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Learning Under Pressure: Emotional Cultures and Student Participation in Shanghai Secondary Schools

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Abstract. Shanghai is a well-known high-achieving educational environment in which students' academic performance is shaped by fierce competition, examination pressure, family expectations, and institutional demands. Much existing research has focused on achievement, stress, and mental health in schooling, while the role of emotions in classroom participation has received less attention. This conceptual study looks at how emotional cultures influence student participation in Shanghai secondary schools. Drawing on the sociology of emotions, school climate, and student agency, it contends that involvement is not only cognitive and behavioral, but also emotionally and socially positioned. Students in high-performing school environments are frequently required to be self-disciplined, efficient, resilient, modest, competitive, and emotionally stable. These expectations may help students succeed, but they may also limit their desire to ask questions, demonstrate confusion, express reluctance, and participate in open classroom engagement. Based on educational observations and socio-cultural research, this paper contends that emotional cultures manage involvement through relational safety, perceived exposure risk, and internalised achievement pressure. Emotional culture should thus be viewed as a structural prerequisite of learning and involvement, rather than as a secondary or purely individual concern.

Keywords: emotional culture, student participation, agency, school climate, Shanghai secondary education

1. Introduction

Students in Shanghai topped the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 and 2012 in reading, mathematics, and science, attracting international attention as a high-achieving educational context [1, 2]. These results have made Shanghai an important case for examining how academic achievement is produced under conditions of competition, examination pressure, family investment, and institutional accountability. Secondary education represents an opportunity for both personal advancement and family mobility for many parents and students. Entrance examinations, school rankings, district differences, family resources, and shadow education have made academic success a shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and wider social systems. Thus, Shanghai presents an interesting setting for investigating how emotional cultures influence student involvement in high-pressure schooling. These characteristics are also

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relevant to larger concerns about school systems, learning organizations, school development, and competitive educational environments [3-5].

High-stakes education research tends to concentrate on stress, mental health, inequity, achievement pressure, and educational competition. These points of view are crucial, but they do not fully explain how students participate in classroom life under pressure. A student may attend class, do homework, and receive great grades while staying emotionally detached or unable to socialize. Another student may keep silent while thinking carefully. A third student may participate enthusiastically, but primarily to avoid criticism or project a positive image. Participation cannot be defined solely as raising one's hand, responding questions, or doing classroom activities. It also considers the emotional implications of speaking, making mistakes, being assessed, displaying vulnerability, and being observed by peers and teachers.

This paper asks: how do emotional cultures influence students' willingness to participate in Shanghai's high-pressure secondary-school classrooms? Pressure is addressed here not only as an issue of personal psychology, but also as a cultural and relational structure. The research investigates how emotional expectations are integrated in teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, home-school communication, and larger narratives of achievement. Emotions are considered not just as personal experiences, but also as cultural and institutional phenomena that influence learning and engagement [6-9].

Secondary school pupils are both subjects and objects of instruction. They are still working on identification, emotional management, social competency, and self-esteem. Peer judgement, instructor authority, family expectations, and future-oriented academic pressure all have an impact on how students learn. For adolescents, classroom involvement is rarely a neutral action. Asking a question may demonstrate curiosity, but it may also reveal uncertainty. Offering an answer may show skill, but it may also invite comparison. Silence may signify detachment, self-protection, deliberate reflection, or a wish to maintain dignity.

These dynamics become more pronounced in Shanghai's achievement-oriented secondary schools. A successful student is frequently expected to be efficient, focused, self-controlling, persistent, and emotionally stable. Such expectations might encourage discipline and performance, but they can also limit the expression of uncertainty, fear, perplexity, or slower modes of thought. When students are expected to appear calm, knowledgeable, and productive, participation can become a show of correctness and poise rather than a process of true inquiry.

This conceptual study is based on socio-cultural analysis, educational observation, and teacher reflection in Shanghai secondary school settings. The approach is based on classroom experience, contacts with students and families from various educational backgrounds, and contemplation on how school expectations, emotional communication, family resources, and student identity influence the transmission of educational pressure. This research adds to the continuing debates about school climate, student agency, and learning in high-pressure settings by presenting a conceptual framework for understanding emotional cultures and student participation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotional culture in education

Research in the sociology of emotions shows that emotions are not simply private psychological states. Hochschild's concept of "feeling rules" refers to social norms that guide what people should feel, how emotions should be expressed, and when particular emotional displays are considered

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appropriate [10]. Schools also communicate feeling rules through daily expectations about good student behaviour, competent teaching, supportive parenting, and successful learning.

