



Research on Chinese Children's Innovative Aesthetic Learning

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Abstract. Innovative thinking and aesthetic learning play indispensable parts in early childhood education, which can develop children's talents and promote their creativities. This study aims to investigate the current pedagogical practice and the existing problems in Chinese preschool aesthetic education, thereby providing possible solutions for preschool teachers. The recruited participants include children and preschool teachers in a private kindergarten and a public kindergarten in Nanjing, China, as well as teachers from a Danish early childhood institution. Through a comparison, it reveals that Danish preschool teachers have higher awareness of the corporation with local community to enhance children's innovative aesthetic learning. Although some challenges still exist in Chinese aesthetic education, Chinese preschool teachers are increasingly emphasizing the significance of children's innovative aesthetic learning and are thus developing prospective strategies to promote aesthetic learning in China.

Keywords: innovative thinking, aesthetic learning, kindergarten, early childhood education.

1 Introduction

Aesthetic education is fundamental for the holistic development of young children [1]. Because of the fundamental effect of early childhood education on later learning stages, Ministry of Education of People's Republic China has recognized the significance of aesthetic education in early schooling and enacted the Kindergarten Education Guidelines [2] and the Learning and Development Guidelines for ages 3-6 Children [3]. These documents represent a guideline for preschool curricula in China, which incorporate five respective domains, including supporting physical and mental health, enriching life experiences, more importantly, expanding the aesthetic experience, and developing creative thinking. According to Resnick's [4] theory of creative learning, education today is more concerned with the thinking patterns to solve problems and make decisions in a creative manner. Thus, it is imperative to introduce innovative aesthetic education into preschools in China.

In contrast to a traditional approach that focuses primarily on intellectual development, aesthetic learning is believed to exert more positive and profound effects on children in the long run. Since aesthetic appreciation is associated with artistic experiences

as well as perceptive, affective, and cognitive concerns [5], children can not only enhance their visual perception abilities and innovation capacities, but also improve their performance in interpersonal interactions and emotional stability. However, under a neoliberal trend in early childhood education (ECE), most children currently lack the opportunities to participate in innovative aesthetic learning activities in the school-readiness curriculum. Therefore, by comparing how Danish preschool teachers instruct children's innovative aesthetic learning, the purpose of this study is to 1) explore the current pedagogical practices of aesthetic education in Chinese kindergartens, and 2) identify its existing problems and provide possible solutions.

2 Research Design

Observation and face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private kindergarten and a public kindergarten in Nanjing, China. Additionally, email interviews were also undertaken to obtain data from Danish preschool teachers. In total, 30 children and 5 preschool instructors were recruited as the research subjects, with children ranging in age from 2-3 to 4-5 in two Chinese kindergartens.

3 Existing challenges in Chinese PRESCHOOL aesthetic EDUCATION

3.1 The imbalance between direct instructional courses and free play

Based on the observation results, preschool teachers are more inclined to provide direct instructional courses rather than affording children sufficient time to play freely in Chinese kindergartens. Similarly, aesthetic learning in China is basically organized by preschool teachers, who determine certain topics and encourage children to follow the instructions based on the themes. In this case, this educational process renders children as passive information recipients as teachers frequently play the controlling role in cultivating children into how they want them to be. The challenge is that those educational practices are inflexibly fixed at the bottom of Bloom's taxonomy [6], because preschool teachers overemphasize correct answers and knowledge reproduction.. Even though children's academic achievements and socio-emotional skills can be improved in the traditional learning process, their creative thinking should be strengthened through free play. By observing children playing freely with their peers, the researcher can investigate what interests or challenges preschoolers, which further serves as an inspiration for children's future activities design [7]. Driven by innate curiosity and enthusiasm, Chinese children are more likely to be engaged in the autonomously dominant experiences in early education, which allows them to improve concentration and extend the length of concentration time [8]. However, Chinese children only have approximately two hours every day in kindergartens to play different kinds of extracurricular activities and outdoor sports, such as building blocks, painting, reading storybooks, playing with toys. This is not enough.

