

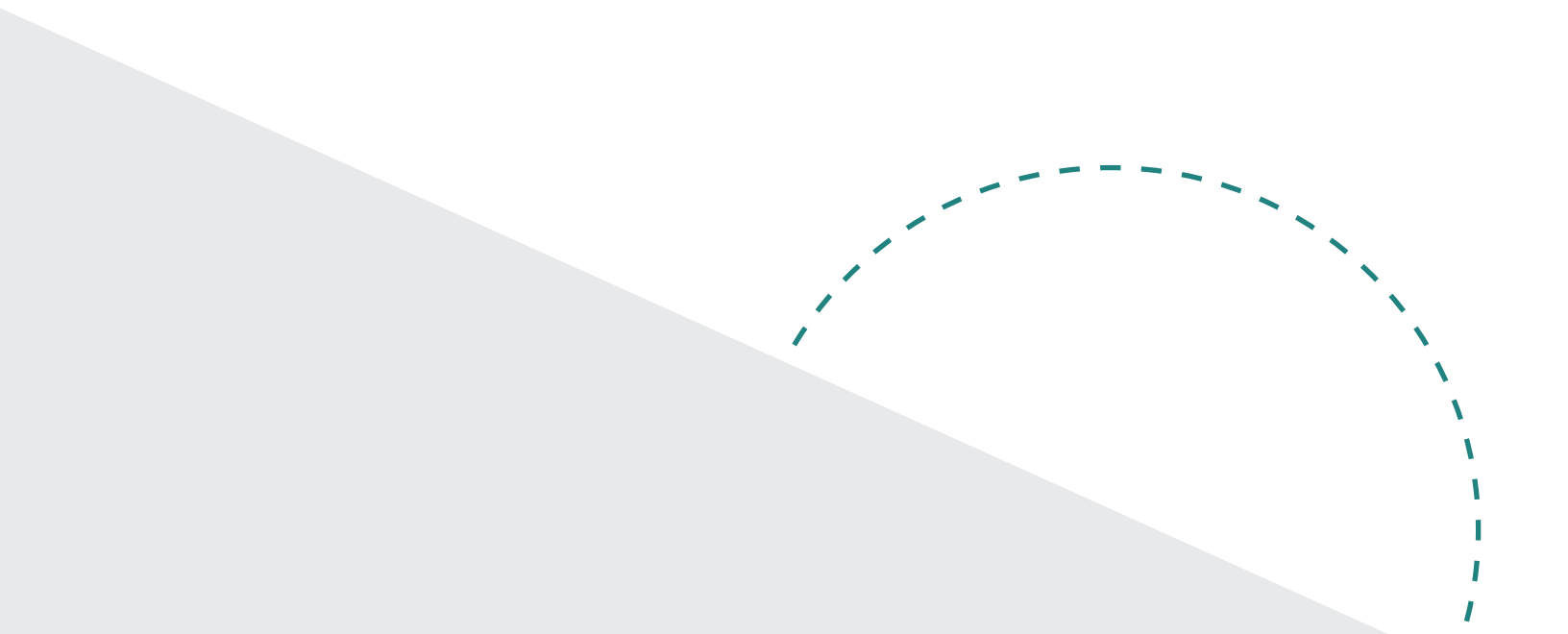


# **IGNITING** *Agency*

in Early Learning

## **Executive Summary & Practices**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agency is a key ingredient for both personal thriving and collective good. Yet the very DNA of schooling in the United States often prevents learners from practicing agency (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Instead, it reflects a culture of compliance and positions many children as passive vessels to be filled and requires them to “earn” what others enjoy freely (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Igniting Agency in Early Learning 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 learning environments that are supportive of it.

### 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.





## 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 must be a part of every learner's school experience, no matter where they live, who they are, or what conditions they face.



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



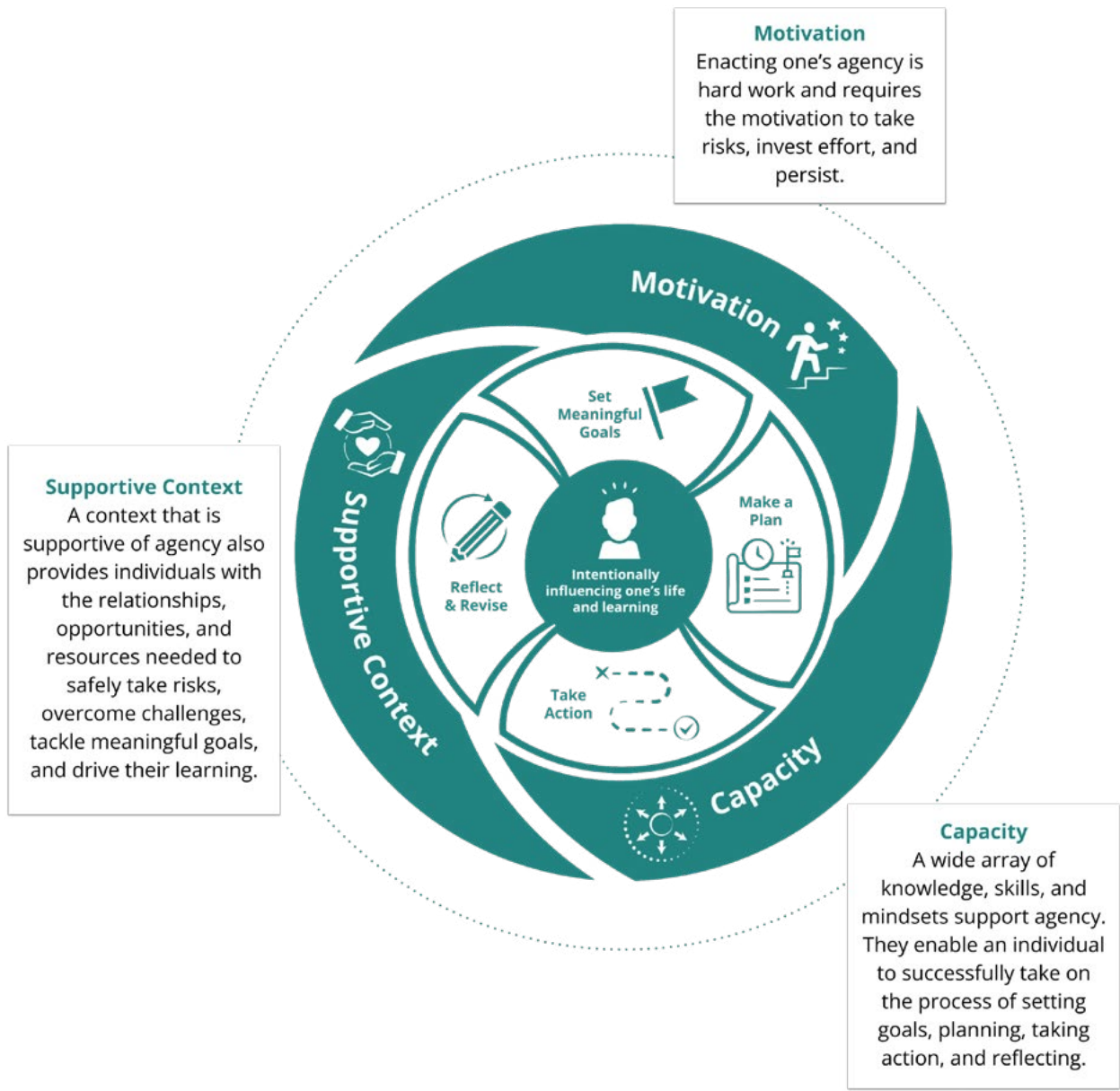
Agentic classrooms enable young people to act on their curiosities, an opportunity that is too often lost for children when they transition to school and can support engagement and learning.



