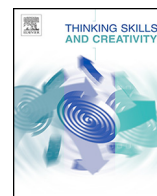




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## Personal and environmental factors affecting teachers' creativity-fostering practices in Hong Kong



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### ABSTRACT

This small-scale exploratory study with 10 primary school teachers in Hong Kong investigated their views on creativity enhancement and the factors that facilitate or impede its development in schools. In particular, the study focused on teachers who were involved in gifted education and who have had training in creativity and gifted education. The study employed a qualitative research approach using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Four themes related to personal factors emerged: (a) personality traits; (b) motivation; (c) attitude; and (d) sense of purpose. In addition, there were two themes related to environmental factors: (a) school and (b) community. Implications for schools and for teacher education in the area of creativity are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

As a response to 21st century needs, fostering students' creativity has been explicitly included in the school curriculum in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2000). Local studies have found that while teachers have been working hard to implement this new emphasis on creativity in the classroom, many of them have encountered difficulties (Cheng, 2010; Forrester & Hui, 2007). To some extent these problems usually stem from large class size, shortage of teaching time, pressures to cover an academic curriculum, and lack of teachers' pedagogical knowledge on how best to stimulate and support students' creativity. In order to improve this situation, a better understanding of personal and environmental factors that can enhance creativity in the classroom may be helpful to teachers.

## 2. Literature review

While there has been no consensus on an exact definition of creativity in the literature, most definitions have usually included the two elements of 'novelty' and 'appropriateness' (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Plucker & Beghetto, 2004). Recent theories emphasize an interaction among several elements that together represent creative ability. Examples include the *systems approach* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), the *componential model* (Amabile, 1996), and Sternberg's *investment model of creativity* (Sternberg & Lubart, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999).

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One area of research interest in the field has been to investigate factors that influence creative behaviours. For example, a Korean study suggested that cognitive factors, together with personality, motivation, and environmental factors all influence creative achievements (Cho, Chung, Choi, Suh, & Seo, 2011). Similarly, a study by Hong, Hartzell, and Greene (2009) in a school setting found that teacher characteristics, such as a clear goal orientation for learning, are associated with creativity-fostering instructional practices. Teachers' personal characteristics may also play an important part in their approach to fostering creativity in others. For example, Bramwell, Reilly, Lilly, Kronish, and Chennabathni (2011) suggested that teachers' intelligence (intrapersonal and interpersonal), motivation, and values are crucial factors in their commitment to creativity. The teachers in that study were also found to be hard-working, nonconforming, knowledgeable, intuitive, confident, flexible, and energetic. Learning outcomes were thus seen to be a result of a teacher's personal characteristics, their pedagogical skills, and the environment in which they were operating (Bramwell et al., 2011).

In Hong Kong, recent educational reforms have seen 'creativity' – together with critical thinking and communication – specifically included for the first time as important major goals in the general school curricula (Curriculum Development Council, 2000, 2001; Education Bureau, 2007a, 2007b). Fostering creativity, critical thinking, and communication should now be part of the teaching of all school subjects, and not something that is unique to gifted education. By emphasizing these skills, the intention in Hong Kong was to change teachers' traditional role from that of transmitter of knowledge to "facilitator of learning" (Forrester & Hui, 2007). This change has already led to some local studies exploring teachers' success in promoting these important goals. For example, Cheng's (2010) research with in-service primary school teachers found that, despite efforts to implement creative teaching ideas in the classroom, these teachers experienced many tensions and dilemmas. Similarly, Forrester and Hui (2007) looked at teachers in primary schools who attended a creativity training workshop. They found that the teaching aims usually espoused by the teachers seemed to lean more towards promoting mastery of subject knowledge rather than creativity or flexibility in thinking.

Interestingly, creativity, critical thinking, and communication in the general curriculum are also specifically referred to as key aspects of gifted education in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2007a). The gifted education curriculum is intended to complement the general curriculum, in that it aims to help students develop their multiple talents and potential (Education Bureau, 2007a). It has always been envisaged that most gifted education would occur within mainstream classrooms, and schools have been given considerable flexibility in implementing the government's gifted education policy. For example, schools can include enrichment and extension activities in the regular classroom, as well as provide pull-out programmes for high-ability students or students with strengths in specific areas.

The fact that creativity is now regarded as a goal to be included in all areas across the curriculum has greatly increased the need for all teachers, at all stages of education, to gain the pedagogical knowledge and skills to help students develop their creativity. This has immediate implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education.

### 3. Purpose of study

This exploratory study is part of a larger mixed-methods study of creativity that also explored teachers' beliefs concerning creativity and their creativity-fostering practices in the classroom. The study reported here aimed to investigate the factors that may influence creativity enhancement for Hong Kong teachers involved in gifted education. The research question addressed was: 'What are the personal and environmental factors that appear to influence teachers' creativity-fostering practices in the classroom?'

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

The research focus was on teachers who have had first-hand experience in developing creativity and gifted education. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used in the selection of participants. Teachers trained in gifted education can be found in local schools across Hong Kong. Most of them teach the mainstream curriculum in their schools, but some may also be conducting gifted education activities, such as creativity and leadership pull-out programmes. It was expected that these teachers could draw most easily upon their experience in fostering creativity in students.

The interviewed teachers all taught in local primary schools. They had to be trained in creativity and gifted education. In particular, teachers who were conducting creativity-related pull-out programmes in their school were approached. An additional optional quality was recognition for teaching excellence in gifted education. Based on these criteria, a total of 10 teachers (9 females, 1 male) were recruited (Table 1).

Apart from one school where it was reported that there was a relatively large proportion of gifted students, all the other schools only had a small number of students who had been officially identified as gifted. Identification mechanisms vary from school to school, with some not finding it necessary to have their gifted students specifically identified, or not having allocated resources for gifted identification.

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