

Different Regions, Different Conceptualizations of Learner Agency: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Early Childhood Curricular Documents in British Columbia(Canada), New York(U.S.), and South Korea

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Abstract

This international comparative study examined how the concept of learner agency is incorporated into early childhood curricula in British Columbia, New York, and South Korea. Using OECD's framework of learner agency as an analytical lens, the study employed qualitative content analysis focusing on three subcategories: student agency, co-agency, and collective agency. Findings revealed that each region embedded these concepts differently within its curricular documents. British Columbia emphasized a relational and ecological understanding of student agency and positioned teachers as researchers and collaborators. New York State portrayed children as active learners and teachers as curriculum planners. South Korea highlighted child-led play and described teachers as co-creators of the curriculum. All three regions referenced collective agency, though to varying degrees. The study suggests that these differences should be understood within each region's sociohistorical contexts in which children learn. The study concludes with directions for future research, including investigations into the practical application of these curricula in educational settings, the inclusion of additional regions for broader comparative analysis, and longitudinal studies exploring the long-term impacts of learner agency.

Keywords: *Early childhood curriculum, learner agency, international comparative studies, qualitative content analysis#*

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Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of learner agency has gained significant attention in the field of education. Learner agency has been shown to enhance student motivation and satisfaction in learning, promote critical thinking, positively influence students' identity development and critical engagement, and provide sustainable learning experiences (Blaschke et al., 2021; Gao, 2010; Pisani & Haw, 2023; Vaughn, 2020).

In light of this, researchers have examined factors that promote or hinder learner agency in educational settings (Charteris, 2014; Dyson, 2020). For example, Mick (2011) ethnographically studied fifth-grade children as they shaped their school projects, exploring the possibilities of learner agency but also noting constraints arising from institutional mistrust toward children's initiatives. Similarly, Raffo and his colleagues (2021) developed a curriculum intervention project with middle school students to investigate how learner agency operates within the curricular structures. On a broader scale, Manyukhina and Wyse (2019) compared primary curriculum documents from four countries, analyzing their orientations such as knowledge-based, skills-oriented, and learner-centered to determine which approaches best support or challenge agency.

While these studies concluded that the enactment of learner agency depends on sociocultural, educational, physical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors, they did not address the sociohistorical contexts in which these curricula were developed that may have led them to either promote or hinder learner agency. Moreover, much of the existing research has focused on primary or upper grade levels, with little attention to early childhood education. To address this gap, our study examines early childhood curricula of three regions—British Columbia (Canada), New York (U.S.), and South Korea—that are sociohistorically familiar to the researchers. We conduct an international comparative study to investigate the conceptualization and incorporation of learner agency in official early childhood curriculum documents and how these were influenced by each region's sociohistorical context.

In particular, we draw on the work of Sousa and Moss (2022), who called for a critical approach to comparative studies in early childhood education through the notion of *science of difference*. Sousa and Moss argued that comparative studies in early childhood education

should aim to develop broad, context-sensitive understandings of policy, pedagogy, and practice. They suggested that such studies should embrace narratives that recognize diverse cultural, social, historical, and geographical perspectives, rather than relying on singular or universal interpretations. Guided by this perspective, this study seeks to understand diverse representations of learner agency rather than to denounce or advocate any single approach.

In this regard, the present study asks: 1) How is learner agency conceptualized in the official early childhood curriculum documents of the three regions—British Columbia, New York, and South Korea? 2) What sociohistorical contexts influence these conceptualizations? To address these questions, we first conduct a region-specific analysis and then carry out a comparative analysis of how the concept of agency is conceptualized, framed, and reflected. Through this study, we aim to explore multiple approaches to interpreting learner agency and to offer insights into the importance of situating each region’s educational agenda within its sociohistorical context.

Learner agency has been defined and understood in diverse ways depending on different theoretical frameworks (e.g., Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017; Settersten & Gannon, 2005). In this study, we adopt the conceptualization of learner agency presented in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Learning Compass 2030* (OECD, 2018), as it reflects the complexity of previous theoretical understandings of agency. This conceptualization draws on educational psychology, particularly Albert Bandura’s theory of human agency, which emphasizes personal agency through reflective and regulative thought, skills, and other self-influencing tools (Bandura, 1989), while also incorporating sociological perspectives by acknowledging the role of sociohistorical factors through the notion of co-agency (Kim, 2022). Further details on how we operationalized the OECD’s conceptualization of learner agency are provided in the following section.