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

# What Drives Agency?

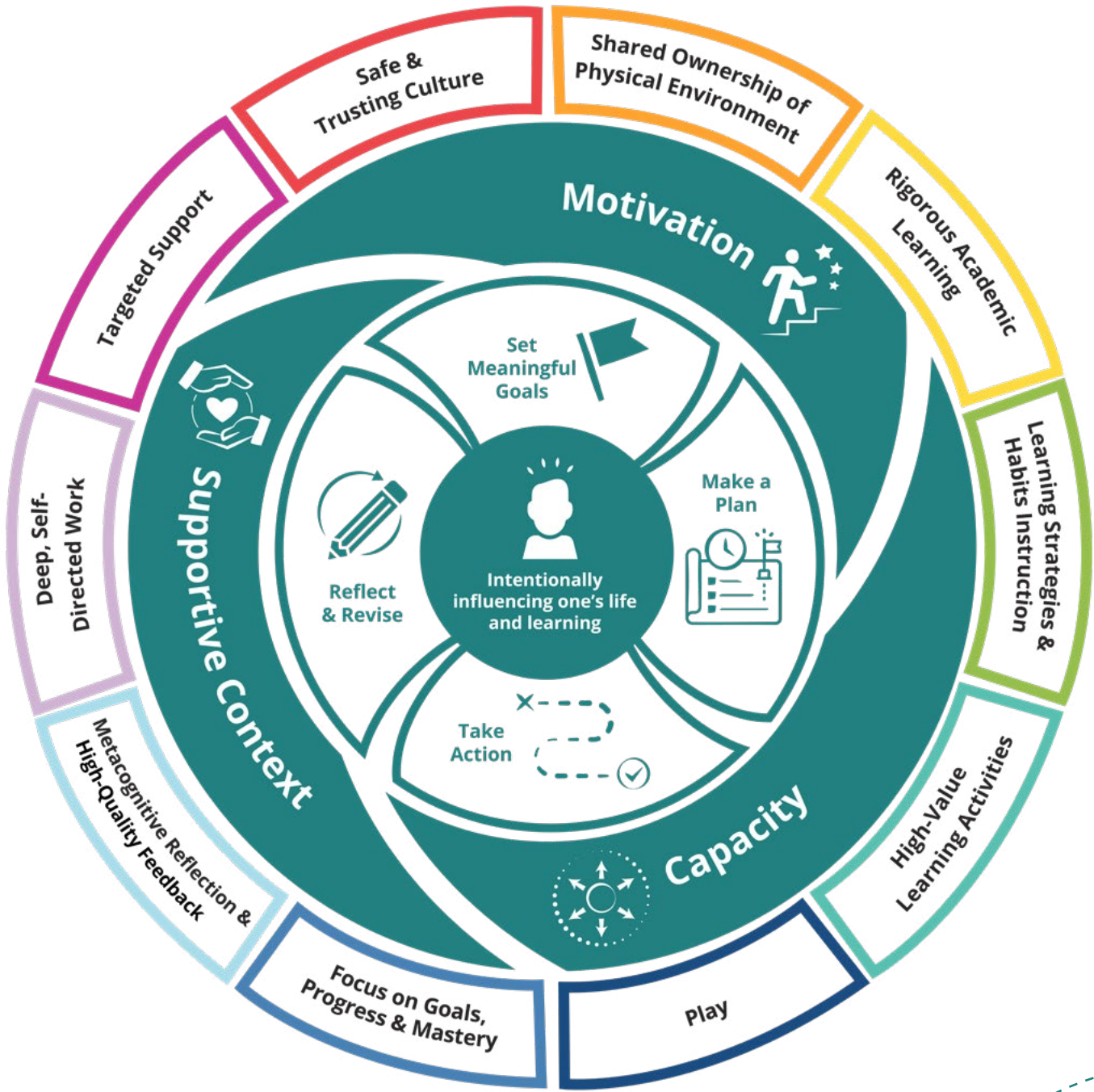
People are more likely to exhibit agency when they are **motivated**, have the required **capacity**, and are situated in a **supportive context**. The relationship among these three factors—or drivers—is dynamic, and when these factors are present, they enable individuals to intentionally influence their lives and learning.



# AGENTIC SCHOOL PRACTICES

There are a variety of ways to cultivate agency in early grades. We have identified ten 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.

<b>Safe &amp; Trusting Culture</b>	A safe and trusting culture creates the context in which learners' voices, wonderings, and needs are respected and nourished proactively.
<b>Shared Ownership of Physical Environment</b>	Structures that encourage and embolden learners to navigate, care for, and shape the physical learning environment help create the conditions for agency to flourish.
<b>Rigorous Academic Learning</b>	Through challenging grade-level content, evidence-based instruction, and learners doing the majority of the thinking, young people master academic knowledge and skills that support agency.
<b>Learning Strategies &amp; Habits Instruction</b>	Instruction on learning strategies and habits helps learners practice and master new skills that support them to drive their learning.
<b>High-Value Learning Activities</b>	High-value learning activities seamlessly integrate learners' interests and curiosities with standards-aligned content and skills in developmentally appropriate ways.
<b>Play</b>	Play is a context where learners can enact their agency by actively defining and pursuing their interests and goals in joyful, meaningful, and engaging ways.
<b>Focus on Goals, Progress &amp; Mastery</b>	A focus on goals, progress, and mastery makes children's learning and the process that got them there visible.
<b>Metacognitive Reflection &amp; High-Quality Feedback</b>	Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback help learners engage in the self-evaluation needed to reach their goals now and in the future.
<b>Deep, Self-Directed Work</b>	When engaging in deep, self-directed work, learners build perseverance and do the "heavy lifting" for their own learning.
<b>Targeted Support</b>	Targeted support provides avenues through which learners can identify their need for help, self-advocate, and receive additional support.



# BUILDING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE:

## Things to Consider as a Site or System Lead

In most contexts, redesigning learning to advance agency in early grades will be a significant change, one that requires fundamental shifts to your school and system. It will require that you identify, create, and refine concrete systems, structures, and routines like those listed within the guidance on how system and site leaders can get started for each of the practices on the following pages. It will also require building crosscutting, foundational conditions that will support the shift toward agency-rich learning and sustain the work long term. Below we offer a list of actions system and site leaders can take to build these conditions.

### **Actions to build conviction in the importance of cultivating agency in early grades:**

- Provide your community with data related to the importance of agency for near- and long-term success for their learners.
- Help your community see how agency is an essential component for racial and social justice through examining the ways agentic learning opportunities have been inequitably available to learners based on factors like race, ethnicity, and family income.
- Visit schools and non-school venues focused on agency to glean new perspectives and envision what agentic learning could look and feel like.
- Inspire action toward this change by drawing upon knowledge and experiences from within your community, including why agency is important to your stakeholders and the role agency has played in their own lives.
- Understand how to talk about agency and agency-rich learning in ways that resonate deeply with your community.
- De-prioritize competing activities so that shifting toward agency-rich learning can be a top priority.





### **Actions to build a coalition of committed stakeholders to help make this change successful:**

- Identify learners, families, educators, school and district staff, and community members that are invested in driving this work forward. Empower them to guide and lead this work.
- Talk with learners, families, educators, school and district staff, and community members who are hesitant about agentic learning to more deeply understand and address their concerns.
- Ensure diverse perspectives are heard and included in this work.
- Create continuity in the people who hold key roles across the community to help sustain the work long term. This includes allowing for healthy turnover when needed.

### **Actions to build clarity with your community around a vision for agentic learning and the work ahead:**

- Build a deep understanding of agency and the practices that support it.
- Host a design sprint to help gather ideas for a more agentic learning experience and co-create a vision for learner agency, including why agency is important to the community and how it will look to support agency for young learners within their context.
- Clarify the design choices and approach your site or system will take to cultivate agency in young learners; these should account for the concerns and complex sociocultural factors present in your community.
- Develop a clear plan for thoughtfully bringing changes into the learning environment, understanding progress, and making changes.

