Exploring the Affective Dimensions of Creative Thinking in Graffiti-Style Ink Painting: Insights from Expert Teachers in Henan, China

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***Abstract* – Creative thinking in art education encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions; yet the latter remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western pedagogical contexts. This qualitative study investigated the affective dimensions of creative thinking namely, curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination, as observed and interpreted by expert art teachers implementing the Graffiti-Style Ink Painting Module (GSIP-M) in primary schools in Henan Province, China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected primary art teachers who had direct experience designing or delivering GSIP-M lessons. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Findings revealed that curiosity served as the primary emotional catalyst for artistic exploration; complexity prompted deeper metacognitive engagement with ambiguous visual problems; risk-taking functioned as a transformative force enabling students to transcend conventional artistic norms; and imagination integrated the other three dimensions into coherent expressive outcomes. Critically, these dimensions were found to operate in a mutually reinforcing cycle rather than as isolated traits, collectively cultivating students' creative confidence, intrinsic motivation, and openness to experimentation. The study contributes to the literature by empirically grounding affective creativity theory within a culturally hybrid, innovative art module, and offers concrete pedagogical implications for designing emotionally responsive art curricula in primary education.**

***Keywords* – Affective Dimensions; Creative Thinking; Graffiti-Style Ink Painting; Art Education; Qualitative Research; Primary Education; China**

I. INTRODUCTION

Creativity has emerged as one of the most sought-after competencies in 21st-century education, widely regarded as indispensable for personal fulfilment, civic participation, and economic innovation (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020). Art education, by virtue of its emphasis on open-ended exploration, sensory engagement, and the communication of meaning through non-verbal symbols, occupies a privileged position in fostering creative development across the lifespan (Eisner, creative development across the lifespan (Eisner, 2002; Winner et al., 2013). Within this context, considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to understanding the cognitive processes underlying artistic creativity, including divergent thinking, originality, elaboration, and flexibility (Guilford, 1967; Torrance, 1974; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). However, creativity is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is equally, and perhaps fundamentally, an emotional experience shaped by curiosity, courage, and the willingness to engage imaginatively with the unknown (Amabile, 1996; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Fredrickson, 2001).

Despite growing recognition of the role of affect in creativity research (Baas et al., 2008; Davis, 2009; Zenasni et al., 2008), the empirical literature on how affective dimensions manifest and interact in actual art classroom settings remains sparse. This gap is especially pronounced in non-Western educational contexts, where the intersection of indigenous artistic traditions and globally circulating contemporary visual cultures creates distinctive pedagogical opportunities and challenges (Cheng & Wan, 2020; Li, 2017; Zhao, 2012). Furthermore, the increasing integration of cross-cultural art forms, such as graffiti, into traditional curricula raises important questions about how emotionally charged hybrid practices shape students' creative dispositions (Amin & Cohendet, 2004; Gude, 2004; Staikidis, 2006).

The Graffiti-Style Ink Painting Module (GSIP-M), developed for primary school students in Henan Province, China, represents one such innovative attempt to bridge traditional Chinese ink painting with contemporary urban visual culture. By fusing the gestural spontaneity of graffiti with the disciplined aesthetics of Chinese brush painting, the module creates a pedagogically rich space in which students are simultaneously challenged to master technical conventions and to transgress them (Chen, 2019; Wang, 2021). This dual demand is hypothesized to activate the four affective dimensions identified by Torrance (1974) and elaborated by Cropley (2001): curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination.

To date, no published study has empirically examined how these affective dimensions manifest within the GSIP-M context, nor how experienced art teachers perceive, scaffold, and interpret students' emotional engagement with creative tasks in this culturally specific setting. Addressing this gap, the present study conducted semi-structured interviews with six expert primary art teachers in Henan Province, seeking to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do expert art teachers describe and interpret students' curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination in GSIP-M lessons?

RQ2: How do these four affective dimensions interrelate and reinforce one another within the creative process as observed in the GSIP-M context?

RQ3: What pedagogical conditions and teacher behaviours appear to support or constrain the development of these affective dimensions?

