even if a learning strategies curriculum is provided, teachers will need the freedom and support to integrate learning strategies into the academic curriculum in a responsive and ongoing basis throughout the day.
- **Offer ongoing professional development on learning strategies and habits instruction.** This includes professional development (e.g., PLCs, lesson studies, coaching) on how to teach, model, narrate, design supportive practice, give high-quality feedback, and encourage reflection on learning strategies and habits for early grade learners. Opportunities should allow teachers to share best practices and learn from, and collaborate with, their peers.

While the literature suggests that learning strategies and habits must be explicitly taught, it is not enough to teach learners goal-setting (e.g., [SMART](#) or [WOOP](#) goal procedures) or reflection skills in isolation and hope that it fosters agency. It will not. Rather, these foundational skills must be nurtured, taught, and practiced actively and authentically in context to further expand learners' skills and enable agency. Therefore, educators must build these learning strategies and habits *and* provide the opportunity to authentically practice (See Practice: [Deep, Self-DIrected Learning](#)). By infusing learning strategies and habits and opportunities for practice into learning, learners further develop and reinforce their agentic capacity.
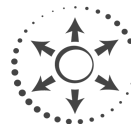
High-Value Learning Activities

High-value learning activities seamlessly integrate learners' interests and curiosities with standards-aligned content and skills in developmentally appropriate ways. These activities come in all shapes and sizes. They can be individual or group focused, align to a variety of topics or subject areas, and can take place over a range of time periods. What these activities have in common is that they allow learners to explore their interests, deeply immerse in learning, and build an array of skills that matter to them and support their growth.

Motivation
Activities grounded in learners' interests give learning value, fueling motivation.

Capacity
When high-value activities are thoughtfully crafted, they support the development of a diverse range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets.

In K-2 settings, high-value learning activities should build on young childrens' intrinsic motivation to learn by focusing on their interests and the questions they have about the world around them. Often these activities build their capabilities in ways that are engaging, purposeful, playful, or fun.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Get to know your learners individually.** Try closely observing, surveying, and talking with your learners individually and as a group to better understand their interests, curiosities, needs, and motivators (Zeiser et al., 2018).
- **Incorporate learner interests into learning experiences**. After getting to know learners individually, respond by incorporating their interests into assignments, projects, groupings, etc. when possible (Adair & Colegrove, 2014, 2021; EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010; NAEYC, 2020; Whitington, 2014).
- **Encourage learners to wonder.** Create routines that help you surface and document learners' ever changing interests, curiosities, and wonderings (e.g., "I Wonder…" wall, surveys).
- **Provide opportunities for learners to explore.** Exploration allows learners to discover their interests, try things out, assess their progress, choose their course, and generally take the lead in their learning (Gündoğdu, 2006; Stixrud & Johnson, 2018; Whitington, 2014).
- **Design lessons that incorporate inquiry-based learning and sensory exploration.** Prime learners with provocative questions and materials to explore. Give them time to construct their own understanding rather than "showing them how."
- **Promote play and use games to help learners practice skills.** Play, in particular, enables children to direct their learning in ways that matter to them (Ghapar, 2021). Play can be guided, self-directed, imaginative, solitary, collaborative, constructive, etc. This includes prioritizing, and protecting, free choice time.
- **Use protocols to lift learners' voices and encourage them to co-construct learning.** Protocols support simultaneous engagement and equity of voice helping each child to feel like their ideas matter. Open-ended discussion protocols can also help you to better understand learners' thinking and passions to better support their learning. (Check out: Protocols Videos from EL Education)
- **Provide opportunities to engage with content and/or demonstrate learning through multiple modalities.** These different modalities (e.g., art, drama, writing) enable learners to

engage through one they value already or want to explore for the first time.

- **Design extended learning experiences, projects, and/or discussions based on learners' interests, wonderings, and real world experiences and needs.** Integrating high-interest topics into learning activities can be incredibly motivating and can act as a vehicle for learners to strengthen a wide range of skills.

