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Youth agency in times of crisis: Exploring education and conflict in Mali through participatory visual approaches with youth

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Education in Mali is constrained by a multi-dimensional crisis that restricts education and makes life difficult. Young people are particularly affected. In this article, we use the preliminary findings of the Participatory Research on Education and Agency in Mali (PREAM) project that was implemented in the conflict-affected regions of Mopti and Segou, to discuss youth agency in situations of crisis and how participatory visual methods can be used both as a way of ascertaining adolescents' perception of their agency and also to contribute to the development of youth agency. More specifically, we use data from six workshops using participatory visual methods (PVMs) to illustrate that young people have something valuable to say about education, agency, and conflict and that PVMs can be an effective way of engaging adolescents in dealing with such topics. Preliminary findings from the research suggest that although participating young people are in an asymmetrical position in relation to power with the adults around them, they nonetheless have a good understanding of their situation and demonstrate agentic behavior that is both adaptative and projective. Girls illustrated how generational order from child to grandmother and gender social norms can constrain agency. At the same time, they used their agency to expose and contest, in the cellphilms they produced, the unfair division of labor in their society. During the workshops, young people were eager to share their stories and wanted their artwork to communicate their concerns to the adults around them. In this article, we argue that it is important for adolescents in Mali to have a voice on questions of education and agency and we discuss why education actors and policy makers should pay attention to the perspectives of young people even (and especially) in times of crisis.

KEYWORDS

Mali, youth, agency, education, crisis, participatory research, visual research methods, conflict

Introduction

Youth in Mali are no strangers to suffering. The armed conflict affecting the central and northern parts of the country is now entering its 10th year, and violence is only one facet of a multi-dimensional crisis. Recurring droughts, political instability, repeated workers' strikes, COVID-19, and, more recently, the weight of international sanctions have made life arduous. Youth living in conflict zones are particularly affected because the crisis not only exacerbates poverty but also disrupts education. Frequent school closures, the destruction of school furniture, the breakdown of the educational infrastructure, the absence of teachers, and the scarcity of materials all undermine the quality of education. Insecurity also leads to absenteeism and youth having to spend energy and time working to support their families rather than studying (Traore, 2015, 2018).

Various authors have documented how participatory visual research enables children and young people to be co-producers of knowledge (Moletsane et al., 2021) and recognizes them as experts on critical issues in their own lives. This process can also contribute to research and policy dialog (Mitchell et al., 2017). Building on this work, researchers from the PREAM project investigated how young people from Mopti and Segou, two conflict affected regions of Mali, perceive agency and the relation between and among agency, education, and crisis. Looking at the perspectives of these adolescents is important because, as we will discuss below, agency tends to be conceptualized from an adult's point of view and there is little evidence that adolescents perceive and experience agency in the same way as do adults. What matters most to adults may be very different from young people's priorities. At the same time, as Punch (2016) highlighted, many of the studies that inform conceptualizations of youth agency have been conducted in the Global North rather than in the Global South where the majority of children live, and where experiences of childhood and adolescence are often very different. A literature review conducted at the beginning of PREAM (Lussier, 2021) confirmed that most studies on youth agency have been conducted in cultural contexts that are very different from the one in which Malian adolescents live. These publications highlight the need to better understand how adolescents in Mali perceive youth agency and explore what they require to develop such agency. The research project seeks to do this.

Participatory Research on Education and Agency in Mali is a 3-year research project implemented by McGill University, the Université des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB), and Plan International with funding from Dubai Cares. Phase one used cellphilming (cellphones + film) and drawings to capture the perceptions of young people in relation to agency and to find out how adolescents exercise agency. Informed by the productions created by youth, a survey was designed to further explore the relationships between agency, education, and crisis in phase two of the study. Phase three will involve a series of youth-focused community workshops with parents and various stakeholders. This article draws on the preliminary findings of phase one and more specifically on the data from six participatory visual workshops, to discuss the intersections between and among youth agency, education, and conflict.

While this article is not a comparative study and we do not seek to confirm or refute Punch's argument, there is an emerging consensus among scholars interested in youth empowerment that more examples of agency from children and young people living in the Global South are needed. We therefore hope that a report on PREAM's fieldwork will contribute to developing a better understanding of how the agentic potential of adolescents is situated in the generational order in terms of social contexts and norms. We believe that such an understanding will help education actors to assess the extent to which their interventions support the capacity of adolescents to enact their own goals.

This article is divided into four sections. Section "Study context: A brief overview of the situation in Mali" provides the context for the study in offering an analysis of education in Mali. Section "Agency in times of crisis" examines the literature on agency in times of crisis. Section "The fieldwork: Participatory research on education and agency in Mali" is divided into four parts: part 1 offers a methodological framework for participatory visual approaches; part 2 uses data from the project data to present how the young participants perceived agency; part 3 presents the agentic strategies that young people used in relation to education and the crisis; and, part 4 problematizes the connections between and among agency, education, and crisis and discusses why education actors and policy makers should pay attention to young people's perspectives in times of crisis.

Study context: A brief overview of the situation in Mali

As a compounded effect of health, security, environmental, and political crises, Mali's progress in terms of poverty reduction has stalled. The United Nations' Development Programme's latest data reveals that 50.3% of the country's population live under the income poverty line of PPP $ 1.90 a day and 68.3% of the population is considered to live in multidimensional poverty[1]. In 2021, 1.3 million people were in a situation of acute food insecurity, the highest level since 2015, and 3 million people were affected by the lack of rain and the resulting lean season (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022). The economic sanctions imposed on the country by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the beginning of 2022 exacerbated the situation and this means that the loss of livelihoods may continue to

1 https://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MLI

increase thus creating more food insecurity (ACAPS, 2022). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2022) Global Humanitarian Overview 6.3 million people need humanitarian assistance in Mali and over 90% of the rural population live either in a conflict area already or fear that the war will spread to their community. The resulting instability is also affecting the provision of health care and education services. At the end of 2021, 21 health centers were non-functional and 82 were only partly functional because of the conflict that exacerbated a situation already made difficult by COVID-19 cases and the low rate of vaccination in the country. On the education front, more than 1,640 schools closed for reasons of insecurity, thus affecting more than 2.9 million children nationwide.

