

# What is Student Agency?



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## Conceptualising Student Agency

In the educational context, agency refers to a respectful and more empowered positioning of students to be active agents in their own learning lives. Student agency encompasses both the *power of possibility* in learning contexts intersecting with the *personal desire and will* to act.

The *strength of will* is shaped by and conditional upon students' sense of their own self-efficacy and belief in themselves, their beliefs about success at school, their sense of belonging in the learning and what they see as the meaning and purposefulness of their actions.

The *strength of an individual's power to act* resides both in the individual learner (their personal and social resources in the form of skills and capabilities; knowledge and understandings; dispositions) and in the power of possibility in their contexts (particularly the opportunities created by adults and others in their learning environments and the ways their interactions and relationships shape their own sense of possibility).

Williams (2017) notes that a strong sense of self-efficacy, along with respect and appreciation for the diversity of individuals in every class and their unique attributes, come together to build a sense of agency. He argues that:

*...learning with agency is an entirely different cognitive and physical activity leading to powerful learners who choose to take on challenges with their whole being. (p. 10)*

The following conceptual model is designed to offer guidance for teachers who want to better understand, design and act to enable optimal student agency with their classes. Optimal agency is achieved when student agency is connected to learning excellence, a strong commitment to and motivation to learn, and results in optimal growth and development.

In their research, Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) stress that the following needs to be a focus of teachers if they are to foster the will to learn and act:

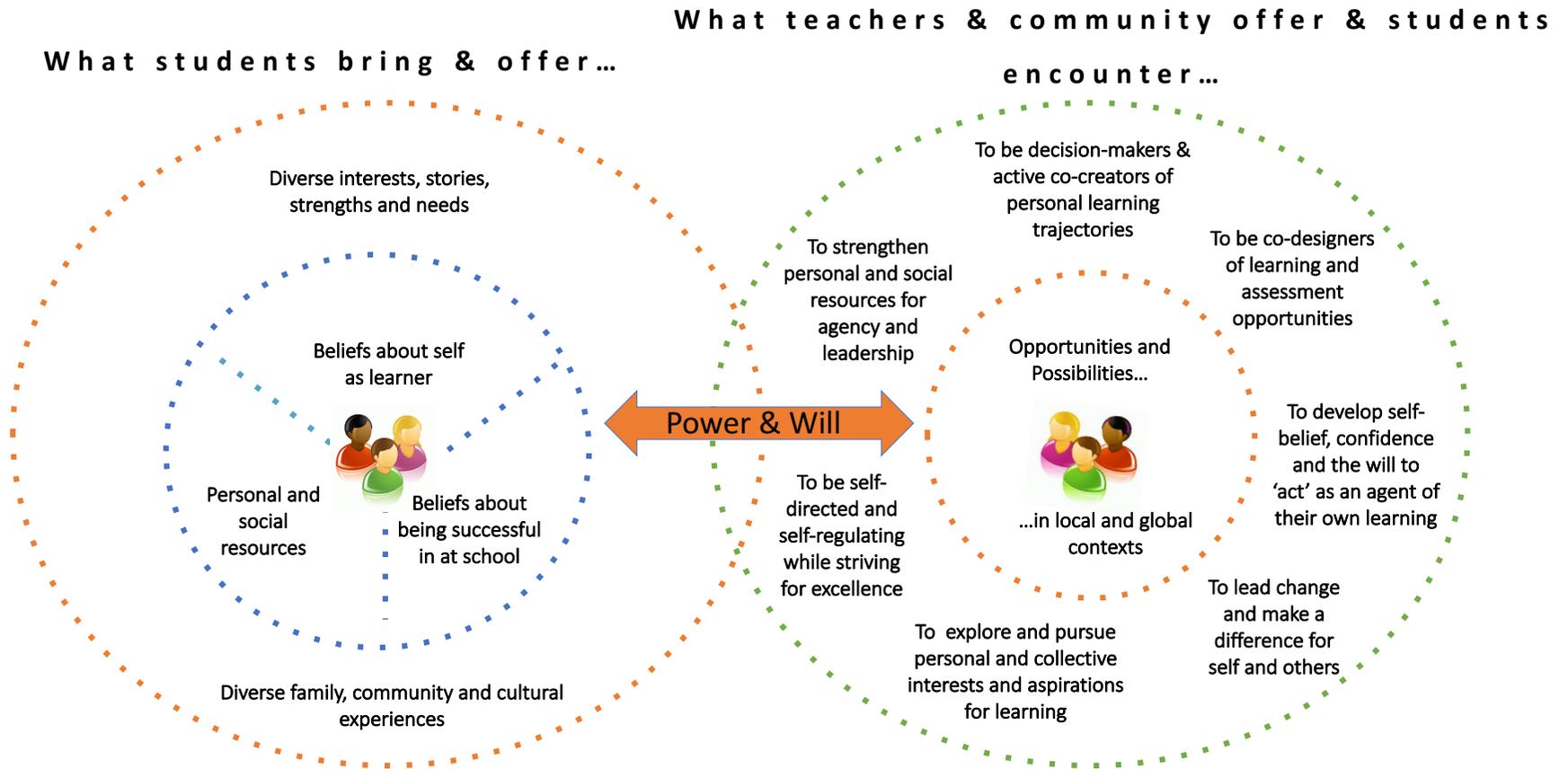
*Students exist within a dynamic ecology; it shapes them, while they also shape it. Knowing each student well enough to see how this web of causality motivates him or her to achieve is crucial to teaching that student well. (p.2)*

