The Impact of Educational Environmental Factors on Enhancing Critical and Creative Thinking Abilities of Students in Technical and Vocational Education

Jiaqi Lu[1], Norwaliza Binti Abdul Wahab[2*]

[1] Faculty of Human development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim 35900, Malaysia

[2] Jiangsu Food and Pharmaceutical Science College, Meicheng Road 4, Huaian, Jiangsu 223003, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: Educational environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the critical and creative thinking abilities of students in technical and vocational education. This study explores how various elements, including teaching resources, curriculum design, and teacher-student interactions, contribute to fostering these essential skills. Focusing on students in vocational institutions, the research analyzes the relationship between educational environments and the development of high-order thinking abilities. By combining literature review and case study approaches, the findings reveal that supportive and innovative educational settings significantly enhance students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and generate creative solutions. These insights provide valuable implications for policymakers, educators, and administrators to optimize vocational education systems and align them with the demands of the 21st-century workforce.

Keywords: critical thinking; creative thinking; educational environmental factors; technical and vocational education

1. Introduction

The development of critical and creative thinking abilities is pivotal in preparing students for the demands of the 21st century. These high-order cognitive skills enable learners to analyze complex problems, evaluate diverse perspectives, and generate innovative solutions. In the context of technical and vocational education, cultivating such skills is particularly essential, as these institutions aim to produce graduates who can adapt to rapidly changing industry needs and contribute to societal progress. However, the role of educational environmental factors in shaping these abilities has not been thoroughly explored, especially within the Chinese vocational education system.

Educational environmental factors, including teaching resources, curriculum design, teacher-student interactions, and campus culture, significantly influence students' cognitive development. Research suggests that a supportive and innovative learning environment can foster critical thinking by encouraging students to question assumptions, engage in reflective thinking, and apply knowledge to real-world scenarios[1]. Similarly, creative thinking thrives in settings that promote exploration, collaboration, and the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives[2].

In China, technical and vocational education has undergone significant reforms to enhance its quality and relevance. Institutions such as Jiangsu Food and Pharmaceutical Science College serve as important examples of how educational environments can be leveraged to support the development of critical and creative thinking[3]. Additionally, campus culture has been shown to play a crucial role in shaping creativity by fostering an environment of open dialogue and innovation[4]. These efforts align with national priorities to cultivate a skilled and innovative workforce capable of driving economic growth and technological advancement.

This study aims to explore the impact of educational environmental factors on the enhancement of critical and creative thinking abilities among students in technical and vocational education. By examining the interplay between these factors and cognitive skill development, the research seeks to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and administrators striving to optimize educational practices.

2. Literature Review

The cultivation of critical and creative thinking abilities has been extensively studied in the context of educational environments. A comprehensive review of existing literature highlights the multifaceted nature of these abilities and the pivotal role that various educational factors play in their development. This chapter synthesizes key findings from previous research, emphasizing the implications for technical and vocational education.

2.1. Critical Thinking in Educational Environments

Critical thinking is widely recognized as an essential skill for academic and professional success. It involves the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in order to make reasoned judgments. Educational environments that encourage open dialogue, inquiry-based learning, and reflective practices have been shown to significantly enhance students' critical thinking abilities[5]. For example, integrating information-based teaching methods allows students to interact with real-world scenarios, fostering their ability to assess complex situations and devise innovative solutions[6].

In technical and vocational education, critical thinking is particularly relevant as students are often required to solve practical problems and adapt to rapidly changing industrial demands. Studies suggest that project-based learning and interactive teaching methods are effective in promoting critical thinking among vocational students[7]. These methods not only engage learners but also encourage them to question assumptions and explore alternative solutions.

2.2. Creative Thinking and the Role of Educational Environments

Creative thinking, characterized by the ability to generate novel and valuable ideas, is equally important in modern education. It thrives in environments that promote collaboration, exploration, and interdisciplinary learning. Campus culture has been identified as a significant factor influencing students' creativity, with supportive and inclusive environments fostering greater innovation.

