

Student Agency in Selected Primary and Middle Schools in Ethiopia: Teachers' Conceptualization, Instructional Perception, and Reported Practice

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Abstract

This study explores teachers' conceptualization and reports practices of student agency in two primary and middle case schools. A case study design that employed quantitative and qualitative methods was employed. Data was collected from a total of 123 teachers (M=76, F=47). The qualitative data collected from 14 purposefully selected interviewees were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes, whereas the quantitative data collected from 109 randomly selected teachers using a questionnaire was screened and analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Teachers conceptualized student agency in terms of student ability, teachers' pedagogy, and school system capacities. The findings further indicate that teachers' current practices are shaped by gaps between theory and practice (praxis), stemming from unclear theoretical grounding, constrained teacher agency, absence of reflective practice, and insufficient effort to address ingrained misconceptions. Teachers perceived instructional practices as largely traditional, causing stasis in student-centeredness and student agency development. Participants attributed the observed instructional stasis mainly to teachers' pedagogical skill gaps and lack of readiness, student passivity or lack of interest, and school structural barriers. At a time when student agency is highly critical for student learning and concerns about schools' and teachers' responsiveness to student agency in light of advancements and diversities for student learning opportunities are growing, the paper emphasizes a coherent effort by educational policy, curriculum, teachers' professional development, and parents to enhance student agency and learning with responsibility.

Keywords: student agency, conceptualization, instructional perception, teacher practices

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Introduction

Student agency has gained increased attention since the 1980s, following the paradigm shift of traditional instruction to student-centeredness (Reigeluth et al., 2017). The increased complexity of student learning in the context of growing dynamism of technology and globalization (Alsaleh, 2024; Zou et al., 2025) consolidated not only the student-centered educational paradigm shift but also authorized student agency to a strategy. Especially, the uncertain outcomes of increasingly complex learning environments, which are worsened by learner passivity, traditional inequities, and imposed dynamic changes in schools, make student agency a leveraging strategy of response. Scholars contend that such unpredictable school outcomes stem mainly from schools' failure to adapt to the new norm of productive learning (AlDahdouh et al., 2015; Doolittle, 2000; Siemens, 2005). Strengthening this criticism, World Development Report (2018) cited in World Bank (2017) described the existing schools as a place of "schooling without learning" (P.24).

Studies show that students who exercise agency acquire resilient self-regulatory skills and perseverance to facilitate long-lasting and successful learning habits (Bandura, 2001; Crick et al., 2015; Lin-seigler et al., 2016). According to Crick et al. (2015), agentic students demonstrate higher learning powers that help them use autonomy, deeper engagement, ownership, and self-regulation during the school learning process.

As a result, several countries, where only a few of them in Africa, adopted student agency in their curricula (OECD, 2018) in order to cultivate agentic students who consistently contribute for their learning success in (Barrance & Elwood, 2018). Similarly, in Ethiopia, the revised education and training policy, similar to the then education policy, aspires schools to cultivate self-reliant, prosperous, problem-solving, and competent citizens (MoE, 2023). In line with this, Ethiopian educational policy and the National General Education Framework envisage teachers' effective pedagogies to anchor policy directives, curriculum objectives, and student needs in instructional practices (MoE, 2020, 2023). Research also shows that student agency is highly associated with the alignment of teachers' pedagogical conceptions with students' learning needs (Priestley et al., 2021; Reeve & Cheon, 2021), and schools' productive learning strategies (Vaughn, 2021).

Student agency conceptualization to a certain degree varies among scholars. For example, Klemencic (2017) conceived of student agency in terms of the power and autonomy necessary to execute their learning in favor of their purpose and responsibility. Reeve and Shin (2020) conceived student agency as “what students say and do...” (p. 151). Yet, Wenmoth et al.(2021) conceptualized student agency as “something students act upon or something to be taught”, referring to the curricula fostering student agency. In sum, the conceptualization of human agency varies across different disciplines depending on how it is operationalized and used. In the same vein, teachers’ conceptions of student agency in school contexts face a lack of consistent theoretical conception or definition (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). As a result, the way teachers conceive student agency guides their subsequent actions: fostering or hindering student agency practices in schools. For example, teachers who conceptualized student agency in terms of autonomy and ownership promoted students’ self-regulated engagement and choice during instruction (Toom et al., 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Teachers who conceive student agency as a negotiated learning experience emphasize the creation of a flexible, reflective, and collaborative learning environment for student engagement (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Priestley et al., 2021). On the other hand, teachers who conceptualize learning in terms of student achievement and focus on controlled instruction hamper the development of student agency (Leijen et al., 2024). Moreover, student agency requires a collective effort of teachers, schools, and communities at large (Biesta et al., 2015). It is highly affected as well by other layers in the education ecosystem.

In addition, researchers revealed that teachers’ perceptions of the instructional process have a direct influence on their deep-rooted belief systems, and behaviors (Pajares, 1992; Sykes, 2011). Zakaria and Ab Wahid (2023) revealed that teachers’ epistemic and pedagogical beliefs are rooted in their pedagogical, curricular, and environmental activities, experienced in the past and at present. Teachers’ epistemic and pedagogical beliefs also have the potential to surge into their interlocked complex and dynamic belief systems that control their decision-making (reasons for knowing or perception), learning, and teaching in schools (Loughran, 2019; Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2014; Mellor, 2021). To this end, teachers who identified themselves as facilitators of student learning and agency strive to create a flexible learning environment and promote critical thinking, open-ended questioning, and creative

peer collaboration among learners (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Vaughn, 2020). Whereas teachers who perceived themselves as authorities undermine student agency through control over students' actions through teacher-led instructions (Toom et al., 2021), authoritative or non-negotiated expectations (Hattie, 2009), and prescribed student habits (Rubie-Davis, 2010). This suggests that due to the intertwined strong relationships among them, teachers' conceptualizations of student agency, perceptions of pedagogical and instructional actions, epistemic and pedagogical beliefs, and actual practices are reciprocally affecting one another consistently in the instructional delivery process.