Attending to the overall context for agency, including the interrelationships and intersections that exist, is central to understanding how and why the power and will to learn emerge for each student. The following section unpacks the elements identified above in the proposed conceptual model, together with what this means for teachers.

# Learner Agency

Figure 1: A Conceptual Model to Guide Teachers

**Agency is about the power of possibility for students to be active agents in their own learning + their personal desire and will to act.**  
This will be shaped by what students bring to their learning intersecting with what they encounter in their learning contexts



Understood as a dynamic ecology where the learner, in community continually shapes and is shaped by all factors

**Attending to student beliefs and how they see themselves as learners:** this means that teachers actively seek to understand how students see themselves as learners, particularly their sense of self-efficacy, and support learners to grow in their self-knowledge and self-belief through their actions and interactions with others. Teachers engage in conversation about this with their students, create opportunities for students to value what they bring to their learning and gather evidence periodically to monitor whether learner identity is strengthening over time. Students also actively attend to the ways they tend to think about themselves and take action, with adequate support and guidance, to develop and grow and change over time. Beliefs about the likelihood of success in class or at school are also shaped by learners' past and present experiences and the messages they are forming about themselves.

**Attending to the strength of student's personal and social resources:** Every student brings a range of personal and social resources to their learning in the form of their *skills and capabilities*; their *knowledge and understandings*; and their *dispositions and motivations to learn*. Teachers can work with students to uncover what they bring to their learning and co-design ways to strengthen each of these related dimensions of learning. This identifies points of need and entry levels for learning. The Victorian Curriculum capabilities, together with the 6Cs of the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) offer teachers a range of validated continua for developing evidence informed capabilities and dispositions. Guy Claxton has also developed extensive resources to support the cultivation of learner dispositions that translate well into monitoring and awareness raising tools (Claxton, 2006; 2008). When teachers co-design such tools with students and students are active in using these to better understand and develop themselves, the potential for optimal learner agency grows.

**Attending to students' interests, backgrounds, stories and needs:** When teachers and students co-design curriculum that values students' interests, backgrounds, stories and needs, the possibilities for agency are likely to expand. When opportunities are created for students to explore and pursue both individual and collective interests and aspirations for learning they are more likely to experience deep engagement and learning, and high levels of commitment and motivation (Toshalis & Nakula, 2012; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; Shawer, 2010).

**Considering the richness of students' social and cultural contexts and experiences:** All students have been shaped by their histories and family, social and cultural life experiences. When teachers (and leaders) seek to understand and embrace the diversity of who their students are, and learn from and with families, they tap into valuable knowledge that can guide the co-design of rich, relevant, real and rewarding learning experiences (Ritchhart, 2007). Having 'supportive and encouraging (and confidence-boosting) friends and family or mentors also has an impact on self-efficacy, which is essential for agency' (Klemenčič, 2015, p.17).

**Creating opportunities and possibilities for student agency in local and global contexts:** If students are to experience the kinds of learning communities and environments that result in them embracing the *power of possibility* to be active agents in their own learning and a *personal desire and will* to act, their teachers are a key enabler. Increasing students' agency in the process of local curriculum design, where the core curriculum is translated into rich, rigorous, real and relevant learning experiences, has also been found to positively impact learner development (Shaw, 2010; Ritchhart, 2007). In particular, opportunities to apply, activate and/or pursue their learning in local and global contexts, forming new kinds of community learning partnerships and making contributions as active citizens is highly motivating.

The extent to which opportunities for student agency are enabled or constrained will also be shaped by a teacher's pedagogical stance (how they tend to see, position and interact with students in their learning) and pedagogical approach (and whether this creates opportunities for students to engage in reflective and intentional action); their approach to learning design and curriculum planning (noticing how students are currently positioned e.g. as audience or active partners); their approach to assessment design and practice; and the extent to which students actively shape the norms, values, culture and ethos of the class resulting in a vibrant learning community.

(This is an extract is from O'Rourke, M & Addison, A. (2017). *Report on Options for Development of a Victorian Student Agency & Leadership Framework*. Developed for the Department of Education and Training, Victoria).

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