

Reimagining Critical Thinking Development: A Teacher Perspective on Alternative Approaches to Hong Kong's Education System

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Abstract

This study examines critical thinking education (CTE) in Hong Kong's secondary schools, exploring how competing national identities and educational reforms have shaped pedagogical practices. Through mixed-methods research involving 23 questionnaire respondents and 4 in-depth interviews, we investigate teachers' perceptions of critical thinking skills (CTS) development and how the educational system shapes their professional identities. Findings reveal significant gaps between content delivery and practical application of CT, systemic barriers including examination-oriented curricula and socio-political constraints, and teachers' evolving roles as knowledge transformers, strategic guides, and motivational encouragers. The study highlights the tension between developing independent thinking and navigating institutional demands, particularly following the implementation of the National Security Law. We argue that meaningful educational reform requires empowering teachers, reimagining assessment frameworks, and balancing institutional structures with the transformative potential of nurturing critically aware learners.

Keywords: critical thinking education, Hong Kong, teacher identity, educational reform, Liberal Studies, pedagogical barriers

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Introduction

The complex relationship between national identity and educational reform in post-1997 Hong Kong presents a unique case study in critical thinking education (CTE), particularly within rapid social and political change. This study examines how competing identities—characterized by nationalism emphasizing loyalty to China and a local-centric mentality prioritizing Hong Kong's unique identity—have shaped educational policies and practices (Morris & Vickers, 2015; Veg, 2017). The tension between these dual hegemonies has profoundly influenced education, where promoting critical thinking (CT) has emerged as a central concern.

The unclear conceptualization of CT creates fundamental challenges for educators. Without an official definition, CT is sometimes misinterpreted as promoting political activities. The field lacks both a precise definition and universally accepted assessment methods (Petrie et al., 2020). This definitional ambiguity extends throughout education, where various professionals hold different perspectives on CT.

Recent reforms have sparked debates about educational goals and teaching methods. The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) system emphasizes standardized testing, which often conflicts with developing critical thinking skills (CTS). Although Liberal Studies (LS) became compulsory to promote CTS (Spires, 2017), unclear guidelines created significant implementation challenges. The 2011 introduction of “Moral and National Education” (MNE) marked a crucial shift. Critics claimed it promoted narrow patriotism while omitting politically sensitive topics (Leung & Tang, 2011). The resulting 2012 Anti-national Education movement demonstrated growing concerns about preserving democratic values and independent thinking (Tse, 2023).

This study examines how Hong Kong's education system navigates these challenges while developing students' CTS. By analyzing curriculum development, teacher perspectives, and institutional responses, the research explores complex relationships between national identity, educational reform, and CT development in Hong Kong's distinctive post-colonial environment, including restrictions following the 2019 protests and the 2021 dissolution of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKTPU). This paper evaluates the current state of CT development through educational professionals' perspectives, examining teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and challenges in promoting CT in schools.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Critical Thinking in Education

CT is generally recognized as encompassing various cognitive processes aimed at evaluating and enhancing one's thinking. It involves meticulous assessment of evidence, eschewing reliance on questionable authority. CT shares affinities with rational thinking and problem-solving, yet it is distinct in its broader scope, integrating logical, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking into a cohesive process.

Critical thinkers are self-regulating and habitually inquisitive, seeking to clarify issues, honestly confront personal biases, and make judgments with prudence. Ennis (1962) describes CT as reflective, reasonable thinking focused on decision-making. McPeck (1981) emphasizes reflective skepticism and intelligent use of evidence. Facione (1990) encapsulates CT as

pervasive, self-rectifying, and essential for interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference. The ideal critical thinker is well-informed, honest, prudent, clear, orderly, diligent, reasonable, focused, and persistent in pursuing accurate conclusions.

Critical Thinking Movement Versus Critical Pedagogy Movement

The CT Movement and Critical Pedagogy (CP) Movement reflect distinct educational projects with different aims and methods.

Table 1

Comparison of the CT Movement and CP Movement

	Critical Thinking Movement (CT Movement)	Critical Pedagogy Movement (CP Movement)
Objective	To teach critical thinking skills and dispositions to enhance individual thinking, without a specific cultural, moral, ethical or political agenda	Seeks to bring about social change and justice, viewing political issues as integral to critical thinking and reasons for its necessity.
Scope	Focuses on teaching individuals how to think critically, developing skills for reasoned, reflective thinking to guide beliefs and actions and creating better thinkers.	Aims to foster social justice by making students aware of indoctrination and the social conditions perpetuating it, empowering them to challenge and escape these conditions.
Method	Involves using teachers, fellow students, and resources to cultivate cognitive skills and critical dispositions. It values impartiality on issues as a key virtue and critical thinking disposition.	Emphasizes dialogue to develop confidence and literacy, eliminating feelings of powerlessness. It views impartiality as evidence of domination and oppression, reflecting different approaches and philosophies towards education and social change.