The findings are intended to enrich theoretical understandings of affective creativity and to provide

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actionable pedagogical insights for art educators seeking to design emotionally responsive, culturally relevant curricula.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Creative Thinking in Art Education

Creative thinking has long been recognized as a central objective of art education, encompassing the generation of novel ideas, the expression of emotion, and the navigation of aesthetic problems without predetermined solutions (Eisner, 2002; Hetland et al., 2007; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Early conceptualizations by Guilford (1967) foregrounded divergent thinking, the capacity to produce multiple, varied responses to open-ended stimuli, as the cognitive core of creativity, while Torrance (1974) expanded this model to include fluency, originality, elaboration, and flexibility as measurable indices of creative potential. In visual arts education, these cognitive operations are further enriched by the sensory, material, and cultural dimensions of art-making, providing students with opportunities to externalize inner experiences through symbolic form (McLennan, 2010; Sullivan, 2010).

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly challenged purely cognitive accounts of creativity, arguing that affective factors, including motivation, emotion, and personal investment, are equally constitutive of the creative process (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Plucker et al., 2004). Within art classrooms, emotional engagement is not merely a by-product of creative activity but an active ingredient that sustains attention, deepens reflection, and fuels the persistence necessary for artistic growth (Davis, 2009; Hetland et al., 2007; Sawyer, 2011). Moreover, art learning uniquely provides what Eisner (2002) termed 'forms of thinking' that are non-propositional and affectively laden, demanding that students attend to qualitative nuance, tolerate ambiguity, and revise their work in response to felt aesthetic judgements rather than external correctness criteria.

More recent research has examined creativity specifically within the context of culturally hybrid art forms and cross-disciplinary curricula. Studies suggest that when students engage with unfamiliar or provocative aesthetic traditions, such as street art, manga, or digital media, their creative curiosity is heightened, as the novelty of the form disrupts habitual modes of perception and invites fresh exploratory engagement (Gude, 2004; Darts, 2004; Staikidis, 2006). Such findings are particularly pertinent to the GSIP-M, which deliberately juxtaposes the countercultural aesthetics of graffiti with the classical discipline of Chinese ink painting.

Affective Dimensions of Creative Thinking

The theoretical framework underpinning the present study derives from Torrance's (1974) identification of affective traits associated with creative behaviour and Cropley's (2001) subsequent elaboration of these traits into four key dimensions: curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination. Although these dimensions were initially articulated in the context of psychometric creativity research, they have been widely adopted and adapted in educational research, where they function as observable dispositions that can be cultivated through intentional pedagogy (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Isaksen & Treffinger, 2004; Runco, 2014).

a) Curiosity

Curiosity, defined as an intrinsic motivational orientation towards exploring novel stimuli, resolving uncertainty, and acquiring new information, has been theorized as a foundational affective precondition for creative engagement (Berlyne, 1960; Kashdan et al., 2004; Litman, 2005). In art education, curiosity motivates students to investigate unfamiliar techniques, experiment with materials beyond their comfort zone, and interrogate the conceptual possibilities of a given assignment (Hetland et al., 2007; McLennan, 2010). Kashdan and Silvia (2009) further distinguish between epistemic curiosity (the desire to resolve knowledge gaps) and diversive curiosity (a broader openness to novel experience), both of which appear relevant to art classrooms. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory provides a complementary account, positing that positive emotions like curiosity expand the momentary thought-action repertoire, thereby enabling more flexible and generative thinking.

b) Complexity

The tolerance for complexity, understood as the willingness to engage with ambiguous, multifaceted, or structurally open-ended tasks, is closely related to what psychologist’s term ambiguity tolerance (Budner, 1962) and to Sternberg and Lubart's (1996) investment theory of creativity, which posits that creative individual characteristically 'buy low' by investing cognitive and emotional energy in problems that others find daunting or ill-defined. In art education, complexity manifests when students must make simultaneous decisions about composition, technique, symbolic meaning, and aesthetic coherence, decisions for which there is no single correct answer (Eisner, 2002; Sullivan, 2010). Engaging productively with this complexity requires metacognitive self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2000) as well as emotional resilience in the face of temporary disorder and aesthetic discomfort (Cropley, 2001; Isaksen & Treffinger, 2004).

