

# Chinese student perceptions and voice: Navigating intergenerational perspectives on learning success and learner identity



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## ABSTRACT

Within migrant Chinese families, variations in acculturation can lead to generational differences in how learning success is understood and valued. During adolescence, a critical period for identity formation, such differences may become particularly pronounced when students' perspectives are not fully recognised. This study examined how perceived intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success influence Chinese secondary school students' learner identities in New Zealand, and how these beliefs were communicated within families. Using thematic analysis of students' accounts, three key themes were identified: students hold broad views of learning success; academic achievement is considered important to parents; and students value open and direct communication with their parents. Despite generational differences, students maintain multifaceted learner identities and benefit from honest and open communication about learning at home. These findings highlight the complexity of Chinese students' learner identities and underscore the importance of recognising student voice within family contexts. By foregrounding students' perspectives, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural values, communication, and identity intersect in migrant Chinese families in New Zealand, with implications for educators and practitioners working to support equitable and culturally responsive practice.

## KEYWORDS

Chinese adolescents, learning success, learner identity, intergenerational differences, intergenerational conflicts

## Introduction

New Zealand's educational landscape presents a distinctive context for understanding migrant learner experiences. The education system is shaped by a bicultural framework grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), which recognises Māori as the indigenous people of New Zealand and

establishes partnership principles between Māori and the Crown. The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) explicitly values cultural diversity and schools often embed and celebrate culture within teaching and the curriculum. However, New Zealand's demographics have shifted considerably, with approximately 29% of the population now born overseas and Auckland ranking among the world's most ethnically diverse cities (Stats NZ, n.d.). For Chinese migrant families, who represent one of the largest and fastest-growing ethnic communities, this means navigating an educational environment where bicultural principles coexist with increasing multicultural realities. While the curriculum encourages schools to acknowledge students' languages and cultural backgrounds, practical implementation varies across schools, creating unique challenges for families negotiating educational expectations and identity development.

High academic expectations are commonly found among Chinese migrant parents (Fang, 2016). Differences in acculturation between parents and their children often lead to divergent beliefs about learning success. In schools, teachers may observe these differences in how students perceive success and approach learning. For example, Chinese migrant students, influenced by Western values, may embrace independence and individuality (Minkov et al., 2018), whereas many Chinese migrant parents prioritise academic excellence and traditional family obligations (Fang, 2016). These dynamics can create intergenerational conflict (J. Liu et al., 2019), which may in turn affect adolescents' self-esteem (Albert Sznitman et al., 2019), family cohesion (Guo et al., 2022), and mental wellbeing (Tummala-Narra et al., 2021), thereby potentially hindering the development of a positive learner identity during adolescence.

Despite these challenges, research shows that conflicts arising from intergenerational differences can be mitigated through effective communication strategies. Techniques like active listening and empathy can help students navigate these challenges and foster healthier family dynamics (Dere & Başıbüyük, 2025). Open and direct communication builds trust, honesty and openness within families, supports students' self-esteem and aids in the development of a positive learner identity (Albert Sznitman et al., 2019). When parents are responsive and flexible to their children's perspectives, students feel empowered, gaining a voice and an attentive audience (Lundy, 2018).

In education, the importance of listening to children's voices is reinforced by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which emphasises children's right to express their views and have them respected. Lundy's (2018) model outlines four key components of research with children: space, voice, audience and influence. This highlights the importance of creating opportunities for students to influence their learning environments and validate their perspectives (Ranta, 2023). Since interactions with social environments significantly influence identity formation (Albert Sznitman et al., 2019), empowering students to express their views, with the aim of ensuring their perspectives are acted upon, is a vital step in fostering their sense of agency and their right to participation (Ranta, 2023).

While existing research often highlights the negative impacts of intergenerational differences on students' wellbeing (Madhavan et al., 2024), there is less attention given to how these differences shape learner identity. Additionally, little is known about how Chinese migrant families in New Zealand navigate conversations about learning success, academic achievement, and conflict

resolution. This study addresses that gap by examining how intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success influence Chinese students' learner identities and how families communicate about these differences.

This study is guided by two key research questions:

1. How do intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success influence the identity of New Zealand Chinese secondary school students as learners?
2. How do New Zealand Chinese secondary school students use their voices to navigate intergenerational differences in beliefs about educational success at home?

