

BEHAVIOUR SYSTEMS GET STUDENTS
READY TO LEARN

LEARNERSHIP IS WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Why behaviour systems and learning systems operate on different layers — and why schools need both.



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We've Solved One Problem. And in Solving It, We've Exposed Another.

Walk into most classrooms today, and something is different.

Students are settled. Expectations are clear. Routines are in place. There's a kind of quiet that schools used to fight for — and now, in many places, have.

That didn't happen by accident. Frameworks like Positive behaviour frameworks — often referred to as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), PBS, or PBIS have done real work. They've made classrooms calmer, safer, more predictable. And in parallel, the quality of teaching has sharpened — often through explicit instruction, which has brought welcome clarity to what teachers do and when.

For anyone who remembers what some of these classrooms looked like ten years ago, the change is remarkable.

But here's the thing.

The order we've created isn't the goal. It's the starting point.

Because once the room is settled — once students are ready, once the lesson is clear — the question that matters next is: ready for what?

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Ready to learn.

But learning isn't the end of the conversation. Students might be learning content — following instructions, completing tasks, meeting the standard — and still not be becoming better learners.

That's the gap we need to close. Not between chaos and order. We've done that work. The gap is between learning... and becoming a learner.



The Learning Equation

There's a simple way to describe what's going on.

$$\text{Growth} = \text{Skilful Teaching} \times \text{Skilful Learning}$$

Not addition. Multiplication.

Which means that if either side is missing, the result collapses.

Skilful teaching $\times$ passive learning = very little. Skilful learning $\times$ weak teaching = limited growth.

The equation only works when both sides are developed deliberately. For the last decade, schools have invested heavily on the left-hand side of that equation. We've raised the quality of teaching, sharpened instructional practice, and built systems — PBL among them — that support teachers to teach. And we should be proud of that work.

But the right-hand side has been assumed.

We've assumed that if teaching is good enough, learning will follow. And for some students, it does. But for most — especially the ones who have quietly drifted into compliance — it doesn't. Not reliably. Not over time. Not in the ways that matter once the teacher is no longer beside them.

Skilful teaching deserves a partner.

That partner is skilful learning. And skilful learning is not something students pick up by osmosis. It's a discipline. And it has a name.

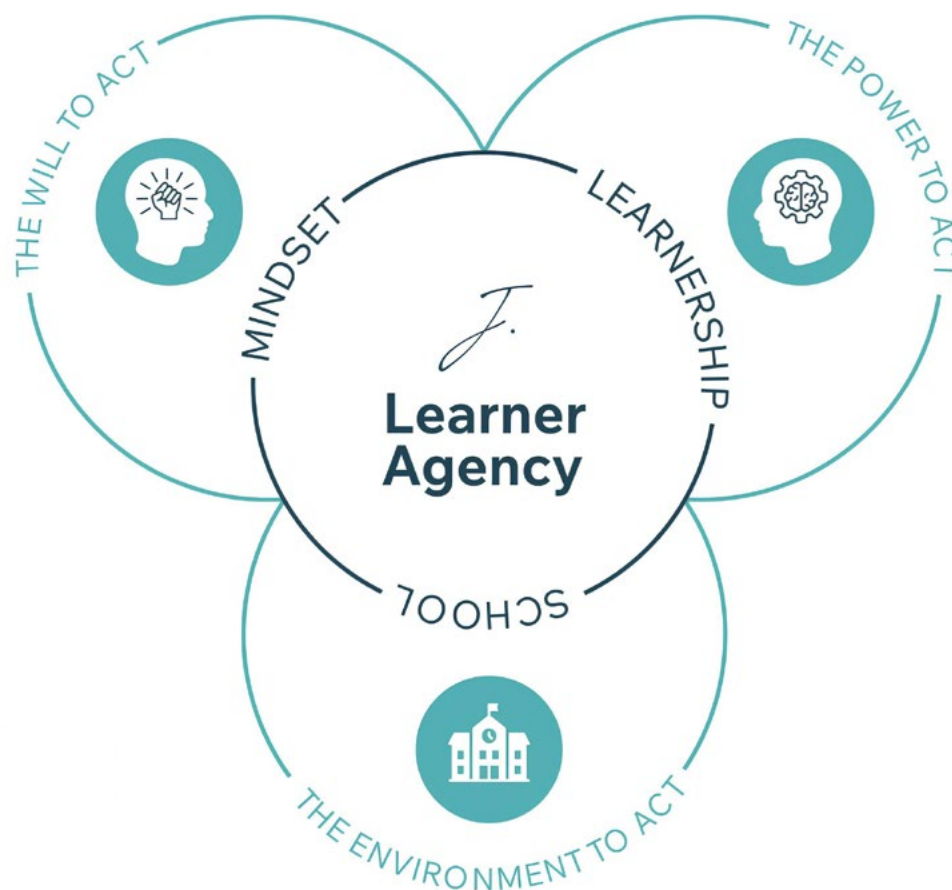
Learnership.