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Ensure flexibility and spaciousness in curricula.** When the curricular scope and sequence includes a manageable number of learning objectives and space for teachers to customize activities they will have more space to include high-value learning activities.
- **Adopt (or encourage your district to adopt) curricula that support agency.** If possible, seek out language arts and math curricula that build in opportunities for learners to engage in high-interest activities, to create meaningful work, and to develop agency. Make this one of your criteria for selection in the curriculum adoption process.
- **Audit the current use of time to optimize high-value learning activities.** Are there other times of the day that could become more learner-centered and incorporate high-value learning experiences? For example, transforming the art room into a maker station or electives to include more purposeful play. What training and support would current teachers need? Do you have the space to accommodate this?
- **Create a master schedule that accommodates time for high-value projects, play, and choice time**. Typically this includes scheduling longer blocks of time for learners to engage in activities like high-interest projects and thematic units anchored in learners' interests, as these blocks provide spaciousness for learners to tinker, test out different strategies, explore, iterate, and get into a "flow" state.
- **Provide educators with agency.** Educators must have the ability to shape their own work and the instructional design of their classroom.
- **Hire teachers who excel at planning purposeful, high-value activities.** Look for teachers who are strong at designing experiences that integrate learners' interests with standards.
- **Support teachers to plan high-value activities.** Provide training on and time for planning purposeful, high-value activities grounded in state standards and learners' interests.
- **Enable increased role specialization.** Consider the ways in which your staff size and educator to learner ratio support role specialization or make it more challenging.

When teachers take the time to observe and truly understand learners, their curiosities, interests, and needs on an individual level, they can support their motivation, remove barriers, and extend their learning in purposeful ways. However, this does not mean that all work needs to be tailored to each individual learner, or that only activities directly tailored to learners' interests can be used. Often, having a shared focus—or better yet, a shared purpose of collective agency—can increase motivation, build capacity, and develop new lifelong passions even when the topic may not be within every learner's primary interests. At their best, shared studies allow each child to bring their individual interests and strengths *and* to develop new ones.
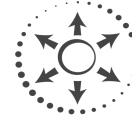
A Focus on Goals, Progress, & Mastery

A focus on goals, progress, and mastery makes children's learning and the process that got them there visible. In agentic settings, grades, levels, and scores take a back seat to the *learning* and *process* that learners took to achieve their goals. When learners see their progress and are recognized for their hard work, it builds their self-efficacy and fuels motivation; helps create a growth-oriented environment; and keeps the emphasis on cultivating their capacity.

Motivation
Makes progress visible, which fuels self-efficacy and is incredibly motivating.

Capacity
Keeps the emphasis on what each learner needs to achieve.

Supportive Context
Cultivates a growth-oriented environment that is celebratory and joyful.

In K-2 settings, a focus on goals, progress, and mastery may be heavily adult guided. Often individual lessons will have goals (or learning targets or objectives) that learners will reflect on during or after the lesson. Adults should aim to check in on longer term goals and discuss goal progress with learners on a regular basis, ideally every week, or as close to that as possible. While goal progress and mastery can be shared with the whole class or school, it's most important for learners to be able to understand and see their progress on goals, milestones, and how they overcame challenges.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Begin by affirming why goals exist and how they are helpful.** This can occur whether it is the first time learners are experiencing goals or the 13th year they are doing so. Affirm the deeper purpose behind goals and how they build skills needed for life as well as communicate an emphasis on progress, not just on the score at the end.
- **Create a system to help manage learners' goals, progress, and achievements.** For young learners, it will be important for teachers to manage these systems; however, learners should always be able to view their goals and progress (e.g., have goal trackers in an accessible space, have a portal where learners can view and manage their goals/progress, create a system for learners to save their best work in a portfolio).
- **Name and explicitly teach to goals.** Communicate academic and habit goals to learners and provide instruction on one aspect of the goal at a time. Differentiate between long-term and short-term goals, providing concrete steps and opportunities for small wins when going after larger goals such as writing a paragraph or mastering counting by twos. (Check out: Using Learning Targets with Early Primary Children from EL Education)
- **Regularly review goal trackers with learners.** Do this without judgment. Ask questions that prompt learners to reflect on their progress and strategies used, get curious about what supported/prevented them in meeting the goal, and identify potential next steps. Use this time to celebrate learners' milestones, hard work, self-awareness, and how they overcame challenges. This could entail holding weekly or bi-weekly 1-1 or small group conferences with learners, and reflecting on goals as a class daily.
- **Carve out time to celebrate learners' goal progress and mastery.** It is important to honor learners' progress regularly both through daily/weekly routines (e.g., end of the day/ lesson