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the learner identities of Chinese secondary school students, their perceptions of parental values, and the strategies they use to manage intergenerational dynamics regarding learning and achievement. While these differences can create conflicts that challenge adolescent identity development, students appeared to adapt to their parents' views. At the same time, they maintained autonomy in shaping identities aligned with their own values.

This study highlights the complexity of adolescent learner identity, particularly for students from migrant backgrounds who navigate intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success. Teachers play a critical role in supporting students through these challenges. Research indicates that open and respectful communication between students and their families is beneficial. By actively listening to and working collaboratively with families, teachers can help bridge generational differences, support constructive family relationships, and foster students' resilience, autonomy, and positive learner identities.

## Literature review

### ***Intergenerational cultural transmission theory***

Intergenerational cultural transmission theory focuses on how cultural beliefs, values and practices are shared between generations. It describes how cultural norms are passed down from parents to children (Williams et al., 2020). Research suggests that parents and their adolescent children often share similar values and cultural orientations (Basilici et al., 2025). For example, a longitudinal study of 323 Chinese students and their parents found evidence of intergenerational transmission of educational aspirations (N. Wu et al., 2018). However, this transmission is not always direct, and children's desire for individuality and independence may conflict with parental values of family obligations and interdependence (Badrinath & Seto, 2024). As identified by Choi et al. (2021), this dynamic can be a source of conflict that shapes both academic and personal identities within families. These studies illustrate that while some Chinese parents and their children may share educational expectations, differences in educational beliefs are also likely due to various factors influencing students' beliefs about achievement and learning.

### ***Cultural perspectives on education and learning success***

Building on the understanding of intergenerational transmission, cultural perspectives on education, especially influenced by Confucianism, significantly shape how education is perceived in Chinese society (Chen, 2023). A core principle of Confucianism is self-cultivation, which emphasises continuous self-improvement (Y. Lee, 2020). This belief contributes to a strong emphasis on education as a pathway to personal betterment (Minkov et al., 2018). For many Chinese families, particularly immigrant families, education is regarded as a vital means for attaining social standing and improving quality of life (J. Wu, 2022). Consequently, parents often hold high academic aspirations for their children, investing significantly in their education (Shen, 2025) with the expectation that this investment will be repaid through academic success (N. Wu et al., 2018).

However, while high parental expectations typically associate with better academic outcomes, they can also negatively impact adolescents' emotional wellbeing. Y. Ma et al. (2018) found that excessive parental pressure contributes to stress and anxiety, particularly in Chinese communities where academic success is highly valued. This suggests that although parents play a key role in shaping their children's academic achievements, this influence can sometimes come at the expense of the child's emotional wellbeing, further complicating the identity formation process initiated by intergenerational cultural transmission.

### ***Adolescent identity formation and Chinese students' identity development***

As students face these pressures, adolescent identity formation becomes a critical area of focus. Erikson (1968) proposed that adolescence is a critical period for identity development, closely tied to psychological wellbeing. His view that identity development is a process shaped by psychological, social, and biological factors reinforces the continued relevance of the psychosocial approach to adolescent development today (Maree, 2022). For Chinese secondary school students in New Zealand, navigating between home culture and mainstream society adds an additional layer of complexity to their identity formation.

Social identity, derived from group memberships like race and ethnicity, enhances belonging (Ng & Wei, 2020) and contributes to self-esteem and emotional connection (Haslam et al., 2022). Ecological Systems Theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) illustrates how various systems (namely the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems) influence identity formation, demonstrating that identity develops within broader sociocultural contexts. This perspective continues to be relevant in light of J. Lee et al.'s (2025) systematic review, which examines the challenges immigrant students face across different ecological systems and their implications for wellbeing, identity, and socioemotional development.

While adolescent values often align with parental expectations (Lin & Wei, 2025), reflecting microsystem influences, broader cultural contexts at the macrosystem level also significantly shape development (J. Lee et al., 2025). Complexity emerges within Chinese students' identities, as seen in Z. Wang's (2023) thematic analysis of 479 Chinese high school students, revealing dimensions such as the exam-oriented self, familial self, enterprising self, competitive self, and free and happy self. This diversity highlights that identity is influenced not just by academic expectations, but also by family

responsibilities and personal ambitions. A longitudinal study of 2,648 Chinese high school students by Zhou et al. (2020) found that prosocial, socially competent, self-determined and resilient selves are key to academic success and wellbeing, illustrating the intricate interplay between parental expectations and students' personal development.

