



The Internal and External Obstacles of the Creativity in Education in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT. In the era of a knowledge-based economy, cultivating students' creativity has received increasing policy and research attention worldwide. Although Hong Kong has launched educational reforms aiming at fostering creativity in daily class, the implementation of creativity in education still encounters substantial difficulties. Based on previous research, this article aims to sort out the obstacles to this implementation from both external and internal aspects. The external obstacles include the Confucian culture and the educational system. On the one side, the Confucian culture emphasizes the social role of education, the moral model role of teachers, and diligence in the learning process. On the other side, Hong Kong educational system has put great pressure on teachers and schools through various high-stake examinations and reforms. These two external factors have created an environment that is detrimental to the development of creativity in schools. While the internal obstacles lie in the teachers' concept and practice of creativity education, that is teachers' incomplete understanding of creativity education and the low efficiency in the creative classroom. These two internal factors have hindered Hong Kong teachers from fostering creativity. Overall, the combination of internal and external factors has impeded the cultivation of students' creativity in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Creativity in education, Hong Kong, Pedagogical dilemmas

1 Introduction

As sustaining innovation and resourcefulness have become crucial to economic survival, the increasing economic competition has led to the growing interest in creativity on a global scale [1]. Accordingly, schools have been entrusted with the task of cultivating creative talents. Since the end of the 1990s, developing students' creativity has been seen as a necessity for teachers [2]. In response to this, the educational sectors of many countries have tried to integrate creativity into school education. For instance, the Council of the European Union encouraged education and training institutions to ensure that curricula, along with teaching and testing approaches at all stages of education, integrate and develop creativity [3]. Besides, in mainland China, the goal of the 1998 educational reform (the 21st Century Educational Reform and Higher Education Law) was to promote innovative abilities in all areas of public education [4].

Thorough research supports the implementation of teaching for creativity. In order to nurture creativity, teachers should create creative learning environments, both physical and pedagogic [5]. Furthermore, the capacity to innovate tends to be fostered better by teachers whose pedagogy appeared flexible, focused, and fine-tuned [6]. On the contrary, classroom characteristics that inhibit creativity have been identified as the use of one correct answer, no mistakes, and ignoring different ideas [7]. However, with all the emphasis placed on creativity in education, the implementation of nurturing creativity in classrooms still encounters substantial difficulties worldwide.

A wealth of studies have been launched on the factors that hinder the promotion of creativity in education. Sternberg proposed that standardized tests have been a great obstacle to developing creativity, as creative thinking on such tests is not likely to lead to improved scores but may be detrimental to performance [8]. Naturally, to avoid being in a no-win situation, teachers have to put more emphasis on helping students improve their scores in classrooms. Besides, Beghetto proposed that considering the crucial role teachers play in education, teachers' own beliefs about creativity are regarded as the essential factor [9]. Apart from these general limitations, the diverse reasons in specific social contexts should not be ignored.

In the context of Hong Kong, creativity was regarded as a general skill to be developed across all subjects in the school under the curriculum reform in 2001 [10]. Yet, fostering students' creativity is still confronted with a number of obstacles in Hong Kong. Hui and Yuen argued that creativity is implicitly hindered because children in Hong Kong are grown up in the Confucian culture which advocates modesty, which creates a challenge for teachers to promote creativity [11]. Whilst Cheng & Walker emphasized that the overwhelming reforms have had a bottleneck effect on the development of Hong Kong schools [12]. By interviewing twenty-eight teachers in three primary schools, Huang and Lee concluded Hong Kong teachers' narrow perceptions of creativity constrain their effective application of creative teaching [13].

Although existing research has shed light on the limits to teaching for creativity in Hong Kong from various perspectives, systematic analyses of the obstacles Hong Kong teachers encounter in the way of promoting creativity in classrooms remain limited. Therefore, the current article aims to reveal these limitations from two aspects: external obstacles and internal obstacles.

2 External obstacles

In the first three decades of the psychological study of creativity, it was most likely viewed as a distinct group of personal features, comprising aspects of personality, cognitive abilities, motivation, and divergent thinking skills. Since the 1880s, psychologists have started to realize that contextual elements, such as society, school, and family, play a significant role in the development of creativity [14]. After twenty years of experimental studies on this issue, Amabile summarized that the social context has a cumulative effect. The social environment shapes one's motivational inclinations (either intrinsic or extrinsic) and consequently encourages or discourages one's creativity [15]. Simonton came to the same conclusion through researching outstanding figures

from a wide range of periods and countries in history. He pointed out that it is the social context, more than the individual factor, that is essential to producing creative outcomes [16]. Therefore, when discussing the dilemma in creative teaching in Hong Kong, obstacles caused by the social environment should not be underestimated. This article selects the two most representative external obstacles: the Confucian culture and the educational system.

