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Building student agency in rural Thailand: Using the Ikigai framework and positive youth development

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Introduction: It is important for life chances and schooling outcomes that students have a positive approach. The Japanese Ikigai philosophy aims at improving well-being and life purposes much as Western Positive Youth Development does. This study examined how a student positive development, based on IKIGAI, was used to develop agentic qualities in students. The study was carried out in rural Thailand where students are highly disadvantaged and experience poor schooling outcomes. The project encouraged the students to develop projects based on their own interests and contexts.

Methods: Content analysis was conducted against the *a priori* structure of the Ikigai framework (i.e., passion, mission, profession, and vocation).

Results: Data about impact were obtained from two student camps during the project and two group discussions at the end of the project from students ($n = 66$) in two secondary schools.

Discussion: The students gained greater passion and showed small gains in mission, profession, and vocation, with the latter two content areas only becoming visible at the end of project school discussions. The IKIGAI principles are an attractive framework for conducting youth development activities in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

PYD, Youth holistically development, Student agency, Ikigai framework, rural Thailand

Introduction

Despite extensive investment by Thailand that has increased school attendance, the average performance of students in rural areas outside Bangkok has not improved, and indeed performance on the Grade 6 Ordinary Test declined from 2011 to 2020 (Durongkaveroj, 2023). Factors contributing to the low performance of rural students include the lack of qualified teachers, insufficient educational resources, and poor physical infrastructure (Durongkaveroj, 2023; Lathapipat, 2018). Rural children living in households whose head does not speak Thai or is not Buddhist tend to have worse health conditions (Waleewong and Yueayai, 2022). Those with only one parent also have poor educational outcomes (Pholphirul and Teimad, 2018). Hence, rural children with minority backgrounds are likely to have both health and educational outcome challenges.

Thailand's Second National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 2003) specifies in Section 22 that education depends on the principle "all learners are capable of learning and self-development ... the teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace." Thus, schooling is to maximize the personal and individual development of all children in light of their potential and circumstances. In

2023, Thailand introduced a campaign of “Students Study Hard with Happiness” (Ministry of Education, 2023), with the aim of raising the quality of education by starting teaching and learning with the happiness of students, teachers, and parents. The policy requires teachers to act as coaches who help students achieve life goals, including having appropriate skills for life and have a curriculum that responds to the interests and needs of learners, so that they can earn income while studying and have jobs that are in line with the needs of the labor market after graduation.

These policy priorities show that a focus on students’ individual development for success in adult life really matters in Thailand. Attention to a curriculum and a pedagogy that generates learning that supports employment and addresses local challenges allows for projects that focus on developing the autonomy and self-esteem of students. This creates opportunities to assist teachers as well as students to develop a learning ecology where positive psychology is applied (Boonsue, 1997; Pordee, 2021). This focus echoes the Western educational idea of student agency (Popkewitz, 2005).

Ikigai, a Japanese philosophy, is a universal concept consisting of passion, mission, profession, and vocation (Mogi, 2017). Ikigai focuses on the life purpose through the self-realization of human beings (Hall et al., 2023). Ikigai is used as a framework of a metacognitive tool, implying individual self-motivation and self-awareness (Hall et al., 2023). It can be applied with any concepts, models, processes, and research methodology for self-empowerment and life purposes in participants individually and as community building in schools, universities, and organizations (Sartore et al., 2023). In this research, Ikigai was adopted because of its focus on life purpose, happiness, and self-empowerment as the basis for students’ approaches to problems in their own schools. The framework of Ikigai opens to exchange ideas among students regarding self-exploration for students’ life purpose. Ikigai fosters students to see beauty and values in simplicity, together with being aware of daily activities (Rodrangsee et al., 2024). Its universal, yet adaptable nature makes Ikigai suitable as a framework for activities resonating students’ agency through self and community empowerment. This is in contrast to top-down models of development from the Thai administrators or purely abstract Buddhist beliefs. Ikigai framework also provides for smaller scale projects, focused more on life-purpose and self-development, and thus aligns well with Western Positive Youth Development.

This paper describes a case study in which activities based on the Japanese Ikigai framework contributed to greater student agency and autonomy in rural Thailand. The paper demonstrates that agency can be enhanced in a South-East Asian nation through a culturally appropriate mechanism. The research question of the project is whether the Ikigai framework, passion, mission, professions, and vocations can foster life purpose and self-empowerment in students participating in the project.

Literature review

At the start of the century, Thailand strengthened the school and community as part of students’ learning process (Office of the National Education Commission, 2003). The 20-year Ministry of Education (2017) National Strategy on Education focused on the development of human potential and resources in the 21st Century and lifelong learning, giving importance to opportunities and equity in Thai society, specifically aiming for self-reliance and self-sustainability in

rural Thai communities. This education policy states that students can learn anywhere and anytime through any innovation or technological platform, and the teacher becomes the students’ coach (Ministry of Education, 2023). Schools have to provide diversity in learning together with appropriate technologies, ensure learning is active, stimulates critical thinking, within a competency-based approach. Thai education policies always place students at the center of learning, giving an agentic quality to students. The Office of the Basic Education Commission (2024) required schools to encourage student autonomy and agency for greater learning with happiness. For example, in 2023, Thailand introduced a campaign of “Students Study Hard with Happiness” (Ministry of Education, 2023) in an attempt to ensure all Thai students are placed at the center of the learning process with intrinsic motivation to learn (Minister of Education, 2024). The policy echoes a holistic and positive psychology approach in developing learners, by placing the learners at the center of schooling.

