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Creative Teaching in Hong Kong Schools: Constraints and Challenges

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Education reforms targeted to promote creativity in schools are often confronted with the problem of translating policy into practice. The distinction between creative teaching and teaching for creativity highlights the relative lack of attention to creative teaching, which could lead to teaching for creativity and student creativity. It is suggested that by making explicit the numerous contextual constraints on creative teaching imposed by inflexible curriculum and centralized pedagogy, teachers are more likely to engage their creativity in addressing these issues, and make schools and classrooms more creative places for student creativity.

Key words: creativity, creative teaching, teaching for creativity, Hong Kong

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In May 2007, a widely publicized anecdotal report by a parent on a teacher's reactions to the creative writings of her gifted child, with the resulting alleged emotional and behavioral problems of the child, has made newspaper headlines in Hong Kong. This and other anecdotes, some having been featured in radio talk shows and television programs, have not only become the discourse in education circles but also raised public awareness on the treatment of gifted children in our schools. More importantly, it is now seriously questioned whether our schools are indeed providing an environment counter-conducive to the nurturance of creativity.

Education Reforms for Creativity

The importance of creativity as a part of the twenty-first-century education process not only receives widespread recognition in western countries but also in Asian Chinese societies (see Elliot, 1999). Far from being a mere chance occurrence or coincidence, politicians and educators in three Chinese societies, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, have all in recent years initiated education reforms that aim to move toward student whole-person development with an emphasis on the nurturance of creativity in students. Specifically, Singapore, starting in 1998, has embraced the notion of "Thinking schools, learning nation" as its educational aim in the twenty-first century, emphasizing the need to develop in students a variety of thinking skills that include problem solving, creativity, and critical thinking (see Goh, 1997; Tan, Lee, Goh, & Chia, 2004). Taiwan in 2001 has started to implement *jiu nian yi guan* or the reformed and integrated nine-year curriculum that includes objectives to nurture aesthetic and creative abilities for scientific investigation and problem solving. Moreover, in January 2002, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has specifically issued a "White Paper on Creativity Education," proposing that creativity education should be made central to educational policy in Taiwan in order that the vision of a "Republic of Creativity" can be realized (see Chen, 2004). In Hong Kong, the Education and Manpower Bureau, in its curriculum reform starting in 2001, has outlined

nine generic skills that cut across key learning areas, and suggested that creativity and critical thinking skills in addition to communication skills should be priority skills to be developed in students in schools (Curriculum Development Council, 2001).

Creative Teaching and Teaching for Creativity

Despite the call to promote creativity in education at the government education policy level, the extent to which education policies could be actually translated into practice at the classroom level has often been a perennial issue. Therefore, a closer examination of what creativity in education means could be helpful in shedding light into the unintended discrepancy between policy and practice. In this connection, Jeffrey and Craft (2004) have highlighted the difference between creative teaching and teaching for creativity, a distinction originally made in a report by the U.K. government-appointed task force, the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, after its two-year deliberation on mapping England's agenda for creative and cultural education. While Jeffrey and Craft (2004) concluded that the focus should be on the difference between creative teaching and creative learning, the distinction between creative teaching and teaching for creativity could be nonetheless useful for our purpose in understanding of what could go wrong in the policy-practice translation process.

In simple terms, creative teaching could be regarded as teaching that aims to make student learning more interesting and more effective through the use of imaginative approaches (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004). As such, the primary concern of creative teaching is with effective teaching. In contrast, teaching for creativity could be regarded as forms of teaching intended to develop students' own creative thinking or behaviors (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004). Thus, the primary objective of teaching for creativity is for learner empowerment. However, it could also be argued that the conceptual distinction is more apparent than real, as creative teaching is implied in and

often leads to teaching for creativity. Indeed, it is often said that teaching for creativity often involves creative teaching, as students' creativity is more likely to be developed in the context in which teachers' creative abilities are engaged. Thus, although creative teaching and teaching for creativity are conceptually distinct, they are highly associated and could be mutually enhancing.

The Emphasis on Teaching for Creativity

In the last two decades, a great deal of research studies and conceptual analysis have been conducted to explore aspects of teaching approaches for enhancing student creativity (e.g., Feldhusen & Treffinger, 1980; Shallcross, 1981; Starko, 1995; Sternberg & Williams, 1996; Torrance, 1972, 1987; Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval. 1994). Also available in these excellent creativity sources are general advice for enhancing creativity in the classroom as well as descriptions of strategies and programs that elicit in students creative processes such as creative problem solving, creative association, invention, creative imagery, and various forms of divergent thinking. For example, one can choose from these sources instructional models that enable students to generate their own questions about a topic, carry out research to answer the most pertinent questions, map their findings onto a large integrative matrix, discover patterns in the matrix, and then develop generalizations about the topic based on the patterns. Within this framework, students are engaged in problem finding, creative connection making, and other higher-order thinking processes. Alternatively, one can also choose other instructional models that aim to promote concept discovery, concept formation, dialectical synthesis of polarized positions, metaphorical analysis, creative mnemonic generation for content mastery, inquiry learning, and cooperative learning processes. Thus, one can conclude that the field of creativity in education has generally emphasized teaching for creativity, and it is no surprise that school reform measures to nurture creativity in

education in Hong Kong as well as those in Singapore and Taiwan have followed the trend in targeting efforts at teaching for creativity.