2.1 The Confucian Culture

Confucius (551-479 BC) was an outstanding philosopher, ideologist, educator, and political ethicist of the late Spring and Autumn Period in China. He proposed a set of rules for society, which is called Confucianism. Because Confucianism fully satisfied the requirements of feudal regimes, it has been highly revered as the authentic ideological system in all dynasties and permeated all aspects of life in Chinese society. Even today, the deep-rooted Confucianism in the consciousness of people is still playing an essential role in Hong Kong education.

In Confucian culture, the role of education for society is more important than that of students' personal development. In the pursuit of collectivism, Confucianism emphasizes the reciprocal responsibilities and obligations of members of society. Influenced by this group-oriented culture, Hong Kong schools tend to guide students to integrate into a large community. This kind of moral-political-oriented education encourages obedience to the collective will and discourages the expression of individual opinions. For example, instead of viewing language as a critical tool for facilitating personalities and self-determination as in American preschools, Chinese preschools teach students how to present long, well-rehearsed presentations without flaw [17]. In this regard, the Confucian culture is detrimental to nurturing creativity.

Moreover, one distinct characteristic of Confucianism is the higher expectations for the role of teachers. In the Confucian tradition, the responsibilities of teachers are not merely imparting knowledge to students, more to the point, the teachers should act as moral models for students to emulate. This is confirmed by Gao's study which involves extensive in-depth interviews, in-class observations, and a pilot quantitative study in Chinese secondary schools. Gao developed a teaching model consisting of a molding orientation corresponding with the knowledge transmission dimension and a cultivating orientation corresponding with the affective and moral dimension [18]. When Chinese parents send their children to school, they pay more attention to giving the child a moral pathway for one's development in society. Therefore, the teacher in the Confucian tradition is expected to have deep knowledge and to be a perfect moral model simultaneously. In return, students are told to show their respect to the teacher by accepting whatever the teacher said without questioning. However, being creative calls for the introduction of new components into an established field, which means the creator has to challenge the conventional manner. As a result, a creative act in the classroom is often perceived as a disturbance in the Confucian culture valuing obedience and discipline [19].

In addition, another noteworthy characteristic of Confucian culture is its emphasis on diligence in the process of learning. The Confucian educational philosophy is based

on the conviction that understanding is a slow and hard-working process. As Asian students believe that success depends on how much effort you put in, they are often considered to be rote learners [20]. In terms of schools, great emphasis is placed on the skills through rigid training programs from a very young age, because it is believed that basic skills are the cornerstone and should be prior to all efforts to promote creativity, which is not conducive to the development of creativity.

In summary, the three points emphasized by Confucianism---the social role of education, the moral model role of teachers, and diligence in the process of learning---are all proved to be detrimental to nurturing creativity. Since this well-entrenched Confucian culture continues to invisibly guide education in Confucian-heritage societies, including Hong Kong, it has created an unfavorable cultural environment to nurture creativity in Hong Kong classrooms.

2.2 The Educational System

In spite of the incompatibility of traditional Confucian culture and creativity education, Hong Kong has put a great deal of effort into promoting creativity in schools. In 2001, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) introduced *The way forward to curriculum development: Learning to learn* which formally stipulated the development of creativity in schools [10]. However, the Hong Kong educational system still exists hindering factors in promoting creativity education.

On the one hand, the high-stakes testing environment of Hong Kong has a negative effect on the implementation of teaching for creativity. In Hong Kong, students have to take various standardized examinations [20]. In the primary grades of fifth and sixth, students have to take three internal school assessments (ISA). The results of this will decide on a student's admission to a secondary school. In the sixth grade of secondary school, students have to take the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE). Because the results of DSE crucially determine whether a student will be eligible for college, this standardized examination is highly valued by parents, schools, and teachers. These tests ask students to fill in the standard answers, measuring creativity little or not at all. Even worse, creative thinking in such tests is likely to result in lower scores [8]. Besides, as standardized tests result in constricted curricula and pedagogy, teachers have to focus on improving test scores and have less autonomy. Accordingly, creative teaching techniques, such as exploratory and partnered learning, were replaced by teacher-centered strategies. Overall, regardless of the beautiful blueprint CDC made, developing creativity in schools is discouraged in such a high-stakes testing environment.