Method

This international comparative study was influenced heavily by the researchers’ professional backgrounds, from the selection of regions to the analysis of data. Accordingly,

in this section, we first present the researchers' positionality and the criteria for region selection, followed by the data analysis procedures and the analytical framework of OECD's conceptualization of learner agency.

Researcher Positionality and Selection of Regions

All four researchers are native South Koreans, specializing in elementary education, early childhood education, curriculum studies, and/or international comparative education. Drawing on our diverse professional backgrounds and our experiences in the educational landscapes of British Columbia, New York, and South Korea, gained through completing education degree programs, working as educators and curriculum developers, and/or conducting research on their curricula, we selected the regions and curricula. Our selections were based on three criteria: 1) familiarity with the respective sociohistorical and educational contexts, 2) online availability of official curricular documents, and 3) recency of curriculum revision within the past five years.

We recognize that our backgrounds offer both strengths and limitations. For instance, those from elementary education backgrounds approached learner agency differently than those from early childhood education, due to variations in the roles and expectations associated with students and curricula. To complement these differing perspectives, we intentionally assigned the analysis to one researcher with an early childhood education background and another with an elementary education background. These two researchers, deeply involved in the initial analysis, exchanged thoughts and questions freely through group text messages and comments in a shared Google Docs, and shared and discussed the entire process during weekly meetings, allowing other team members to contribute to the discussion.

While we believe that our extensive professional knowledge of the specific regions adds depth to our study, we are mindful that our findings should not be generalized to represent early childhood curricula across all of Canada and the U.S. Additionally, variations in the definitions of early childhood education, as well as differences in the administrative units overseeing related policy and curriculum, led us to analyze curricular documents covering different age groups, despite our initial intention to focus specifically on *preschool curriculum*.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a method for interpreting text data by systematically coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Among various approaches, we adopted two outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005): conventional and directed. Conventional content analysis, an inductive coding process, involves iteratively reviewing documents to surface key concepts and emerging categories (Tesch, 1990). Directed content analysis predetermines codes based on theoretical frameworks to link findings directly to the research questions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

First, we conducted an initial reading of each document from beginning to end to determine which sections to exclude from the analysis. For example, we excluded the appendices in the South Korean documents due to redundancy. In the New York document, we omitted the Student Work Samples section. Then, we conducted an individual analysis of each document by thoroughly reading the selected sections, highlighting passages where learner agency was represented, and noting emerging themes in the margins. Table 1 summarizes the documents and page ranges analyzed.

Table 1. *Documents Overview*

Region	Year Revised	Age Range	Document Analyzed	Page Analyzed (Excluded)
British Columbia	2019	0 to 8	Early Learning Framework of British Columbia	pp. 3-99 (pp. 100-101)
New York	2019	4	The New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards: A Resource for School Success*	pp. 3-63 (pp. 64-74)
South Korea	2019	3 to 5	2019 Revised Nuri Curriculum Handbook	pp. 8-115 (pp. 116-150)

Following the conventional analysis process, we conducted a directed content analysis by first constructing a codebook grounded in the OECD's framing of learner agency. We independently reviewed the OECD's reports, including *Conceptual Learning Framework: Student Agency for 2030* (OECD, 2019) and *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030* (OECD, 2018), paying attention to their conceptualization of learner agency. We then discussed our individual interpretations of the OECD's conceptualization and agreed to

utilize three subcategories: student agency, co-agency, and collective agency.

Student agency involves responsibility, active participation, and decision-making. It emphasizes learners shaping their own paths and influencing society positively by “acting rather than being acted upon” and making “responsible decisions and choices” (OECD, 2019, p. 4). This concept highlights a proactive role of students in both the learning journey and its broader context. Co-agency refers to interactive, supportive relationships among students, caregivers, teachers, and communities, treating agency as relational and embedded in learning environments, not just as an individual attribute (OECD, 2019). Collective agency is “the idea of individual agents acting together for a community, a movement, or a global society” (OECD, 2019, p. 9), foregrounding collaboration toward shared goals and collective values.