The CT Movement and Critical Pedagogy (CP) Movement pursue different projects. CT focuses on cultivating reasoning skills and dispositions through rational reflection and comparatively impartial analysis (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Davies, 2015). CP is explicitly political, aiming to develop consciousness of oppression and support action against inequity (Giroux, 1988), linking reflection to praxis (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993; Rahimi & Sajed, 2014; Zembylas, 2015). In practice, integration is delicate: CT without CP can become technocratic neutrality, while CP without CT risks moralism or dogma. In Hong Kong, this distinction is salient for LS, where policy and assessment shape what forms of criticality are teachable and institutionally permissible (Chong et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2010; Morris & Adamson, 2010).

Historical Evolution and System Characteristics

Hong Kong's education has long balanced civic ideals with nation-building. From the mid-1980s, policy increasingly emphasized national identity and patriotism (Fisher, 2012; Hung, 2014). Post-1997 reforms promoted active learning through the Basic Education Curriculum Guide and, in 2006, introduced LS to strengthen CT for civic participation (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). Controversy over the 2012 MNE Guide, criticized as ideological "brain-washing", exposed tensions between policy directives and democratic, independent thinking (Law, 2009). The Concern Group on National Education called for national education

compatible with democracy and CT, reinforcing links between CT, social consciousness, and citizenship (Tse, 2023). Structural features also hinder CTE. Task-based, outcome-driven learning encourages rote memorization and exam strategies (Ng, 2019), while a provider–receiver model positions teachers as transmitters and students as passive recipients, limiting inquiry (Yuen, 2015). Teacher-centered instruction in crowded classrooms further reduces interaction needed for CTS development (Biggs, 1996).

The Role of Teachers in CTE

Teachers act as transformative agents whose influence extends beyond content delivery to students' cognitive development and personal formation (Choy & Cheah, 2009; Mullins, 1990). Professional identity matters because beliefs and philosophies shape instructional decisions and the classroom climate for CT, including whether students feel able to express ideas (Beijaard et al., 2004; Hussain et al., 2019).

Contemporary Hong Kong education confronts emerging challenges that threaten to diminish traditional teacher influence. The rise of “star tutors” and expanding shadow education undermines traditional teacher roles, with these tutors predominantly focusing on test-taking strategies rather than holistic development (Lai & Byram, 2012; Tsoi, 2013). Despite this increasing commercialization, teachers remain essential in creating structured environments where students engage with democratic principles, human rights, and social justice.

In the global educational landscape, teachers occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of CT development and civic engagement cultivation. Strengthening their voice in critical pedagogy involves researching their practices and sharing insights, contributing to evolving understandings of teaching methodologies. Beyond fostering intellectual growth, teachers also play a pivotal role in shaping students' moral development, functioning as both information sources and transformative figures, guiding students in developing personal and civic virtues.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates three frameworks to examine CTS development, teacher perceptions, and role identity under Hong Kong's institutional and sociopolitical constraints: Davies' Critical Thinking Model (2015), Wong's Teachers' Perceptions Model (2021), and Kaplan and Garner's DSMRI (2017).

The Stages of CT Development in Hong Kong Secondary Education

The Model of Critical Thinking in Higher Education provides a multidimensional framework for evaluating CT within educational contexts by integrating cognitive skills, judgment, dispositions, emotions, attitudes, readiness, actions, and social relationships. Although originally designed for higher education, its application to secondary education is particularly relevant, as this stage serves as a crucial preparatory phase for university, where expectations for CT are heightened (Stuppel et al., 2017). Given that fundamental components of CT—such as skills, dispositions, judgment, and affective-social-relational dimensions—develop incrementally across educational stages, the model's theoretical constructs are readily transferable for examining CT development in earlier-stage learners.