### ***Voice and agency in education***

The complex interplay between identity development, parental expectations, and sociocultural contexts underscores the importance of recognising students' voice within education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) asserts that all children, regardless of background or status, have the right to care and to develop in a harmonious and protected environment. New Zealand ratified the UNCRC in 1989, committing to uphold these rights.

Article 12 of the UNCRC affirms children's right to participate in decisions that directly affect them (United Nations, 1989). This research project is grounded in this principle, emphasising the necessity of including students in discussions about their educational experiences. Chinese students in New Zealand navigate diverse sociocultural and educational systems, highlighting the importance of considering their unique perspectives. By situating the project within the framework of the UNCRC, it underscores the importance of seeking their voices and fostering participation, ultimately empowering students to influence the structures that shape their learning experiences. Providing genuine opportunities for students' voices to be heard is vital in reinforcing their agency and rights (Lundy, 2018), and it can help illuminate the stress and anxiety that often arise from high parental expectations and intergenerational conflicts previously discussed.

In summary, the interrelationship between intergenerational cultural transmission, cultural perspectives on education, adolescent identity formation, and student voice in education offers a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping Chinese students' experiences in New Zealand. These insights reveal the complexities and challenges faced by these students as they navigate cultural expectations across home and school contexts, highlighting the need for further exploration of how these dynamics influence their identities and how they express their views. Synthesising key findings across these fields, this review establishes a foundation for examining the multifaceted experiences of Chinese students in New Zealand.

Despite this growing body of literature, three critical gaps remain. First, research has predominantly focused on parental perspectives, leaving students' own voices and experiences underexplored. Second, while cultural transmission and identity formation are well documented, there is limited understanding of how Chinese students in New Zealand specifically integrate potentially competing cultural frameworks into their learner identities. Third, although the UNCRC affirms children's right to participation, little is known about how Chinese migrant students exercise voice within family contexts where direct communication may conflict with cultural values. By centring students' perspectives, this study examines how intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success shape Chinese secondary school students' learner identities in New Zealand and how students communicate about these differences at home, offering insights essential for teachers working to support these students in navigating dual cultural expectations.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the phenomenon in depth, emphasising the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was initially used to select participants who met the criteria of being Chinese secondary school students in New Zealand, aged 15 to 18. This age range was selected as it aligns with a period of heightened identity development (Branje et al., 2021) characterised by increased self-awareness (Demetriou et al., 2020) and the ability to articulate nuanced perspectives (Rew et al., 2015). Furthermore, this demographic is likely navigating contrasting value systems between parents and peers, making them well-suited to provide insights into intergenerational beliefs and the negotiation of autonomy (Z. Wang, 2023).

Two local secondary schools were contacted, resulting in the recruitment of one student through purposive sampling. Subsequently, a snowball sampling strategy was implemented. This approach, relying on referrals from existing participants' social networks, proved effective in accessing a hard-to-reach population and fostered trust within the research community, crucial when exploring potentially sensitive topics such as differing parental perspectives (Parker et al., 2019).

A total of ten participants were recruited. This sample size allowed for in-depth analysis, enabling rich and nuanced data collection (Bekele & Ago, 2022). Key demographic details about the participants are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Demographic information of participants*

Identifier	Gender	Age	Years lived in New Zealand
P1	M	16	5 years or more
P2	M	17	5 years or more
P3	M	16	5 years or more
P4	F	16	Less than 5 years
P5	M	17	5 years or more
P6	M	17	5 years or more
P7	F	16	5 years or more
P8	F	16	Less than 5 years
P9	F	15	Less than 5 years
P10	F	16	5 years or more

### **Data collection**

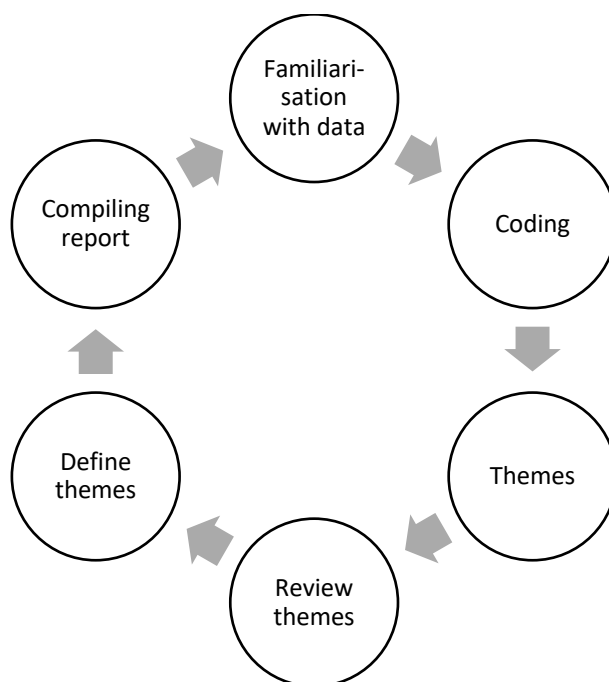
Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to gather detailed information about participants' experiences with intergenerational beliefs regarding learning