3.2 Limited material conditions for children's aesthetic learning

In China, creative art activities have been highly valued by most kindergartens in recent years, with preschool teachers placing a high priority on their far-reaching impact on children's future development [9]. However, the aesthetic learning environment and material availability vary significantly from publicly funded kindergartens to privately financed ones in China. The local governments and Education Bureau provide resources and supportive environments for those public institutions so that children's learning requirements for aesthetic perceptions can be satisfied. In contrast, the annual budget schemes in private kindergartens are so limited that the leaders are required to allocate the money in an economical manner. According to the interviews with teachers in the private kindergarten, there is a mismatch between the number of children and the number of aesthetic learning resources, such as papers, crayons, soft clay. Sometimes preschool teachers need to ask students to bring materials from home. However, children may benefit from this behavior as they can bring their favorite painting tools from home and share them with peers.

Moreover, certain kindergartens may underestimate the importance of aesthetic education due to varying curriculum focuses. To illustrate, the private kindergarten in this study is an international kindergarten, so instead of aesthetic teaching, this school considers foreign language acquisition as a priority in its curriculum. Nevertheless, the selected public kindergarten highlights the importance of traditional Chinese paintings, thus providing abundant aesthetic learning materials to children. Also, some painting experts are employed by the public kindergarten to impart the painting culture and skills to all stakeholders (teachers and preschoolers), which enhances the aesthetic education.

3.3 Unwillingness of introvert and shy children to express innovative ideas

Through observations, it demonstrates that creative ideas do not always originate from enthusiastic children in a class, while some children who exhibit varying degrees of introversion or shyness also have creative thinking in aesthetic activities. But due to their personalities, these children are unwilling to actively express innovative ideas.

Introversion refers to unexpressed thoughts, feelings, character, etc. According to Condon and Ruth-Sahd [10], introverted children have significant advantages over extroverted children in terms of thinking before acting, absorbing and processing information thoroughly, focusing on the task, and producing more accurate outputs. Their non-combative demeanor and readiness to listen make them easier to get along with. Nevertheless, the most challenging obstacle for this group of children is discovering and exploiting their own strengths. Introverts may be susceptible to undervalue their own abilities and be intimidated by more powerful and proactive extroverts [10].

Different from introversion, shyness is attributable to social anxiety, which is characterized as "fretful disquiet that stems from the prospect of negative evaluations from others [10]. Due to an innate deficit in self-perception, individuals with severely bashful features can be vulnerable to the emotions of guilt and shame [11]. It can prevent the creative idea from being adopted and implemented, such as fear of failure, fear of being

different, fear of criticism or ridicule, fear of rejection, fear of supervisors, timidity, or shaky self-esteem [12]. A key difference between introversion and shyness is that shyness will have painful behaviors, while introversion will not. For instance, when shy students receive several negative evaluations, they may suffer embarrassing manifestations such as blushing, sweating, stammering, shaking hands or knees, and even dizzying [13]. On the other hand, rather than experiencing painful behaviors, the introverted students would limit social interaction out of personal preference because they consider interaction avoidance as their attempt to conserve energy [10].

Based on the observation on children in this study, the diverse factors that provoke children's demonstration of introversion and shyness are presented below:

Personality traits: According to Galen's (129-216 CE) theory of the Four Temperaments, these introverted and shy children may be born with Melancholic and Phlegmatic personality types, which characterize them as conscientiousness or steadiness, with inactive behaviors in aesthetic activities.

Preschool teachers' behavior: During the educational activities, several preschool teachers with extensive and professional teaching experience may exhibit insufficient patience and employ direct supervision to fulfil the course arrangement. Under the influence of this learning style, children may gradually lose their initiative in independent thinking and creative expression.

Family education: According to Baumrind's (1927-2018) Three Parenting Styles, those children who have been subjected to the authoritarian parenting style for a long time may be afraid of openly expressing their thoughts since their actions and brains are strictly limited at home.

3.4 Individual developmental differences in children's aesthetic performance

According to the results of the observation, various developmental differences among children can be identified in their activity performances, particularly in some aesthetic activities such as painting or music. The following is part of a transcript during the observation:

In a spring-themed painting activity, one or two children in a junior age group could quickly imagine the relative scenarios of spring and visualize their innovative ideas on the paper using diverse colors and concrete stuff. Whereas, simultaneously, there were also some children who could only use a simple color to draw a few rudimentary figures. Some even felt anxious about not getting any ideas of what they could accomplish and sought guidance from the preschool teachers.

This example clearly demonstrates three different levels of child development. Therefore, preschool teachers should constantly keep in mind that diverse growth features of individuals imply varied scenarios that may arise during artistic activities, thus manifesting the significance of conceiving the corresponding strategies.

4 Solutions to improve the situations

4.1 Strengthening the theoretical studies on teacher practice

To solve the imbalance between direct instructional courses and free play, the most appropriate strategy is to strengthen the proper training on preschool teachers so that the corresponding teaching practices can be selected to achieve the intended learning purpose. However, children are frequently taught with static and complete knowledge, and they become experts in consuming knowledge rather than producing knowledge [14]. Therefore, preschool teachers should be aware of the purpose of creating various teaching practices. The direct instructional courses are teacher-initiated where children can benefit from obtaining direct information and broadening their scope of knowledge; while free play can exercise children's creativity and communicative capabilities when some scabrous situations have arisen, such as imbalanced power structures, conflict, and negotiation [7]. Free activities demand a high level of students' self-governing, which Chinese children lack. Accordingly, preschool teachers need to allocate abundant time for children to improve their aesthetic innovation rather than organizing activities only for the purpose of transferring knowledge. Considering young learners' diverse studying interests, a qualified facilitator should use a variety of techniques to support them to make progress [7].

Also, another misunderstanding should be clarified that the goal of education is not merely to impart the notion of innovation but to develop children's integrated competence in innovative learning activities [6]. The preschool teachers can use "the pedagogy of ideas" [15] and "the kindergarten approach to learning" [4], which were embedded in a vision-driven idea-generating "design process" ("*Understand*", "*Create*" and "*Deliver*") mentioned in Nørgård and Paaskesen's [6] article, thereby engaging students in the "creating" level of Bloom's taxonomy [6].

Concerning the specific solutions, preschool teachers should comprehend the "design process" first and then encourage children to envision what they want to accomplish, share their creations with peers, and ultimately reflect on their innovating experiences. Meanwhile, Chinese preschool teachers should be familiar with the co-construction pedagogy, which allows preschool teachers to cooperate with children in generating an original manner of comprehending and strike a balance between child-initiated and teacher-guided activities in open-ended exploratory contexts [6]. This requires teachers to review and analyze literature and theories on how to raise innovative and collaborative children.

4.2 Providing proper environments for children's play

A pedagogical learning environment refers to a context which is consciously and purposefully associated with children's well-being, learning, and development [16]. In the process of establishing pedagogical environments, it is necessary to consider the competencies and knowledge of preschool teachers, size of the class, physical environment, psychological conditions of the children, children's aesthetic perspectives, children's interests and participation, as well as the child-adult ratio. The physical environment

may be concerned with the design of interior and outdoor decorations, the size and layout of the rooms, and the availability of equipment and materials, which can be flexible. On the other hand, children's psychological conditions are in regard to the interaction between children and adults [16]. In detail, preschool staff need to consider whether they create a relaxed atmosphere for children before play and whether they provide emotional or physical support during play according to children's different needs. In terms of children's aesthetic perspectives, which are about whether the layout and decoration of the rooms have an inspiring effect on children's aesthetic perspectives [16].

In certain private kindergartens in China, teachers should take all the above-mentioned factors into consideration to provide more supportive surroundings for children's aesthetic development. The establishment of a pedagogical learning environment is expected to target the process where teaching practices are planned and organized [16]. In order to enhance children's aesthetic learning and development, preschool teachers should figure out the effective way to build the environment, select the most useful learning materials, and divide children into small groups to help them engage more actively in aesthetic learning.

4.3 Cooperating with parents and local community

Despite the fact that numerous efforts have been made from teachers to provide appropriate surroundings for children's innovative aesthetic learning, it is also important for teachers to conduct cooperation with parents and the local community. The contemporary education is concerned with learner's ability to not only live as an active and engaged citizen in a multi-faceted world, but also work in a socially accepted manner, including the way of communication and collaboration [6]. Chinese kindergartens lack the awareness of collaborating with the local community and surroundings, and except for the school personnel and children's parents, others rarely have the opportunity to interact with the school. According to interviews with Danish teachers, children are encouraged to carry out innovative activities with volunteers from the local community, such as The Coding Pirates Future Island [6], which serves as a desirable practice to promote the pedagogical schemes in China. This can largely improve children's creative thinking and manipulative ability through cultivating technological imagination, enterprising, and co-creation [6].

As part of the pedagogical curriculum, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) should investigate how to collaborate with the local community [16]. For instance, the kindergartens can invite volunteers experts in diverse professional fields to play with children and transfer knowledge to them. Also, children can be inspired to participate in the activities held by the local community, such as painting and making handicrafts with youngsters or the elderly.