Figure 1
The Model of Critical Thinking in Higher Education

	<i>Forms of criticality</i>	<i>Criticality Level</i>
CT Movement	Critical Rationality	Low ↓ High
	Critical Character	
Criticality Movement	Critical Actions	
	Critical Virtue (<i>Awareness of oppression</i>)	
CP Movement	Critical Consciousness	
	Participation (<i>Resistance of oppression</i>)	
	Critical Pedagogy	
Critical Openness	Critical Creativity	
	Critical Being	

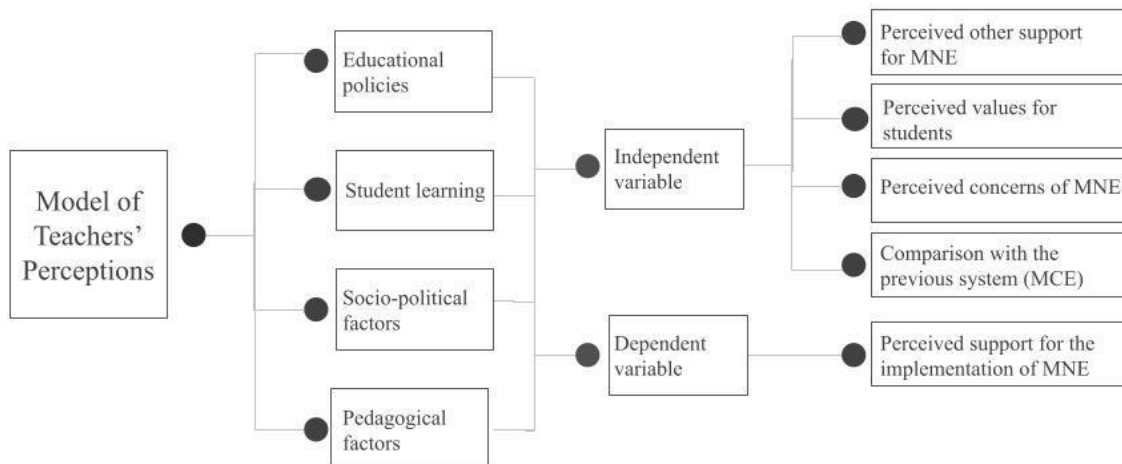
Note. From Davies, 2015

Applied here, the model supports evaluating how far the system enables criticality and where structural conditions constrain it, linking individual skills to sociocultural context (Bailin & Battersby, 2016) and informing targeted, context-responsive reform.

Teachers’ Perspectives on CT: Opportunities and Obstacles

The Model of Teachers' Perceptions provides a structured framework for analyzing how educators cultivate CT in Hong Kong's classrooms while addressing the complexities of national identification through a critical education lens. Tailored to the Hong Kong educational context, it identifies four fundamental factors shaping teachers' perceptions: educational policies, student learning, socio-political influences, and pedagogical considerations (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). The model further incorporates independent variables—such as perceived external support for MNE, perceived educational value for students, concerns regarding MNE, and comparisons with the previous system—as well as a dependent variable measuring perceived support for MNE implementation.

Figure 2
The Model of Teachers’ Perception



Note. From Wong et al., 2021

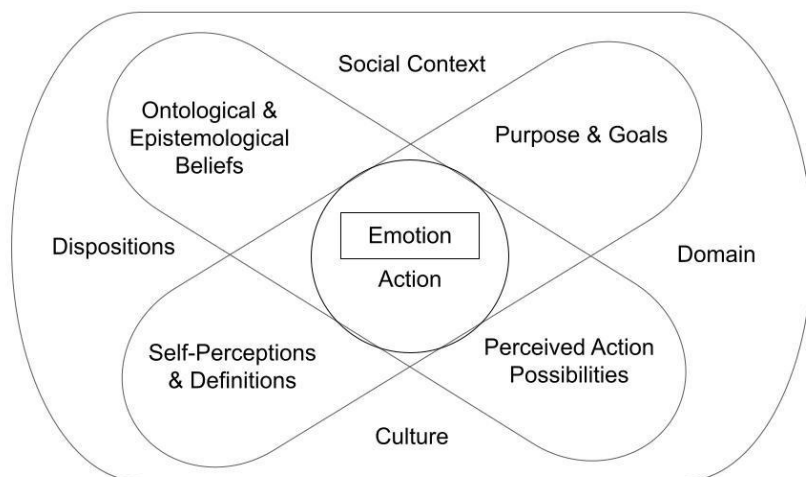
Additionally, this model draws on Freire's concept of praxis, which emphasizes the integration of critical reflection with action. Within this approach, problem-posing techniques in critical pedagogy are employed to empower students as active knowledge creators rather than passive recipients. This theoretical foundation enables exploration of how external factors—including educational policies, student learning approaches, socio-political contexts, and pedagogical considerations—influence teachers' perceptions and strategies for promoting CT in secondary schools.