shout outs, story telling, documentation panels) and longer-term structures (e.g., exhibitions of work, learner-led conferences). Tend to the ways that feel meaningful to learners by asking them beforehand and building rituals that learners look forward to.
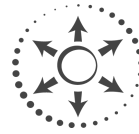
- **Minimize the use of external rewards.** External rewards such as prizes or points for reaching a goal are not likely to promote real engagement and intrinsic motivation to learn (Hyson, 2008) and can create an unsupportive culture of competition or winners and losers.

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Build a system-wide, community-driven vision and investment in broad graduate aims**. They should be inclusive of transferable agentic skills like self-direction, self-awareness, and perseverance, and also academic skills and knowledge.
- **Ensure the system has a clear strategy to design toward these broader outcomes.** How does the curriculum, structures, supports, and school design explicitly support these skills in each grade band? How and what will we measure? Why? Then, align on the most effective strategy and create a systemic structure or process that can be used by all learners.
- **Model goal orientation by celebrating staff for their learnings and goal accomplishment in warm, authentic ways.** Create regular time each month for all staff—including leaders—to create, monitor progress, and reflect on goals they are striving to achieve, celebrating progress along the way. Keep the emphasis on learning and progress, and not, for example, on who has turned in their lesson plans on time for the last month. Doing so creates a culture of joyful celebration rather than one focused on rewards.
- **Create systems to manage and share learners' goal progress and attainment.** This may include online platforms (e.g., a LMS), but can certainly be done in lower-tech ways (e.g., spreadsheets or paper goal trackers). Doing so helps make goal progress and attainment visible to learners, teachers, and parents. Consider implementing structures like learner-led conferences and celebrations of learning to share learner work with parents and the community. (Check out: The Who, What, and Why of Student-Led Conferences from EL Education)
- **Develop metrics and systems to understand progress toward fostering agency.** Set goals, collect data, and measure progress on agency development based on the experiences and outcomes of young people, families, and educators.
- **Establish common practices and expectations for external rewards**. Ensure that teachers, staff, and families have a shared vision for external rewards. Make strategic, intentional decisions about when external rewards are used.

Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback

Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback help learners engage in the self-evaluation needed to reach one's goals now and in the future. Reflection and feedback can take many forms and range in frequency and depth. What these processes have in common is that they carve out avenues for learners to receive concrete, actionable feedback from their teachers and peers, which can then be used to set meaningful goals and plan tangible actions toward those goals. Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback are essential for supporting the agentic

Capacity

Builds self-awareness and other capacities that prepare them for self-directed learning.

Supportive Context

Helps create a community of learners that encourage each other to produce their best work.

cycle; building learners' self-awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, and interests; and helping to create a community of learners that support each other to produce their best work. Both of these processes need to be modeled and carefully scaffolded in a non-judgemental way so that learners feel safe to accurately and compassionately engage in reflection and feedback processes.

In K-2 settings, metacognitive reflection and feedback processes will rely heavily on adult scaffolding, modeling, and narration as children's metacognition is just developing. The youngest learners need opportunities to reflect and/or receive feedback during or soon after a task, while older learners may be ready to reflect over longer time horizons (e.g., one week).

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Provide process-oriented, high-quality feedback on children's learning and growth.** In K-2 settings, feedback generally should be given during or soon after a task is completed to help learners reflect on their work and the strategies they used. Be as concrete as possible and relate what children did to positive descriptive adjectives. For example, you might say, *"You drew individual tally marks for each color of block so that you could count them easily. Working neatly and carefully helped you to be accurate so that you could make your graph."* (See Practice: Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction)
- **Encourage self-reflection and metacognitive thinking.** Do this by asking learners questions on what strategies worked or did not work for them and *why* as well as what they might try differently next time. This may be done in 1-1 or small group conferencing and/or as a class. Class reflections can be added to anchor charts for future reference and goal setting. (See Practice: Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction)
- **Use 1-1 and/or small group conferencing to encourage self-reflection and offer feedback.** Individualized conferencing appointments are a great time to: build metacognitive skills through questioning and discussion, help learners decide what to revise, review self-evaluation rubrics, offer feedback on specific skills, support learners to consider strategies and feedback suggested by others, and more.
- **Help learners identify challenges they are facing with regards to employing their agency.** This includes helping learners identify gaps in the skills, mindsets, and/or

self-knowledge that underpin agency (Zeiser et al., 2018).