### **Actions to build the capacity needed to shape and implement agency-rich practices:**

- Remove any barriers that may prevent stakeholders from investing the time and energy needed to make this change successful.
- Support school and district personnel to develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to foster agency in early grades. This includes reflecting upon and addressing deficit perspectives used to deny some learners from experiencing agentic learning at school (e.g., Adair et al., 2018; Adair & Colegrove, 2021; Colegrove & Adair, 2014).
- Train teachers to directly address how learners can handle situations that do not encourage agency or that even penalize it. If this isn't addressed, 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 (J. Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021).

- Assess your school and district personnel’s current capacity—including their access to resources, abilities, and time—and make changes to ensure they have what is needed to shape, implement, and improve upon this work.
- Apply for additional grants to fund costs associated with initiating, iterating, and sustaining this work.
- Research and connect with other innovative learning environments focused on advancing agency in early grade contexts to get ideas and access support.

### **Actions to build a culture of trust, risk-taking, and collaboration:**

- 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.
- Nurture a supportive, “safe-to-fail” culture for learners and adults by diminishing barriers to success, prioritizing community-building routines, and encouraging staff to openly share their successes and failures.
- Pilot new practices and structures with a small group to further refine and iterate ideas, check critical assumptions, and more.
- Schedule regular step-backs to assess and understand progress toward goals based on the experiences and outcomes of young people, families, and educators.
- Celebrate learnings and wins—big or small—in warm, authentic ways (Kotter, 2018) and regularly share your innovation journey with the broader community.

## Safe & Trusting Culture

A safe and trusting culture creates the context in which learners' voices, wonderings, and needs are respected and nourished 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 spaces for learners to practice their agency, help create a sense of belonging, and support learners to overcome challenges as they pursue meaningful goals.

*Van Ness Elementary School*



### Motivation

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



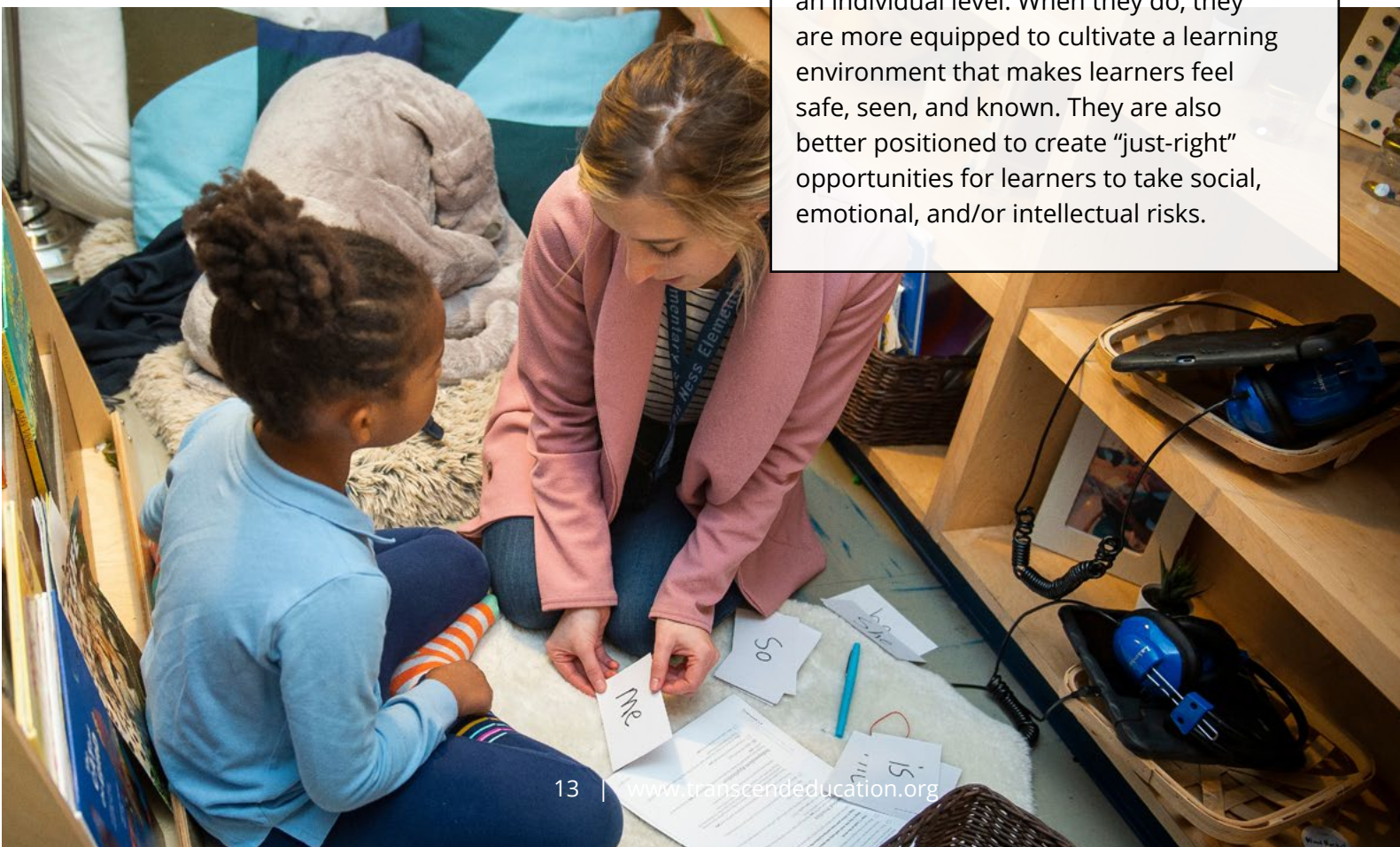
### Supportive Context

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

### Applying a Developmental Lens



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 group norms or community agreements.** These shared agreements, which replace a list of teacher-created classroom rules, help ensure all learners feel physically and psychologically cared for as well as invested in collective ownership of the community norms. Consistently reinforce community agreements through setting and reinforcing clear expectations. (Check out: Code of Cooperation from Lindsay Unified School District)
- **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)
- **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: Language of Safety 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: Language of 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!”
- **Embrace failure and celebrate mistakes.** Create a “safe-to-fail” classroom culture where mistakes are seen as a valuable part of learning and where learners are encouraged to support one another.
- **Create regular opportunities for learners to talk about their emotions and work through problems as a group.** For example, use community meetings as an opportunity for learners to discuss any challenges they are facing and develop solutions collaboratively with their peers. Explicitly teach ways to talk about emotions (e.g., “I” statements) and simple processes for conflict resolution. Also, 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: Targeted Support)
- **Focus on growing positive relationships with learners, and 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. This can be a great opportunity to practice appropriate touch, eye contact, presence, playfulness, and more. (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 (J. Poon, personal communication, August 31, 2021).

### **How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:**

- **Build strong relationships with and among adults in your school or system.** Get to know your staff and create explicit opportunities for them 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, daily check-ins), as well as structures and adult roles that provide space and support for learner-facing staff to help them maintain their own composure (e.g., a call-for-help/tap-out system).
- **Ensure behavior systems help learners take ownership of their emotions, words, and actions as well as the impact they have.** Make sure adults are on board to start with relationships and belonging as a foundation for behavior systems and deeply examine any systems that rely on or encourage external rewards (e.g., point systems, prizes). If external rewards are occasionally used, allow learners to have a voice in what these are.
- **Ensure the school's culture demonstrates an authentic belief in learners' ability to be agentic.** Ensure 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.

## 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. An intentionally designed environment that grows and adapts with learners enables independence, collaboration, and learners' belief that they have an impact on their community.<sup>3</sup> Ownership gives learners the opportunity to practice their agency and make the learning environment their own, which can be incredibly motivating.

*Van Ness Elementary School*



### Motivation

Provides a sense of control to learners and enables them to bring value to their surroundings.