However, in the Ethiopian primary and middle school context, it appears no study has been conducted on teachers' conceptualization of student agency, perceived agentive instructional practices in contrast to fostering student agency. Even though cultivating student agency under the student-centered instruction has been envisaged from the 1994 Education and Training Policy to the current education policy and curriculum framework (MoE, 2020, 2023), it has not yet been adequately examined as a research topic. In addition, related findings from previous studies revealed that instructional practices were dominated by teacher-centered pedagogy (Serebssa, 2006; Tadesse, 2020) and test and exam-oriented assessments (Asgedom et al., 2006). Teachers lacked motivation mainly in organizing curricular materials in favor of student's learning pace and needs (Amsalu, 2017) and undermined self-and peer-assessment options (MoE, 2016, 2020; Solomon, 2014) that help students monitor their learning progress, ownership, and responsibility.

There is growing evidence that shows constructivist theory of learning or its derivative, active learning in the Ethiopian context, should be grounded in culturally relevant teaching and learning practices to foster student agency (Cobern, 2012; Gebre & Polman, 2020). Concerns about whether Ethiopian policy and education practice have properly contextualized the essence of active learning or constructivism have been raised following the difficulties to institutionalize active learning in Ethiopian schools. Some went so far as to argue that overreliance on theories of active learning and the misconceptions and malpractices of active learning are the reasons for the poor education quality in Ethiopia (Keski-Mäenpää, 2018; Michael et al, 2023). Hence, teachers' pedagogies in Ethiopian schools now appeared to be strained by two contradictory methodological assumptions

derived from the existing instructional paradigms (behaviorist and constructivist). On top of this, studies indicate some students in schools tend to avoid learning tasks, refrain from active involvement, and resist taking responsibility, often violating school norms, rules, and teacher authority in classrooms (Aliye, 2018; Berhane, 2016; Ebabuye & Asgedom, 2024; Mihiretie & Andarge, 2021). Berhane further elaborated that student misbehaviors are mainly caused by unmet needs and worsened dependence on the support of others draw them into inattentiveness, disengagement, and purposelessness. Based on the theoretical assertions and empirical findings presented above, teachers' pedagogical activities and reported student behaviors in Ethiopian primary schools fall in sharp contrast to the policy aspirations, student-centered instructional principles, and constructivism. This discrepancy may affect the development of student agency, which is the main driver of this study.

Objectives of the Study

This paper examines teachers' conceptualizations of student agency in relation to their perceptions of instruction and reported pedagogical practices in the case schools.

Specifically, the paper tried to address the following specific objectives:

- Investigate how teachers of the primary and middle schools conceptualize student agency
- Explore teachers' perceptions of major constituents of instructional practices towards fostering student agency.
- Assess the epistemic and pedagogic beliefs of teachers teaching in the case schools.
- Assess teachers' reported instructional practices and their implication to student agency practices at schools.

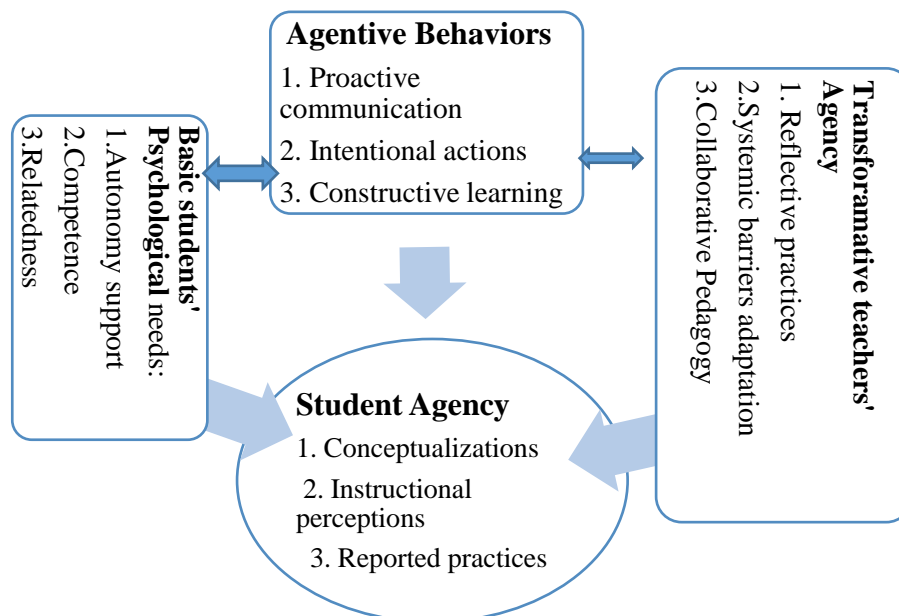
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A number of alternative frameworks are used to gauge teachers' roles in fostering student agency in schools. Some models focus on specific aspects of agency, while others suggest more comprehensive strategies to generate pertinent activities for cultivating student agency. For example, Vaughn's (2021) suggested an interactive and choice-based model that

focuses on capacitating students' metacognitive awareness. But others recommend models that promote skill of self-direction (Fisher & Frey, 2010), authentic dialogue and critical inquiry and self-reflection self-regulatory skills (Muhonen et al., 2024).

Amongst the alternative frameworks, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), Agentic Engagement Framework of Reeve & Shin (2020), and Transformative Teacher Agency Model (Priestly et al., 2021) together hold relatively more comprehensive and relevant theoretical principles that direct activities fostering student agency in schools.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) framed cultivation of student agency in schools in terms of students' psychological needs realized through the development of student autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Similarly, Reeve & Shin's (2020) Agentic Engagement framework, which constitutes students' proactiveness, intentionality, and constructive learning strategies focuses on students' agentic behaviors. However, Priestly et al.'s (2021) Transformative Teacher Agency Model emphasized teachers' agency prior to student agency for effectiveness. According to Priestly et al., teachers significantly affect the cultivation of student agency through their reflective and collaborative pedagogy when they are able to build teacher agency that overcomes schools' systemic barriers. Each of the theoretical and conceptual models mentioned above has a relatively prior concern and preference for alternative strategies of fostering student agency.



