

**STUDENT AGENCY IN A HIGH-POWER CONFUCIAN
HERITAGE CULTURE: SCHOOL LEADERS AND
STUDENTS AS ALLIES OR ENEMIES?**

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ABSTRACT

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The study deals with the concept of student agency during education reform in a high-power Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) country with a view to exploring how student roles in student agency development are perceived by school leaders and students as well as what enables and constrains it from a socio-cultural perspective. The study gives insight into the current state of reform toward student-centered learning after 5 years of implementation. It expands the discourse of student agency and power in Asia.

The research was carried out using two methodological instruments semi-structured interviews with school leaders and open-ended surveys with students in three different middle schools in Vietnam. The interviews were done with 5 leaders (2 principals and 3 head teachers); an email response to the interview questions was collected from another principal. Seventeen to twenty-two surveys were collected from each school, for a total of 59 surveys.

Using thematic analysis and Kreiler (2018)'s categorization, the research identified eight roles with which students were associated, of which four they embraced and four rejected. Students embraced the roles of (1) actively identifying their interests, (2) learning ways to self-regulate to achieve goals, (3) knowing and using their rights, and (4) behaving responsibly with others. Meanwhile, they resisted imposed roles of (1) simply reproducing knowledge, (2) achieving goals set by others, (3) obeying rules and authority without mutual consent, and (4) placing academic identity over other identities. Enablers and constraints in the practice of relational, participatory, and contextual resources were identified using the adapted version of Agency of University Students scale (Jääskelä et al., 2021). Finally, some values of CHC appear to have both negative and positive influences on student agency development. It is, however, not the sole culprit

that caused tensions between schools and students that constrain student agency. The research investigates opportunities to better foster a relationship of alliance between schools and students.

Keywords: student agency, Confucian Heritage Culture, student-centered learning, power imbalance, education reform

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUS Agency of University Students

CHC Confucian Heritage Culture

MOET Ministry of Education and Training

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing uncertainty and unpredictability, human agency has been recognized as the propelling force behind organizational improvement. In education, student agency is increasingly attracting more scholarship. Students can be influential change agents for school climate enhancement, according to research (Hill, 2019). Numerous researchers have demonstrated its beneficial effects on learning enhancement, teacher professional development, and students' self-esteem and self-concept (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015). Developing student autonomy equates to creating an asset for both students and the educational environment. In 2019 (p.5), the report by OECD established this as a global objective, stating, "Student agency is defined as the capacity to set goals, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting instead of being acted upon, shaping instead of being shaped, and making responsible decisions and choices instead of accepting those made by others."

Even though some studies seek to determine the value of student agency in school development, they also query the viability of the proposed student agency models due to the many variables that can either reduce or exacerbate the tension between student agency and power balance in schools (Nieminen et al., 2022; Pignatelli, 1994). The discussion of student agency challenges long-held assumptions regarding teaching, learning, school operations, and concealed power discourse. Nonetheless, school leaders have a significant impact on school enhancements by administering and directing organizational learning, which indirectly affects student agency (Day et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2008). Therefore, it is worthwhile to discuss the relationship between power and agency in school settings from the perspectives of school leaders and students. In a culture characterized by a large power gap, the tension between strengthening hierarchy and agency may become more pronounced. According to Hofstede (2005), schools in Asian nations, which tend to exhibit characteristics of high-power societies, could be fertile ground for investigation.

In such countries, educational reforms have been taking place with a gradual shift toward student-centered learning (Berry, 2011). This creates a compelling phenomenon to study the tensions in the perceptions of different parties towards student agency. This research accordingly plans to investigate this exact matter - student agency during education reforms. The following sections will unveil how the results come about to answer the pressing question “Are students and schools allies or enemies in the reform?”.

Following this section, section 2 provides a literature review on the multidimensionality of student agency and how it has been measured. It then examines the values of Confucian Heritage Culture and its impact on learning that has been studied. The section concludes with an overview of the current education reform in Vietnam, a country identified by its Confucian Heritage Culture, geared toward student-centered learning. The purpose of this section is to set the groundwork for the research hypothesis and discussion.

In sections 3 and 4, the relevant investigation is presented. While section 3 poses two research questions, section 4 demonstrates how these questions are answered by examining the researcher's positionality, the data acquisition and data analysis process, and ethical considerations that must be addressed.

Section 5 presents the study's findings in two subsections that respond to two research queries. Section 6 discusses the findings in relation to the relevant literature, and its limitations, and makes suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will review literature pertinent to the topic and context of the study to set the tone for the rest of the paper. First, I examine the study's central concept: student agency. This section provides a review of its meaning, theoretical constructs, affordances, and challenges. Then, I discuss Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), a cultural aspect that may have a moderating effect on student agency. In the final sub-section, in which the Vietnamese context is discussed, I combine these two concepts. Vietnam, identified as a CHC, is currently promoting student agency in its reform of the fundamental level of education.

2.1 Student agency

The concept of agency has been studied and conceptualized in various fields of social sciences, from sociology to psychology with different lines of research in professional agency to agency in life transition to student agency. This concept of agency in general deserves more attention and concrete theorization to move future research forward.

2.1.1 Multidimensionality of student agency

Student agency is a multi-dimensional concept that has been widely researched yet under-theorized (Leadbeater, 2017; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022; Vaughn, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2020a). It is defined broadly as students' ability to take an active role in their learning, make decisions about their learning experiences, and exert control over their environment to achieve their goals despite possible challenges (Czerniewicz, 2009; Klemenčič, 2015; Reeve, 2012; Vaughn, 2018). Student agency involves various constructs such as self-efficacy beliefs (Jackson, 2003; Zeiser et al., 2018), perseverance of interest and effort, mastery orientation (Zeiser et al., 2018), meta-cognitive self-regulation (Jackson, 2003; Zeiser et al., 2018), self-

regulated learning, and future orientation (Zeiser et al., 2018). Student agency is viewed as a critical component of student success and is positively associated with academic achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). OECD (2019, p.5) deemed this concept a 2030 goal with many value-laden constructs that deserve further attention:

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

Some languages do not have a direct translation for student agency. Some even coined a new term for it in their native language (OECD, 2019). Although promoted by scholars as highly necessary, it needs to be understood as a whole to avoid the naïve perception of students having agency as always mastery-oriented. Student agency is not always positive and might lead to maladaptive or resisting actions under taxing contexts that could threaten students’ own identity, such as in an exam-driven assessment culture (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Vaughn et al., 2020b). In such contexts, they still can act intentionally yet with a lack of growth to preserve their identity among their peers or their well-being (Harris et al., 2018). Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) categorized students’ agency status into three types in which maladaptive agency refers to accounts of students agentially engaging in maladaptive behaviors instead of adaptive behaviors for personal growth. In other words, they work not towards mastery but performance, which by OECD (2019, p.5)’s definition, does not display the expected result of a growth mindset.

Another attribute of student agency is its temporality (Klemenčič et al., 2015). Students need to “invent new patterns of thought and action, rather than merely repeat past routines and habits that may constrain them... [and] construct new possible images of future selves and along with these projections, the ways to achieve them” (Klemenčič et al., 2015, p.9). Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2014)

argued that student teachers' identity formed in the past is tested and refined through the present situation, with future-orientation to form a new identity. All tests and trials throughout the course of identity reformation involve agency. Agency is both an end and a means of renegotiation. Therefore, scholars consider agency as *becoming* and closely associated with identity-making (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014).

That being said, students cannot act in a silo but in relation to other factors, which can explain "why an individual can achieve agency in one situation but not in another" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p.137, cited in Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). Contextual (i.e. social, cultural, material) affordances and constraints will also mediate the levels and forms of agency one enacts (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Trommsdorff, 2012; York & Kirshner, 2015). The use of technology (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015; Voogt et al., 2015), mobile phones (Matsumoto, 2021), different classroom setups (Nieminen et al., 2022), teacher support and feedback (Jang et al., 2016; Wanders et al., 2020) have been topics of research in recent years. The power dynamics in the educational environment have the potential to regulate student agency development, for example through adults' positioning of students and the roles students take on (York & Kirshner, 2015), the chance for participation, equality, or relationships with teachers, peers, or parents (Jääskelä et al., 2021). However, incorporating more of the mentioned does not guarantee improved agency. Taub et al (2020) rather argued that the levels of affordances and barriers need to be examined as seemingly more constraining situations could have enabling impact. Such elements, thus, cannot be prescriptive but needs to be examined critically, reflectively, and in general dialogically, which calls for a reconsideration of values and power dynamics in schools (Wanders et al., 2020).

Student agency has also been studied in various aspects of school practices including assessment (Adie et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2018; Klemenčič, 2017; Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2020a; Vaughn et al., 2020b), curriculum development (Jackson, 2003; Hill, 2019), and pedagogical practices in various school subjects such as science (Cavagnetto et

al., 2020), literacy (Vaughn et al., 2020a), and writing (Barnes, 2020; Matsumoto, 2021) even though with lack of consensus in the multidimensionality of this concept. This signifies the need for more research and focuses on student agency to enrich the discourse of student agency in schools which has been claimed as a core principle but barely acted upon (Jackson, 2003).

This complexity is mostly attributed to the multidimensionality of student agency; thus, scholars of student agency pledge for dialogue, genuineness, and continuous reflection from all educational parties, especially the ones of higher authority to be proactive in sharing power and authority (Cavagnetto et al., 2020; Cook-Sather, 2020; Hill, 2019; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Schenkel & Calabrese Barton, 2020; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022).

2.1.2 Assessing student agency and the AUS scale

To create measures and scales for student agency, several researchers put effort into creating the Agency of University Student scale (AUS) (Jääskelä et al., 2021), StAP (Vaughn et al., 2020b), and qualitative measures mostly deriving from student self-reports (Reeve, 2012; Voogt et al., 2015). Projects are carried out worldwide to be able to investigate the constructs, antecedents, barriers, and practical measures for student agency (Zeiser et al., 2018). Assessing student agency can be challenging, as traditional assessment methods may not accurately capture the complexity of the construct (Velayutham & Aldridge, 2016). Nonetheless, Stenalt and Lassesen (2022) added that it should be done with caution to avoid creating a “surveillance culture”, which, I concur, can be counterproductive if used as a form to avoid genuine dialogue and reflection.

Attempting to capture the multidimensionality of student agency in the interplay of individual, collective, and collaborative resources, the Agency of University Student (AUS) scale is a validated instrument, examined by Jääskelä and colleagues (2021) for its potential for assessing higher education students’ agency in online courses. This scale addresses various constructs of student agency such as self-efficacy beliefs, competence, interest, motivation, and future orientation (Czerniewicz, 2009; Jackson, 2003; Klemenčič, 2015; OECD, 2019; Reeve, 2012;

Vaughn, 2018); Zeiser et al., 2018). It also employs a person-subject-centered approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) that is based on the notion that the concept of agency is closely connected to learning as it involves the emotional experience, cognitive processes, and actions that occur within the context of education and learning relationships (Jääskelä et al., 2021).

The purpose of the scale was to act as student agency analytics for students and teachers alike (Jääskelä et al., 2021). Students at university levels could use the results to develop their abilities to self-reflect, self-regulate, and monitor their academic development. Teachers could use this scale for their pedagogical development to gain a better understanding of their practices as well as insights into their groups of students. Nonetheless, it is admitted that the scale might not be able to capture all the nuances of student agency even though it could afford more consistence and structure. It could, however, offer a structured and fresh view of student agency and its diverse constructs. Table 1 below shows the structure of the questionnaire with three major themes: individual resources, relational resources, and participatory resources, all of which are considered mediating factors for student agency. Each theme is further divided into sub-themes, with a total of 11 sub-themes that represent the nuances of conditions for student agency development.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-themes in Agency in University Student Scale (Jääskelä et al., 2021)

Theme	Individual resources	Relational resources	Participatory resources
Sub-themes	Interest and utility value Self-efficacy beliefs Competence beliefs Participation activity	Peer support Trust Teacher support Equal treatment	Opportunities for choice Opportunities for influence Ease of participation Participation activity

Fifty-eight questionnaire items were developed to measure the impact of 11 sub-themes, which are evaluated on the Likert scale (See Appendix 5 for more details).

The measurement of student agency will be incomplete without a close examination of the context. Students' interpretation of a context has plenty of implications for the development of student agency in that context and beyond. The following sub-section situates the study in the context of Confucian Heritage Culture to explore a context that is too often put in binary comparison with Western culture.

2.2 Confucian Heritage Culture

Confucian Heritage Culture originated from Confucius (551 – 479 BCE). Confucius, also known as Kongzi in China and Asia in general, is a great Chinese philosopher and educator. He lived approximately a century before Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) (Juanjuan, 2013). His ideologies, also known as Confucianism, influence some Asian countries (e.g., China, Vietnam, Singapore, and Hong Kong) (Truong et al., 2017). Confucianism is regarded as “a worldview, an ethical system, a political ideology, and a scholarly tradition” (Goldin, 2011 and Yao, 2000, cited in Truong et al., 2017) and even appropriated partly as a “religion” in Vietnam (Ly, 2021). However, one must not confuse original Confucius's educational philosophy and how it manifests in countries influenced by Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) to avoid a stereotypical, ethnocentric description of such countries (Wang, 2013).