### Supportive Context

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

### Applying a Developmental Lens

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 different spaces exist so that learners can choose where and how to work; having movable, child-sized furniture; creating areas for collaborative and solo work; etc. Research shows that flexible, welcoming classrooms together with other design decisions (e.g., light, ownership, air quality) can positively impact learning outcomes (Barrett et al., 2015).
- **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 materials labels with pictures and words and having alternative seating choices and child-height shelving to support independence.
- **Ensure the design of the physical space is warm and welcoming to young learners.** This includes displaying pictures of children and families, incorporating natural elements, and integrating decorations that reflect learners' cultures. (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 displayed does not need to be a final product. In fact, displaying work in progress (e.g., via documentation panels) helps learners see their work taking shape as a success and understand they should take pride in where they are in the process.
- **Seek learners' input on how the room is set up and decorated.** Consider having learners choose a theme at the beginning of the year to decorate the space and 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.** Consistently review the wall displays, anchor charts, and other materials to keep the room current with learners' needs and free from visual clutter. Doing so helps ensure the opportunities young people have and the resources available to them are accessible and engaging, intentionally build capacities, and entail agentic action.
- **Introduce classroom roles and responsibilities.** Classroom jobs can help build learners' sense of ownership as they become co-agents who are responsible for maintaining a learning space. They also build learners' self-efficacy through a job well done. (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 physical spaces such as staff lounges, offices, hallways, etc.

- **Set school-wide norms for classroom setup.** Add these norms (e.g., get rid of clutter) 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 and organizational supplies.** Make sure furniture fits the learners. Buy furniture that has multiple purposes and is easily maneuverable by children. Procure organizational systems (e.g., shelving, boxes, trays) that are sturdy, attractive, and easy for children to use.
- **Provide professional learning to expand thinking around the use of the physical space in learning environments.** 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 (in terms of both look and feel and school/district regulations) and then trust teachers' creativity and style.

## Rigorous Academic Learning

Through challenging grade-level content, evidence-based instruction, and learners doing the majority of the thinking, young people master academic knowledge and skills that support agency. Rigorous academic learning provides learners the opportunity to practice essential academic competencies *and* demonstrate all that they know and can do.<sup>4</sup> Access to rigorous academic learning can expand capacities across content areas and positively influence how learners see themselves as well as their motivation to learn.<sup>5</sup>



Stretches learners to grapple with challenging content and see all they are capable of, influencing motivation.



Provides a chance to practice and reach grade-level standards across subjects.

*Van Ness Elementary School*

### Applying a Developmental Lens

K-2 settings should be especially focused on building children's foundational knowledge and skills in literacy and math—things like phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, writing, number sense, and more—as these capacities support all future learning. Early grade educators must use evidence-based practices to do this. While these practices will vary based on the content being taught, all educators should focus on rigorous grade-level content and tasks, scaffolds, effective practice, high-quality feedback, and higher-order questioning.



## How to get started if you are a teacher:

- **Use standards-aligned assessments to understand what learners know, what they are still working on, and how their learning is progressing.** When you know what your learners know and can do, then you can effectively differentiate instruction to meet their needs, scaffold on-level lessons, and engage them in more purposeful practice activities.
- **Ensure all learners have access to high-quality instructional materials and grade-level tasks.** Research shows that when learners—regardless of starting point—have access to grade-level assignments, experience strong instruction that requires them to engage deeply with rigorous content, and receive appropriate support, they rise to the challenge (TNTP, 2018, 2021, 2022). Work to offer consistent opportunities for learners to engage in grade-level work because they are not only deserving of these experiences but also ready and able (TNTP, 2018). This can be enabled by providing scaffolds, such as graphic organizer, peer support, additional instruction, or adaptive technology, so that learners who may lack prior knowledge or skills relevant to the tasks can still engage in them. (Check out: Scaffolding Strategies from TNTP)
- **Incorporate “just-in-time” opportunities for learners who still need to master prior learning.** Research shows that access to grade-level tasks coupled with tailored support can effectively help learners “catch up,” while a traditional remediation approach can almost guarantee that they fall further behind (TNTP, 2021). As such, teachers should start with grade-level content and purposefully incorporate any prior grade-level standards needed to master new grade-level content into lessons (TNTP, 2021; Wetter, 2021).
- **Use evidence-based literacy practices.** To build reading fluency it’s essential to use evidence-based instructional practices informed by the science of reading (e.g., explicit and systematic instruction on phonics, grammatical structures, and encoding and decoding words; interactive read-aloud lessons from varied and complex texts) (The Reading League, 2022). (Check out: The Science of Reading: A Defining Guide from The Reading League)
- **Use evidence-based mathematics practices.** Provide learners with opportunities to discuss and explore mathematical concepts and ideas. To facilitate discussion, ask open-ended questions that have learners reflect on their mathematical approach, debate different approaches to solving problems, explain their reasoning, make connections, and more. For example, you might ask: “Why did you choose to group the blocks this way?” or “What would happen if \_\_\_?” (Check out: Elementary School: Engaging in Mathematical Discourse from Inside Mathematics; Math Block from The Number Lab)

## How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:

- **Own academic vision setting and the development of instructional staff.** Work to articulate a clear, shared vision for high-quality, evidence-based academic learning. Do this by setting site- and system-wide expectations for what high-quality instruction looks like. Then, commit to (1) coaching and developing all staff members through practice-based development and (2) building systems for looking at learner work and data, and adjusting

instruction accordingly.

- **Invest in evidence-based instructional materials.** Ensure the curricular materials at your site and in your system are evidence-based. If they are not, procure ones that are.
- **Consider procuring adaptive technology to facilitate individualized mastery-based learning.** Adaptive learning software can be a powerful tool to support learners in building the skills needed to master grade-level content (e.g., Wetter, 2021). View technology as an additional resource for achieving this.
- **Train teachers, instructional coaches, and district/school administrators on evidence-based instructional practices.** This includes professional development on the science of reading, how to build mathematical foundations (e.g., early number sense), strong writing instruction, and more.
- **Offer ongoing implementation support on how to use evidence-based instructional materials.** This includes supporting teachers to use high-quality instructional materials in daily classroom practice, design evidence-aligned assessments, and more.
- **Audit system- and school-level decisions to ensure all learners have access to rigorous learning.** Identify and work toward addressing any structures that prevent some learners from experiencing rigorous instruction, grade-level work, and high expectations (TNTP, 2018).
- **Ensure teachers and other school personnel enact high expectations for every learner.** Do so by supporting teachers and school personnel to: deeply reflect on their beliefs and actions, examine common practices that reflect low expectations and limit learner opportunities (e.g., ineffective differentiation, “meeting learners at their level”), see firsthand what learners can do when provided rigorous academic learning experiences, and more (e.g., TNTP, 2018).

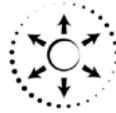
# Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction

Instruction on learning strategies and habits helps learners practice and master new skills that support them to drive their 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 learners' motivation through an increased belief in their ability to succeed.