Unfortunately, despite policy initiatives, Thai administrators do not provide concrete action plans for teachers to give them the skills and knowledge to empower and enhance student agency and holistic self-growth. Furthermore, rural children regularly perform poorly on national measures of learning and are subjected to a teacher-centric, didactic, authoritarian schooling that diminishes their well-being and sense of agency or autonomy (Durongkaveroj, 2023; Lathapipat, 2018). While focusing on the psycho-emotional and social aspects of education may seem counterintuitive, overcoming negative experiences requires action that focuses on developing agency and autonomy, by focusing on the strengths young people have, even if such are indirectly linked with greater performance. Hence, positive youth development activities can be legitimately viewed to build success in schooling.

Positive youth development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) positions young people as active agents in their own development able to influence and be influenced by their environments (Bandura, 2003; Lerner et al., 2018). Social skills, including agency and autonomy, increase when children are given opportunities to experience and demonstrate care and compassion, social competence, connection to peers and school, and their own character (Lerner et al., 2018). Thus, school contexts are instrumental in supporting (or hindering) the development of social skills and prosocial behaviors (Benson et al., 2007; Fernandes et al., 2021). The core idea of PYD is a focus on the strengths youth have and their inherent capacity for growth and development, such that they are able to change and control their contexts, with appropriate support from their family, social, and school environments (Benson et al., 2007; Shek et al., 2019). PYD emphasizes strengths and positive growth in youth, which contributes to greater resilience in the face of challenges and leads to greater life satisfaction, which is important for positive coping behaviors in adolescence (Park, 2004).

The Five Cs (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character) model of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2018) conceptualize a core set of characteristics that lead to youth well-being. Through enhancement of the Five Cs, youth develop competence to contribute to themselves, their family, their community, and broader society (Travis and Leech, 2013). Connection is how youth are accepted, cared for, and affirmed through bonding with family, friends, and the broader community (Travis and Leech, 2013;

Fernandes et al., 2021). Caring and compassion represent an individual sense of empathy, sympathy, and response to others (Travis and Leech, 2013). Character shows an individual's sense of respect for morality and values (Fernandes et al., 2021). Confidence refers to satisfaction, self-efficacy, and self-worth in one's circumstances and future possibilities (Travis and Leech, 2013). Competence is recognizing and developing one's abilities, achievements, and performance (Travis and Leech, 2013; Fernandes et al., 2021).

Coherent with PYD, Bandura (2006) identifies four elements of human agency (i.e., intentionality, forethought or motivation, self-reactivity or self-efficacy, and self-reflectiveness or self-regulation). Agency underpins all students' abilities and would affect their cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes as they interact with the learning ecology (Code, 2020). The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2019) states that students can set up their goals reflecting changes in themselves, their school, and their community, and act responsively to effect these changes. Hence, agency is an effective short form for youth who have the 5Cs and positive outlook on themselves and their future. PYD has been used extensively in Thailand, especially among underprivileged and grassroots perspectives, as PYD promotes personal growth, community development, and fosters civic responsibility in youth (Authaisa, 2024).

Ikigai

Ikigai is a Japanese philosophy related to well-being and finding a life purpose. Ikigai refers to the ability to choose how one spends one's time in order to find purpose in life (Kumar, 2022). Thus, at the individual level, Ikigai is related to people's sense of self and personal value since Ikigai encourages motivation and agency in the journey toward one's inner self (Kono and Walker, 2020; Mayer and Vanderheiden, 2021). Societally, Ikigai can help to build organizational values and a culture of common vision, based on finding each individual's meaning in life while working together to create consciousness and inner life awareness in work and responsibility (Mayer and Vanderheiden, 2021). Ikigai has been applied in transformative learning and social engagement in educational settings. Because Ikigai focuses on the development of human potential and strengths through understanding of oneself and attempting growth, it can be used in a self-reflexive process, in which people engage intensely in social issues to find meaning and purpose in life (Mayer and Vanderheiden, 2021). The five elements of Ikigai include minimalism, initiating, self-awareness, flow or optimal state, finding happiness in what one is doing, and achieving happiness through recognizing consciousness or here and now through the flow experiences (Mogi, 2017; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). These elements do need to occur in any sequence.

Kono and Walker (2020) studied Japanese university students' perceptions of Ikigai's goal of a life worth living and found that life affirmation depended on diversity and balance in life values. The sense of Ikigai occurred through personally valued experiences and interpersonal relationships, which gave a sense of meaning. Sartore et al. (2023) argue that Ikigai can be integrated with a cognitive-motivational model of the workplace to enhance self-determination, fundamental needs, and mindfulness. Self-determination fosters intrinsic growth, including altruistic goals. Ikigai leads to well-being and performance at work. Ikigai was used to foster self-leadership

skills among university graduates during Covid 19 in Malaysia (Hall et al., 2023). Ikigai has been used to guide career planning activities for secondary school students (Rodrangsee et al., 2024). As Ikigai is associated with recognizing purpose in one's life, this study uses the Ikigai-inspire framework as a metacognitive tool, including self-reflection to discover personal values and life purpose.

Ikigai has been interpreted into a Western lens, simplifying the framework to what you love to do (passion), what you are good at (mission), what the world needs (profession), and what you can be paid for (vocation; Garcia and Miralles, 2016). Passion arises from knowing what one enjoys doing to attain self-achievement, while mission implements passion into some highly skilled profession that delivers something the world needs, which hopefully becomes something that earns a living (Tamachiro, 2019). Kono and Walker (2020) state that applying Ikigai reflects the person's interpersonal relationships in ways that people gain social support and related needs, which is close to the relationship aspect in PERMA. This version of Ikigai has been implemented as a positive youth development framework that aligns well with the cultural and policy framework of Thailand.