success, how these beliefs shaped their own learner identity, and how they expressed the impact of these beliefs in their own voices. Open-ended questions were essential for allowing participants to explore their thoughts freely, which is particularly important for understanding complex issues such as identity and intergenerational dynamics. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Preplanned questions guided the discussions, while probing questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate and clarify their ideas when they provided particularly insightful responses.

To respect participants' linguistic preferences and ensure they could express themselves fully, students were given the option to be interviewed in either Mandarin Chinese or English. Three interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and seven were conducted in English.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to address the research questions. The coding procedures and data analysis followed the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. The six-phase framework of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)*

Immersion in the dataset through reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed a comprehensive understanding of the responses. Transcriptions were created in Excel and thoroughly checked against the audio recordings for accuracy. The entries were examined iteratively to identify important keywords related to the research question. Following this, initial codes were generated based on the identified keywords and the key ideas expressed by participants. For example, when students mentioned phrases such as “independent learner” or “research on my own” during their interviews, these were first highlighted as keywords and subsequently used to generate the code ‘independent learner’. Codes with similar meanings were grouped together to form broader categories. For

example, 'independent learner' and 'proactive learner' were grouped under the overarching category of 'active learner'. The categories were iteratively reviewed and refined in the context of the students' statements and the initial codes to identify overarching themes.

To support this process, a coding scheme was developed to organise the categories and preliminary themes. The emerging themes were informed by relevant theories such as self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), goal-orientation theories (Dweck, 2017), and family communication studies (High & Scharp, 2015), which contributed to the identification of overarching themes. For example, the literature suggests that self-directed and motivated learners exhibit characteristics such as being goal-oriented, proactive, capable of independent problem solving and intrinsically motivated (Robinson & Persky, 2020; Tekkol & Demirel, 2018). Through this rigorous analytical process, key themes were identified that provided valuable insights into the research questions.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For participants aged 16 and under, parental informed consent was also required to ensure that both the participants and their families fully understood their rights and the purpose of the research. Privacy and confidentiality were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were informed about how their data would be anonymised and securely stored to protect their identities. These measures were particularly important given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed, such as intergenerational conflicts and differing views on learning success.

### ***Research positionality***

This study is primarily informed by the positionality of the first author, a researcher of Chinese descent who was born in Taiwan and is situated within the New Zealand educational context. Her cultural background provides a lens through which she engaged with participants' accounts, offering cultural and linguistic familiarity that supported rapport-building and the interpretation of culturally embedded meanings. At the same time, she recognises her position as both an insider and an outsider (Bukamal, 2022), as participants' experiences are shaped by diverse migration histories, family dynamics, and identity trajectories that do not fully mirror her own.

Given the use of thematic analysis, reflexivity was integral throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013), with analytic decisions and interpretations informed through ongoing reflexive consideration of how assumptions and perspectives shaped theme development. Recognising that knowledge production is inherently situated (Xiong et al., 2024), the research does not attempt to claim neutrality but instead embraces reflexivity as a methodological strength that contributes to a more contextually sensitive understanding of Chinese students' experiences in New Zealand.

## Results

Understanding Chinese secondary school students' perceptions of intergenerational differences in learning success provides insights into their social psychology, particularly regarding learner identities and family communication.

Thematic analysis revealed three major themes related to learner identity, perceived parental values regarding learning success, and home dialogues about learning success, which are: students hold broad views of learning success; academic achievement is considered important to parents; and students value open and direct communication with parents.

### ***Students hold broad views of learning success***

Students described multiple learner identities including a Self-Directed and Motivated Learner, a Well-Rounded Learner and an Achiever. Collectively, these identities support the overarching theme that students hold broad views of learning success.

