



## Tensions and dilemmas of teachers in creativity reform in a Chinese context

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed at revealing the problems experienced by primary teachers of Hong Kong SAR, China, in their initial school-based creativity teaching, through reviewing the teacher reflections in 75 action research reports. A number of teacher tensions and dilemmas emerged. Lack of teaching time and undesirable student performance in creative tasks were the most common problems reported by teachers in Hong Kong. And the most frequently mentioned reasons of teacher tensions were students' original thinking and learning habits, and the original heavy and tight curriculum. In analysis, the present study discovered three groups of teacher tensions and five types of teacher dilemmas. They included tensions from lack of resources, undesirable student responses, various teaching demands and changes, and dilemmas in pedagogical arrangements, teacher role, educational value, teaching style and ethical choice. As revealed in the teacher reflections, these tensions and dilemmas were originated from problems of several levels, including the individual level, system level and cultural level. From further analysis, these problems together reflect the existence of some fundamental discrepancies, which educators should not neglect, including those discrepancies between creativity and knowledge learning, creativity culture and Chinese culture, and creativity reformers and traditional educators. Furthermore, this study discovered an additional explanation to the hardship of the reform. Evidence indicated that some of these educational factors might have formed causal loops, creating multiplying negative impacts on teachers. In future, apart from coping with individual tensions and dilemmas, educators need to find ways to resolve the problems of various levels, addressing the interconnectedness of various factors and the complexity of the issue.

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### 1. Introduction

In the era of the knowledge-based economy today, the entire world is urged to nurture global citizens with creativity and innovative capacity (MacDonald, 2005). Answering the call of our times, the educational sectors all over the world are integrating creativity in curriculum frameworks (Le Metais, 2003). Countries and regions in the East, e.g. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Israel, have imposed curriculum reforms with an emphasis on creativity development in their primary and secondary schools.

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### 1.1. Literature review

What is creativity? In psychological literature of earlier years, creativity always referred to the ability to produce work or idea that was novel and appropriate/useful (Amabile, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). In recent education field, scholars emphasize the development of creative potentials of students, instead of their immediate creative achievements or performance. Creativity education is believed to include the development of a combination of abilities, skills, motivation, attitudes, knowledge and other attributes (Kaufman, 2009; Runco, 2003, 2007, 2008; Starko, 2010; Sternberg, 2003). Government curriculum documents of Hong Kong have suggested some general principles for developing students' creativity. It is stated that teachers should ask students to go beyond the given information, allow them time to think, strengthen their creative abilities, reward their creative efforts, value their creative attributes, teach them creative thinking techniques and the creative problem solving model, and create a climate conducive to creativity (Curriculum Development Council, 2002b).

Creativity education encounters substantial difficulties worldwide. A number of studies (Craft, 2005; Hayes, 2004; Maisuria, 2005; Zawojewski & McCarthy, 2007; Zohar, 2008) have criticized that high-stakes tests in many ways hinder creativity education. As commented by Maisuria (2005), the highly centralized testing regimes turn the education into a game where teachers teach the art of passing exams, lowering teachers' and students' creativity. Apart from the domination of examination approach, making room in the tightly packed curriculum for the development of creativity is always difficult (Zawojewski & McCarthy, 2007). Due to the packed and standardized curriculum, short instructional time always arises as a constraint in creativity education (Clark & Linn, 2003). However, activities to boost creativity, such as thinking, imagining, asking questions, experimenting and reflecting upon work, all need substantial thinking time (Cremin, Burnard, & Craft, 2006; Goree, 1996). Getting enough time to do creative activities is another difficult balance between content and creativity teaching. Furthermore, Cropley (2010) suggested that, by nature, creativity in classroom might be a threat to received knowledge, teacher self-image and classroom discipline.

In the book of Craft (2005), there is a comprehensive discussion on tension and dilemmas in creativity education. Cheng (in press) reported that students in Hong Kong encountered substantial tensions and dilemmas in creativity education, which mainly came from the change in learning style, time constraints, knowledge-orientated examination, high demand in thinking, and lack of task-specific skills. However, empirical studies focusing on the tensions and dilemmas of teachers in creativity reform, especially that in Asian context, are still rare. To fill this gap, this study aimed at understanding the problems encountered by teachers in the reform process and the sources of these problems, all from teachers' perspectives.

### 1.2. Context

In Hong Kong, creativity is now one of the three most significant "generic skills" to be developed across all subject curricula (Curriculum Development Council, 2002a). Like the situation of other Asian areas, creativity is not taught as a separate subject, but to be infused into the regular curriculum, which is still highly conventional and knowledge-centered. The creativity reform of Hong Kong is confronted with a number of obstacles and dilemmas (Cheng, 2004; Craft, 2005; Hui & Lau, in press).

Hofstede's study (2001) revealed that Hong Kong's culture, in nearly all his five dimensions, is in high resemblance of the characteristics of Asian societies. Despite its long-term British rule, Hong Kong is still under strong influence of Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), especially in education sector. Craft (2005) commented that, in a repressive or conformist culture, like CHC, creativity may not be considered by teachers as desirable as that in the Western culture. CHC schools emphasize morality, collectivism and conformity more than individual interest, will and initiatives of students. Under these circumstances, students are accustomed to following teachers' instructions without questioning, thus gradually losing the ability of creative thinking. Ng and Smith (2004) even claimed that CHC teachers, in nature, do not favor having a class of creative students. In the context of CHC, school curriculum is usually highly centralized, rigid, heavy and examination-oriented, with mostly expository and rote-learning teaching style, and consequently results in the lack of creativity in students (Cheng, 2004; Zhao, 2007). The domination of subject content is further revealed in Cheng (in press). It reported that, even in creativity-infused lessons, learning outcomes reported by students were obviously biased towards the acquisition of content knowledge, rather than the creative thinking parts in the activities. As suggested by Niu and Sternberg (2003), creativity of Chinese students might be influenced by social values, school pedagogical practices and educational testing systems.

In Hong Kong, another frequently mentioned obstacle of education reform is the overloading of teachers. A recent report on teachers' work (Lai & Law, 2010) reveals that 57% of teachers work more than 61 h in average per week, and 27% of the primary teachers work more than 71 h per week. Such statistics are much higher than their counterparts in the West. High pressure does not only result in the physical problem of teachers in Hong Kong, but also result in mental diseases, ranging from minor nervous problems, anxiety, depression to suicide-prone syndrome. A recent survey reveals that 88% of school teachers are experiencing heavy work-related stress and 13% of them are suffering from "anxiety disorder" (HKPTU, 2008). In the past decade, there have been about 30 teacher suicide cases due to their work-related pressure in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong, as a modernized Chinese city of Confucian and collective culture, has an intensive, knowledge-centered curriculum, an examination-orientated school culture and heavy teacher workload. It is now undergoing creativity educational reform in a top-down mode. To improve education of Hong Kong and other places of similar backgrounds, it is worthwhile to conduct an in-depth study on the tensions and dilemmas of Hong Kong teachers in their school-based creative teaching. This

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