Over his lifetime, Confucius produced several books; yet the most famous manuscript is the *Analects of Confucius* (Juanjuan, 2013; Kim, 2003; Tan, 2016), which covered a series of conversations between Confucius and his students ranging in breadth from friendship to government. The focus of this book is on the Chinese concepts of *ren* (human benevolence and goodness) and the *junzi* (enlightened individual). Apart from *ren* and *junzi*, this book also discusses other themes of morality (*yi* - righteousness) and rectification values such as *li*

(decorum, ritual), , *xiao* (filial piety), and *zhong* (loyalty) (Juanjuan, 2013; Ly, 2021). *Li* stipulates the social norms that regulate people's behaviors towards family, friends, and superiors. *Yi* refers to one being virtuous with morally appropriate conduct. *Xiao* means holding respect and duty for as well as obeying and serving one's parents and ancestors. *Zhong* is considered an uplifted definition of *xiao*, referring to one's obligations with other social ties such as a spouse, friends, country, and others. With Confucius, the best way to cultivate such virtues is by learning and self-cultivation (Juanjuan, 2013).

2.2.1 Criticism

Confucius's philosophy indeed has attracted controversy. As regards the aspect of *zhong*, it is criticised for reinforcing hierarchical roles or power distance (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005). While some cultures actively try to eradicate the status differences associated with gender, age, rank, or social class (i.e., low power distance), a high-power distance culture tends to regard power imbalance as an unquestionable feature of social relationships (Hofstede, 2005). In other words, the level of stability of a society relies on unequal relationships between people (Phuong-Mai et al., 2005). This comes as no surprise since Confucius's ideologies were once employed as a governing instrument for people to move upward in society through multi-level examinations (Ly, 2021). This is observed in several studies in CHC-influenced countries (Hǎng et al., 2015; Ho & Ho, 2008; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Truong et al., 2017). This repercussion, however, is not exactly intended by Confucius in his teachings, but an aftermath of "various negotiations amongst the Confucian, examination, globalization as well as political forces" (Wang, 2013).

Regarding its influence on education, CHC values have also been critically analysed with the view to evaluating the appropriacy of learning methods that appear relatively alien to such contexts, such as metacognitive strategies (Fwu et al., 2018; Thomas, 2006; Zhan & Wan, 2016), blended learning (Chan, 2019), formative assessment (Pham & Renshaw, 2015; Wicking, 2020), collaborative learning (Chen, 2015; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Wicking, 2020), communicative language

teaching (Han, 2022), self-study (Barron, 2007), and social constructionism approach (Hàng, Meijer, Bulte, & Pilot, 2015; van Schalkwyk & D'Amato, 2015). Zhan and Wan (2016) and Thomas (2006) pointed out that students coming from a CHC-identified community tend to reflect on the surface level at the content and assessment rather than the process of thinking which is conducive to learning. Barron (2007) criticized the CHC-influenced students' learning approach as passive, quiet, lack of critical thinking, compared to their Western fellows. These suggestions, however, are challenged by contemporary research in learning theories with an attempt to demystify the notion of CHC learners. Tran (2013) questioned this notion to be an over-generalization that can segregate and reinforce stereotypes (Ryan & Louie, 2007). According to Tran (2013), a distinction needs to be drawn between passivity and quietness to call for a better culturally responsive pedagogy. Thomas (2006) also indicated that this type of learning approach rather stems from contextual affordances rather than culture when he compared so-called CHC and non-CHC students. Van Schalkwyk and D'Amato (2015) also critically evaluated the concept of critical thinking in CHC which often follows memorization and understanding. Even though this idea of thinking is not strictly reflective of Confucius's philosophy, which roughly translates into "Learning without thought is pointless; thought without learning is dangerous" (*Analects of Confucius*, cited in Juanjuan, 2013), it indicates a need for critical thinking in the culture. Having said that, critical thinking might be delayed due to the idea of rectification (Van Schalkwyk & D'Amato, 2015). De Vita and Bernard (2011) concurred that CHC-influenced students could adapt to the new learning approach in Australia, a non-CHC environment, with some adjustments. They also pointed out the preference for practical knowledge of CHC-influenced students, which is in contrast to Hàng and fellow researchers' study (2015) that concluded the CHC-influenced community might opt for theoretical knowledge. This further accentuates the complexity of learning within and between communities which necessitates a critical pedagogy approach to examine education practices.

2.2.2 Endorsement

Despite the criticism, many scholars, Eastern and Western alike, defend CHC and individuals coming from any CHC-influenced community. O'Dwyer (2017) and Park (2011) called for a fair, thick description of CHC values and CHC communities, not from an ethnocentrism point of view but from longitudinal interactions, reflexive approaches, and with a "surplus of visions" (Ryan & Louie, 2007) to focus rather on "how best to teach and how best to learn".

Confucius's ideology was put in comparison with that of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and other theorists to find four common themes: learning together, application of theory and practice, the significance of reflection for teachers and students, and education for democracy (Juanjuan, 2013). Confucius was seen as a "philosopher of twenty-first-century skills" (Tan, 2016) when his teachings ring true in four aspects of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, with a stronger focus on ethical development.

Taking a wide array of previous research into account, the researcher needs to embrace an outsider-insider perspective to observe, appreciate, contemplate, and reevaluate the common themes that are barely challenged, including the issue of hierarchy, harmony, filial piety (Fwu et al., 2018; Haller, Fisher, & Gapp, 2007; Hång et al., 2015; Ho & Ho, 2018; Monkhouse, Barnes, & Hanh Pham, 2013; Nguyen, Jin, & Gross, 2010; Truong et al., 2017) and education for social advancement or utilitarian beliefs (van Schalkwyk & D'Amato, 2015; Wicking, 2020).

Asian countries (e.g., China, Vietnam, Singapore, and Hong Kong) are considered to be under the influence of Confucian values. However, it is worth repeating that the vicissitude of political and economic contexts of different countries has a mediating effect on how Confucianism manifests itself (Wang, 2013). The study will take a closer look at the case of Vietnam with its unique context.

2.3 Vietnam's education

As the case study of this research that is influenced by CHC, Vietnam's education needs to be looked at through its past, present, and future to reveal the local and global forces that influence its orientation. Its current education reform will also be discussed as it lays the background for the research.

2.3.1 The formation of Vietnam's education system

Vietnam has undertaken various educational reforms ever since pre-independence in the early twentieth century. In the early nineteenth-century of Vietnamese education, Chinese literature and Confucian ideas were the primary texts for testing at multiple levels. Such exams were at a high stake leading to governmental jobs with power and influence in the governing body (Vu, 1959, referred to in Huynh, 2023). After the French invasion in the late nineteenth century, a French schooling system was established to serve the children of colonizers and those of a high class.

In the early phase of the regained independence in 1945 in northern Vietnam, education became a priority to eradicate illiteracy (Nguyen 2005, cited in Huynh, 2023). The first major reform took place in 1950, during wartime, with the establishment of a 9-year schooling system with inadequate resources and a dim situation during the war (Bùi, 2019). With the rise of literate people, Vietnamese started to replace French as the language of instruction, but only in the northern part of Vietnam. Southern Vietnam was still occupied by the French, having a 12-year schooling system, even until the French withdrawal in 1954 (Nguyen, 2013, cited in Huynh, 2023).

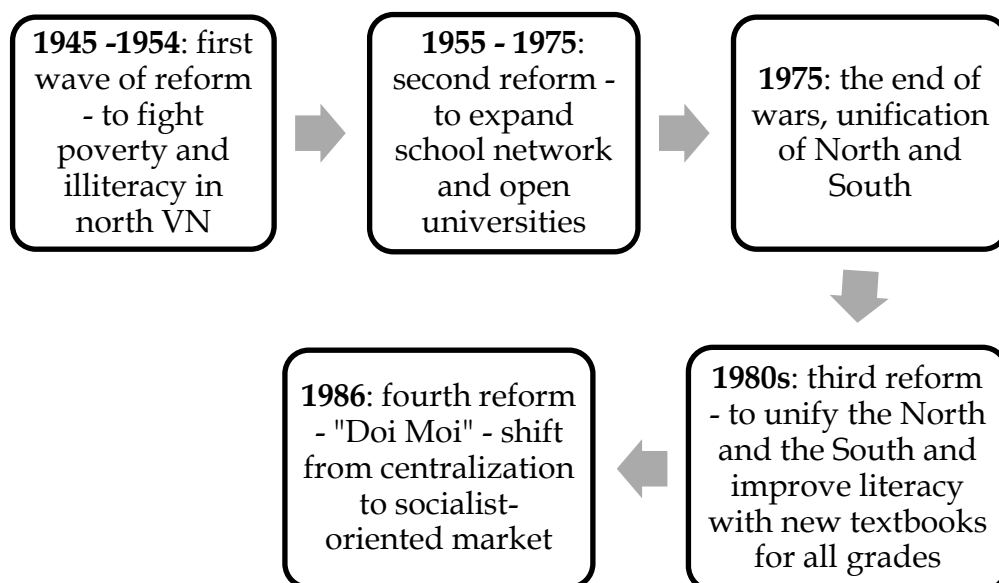
During the years from 1954 to 1975, education in North and South Vietnam experienced two different models. While Northern Vietnam aimed to provide mass education to eradicate illiteracy and the first steps to provide higher education for equity learning opportunities, Southern Vietnam focused on providing individualized "elitist" education with various options of undergraduate and

graduate for a smaller group of people. They, in sum, differed in both forms and functions (Huynh, 2023, p.24).

In 1975, a process of unification was set into motion. A system of 12 years of schooling with the first 9 years considered as basic education was established with a long-standing curriculum and textbooks that lasted until the end of the century (Duggan, 2001, cited in Huynh, 2023). The North government took over the higher education system in the South (influenced by the French system) and attempted to turn it into a similar system in the North (influenced by the Soviet model) (Nguyen, 2005; Pham, 1994). However, the reform was met with new problems. Years of war, coupled with economic sanctions from the US and border wars in the late 1970s had rendered a system heavily lacking in resources. This tension led to a comprehensive political and economic reform in 1986 that followed a socialist-oriented market economy, which is often referred to as *Doi Moi* (reform) (Huynh, 2023). During 15 years from 1986 to 2000, even though education governance was still high centralized, several stipulations offered better flexibility for the local levels. Figure 1 lays out a brief overview of the reforms in the 20th century.

Figure 1

Vietnam's Education Reform in the 20th Century (adapted from Huynh, 2023)



Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, education, in general, has received a steady increase in resources that led to better-equipped classrooms, smaller class sizes, and more trained teachers (Huynh, 2023). Another important aspect of education, curricula, and testing, has gone through several revisions and still provokes a lot of controversies (Le, 2009). Besides testing, education inequity also sparks lots of debate concerning the expected contribution of parents at 25%, which was argued to be up to 50% if counting parental contribution to private tuition (UNESCO, 2016).

2.3.2 Vestiges of the past

It is acknowledged that Vietnam's education system is a reflection of many "vestiges of the past" (Huynh, 2023, p.29).

First, it displays a stronger focus on outcomes than on process. This focus is exemplified by the ever-increasing public attention and resources given to high-stake testing. This idea is compounded by the so-called ideology of Confucian regarding education as "a social equalizer and a career advancer" (Huynh, 2023, p.29). Nonetheless, this is a socially adapted ideology of Confucius, developed through examination culture but not originally from the guru (Sun, 2008). While it promotes the importance of education on self-advancement and challenges structural inequity, it gives overwhelming significance to high-stake testing.

Second, the Vietnamese education system is strongly centralized. Even with more established international connections and the privatization of education, the Ministry of education and training (MOET) is still in a constant struggle to "sustain a healthy dose of institutional autonomy while maintaining effective checks and balances" (Huynh, 2023, p.30).

Third, high public engagement is one feature of the system. Given the fact that parental contributions stand at a high rate of 25% (UNESCO, 2016) and the Confucian idea that schooling is at the heart of a child's upbringing, parents tend to get involved in all educational matters.

Fourth, this system also attracts a great amount of public opinion, especially in changes. Education reform is then argued that it needs to “be new and innovative but it must not be different” (Huynh, 2023, p.31).

Fifth, the public also gives a lot of talk about testing, especially the high-stake entrance exam into universities. It creates many discourses of fairness, effectiveness, validity, and informal educational services (Huynh, 2023).

Last but not least, the system is bound to exacerbate inequity “between rich and poor, urban, and rural, and advantaged and disadvantaged areas” (Huynh, 2023, p.31) due to its reliance on parental contribution (UNESCO, 2016).

2.3.3 Focus of 2018 curriculum reform

Education reforms in Vietnam over the years have focused on several major themes, consisting of types of education provision, assessment, equity, curriculum, and pedagogy (Huynh, 2023). While the forms of education and equity in education continue to be worked on with humble but steady results (Huynh, 2023), the reforms of assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy attract much debate in society.

