

How can systems build teacher agency?

Building teacher agency requires more than giving teachers autonomy. It requires creating the conditions where professional judgement is trusted, expertise is developed, and innovation is valued.

If we want students to become independent learners, schools must first become places where teachers are empowered as independent professionals.

Here are five ways systems can build genuine teacher agency.

1. Shift from Compliance to Trust

Many systems remain heavily focused on implementation and compliance. Teachers are often asked to deliver initiatives rather than help shape them.

Agency grows when teachers are viewed as professionals capable of making informed decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

The question shifts from:

"Did you implement the program?"

to

"What evidence do you have that student learning improved?"

The focus becomes outcomes, not compliance.

2. Prioritise Teacher Learning, Not Just Professional Development

Professional learning should move beyond one-off workshops.

Teachers build agency when they:

- Engage in action research.
- Investigate their own practice.
- Collaborate with colleagues.
- Analyse evidence of impact.
- Contribute to educational knowledge.

John Hattie's work reminds us that teachers who evaluate their own impact have some of the strongest effects on student learning.

Agency develops when teachers become knowledge creators rather than knowledge consumers.

3. Give Teachers Permission to Innovate

Innovation rarely emerges from rigid systems.

Schools serious about future-focused learning should encourage teachers to:

- Trial interdisciplinary units.
- Experiment with assessment models.
- Integrate AI thoughtfully.
- Explore inquiry-based approaches.
- Adapt learning to student needs.

Not every innovation succeeds.

But a culture that punishes failure inevitably discourages creativity.

4. Involve Teachers in Curriculum Design

Teachers closest to students often have the clearest understanding of what engages them.

Rather than simply receiving curriculum, teachers should be involved in:

- Designing learning experiences.
- Mapping competencies.
- Creating assessment tasks.
- Determining authentic contexts for learning.

Agency grows when teachers become architects of learning rather than deliverers of content.

5. Build Collective Agency

Teacher agency is not just individual.

Research increasingly points to the importance of **collective teacher efficacy**: the shared belief that educators working together can positively influence student outcomes.

When teachers collaborate around:

- Student learning
- Assessment practices
- Curriculum design
- Interdisciplinary inquiry

their impact is amplified.

The future of schooling will likely depend less on individual expertise and more on collective professional intelligence.

The Bigger Question

Perhaps the most important insight is this:

If we want schools to move beyond industrial-era models of learning, we cannot continue to operate industrial-era models of leadership.

We cannot ask teachers to develop creativity, critical thinking, agency, and innovation in students while expecting compliance, standardisation, and risk avoidance from the adults.

Teacher agency is not a nice-to-have.

It is the foundation upon which curriculum innovation, assessment reform, interdisciplinary learning, UDL, and future-focused education are built.

After all, students are unlikely to experience authentic agency in classrooms unless the teachers leading them experience it first.