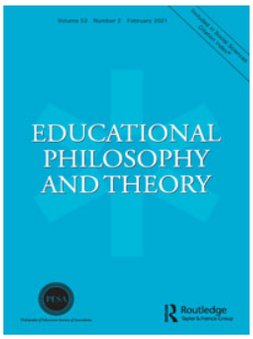

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Alienated learning in Hong Kong: A marxist perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a Marxist perspective to investigate Hong Kong students' alienation from learning. Alienated learners find learning to be a meaningless, disempowering, and estranging activity. Fifteen Hong Kong undergraduate students were invited to join a photovoice project in which they actively took, shared, and discussed photographs of their experiences with learning. The results suggest that social beliefs about high-stakes examinations legitimize internal contradictions in the education system. This makes students uncritically and unreflectively accept alienated learning. Photovoice projects help the students to become critically aware of their position, self-determination, and agency.

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Confucius (551–479 BC) asked, "Isn't it a pleasure to study and practice what you have learned?" To Confucius, the answer was a definite yes, because he saw learning as a meaningful process through which a person becomes a gentleman (*junzi*) and reaches the highest standards of benevolence, justice, politeness, wisdom, fidelity, integrity, and filial piety (Gu, 2004). This Confucian view of education has been echoed by numerous Western philosophers. For example, according to Noddings (2016), Dewey saw the aim of education as enabling people to develop their potential and capacity for continuous growth, and Whitehead considered education to be a facilitator of civilized life. Accordingly, learning should be happy, meaningful, and fulfilling, because it can help a person to express and develop his/her humanity, potential, and personality.

Such philosophical approaches to education continue to influence many societies, including Hong Kong. Hong Kong's Education Commission defines the aim of education as "to develop the potential of every individual child … [to] enable them to lead a full life so that our students become independent-minded and socially aware adults, equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which enable them to lead a full life" (Education Commission, 1992, p. 9) and "to enable every person to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills, and aesthetics according to his/her own attributes so that he/she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to change" (Education Commission, 2000, p. 5). Modern education systems aim to help students explore and develop their human potential and capacity for growth. For instance, they encourage schools to foster students' all-round development by developing curricula and mechanisms that promote learning outside the classroom and by evaluating students' non-academic performance with summative assessments. Hong Kong has combined two high-stakes public examinations into a single university entrance examination called the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education

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(HKDSE). However, research suggests that learning is still a boring, stressful, and meaningless experience for many Hong Kong students (Li et al., 2017). This implies that students are alienated from learning, despite efforts to prevent this.

This study adopts a Marxist perspective to analyze how Hong Kong students are alienated from learning. This study focuses on the Hong Kong context because although Hong Kong has reformed its education system to promote students' well-being in learning, many students still report feeling stressed, depressed, or anxious about learning (Chung, 2017). Moreover, Hong Kong shares educational and sociocultural characteristics with a range of Eastern and Western societies such as China, Singapore, the U.K., and Australia. Thus, a study in a Hong Kong setting not only provides insights into alienated learning in Hong Kong, but the findings may be applicable to other societies.

Alienated learning versus estranged learning

In the literature, alienated learning is also referred to as estranged learning. As Marx tended to use alienation and estrangement interchangeably (Wallimann, 1981), researchers adopting a Marxist perspective have treated alienated learning and estranged learning as interchangeable concepts that describe the separation and contradiction between learners' selves and learning activities (e.g., Lave & McDermott, 2002; Williams, 2011). However, the meanings of the German words originally used in Marx's writings—*Entäusserung* (alienation) and *Entfremdung* (estrangement)—are slightly different (Sayers, 2013). After analyzing how Marx used the two German words, Chitty (2014) suggested that *Entfremdung* refers to one's experiences of being cut off from labor, whereas *Entäusserung* means an underlying structure that externalizes a person's labor from the self beyond his/her control. Accordingly, the concept of estranged learning is more concerned with learners' experiences of the separations and contradictions between themselves and their learning activities, whereas the concept of alienated learning emphasizes the underlying structure that creates the separation and contradiction. As this study is interested in how students are alienated from learning, the concept of alienated learning is more suitable than that of estranged learning.