The Ikigai/PYD experiment

The Project focused on developing and training teachers to deliver authentic learning within a context of believing that all students could learn. The project placed students at the center of the learning process by encouraging them to initiate projects based on their own interests and contexts. Having students act purposefully, effectively, and reflectively on real-world problem-solving should develop their agency through an authentic activity (Benson et al., 2017). The project required students to approach a problem or issue in their own school or community, while their teachers functioned as coaches supporting students individually through problem-solving and reflection processes throughout the entire project.

The main intervention or training occurred in two concentrated day camps where mentors from Ging Gan Bai Learnscape used Ikigai principles to foster life purpose and self-empowerment. The first camp took place within the school grounds in July 2023 and lasted 3 days. The second camp was 2 days approximately 2 months later. Between camps, students carried on with developing their self-designed project while doing their regular school activities and learning. The mentor group helped students inquire into and discuss their own dreams, concerns, hopes, and wishes for themselves and their social circumstances. Multiple activities were used to achieve this aim.

Camp 1. The first day began with ice-breaking activities to welcome students and prepare them for the more reflective work. The mentors introduced students to important characteristics of selected professions and people to stimulate a vision for what the students might like to do as adults, encouraging them to identify their own capabilities and skills that might support those professions or vocations, and requiring students to state explicitly an ambition for their future careers. The team then encouraged students to identify and relate to the various issues and crises in society that they observed and experienced. Students were asked to identify their social strengths, such as respecting other people, self-control, self-expression, and so on. Then, students created a treasure box in which they stored the papers on which they had written their self-reflections and strengths.

Note that this process of recording self-reflections was done at the end of each day.

On the second day, students were divided into groups according to the vocations (i.e., arts, farming, mechanics, sports, crafts, music, or cooking) they had identified on the first day. Team building began with a stock-take of resources in their communities (e.g., places, culture, people, and traditions) for that vocation. The mentors encouraged students to include their own strengths, identified in Day One, as part of the community resources. Students were encouraged to analyze urgent problems and consequences in their school or community, resulting in a project that they then decided to address. To help them think about that problem Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (1979) technique of using their own bodies to create an image of the story was introduced. Students then used body sculpture and image theater activities to explore, exchange, and discuss goals and hopes for the selected problem. The mentors showed the students an inspiring clip from Klongtoey Dee Jung, a PYD project teaching music skills to underprivileged youth in Klongtoey, the biggest slum in Bangkok. The clip told how the youth in the project were developed and empowered through music practice as a team. The mentors then invited students to create a musical performance as an orchestra with different kinds of musical instruments, to enact the importance of teamwork and student initiative.

On day three, students started planning activities, places, people involved, time frame, and their roles for their project. The camp ended with students presenting their projects to the Ging Gan Bai mentors and teacher coaches and the fellow participants.

The two secondary schools created 11 projects, which included:

- environmental issues topics
 - o P1-a campaign for garbage management and recycling.
 - o P2-a campaign to reduce open-air garbage burning in the community),
- self and community well-being projects
 - o P3-bicycle repairing to reduce drug use.Two projects to decrease smoking among teenagers
 - o P4 farming and
 - o P5 mechanics.
- stress management and self-empowerment
 - o P6 team cooking
- self-awareness and empowerment
 - o P7-peer-listening.
- two projects against bullying
 - o P8, playing music
 - o P9 playing music.
 - o P11-content making; and
- Developing self-understanding
 - o P10-arts making with moto-punk teenagers.

Camp 2. Two months later, a second camp continued the Ikigai intervention. On Day One, self-reflection was stimulated through the arts. In pairs, students drew a flower to represent their feelings about their project's story. Students then molded clay figures to represent the obstacles they experienced in their project. In pairs, students shared their thoughts and feelings around the clay figures and how they were able to cope with the challenges. Students were encouraged to write coping words and strategies to empower themselves. In a circle, the students shared their coping words with all the participants in that school, and with the peers providing active listening and by echoing the words back to each speaker.

On the second day, the mentors focused on communication and creativity. Students were introduced to a simple model of communication (i.e., Sender, Message, Context, and Receiver; SMCR). In their project groups, including their teacher coach., students designed and made a one-minute TikTok. Student TikToks were shared with the whole group, with group feedback and team reflection. The activities ended with students writing supporting words to their peers and their coach. Students then returned to complete their projects over the next month, at which time the LSED team collected the various artefacts for analysis.

Given that the project was designed around the four Ikigai themes, we wanted to know from the perspective of the students themselves whether there was any insight or evidence that the project had worked as intended. The research was approved by the Social Science Institutional Review Board, Thammasat University August 2023. The participation was voluntary, had informed consent, parental approval, and school leader and teacher approval.

Methodology

This study arises from a multi-month experimental intervention, funded by Jai Krating Foundation and run by the Faculty of Learning Sciences and Education, Thammasat University, to improve student agency and autonomy in four schools in Pichit and Utharadit provinces of Thailand. To determine the impact of the intervention on students themselves, content analysis of student comments and discussions at two intervention camps and two post-intervention discussions was conducted. Analysis examined student discourse against the four themes of ikigai (i.e., mission, vision, profession, and vocation). Hence, the study attempts to reveal the impact of the intervention at early and final stages of the intervention.

Participants

In this study, only secondary school data were analyzed, which were Wangtagu and Baan Noi Prek Utit in Pichit province. Within each school, participants were selected from students who joined the community theater and short film camp in the first-year project, giving a total of 66 students. Of these 40 were young women, 30 came from single-parent homes, 45 lived in households where their real parents had to work outside their hometown or abroad, and eight were involved with drugs due to their usage in the family. The average age was between 12 and 16 years old.