Based on these three subcategories, we compiled verbatim excerpts evidencing each code into an analytic matrix and highlighted key phrases within each quotation to build a codebook. We then grouped the excerpts into sub-themes (e.g., student agency: responsibility and influence, active participation, development and well-being, and contextual application). Through iterative discussion, all researchers refined the subthemes and reached consensus. The resulting analytic framework is presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2. *The Codes to Analyze Learner Agency*

Learner Agency	Student Agency	Responsibility and Influence	- Capacity to set goals, reflect, and act to effect change. - Taking an active role in learning and decision-making. - Aiming to positively influence personal, societal, and environmental circumstances.
		Active Participation	- Acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped. - Making responsible choices instead of merely accepting those determined by others.
		Development and Well-being	- Development of identity, belonging, and purpose. - Utilizes motivation, hope, self-efficacy, and a growth mindset to navigate toward well-being and flourish in society.
		Contextual Application	- Exercised in various contexts: moral, social, economic, and creative. - Moral: making decisions considering the rights and needs of others.

		- Social: understanding societal rights and responsibilities. - Economic: contributing to local, national, or global economy. - Creative: innovating in artistic, practical, or scientific purposes.
Co-agency (Collaborative Agency)	Interactive and Supportive Relationships	- Co-agency involves interactive, mutually supportive relationships with caregivers, teachers, peers, and the community. - Teachers and students as co-creators in the teaching-and-learning process.
	Role of Various Agents	- Teachers: Designing learning environments valuing agency, co-creating with students. - Peers: Influencing each other's agency and playing an active role in shaping lessons. - Caregivers: Acting as co-agents and engaging positively with learning. - Community: Contributing to the learning environment and helping to "co-regulate" children's actions and development.
	Effective Learning Environments	- Built on co-agency where all agents work together (students, teachers, caregivers, community). - Providing "tools" needed for students to realize their potential and thrive in various environments.
	Factors Supporting Co-agency	- Personalized learning environments that motivate and support students. - Building a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, and overall well-being.
Collective Agency	Acting for a Common Purpose	- Refers to individuals acting together for a community, movement, or global society. - Involves shared responsibility, sense of belonging, identity, purpose, and achievement.
	Overcoming Differences	- Requires putting aside differences and tensions to achieve common goals.

Finally, we revisited each document to conduct a comparative analysis, examining how the codes were instantiated and cross-referencing definitions and meanings across the curriculum documents from all three regions using the codebook. Analysis results were discussed and validated collaboratively, with the process documented on shared Google Docs as an audit trail (Harste & Vasquez, 1998). All researchers revisited the data multiple times, exchanging thoughts and refining findings during weekly meetings.

Sociohistorical Context of Each Region' Revised Curriculum

British Columbia's Early Learning Framework

The British Columbia Ministry of Education first published the *British Columbia Early Learning Framework* in 2008, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Children and Family Development, to support adults in creating rich early learning experiences and environments for children (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2008). As a province-wide statement of vision, principles, and early learning areas, the *2008 Early Learning Framework* reframed early years' practice, presenting a child image as capable and full of potential and introducing pedagogical narration to reflect new understandings of childhood (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019). However, as the social, political, economic, and cultural context of British Columbia evolved, the Ministry revised the framework to include updated concepts, language, and connections that address new realities (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019). The revised framework expands its focus from children up to age 5 to those up to age 8, acknowledges the lasting legacies of colonization and marginalization of Indigenous peoples, and strengthens efforts toward reconciliation by honoring Indigenous authorities in education. It also reinforces a vision of inclusive spaces and practices for all children, adopting a holistic perspective on learning and being by emphasizing relationships with others, ideas, materials, places, and histories. Additionally, the updated framework aligns with British Columbia's curriculum, which lists core competencies and essential learning components, including key content, concepts, skills, and big ideas, for students from kindergarten to Grade 12 (Government of British Columbia, n.d.).

New York State's Prekindergarten Learning Standards

In 1998, New York State launched the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program to provide free pre-kindergarten education for all 4-year-olds, regardless of socioeconomic status (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2023). After decades of structural adjustments, 93% of school districts now offer UPK, meeting an average of 7 out of 10 quality standards benchmarks (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2023). As part of quality assurance efforts, the first *New York State Prekindergarten Learning*

Standards were adopted by the Board of Regents in 2011 to provide a whole-child learning framework and to align with the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards in English Language Arts, Literacy, and Mathematics, as well as the New York State K-12 learning standards in science, social studies, and the arts (New York State Education Department, 2011). The *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* were revised in 2019 with the goals of consolidating all learning standards for 4-year-olds, providing a uniform format across content areas, and making the standards more accessible and understandable for early childhood educators (New York State Education Department, 2019).

