

Using a 3CAPs Conceptual Framework to Explore Hong Kong Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions About Visual Arts Education

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Abstract

In the past decades, the visual arts in early childhood education were dominated by conventional approaches to shaping children's artistic output. Craft making formed the major content of visual arts activities in kindergartens, and teachers relied on product-oriented instructions to deliver visual arts teaching to young children. However, there was a revision of the Hong Kong kindergarten education curriculum in 2017, when the government recognized the importance of children's creativity in the arts by placing more emphasis on the elements of free expression and creativity. The early childhood curriculum reforms were found to be a de facto revolution of teaching ideas, leading to a remarkable gap between teachers' reported beliefs and their practices. Using a 3CAPs (i.e., culturally appropriate, contextually appropriate, and child-appropriate practice) conceptual framework, in-service kindergarten teachers' views on and their competence in visual arts education in Hong Kong are examined. A belief–practice gap in implementing visual arts education in Hong Kong kindergartens is evident from the voice of teachers. Kindergarten teachers generally show support towards creativity in early childhood arts but face considerable difficulties to put it into practice. Policymakers and reform leaders should act boldly to develop curricula and pedagogies that are culturally appropriate, contextually appropriate, and child-appropriate.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Visual Arts, Belief–Practice Gap

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Introduction

Art is a kind of aesthetic experience and is commonly defined as a form of representation through which private ideas and concepts are shared publicly (Eisner, 1988). As children's first language (Wright, 2003b), the visual arts provide a way for young children to learn and express themselves. Early visual arts education has been a subject of debate among many international researchers and practitioners of early childhood and arts education (Twigg & Garvis, 2010). Some scholars have argued that every art form should be introduced to children in a balanced fashion, as children may have favorable learning experiences from each form (Bautista et al., 2018).

In Hong Kong, reforms were introduced into the kindergarten, primary school, and secondary school curriculums in the early years of the new millennium. The government stressed the importance of motivating students for lifelong learning, explaining its expectations regarding the curriculum reforms in its document *Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (Education Commission, 2000). The *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 18) was revised in 2006. The pre-primary curriculum framework aims to “nurture well-rounded children for life with ethics, intellect, physique, social skills, and aesthetics, and to motivate children’s learning attitudes positively for lifelong learning” (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 18). The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) formed a committee tasked with developing a “free quality kindergarten education scheme,” whose remit included curriculum revision. In March 2017, the committee reviewed the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum*, renaming it the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (“the Guide”). In this new guide, the learning domain *arts* was renamed *arts and creativity* to highlight children’s freedom of expression and creativity. In this revision, the core framework for developing well-rounded children remains unchanged, with aesthetics continuing to be a component of the curriculum goals. Children’s capacity for art appreciation, creative expression, and imagination are highlighted in the document, and elements of the visual arts are also mentioned (e.g., lines, colors, shapes, and forms of expression). In general, the new guide has strengthened teachers’ basic understanding of early visual arts teaching (Curriculum Development Council, 2017).

The 3CAPs Conceptual Framework

Previous literature provides evidence of a belief–practice gap among Chinese kindergarten teachers (Li et al., 2011). Since the turn of the millennium, early childhood curriculum reforms have been implemented in Hong Kong to promote Western educational ideologies and practices, such as a play-based curriculum and child-centered instruction (Li et al., 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005). These reforms have forced Hong Kong teachers to replace their traditional teacher-directed pedagogies with imported child-centered ones, even though they are used to the traditional ones in which they were trained (Li & Chen, 2017). This pedagogical tension has caused a cultural collision between Chinese traditional culture and these aspects of imported culture (Li & Chen, 2017). According to Li (2007), every culture is unique, with its own specific value system that cannot be understood universally (Li, 2007a). Li (2007b) introduced a 3CAPs (culturally appropriate, contextually appropriate, and child-appropriate practice) conceptual framework to characterize curriculum development in early childhood education (ECE). This framework is divided into three parts. First, through *culturally appropriate practice*, curriculum development should be sensitive to Chinese social ecology and culture and not overly dependent on Western ideas. Second, through *contextually*

appropriate practice, curriculum developers should respect local contexts and not implement a single quality standard in the face of considerable regional differences. Third, the *child-appropriate practice* should be adopted, as individual Chinese children in different areas may differ with respect to local culture, schooling experiences, and family upbringing (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 1479). Given this belief–practice gap, policymakers, and reform leaders should act boldly to develop curricula and pedagogies that are culturally, contextually, and individually appropriate for children. The early childhood reforms were found to be a de facto revolution of teaching ideas (Liu & Feng, 2005); however, they brought about a remarkable gap between teachers’ beliefs and practices (Li et al., 2011).

Culturally Appropriate: How Do Teachers Perceive the Early Visual Arts Curriculum in Hong Kong?