Constraints on Creative Teaching

In reviewing past efforts at promoting creativity in education through teaching for creativity, Plucker and Beghetto (2003) have echoed the sentiment regarding the lack of important progress over decades of reform efforts. Specifically, they maintained that educators in creativity often warned others against "functional fixedness" and "groupthink,' but they rarely looked beyond their academic disciplinary boundaries for new information, inspiration, and insight. In other words, efforts at teaching for creativity have rarely been supported by efforts to teach creatively. Thus, the call for a parallel emphasis on both teaching for creativity and creative teaching might set the stage for reducing the discrepancies between policy and practice in the promotion of creativity in Hong Kong schools.

Why couldn't teachers teach creatively in teaching for creativity? Evidently, there are multiple reasons. Ambrose (2005) has argued that creative teaching is a highly complex endeavor that is influenced by a wide range of contexts and constraints, and requires a broad array of skills and dispositions. Of particular relevance are the contexts and constraints that prevent teachers from teaching creatively. Metaphorically, it is said that a good teacher teaches creatively, and he or she is a catalyst to creativity. In contrast, a poor teacher unintentionally builds cages, and worse still, is largely unaware of the cage that is built by oneself or by others. After all, the impossible cage to escape from is a cage where one cannot see the bars.

Perhaps, one of the powerful forces suppressing or supporting creative teaching in Hong Kong could be based on teachers' tacit view of what teaching and the teacher role should be. It is likely that teachers who endorse teaching as the rigorous transmission of a core collection of essential knowledge and skills could be less inclined toward experimenting and adopting teaching innovations that deviate from well-established procedures.

This entrapment or constraint could be further reinforced by teacher education programs that overemphasize subject or disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic approaches to transmit faithfully established knowledge and skills to students. The challenge therefore is to gain support from teachers not to privilege this view, but to consider seriously alternative views such as the progressive-constructivist view that aims to promote student learning and construction of knowledge through exploratory and discovery learning (see e.g., Dewey, 1938). Teacher education programs that promote such alternative views of teaching and learning could thus be supportive of creative teaching.

Even if teachers adopt a more constructivist view of teaching and learning, potential teacher creativity could be seriously compromised under the Hong Kong examination-oriented education system with its prescribed common curriculum and centralized pedagogy or teaching frameworks. It is likely that a curriculum which is fixed and compulsory, which involves a great deal of content or propositional knowledge, and which takes up a great deal of learning time, could pose great challenges to stimulating creativity in the teacher who needs to balance creativity and judgments against the requirements to teach in certain prescribed ways. Thus, recent school reform measures that aim to restructure the curriculum to be more flexible could be supportive of creative teaching.

Notwithstanding the aim of recent curriculum reforms for a more flexible curriculum, new constraints on teacher creativity might arise from the implementation of reform measures, as some measures might entail standards and accountability systems that narrow and fragment the curriculum, thereby making it much less conducive to teacher creativity. Moreover, new accountability systems that depend heavily on external measurement might overvalue extrinsic motivation in teaching while undermining intrinsic motivation, which is often necessary for creative work (see e.g., Amabile, 1983, 2001). In summary, educational contexts in Hong Kong with or without recent reform initiatives have presented daunting obstacles that discourage creative teaching. Presumably, teachers who are made aware of these

obstacles or the cage of entrapment are better able to plan to overcome these obstacles and devise possible escape routes for creative teaching.

Relevance, Ownership, Control, and Innovation in Creativity in Teaching

While teaching for creativity does not necessarily require creative teaching, creative teaching often leads to teaching for creativity. Since the literature on creativity in education deals mainly with teaching for creativity, conceptual analysis on creative teaching is of particular value. In this regard, Woods' (1990) conceptualization of the features of creative teaching in terms of relevance, ownership, control, and innovation is revealing. Jeffrey and Craft (2004) went beyond creative teaching and suggested that Woods' (1990) features of creative teaching describe the relationship between creative teaching and teaching for creativity, and articulate how creative teaching could lead to teaching for creativity.

Accordingly, teachers who teach creatively use imaginative approaches to make learning interesting and effective. To make learning experiences relevant to students, they ensure that the curriculum and pedagogy are relevant to students. For example, mathematics is made exciting, literacy is experienced as a set of keys unlocking a whole range of delights and emotional journeys, science is developed as a passion for enquiry, discovery and experimentation, technology provides intensely focused activities involving problem solving, and the arts are valued as opportunities for expression of diverse emotions, including frustration and satisfaction. In getting students to engage in learning, teachers might also prioritize strategies or adapt the strategies to the appropriate age range, context, and individual. With relevance ensured and students engaged, the resulting dynamic and active ethos will lead students to appreciate the qualitative aspects of each focus of learning, and eventually to take ownership of knowledge, learning processes, and the resulting skills and understanding. Thus, creative teaching

encompasses teachers' efforts in making teaching and learning relevant and in encouraging student ownership of learning.

