

The Predicament and Breakthrough Paths of Preschool Teachers' Creative Leadership under China's Centralized Education Management System

Li Yu^{1,2*}, Loy Chee Luen^{1*}

¹Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia, ²Hengshui University, Hexi District, Hengshui City, Hebei Province, China

Email: 517802370@qq.com

Corresponding Author Email: loy.cl@fpm.upsi.edu.my

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Abstract

China's centralized education governance expects preschool teachers to foster children's creativity while compressing their autonomous decision-making power. This study examines preschool teachers' creative leadership predicaments and breakthrough pathways within this constraints. Employing library research method and drawing upon Structuration Theory, Early Childhood Leadership Theory, and Creative Pedagogy Theory as analytical frameworks, the research reveals four core dimensions of creative leadership: curriculum creation, environment creation, play-based teaching creation, and creative parent partnership. Teachers confront four predicaments: safety (risk aversion), institutional (standardized constraints), role (identity conflict), and evaluation (outcome orientation) dilemmas. The research proposes breakthrough pathways that require establishing balanced space between structural constraints and professional autonomy through teacher agency, kindergarten support systems, and policy-level decentralization. This study's novelty lies in pioneering creative leadership research in China's centralized context, offering the theoretical perspective of "autonomy within constraints" for understanding teacher agency in high-stakes accountability environments globally.

Keywords: Preschool Teacher Leadership, Creative Leadership, Four Predicaments, Centralized Governance, China

Introduction

From "Access to Kindergartens" to "Quality Kindergartens": The Core of Quality Improvement Lies in People

China's preschool education is undergoing a historic transformation from scale expansion to connotation development. The 14th Five-Year Preschool Education Development and Improvement Action Plan explicitly proposes to "comprehensively improve the quality of kindergarten care and education," signaling a policy shift from "universal coverage" to "quality deepening." However, the core of education always lies in people. The improvement

of preschool education quality ultimately depends on the quality of daily teacher-child interactions in every classroom. In this process, the role of kindergarten teachers is crucial. They are no longer traditional caregivers or knowledge transmitters but are expected to become leaders capable of flexible response, creative work, and positive influence on peers and the educational environment. This capability is termed "preschool teachers' creative leadership."

"Creative Leadership": The Special Connotation in Preschool Education Context

Unlike primary and secondary education, preschool education takes play as the fundamental activity, emphasizing the integration of care and education and generative courses. In this context, teachers' creative leadership has unique connotations: it is not power derived from administrative positions but a creative influence based on professional autonomy (Sun, 2024). It is manifested in teachers' ability to creatively design emergent curricula based on in-depth observation of children; to keenly identify problems in care and education processes and initiate micro-innovations; to lead classroom environment creation, transforming space into the "third teacher"; and to creatively conduct home-kindergarten co-education, converting parents into educational partners. Teachers with creative leadership form their own educational styles and radiate influence to drive colleagues' collective growth. Thus, teachers rich in creative leadership are the most valuable asset and most dynamic engine of a kindergarten.

However, a reality that cannot be ignored is that China's long-standing top-down centralized education management system functions as a "double-edged sword." While it has made indelible contributions to regulating kindergarten operations, ensuring basic education quality, and promoting policy implementation, its characteristics of standardization, unification, and control have also compressed teachers' autonomous creative space to some extent, constraining their professional judgment and innovative capacity. Many teachers harbor infinite aspirations for quality education in their hearts yet must follow various rules and constraints in practice. The state expects them to cultivate children with creative spirit, while the system suppresses their own creative leadership development.

Core Contradiction: Conflict between Centralized Governance and Creative Demand

Existing research often simplistically assumes that "centralized management inevitably suppresses teacher's creativity," neglecting teachers' proactive responses and strategic choices under constraints (Chen et al., 2024). The actual situation is more complex: teachers are not entirely passive, yet institutional constraints are indeed real. This paper describes this complex situation as "predicament" — not a black-and-white choice but multiple intertwined obstacles in teachers' daily work. These obstacles cannot be simply eliminated and can only be addressed and overcome through various means.