The contemporary challenges of education in Mali

Even though the last two decades have been characterized by increased attention to education from national authorities and international actors alike, Mali's schooling system is constantly weathering crises. Decentralized since 2003, the system has not yet managed to bridge the disconnect between the traditional values of a significant segment of the population and the exogenous norms put forward by its proponents, predominantly elites, under the guidance of Western actors (Diakité, 2000; Loua, 2018). Teachers' strikes are frequent, classrooms are overcrowded, teaching and learning materials are scarce, old and new curricula have been coexisting for years, and the conditions under which children learn vary significantly. While Global education initiatives and Mali's decennial program for the development of education (PRODEC) have led to a sharp increase in gross enrollment ratios, such rapid change also brought the twin challenges of not having enough qualified teachers and being unable to make sure children thar learn (Pryor et al., 2012). While the lack of qualified teachers in remote areas is far from being an issue specific to Mali (see United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022), insecurity has led a great number of instructors to flee from zones perceived as dangerous. As a result, classes are frequently provided by personnel with a technical diploma or by those who have completed only secondary school (Traore, 2018). Even when teachers have attended teacher training colleges, the quality of the instruction they provide is often problematic. Two factors contribute to this: first, until recently, the curricula of the teacher training colleges did not align closely with the needs of the schools. Second, although Mali has received its fair share of international assistance to the education sector, this did not translate into sufficient support for teacher training, leaving educators ill-equipped to deal with the harsh teaching conditions they face (Lussier, 2015). The consequence of these challenges can be seen in learning outcomes, like, for example, the low rate of success in the fundamental school diploma (DEF). In 2021, 68,67% of the students who took the DEF examination were admitted nationwide (68,06% for girls and 69,23% for boys) to secondary school (Mali Centre National des Examens et Concours de l'Éducation, 2021).

Youth, education, and the Malian crisis

Although multifaceted crisis is a common feature of Mali's history, the last decade has been particularly difficult for adolescents who witnessed the presence of armed personnel near or on the school grounds and who felt the adverse effects of the violence surrounding them. Insecurity led to a rise in migration and in the last 5 years, the number of internally displaced people, 64% of whom are under 18 years of age, has increased from 38,172 in 2017 to 350,110 by United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2022). Such movement of the population has an impact on education either by depriving displaced learners of their right to attend school, or by overcrowding in classrooms in the host communities. Furthermore, prior studies suggest that the conflict brought rape, kidnapping, conscription of child soldiers, and a range of other violent acts and human rights violations in its wake (Traore, 2015, 2018). The crimes committed by armed groups also have a significant impact on the school dropout rate along with early and/or forced marriage, sometimes perceived as a way of protecting girls (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011; Traore, 2015).

In addition to school closures and the destruction of the educational infrastructure, armed conflict also deflects important financial resources that could otherwise be allocated to education orto measures that would improve human development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011). This leads to the loss of livelihood and to increases in poverty, thus forcing young people to work to help support their families. The effect of the crisis on educational access is particularly devastating. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Institute for Statistics[2], accessed 30 March 2022, between 2011 and 2018, Mali's gross enrollment ratio for primary education declined from 84.2% to 75.6% (78.27% to 71.6% for girls and 89.96% to 79.47% for boys) and the number of out-of-school children increased from 771,049 to 1,343,000. In such troubled contexts, youth agency runs the risk of being constrained and overlooked. Yet, in a country plagued with hardship, an understanding of youth agency, as we explore in the next section, is particularly important because it can help to frame how young people envision and assert their identities while using self-perception to imagine a different world (Barton and Tan, 2010). It can also

2 http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ml

play a central role in removing inequities that limit wellbeing (Sen, 1999).

Agency in times of crisis

Why study agency?

Priya et al.'s (2021) bibliometric analysis revealed that agency is the fifth most important keyword used in empowerment literature in relation to women. However, despite the profusion of literature on agency, the concept remains problematic because the term is not universally understood (Esser et al., 2016). It is also used differently in various disciplines and sometimes interchangeably with terms such as "free will," "self-efficacy," "personhood," or "autonomy" (Gammage et al., 2016; Lussier, 2021). Moreover, it often lacks resonance with interventions in non-academic settings. This means that what it signifies for youth in contexts of crisis has not yet been fully documented. The absence of research on how young people in Mali relate to agency potentially limits the extent to which decision makers can address these concerns.

Although youth are in an asymmetrical position in relation to adults as far as power is concerned, they are still able to make decisions and influence their environment in their own unique peer cultures (Biggeri et al., 2019). For instance, in situations characterized by conflict and violence, adolescents have displayed a variety of strategies aimed at restoring their wellbeing (Veronese et al., 2017; Cavazzoni et al., 2021). It is important to consider that agency, like empowerment, can be distinct in different domains of life (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002; Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). An adolescent may demonstrate a certain level of agency at school, but not at home and vice versa. The notion of youth agency implies that they have not only the ability but also the opportunity to set goals and objectives, but this is constrained by the social, political, and economic conditions that youth face. In other words, agency if affected by the structures surrounding young people. However, little is known about the way in which young people themselves perceive such structures in relation to their agency. Gurdal and Sorbring (2018, p. 1) highlight the importance of self-efficacy and children's beliefs that they can affect a particular outcome. Without such belief, youth are unlikely to take action. Agency therefore warrants being studied *in situ* if we are to consider the specific conditions under which it is created and enacted.