The most recent reform in 2018 has opened up a new discourse on the opportunities and challenges for a comprehensive education transformation (Pham et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). According to the Policy Development website (2023), there are 10 new focuses of reform in the basic education reform 2018. The first focus is on the vision and mission, which is education for competency rather than knowledge to help students to take ownership of their knowledge and skills for life-long learning, choose suitable career paths, develop, and maintain social contacts, have their own identity with a strong moral compass and enriching emotional life. The change also entails the switch of views of students from responsible citizens to responsible individuals with agency. This vision aligns to a certain extent with the OECD (2019)’s definition of student agency. The second focus is on content and time allocation. Compared to the previous reform in 2006, this reform draws on the interdisciplinary idea of curriculum development. Subjects are combined which reduces the compulsory subjects to 10 in primary and

secondary schools. Local authority gets more control over the optional content and how to distribute content over the school year. The third focus is on pedagogy. Even though the reform in 2006 indicated the need for a more active teaching and learning approach, high-stakes and heavy assessments impeded its realization. The 2018 reform manages to specify the teaching approaches which include “learning by doing”, coupled with several local decisions to omit high-school entrance exams (VTC News, 2023) and changes in assessment from solely summative to formative assessment (Pham et al., 2023). This uplifts stress and gives way to more liberating approaches to teaching and learning. The fourth focus is on textbooks. In contrast to the one-textbook approach in 2006 reform, this new reform employs the idea of “one curriculum - many textbooks” to realize the mission and vision of competency-based learning. The fifth focus is on the role of teachers in both the development of local syllabi and teaching roles. While the old reform laid out a detailed annual curriculum with specified lessons and objectives, the new reform opens up the chance for teachers to actively get involved in the design of the school syllabus. Teachers need to change from being content deliverers to organizers, evaluators, and facilitators of student learning. This has been welcomed by teachers yet met with confusion due to the lack of self-efficacy and competence beliefs in teachers to actualize the reform (Pham et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). Mr. Nguyen Kim Son, the Minister of Education and Training, once confirmed teachers’ roles in the reform (Nguyen, 2023, cited in Do, 2023)

The degree of reform depends on the teachers; how much teachers can reform determines how much the reform turns out.

(Mức độ của đổi mới đang lệ thuộc các thầy cô, thầy cô đổi mới được đến đâu, sự nghiệp đổi mới dừng đến đó)

The sixth focus is on the requirements of students. Students are now required to apply what they learn in real life to a more extensive extent. Schools must create opportunities for students to participate in a wide range of activities including career orientation activities. Students, on the other hand, are required to self-study more. The seventh focus is on parents’ responsibility which

stipulates that parents need to accommodate students' learning and attempt to apply practical knowledge outside of school. The eighth focus is delegating accountability to the local authority in actualizing education objectives and plans. The ninth and tenth foci cover the collaboration of school, local and national authorities in realizing physical, material, and pedagogical requirements for the reform.

In general, the current reform in Vietnam aims to comprehensively implement student-centered learning at the basic level of education with the central idea to promote student agency. While the first focus sets the tone for it, the other focus offers practical and action-oriented measures in pedagogy, curriculum, and content, as well as specifies the roles of involved parties in education with an aim to create a conducive environment for students to become autonomous, self-directed with hope, well-being and a growth mindset. Even though this reform aligns with student agency defined by OECD (2019), the reported challenges are hard to ignore.

3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research about educational leadership in Asia is scant compared to other regions regarding quantity and topics, not to mention studies into student agency, students' roles, and positioning in Asian culture. This lack of research calls for more investigation into this under-researched area of different cultural and social attributes to broaden scholarly understanding of “Asian literature” (Hallinger & Chen, 2014). Coupled with the influence of Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), research in Asia expects to provide a fresh perspective for exhaustively researched concepts in Western countries. It is not to challenge but to add a “surplus of visions” to the existing literature (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

Being a pivotal concept for development, student agency remains under-researched in Asia despite its importance for school development. The idea of student agency is not alien to CHC-influenced countries yet how it manifests can be explored further, especially during rigorous educational reforms as well as internationalization in said nations. As a country highly influenced by Confucius's philosophical ideas, Vietnam has been undergoing a national shift toward more experiential, student-centered learning with the national education reform in 2018. With the influence of CHC, the reform has been met with rising challenges. It would be of paramount importance to investigate how school leaders maneuver the socio-cultural factors to accommodate and enhance student agency and how students interpret the current practices and the effect on their agency. In the scope of this research, the researcher will use the case of Vietnam as the subject of analysis.

To explore how school leaders and students in Vietnam perceive student agency and the influence of socio-cultural and organizational contexts on student agency through the localization of curriculum at school and classroom levels, the research employed an exploratory qualitative approach with interviews with school leaders and open-ended surveys with students. The research aimed to unveil the enablers and constraints in the totality of the learning experience. The focus of this research will be on two major questions below:

Question 1: What are students' roles in student agency as perceived by students and school leaders?

Question 2: How enabling or constraining for student agency is the learning environment as perceived by students and school leaders?

My hypothesis for question 1 is that students take a central role in the development and enactment of their agency for the best of their sakes, yet the gravity of student roles can be perceived differently by school leaders and students. Students, while trying to study hard and become well-rounded, would expect others (e.g. parents, teachers, and schools in general) to accommodate their needs for such development and enactment. In contrast, teachers and schools would expect students to try their best to overcome challenges and constraints to become accomplished individuals who achieve a high level of education, and moral qualities with a strong sense of identity and agency. My hypothesis for research question 1 also lays a basis for my corresponding hypothesis for research question 2. In schools where students' roles and positioning align with students' expectations, it would be viewed as conducive to them. School leaders might be able to name enablers for student agency development while being more hesitant to discuss the constraints.

These questions will help me to find answers to the ultimate question "Are school leaders and students allies or enemies?" against the backdrop of Confucian Heritage Culture, during national education reform. What kinds of roles students embrace or challenge and the nature of the learning environment have the potential to shed light on the true relationship between students and schools, which very often can be filled with conflicts and tensions.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

The following section presents how the study is carried out to answer the two preceding research questions. The researcher's position within the research is first clarified to unveil possible bias and blind spots through the research as well as how the researcher could be a resource to the research. Next, the data collection process is presented with a description of the participants' unique features. Finally, how the data was analyzed is reported with a review of the AUS scale as one crucial framework to answer research question 2. Ethical considerations are also discussed.

4.1 The researcher's positionality

I approached this topic from the perspective of a Vietnamese with Vietnamese parents, and of a former student of Vietnamese education, brought up in a CHC culture throughout my childhood and schooling.

I experienced public schools (from kindergarten to university) during my studenthood and worked in private institutions after my BA graduation as an English teacher from 2019 to 2021.

This position puts me in an insider view of the system and culture as a student. Yet, regarding policies and educational reforms throughout the years, especially the reform taking place after 2013, I consider myself both an outsider and an insider. I entered the university in 2014 and graduated in 2018. The gravity of the reform was minor to me compared to other student cohorts after me. However, I was the teacher during the reform, which lent me a unique opportunity to reflect on what there had been before the reform and during its occurrence.

4.2 Data collection

The current study was designed to explore in-depth school leaders' and students' views of their experiences with student agency in Vietnam, a so-called Confucian

Heritage Culture (CHC) country, amidst the new educational reform. It approached their perception of students' roles, school practices, and socio-cultural factors in order to theorize the enablers and constraints for student agency development in a CHC context. Therefore, it employed a qualitative research approach. According to Tracy (2010) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.24), qualitative research can facilitate researchers in gaining insights into nuances and tacit knowledge of what is going on, in understanding "how people interpret their experiences... construct their world... [and] what meanings they attribute to their experiences".

4.2.1 Research participants

I approached secondary schools in Vietnam as the students are in the critically transformative phase of identity and agency negotiation (Duerden et al., 2019; Kroger, 2005; Marcia, 2002). I originally pursued secondary schools in Hanoi, either public or private institutions through schools' public emails. However, the response was next to nothing with two responses directing me to contact them at another time when the headmasters would come back. Eventually, as a result of time constraints, I had to select schools that met the following criteria: secondary schools that follow the national curriculum in which the language of communication is Vietnamese.

The three schools I managed to contact were based in the northern part of Vietnam and are coded as school 1, school 2, and school 3. They ranged in structure, size, and enrollment method. In all schools, I contacted the gatekeepers who were the highly respected retired teacher, the head of a department, and the director of an academic department, respectively. They paved the way for me as a young researcher to get access to the (vice)principals and heads of departments. From that point of contact, I also gained access to 8 and 9 graders in three schools. They had had at least 2 years of schooling at that school up to the time they were approached. I selected random grades 8 and 9 in all 3 schools so that the participants were equally distributed among all group levels and/or all classes. I checked the schools' regulations related to data collection on students and

included the consent form, research notification, and research privacy notice in the emails to the gatekeepers. These documents were later on printed out and sent to the students with a requirement that their parents needed to consent to their participation. Table 2 below is a summary of the attributes of the three schools in terms of structure, location, size, and enrollment method.

Table 2

Brief Description of Participating Schools

School	Basic description	
	Structure, size, and location	Enrollment method
School 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a public school located in a developing city in northern Vietnam, with prestige in the neighborhood • students are tested at the beginning of grade 6 to be assigned to classes based on their academic results • 1575 students (approx. 45 - 48 students in one class) 	All students within its catch area are liable to enrol
School 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the one and only 'selective' public gifted secondary school in a developing city in a northern city in Vietnam • students are assigned to classes corresponding to their living areas • 651 students (approx. 30 - 35 students in a class) 	Main method: selective entrance exams Other: Students with provincial and local academic accolades can get in half-way
School 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a private school in a northern city • students are assigned randomly to all classes 	A variety of evaluation methods used simultaneously <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application • Observation of students

-
- 668 students (approx. 30 students for a class)
-

- Tests for parents or legal guardian
-

4.2.2 Data collection process

To ensure a rich description of the phenomenon I was investigating, I used semi-structured interviews with school leaders and open-ended surveys with students at the same school.

The method to collect data from school leaders was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between structure and flexibility, as they allow researchers to follow a predetermined set of open-ended questions while also enabling participants to discuss relevant topics that emerge during the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This flexibility allows participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences, which can lead to the discovery of new and unexpected insights. These interviews can also provide in-depth and detailed information on participants' experiences and perspectives, as they allow participants to elaborate on their responses and provide more nuanced explanations of their thoughts and feelings (Seidman, 2013). This depth and detail can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Moreover, it could involve participants in the research process and empower them to share their perspectives and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This involvement can lead to increased participant engagement, which can lead to richer and more meaningful data. Nonetheless, interviews are not without limitations such as participants' hesitance to share sensitive information due to social expectations or fears (Barbour, 2018), which can be addressed with caution by being transparent and ethical in dealing with them (Tracy, 2010).

In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders (principals and heads of department) in 3 schools. Before the data was actually collected, the ethical issues were discussed clearly with the participants, and a consent form had been signed prior to the data collection. The interview questions were designed by the researcher and adjusted with two formal evaluation rounds by the researcher's supervisors. To design the questions, the

researcher reviewed literature related to curriculum reform attempts in Vietnam, Confucian Heritage Culture and its impact in Vietnam, as well as the theoretical construct of student agency. To ensure the interview was semi-structured, the researcher designed the questions to allow for flexibility for relevant topics to arise (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This creates chances for both participants to answer in their way and researcher to follow up with relevant questions. The questions were piloted with one teacher, and some minor language changes were made. During the interview with the first participant, an issue related to the translation of the concept of student agency arose. The participant found this concept “strange”, so it was hard for her initially to relate to it and make relevant judgments. Even though the researcher followed up her confusion with clarification of related concepts in the definition by OECD (2019) (e.g. sense of belonging) and she found it more familiar, minor changes to the scaffolding before and during the interview were later made to minimize the linguistic hindrances with other participants. Firstly, the interview questions with the OECD definition were sent earlier to the participants. Second, the researcher took the initiative to reassure participants of the multifaceted and contested nature of research in student agency to signify the importance of multivocality (Tracy, 2010) and named several concepts of student autonomy and student voice as relevant aspects of student agency research. The questions can be found in Appendix 1. In each school, one principal/ vice principal and one head of department were interviewed. I scheduled and interviewed 5 participants and got one response in the form of a document via email across the course of 4 months from September to December 2022 with the school leaders. The interview was recorded with their consent. Each interview took up to 1 hour and 15 minutes. The email response from the school principal of school 2 was brief yet answered all interview questions.

To collect students’ opinions, open-ended surveys were distributed to them during the same period from September to December 2022 to collect data from a large number of participants and also to invite a broader range of perspectives (Marshall et al., 2013). Participants also got to control the pace and time of their responses, allowing them to present thoughtful and detailed responses (Baruch

& Holtom, 2008). I collected data from grade 8 or grade 9 students (13 – 14 years of age) who had experienced the same school environment for at least 2 years. I checked with my point of contact at each school to see if any regulations on data collection for students under 16 were applied at the school and this was cleared. The survey aimed to explore how the students perceive the situation of student agency at their school. A collection of students was invited for the survey (see Appendix 3) with several criteria to maximize diversity, including grade, gender, and competence. An incentive in the form of a voucher (approximately 2 euros) was given to them to encourage them to participate. Surveys, nonetheless, are still potentially biased (Baruch & Holtom, 2008) with a lack of depth (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). This was compensated by the open-ended nature of the survey. A collection of 17-22 surveys was collected from each school. Table 3 summarized the collected data from three schools.