The Intersection of Teacher Identity and Role in CTE

The DSMRI provides a valuable lens for understanding the complexities of teacher identity and its influence on CTE. This model conceptualizes teacher identity as a dynamic construct shaped by the interplay of four interrelated components: beliefs and values, goals, self-perceptions, and perceived action possibilities. These components evolve in response to personal experiences, professional environments, and sociocultural factors, collectively shaping an educator's unique and continuously developing professional identity.

The DSMRI underscores the notion that identity is not static but is constantly redefined through interactions between individuals and their environments. By examining the intersection of personal motivations and institutional constraints, this framework sheds light on why some educators embrace or resist certain pedagogical approaches. This model offers a systematic approach to analyzing teacher identity by investigating how personal beliefs and external influences shape their roles in CTE, providing an analytical foundation for examining how teachers navigate challenges associated with promoting CTS across diverse educational settings.

Figure 3
The DSMRI



Note. From Kaplan & Garner, 2017

Together, the three frameworks enable analysis of system-level criticality, teachers' perceptions, and identity-driven instructional dynamics in Hong Kong's CTE.

Methodology

This study explores teachers' perceptions of CTS development among secondary school students in Hong Kong and examines how the educational system influences teachers' professional identities. The research is guided by two primary questions:

1. *How do teachers perceive the progression of critical thinking skills among secondary school students in Hong Kong?*
2. *How does the educational system shape teachers' identities in facilitating critical thinking development in Hong Kong?*

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to investigate CT development in Hong Kong's secondary education system. The quantitative component employs structured questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale. The qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews exploring four thematic areas: teachers' perceptions, identity formation (considering both internal and external influences), and outcomes through 11 questions. To enhance participant engagement and ensure data reliability, a dual-language methodology was implemented, with surveys and interviews conducted in both English and Cantonese.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected based on their active engagement in CT instruction, particularly within the LS curriculum, overseen by the Education Bureau (EDB). Eligibility criteria included holding a valid teaching license, being within Hong Kong's standard working age range being aged 18–65, and possessing at least a tertiary-level academic qualification. Recruitment began through personal professional networks within secondary schools and expanded via snowball sampling.

The primary data collection phase focused on questionnaire distribution, resulting in 23 valid responses. Participants' ages ranged from their 20s to early 60s, with teaching experience varying from 1 to over 40 years. All interviews conducted in Cantonese were carefully transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. From the survey respondents, four interview participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their willingness to provide deeper insights.

The interviewees represented diverse backgrounds, spanning different age groups, teaching experiences (2-20 years), and subject areas, including STEM disciplines (Chemistry, Mathematics) and humanities (Religious Studies, Visual Arts, English, and Citizenship and Social Development).

Table 2*Demographic and Professional Profiles of Interview Participants*

Participant	Age group	Educational level	Years of Teaching	Teaching subjects
A	30-39 years old	Master	11–15 years	Chemistry
B	20-29 years old	Bachelor	2 years	Mathematics
C	40-49 years old	Bachelor	About 20 years	Religious Studies, Visual Arts, Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) (Previously Liberal Studies)
D	20-29 years old	Master	2 years	English, Visual Arts

Ethical Considerations

Given Hong Kong's complex political climate, the study implemented stringent ethical safeguards, including voluntary participation protocols, strict anonymization of participants, data confidentiality measures, secure communication channels, and flexible participation options.

Analytical Framework

The research analysis employed a framework examining CT in education through four key analytical elements derived from systematically coded interview and survey data.

Table 3*Conceptual Mapping: CT Research Frameworks*

Author	Model	Measurements	Element
Davies (2015)	The Model of Critical Thinking	CT Movement, Criticality Movement, CP Movement, Critical Openness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Criticality level of the current Hong Kong Education System 2. Teachers' perspectives on the current state of critical thinking education 3. Pedagogical barriers in critical thinking instruction 4. Opportunities and challenges shaping the future of critical thinking education
Wong et al. (2021)	The Model of Teachers' Perceptions	Educational policies, student learning, socio-political factors, pedagogical factors	
Kaplan and Garner (2017)	The DSMRI	Ontological and epistemological beliefs, sense of purpose, goals, self-perceptions, and perceived action possibilities	

This framework synthesized three critical theoretical models, systematically mapping their core dimensions to provide a structured approach to understanding CT through interconnected lenses of criticality, teacher perceptions, and instructional dynamics.