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The Order We've Built Isn't the Agency We Need



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Order makes learning possible. Challenge makes learning necessary.”

Here's where I want to be precise.

The order PBL creates is valuable. Students need predictable routines. They need clear expectations. They need to know what's coming. Without those things, learning is almost impossible.



It's Learnership that turns challenge into fuel rather than friction."

But order isn't the same as agency.

Agency — the capacity of a learner to take meaningful action, particularly in the face of challenge — has three parts:

- the **environment** to act
- the **will** to act
- the **power** to act

And here's the catch. PBL doesn't set out to build any of them.

The **environment** to act isn't just an orderly classroom. It's a classroom where students are expected — and supported — to engage with challenge. A classroom full of problems that stretch them beyond what they can already do. Order makes learning possible. Challenge makes learning necessary.

The **will to act** comes from mindset — a learner's belief that their effort can change their circumstances. A classroom can be perfectly settled and still be full of students who don't believe there's any point in trying.

The **power to act** comes from Learnership — the skills a learner brings to the learning process itself.

PBL doesn't produce any of these. What it does is clear the ground so that the work of building them becomes possible. That's a real contribution. It's just not the whole job.

But if PBL clears the ground, who builds what comes next? Teachers do — through the problems they set, the cognitive demand they hold, the moments they decide not to rescue. This is where instructional design meets Learnership, and where the environment to act is actually built. Because challenge without Learnership is just frustration. Drop a student without the skills of learning into a difficult task and they don't grow — they shut down. It's Learnership that turns challenge into fuel rather than friction. The two have to be built together.



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PBL was built to create the behavioural foundation. What happens on that foundation is a different kind of work.”

What PBL Is — and What It Was Never Designed to Do

Let me be clear about something.

I’m not arguing against PBL. PBL, done well, is one of the most important shifts schools have made in recent decades. It solves a real problem. It creates the conditions under which learning can happen.

But PBL was never designed to develop learners.

It was designed to shape behaviour. And when we expect it to do more than that — when we ask a behavioural framework to do the work of building skilful learners — we’re using the wrong tool for the job.

The fact that PBL doesn’t grow learners isn’t a criticism. It’s a matter of scope. PBL was built to create the behavioural foundation. What happens on that foundation is a different kind of work.

And yet, in many schools, that work gets skipped — not by design, but by default. The assumption creeps in that if students are settled, focused, and following instructions, learning will take care of itself.

It won’t. Students may be learning content. But learning content is not the same as becoming a learner. And the difference between those two things is what determines what students can do once the teacher stops guiding them.



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Raising the status of learning from an act to an art.”

What Learnership Is — and What It Isn't

Learnership is the expertise a person develops in learning.

It's not about what students learn. It's about how they learn — and more importantly, about developing their skill in learning itself.

There are five elements:



Challenge

How learners engage when the work stretches them



Habits of Mind

The dispositions that sustain thinking through difficulty



Mistakes

How learners generate and use information



Advice & feedback

How learners seek and act on guidance



Effort

How learners invest energy to produce growth

That's the discipline.