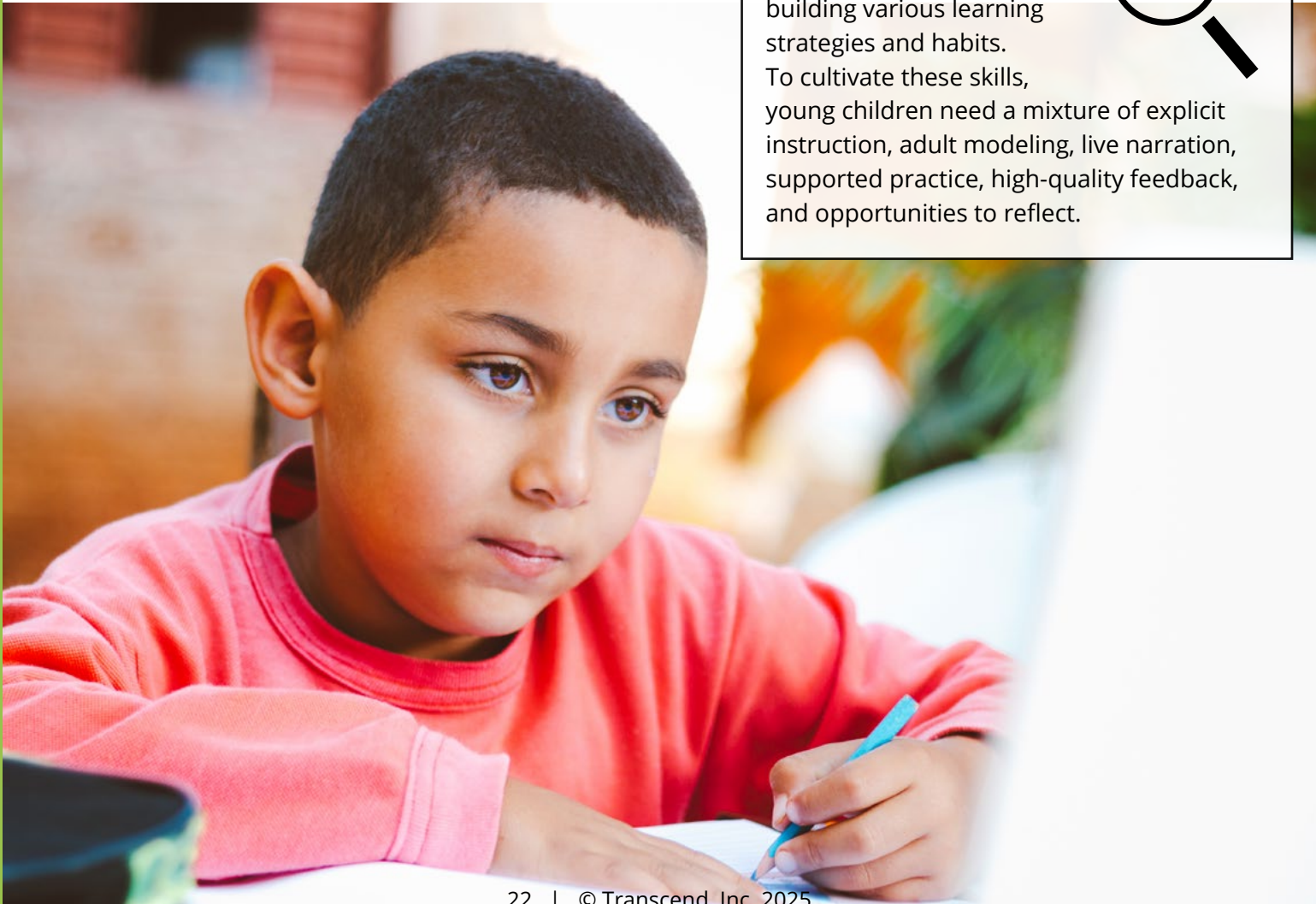
**Capacity**

Strengthens learners' overall capacity.

## Applying a Developmental Lens

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 the curriculum 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 as well as time to reflect and make connections.
- **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 ways you may change your plans in relation to learning strategies and habits. This helps learners develop their inner voice and metacognitive thinking skills.
- **Pair habit goals with academic goals in daily lessons.** Then, explicitly teach 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 when learners can get tailored support on these habits and skills. (See: Targeted Support)
- **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: 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: 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. Additionally, ensure the set of learning strategies and habits reflects what parents, caregivers, and the community find important for their young people.
- **Provide curricular resources and instructional guidance that helps educators integrate learning strategies and habits across all parts of a learner's day.** Create, adopt, or adapt a high-quality learning strategies and habits curriculum at the school or system level that teachers can customize and that is designed to be integrated across the day. Also, consider taking on an instructional approach, such as a project-based one, that supports the integration of learning strategies and habits.
- **Ensure educators have the time and autonomy to customize the curriculum.** Even if a learning strategies curriculum is provided, teachers will need to adapt it to meet the needs of their learners. Encourage teachers to bring in their own experiences, make connections to learners' lives, and more.
- **Offer ongoing professional development on learning strategies and habits instruction.** This includes professional development (e.g., professional learning communities, lesson studies, coaching) on how to support young learners' development of learning strategies and habits. Opportunities should allow teachers to share best practices and learn from, and collaborate with, their peers.

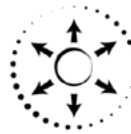
## High-Value Learning Activities

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 take place over a range of time periods. What these activities have in common is that they allow learners to explore their interests, co-design learning to increase relevance, and build an array of skills that matter to them and support their growth—opportunities that are essential for fostering agency.



### 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.

### Applying a Developmental Lens

In K-2 settings, high-value learning activities should build on young children's 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, and/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; Galinsky, 2010; NAEYC, 2020; Whittington, 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 grapple with or explore the concepts 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, inquire, 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.
- **Use protocols to lift learners' voices and encourage them to co-construct learning.** Protocols are discussion structures that 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 mediums they value already or want to explore more.
- **Design extended learning activities, projects, and/or discussions based on learners' interests, wonderings, and experiences.** Integrating high-interest topics into learning activities such as a study or project can be incredibly motivating and can act as a vehicle for learners to strengthen a wide range of skills. For example, use projects as an opportunity to engage in meaning making across home and school contexts, and learn more about children and their families (Alvarez, 2018).

## 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 can more easily incorporate high-value learning experiences into daily classroom practice.
- **Make sure staff have access to a wide range of supplementary instructional materials.** Create avenues through which teachers can access resources and materials that are

responsive to learners' top interests. Otherwise, designing high-value learning activities on their own can be taxing on and unsustainable for teachers.

- **Audit the current use of time to optimize high-value learning activities.** Identify times of the day that could incorporate high-value learning experiences. For example, transform the art room into a maker station or develop choice menus around learners' interests. Consider: What training and support would current teachers need? Do you have the space to accommodate this?
- **Provide educators with agency while ensuring coherence from grade to grade.** When educators have the ability to shape their own work and the instructional design of their classroom without fear of failing, they are able to extend agency-rich opportunities to their learners (Colegrove & Zúñiga, 2018). Encourage educators to shape the instructional design of their classroom in ways that create vertical alignment in curriculum and experiences.
- **Hire educators who believe in high-value learning activities.** Look for teachers who are committed to designing experiences that integrate learners' interests with standards, and to learning how.
- **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.

# Play

Play is a context where learners can enact their agency by actively defining and pursuing their interests and goals in joyful, meaningful, and engaging ways. Types of play exist across a spectrum—ranging from the most agentic play, which is initiated entirely from within the player, to the least agentic play, which is controlled by external rules, for example board games—and require players to take on different roles and responsibilities. When learners engage in play, they have the opportunity to lead their learning based on their interests and motivations; develop and apply a wide range of skills as they make sense of the world around them; and experience a natural context for agency.



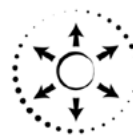
## Motivation

Allows learners to take charge, immerse in joyful experiences, and pursue curiosities, which is highly motivating.



## Supportive Context

Provides learners the opportunity to influence goals, what to learn and play, and how.



## Capacity

Creates meaningful opportunities for learners to practice a wide range of learning standards and objectives.

### Applying a Developmental Lens

Given the importance of play for young children, early grade classrooms should offer a blend of play types (e.g., free play, guided, imaginative, inquiry, games), where adults and children experience a variety of opportunities to negotiate the design, flow, level of guidance, and outcomes of play. Regardless of the type of play at hand, early grade educators should take an active role in observing, interpreting, extending, and supporting reflection on children’s thinking and learning during and after play.