- **Scaffold reflection and feedback**. Do this by developing routines, structures, and procedures that support learners to reflect, give feedback, and consider feedback from others. Some effective strategies for this are simple self-evaluation rubrics, a buddy system where learners check in daily with a peer to reflect on goals and/or work, class-made criteria list based on models of high-quality work, critique protocols, and sentence stems for learners to use when sharing feedback to others.
- **Model metacognitive reflection and how to give high-quality feedback to others.** This may include modeling how to reflect on one's goals, work, or learning strategies used; how to ask for feedback from others; or how to share both positive and constructive feedback. (Check out: Simple Critique Protocol for Primary & Elementary Students from EL Education)
- **Narrate learners' actions to build their inner voice.** You might also encourage learners to share their thinking aloud with you, to a partner, or quietly to themselves.
- **Provide space and time for learners to reflect and give/receive feedback.** Do this by designing specific moments of the day for all learners to take part in metacognitive reflection, self-evaluate work, and provide/receive feedback.
- **Provide opportunities for learners and families to give candid feedback.** Ask learners and their families to give constructive feedback to the school/teacher and use this feedback to inform decisions to best meet the needs of all learners.

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Hire educators who are skilled at providing high-quality feedback to learners.** Look for teachers who provide feedback that focuses on learner process and gives actionable suggestions for improvement.
- **Offer ongoing professional development on supporting metacognitive reflection.** This includes professional development (e.g., PLCs, lesson studies, coaching) on how to teach, model, narrate, and support metacognitive reflection and the ability to give and consider feedback from others for early grade learners. Provide opportunities for teachers to share best practices and learn from, and collaborate with, their peers.
- **Model metacognitive reflection**. Leaders can practice this process with staff and describe the ways in which they themselves are striving to improve in relation to their goals. They may also ask for feedback from staff to share some of the reflections they are having on their journey.
- **Give high-quality feedback to staff.** Examine your own feedback practices and those of your coaches to ensure that you are regularly modeling how to give high-quality feedback. Use descriptive praise, 2x2s, or other structures to provide actionable feedback.
- **Develop a guide of effective metacognitive reflection questions for staff to use with learners.** Include effective questioning techniques to use before, during, and after learning such as "What should I try first to solve this problem?" or "What helped me finish this task?"
- **Create ways for staff to experience high-quality feedback.** In addition to giving staff feedback, integrate opportunities for staff to practice giving feedback to each other during professional learning.
- **Help teachers identify the types of work that are worthy of peer feedback.** Provide opportunities for teachers to share work and discuss which work they are having students give feedback about and how they are scaffolding students for success.
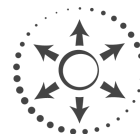
Deep, Self-Directed Work

When engaging in deep, self-directed work, learners build perseverance and do the "heavy lifting" for their own learning. These learning experiences are purposefully designed by educators and offer tasks that are optimally challenging, stretching learners just beyond their current level of mastery. While self-directed work can vary in design from daily lessons to regular structures, they all require that learners shoulder the responsibility for learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Here, learners take action and practice getting into a flow state, while simultaneously building a wide range of capacities.

Motivation
Allows learners to experience opportunities to control their own learning, fueling motivation.

Capacity
Builds a wide range of capacities, including a growth mindset and perseverance.

In K-2 settings, as children engage in self-directed work, early grade teachers should look out for learners who are reaching a point of frustration and proactively offer support. This is important because young children may not yet have the awareness to ask for help. However, teachers must do this in ways that do not undermine a learner's autonomy, agency, or intelligence (See Practice: Targeted Support).