c) Risk-Taking

Creative risk-taking involves the willingness to attempt novel, unconventional, or potentially 'incorrect' approaches in the absence of guaranteed success, a disposition closely linked to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), and what Beghetto (2009) terms 'creative self-concept.' Research in educational psychology suggests that risk-taking is both enabled and constrained by classroom climate: environments characterized by evaluative pressure, normative comparison, and performance-goal orientations tend to suppress willingness to experiment, while mastery-oriented climates that value effort, process, and mistake-making as learning opportunities tend to promote it (Amabile, 1996; Dweck, 2006; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). In the context of art education, where cultural norms and aesthetic conventions can exert powerful conforming pressures, risk-taking represents a particularly significant affective threshold that

differentiates students who engage deeply with creative possibilities from those who default to formulaic reproduction (Hetland et al., 2007; Winner et al., 2013).

d) Imagination

Imagination, conceptualized by Vygotsky (2004) as the capacity to combine prior experiences in new ways and to construct internal representations of what does not yet exist, occupies a central position in theories of creative development. In the context of art education, imagination functions as a bridge between affective experience and symbolic expression: students must not only generate mental images of possible artworks but also select and transform these images into concrete visual forms through the mediation of materials, techniques, and cultural conventions (Greene, 1995; Sawyer, 2011). Greene's (1995) concept of 'wide-awakeness', a heightened, imaginatively engaged mode of perception and responsiveness, offers a resonant account of the conditions under which artistic imagination flourishes. More recently, Craft (2002) has distinguished between 'big-C' imagination, concerned with transformative cultural innovation, and 'little-c' everyday creativity, the latter being more characteristic of primary school contexts and more accessible through intentional pedagogical design.

Affective Dimensions in Chinese Art Education

The Chinese art education context presents both unique resources and distinctive challenges for the cultivation of affective creativity. Traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy particularly the concepts of yi (expressive intention), qi (vital energy), and kongbai (meaningful emptiness), foregrounds the emotional and spiritual dimensions of art-making in ways that resonate with contemporary creativity research (Li, 2017; Zhao, 2012). However, the Chinese primary school system has historically emphasized technical skill acquisition, examination performance, and conformity to established aesthetic standards, creating structural tensions with the open-ended, risk-accepting dispositions associated with creative development (Cheng & Wan, 2020; Pang & Plucker, 2012; Niu & Sternberg, 2006).

Recent curricular reforms under China's New Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2022) have sought to address these tensions by emphasizing creativity, self-expression, and aesthetic sensibility as primary goals of arts education. Nevertheless, empirical research examining how these goals translate into classroom practice, and particularly how teachers interpret and scaffold students' affective engagement with creative tasks, remains limited (Cheng & Wan, 2020; Wang, 2021). The present study therefore addresses a substantive empirical gap in the literature.

The Graffiti-Style Ink Painting Module (GSIP-M)

The GSIP-M was designed as a culturally hybrid intervention that combines the gestural spontaneity and expressive boldness of graffiti with the meditative discipline and aesthetic refinement of traditional Chinese ink painting. This combination is theoretically motivated by arguments in cultural studies and art education regarding the pedagogical value of 'third space' creative encounters, contexts in which students negotiate between familiar and unfamiliar cultural codes, generating new meanings and hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994; Gude, 2004; Staikidis, 2006). From a creativity standpoint, the GSIP-M is designed to activate all four affective dimensions identified in the framework: the novelty of graffiti aesthetics is intended to arouse curiosity; the challenge of integrating two structurally distinct artistic systems is intended to engage complexity; the norm-transgressing nature of applying graffiti to ink paper is intended to invite risk-taking; and the expressive openness of both traditions is intended to foster imagination.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, situated within an interpretive epistemological framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants, and that meaning must be understood in relation to the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced, an assumption well suited to the exploration of teachers' perceptions of an emotionally and culturally complex pedagogical phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured individual interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they allow participants to articulate nuanced, context-specific experiences while permitting the researcher to probe and follow up on emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

A phenomenologically informed orientation guided the study's analytical sensibility: rather than testing hypotheses, the research sought to understand the lived experience of teaching the GSIP-M from the perspective of those most directly involved (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). This approach is consistent with recent calls in art education research for methodologies that foreground teachers' practical and emotional knowledge as a legitimate form of professional expertise (Bresler, 1995; Eisner, 1998).