Emotional culture refers to how institutions organise the expression, interpretation, and value of emotions. In schools, it includes norms surrounding enthusiasm, fear, embarrassment, care, competition, disappointment, hope, and resilience. It shapes which emotions are encouraged, tolerated, hidden, or sanctioned. Some schools explicitly invite students to express confusion or anxiety, while others may appear caring but still push students to maintain fast, efficient, and controlled learning performances.

School climate and school emotional culture are related but distinct concepts. School climate includes the perceived quality of teacher-student relations, safety, social norms, and pedagogical practices. Emotional culture focuses more specifically on the emotional cultures that give meaning to these relationships and practices. Students may avoid participation even in an orderly classroom if they fear humiliation or exposure. Conversely, a demanding lesson may support deeper learning if students know that mistakes will not be punished. Research on teacher-student relations and classroom emotions shows that students' emotional experiences are shaped by interpersonal relations and classroom contexts [11].

Emotions are also connected to inequality, power, and identity. Zembylas argues that emotions are shaped by cultural and institutional arrangements rather than by individuals alone [9]. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital [12], Reay's work on emotional capital shows how schools and families transmit resources such as confidence, entitlement, resilience, and comfort with authority [8]. These emotional resources are unevenly distributed. Some students learn that their questions will be welcomed; others learn that mistakes may lead to shame, conflict, or invisibility.

Academic competition therefore distributes not only grades and opportunities but also emotional positions. Students may be positioned as excellent, average, lagging, promising, disappointing, stable, unstable, or troublesome. These labels influence how participation feels. A student who has internalised a sense of being "not good enough" may withdraw from discussion. A high-achieving student may participate frequently but still struggle to express genuine confusion. Emotional culture thus links competence, identity, and engagement.

2.2. Student participation and agency

Student participation is frequently discussed using the terms engagement, voice, and agency. Engagement is typically classified as behavioural, emotional, or cognitive. Behavioural engagement requires effort and involvement, emotional engagement includes interest and belonging, and cognitive engagement comprises investment in learning, strategy application, and reflection. Classroom involvement intersects with these aspects since it includes students' observable behaviours, emotional positioning, and cognitive contributions.

Participation may include answering questions, starting a discussion, working cooperatively, soliciting input, providing feedback, expressing ideas, and highlighting gaps in understanding. However, not all visible participation is equally important. Students can participate compliantly by completing required tasks without taking ownership; performatively by providing correct answers to maintain an image of competence; defensively by speaking only when necessary to avoid negative judgement; or agentically by seeking understanding, making connections, and contributing ideas.

The difference between these types of engagement is intimately related to agency. Students' agency refers to their ability to act actively in their own learning, make decisions, propose ideas, impact classroom engagement, and participate in meaning-making. In schools, agency is relational and structured, influenced by conventions, teacher authority, curricular demands, assessment

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techniques, and peer culture. As a result, schools serve as both knowledge transmission platforms and learning communities [3, 5].

The link between participation and agency is complex. A student may speak frequently out of insecurity or a desire for approval, but this does not necessarily imply strong agency. A silent student may feel empowered if the classroom allows for reflective contributions. In high-pressure classes, participation can easily turn into performance. Teachers may prefer confident, fast, and measured responses since they are visible and easy to assess. This has the potential to marginalise slower, more uncertain, exploratory, or introspective modes of involvement.

This issue is especially significant in language and literacy schools. Participation may necessitate students disclosing pronunciation issues, vocabulary gaps, interpretive ambiguity, or insufficient knowledge. Students must consequently not only know something, but also be willing to be heard. Peer pressure can exacerbate this risk during adolescence. Classroom involvement is both a learning activity and a social act. Whether students understand it as expression or evaluation is partly determined by the classroom's emotional culture.

3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper connects emotional cultures, relational safety, exposure risk, internalised achievement pressure, and student participation. Youngsters learn through social interactions. Task complexity and cognitive aptitude are not the only factors that determine participation. Students' perceived safety in connection to teachers, peers, families, and school standards is also important.

High-performing schools frequently expect students to be self-disciplined, hard-working, emotionally stable, resilient without complaining, competitive without arrogance, and always striving for progress. These norms are transmitted via classroom tempo, peer comparison, instructor remarks, parent-child contact, school events, exams, and rankings.