Source: STR framework adapted (based on the above works) by the authors

Consequently, a hybrid STR (Student needs, Teacher agency, and Responsive engagement) theoretical framework was constructed, integrating the major strategies of Self-Determinism Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), Transformative Teacher Agency (Priestly et al., 2021), and Agentic Engagement (Reeve & Shin, 2020) models. The hybrid STR theoretical framework is built on three major student agency-fostering dimensions: students' *basic psychological needs*, *agentic behaviors*, and *teachers' agency*. The first two dimensions refer to the students who are expected to be major contributors to their learning as agents. The remaining dimension refers to teachers' creative and agentic facilitation of students' learning and agency in the complex and dynamic contemporary schooling. Each model (Priestly et al., 2021; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020) used to construct STR theoretical framework contains three sub-dimensions containing tasks related to engaging students and teachers for fostering student agency (see major tasks in each sub-domain of the STR framework).

Methods

Design of the study

The purpose of this article was to explore teachers' conceptualization of student agency, instructional perceptions, and reported practices in light of fostering student agency. Consequently, a case study design, involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, was employed. This design was chosen for the relative advantage it renders for an in-depth exploration of the issues under consideration (Creswell & Plano, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Case School Selection

Primary and middle schools in Addis Ababa city administrations are leveled into four levels: Level 1, 2, 3, and 4 depending on their performance status measured by school performance evaluation criteria (MoE, 2014)⁴. The school performance criteria are built around input, process, and output categories, with 25%, 35%, and 40% weight in the overall school activities, respectively. That is, 75% of the criteria directly or indirectly refer to school

⁴ Ethiopian schools are ranked from Level 1 to Level 4 based on inspection criteria that include input, process, and output factors. Level 3 schools are categorized as those that meet minimum standards. Level 1 and Level 2 schools are below minimum standard.

achievements realized through student participation, student-teacher interactions, and engagements for ensuring competencies (MoE, 2010, 2016, 2020). For instance, the criterion under standard 9 of the documents (MoE,2014) stated that “students take initiatives to invent, research, and solve their problems and others in the surrounding” (P.8). Similarly, under standard 13, a criterion stated that “teachers use various active learning methods that encourage students to be investigative, problem solver, creative, and independent” (p.10). Both criteria indicate essential elements of student agency capacities. Schools performing high with such agentic issues appear more appropriate to explore evidence on the nature of context-dependent student agency (Mercer, 2012) in the selected schools.

Consequently, based on the evidence from the Addis Ababa city education bureau, we selected two Level 3 schools (one from private and another from government) located adjacent to Yeka and Lemi Kura sub-cities, among four Level 3 primary and middle schools within the two sub-cities. As the main purpose of this study is to explore teachers’ conceptualization of student agency, the selection meets both the purpose and the assumption that context shapes agency (Mercer, 2012; Pope, 2021). Such selections of cases are also backed by theoretical suggestions of scholars that stated selecting cases based on typicality or performance qualities increase validity of evidence and feasibility of cases (Thomas, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Participants

Studies revealed that after task mastery, teachers stabilize their pedagogical and epistemic beliefs within the range of 4-6 years of services (Beijaard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2006; Pajares, 1992). Thus, teachers with more than five years of teaching either mathematics or science subjects in grades five to eight were purposively selected. Seniority of teachers from each grade level got priority during selection of participants. Besides, the focus on science and mathematics subject teachers was because one of the authors had studied and taught mathematics and science, which is useful for in-depth analysis of the subjects of study (Creswell & Plano, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sampling Procedures and Samples

Quantitative data was used to examine teachers’ dominant epistemic and pedagogic beliefs and reported practices. A random sampling procedure was employed to select teachers who have over five years of teaching experience. The list of teachers was collected from directors’ offices. Yamane (1967) formula was used to determine the samples size and a total of 112 teachers (m=65, f=47) were proportionally selected as samples of the study indicated below.

Table 1:

Target Populations and Sample Respondents

Case School	Teachers									
	Grade	Target population			Papers distributed			Papers Collected		
		M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
School A	5-8	46	39	85	33	28	61	33	27	60
School B	5-8	45	26	71	32	19	51	31	18	49
Total		91	65	156	65	47	112	64	45	109

As can be seen in Table 1, among 112 sampled teacher respondents, 109 teachers filled and returned the questionnaire. However, the questionnaire responses from five respondents (School A, m=3, f=0; School B, m=1, f=1) were rejected during screening.

Table 2

Interview participants

Case			Interviewees					
			Purposefully selected			Interviewed		
			M	F	T	M	F	T
School A	5-8	Teaching mathematics	6	1	7	4	0	4
		Teaching Science	2	3	5	2	1	3
		Vice Director	2	0	2	1	0	1
School B	5-8	Teaching mathematics	3	1	4	3	0	3
		Teaching Science	2	2	4	1	1	2
		Director	1	0	1	1	0	1
Total			16	7	23	12	2	14

As can be seen in Table 2, 23 participants (m=16, f=7) were purposefully selected for the interview from 32 (m=23, f=9) target teachers who fulfilled five or more years of teaching the respective subjects. For teachers teaching the same subject in the same grade, only one senior teacher was selected for the interview. However, based on constant comparison of participants' responses while collecting data, we recognized data saturation after interviewing 12 participants, which is in the range of sample size required for data saturation (9-17 interviews as stated by Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). After looking at the data, we conducted two additional interviews to gain a deeper understanding of selected themes. Totally, an interview was conducted with two principals, five mathematics teachers, and five science teachers.

Instruments and Procedures

Semi-structured interview: Teachers' conceptualization of student agency, instructional perceptions and reported practices in line with student agency were explored through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview consisted of several questions asking participants about their student agency conceptions, successful and failed

lessons, instructional perceptions, and assessment strategies that foster student agency during teaching and learning practices. The core questions include “What is student agency for you? How could you define student agency in your own words? Are there agentive students in your classrooms or in the school? How do you characterize them?” What specific skills, strategies, and know-how are necessary for agentive learners? Why? How far are the existing instructional practices aligned with activities that foster student agency? What specific teachers’ pedagogical skills or competences are essential for fostering student agency in the existing instructional process and practice? Why? The interview was conducted by one of the researchers of this study from November 2024 to January 2025. And the interviews lasted from fifty minutes to one and a half hours.