Several studies on youth agency are particularly illuminating. In a study conducted in Ethiopia, Berhane et al. (2019) found a significant correlation between agency and social norms, especially in relation to early marriage, education, and nutrition. These authors asserted that empowering adolescent girls requires changes in the social environment that condition their choices as well as in their opportunities for exercising agency. The influence of parents, guardians, and teachers on the agency of children and youth is also important. They can support autonomy by making young people feel competent, allowing choices, encouraging curiosity, and feeding motivation. They can also be controlling and pressure youth to behave in specific ways (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ballet et al., 2011). Consequently, youth agency is not only informed by social structures and local circumstances but is also shaped by inter-generational factors such as the socio-economic conditions of the parents, access to resources, and so on. In Mali, as is the case in most sub-Saharan African countries, the role of the extended family and significant community members is often more significant than it is in the Global North and adolescents are expected to respect and obey the adults in their families. In some families, uncles and aunts have as much authority as parents do. Older siblings are also significant in shaping the ways in which youth perceive what is expected of them. So far, the role that the generational order plays on youth agency is still under documented and this study seeks to contribute to this.

Whether individual or collective, agency is temporally embedded and generally associated with change. It is informed by the past, oriented toward the future, and enacted in the present. It requires a projective ability to imagine alternative possibilities and the capacity to contextualize past habits and future undertakings based on what is happening in the moment (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In the literature on gender equity, agency often integrates the ideas of consciousness, voice, and action where voice is understood as the capacity of an individual or a group to communicate practical needs and strategic interests (Gammage et al., 2016). Furthermore, agency involves action and being able to transform a difficult situation into something worthy and positive. It is also about being accountable for one's deeds, good or bad (Dahl, 2009; Keïta, 2014). Since agency encompasses potential, action, and purpose, it plays a central role in helping young people to find solutions to the challenges they face, avoid harm or threats, and contribute, at least potentially, to peace processes. It is therefore particularly important for the future of a country like Mali. However, so far, schools in Mali pay little attention to children's' voices and agency and are sometimes perceived to shape learners without their knowing and impose prescriptive and collective orientations on them (Dembelle and Dia, 2022). Thus, there is a need to better understand how young people themselves and see the relationship between agency and their experiences of education.

Youth agency and conflict

In recent years, the idea that children and youth are helpless victims of the violence they witness has been challenged (Veronese et al., 2020) and studies of children living in conflict

and post-conflict situations have revealed different mechanisms through which they mobilize resources and skills to overcome hardship and influence their environment, making them distinct actors with a role to play (Marshall, 2015; Watson, 2015). At the same time, in any discussion of youth agency, it is important to recognize that it may not necessarily be deployed toward the ends that policy or development actors hope for. A young person may choose to conform to patriarchal stereotypes or decide consciously to refrain from acting in a certain way. For example, education partners may expect educated girls to use their agency to challenge what they perceive to be gender-biased distribution of household's chores, but, as two cellphilms from our project revealed, girls may decide instead that being agentic means convincing other girls to do what is asked of them in order to increase their chances of finding a husband (and hence conforming to the decorum of traditional womanhood in accordance with social expectations). (See section "Focusing on the artwork: What does it mean to "picture agency"?"). Amara (2016), discussed the discrepancy between what school and media convey as agency and the social realities and expectations of African youth. According to them,

> [young people] end up trapped between two worlds that have less in common than [their] adolescent selves let us believe: an individualist approach inherited from western media, and the traditional collectivist approach inherited from [their] elders (Amara, 2016: n.p.).

Because of poverty and the lack of employment opportunities, some educated girls may choose to abide by traditional gender norms and accept marriage as a safety net, a way to survive harrowing conditions. This apparent docility of educated girls also may obscure the reality of the backbreaking work of mothers who bear alone the household drudgery to ensure the wellbeing of the family. In siding with their mothers by performing domestics chores, daughters also bear their share of responsibility while acting in solidarity with mothers and other women in the community. In so doing, they ensure social continuity by honoring their mothers who are the guardians and perpetuators of cultural values that they pass on to their children. It might also illustrate the collective nature of the society in which children owe respect and are obliged to assist their parents and guardians when help is needed.

In many African societies, the child-parent relationship is very complex. If parents and guardians have the responsibility to protect children by providing for their basic needs and ensure that they live in a safe environment, children are expected to give back to their communities by working to improve their wellbeing. Such expectations are maintained even in (or especially because of) times of crisis. Adolescents are educated to have a sense of community and collectivity that goes beyond their parents since it extends to relatives and guardians. This mantra of the Ubuntu philosophy is enshrined in African ontology and expressed in the sentence "I am because we are" (Bolden, 2014, p. 2) or "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share" (Tutu, 1999, p. 35). The primacy of the group over the individual is an idea deeply rooted in many African cultures. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, this concern for the wellbeing and harmony of the community is expressed thus: "No man, however great was greater than his people; no one ever won a judgment against his clan" (Achebe, 1964, p. 228). In such a context, the idea of resistance as celebrated by many feminists and human rights activists may also be perceived as a dishonor for family members. This is because how agency is framed and interpreted depends on who is looking at it and where it is enacted, so context and positionality are important parameters in assessing youth agency. Some expressions of agency are considered transformative because they question the *status quo* and seek to challenge and change the way things are. Others are perceived as non-transformative because they align with existing power dynamics and decision-making structures (Kabeer, 1999; Gammage et al., 2016; Donald et al., 2017).

