

OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030

Conceptual learning framework



STUDENT AGENCY FOR 2030



IN BRIEF

STUDENT AGENCY FOR 2030

The concept of student agency, as understood in the context of the OECD Learning Compass 2030, is rooted in the principle that students have the ability and the will to positively influence their own lives and the world around them. Student agency is thus defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others.

When students are agents in their learning, that is, when they play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn, they tend to show greater motivation to learn and are more likely to define objectives for their learning. These students are also more likely to have “learned how to learn” – an invaluable skill that they can and will use throughout their lives.

Agency can be exercised in nearly every context: moral, social, economic, creative. For example, students need to use moral agency to help them make decisions that recognise the rights and needs of others. While a well-developed sense of agency can help individuals achieve long-term goals and overcome adversity, students need foundational cognitive, social and emotional skills so that they can apply agency to their own – and society’s – benefit.

Agency is perceived and interpreted differently around the world. Some languages have no direct translation for the term “student agency” as it is used in the OECD Learning Compass 2030; interpretations will vary across different societies and contexts. Nonetheless, the notion of students playing an active role in their education is central to the Learning Compass and is being emphasised in a growing number of countries.

When students are agents in their learning, they are more likely to have “learned how to learn” – an invaluable skill that they can use throughout their lives.

In education systems that encourage student agency, learning involves not only instruction and evaluation but also co-construction. Co-agency is when teachers and students become co-creators in the teaching-and-learning process. The concept of co-agency recognises that students, teachers, parents and communities work together to help students progress towards their shared goals.

KEY POINTS

- Agency implies having the ability and the will to positively influence one’s own life and the world around them.
- In order to exercise agency to the full potential, students need to build foundation skills.
- The concept of student agency varies across cultures and develops over a lifetime.
- Co-agency is defined as interactive, mutually supportive relationships—with parents, teachers, the community, and with each other— that help students progress towards their shared goals.

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STUDENT AGENCY



Ms Kiran BIR SETHI, Founder, Riverside School and Design For Change, India
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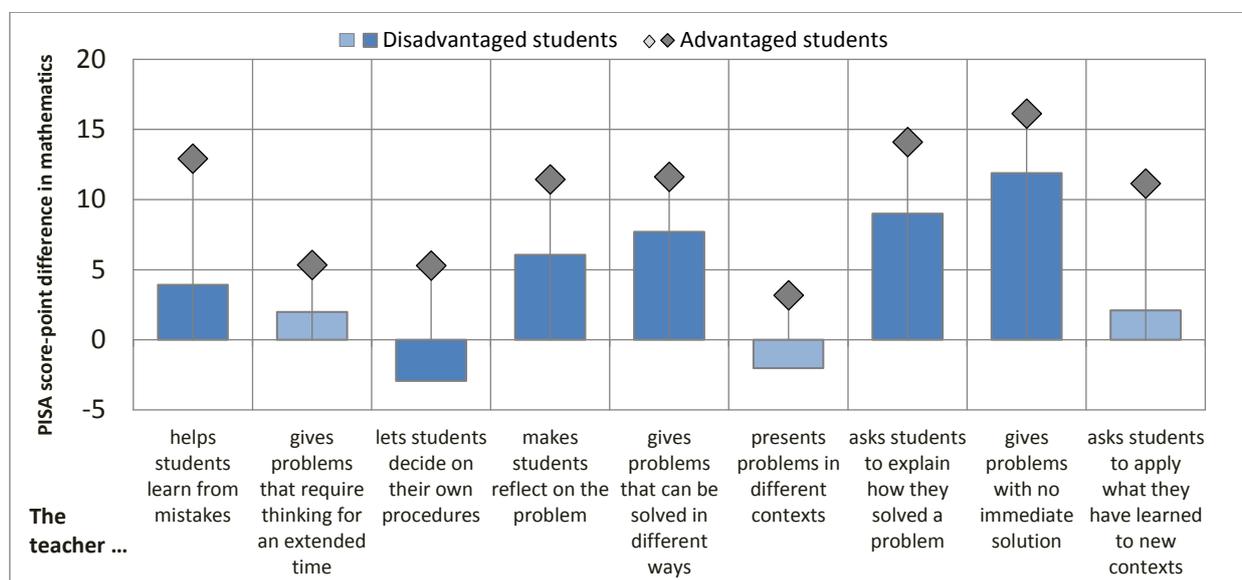
Student Agency for 2030

There is no global consensus on the definition of “student agency”. In the context of the OECD Learning Compass 2030, student agency implies a sense of responsibility as students participate in society and aim to influence people, events and circumstances for the better. Agency requires the ability to frame a guiding purpose and identify actions to achieve a goal (OECD, 2018^[1]). It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others.