Emotional cultures affect involvement in three ways. First, they have an impact on relationship safety. Students feel relational safe when they are noticed, challenged, and encouraged without being humiliated or judged harshly. When students believe their teachers and peers will not mock them, they are more likely to ask questions and take intellectual risks. When relational safety is compromised, students may withdraw socially. This is consistent with previous research on teacher-student interactions, classroom atmosphere, and students' emotional experiences [11].

Second, emotional cultures influence perceived exposure risk. Participation exposes students. Questions reveal uncertainty, responses reveal the possibility of inaccuracy, and views reveal personal interpretation. In a society that emphasises correctness, quickness, and emotional composure, students may be hesitant to speak up when they are unsure, particularly during adolescence, when self-esteem and peer assessment are emerging.

Third, emotional cultures promote internalised achievement pressure. External pressure may become self-monitored. Students may believe that work is only worthwhile if it leads to constant improvement. Under this pressure, kids may only raise their hands if they are certain of the answer, or they may speak excessively to meet teacher expectations.

The framework identifies four types of participation. Compliant participation happens when pupils satisfy expectations without taking ownership. Students engage in performative engagement when they demonstrate competency in order to receive recognition. Defensive involvement happens when students attempt to avoid embarrassment, errors, or negative feedback. Agentic engagement happens when students enquire, investigate, question, reflect, and create meaning. These categories

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are not designed to permanently identify pupils. Rather, they demonstrate that same classroom behaviours can have diverse emotional implications.

The framework acknowledges the ecological character of emotional culture. School, family, and social milieu all influence classroom involvement. Institutional rules, evaluation techniques, teacher-student relationships, and peer norms all influence the school atmosphere. Family communication, parental expectations, comparison, and support all influence the home environment. The broader social milieu includes stories of achievement, competitiveness, mobility, and failure.In Shanghai's high-pressure secondary schools, emotional cultures influence relational safety, exposure risk, and internalised achievement pressure, which in turn shape compliant, performative, defensive, and agentic participation.

4. Discussion and analysis

4.1. High-performing school emotional expectations

High-performing schools do more than just plan instruction. They also set standards for how kids should act, feel, and appear under pressure. In Shanghai secondary schools, pupils are frequently expected to manage enormous workloads, stay focused, respond swiftly to teacher judgement, and maintain strong academic achievements. These expectations are shaped by selected exams and competitive education.

The emotional ideal of the good student is inextricably linked to self-regulation. A good student is required to not only understand the material but also to manage weariness, worry, frustration, distraction, and disappointment. Academic competency includes emotional regulation. Students who remain productive under pressure may be commended as responsible or resilient, but those who exhibit worry may be perceived as weak-willed or inadequately persistent. Emotional culture thus influences both student behaviour and the assessment of academic pressure [7, 9].

This culture can foster perseverance, delayed reward, and seriousness about learning. However, it may limit emotional expression. If kids believe they should always be strong, they may be hesitant to express uncertainty. If blunders cause embarrassment, people may avoid taking intellectual risks. If participation becomes a demonstration of competence, pupils may only talk when their responses are polished.

Silence is therefore not always passivity. It may be strategic self-protection or evidence that students are assessing relational safety. When classroom culture values accuracy more than inquiry, students may learn that questions are worthwhile only if they are sophisticated and that mistakes are acceptable only when they do not slow down the class. A teacher may ask why students are not participating, but the more precise question is what emotional risks participation carries in that classroom.

4.2. Pressure to participate: relational safety and exposure risk

Classroom participation involves exposure. In high-pressure settings, this exposure becomes more significant. A wrong answer may be embarrassing, a basic question may feel costly, and a subjective interpretation may appear strange or pretentious. For adolescents who are forming identities as intelligent, average, diligent, popular, promising, or disappointing, participation can either protect or threaten self-worth. In emotionally safe classrooms, students are more willing to make mistakes. In unsafe classrooms, each mistake may feel like a judgement of identity.

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Teacher response is critical to this process. A teacher's tone, tempo, facial expressions, and phrasing can all influence whether children feel safe or frightened. If a student provides an incomplete answer, one teacher may remark, "Good start. Let's improve it." Another teacher may become irritated or publicly highlight the deficiency. Both replies may be academically motivated, yet they have distinct emotional connotations. Teachers therefore impart both content and emotional rules during classroom interactions [13].