Another way to distinguish between forms of youth agency borrows from Jeffery's (2001), Maslak's (2007) work on women and agency. Agency is described as oppositional if a person or a group of people act against or plan actions that oppose established norms. It is allegiant if it aligns with accepted thoughts and behaviors to achieve a purpose. Oppositional agency differs from what Bordonaro and Payne (2012), Johnson et al. (2018) have referred to as ambiguous agency. While oppositional agency relates to youth using their agency to challenge social norms, the term ambiguous agency is used to describe actions that counter narratives and assumptions about the nature of childhood and adolescence, or, in other words, when young people behave differently from what is expected from a person of their age. The converse is called responsible agency when the conduct of an adolescent or a group conforms to expectations and aligns with moral and social views about youth. Once again, what is considered ambiguous or responsible is highly influenced by positionality and relevant socio-cultural perspectives. This is particularly the case in situations of crisis. For instance, a 15-year-old boy who decided to leave school and join an armed-group would typically be perceived as demonstrating ambiguous agency by an NGO worker from the West, but the same behavior could be seen to be the responsible and appropriate thing to do in by the boy's father who is sympathetic to the values of the group his son seeks to join. Similarly, a family in desperate need of food may be more likely to accept their child's suggestion that he drop out of school to sell mangoes on the side of the road than if they were better off. Understandings of adolescent's agency are therefore contingent on gender and the local social construction of youth and are neither universal nor static; they are shaped by context and by adults' perceptions (Hoang and Yeoh, 2014).

The capacities that define a person's modes of agency are not only constrained by the circumstances, power dynamics, and hardships experienced, but can also emerge from these conditions. Mahmood (2001) drew attention to the specific ways in which an actor operates in terms of their thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being. She presented the notion of docile agency that relates to the malleability that agents need to operate. But docile agency is not the same as passivity; it may carry a sense of effort, struggle, and achievement. Docility may also be strategic in that it may also effect change and transform perceptions and attitudes. As Mahmood observed,

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed *a priori*, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may well be a form of agency – one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. (2001, p. 212)Recognition of the dialectic relationship between agency and structure dates back to the work of Giddens (1984). Customs, laws, social norms, rules, family situation and other social factors all make up a set of interconnected frameworks that shape the opportunities and resources available for youth to exercise agency (Maslak, 2007). The extent to which youth agency can influence structures, especially in times of crisis, is, however, less clear since it is exercised in a context in which suitable ways of being and acting rarely depend on individual choice alone and in which opportunities to organize are severely constrained by both political and security constraints. Youth protests have contributed to progressive changes to structures in some countries and young people played an important role during the 1991 democratization process. However, currently adolescents' voices are seldom taken into consideration by Mali's military rule.

The insecurity generated by the conflict in Mali has constrained some families to send members to safer locations and thus reduce connections with those adults who played a significant role in the children's lives. How this may affect the agency of adolescents is still unclear. However, the dynamics of family life in Mali is another example of the importance of the context in shaping young people's agentic potential. It also provides an additional reason to specifically capture adolescents' perspectives about agency since family dynamics change based on the generational order. It also put into perspective the collective nature of the agency portrayed in some participants' artwork (See section "Focusing on the artwork: What does it mean to "picture agency"?").

The fieldwork: Participatory research on education and agency in Mali

Methodological framework: What does participation have to do with it?

Here, we map out the key features of participatory visual research with young people as an approach to capturing youth perceptions of agency and the relationship between and among agency, education, and crisis. Participatory visual research refers to a broad range of methods and approaches to engaging participants in the co-production of knowledge through, for example, photovoice, participatory video and cellphilming, digital storytelling, and drawing. Such approaches, as Mitchell (2011) has highlighted, build on the idea of the visual as a mode of inquiry (how do the participants themselves see the issues?), as a mode of representation (how do they choose to represent their concerns visually?), and as a mode of dissemination and knowledge mobilization (how can these visual images reach audiences such as peers, community members, and even policy makers?). Applied to work with young people, participatory visual research addresses a critical question posed by the well-known sociologist Ann Oakley, who asked "What would the world look like from the point of view of children [young people] as knowers and as actors?' (Oakley, 1994, p. 23). While the overall approach to doing research with young people is not without critique, most notably that it may be overly celebratory as Low et al. (2012) have noted, potentially tokenistic (does this work promise more than it can deliver?) (Delgado, 2015), and sometimes lead to ethical challenges when it comes to anonymity (see for example Akesson et al., 2014), participatory visual work has, overall, helped to shift the power dynamics in research with young people. And while it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss knowledge mobilization, we see it as a shift in how we think of the notion of what Rose (2016) referred to as audiencing and engagements of communities.

Positioning

Given the significance of context and finding appropriate approaches to hearing from young people in two conflict zones, we would be remiss if we did not refer to the positionality of the research team members in framing the fieldwork and preliminary data analysis. As noted earlier, the research comes out of a partnership between a team of Mali-based researchers (men and women) and Canadian-based researchers (men and women). While the fine tuning of the methods and tools (including the actual prompts used to elicit data) was jointly developed, the fieldwork was carried out by the Mali team to take account of differing language and cultural contexts. The preliminary data analysis reported here comes out of what might

be described as collective data analysis[3], carried out by members of the entire research team.