Findings

The investigation into CTE in Hong Kong's secondary schools revealed four key themes: (1) the criticality level of the current education system, (2) teachers' perspectives on CTE, (3) pedagogical barriers to CT instruction, and (4) opportunities and challenges shaping the future of CTE.

Criticality Level of the Current Hong Kong Education System

Hong Kong's education system demonstrates considerable strength in content delivery, with over 65% of respondents affirming its effectiveness in broad subject knowledge transmission. However, significant limitations emerge in developing practical application and CTS. More than 70% of educators express uncertainty about students' capacity to translate theoretical knowledge into real-world contexts, highlighting a substantial gap between academic learning and practical implementation.

The development of CTS presents a particularly complex picture. Educators' responses indicate marked ambivalence, with 45% maintaining a neutral stance on students' abilities to compare, contrast, synthesize, and critically evaluate information from multiple sources. This neutrality suggests not just an absence of CT development, but potentially a systemic challenge in designing and implementing pedagogical approaches that genuinely cultivate analytical reasoning.

The integration of critical pedagogy shows limited success, with two-thirds of respondents either disagreeing or remaining neutral about the system's effectiveness in fostering advanced cognitive skills. While the system exhibits moderate achievement in promoting student identity and self-awareness, its ability to transform learning into substantive, actionable critical engagement remains constrained. These findings underscore a critical need for comprehensive reform, emphasizing the imperative of bridging the significant theory-practice divide and developing more sophisticated methodologies for instructing CT capabilities within Hong Kong's educational framework.

Teachers' Perspectives on Critical Thinking Education

The complex nature of CTE in Hong Kong is characterized by characterized by educators' varied perceptions and systemic challenges. Teachers universally recognize the importance of fostering CTS in students but their perspectives diverge when exploring key aspects of implementation across four critical categories:

Purpose of Education

A critical underlying theme emerges regarding the multifaceted purposes of education. Educators conceptualized educational objectives through three interconnected lenses: workplace skill development, fostering holistic and independent thinking, and facilitating societal adaptation. This comprehensive perspective challenges reductive views of education, positioning learning as a transformative process that extends beyond immediate academic or professional instrumentality. By conceptualizing schools as microcosmic social environments where students can encounter and navigate complex interpersonal and intellectual landscapes, teachers articulate a vision of education that is fundamentally about empowerment, critical engagement, and societal preparation.

Definition of Critical Thinking

Educators' conceptualization of CT moves beyond simplified definitions toward a practical account of intellectual engagement. Interviewees described CT as a multifaceted capacity involving independent judgment, comprehensive analysis, and the ability to evaluate issues from multiple stakeholder perspectives. This understanding is reflected in varied pedagogical approaches: science teachers emphasize data-informed objectivity, mathematics teachers encourage exploration of multiple solution pathways, and humanities teachers rely on open-ended questioning and real-world scenario integration. Across these strategies, the shared pedagogical orientation is to cultivate students' capacity to question assumptions, consider complex possibilities, and resist uncritical acceptance of dominant views. At the same time, educators must work within systemic constraints, most notably Hong Kong's examination-oriented framework, which they identify as limiting genuine CT development by privileging standardized assessment metrics over substantive intellectual exploration.

Importance of Teacher's Role

Fundamentally, teachers unanimously recognize the pivotal role of CT development, with 60% categorizing it as "very important" and 40% as "important". However, a notable discrepancy emerges between this recognition and actual implementation, as educators' self-assessment of their CT instructional effectiveness demonstrates ambivalence: approximately half perceive their efforts as "effective" or "very effective", while 40% maintain a neutral stance, and 5% candidly acknowledge limitations in their approach.

Teacher Identity Formation

The investigation further highlights the complex dynamics of teacher identity formation within CTE. Personal background, socioeconomic experience, and professional trajectory strongly shape instructional approaches. More experienced educators reported greater confidence in developing refined questioning techniques, while also emphasizing the careful balance required to manage classroom dynamics. The findings also show teachers' strong awareness of their own strengths and limitations. For example, some noted that rapid cognitive processing can unintentionally disadvantage students who learn at different speeds. At the same time, they expressed a clear commitment to building inclusive, participatory learning environments that move beyond traditional didactic models.

This study underscores the complexities of integrating CT in Hong Kong's education system, highlighting key challenges in translating recognition into practice. While the system has potential, significant structural and pedagogical reforms are needed.