And it's worth being equally clear about what Learnership is not.

It is not another classroom management strategy. It is not “engagement by a different name.” It is not a program, a checklist, or a new acronym to fit into the crowded field of school initiatives. And it is certainly not a replacement for PBL.

It is the deliberate, explicit development of the skills of learning — taught, named, modelled, practised, and assessed, the same way we teach anything we take seriously.

This is what I mean when I talk about raising the status of learning from an act to an art.

Because the difference between learning as an act and learning as an art is the difference between doing something... and being skilful at it.



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The two layers don’t compete. They compound.”

“But Won’t Behaviour Slip?”

I often hear this from schools that have worked hard to get PBL embedded.

The concern is understandable. If we shift our attention to Learnership, will the behavioural gains we’ve worked so hard to build start to erode?

The answer is no — because Learnership isn’t a replacement for PBL. It’s a second layer that sits on top of it.

PBL keeps doing its job. Routines remain consistent. Expectations stay clear. Behaviour systems keep running.

What changes is what we do with the conditions PBL creates. Rather than stopping at “the class is ready”, we move to “now let’s develop them as learners.” One doesn’t weaken the other. In fact, the work of Learnership tends to strengthen the behavioural gains — because students who know how to engage with challenge have fewer reasons to disengage from it.

The two layers don’t compete. They compound.



The Motivation Problem — Reframed

Many of the schools I work with describe a motivation problem.

Students disengage. They give up quickly. They want the work to be easier. They wait for someone to rescue them.

The instinctive response is to make learning more engaging. More fun. More interactive. More relevant.

But that's treating the symptom, not the cause.

Motivation isn't an input. It's an output. And more than that — it follows action. One of the more robust findings in motivation psychology over the last couple of decades is that motivation rarely comes before doing. It comes through doing — through experiencing progress, seeing effort produce results, noticing yourself become more capable.

That's why motivation is best understood as a lagging indicator of Learnership.

When students have the skills of learning, motivation tends to follow. When they don't, no amount of polish on the activity will fix it.

And there's a further distinction worth naming. Some students are unmotivated — they haven't yet found a reason to care, and traditional engagement strategies can genuinely help. But many

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are demotivated — they've tried, they've struggled, they've seen no visible change in their outcomes, and they've concluded their effort doesn't make a difference. That's not laziness. It's a rational response to what they've experienced. No amount of making it fun will fix it.

The only thing that will is evidence that their effort matters.

That evidence comes from Learnership.



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A classroom where learners are growing looks different. It's not louder or rowdier — but it's alive.”

From Compliance to Capability

The shift we're describing isn't behavioural. It's dispositional.

Compliance and capability sit on different axes.

Compliance is about what students do when the conditions are easy and the direction is clear. Capability is about what students do when the conditions are difficult and the path isn't obvious.

A compliant classroom can look wonderful. And it can still produce students who collapse the moment they're asked to think for themselves.

A classroom where learners are growing looks different. It's not louder or rowdier — but it's alive. Students are grappling with ideas. They're making decisions. They're getting things wrong and figuring out why. They're doing the thinking.

This is what schools are chasing when they talk about moving students along the Learnership continuum — from Beginning and Directed learners toward Independent and ultimately Agile learners who can drive their own growth.

This isn't about categorising students. It's about recognising where they are in the process — and what they need next.

And that shift doesn't happen by hoping. It happens by teaching.



In the Classroom: Teaching the Learner, Not Just the Lesson

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Challenge is the pathway to growth. Habits of Mind are the dispositions that carry learners down that path. Mistakes and feedback are the information that keeps them heading in the right direction. Effort is the investment that drives it all.”

The shift to Learnership doesn't show up in what teachers cover. It shows up in what students are becoming while they cover it.

Because here's what's actually happening in a Learnership classroom: the teacher isn't just teaching the content. They're teaching the learner. Deliberately. Explicitly. Across the year, across the school, across every subject — building students who engage with challenge, reach for habits, use mistakes, seek feedback, and invest effort.

And that work isn't a single shift. It's a progression.