Table 3

Summary of Collected Data in Three Schools

School	Semi-structured interviews	Surveys
1	2 recorded interviews with school leaders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School principal 1 (female) • Head teacher 1 (female) 	22 surveys with students (7 males, 12 females, 3 non-specified)
2	1 email response from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School principal 2 (female) 1 recorded interview with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head teacher 2 (female) 	20 surveys with students (10 males, 6 females, 4 non-specified)
3	2 recorded interviews with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School principal 3 (female) • Head teacher 3 (female) 	17 surveys with students (6 males, 9 females, 2 non-specified)
In total	5 interviews and 1 email response (all female)	59 surveys with 23 males, 27 females, and 9 non-specified gender

4.3 Data Analysis

4.3.1 AUS scale and adaptation

The Agency of University Student (AUS) scale aligns with the theoretical construct of student agency and serves well the purpose of the research which was to examine the affordances and barriers to student agency. AUS scale deals with multiple facets of student agency including individual, collective, and co-agency (Bandura, 1986, 2001) in an educational context. All 58 items, categorized into 13 groups, allowed the researcher to code the data qualitatively. The scale can be accessed in Appendix 5.

The original target of the AUS scale is university students at the level of a course, so it had to be adapted for my study. I adapted the original questionnaire items of the AUS scale into codes that I used to code the collected data. The adaptation went through several steps. First, the individual resources (including competence beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs, interest, and utility beliefs) were omitted to suit the purpose of research question 2. Thus, the coding frame for question 2 used two resources namely *relational resources* and *participatory resources* from the AUS scale. After that, all reverse-coded items were now reversed. Following that, questionnaire items pertinent to practices at course levels were reworded to cover the expansiveness of the schooling experience. For example, the original reference to “the course” was reworded as “school experiences” or “learning experience”. By and large, the original AUS codes were adapted and used as a coding frame to answer research question 2 as presented below in Table 4. For example, the combination of questionnaire items 1, 2, and 3 in Table 4 was considered under the new code “Students take responsibility to participate actively in school activities”.

Table 4

A New Coding Frame with Adapted Codes from the AUS Scale

Resources		Original questionnaire items (from the AUS scale)	Adapted codes for the context of the study
Relational resources	Equal treatment	1. Equality among students 2. Equal treatment of students by teachers 3. Other students have a stronger influence on the course. (a)	Equal treatment and standing of students with other students and teachers
	Teacher support	4. Teachers' friendly attitude towards students 5. Belittling of students by teachers (a) 6. Experience of being oppressed as a student 7. Not enough room for discussion given by teachers (a) 8. Teachers' contemptuous attitude towards students. (a)	Teachers are friendly and respectful towards students (4, 5, 6, 8) Teachers give space for students to claim authority (7)
	Trust	9. Safe course climate 10. Experience of being welcome in the course 11. Experience of being able to trust teachers	The learning environment is safe and welcoming (9, 10, 15)

		<p>12. Approachability of the teachers</p> <p>13. Possibility to be oneself in the course</p> <p>14. Experience of teachers' interest in students' viewpoints</p> <p>15. Encouraging students to participate in discussions.</p>	<p>The teachers are trustworthy and approachable (11, 12, 14)</p> <p>Students can be themselves (13)</p>
	Peer support	<p>16. Experiencing other students as resources for learning</p> <p>17. Asking for help from other students when needed</p> <p>18. Providing support for other students in challenging study tasks</p> <p>19. No possibility to share competence with other group members (a)</p> <p>20. Opportunities to share competences in the group.</p>	<p>Peers are resources for learning (16)</p> <p>Peers can be approached for support and help (17, 18)</p> <p>There is a dialogic, sharing culture in class or groupwork (19, 20)</p>
Participatory resources	Participation activity	<p>21. Taking responsibility by being an active participant</p> <p>22. Asking questions and making comments in the course</p> <p>23. Expressing opinions in the course</p> <p>24. Willingness to participate even when having other things to do</p> <p>25. Enjoyment in taking initiatives and collaborating in the course.</p>	<p>Students take responsibility to participate actively in school activities (21, 22, 23)</p> <p>Students are willing and joyful in participating despite time or scope constraints (24, 25)</p>

Opportunities to influence	<p>26. Student viewpoints were listened to</p> <p>27. Student viewpoints and opinions were taken into account</p> <p>28. Experience of having to perform according to external instructions (a)</p> <p>29. No opportunities to influence the goals set for this course (a)</p> <p>30. Possibilities to influence the working methods</p> <p>31. Opportunity to influence how competence is assessed in the course</p> <p>32. No possibilities to influence the course contents. (a)</p>	<p>Possibilities to influence the content and goals (29, 32)</p> <p>Possibilities to influence assessments or working methods (30, 31)</p> <p>Non-experience with external demands or instruction (29)</p> <p>Students' viewpoints are heard and taken into account (26, 27)</p>
Opportunities to make choices	<p>33. No possibility to choose contents in line with the learning goals (a)</p> <p>34. Opportunity to choose course contents based on one's own interest</p> <p>35. No possibility to choose between ways of completing the course. (a)</p>	<p>Opportunities to choose content based on learning goals and interests (33, 34)</p> <p>Opportunities to be flexible with methods of assessment (35)</p>

	Ease of participation	<p>36. Ease of participation in discussions</p> <p>37. Difficulties participating in discussions (a)</p> <p>38. Possibility to express thoughts and views without being ridiculed</p> <p>39. Courage to challenge matters presented in the course.</p>	<p>It is easy to participate and contribute in class (36, 37)</p> <p>Possibility to express thoughts and views, even when they might contradict presented content or others' ideas (38, 39)</p>
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* (a) *Reversed-coded item*

4.3.2 Data analysis process

I used qualitative research methods from an interpretive paradigm to explore different voices educational stakeholders had regarding student agency. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The interviews were transcribed approximately 5 – 7 days after they were conducted. I took around 2 hours to transcribe 10 minutes of recording, rendering the total time to transcribe a 70-minute interview at 14 hours or 5 part-time working days. I also reviewed the transcript a week apart to check the accuracy of the transcript as well as to add non-verbal language aspects such as long pauses or laughing. Meanwhile, the surveys were easier to process simply by retyping and reviewing the document. All participants' identifiers were converted to codes during this step, such as the head of department A of School 1 was coded as headteacher 1, and student B in School 2 was coded as student 13 (S2). Principals and a vice principal from 3 schools were all coded as principals 1, 2, and 3 corresponding to the school to avoid releasing the vice principal's identity.

The data was first reduced by coding participants' perspectives of student agency, student roles, school rules, and cultural impacts. The process employed in-vivo coding to allow their voices to emerge authentically (Saldaña, 2016). MAXQDA was used as the coding assisting tool that enabled coherent and organized codes and accommodated a variety of languages including Vietnamese. I utilized the functions of set comparisons and smart coding tools to carry out case analysis and cross-case examination. Following the inductive stage, I employed both inductive and deductive approaches to find answers to research question 1 and a theory-guided qualitative analysis for research question 2 (Schreier, 2012) with multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016).

To answer research question 1, which is "What are students' roles in student agency from the perspectives of school leaders and students?", I must define the concept of "role". According to Oxford Learner Dictionary (2023), roles are

defined as “the function or position that somebody has or is expected to have in an organization, in society or a relationship”. Thus in this study, students’ roles are the position and functions students are expected to have in schools and learning in general. The roles may be expected by others apart from the students, including teachers, schools, and parents. This role, however, could be embraced or resisted by students themselves (Kreiler, 2018). Embraced roles are roles that students find resonant with their desired studentship roles and identities. Whereas, resisted roles go into conflict with their expectation which could cause stress and maladaptive behaviors. Inductively, the earlier in-vivo codes were categorized and analyzed into either “embracing” or “resisting” role groups using an iterative process. For each role group, four specific, recurring roles were later identified as “embracing” and four roles were found to be “resisted” when comparing school leaders’ and students’ perspectives of such roles. An example of this analysis is presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Example Codes of Student Roles and Role Groups

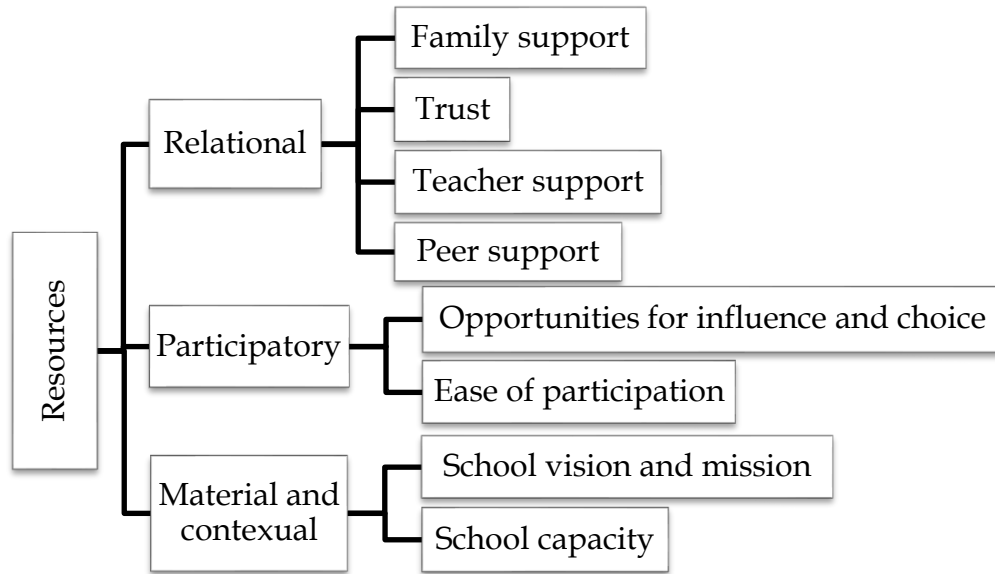
School leaders	Students	Embraced or Resisted Role?
“Students need to understand that what influences them the most is their internal power, which is their genuine desire and interest to do something, not from external disciplines and expectations.” (Principal 3)	“After more than two years in this environment, everyone has got some-what a goal for themselves. They know what they want and like” (student 4, S2)	<i>An embraced role:</i> Students need to study hard and find interest in doing so
“Students need to understand that they have rights but they can’t just speak whatever and however they like. They need to	“We need to follow rules to create a safe space for everyone to develop agency” (student 14, S1)	<i>An embraced role:</i> Student’s responsible behavior in relation to others

learn to talk responsibly" (head teacher 3)		and others' learning
"Students still need to follow imposed templates by teachers sometimes in writing tests even though the reform tells otherwise. It's in the mindset" (principal 3)	"When writing, Vietnamese students might need to follow a certain format, a certain way of thinking such as always agreeing with the author" (student 15, S3)	<i>A resisted role:</i> Students reproduce and memorize learned knowledge.
"My school has the most number of students passing entrance exams into public high schools, which is considered a pride of parents" (principal 1)	"I feel that everyone that I have met normally can't determine what they want to pursue and choose to follow in parent's path for them..." (student 17, S1)	<i>A resisted role:</i> Students are oriented towards achieving the goal set out by the school or family

Question 2 was answered with a theory-guided approach yet with an openness to new codes and themes. Using the AUS scale as a framework of resources, I first coded the emergent resources into relational and participatory resources. In relational resources, a new sub-theme namely family support arose. Meanwhile, in participatory resources, three sub-themes from the AUS scale which are opportunities for influence, opportunities for choice, and participation activity were combined into opportunities for influence and choice as they were often mentioned simultaneously. Another resource group emerging was material/contextual resources that cover school capacity and school missions and visions, both of which do not belong to either relational or participatory resource groups. Resources and their sub-resources were generated after multiple rounds of coding and positioned into a hierarchical coding frame (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2

Coding Hierarchy for the Mediating Factor of Learning Environment



An example of the analysis for the resources can be seen in Table 6 below. The resources were reported as either enabling or constraining students and their agency development by the participants.

Table 6

Example Coding for Resources

In-vivo codes from collected data	Coded resources
<i>"One time before a class excursion, a student suddenly cried, and everybody wanted to know why and he said his parents prohibited him from doing many things for fear of him getting hurt. He felt that he was just a redundant being." (head teacher 1)</i>	Family support
<i>"The school rules also have their drawbacks as they might hinder students from self-regulating their behaviors and raising their voices." (student 18, S1)</i>	Opportunities for influence and choice

4.4 Ethical Solutions

When conducting the research, I was aware that several ethical issues might emerge.

The first consideration was procedural ethics, which includes informed consent (Bryman, 2016). Participants were informed of the study and its purposes before they agreed to participate. The research notification and privacy notices were sent to teachers at least 2 weeks before the data collection. One teacher who was notified only one day before the collection got extended time to read the notification and ask me any questions she might have. Students, who were under 16, received the research notice and consent forms for both them and their parents to sign. A video was made for them where I recorded a 5-minute presentation of the research purposes and of the ways data would be collected as a video research notification for those who might not have read the written notification. It was played to the students during their classes to ensure concentration. The data collected was kept confidential and participants' anonymity was protected. Participants' names and any identifiable information were converted into codes that are unrecognizable to others. The principals were coded as principals 1, 2, and 3 even though one of them was vice-principal. The students were coded into student 1 to student 22 together with their school code, which was school 1 (S1), school 2 (S2), and school 3 (S3). Any identifiers such as specific nouns (e.g., school subjects) or numbers (e.g., student population) were adjusted to mask the identity. However, the school could still be recognized by the participants within the schools themselves since three schools with three different models were selected for research. The data collected was stored securely (Bryman, 2016) with multi-authentication protection.