South Korea's Nuri Curriculum

The *Nuri Curriculum* was introduced in 2011 as a nationwide curriculum for children ages 3 to 5 to strengthen the government's responsibility for early childhood education and care (South Korea Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019). However, the first *Nuri Curriculum* lacked systematic organization and did not adequately reflect teachers' needs in practice (Kim, 2019a). Additionally, the Moon Jae-in administration's Early Childhood Education Innovation Plan, which identifies "building a child-centered educational culture through a classroom revolution" as a key initiative, laid the groundwork for a paradigm shift toward child-centered education (Kim, 2019a, p. 8). Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Education published a revised curriculum in 2019, known as the *2019 Revised Nuri Curriculum*. According to Kim (2019b), the revised *Nuri Curriculum* has several features. First of all, it establishes a coherent curricular structure by explicitly articulating the curriculum's features and its vision of the learner, which was omitted in the original *Nuri Curriculum*, and aligns them with the national curriculum for elementary and secondary education. The revised curriculum streamlines content by presenting it comprehensively without age bands. It also re-grounds early childhood education in play, supporting children's learning through child-led play and emphasizing children's agency over teacher-driven planning. In addition, the revision replaces previous terminology with more practice- and teacher-friendly terms to support teachers' autonomy and simplifies assessment to reduce their workload.

Findings of Comparative Analysis

Differing Portrayals of Children and Student Agency

Children are portrayed differently across the three curricula, reflecting how each region incorporates the notion of student agency. In British Columbia's *Early Learning Framework*, a child is described as "a gift, as strong and capable in their uniqueness and full of potential, living and growing in complex interdependence with humans and all world relations" (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019, p. 15). This perspective challenges traditional child development theories that assume "every child learns in a predictable, linear progression, regardless of context or community" (p. 11) and questions conventional notions of "normal" growth and development, as well as what counts as "best" practices. By recognizing each child's individuality and capabilities, the framework positions children as active participants in their learning, engaging in "living inquiries":

Children can experiment, investigate, and inquire in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them... Within the contexts of their individual and cultural identities, children are listened to and valued for their ideas and knowledge. (p. 12)

This emphasis on inquiry and active engagement is central to the framework and evident throughout the document.

Similarly, South Korea's *Nuri Curriculum* portrays children as active, intellectual beings, emphasizing "child-led play" as a core approach. Child-led play is conceptualized as a learning process in which children actively explore their interests and capabilities independently, rather than following predetermined paths established by teachers. The curriculum states:

Children choose, actively participate, and lead play or work based on their preferences. The revised *Nuri Curriculum* helps children perceive themselves as valuable and positive, fostering an understanding of their capabilities. It encourages them to grow into individuals who recognize their strengths and strive to expand their abilities.

(South Korea Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019, p. 29)

Through this approach, children take ownership of their play and actively engage in developing physical, cognitive, and social-emotional capacities.

By contrast, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* frame children as capable and “active learners,” but places a stronger emphasis on academic knowledge and skill development. For instance, the key domain “Physical Development and Health” links healthy habits to academic outcomes (New York State Education Department, 2019, p. 10), while “Social and Emotional Learning” connects social-emotional competence to well-being and academic performance (p. 12). Another domain, “Approaches to Learning” focuses on workforce-aligned skills, moving from rote tasks to problem-solving, with schools supporting opportunities for skill practice (p. 9). Here, curriculum, teaching content, and materials are designed to support academic achievement and skill acquisition within teacher-planned structures and standards.

In this manner, play in the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* is treated as an instructional strategy to support learning objectives rather than as a medium with intrinsic meaning:

Play is an important vehicle for developing a variety of skills outlined in the NYSPLS [*New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards*] and is essential to the EFQ². Rather than detracting from academic learning, purposeful play supports the abilities that underlie such learning. (p. 38)

This framing emphasizes “purposeful play” and “intentional planning,” prioritizing play that aligns with academic learning goals. While these strategies support the development of targeted skills, they focus on structured, teacher-guided experiences. In this context, children are active learners within the framework provided, with fewer opportunities to independently pursue their own interests or engage in open-ended exploration.

²) NYC Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Education Early Childhood Framework for Quality.