Participants

A total of six primary art teachers participated in this study, selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure that each participant possessed direct, substantive experience with the GSIP-M. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the aim is to select information-rich cases that can illuminate the phenomenon under investigation in depth rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria required that participants had either been involved in the design and pilot implementation of the GSIP-M or had observed and documented students' responses across a minimum of one full module cycle.

Participants' teaching experience ranged from five to fifteen years, and their professional backgrounds included formal art education training, curriculum development, and participation in continuing professional development programmes focused on innovative pedagogy. Three participants were involved in the module's design and pilot implementation, while the remaining three served as observer-teachers who documented and reflected upon student responses. This combination of perspectives

enriched the data by capturing both insider (design) and outsider (observation) viewpoints on the same pedagogical phenomenon.

Participation was entirely voluntary. All participants were informed of the study's aims, the nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any point without penalty, and the measures in place to protect their confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in the reporting of findings (Teachers A through F).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted between July and October 2025. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face at the participants' schools or via a secure video-conferencing platform, according to participants' preferences and logistical constraints. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' first language, to ensure richness of expression and to minimize communicative barriers (Temple & Young, 2004).

The interview guide was developed iteratively through a three-stage process: (a) an initial review of the theoretical literature on affective dimensions of creativity; (b) a pilot interview with one art teacher external to the study, the transcript of which was reviewed for clarity and comprehensiveness; and (c) a peer review by two experienced qualitative researchers in art education. The finalized guide comprised six open-ended anchor questions addressing each of the four affective dimensions, as well as questions concerning overall perceptions of the module, classroom climate, and teacher-student interaction. Representative anchor questions included: '*Can you describe a specific moment when you observed a student displaying curiosity or excitement during the GSIP-M*?' and '*How did you respond when students took unexpected creative risks, and what effect did this have on the class?*' Probing questions were used flexibly to elicit elaboration, concrete examples, and reflective commentary.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher immediately following each interview. Transcripts were then translated into English using a process of back-translation (Brislin, 1970): a bilingual research assistant produced an initial English translation, which was then reviewed and refined by the primary researcher to ensure accuracy and preservation of idiomatic meaning. All participants were subsequently invited to review both the Mandarin transcripts and the English translations for accuracy and completeness, as part of the member-checking process described below.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and preliminary note-taking; (2) generation of initial codes through systematic identification of significant phrases, narrative units, and patterns; (3) construction of candidate themes by clustering related codes; (4) review and refinement of themes against the original dataset; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) production of the final analytic report. The analysis was conducted primarily inductively, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts, while the theoretical framework of Torrance (1974) and Cropley (2001) informed the organizing structure of the final presentation.

Analysis was conducted manually, using a colour-coded annotation system on printed transcripts. This approach enabled close, contextually sensitive engagement with the data and facilitated the tracing of connections across participants' accounts. To enhance the rigour and transparency of the analytical process, peer debriefing was conducted with two art education researchers who independently reviewed a stratified sample of coded transcripts and provided feedback on coding decisions. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. An analytical audit trail was maintained throughout, documenting all coding decisions, theme revisions, and interpretive choices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through four criteria adapted from Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with the data, peer debriefing, and member checking, whereby participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts and the plausibility of preliminary findings. Transferability was supported through thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the research context, participants, and pedagogical setting, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to analogous contexts. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail and through reflexive bracketing by the primary researcher, who maintained a reflective journal throughout the study to monitor and document the influence of personal assumptions and prior knowledge on interpretive decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. All data were stored securely on a password-protected institutional server and used exclusively for the purposes of the present study.

IV. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the six interview transcripts yielded four primary themes corresponding to the affective dimensions of creative thinking identified in the theoretical framework: curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination. A fifth cross-cutting theme emerged concerning the interrelationship and mutual reinforcement of these dimensions within the creative process. Collectively, the themes paint a portrait of the GSIP-M as a pedagogical environment that elicits affectively rich, emotionally transformative creative engagement. Illustrative

quotations are presented for each theme; all quotations have been translated from Mandarin Chinese.