Student agency is not a personality trait; it is something malleable and learnable. The term “student agency” is often mistakenly used as a synonym for “student autonomy”, “student voice” and “student choice”; but it is much more than these concepts. Acting autonomously does not mean functioning in social isolation, nor does it mean acting solely in self-interest. Similarly, student agency does not mean that students can voice whatever they want or can choose whatever subjects they wish to learn.

Indeed, students need support from adults in order to exercise their agency and realise their potential. For example, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment found that certain methods teachers use in class may be more effective for some students than for others. When mathematics teachers let 15-year-old students decide on their own procedures to solve a problem in class, or when they present problems in different contexts, not only do socio-economically advantaged students benefit more from these approaches than disadvantaged students do, but the approaches can have an adverse impact on disadvantaged students’ performance (Figure 1) (OECD, 2012^[2]). It is thus particularly important to ensure that disadvantaged students receive adequate support when teachers use teaching strategies that call for student agency.

Figure 1. Mathematics teachers' teaching strategies and student performance in mathematics, by socio-economic status



Note: Disadvantaged (advantaged) schools are those whose mean PISA index of economic, social and cultural status is statistically lower (higher) than the mean index across all schools in the country/economy.

Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database.

Box 1. Key constructs related to “student agency”

Student agency relates to the development of an **identity** and a **sense of belonging**. When students develop agency they rely on **motivation, hope, self-efficacy** and a **growth mindset** (the understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed) to navigate towards well-being. This enables them to act with a sense of **purpose**, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society.

Developing agency is both a learning goal and a learning process

From their earliest years, children learn to understand the intentions of people around them and develop a sense of self, an important step towards agency (Woodward, 2009^[3]; Sokol et al., 2015^[4]). As they progress through schooling, students should be able to find a sense of purpose in their own lives, and believe they can fulfil that purpose by setting goals and taking action to achieve those goals. That is when student agency is a learning goal.

As a learning process, student agency and learning have a circular relationship. When students are agents in their learning, that is, when they play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn, they tend to show greater motivation to learn and are more likely to define objectives for their learning. The development of agency is a relational process, involving interactions with family members, peers and teachers over time (Schoon, 2017^[5]). It is a process that continues and evolves throughout a lifetime.

Student agency can be exercised in a variety of contexts

Agency can be exercised in nearly every context: **moral, social, economic, creative**. For example, students need to use **moral agency** to help them make decisions that recognise the rights and needs of others. Exercising moral agency requires that a student thinks critically and asks such questions as “What should I do? Was I right to do that?” (Leadbeater, 2017_[6]).

In addition to moral agency, students also need to develop **social agency**, which involves an understanding of the rights and responsibilities related to the society in which they live. Going to school is one step towards acquiring social agency, as it introduces students to a community, to authority represented by strangers, and to the need to learn how to build relationships with other people outside of their family (Leadbeater, 2017_[6]).

In addition to this, students should be able to identify and seize opportunities to contribute to the local, national or global economy to exercise **economic agency** (Leadbeater, 2017_[6]). **Creative agency** allows students to add new value to the world by using their imagination and ability to innovate, whether for artistic, practical or scientific purposes (Leadbeater, 2017_[6]).

In all of these contexts, agency is the foundation for developing the competencies students need to shape the future (see the [concept note on Transformative Competencies](#)). Agency can be developed as students learn, receive feedback and reflect on their work (see the [concept note on Anticipation-Action-Reflection Cycle](#)).

Building a sense of agency is critically important in overcoming adversity

A well-developed sense of agency can help individuals overcome adversity (Talreja, 2017_[7]). For example, a child’s background – his or her parents’ level of education, the socio-economic status of the family – can affect a child’s sense of agency (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997_[8]; OECD, 2017_[9]; Yoshikawa, Aber and Beardslee, 2012_[10]) and influence the likelihood that he or she will have access to quality education and to the means of realising his or her potential (Schoon, 2017_[5]).