Situational ethics was taken into consideration. The school leaders whose interviews took place on Zoom were recorded with the university's verified recorder. Students, after having written their surveys for a week, submitted the surveys in the presence of me or my representative who had no power over the participating students.

Relational ethics was another aspect for consideration (Smith, 2015). I avoided co-opting leader participants after three invitations or reminders. Their willingness to participate and share was respected and not questioned. With participants, the researcher invited them to make suggestions on the best time and date for the interviews. In addition, I gave students one week to complete the surveys.

In general, ethical matters were concerned with throughout the research process with the principle to be genuine, and to have fairness and create mutual trust.

5 RESULTS

The three studied schools employed different rules, routines, rituals as well as other educational practices given their varying missions, visions, and contextual conditions. The school compositions need to be viewed in their entirety including the power dynamics they brought into the discourse of student agency. The results are presented in the following structure to answer the two research questions: (1) the perceived roles of students and (2) the mediating effect of the learning environment on student agency.

5.1 Student roles in student agency

The roles of students are perceived by both school leaders and students, some of which either resonated or contradicted students' expectations of their own roles in developing student agency.

5.1.1 Embracing roles

It was acknowledged by school leaders and students alike that *students need to study hard and find interests in doing so*, which played an important role in developing student agency. Student interests had an impact on their intentional actions for agency, as reported by all school leaders. This role was emphasized by the reform towards student-centered learning. According to principal 1, seemingly only students with interest and strong utility value could thrive in the reform as teachers required them to be proactive and collaborative in school-work. Contrarily, unmotivated students might fall behind since they barely “show any interest through the lessons” (head teacher 3) to “take good notes and review” (principal 1). Teachers and families are expected to encourage unengaged students to participate and they may work closely with them on an individual basis depending on the school's capacity. However, principal 1 suggested that students may be most interested and see the most value in the "selected classes". Likewise,

head teacher 3 observed that students in the stronger group of her classes demonstrated better focus and commitment to learning tasks compared to students in other groups. This indicated some association between the school' standard of competence and students' interest.

Head teacher 3: In less accomplished groups, they can't even finish what I assigned. With students in the strongest group, when they take an absence, they ask about homework. Other groups just associate absence with the privilege of homework exemption... In such groups, teachers continue struggling to influence their attitudes and motivation.

Some interests came from external motivators such as good social status. This external drive discourse appeared in school 2 where academic contests and academic competitions were a norm. Students were encouraged to look into the opportunities of choices in the oncoming years to plan their current studies (head teacher 2). This was believed to motivate them to work at the moment on something they had little liking for. Student 20 (S1) suggested having more academic competitions and prizes for high achievers to motivate them to study harder.

Principal 3 discussed the importance of students' intrinsic drive. To build their agency, she underlined that students had to explore their drives and grow their interests as well as their self-efficacy and competence beliefs.

Principal 3: students need to understand that what influences them the most is their internal power, which is their genuine desire and interest to do something, not from external disciplines and expectations. That means education needs to educate the child from within, letting them take responsibility for the way they live, change, and learn.

Principal 3 challenged the dichotomy of important and trivial subjects. In school 3, she believed all interests, either in art, music, physical movements, and so on, were highly appreciated and worth developing. Head teacher 2 also discussed the dichotomy yet she did not mention the representation of traditionally inferior subjects in academic competitions, which was a big part of her school practices. Even though this idea of equal status quo among subjects was not mentioned by other leaders, they agreed that students' interests can be different and when

students participated in extracurricular activities they like, they were lively, creative, and demonstrated agentic behaviors.

Apart from interest, another role of students is that *they need to learn to regulate themselves to achieve their goals, either in academic or non-academic matters*. This mindset was typically true among high achievers in schools 1 and 2, especially school 2 (n=7). They believed that students needed to take ownership of their learning, self-reflect, and take initiative to achieve their goals. This aligned with head teacher 1's and principal 1's perceptions that without this mindset, students "will not succeed in the reform". This role, if enacted actively, was considered conducive to agency development and also a reflection of agentic action (head teacher 2).

Head teacher 2: Students in school 2 in general are very active agents in their own learning so they don't have problems setting or adjusting goals and achieving them... Many of the students don't need to go to extra classes to achieve high prizes in academic competitions.

Self-regulation involved self-reflection to build individual resources such as competence, skills, confidence, and a growth mindset consistently. Students referred to "building confidence" as a goal for themselves. Teachers and schools in general did not have enough capacity to cater to students' individual needs (principal 1); therefore, the control was mostly within students' capacity to take advantage of school activities, make smart decisions in time distribution, and collaborate with others.

Extracurricular activities were considered the most fertile ground for students to enact their agency. In extracurricular activities, head teacher 1 valued students' role more than teachers' as "if they know something, they know it better than teachers" and that "teachers might need to learn from them". This might seem to align with the earlier role of interest pursuit. However, there is a shift in mindset in which participation in extracurricular activities might not necessarily mean the exploration and pursuit of interest. In school 2, head teacher 2 claimed that these two roles might collide, which encouraged teachers and school staff to organize more activities for students to participate in and learn more about their

interests to pave the way for agency development as well as a ground for them to take agentic actions. Students seemed to be excited about such activities as a majority of them expected schools to give more space for them to sharpen their skills in various areas such as art, music, athletics, critical thinking, or public speaking.

Amidst the reform, another role that recurred was that *students need to know their rights and raise their voices in matters related to them*. This is critical in light of the reform when the identities of both teachers and students needed renegotiation (head teacher 1, principal 1). The reform not only required teachers to create active learning opportunities for students but also for students to understand their power in raising their voices and making full use of the chances presented to them. Students in school 3 were considered to know their rights to make contributions to teachers' lesson plans, and to be involved in making decisions related to them such as the validity of assessment (head teacher 3, principal 3). Nonetheless, this role was rather enhanced or constrained by school practices and power dynamics. It is noteworthy that the head teacher 2 perceived student agency as the goal of education. Her judgment of student roles in comparison with others' roles might be based on this opinion.

Head teacher 2: A good environment is, in my opinion, where students can develop themselves and their identities on their way and a place that gives them motivation and hope to develop further".

Head teacher 2 explicitly communicated with her students before the start of the official school year about her positioning of students as "partners", which gives space for them to raise their voices and ask questions anytime.

Students' responsible behavior in relation to others and others' learning was thus considered vital. Head teacher 3 emphasized that for students to use their rights properly, they needed to be accompanied by responsible behaviors with others, for she feared that "the students will have too much freedom without knowing the boundaries of their actions, such as how to talk to others or manners in class". The need to hold respect and gratitude for others was a recurring theme. In school 1, head teacher 1 discussed the importance of the flag-raising ceremony at

the beginning of each week to remember the sacrifices of the fallen soldiers. A sense of patriotism and community was nurtured through such events. She also mentioned that students' proper attitudes and compliance with rules created a better space for learning together where all students knew the comfortable extent of their behaviors. A balance between rights and obligations was considered important by teachers in all three schools.

Head teacher 1: what students must have is a love for the human being and solidarity with their fellow friends... national holidays remind them of the sacrifices of their countrymen and ancestors in the past.

Student 11 (S1): I feared that too much agency can lead students to do things only for their own good but might be harmful to others.

Student 11 might have associated student agency with the freedom to make decisions which she reasoned with both benefits and drawbacks. That being said, for her, selflessness is a desired trait for a man with morals. This role could create a safe and equal environment for everyone which is a prerequisite for positive student agency. In alignment with this, students were expected to resonate with the value of their school's rules to willingly comply. While this role was explicitly expected by students in school 3, where rules were printed in the school handbook with the discussion of values, rules were implicitly expected in schools 1 and 2 even though rules were reintroduced at the beginning of the school year yet without discussion of its values.

5.1.2 Resisting roles

A resisted role of students was that *students reproduce and memorize learned knowledge*. Students were viewed as recreators of knowledge in in-class learning. As much as head teacher 1 and principal 1 wanted to claim how student-centered the classroom had become since the reform, they both emphasized the importance of students taking good notes in class and following lectures and instructions. The realist view of a single correct answer to an academic matter was recurrent.

Principal 1: For me, it is obviously teachers who make the final decisions because we (teachers) are teachers, right? We are teachers and we teach students. They can have their opinions, but we must be the ones who make the final decisions.

This view rang true to head teacher 3 who held higher expectations for higher achievers by creating more chances for them to present, discuss, and figure the knowledge out on their own while with lower achievers, she employed a rather one-way instruction. Low-achievers might be encouraged to “memorize and take good notes” first before they could dive into higher-order thinking skills. In a sense, students’ competence and self-efficacy beliefs correlated positively with opportunities for choices.

Principal 1: In schools, academic knowledge still remains the goal... and student-centered learning is only for hard-working students. Some students are lazy not to take notes and memorize at home. Without deep memorization, they will soon forget.

Principal 1 mentioned the importance of taking notes because “knowledge is learned in class; skills are acquired out of class”.

Principal 1: In a public school like ours, learning knowledge is still the main duty. Learning skills in extracurricular activities is done out of class, for social skill practices”.

The knowledge-based approach was still dominant despite governmental efforts to shift to a competency-based approach. This was recognized by the principal as a deficit, yet she emphasized the need for time for holistic changes.

Another resisted role related to academic knowledge is that *students are oriented towards achieving the goal set out by school or family*. An orientation to examination and academic achievement was evident in school 1 with a school-wide expectation of all students getting into public high schools, which are considered superior to private schools in the neighborhood (principal 1). With an increase in the socialist-market orientation of the government, schools were entrusted with more autonomy yet also more accountability through academic outcomes, such as the results of high school entrance exams (Huynh, 2023). Principal 1 also indicated her school’s high achievement as an attractive and reliable reference for

parents to make decisions to enroll their children here. This pressure was observed by students, considering it to be “counterintuitive, stressful and demotivating” (student 15, S1, even though he belonged to the “selected group”). This urgency did not always seem to be the case. Students’ intrinsic motivation and one’s identity were considered “vague” at this stage of life by head teacher 1; the orientation of schools and families was important for students to see the “right path” to pursue. Nonetheless, this idea of students not being able to make decisions for themselves was contested by students who believed that such practices “restrict the development of one’s identity” and proposed that “students should get more choices and ownership of their learning”.

Another role students resisted is obeying *authority and rules without mutual agreement, for face harmony*. Students’ role to obey authority was covered under terms such as respect for teachers or students’ obligation. In school 1, students’ obligations to themselves, schools, and the community at large were emphasized more than their rights. Head Teacher 1 considered students having solidarity and sympathy with their fellow students to be of utmost importance, more than academic knowledge. She was proud of her student’s effort to help other students by being selfless. Much as the sacrifice was considered noble, students found themselves in a moral dilemma if they were to make decisions that suited themselves or voice up against the majority. The role was resisted by students in their discussions of certain rules such as paid parking slots for bikes, camera surveillance, prohibition of buying food in front of the school, eating in school, or using mobile phones. Such rules sparked controversy as some students did not understand the values behind them and thus found it constraining to follow. The uniform was the most frequently discussed rule by students as restricting as the implementation of uniforms was too strict, either in the time of use, materials, or colors. Head teacher 3 acknowledged the lack of discussion over the new rule of uniforms throughout the week instead of just a few days back then. Nonetheless, she discussed the benefits of this new rule. Head teacher 2 agreed with the general impositional nature of rules that students needed to follow but the lack of

appearance of rules in her school seemed to give a positive impression of rules as being low-key.

Another source of resistance was the perception that *students' role to promote their academic identity is more important than other identities*. Thus, the student's current academic ability and competence were perceived to correlate with student agency. Students who possessed a comparatively better academic ability tended to perceive themselves as more competent and confident or having enhanced self-efficacy beliefs. Student 19 (S1) mentioned her good social status at school as a manifestation of her academic edge and those of her classmates' compared to students from the other lower-achieving classes. Better academic achievement was associated with "more voice", and "more confidence". Their accomplishment seemed to give them a boost of confidence, especially when they had other less accomplished classes to compare to.

Student 19 (S1): In my class (one selected class), everyone has some reputation because we are the most competent class in the school.

This factor also played a role in School 3 during the entrance selection process according to Principal 3. Those students who were unable to meet the minimum requirement were rejected or only admitted if their parents demonstrated a considerable commitment to supporting them. Thus, students' academic achievement could mediate students' confidence and even chances for their opportunities to enact agency. Students' competence as a factor encouraged them to either put more effort into it to reinforce their dominant academic identity or to try to build their identity by achieving the expected standards. The promotion of this role also led to the reinforced belief of teachers as the "fount of knowledge".

In contrast, some students in school 3 that had prior experience in another environment endorsing the overpowering significance of academic identity found it liberating to be able to study in a less academically heavy environment. More interesting, in school 2 where academic identity seemed to be visible among all individuals, students were encouraged to develop other identities as well. Teachers' imposition of this role on them was less significant. Rather, students'

relative academic achievement gave them peer pressure to move beyond and above.

To challenge the school's focus on academic identity, students agentially wanted to enhance their growth mindset to overcome the imposition. They, however, also believed that their competence could be enhanced if their school normalized the notion that competencies needed to be developed over time, not instantly. This expectation was indeed promoted in school 3.

Interviewer: Do you think students all understand the purpose behind grouping, which is to give them the most appropriate environment to develop their competence?