Marxist perspective on alienated learning

The concept of alienated learning is based on Marx's concept of alienated labor. According to Marx, the self and labor should be intimately and harmoniously related because labor, a productive and creative activity, helps people express and actualize themselves (Ollman, 1976). Thus, labor is an intrinsically rewarding activity. However, capitalism threatens the relationship between the self and labor. In industrial capitalist societies, as Marx observed in the 19th century, factory workers must exchange their work for wages, because they lack the means of production. Therefore, labor becomes a commodity and not a means of self-actualization. In the capitalist mode of production, workers are reified as a collective machine that enables capitalists to make profits. In this sense, labor is alienated from the workers' selves. With the spread of capitalism, more and more people have had to perform alienated labor in labor markets. In post-industrial capitalist societies, service workers not only engage in an alienated form of manual labor, they must also perform emotional labor (Wharton, 2009); post-industrial capitalism makes workers sell their emotions, leaving them powerless to express their own emotions in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). In the 21st century, capitalism has further penetrated into the public sector in the form of neoliberalism, which seeks to reform the public sector according to market logics like competition, accountability, and performativity. Public servants need to work in a quasi-market environment in which their labor and labor process are not only monitored by state bureaucracy, but also by the community, leading to alienated labor (Tummers et al., 2009). Regardless

of the job, alienated labor is in general external, alien, and hostile to the workers because it does not allow them to express and actualize themselves, but only satisfies the needs and interests of their employers. Therefore, performing alienated labor is stressful, exhausting, and meaningless, and gives rise to feelings of powerlessness (Blauner, 1964; Karger, 1981; Yadav & Nagle, 2012).

Following Marx, Lave and McDermott (2002) suggested that learning under capitalism is a particular form of alienated labor that creates conflict between learning activities and learners' selves. Unlike alienated labor in the workforce, alienated learning is not caused by a capitalist mode of production but by a capitalist mode of education (Williams, 2011). Bowles and Gintis (1976) showed how capitalism develops such education systems by matching the social structure of schools with the social structure of the economy. They noted that the hierarchical social relationships between principals, teachers, and students replicate the hierarchical relationships and division of labor in the workplace. Students, like workers, become powerless agents unable to control the learning process, which is instead controlled by principals and teachers, who are the managers of the school. Students are forced to acquire predefined knowledge through specific learning activities that may not be relevant to them (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). Moreover, the education system emphasizes competition between students through evaluation and meritocratic ranking, which fills students with false consciousness (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Consequently, students may passively accept their dominated and oppressed position without reflecting critically on it. Freire (1970, p. 77) described the education system as banking education that "serves the interests of oppression," "transforms students into receiving objects," "attempts to control thinking and action … and inhibits their creative power." The education system thus alienates learners from learning. Learning becomes an "activity experienced as suffering" by a learner who "does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Lave & McDermott, 2002, p. 36). In other words, as Hascher and Hadjar (2018) illustrated, performing alienated learning, like performing alienated labor, may give rise to feelings of powerlessness in students.

Scholars have argued that student empowerment can emancipate students from alienated learning (Bragg, 2007). One traditional approach to student empowerment is encouraging student voice, because it facilitates critical dialogue both among students and between students and adults, creating a critical consciousness of their domination and oppression. This fosters self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-identity (Adams, 2008). However, research has shown that student voice activities tend to be manipulated by principals and teachers (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). In such cases, students may find it difficult to think freely and critically about themselves. Moreover, principals and teachers may treat student voice as data that will help them to manage their schools effectively and control their students (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Thus, even if students are invited to speak out, student voice activities may not necessarily empower students and may even disempower them.

Photovoice and empowerment

Photovoice is a method that empowers study participants by asking them to identify, represent, discuss, and enhance their social lives and communities using photographic techniques. The aim is to make them critically conscious of personal or community issues and ultimately to influence policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). Researchers have found that photovoice can generate rich phenomenological or ethnographic data that can be used to answer social research questions (Hanna, 2020; Tsang, 2020); however, Kuratani and Lai (2011) have reminded us that treating photovoice as only a research method undermines its distinctive feature—empowerment. Educational researchers have studied how photovoice can be used to empower students in the

education system (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017). According to them, photovoice is an advanced method for fostering student voice for student empowerment (Thomson, 2008).

Unlike traditional student voice methods, photovoice encourages participants to define significant and relevant information, collect and interpret data, and create opportunities for influencing and reframing research inquiries (Asaba et al., 2014). In a photovoice project, the participants are invited to take photographs of their lives and their communities within a defined period. They are then asked to select and discuss in a group setting the photographs that are most important to them. They are encouraged to share the stories behind their photographs based on the following SHOWED questions: (1) What do you **S**ee here? (2) What is really **H**appening here? (3) How does this relate to **O**ur lives? (4) **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength **E**xist? (5) What can we **D**o about it? (Wang & Burris, 1997). The participants are also invited to codify the issues and themes that are identified in the group discussion. By actively taking, sharing, discussing, and codifying the photographs, the participants are expressing their views to each other and learning from one another. They are learning to think critically and to enrich their critical consciousness of themselves, their lives, and their communities (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017). For instance, Ohmer and Owens (2013) showed that inviting low-income ethnic minorities to photograph their neighborhoods and then discuss their photographs helped them to critically reflect on and appreciate their neighborhood lives, which in turn enhanced their collective efficacy in crime prevention. Wang (2020) showed that the photovoice practice could become a means of empowering students to think critically with respect to the effects of globalization on their lives and their agency in solving problems in a globalized world. Lee et al. (2019) also demonstrated that photovoice could raise youths' awareness of inequality in their community, and lead to a sense of collective efficacy for changing this inequality.

Photovoice is more empowering than student voice activities because of the photo-taking and sharing component. According to Carlson et al. (2006), these processes can equip participants with critical and reflective understanding of their lives, as they help the participants to translate thoughts and emotions into photographs that foster emotional engagement and stimulate collective introspection and discussion. Carlson et al. (2006) showed that in the first stages of a photovoice project, the participants tend to passively accept the status quo, but as they participate, they become critically aware that the problems they are discussing are related to public issues rather than their private troubles. This consciousness is developed because the photo-taking and sharing not only encourages individual reflections, it also develops emotional bonds between participants, which creates a sense of we-ness and collective critical reflections on their lived experiences (Ohmer & Owens, 2013).

Method

The photovoice method was selected for this investigation of alienated learning in Hong Kong students because it can generate rich information about the participants' meaning, consciousness, and lived experiences of learning. It offered greater opportunities for exploring social phenomena than methods such as surveys and interviews, which rely on numbers and words (Asaba et al., 2014). In addition, as photovoice is regarded as a method of empowerment, the study applied a Marxist perspective and included opportunities for students to think critically about their dominated and oppressed position in the education system and their agency for self-determination.

Participants

Due to limited resources, this study focused only on undergraduate students in self-financing higher education institutions. This group of students was chosen because they had completed

12 years of free and compulsory education, which is often regarded as the most stressful and alienating period of education in Hong Kong. Thus, they presented rich cases for understanding students' alienated learning.

Participant recruitment and data collection took place between December 2017 and February 2018. During this period, invitations to the photovoice project were emailed to students at one of the largest self-financing higher education institutions in Hong Kong. Fifteen students aged 17 to 21 replied to the email and expressed interest in the project. They were all majoring in the social sciences. There were nine second-year students, five third-year students, and one final-year student. Eight students were men and seven were women.

Procedures

The 15 students were invited to a briefing session to explain the purpose and procedures of the project. To avoid influencing the participants' contributions, the researcher only told them that the project was investigating their learning experiences, and did not explicitly tell them that the project was focused on alienated learning. After the purpose and procedure were explained, they were informed of their right to withdraw. No student asked to withdraw from the project, so all 15 were invited to sign a consent form. After collecting the signed consent forms, the researcher explained to the participants how to use their mobile phones to take photographs that complied with the study's ethical requirements. After the briefing session, the participants were given four weeks to take photographs on the following themes: (1) their life at school, (2) the thing or place they liked most at school, (3) the thing or place they disliked most at school, and (4) the thing or place they felt best represented education in Hong Kong.