Three characteristics of the Self-Directed and Motivated Learner identity emphasise a proactive approach fundamental to learning success: independent problem-solving, goal setting and intrinsic motivation.

All participants recognised self-direction, particularly through independent problem-solving, as essential. For example, P7 described an independent problem solver as someone who actively seeks solutions and takes steps to "solve problems we don't understand". Goal setting was another key aspect of self-direction, with participants highlighting its role in providing focus and direction. P10 suggested that both "setting a very short-term goal which must be achieved" and long-term goals such as "working towards your dreams" help maintain focus and motivation. Intrinsic motivation was also identified as a critical factor for learning success. Participants distinguished between external pressure and internal drive. P8 stressed that motivation "can't come externally from someone else", explaining that it must stem from within, as "it can't be forced or anything".

The identity of a Well-Rounded Learner reflects a holistic view of learning success, valuing personal development and accomplishments beyond academics. Seven participants perceived learning success as a multifaceted process, where academic achievement is just one component. P2 reflected this broader perspective, stating, "Academics, in the end of the day, does not really determine how good of a person you are", highlighting the importance of personal character in defining success in learning. Extracurricular activities were identified by four participants as key to their sense of achievement and personal fulfilment. P9 linked extracurricular participation to future success, explaining that involvement in various activities helps to build skills with long-term benefits.

Finally, an Achiever identity was identified as key to learning success for all participants. High academic performance, such as achieving "high scores" (P2) and "very high academic results" (P4) was seen as a crucial indicator of success. Academic achievement was viewed not only as a reflection of learning but also as essential for future opportunities and personal fulfilment.

### **Academic achievement is considered important to parents**

The second theme highlights high parental expectations for excellence, emphasising that academic achievement is considered important to parents. Students believed their parents associate learning success with hard work and persistence, expecting them to “perform to my best” (P2). Students proposed that parental aspirations are tied to future opportunities, which aligns with the students’ Achiever identity. However, while students expressed an understanding that their parents “just want the best for me ... to do well, have a good life” (P9), this understanding came with internal conflict for seven participants. They noted tension between their personal beliefs and their perceptions of their parents’ expectations, suggesting that academic achievement was sometimes overemphasised. P3 reflected on this, stating that “maybe grades might not be as important to them as they believe”.

Participants also reported that the perceived pressure caused stress (P8) and strained parent-child relationships (P3). P4 expressed feelings of “never be[ing] good enough”, while P10 explained that when parental expectations differed from their own, it reduced their motivation to learn:

[I]f their beliefs are a bit different from mine, then I don’t feel like doing that thing, so I just don’t try very hard. Just don’t have very big motivation. ... Just a passing grade is good enough to answer to my parents’ view. (P10)

In addition to feelings of inadequacy, five participants expressed that they were “learning for others rather than for themselves”. P3 explained, “it wouldn’t be, like, I’m studying for myself, but I’m studying for them, and I don’t think that’s a great way to study”. These perspectives suggest that external motivation, driven by a desire to meet parental expectations, can shift the purpose of learning, undermining intrinsic motivation.

Despite these challenges, five participants identified positive aspects of parental aspiration. For example, P4 noted that “pressure and everything will boost me more into putting in more effort”, while P9 explained that “a bit of pressure is always needed in order to just give that little push”. These views suggest that moderate levels of parental pressure can enhance motivation and performance.

Interestingly, while students acknowledged parental influence in shaping their learner identity, they also noted the significant influence of their own experiences and peer interactions. P1 reflected that parents’ views “had passed on to me, but then I think it adds on to my own views as well as my own experiences at school”. Similarly, P2 suggested that peers may have a stronger influence than parents, stating “the people you are with at school, outside of your home, will also potentially influence that more than your parents”. This highlights the role of social contexts outside the family, such as peer groups, in shaping students’ learner identities.

P9 acknowledged that while parental values played an important role in her early development, they were not the sole determinants of her learner identity. She explained, “you kind of first encounter the aim to want to get high grades with your parents, because they kind of implement it when you’re young ... and those beliefs have probably resonated with me in my life at high school and wanting to just achieve better”, and “in the end it’s still my own opinion on what motivates me and what I want

to do in the future that keeps me learning, that keeps me wanting to aim and grasp that success". This reflection shows that while parental beliefs initially shape a child's worldview, students' evolving sense of identity can play a more significant role in learning and education.