Students don't arrive as skilful learners. Some treat challenge as a threat. Others tolerate it but don't use it. A few seek it out. Some hear feedback as judgement. Others wait for it. A few start asking for it before they begin. The same is true of mistakes, of effort, of every element of Learnership.

Which means the teacher's role isn't fixed. It moves.

At the start, the teacher is a Supporter — building safety, removing identity threat, helping students believe that learning is something they're capable of. The language sounds like reassurance, but it's deliberate:

“Getting it wrong is part of getting it right.”

“This is new — you’re not expected to have it yet.”

As students develop, the teacher becomes a Coach — pushing into the Learning Zone, prompting strategy, calibrating challenge, refusing to rescue. This is where the language shifts:

Not: “Let’s get through this task.”

But: “This is designed to stretch you. That’s where the learning is.”

Not: “Just try harder.”

But: “Which habit would help you here — persistence, flexibility, precision?”

Mistakes aren’t softened. They’re examined.

Not: “That’s okay, mistakes happen.”

But: “What is this mistake telling you?”

Not: “Here’s what you did.”

But: “What will you do next — and whose expertise do you need?”

Not: “Good effort.”

But: “What did you do when it got hard? Was your effort strategic — or just persistent?”

And eventually, for students who are ready, the teacher becomes a Mentor — stepping back, trusting the learner to drive their own growth, naming what they’re already doing rather than directing what they should do next.

Three roles. One trajectory. Each one matched to where the student is — not where we wish they were.

That’s what makes this work different from a vocabulary upgrade. Teachers aren’t just changing what they say. They’re reading the learner, calibrating their role, and deliberately moving students along — from avoiding challenge to seeking it, from receiving feedback to inviting it, from giving effort to investing it.

And underneath all of it, one question that runs through every role:

Who is doing the thinking here?

Because the answer to that question — over time, across years, across every classroom — is the difference between a student who has been taught and a student who has become a learner.



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From Classroom to Culture: Learning Deserves a System

Here's something worth naming.

PBL didn't succeed because it was a good idea. It succeeded because it became a system — not a suggestion.

It defined behaviour precisely. It taught it. It made expectations visible on walls and in routines. It used shared language across every classroom, every year level, every teacher. It reinforced what it valued through observation, acknowledgement, and leadership attention.

That's what made it stick.

And that's exactly the lesson we need to take into Learnership.

Most schools approach Learnership as a set of ideas. A poster or two. A language shift in some classrooms. Isolated good practice from teachers who happen to care about it. And then they wonder why it doesn't spread.

It doesn't spread because it hasn't been made into a system.

To change that, we need to do for learning what PBL did for behaviour:

Make it explicit. What does engaging with challenge look like in

this school? What counts as effective effort? How do we talk about mistakes? Define it with the same precision PBL defines respect.

Teach the process. Don't assume students know how to learn. Teach the habits, name the elements, model them, practise them.

Make it visible. On walls. In language. In routines. The same way behavioural expectations are visible.

Keep it consistent. Students shouldn't have to relearn how learning works every time they change classrooms.

Reinforce through systems. Observation cycles that look for learning behaviours. Team conversations that examine them. Leadership attention that signals what matters.

This is what it means to make Learnership culture — not just practice. PBL is a system for behaviour. Learnership needs to become a system for learning.



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**Masters of their
circumstances — not
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The Real Question

Most schools have got good at getting students ready to learn.

That’s worth celebrating. It was hard-won, and it matters.

But it was always meant to be a means, not an end.

The real question isn’t whether our students behave well when things are easy. It’s whether they have what it takes when things get hard. Whether they can invest effort strategically. Whether they can sit with difficulty. Whether they can learn without us.

Whether, in other words, they are becoming learners.

Because learning isn’t about completing work. It’s about becoming someone who can do what they couldn’t do before. Masters of their circumstances — not victims of them.

And that doesn’t happen by accident. It happens when we decide to teach it.