After four weeks, the participants attended a photovoice meeting where they shared and discussed their photographs. The photovoice meeting consisted of a sharing session and a discussion session. During the sharing session, each participant selected one significant photograph to share. Each participant had 15 to 20 minutes to share their thoughts on the photograph and to answer the following questions. (1) Why did you choose to share this photograph? (2) What did you see here? (3) What story does the photograph tell? (4) How does this relate to your life? (5) What could you do about it? After each student shared their thoughts, the other participants could respond briefly if they wished. Once the sharing session was over, a discussion session started. During this session, the participants were invited to select some of the shared photographs for a discussion based on 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?

In the photovoice meeting, the researcher moderated the sharing and discussion to keep the meeting running smoothly. For example, if there was a period where everyone was silent, he invited participants to share and talk; he encouraged participants to respond to each other and to discuss issues during the sharing and discussion sessions; he asked probing questions to clarify points and ideas when necessary. The entire photovoice meeting was audio recorded. At the end of the meeting, the participants were encouraged to submit their photographs to the research project; 60 photographs were collected.

Data analysis

The photovoice meeting was transcribed verbatim. After the transcription, the authors analyzed the visual and narrative data using the four-stage approach proposed by Oliffe et al. (2008), which includes preview, review, cross-photo comparison, and theorization. In the preview stage, the authors examined the photographs and their narratives to become familiar with the meanings that the participants gave to the photographs and how they situated themselves in relation

to the content and the taking of the photographs. Second, in the review stage, the authors interpreted the photographs and the participants' narratives from the researchers' perspective. Following Oliffe et al. (2008), the authors paid particular attention to the details and people depicted in the photographs and to both the supporting and incongruous relationships between the photographs and the narratives. Third, in the cross-photo comparison stage, the authors coded the entire photographic collection and the participants' narratives based on the observations made in the previous stages to identify the themes. The authors continuously refined the themes by comparing photographs with photographs, photographs with narratives, narratives with narratives, incidents in the data with other incidents, incidents with themes, and themes with other themes to improve the credibility of the data analysis. Finally, in the theorization stage, the authors used a Marxist perspective to analyze the links between the themes that emerged to develop a more theoretical and abstract understanding of the phenomena studied.

Position of the researcher

During the study, the first author worked at the self-financing higher education institution from which the participants were recruited. He helped to collect the data. In fact, the 15 participants already knew the first author, because they had taken his courses, *Introduction to Sociology* and *Diversity and Equality*, in previous semesters. Some of them had formed good relationships with him while they worked together in the Social Exposure Program, which studied different social issues in Hong Kong between September 2017 and November 2017. That program was organized by the self-financing higher education institution. The prior good relationships may have provided the participants with a sense of safety when making disclosures during the photovoice meeting. None of the participants were attending courses delivered by the first author at the time of the study, so there were no obvious potential negative consequences, like receiving a low grade in a course, if they did not give preferred responses during data collection.

Although the first author did not introduce any Marxist ideas into the photovoice process, this did not mean that the participants did not know such ideas. In the two courses, *Introduction to Sociology* and *Diversity and Equality*, the first author taught Marxism and related theories to the participants. He also showed his support for Marxism in the course of *Diversity and Equality*. Thus, some of the participants may have been influenced by him before joining the project, and thus expressed some ideas corresponding to Marxist theories during the photovoice meeting.

Findings

Social belief in high-stakes examinations

One-fifth of the photographs produced by the participants showed their academic results in the HKDSE (Figure 1). The photographs indicated a social belief in the importance of high-stakes examinations, i.e., the belief that students' life chances are solely related to their HKDSE results, which directly determines whether they will get into a publicly funded university. One student said,

> My parents always told me, 'No education, no life.' If I could not get good exam [HKDSE] results and go to a good university, I would not get a good job to make money. (Student H)

As they are influenced by this social belief, getting good HKDSE results is an important goal for Hong Kong students.

> I would describe myself as a person without concrete goals or real talent for studying. But what I do know is that I had to do whatever it took to pass the HKDSE. I think most secondary students shared the same purpose. Who doesn't want to score well for a university admission ticket? (Student L)

Figure 1. Photogropahs of HKDSE results.

Hong Kong students often study hard to get good results on the HKDSE.

