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Grounded Theory of Learner Agency in Secondary Social Studies

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Abstract

Developing learner agency is a central challenge for contemporary education as schools are expected to prepare students for democratic participation, lifelong learning, and rapidly changing societies. However, secondary social studies education in Thailand remains predominantly teacher-centred, reflecting Paulo Freire's concept of "banking education," where learners are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge. This study explores the socio-psychological processes through which students develop learner agency and transform classroom experiences into meaningful learning.

Adopting a qualitative design, the research is grounded in Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory within a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflexive memo-writing with secondary school students in Surat Thani Province. Theoretical sampling was employed until theoretical saturation was achieved, and data analysis followed the constant comparative method with gerund-based coding to capture the dynamic nature of students' learning experiences.

The findings reveal that learner agency develops through an iterative process where students negotiate classroom power relations, critically reinterpret teacher-directed knowledge, and construct personally meaningful understandings through active participation and reflection. Rather than simply resisting traditional pedagogy, students continuously reshape their identities as autonomous learners by connecting academic knowledge with their lived experiences. Classroom relationships, dialogic interaction, and opportunities for reflective participation emerged as key conditions supporting this development. The study proposes an empirically grounded theoretical framework and provides practical implications for designing inclusive, participatory, and future-ready learning environments that empower students as active meaning-makers and democratic citizens.

Keywords: Learner Agency; Learner-Centred Pedagogy; Meaningful Learning; Social Studies Education; Transformative Learning