Instrumentation

In Camps 1 and 2 and at the end of the project, students generated written reflections as per instructions. The students wrote reflections about what aspects of this project caused the most significant changes in students based on the most significant change evaluation (Intrac, 2017). These questions have been used in the Teacher Movement project of the Faculty of Learning Science and Education (2022). These data were available to the research team for secondary, non-reactive analysis (Webb, 1981). The responses were not influenced by the presence of the research team or the project treatment team.

At the end of the project, two semi-structured group discussions were conducted, one in each school. All the students participating in each school were asked to take part in an open forum semi-structured discussion. The outline of the questions was related to the reflections that the students wrote based on their most significant changes, of which the researcher went into more detail in the discussions. The researcher also asked about the challenges the students faced in doing the project, and how they coped with these challenges, or which aspect supported them through these challenges. The research team directed the content of the discussion on if and how participants believed the project had helped them change.

Content analysis

Data from sources were subjected to a content analysis against the *a priori* structure of the Ikigai framework. That means texts were coded in semantic units and grouped into insights related to the impact of the project upon student passion, mission, profession, and vocation. Verbatim quotes from reflections and discussions were coded C1 and C2 for the two camps and DA and DB for the two discussion groups. The Project number is added to the code to further instantiate the comments. To identify individual contributors a sequential number is added to anonymously identify individual students. Hence, C1P3_11 means camp 1, Project 3, person 11, and so on.

To illustrate the projects more fully, details are given of what Project P10 was about. This group worked with the Moto punk teenagers who ride motorcycles at night. The Project students used art to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere to work together, rather than judging and criticizing them. The common activity of creating art helped create shared conversations. These activities helped change the students' perceptions of the participants.

For example,

- “I recognized that the Moto punk teenagers drive motorcycles at high speed at night because they need attention. They said that they did not look as cool as when they drove at high speed. When they drove at night, people paid attention to them.” DAP10_65

Listening to the moto punk teenagers' insights, such as lack of attention from their family, and using moto biking as their identity were the reasons why they had become moto punks. Working together in the activities, the students in this group perceived new perceptions from the moto punk teenagers. This project made the moto punk teens recognize another ability and concentration through artwork. The project might not eliminate the fast driving of the Moto punk teenagers, but at least they had less time to go

out driving as they built new identities through artwork. For example:

- “I realized that the moto punk teenagers were also kind-hearted human beings who needed love, attention, and a place to show their abilities.” DAP10_62
- “Even though the moto punk would keep continuing their speedy driving at night, they recognized new choices and values to spending their free time through art making.” DAP10_64

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of Ikigai themes and subsets detected in the data according to the data source (i.e., Data Camps 1 and 2 and Discussion Groups at School A and B). A total of 388 comments were classified into the four major Ikigai themes. Across all data sources, comments related to Passion constituted the most comments (i.e., range: 65% in Discussion B to 86% in Camp 2). Comments concerning Mission were the next common type of result (i.e., range: 13% in Discussion B to 20% at Camp 1). Interestingly, only students in Discussion A and B provided comments related to Vocation (i.e., range: 7% in Discussion A to 15% in Discussion B) and Profession (i.e., range: 2% in Discussion A to 7% in Discussion B).

Within each theme, the different data sources seemed to elicit comments related to different sub-topics. For example, within Passion, Camp 1 had 38 comments related to self-expression and self-confidence, with no comments for self-awareness and self-love. In contrast, the complete reverse was seen in Camp 2, with 47 comments on self-awareness and self-love. To ascertain if the source of the comments mattered, the number of comments between the two data camps and between the two school discussions were tested across the four major themes instead of the sub-themes. The distributions were statistically equivalent between each pair of sources (i.e., Camp 1 vs. Camp 2 [$\chi^2(4, 130) = 0.90, p = 0.82$] and School A vs. School B for Discussions [$\chi^2(4, 259) = 7.38, p = 0.06$]). Consequently, the source of the comments concerning these four themes was ignored in subsequent analysis.

Passion

The students exhibited many instances of self-expression across Camp 1 and both Discussion groups. The project work required students to work together each week with their friends and peers, allowing them to express and share their feelings, thoughts, and ideas in the project work. Several students reflected that the entire process encouraged students to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions before they did their projects. For example:

- “Participating in the project, encouraged me to share many new ideas with my peers. I became more expressive, liked to speak out my ideas, and was always part of the project.” C1P10_63
- “The experiences gained from this project were talking to other people more, being more expressive, and sharing, and my opinions to the team.” DAP6_28
- “The activities made me feel confident to express my feelings and ask questions to my peers. In the activity, I liked to share my

TABLE 1 Frequency of Ikigai themes and subthemes by data source.