On the other hand, implementing multiple reforms in parallel has had a bottleneck effect on Hong Kong education. Since Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, politicians have initiated a set of reforms aiming to significantly change the shape of education in Hong Kong. In terms of School Management, the Education and Manpower Branch (EMB) and Education Department introduced a series of policies promoting school-based management (SBM) which decentralized the administrative responsibilities and involved multiple stakeholders in school governance [21]. When it

comes to curriculum development, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) proposed curriculum development at the school level, which represented a significant deviation from the traditional central curriculum [22]. In terms of quality assurance, the EMB introduced the school self-evaluation (SSE), the external school review (ESR), and the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) to inspect and evaluate the performance of schools in Hong Kong [23]. Although each of these reforms was pioneering and well-intentioned, implementing them in parallel led to chaos and hampered schools from reaching the objectives of the reforms. Even worse, this bottleneck effect of reforms created tons of pressure on the school and teachers, making it harder to nurture creativity in the classroom.

Due to the high-stakes testing environment and multiple reforms, schools, teachers, and parents are compelled to pay more emphasis on children's academic performance. Under this heightened tension, schools in Hong Kong are reported to have heavy and intense curricula, rigid schedules, short lessons, and the original layout of the classroom, all of which are suitable for expository pedagogy only [24]. Considering the distinction that exists between knowledge-focused learning and creativity-focused learning, Hong Kong's educational system creates a more disadvantageous environment for creativity education.

3 Internal obstacles

Apart from the above-mentioned external obstacles, the internal impediments of teachers should not be ignored. This is because teachers play a significant part in establishing a classroom environment conducive to developing students' innovative abilities. More specifically, whether a teacher can effectively promote creativity education in the classroom mainly depends on two factors: teachers' concept and practice of creativity education.

3.1 Teachers' Concept of Creativity Education

When it comes to the definition of creativity, teachers in Hong Kong seem to hold ambivalent views. After interviewing 204 Hong Kong primary and secondary school teachers, Chan and Chan found that creative students who were distinguished by their constant questioning, imaginative, and responsive nature were described by their teachers as arrogant, attention-seeking, insubordinate, and ego-centered [25]. Nominating such socially unappealing characteristics as features of students who are creative, Hong Kong teachers may have trouble recognizing authentically creative students in the classroom. Moreover, Hong Kong teachers are proven to strongly associate creativity and intellectual functioning. After comparing the beliefs about the creativity of 515 teachers from China, Germany, and Japan, Zhou, Shen, Wang, Neber, and Johji concluded that Chinese teachers connect creativity more with math, a subject demanding massive intellectual operations [26]. Also, in Chien & Hui's study of 877 early childhood educators in three Chinese societies, it was found that Hong Kong teachers considered children's innate ability and family parenting style as the crucial factors, which

implies there is little teachers can contribute to nurturing creativity in the classroom [19]. Hence, Hong Kong teachers' ambivalent and incomplete beliefs about creativity create a dilemma for teachers in creativity education.

In addition, Hong Kong teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of creativity education. Huang and Lee summarized three interwoven layers of creative teaching, namely, the innovative processes, productive teaching achievements, and creative learning achievements [13]. However, in their study of teachers from three Hong Kong primary schools, only half informants were aligned with this integrated conception. Others placed emphasis only on the innovative teaching processes, rather than on combining the three layers together. Huang and Lee explained that with all the specific suggestions provided by CDC, Hong Kong teachers may focus more on incorporating the creative ingredients with their instructional contents, that is the innovative processes [13]. However, the simultaneous absence of instruments that systematically integrate creative teaching and learning with the design of longitudinal subject curricula in their teaching practices suggests that Hong Kong teachers often neglect the outcomes of creative learning. Therefore, Hong Kong Teachers' understanding of creativity in education still needs to be supplemented and improved.

Another reason why some Hong Kong teachers are confused about creative teaching is that it is difficult to assess the creative learning outcomes in a short time. Through reviewing the action research reports of 75 teachers, Cheng found that Hong Kong teachers felt puzzled at the value of creative teaching [27]. As mentioned previously, examination-oriented education and extensive educational reforms have already created great pressure on teachers. What confused teachers are whether the time and efforts they invest in creative teaching are worthwhile in this teacher-overloaded context. Since the outcomes of creative teaching usually cannot show up instantly, teachers tended to lose their confidence in creative teaching. Furthermore, creative teaching has become something teachers were used to abandoning in the face of the shortage of resources. This reveals that Hong Kong teachers have been trapped in a value paradox between creativity and traditional education, which hinders the development of creativity education.