Perceived Roles of Teachers and Co-agency

All three curricula assign significant importance to the teacher's role, yet they construe that role differently. In the *Early Learning Framework*, the term "pedagogy of listening" stands out in how it positions teachers within the learning space. This approach, informed by Reggio Emilia, emphasizes "notic[ing] the many ways children express themselves, recognizing that intentional, open listening is the basis of a reciprocal relationship" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 80; cited in British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019, p. 18). The pedagogy of listening positions teachers as "researchers and collaborators" (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019, pp. 17-18). The document encourages teachers to "listen to the incredible range of children's expression, and to what children bring forward that may never have been heard before" (p. 49). Teachers are expected to create conditions in which "children can invent, investigate, build theories, and learn" (p. 18), attentively responding to children's inquiries.

At the same time, teachers are encouraged to acknowledge the uncertain aspects of teaching and learning:

Listening...requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change. It demands that we have clearly in mind the value of the unknown and that we are able to overcome the sense of emptiness and precariousness that we experience whenever our certainties are questioned. (p. 18)

Emphasizing the act of listening implies withholding teachers' prior knowledge and embracing the uncertainties that children bring, fostering learning through collaboration—between children's voices and teachers' act of listening—in other words, through co-agency.

Interestingly, the *Early Learning Framework* expands the concept of relationality to include non-human entities, stating that "pedagogies occur in relationship with families, children, communities, legislation, policies, places, ideas, materials, and histories" (p. 27). This holistic view acknowledges diverse influences on children's learning beyond direct human interactions.

In the *Nuri Curriculum*, teachers are described as “agents of the curriculum whose role is to support children’s play and learning and professionals who learn and grow with children” (South Korea Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019, p. 43). While teachers are still agents of the curriculum, their roles have shifted from simply delivering pre-planned lessons or following scripted content to documenting children’s interests and facilitating play. This indicates a move from a teacher-centered to a child-centered approach, redefining teachers as “facilitators” who arrange environments and engage meaningfully with children to support play (p. 44), which requires higher-order thinking, flexibility, and creativity. This approach embodies co-agency, emphasizing interactive and supportive relationships as teachers “create the curriculum together with children” (p. 27).

The curriculum also positions children’s homes, early childhood centers, and communities as co-agents who actively collaborate. It assumes that early childhood center directors and caregivers understand and embrace a child-centered and play-based approach, facilitating child-led play. The role of early childhood centers and the local communities is to provide “human, environmental, and cultural resources so that children can have rich experiences” (p. 27). These stakeholders are considered co-agents of the curriculum, collectively supporting child-led play and a rich learning environment.

On the other hand, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* position teachers primarily as curriculum and instruction planners who intentionally design lessons (New York State Education Department, 2019). In this curriculum, teachers focus on designing lessons that support students’ academic achievement and skill development, rather than determining content based on individual professional judgment or philosophy. Similarly, families are described as “essential [components] to children’s success in the elementary classroom and later learning” (p. 4). The emphasis on “interactive, mutually supportive relationships” is limited (OECD, 2019, p. 2), and co-agency is less explicitly represented. Consistent with the focus on school readiness, teachers are depicted primarily in their planning role rather than as co-creators of curriculum with students.

Conceptualizing Citizenship through Collective Agency

Collective agency is identified across all three regions, though reflected to varying degrees.

Alongside student and co-agency, the *Early Learning Framework* places strong emphasis on collective agency, positioning it as part of a decolonizing process. It explicitly highlights the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and the cultivation of children as “citizens of their communities and the world,” promoting “engagement and meaningful relationships with people and places, pasts and futures” (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019, p. 84). More specifically, the document states:

Children develop a sense of place when they connect with their local communities and outdoor environment. Early learning is “of a place” when children and educators engage with local histories with respectful curiosity and a desire to contribute and share.
(p. 21)

Here, the term “place” encompasses environments where children “interact to learn, create memory, reflect on history, connect with culture, and establish identity” (p. 21). It extends beyond a physical space, connecting pasts and futures, and encompasses “all creatures, plants, trees, and non-living entities and landforms” (p. 21). This “common world framework,” which views children as interconnected with people, places, things, and the more-than-human, emphasizes collective responsibility, linking the *Early Learning Framework*’s goal of fostering collective agency. It also calls upon communities and governments to support children’s learning and well-being, embedding co-agency within broader collective responsibility.