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Integrate extended blocks of uninterrupted work time into learners' schedules.** This is a time for learners to select into and practice an array of skills.
- **Help learners to build stamina.** Persisting through challenges takes practice over time. Help learners build their stamina and comfort with "not knowing yet" by using timers, giving micro-challenges, varying the level of difficulty, and praising effort.
- **Use open-ended *why* and *how* questions to deepen learners' thinking.** Questioning can be a powerful tool to better understand *why* learners think what they think and can embolden them to find answers for themselves. When adults shift from answering learners' questions to offering encouragement, nurturing learner reflection and deep thinking with additional questions, and providing resources and guidance so learners can find answers themselves, learners are positioned as drivers of their own learning.
- **Develop opportunities for discussion around learner interests and wonderings.** These types of activities are not only highly motivating to learners, but they also require learners to do the majority of the cognitive lifting. Learners themselves must generate ideas, push each other's thinking, find solutions, and more.
- **Design open-ended activities and daily lessons around inquiry questions.** Give learners opportunities to use their creativity and problem solving skills by designing lessons around a challenge such as: *"How many squares can you find in our classroom?"* or *"How can you make this lightbulb light?"* Additionally, you might design open-ended activities or projects with no-single right answer or predetermined end product. For example, learners might work in small groups to answer: *"What does a school of the future look like?"* and create a diorama as a final product.
- **Provide opportunities for learners to grapple or explore the concept alone or with**

peers before providing direct instruction. Often instruction is built on the framework of "I do, we do, you do." When children have a base of prior knowledge on a subject, try beginning with a "you do" to give learners opportunities to experiment and come up with their own solutions. Then, if you model or explain, you can honor all that they already know and are able to do and target instruction to their areas of challenge.

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Ensure your schedule allows for extended blocks of work time.** These blocks generally range from 30 minutes to 3 hours.
- **Train teachers.** Teachers will need to learn how to recognize when a learner is stuck, how to employ new questioning and discussion strategies, how to design lessons around inquiry questions and open-ended activities, and how to engage in data driven instruction to ensure practice time is intentional and developmentally appropriate.
- **Develop instructional materials to support questioning and discussion.** These materials should also include rich content for learners to think about.
- **Revise curricular scope and sequence to include explicit opportunities for deep, challenging work.** This can include deliberate practice, uninterrupted work, discussion, and open-ended activities.
- **Hire teachers who excel at planning standards-aligned learning activities.** Look for teachers who are strong at designing activities that require learners to persevere, grapple, and do the "heavy lifting."
- **Support teachers to plan standards-aligned learning activities.** Provide sufficient time for your staff to design purposeful learning activities that require learners to persevere.

> Supporting young learners' motivation—and agency—via increased opportunities for choice and autonomy does not mean that 'kids run the show.' Rather, adults must take on the role of a coach or guide, helping children make agentic decisions for themselves and providing support along the way when needed (OECD, 2019; Stixrud & Johnson, 2018; Transcend, 2018). In addition to offering support, adults must set learners up for success by understanding the appropriate level of autonomy learners need for the work they are doing, ensuring work is appropriately rigorous, and providing necessary resources.

Targeted Support

Targeted support provides avenues for learners to identify the need for help, self-advocate, and receive additional support when needed. Support can take many forms, including materials that help learners seek support, mentorship opportunities, 1-1 and small group conferencing, and more. What these supports have in common is that they help ensure learners can access the support they need to drive their learning; build a variety of support seeking skills that underpin agency and, in turn, support the will to take action and persevere; and make support accessible to learners as they tackle challenging work.

Given that young children look to trusted adults as resources when they need help, early grade educators should create clear structures for learners to access support when learning, including support from their peers and community. Since young learners may not have the self-awareness yet to know when they need help, or how best to ask for it, educators will likely need to be proactive in checking in and directly offering support, as well as building support-seeking skills in learners.
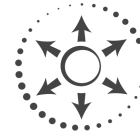
Motivation

Diminishes barriers to success and increases a learner's sense of control over their learning.

Capacity

Helps build learners' self-advocacy and resourcefulness, among other skills.

Supportive Context

Adult guidance, peer support, and other scaffolds made known through tailored supports help ensure that even challenging work is doable.

