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## **In de klas met kompas: student agency als leidinggevend principe in het voortgezet onderwijs**

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## English summary

This dissertation is based on the conviction that *student agency* should be a guiding principle throughout the secondary school curriculum. The rationale behind it is that it contributes to students' capacity to shape their own learning and lives, in connection with others and the world around them. *Student agency*, the will and skill to shape one's own learning and learning environment, is seen as a stepping stone toward human agency: the will and skill of people to consciously and intentionally direct their actions and future. In education, student agency is associated with learning, personal development, and preparation for a future role in society.

Up to now, the concept of *student agency* has mostly been used as an abstract construct, with inconsistent operationalizations. What is lacking is a coherent curriculum that systematically fosters its development. This dissertation aimed to conceptualize *student agency* within a coherent framework, so that it can be examined in relation to intended outcomes. The focus is on *student agency* in relation to students' learning approach and its relation with their academic performance, well-being, and stress. It also investigates how curriculum elements can be aligned in order to promote the development of *student agency*.

Four sub-studies were conducted to gain insight into how *student agency* can be operationalized, how curriculum elements can be aligned to foster its development, how *student agency* relates to academic performance, well-being, and stress, and how it manifests in students in relation to these outcomes. The coherence between curriculum elements and their contribution to the development of the features and foundations of *student agency* was mapped through a systematic review (study 1). Second, a quick scan was developed and validated to enable students to reflect on their own *agency* in the learning process (study 2). Using this quick scan, the relation between *student agency*, academic performance, well-being, and stress was examined (study 3), as well as how *student agency* manifests in students in relation to

these outcomes (study 4). The studies were conducted in three secondary schools, with students from all grade levels in lower vocational (mavo), senior general (havo), and pre-university education (vwo).

*Chapter 1* outlines the relevance of *student agency* in secondary education. It is considered the propeller that helps students realize their potential and shape their futures. Students who develop *agency* not only learn to function in society as it is but also to critically question and positively influence it. This requires capacities such as envisioning a future, weighing alternatives, making deliberate choices, and acting upon them. These capacities can be cultivated in secondary education. Furthermore, *student agency* is seen as essential for both academic performance and students' well-being. Sustainable development of *agency* requires coherence in the curriculum and explicit guidance throughout the entire school career.

*Chapter 2* presents a systematic review of 86 empirical, peer-reviewed studies, with the aim of providing insight into how curriculum elements in secondary education can contribute to the development of *student agency*. Bandura's framework (2001, 2006), consisting of four features (intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness) and three foundations (values/moral, self-efficacy, and consciousness), served as the analytical framework for *student agency*. In addition, Van den Akker's curricular spider web (2003, 2006) was used.

The analysis showed that the development of *student agency* depends on the coherent integration of all curriculum elements. Based on the vision that *student agency* is relevant for learning, personal development, and societal participation, learning goals can be formulated. In addition to subject-specific goals, these should also target the foundations and features of *agency*. Such goals should then be translated into authentic, meaningful learning activities. *Epistemic agency* should play a central role, meaning that students collectively contribute to knowledge construction and learn to apply this knowledge in practice. Assessment and teacher guidance should explicitly focus on *student agency*. Finding a balance between teacher-centered and student-centered

learning is essential: a balance is needed to both safeguard academic performance and foster *student agency*.

*Chapter 3* reports an exploratory study into the validity and reliability of a quick scan designed to enable students to reflect on their *agency* in the learning process. The quick scan, developed with Bandura's framework, was tested in three iterations and demonstrated good construct validity and homogeneity. Regression analyses confirmed that the foundations were significant predictors of the features of *student agency*: the foundation *values/morals* was the strongest predictor of *intentionality* and *self-reflectiveness*, while the foundation *self-efficacy* was the strongest predictor of *forethought* and *self-reactiveness*. *Consciousness*, operationalized as noticing when learning is at risk, also emerged as a significant predictor, particularly for *self-reflectiveness*, followed by *forethought* and *intentionality*.

*Chapter 4* examined the relationship between *student agency*, academic performance, well-being, and stress among 1,470 students from three schools in the Netherlands and Belgium, using the *Student Agency Scale*. This study reported both quantitative analyses and illustrative interviews with four students and was the first to link both the foundations and features of *agency* to intended outcomes. Results showed that *student agency* explained 49% of the variance in well-being, 8% in academic performance, and 4% in stress. When controlling for other influences, *self-reflectiveness* was the strongest predictor of well-being, *self-efficacy* of academic performance, and *consciousness* of stress. Other foundations and features also proved to be significant predictors. A notable finding was that *forethought* was negatively associated with both stress and academic performance, possibly because students lacked sufficient experience to choose effective learning strategies. This was further illustrated by the role of *consciousness*: noticing that learning is not going well did not significantly relate to performance, but it was linked to higher stress and lower well-being. Thus, *consciousness* did not automatically lead to effective learning strategies. Insight into how *student agency* manifests in relation to these outcomes is crucial for teachers to tailor support to students' needs.