Research shows that children who had faced adversity in childhood, including physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect, tend to have lower aspirations for their future, less of a sense of achievement and less motivation (Duckworth and Schoon, 2012_[11]). Those negative attitudes, in turn, undermine their self-confidence and well-being (Ahlin and Lobo Antunes, 2015_[12]).

While a sense of agency can help students overcome adversity, disadvantaged students need carefully designed support to build foundation skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and social and emotional skills (see the [concept note on Core Foundations](#)). Without these skills, students will not be able to use their agency to their – and society’s – advantage (Talreja, 2017_[7]).

There are different interpretations of “agency” across cultures

Agency is perceived and interpreted differently around the world. In some languages, such as Portuguese, there is no direct translation for the term “student agency” as it is used in the OECD Learning Compass 2030. In Korean, a new term was created in order to communicate the concept accurately (학생주도 and 학생주체). The words are often equated with related, but not identical, concepts, such as “student-centred” or “independent” or “active” learning (Abiko, 2017_[13]; Steinemann, 2017_[14]).

Differences in interpretation are usually related to culture. For example, in many Asian cultures, self-regulation is important in maintaining harmony in society, whereas in Western culture, self-regulation is often applied in the service of attaining personal goals (Trommsdorff, 2012_[15]). For example, in Japan, the word “agency” is often used in the context of collectivity, where maintaining harmony within communities is more important than an individual’s opinion (Abiko, 2017_[13]). In China, the concept of agency often refers to the traditional values of prioritising harmony within groups and the individual’s obligation to contribute to his or her country’s growth (Xiang et al., 2018_[16]). In South Africa, the interpretation of student agency asserts that “a person is a person through other people” (Desmond, 2017_[17]).

The definitions of harmony and conformity, and their relative priority in relation to values such as individualism and personal autonomy, lie at the heart of differences between many Eastern and Western cultures. However, in all societies, these relationships between belief, motivation, and personal and social identity are vital aspects of cultural and educational change. How students develop an understanding of their own role in wider processes of change, and the role of education in this understanding, are central to student outcomes. While it may be impossible to formulate a universally applicable definition of “agency”, the concept has relevance in every context. Student agency – students’ ability to play an active role in their education – is thus central to the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (see the [concept note on the OECD Learning Compass 2030](#)).

Co-agency implies relationships with others: parents, peers, teachers and the community

Parents, peers, teachers and the wider community influence a student’s sense of agency, and that student influences the sense of agency of his or her teachers, peers and parents – a virtuous circle that positively affects children’s development and well-being (Salmela-Aro, 2009_[18]). Thus, “co-agency”, often referred to as “collaborative agency”, implies the influence of a person’s environment on his or her sense of agency.

An effective learning environment is built on “co-agency”, i.e. where students, teachers, parents and the community work together (Leadbeater, 2017_[6]). One of the aims of education is to provide students with the tools they need to realise their potential. In the broader education ecosystem, education goals are shared not only among students and teachers, but also with parents and the wider community. Therefore, students can find the “tools” they need to thrive not only in school, but also at home and in their community. In this context, everyone can be considered a learner, not only students but also teachers, school managers, parents and communities.

Teachers play a key role in designing a learning environment that values agency

To help students develop agency, teachers can not only recognise learners' individuality, but also acknowledge the wider set of relationships – with peers, families and communities – that influence their learning.

In the traditional teaching model, teachers are expected to deliver knowledge through instruction and evaluation. In a system that encourages student agency, learning involves not only instruction and evaluation but also co-construction. In such a system, teachers and students become co-creators in the teaching-and-learning process. Students acquire a sense of purpose in their education and take ownership of their learning (Figure 2). For teachers to be effective co-agents, they need “the capacity to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their students and colleagues” (Calvert, 2016_[19]). In order to achieve this, teachers need support, including in initial teacher education and through professional development, in designing learning environments that support student agency.

Peers influence each other's agency

Co-agency also happens at the student-to-student level. When students play an active role in shaping their lessons, they are more likely to participate, ask questions, have open and candid discussions, express opposing opinions and make challenging statements (Salmela-Aro, 2017_[20]). They not only gain a higher level of analysis and communication skills but are also more creative while solving problems (Greig, 2000_[21]; Hogan, Nastasi and Pressley, 2000_[22]). Students acquire a stronger sense of autonomy and are more confident working in teams (Gafney and Varma-Nelson, 2007_[23]). This results in better student achievement outcomes, attitudes and persistence, a greater sense of empowerment, and improved analytical thinking and problem-solving ability.

