When youth have opportunities to drive their own learning, exercising learner agency, it leads to dramatic outcomes—the cultivation of MINDSETS, SKILLS, and BEHAVIORS that are essential to success as adults.

But this development is not happening for the vast majority of our young people. Instead, youth often feel that learning is something that happens to them, resulting in a disempowering environment that robs them of the opportunity to develop agency and pursue their learning interests.
In 2017, we highlighted this problem with a framework based on decades of research. Now, after two years spent working directly with more than 400 young people nationwide designing and testing approaches to solve this challenge, here are the punchlines:

We observe that the emergence of learner agency is a dynamic and self-reinforcing cycle, not a static and linear relationship between inputs and outcomes. Rather, as a young person experiences changes in their mindsets, skills, and behaviors during the pursuit of their learning journey, they then develop stronger and stronger outcomes in these same areas which, in turn, propel them to seek out additional opportunities to exercise—and strengthen—their agency.

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE?**

We started by asking and testing, “What set of conditions do youth need to lead their own learning?”

1. **Passion/Interest**
   Youth expresses strong interest to pursue a self-identified learning topic

2. **Meaningful**
   Youth expresses a belief that the learning experience will help them be successful, now and/or in the future

3. **Decision-Making**
   Youth exercises fully autonomous decision-making over what they are learning, how they are learning it, and how success will be defined

4. **A “Champion”**
   Another person expresses interest in the youth and their interests, belief in their potential for success, and asks questions for self-reflection, but critically without giving advice or direction

5. **Funding**
   Youth has access to money (e.g., $500) to pursue their learning, with full decision-making authority to use funds as they decide

6. **Self-Directed Time**
   Youth dedicates time to carry out the learning experience (e.g., 10 weeks) and decides how this time is spent

Based on data through our eight learning cycles, we posit that these six conditions are interconnected and critically important. When they are all in place, and not watered down nor bounded by adult guardrails, young people build and practice strong levels of learner agency resulting in powerful outcomes that deepen with time. But despite the strength of the outcomes, we rarely see this set of conditions made available to our young people.

We recognize that this approach pushes the boundaries of what some people consider comfortable (e.g., learners have complete decision-making authority over the design, implementation, and assessment of their self-led learning journey with zero accountability for failure). What we ask you, the reader, to explore is what this set of conditions means for the development of agency. And to do that, we ask you to consider the outcomes we are seeing with young people.
WHAT HAPPENS? IMPROVED MINDSETS, SKILLS, AND BEHAVIORS

Building off the findings from our learning cycles, we have identified a set of changes in mindsets, skills, and behaviors of youth who have increased learner agency.

**INCREASES IN MINDSETS AND SKILLS**
- Confidence
- Self-motivation, determination, and perseverance
- Self-awareness and awareness of others
- Goal-setting, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection

**CHANGES IN BEHAVIORS**
- Seizing new learning opportunities previously ignored
- Creating new learning experiences, often including other people
- Taking action to improve a current learning experience
- Inspiring and helping other youth to lead their learning

Our two most recent set of research findings from June and December 2018 respectively found that youth gained critical knowledge as well as meaningful and sustained changes in their mindsets, skills, and behaviors as a result of the full set of conditions outlined above. **Our findings show:**

Significantly, these outcomes emerge very quickly. While conventional wisdom might suggest that learner agency takes years to develop, we see dramatic changes in these outcome areas in as few as 12–14 weeks. And then we see the outcomes deepen and endure in the coming months and years.
WHAT’S NEXT?
GripTape sees this framework as an evolving work. It is our intention to continuously test the hypotheses embedded herein through ongoing rapid learning cycles such as the GripTape Learning Challenge, as well as through data collection, analysis, and collaboration with a select group of youth and adult partners across formal and informal learning settings.

Research findings on the impact of GripTape’s programs for youth development and learning can be found at www.griptape.org/resources.

READY TO JOIN US?
Each and every day, GripTape is giving young people the traction they need to take control of their own learning, choose their purposes, and achieve their full potential. Does this mission light up your mind, stir something in your heart? Join us! From young people, to volunteers, to partners and staff, we are an energetic and passionate team. Are you a funder, a researcher, someone who is inspired to ignite the interests and passions of our youth? Join our effort. We want to hear from you, right here—info@griptape.org

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