> Students in Hong Kong are trapped on a treadmill of endless exams. Every student wants to stand out from the crowd, to be the winner who gets into university. We keep training ourselves by practicing past papers and exam exercises. (Student J)

In addition, the participants mentioned that attending private tutorial classes for examination preparation was common throughout their school life. Figure 2 shows a set of advertisements for private tutorial classes from kindergarten to senior secondary school in Hong Kong. Student I said, "going to school and going to private tutorial class after school were part of my daily life," and Student D said that this situation allowed them "no entertainment and relaxation, just lessons, exercises, and assignments."

A "Time-wasting game"

During the photovoice discussion session, Student A described education as a "time-wasting game" because she thought that in school she had learned exam skills and knowledge but nothing useful or relevant to her life. The "time-wasting game" metaphor implied that learning does not meet the students' needs or facilitate their growth in school, even though the students thought it should. This thought was echoed by other participants during the photovoice discussion session. For instance, Student K said,

> Reflecting on my learning experience of more than 20 years, I asked myself a question: what did I learn? I believed that my school life was made for exams and that by passing these exams, I could ultimately get into a good university. Yet I couldn't help but ask myself what I had learned. The practical applications of my learning are so limited that I can rarely apply this knowledge, e.g., the Pythagorean theorem or classical Chinese, to my daily life. (Student K)

Figure 2. A photograph of a set of advertisements of private tutorial classes.

To some extent, the "time-wasting game" can be attributed to the high-stakes HKDSE examination. The participants tended to accept unconditionally the idea that performing well on the HKDSE to gain admission to a publicly funded university was the only way to confirm their value and improve life chances. Thus, they explained that they unreflexively engaged in learning activities to prepare for the HKDSE, for example by attending private tutoring classes every day. Although they did not question the situation, they did not enjoy learning—even hated it—because they found learning to be meaningless and estranging. Student B illustrated these feelings using a photograph of a private tutoring school logo that was an unhappy face (Figure 3).

Internal contradiction in the education system

The findings also revealed an internal contradiction in the education system. This was clearly represented by the photograph of a music school (Figure 4) and its interpretation by Student B during the photovoice discussion session.

> I want to share this picture with you because it reveals and satirizes the Hong Kong education system. A music school is supposed to be a place to impart musical 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 for 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. (Student B)

The internal contradiction in the education system is that the education system explicitly encourages students' all-round development, yet subordinates everything to exam results.

The existence of this internal contradiction was supported by the participants' narratives about their learning experiences in senior secondary school (Grade 10 to Grade 12). They stated that they were discouraged and even prevented from developing and exploring their personal interests by their schools once they entered Grade 10, because it was believed that focusing on

Figure 3. A photograph of the logo of a private tutorial school.

Figure 4. A photograph of a music school.

their interests would not benefit their HKDSE preparation and would affect their exam performance. For instance,

> After entering Form 4 (Grade 10), my school started to pressure us. I had to do a lot of papers assigned by my teachers and my school every day, and I had no choice but to give up my piano lessons for the sake of my studies. I even got rid of my piano, which had been the only way to release my emotional stress. My stress increased after that. (Student A)

This did not mean that Hong Kong secondary schools did not allow students to develop personal interests. Indeed, each Hong Kong secondary school offered students a wide variety of extracurricular activities. However, the schools excluded underperforming students from these extracurricular activities. For example, Student M explained that while her secondary school

offered many extracurricular activities, not all students had the opportunity to participate. Her school required underperforming students to attend supplementary classes, giving them no time to engage in extracurricular activities.

> Teachers had the power to decide who participated in extracurricular activities. Regardless of the potential and interests of a student, he or she was less likely to be selected for an activity than students with good academic results. It was compulsory to attend supplementary classes if your academic performance was below average. Priority was given to supplementary classes, even if you had other activities at the same time. In other words, if your academic results were below average, your right to attend activities was limited. (Student M)

As their personal interests were suppressed at school, they believed that they could not find a sense of self in learning, which resulted in a sense of dehumanization.

> Hong Kong students are the products of the education factory. It is difficult for them to develop their own interests, talents, and personality because these elements, or their uniqueness, are not satisfied with the standard of products, which is only about academic results … Having given up my interests, I gradually became an aimless learner, a byproduct of the education system. (Student O)

The "loser" identity

Although the participants devoted their time and energy to preparing for the HKDSE, they failed to achieve the results necessary to enter a publicly funded university. This failure led some participants to perceive themselves as losers.

