

Gems on the path: The perspectives and practices of 12 educator proponents of teaching for creativity

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the initial outcomes of a doctoral study about teaching for creativity in primary schools. The investigation inquired into how and why educators teach for creativity and implement creative processes in music, performing arts and generalist classrooms. The key outcomes discussed in this paper refer specifically to the perspectives and practices of 12 interviewed participants. The study was mixed methods in approach and adopted a pragmatic worldview. Data collection consisted of a survey and semi-structured interviews. The 12 interviewed participants comprised five classroom music teachers, five performing arts teachers and two generalists, drawn from eleven State primary schools across Melbourne. The outcomes of the investigation demonstrate that the purposeful fostering of children's creative development in the classroom environment is multi-faceted. The beliefs, actions, views and expectations of the educators contributed significantly to their teaching approaches. The 12 participants demonstrated a belief in the benefits of creativity for the development of children's life skills and individuality. These aspects formed a steady undercurrent which influenced their practices. The teachers promoted self-directed learning by establishing high-level motivation driven by the musical interests of the children and by fostering child-led learning in performance-focused music tasks. The shared perspectives and practices of the teachers in the study provides insight into teaching for creativity in the primary school setting and highlights the benefits of creativity as the gems on the path of a lifelong journey in music.

Keywords: teaching for creativity, creative process, music education, creativity, education.

Background

Teaching for creativity is about the ways in which educators foster children's engagement in creative processes. Defined by Robinson (2011), as "facilitating other people's creative work" (p. 269) and by Craft (2005) as "forms of teaching that are intended to develop young people's own creative thinking or behaviour" (p. 22), teaching for creativity refers to specific teaching and learning practices. There has been minimal investigation into the ways in which educators in Victoria, Australia, approach teaching for creativity (Selrig & Keamy, 2017) and it is a topic that is generally under-researched (Thomas, 2016). It is a poignant and relevant field of study, particularly in the

wake of the compulsory inclusion of the *Critical and Creative Thinking* capability in the *Victorian Curriculum F-10* (VCAA, 2017). In Victorian State primary schools it is a requirement for teachers to include critical and creative thinking experiences for children in all key learning areas (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; VCAA, 2015a). Curriculum and policy expectations of teacher practice reflect the notion that creativity is a valued twenty-first century skill, important across disciplines in the education of young people (Harris & de Bruin, 2017; MCEECDYA, 2008).

This paper draws on the research outcomes of a recent doctoral study in which teaching for creativity was investigated. The 12 proponents of teaching for creativity were the interview participants in the

study. The study was titled *Teaching for creativity and creative processes for music educators in Victorian State primary schools*. It was mixed methods in approach (Creswell, 2014) with a pragmatic worldview (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) and underpinned by a social constructivist philosophy (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The research design featured two data collection phases: a quantitative survey (Fowler, 2009) and semi-structured interviews (Stake, 1995). Ninety-two educators from State primary schools across Victoria completed the survey, 42 generalist teachers, 25 performing arts specialist teachers and 25 music specialist teachers. Additionally, the survey provided for the purposeful sampling of the interview participants. The total interview sample comprised two generalists, five performing arts specialist teachers and five music specialist teachers.

The investigation into teaching for creativity contained a strong emphasis on the ways in which teachers engaged children in creative processes. As a field of research, creativity is traditionally divided into the four p's: person, product, process and press (Runco & Albert, 2010). Creative process, one of the four areas, is defined by Lubart (2018) as a series of thoughts and actions involved in developing a product that is original. Renowned in the creativity literature as the standard model to depict the creative process is Wallas's (1926) *Four-Stage Model of the Creative Process* (referred to as the four-stage model). It consists of four thought-oriented experiences in application to a specific task: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. Relating to creative process in music, Webster's (1990, 2015) model of creative thinking process in music incorporates Wallas's (1926) four-stage model.

Creative processes are an essential component of music education. Webster and Hickey (2001) state that "creative process begins with an idea or intention and ends with a creative product" (p. 20). Alternating in emphasis, is music education researcher Wiggins's (2002) positioning of "creative process as meaningful musical thinking" (p. 78).

Her more explicit definition is, "Musical creative process enables learners to engage in musical thinking in ways that are personally meaningful" (Wiggins, 2002, p. 79). Her statement aligns with Burnard and Younker's (2002) recognition that the creative process is unique to individuals. Wiggins's comments about creative processes in music do not relate exclusively to composition. Contrastingly, Reimer (2003) does pinpoint composition and refers to the "creating dimension of musical experience" (p. 103), where there is a "certain way of thinking and acting that underlies musical creating" (p. 103).