As Hsieh (2004) noted, ECE pedagogies have been influenced by Chinese social expectations. The philosophy of Confucianism reflects the context and essential values of traditional Chinese culture. In particular, as the school system is socially hierarchical, persons of lower status should be obedient and respectful to those of higher status. Confucianism highlights group interests, unlike child-centered Western approaches that stress individualism. In traditional Chinese ECE, a well-behaved child is expected to conform and participate in group activities (Hsieh, 2004). Chinese cultural beliefs about the importance of effort, discipline, and obedience are also evident in the kindergarten curriculum (Lau & Rao, 2018). Therefore, the environment for early childhood arts education in Asia is very different from that of Western countries. Arts-related pedagogical practices in Asian kindergartens are traditional and product-oriented in nature (Bautista et al., 2018). Teachers tend to teach children visual arts collectively instead of individually. Most of the time, the teacher-child ratio is 2 to 22. In such a relatively large class, their only choice is to deliver highly structured and product-oriented teaching. Therefore, children must follow instructions from teachers’ direct teaching, despite teachers’ support for creative pedagogies in visual arts. Unique children’s voices are hard to find among the children’s artworks produced in Hong Kong kindergartens.

Contextually Appropriate: What Are the Barriers to Implementing Early Visual Arts Education in Kindergartens?

In Asian regions, with their highly competitive, pragmatic, and efficiency-driven expectations, parents typically demand that teachers train their children in following rules by delivering explicit instructions (Ellis, 2014; Lee & Yelland, 2017). Since Hong Kong’s educational environment is examination-driven, parents are likely to have high expectations of their children’s academic performance and school readiness (Fung & Lam, 2009). Some teachers might be pressurized by parents who value academic subject areas more than visual arts for children’s learning. Parents might think that visual arts should not be a subject area for children’s learning or for developing children’s academic or even career paths. Therefore, early visual arts education (e.g., drawing, painting, sculpting, and collage) has already become marginalized at the periphery of the regular curriculum (Chan & Chan, 2007). However, the Hong Kong scenario for early childhood arts is not unique. In Singapore, Bautista et al. (2018) found that time constraints can be a contributing factor, as many kindergarten curricula in Singapore are restricted to 3–4 hours per day, so teachers can allocate very limited time to delivering different forms of arts activities. Moreover, many teachers have scheduled prescribed learning and routine activities for their classes, causing the ‘hurried teacher, hurried children’ phenomenon. Accordingly, very little time has been left for early visual arts

education. Some teachers are tempted to teach children directly at every step to complete the visual arts activity in a limited time.

Child-Appropriate: How Do Teachers Perceive Their Competency in Teaching Visual Arts?

Hong Kong kindergarten teachers do not have sufficient arts training to acquire the necessary arts-related pedagogical skills (Leung, 2018). Teacher training programs provide too little time for teachers to learn early childhood arts as an academic discipline, making it difficult for teachers to deliver specific arts knowledge or skills to children (Eisner, 1988). Leung (2018) found that the visual arts module offered in the Bachelor of Education program accounted for only three credits out of more than 100 credit hours of study. This limited skills-based arts training is insufficient for enabling kindergarten teachers to teach visual arts. Therefore, when teaching children the craft-making process, teachers may repeat the steps they have acquired through rote learning (Leung, 2018). Teachers know that they lack sufficient content knowledge in visual arts, as most of them have not received sufficient academic training in this area. For example, the knowledge about the physicality of materials and visual arts pedagogies is not included in the early childhood teacher education programmes in Hong Kong. Many teachers learn this knowledge just from their peers after joining the industry. Through observation and imitation, teachers acquire their competence via repeated classroom practice. To handle unexpected responses from children, kindergarten teachers incline to provide highly structured teaching patterns for more predictable classroom control.

Conclusion

In Hong Kong's complex culture, if imported ideas and pedagogies are not culturally appropriate, contextually appropriate, and child-appropriate, they will be deformed, transformed, and eventually reformed. First, early visual arts education (EVAE) should be culturally appropriate practice. Many scholars, including Silverman (1995), Mayer (2004), and Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007), have tried to integrate instructivist and constructivist methods into classrooms. These two types of practices are not necessarily conflicting or dichotomous. They could be adjusted and incorporated into a culturally appropriate practice for Hong Kong kindergartens. Second, EVAE should be contextually appropriate practice. Constraints are very common in an institutional system with its own resources and policies (Porcaro, 2011). Therefore, we must understand how contextual factors lead to the adoption of teaching practice (Palincsar, 1998), including how teaching practice is applied institutionally (Arnseth & Ludvigsen, 2006). Third, EVAE should be child-appropriate practice. Teachers lack expertise in visual arts teaching; therefore, they do not have the skills or strategies to deliver child-appropriate practices, contributing to the theory-practice gap (Fowler, 1989; Kindler, 1997; Piscitelli, 1993; Wright, 1991). In the future, teacher education programs should highlight these skills and strategies to empower and equip EVAE teachers.

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