> My HKDSE results were not satisfactory. I felt like a loser rejected by society or by other people, those who achieved satisfactory results. Less qualified students generally perceive themselves as losers. (Student B)

To overcome this "loser" identity, the participants chose to pay for degrees at self-financing higher education institutions. They hoped that such institutions would give them a diploma, which would confirm their competency and value. However, they eventually realized that self-financed degrees did not have the same value and were inferior to publicly funded degrees. As a result, their "loser" identity or sense of inferiority persisted.

> I failed the HKDSE, so I had no chance to get into a publicly funded university. So, I took a diploma and progressed toward a higher diploma at a self-financing higher education institution. Indeed, this process is similar to playing a mobile game. In a mobile game, I can buy heroes to strengthen my competencies. In the same way, I can buy a certificate or diploma to increase my competencies. When you cannot get into university, you just pay for a self-financed degree course. If all goes well, one day you may be comparable with university students. However, you may also realize that the heroes you bought aren't strong enough to help you compete with university students. You can only pay again and again to stay on the self-financing track. Yes, that's the reality of losers (Student K).

Critical consciousness and rediscovery of the self

During the photovoice discussion session, some participants became aware that their position and loser identities were related to the structure of the Hong Kong education system. For example, as mentioned earlier, some participants understood the internal contradiction in the education system. Moreover, during the photovoice discussion session, the participants critically noted that high-stakes examinations drove Hong Kong people to judge one's competence and value based solely on exam results and that this discouraged people from pursuing their dreams and interests. For instance,

> Many people blindly pursue a high level of academic attainment, university certificates, and credentials, yes, because employers just judge their competence by these things. Ironically, these things may not fully reflect one's competence. When the majority of people believe them, students view scores, the HKDSE results, as the goal of education but forget the true meaning of education. I think many Hong Kong students like me

> just know that we "need" to study in order to get good results, the "basic requirement," required by society. But, it seems that we don't know what we are studying for. (Student F)

To some extent, these critical reflections and consciousness could empower the participants to rediscover their value, helping them to regain their sense of agency in their lives. For example,

> The discussion makes me rethink my HKDSE results—for whom and why are my results not socially accepted? I am wondering whether it is because I am studying in an unjust education system that I have become a loser. I am also reflecting on my past. I chose to study for scores, results, and certificates because everyone did so. I thought it was correct. But now I ask myself for what and for whom? I study, I learn, for myself. The reflections let me understand I shouldn't just rely on others' opinions when I decide what I should learn. I should learn something, do something, in which I'm interested. When I decide it, I should do it. (Student E)

> Always follow your heart. Go with what interests you. Your value should not be determined by what others think. School can be a place of education, but there are many more ways to learn outside of school. Never define the meaning of life by a diploma or certificate. Own your life and define it in your own way. (Student G)

Discussion

The findings imply that there is an internal contradiction in the Hong Kong education system that alienates learning from students. Specifically, although the education system encourages the all-round development of students (Education Commission, 1992, 2000), it subordinates all-round development to exam results. As the findings reveal, the Hong Kong education system tends to force students to study hard and prepare well for the HKDSE while discouraging them from developing and exploring their personal interests and potential. Under these conditions, learning may become a means of achieving good exam results and life opportunities rather than a means of self-actualization. Thus, the students may view learning and education as a "time-wasting game," i.e., they have for many years been learning things that are irrelevant to their growth, needs, and human potential. As the findings show, when students do not perform well in the HKDSE, they may interpret the poor HKDSE results as an indicator of their inferiority and status as "losers." In this, they tend not to enjoy learning and feel that learning is an unhappy, meaningless, and estranging activity situation (Lave & McDermott, 2002). Learning is alienated from them.

The internal contradiction between learning for development and learning for exams is to some extent legitimized by the social belief in high-stakes examinations in Hong Kong. Consistent with other studies (e.g., Pong & Chow, 2002), the present study finds that Hong Kong society tends to believe that high-stakes examinations can effectively identify the students who should be granted admission into publicly funded universities, and thus rewarded with better life chances. Therefore, the students face social pressure to study hard for the HKDSE rather than develop their personal interests and potential, which do not help them to get good exam results. To effectively prepare the students for examinations, as the literature illustrates (Berry, 2011; Morris & Adamson, 2010), the Hong Kong education system tends to support and reinforce traditional pedagogical approaches like chalk and talk, rote-learning, and formative assessment, even though it has the goal of promoting progressive pedagogy.