Educational technologies, such as virtual reality and digital tools, have also been found to enhance creative thinking by providing immersive and interactive experiences[8]. These tools enable students to experiment with new ideas in a risk-free environment, thereby cultivating their creative potential. Furthermore, innovative curriculum designs that integrate art and technology encourage students to think beyond traditional boundaries and develop unique perspectives[9].

2.3. Educational Environmental Factors in Technical and Vocational Education

Technical and vocational education institutions face unique challenges in cultivating critical and creative thinking. The quality of teaching resources, teacher-student interactions, and the physical learning environment play a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive abilities. Research indicates that institutions with well-designed learning environments and supportive teaching practices are more successful in fostering these skills. For instance, project-based learning and collaborative workshops provide vocational students with opportunities to apply their knowledge in practical contexts,

enhancing both critical and creative thinking.

Additionally, the integration of interdisciplinary approaches in vocational education has been shown to encourage students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications, thereby deepening their understanding and improving their cognitive skills[10].

3. Research Design

This chapter outlines the research design adopted to explore the impact of educational environmental factors on the critical and creative thinking abilities of students in technical and vocational education. The methodology is grounded in a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

3.1. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

(1) To identify key educational environmental factors that influence critical and creative thinking.

(2) To analyze the relationship between these factors and cognitive skill development in students.

(3) To provide evidence-based recommendations for optimizing educational environments in technical and vocational education.

3.2. Research Setting

The study is conducted at Jiangsu Food and Pharmaceutical Science College, a leading institution in technical and vocational education in China. The college's diverse student population and innovative teaching practices provide an ideal setting for investigating the interplay between educational environments and cognitive development.

3.3. Research Methods

3.3.1. Quantitative Approach

A survey questionnaire is designed to measure students' perceptions of their educational environment and its influence on their critical and creative thinking abilities. The questionnaire includes items on teaching resources, curriculum design, teacher-student interactions, and campus culture. Responses are collected from a sample of 200 students across various disciplines to ensure representativeness[11].

3.3.2. Qualitative Approach

In-depth interviews with 10 faculty members are conducted to gain insights into their perspectives on fostering critical and creative thinking through educational practices. These interviews focus on teaching strategies, challenges faced, and opportunities for improvement[12].

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

3.4.1. Data Collection

Data is collected over a period of three months. The survey questionnaire is distributed electronically, while interviews are conducted in person and recorded for transcription and analysis[13].

3.4.2. Data Analysis

Quantitative data is analyzed using statistical software to identify trends and correlations between educational environmental factors and cognitive skills. Qualitative data from interviews is analyzed thematically to uncover recurring themes and insights[14].

1. Results and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the study, analyzing the impact of educational environmental factors on the critical and creative thinking abilities of technical and vocational education students. The results are structured to highlight key themes and correlations identified through the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

4.1. Quantitative Results

The survey responses from 200 students at Jiangsu Food and Pharmaceutical Science College reveal significant insights into the role of educational environmental factors in cognitive development. **Table 1** summarizes the key findings.

Table 1. Impact of Educational Environmental Factors on Cognitive Development

Educational Environmental Factor	Impact on Critical Thinking (Mean Score)	Impact on Creative Thinking (Mean Score)
Teaching Resources	4.5	3.8
Curriculum Design	4.8	4.6
Teacher-Student Interaction	3.9	4.7
Campus Culture	3.7	4.8

The results indicate that curriculum design and teaching resources have the strongest influence on critical thinking, while campus culture and teacher-student interaction play a more prominent role in fostering creative thinking. These findings underscore the importance of a well-rounded educational environment in supporting diverse cognitive abilities.

4.2. Qualitative Insights

Interviews with 10 faculty members provide deeper insights into how these environmental factors are operationalized in the classroom. Thematic analysis identified the following recurring themes:

(1) Integration of Real-World Scenarios: Educators emphasize the value of incorporating real-world applications into teaching, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical problem-solving .

