Primary Years Programme

Learner agency

The learner

Summary
• Students have voice, choice and ownership for their own learning. • When students' have agency, the relationship between the teacher and students becomes a partnership. • Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy bring a stronger sense of agency to the learning community. • The learning community supports agency and fosters self-efficacy.

Our understanding

Our understanding of the learner is the foundation of our approach to learning and teaching. Children inquire, question, wonder and theorize about themselves, others and the world around them. They are keen observers and explorers. Through their experiences and interactions, they naturally develop intricate, multi-layered perceptions and understandings. Throughout the PYP, a student is an agent for their own and others' learning through the concept of learner agency. Learner agency is connected to a student's belief in their ability to succeed (self-efficacy).

Agency

Conceptualized by Bandura in social cognitive theory, agency "enable[s] people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times" (Bandura 2001).

PYP students with agency use their own initiative and will, and take responsibility and ownership of their learning. They direct their learning with a strong sense of identity and self-belief, and in conjunction with others, thereby building a sense of community and awareness of the opinions, values and needs of others.

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When learners have agency, the role of the teacher and student changes; the relationship between a teacher and a student is viewed as a partnership.

TSM: Supporting student agency

Students take initiative, express interest and wonderings, make choices and are aware of their learning goals. They are actively engaged, and monitor and adjust their learning as needed. Students offer feedback to others and consult on decisions that affect them. In school, students take responsibility for their learning and collaborate with teachers and other students to plan, present and assess learning needs.

Teachers recognize students' capabilities through listening, respecting and responding to their ideas. They make thoughtful considerations and decisions with an emphasis on relationships, dialogue and respect for one another.

Self-efficacy

Efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their "capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura 1997). This belief is integrally connected to agency because the stronger the sense of self-efficacy, the greater likelihood that the individual will exercise agency (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy influences the choices students are confident in making, which, in turn, influences the degree of ownership and impact they have in their lives.

When teachers acknowledge learner agency and the importance of self-efficacy, students become partners in the learning process. In this partnership, teachers work alongside students, meet with small groups and individuals as needed, and monitor learning and provide feedback.

Students demonstrate agency when they:

- influence and direct their own learning
- make choices
- voice opinions
- ask questions and express wonderings

- communicate understandings

- construct new meanings

- participate in and contribute to the learning community.

Agency and the learning community

The learning community recognizes that agency and self-efficacy are fundamental to learning. A learning community that supports agency offers opportunities for students to develop important skills and dispositions, such as critical and creative thinking, perseverance, independence and confidence. These are vital to the learning process and the development of self-efficacy. The learning community further offers students multiple opportunities to experience the impact of their choices and opinions, which support their evolving perceptions of their identity. In return, students with a stronger sense of self-efficacy bring a stronger sense of agency to the learning community.

A school with a focus on agency considers its perceptions of how children learn, children's capabilities and the overall value of childhood. When teachers consider their beliefs around children's identities and rights, they are examining personal beliefs, theories, cultural backgrounds and values. For example, the teachers' beliefs and values will influence their choices of how to allocate time, how to set up learning spaces, choose and arrange materials and foster relationships within the classroom and the broader community.

Supporting learner agency and self-efficacy

Teachers who support agency

When teachers support student agency, they:

- notice, and reflect on the students' existing capabilities, needs and interests in order to personalize learning

- actively listen to students' opinions, wonderings, perspectives and aspirations to extend student thinking and action

- foster authenticity for students to explore their interests by giving them open-ended tasks

- offer opportunities for students to demonstrate creativity and take risks

- reflect on when students need help, and when not, by using assessment evidence to inform learning and teaching

- listen and respond to each student's activities to extend their thinking.

Strategies to support agency

Students learn by doing. Teachers create opportunities for agency in the classroom by involving students in the following activities.

- Establishing a respectful and welcoming culture. Collaborate with students to create shared agreements about how to interact with others to create a culture of respect and trust where all students feel welcomed, significant and emotionally safe.

- Creating shared routines. Ask for students' input into developing routines around arrival, transitions, communication signals, meetings, clean up and dismissal.

- Setting up the learning spaces. Ask students to help set up and arrange learning spaces that make them feel safe physically and where they can access learning materials, make choices and take risks.

- Making decisions about learning. Involve students in making decisions about what, why and how they learn—as co-collaborators in the learning community. Allow time to respond to students' ideas about action.

- Communicating expectations. Clarify what knowledge, conceptual understandings, skills and dispositions the students are learning, and why.

Strategies to foster self-efficacy

Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy bring a stronger sense of agency to the learning community. The key to supporting and sustaining agency and self-efficacy is to give students as many opportunities as possible to develop and demonstrate the approaches to learning and attributes of the learner profile.

To foster self-efficacy, teachers strive to:

- model behaviour and language use, considering implicit and explicit messages to students
- offer opportunities for reinforcement and mastery
- give timely, specific and well-considered feedback on learning

- create a learning environment where students can set their own learning goals and success criteria, and monitor and adjust their learning against them

- give students the chance to provide feedback to each other

- build in time for reflection to enhance students' awareness about the success of their efforts and ways to improve in the future

- carefully group and regroup students in different ways—ability grouping, social grouping, self-chosen grouping—to foster students' perceptions of intelligence and ability as fluid

- encourage students to monitor their own emotional and physical well-being so they can be more sensitive participants within the learning community.

TSM: Co-constructing central ideas with students

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Further reading

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