A note on terminology: “Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL)” is used throughout this paper in its broader sense — as a reference to the family of evidence-based behaviour frameworks (including PBIS, PBS, and SWPBS) widely implemented across Australian, New Zealand, and international school systems. The argument here addresses the category, not any specific commercial or proprietary program.



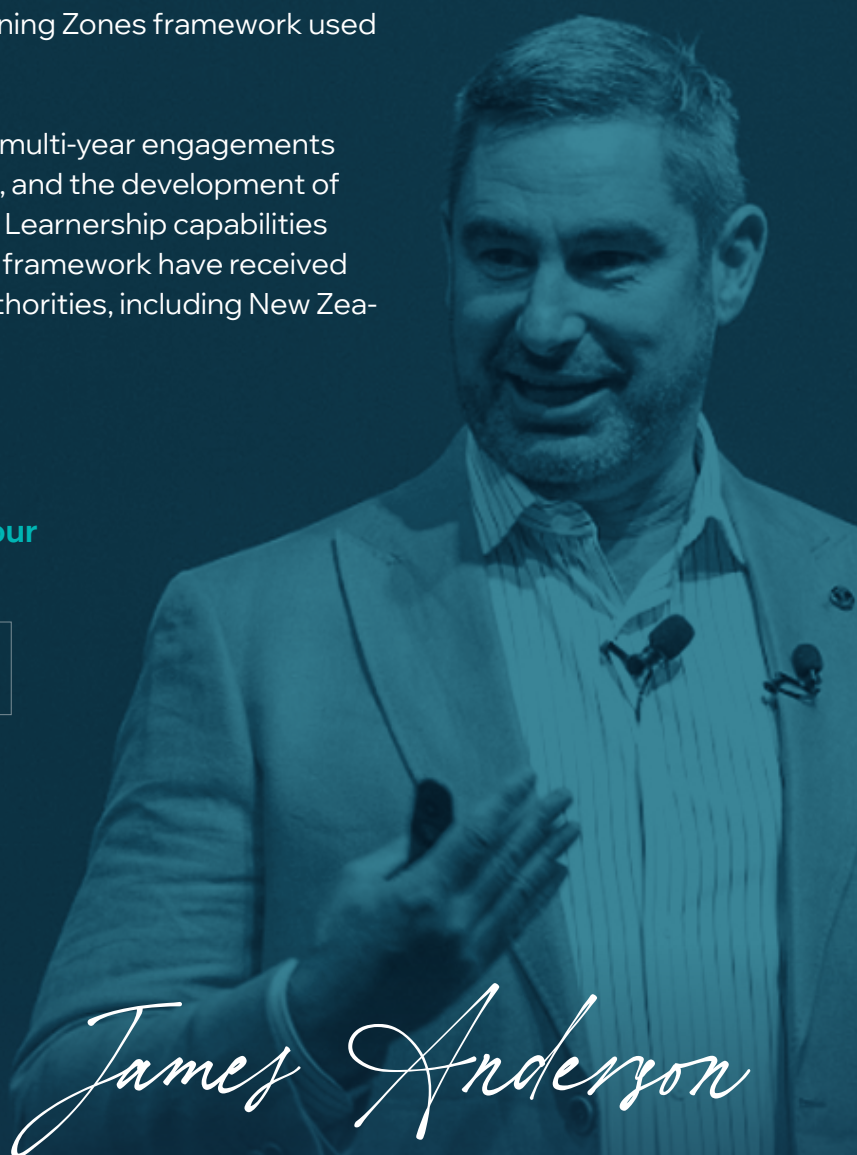
ABOUT JAMES ANDERSON

James Anderson works with schools across Australia, New Zealand, and internationally to develop cultures of learning and growth. He is the author of *Learnership* and *The Agile Learner*, and the creator of the Learnership Matrix, the Mindset Continuum, and the Learning Zones framework used by schools throughout Australasia.

He partners with schools through sustained, multi-year engagements — professional learning, leadership coaching, and the development of school-wide scope and sequences that build Learnership capabilities across year levels. Schools implementing his framework have received strong validation from external education authorities, including New Zealand's Education Review Office.

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