Teacher questionnaire: Teachers’ epistemic and pedagogic beliefs were measured using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). Similarly, the frequency of teachers’ reported practices was measured using a five-point rating unit scale: regularly (5), often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), and never (1). The questionnaire items were adapted from Hofer and Pintrich’s (1997) questionnaire, structured on the nature of knowledge and knowing subscales.

A pilot test was administered before adapting items to the main questionnaire. Analysis of internal consistency reliability on items within the subscales (groups) was carried out using the pilot test assessment data and SPSS. Items in each group (nature of knowledge and knowing) were evaluated for Cronbach’s Alpha(α) using “if the item is deleted” function until “ α ” meets the “ $\alpha \geq 0.7$ ” research purpose requirement (Hair et al.2021; Taber, 2018). As a result, three items from the nature of knowledge subscale ($\alpha=0.860$) and four items from the nature of knowing subscale ($\alpha=0.795$) were added to the adapted questionnaire to measure teachers’ epistemological beliefs. A similar procedure was employed to adapt Chan and Elliot’s (2004) pedagogical beliefs questionnaire. After internal consistency reliability analysis with respect to the minimum Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient requirement for research ($\alpha \geq 0.7$), three items from constructivists’ pedagogic beliefs subscale ($\alpha=0.805$) and four items from traditional pedagogic beliefs subscale ($\alpha=0.768$) were added to the adapted questionnaire.

Totally 19 items were prepared to measure teachers' epistemological and pedagogical beliefs and reported practices. The questionnaire contains 19 items (3 items on the nature of knowledge, 4 items on the nature of knowing, 3 items on constructivism, and 4 items on behaviorism) and 5 items on teachers' practices. Lastly, the questionnaire items were translated into Amharic and were commented on by English language teachers. After the inclusion of comments and feedback, the questionnaire was used for data collection.

Before administering the questionnaire, one of the researchers and the data collectors provided orientations to the respondents about the major constituents of the questionnaire and probable ambiguities respondents may face while replying to each item of the questionnaire. Especially, those commonly occurring social desirability, lack of concern in responding to the items, replying without understanding the intent of the items, and the consequences of such replies were discussed openly with the respondents. Following, a consensus was reached on the importance of professional diligence and responding to items based on the existing actual professional thoughts and practices. Respondents were given adequate time (at most two days) to fill out the questionnaire in order to avoid time pressure to complete the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

We applied SPSS to analyze quantitative data using statistical means, percentages, and standard deviations. The data analysis employed both inductive and deductive data analysis methods sequentially for both confirmatory and addressing research objective purposes (Neale et al., 2016). In the first phase, qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using texts. Open coding was employed to identify recurring concepts mentioned by participants. Theoretical coding was also used to look into possible teachers' abstractions. Coding and recording continued until data saturation and consensus were reached. Following the open coding process, categories emerged. In the second phase, these categories were deductively regrouped into major themes containing sub-themes aligned with the research questions. The three major themes that emerged were *student agency conceptualizations*, *instructional stasis*, and the *praxis gap*. The instructional stasis included teachers' readiness

stasis, pedagogical skill gaps, school structural barriers, and uninterested and disengaged learners as sub-themes.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted under the guidelines 7th edition of APA on ethical principles and code of conduct of research (American Psychological Association, 2019). Consequently, data collection was conducted after a brief explanation was given to participants and their oral consent was secured. Participants were also informed to withdraw from their engagement when they find exit is necessary. Finally, pseudonyms were used to secure participants' anonymity and ensure data confidentiality.

Results

The respective analysis conducted on data collected from 109 (m=64,f=45) sampled respondents and 14 participants (m=12,f=2) using quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, respectively, renders results that help answer the research objectives. These results are presented sequentially as follows.

Conceptualization of Student Agency

Interviewees were asked to define and explain student agency in their own words. Teachers and directors articulated student agency with respect to students' capacity, teachers' pedagogy, and school system capacity (see Table 3). Table 3 provides the STR Theoretical Framework that contains strategies used to evaluate teachers' conceptualizations of student agency with respect to essential tasks and strategies for fostering student agency, and selected responses of teachers that can be categorized in each of the strategies.

Table 3

Conceptualizations of Student Agency in Relation to the STR Theoretical Framework

No	STR framework	Major Dimensions	Conceptualizations of Student Agency
(A,B, &C)			
A	Enhancing Basic Psychological Student Needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness)		
i	Autonomy support (ownership, intrinsic motivation, responsibility,)	self-directedness,	
ii	Competence (mastery of experience, self-efficacy, persistence, ...)		“learners’ academic skills” (P1, P6) “...acquisition of the knowledge, skill, and attitude set in the curriculum” (P5) “...student skills for self-reliance”(P6) “... student performance with or beyond the curriculum” (P10) “... what students do to become a student” (P7) “knowledge and attitude, acquired during learning subjects” (P1) “... the ability that students develop to manage their learning for life success” (P11)
iii	Relatedness (valuing, collaboration, relationship, ...)	empathy, risk-taking, trusted	
B	Capacitating Learners with Agentic Student Behaviors(proactiveness, intentionality, and constructive learning)		
i	Proactive communication (self-initiated... for preference...)	(self-	“... abilities built on what students can do with interest”(P10)
ii	Intentional action (setting goals, self-monitoring, self-regulation)		“... is enabling students become responsible for their learning beyond active participation” (P3)