Ikigai themes and sub-themes	Data source			
	Camp 1	Camp 2	Discussion school A	Discussion school B
Passion				
<u>Self-expression</u>				
• Expressing and sharing their thoughts and ideas	20		21	9
• Sharing their insights and acknowledging peers' perceptions of the project			9	4
• Supportive as a group, group dialog made them find their group solutions or group process	5		4	2
• Talking and associating with other people more	5		8	6
<u>Self-confidence</u>				
• Self-assurance as feeling creative, fun and flow	2			1
• No judgments or right or wrong in working in the activities	6		4	4
• Presenting their project to their peers and teachers made students conquer their shyness and self-criticism			6	2
• Self-reflections made students recognize their strengths and inner values			3	2
<u>Self-awareness and self-love</u>				
• Self-love as stop caring about other people too much and caring more about yourself in aspects of pursuing what students liked to do		6		
• Being courageous		1		
• Acknowledging their good values		6		
• Students acknowledged their negative feelings, which were worries, stress, fear, and sadness		6		
• Self-empowerment and positive thoughts:		17		
• Students wanted to quit smoking cigarettes and marijuana since they could have been better without using drugs		11		6
• A relaxed, comfortable, trusting, safe and opened atmosphere together with time and trust were very important in creating a safe space for students to speak out their stories and insights			8	
<u>Self-adjustment</u>				
• Arts to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere to work together and share conversations			7	
• Perceiving new perceptions from the moto punk teenagers through listening to their stories			4	
<u>Working as a team</u>				
• Students were related to others and caused them to be aware of others thoughts and opinions more		4	4	
• Asking for advice and group agreement before and after any activities in the Project	6		7	2
• There was no one absolute idea in working on the project	5			
• Taking action seriously in designing the project			4	
• Listening to other people's problems and issues provided empathy quality	2		14	
<u>Self-responsibility</u>				
• Concentration and focus			15	
• Self-motivation as the process encouraged them to think of what they like to do and wanted to use those skills in their project	6		5	8
• Solving problems as a team in the projects			17	
• Taking their part in the activities seriously as students got to do what they liked and chose to do themselves			5	3
• Students gained leadership from working as a teamwork			4	
Sub-total Passion	57	51	146	44
Mission				
• The experiences achieved in the project were valuable and helped alleviate the problems of their peers			1	

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Ikigai themes and sub-themes	Data source			
	Camp 1	Camp 2	Discussion school A	Discussion school B
• Their activities made their peers more resilient and they were able to cope with themselves when they were faced with bullying situations			3	
• To provide a comfortable space for listening and giving advice to their peers as this would alleviate their problems with their low self-esteem and lack of support from their family			1	
• Feel proud with how their peers were able to cope with their problems of being bullied more and their art projects enhanced moto punk teenagers' senses of positive self			2	
• Students were able to quit drugs by joining the farming and mechanic project				4
• Gaining friendships and relationships with peers	7		8	
• Getting positive and supportive relationships with their teacher was one of the key successes of the projects	7	8	10	5
• Success in the project came from the strengths of each member's skills and competency			1	
Sub-total Mission	14	8	26	9
Vocation				
• Students Recognize one's self-worth for society or community found their purpose in life			12	10
• Apply knowledge and skills with peers and younger students in school			2	
Sub-total Vocation	0	0	15	10
Profession				
• Students applied knowledge and experiences from the activities in their lives together with gaining payment back ^b			4	5
Sub-total Profession	0	0	4	5
Total comments	71	59	190	68

Ikigai themes in italics; sub-themes underlined; sub-totals in bold.

^aE.g., keep doing what they were doing, not giving up, being relaxed, being brave, keep smiling, being patient, needing support from parents, and keep looking at the goal and life purpose.

^bMaking herb juices, Cooking for members of their families, Selling vegetables from their farming, and the flowerpots they made from car tires for people in their community.

thoughts and ideas and became more confident with myself”
DBP11_57

Within the project process students participated in dialog, asking questions, and listening as a team. Sharing insights and acknowledging peers' perceptions of the project were critical processes in the project. For example:

- “Sharing and accepting peer's ideas and thoughts were very important. The Students Agency Project encouraged me to listen to other people more and not to take one's own thoughts and opinions too seriously.” DAP2_7
- “Working on the Students Agency Project encouraged me to share my thoughts and ideas while listening to others' opinions well. I became both a good speaker and listener. I recognized the challenge of accepting others' ideas and needed to listen to others well. It was hard to do at the very beginning, however, when we knew how to cope with this through our awareness, it was possible to do so.” DAP8_54

These comments showed that working in the Students Agency Project enhanced good relationships among participants since working as a group required them to carefully think and speak in order not to cause conflicts in working.

When students were faced with problems, stress and doubt, or different ideas, group dialog helped the students find solutions and solve conflicts. For example,

- “I needed to express my thoughts and ideas, together with listening to people in my groups to find the solutions together.” C1P8_56
- “After each session of the activities, my group would sit as a circle and have a dialog about what made us satisfied or unsatisfied. We always talked about the problems that caused us not to be happy with the project. These group dialogs helped us to solve conflicts in our groups.” DAP1_4
- “In the project, everyone had the right to speak and share their ideas as everyone was equal. ... Talking among peers in the group made us know how to solve problems and conflicts in our group.” DBP11_58

Rather than being isolated, shy, passive, and nonchalant as before, participants gained interpersonal skills since they talked and associated with other people more. For example, C1P_22 explained, “The activities in Camp 1 introduced me to and work with new friends from another school. Working outside my school was fun.” In Camp 1, students gained new experiences working with friends from another school. Working with other people made them realize that each person had

different skills and abilities. However, group support made their project successful. In this project, the students felt that they could express themselves and be accepted by their peers and teachers. For example:

- “I used to be shy and did not like being in front of other people. However, in this project when I practiced and rehearsed the script, I became better at expressing myself to my peers in school and no longer felt shy in front of my friends.” DAP1_4
- “I talked to other people more and became more self-expressive while working on the content-making project as I used to be shy, and quiet, and dared not to speak or express myself in front of others.” DBP11_60
- “The activities enhanced my talking with people better and to try and do new skills in the project, which made me able to give consultation to my peers.” DAP7_36

The students became more self-assured. At the end of Camp 1, students reflected that the activities in the camp and the project made them feel creative, fun, and experience flow in the working process. For example, C1P9_48 said “I got to do activities I liked, which were taking photographs, movements, singing, and acting.” The students gained confidence through practicing skills that they liked.