Curiosity: The Emotional Spark of Creative Exploration

All six participants described curiosity as the most immediately observable affective response to the GSIP-M, consistently appearing at the outset of lessons as students encountered the novel combination of graffiti and traditional ink painting for the first time. Teachers characterized this curiosity as multidimensional, encompassing perceptual curiosity (heightened attention to unfamiliar visual stimuli), epistemic curiosity (a desire to understand how the two traditions could be reconciled), and what Berlyne (1960) would term diversive curiosity (a generalized openness to exploration).

"*They were so curious about the idea of using graffiti with ink. Some even asked if they could try different spray effects or unusual colour combinations. It was as if the module gave them permission to wonder.*" (Teacher A)

"*I could see their eyes light up when I showed them graffiti patterns alongside traditional ink scrolls. They wanted to understand how you could mix those two languages. The questions came immediately, they didn't wait to be prompted.*" (Teacher D)

Several teachers noted that curiosity was not merely an individualized response but a socially contagious phenomenon: when one student began experimenting with an unconventional technique, peers quickly became interested and sought to explore similar possibilities. This social dimension of curiosity aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) account of the socially embedded nature of creative engagement and with research on peer-facilitated inquiry in art classrooms (Hetland et al., 2007; Sawyer, 2011).

"*When one child started layering ink and graffiti marks in an unexpected way, others crowded around to look. Curiosity became contagious in the room. I didn't need to prompt them, they prompted each other.*" (Teacher C)

Teachers also observed that curiosity sustained engagement over time, functioning not merely as an initial affective spark but as a renewable motivational resource that students returned to when encountering obstacles. This finding resonates with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions including curiosity build psychological resources that support sustained engagement with challenging tasks.

Complexity: Engagement with Ambiguity and Challenge

The second theme, complexity, captures teachers' observations of students' growing capacity to engage productively with the inherent technical and conceptual challenges of the GSIP-M. Unlike many conventional art tasks that offer clear procedural guidance, the module deliberately presented students with open-ended compositional problems that required them to navigate the competing aesthetic logics of graffiti and ink painting simultaneously.

"*When students layered graffiti lines with ink strokes, they had to make simultaneous decisions about composition, balance, and meaning. It was not easy, but they enjoyed thinking about how to make it work, I could see them pausing, stepping back, revising. That metacognitive reflection was very different from what I usually see.*" (Teacher C)

"*Some tried to make their work look symmetrical, others wanted to make it chaotic but meaningful. It shows how they can deal with complexity in art, not as a problem to be solved, but as a space to explore.*" (Teacher F)

Importantly, teachers described a developental arc in students' relationship to complexity: initial discomfort and uncertainty gradually gave way to what several teachers characterized as 'productive struggle', a state in which the challenge of the task became a source of aesthetic pleasure and intellectual satisfaction rather than anxiety. This progression mirrors Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) concept of flow, in which optimal creative experience is characterized by a dynamic equilibrium between perceived challenge and perceived skill.

Teachers also noted that their own pedagogical responses to students' struggles were consequential: teachers who normalized ambiguity and explicitly reframed struggle as evidence of engagement reported more sustained creative involvement from students, while those who were inclined to resolve difficulties by providing answers observed shorter-lived engagement with complex compositional problems. This finding echoes Hetland et al.'s (2007) documentation of 'studio thinking' practices, particularly the habits of 'stretching and exploring' and 'reflecting.'

Risk-Taking: Confidence through Experimentation

Risk-taking emerged as the most transformative affective dimension across participants' accounts. Teachers unanimously described an initial phase of creative inhibition, in which students' prior socialization within conventional Chinese art education, with its emphasis on technical correctness and adherence to established aesthetic norms, created a powerful internal constraint against experimentation. The threshold between inhibition and creative risk-taking was consistently described as a pivotal moment in students' engagement with the module.