Peer culture is equally important. In certain classes, students laugh at surprising responses, categorise classmates based on their achievement level, or view queries as indicators of weakness. In other classes, students learn that confusion is natural and that their peers' enquiries can help them learn together. Teachers can encourage listening, respect, and collaborative discovery, or they might let peer evaluation dominate classroom interaction.

Relational safety does not imply lesser intellectual requirements. A secure classroom can nonetheless necessitate accuracy, effort, and accountability. The distinction is that correction is presented as development rather than humiliation. Students can be challenged without feeling ashamed. Research on leadership, school reform, learning cultures, relational trust, and deeper learning indicates that emotionally supportive school cultures can coexist with ambitious learning objectives [5, 14].

Students in safe spaces can voice their questions and try new ways of thinking without fear of being judged. Without this protection, pupils may appear to be engaged while actually participating defensively. Students in language acquisition, reading comprehension, and discussion-based classrooms must interpret texts, infer meanings, construct arguments, change ideas, and be willing to accept uncertainty. If the emotional culture of speed and certainty becomes too dominant, students may become strong test-takers but less confident thinkers.

4.3. Family dynamics, social comparison, and internalised achievement pressure

Student participation extends beyond the classroom. In many Shanghai families, education symbolises hope, sacrifice, anxiety, and future mobility. Parents invest time, money, and emotion in children's education. This investment provides support and opportunity, but it can also intensify pressure. Emotional capital helps explain how family involvement transmits both support and expectation through emotional resources, confidence, and anxiety [8].

Parental expectations do not remain external. Many students internalise them. After repeatedly hearing that more effort is needed, a student may develop an inner voice suggesting that value depends on performance. Such students may fear asking questions because questions can feel like evidence of failure, parental disappointment, or insufficient competitiveness.

Educational pressure in Shanghai families does not take a single form. High-resource families may invest heavily in education while students still experience emotional distance, over-control, or a lack of being heard. Middle-class families may spend substantially on tutoring and educational planning because they fear missing a limited mobility window. Working families may make considerable financial sacrifices to help children avoid restricted social pathways. These family contexts differ, but they often communicate a shared emotional message: the student must not fall behind. Under this message, asking a question may reveal a weakness, making a mistake may appear to waste family investment, and silence may protect the student from criticism. Family education therefore includes not only instruction and investment but also emotional modelling.

Social comparison further complicates this process. Rankings, class places, school reputation, and peer trajectories all gain emotional significance. Even if teachers do not openly compare pupils, children can compare themselves through parent networks, tutoring markets, social media, and

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stories of extraordinary accomplishment. These comparisons become emotional anchors. Ordinary progress may feel insufficient since someone else always seems to be achieving more.

Students may therefore believe that they must continually develop and never fall behind. This pressure may encourage effort, but it can also cause worry. Some students avoid asking questions for fear of being exposed as failures. High-achieving pupils may conceal their doubts since excellence has become an integral part of their personality. Lower-performing pupils may withdraw since involvement exposes the gap between them and others. Family pressure is also incorporated in social structures: parents are concerned because competition appears to be consequential, schools are held accountable, and teachers must meet the expectations of both parents and institutions. Students are at the crossroads of these anxieties. This is why emotional culture needs to be understood holistically [15-17].

4.4. Compliance, performance, defence, and agency

Under academic pressure, students may take notes, complete assignments, and prepare for examinations. Yet deeper forms of participation may be less visible.

Compliance occurs when students complete tasks and follow instructions. It supports order and progress, but it does not necessarily produce ownership or deep learning. Performative participation occurs when students answer correctly or seek praise in order to manage impressions. It may appear positive, but it can reduce learning to image maintenance. Defensive participation occurs when students speak only to avoid consequences or criticism. In this mode, students may not offer their own ideas, but instead rely on memorised or safe responses. Fear of mistakes, embarrassment, and comparison is often hidden because students appear cooperative.

Agentic participation is different. It occurs when students are genuinely involved in meaning-making. They can ask honest questions, express incomplete understanding, reconsider ideas, take intellectual risks, and connect learning with identity. Agentic participation does not always mean speaking frequently. Thoughtful listening, writing, collaboration, and carefully formed questions can also be agentic. Students need space to think, relate, and contribute.

Therefore, participation cannot be confined to classroom activities or student discourse. A frequent speaker may be performing. A silent student may be thinking intensely but without a safe entrance point. A dynamic class may nevertheless be motivated by pressure rather than agency.