Participatory visual workshops

Our approach was to organize a series of participatory visual workshops with adolescents in two regions of Mali, Mopti and Segou, focusing particularly on the use of two methods—drawing and cellphilming—in six participatory visual workshops with 120 adolescents from grade 7 (13 to 18 years of age). We chose drawing as a low-tech and low-cost method and one that offers rich possibilities for participatory engagement and interpretation on the part of the participants (Theron et al., 2011). Individuals were asked to draw "À quoi ressemble s'aider soi-même" (What does helping yourself look like?). We also included cellphilming (cellphone + video) that had youth working in small single-sex groups to produce a one to two minute cellphilm in response to the prompt "vous allez créer des cellphilms sur avoir la capacité d'agir et de s'aider soi-même ou ne pas avoir la capacité d'agir et de s'aider soi-même" (Create cellphilms on having the capacity to act and help yourself or not having the capacity to act and help yourself). The process of cellphilming gives participants a chance to brainstorm the issues in small groups, develop a storyboard before they begin their filming, do the actual filming themselves, and finally screen their films and reflect on the process. Indeed, what was important about both approaches is that they frame group reflection and the engagement of the participants as part of post-production.

As is the case in many participatory visual studies, deciding on the prompts for both the drawing and cellphilming was far from simple, particularly given the elusiveness of the concept of agency. There were two main challenges for our team: first, making sure that all the persons involved in the data collection and analysis shared the same understanding of the prompt, and second, translating the prompt into several local languages. As a starting point to generate suitable prompts, we drew on Kabeer's definition of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (1999, p. 438), which is also cited in Gammage et al. (2016), Donald et al. (2020) as well as in Klein's (2016) work on agency in Bamanakan (one of the local languages of Mali). However, the term 'goal' does not translate easily in the local languages and after discussions between the Canadian and Malian researchers who also consulted local language specialists, it was deemed preferable to use more open-ended prompts. The simple and focused formulation of the prompts provided the research team with the necessary scope to explore adolescents' understandings of agency and enable discussions on contexts and factors influencing agency.

3 We use the term collective data analysis to refer to the Mali-based and Canadian-based teams reviewing data separately, and then coming together virtually to discuss the various interpretations of the data.

Researching education in conflict-affected areas

Education is much broader than schooling and can take place in a variety of settings including in the contexts of family and work. The researchers are as curious about the connection between agency and informal capacity development as they are about the relationship between agency and formal and non-formal education. However, negotiating access to young people in times of crisis and assuring the safety of both researchers and participants during a war can be particularly complex. In addition, it was necessary to obtain both governmental clearance and clearance from our respective universities to conduct the fieldwork. Narrowing the scope of the first phase of the study to the arena of formal education made the process easier. It also enabled us to work with the decentralized structures of Mali's Ministry of Education and organize the workshops in schools where it would be safe for adolescents to gather.

Focusing on the artwork: What does it mean to "picture agency"?

The data set from the workshops includes 120 drawings, 23 short cellphilms produced in small single-sex groups of boys and girls, along with discussions held in mixed-sex groups and the transcripts of the reflections of the participants. As we explore here, the analysis of the data required a great deal of contextualization and interpretation in relation to the question: How we can we read agency? Conceptions of the relationships between adolescents and their social world have often been described in terms of resistance and agency. However, discourses of resistance deserve to be investigated in their socio-cultural contexts for they run the risk of being commodified. The literature on women and agency provides interesting insights on the matter. For instance, some authors have argued that girls and women are increasingly being constructed in ways that further a neoliberal and post-feminist agenda by being presented as remarkably rational actors who use their education to adapt to shifting market forces (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2008; Gonick et al., 2009). When asked to draw what it means to have the capacity to help oneself, many participants in the study illustrated ways of making money.

> At the center of the drawing there is a dress that I made myself and next to it there are three scissors and a sewing machine. This activity will allow me to make money and not depend on other people.

(Translation of a girl's description of her drawing - **Figure 1**)

FIGURE 1
Drawing aof a 13-year-old girl who wants to become a seamstress.

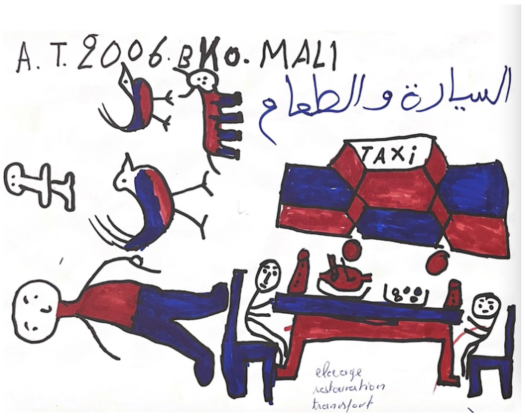

FIGURE 2
Drawing by a 16-year-old boy who wants to raise and sell chickens.

> This is me here, sitting in front of a computer. I am a cashier. I work at the bank. This way, I can have money to help myself and help my parents.
>
> (Translation of a girl's description of her drawing)

> Researcher: What does your drawing represent?
> Girls: For me, it's sewing.
> Researcher: Tell me more.
> Girl: This is a sewing machine and a suit. Sewing is like the idea of [agency] because when you sew somebody's clothes you find some money and you can help yourself with that money.
>
> (Translation of a girl's conversation about her drawing)

> This is a scale and a bag of rice. I sell the rice. I wish to become a big merchant to help myself.
>
> (Translation of a boy's description of his drawing)

> This is a fisherman, a fish and water because fishing can bring a lot of profit and with the money, I can help myself.
>
> (Translation of a boy's description of his drawing)

> Boy: For me it's raising chickens. This is me. I am giving food to my chicks. I want to become a merchant to sell my chicks.
> Researcher: So, for you trade is similar to the idea of [agency]?
> Boy: Yes.
>
> (Translation of a boy's description of his drawing - **Figure 2**)

Earning an income was portrayed by several participants as being directly connected to agency. The artistic productions do not allow us to say whether the young participants saw earning an income as a prerequisite to agency or as a component of agency, but the importance of money was highlighted in drawings and in cellphilms. While such observation is not surprising considering the impoverished environment in which these adolescents live, it raises the question of whether they represent a form of grassroots neoliberalism, thus raising important questions about the impact that such a mindset may have on the will to pursue an education. In their study of microcredit in Nepal, Rankin and Shakya (2007) argued that a neoliberal mindset at the grassroots level led to the belief that money was enough to change one's life, thus deterring local people from engaging in learning and capacity development activities and ultimately reducing agency. Evidence does not allow us to say whether such situation will arise in the communities taking part in this study, but the interest in money was strong enough in the different workshops to raise questions about the perceived importance of money in realizing one's objectives and therefore how youth see it in relation to agency.