How to get started if you are a teacher:
- **Set up 1-1 and/or small group conferences with learners.** This time can be used to set goals, plan actionable steps, track progress, reflect, practice a skill, get feedback, share strategies, receive additional support, and more.
- **Establish consistent systems, structures, and protocols for learners to access tailored support.** Create structures that allow children to make decisions about when and how they want to receive this support. Doing so will help learners build stamina and help *you* know when to check in and when to let a child continue to work uninterrupted.
- **Design cooperative activities.** Working and playing with peers provides avenues for learners to build communication and collaboration skills as they share ideas, imagine together, and even work through conflict (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011; Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). These activities can help young learners develop positive peer connections.
- **Encourage learners to check in with and leverage their peers as resources.** Peers can be a powerful resource for learners and can support them in tackling challenging tasks, reflecting on goals and focus, holding each other accountable, and more. Modeling as well as creating routines and expectations around how to give and ask for support will be incredibly important. Build out opportunities for learners to practice this skill.
- **Help learners identify others to learn from and to lean on for support**. Doing so helps expand learners' networks and encourages them to tap into these resources and relationships to support their learning and growth.

How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:
- **Prioritize routines that create a sense of belonging for learners of all ages and a "safe to fail" culture.** Establishing trust and prioritizing relationships allows learners to take tolerable risks and seek support without judgment. This helps them understand that trying and "failing" is part of learning and growing.
- **Establish consistent systems, structures, and protocols across the school site or district for learners and adults to access support.** In order to ensure all learners have at least one trusted coach/teacher that would be able to accurately report on their current wellbeing, strengths, and areas for growth. For adults, design small continuous cohorts of peers to check in and support one another. This may also include educator and leader affinity groups, ongoinging PLCs, faculty circles, and more.
- **Give high-quality feedback to staff.** Use descriptive praise, 2x2s, or other structures to provide actionable feedback.
- **Create a master schedule that is strategic and flexible**. This enables learners to seek and receive the support they need from adults and peers when they need it. Additionally, schedules should accommodate time for regular check-ins between a learner (or a group of learners) and an adult.
- **Ensure adult learners have access to support.** Carve out avenues for your staff to seek help when needed, get advice or mentorship, and more. Additionally, as a site or systems leader, model and normalize seeking support when you need it.
- **Diminish barriers to success.** Ensure all learners have access to enabling resources (e.g., materials, technology) needed for learning. Ensure budgeting and operational decisions reflect this priority (Transcend, 2020).

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: List of Skills that Grew When Young Children Could Regularly Express their Agency

Through a blend of traditional ethnographic and video-cued methods, classroom observations, and formal and informal interviews, Adair and Colegrove (2021) documented a wide array of capabilities that expanded when young children could regularly express their agency in Ms. Bailey's 1st grade class. Below we include the list of skills:

- Ask questions that deepen knowledge
- Engage in intellectual discussions
- Observe
- Listen
- Clarify information
- Lead
- Respond to other's needs
- Share knowledge
- Act on curiosity
- Collaborate
- Create models
- Tell stories
- Welcome new participants
- Share knowledge
- Teach

- Pursue an interest deeply
- Fail without giving up
- Initiate
- Adapt
- Follow interests
- Offer feedback
- Take charge of learning
- Work with diverse group
- Learn from families and community members
- Connect to diverse stories
- Resolve conflicts
- Translate between two languages
- Respond to others questions
- Build community

Source: (Adair & Colegrove, 2021)

Appendix B: Key Developmental Milestones, Trajectories, and Transitions Between Ages 4-8

Cognitive Development
- **Children develop in their ability to remember experiences and make connections**. Over time, children are increasingly able to use deliberate and spontaneous strategies to remember information, use knowledge of routines to think ahead, and describe events and other details from memory. Starting in 1st and 2nd grade, children typically progress to connect the past and the present using approximate time estimates (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop early number, space, and object sense, which provide strong foundations for learning** (Galinsky, 2010). Children are increasingly able to group objects and words based on a variety of associations (e.g., by physical characteristics, function) (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop their ability to think symbolically,** using images and symbols to represent ideas, objects, places, etc. (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).