The social belief in high-stakes examinations may have socioeconomic and cultural roots. As Lui (2009) illustrated, the opportunities for upward mobility in Hong Kong have been decreasing and even disappearing because of global economic restructuring. Accordingly, families and schools are increasingly anxious about their children's future. Therefore, they may have high expectations and put much pressure on their children to study hard for a better future career (Ma et al., 2018). The social pressures and expectations may be reinforced by the limited access

to public universities. In Hong Kong, only around 18% of students are admitted to public universities every year (Park, 2018). As a result, society may believe that good results in the HKDSE and subsequent admission to a public university is important capital for students searching for a better career (Postiglione, 1997).

Culturally, as a Chinese society influenced by its Confucian heritage, Hong Kong's education system is based on an exam-oriented, pyramidal education system for selecting and training elites (Berry, 2011). Therefore, from a cultural point of view, high-stakes examinations as a gateway to upward mobility has been a feature of Chinese education for a long time (Miyazaki, 1974). Thus, the social belief in high-stakes examinations has been culturally legitimatized and continues to influence the contemporary Hong Kong education system and students' lives.

It should be noted that the social belief in high-stakes examinations is not unique to Hong Kong and Chinese societies. Since the mid-1990s, neoliberalism has spread to different parts of the world. Under neoliberalism, education tends to be viewed as an investment for economic returns (Ho, 2005). To enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of this investment, states decentralize authority to schools for self-management but make the schools accountable for educational outcomes in terms of students' scores on standardized examinations (Mok, 2003). Therefore, schools tend to focus on preparing students for examinations (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). In this situation, the students become more vulnerable to alienated learning because they may be forced to study knowledge that may not be relevant to them, except as an exam topic. Nevertheless, because examination scores are viewed as indicators of students' competence under neoliberalism, students may be extrinsically motivated to learn and study (Beach & Dovemark, 2005)—in other words, they may be self-alienated from learning. In this sense, the social belief in high-stakes examinations may become prevalent and significant in Western societies and influence their students. Future studies could consider and analyze the effect of social belief on alienated learning in Western societies.

Student empowerment

According to Freire (1970), there are three levels of consciousness. At the magical level, the lowest level, people are trapped by the assumptions of inherent inferiority and take this inferiority for granted. At the naïve level, people may perceive the world as sound but corrupt and may also blame other people for the injustice. At the highest level of critical consciousness, people will recognize their agency to make choices to maintain or change their lives and reality. Carlson et al. (2006) found that photovoice can help people to develop from the magical level to the highest level of critical consciousness. This study's findings are consistent with Carlson et al. Initially, the participants perceived themselves as losers or as inferior to other students because of their performance on the HKDSE, and were not aware of their dominated and oppressed position. They attributed their failure in HKDSE to their own failing (the magical level of consciousness). Their awareness of their dominated and oppressed position in the education system was raised through their active, reflective, and critical engagement in taking, sharing, and discussing photographs of their experiences at school during the photovoice meeting. As the results show, some of the participants became aware of the link between their personal experiences in school and the social structure of the Hong Kong education system (the naïve level of consciousness). They also realized that they had the agency to rediscover their sense of self and determine their own lives. The development of the highest level of critical consciousness helped them to stop perceiving themselves as "losers" who were inferior to other students. This took place as the participants discussed the taking and meaning of the photographs that stimulated emotional engagement and collective introspection (Carlson et al., 2006), suggesting that the photovoice method may be a means of student empowerment.

Implications

Alienated learning is a more complicated phenomenon than the worker alienation described by Marxist theory. Alienated learning is not only related to the economic system, but also to an internal contradiction in the Hong Kong education system. This contradiction is legitimized by a social belief in high-stakes examinations, which is co-constructed by closed stratification systems, an elite education system, and an examination-orientated culture, which make families (and also parents) and schools (and also teachers) anxious about students' future and thus force the students to study hard for examinations. Although this study cannot articulate all of the socio-economic-cultural forces that influence students' learning, it still offers insights into a philosophical analysis of alienated learning. A complete study of alienated learning requires future researchers to identify the socio-economic-cultural forces involved, describe how each force influences students' learning, explain how all of the forces are interrelated and together construct an alienating education system, and investigate how social actors, including students, parents, and teachers, and social institutions like families and schools respond to these forces. Thorough philosophical or empirical investigations of these issues are needed to provide a more comprehensive account of alienated learning.