The research questions focus on: What practical difficulties do preschool teachers face in developing creative leadership under China's centralized preschool education management system? What proactive responses and spaces do teachers have when facing these constraints? What adjustments are needed in the education management system to truly support the development of teachers' creative leadership?

Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Framework

Core Conceptual Definitions

Preschool Teachers' Creative Leadership

This study defines "preschool teachers' creative leadership" as: the capability of teachers in kindergarten care and education contexts to creatively lead curriculum generation, environment creation, play implementation, and home-kindergarten partnership based on professional autonomy, and to drive colleagues' collective growth through professional influence (Taggart et al., 2015). It encompasses four interrelated core dimensions:

Curriculum Creation Leadership

Teachers are not mechanical executors of textbooks or unified curricula issued by superiors but can become curriculum developers and designers. Based on the spirit of the Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6, they keenly capture the interests, needs, and educational opportunities in children's lives (such as a sudden snowfall or a new pet rabbit in the class) to generate vivid, interesting, and meaningful class-based curriculum activities. This represents creative implementation and transcendence of preset plans, embodying the professional role of "teacher as curriculum leader."

Environment Creation Leadership

Regarding the classroom environment as the third teacher, teachers creatively plan area layouts of the kindergartens, the placement of the select materials, and present traces of children's learning. Unlike decorative environments pursuing mere aesthetic neatness, creative leadership is manifested in constructing the living environments that support children's exploration, expression, and communication, and in leading colleagues to collectively improve environment creation professionalism.

Play-Based Teaching Creation

In preschool education where play is the fundamental activity, teachers' creative leadership is prominently manifested in the following aspects, designing play contexts creatively, generating play themes, and employing play strategies to support children's learning; organically integrating educational objectives into play processes rather than direct teaching divorced from play; and leading curriculum reform practices centered on play to prevent primary schoolification tendencies (academic pressure in early childhood education).

Creative Parent Partnership

Breaking through traditional informative home-kindergarten relationships, teachers creatively design parent participation forms (such as parent workshops, parent-child project-based learning, and parent resource hub), converting parents from the educational bystanders to the educational co-educators to collectively build educational ecosystems supporting children's creative development.

China's Centralized Preschool Education Management System

In China's preschool education field, the governance model with power highly concentrated in education administrative departments has three distinctive characteristics: administrative vertical management (hierarchical control from the Ministry of Education to local education bureaus), curriculum standardization unification (the contradiction of documents such as the rigid guidelines versus local flexibility), and the intensive evaluation accountability (multiple

pressures including kindergarten grading, inclusive education assessment, and safety veto power). While this system ensures basic quality, it also restricts kindergartens' autonomous education space and teachers' professional decision-making power (Xie & Li, 2020) .

Exam-Oriented Tendencies in Preschool Education

Although preschool education has no high-stakes examinations, it faces distinct exam-oriented pressures: school-readiness anxiety (parents' worries about children's academic preparation transfer to kindergartens), utilitarian kindergarten assessment (cramming and window dressing for evaluation inspections), and de-gamification of kindergarten teaching (skill drills replacing child - initiated play). These tendencies mirror exam-oriented education in primary and secondary schools, jointly forming an institutional environment that constrains teachers' creative leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Structuration Theory

Giddens's theory of structuration duality provides the core analytical framework for this study. This theory posits that social structure both constrains action and provides conditions and resources for action, with the two mutually influencing and constituting each other. Specifically for this study, while institutional arrangements such as centralized management and standardized assessment indeed limit teachers' room for maneuver, teachers are not entirely passive recipients but can actively employ existing rules, mobilize resources, and expand autonomous space in practice (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015). This theory helps explain: why creative leadership development varies among different teachers and kindergartens under the same institutional environment; and how teachers' autonomous efforts may gradually change local practice patterns.

Early Childhood Leadership Theory

Distinguishing from general teacher leadership research, this study introduces specialized early childhood leadership theory, emphasizing that: preschool education leadership has relational and distributed characteristics, existing not only in formal management positions but permeating daily care and education interactions; creativity is the core professional attribute of preschool education, with teachers' creative leadership and children's creativity development having a symbiotic relationship (Heikka et al., 2018) .

Creative Pedagogy Theory

Drawing on Craft's (2000) creativity in education theory and the emergent curriculum concept in preschool education, this study emphasizes that teachers' creative leadership is manifested in "possibility thinking"—the professional capacity to break through conventions, imagine alternative solutions, and undertake innovation risks, which is the core element of high-quality preschool education.

Constraints on Preschool Teachers' Creative Leadership Development: Four Predicaments

Despite the unquestionable value of creative leadership, its development space is significantly compressed under the centralized education management system. These predicaments originate from multiple levels, intertwining to collectively constitute barriers to teacher creation.

Safety Predicament: Risk Aversion Leading to "Dare Not Create"

In China's preschool education field, the safety is the absolute red line and bottom line. Stringent accountability mechanisms and the veto power of safety incidents lead kindergartens and teachers to adopt conservative work attitudes, prioritizing error avoidance over proactive innovation.

Creative activities in preschool education often accompany certain kinds of disorders, such as scattered materials during exploration process, paint smears during artistic creation, and adventurous play during outdoor play. From an educational value perspective, these phenomena accompany children's deep learning and creative expression; yet from a safety management perspective, they are viewed as risky factors potentially causing accidental injuries. Under this pressure, those challenging creative activities (such as letting children climb trees, use real tools, or engage in mud and water play) are rarely pass kindergarten safety inspections or gain parental approval. To avoid accountability, teachers tend to choose conservative approaches and abandon innovative or creative attempts.

Institutional Predicament: Standardized Management Leading to "Cannot Create"

The centralized management advocates standardization and efficiency, manifested in kindergartens as highly structured daily arrangements and intensive documentation work, forming three constraints. To start with, time constraint, many kindergartens' daily schedules are divided minute by minute, with teachers busy completing the prescribed actions like assembly line workers. Creative leadership requires pausing to observe children's play, respond to sudden questions, and discuss curriculum with colleagues, yet highly programmed schedules compress this possibility. Then, space constraint. Classroom environment creation is often subject to uniform standard requirements. To prepare for superior inspections or participate in grading evaluations, kindergartens require all classrooms to be uniform in appearance and theme-based. Teachers' personal creative ideas and children's personalized works may be required to be redone for being not aesthetically pleasing or not meeting evaluation standards. The environment is no longer a dynamic record of children's and teachers' shared life, but has become a static display board for visitors. Leadership in environment creation can't be exercised. Finally, documentation constraint, detailed weekly plans, daily plans, observation records, case analyses and various summaries occupy teachers' most of time. Many teachers acknowledge that much of this documentation serves primarily to produce records for inspection purposes, rather than to support genuine professional reflection. Ultimately, excessive exhaustion leaves teachers lacking the energy for creativity (Zhang et al., 2021).

Role Predicament: Identity Conflict Leading to "Not Good at Creating"

Preschool teachers face long-standing multiple pressures on professional identity. In practice, there is a general tendency to emphasize care over education (Gao, 2021), and teachers are more positioned as caregivers rather than educators and leaders. Such de-professionalized social perceptions make it difficult for teachers to develop an identity consistent with their leadership role (Yang & Rao, 2021). At the practical level, curriculum creation is simply equated with organizing activities for young children; The leadership in environmental design is simplified as manual crafting skills, and creative parent partnership is interpreted as the ability to communicate with and appease parents. The above cognitive biases deprive teachers' creative leadership of its necessary foundational support.

However, the effective development of creative leadership requires teachers to break through the above positioning, become researchers of children's learning processes, leaders in curriculum implementation, and authoritative subjects with professional discourse power, creating an exploration - based educational environment allowing trial and error. When teachers attempt to exercise creative leadership (such as refusing parents' unreasonable demands, insisting on open-ended educational activities, or leading kindergarten-based teaching research, they may face various forms of negative feedback: doubts from parents that they cannot effectively manage young children, exclusion from colleagues who view them as showing off excessively, criticism from kindergarten principals that they are disobedient to institutional management. Against the background of female dominance and low social status in preschool education, establishing this professional authority is particularly difficult.

In the centralized management system, this predicament is even sharper. Teachers are primarily positioned as faithful implementer of curriculum policies and standards formulated by higher authorities. However, the generative curriculum philosophy of early childhood education simultaneously demands that teachers assume roles as curriculum developers, adapters, and creators. This contradiction confronts teachers with specific choices: choosing faithful implementation ensures job security, process controllability, and evaluable results, yet may suppress children's individuality and teachers' creativity; choosing autonomous creation means undertaking risks, facing uncertainty, and producing less quantifiable results, but holds the potential for genuine educational innovation. Centralized management compresses autonomous space through textbook approval processes, unified lesson preparation, and standardize teaching plans, making it difficult for teachers to break through conservative practices even when possessing innovative willingness.

Evaluation Predicament: Outcome Orientation Leading to "Unwilling to Create"

The centralized management evaluation system is typically top-down and outcome-oriented. Evaluation criteria often focus on quantifiable and superficial indicators, such as the volume of publicity articles produced, the number of the competition awards won, the aesthetic refinement of the physical environment, and the comprehensiveness of the documentation.

Teachers' creative efforts are often manifested in subtle and difficult - to - quantify educational contexts, such as facilitating peer relationships for introverted children, transforming unexpected situations into curriculum resources, and mediating home-school conflicts.

However, these professional practices lack effective recognition and incentives. The prevailing evaluation orientation drives teachers to prioritize work that is easily quantifiable and demonstrable, rather than innovative and creative practices that benefit children's development but require substantial investment and yield slow results. When the creativity receives no recognition and failure is not tolerated, teachers tend toward conservative implementation, and their intrinsic motivation to engage in educational creation gradually declines.

Breakthrough Paths: Seeking Autonomous Space within Constraints

This study holds that identifying the predicaments is not the ultimate objectives, seeking solutions is the key. Completely overturning the existing system is neither realistic nor necessary. A more feasible strategy is to acknowledge the legitimacy of the system's existence and through multi-level efforts, secure maximum space for the development of creative leadership.

Teacher Level: Enhancing Professional Autonomous Capacity

Preschool teachers are not passive recipients and they can enhance their creative leadership through the following approaches. First, make good use of the flexible space of policies. Although the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 is a unified document, its provisions regarding "respecting individual differences" and "supporting active exploration" can serve as grounds for curriculum creation and innovation. Teachers can flexibly deploy these policy discourses to secure legitimacy for autonomously designed activities. Second, accumulate practical experience incrementally. Creative leadership need not pursue grand transformations. A single effective parent communication, an improvement to a learning corner, or an initiative to share professional experiences constitutes concrete practice. Through these small-scale innovative and creative attempts, teachers can gradually build professional confidence and influence. Third, establishing professional learning networks. Teachers should proactively transcend the constraints of their immediate kindergarten settings by engaging with professional communities and online platforms to access cutting-edge early childhood education concepts, connect with peers, and develop foundational creative capacity through exchange.

Kindergarten Level: Improving Internal Management Environment

Kindergartens serves as a critical site for improving teachers' working environment, with principals playing a core role. Specific measures can be undertaken in the following areas. First, transform leadership approaches. Principals should shift from managers to supporters, practicing distributed leadership concepts by reducing direct control and giving teachers greater autonomy in curriculum design, environment creation, and teaching research activities. When facing teachers' creative attempts, principals should first consider how to provide support rather than simply reject them. Second, optimize time arrangements. While ensuring basic activity order, principals should allow teachers flexibly to adjust schedules according to actual circumstances. Dedicated time slots for teaching research should be established to enable teachers to engage in curriculum development and peer exchange. "The creative time" for teachers should be instituted, such as exempting teachers from classroom duties for half a day each week to focus on curriculum development, in-depth learning, or cooperative inquiry. Third, establish error-tolerant mechanisms. The kindergarten should explicitly communicate that attempts made with careful consideration and for the purpose of children's development will not be penalized even if the outcomes are not good. By analyzing the educational value of unsuccessful cases, kindergartens can alleviate preschool teachers' concerns about failure. Fourth, improving evaluation methods. An evaluation system centered on children's effective learning and teachers' professional growth should be established. Inspection of formalized documentation should be reduced, while observation of actual educational processes should be increased. Creative consciousness and professional influence demonstrated by teachers in daily work should be recognized and commended.

System Level: Promoting Decentralization Reforms

Education authorities need to adjust their management approach, shifting from comprehensive control to baseline management (Jiang et al., 2022). Specific measures include the following. Clarify management boundaries. Authorities only need to establish basic standards for quality, safety, and teacher staff, such as teacher-child ratios, hygiene conditions, and teacher qualifications. Provided that these baselines are not violated, kindergartens should be granted full autonomy in curriculum, instruction, and evaluation. Moreover, optimize supervision and evaluation. Evaluation indicators should be reformed to reduce documentation inspections. In detail, the focus of supervision should shift toward observing the quality of teacher-child interactions, understanding children's actual development status, listening to children's voices, and sensing kindergarten cultural climates — dimensions that better reflect educational substance. Moreover, provide targeted support. Regional teacher innovation projects should be established, enabling teachers to independently apply for small-scale projects in curriculum development and environmental improvement, with access to funding and expert guidance. This both gives teachers resources to realize ideas and represents significant spiritual recognition. Eventually, improve teacher education. Pre-service training and in-service professional development should incorporate specialized content on curriculum generativity, environmental design, and reflective practice to systematically enhance teachers' creative leadership capacity, rather than remaining at the level of skill training alone.

Home-Kindergarten Partnership: Guiding Parents' Educational Concepts

Teachers' creative leadership is not limited to kindergartens but also includes guiding parents' educational concepts. Through parent workshops, WeChat articles, and case sharing, teachers should proactively communicate modern educational concepts to parents, explaining why children need to play with mud and why process matters more than results. Such efforts reduce resistance to teachers' creation and innovation due to parental misunderstanding. Furthermore, mobilize resources to form collaborative synergy. Parents should be regarded as educational partners rather than bystanders or critics. Moreover, teachers should identify professional resources among parents, such as designers, architects, artists, gardeners, and invite them to participate in curriculum development to enrich educational activities and jointly create more possibilities for children's growth.

Conclusion and Discussion

Chinese kindergarten teachers bear the significant responsibility of cultivating children's creativity, yet in practice, the space for exercising their creative leadership is constrained by multiple systemic limitations.

This main findings of this study are as follows: preschool teachers' creative leadership is context-specific, encompassing four core dimensions: curriculum creation leadership, environment creation leadership, play-based teaching creation, creative parent partnership, which distinguishes it from the instructional leadership of primary and secondary school teachers. The development of preschool teachers' creative leadership in China faces four types of predicament: safety concerns inhibit teachers' willingness to create and innovate, institutional limitations restrict teachers' motivation for creativity. The pathway for enhancement lies in seeking balance between systemic constraints and professional autonomy, including teachers' proactive expansion of professional autonomy, including

teachers' proactive expansion of professional autonomy, kindergartens' optimization of internal support environments, and the implementation of decentralization reforms at the administrative level.

This theoretical contribution of this study lies in situating creative leadership within the specific context of centralized management in Chinese early childhood education, proposing the core ideas of seeking professional autonomy within institutional constraints, thereby enriching non-western perspectives in early childhood leadership research. By applying structure - agency theory, this study reveals the enabling conditions for preschool teachers' professional autonomy under high-stakes accountability systems, providing a Chinese case for global efforts to enhance early childhood education quality.

This study is primarily theory-building in nature, employing policy text analysis and theoretical deduction methods without empirical data validation. Future research may adopt qualitative methods to examine teachers' specific coping strategies and psychological experiences in depth, or conduct intervention studies to verify the practical effects of relevant strategies.

Against the backdrop of increasing global educational standardization and accountability, the predicament faced by Chinese kindergarten teachers and their coping strategies hold general referential value. Advancing teachers' professional development requires tripartite coordination: individual teachers need to strengthen their sense of agency, kindergarten administrators need to optimize supportive environments, and educational authorities need to advance decentralization reforms. Through multi-stakeholder collaboration, teachers can strike a balance between regulatory requirements and professional autonomy, transforming from passive implementer to active participants in the high - quality development of Chinese early childhood education, thereby providing more effective professional support for children's creative development.

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