In music, creative processes are inherent (but not exclusively), in improvisation and composition. The Australian Society of Music Education (ASME) *Principles, Policies and Guidelines for Music Education*, includes the following statement, "All learners should have extensive opportunities for active participation as listeners, performers, composers and improvisers" (ASME, 1999, p. 4). Experiences of music in primary schools, according to curricula, should incorporate listening, composing and performing (ACARA, 2017; VCAA, 2015b). The Music rationale in the *Victorian Curriculum F-10* refers to three key principles of music, "students listen to, compose and perform" and that "through performing, composing and listening with intent to music, students have access to knowledge, skills and understanding, which can be gained in no other way" (VCAA, 2015e, para. 4). The *Quality Music Education Framework* (2018) includes "creativity and activity" (para. 3), as one of six characteristics of quality music education. Yet previous research by King (2017) found that the music activities delivered by generalists had a minimal emphasis on creative processes, demonstrating a greater scope for the inclusion of improvisation and composition in classroom music teaching.

The gems on the path in this paper refer to the specific perspectives and practices of the 12 interview participants. These "gems" underpin the key research outcome of the study – five strategies of teaching for creativity – that are unpacked in this paper. Following the explanation of the five

strategies, specific perspectives and practices are drawn out for further discussion. The background of the 12 interview participants is important to note. Their combined voice represents a unique blend of experience. In the study, this has been referred to as “blended” practice, because notwithstanding their roles (at the time of the interviews), eleven of the 12 participants had worked during their careers as generalist teachers, and eleven of the 12 had worked as music specialist teachers. Thus, nearly all the participants had experience in the engagement of children in creative processes in both generalist and specialist teaching environments.

Five strategies for teaching for creativity

The outcome of the investigation into teaching for creativity was the emergence of five teaching strategies. Each of these promote and foster the creative work of children through a specific teaching approach. Whilst the study focused on the creative processes for music educators, the “blended” practice voice of the participants suggests that the strategies would be relevant and pertinent for activities not just in music, but also for performing arts teachers and for generalists teaching the broader curriculum. The interview participants were individually interviewed. The interviews (up to forty minutes in duration) were analysed using Creswell’s (2014) six steps of coding. The five strategies of teaching for creativity are presented prior to the discussion of the specific perspectives and practices of the 12 interview participants.

Strategy 1: Recognising the creative processes of children

The participants referred to a type of focus inherent in children during creative work. This has been referred to in the study as teacher perception of children’s creative processes. First, the participants described children’s natural, innate capacity to be creative. The teachers recognised that each child had their own “way”, which was

noted in the phrase, “the way they work on it” (Participant 2). Participant 12 spoke of an “intuitive sensibility they display in each of their own ways.” Participant 7 recommended to “just provide them with the facilities to be creative and let their own creativity guide them.” And second, that this “way” was a direct indication of a description a number of the participants used, that creativity was “children just being themselves”. Participant 12 said, “We say, ‘Oh they’re being kids’, but really they are being naturally creative in a place, like a frame of mind, or way of being that has so many possibilities.”

Strategy 2: Diversifying children’s experiences and imagination

The second strategy was about broadening the scope of children’s experiences and imagination through the varying of teacher approach, demonstrations of teacher modelling of the creative process itself, and of the provision of a variety of learning experiences. The theme was summed up by Participant 12’s comment, “The children can’t go outside the square if they are always told to, ‘Stay in the square, stay in the square!’” Participant 10 reflected on the varied styles of music, dance and drama resources she purposefully utilised in the classroom in teaching for creativity: “I feel like it’s my job to expose them to as many things as I can.” Participant 10 went on to recommend to teachers to add variety of experiences into the classroom. She said, “find a different way to hook them in, you have to be willing to think outside the box ... is there a better way or is there a different way?” Participant 12 asserted: “Teaching for creativity means that I have to battle the norm,” adding, “it means a commitment to avoiding the everyday over and over and over, and trying something different, left of field.”

Strategy 3: Creative processes in the classroom

Engaging children in creative processes was a practical way for the participants to teach for

creativity. Open-ended tasks within a set framework were a key feature. Participant 4 explained, “most of our lessons are open-ended: so it’s quite a fluid task within a set structure.” Participant 5 referred to, “giving them that freedom within a controlled environment, that’s just so important.” Structure enabled freedom of exploration. It often reflected the development of skills with an immediate application of those skills in an open-ended manner.

The participants noted that creative process has a specific starting point. “Creative processes, ok so it is like a beginning, just any beginning that we say, ‘ok we’re starting here’. We begin. Something happens, like a problem in a story, or like a weird situation, or a funny event where everything goes wrong, or there is a situation that needs fixing. How can we do that?” (Participant 12). Participant 4 explained, “Creative process: We gave the guidelines . . . how many in your group, how long you’ll have, this is what you’re doing today, this will be your chance to perform and that’s how this will work.” And similarly, “I start by giving them a framework to work in,” said Participant 7.

Strategy 4: Maximising the outcomes of creative processes

The fourth strategy is about the way teachers maximised children’s development of music skills and life skills as key outcomes of creative process tasks. Participant 8 stated, “if there’s a problem there are so many different ways of looking at it, of dealing with it – and if I can do that in my classroom and if it can at some point be translated in their everyday world [that is a positive thing].” Participant 11 reflected, “Things like innovation and resilience are two classic life skills that enable children to adapt and respond to a complex world and these are nurtured in creativity, to me that is why to nurture those skills.” Creativity is “a pattern of knowing that will help them in their future,” said Participant 12. “They need to learn to be creative, on a different scale to what we’ve done, but we can give them the basis of how to do it,” stated Participant 5. Maximising the outcomes of creative

process tasks engendered the development of music skills, yet it was the emphasis on life skills that was central to this strategy.