"*At the beginning, they were afraid to 'ruin' their work. The white paper felt sacred to them, like they had to protect it. But after seeing peers try new things and get positive responses from me, they started to be braver. The shift was visible.*" (Teacher B)

"*One student drew graffiti letters directly on his ink painting, bold, large, across the whole composition. He said, 'I just want to try.' That was a breakthrough moment, not only for him but for the atmosphere in the whole class.*" (Teacher E)

Teachers described two key mechanisms through which risk-taking was enabled. First, observational learning (Bandura, 1997): witnessing peers receive positive feedback for experimental work provided vicarious evidence that risk-taking would not result in social sanction or academic penalty. Second, explicit teacher reframing: several teachers reported deliberately articulating to students that in the GSIP-M there were no 'wrong' answers, and that unexpected outcomes were to be treated as data rather than failures, a pedagogical move consistent with Dweck's (2006) account of growth mindset cultivation and Amabile's (1996) model of intrinsic motivation in creative contexts.

The consequences of successful risk-taking extended beyond individual creative acts: teachers observed that students who took risks and received affirming responses subsequently demonstrated increased creative confidence, greater willingness to persist through difficulties, and a more exploratory orientation toward subsequent art tasks. This cumulative confidence-building trajectory aligns with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory and with Beghetto's (2009) account of creative self-concept development.

Imagination: Integrating Emotion and Expression

Imagination, the fourth affective dimension, was described by teachers as the culminating and most complex dimension in students' creative processes, the point at which curiosity, engagement with complexity, and willingness to take risks coalesced into distinctive expressive outcomes. Teachers' accounts emphasize that imagination in the GSIP-M context was not abstract or fantasy-like but was concretely grounded in the visual and material possibilities that students had explored throughout the module.

"*They imagined stories behind their artworks, one student said his painting was like a dream city full of colours and clouds. Another described hers as a conversation between past and present. These weren't just decorative ideas; they were personal interpretations with emotional depth.*" (Teacher A)

"*Some used symbols, others used abstract forms to express their imagination. Each work was personal and full of emotion. I could see the child in every piece, their personality, their feelings, their way of seeing the world.*" (Teacher D)

Teachers particularly emphasized the identity-expressive dimension of imagination in the GSIP-M context: the module's hybrid aesthetic opened a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) in which students could simultaneously engage with and resist both the traditional Chinese aesthetic canon and the globalizing cultural vocabulary of street art, constructing hybrid visual identities that reflected their own situated positions as young people growing up in contemporary China. This finding resonates with Gude's (2004) and Staikidis's (2006) arguments regarding the potential of culturally hybrid art curricula to support identity formation and critical aesthetic engagement.

Teachers also observed that imagination served an integrative function, drawing upon and synthesizing the emotional and cognitive energies generated through curiosity, complexity, and risk-taking. This synthesis produced what several teachers described as a sense of personal 'voice' or 'authorship' in students' work, a quality that distinguished the outcomes of the GSIP-M from more technically oriented art activities in which student work tended toward uniformity.

The Interrelationship among Affective Dimensions

While the four affective dimensions were analyzed separately for clarity of presentation, participants consistently described them as dynamically interrelated and mutually constitutive within students' creative processes. No single dimension operated independently; rather, they formed a recursive emotional cycle in which each dimension both preceded and was reinforced by the others.

"*Curiosity made them start, complexity kept them thinking, risk-taking kept them going when it got hard, and imagination completed their work and gave it meaning. It's like different stages of the same creative journey, but you can't skip any of them.*" (Teacher F)

Teachers described this cycle as iterative rather than strictly sequential: imagination could rekindle curiosity; successful risk-taking could deepen engagement with complexity; and productive struggle with complex tasks could, paradoxically, strengthen risk-taking dispositions by demonstrating students' capacity to navigate difficulty. This dynamic interrelationship echoes Cropley's (2001) systemic model of creative development and aligns with recent process-oriented accounts of creativity that emphasize the non-linear, recursive nature of creative engagement (Sawyer, 2011; Glaveanu, 2014).

Crucially, teachers identified the classroom emotional climate as the key enabling condition for this affective cycle to operate: in environments characterized by psychological safety, mutual respect, and explicit valuing of process over product, the four dimensions reinforced one another powerfully; in more evaluative or product-focused environments, teachers reported that the cycle was disrupted, typically at the risk-taking threshold.