Drawings often captured young people's interest in a career, but in both regions, girls also talked about their domestic work. As can be seen in **Table 1**, household work appeared in six cellphilms produced by girls. The domestic tasks portrayed included gathering wood and water, gardening, cleaning the house, and doing other household chores. The connection between these duties and agency is complex and girls' perceptions were sometimes contradictory. Some girls saw such tasks as contributing to their social construction, thus contributing to their agency. For instance, when asked what a cellphilm on housework said about agency, one girl answered "It's working to help ourselves and our families."

TABLE 1 Themes presented in the cellphilms by region and gender.

	Segou	Mopti
Boys	The power cut	Football players
	Strike at school	Discipline in class
	Animal husbandry	Health problems
	Expensive life	School
	The agreement/reconciliation	The conflict
	Peace	Bomb
Girls	Gardening	Cleaning the house
	War in the country	Looking for water
	Refusal to work at home	Watering the garden
	Coronavirus	Health of the child
	Advisory on households' chores	The girl doesn't go to school
	Theft at school	

Others highlighted the heavy weight of such duties and the challenge they represent for girls. For example, a group of girls expressed how collecting water, particularly in times of drought, takes a lot of time, and another cellphilm illustrated the hardship of cleaning the house.

If in the Global North, emphasis is laid on children's and adolescents' rights, and their sense of agency is perceived by how they use these rights to achieve desired goals and dreams, in Mali, emphasis is often placed on their numerous duties and responsibilities rather than on their rights. In the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990, p. 23) that Mali adopted in 1996 and ratified in 1998, we read that "Every child shall have responsibilities toward his family and society, the State and other legally recognized communities, and the international community. Therefore, he/she has the duty:

(a) to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need;
(b) to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service;
(c) to preserve and strengthen social and national solidarity;
(d) to preserve and strengthen African cultural values in his relations with other members of the society, in the spirit of tolerance, dialog and consultation and to contribute to the moral wellbeing of society" (African Union, 1990, p. 23).

In the cellphilms produced during this project, adolescents are aware of the responsibilities they are expected to shoulder. Some of them find a way to reconcile this by pursuing personal projects along with family ones. However, others give priority to individual choices, refusing to abide by the social norms. In one cellphilm, a younger girl refuses to obey her mother's injunction to perform domestic chores. In the cellphilm her elder sister reminds her of her duty toward the family and the larger community since she is responsible for their wellbeing. Discussions about this cellphilm were interesting because different viewers had different perceptions on which sister is being agentic. Some said that the girl refusing to work is an example of oppositional agency and some viewers justified her actions by the weight of her burden in claiming that the chores might have impacted on her ability to study. However, for some of the girls who produced the film, the older sister was the one demonstrating agency, as illustrated in the following exchange between a researcher and the participant:

> Researcher: What does your cellphilm say about agency?
>
> Girl: We talked about the capacity to act and help oneself when the sister came to give advice to her younger sister. If [the little sister] doesn't learn, when she will be at home with her husband, she will have a leading co-wife (coépouse fonctionnaire) so she will continue to do all the domestic tasks. To avoid this, she must fight in her work (work hard).

(Translation of an exchange between a researcher and a girl in Segou)

While the discussions that arise from this cellphilm focused mainly on who was being agentic, and revealed different interpretations of agency, it could also be argued that both girls were agentic with two different forms of agency at play. In Mali, elder siblings are typically expected to play parental roles in front of younger siblings by transmitting social and cultural values regarding gender roles and expectations to them. Through constant checking and policing, they prevent their younger sisters from going against the grain. They are also the link between younger ones and parents, and they labor to ensure the preservation of generational dialog and continuity.

Older siblings are also regarded as role models because they embody archetypal female roles and therefore, epitomize desired decorum for woman. In addition to mothering and giving care to younger siblings, they are also expected to be good examples of discipline and morality because they become the yardstick against which the attitudes and actions of younger siblings are measured. They are also expected to sacrifice personal ambition for the benefit of the family and younger siblings who do not bear the moral burden of community wellbeing (Abebe, 2019). Consequently, younger siblings may yearn to escape this social burden by focusing on personal development and career choices through taking advantage of modern education and learning skills. These differences in social expectations raise the question of whether such sacrifice is a function of choice or not and, therefore, whether it could be considered a form of docile agency. The younger sibling's rebellious attitude in one cellphilm illustrates this tension between modern values centered on the individual and traditional ones geared toward the community.

In West Africa, adolescent girls are generally believed to have more limited agency than boys because prevailing social norms and cultural practices tend to benefit male children. For instance, girls' early marriage is often encouraged to prevent out of wedlock births and preserve girls' virginity

FIGURE 3
Drawing of a girl who wants to join the army.

until their wedding. Patriarchal societies also tend to have customs prioritizing boys in matters such as education and health (Burkina Faso Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de l'Alphabétisation, 2017; Mali Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2018; Berhane et al., 2019). In the workshops, girls did not demonstrate a lower level of agency but, rather, a different expression of agency. As we can see in **Table 1**, they illustrated the weight of the household burden on girls and their examples of agency often aligned with traditional gender roles. While these cellphilms provide examples of allegiant and even docile agency, they also depicted characters demonstrating oppositional agency as we see in the attitude of the younger sister discussed above. At the same time, some individual productions from girls broke with gender stereotypes. For example, one girl drew herself as a soldier and told the researchers that she would like to join the army (see **Figure 3**).