## How to get started if you are a teacher:

- **Learn about the value of play and different types of play.** Take some time to learn about the different types of play and strong play-based practices to help identify what's right for your context and learning objectives. (Check out: *The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting* from NAEYC; *How We Play* from the National Institute for Play; *Pedagogy of Play* from Project Zero)
- **Design play to meet learners' interests and motivations.** Closely observe and ask learners about their evolving interests and goals. Then, use these to design play experiences (e.g., AnjiPlay, n.d.; California Department of Education, 2021).
- **Design welcoming play spaces.** Work to ensure play spaces and the materials inside them (e.g., books, images, toys, artifacts) represent the varied identities your learners hold (California Department of Education, 2021). This includes, but is not limited to, encouraging learners to use their home languages during play and ensuring furniture and materials are movable, child-sized, accessible (e.g., physically, visually, auditorily), and allow for solitary and collaborative play.
- **Incorporate materials that spark curiosity and act as an invitation to explore new ideas and concepts.** Try introducing a variety of open-ended materials (e.g., ordinary objects, art supplies, recycled materials, nature, photos, loose parts, musical instruments) as they invite learners to use their agency to author their own stories, express themselves, explore new possibilities, make meaning, experiment, and more (e.g., California Department of Education, 2021; Drew & Rankin, 2004).
- **Ensure play experiences have opportunities for choice.** Do so by designing open-ended play experiences that allow children to make decisions around the activities, materials, outcomes of play, etc. (California Department of Education, 2021). Including choice gives play greater value to children and fuels their motivation to engage in it and in turn practice their agency.
- **Use play to meet learning standards.** Research shows that opportunities for choice, play, and agency can provide avenues toward meeting learning standards (e.g., Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Drew et al., 2008; Drew & Rankin, 2004; Illescas-Glascock et al., 2023; Kinard & Gainer, 2020). To do this, educators should intentionally plan play experiences that help children practice language, literacy, math, science, social studies, social and emotional skills, and more. They should also carefully observe play and choose when to join or interact, in order to ask questions, provide scaffolding, and teach in the moment.
- **Observe, document, and reflect on play.** Work to understand how children are learning as well as the varied skills they exhibit during play by asking questions like: "How are children revealing their thinking and feelings?" (California Department of Education, 2021, p. 115). Consider how what you learn by observing children's play can help you adjust play structures moving forward.
- **Observe and respond to unfair or exclusionary behavior during play.** Children often reflect what they see in the world through their play, including stereotyping or unfair treatment of others. Educators need to stay attentive during these moments and use

thoughtful strategies—such as narrating what’s happening (“verbal mapping”)—to gently guide children toward more respectful and welcoming interactions (Kinard et al., 2021). (Check out: *Leading by Following: An Introduction to Verbal Mapping as “Naming” Abstract, Affective Realia* by Dr. Tim Kinard and Dr. Jesse Gainer)

- **Encourage learners to reflect on play.** State what you see learners doing during play to increase their self-awareness, for example: “You stacked the rectangular block on top of the square block.” Ask learners open-ended questions about their play to understand their thinking (AnjiPlay, n.d.) and further learning (California Department of Education, 2021). For example, you might ask a learner: “How did you decide to stack the blocks that way?” or “Why do you think the leaves float, but the rocks sink?”

### **How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:**

- **Educate yourself and other administrators on the value of play.** Learn about the importance of play for children’s holistic development and how to support the implementation of high-quality play experiences across a site or system.
- **Build teachers’ capacity to participate in and support play.** Engaging in play pedagogies requires a range of knowledge and skills (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). As such, provide teachers with professional development on play, including how to participate in play, to better equip them to support high-quality play experiences. This includes cultivating adult mindsets that view play as an invitation to lean in and learn more about young people, their goals, and their learning.
- **Address barriers to incorporating play in daily classroom practice.** Research shows that teachers often face a variety of challenges when employing play-based learning, such as pressures in curricular delivery and policy mandates, time pressures, understaffing, lack of training or familiarity with the theory of play and play-based learning, parental attitudes and pressures, and more (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Work to understand the barriers that are present at your site, and collaborate with teachers and families to address them.
- **Create a master schedule that accommodates time for play.** This might look like scheduling longer blocks of time for learners to engage in play (e.g., maker spaces, free play) and/or incorporating play (e.g., math games, puzzles, theater, storytelling) into existing content blocks or centers.
- **Consider offering multi-aged opportunities for play-based exploration.** Doing so provides avenues that allow older learners to step into the role of teachers, empowering them to share their knowledge, creativity, experiences, and more with younger peers during play.
- **Provide adults with opportunities to play.** Play is not just for young children. It’s important to provide teachers with opportunities to play, tinker, explore, and exercise their creativity because play can “keep our brains flexible, ward off depression, sustain optimism, and sharpen our social-emotional skills” (National Institute for Play, n.d., para. 8).

## 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 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.



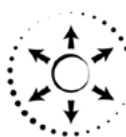
Motivation

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



Supportive Context

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



Capacity

Keeps the emphasis on what each learner needs to achieve.

### Applying a Developmental Lens



In K–2 settings, a focus on goals, progress, and mastery may initially 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, reflect on, and see their progress toward goals 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.
- **Develop systems for learners to share their goals.** Sharing a goal or intention with an accountability partner helps increase the likelihood of success (Pulliam Phillips, 2010). This could look like creating opportunities for learners to share daily, short-term goals with a peer or long-term goals with a parent at a conference.
- **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 and their families 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, have a system for learners to save their best work in a portfolio). (Check out: How Data Notebooks Can Support Goal-Setting and Student Agency in Elementary School from Aurora Institute)
- **Name and explicitly teach 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, identify potential next steps, and practice metacognitive thinking. (See: Metacognitive Reflection & High-Quality Feedback) 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.
- **Celebrate and display learners' progress and mastery.** It is important to honor learners' progress regularly through both daily/weekly routines (e.g., end of the day/lesson shout-outs, storytelling, 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 tend to reduce intrinsic motivation to learn (Hyson, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Instead, they can create an unsupportive culture of competition and should be minimized.

## How to get started if you are a site or systems leader:

- **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.

- **Create systems to manage and share learners' goal progress and attainment.** This may include online platforms (e.g., a learning management system), but can certainly be done in lower-tech ways (e.g., spreadsheets or paper goal trackers). Doing this 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)
- **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.
- **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

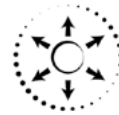
Metacognitive reflection and high-quality feedback help learners engage in the self-evaluation needed to reach their goals now and in the future. Reflection and feedback can take many forms and range in frequency and depth. What these processes have in common is that they carve out avenues for learners to gather new insights from their reflection and the feedback of others, which they can then use to set meaningful goals and plan tangible actions toward those goals. Metacognitive ability—nurtured through feedback, practice, and instruction—equips young people to set goals, plan, and assess. Self-reflection as well as giving and receiving feedback require a supportive context but can also help foster such a context by helping learners feel seen, valued, and heard.

*Long View Micro School*



**Supportive Context**

Helps create a community of learners that contribute to each other's growth and learning.