- iii Constructive learning (debate, inquiry, interaction, critical thinking, co-construction...)
 - C Transforming Teachers as Pedagogical Agents over Schools' Systemic Barriers(reflective practice, systemic barrier adaptation, and collaborative pedagogy)
 - i Reflective practices(own biases, beliefs, self-evaluations, ...)
 - ii Systemic barrier adaptation (creation of "...strategy of school improvement a reflective learning environment, interventions ..." (P2) creativity, and innovativeness)
 - "system to cultivate knowledge, skill, and attitude..." (P4)
 - "... a process of creating effective school systems", (P9)
 - "...systematic family support" (P14)
 - iii Collaborative pedagogy (meeting needs, co-creation, contributing, risk-taking...)
 - "Updated teacher pedagogy" (P9)
 - "...an aspect of teacher's pedagogy..." (P12)
 - "...pedagogy of preparing knowledge seeking students" (P13)
 - "...is the capacity of teacher's pedagogy initiating student motivation, interest, and curiosity for learning" (P8)
-

As can be observed in Table 3, teachers' conceptualizations of student agency fall within five of the total nine sub-themes in the STR framework. Each sub-theme in the STR Framework contains strategies applied to foster student agency. Teachers mainly conceptualized student agency in terms of students' abilities, ranging from "skills to learn subjects"(P1) to " skill of self-reliance or life success"(P6). In addition, a few of the participants conceptualized student agency in terms of school systems, ranging from "strategy of school system improvement" (P2) to "a process of creating effective school systems" (P9). Others conceptualized student agency as "... the capacity of teachers' pedagogy initiating

student motivation, interest, and curiosity for learning”(P8). The STR Framework emphasizes the role of teachers’ reflective and collaborative pedagogical skills in overcoming school barriers and adapting student agency to school systems. However, participants’ responses displayed in Table 3 indicate that participants lacked focus and understanding to mention teachers’ reflective and collaborative pedagogical skills among the determinant factors they listed, indicating a sharp contrast between teachers’ and theorists’ propositions for cultivating student agency in schools.

In addition, teachers’ conceptualization of student agency overlooked most productive student agency fostering strategies such as autonomy support, relatedness, and constructive learning. Rather, teachers’ conceptualizations largely focus on subject matter mastery strategies. Autonomy, proactive communication, trusted relationships, constructive learning, and intentionality constructs, which are primed to generate self-reliant and self-regulated learning skills, are undermined. The overall data show that participants’ conceptualizations of student agency are limited in scope and focus on acquisition of knowledge, teacher pedagogies, and school-level action, hence they lack comprehensiveness and do not adequately position students at the center of taking responsibility for their own learning and growth. The possible reasons could be linked to either the traditional teaching lens that teachers used to view learning or to the lack of participants’ understanding to differentiate the effect of instructional orientations (behaviorism and constructivism) to either hinder or facilitate student agency development.

Similarly, conceptualizations of student agency, in terms of either teachers’ pedagogy or schools’ systems, seem to align with the top-down cascaded school improvement program guidelines (rules, policies, structures, and infrastructure affordances) that schools experienced over the past years. The school improvement program was launched in 2008 and operationalized through multi-phased quality improvement programs, including teacher development, curriculum reform, and student engagement strategies. Although the responses assert teachers’ pedagogy as one factor affecting student agency, participants fail to describe the essential characteristics of teachers’ pedagogy that foster or hinder student agency.

Perceived Instructional Stasis

Teachers' instructional stasis emerged as a major theme with four sub-themes: teachers' readiness stasis, pedagogical skill gaps, uninterested and disengaged learners, and school structural barriers.

Perceived Teacher's Readiness Stasis

Despite strong aspirations for alignment, participants' reflections show a disconnect between curricular expectations, student needs, and teachers' pedagogical initiation and readiness. For example, P4 stated the issue as "I feel responsible for teaching the contents of my subjects... I still do not have access to the curriculum framework, and I have no idea what new issues are included in it". Another teacher states that teachers are expected to enact changes without training on expected changes should be organized by the authorities: "I have strong reliance on textbooks and teacher guides, if there are no training opportunities given by respective authorities about new issues, I teach the way I used to teach years ago"(P8). Both P4 and P8 reflections showed a lack of inquiry and readiness in participants, especially in inquiring about gaps in learning materials (textbooks and other resources), diverse learning needs, and solving problems with responsibility. The gist of the reflections quoted by P4 and P8 provides evidence that teachers' readiness stasis may contribute to the overall instructional stasis.

Teacher Pedagogical Skills Gap

Participants perceived teachers' existing pedagogical skill gaps from limited knowledge of how to address students' needs and lack of clarity on expected learning outcomes. Some teachers state that the existing skill gap is caused by their own weaknesses and lack of readiness. P2 stated that "identifying the type of skills required from students during and after my teaching was not easy for me. I am still certain not about the necessary skills I should expect from students, except their usual recall of facts." Similarly, P3 reflected that "I doubt I can assess students' skill acquisition in each lesson." In some cases, participants reflected their frustration with the inadequacy of their expertise by conceding:

...I know the subject matter very well. I have a good deal of experience in mastering the subject. But as a teacher, I have learned that there are things in my class that my teaching is not able to solve by now. ... I also observed that students' motivation of learning mathematics was declining time after time despite my efforts (P8).

Similarly, P1 perceived a pedagogical skill gap and reflected it by stating that "students have information about several topics from the media and different learning platforms. Our teaching is limited to subjects or contents of the curriculum and is unable to meet students' interests. So, I think schools need to change the current instructional mechanisms."

There are also reflections emphasizing the importance of addressing students' interests and curiosity to enhance students' learning with responsibility and agency, rather than blaming students for being passive in the learning process. For example, P10 stated that "... students become responsible for what they can do with interest. Performances by some interested students are even beyond the scope of the curriculum objectives. Teachers are not ready to meet these needs." P8 also stated that "some students have access to different learning tools. Sometimes they lack interest in the class because what we do is similar to what they have or even less clear and detailed than what they can access on the internet." As a result, even agentic students who take responsibility for their learning may not be adequately supported, as many teachers are pedagogically unprepared for such situations.