This issue further complicates worldwide comparisons of "active" versus "passive" classrooms. East Asian classrooms are commonly described as quieter and more teacher-centered, whereas Western classrooms are frequently described as more engaging. Such comparisons can be oversimplified. The important question is not how often kids speak, but whether they feel capable of participating effectively and expressing evolving views. Intercultural methods can go beyond essentialist comparisons to investigate how meaning is created in various educational environments [18, 19].

5. Implications

5.1. Implications for teachers

Teachers play an important role in shaping the emotional culture of the classroom. Daily teaching decisions may increase or reduce the emotional risks attached to participation.

First, teachers can normalise mistakes as part of learning. Students need to see repeatedly that mistakes will be handled with respect. Teachers can value partial answers, demonstrate how to

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revise them, and present confusion as a productive stage of learning. Second, teachers can provide multiple forms of participation. Pair discussion, written reflection, anonymous questions, small-group reasoning, and delayed response can all support adolescents who are uncomfortable with immediate public speaking.

Third, teachers can attend to students' emotional signals. Silence, perfectionism, irritability, over-compliance, and excessive self-criticism may indicate pressure. Teachers do not need to act as therapists, but they do need to recognise that learning behaviour has emotional conditions. Fourth, feedback should maintain high expectations without producing shame. Instead of defining students as careless or weak, teachers can identify specific problems and provide concrete routes for improvement.

5.2. Implications for school leadership

School leaders shape school emotional culture through assessment policies, teacher evaluation, communication norms, and narratives of success. If schools recognise only top scores, fast progress, and outstanding results, they may unintentionally narrow participation. If they also recognise growth, inquiry, collaboration, resilience, and reflection, they can expand the emotional meaning of success.

Leadership for participation needs to examine the school environment. Schools can ask: who is willing to speak up here? Who remains quiet? What feelings are students expected to hide? How are mistakes explained? How can educators reduce unnecessary parental anxiety? How do routines distribute recognition and shame?

Professional development should also address emotions. Teachers need tools for understanding students' emotions, sensitivity, and participation risks. Under pressure, teachers also manage their own emotions. They need to reassure parents, maintain order, and support students simultaneously. Without institutional support, teachers may transfer pressure to students because they themselves are working under emotional strain [13].

5.3. Implications for equity

Emotional culture is also an equity issue. Students do not enter classrooms with equal emotional resources. Some students receive confidence, language resources, and a sense of entitlement to ask for help from their family environments. Others may come from contexts marked by conflict, scarcity, instability, or excessive comparison. If classrooms reward only confident, quick, and articulate answers, they are more likely to recognise students who are already familiar with the emotional codes valued by school culture [8, 9].

An equity-oriented classroom does not remove all difficulty. Rather, it reduces unnecessary embarrassment and fear of failure when students encounter difficulty. It creates conditions under which more students can participate agentically, not only those who are already self-confident. Emotional safety should not be confused with the absence of academic discipline. Academic rigour should be organised in ways that support student development rather than intensify avoidable shame [16, 17, 20].

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that student participation in high-pressure Shanghai secondary schools is shaped by emotional culture. Students are not only learning content and preparing for examinations;

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they are also learning emotional cultures related to self-discipline, efficiency, resilience, failure, modesty, excellence, and vulnerability. These norms influence whether participation feels safe or risky, meaningful or performative, agentic or defensive.

The central claim is that participation should be understood as an emotionally situated practice. Emotional cultures shape students' relational safety, perceived exposure risk, and internalised achievement pressure, which in turn influence their willingness to participate in class. These mechanisms help explain why students may remain quiet even when they are capable, participate defensively, or complete tasks without a sense of ownership.

The quality of Shanghai's educational environment should not be evaluated only by achievement or pressure. It should also be examined through the emotional conditions of classroom life. High expectations can support learning when accompanied by trust, dignity, and meaningful feedback. They become restrictive when they make students afraid of mistakes, unwilling to show uncertainty, or reluctant to explore.

The issue is not that schools should have no pressure. Some pressure is necessary for serious study and competition. The more important task is to transform the emotional culture surrounding pressure. Students need classrooms that expect effort without punishing vulnerability, require correctness while allowing mistakes to become learning opportunities, value achievement without making it the only source of self-worth, and define participation as more than visible obedience.

Understanding emotional culture can improve understandings of educational quality and equity. A school is not only a place where students study and strive for opportunity. It is also a social and emotional environment in which young people learn who they are allowed to be while learning. If participation is to become genuinely agentic, schools need to examine not only what students do but also what students feel they are allowed to risk.

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