Pedagogical Barriers in Critical Thinking Instruction

Building on how teachers' perceptions shape critical thinking education, this section examines the practical challenges educators face in applying CT instruction.

Syllabus

At the core of these challenges is a deeply entrenched examination-oriented curriculum that restricts educators' capacity to foster substantive critical engagement. A rigid syllabus and its emphasis on standardized assessment create a pedagogical environment that privileges content

memorization and model-answer reproduction over nuanced analytical thinking. Teachers consistently report being constrained by packed schedules, large class sizes, and institutional pressures that make individualized attention and sustained exploratory discussion difficult to achieve.

Teacher Qualification System

The teacher qualification system represents a critical institutional constraint, as the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and wider certification processes show substantial weaknesses in preparing educators for CT pedagogy. Although certification has become increasingly competitive, it often fails to provide meaningful training in CT instructional strategies. As a result, new teachers tend to concentrate on classroom management and textbook-driven content delivery, with limited institutional support for developing critical inquiry approaches. This systemic gap produces a clear disparity between experienced teachers who have built sophisticated strategies for integrating CT and early-career educators who enter the profession without comprehensive preparatory frameworks.

Socio-Political Dynamics

Political and sociopolitical dynamics introduce another profound layer of complexity to CT instruction. The implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) has created a chilling effect on educational discourse, compelling teachers to exercise extraordinary caution in material selection and classroom discussions. Liberal arts educators, in particular, report significant self-censorship, avoiding potentially sensitive topics related to political rights and social policies. This environment of restricted expression fundamentally undermines the core principles of CT, transforming educational spaces from platforms of intellectual exploration into zones of constrained dialogue. The potential professional and legal repercussions—including job loss or legal prosecution—create a pervasive atmosphere of intellectual restraint that directly conflicts with the open-minded inquiry essential to CT development.

Pedagogical barriers to critical thinking instruction stem from sociocultural and institutional factors. Teachers must navigate information complexities while balancing institutional demands, political sensitivities, and pedagogical goals. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms in teacher preparation, institutional culture, and alignment between education and sociopolitical contexts.

Opportunities and Challenges Shaping the Future of CTE

The landscape of CTE in Hong Kong is characterized by a dynamic interplay of promising opportunities and considerable challenges. At the heart of potential transformation lies curriculum design, which offers remarkable potential for cultivating multi-contextual CT by integrating real-life examples across disciplines. This approach seeks to reframe CT as a versatile skill that extends far beyond traditional academic boundaries.

The technological infrastructure of Hong Kong provides a compelling backdrop for this educational evolution, with its advanced digital ecosystem offering unprecedented platforms for information gathering and analysis. Nevertheless, this technological advantage is simultaneously a challenge, as students must develop refined skills to navigate and critically assess the overwhelming volume of available information. The multilingual educational environment, particularly the use of English as a primary instructional medium, presents

additional opportunities for fostering rich intellectual discourse, though these potential advantages remain largely unexplored within current pedagogical practices.

Classroom dynamics further complicate the implementation of CTE, with educators constantly negotiating between comprehensive curriculum demands and the imperative to promote deeper analytical thinking. The examination-oriented system creates significant time constraints, compelling teachers to develop innovative strategies that balance standardized assessment requirements with meaningful intellectual exploration. The diverse student backgrounds add another layer of complexity, requiring educators to develop adaptive teaching approaches that can engage students with varying levels of intellectual curiosity and participation.

The sociocultural context of CTE in Hong Kong introduces additional layers of complexity. While academic spaces nominally permit open-minded questioning and intellectual exploration, the broader political and institutional environment creates subtle yet significant constraints on discourse. Teachers must navigate these delicate boundaries, seeking to create meaningful CT opportunities within systematically defined parameters.

Ultimately, the future of CTE in Hong Kong hinges on a fundamental reimagining of educational priorities. Success will demand a holistic approach that conceptualizes CT not merely as a skill set, but as a fundamental mode of engaging with knowledge. This transformation necessitates comprehensive reforms spanning teacher training, curriculum design, and institutional culture—shifting from a model of passive information transmission to a dynamic ecosystem of intellectual inquiry and independent thought.

Discussion

Transforming Education: The Role of Teachers in Fostering Critical Beings

Fostering CTS has become a central priority, and teachers play a key role in supporting students' analytical development. In Hong Kong, educators function as essential intermediaries in CTE, continually balancing institutional requirements with educational aims. This study identified three distinct yet interconnected roles that teachers have developed.