Adolescents often internalize social norms when they are quite young, and this influences not only their behaviors but also how they project themselves into the future. When the norms are inequitable, they reinforce power imbalance and can constrain girls' capacity to choose. In the example of the drawing of the girl above, boys commented that the army was for men, but the girl seemed undeterred.

Survival agency: How are adolescents connecting agency, education, and crisis?

In their productions, young people demonstrated a form of what might be referred to as survival agency (Meyers, 2016) and a high level of awareness of the crisis. The conflict is there yet life goes on and adolescents find ways to fulfill themselves and pursue their goals. Such agency enables them to be resilient. Some of the cellphilms also showed young people as agents of peace. For example, both boys and girls produced cellphilms in which a young person acted as a mediator in a dispute. They also provided several examples of solutions to the challenges faced by their communities. These suggest that adolescents want to be part of the solution. In the discussions, adolescents expressed a desire to be heard and told the researchers that they want their cellphilms to be seen, as exemplified in this conversation between a researcher and respondents.

> Researcher: According to you, who should see your cellphilms?
>
> Girl 1: They can be seen by everyone.
>
> Girl 2: Our cellphilms should be shown where there is no peace.
>
> Boy 1: Everyone can see our cellphilms for some to get out of their mistake.
>
> Boy 2: We have to show them to the President of the Republic.
>
> Researcher: Why?
>
> Boy 2: For peace to settle between the President and the judges.
>
> Girl 3: The minister of education should see them.
>
> Researcher: Why?
>
> Girl: Because the minister can help us.
>
> Boy 3: We can show them to the teachers.
>
> Researcher: Why?
>
> Boy 3: So there can be peace between the teachers.

(Translation of exchange in Segou)

> Researcher: Who should see these videos?
>
> Respondents: Everyone.
>
> The teachers.
>
> The commune leaders.
>
> Adults and elderly people.
>
> Researcher: Why?
>
> Respondents: All the activities shown in the cellphilms concern adults as well. If people see the cellphilms they will understand that the films are showing the lives of young girls and young boys from the village and also other members of the community.

(Translation of exchange summary from Mopti)

The workshops revealed that the participating adolescents in both regions are aware of various factors and conditions affecting how agency is created and enacted. Some of these factors are directly related to the structures mentioned earlier, while others relate to needs deemed essential to manifest agency. For instance, some of the drawings showed water towers, roads and means of transport, health care services, food production, means of protection, schools, and materials

needed for learning. The following conversation illustrates what participants needed to have agency.

> Researcher: What do you need to have the capacity to act and help yourself?
>
> Girl: We want our school to be rehabilitated so we can learn better.
>
> Boy: We want our teachers to teach us.
>
> Boy: We want peace to rule in the agriculture areas, especially [name of town].
>
> Girl: We want the teachers' strike to end.
>
> Girl: We need enough water at our school.
>
> Boy: Provide employment to young people because they are discouraged since they have a diploma but remain without a job. Some join the army as a last resort.
>
> Girl: There are too many militaries at the same time. Too many thieves.
>
> Girl: If they do not work, obviously they will steal.
>
> Researcher: If you could change something to have more agency what would it be? Why?
>
> Girl: End the conflict, because when the conflict ends there will be peace.
>
> Boy: Youth unemployment. If young people have jobs, there will be no theft.
>
> Boy: That the bandits stop burning fields, that's what peace means.

The participants were aware not only of their needs, but their productions also illustrated examples of agency and strategies to support their wellbeing. One such strategy is going to school. Four cellphilms related to schooling and its importance. Some even went further by creating a cellphilm showing young people doing school-related exercises together to keep on learning in spite of the teachers' strike. Other strategies included working together to build a garden, selling goods to make money for the family, acting as mediator in a dispute, seeking and providing advice, and leaving the village to find work. Another strategy is to call upon community members to work together. For example, in three cellphilms the characters sought guidance from significant community members such as imams and village leaders to bring opposing parties together and find solutions.

One of the cellphilms told the story of a group of boys finding an unexploded device on their way to school and preventing other children from touching it while the relevant authorities, in this case the school principal, are informed. This cellphilm is not only an explicit illustration of the risks children face on their way to school but also a demonstration that young people can play a role in matters of security. In the scenario young people decided collectively to act to prevent tragedy but also took individual decisions and actions. The participants perceived their capacity to act and help themselves from their own cultural lenses and their art was often reflective of their family and community lives.

Discussion and conclusion

Our preliminary findings suggest that the various layers of crisis affecting youth in Mali have an influence on both agency and education. They also reveal that the participating adolescents want to play a role in preventing, managing, and resolving the conflict and believe that their agency can help to address the crisis. Given the complexity of the situation and the status of youth in the communities investigated, however, more research is needed to explore the extent to which youth can really play such a role, something we plan to explore in a later phase of the study.