In addition to the philosophical implications, the study has practical implications. The results suggest that education leaders could improve alienated learning among Hong Kong students using two approaches. The first is a structural approach. As the results suggest that alienated learning may be related to the social belief in high-stakes examinations, education leaders should initiate a cultural reform of the education system to solve this problem. Although a change in the culture of the education system is necessary, it may be difficult to implement because it would require a fundamental and comprehensive change of the entire education system and even of society. As a result, unpredicted and unintended negative consequences could occur.

Therefore, education leaders could adopt a photovoice approach to empower students. As this study shows, by participating in photovoice, students can reflectively and critically analyze themselves and their situations by taking, sharing, and discussing photographs with others. Throughout the photovoice process, their critical consciousness may be awakened. This awakened critical consciousness could help them to become aware of the structural influences that affect them and their agency. This will empower them to identify or rediscover their self, value, and meaning through learning. Moreover, this critical consciousness could motivate them to work collectively to change the current social beliefs about education and learning (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017), ideally solving the identified internal contradiction.

A feasible way to implement photovoice is to consider it as part of a multiliteracies pedagogy. According to The New London Group (1996), communication and meaning-making have been extraordinarily influenced by new communication technologies. Therefore, education systems should develop literacy beyond written and spoken language to help students perceive, express, and communicate the meanings of the world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). To achieve this, education should develop multiliteracies pedagogical approaches, which encourage the use of various forms of communication, including visual, spatial, gestural, and audio literacies, in teaching and learning, to help students to critically appreciate and construct knowledge about the world, which in turn will help them to design a better life for themselves and society (Olthouse, 2013). Photovoice can be one such multiliteracies pedagogical method because it promotes visual literacy. Education leaders can train and encourage teachers to apply this pedagogy in classrooms. Of course, other multiliteracies pedagogical approaches focusing on video literacy, audio literacy, spatial literacy, etc. can also be used to empower students. Future studies could examine how different multiliteracies pedagogical approaches can achieve the purpose of student empowerment in education.

If educational leaders sincerely value student voice, then empowering students with photovoice may be an opportunity to create a non-alienating education system. In such a system, students may enjoy autonomy in learning and develop meaningful connections between themselves and learning labor. Through these meaningful connections, they will be able to identify and develop their humanity, potential, and personality. In other words, learning will no longer be aliened from students, and students will enjoy learning. However, education leaders should not adopt the photovoice approach merely as a way to improve schools (although it may do this), as this focus may turn the photovoice process into a disciplined, adult-dominated process in which students are discouraged from reflectively and critically examining their lives, situations, and experiences at school. They may thus become disempowered rather than empowered by the photovoice process.

Limitations and further research

The study focuses on the alienated learning among a group of undergraduate students who obtained poor HKDSE results and therefore entered self-financing higher education institutions rather than attending publicly funded universities. This does not mean that students who obtain good results in the HKDSE and pursue a bachelor's degree in publicly funded universities never have alienated learning experiences. However, due to different educational trajectories, the patterns and experiences of alienated learning may be different for these two groups of students. In this sense, the findings of this study may not reflect the alienated learning of students attending publicly funded universities. Therefore, further studies could investigate how these students may be alienated from learning. A comparison of the differences and similarities between the two groups of students could offer a more comprehensive understanding and explanation of alienated learning. Moreover, as a qualitative study, this study cannot provide robust causal links between alienated learning, the internal contradiction in the education system, and the social belief in high-stakes examinations. Thus, researchers could design and conduct questionnaire surveys to test the relationships. As alienated learning and the social belief in high-stakes examinations may also exist elsewhere, researchers could also consider comparing national similarities and differences by conducting cross-national social survey research. Finally, although the study shows that photovoice may help students to regain their agency, it does not analyze the mechanisms through which this process works. Thus, further studies are required to analyze how photovoice contributes to student empowerment.

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