Principal 3: Yes, they all understand the “why” of this ... because we all started off with the highest respect for students’ individuality. We don’t want to ask the fish to climb trees. Of course, there needs to be a standard but that is not to equalize everybody.

In general, even though teachers wanted to promote students’ roles in their learning, the expectation for academic performance, curriculum, high school entrance exam, and lack of capacities made it hard for teachers to give up their authority to students. On the other hand, some teachers were so accustomed to the traditional way that they did not feel comfortable changing. This was not in line with some students’ expectations but was a response to the demand for local accountability in forms of academic achievement.

Head Teacher 2: Not all schools can create an environment that is quite democratic for students’ voices because eventually at the end of the year, they still need to submit reports of their academic achievement... The new reform is still so academically heavy... even textbook writers might have to take those social demands into consideration

Principal 3: Oriental culture in general prefers a more standard path such as if a student wants to be considered excellent here, he needs to excel in Maths, Physics, or Chemistry.

Each school, with its unique background and approaches to promoting student agency, had promoted certain roles of students that are embraced or contested

by them. The following Table 7 presents a synthesis of the roles of students through school visions and missions as well as the practices.

Table 7*School Missions and Practices Employed at Three Schools*

School	School mission and vision (from the most to least emphasized)	School practices	
		Rules, routines, rituals	Other practices
School 1	<p>Students achieving and surpassing academic standards</p> <p>Students respecting authority and following class/ school rules</p> <p>Students taking responsibility for their learning through active participation in class and at home</p> <p>Students finding their interests (13/22 believe they have little to none of voices and choices)</p>	<p>Rules facilitate managerial matters</p> <p>Rules are strict to mitigate misbehaviors and regulate possible unpleasant behaviors (e.g. eating in school or buying food in front of the school) for all students</p> <p>Cameras have recently been installed to monitor the degree of rule compliance</p> <p>In general: students are divided about rules</p>	<p>Annual and seasonal student-centered school activities</p> <p>Extra paid courses (e.g soft-skill or English courses)</p> <p>Invitation to parents to pay a visit to the school to establish better collaboration</p>
School 2	<p>Students achieving and surpassing academic standards</p> <p>Students developing social and emotional agency through active</p>	<p>Rules are to keep students' behaviors in check and instill an attitude for community responsibility (principal 2) (13/18 students agree)</p>	<p>Annual and seasonal student-centered extra-curricular activities</p>

	<p>participation in class and school activities</p> <p>Students finding their interests</p> <p>Students following rules and developing self-discipline</p>	<p>Rules are not displayed anywhere</p> <p>Some rules spark controversies (e.g. uniforms, use of phones - 5/18 students indicated that)</p>	<p>Periodical tests, placement tests, and progress tests for selective specialized groups</p> <p>Academic competitions at school, city (all grades), and provincial levels (grades 8 and 9)</p>
School 3	<p>Students finding their interest and pursue it</p> <p>Students understanding the 'why' of school practices and develop their own 'how'</p> <p>Students developing social and emotional agency</p> <p>Students achieving academic standards and surpassing in his/her area of interest</p>	<p>Rules were not too strict, enough to build discipline, enabling student agency, self-regulation, confidence, responsibility, and rules are to protect students' rights (7/12 students endorse this)</p> <p>Rules for uniforms received the most criticism from students (4/12)</p>	<p>Transparent school's core values</p> <p>Club and specialized class selection</p> <p>School surveys administered 4 times/a year to students and parents</p> <p>Segregation of levels in three academic subjects (Maths, Literature, English)</p>

5.2 The mediating effect of learning environments

Learning environments, including the immediate influence of one's family, had a great impact on student agency development. The following analysis gives light on the factors influencing student agency either as constraints or as enablers for it.

5.2.1 Relational resources

Families played a significant role in a student's schooling and upbringing. Head Teacher 3 believed that the impact of family values on a child propelled him toward a certain way of behaving. Therefore, she asserted that families needed to learn how to set simple, early rules and build values at an early age, such as having respect or being polite.

Head Teacher 3: Even when they are not born with the 'leadership traits', parents need to guide their kids with basic values that are easy to follow... If possible, they all should be required to take parenting classes before deciding to have kids.

With fear of external bad behaviors getting to children nowadays with the introduction of social media and exotic cultures, head teacher 3 affirmed that only when families set the foundation can they stand unaffected by such influences. She held the roles of families and early education above that of teachers in middle schools. This is in contrast to head teacher 1 who believed that the school worked better at protecting students from such vigilant influences than students' families. That might stem from her exposure to parents whose decisions constrained students' agency more than enhanced it.

Head Teacher 1: One time before a class excursion, a student suddenly cried, and everybody wanted to know why, and he said his parents prohibited him from doing many things for fear of him getting hurt. He felt that he was just a redundant being.

This notion of oppressive parents seemed to ring true to student 5 (S2) as well when she mentioned the nature of "Asian parents" to "care only about grades and focus on academic competitions but not their child's experience at schools".

However, it is unknown if she was directing at parents at her school because head teacher 2 had a different idea of the parents there considering the good behaviors of students.

Head Teacher 2: Generally, students are very well-behaved and I guess their parents were just like that so they had children who behaved properly as well.

Both principals 1 and 3 had the belief that families needed to have a mutual understanding of the learning environment in which their children partook to collaborate and help them develop their agency holistically. The emphasis was laid more on School 3 when parents had to take a test to check the compatibility of their educational philosophy and that of School 3. If the parents demonstrated a significant difference in expectation to that of school 3, the child, even having passed the entrance tests, would not be admitted. During the school year, the school and parents and child would operate on a mutual agreement printed in a parent booklet signed prior to the start of the school.

Principal 3: Some parents who try to enroll their kids share that they want their kids to be able to get into gifted schools or selected classes, and to be excellent in this or that subject. With these cases, [school 3] would be hesitant to admit their child because they already have a mindset of what they want to impose on the educational practices and future collaboration will be really challenging.

Principal 3 believed the importance of family support was not only for the students' sake but for the school's vision too, which was student agency at the forefront. Without parents who could advocate for such causes, she believed this school model would not succeed. Principal 1 emphasized the need for participation from parents through the possibility of school visits and channels for parents to give feedback to School 1. The importance of family education or early education for the cohesive development of a child recurred in her response.

Principal 1: The involvement of parents needs to start early, at kindergarten and primary school, middle school ...

Thus, it appears that family had an influence on students' core values, which could enable or constrain students' personal resources such as their self-efficacy

beliefs leading to student agency. The family also played a role in providing the material and participatory resources to promote student agency.

An environment full of trust was another factor that influenced student agency. It was, in fact, highly desired by students, especially expected by a majority of students in school 1 and several students in school 2. An exceptional case was the current level of trust in school 3. There was a mutual understanding between the school principal, head teacher, and students. This high level of trust was mostly attributed to “the school’s transparent core values” which emphasized the importance of love and respect for everyone and oneself, genuineness, responsibility, striving for excellence, bravery, collaboration, and grit. These values were recalled by 10 surveyed students. This mutual understanding of the values of school practices also created a sense of trust among students and teachers during conflicts or everyday discourse. This made students “motivated to share their opinions without any fear” (principal 3).

The voices of students were heard in different ways and times, becoming a school-wide norm. This might contribute to almost all students’ beliefs that they all had agency (n=16/17) as “all voices are listened to”, “we encouraged each other to share ideas”, and that “we are all valued and respected”. For example, the violation of rules was considered from different standpoints (head teacher 3), covering a wide yet not exhaustive variety of cases so as not to unfairly treat anyone. This level of trust created a learning environment in which students “asked teachers so many things... commented on how a lesson should be taught... or shared how they wanted to learn” (principal 3). This enhanced awareness of metacognitive matters indicated a sense of control, intentionality, and thus developing agency in important matters to them.

However, students also resisted some rules such as eating in school or the introduction of uniforms (n=5). They had not seen the rationality behind these practices and thus questioned them. Student 2 (S3) was an exception when she admitted not having the control over study like she wanted and hoped school 3 would continue doing what it had promised. This resistance indeed demonstrated agency.

In school 2, a consistent degree of trust with teachers was acknowledged. Students praised teachers for giving them plenty of space to express themselves. However, students seemed to have trust issues with their peers and their environment. They experienced peer pressure that deterred some of them from raising their voices.

Student 5 (S2): Students all have voices, but they don't dare to speak against the majority. They don't dare to raise their own voice and just follow the popular vote against their will.

The fear of being disparaged indicated the importance of academic standing, and that some students view their ideas as a reflection of their identity. They did not have the habit to evaluate the idea itself, not the one who had the idea. The lack of trust influenced students to either adopt a maladaptive agency of “perfectionism” or no agency at all and just “follow what others say”.

School 1's leaders had a lower sense of trust for students as principal 1 when asked what might happen if students took control of the school, hesitantly mentioned the possibility of “anarchy” where students might break plenty of the rules. At the same time, she also emphasized the need for more empathy and trust in the school for better “democracy” to develop students' agency. She hoped teachers could all give more space for students to “give opinions freely when classes are over” (principal 3). That being said, the expected democracy during class might not be a focus. Students in school 1 still had a reservation when confronting teachers, which was recognized by both head teacher 1 and students.

Student 13 (S1): Going to school is still stressful, not in terms of studying but in relationships with teachers. I rarely look teachers in the eyes. I feel afraid when doing so.

Some students had a harder time feeling heard than others for “being different” (student 3, S1), and for “having absurd ideas” that teachers disregarded (student 7, S1). Some of them also showed their opposition to the strict monitoring with camera surveillance at their school (n=3) which they felt offended by, as it “violated their rights”. This low sense of belonging and control indicated a low sense of agency or the possibility of maladaptive agency. Head Teacher 1 also

recognized this issue when she constantly found the need to reassure students of the trust teachers had for them; otherwise, students felt hesitant to chip in. She retold occasions when students tried to trick her into manipulating them to test out her trust in them.

Header Teacher 1: I noticed that sometimes students would trick me to see if I actually trust them to do something. They would say things like "I don't know how to do it" and in that case, if I try to intervene and my opinions do not align with theirs, they would frown and I had to immediately reassure them that I was just giving my opinions but the final decision was on them. Then, they would seem much more cheerful.

Nonetheless, even though she emphasized that the fear of teachers was "non-existent in my school", she discussed incidents with her colleagues that she found lacking in trust and imposing. That being said, even though teachers in School 1 wanted to create a more democratic environment, tensions existed between teachers and students.

It is noteworthy, however, that teachers' trust was considered not just a resource but also an outcome of students' increased individual resources. According to head teacher 3, some students needed to earn the trust of teachers by performing academically and showing commitment to their learning more. She demonstrated a lack of trust in low-achieving students as she told them directly "I understand why you are in this group and not in more advanced groups". In short, it appeared that high academic achievement was a catapult and motivation for students to have accomplishments but low achievers might struggle with limited trust despite seemingly extensive support (i.e. teachers' encouragement, teachers' friendliness).

In congruent with trust, *teacher support, including their friendliness towards students and encouragement*, was coveted by students, especially in school 1.

Student 20 (S1): Teachers should encourage students more, not ridicule, and then extinguish their ideas.

This was seen as an issue by both students and school leaders of School 1 alike. Tensions existed among teachers creating a dilemma of whether to give in space

or intervene. This was attributed to the remnants of teacher-centered teaching approaches.

Head Teacher 1: Traditional ways of teaching work fine and some teachers don't want to take risks by giving students more voices and choices.

It is noticeable that the storming period of new norms during the reform was still happening and shifting teachers' and students' perceptions of students' roles. Before the official curriculum reform in 2018, teachers received professional training to implement the new curriculum, yet they reported that they had been "completely clueless" about the new approach and how it should be implemented (principal 1). Teachers had to show students how to learn in a student-centered manner, which was "strange" to them (principal 1). Head Teacher 1 emphasized the importance of bravery in teachers to share authority with students gradually, which she believed might be lacking in some of her colleagues. This power imbalance fuelled "students' hesitance to open up" in matters important to them. Although they could be intentional in bottling up their ideas, they might find a decrease in hope and motivation as well as a sense of belonging to an environment they spent a large amount of time, which was considered maladaptive to the situation.

Even though less discussed compared to other factors, *peer support was mentioned as a necessity* by student 16 (S2) as she experienced a negative experience of dissidence among friends. Peer pressure appeared to be a problem as well. This, interestingly, did not appeal to head teacher 3 as a resource. She downgraded the importance of peer support as she believed "to have students teach each other is very rare because, like adults, the percentage of alpha leaders is small compared to the rest". She emphasized students had differentiated abilities to lead and support others. However, she might have neglected this aspect since respect among peers was already significant at her school, acknowledged by all students to be a conducive factor for their bravery and courage in raising their voices.

Similar to trust, *equal treatment* was expected by all participants; however, school leaders and students also acknowledged the complexity of equality matters amidst a strong influence of hierarchy and academic competition.

Student 8 (S2): I think I can't voice up in school because the preference for the rich over the poor still exists at school.

School leader 2 and head teacher 2, on the contrary, refuted segregated treatment at their school by the introduction of uniforms, and all teachers “loving their jobs and having years of professional practice”. Head Teacher 2 mentioned her discussion with her students regarding the hierarchy in friendship and asserted that students made or broke friendships because of one’s personalities, not of their social or financial status.