### ***Students value open and direct communication with parents***

A key element of students' communication with parents was honesty and a willingness to consider different perspectives. All participants emphasised the value of a supportive and nurturing environment that fosters open and direct communication. P4 highlighted the importance of expressing their opinions freely without the fear of conflict, while P3 stressed the need for parents to provide a space to share information on students' own terms. This highlights the importance of parents and students co-creating a space where knowledge and perspectives can be shared and valued.

Parental encouragement appeared as a critical factor in motivating students and shaping their identity. Participants stressed that encouragement, rather than pressure, was key to fostering motivation. P7 explained that parents should not "put too much pressure on students" but should instead focus on providing support, as "their encouragement and support will make me work harder".

An interesting dimension of this theme was students' acknowledgement of the role that their parents' cultural background played in shaping educational expectations. Participants recognised the influence of their parents' upbringing and cultural values on their approach to learning. P9 noted: "because my parents have an Asian background and they come from China, their idea of learning is vastly different to what we experience in New Zealand". It shows that students acknowledge that parental values and experiences are shaped by their own educational backgrounds and social environments.

## **Discussion**

While previous research on Chinese students' learner identity and intergenerational conflicts has primarily focused on parental perspectives, the current study shifts attention to students' perspectives. Understanding students' views on intergenerational beliefs about learning success, how these beliefs shape their identity and how these are communicated within the home provides valuable insight into the social and cultural psychology underpinning students' learning, achievement, and development – factors closely linked to school performance. Importantly, the findings suggest that parental beliefs and values influence learner identity and shape learning behaviours, highlighting the significance of the home environment in understanding students' educational experiences and achievements more holistically.

This research identified three themes: students hold broad views of learning success; academic achievement is considered important by parents; and students value open and direct communication with their parents. These findings will be examined in relation to (a) the impact of intergenerational

dynamics on Chinese students' identities as learners, and (b) how students navigate intergenerational beliefs and discuss learning success with their parents.

### ***Balancing parental expectations and student perspectives on learning success – the impact on Chinese learner identities***

This study highlights that New Zealand Chinese secondary school students perceive their parents' strong emphasis on academic achievement as central to learning success, reflecting cultural values in which education is viewed as key to future success and opportunities (J. Wu, 2022). However, the findings also reveal a divergence between parents' and students' views, with students demonstrating a broader and more dynamic sense of identity. While parents may focus on academic achievement, students extend their learner identities to include being self-directed and motivated learners, well-rounded individuals, problem-solvers and high achievers. This shift reflects a generational transition, where students adopt a more holistic definition of success that values personal growth, autonomy and extracurricular involvement alongside academic achievement. These findings suggest that, in response to intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success, students develop dynamic learner identities that accommodate both collectivist cultural values emphasising family obligations (Z. Wang, 2023) and the individualistic norms of independent thinking and personal growth (Minkov et al., 2018).

For schools, this highlights the need to recognise and nurture the multifaceted identities of Chinese students. These students navigate complex cultural dynamics, balancing collectivist values with the individualistic norms of New Zealand's education system. Understanding and supporting these dynamic learner identities can help schools create inclusive learning environments that validate students' diverse strengths and aspirations.

Navigating dual cultural influences can create tension for students, as parental expectations may feel overwhelming and strain student-parent relationships (M. Liu et al., 2022). These pressures can also affect how students perceive their familial identity, that is, how they understand their achievements in relation to family expectations, such as viewing learning success as an obligation (Z. Wang, 2023). However, the findings of this study suggest that while parental expectations play a role in shaping learner identity (Badrinath & Seto, 2024), other influences such as peers, school culture and personal experiences, are also central to the formation of learner identity. Students' learner identities are thus shaped by interactions across multiple contexts (Crocetti et al., 2023). Some students may be more influenced by peer expectations, while others prioritise parental values. This variability highlights the highly individual and context-dependent nature of students' self-perceptions as learners.

Teachers play a crucial role in understanding how culturally embedded parental expectations for hard work shape students' learner identities (Averill et al., 2016). While these expectations can be motivating, a singular focus on academic success may create tension as students navigate their own aspirations. Schools can help balance these influences by partnering with parents to foster a holistic approach that values personal growth (Minkov et al., 2018) and autonomy (Education Review Office, 2018). A strong school-parent partnership encourages open dialogue about diverse definitions of

success, including students' own (Capretta et al., 2024) and provides opportunities for parents and teachers to understand how students can be supported across contexts (T. Ma et al., 2024).