Uninterested and disengaged learners

Another sub-theme that emerged from the interview was teachers' perception of students as passive learners. Teachers reported that they have exerted efforts to motivate students despite students' persistent indulgence. One of the teachers remarked that "I insist on motivating every student to take chances... but students are not ready to be responsible" (P3). However, P8 views this as a pedagogical challenge by stating that "...none of my teaching was able to reverse students' motivational decline"- implying the existing pedagogical inadequacies for dealing with students' needs. In addition, the expectations teachers set for students appear to be focused only on subject matter learning outcomes while students appear to be interested in diverse activities. P5 stated the aspect of it as "... I expect my students to

achieve a minimum of the instructional objectives set. I mean to get them to achieve the knowledge, skill, and attitude set in the curriculum. I think any teacher does so with focus. However, some students' interests are different from the curriculum contents, which we cannot respond to."

Notwithstanding the above dominant view among teachers, there are responses that show students also take the initiative for their own learning. For instance, P6 described agentic learners (agents) as "... agents demonstrate strong academic ability, they make friends with clever students, and dare to ask about issues they do not understand in class." Some teachers assert that agentic students are cultivated by parents more than schools. P6 states that "teachers and schools contribute little to students' agency. Rather, students' educated parents play higher roles, though few agents come from parents with poor educational conditions." This suggests the important role parents play in fostering student agency and the need for teachers and schools to reimagine their roles.

Moreover, interviews also demonstrated that schools' cultures and practices do not adequately support the development of students' agentic skills.

School Structural Barriers

Teachers and directors acknowledged school systemic constraints in relation to the rigidity of curriculum, tests and exams, teaching methods, and school policy hinder the development of agentic students. P1 stated his concern by stating, "I do not think only students' efforts can solve student learning problems in our school. Rather, the school should build systems that equip students with learning skills. The focus is on rehearsing content and exams." P3 also asserted that the mathematics textbooks' overloaded content is a structural barrier to student agentic activities as "... activities in the textbooks lack differentiated instructions, nor do they start with self-assessments. Students need teachers' close support to exercise and perform activities. But I have a lot of content to cover that I cannot engage students in active learning activities." Even though P1 and P3 perceived rigidity of student textbook, assessment strategy, and content loaded curriculum as school structural barriers, P5 contends that "teachers failed to cultivate student behaviors and learning in schools due to

lack of school strict rules and enforcements.” Some students do not take classes seriously because the standards are not respected by the school leadership and teachers.

In addition to the qualitative data, the study attempted to examine teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and how it can positively or negatively affect student agency.

Teacher Pedagogical Beliefs

It is widely agreed that teachers’ pedagogical beliefs influence teachers’ pedagogical actions, which in turn influence student agency. As a result, the study assessed teachers’ pedagogical beliefs using a questionnaire. The results are presented briefly in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Teachers’ pedagogical beliefs) (N=104)

Items on the nature of teaching	Cases					
	School A			School B		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Good teachers direct students to the right ways to find the correct answers	56	3.45	1.45	48	3.55	1.50
Teaching is a transfer of universally proven methods and facts to students	56	3.50	1.46	48	3.56	1.50
Best teachers prioritize subject mastery over other interpersonal qualities	56	3.23	1.37	48	3.53	1.28
Subject mastery affects competence more than professional expertise	56	3.59	1.13	48	3.46	1.18
Mean (traditional teaching beliefs)		3.44	1.35		3.53	1.36
Teaching is the creation of inquiry, problem-solving, and creative thinking	56	2.27	1.14	48	2.60	1.07
Teaching is built into students’ experiences, choices, and meaning-making activities	56	2.09	0.92	48	1.96	0.65
Teaching requires teachers’ autonomy to adapt curriculum to student’s needs	56	2.28	.98	48	2.15	.92
Mean (constructivist teaching beliefs)		2.21	1.01		2.24	0.88

The subscale level mean scores indicate teachers rated higher items on traditional pedagogical beliefs (School A, m=3.44; School B, m=3.53), whereas the mean value for items that constructivist pedagogical beliefs are low (School A, m=2.21; School B, m=2.24).

This suggests that teachers' beliefs largely favor teacher centeredness rather than engaging students in inquiry and promoting them to be responsible for their own learning. Teachers dominantly view students as recipients of structured knowledge. To understand deeper teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their relation with their view about knowledge and learning, teachers rated selected items on epistemological beliefs.

Table 5

Results of teachers' epistemological beliefs) (N=104)

<i>Items</i>	<i>Cases</i>					
	<i>School A</i>			<i>School B</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Learning is a holistic student progress beyond academic scores	56	2.27	1.02	48	2.21	.98
Knowledge is meaningfully constructed by students & others	56	2.14	1.20	48	2.17	1.19
Subscale mean of items		2.21	1.11		2.19	1.08
Recall enhances learning more than inquiry strategies	56	3.66	1.13	48	4.17	1.07
Students learn to the best through in-depth lectures	56	3.41	1.49	48	3.64	1.44
Some pupils are born to learn; others are not	56	3.52	1.36	48	3.54	1.37
Knowledge is a fact transferred from a teacher to students	56	3.62	1.39	48	3.86	1.38
Knowledge is a universal fact transferred across generations	56	3.54	1.45	48	3.85	1.29
Subscale mean of items		3.55	1.36		3.81	1.31

The results show that teachers in both schools dominantly hold a view of knowledge as static, universal fact and inborn ability to learn (School A, M=3.55 and School B, M=3.81) rather than viewing knowledge as a social construct and learning as a wider development of students (School A, M=2.21 and School B, M= 2.19). Teachers' rated mean values for students' ability is inborn, knowledge is a universal fact, and recalling as learning are close to

the point of agree (4) whereas their rating mean values on social construct of knowledge and learning as more than scoring in exams are close to the point of disagree (2).