The notion of collective agency is briefly introduced in the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* within the Social Studies domain:

Prekindergarten children... have a strong sense of fairness and are honing their understanding of right and wrong in the greater community... The Social Studies Practices, especially civic participation (e.g., following rules in the classroom) and gathering... should be woven into prekindergarten classroom practices. (New York State Education Department, 2019, p. 23)

In this context, collective agency centers on developing children’s understanding of fairness

and community norms, rather than on active participation aimed at transforming their communities.

Similarly, the *Nuri Curriculum* addresses collective agency in a single paragraph:

A person who lives together is a democratic citizen who feels a sense of belonging to the society they are part of, respects life, coexists with nature, and collaborates to address social issues for the betterment of society... The revised *Nuri Curriculum* helps children develop into individuals who value and care for family, neighbors, living beings, and the surrounding environment, fostering a mindset of consideration, responsibility, and mutual respect. (South Korea Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019, p. 30)

Children are encouraged to develop a sense of belonging and to engage with social and environmental issues, aligning with key aspects of the OECD's concept of collective agency. However, beyond this passage, explicit references to collective agency are limited, suggesting that while the concept is acknowledged in the *Nuri Curriculum*, it remains largely abstract and is not systematically embedded into specific curricular practices.

Contextualizing Findings in Sociohistorical Perspectives

The findings reveal that each region conceptualized learner agency differently. This section discusses how sociohistorical contexts have shaped these conceptualizations.

In South Korea, a strongly centralized national curriculum system has historically guided educational practices (Kim et al., 2010), and limited students' voices in their learning experience, particularly in early childhood education (Adamson & Litjens, 2016). At the same time, early childhood education institutionalized free-choice activities under the influence of child-centered traditions (Yang, 2003). Within this trajectory, play has been recognized as a key arena for children's agentic learning (Oh, 2019). In a sociohistorical context where collectivist values and "preparation" discourses (e.g., developmentalism and school readiness) are influential (Min & Lim, 2019), play has often been framed as both a

pedagogical tool and a developmental process for achieving pre-specified educational goals (Oh, 2019; Son & Lim, 2020).

The aspirations of caregivers, including parents, for children's academic success have also contributed to a tendency to distinguish "play" from "learning," resulting in outcome-oriented forms of play in many early childhood settings (Kim et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2017). Such dynamics, together with research trends emphasizing play's contribution to academic skills, have sometimes overshadowed the intrinsic value of play and children's self-directed participation. Recently, influenced by global discourses on children's rights and future-oriented competencies (Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, 2019), the revised *Nuri Curriculum* has reemphasized child-led play, positioning play as both the purpose and the foundation of the curriculum. It foregrounds student agency and situates teachers as facilitators who co-create the curriculum with children and learn alongside them.

British Columbia's *Early Learning Framework* stands out for its relational and ecological understanding of student agency, conceptualizing learning as an interconnected process involving people, materials, and places. Teachers are viewed as collaborators and researchers rather than as implementers of predetermined curricula, with a responsibility to cultivate environments where children can inquire and construct knowledge.

The framework was influenced by the Investigating Quality (IQ) project, which emerged in 2005 with government support to enhance early childhood education quality (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008). This project, informed by Indigenous knowledge systems and reconceptualist scholarship, questioned universal developmental norms and introduced relational and decolonizing perspectives that understand learning as situated within webs of interconnection (Atkinson, 2020; Pence, 2021). These contributions helped establish the conceptual foundation for the *Early Learning Framework*, bringing notions such as culture, context, and environment into the core of early learning (Jessen, 2020; Pence, 2021). Anchored in the "common worlds framework," which views children as entangled with people, places, things, and the more-than-human, the *Early Learning Framework* emphasizes children's becoming citizens of their communities and the world (British Columbia Ministry of Education et al., 2019). In this philosophical orientation, collective agency is not treated as a discrete topic but as a central pedagogical stance that informs the entire framework.