### ***Navigating intergenerational beliefs – how Chinese secondary school students communicate their perspectives on learning success to parents***

In exploring how students use their voices to navigate intergenerational differences in beliefs about learning success at home, the findings highlight the importance of open and direct communication as a key strategy for managing differing views. As adolescence is a developmental period characterised by increasing autonomy, communication around learning can become particularly challenging, especially within families where traditional cultural values emphasise parental authority (Choi et al., 2021). Students in this research expressed a preference for transparent communication, where they could honestly share their perspectives and keep parents informed of their learning progress. This fosters collaboration and a sense of partnership between students and parents, supporting learning success while also enhancing emotional wellbeing.

The findings highlight that students perceive a nurturing and supportive environment as essential for facilitating open communication. This aligns with research showing that healthy family communication promotes adolescents' identity development and emotional wellbeing, strengthens family cohesion, and reduces conflict (Albert Sznitman et al., 2019; Dere & Başbüyük, 2025). For teachers working with Chinese students and families, this underscores the value of encouraging environments that promote honest and respectful dialogue. At the same time, open communication may not always align with the cultural norms of some families. In some Chinese immigrant families where traditional Confucian values like filial piety and respect are emphasised, direct communication may be less common or even discouraged (Ho, 2020). In these contexts, encouraging open dialogue can be challenging and may inadvertently lead to miscommunication or tension. When students and parents have differing communication styles, strained relationships can arise unless both parties demonstrate flexibility and adaptability.

Teachers can play a key role by offering culturally responsive guidance that respects traditional values while fostering mutual understanding. This might include modelling communication strategies such as empathetic listening, encouraging parents to create safe spaces for students to express themselves and encourage teacher-parent connections. By supporting families in navigating these dynamics, teachers can help maintain emotional connections between parents and students and promote healthy psychosocial adjustment (C. Wang et al., 2021).

A closer look at the distinction between parental encouragement and pressure reveals complexities that are relevant for teachers. While students generally view encouragement as positive and motivating (Gupta & Bashir, 2017), excessive pressure can lead to stress, self-doubt, and reduced wellbeing (Y. Ma et al., 2018). What distinguishes encouragement from pressure, however, is not universal and depends on individual factors such as a student's academic performance, self-efficacy (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023) and internalised parental values (Xue, 2025). This highlights the importance of personalised approaches from parents that consider their child's unique strengths, challenges and emotional needs.

The findings illustrate the role of cultural factors in shaping family communication dynamics in Chinese immigrant families. Students recognise that their parents' educational beliefs, grounded in Confucian values such as self-cultivation, knowledge advancement and filial piety (Cheung, 2020), emphasise academic success as a way to honour the family (Chuang et al., 2018). This often creates tension as students navigate between these traditional values and the individualist perspectives of Western cultures. While students respect their parents' views, they may feel conflicted by the need to reconcile these expectations with their own desire for independence and self-expression. For teachers, understanding these cultural dynamics can inform more empathetic and inclusive practices. Teachers can foster collaboration between home and school by acknowledging the importance of cultural values while creating space for students to express their individuality. By facilitating conversations that bridge these perspectives, teachers can help students feel supported in both honouring their cultural heritage and pursuing their own unique aspirations. This approach can ease the potential tension students may feel and strengthen the relationship between families and schools.

This research highlights the complexities of Chinese immigrant students' learner identity, shaped by cultural values, family expectations, and individual experiences. Students' Chinese heritage functions as a form of cultural and educational capital, equipping them with attitudes and behaviours that enhance academic engagement, such as effort beliefs grounded in obligation and role fulfilment. Confucian traditions emphasising self-cultivation and family duty likely foster intrinsic motivation for achievement that surpasses personal interests. This intrinsic motivation represents both a cultural asset and a pathway to academic success (Chen, 2023).

Despite the challenges of navigating dual cultural influences, students develop balanced and dynamic learner identities. While the Chinese cultural emphasis on fulfilling familial obligations enriches their social identity, exposure to individualistic norms fosters autonomy, self-directed learning, and positive self-regard (Ryan & Deci, 2017). By accessing this diverse cultural capital, students define unique identities that support personal growth and academic achievement (Cui, 2015).