V. DISCUSSION

Curiosity as an Intrinsic Motivational Force

The finding that curiosity functioned as the primary affective catalyst for creative engagement in the GSIP-M aligns with and extends established theoretical accounts of curiosity in creative and educational contexts. Berlyne's (1960) distinction between epistemic and diversive curiosity is empirically supported by teachers' observations of students' simultaneous desire to understand the cultural logic of the module and their broader openness to aesthetic exploration. Kashdan et al.'s (2004, 2018) characterization of curiosity as a trait-like disposition towards uncertainty and novelty is further nuanced by teachers' descriptions of curiosity as socially distributed and pedagogically activatable, not a fixed individual attribute but a dynamic response to environmental affordances. This resonates with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory: the positive

emotional valence of curiosity expanded students' momentary thought-action repertoires, enabling more generative and flexible engagement with the module's creative challenges.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that teachers can deliberately engineer curiosity-activating encounters by introducing aesthetic juxtapositions, posing generative questions without offering answers, and creating opportunities for peer-to-peer artistic dialogue. The GSIP-M's structural feature of combining two aesthetically contrasting traditions appears particularly effective in this regard, suggesting that culturally hybrid art curricula may have distinctive affordances for curiosity activation.

Complexity as Productive Aesthetic Discomfort

The findings regarding complexity extend Torrance's (1974) characterization of complexity-tolerance as an affective trait by documenting the pedagogical conditions and teacher behaviours that appear to transform initial aesthetic discomfort into productive creative engagement. The concept of 'productive struggle,' widely discussed in mathematics education research (Kapur, 2016; Warshauer, 2015), appears equally applicable to art education contexts: the GSIP-M generated conditions in which students' initial difficulty with the integration of two aesthetic systems became a generative force for metacognitive reflection and compositional innovation.

This finding also resonates with Eisner's (2002) account of art education as uniquely suited to cultivating tolerance for ambiguity, a disposition of increasing importance in complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing social environments (OECD, 2019). By deliberately designing tasks that resist resolution through procedural application and instead demand aesthetic judgment, the GSIP-M appears to offer a distinctive site for the cultivation of this broadly valuable cognitive and affective competency.

Risk-Taking and the Centrality of Psychological Safety

The finding that risk-taking was simultaneously the most transformative and the most fragile of the four affective dimensions has significant implications for art pedagogy. Teachers' accounts converge in identifying psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), a shared belief that the classroom environment is safe for interpersonal risk, as the key enabling condition for creative experimentation. This finding accords with Amabile's (1996) componential model of creativity, which identifies extrinsic motivational factors, including evaluation pressure and surveillance, as powerful inhibitors of intrinsic motivation and risk-taking. It also resonates with research on creativity in Chinese educational contexts, which has documented the constraining effects of examination culture and norm-conforming socialization on students' willingness to depart from aesthetic convention (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Pang & Plucker, 2012).

The specific mechanisms through which teachers enabled risk-taking, observational learning, explicit reframing, and non-evaluative feedback, suggest practical leverage points for pedagogical intervention. Notably, the GSIP-M's deliberate norm-transgression (applying graffiti aesthetics to the culturally charged medium of Chinese ink paper) appears to function as a structural permission to take risks, legitimizing departure from convention at the level of the module's design rather than relying solely on individual students' dispositional courage. This structural scaffolding of risk-taking represents a potentially generalizable design principle for creative art curricula.

Imagination as Identity and Integration

The accounts of imagination in the GSIP-M context extend existing theoretical frameworks in two important ways. First, they support Vygotsky's (2004) argument that imagination is not a purely individual cognitive capacity but a socially and culturally mediated process: students' imaginative outputs were shaped by their engagement with two distinct cultural traditions, by peer interactions, and by teacher feedback. Second, they align with Greene's (1995) account of aesthetic imagination as a mode of critical engagement with social and cultural reality: students' imaginative constructions were not merely fanciful but were invested with personal and cultural meaning, reflecting their negotiations between tradition and modernity, between local and global aesthetic vocabularies.