Teacher Praxis Gaps

Interview responses show that teachers have difficulty creating relevant and motivating teaching methods for students. One of the teachers stated, “I teach the way I used to teach years ago, if training is not provided by the respective authorities.”(P8). Another participant (P5) reflected that the teaching practice is stagnated. P5 further stated that “...many teachers refrain from solving problems using available strategies and knowledge. They would rather report to them to the school management irrespective of the difficulty level of the problems they faced.” P4 stated, “... teachers focus on the difficulty level of contents, not on the strategies of teaching or students’ learning related problems. Some of us assume that those who can learn and those who cannot stay calm in class can try it at home.” Some of the reflections of participants show that teachers have misconceived major professional knowledge and skills of employing student-centered instruction. For example, P3 stated his teaching as “students often form groups and work on problems. And I insist that every student take chances while working in a group. Yet, students are not responsive. This forces me to lecture on the lesson.” These responses suggest that teachers have difficulty and a commitment to address the learning needs of students and engage them in the teaching and learning process. In addition to the interview, teachers were asked to rate some states based on their pedagogical practices.

Table 6

Teachers’ Self-reported Pedagogical Practices (N=104)

Items on Self-reported practices	<i>School A</i>			<i>School B</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I teach students using well-prepared lectures in daily lessons	56	3.68	1.52	48	4.08	1.30
I teach with priority to subject matter content over skill-building activities	56	3.52	1.36	48	3.85	1.20
Mean(<i>traditional teachers’ practices</i>)		3.6			3.96	

I teach focusing on self-assessment, self-reflection, and evaluation strategies	56	2.16	1.08	48	1.83	.72
I make curricular modifications to meet student needs and preferences	56	2.39	1.23	48	2.17	1.33
I collaborate with students to co-create assessments and learning	56	2.32	1.03	48	2.30	.98
Mean(<i>constructivist teachers' practices</i>)		2.29			2.1	

Table 6 shows that teachers in both schools *often* employ traditional teaching methods (School A: $m=3.6$; School B: $mean=3.96$). Higher mean scores for the use of lecture (School A, $m=3.68$; School B, $m=4.08$) and prioritizing subject matter content over skill-building activities (School A: $M = 3.52$; School B: $M = 3.85$) suggest the dominance of teacher-centered and content-centered teaching and learning.

On the other hand, items referring to teachers' collaborative, reflective, and adaptive activities (constructivist teachers' practices) had lower scores in both case schools (School A: $m=2.29$; School B: $m=2.1$), indicating that teachers rarely perform activities that facilitate student agency.

The findings revealed that teachers' pedagogical practices, largely shaped by traditional behaviorist approaches, were consistent with their essentialist views of knowledge. However, these practices contrast sharply with student agency-oriented mechanisms, including student-centered teaching and constructivist approaches.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine student agency conceptualizations, instructional perceptions, and self-reported pedagogical practices of teachers in primary and middle school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. By applying a case study design involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods concurrently, data was collected and analyzed in search of answering the objectives of this study.

Findings reveal that teachers conceptualize student agency in terms of multiple potential agents of learning: student abilities, teachers' pedagogical skills, and the school

system's capacities. Teachers largely perceived current instructional practices as largely static with respect to student agency and student-centeredness. Participants attributed this instructional stasis to several factors, including teachers' lack of readiness (readiness stasis), pedagogical skill gaps, schools' structural barriers, and uninterested or disengaged learners' behaviors. Teachers' current instructional practices are also found to be filled with praxis gaps caused by their limited reflectiveness to learn from their professional practices, back and forth orientations between behaviorist and constructivist competing perspectives, and unchallenged misconceptions ingrained in their transmissionism epistemological and pedagogical beliefs.

Teachers' conceptualizations of student agency in terms of student abilities, teachers' pedagogy, and the school system capacities align with the view of ecological agency that emphasizes the roles of structures, contexts, and systems that play in shaping human agency during the interplay (Emirbayer and Mische,1998). This perspective subsumes contrastive arguments on the dilution impact of focus among the listed key subjects of agency considered (Priestly et al., 2021). Consequently, to what extent each listed potential agent considered under teachers' conceptualizations of student agency contributes to the student agency development in schools is an important point to consider to understand the focus of teachers' conceptualizations. Based on what participant and respondent teachers attributed to the roles and responsibilities of potential agents, teachers' conceptualization, perceptions, and practices of student agency appear to be grounded in teachers' pedagogy. This contention appears valuable when the causes of existing instructional stasis in the case schools are evaluated against the share of key potential agents. The findings revealed that most of the causes of the existing instructional stasis such as teachers' pedagogical skill gaps, teachers' lack of readiness (readiness stasis), existing school structural barriers (e.g., rigid curricula, standardized assessment systems, delivery mechanisms, policy implementation strategies, school structures, and others), and student disengagement behaviors tend to focus more on teachers' roles in contrast to the other two remaining potential agents.

In addition, findings showed that teachers in the case schools have transmissionism epistemological and pedagogical beliefs, which assert students in the case schools to be active learners- implying their existing praxis gaps. Indeed, passivity of students is an expected

outcome of teachers' current pedagogy, explained by a lack of commitment to student-centeredness and agency. At the same time, this is also an aspect of their theory-practice gap that assumes active student engagement and agency from a traditional teacher-led approach.

Synthesizing the findings on teachers' conceptualization of student agency and causes of perceived instructional stasis, the results show that the roles and ownership of students that need to be demonstrated in the process of instruction were seriously undermined by teachers' traditional orientation and practices. In fact, it is evident from various theoretical and educational perspectives that teachers gauge students' agency and learning pedagogically. For example, Prestly et al. (2021) regard teachers with agency as integral actors of fostering student agency in schools. According to Priestly et al. (2021) teachers foster agency when they are progressively learning from their reflective practice, manage systemic adaptation to school barriers, and enact collaborative pedagogy that facilitates co-creation, construction of knowledge, and contribution with students in schools. In the findings of this study, however, more of the gaps identified as barriers to conceptions, perceptions, and practices fostering student agency were referred to the teachers (e.g., see, causes of instructional stasis and praxis gaps). Neither their self-reported practices nor their perceptions of the causes of instructional stasis uncovered the existing teachers' theory-practice critical professional gaps (praxis) of fostering student agency in schools.