Others stated:

- “We had rehearsals before making our content. Even though we rarely were free at the same time to rehearse together, we tried hard to practice individually, speak out, and ask questions as a character in our content. We worked hard and felt proud of ourselves.” DBP11_59
- “I participated in the Partnership School project in the first year to practice community theater. I liked acting but did not dare to be expressive at that time. However, this year I got to do acting again in this Student Agency Project.
- Rehearsing and adapting my role with peers was fun and made me feel assured in myself and acting.” DAP1_5.

Sharing their thoughts and ideas with the team made students feel there were no judgments or right or wrong as in their regular classrooms. However, students took actions seriously as they got to do what they liked and chose to do themselves. Unlike the regular classroom setting, the lack of judgment gave the students the freedom to try and do the activities that they liked. For example:

- “I became more expressive and shared my thoughts with other people better without worrying whether my ideas would be right or wrong.” DAP1_2
- “We gained the freedom to decide the activities usually prohibited in our school to increase participation with our peers for self-improvement, such as playing snooker and game cabinets.” DAP7_40

The Project process provided opportunities for the students to present their project to their peers and teachers during both camps and at the end of the project. The students conquered their shyness and self-criticism and became closer to their teachers. Being

supported by the teachers empowered the students to do their projects. For example:

- “Presenting my idea to and talking with our teacher in the activity made us closer to our teacher. Now we feel easy to speak our thoughts and ideas in class.” DBP3_15
- “My group did a project about mental health issues at school. We had to present the causes, the effects, and how to alleviate the problems of mental health in school to our teacher. The teacher always gave us suggestions about the project, which helped us to be less worried about ourselves and our projects.” DAP7_39
- “When I had to lead the youngsters and friends in the activity, these experiences made me able to speak my thoughts and will in front of people. I became more open to my faults and was open to the teachers’ and peers’ advice.” DAP7_36

In Camp 1 and 2 students were required to write a self-reflection on what they did at the end of the activity every day. Writing their strengths and self-reflections, and storing them in a treasure box at the end of their group activity made students recognize their strengths and inner values. Through these reflections, the students recognized that they had learned new skills, knowledge, happiness, and friends from the project and at the school. For example:

- “I had made new friends by joining both camps. The reflections that I wrote at the end of each activity made me recognize that I gained confidence from being in this activity and felt less worried when I made furniture in the project.” DBP4_17
- “Through activities and self-reflection, I recognized and knew myself better. I became a more positive person.” DAP1_2

In Camp 2, a self-healing process was applied to the students for self-reflection regarding the problems and obstacles of the project and positive changes. Self-awareness and self-love were two key messages in students’ reflections in Camp 2. Students reflected on self-love that would happen when they stopped caring about other people too much and cared more about themselves in aspects of pursuing what they liked to do. For example:

- “Let go of the problems so I would not be too serious and put pressure on myself too much. I would like to try solving the problems little by little at a time.” C2P3_15
- “Let it go. Stop listening to other’s words and be myself.” C2P8_57
- “Wish my grandmother understood what I am doing. I want her to stop putting pressure on or blaming me but rather support me.” C2P5_27

Students also reflected on being courageous as one of the qualities of self-love, as C2P5_1, said “Do my best in what I think. Do it with confidence and courage without worrying and hesitation.”

Acknowledging their good values was very important for them to work in the Student Agency Project. For example, C2P8_53, said “Being self-assured was very important. No matter what they thought about me, it was their problem, not mine.”

The project raised students’ awareness of their negative feelings, including worries, stress, fear, and sadness. Students molded clay in

the shape representing their negative feelings and acknowledged it through different negative feelings. For example:

- “This was just one piece of sadness. I would get through it because I was good.” C2P10_66
- “Decreasing my fear. Try opening up to the fear and try to be more careful.” C2P7_35

Students also wrote about self-empowerment and positive thoughts in their reflections, which were keys for their being able to be successful in the project. For example:

- “Keep doing what they were doing and do not give up, I would pass through the obstacles.” C2P10_64
- “How to live my life to pursue my goal and life purpose?” C2P11_58
- “Do not let go of my dream.” C2P9_47
- “While working on this Project, we had to understand other people and ourselves. I had to have self-talk and felt more interested and in-depth in what we were doing in the project.” DAP7_37

Students who used drugs such as cigarettes and marijuana expressed in this process that they wanted to quit because they could have been better off without using drugs. For example:

- “I wanted my uncle to quit smoking marijuana since [his smoking] would make me want to be addicted to marijuana again. I wanted to spend my free time helping my parents sell merchandize in the community and go fishing.” C2P3_14
- “I wanted to tell myself that I wanted to quit smoking cigarettes and marihuana.
- “Now that I could do one. I would be able to quit both eventually since I was good.” C2P5_26
- “I wanted to quit smoking electric cigarette.” C2P9_11

Through their arts and reflections, self-love, self-awareness, self-empowerment, and support from their peers, teachers, and their family were seen to be very important for them in life and in the projects.

A key feature of the activities the students created as their projects was an informal and relaxed atmosphere. The activities helped students become aware of their feelings.