The finding that imagination served an integrative function, drawing upon and synthesizing the energies generated through curiosity, complexity, and risk-taking, suggests that it may be more accurate to conceptualize imagination as an emergent property of the affective creative cycle rather than as a discrete dimension existing alongside the other three. This theoretical refinement has implications for assessment: rather than attempting to evaluate imagination independently, educators might look for evidence of imagination in the degree to which students' creative outcomes synthesize and transcend the other affective dimensions they have navigated.

Implications for Art Education Practice

The findings of this study carry several concrete implications for art education practice. First, teachers should intentionally design for affective engagement rather than treating emotional experience as a by-product of cognitive activity: the GSIP-M demonstrates that specific design choices, cultural hybridity, aesthetic juxtaposition, deliberate norm-transgression, can systematically activate curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination. Second, psychological safety should be treated as a non-negotiable precondition for creative learning: without it, the risk-taking threshold remains uncrossed and the affective creative cycle is disrupted. Third, complexity should be reframed as a pedagogical asset rather than an obstacle: tasks that resist easy resolution and demand aesthetic judgment develop forms of thinking that have broad transferable value. Fourth, assessment practices in art education should be redesigned to recognize and value affective dimensions of creativity rather than privileging technical accuracy and aesthetic conformity.

More broadly, the success of the GSIP-M in activating affective creative engagement suggests that culturally hybrid art curricula, in which students are invited to negotiate between familiar and unfamiliar aesthetic traditions, may represent a particularly powerful framework for fostering the

emotional foundations of creativity. This finding is potentially generalizable beyond the Chinese context to any educational setting in which globalized and indigenous aesthetic traditions coexist and can be brought into productive tension.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the sample comprised only six teachers, all based in a single province of China, which limits the transferability of findings to other regional or national contexts. Second, data were collected exclusively through teacher interviews, relying on self-report and retrospective reflection rather than direct observation of classroom practice. Future research should incorporate structured classroom observations, student interviews, and analysis of student artworks to provide a more comprehensive and triangulated understanding of affective dimensions in creative learning. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study precluded examination of how affective dimensions develop longitudinally across extended engagement with the module. A longitudinal or case-study design tracking the same students over multiple module cycles would provide valuable developmental insights. Fourth, the absence of a comparison group means that it is not possible to determine the extent to which the affective outcomes observed are specific to the GSIP-M rather than characteristic of innovative art modules more generally. Finally, the translation process, while conducted with care, inevitably introduces interpretive mediation between participants' original Mandarin expressions and the English presentation of findings.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has provided empirical grounding for the theoretical claim that creativity in art education is fundamentally an affective phenomenon, shaped by curiosity, complexity, risk-taking, and imagination working in dynamic mutual reinforcement. Through the accounts of six expert primary art teachers in Henan Province, China, the study has documented how the GSIP-M, a culturally hybrid module that fuses traditional Chinese ink painting with contemporary graffiti aesthetics, creates a pedagogically rich environment in which these affective dimensions are systematically activated, scaffolded, and integrated into distinctive creative outcomes.

The findings extend Torrance's (1974) and Cropley's (2001) theoretical frameworks by situating affective creativity within a specific cultural and pedagogical context, by documenting the mechanisms through which teachers enable and sustain affective engagement, and by proposing that the four dimensions operate not as independent traits but as a recursive, mutually reinforcing emotional cycle. They also contribute to the growing literature on creativity in Chinese education by identifying specific structural and pedagogical features of the GSIP-M that appear to counteract the constraining effects of examination culture and aesthetic conformism on creative risk-taking.

For art educators, the central message of this study is that attending to the emotional foundations of creativity is not supplementary to the teaching of artistic skill, it is constitutive of it. Classrooms that cultivate curiosity, embrace complexity, normalize risk-taking, and create space for imagination are classrooms in which students develop not only as artists but as creative thinkers, resilient problem-solvers, and culturally agentive individuals. The GSIP-M represents one promising model for how this vision can be realized within a primary school context; the principles it embodies are, however, potentially applicable across a wide range of art education settings, curricula, and cultural contexts.

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