The first phase of the study also seems to indicate interesting differences between the way agency is perceived by the participating adolescents and how it is usually described in the literature. First, the research participants' view of agency, although multi-faceted, was situated and deeply rooted in their daily experiences, thus making it unique and highly contextual (as exemplified in the cellphilms mentioned earlier of the girl receiving advice from her sister and the boys finding an unexploded device). Second, as mentioned in section "Focusing on the artwork: What does it mean to "picture agency"?," the participants' productions illustrate a collective view of agency that also enabled individual decisions and actions, thus blurring the line between two forms of agency that are often presented as a dichotomy. The young people who took part in the workshops seek to act not only for their own sake but to help their extended family and their community. They also portrayed collective actions as being agentic rather than individual ones. This heightened sense of community and family duty, while reflective of the Malian culture, is sometimes perceived as a lack of agency by international actors whose interventions tend to emphasize a form of individual agency that leads to emancipation rather than more docile and allegiant forms of agency. The strong emphasis on collective agency in the workshops raises questions about whether education partners should expand the scope of what they consider agentic behavior and whether non-transformative agency deserves to be celebrated as well. Further, it led us to reflect on who decides what is transformative and what is not and whether it is ethical to expect transformative agency in a context of crisis. Finally, our group analysis sessions to which we allude earlier, revealed that youth perceptions differ from those of the adult researchers. This forces us to reflect on and confront our preconceptions about agency and suggest that youth may not necessarily share the same views as the adults around them. We believe that young people should be given a voice in the decision-making processes that concern them, including deciding for themselves what form of agency they seek, and be provided with opportunities to express their concerns and present solutions.

The disconnect between discourses and practices in social interventions with children and youth in Africa has been acknowledged for more than a decade (Abebe, 2019). On the one

hand, child-rights actors defend young people's right to exercise agency. On the other, measures aimed to protect children and interventions targeting youth thought of as being at-risk, in need, or out of place often use directives and supervisory approaches that are paternalistic in nature and that attempt to bend adolescents' conduct toward accepted norms and behavior. In other words, youth are encouraged to be agents, but only if this fits into adults' visions and only if it is what is thought of as the right type of agency (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). The research participants clearly showed that young people in Mali are agentic even in the difficult context of war but discussions and reflections on cellphilms also revealed that the same story can be perceived differently. The next round of data collection will allow us to better understand what promotes and what constrains youth agency but, as importantly, it will give us the opportunity to engage both adults and youth in a discussion on the artwork produced and what it teaches us about agency and education in times of conflict.

Girls illustrated how the generational order and gender social norms set boundaries on their agency. Nevertheless. they used their agency to expose their heavy workload and contest in their films, the unfair division of labor. As discussed in section "Focusing on the artwork: What does it mean to "picture agency"?," our preliminary findings suggest that girls' agency remains constrained by traditions and gender-based roles and tasks. While there is a progressive drive, there seems to be no real transformation yet. However, we are aware that our own positionality as adults, as educated women, and as outsiders to the community make this statement questionable and we cannot dismiss the possibility that a form of docile agency is at play. While the education received within the family will still have an impact on what counts as agency, generally, the participating adolescents aspire to fulfill themselves in relation to professional offers in their living environment, and that was particularly the case for girls.

In hindsight, we recognize that the prompts used in the different participatory activities are imperfect and may have somehow influenced young people's understanding of the term agency. Such is the challenge with any elusive concept but even more so when it does not have a direct translation in local languages. We also realized, while watching and making sense of the cellphilms, how positionality can shape our understandings of what is agentic and what is not. For instance, in the collective data analysis the perception of the Mali-based researchers with a strong sense of local culture and knowledge was sometimes different from that of the Canadian-based researchers. This realization led us to adopt more collaborative ways of analyzing data and to organize online conversations in which both the Malian and Canadian teams could discuss their interpretation of the data. Learning from this experience was also applied to the translation of the survey of the second phase of data collection. Extensive discussions involving local language specialists and national researchers took place to refine the wording of the survey items.

Perhaps the most significant finding from a policy perspective was the young people's level of participation and the eagerness of research participants to engage with complex issues and share their stories. The participatory workshops highlighted the significance of youth commitment, or what we might describe as agency to study agency. These adolescents expressed a strong desire to be heard and a level of understanding of the situation that may surprise many adults. Traditionally, in Mali, adolescents are rarely given the opportunity to voice their concerns and share their perspectives with policy makers. Perhaps it is time to listen to what they have to say.

The study has so far enabled us to identify some specific blind spots to which education actors and researchers should pay attention. First, the intersection between agency and local culture is key. Empowering educative practices that incorporate indigenous perspectives are still in gestation in Mali at the moment, yet they are important as part of addressing gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices. Second, there may be tensions between girls' agency and cultural values. The artwork produced by the girls in the study suggests the need to question existing practices, to negotiate new intergenerational relationships, and ultimately to put an end to the transmission of sexist, oppressive, or inegalitarian values. Educational leaders need to be on board alongside gender activists and other education partners because such ideas may appear to threaten cultural identities and girls and young women will need all the support they can get for change to take place. Third, the link between youth agency and the promotion of peace deserves further attention. Young people have demonstrated that they want to play a role in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict, yet how it may happen in practice still needs exploration. Fourth, the agency of communities should not be forgotten since it may well be a path to increased resilience, improved coexistence, and aid in the fight against corruption. The research also highlights areas that deserve further investigation. For instance, other studies should look at the influence of the generational order on agency both in the Global North and in the South in order to provide a better understanding of how adolescents' agentic potential is situated within the generational order and its relationship to social norms. Finally, more work on investigating the differences between adolescents' and adults' views of agency should also be undertaken.

These points demonstrate, we believe, a need to recognize the value of the perspectives of youth for social change and the importance of supporting the development of their agency in order to help them overcome the challenges they face. Interventions aimed at increasing youth agency may be misaligned unless young people are listened to and provided with the opportunity to determine for themselves the type of agency they seek. The messages contained in the cellphilms and drawings of the young participants alongside their enthusiasm for this type of approach suggests that young people want their voices to be heard in the decision-making processes that

concern them. We believe that education actors and policy makers should pay attention to young people's perspectives even (or especially) in times of crisis and provide them with opportunities to express their concerns and present solutions.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because only the art work for whom consent has been provided is available for public viewing. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to CM, claudia.mitchell@mcgill.ca.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the McGill Research Ethics Board Office. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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