Students used cooking, games playing, and live music to create informal, relaxed, and safe spaces for the participants. As project leaders, the students had to be focused and patient when they listened to their peers' stories. Nevertheless, participating students felt fun and flowed with the project. For example:

- “Times and trust are very important in creating a safe space for participants to speak out their stories and insights. We used cooking as a medium to connect to the participants who had issues and joined the activity. We tried to cook and talked without any specific topics. Listening to the participants' talk was the key for them to share their stories.” DAP6_30
- “It took 2–3 times for the participants who continuously joined our cooking project to start sharing some insights and deep talk with us. Our project happened every Friday. Our group used

informal conversation and a relaxed atmosphere through cooking to create a comfortable, safe space and trust.” DAP6_29

Activities in both camps helped students to relate better to others and caused them to be aware of others thoughts and opinions as they worked as a team. The mentors facilitated the activities in both Camps, which encouraged the students to work with other people from their own and another school. For example:

- “I made new friends and the mentors were very supportive of them.” C1P1_4
- “I had got to exchange ideas and thoughts. This made me aware of others' problems and feelings better.” C1P8_56

Students recognized the importance of asking for advice and group agreement before and after any activities in the Project. Students recognized how important it was to work, ask everyone's opinion, and wait until they got the agreement of the entire group. The students had changed from working alone to working as a team and became better at listening and sharing their ideas. For example:

- “There was no one absolute idea in working on the project.” C1P6_30
- “Each member shared an important part and took action seriously in designing the project.” DAP8_55
- “Even though I learned to wait and listen to my peers' opinions, everyone on the team tried our best in our part and the responsibility that we got in the project.” DAP2_10

Group agreement and working as a team helped the students improve how to work together better the following time.

Listening to other people's problems and issues developed students' empathy. The students practiced deep listening (i.e., listening without judgment and responding until people who shared the stories ended). This helped them become more comfortable in sharing stories. The students learned empathy through these practices. For example:

- “I cared for and empathized with other people more. I listened more than they spoke and became more patient with the people around me.” DAP6_32
- “I felt connected and understood the feelings of my friends who joined the activities of peer listening for self-empowerment. When I interviewed my friends about their reasons and needs for joining the activity, their stories, backgrounds, and hopes for being better made me no longer judge my friends but empathize with them more.” DAP7_40

Problem-Based Learning in the Student Agency Project made students thrive in terms of self-regulation and self-responsibility. Students reflected that they gained concentration and focus, and patience through practicing arts, and crafts. For example:

- “Through the activities, I became focused, patient, and concentrated on the project. My group paid attention to the activities and gained experiences and new knowledge through this hard work.” DAP6_31

- “The members in my group became more patient and focused on the activities. Before joining this project, we did not like any detailed and neat activities. From then on, when I was assigned to do drawing or painting in my class, I felt more concentrated and focused on what I was doing.” DAP10_64

The projects encouraged student to think of what they like to do and allowed them to use those skills. This helped develop students' personal motivations. Students were more self-regulated through the activities than in their regular classroom. For example:

- “I had got to practice many skills in this project. First, I did not think that the team would make it successful. I got many new ideas, thoughts, and skills from being in this project.” DAP10_63
- “The activity was self-learned. My friends and I had to use our creativity, analytical thinking, and research in the process.” DBP9_51
- “The activities enhanced us to talk with people better and to try and do new skills in the project, which made us able to give consultation to their peers.” DAP7_39 Being self-motivated and regulated through practicing what they liked to do, students grew in responsibility and resilience because they took their part in the activities seriously. For example, DAPP10_63 said “I became more on time in working on the projects with my peers and people who joined our activities.”

Teamwork and problem-solving as a team were key aspects of the overall project. Students solved problems as a team in their own projects. They relied on a growth mindset and positive attitude to get over disappointments and mistakes. They learned to respect each other and themselves and they realized that they had learned many new skills and gained new perceptions about themselves and skills. For example:

- “We had a self-talk for self-adjustment and attitudes. Then, each student in our group decided to say sorry to all the members. The students talked and set up the goal of the project together again. We worked on the new schedule and kept to the goal. Finally, we were able to interview participants and make our campaign against garbage burning in the community.” DAP2_8
- “When we made mistakes in the activities, talking with all team members and our teachers made us change ourselves rather than blaming other people. We looked for the roots of the problems, and tried to adjust ourselves to make the project successful.” DAP7_36

Students gained leadership from working as a teamwork. For example, DAP7_35, said “I gained leadership qualities by joining this Project as I was the oldest in school. We had to lead the younger ones in the activities to make the younger ones work together.”

Involvement in the projects had a positive effect on students' personal life challenges. For example:

- “I was able to quit drugs by joining the farming and mechanic project because I spent my free time more on making flowerpots and sinks from car tires.” DBP5_23
- “Concentration and friendships gained in participating in the project caused me to decide to quit using drugs and focus more on practicing sports for my future studies.” DBP5_26

Getting positive and supportive relationships with their teachers was one of the key successes of the projects because students had to do self-reflection frequently with their teachers as coaches. Students gained better positive relationships with their teachers. For example:

- “I had worked with my teachers more in the activities in the Camps. The teacher became more friendly with me.” C1P3_16
- “Our teachers had supported us both mentally and practically in doing the activities. Our teachers suggested we use a local Thai traditional song in the activity to sing about garbage management. The teacher listened to our team when we felt stressed as we found it very hard to find the same free time to work on the project.” DAP1_4
- “I gained support from my teacher throughout my entire project. At the very beginning, I had so many problems with the project, however, we wrote our script, and songs and had rehearsals with support from the teacher.” DAP2_6

Mission

Completing the projects the students had created for themselves helped them achieve a valuable goal by helping alleviate the problems of their peers. For example, DAP8_52 said “During the lunch break, our group performed music at the activity space in our school twice a week. People who came to listen to our songs told us that they felt less worried about their problems and felt happier as they could share their problems with others.”

The activities the students had engaged in as listeners empowered them to support their peers through sharing their stories and problems. Students liked to provide a comfortable space for listening and giving advice to their peers as this would alleviate their problems with their low self-esteem and lack of support from their family. For example, DAP7_39 said “The participants were able to accept their issues better as they could share their problems with someone else.”

Students recognized their strengths from participating in the Student Agency Project. Success in the project came from the strengths of each member's skills and competency. For example, DAP10_62 said “In this project, we had and were good at different skills. However, we tried to support each other, using different skills to make the project successful.”