*Chapter 5* reports a cluster analysis that distinguished eleven student profiles based on *student agency*, academic performance, well-being, and stress, which could be divided into three overarching categories: thriving, struggling, and at risk. The profile with the highest academic performance, the *intuitive agents*, did not report the highest levels of *student agency* or well-being, though they did report the lowest stress. Students with above-average levels of *agency*, the *conscious agents*, reported the highest well-being and below-average stress. Thriving students were found more often in lower grades than in upper grades.

The struggling profiles varied in their reports of *agency*, well-being, and stress, combined with slightly above-average or, in one case, slightly below-average academic performance. *Detached survivors* reported low levels of *agency* and well-being. *Stressed performers* and *stressful agents* reported high stress but differed in their levels of *agency*. *Unconscious agents* reported the lowest on *consciousness*, which was combined with below-average performance and stress.

The at-risk profiles all showed below-average performance, mostly combined with low *agency* and well-being. Only the *overestimating agents* reported above-average *agency* and well-being, yet still underperformed academically. These at risk profiles appeared more frequently in upper grades. Based on earlier studies, recommendations were formulated to support these profiles: flourishing students benefit from more challenging, complex tasks to prepare them for upper grades. Struggling students need support in developing more effective learning strategies; and at risk students first need to recognize the value of learning, which can be fostered by linking schoolwork to personal development and societal roles. Once motivation is established, scaffolding can shift toward effective learning strategies.

*Chapter 6* summarizes the main findings, discusses limitations, and presents recommendations for future research and practice. In terms of conceptualization, this dissertation shows that the framework of foundations and features is useful for operationalizing *student agency* in secondary education. It provides guidance for *agency*-development that can be tailored

to different contexts and intended outcomes. The dissertation demonstrates that the foundations predict the features of *student agency*, and together they predict academic performance, well-being, and stress. It further shows how curriculum elements can be coherently designed to foster both the foundations and features of *agency*. A coherent, school-wide curriculum is essential for sustainable development. Collaboration among students, and between students and teachers, can enhance both individual and collective manifestations of *agency*. Finally, the student profiles illustrate how foundations and features of *agency* relate to academic performance, well-being, and stress, thereby clarifying students' support needs so that their *agency* can be strengthened. These analyses also show that the relationship between *student agency* and outcomes is more complex than regression analyses alone reveal, adding valuable insights to earlier research.

The main limitations concern the lack of longitudinal data, the interaction with the learning environment, the limited amount of qualitative data, and the focus on *student agency* in relation to learning approaches. Since the data were collected at a single point in time, more complex interactions between *agency* foundations, features, and outcomes could not be examined. This dissertation found flourishing profiles mostly in lower grades and at-risk profiles mostly in upper grades. Longitudinal research could shed light on this pattern.

The studies were conducted in schools with predominantly teacher-directed approaches. Other school models each have their own ways of creating space for *agency* development. Further research on how curriculum design and alignment influence the development of *student agency* would be valuable, as would examining the perceived usefulness of the *Student Agency Scale* as a tool to promote understanding of what *student agency* entails and what is needed to support its' development. With targeted guidance, *students' agency* could potentially be enhanced more effectively.

Qualitative research could provide more insight into students' motives, beliefs, and experiences. One recommendation is to select and interview students across the different profiles to gain a deeper understanding. Finally, while this dissertation focused on *agency* in relation to learning approaches

and outcomes, future research could operationalize *agency* in relation to preparation for societal roles. This could be connected to students' citizenship development, which is widely regarded as an important educational outcome.

This dissertation also outlines practical implications. First, an explicit focus on *student agency* in the curriculum requires room for interdisciplinary collaboration and for *teacher agency*: the will and skill to make professional decisions when combining formal curriculum goals with the development of *student agency*. Joint curriculum design and action research are essential to assess the curriculum's impact on *students' agency* development and to make improvements. Teacher training should prepare future educators for this task.

At the system level, it is important that educational quality is not assessed solely in terms of test scores or teaching characteristics. The findings from this dissertation can broaden the scope of quality assessment by including the extent to which curricula contribute to the development of *student agency* in relation to achievement and citizenship. Collaboration with researchers could support systematic knowledge building in this area.