Parent council and parent-child courses are two examples of parent-teacher collaboration. Initially, the parent council should be established and mobilized so that it can actively use local community resources to present an appropriate pedagogical learning environment for children in ECEC settings [16]. Almost all Chinese kindergartens have

their own parent councils, where competent parents organize activities and provide materials to the kindergartens. In this situation, the parent council plays the role of the favorable assistant in ensuring children's positive and cohesive transitions from the home to institutions [16]. Additionally, since parents shoulder the responsibility to educate children at home, it is necessary to set up a "parent-child class" in the kindergartens. In this special curriculum, parents are required to use their specialties to impart knowledge to children at school, therefore strengthening children's abilities and broadening their knowledge. Under this circumstance, while participating in activities with their closest companion, children can feel more relaxed to propose more innovative ideas.

4.4 Focusing on children's interests and offering more freedom to play

In China, it is universally assumed that an educational institution should be a place for children to learn rather than play. Parents often uphold an excessive expectation of children's learning outcomes at the early childhood center and will be unsatisfied by the pure entertainment [17]. However, some studies have proven the beneficial practical effect of free play on children's experience of the world [18]. Therefore, two factors must be considered in order to thoroughly realize the true freedom of children's play.

Children's perspectives: As practitioners, it is vital for teachers to consider children's ideas, recognize the importance of their growing sense of self, and ensure that young children are endowed with sufficient autonomy in exploring the world. This can also enable children to directly confront the challenges and take the initiative when getting older [19]. In the process, children's innovation level and aesthetic perception can also be promoted as well.

Adults' trust in children: Adults should not only trust children's capacity of selecting the appropriate learning content for their development, but also their ways of engaging in the provided activities. In this process, parents should observe children's behaviors. Moreover, avoid interrupting children because this may disturb their thinking and undermine their efforts [19].

4.5 Observing and tracking Individual behaviour in both short and long run

Findings show that the performance of children's aesthetic learning is strongly linked to their different temperaments, personalities, and surrounding elements. Preschool teachers are responsible for observing, tracking, and addressing different situations. Combined with the interview findings, some possible situations and the corresponding strategies are presented below:

For children who excel in certain areas

Preschool teachers need to provide adequate opportunities for children to explore their potentials and highlight their strengths; for example, children are advocated to assist in the daily instructional schedule and the creation of the learning environment. Meanwhile, compared with peers at other developmental levels, preschool teachers

need to skillfully reserve higher requirements for these comparatively talented children to constantly improve their abilities in corresponding aspects.

For children who perform at a normal level in certain areas

In order to detect subtle changes in children's learning motivation, teachers should continuously monitor and record their various behaviors, as well as fine-tune the intended learning outcomes or teaching styles according to their different development statuses. Besides, it is also necessary for teachers to discover children's prospective advantages through instructional activities.

For children who are weak in certain areas

According to Vygotsky's (1896-1934) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), preschool teachers should not only set the learning goal slightly higher than children's current development level, but also adjust the difficulty of activity content in a targeted and timely manner for these types of children. Additionally, feasible measures should be taken to encourage children to boldly present their innovative perspectives and give them verbal incentives in time. It is also imperative to discover children's advantages, such as carefulness, earnestness, and patience, and ease their anxiety when they are hindered in the areas they are not adept at, thereby progressively developing children's self-confidence and overcoming their fear of obstacles.

To summary, the findings of the interview suggest that when confronted with the challenges of individual variations in aesthetic activities, preschool teachers generally adopt both short-term and long-term strategies. Short-term strategies refer to teachers' timely intervention and withdrawal, and timely capture of children's interests; long term strategies include positive guidance and peer modeling.

5 Conclusion

This qualitative research reflects the values and benefits of children's innovative aesthetic learning in the aspects of creation, emotion, and social development. It is worth mentioning that despite Chinese kindergartens lack of awareness to intertwine the amusing with education, the advantages of structured aesthetic activities cannot be denied. Furthermore, through the combined approaches of literature review, direct observations, and interviews, some solutions are provided to address the current problems in Chinese preschool aesthetic learning, that is, the cooperation among children, preschool teachers, parents, local community, and kindergartens.

Although there are still some problems remaining to be solved in aesthetic learning and the best selection of children's learning styles has yet to be identified, the authors remains optimistic about the bright future of children's aesthetic education in China with the joint effort of educators.

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