Apart from social status, the treatment of students of different academic statuses seemed to be a problem for discussion. Student 10 in school 3 attributed the segregation of students into 3 competence levels to furthering parents’ academic competition, which might tarnish students’ interest, self-efficacy, and competence beliefs, and thus their agency. However, he boiled the most important factor of successful education to students’ discipline and self-efficacy to move up the ladder in life.

Student 10 (S3): [the grouping by levels] deliberately constrains student agency because the parents often take grouping as an academic benchmark for comparison. But in the end, the most important thing is students’ interest and their desire to improve.

5.2.2 Participatory resources

Enhanced participatory resources were called out by students as the most expected improvement in their educational institutes for the development of student agency.

Teachers needed to lift some barriers of hierarchy and academic stress to pave the way for participatory resources, especially *opportunities for influence and choices*. Giving students space to regulate their study and reflect seemed to be an uncommon practice in school 1, which was validated by students’ claim (n=7) that they did not have agency and decision-making opportunities. School principal 1, nonetheless, accentuated her attempt to integrate more extracurricular activities for students without overplaying academic activities.

Principal 1: I still integrate competency-based activities for students... but we need to tactfully integrate so it is just a part of the educational experience. In public schools, us included, learning academic knowledge is still the priority; others are just add-ons.

She planned to organize more clubs for students to join and host events themselves. Nonetheless, the level of students' self-directedness through such activities attracted skepticism as students had an outcry for more influence and voices either in the forms of "anonymous feedback" (student 2, S1), academic contests (student 20, S1), student-focused activities (student 6, S1), or simply "space for students to self-regulate and make decisions" (student 3, S1).

Heavy curriculum and assessment seemed to constrain students' opportunities to make decisions on what and how to learn. Knowledge-based education also rendered students "full of unnecessary stress" (student 8, S2). The high school exam, which was considered "more important than the university exam" (head teacher 1) further reinforced its status as a high-stake test, impeding students and teachers alike to participate and organize more events that catered to "individual needs". One student got emotional by stating her unhappiness "due to overwhelming stress from studying and extra classes without any time for relaxation" and that "I hate the educational system. It's unlikely Vietnamese students can develop student agency because the system values outcomes and grades the most" (student 17, S1)

In line with other factors, *ease of participation and level of participation activity needed further focus* as a way to degrade hierarchy and peer pressure to enable student agency.

Students in school 2 were also reported with a high level of competitiveness and goal-setting skills (head teacher 2). According to head teacher 2, teachers in her school would guide students in setting goals and reorienting after academic competitions, which were organized at different levels from class to province. The involvement of the triad of parents, students, and teachers was emphasized in the decision-making process for future action orientation for students to develop their agency.

Students also had chances to learn about their interests in the school's extracurricular activities, which teachers tried to diversify and organize frequently. Head teacher 2 also thought that students would like such collaborative, extracurricular events to be held more regularly, which aligns with the majority of students' expectations. However, the ease of participation might not have made it to the structural level of schools' operation in schools 1 and 2 as students still reported feeling "scared to participate" or "having too much homework and extra classes" and that participating became inviable.

5.2.3 Material and contextual resources

The *visions and missions of each school* were seen to have a major impact on students' individual resources, either positively or negatively. A positive impact would be generated if the school's visions and students' visions aligned to a large extent (students 5, S2). If the school's vision was to promote academic excellence, students who fell short of it might have low self-efficacy beliefs.

Student 5 (S2): Student agency exists only in high-achieving, confident individuals, not in less achieving ones because my school values accomplishments and achievements. Those falling behind generally don't dare to show their identity and just focus on studying to improve.

School capacity, including infrastructure and the class size, was a contextual issue discussed by principals 1 and 3, and head teacher 1. When asked what they would like to change about the current practices to promote student agency, principals 1 and 3 mentioned the expectation to do more for students yet the financial conditions had not yet afforded it. They both concurred that changes would take place, but it would take time.

Principal 1: One issue public schools are facing is the overcrowded number of students and deficient infrastructure across schools. International schools, in general, have looser rules and a different developmental path.

Principal 3: If possible, [school 3] will always look out for better practices and listen to parents and students to improve. Sometimes we want this and that all but the

financial reality doesn't afford it ... (such as) increased teacher salary, better test scores, and better infrastructure.

Student 17 (S1) pointed out the enabling factor of an environment that is somewhat under-resourced that would encourage students to take initiative.

The invasive coverage of quick social media, technology, and the pandemic were also believed to pose potential threats to malleable young people (head teachers 1, 3, principal 1). While head teacher 1 and principal 1 wanted to tighten the rules at school, head teacher 3 expected parents to accompany their children more to evaluate contexts and consider proper actions.

6 DISCUSSION

Following the findings, this section aims to invite readers into a discussion of the importance of student agency, culture, and educational practices from a socio-cultural point of view. Implications of the findings will be raised, followed by an evaluation of the study's credibility and limitations. The possibility of future research will be discussed.

6.1 Implication

The research had been initiated with the purpose to investigate the enabling and constraining factors in a Confucian heritage culture-influenced learning environment on student agency.

Using thematic analysis and Kreiler (2018)'s categorization, the research identified eight roles with which students were associated, of which four they embraced and four rejected. Students embraced the roles of (1) actively identifying their interests, (2) learning ways to self-regulate to achieve goals, (3) knowing and using their rights, and (4) behaving responsibly with others. Meanwhile, they resisted imposed roles of (1) simply reproducing knowledge, (2) achieving goals set by others, (3) obeying rules and authority without mutual consent, and (4) placing academic identity over other identities. Enablers and constraints in the practice of relational, participatory, and contextual resources were identified using the adapted version of Agency of University Students scale (Jääskelä et al., 2021). Finally, some values of CHC appear to have both negative and positive influences on student agency development. It is, however, not the sole culprit that caused tensions between schools and students that constrain student agency.

The finding indicates that students have different roles that have long been accepted and internalized while some roles have been introduced with the reform. This creates a phase of renegotiation of identity and roles among both teachers and students that had not ceased. It is interesting that both some of the embracing and resisting roles were promoted with the reform. This called for the

open and dialogic reconsideration of roles and positioning of both teachers and students (Goodman & Eren, 2013; York & Kirshner, 2015). Overall, the embracing roles were recognized by both groups of participants; however, students were the dominant group that pointed out many roles they would like to resist. This might highlight the impact of the heavy exam-driven culture (Thanh Pham & Renshaw, 2015) on school practices that render academic competence of greater significance, which I would like to connect with the theory of three domains of learning. It has been argued that to create an effective learning experience that caters to the learning styles and modalities of different students, it is crucial to take into consideration all learning domains including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Sousa, 2016).

The purposeful focus on the cognitive domain while ignoring the others such as in the practice of expecting students to achieve a common goal can be interpreted negatively by students as an act of oppression rather than a dose of motivation. This contradicts OECD (2019)'s emphasis on motivation, hope, and self-efficacy as vital constructs of agency. It might be important to find common ground on how to promote students' cognitive ability without turning a blind eye to students' hope, motivation, and self-directedness for adaptive agency instead of the maladaptive form (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). In my study, some teachers wanted to ally with students but they were put in a position where they needed to employ power imbalance to coerce students due to orders from higher authority. However, the exam-driven education was not local to Confucian Heritage Culture but rather a global phenomenon (Vaughn, 2018).

That being said, teachers' focus on developing students' academic identity could highlight the constraints in the neoliberalism idea of accountability amidst decentralization (Lin & Zhao, 2023; Huynh, 2023). This idea seems to penetrate different aspects of the education system from school/class/student rankings, and textbooks to assessment, which plays a role in fostering school shopping and unhealthy competition (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Even though there has been a slow shift to omitting high school entrance exams which promised to reduce unnecessary stress for students, the shift itself might cause other problems such as

corruption if not handled critically (VTC News, 2023). Moreover, the stigma associated with those who “fail” public high school and need to enroll in vocational schools might be both a motivation and a demotivation factor for students to continue pursuing academic achievement.

I also paid attention to whether the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) was manifested in the learning environment and the perceived roles of students. Although not explicitly discussed by participants, CHC appears to have a subtle yet considerable effect on relational and participatory resources for student agency.

The concept of hierarchy in CHC (Thi Nhat et al., 2018) was widespread in various relationships, between teachers-students, high-achievers-low-achievers, selected and mainstream classes, main and minor subjects, or schools of high and low rankings. The hierarchy was further reinforced through the examination culture. The stake to renegotiate the hierarchy seemed to be high since the traditional model was endorsed by a large number of teachers without much examination and reflection. The pervasive, uncritical nurture of hierarchy across socio-cultural contexts penetrated multiple levels of relational resources which might be a reason for student agency not being the priority but academic achievement. Students in return resisted teachers as “the fount of knowledge” through silence or ignorance, which is considered a form of resistive or maladaptive agency (Ha & Li, 2014; Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). The values of CHC to show respect for teachers and strive for academic excellence for social advancement seemed to have been practiced in ways that rob students of trust in their closest resource of support. The internalized power imbalance deterred students from participating in matters that were important to them. Despite various opportunities for participation, students still struggled to use the opportunities to influence and make decisions. That meant power imbalance could also cripple the participatory resources for student agency development. Therefore, it is critical to investigate the power dynamics and school discourse to turn student resistance into student collaboration for adaptive agency (Gorzelsky, 2009)

Nonetheless, CHC was not the sole culprit for all the constraints but many other contextual factors as well, such as the exam-focused assessment culture,

lack of infrastructure, and quality teachers which are identified as challenges for agency development (Zeiser et al., 2018). Indeed, students also embrace the CHC-influenced role of self-cultivation “for a holistic integration of body, heart-mind, soul, and spirit; interconnectedness and fruitful interaction with all levels of the human community from the individual to family, to the world, and with all things; and sustainable relationship between humans and nature” (Canda, 2013, p.226). This acceptance can also be connected to the concept of “interdependence” in Asian countries (Trommsdorff, 2012, p.22) in which students’ agentic regulation is correlated with social harmony.

The finding also supports the person-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989, cited in Van Vianen, 2018) which suggests that students can flourish the most when their expectations align with those of schools, such as academic excellence or independent learning. However, students all wanted to have a high level of trust in the school, which is an indicator of the negative influence of CHC's value of authority and hierarchy. This aligns with studies that advocate for trust, or relational trust, to be the most important element for a healthy educational institution (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Smith et al., 2001). Trust also has a positive correlation with transparency (Hubbard, 2009). Transparency opens up dialogue and honesty for discussion while a lack of transparency creates suspicion and thus erodes trust (Bartlett & Preston, 2000). Therefore, transparency in the understanding of different values needs to be openly discussed. What do schools mean by respect? Is it respect for teachers and authority in general or is it respect for everyone and oneself? What does excellence entail? Does it refer to test-taking skills or having the ability to think critically? That extends to other values that are imposed upon students without their buy-in such as in disciplinary practices. Such discussions need to be open, dialogic, and transparent to avoid false democracy in a somewhat oppressive environment. Future research should explore in what ways such discussions could be realized in such a high-power-distance culture.

Nonetheless, the findings indicate the importance of transparency in school practices to create understanding, trust, and a sense of belonging. This

aligns with research carried out within and beyond CHC communities. Without a genuine shift to viewing students as resourceful individuals with different needs, competence, and relational past and future orientation, schools might deliberately be setting themselves up against their students and furthering the oppressor-oppressed relationships where students might develop trauma-based transformative or maladaptive agency (Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019). Renegotiation of agency and identity needs sensitivity since it happens for both teachers and students, not to mention the family and others involved.

6.2 School leaders and students: Allies or Enemies?

It was noticeable that the relationship between schools and students was not meant as enemies at the outset. It was intended as an alliance with visible conflicts of interest. Students who feel hopeless, violated, or unheard were still present. It is not strange in schools from non-CHC countries. However, in the case of Vietnam, challenges persisted with reported lack of time, school-wide processes, student awareness, and of teacher perception of agency. Such challenges were in correspondence with Zeiser (2018)'s report. The challenges are further enhanced by a strong influence of CHC values of hierarchy, filial piety, and interdependence (Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Trommsdorff, 2012). School leaders who let external assessment take precedence over their students, who set aside students' individuality, and who failed to nourish trust were setting themselves up as enemies against their students.

To enhance student agency, it is thus necessary to reexamine the resisted student roles as well as the constraining factors in the learning environment to unveil and untangle existing tensions. Some school practices are believed to have the capability to neutralize the challenges to pave the way for more enablers (Zeiser, 2018), to shift the relationship from unintended enemies to intentional alliances. I would argue that it is critical to look at measures to improve student agency in CHC-influenced countries through a culturally responsive lens. Interestingly, a pedagogy developed through that lens so often aligns with inclusivity,

trust, and transparency, which are conducive to student agency development (Bartlett & Preston, 2000; Hubbard, 2009). Such practices could be done at institutional, personal, and instructional levels (Richard, 2007) to avoid sending mixed messages to students about their importance in the learning environment – *“it is important to learn this, but you are not sovereign to do it yourself!”* (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020, p.1043). I would invite educators and leaders to rethink the messages students are receiving on their ends and the affordances for student agency in all educational processes.