In many Chinese immigrant families, traditional or Confucian values, including filial piety and respect, often mean that children speaking up may not be encouraged (Ho, 2020), as such expression can risk disrupting family harmony (Pham, Lui, & Rollock, 2020) and challenge established hierarchical norms (Badrinath & Seto, 2024). In these contexts, although children's voices may be valued in individualistic cultures, they may not align with collectivist ideals of interdependence and obedience (Minkov et al., 2018). Speaking up can therefore potentially lead to miscommunication, relational strain, and disruption of collective harmony, negatively affecting students' wellbeing (Pham et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, how students navigate these tensions depends on their personal perception of the experience as supportive (Soenens et al., 2015). This variability challenges the notion of a universal view of children's voices: while certain psychological needs may be broadly recognised, their expression is influenced by cultural contexts and family dynamics (Fontaine & Breugelmans, 2021). Given the influence of Confucianism, which prioritises harmony, conflict avoidance, and collective goals, supporting diverse forms of expression requires an understanding of children's voices that

acknowledges both universal principles of children's rights and the cultural specific ways in which these rights are experienced (Soenens et al., 2015).

The findings align with Paris's (2012) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which emphasises that education should actively sustain and perpetuate students' heritage cultural practices while they are also developing competencies valued in mainstream schooling. Paris argues that culturally sustaining pedagogy "seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93). The multifaceted learner identities Chinese students develop – as self-directed learners, well-rounded individuals, problem-solvers, and achievers – reflect this cultural sustaining. Rather than abandoning Confucian values in favour of Western individualism, students sustain their heritage cultural practices while simultaneously developing the autonomy and self-direction valued within the New Zealand education system. This cultural plurality represents a strength rather than a tension to be resolved.

These findings have clear implications for educators and policymakers. At the classroom level, teachers who adopt a culturally sustaining stance create learning environments where multiple cultural frameworks can coexist, supporting students in maintaining rich, pluralistic identities without being positioned as having to choose between cultural values. Encouraging diverse definitions of success, promoting student-parent partnerships, and supporting open dialogue can help students navigate intergenerational expectations while thriving academically and emotionally.

At the school level, strategies could include family partnership programmes that move beyond grade-focused parent-teacher conferences to collaborative conversations about learning and achievement that honour both collectivist and individualistic perspectives. Professional development could enhance teachers' cultural competence, helping them understand how Confucian values shape family communication and achievement beliefs.

At the policy level, schools need accessible counselling services with culturally competent practitioners who understand intergenerational dynamics in migrant families. These support services could help students develop strategies to negotiate differing viewpoints about learning success, maintain positive family relationships and develop positive learner identities while honouring both their cultural heritage and individual aspirations.

Finally, this research reinforces the importance of amplifying children's voices in alignment with the UNCRC. Offering students opportunities to communicate in their preferred language allowed them to express views confidently and authentically, highlighting that children's rights to be heard must be interpreted within cultural contexts (Brando, 2019). Supporting students in expressing their perspectives requires balancing universal principles of voice and autonomy with the cultural norms of families shaped by collectivist and Confucian values. Recognising both universal and culturally specific dimensions of student voice is essential for fostering wellbeing, identity development, and equitable educational experiences.

## Conclusion

Students' learner identities are psychologically and socially complex. Developing a positive identity is crucial for helping students face challenges constructively. For Chinese secondary school students in New Zealand, intergenerational beliefs about learning success further complicate self-perception as they navigate different cultural expectations. Open and direct communication provides essential support and encouragement, contributing to wellbeing and identity development. Building strong school-parent partnerships that emphasise holistic identity and open communication is key to minimising intergenerational differences in New Zealand Chinese families.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. This research captures only students' perceptions of their parents' beliefs, which may not fully reflect the parents' actual views. In the context of Chinese culture, the emphasis on family unity may lead students to be reluctant to discuss family conflicts, as these matters are often regarded as private. Consequently, the extent of intergenerational differences reported by students may be limited. Notably, students became more open and provided deeper insights toward the end of the interviews, possibly due to increased familiarity with the interviewer and the interview process. This highlights the importance of creating a safe and comfortable environment for students to discuss topics that are sensitive to them or their families.

An ecological view of development suggests that parents' own schooling experiences can shape students' conceptualisations of success. While this influence was not revealed in the current data, future research could explore how parents' educational experiences contribute to the development of adolescents' learner identities. Future studies incorporating both student and parental perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of intergenerational dynamics in migrant Chinese families.

These findings underscore the importance for educators and policymakers of recognising students' multifaceted learner identities, supporting open and culturally responsive family-school communication, and creating environments that honour both students' cultural heritage and individual aspirations.

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