As *knowledge transformers*, teachers maintain a delicate balance between preserving objectivity, particularly in subjective subject areas, while continuously examining and adjusting their teaching methods through self-reflection. In their role as *strategic guides*, educators leverage their classroom experience to develop multiple questioning techniques and create structured frameworks for intellectual exploration, implementing careful interventions that challenge student assumptions while providing scaffolded support for analytical development. As *motivational encouragers*, teachers focus on creating dynamic learning environments that transform CT from a mere requirement into an engaging practice, fostering student independence and genuine interest in complex intellectual concepts.

These roles, however, are increasingly shaped by external constraints, including rigid curriculum demands, examination standards, and socio-political sensitivities. Ambiguity around “freedom of expression” encourages teachers to operate within what one respondent described as a “legal and compliant framework,” carefully distinguishing analytical skill development from political activism. This caution reflects the balance educators must maintain to promote CT while avoiding contentious or potentially risky territory.

With limited institutional support and no clear guidelines or assessment frameworks, many teachers rely heavily on personal creativity and resilience to manage these pressures. This growing burden highlights shifting educational dynamics in which teachers' work becomes simultaneously more demanding and more constrained. The intensifying challenges, alongside declining teacher autonomy, underscore the need for stronger systemic support so educators can sustain their evolving responsibilities and continue to nurture students' intellectual growth in a changing world.

Reforming Education: The Role and Controversy of Critical Thinking

The development of CT in Hong Kong's education system has been a focal point of discussion and reform. Reflecting on the former educational reform, the transition from the Advanced Level (AL) examination system to the HKDSE, while representing a significant structural shift, has had minimal impact on the delivery of CT instruction.

Within the DSE system, the LS curriculum stands out as a paradoxical case, showcasing both the successes and unintended consequences of efforts to foster CTE. Despite its controversial removal, the curriculum's original intent to develop students' ability to “apply CTS, creativity and different perspectives in making decisions and judgments on issues and problems at both personal and social levels” (CDC & HKEAA, 2007) was notably manifested through student-led social movements (Fung & Lui, 2017). These movements, most prominently the Anti-National Education campaign, reflected students' capacity to translate academic learning into real-world application, effectively proving the curriculum's underlying pedagogical objectives.

The elimination of LS, however, sparked intense societal debate about the role of CT in education. Former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa criticized the subject as a “complete failure”, suggesting it encouraged excessive social activism. This perspective necessitates a crucial clarification: CTE is fundamentally about developing independent thinking skills, not promoting political opposition. The ultimate goal of CTE extends beyond mere academic achievement or political engagement—it aims to cultivate individuals capable of sophisticated analytical reasoning, informed decision-making, and thoughtful engagement with complex societal issues, equipping students with essential competencies for lifelong learning and meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world.

The ongoing discourse and reforms in Hong Kong highlight the need for a more diverse and sustained approach to CTE, ensuring that future generations are equipped to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world.

Systemic Barriers to Critical Thinking Education in Hong Kong

While the issue is widely acknowledged, the barriers to CT instruction remain persistent in practice. Teachers operate within an institutional landscape structured by interlocking pressures, including curriculum mandates, examination requirements, and socio-political sensitivities. As a result, CT instruction is less a discrete pedagogical task than a form of strategic negotiation, in which educators must continuously balance institutional constraints against educational ideals.

For instance, the absence of CT as a standalone subject creates significant implementation barriers, particularly within an examination-oriented environment that prioritizes content coverage over analytical skill development. Teachers repeatedly face an impossible choice

between facilitating meaningful discussions that develop higher-order thinking and meeting rigid curriculum coverage requirements. Without clear guidelines and established assessment mechanisms, teachers struggle to develop and verify instructional strategies, perpetuating a cycle of pedagogical improvisation where individual creativity and resilience become the primary mechanisms for CTE, rather than structured, institutionally supported development. The lack of a comprehensive assessment framework further exacerbates these challenges, rendering the systematic evaluation of students' CT development exceptionally problematic. Traditional assessment methods, predominantly focused on content recall and standardized testing, prove inadequate for capturing the cognitive processes associated with CT.