Although the findings of this study overlooked them, the remaining potential agents of student agency (student abilities and school system capacities) play indispensable roles in cultivating agents of learning in schools. For example, educational psychologists and theorists like Ryan and Deci(2020) and Reeve and Shin(2020) empower students over other factors and emphasize active engagement and ownership of students for fostering student agency in schools. According to Ryan and Deci(2020), student agency could be fostered when students are enabled to be autonomous, competent, and related. Similarly, Reeve and Shin(2020) revealed that student agency is fostered when students are enabled to be proactive, intentional, and constructive learners. In the findings of this study, neither of them was the agenda of participants' reflection while conceptualizing student agency during the interview, indicating critical deviation of teachers' conceptualizations of student agency from the focus of the subject of student agency.

To sum up, as long as teachers are provided with more authority, they need to respond to existing necessary demands equally. But the findings showed that the existing instructional stance to interventions (student-centeredness and student agency aligned) seems to be associated to the lack of teachers' compliance to the aspired change or intervention requirements. Regarding this, the Ethiopian educational policy and curriculum framework aspire to cultivate self-reliant, prosperous, problem-solving, and competent citizens with 21st century skills- agentic strategies and skills at the center, under teachers' close and constructive facilitations (MoE, 2023). Despite such strong aspirations, student-centered instructional practices that are purported to default student agency in case schools seem to cease to exist due to the existing instructional stasis caused mainly by the lack of teachers' compliance with requirements. These gaps make student agency still the least understood with respect to necessary skills and practice being diluted with other influential school learning barriers. In such situations, fostering student agency with explicit skill acquisition strategies and clear guidelines is much more difficult for schools. More importantly, anticipating student agency from a schooling whose instructional practices are dominated by teacher-led or traditional teaching is a paradox and unreal.

Surprisingly, the findings of this study were analyzed from the data collected from teachers teaching in high-performing level 3 primary and middle schools. Besides, 75% of the criteria used to evaluate school performance of such schools were directly or indirectly referring to student participation, student-teacher interaction, and student competence (MoE, 2010, 2016, 2020). The case schools were selected with the assumption that student agency in such schools could be objectively understandable and visible in the interactive processes and concerted effort among teachers, students, and the school for high performance. However, the near absence of student agency and teachers' deepened misconceptions about agentic pedagogy in the case schools imply the need for deeper and broader study in the area across schools.

Conclusion

This study was set out to investigate teachers' conceptualizations, perceptions, and practices regarding student agency, a concept central to the national policy that aspires to produce critical thinkers, problem-solvers, decision-makers, and creative individuals. The findings collectively reveal a profound disconnect between these policy goals and the instructional reality of understanding, fostering, and adhering to student agency in the instructional processes of primary and middle schools.

The analysis indicates that teachers' dominant pedagogical and epistemological beliefs and practices align with behaviorism, a traditional approach that fundamentally contrasts with constructivism, a pillar of policy's aspirations. This traditional mindset harbors a state of instructional stasis that fuels teachers' pedagogical skill gaps, readiness stasis, praxis gaps, and mismatched orientations undermining the ongoing student agency practice in schools. Teachers' misconceptions, coupled with a lack of understanding of the core skills of student, agency make student agency practices in schools implicit. Consequently, the aspirational goals - to cultivate agentic students who are active contributors to the country's affairs and learning - are being undermined by the very instructional practices meant to enact them.

Implications

The findings from this study may not be comprehensive enough to draw lessons for much practical action and/or other policy issues, yet they will have the following implications that should be interpreted with caution.

While teachers' limited conceptualization and understanding of student agency may not be a surprising thing, it is noteworthy to see that teachers and schools do not internalize and institutionalize the main intent of student-centered or other policy goals on students' roles in the construction of knowledge, critical thinking, problem solving, and agentic skills.

Teachers are critically reflecting on the effects of their skill gaps, readiness stasis, curriculum content loads, school structural barriers (lack of affordances, rigid curricula, standardized assessment strategies...), students' disengagement, and related factors on the ongoing instructional process. These suggest the need for a deeper and sustained discussion

on student agency and how instruction can influence, and what teachers should do to enable students to access diverse sources in line with their interests. At a time, when students have access to different sources of knowledge, the school practice of teaching only the contents of the textbooks needs to be explained from diverse perspectives and the inclusion of alternative agentive learning strategies. In the first place, it is important to use school improvement efforts to look into the school culture in terms of fostering student agency and whether the schools have the pedagogical and curricular resources to do so. Second, help teachers unlock their pedagogy in favor of fostering student agency within the student-centered instruction, rendering the prime focus for agentive skills and strategies. The CPD could be authentically used to uncover teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, and support them in viewing learning from the side of students rather than mere repetition and reiteration of active learning. More importantly, teachers need to shift paper and pencil assessments to formative strategies that orchestrate self-reflection, self-and-peer assessment, and self-regulated progression to ensure development of student agency in schools. Interventions employed to change school culture and teachers' statistics, both in terms of beliefs, readiness, and competence, need to focus on how teachers and schools can respond to the alarmingly growing demands of student agency and learning in schools. Lastly, schools should consider and valorize student agency as a fundamental component of their instructional practices. In addition, more comprehensive research is required to better understand its status and to strengthen student responsibility, ownership, and motivation. This is critically important when considered against the lack of interest and trends of disengagement by students reported in this study, and appears to be highly prevalent in Ethiopian schools.

Limitations

Despite several insightful findings, the results of this study could be biased due to taking performing schools as cases, though we presented a rationale for why we selected them as cases. This, in turn, limited the results of the study to very specific schools, such as the case schools. The quantitative approach used in the schools could also be biased for adequacy of sample size, subject-matter specificity (only mathematics and science teachers were studied), and other school factor effects are not considered. The separate analysis of

quantitative data with disregard for qualitative data of the case schools may pose a limitation as there may be readers looking for data from both types of sources. Besides, the findings of this study could also be biased methodological linearity (only means are used), interviewers' probing bias (the interview had a series of probing), and novelty of the concept (questions of understanding were repeatedly used). The authors drew on their experience to reduce bias by refocusing participants' conceptions and perceptions into reflections of their practical observations and experiences of professional practices.

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