(2) Collaborative Learning Environments: Group projects and collaborative activities are frequently cited as effective methods for promoting creativity and critical thinking. Faculty members report that students demonstrate higher engagement and innovation when working in teams .

(3) Supportive Campus Culture: A culture that encourages open dialogue, experimentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration fosters an environment where students feel confident to explore new ideas.

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Statistical analysis reveals strong positive correlations between specific educational factors and cognitive abilities:

(1) Curriculum Design and Critical Thinking: A correlation coefficient of 0.78 indicates a strong relationship between well-structured curriculum designs and the enhancement of critical thinking .

(2) Teacher-Student Interaction and Creative Thinking: The correlation coefficient of 0.73 highlights the importance of interactive teaching methods in fostering creativity.

These correlations validate the hypothesis that targeted improvements in educational environments can significantly enhance cognitive skills.

4.4. Discussion

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data align with existing literature, reinforcing the critical role of educational environmental factors in shaping cognitive abilities. For instance, the emphasis on real-world scenarios and

collaborative learning mirrors the strategies highlighted in prior research.

However, the results also reveal certain challenges, such as the variability in resource availability and the need for professional development among educators to effectively utilize innovative teaching methods. Addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the potential of technical and vocational education systems [15].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that educational environmental factors play in shaping the cognitive abilities of technical and vocational education students. By analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, this research provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which educational environments influence critical and creative thinking. This chapter summarizes the key findings, discusses their implications, and offers practical recommendations for optimizing technical and vocational education.

5.1. Summary of Findings

The study revealed the following key points:

(1) Critical Thinking: Curriculum design and teaching resources are the most significant factors influencing students' ability to think critically. These factors provide structured opportunities for students to analyze and evaluate complex problems.

(2) Creative Thinking: Teacher-student interactions and campus culture play a more substantial role in fostering creativity. Collaborative and inclusive learning environments encourage students to explore novel ideas and take creative risks.

(3) Correlation Between Factors: Strong positive correlations were found between curriculum design and critical thinking ($r = 0.78$) and between teacher-student interaction and creative thinking ($r = 0.73$).

5.2. Implications for Vocational Education

The implications of these findings are multifaceted:

(1) Pedagogical Innovation: Integrating real-world applications and project-based learning into the curriculum can enhance students' cognitive abilities and prepare them for practical challenges.

(2) Equitable Resource Distribution: Addressing disparities in access to educational resources is critical to ensuring all students benefit from quality teaching and learning environments.

(3) Faculty Development: Professional training programs for educators can equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to implement innovative teaching practices effectively.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

(1) Enhancing Curriculum Design:

Include interdisciplinary approaches that combine technical skills with creative problem-solving.

Develop modules that encourage reflective thinking and critical analysis.

(2) Fostering Teacher-Student Interaction:

Promote active learning strategies such as group discussions, role-playing, and collaborative projects.

Provide training for teachers on facilitating inclusive and interactive classrooms.

(3) Building Supportive Campus Culture:

Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities that promote innovation and teamwork.

Create spaces for open dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration.

(4) Improving Access to Resources:

    Invest in modern educational tools and technologies to bridge resource gaps.

    Collaborate with industries to provide students with access to real-world learning opportunities.

5.4. Future Directions

This study opens avenues for further research in the following areas:

(1) Longitudinal Studies: Examining the long-term impact of educational environmental factors on cognitive development.

(2) Comparative Studies: Analyzing differences in educational environments across regions or institutions to identify best practices.

(3) Technology Integration: Exploring the role of emerging technologies, such as AI and VR, in enhancing critical and creative thinking.

6. Conclusion

The research highlights the transformative potential of well-designed educational environments in fostering critical and creative thinking among technical and vocational education students. By addressing existing challenges and implementing targeted interventions, educators and policymakers can create learning environments that equip students with the cognitive skills needed to thrive in a dynamic, technology-driven world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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