These institutional challenges intersect with teachers' personal and professional experiences in complex ways. Our research illustrated how teachers' own socioeconomic backgrounds significantly influence their pedagogical approaches and understanding of student needs. One educator from the middle class demonstrated heightened sensitivity to the thinking patterns of students from similar socio-economic circumstances, while acknowledging difficulties in understanding the constraints faced by students from lower socio-economic status families. Similarly, educators who experienced traditional, examination-focused education during their own schooling acknowledged how these early experiences initially created barriers to adopting innovative teaching approaches.

These challenges are further compounded by historical practices within the education system in Hong Kong. The implications of this uncertain landscape extend beyond immediate classroom dynamics, potentially reproducing existing social and intellectual inequalities through inconsistent implementation of CTE. However, the declining role of teachers and their decreasing autonomy in shaping curricula and pedagogical approaches present significant barriers, further complicating efforts to achieve educational objectives.

The Shift From Teaching Critical Thinking Skills to Cultivating Critical Thinkers

The development of CT in Hong Kong fundamentally reframes its purpose as the cultivation of critical beings—individuals able to navigate complex intellectual and social landscapes. The aim moves beyond knowledge transmission toward fostering adaptive cognitive capacities that support nuanced analysis, independent judgment, and transformative engagement with multifaceted global challenges.

At the heart of this approach is identity development through critical openness, a dynamic process of self-discovery that interrogates the foundations of personal understanding. Critical openness functions as a demanding form of self-engagement in which individuals learn to deconstruct inherited narratives, trace the genealogy of their beliefs, and shape a more authentic sense of self that is grounded in lived experience yet open to deep change. Identity is treated not as a fixed construct but as an ongoing, negotiated space of becoming, where personal agency intersects with wider social, cultural, and intellectual forces.

In an era of intensified informational complexity and rapid technological change, CT becomes an essential adaptive mechanism. Individuals must cultivate the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information across diverse sources, resisting uncritical acceptance and forming well-reasoned perspectives. This orientation privileges knowing how to think over accumulating static knowledge, emphasizing cognitive resilience and the capacity to interpret and engage meaningfully with complex societal challenges.

The educational imperative, then, is to prepare individuals who can grasp intricate information, consider varied perspectives, and translate understanding into meaningful action. Critical openness becomes a transformative practice of identity formation, teaching learners to hold their views with both seriousness and humility, capable of commitment while remaining open to reimagining. In doing so, education extends beyond traditional academic boundaries, positioning learning as a comprehensive process of identity formation and intellectual development that prepares individuals not as passive recipients of information, but as active agents able to engage with and shape social, technological, and cultural change.

Opportunities for Reform: The Role the Government Can Play

Educational reform requires recognizing teachers as the primary implementers of change, particularly as professional autonomy and support have weakened after the HKTPU's dissolution. The government should provide safe, politically neutral channels for educators to share challenges without fear, while allowing flexibility for diverse teaching approaches within a coherent strategy.

Reform should combine clearer curriculum guidance with assessment frameworks that reward critical engagement, alongside practical training, sustained professional development, and international exchange. Such infrastructure can protect academic space, support teacher growth, and better balance institutional requirements with the cultivation of independent, critically aware learners.

Conclusion

This study shows that critical thinking education (CTE) in Hong Kong is shaped by systemic barriers and sociopolitical constraints: despite reforms such as Liberal Studies (LS), an examination-oriented culture still weakens real CT practice, compounded by the lack of a standardized definition of CT, political sensitivities that narrow open discourse, and assessment systems that privilege standardized testing over independent thought. Teachers sit at the center of this tension, expected to satisfy institutional mandates while nurturing students' analytical and critical reasoning, and this research affirms their efforts and that they are not alone. At its core, CTE aims to cultivate "critical beings" who can think reflectively, act purposefully, and engage deeply with the world; as Dewey (1897) argues, education is lived and becomes meaningful when knowledge connects to practice, and in Hong Kong this is also inseparable from identity formation as students reflect on values, experiences, and roles in society. Davies further stresses that skills and dispositions are insufficient without action—"criticality without action is blind" (as cited in Davies, 2015, p. 65)—so CTE must move beyond passive reflection to purposeful, ethically grounded action. Importantly, fostering CT is not a political agenda but an educational commitment to equip students to navigate diverse perspectives and societal challenges with judgment and integrity. Achieving this requires reforms beyond curriculum tweaks: empowering teachers through stronger training and support, reimagining assessment to reward critical engagement rather than rote learning and creating pedagogical spaces that protect intellectual autonomy and meaningful exploration of identity, so Hong Kong can balance institutional demands with the transformative potential of nurturing independent, critically aware learners in a complex, interconnected world.

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