Creative teaching then continues in teachers' efforts to teach for creativity through passing back control to the students and encouraging innovative contributions. In the process, teachers are prepared to acknowledge the boundaries of their own knowledge, and students are encouraged to get actively involved in the determination of what knowledge is to be investigated and acquired, and to take control through experimentation and problem solving. By ensuring that students have a significant amount of control, students will have more opportunities to suggest, invent and propose ideas, to make connections, and to be expressive and innovative.

Jeffrey and Craft (2004), after examining the relationship between creative teaching and teaching for creativity in the classroom, suggested that the dichotomy is false, and that teachers who work creatively employ both creative teaching and teaching for creativity according to the circumstances they consider appropriate. Very often, teaching for creativity may arise naturally from teaching situations not specially intended for the purpose, and teaching for creativity is more likely to emerge from creative teaching contexts. While creative teaching does not necessarily lead to student creativity, it may provide suitable contexts for both teacher and student to be creative in a number of ways. Specifically, when teachers use their own creativity to teach, the enabling ethos may lead students to use the spaces provided to maintain and develop their own creative learning. In addition, as teachers model the expression of their own ideas, students are encouraged to be expressive and innovative.

Taken together, the framework devised by Woods (1990) describing creative teaching can be used to explore creativity in education in general and creative learning in the classroom. Accordingly, the features of creative teaching (relevance, ownership, control, and innovation) could be interpreted as features that characterize learning environments that foster creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and ultimately creative learning and creativity in students. In other words, relevance, ownership, control, and

innovation could be indicative of the escape routes from the cage of entrapment.

Promoting Creative Teaching in the Classroom

Regardless of whether one maintains the dichotomy of creative teaching and teaching for creativity, or emphasizes the close association between creative teaching and teaching for creativity and even student creative learning, student creativity as the outcome of teachers' work could be broadly interpreted to provide clues as to whether teaching is creative or noncreative, although creative teaching may but does not necessarily lead to student creativity. Nonetheless, it could be argued that one should put an equal emphasis on creative teaching as on teaching for creativity to foster student creativity in schools.

To promote creative teaching, teachers have to value creativity and respect students' individual differences in expressing and creating. More importantly, they have to believe that teacher creativity could model student creativity, and that a creative and imaginative approach could be more effective in teaching for creativity. To address the constraints of an inflexible content-oriented curriculum, teachers have to introduce flexibility into the curriculum through, for example, thematic integration in which a theme serves as an integrative magnet for interdisciplinary thinking. Exploring a theme or a real problem through multiple disciplinary lenses could also involve students in real-world challenges to promote creative thinking in students. In planning classroom instruction, teachers also flexibly make room for students' creative improvisation, which could emerge from students' responses and needs (see Borko & Livington, 1989), and could take the form of creative problem finding and problem solving within the context of planned lessons (see Moore, 1993).

In promoting creative teaching for student creativity, Plucker and Beghetto (2003) have suggested problem-based learning. Briefly, problem-based learning postulates that any transfer of learning from traditional

classrooms to real-life application occurs infrequently, and that learning requires situation-specific competence (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Therefore, teachers should employ as much as possible problem-based learning, which establishes interesting questions and discrepant events as focal points for student investigation (Pithers & Soden, 2000; Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). Problem-based learning makes the classroom environment conducive to students' open-ended inquiry, problem solving, and problem finding, which are important aspects of creative thinking (Moore, 1993; Runco & Chand, 1995; Runco & Nemiro, 1994). Where time constraints prevail, and where the nature of the curriculum is less conducive to discovery as is the case in Hong Kong, teachers could teach creatively by blending rote learning of basic skills and concepts with creative discovery learning. However, student-centered inquiry should remain the prevailing climate in the classroom that fosters creative teaching and creative learning.

Another possible set of constraints on creative teaching that needs to be addressed in a Hong Kong regular classroom is the inclusion of special-needs students. Arguably, inclusion substantially elevates the complexity of teachers' work while presenting yet another opportunity for creative problem solving. Teachers who are keen on creative teaching need to be perceptive enough to recognize the debilitating effects a mismatch between instruction and the diversity of special needs could have on students, their performance, their general functioning, and even their long-term life chances. They need to have superior organizational skill to plan and manage a variety of curriculum modifications and differentiation plans in the inclusive and creative classrooms (Tomlinson, 1996). Nonetheless, teachers who teach creatively recognize the need to experiment with a wide variety of complex instructional strategies to address the diverse learning and emotional needs of students, including special-needs students.

Perhaps, the best conclusion to draw from this overview is that creative teaching can be and need to be promoted in Hong Kong classrooms. Creative teaching requires a lot of risk taking, planning, experimentation, and problem solving, which in turn require a great deal of intrinsic motivation on the part

of the teacher engaged in creative teaching. More importantly, creativity, including creative behaviors and creative learning on the part of the students, can be important intrinsic rewards. Teachers who can appreciate students' diverse and complex needs while recognizing the restricted intellectual and affective development of students in confining and noncreative classrooms will certainly find strong reasons for long-term commitment to creative teaching in the classroom.

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