In contrast, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* articulate student

agency more implicitly, primarily through the guiding principle that children are active learners. This framing reflects the broader policy history of early childhood education in the United States. Since the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 legislation, standards-based accountability has shaped early learning policies, emphasizing measurable academic outcomes as indicators of success (Brown & Barry, 2019). The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) further institutionalized this orientation, with the resulting "accountability shove-down" extending into preschool education and emphasizing predefined performance goals (Hatch, 2002). The subsequent Good Start, Grow Smart initiative reframed early childhood programs as preparation for school rather than as unique educational stages with their own purposes (Brown, 2018). Under later administrations, including Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge and the Every Student Succeeds Act, the emphasis on readiness and accountability persisted (Brown & Barry, 2019). Within this context, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards*' focus on academic learning and its limited explicit treatment of student agency reflect a policy trajectory that prioritizes school readiness as a key educational goal.

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study, informed by Sousa and Moss' (2022) critical approach to comparative early childhood studies, was to examine how learner agency is conceptualized across early childhood curricula in three regions—British Columbia, New York State, and South Korea—and how each region's sociohistorical contexts have shaped these conceptualizations. For this analysis, we organized the OECD's concept of learner agency into three subcategories—student agency, co-agency, and collective agency—and used this as the analytical framework. We then incorporated each region's sociohistorical background to provide context-sensitive interpretations of the curricula, embracing diverse perspectives (Sousa & Moss, 2022).

The findings indicate that while none of the curricular documents frame children as passive, they vary in how learner agency is expressed. First, student agency is referenced differently across documents: it is explicitly embodied in child-led play in the *Nuri Curriculum*,

manifested through children's leading roles in inquiry-based learning in the *Early Learning Framework*, and described in terms of "active learners" in the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards*. Similarly, the teacher's role is emphasized in all three, though the emphasis differs across regions. In the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards*, teachers' planning is described as guiding and structuring children's learning experiences. The *Nuri Curriculum* positions teachers as co-constructors who facilitate child-initiated play, while the *Early Learning Framework* highlights teachers' role in creating conditions for inquiry and practicing a pedagogy of listening. Beyond the teacher, the *Nuri Curriculum* recognizes caregivers and communities as co-agents in supporting child-centered, play-based learning, whereas the *Early Learning Framework* extends the notion of co-agency to include policies, places, materials, and other contextual factors. Regarding the public purpose of learner agency, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* and *Nuri Curriculum* reference it briefly, whereas the *Early Learning Framework* presents it as a central pedagogical commitment.

These distinctions reflect each region's unique sociohistorical trajectories. In British Columbia, the *Early Learning Framework* has evolved within a context influenced by the Investigating Quality (IQ) project, Reggio-inspired approaches, Indigenous reconciliation, and the adoption of place-based and relational perspectives. Consequently, it offers concrete guidance for supporting learner agency and articulates education as a relational and community-oriented process. In New York State, the *New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards* reflect policy trends shaped by accountability-focused reforms and an emphasis on school readiness, situating learner agency within broader goals of academic preparedness. In South Korea, the revised *Nuri Curriculum* represents an intentional move toward a child-centered and play-based orientation within an education system historically characterized by teacher-led instruction. Its emphasis on child-led play and early childhood teachers' understanding of play-based learning reflects a shift in discourse toward acknowledging the child as a competent learner and valuing holistic growth.

This comparative study contributes to a contextualized understanding of learner agency in early childhood education. By illustrating how learner agency is variously represented in curricular documents and linking these representations to each region's sociohistorical context, the study offers insight into how learner agency can be understood and integrated

into early childhood curricula.

At the same time, the study has several limitations that inform directions for future research. Because the analysis was limited to curricular texts, it does not capture how learner agency is interpreted or enacted in practice. For instance, while the *Nuri Curriculum* emphasizes child-led play, caregivers' and teachers' practices may continue to reflect academic- or outcome-oriented expectations (Lee, 2023). Similarly, while the *Early Learning Framework* articulates agency across individual, collaborative, and collective dimensions, empirical research is needed to explore how these ideas are enacted in classrooms. Future studies should thus investigate how teachers and caregivers in each region conceptualize learner agency and how it is embodied in everyday educational practices.

We also encourage broader international comparative research on learner agency in early childhood education. While this study focused on regions for which we have a deep understanding of the sociohistorical context, expanding such research to include additional regions could provide new perspectives. For instance, within-continent analyses (e.g., across East Asian regions) could reveal sociohistorical nuances underlying seemingly similar education cultures, such as those emphasizing academic achievement. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term influence of early learner agency on students' educational trajectories across various contexts would further inform curriculum design and policy development. Through such collective efforts, we may deepen our understanding of learner agency and reimagine who should be at the center of the learning journey.

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