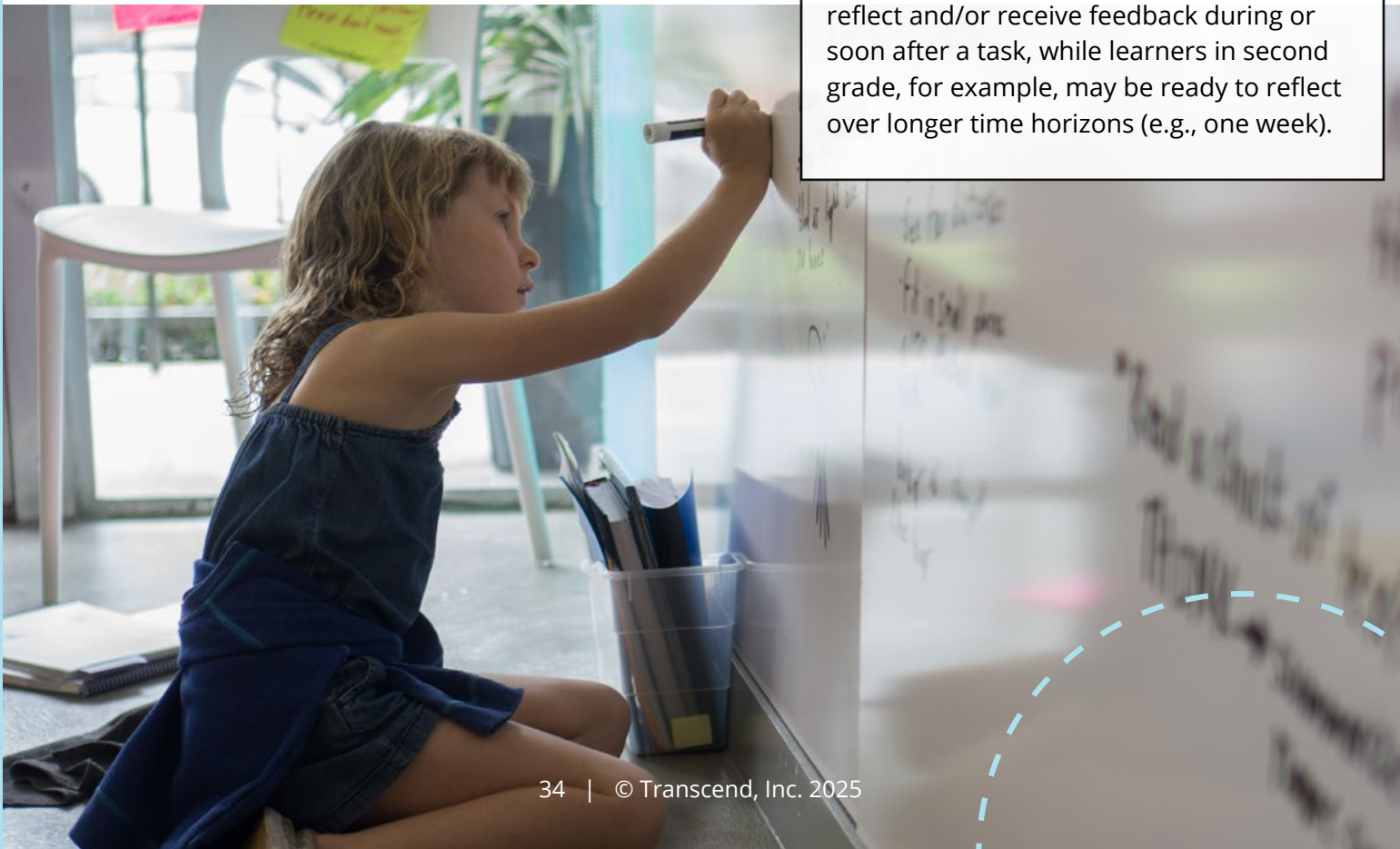
**Capacity**

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

### Applying a Developmental Lens



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 learners in second grade, for example, may be ready to reflect over longer time horizons (e.g., one week).



## How to get started if you are a teacher:

- **Model metacognitive reflection and how to give high-quality feedback to others.** This may include modeling how to reflect on your 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 or with a partner, or vocalize it quietly to themselves.
- **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 flower so that you could count them easily. Working neatly and carefully helped you to be accurate so that you could make your graph." (See: 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 (e.g., "What strategies are you using to \_\_? Did that strategy work for you? Why?"). (See: Learning Strategies & Habits Instruction)
- **Use 1-1 and/or small-group conferencing to encourage self-reflection and offer feedback.** Small-group 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, reflect on goal progress, and more. (See: Focus on Goals, Progress & Mastery)
- **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 self-reflection and peer feedback.** Develop 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 based on models of high-quality work, critique protocols, and sentence stems for learners to use when sharing feedback to others.
- **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 feedback to you.** 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:

- **Take a cross-curricular approach to developing metacognition.** Research examining more than 50 studies on metacognition and learner outcomes and well-being suggest that metacognition can be taught and should be systematically integrated across the curriculum to complement learning (Perry et al., 2018). Identify ways to take a cross-curricular approach to develop learners' metacognition in your school or system. Then, create tools for teachers to use to support metacognitive thinking. For example, create a guide of 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?" (Check out: Empowering Young People with Questions from The Forest School)
- **Offer ongoing professional development on supporting metacognitive reflection.** This includes professional development (e.g., professional learning communities, 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 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.
- **Create ways for staff to experience high-quality feedback.** Examine your own feedback practices and those of your coaches to ensure you are regularly modeling how to give high-quality feedback. Use descriptive praise, 2x2s, or other structures to provide actionable feedback. Additionally, 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 learners give feedback about and how they are scaffolding learners for success.
- **Hire educators who are skilled at providing high-quality feedback to learners.** Look for teachers who provide feedback that focuses on the learning process and gives actionable suggestions for improvement.

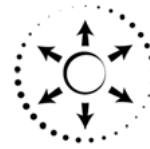
## Deep, Self-Directed Work

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 time for self-directed work can vary in length and frequency, all such work requires that learners shoulder the responsibility for learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Here, learners have the opportunity to control and make decisions for their learning, fueling motivation, as well as 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.



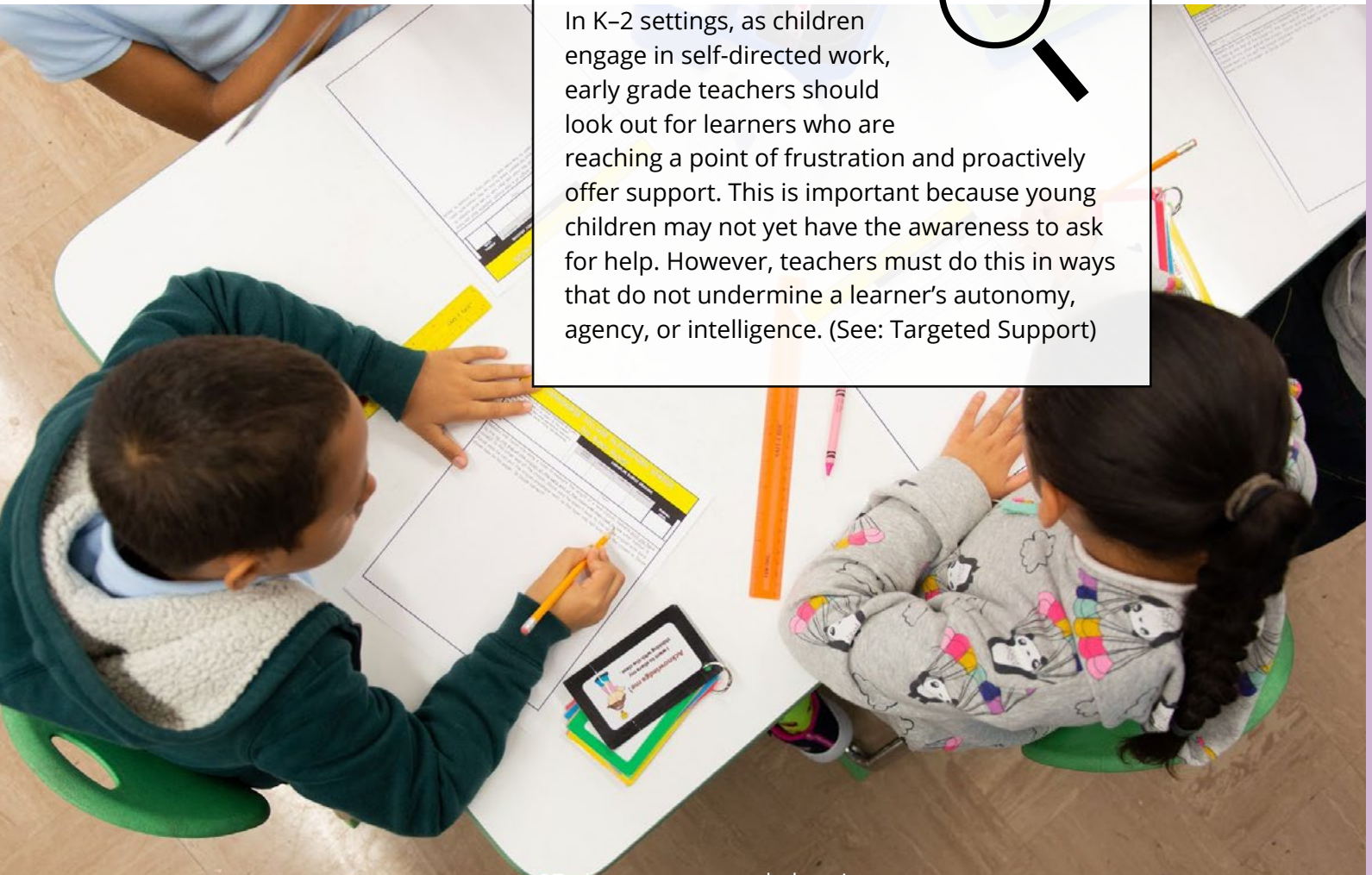
### Capacity

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

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### Applying a Developmental Lens