Approaches to Learning
- **Young children are motivated by their curiosity and a desire to understand the world around them** (EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010; Hyson, 2008).
- **Young children seek mastery and competence** (EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010; Hyson, 2008).
- **Children are intrinsically motivated to play and learn through relevant and interesting tasks/activities** (EL Education, n.d.; Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop their ability to reflect and think metacognitively about their learning** as they begin to understand their identities as learners (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).
- **Children develop confidence in their ability to persist through challenges**. Over time, learners progress toward pursuing a personal goal until it's reached and completing developmentally-appropriate activities with minimal assistance from adults (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop their ability to set a goal, make a plan to reach that goal, monitor their progress and evaluate their plan, and make adjustments as needed** (Galinsky, 2010).
- **Children show flexibility, creativity, and imagination during play and thinking**. Children begin to accept better ideas and incorporate them into plans when they emerge, exercise creativity when completing tasks, experiment and invent, and over time need less detailed instructions (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop their ability to solve problems using a range of strategies**, typically progressing to solve problems on their own before seeking help from a peer or adult (Teaching Strategies, 2015).

Social-Emotional Development
- **Children are increasingly able to recognize, name, and identify what caused their emotions**; use words to express what they are feeling; and manage their feelings and

emotions using learned strategies (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children are increasingly able to take care of their needs, taking increased responsibility for their personal well-being.** Learners in 1st and 2nd grade typically progress toward using their growing skills to accomplish personal goals (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop interpersonal problem-solving skills.** Over time, children rely less on teacher or adult guidance to resolve social problems, shifting to use supports and other structures to resolve problems on their own (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop and sustain positive, warm, and trusting relationships with adults.** Children look to trusted adults as resources when they need help and to share interests (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
  - **Young children look to others (e.g., teachers, parents or caregivers) for how to approach things** as well as to understand what is safe, interesting, scary, etc. (Galinsky, 2010).
  - **From an early age, learners know who they can turn to for help when learning** (e.g., asking one adult to help them fix a broken toy and another to find a book on dinosaurs) (Galinsky, 2010).
- **Children develop positive relationships and interactions with peers.** Children progress toward initiating, joining, and engaging in positive interactions with small groups of their peers. Learners in 1st and 2nd grade typically progress toward working collaboratively in small groups to achieve a collective goal (Teaching Strategies, 2015).

Identity & Personal Development
- **Most children, well before the age of 5, have developed rudimentary definitions and understandings of social identities**, both their own and those of others (NAEYC, 2020).
- **Children begin to develop positive associations with various aspects of their identities,** often taking pride in these identities. Sometimes, children begin to challenge society's messages about various social identities and the societal value they hold (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2020).

Executive Function
- **Executive functions emerge in preschool years but don't fully develop until young adulthood** (Galinsky, 2010). Young children make significant progress in executive functioning the following ways:
  - **Children are increasingly able to focus for sustained amounts of time on activities that are engaging and matter to them** (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
  - **Children are increasingly able to flexibly adjust to and accept changes in their routines.** They demonstrate cognitive flexibility, adjusting to changed priorities, considering alternatives when problem solving, selecting new strategies, and correcting course as needed (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
  - **Children are increasingly able to inhibit and regulate their actions** in ways that uphold community agreements (Teaching Strategies, 2015).

Physical Development
- **Children demonstrate and increase fine-motor and large-motor physical competence**, balance skills, as well as traveling skills and movements (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Young children become increasingly aware of their bodily movements** as well as safe ways to move around spaces (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Young children explore the world through their bodies, senses, and movement** (EL Education, n.d.).

Language & Literacy Development
- **Children develop foundational skills in language and literacy in early childhood** (e.g., foundations for speaking, reading, listening, writing, comprehension, oral language, vocabulary) (Galinsky, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop their voices as writers**, progressing toward writing using conventions (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children develop phonological awareness, skills in phonics, and concepts of print and its uses** (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children typically progress toward using various strategies to make meaning while reading grade-level content** (Teaching Strategies, 2015).
- **Children increasingly develop their ability to express their thoughts and needs** as well as engage in and extend conversations with others by asking and answering questions, responding to comments, and connecting ideas shared during the conversation (Teaching Strategies, 2015).