Strategy 5: Self-directed learning

The key focus of Strategy 5 is the pedagogical approach of self-directed learning. The participants were adamant in the design of lessons that were student-led and child-centred, as Participant 9 aptly said, “learning was pioneered by the students.” It was through the application of skills that the children engaged in creative processes in a self-directed way. Additionally, the teachers described “letting go”, which was reflected in comments such as, “not be too strict or have too many boundaries” (Participant 9) and to “stop giving them the answer” (Participant 5) – in the words of Participant 2, the children learn that they “are the answer”. Participant 2 explained, “I give them full ownership.” Self-directed learning is a pedagogical approach generally referred to in the context of adult education (Grow, 1991). The self-directed learner focus had the element of the learner at the centre. Craft (2003) aptly describes the teacher’s role, “Firstly making teaching and learning relevant and encouraging ownership of learning and then by passing back control to the learner” (p. 121). The sense of control is described by Csikszentmihalyi (2014) as one of the parameters he suggests in order to set up conditions for flow within the creative process, “Control must be made possible” (p. 183). This was precisely the case of “who” led the learning, in the activities described by the participants in the study.

Discussion about the perspectives and practices of the proponents of teaching for creativity

Underpinning the five strategies of teaching for creativity were the perspectives and practices of the participants. The perspectives show the motivation the teachers had for why they teach for creativity. First, there was an undeniable

sense of altruism underlying the teaching for creativity approaches. Participant 2 explained his motivation for fostering creative work, "It is the most wholesome thing that a child can do, find their interest point, find their centre and there is nothing more, you know, respectful from another human being than to offer them an opportunity." Participant 8 reflected, "So, if I can do that for anyone (foster creativity) for whatever is going on, there is something in it for me." The key motivation Participant 6 had for teaching for creativity was, "To help them develop that confidence and develop their lifelong love of music," and for Participant 9, "I think it is really important for them to find their voice." These comments contributed to the acknowledgment of the ways in which creative work develops children's sense of individuality and "voice" (Strategy 1) and the promotion of life skills (Strategy 4). Strategy 1 moved beyond definitions of creativity into a recognition of children's creative process, which was motivated by the capacity of creativity to assist children to find their "own way". Individuality and diversity were recognised and celebrated in the teaching for creativity classrooms and explored through creative processes. Through music, the concept of diversity was amplified, specifically in the composition and performance of children's own works.

Regarding the practice of the teachers, there was focus on music (and life) skill building and the use of specific pedagogical approaches, namely self-directed learning. There was an emphasis on creativity as the vehicle for skill building. "You teach skills and knowledge but if you are not going to give them a chance to apply it, it is pointless doing it," asserted Participant 3. "So my job is to give them skills that they can work with," explained Participant 12, adding, "but we need to help their creativity selves be able to operate here in the real world with things that are part of this life. And rather than learn to ignore the creativity within them, they need to apply it all the time to everything."

The fifth strategy is the pedagogy of self-directed learning, which requires further discussion. Self-

directed learning is an approach with key defining features, in which Grow's (1991) research is referred to specifically. Grow (1991) states, "The goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners" (p. 127). Regarding the self-directed learning approach, Grow (1991) developed a model titled, *The Staged Self-Directed Learning Model* (p. 129). The model was designed for an educator to use to assess a learner's current situation regarding the ability to be self-directed and to map how to support the student to progress to later stages. The four stages are as follows: Stage 1 is where the learner is dependent on the teacher and the teacher is in the role of coach, Stage 2 depicts the learner as "interested" and the teacher as a "motivator or guide", Stage 3 shows the learner is now "involved" and the teacher is "facilitator", and by Stage 4, the learner is "self-directed" and the teacher is a "consultant, delegator" (p. 129). Participant 12's observation of the children in her classroom was one example of the essence of self-direction, "I see the best work and the best side of each child when they are engaged in creativity. They are the ultimate learner and also their own teacher."

Conclusion

Teaching for creativity is about the ways in which educators can foster, facilitate and promote children's engagement in creative work. Creative processes, and the purposeful engagement of children in such processes, in the primary school classrooms of the State of Victoria, has been under-researched. A recent investigation into teaching for creativity and creative processes for music educators provided insights into current teacher practice by Victorian State primary school teachers. The research outcome of the study – the strategies of teaching for creativity – offers support to guide the future practice of generalists, performing arts and music teachers in the engagement of children in creative work. The five strategies are underpinned by the perspectives and practices of the participants, which demonstrate a steadfast belief in the importance of creativity in the

development of music learning and skills for life. Further, that creative processes and creativity in music are the gems on the path towards fostering a lifelong love of music.

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