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: Targeted Support)



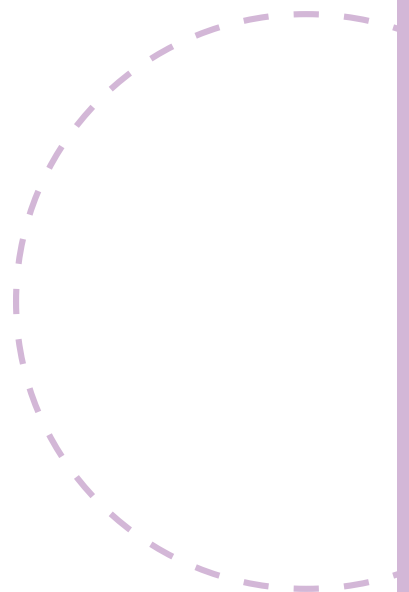
## How to get started if you are a teacher:

- **Integrate extended blocks of uninterrupted work time into learners' schedules.** To do this, consider modifying current systems, such as traditional station rotations, to have learners select and practice an array of skills. These blocks typically range from 30 to 60 minutes, and in some instances are up to 3 hours long (e.g., Montessori work periods). You might use this time to have learners work on personally challenging tasks of their choosing in their zone of proximal development.
- **Plan optimally challenging activities for deep, self-directed learning time.** Use data from standards-aligned assessments to create purposeful practice opportunities for learners.
- **Help learners to build stamina.** Persisting through challenges takes practice over time. Help learners build their stamina and comfort with “not knowing yet” by gradually increasing time allocated for self-directed work, starting with short sessions and giving micro-challenges or more comfortable activities.
- **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.
- **Develop opportunities for discussion around learner interests and wonderings.** These types of activities are not only highly motivating to learners; 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.

## 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 to 60 minutes, and in some instances are up to 3 hours long—providing unrushed time for learners to tinker, test out different strategies, explore, iterate, and get into a “flow” state.
- **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 the 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.” (See: Rigorous Academic Learning)
- **Support teachers to plan standards-aligned learning activities.** Provide sufficient time for your staff to design purposeful learning activities that require learners to persevere.



## Targeted Support

Targeted support provides avenues through which learners can identify their need for help, self-advocate, and receive additional support. Support can take many forms, including materials that help learners seek support, mentorship opportunities, 1-1 and small-group conferencing, and others. 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.



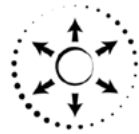
### Motivation

Reduces barriers to success and increases learners' sense of control over their learning.



### Supportive Context

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



### Capacity

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

*Van Ness Elementary School*

### Applying a Developmental Lens

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.



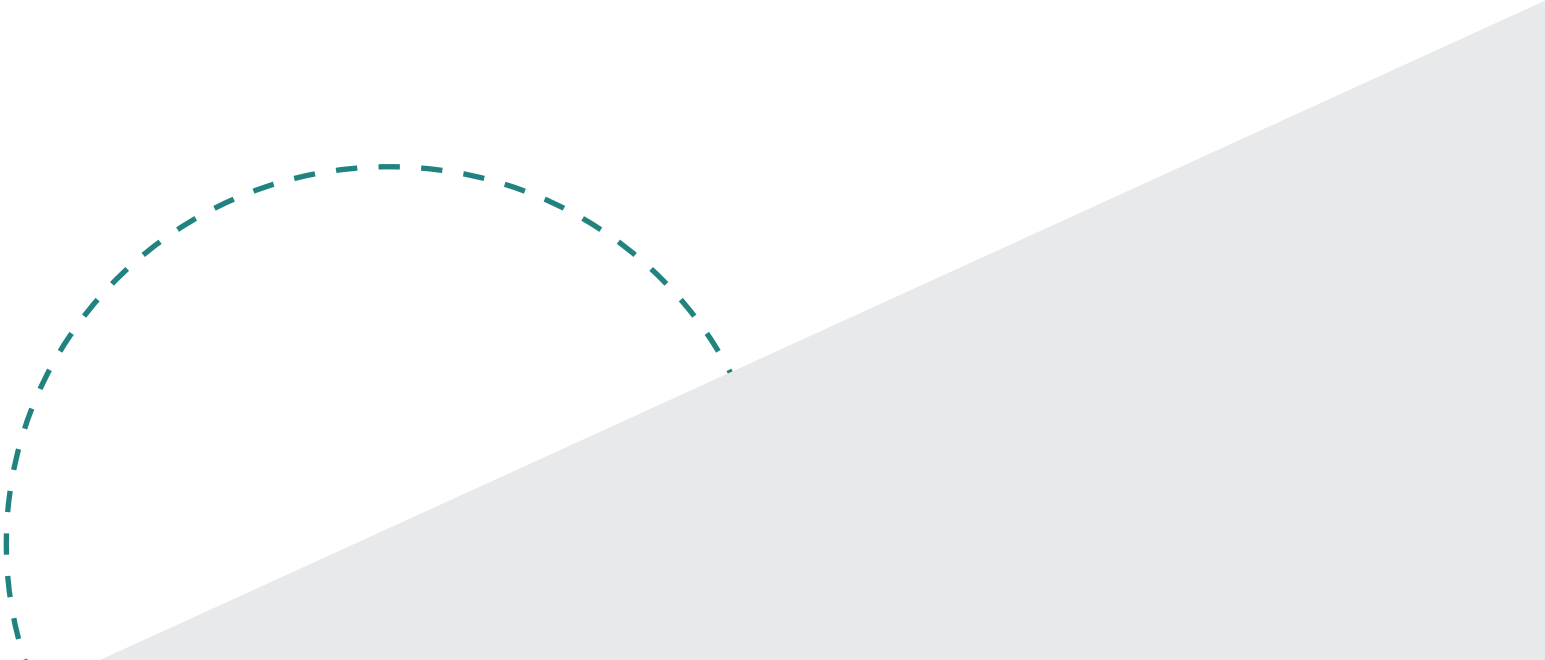
## How to get started if you are a teacher:

- **Set up 1-1 and/or small-group conferences with learners.** Learners can use this time to set goals, plan actionable steps, track progress, reflect, practice a skill, get feedback, share strategies, receive additional support, and more.
- **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. (See: Safe & Trusting Culture)
- **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 this will help learners build stamina and help you know when to check in and when to let a child continue to work uninterrupted.
- **Explicitly teach problem-solving and self-help strategies.** Introduce scaffolds for learners to begin to solve problems on their own, such as visual prompts to share, take turns, or use a timer when several children want the same materials. Provide phrases or sentence stems children can use to ask for help from teachers or peers. Model and role-play using strategies until learners are comfortable with them. (Check out: Solution Toolkit: Classroom Edition from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations)
- **Design cooperative activities.** Peers can be a great source of support. Working and playing with peers can also build communication and collaboration skills as learners 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 opportunities for learners to practice this skill.
- **Help learners identify others to learn from and to lean on for support.** Doing this 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:

- **Establish consistent systems, structures, and protocols across the school site or district through which learners and adults can access support.** Ensure all learners have at least one trusted coach/teacher that is able to accurately report on their current well-being, 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, ongoing professional learning communities, 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 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 your staff can take 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.
- **Reduce 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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