Parents also play a key role as the co-agent of students' learning

Students also learn from and with their parents. Research shows that responsible and positive family engagement with schools improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism and strengthens parents' confidence in their child's education (Davis-Keen, 2005_[24]). Students with involved parents or caregivers earn higher grades and test scores, have better social skills and behave better at school. In some cases, however, schools compensate for a lack of resources or cognitive stimulation at home. In disadvantaged communities, where parents may have less knowledge, language skills or confidence to help their children with their schoolwork, it can be more difficult to create a learning environment where parents play an active role in their child's schooling (Davis-Keen, 2005_[24]).

The wider community is also part of students' learning environment

School is not the only place where children learn. Educating children is a responsibility shared among parents, teachers and the wider community. It is the responsibility of adults to help children develop the skills they need to shape the future. The sense of agency is difficult for children to develop on their own; they need the collaboration of adults to “co-regulate” their actions and development (Talreja, 2017_[7]). When the community is also involved in children's education, children can learn about the opportunities for their future and also how to be engaged, responsible citizens, while the community can learn about the needs, concerns and views of its younger members.

“Collective agency” is needed to make change happen for the common good

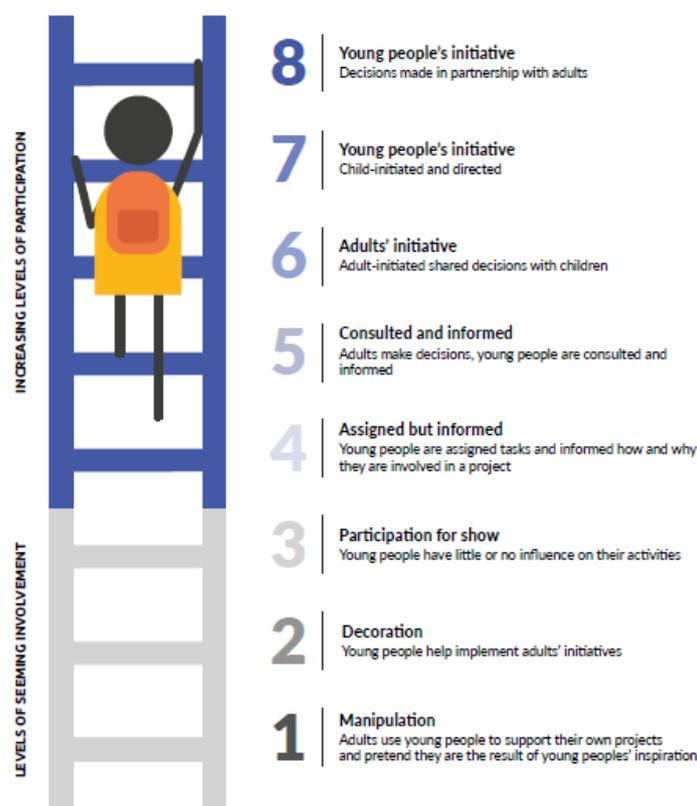
Collective agency refers to the idea of individual agents acting together for a community, a movement or a global society. In contrast with co-agency, collective agency is exercised on a larger scale and includes shared responsibility, a sense of belonging, identity, purpose and achievement. Many complex challenges demand collective responses, such as the growing distrust of governments, increases in migration and climate change. Entire societies need to address these challenges. Collective agency requires that individuals put their differences and tensions aside and come together to achieve a common goal (Leadbeater, 2017^[6]). Doing so also helps build more solid and unified societies.

Students develop the Sun Model of Co-agency

Some have considered children to be the most ignored members of society (Hart, 1992^[25]). Many projects for children are fully designed and run by adults, where the students either have no role to play or are manipulated by adults. In the early 1990s, sociologist Roger Hart developed the Ladder of Participation to illustrate the level of children’s participation in activities and decision making (Hart, 1992^[25]).