Students felt proud of how their peers were able to cope with their problems of being bullied more and their art projects enhanced the participants' senses of positive self as part of their self-transformation. For example, DAP10_63 said “This art project was successful and we continued the project because our teacher supported us with the funding to do the project.”

Vocation

As the Student Agency Project let the students choose the activities based on their preferences, students explored and did their project to serve their school and community. For example, DAP1_1 said “I could use knowledge and experiences in this Project in real life to support and mitigate my friends who had suffered from depression.”

Students recognized one's self-worth for society or community and set up a purpose in life. For examples:

- "I realized that I wanted to pursue my study in mass media doing performance arts and acting for my future study and self-development." DBP11_60
- "I wanted to further my study in marketing or business from the skills gained in participating in the project such as selling crafts that I made." DBP5_23
- "The skills gained in participating in the project, which was playing music made me want to further my study in music." DAP8_52
- "At the end of the project, I recognized that I liked to perform and dance and want to continue practicing performing and dancing more in the future." DAP2_8
- "I wanted to take care of the environment to help stop global warming in the future." DAP1_3

Students reflected that they would apply experiences gained in the project in their own lives to support peers and younger students in school to cope with depression or low self-esteem. For example:

- "I practiced many new skills in the project such as making furniture. I could share and teach these skills to the younger students at my school." DAP1_5
- "We had many rehearsals for our project. We became better at expression. Now we could do the drama activities with our peers and younger students at school." DAP1_2

The activities in the Student Agency Project improved the participants and made the students recognize their skills and values, which became the students' life purpose.

Profession

Many fewer comments were made that could be aligned with the idea of profession. Students applied knowledge and experience from the activities in their everyday lives as a way of earning income. Students earned money by making crafts, farming, planting, and cooking together and selling their products to people. For example:

- "I made herb juices as my vocation and cooked for members of my families." DAP6_30
- "I sold vegetables from my farming and the flowerpots that I made from car tires to people in their community." DBP5_25
- "I practiced planting vegetables like water spinach, and bok choy, painting plant pots, and selling these items at the booth in the community market." DBP5_27

Discussion/conclusion

This study explained how the IKIGAI/PYD experiment built agentic qualities in students. Students in this project became active agents in their own development (Bandura, 2003; Lerner et al., 2018). The IKIGAI/PYD framework focuses on the development of human potential and strengths through understanding oneself and attempting

growth, through the use of a self-reflexive process, in which people engage intensely in social issues to find meaning and purpose in life (Mayer and Vanderheiden, 2021).

The evidence assembled here from the high school participants shows considerable growth under the notion of Passion, and much smaller changes in terms of mission, vocation, and profession, although the evidence for changes in those three areas was positive. The low frequencies for comments related to Vocation and Profession and their restriction to the post-intervention discussion groups suggest that there may be a progressive process underlying the tendency of these students to talk about those aspects of positive development. It may be that they needed to experience Passion and Mission, before they could begin to think about life as an adult. Alternatively, the shift in discourse may reflect a developmental process among adolescents as they aged through the school system.

In terms of Passion, the experiment built up a positive sense of self in students, which led to greater social skills and sense of community with peers and teachers. In the projects, students demonstrated care and compassion, social competence, connection to peers and school, and developed their own character (Lerner et al., 2018). The study showed students gained self-expression, self-confidence, self-awareness and self-understanding, self-adjustment, self-regulation, and self-responsibility. The students revealed that they had developed in themselves better coping with problems at home and school and with their peers. They also showed large gains in terms of understanding and managing themselves. There is evidence of greater ability to manage setbacks and negative emotions, leading to choices that resulted in healthier lives. On that basis, having students engage in real world, authentic projects in the rural, impoverished, challenging context of Thailand has been a success. These are young people who believe in themselves and are willing to contribute to their own communities.

Although there was not much evidence about enhanced mission, vocation, or profession, it may well be too soon given the age and stage of schooling to see those aspects of Ikigai developing. Longer term follow-up is needed to see if the participants of these interesting team-building and potentially commercial projects have the desired impact. Nevertheless, this study shows that young people can develop through the framework of projects that address concerns in their own environment. The Ikigai framework allows a full range of developmental processes to grow.

In terms of policy implications, this study suggests the Ikigai framework is a useful human development model and could be used in any school's development for enhancing student agency and life purpose. The Ikigai model engaged students to work as a team in real problems and project-based learning. Students gained a sense of passion and the ability to implement self-defined projects. The Student Agency Project guided by the Ikigai approach seems to have helped the students learn innovatively and acquire knowledge with happiness while giving due consideration to the environment. Apart from the competency the students gained (e.g., working with the community and friends, communication, and self-learning), they became change agents concerning the problems within their community.

The Ikigai plus project-based learning combination contributed to the students' personal development processes from selecting a topic, setting goals, choosing working methods, persevering through obstacles, and working as a team. The model emphasized that happiness in learning truly comes from students' and teachers' own

autonomy, where learning could happen outside the classroom and where teachers provided mental support as their coaches within the projects. The Ikigai model could be applied in other parts of Thailand in project-based learning, which is consistent with the recent Thai Educational Policy goals. Consistent with the [Office of the Basic Education Commission \(2024\)](#), the project helped the schools by providing appropriate inner growth development techniques for encouraging student autonomy and agency. It seems that Ikigai helps such students develop a sense of self, autonomy, and inner growth. The evidence here, around Ikigai as a conceptual analysis and as a framework for positive youth development suggests further use of Ikigai is warranted.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University (Social Sciences), Thailand. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

PS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SW: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. SP: Funding acquisition, Resources, Writing – review & editing. GB: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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