Thinking Skills and Creativity 10 (2013) 133–142

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Thinking Skills and Creativity

journal homepage: http://www.elsevier.com/locate/tsc

Exploring the use of the pedagogical framework for creative practice in preschool settings: A phenomenological approach

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 3 October 2012
Received in revised form 8 August 2013
Accepted 26 August 2013
Available online 13 September 2013

Keywords:
Pedagogical framework
Creative practice
Preschool

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the experiences of using a pedagogical framework for creative practices (PFCP) to support preschool teachers in fostering children's creativity in their classrooms. The PFCP includes five pedagogical components: (1) motivation; (2) a divergent process of generating possibilities; (3) a convergent process of selecting ideas; (4) putting ideas into practice; and (5) evaluation. Eighteen teachers from six Hong Kong preschools participated in the study. According to the PFCP, each teacher developed six creative practices and implemented them in their classrooms. Individual semi-structured interviews were used elicit teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the PFCP and the changes of teachers' teaching pedagogy. The observations used as a source of evidence to illustrate teachers' actual teaching behaviours and children's creative performance. The results suggest that the PFCP was perceived as being effective in helping teachers improve their lesson planning and pedagogy. Positive effects such as enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills, infusing creativity into the various learning domains and shifting teaching practices from being strongly teacher centred to being more child centred were documented. This paper discusses the implications and suggests that the PFCP could serve as a starting point for teachers to explore their own creative-practice methods. Finally, the study should lead to further inquiry on effective creative practice teaching strategies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, creativity has gained increasing attention in education. Craft (2007) reported that policymakers, including those in many Asian countries (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2002; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2004), have enacted policy initiatives aimed at fostering student creativity. Hong Kong has officially issued a number of educational policies that call for the recognition of creativity and its inclusion in the aims and the objectives of the curriculum. The development of creativity has been identified as one of the three most significant generic skills across all subject curricula, spanning from pre-primary education to lifelong learning (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). The new curriculum guide for pre-primary education says that creativity stimulates children's creative and imaginative powers and encourages children to enjoy participating in creative works (Curriculum Development Council, 2006).

Although there is a growing awareness of the importance of developing children's creativity within the preschool curriculum, many studies have found that the preschool curriculum in Hong Kong still reflects the influences of its social and cultural context, that emphasises the importance of working hard and treasures conformity, discipline, and obedience to authority (e.g. Cheng, 2004; Rudowicz & Hui, 1998). Preschool teachers usually perceive a good lesson as one in which the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2013.08.004

teacher completes the planned learning tasks and supervises each child's work. Talking among children is viewed as a sign of ineffectiveness (Li, 2003). Teachers emphasise academic success, rote learning of factual knowledge, drilling of isolated skills, and memorisation (Chan & Chan, 2003; Li & Wong, 2008; Rudowicz & Hui, 1998). Chien and Hui (2010) reported that Hong Kong preschool teachers tended to prefer expected ideas, discouraged further exploration of unexpected or creative ideas, and that they perceived themselves as not competent to enhance creative development in young children. These features seem to run counter to the development of creativity and may reflect the influence of strong Chinese values.

Although the development of creativity is seen as underpinning the reform process, the success of that policy will depend on how it is translated into practice. The official curriculum reform document (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) highlights a range of child-centred pedagogies. It recommends that teachers should plan various activities to suit children's abilities and interests, motivate children to learn, and provide children with opportunities to explore independently and develop social relationships. These recommendations require new teaching pedagogies of teachers.

This paper describes a study using a pedagogical framework for creative practice (PFCP) designed to promote creativity in preschool classrooms. It documents the findings of the study and uses them to reflect on creative practice in the early years.

1.1. Creative pedagogy

Creativity has been seen as the need to generate new ideas or express oneself in a unique way and it is often associated with the arts. The emphasis is on imagination, originality, and appropriateness (Barron, 1988; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Recently, creativity has been seen to encompass not only the capacity of expressiveness, but also the ability to respond creatively to changing situations, to resolve problems and challenges, and to make a positive contribution (Creativity, Culture and Education, 2009). The view of creativity becomes a core aspect of all education. It conceptualises creativity as everyday problem solving and creative expression, which Craft (2001) termed little-c creativity. The notion of little-c creativity is particularly applicable to the preschool setting as it can be found in ordinary people.

Creativity can be developed and taught (Cropley & Cropley, 2008). The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Culture Education (NACCCE, 1999) stressed that all people are capable of creative achievement in some area of activity, provided the conditions are right and they have acquired the relevant knowledge and skills. Numerous studies have sought to identify the key pedagogical strategies that facilitate the development of creativity in classrooms. Of note is divergent thinking, identified as crucial for developing creativity (Guilford, 1950). Cropley and Cropley (2008) pointed out that especially in a person's early years; creativity requires divergent thinking because it increases the number of possible ideas. The more often children consider other viewpoints, the better the solutions they are likely to generate. They further commented that divergent thinking does not solve a problem directly, but merely generates numerous possibilities in relation to a problem for further analysis and evaluation.

Many researchers (e.g. Amabile, 1996; Barak, 2009; Howard-Jones, 2002; Sternberg, 1985) suggested creativity requires both divergent and convergent thinking. While divergent thinking allows children to explore a large number of possible ideas or alternatives, convergent thinking helps them analyse the different ideas and choose the best one to solve the problem. Although divergent thinking may seem more related to creativity than convergent thinking, creative processes require the integration of both kinds of thinking: divergent thinking initially generates a greater number and range of ideas, and convergent thinking then sharpens focus and narrows down and synthesises ideas and information (Barak, 2009).

Craft (2007) suggested that 'possibility thinking' is at the core of creativity in education. 'Possibility thinking' involves both problem finding and problem solving. The key aspects of pedagogy for 'possibility thinking' are the opportunity for exploration in playful contexts, offering both space and time to develop ideas and options (Craft, McConnon, & Matthews, 2012). Lubart (2000) summarised several dimensions of learning processes crucial to creativity, including (a) problem finding and solving, (b) divergent thinking, and (c) synthesis and combination of information. Kurtzberg and Amabile (2000–2001) proposed that children can become more creative if they are taught to effectively apply appropriate metacognitive strategies to stimulate their creativity. The creative process can be perceived as a form of problem defining and problem solving, and consists of four phases: problem analysis, ideation, evaluation, and implementation (Zeng, Proctor, & Salvendy, 2011).

Besides the creative process, Amabile (1996) stressed that intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in the development of creativity. Individuals who engage in an activity mainly for its own sake are intrinsically motivated. They tend to be more curious, more cognitively flexible, more open to and more willing to use non-traditional methods to reach decisions. Researchers (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) have found that intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity because it is related to task satisfaction and enjoyment. Strategies such as challenges, freedom, resources, and teacher encouragement may influence intrinsic motivation; external influences such as deadlines and the notion of being scrutinised may undermine individuals' intrinsic motivation towards a task and consequently their creative performance (Collins & Amabile, 1999).

1.2. Pedagogical framework for creative practice (PFCP)

Jeffrey and Craft (2004) proposed two important concepts of creativity in education, namely, teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. Teaching creatively is described as using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting