

Alienated Learning in the Context of Curricular Reforms

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Abstract

In neoliberal contexts, schools are accountable for educational quality, and effectiveness is measured by objective indicators, such as examination scores. Schools tend to become committed to preparing students for examinations rather than all-round and complete personal development, making it difficult for students to identify the meaningful connections between themselves and learning activities, and, in turn, resulting in negative learning experiences. Marxist theorists refer to this condition as alienated learning, that is, the internal contradiction between the learner's self and learning labour. In contrast, curricular reforms across the globe have promoted a progressive pedagogy that values engaging students in the full range of life experiences in education, enabling them to overcome alienated learning. Yet the effects of curricular reforms are still unclear. The present study sheds light on the extent to which reforms permit students to confront alienated learning. To achieve this aim, the study investigated 44 Hong Kong secondary and undergraduate students with photovoice methods. Its findings suggest that the effects of these curricular reforms are minimal, though they offer opportunities for students to explore their interests. Many students will still experience alienated learning; their interests continue to be subordinated to examinations and even devalued by their schools and teachers.

Keywords: alienated learning; progressivism; neoliberalism; curricular reforms

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, numerous societies across the globe have emphasised a neoliberal agenda of education that makes schools accountable for their effectiveness and quality of education through measurable outcomes (Ball 2016). One of these objectives, or measurable outcomes, is students' achievements in examinations. Examination scores, especially national or international examinations and assessments, entail that a school's quality can be easily judged and ranked (Ball 2016). Schools have been pressured to prepare students for examinations to ensure their quality (Crocco and Costigan 2007). Students find such learning at schools boring, meaningless, and alienating because it is hard for them to identify the meaningful connections between themselves and the learning activities for examinations (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014). The Marxist view refers to this phenomenon as alienated learning or estranged learning—the separation and contradiction between learners' selves and learning labour (Lave and McDermott 2002; Williams 2011).

Nevertheless, since 2000 many societies have committed to promoting a progressive pedagogy that values student-centred instruction, project-based learning, experiential learning, and diverse learning outcomes to foster students' all-round and holistic personal development (Kennedy 2005). To achieve this, these countries have initiated a variety of curricular reforms based on common themes such as lifelong learning and learning to learn (Cheng 2017). These curricular reforms should enable students to explore and develop their interests, fostering self-realisation rather than alienation. However, few studies have considered how, why, or the extent to which progressive curricular reforms enable students to overcome alienated learning.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to advance our understanding of the influences of curricular reforms that promote a progressive pedagogy on students' experiences of alienated learning. In particular, it proposes to answer the following research questions from a Marxist perspective of alienated learning: (1) How do students experience alienated learning amid curricular reforms that promote progressive pedagogies? (2) Why, how, and to what extent do curricular reforms enable students to overcome alienated learning? The study investigates this context in Hong Kong: alienated learning is a silent phenomenon in its society and, similar to others, Hong Kong has reformed its school curricula to promote a progressive pedagogy (Cheng 2017).

Hong Kong serves as a fruitful case study for this investigation. Since its education system has been influenced by both Western (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia) and Chinese cultures, this study's findings may also have implications for Western and other Chinese (e.g., China and Taiwan) education systems.

The Marxist Perspective of Alienated Learning

The concept of alienated learning originates from Marx's theory of alienation (Lave and McDermott 2002). According to Marx, the relationship between the self and labour

should be intimate and harmonious; that is, labour is exercised by human beings to satisfy their needs and confirm and manifest their selves (Mészáros 1970). Labour should comprise the productive and creative activities leading to self-realisation (Ollman 1976). However, this relationship becomes contradictory due to the expansion of capitalism. Marx suggests that capitalism transformed the labour process into a series of exploitative relationships in which workers must sell their labour to capitalists in exchange for wages because the latter control the means of production. In this situation, labour is reified as a commodity for capitalists to make profit (Mészáros 1970). Labour becomes external to workers, and they become powerless to control it (Swain 2012). Labour then tends to satisfy and express the needs of capitalists instead of workers (Israel 1979). Hence, workers are inclined to view their labour as a mere commodity exchanged for a living, whereby they are extrinsically driven rather than intrinsically motivated to work. They may find their labour alien and hostile to them while performing it because the meaningful connections between labour and the self are absent (Swain 2012). This form of labour is called alienated labour, which concerns the contradiction between the self and labour. Performing alienated labour generates a sense of powerlessness (being controlled by others or an impersonal system), meaninglessness (a lack of understanding of the purpose or significance of one's work within the labour process), and self-estrangement (without fulfillment at work, labour is simply a means of earning a living) (Mottaz 1981). As Marx (1959) notes, alienated labour often leads to unpleasant lived experiences because it denies the self through labour rather than affirming it.

Marxist theorists suggest that the alienated condition exists not only in the realm of work but also in the realm of learning (Lave and McDermott 2002; Williams 2011). They extend the theory of alienation to explain “the pronounced apathy, the lassitude, or the quiet resentment exhibited by ... students, or any number of similarly unsettling types of behavior found in the school” (Gereluk 1974, 35). Following Marx, they view learning as a kind of alienated labour performed by students at school, thus alienated learning (Lave and McDermott 2002). Different from alienated labour in the workforce, alienated learning results from a capitalist mode of education (Williams 2011). As Freire (1970, 77) elaborates, the capitalist mode of education “transforms students into receiving objects” and “attempts to control thinking and action ... and inhibits their creative power”. What and how students study in school is defined and supervised by adults, such as their teachers and parents (Gore 1995). They have no share of knowledge or control over their learning activities for self-fulfillment and self-realisation (Williams 2011), making it difficult to identify the relevance between the self and meaningful learning activities, and leading to a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement (Barnhardt and Ginns 2014).

Recently, the public sector of education has been pervasively influenced by neoliberalism, a form of hyper-capitalism (Piven 2015) that emphasises the economic and market values of education. For example, it promotes the efficacy, effectiveness, and economy of education by integrating accountability and performance measures to

steer schools and teachers towards producing measurable outputs, examination scores in particular. Accordingly, schools and teachers tend to privilege teacher-centred and rote-learning pedagogies because these are interpreted as most effective in preparing students for examinations (Crocco and Costigan 2007). That is, students are directed to learn the examined knowledge and examination skills and to study hard for examinations rather than learn something meaningful to them. They are pressured to obtain high scores on examinations since the scores are indicators of school and teacher performance. Students are reified through examination scores that judge their values and competency (Ball 2016). Consequently, students find learning separates them from their selves, resulting in feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness. In other words, they perform alienated learning.

The Marxist view suggests the alienated condition of learning can be legitimised through competitive culture under capitalism. Bowles and Gintis (1976) observe that schools tend to group students according to their academic abilities and differentiate educational services accordingly. Tracking can fuel the competitive culture among students, functioning as a hidden curriculum that socialises them through the instrumental values of education; that is, education becomes a means to obtain a better material life. Certain students may acquiesce to the reification of themselves. They then strive to acquire examination-related knowledge and skills for extrinsic purposes rather than self-realisation (Finley 1984). Moreover, in modern capitalist societies, one's material success largely depends on academic scores and educational credentials (Collins 1979). Once someone obtains desirable examination results and, in turn, education credentials, he or she will have a competitive advantage in the job market. Parents, in turn, pressure their children to study hard in exchange for a better future. This is particularly true in Chinese societies, where education has been consistently regarded as the essential means for upward mobility. Accordingly, many Chinese parents stress over their children's academic performance throughout every stage of education (Lui 2009). They spend a lot of time monitoring their children's study habits or send them to private tutorial classes because they desire that they perform well on examinations and, thereby, access a promising future (Watkins 2010).

Curricular Reform and Progressive Pedagogy

A global trend of curricular reforms based on progressive pedagogy began in 2000 (Kennedy 2005). Nevertheless, progressive pedagogy is not a new concept. It can be traced back to Dewey's philosophy of education. For Dewey, education is a process of growth by reorganising and reconstructing experiences that enhance individuals' capability to direct subsequent experiences (Winch and Gingell 2008). It implies that learning and growth are the results of continuous experiencing and interacting with the world (Dewey 1938). Education should provide opportunities for students to experiment and have new experiences. As Sullivan (1966, 393–94) asserts, from Dewey's perspective, "education must create real life situations to provide appropriate experiences which suit the child's mental powers, interests and needs; to awaken new

needs, raise new questions; and to provide conditions necessary to develop all of the native capacities” and engage students in “constructive, expressive activities originating from his own social activities and relating to his previous experiences”. To achieve that, students need be treated as central to education so that educational activities start from students’ interests (Winch and Gingell 2008). Dewey (1938) proposes education should be progressive. Different from traditional education that transfers and imposes predefined knowledge through the rote-learning approach, progressive education or pedagogy engages real-life situations in learning experiences and allows students to participate in learning activities in a variety of social settings so as to facilitate constructing understandings and identifying the meaningful connections between themselves and learning activities for living (Guttek 2014; Williams 2017).

In practice, a progressive pedagogy encourages education to involve the full range of life experiences rather than simply academic achievement (Hugg and Wurdinger 2007). It entails aiding students to reorganise and reconstruct their experiences for personal growth by enabling them to manage their conduct according to their personal needs and the social needs of communities, to satisfy and develop their potential through direct and indirect experiences with the world and the application of knowledge, and to locate themselves in the broader community that structures their social groups and societies (Pecore 2016). To achieve practical pedagogical goals, societies reform their school curricula by emphasising ideas and practices such as all-round and complete personal education, integrative coursework, active acting, deep learning, service learning, problem-based learning, experimental learning, and student-centred teaching (Kennedy 2005). Gradually, there must be larger spaces for students to explore their interests and satisfy their needs through learning at school, allowing them to identify the meaningful connections between them and learning activities. Studies show that a progressive pedagogy, such as problem-based learning, service learning or student-centred teaching, tends to increase students’ learning engagement, motivation and enjoyment (e.g., Lai and Hui 2021; Rotgans and Schmidt 2011).

Progressive curricular reforms provide opportunities for students to enjoy learning, yet researchers suggest that their effects may be minimal (Woods 1994). They argue that schools tend to instrumentally utilise progressive pedagogies to enhance students’ multiple competencies, justifying academic quality rather than pedagogically facilitating students’ self-realisation (Beach and Dovemark 2005). A reformed learning situation can still be alienating (Beach and Dovemark 2005), whereby learning remains alienated at a reformed school (Williams 2011).

Research Context

Given the influence of its Confucian heritage, the Hong Kong education system has been characterised as meritocratic (Waters and Leung 2016; Yung and Zeng 2021). The meritocracy prefers a pyramidal education system for social selection based on individuals’ measurable merits. The Hong Kong education system has consistently been examination-oriented (Morris and Adamson 2010). Based on examination results, the

system stratifies students from primary to higher education (Post 1994). The Hong Kong education system tends to track students within and between schools (Tsang 2011; Zhou, Cai, and Wang 2016). That means the students with good academic performance will be stratified into good schools, while the students with poor academic performance will be stratified into poor schools. As Postiglione (1997) observes, this educational stratification determines the life chances of Hong Kong students. To ensure their life chances, preparing and drilling students for examinations, especially high-stakes examinations, are socially regarded as the gateways to upward mobility (Lui 2009). Hence schools and teachers continue to use traditional pedagogical approaches such as rote-learning and teacher-centred classes despite the emphasis on progressive pedagogies by curricular reforms. Traditional pedagogical approaches are still perceived as the most effective means to prepare students for examinations (Pong and Chow 2002).

To some extent, the examination-orientation has been reinforced from the 1990s when neoliberalism spread to the Hong Kong education system. In 1991, the government introduced economic and market values such as accountability into the education system through a pilot scheme called the School Management Initiative (SMI). It sought to bureaucratise the school management structure and hold schools and teachers accountable to their delegated financial authority. Following SMI, Hong Kong introduced the initiative of School-Based Management (SBM) in 1997 and enforced it in 2000. According to SBM, every school had to develop formal procedures for setting their goals, conducting internal evaluations, and staff appraisals (Education Commission 1997). Beginning in 2002 the government also developed a framework of performance indicators to evaluate school performance in academic and non-academic contexts (Education Bureau 2008). To make schools and teachers more accountable, Hong Kong required each school to prepare and publish plans and reports outlining their long-term goals, priority areas, specific targets for implementation, progress of work evaluations, and improvement and development targets, in addition to publishing a public school profile sharing its circumstances and performance (Education Commission 1997). Moreover, the government introduced a policy of school closure that would close any school unable to recruit enough students. To survive, schools were compelled to be pragmatic and forcefully produce good outcomes, especially examination results, to attract parents and students (Choi 2005). In this situation, schools and teachers became more enthusiastic to drill and prepare students for examinations (Berry 2011; Pong and Chow 2002). As a result, students face heavy academic burdens, especially those caused by examination demands, leading to academic stress, depression, anxiety, and boredom. For instance, studies indicate that approximately 40% of students are academically stressed and 20–40% are prone to anxiety or depression as a result of the learning context in Hong Kong (Chung 2017; Ng, Chiu, and Fong 2016). Moreover, the literature also notes that Hong Kong students generally feel bored or have low interest in learning (Hui 2015; Jablonka 2013). Since stress, depression, anxiety, and boredom are closely related to alienation (Karger 1981; Schacht 1971; Yadav and Nagle

2012), the literature implies that alienated learning is prevalent among Hong Kong students.

To release students from this academic burden and foster their total personal development and multiple interests, since 2000, the Hong Kong government has coined the slogan, “Learning More Than Scoring”, initiating a far-reaching curriculum reform proposal based on *learning to learn* from the perspective of a progressive pedagogy (Curriculum Development Council 2000; Kennedy 2005). To achieve these goals, the government evolved the proposal into the New Senior Secondary (NSS) reform, which advocated providing many non-academic learning opportunities for students to explore and develop their non-academic talents by altering the academic structure of senior secondary school as of 2009. For example, there used to be two public examinations in the Hong Kong education system, but these were replaced by a single examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). It is a high-stakes university entry examination intended to decrease the pressure of examinations. Moreover, mechanisms to encourage schools to foster students’ all-round and complete personal development were introduced. For instance, Other Learning Experiences (OLE) proposed to facilitate students’ personal development by providing them with multiple kinds of learning experiences outside classrooms. Students’ non-academic achievements in OLE are recognised as an auxiliary reference item regarding publicly funded university admission, in addition to the HKDSE results. Formative, school-based and project-based learning and assessment were also proposed to replace some comprehensive examinations to evaluate students’ academic achievements. Nevertheless, Chan (2010) notes that the curricular reforms in Hong Kong failed to achieve these purposes. For instance, certain studies demonstrate that Hong Kong students remain prone to anxiety, depression, and other kinds of negative emotions during learning due to academic and examination pressure (Fung et al. 2015). This implies that the Learning to Learn reform may fail to achieve its stated purposes.

Methods

Photovoice

Photovoice was applied for data collection. According to Wang and Burris (1997), photovoice is a method inviting participants to identify and discuss their lives and lived experiences through photographic techniques. In practice, photovoice researchers invite participants to take photographs based on themes and ask them to select and discuss one or a few of their photographs in a group setting (Sutton-Brown 2014). Since the process of taking and discussing photographs may facilitate participants to make deeper reflections, photovoice is an advantage to evoke elements of human consciousness that conventional qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups alone cannot (Asaba et al. 2014). Plunkett, Leipert, and Ray (2013) point out that photovoice is a useful method for eliciting data that may deepen understanding of participants’ lived experience. For instance, researchers have applied photovoice to investigate the lived experiences of pain (Baker and Wang 2006), leisure (Genoe and Dupuis 2013), and

mathematics education (Harkness and Stallworth 2013). As the present study aimed to investigate how students experienced alienated learning, that is, the lived experience of alienated learning, photovoice would enable the study to achieve its aim by inviting them to reflectively take and discuss photographs regarding their school life and perceptions of education.

Participants

Data for this study were collected from a broader project that sought to share the lived experiences of learning among Hong Kong students, especially underachievers, in the context of NSS curricular reforms, empowering the participating students to discover the meaningful connections between themselves and learning. There were two phases to the project.

During the first phase, the researchers visited a self-financing higher education institution that admitted students who failed to obtain any offerings from public universities, and invited undergraduate students to join the project. This group of students was selected because they completed 12 years of free and compulsory education amid NSS reforms. They presented rich cases to elaborate underachievers' learning experiences during the NSS. Participant recruitment and data collection of the first phase took place between December 2017 and February 2018. A total of 15 students aged 19 to 21 and majoring in social sciences agreed to join the project. The undergraduate students are labelled UGS01 to UGS15 in this article.

The second phase of data collection was conducted from March to April 2018, when the researchers visited a Band 3 secondary school in Hong Kong—a type of school admitting a large proportion of students who were academically lower achievers in Grade 7, run by a charity and subsidised by the government. Grade 11 students were invited to participate in the project because they had attended secondary schools experiencing the NSS reforms. It was expected that they would provide detailed information reflecting lived experiences of learning during Hong Kong's curricular reform. There were 29 Grade 11 students aged 16 to 17 years who agreed to join the project. The secondary students are labelled SS01 to SS29.

Procedures

During each phase, after students agreed to take part in this study, they were invited to join a briefing session where the researchers explained the purpose and procedures of the project. All participants were then informed of their right to withdraw. Next, participants were invited to sign a consent form. For the secondary students, their parents were also notified about the project. The researchers excluded from the project those children whose parents disagreed with their participation. Since no participants or their parents asked for withdrawal, all participants were invited to sign a consent form.

After the briefing session, the researchers invited participants to take at least four photographs within four weeks based on one or more of the following themes: (1) What was their school life like in the past? (2) What did they like the most about the education system in Hong Kong? (3) What did they dislike the most about the education system in Hong Kong? (4) What best represented the education system in Hong Kong to them? The researchers did not directly ask the participants to take photographs about alienated learning because they tried to avoid leading the participants to only produce data favourable for the research aim. The researchers designed the four themes that focused on their feelings, thinking, and perceptions regarding school life and education during their daily lives. Ciolan and Manasia (2017) note that these types of photography themes offer opportunities for participants to critically observe and reflect on their learning behaviours, resulting in rich information for the investigation of lived experiences of learning.

Next, students were encouraged to submit their photos, each with its own title. The participants were then invited to join a group discussion session—two groups for the undergraduate students (1 group had 7 participants and another had 8) and three groups for the secondary students (3 groups had 7 participants and 1 had 8). During that session, they were invited to select at least one photo that was most significant or meaningful for them and share the story or viewpoint behind the photo with the others based on the following questions: (1) Why do you want to share this photograph? (2) What do you see here? (3) What story does the photograph tell? (4) How does this relate to your life? (5) What can we do about it? Each sharing lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. After sharing, in an attempt to draw out rich lived experiences, the researchers encouraged the participants to select the shared photographs that they wanted to discuss further as a group via the following questions: (1) Why did they choose these photographs for discussion? (2) What do the photographs mean to them? (3) How do the photographs relate to their lives? Ultimately, 173 photos were collected and analysed as the major data resource for this study.

Data Analysis

The group discussions were recorded and transcribed with permission from all participants. The transcriptions and photos were coded and analysed. Data analysis began with open coding and was followed by focused coding. The researchers continually refined and modified the coding scheme during the coding process to improve credibility by comparing incidents with incidents, incidents with themes, and themes with themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Peer debriefing was also applied to improve the credibility. It was expected that the resulting themes would cover the multilevel and complex meanings of participants. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to facilitate data analysis. The following themes ultimately emerged from the data: a sense of powerlessness, a sense of meaninglessness, a sense of self-estrangement, the internal contradiction of the education system, and the glimmers of social and school support for self-realisation.

Results

A Sense of Powerlessness

There were 24 photos of non-academic interests (see Table 1). According to the participants, the photos imply their sense of powerlessness to control their efforts to pursue non-academic interests at school. For instance, one observes:

I can only look at the students on the basketball court from afar. I envy them. ... In fact, many people's strengths are not academic, but in other areas. However, no one can escape; it seems that each student must follow the same educational route where many talents and interests have been buried. I have no choice but to feel helpless and sad. Especially, once Grade 10 starts, everyone needs to face the HKDSE. Who cares about those non-tested talents and interests? (SS12)

The extracts imply that while participants have opportunities to explore their interests, there could be institutional forces restricting their access to these interests, particularly once they entered Grade 10 and approached the HKDSE. According to UGS13, opportunities are restricted for underachievers at school.

Teachers have the power to decide who will attend extracurricular activities. However much potential and interest a student has, he or she is unlikely to be selected for an activity [compared to] students with good academic results. It is compulsory to attend supplementary classes if your academic performance is below average. Priority is given to supplementary classes even if you have other activities in the same time slot. In other words, if your academic results are below average, your right to attend activities is constrained. (UGS13)

Although not all schools had the same institutional practice, they tended to encourage the participants to give up interests to concentrate on studying for examinations. Some participants ignored their teachers' advice, and their teachers convinced their parents to stop them from engaging in hobbies. Thus, as SS23 expresses, "parents always threaten us to learn! Like, 'do not waste time, go to the exams quickly!'"

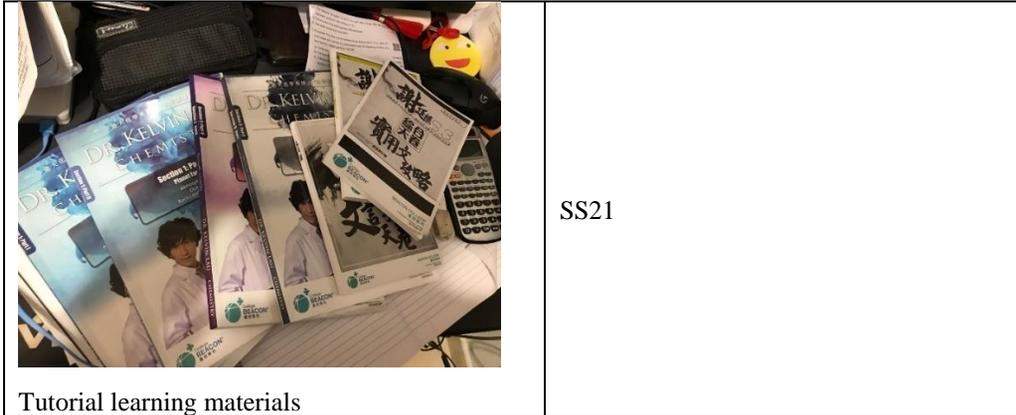
Table 1: Examples of photos about hobbies and interests

Photo	Photographer
 <p data-bbox="163 706 365 735">School playground</p>	SS12
 <p data-bbox="163 1203 221 1232">Tuba</p>	UGS05

In this context, the participants had to abandon their interests and continue to be tied to traditional school education and examinations. To improve their academic performance, they were pressured to attend private tutorial classes after school every day. There were 10 photos showing private tutorial centres, tutorial class advertisements, and tutorial learning materials (see Table 3). They said these photos suggested the following: “going to school and going to tutorial classes after school were all part of my daily life” (UGS01); “no entertainment and relaxation, but [just] lessons, exercises and assignments” (UGS10); and “too many tutorials, so tired” (SS21). All these expressions demonstrate their sense of powerlessness in learning.

Table 2: Examples of photos about private tutorial centres, tutorial class advertisements, and tutorial learning materials reflecting the sense of powerlessness in learning

Photo	Photographer
 <p data-bbox="164 893 602 920">Tutorial centre and its unhappy face logo</p>	<p data-bbox="702 607 786 637">UGS02</p>
 <p data-bbox="164 1494 475 1523">Tutorial class advertisements</p>	<p data-bbox="702 1208 786 1237">UGS01</p>



Tutorial learning materials

SS21

A Sense of Meaninglessness

Since the participants were asked to abandon their interests and concentrate on studying for examinations, they often identified learning as a means to gain examination scores rather than obtain self-realisation, generating a sense of meaninglessness in learning. Fifty-five photos were about homework, textbooks, grades, and exam-related themes (see Table 2). Many photos from the series imply that the meaning of learning to the participants concerned preparation for examinations rather than self-realisation, which is also reflected by their words:

We kept doing past papers, going to tutorial classes, reciting books, attending mock exams; for example, doing mathematics past papers used to review a long formula that we will not use again, doing Chinese past papers to understand the questions which the author did not think about. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to obtain higher marks [in the HKDSE]. (UGS08)

They viewed learning this way because they were told that obtaining good examination results, especially in the HKDSE, and then attending universities were the only means to guarantee their success in life:

One of my former secondary school teachers told me that I would be considered competent and valuable only if I had good HKDSE results and received an offer from a publicly funded university. (UGS07)

My parents always told me, “no education, no life”. If I could not get good examination results and go to a good university, I would not get a good job to make money. (UGS08)

As a result, numerous participants expressed that receiving high examination scores to enter universities was their major learning goal:

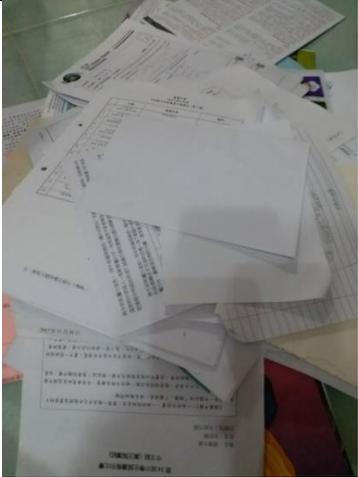
Learning is just to prepare me for a better future, because knowledge can help us get rich. ... Every effort is to equip me for a good university, so that I can have a better life. (SS25)

The data indicates that students ranked examinations as the priority of their learning life, which was driven by instrumental and extrinsic purposes. Even though they affirmed that a better examination result may assist them in hunting for better job opportunities in the future, students rarely enjoyed the learning process, stating that learning was meaningless to them. UGS08 perceived education as “a game of wasting time” because students were asked to study so much knowledge that was disconnected from their lives. Similar ideas were also expressed by a secondary participant:

I sometimes do not understand why modern people still have to recite the ancient Chinese language. In the future, we will not use ancient Chinese in dialogue with others. I truly feel it's useless! Similar to classical Chinese, teachers often let us mechanically recite the model answers, which we simply do not understand at all. (SS09)

Accordingly, learning activities and students' selves tended to be discrete. Learning, for the participants, is merely the means to achieve the utilitarian goals of future outcomes (including university, work, money, and status), compelling students to gradually lose the essence of learning, as indicated by the data above. Accordingly, it can be difficult for them to identify the connections between themselves and their learning labour, engendering a sense of meaninglessness.

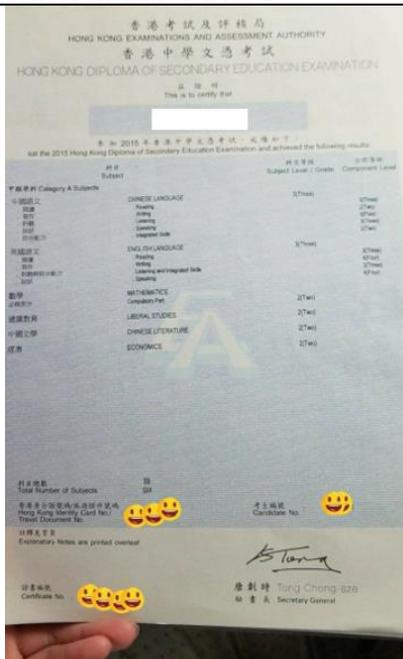
Table 3: Examples of photos about homework, textbooks, grades, and exam-related themes reflect the sense of meaninglessness in learning

Photo	Photographer
 <p data-bbox="163 1625 284 1647">Homework</p>	<p data-bbox="694 1361 752 1383">SS20</p>



SS09

School examination results



UGS12

HKDSE results

school looks like a prison to me just like this picture shows. I now understand this more. I am trapped in it all day long! (SS03)

Similarly, UGS15 described education as an industrial building or factory that reified students through learning:

I think an industrial building or a factory is the best metaphor to describe Hong Kong education. A factory is a place where standardised products are created by a production line. If the products cannot meet the standard, they are inferior. Hong Kongese students are the products produced by an educational factory. It is hard for them to develop their own interests, talents, and personalities because those things, or their uniqueness, do not satisfy the standard, which is only about academic results. (UGS15)

Table 4: Examples of photos reflecting the sense of self-estrangement in learning

Photo	Photographer
 <p data-bbox="163 1030 281 1057">Dead body</p>	<p data-bbox="714 851 773 879">SS05</p>
 <p data-bbox="163 1403 336 1430">School is prison</p>	<p data-bbox="714 1233 773 1261">SS03</p>

 <p data-bbox="164 473 658 500">Education is an industrial building or a factory</p>	UGS15
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The Internal Contradiction of the Education System

From the findings, it is evident that alienated learning—that is, the sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement—tends to be constructed by an internal contradiction of the education system in Hong Kong. On the one hand, the education system promotes the progressive values of well-rounded and total personal development via curricular reforms; on the other, it emphasises examination results as the most important indicator of one’s competency and a school’s effectiveness. This contradiction is reflected by the photo (see Table 5) shared by UGS02, who makes the following comments:

I want to share this picture with you because it reveals and satirises the Hong Kong education system. A music school is supposed to be a place to impart music knowledge and techniques. Its environment should be full of musical instruments. The walls should display posters of different music classes. However, in the photograph, what I see is a music school displaying countless posters of tutoring classes for primary or secondary school students. It truly reflects how exam-oriented the Hong Kong education system is. Society wants to focus on all-round development, but what matters most is academic achievement. The focus is only on exams and not on non-academic skills and interests. (UGS02)

Table 5: A photo reflecting the internal contradiction of the education system

Photo	Photographer
 <p data-bbox="163 678 457 702">A community music school</p>	<p data-bbox="742 465 823 493">UGS02</p>

As UGS02 perceives, non-academic achievement was subordinated to academic achievement, even though the education system values the complete personal development of students. The subordination of non-academic achievement was mirrored by teachers' orientation towards extracurricular activities. As discussed above, teachers often discouraged students, especially the underachievers, from exploring and developing their personal interests through extracurricular activities when they were facing examinations, especially the HKDSE. Moreover, the participants mentioned that some teachers evaluated students' competence by heavily relying on their academic achievements, resulting in disproportionate instruction:

Well-performing students received most of the teachers' attention. What about those who did not do well on the tests? Nobody cares. They were invisible in teachers' eyes, even though they were in the same classroom or shadow education as those who performed well. Take me as an example; not a single teacher cared or reminded me when I slept in the class during Grade 10 and 11. (UGS05)

Collectively, these findings reinforce the idea that academic achievement is more important than non-academic achievement in Hong Kong's education system. Therefore, although it purports to value all-round and total personal development, the system paradoxically discourages students from exploring and developing their non-academic interests.

The Glimmers of School Support for Self-Realisation

Although the majority of participants experienced alienated learning, three of them discussed their ability to enjoy their personal interests through school life. All three

mentioned that their interests were recognised by their school and rekindled the hopes of some other students. A member of a school basketball team states:

The school will give us the opportunity to train [play basketball] overseas and sponsor our costumes and sneakers. I even feel a little bit superior and proud that I am a basketball player at this school. In this sense, we have the strong motivation to win honours for our school. I feel that the school's affirmation of playing basketball has made me more confident and more motivated. (SS02)

The other two mention the following:

I feel that the school also recognises the achievements of our extracurricular activities. I won the Canadian Culinary Competition last year. The principal awarded me at the end of the school's assembly. Although I think the school still cares more about academic achievements, I feel that it seems to have begun to give space to the underachievers, like me, to develop their personal interests. I am still very encouraged. (SS22)

I feel that the talented art students also got encouragement last year. I remember that the principal helped a senior schoolmate who wrote novels online (he is poor at academic performance) to find a publisher to publish the paper version. This year, the school also gave us the opportunity to exhibit our paintings, and the SBA [school-based assessment] works at shows. The art teachers elaborately decorated the venues so that the students could take pictures of their works and credit the exhibition record in their portfolios, which helped with university interviews and job hunting. At the time, I felt that my personal interests were recognised and felt very satisfied. (SS13)

This demonstrates how the curricular reforms provide specific opportunities for students to explore and develop their interests for self-realisation. Schools also facilitate students' non-academic achievements, such as their basketball and literary talents, providing opportunities for external exchanges and financial support. Some students' non-academic achievements had been encouraged and rewarded. Different forms of affirmation from a school could reinforce students' idea of developing their interests into a career. These pleasures sharply contrasted with the experiences of alienation of many students, as presented in the previous sections. Although most of the students experienced alienated learning, glimmers of hope remain. If a school could carry these opportunities forward, it might constitute a possible direction and means for students to break the existing cycle and improve their predicaments.

Discussion

This study's findings generally support the Marxist perspective of alienated learning. The perspective depicts that education systems, influenced by capitalism, tend to be meritocratic. In Hong Kong, meritocracy legitimises a highly stratified education system tracking students within and between schools based on merits, especially academic performance in examinations (Post 1994; Tsang 2011; Zhou, Cai, and Wang

2016). The society tends to force students to study hard for examinations in order to access better social mobility and life chances. As Beach and Dovemark (2005) suggest, this situation is inclined to reify students through the pursuit of examination scores, as they are forced to study hard for the tested knowledge rather than developing their interests and potential. Learning becomes alienated (Lave and McDermott 2002; Williams 2011). As the findings show, performing alienated learning leads students to feel powerless, to perceive education as meaningless, and to become self-estranged.

Theoretically, progressive pedagogy is an approach to confront alienated learning. This is because the pedagogy emphasises placing students' interests at the centre of education and engaging them in real-life situations in which they can find meaningful connections between learning activities and themselves (Gutek 2014; Williams 2017). The Hong Kong government has attempted to alleviate alienated learning through curricular reforms based on progressivism (Kennedy 2005). As Lee (2022) notes, since the mid-1990s a series of curricular reforms has institutionalised all-round and holistic personal education based on the progressive pedagogical values in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study imply that the curricular reforms may not enable students to overcome alienated learning because of an internal contradiction existing in the education system. That is, the education system promotes the progressive values of well-rounded and total personal development, but it also emphasises examination results rather than other things as the most important indicator of a school's and individual's merit. In other words, the progressive pedagogy tends to be subordinated to the traditional pedagogy of examination in Hong Kong (Berry 2011; Pong and Chow 2002).

The subordinate position of progressive pedagogy can be explained by Marx's idea of economic determinism. According to this idea, a particular economy will structure all aspects of political, cultural, and social life. In order to sustain the capitalist economy, capitalism attempts to control and monitor the education system in order to make sure it can effectively produce future labour power and surplus value (Reid 2003). In Hong Kong, only the knowledge, skills, and competence assessed by examinations are regarded as valuable labour power by the economy. Capitalism introduces the logics of accountability and performativity to govern schools' and teachers' work to equip students with those examined knowledge, skills, and competence through neoliberal education reforms (Carter and Stevenson 2012). Consequently, the Hong Kong education system becomes more dependent on measurable outcomes, especially examination scores, as indicators to judge the effectiveness and quality of schools and teachers (Choi 2005). Schools and teachers may become overly committed to producing scores by preparing students for examinations. Although the neoliberal education reforms also propose performance indicators related to non-academic achievement, the literature suggests that these types of performance indicators may be loosely coupled with schools' and teachers' work (Lee 2022). This is because most non-academic achievements do not provide knowledge, skills, and competences that can be examined. There is a lack of rigorous inspections on the quality of schools' and teachers' work for catering to students' non-academic development (Tsang 2019). Hong Kong schools

offer a wide range of extracurricular activities and OLE outside the classroom, but extracurricular activities and OLE do not effectively facilitate the exploration and development of interests for self-realisation. Moreover, as the findings suggest, students typically enjoy the opportunity to join different extracurricular activities and OLE before Grade 10, since there is less examination pressure. Once they enter Grade 10, they must prepare for the HKDSE as a high-stakes examination, so they may be forced to give up their interests and concentrate on their studies. As a result, students' interests are not central to education but subordinate to academic achievement or even devalued by the education system. In this situation, students perceive that they are judged by teachers and schools based on examination scores rather than non-academic achievement because they embody the effectiveness of the teachers and schools. Students are reified through examination scores that are monitored by teachers and schools (Crocco and Costigan 2007; Williams 2011). They find they are powerless to determine their learning labour process. Moreover, this article's findings reveal that parents tend to support such reification. According to the participants' narratives, their parents often express the view that a person's success is determined by their examination scores. Students are forced to learn instrumentally not only by teachers and schools but also by their parents and families. Consequently, they tend to recognise the exchange value of learning instead of the use-value (Williams 2011). It is hard for them to identify the meaningful connections between their learning labour and their selves. They are inclined to feel a sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and self-estrangement in addition to being stressed because they perform alienated learning.

The findings also demonstrate that schools do not necessarily only alienate students but also provide opportunities to facilitate their self-realisation. To some extent, this can be explained by the purposes of the curriculum reform that promotes a progressive pedagogy. Although the education system emphasises performativity, accountability, efficacy, and effectiveness of education, subordinating educational values to instructional values, it cannot be denied that curricular reform can also instantiate progressive values such as complete personal education, the enjoyment of learning, and student-centred education. The reforms can institutionally create opportunities for students to explore and develop their interests. However, as Woods (1994, 123) argues, curricular reforms "do not appear to have been very productive as yet in the empowerment of students" since only three participants expressed a sense of self-realisation in learning in the context of curricular reforms. In the evaluation of three participants' expressions, this study identified schools' and teachers' recognition, respect, and support for students' interests as important factors shaping students' experiences of alienated learning. However, given the influence of neoliberalism, it can be difficult for them to fully support students in developing their interests rather than studying for examinations (Crocco and Costigan 2007). Accordingly, neoliberal education reforms may restrict the function of progressive curricular reforms and reproduce alienated learning. From a Marxist perspective, the reforms are structurally underpinned by a capitalist economy. In other words, we need to transform the economy

if we would like to improve the education reforms that confront alienated learning. This is not easy to do. Alternative and feasible approaches are needed.

First, in addition to progressive pedagogy, we need critical pedagogy. In brief, critical pedagogy views education and teaching as an inherently political act; it rejects the neutrality of knowledge and awakens students' critical awareness of their alienated situation (Freire 1970; Giroux 2007). According to Uddin (2019), teachers can improve students' critical awareness by encouraging dialogue between them and students and among students, connecting learning with real-life situations, engaging students with out-of-book activities, providing hands-on study activities, and applying problem-posing education in teaching. When students become more critically aware of their alienated situation, it is possible for them to realise their own agency to regain control over themselves and determine their own lives (Tsang, Lian, and Zhu 2021). The government has provided pre-service and in-service teachers with training about critical pedagogy and encourages them to apply it in their classroom.

Second, the Hong Kong government should consider how to change society's mindset about the instrumental understanding of education to make curriculum reform successful. It must educate the public, including parents, about the expressive values of education rather than its instrumental values. The present study has two limitations. Firstly, Hong Kong is a Chinese society influenced by Confucian ideas of education. The education system has been examination-oriented and the society has emphasised the instructional values of education and learning. Alienated learning is influenced not only by neoliberalism but also by Confucianism in Hong Kong. However, the present study does not identify strong evidence to differentiate the effects of these ideologies. A possible reason why the present study fails to identify such evidence is that neoliberalism and Confucian ideas of education can be mutually reinforced and reproduced, making it difficult to differentiate them. Further studies should investigate the relationship between neoliberalism, Confucianism, and alienated learning in Hong Kong or other Chinese societies. Secondly, the participants of the study tended to be underachievers, so the findings do not represent the experiences of high achievers. The experiences of alienated learning are likely different among the two groups of students. Further studies should examine how high achievers experience alienated learning in the context of curricular reforms.

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