6.3 Credibility and limitations

The credibility of this research is the priority of the entire process, to create a thick description of data with a focus on multivocality (Tracy, 2010) to crystallize data in its most genuine and diverse “colors, patterns, and arrays” (Richardson, 2000b, p.934, cited in Tracy, 2010).

Having aimed for a thick description of the phenomenon, the researcher used multiple data sources including interviews, surveys, and documents to confirm findings. Data collected from interviews was transcribed with attention to the location and time, non-verbal hints (e.g., laughing, pauses), and possible disruptions (e.g., disrupted connection, school recess). The surveys were retyped and checked twice to maintain their original content. The findings and interpretations were shared with another researcher coming from a different country to obtain feedback. Moreover, since the collected data was in Vietnamese, I used the original texts during the coding process in MAXQDA software, then during theme formation, and the finding report. By doing that I could ensure I read the original texts multiple times for a correct understanding of meaning and intentions. Primary thoughts were journaled down for future reflection. Alterations were made with added descriptions and exploration. In addition, I was aware of my own biases and assumptions of CHC values and primary pejorative perception of academic competition as a totality of my schooling experience. Thus, I wanted to explore the hidden source of my contempt and develop empathy for

them and gather momentum to take action. It was an eye-opener and privilege for me to have sharing of both teachers and students since I used to only play the role of a student. Coupled with documents regarding the reform, the collected interviews and surveys helped me form a better social background of school practices.

Nonetheless, I did not avoid confrontation with possible biases I might have for the private school. I might have favored its practices more as such practices might have accommodated me as a student back in the day. However, I kept my mind open while keeping the research questions in mind.

My positionality and self-reflexivity enabled me to gain tacit knowledge which is considered a “largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p.492, cited in Tracy, 2010). I tried “taking note of who is talking, and what they are talking about, but also who is not talking and what is not said” (Tracy, 2010, p.843). This kept me anchored in the theory of dialogic research where researchers are also considered “instruments” or participants (Tracy, 2010, p.842) to maintain transparency and sincerity.

Despite the small sample size of three schools, the actual collected data from 5 interviews, 1 email reply, and 59 surveys constituted a large data. The analysis thus reached a point of saturation where themes recurred and formed a coherent entity.

Despite the efforts for reliability and rigor, the saturation of the data might be a limitation that restrains the generalisability of the research. Three schools selected followed three different models that, even though lending insights into comparative school practices, might not be representative of all schools following these models. Another limitation is the short duration of the data collection phase from September to December 2022, which is 4 months. This period could not capture the dynamics of the reform that has been taking place slowly. The data collected now might not reflect what will be in the near future.

6.4 Possibility for future research

The topic of building student agency in a CHC culture will continue attracting interest, especially amidst the reform in the socialist market. Investigations into successful models would shed light on practice implications for other institutions. Moreover, as this research is currently qualitative, quantitative research into student agency using the adjusted AUS framework would have the potential to generate a scale to evaluate student agency in CHC education. To make up for the limitations of this research, future research could approach a specific model of school for a better representation and give a more insightful answer to the tensions. A longitudinal study would be interesting and necessary to reveal the changing forces and power dynamics among schools and students to see if more alliances will be formed.

7. CONCLUSION

The thesis set out to investigate the conflicting perception of student agency in Vietnam, a high-power Confucian Heritage Culture-influenced country. The research was able to name the tensions in student roles and where different roles took place. The research gave insight into the implementation of the new education reform at schools regarding what has been shifting and what else might need to be done. It might also offer insights for those institutions who wish to import education from non-CHC markets and localize it in Vietnam. In general, the impact of CHC on education is significant yet it can be morally confusing and dogmatic without open discussion. The ideas of filial piety, loyalty, or moral improvement call for frequent, if not daily, talk.

The research also offers new light on how student agency surveys could be used to promote student agency at different levels of schooling and contexts. Scales such as AUS need to be adapted to capture agency constructs and factors influencing them on a case-by-case basis. For example, at middle school levels, family support needs to be added to relational resources because it plays a pivotal part in student agency development. Nonetheless, it cannot replace other systematic measures such as a culture of trust and dialogue. Whether students and schools are allies depends on the alignment of what is said and what is done. Institutional, personal, and instructional changes need to take place to realize a supportive and trusting environment.

In general, the research contributed to the humble amount of literature on student agency in Asian countries, especially in countries influenced by CHC. It is not without its limitations but it has the potential to create talks in matters of student agency and the roles of students, teachers, family, and society in nurturing generations with strong and healthy mindsets, for wellbeing and prosperity (OECD, 2019).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview questions in English

Student agency relates to the development of an identity and a sense of belonging. When students develop agency, they rely on motivation, hope, self-efficacy and a growth mindset (the understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed) to navigate towards well-being. This enables them to act with a sense of purpose, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society. (OECD, 2019)

1. What do you think about this statement?
2. How do you perceive the roles of student in developing student agency?
3. Do you think it is possible to promote student agency holistically at your school?
4. What are the rules, routines and rituals employed at your school? Why?
5. Among such practices, what do you think is enabling or constraining student agency?
6. If possible, what practices would you want to bring in to support student agency?
7. How do Confucian values enable or constrain student agency?
8. What do you think about the influence of hierarchy and harmony aspects on student agency?
9. How similar are your school culture and the societal culture?
10. What should be changed in the culture to promote student agency?

Appendix 2 Interview questions in Vietnamese

“Student agency liên quan tới sự phát triển bản sắc cá nhân và cảm giác thuộc về của học sinh. Khi học sinh phát triển student agency, họ dựa vào động lực, hy vọng, sự hiểu biết năng lực bản thân và tư duy phát triển (tư duy cho rằng khả năng và trí thông minh có thể được phát triển) để hướng tới hạnh phúc. Điều này cho phép họ hành động có mục đích. Chính điều này hướng họ tới sự vươn lên và phát triển trong xã hội.”
(OECD, 2019)

1. Thầy/ cô nghĩ gì về định nghĩa về student agency này?
2. Thầy/ cô nghĩ gì về vai trò của học sinh trong việc phát triển student agency?
3. Thầy/ cô có nghĩ rằng có thể thúc đẩy quyền tự quyết của học sinh một cách toàn diện tại trường học của thầy/ cô không?
4. Các quy tắc, thói quen và nghi lễ được sử dụng ở trường của thầy/ cô là gì? Tại sao?
5. Trong số những thực hành như vậy, thầy/ cô nghĩ điều gì đang tạo điều kiện hoặc hạn chế student agency của học sinh?
6. Nếu có thể, thầy/ cô muốn áp dụng những thông lệ hay thực hành nào để hỗ trợ student agency?
7. Các giá trị Nho giáo khuyến khích hoặc hạn chế student agency của học sinh như thế nào?
8. Thầy cô nghĩ gì về ảnh hưởng của hệ thống phân cấp và sự mong muốn hòa hợp (thay vì đối đầu) đối với student agency của học sinh?
9. Văn hóa trường học của thầy/ cô và văn hóa xã hội giống nhau như thế nào?
10. Nên thay đổi điều gì trong văn hóa để thúc đẩy agency của học sinh?

Appendix 3 Survey in English

SURVEY

Student agency relates to the development of an identity and a sense of belonging. When students develop agency, they rely on motivation, hope, self-efficacy and a growth mindset (the understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed) to navigate towards well-being. This enables them to act with a sense of purpose, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society. (OECD, 2019)

Personal information

Class:

Gender: Male/ Female/ I'd rather not say

Below are questions about your school's rules, routines and rituals that might be constraining or enabling the enactment of your agency as well as your thoughts on how your school positions you. Please take your time to write your answer to the question below within 150 – 250 words. Your answer is a wonderful contribution to the research.

What do you think about the concept "student agency"?

You can use some questions below to guide you

1. Is student agency important?
2. Are what you are experiencing at schools enabling or constraining student agency?
3. What are the current rules, routines and rituals at school you think are necessary for student agency? Explain why.
4. What are the current rules, routines and rituals at school you think should be omitted as they constrain student agency? Explain why.
5. What can your schools or yourself do to promote student agency?

Appendix 4 Survey in Vietnamese

Thông tin cá nhân: Lớp: Giới tính: Nam/ nữ/ em không muốn đề cập

Phiếu khảo sát xoay quanh về quy định, quy trình và nghi thức trong trường mà có thể hạn chế hoặc hỗ trợ student agency và chỗ đứng của học sinh trong trường và văn hóa Việt Nam. Em hãy dành một chút thời gian cho câu hỏi dưới đây trong khoảng 150 - 250 từ. Câu trả lời của em là một sự đóng góp rất lớn cho nghiên cứu này. *Em nghĩ gì về student agency trong môi trường học hiện tại của em?* Để nắm được khái quát cách hiểu về student agency, em hãy đọc định nghĩa dưới đây do tổ chức Hợp tác và Phát triển Kinh tế OECD đề cập năm 2019.

“Student agency liên quan tới sự phát triển bản sắc cá nhân và cảm giác thuộc về của học sinh. Khi học sinh phát triển student agency, họ dựa vào động lực, hy vọng, sự hiểu biết năng lực bản thân và tư duy phát triển (tư duy cho rằng khả năng và trí thông minh có thể được phát triển) để hướng tới hạnh phúc. Điều này cho phép họ hành động có mục đích. Chính điều này hướng họ tới sự vươn lên và phát triển trong xã hội.”
(OECD, 2019)

Em có thể dùng một số câu hỏi dưới đây để định hướng cho câu trả lời của mình. Nếu em có ý tưởng khác, em hãy mạnh dạn chia sẻ nhé.

1. Học sinh trường em có agency không? Các bạn có thể trở thành những người tự chủ, hiểu biết, có bản sắc cá nhân, tự tin, và hạnh phúc không?
2. Em hãy đánh giá ảnh hưởng của các quy định, quy tắc và nghi thức tại trường lên agency của học sinh (VD: đồng phục, sử dụng điện thoại, giao tiếp với thầy cô, vv).
3. Em có thấy mình có tiếng nói và lựa chọn tại trường không (trong và ngoài lớp học)?
4. Em thấy văn hóa nhà trường và văn hóa Việt ảnh hưởng thế nào tới student agency?
5. Trường em hoặc bản thân em có thể làm gì để nâng cao student agency của em và học sinh khác?

Appendix 5 The Agency of the University Students (AUS) Scale

AUS: Abbreviated items of the Agency of the University Students (AUS) Scale in the order of dimensions.

- Competence beliefs
 1. Understanding of the course contents
 2. Experiencing course contents as too challenging (a)
 3. Sufficient basis for participation in discussions in the course
 4. Understanding of the constructs presented in the course
 5. Course demands have not been excessive
 6. Lacking basic knowledge for understanding the course contents (a)
 7. Experience of a need for revision of basic concepts prior to the course (a)
- Self-efficacy
 8. Belief in one's ability to succeed in the course
 9. Belief in succeeding even in the most challenging tasks
 10. Belief in successfully completing the course
 11. Confidence in oneself as a learner in spite of challenges
 12. Belief in attaining personal goals set for the course.
- Equal treatment
 13. Equality among students
 14. Equal treatment of students by teachers
 15. Other students have a stronger influence on the course. (a)
- Teacher support
 16. Teachers' friendly attitude towards students
 17. Belittling of students by teachers (a)
 18. Experience of being oppressed as a student
 19. Not enough room for discussion given by teachers (a)
 20. Teachers' contemptuous attitude towards students. (a)
- Trust

21. Safe course climate
 22. Experience of being welcome in the course
 23. Experience of being able to trust teachers
 24. Approachability of the teachers
 25. Possibility to be oneself in the course
 26. Experience of teachers' interest in students' viewpoints
 27. Encouraging students to participate in discussions.
- Participation activity
 28. Taking responsibility by being an active participant
 29. Asking questions and making comments in the course
 30. Expressing opinions in the course
 31. Willingness to participate even when having other things to do
 32. Enjoyment in taking initiatives and collaborating in the course.
 - Ease of participation
 33. Ease of participation in discussions
 34. Difficulties participating in discussions (a)
 35. Possibility to express thoughts and views without being ridiculed
 36. Courage to challenge matters presented in the course.
 - Opportunities to influence
 37. Student viewpoints were listened to
 38. Student viewpoints and opinions were taken into account
 39. Experience of having to perform according to external instructions (a)
 40. No opportunities to influence the goals set for this course (a)
 41. Possibilities to influence the working methods
 42. Opportunity to influence how competence is assessed in the course
 43. No possibilities to influence the course contents. (a)
 - Opportunities to make choices
 44. No possibility to choose contents in line with the learning goals (a)
 45. Opportunity to choose course contents based on one's own interest
 46. No possibility to choose between ways of completing the course. (a)
 - Interest and utility value

- 47. The course was not inspiring (a)
- 48. The course was not inspiring because of unclear utility value (a)
- 49. High motivation to study in the course
- 50. The contents of the course were interesting
- 51. Desire to learn in order to understand
- 52. Desire to succeed in the course
- 53. Maintaining persistence in the face of the high effort demanded.
- Peer support
 - 54. Experiencing other students as resources for learning
 - 55. Asking for help from other students when needed
 - 56. Providing support for other students in challenging study tasks
 - 57. No possibility to share competence with other group members (a)
 - 58. Opportunities to share competences in the group.

Note: (a) Reversed-coded item. The AUS Scale is copyrighted by the authors, its use requires written permission from the authors