3.2 Teachers' Practice of Creativity Education

The last link in creativity education is teachers' practice in the classroom. During the process of practice, the transformation from traditional education to creative education is a great challenge for Hong Kong teachers.

Student-centered mode of pedagogy is identified as a typical strategy to implement creativity education. In this pedagogy, the teacher act as a facilitator instead of a lecturer, while the students become observers, performers, and creators instead of passive listeners. Through group discussion, role play, drama presentation, and group activities, students' independent thinking as well as creativity can be effectively stimulated. However, from the government's inspection report, the pedagogy used by Hong Kong teachers is still identified as a teacher-oriented and knowledge-transmitted mode [27]. Consistent with this, Li reported that Hong Kong teachers regarded imparting academic knowledge and completing the lesson plan as a good lesson, while regarded students'

talking as a sign of ineffectiveness [28]. The reports of 75 teachers in Cheng's research may provide some explanations for this disparity in pedagogy. On the one hand, some Hong Kong teachers are unfamiliar with the playful style of creative teaching, conversely, they are usually authoritative and strict with students in usual lessons. Given their greater concern for imparting evidence-based knowledge and training children to be well-behaved, it seems that the control of teachers is more important than children's innovation. On the other hand, Hong Kong students may have poor performance in creative learning tasks since they are not used to this either. Over half of teachers in Cheng's research reported that students rarely respond to creative questions. Teachers criticized that many Hong Kong students were score-oriented, accustomed to studying by rote, and unmotivated to think, so they lacked the confidence to think creatively and speak their ideas out loud. Furthermore, these students' poor performance seemed to disappoint their teachers [27]. In summary, due to the unfamiliarity of both teachers and students with creativity in education, the teacher-centered mode of pedagogy still dominates in the classroom in Hong Kong.

For those teachers who value creativity in education and try to adopt the student-centered mode of pedagogy, low classroom efficiency is another obstacle in the way of creative teaching. According to Cheng's research, the reasons for these teachers' low classroom efficiency can be divided into three categories [27]. The first reason is the wide variation in students' creative learning capabilities. Students in the same class have different levels of capacity, speed of work, and willingness to present, making it more difficult for teachers to design effective classroom activities which are appropriate for every student. The second reason is more prominent disciplinary issues. Compared with traditional expository teaching, the interesting activities in creative teaching tend to give students extra freedom, excitement, and interactions, which leads to more discipline problems. The chaos in the classroom further causes tensions among teachers in the implementation of creativity education. The last and also the most frequently reported reason is the limited time. Based on the teachers' reports, because of the lack of time, they had to shorten their descriptions and instructions, and the students did not have enough time to think, discuss, share, and practice. This put both teachers and students under enormous pressure, rendering the practice of creative teaching neither in-depth nor effective.

Overall, the negative factors discussed above highly interact with each other, including teachers' unfamiliarity with student-centered pedagogy, students' poor performance, great student differences, disciplinary issues, and limited time. These factors usually appear together in the classroom, forming multiplying negative impacts on teachers' practice of creativity education.

4 Conclusion

Considering the intensifying competition in the world economy, Hong Kong has a pressing need to nurture creativity in the young generation. However, on the one hand, the progress of implementing creative education has been impeded by the well-entrenched Confucian culture and the high-pressure educational system, which are the

external obstacles. Specifically, the obedience, discipline, and diligence valued by the Confucian culture are inconsistent with the nature of creativity education. Besides, the heavy pressure created by various high-stake examinations and reforms has made no room for creative teaching in Hong Kong. On the other hand, fostering creativity in the classroom has been difficult for Hong Kong teachers because of their misunderstanding about creative education and the low efficiency in the creative classroom, which are internal obstacles.

Accordingly, to remove the external obstacles, the educational department should introduce more liberal education policies and reduce the number of high-stakes examinations. In terms of the internal obstacles, the teacher-training programs in colleges should place greater emphasis on improving the creativity, self-efficacy, risk-taking, and leadership skills of teachers. Besides, it is necessary to hold more creative instruction workshops for front-line teachers, so that they can gain the momentum to accommodate the transformation from traditional education to creative education.

Although this review provides a relatively comprehensive analysis of the obstacles to creative education in Hong Kong, there are still other factors that have not been discussed, such as the limited teaching space and parental involvement. Hence, future studies should seek to validate prior findings by taking more factors into account. With more thorough explanations for the dilemma of creativity in education, we can figure out better countermeasures to remove the barriers.

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