Figure 2. The ladder of participation

Eight levels of young people’s participation



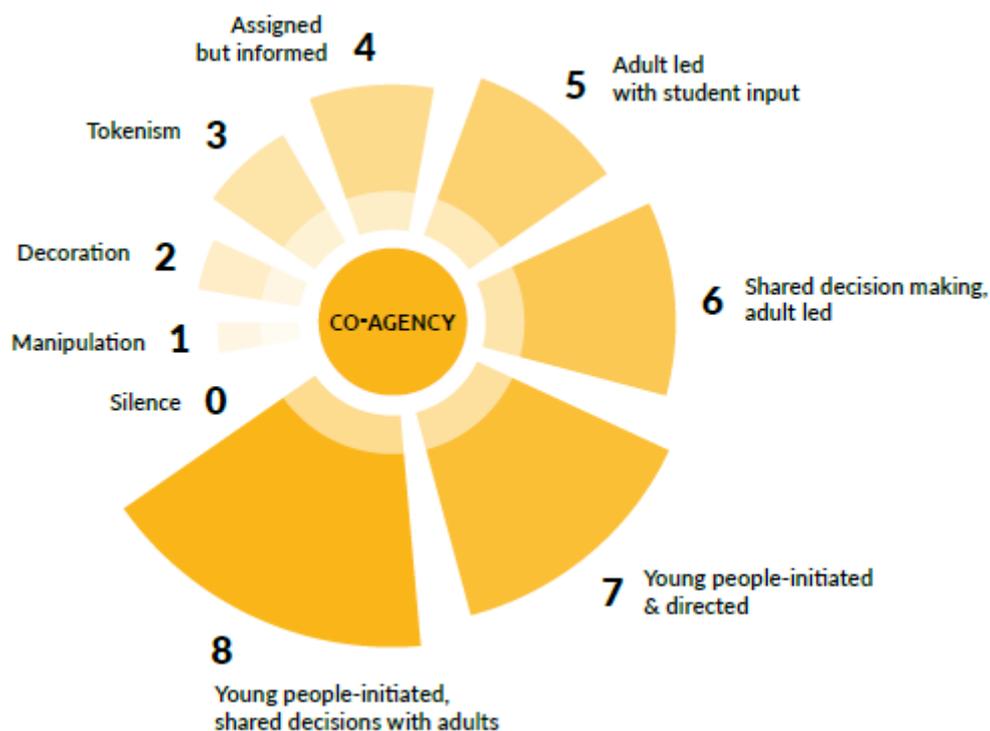
Note: The ladder metaphor is borrowed from Sherry Arnstein (1969); the categories are from Roger Hart (1992).
Source: Arnstein (1969^[26]) and Hart (1992^[25]).

A little less than 30 years later, in 2018, the OECD Student Focus Group – students from 10 countries who had volunteered to help steer the development of the Learning Compass 2030 and were selected by their respective countries to do so – created the “Sun Model of Co-agency” based on the ladder schema.

Students changed the visualisation from a ladder to a sun (see Figure 3, next page), as they determined that agency is better represented by a circular image than a linear one. They also wanted to show that in every degree of co-agency, students work with adults (except in the newly added degree of “silence”, or 0, where neither young people nor adults believe that young people can contribute, and young people remain silent while adults initiate all activities and make all decisions. By comparison, in the first three degrees of co-agency (“manipulation”, “decoration” and “tokenism”), students believe that they could contribute to decision making, but they are not given the opportunity to do so. The stronger the degree of co-agency, the better for the well-being of both students and adults.

Figure 3. Sun Model of Co-Agency

The light is brightest when we shine together



Source: OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Student Focus Group.

Table 1. Degrees of co-agency

0. Silence	Neither young people nor adults believe that young people can contribute, and young people remain silent while adults take and lead all initiatives and make all decisions.
1. Manipulation	Adults use young people to support causes, pretending the initiative is from young people.
2. Decoration	Adults use young people to help or bolster a cause.
3. Tokenism	Adults appear to give young people a choice, but there is little or no choice about the substance and way of participation.
4. Assigned but informed	Young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are involved, but do not take part in leading or taking decisions for the project or their place in it.
5. Adult led with student input	Young people are consulted on the projects designed, and informed about outcomes, while adults lead them and make the decisions.
6. Shared decision making, adult led	Young people are a part of the decision-making process of a project led and initiated by adults.
7. Young people-initiated and directed	Young people initiate and direct a project with support of adults. Adults are consulted and may guide/advise in decision making, but all decisions are ultimately taken by young people.
8. Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Young people initiate a project and the decision making is shared between young people and adults. Leading and running the project is an equal partnership between young people and adults.

Source: Hart (1997^[27]). Modified from the Ladder of Student Participation by the OECD Student Sphere (Linda Lam, Peter Suante, Derek Wong, Gede Witsen, Rio Miyazaki, Celina Færch, Jonathan Lee and Ruby Bourke).

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