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Student teachers' conceptions of creativity in the secondary music classroom

Dimitra Kokotsaki*

School of Education, University of Durham, Leazes Road, Durham DH1 1TA, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the meaning of the concept of creativity from the perspective of student teachers pursuing a one year teacher training course following their first degree. Seventeen student teachers following a specialist music teaching route in secondary education were selected as the sample for this study to offer their understanding on creativity in the secondary music classroom. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and were subject to in-depth qualitative analysis using Atlas.ti software. All student teachers seemed eager to teach for creativity as they thought it was a vital component of their pupils' musical engagement and development. However, some held richer conceptions than others or tended to overlook significant areas of musical involvement, such as improvisation, group work and engagement in evaluating and refining the creative musical product. Creativity was generally expected but it would emerge on an intuitive level as a by-product of a learning objective rather than being explicitly considered in the planning process. These narrow conceptions of the meaning of creativity in the music classroom need to be taken seriously and explicitly addressed in music education programs in order to maximize the expression of pupils' creative potential in the music classroom and beyond.

1. Introduction

'Creative adults develop from creative children. Creative people change the world' (Balkin, 1990)

Creativity has been described as a 'slippery' concept (Philpott, 2001) and even though it is valued as a fundamental human capacity, its underlying structures and perceived impact remain vague and 'elusive' (Burnard, 2006). Promoting creativity in education is recognized as important (consider, for instance, its central role within the new music National Curriculum: QCDA, 2007), yet relatively little research has been conducted on creative processes in music (Hallam, 2006).

Boden (1990) has argued that young people's creative endeavours can be differentiated into 'p-creative' and 'h-creative' acts, having psychological and historical connotations respectively. The latter is associated with the 'traditional' concept of creativity (Odena, 2001) or Craft's (2001) 'big C' creativity, where creative products have been widely recognized and accepted as being of exceptional quality. The psychological aspects of creativity may not have historical significance but are new and personal to the child and are frequent occurrences in the music classroom. According to Odena and Welch (2009), creativity, in this case, can be defined as 'imagination successfully manifested in any valued pursuit' (p. 417).

* Tel.: +44 0191 334 8410/4219.
E-mail address: dimitra.kokotsaki@durham.ac.uk

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Musical creativity can be demonstrated through composition and improvisation which are regarded as the main activities for generating new ideas in music; however, music listening and performance have been considered in more recent research as additional forms of creative behaviour (Dunn, 1997; Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009; Reimer, 1989).

Composition and improvisation both refer to the act of creating new music, however, their essential distinction lies in the intent or lack of intent to revise the created music. In composition, in particular, the musical product is revised to suit the composer's intentions, whereas the improvised piece is the spontaneous creation of music which does not involve the intent to revise (Brophy, 2001). In other words, 'musical sounds made during improvising form the resultant musical product, and it is not possible to go back and revise the product, as can be done while composing' (Kratus, 1995, p. 27). In his seven-stage theory of improvisational development, Kratus (1995) described the process of moving from the first stage of exploration where there is little control over the performing medium or the musical materials towards subsequent stages where sounds are used in a more tightly structured context and where stylistic and personal approaches to improvising can be developed. Improvisations of some twelve-year-olds have shown evidence of the beginning of the fifth stage of 'structural improvisation' (Moore, 1989, cited in Brophy, 2001). This echoes Swanwick's (1988) stage of *imaginative play* in children's development and, in particular, the *speculative* and *idiomatic* developmental modes which, judging from the compositions of 9–14 year old children, involve imaginative deviation and considerable experimentation as there is an apparent desire to explore structural possibilities and contrast or vary established musical ideas.

In recent years, the perception of creativity as being achievable only by a limited number of talented people has shifted towards a more democratic definition according to which everyone can be creative in some area given the right conditions and support (NACCCE, 1999). Creativity, in general, and more specifically improvisation, as a certain form of creative behaviour, has been defined as a learnable and teachable high-level skill (Balkin, 1990) that can develop with learning, practice and experience (Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009).

Fautley (2005) developed a model of composing in the lower secondary school focusing on the group dimension of composing. The creative process can generally be described as the thinking that takes place as a person is planning to construct a creative product. This is defined as an active, constructed (Webster, 2002) and dynamic mental process which swings between convergent (factual) and divergent (imaginative) thinking (Webster, 1990) with creativity closely related to the latter. Divergent thinking, in particular, includes qualities such as *musical extensiveness* which refers to the number of ideas generated through open-ended questions, *flexibility* and *originality* (Swanwick & Tillman, 1986). *Originality* was the most commonly mentioned criterion for assessing creativity in Zbainos and Anastasopoulou (2008) study followed by *eagerness*, *co-operation* and *pupils' effort* which describe social skills rather than creative behaviours. In addition, a significant component of creative growth is the development of the decision-making process which helps connections to be made 'where connections were not previously apparent' – the heart of creativity is about 'connections, connections, and connections' (Balkin, 1990, p. 30).

Balkin (1990) and Kratus (1990) defined creativity in music and creative learning by focusing on its components, the 'three Ps of the creativity equation' (Balkin, 1990), the person, the process and the product, in an attempt to help educationalists to generate specific goals and objectives for creative learning. Jeffrey and Woods (2009) added a physical component referring to the *place* (the fourth P) where creative learning is situated and which can promote a sense of ownership and belonging. Kratus (1990) believes that a creative person can bring forth personal traits such as *originality* (producing unusual or uncommon responses), *fluency* (producing a number of responses to a problem) and *flexibility* (producing responses that are different from each other) to enable engagement in the activities of composing, improvising and performing music. Fluency, flexibility and originality are three of the four scales (the fourth one is *elaboration*, i.e. the amount of detail in the responses) that form part of Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking as they were first developed in 1966 (in Kyung, 2006). These personal qualities echo Webster's (1990) 'enabling skills' which include *musical aptitudes*, *conceptual understanding*, *craftsmanship* and *aesthetic sensitivity*, in short, any personal characteristics, musical background and knowledge which facilitate the creative process.

The creative process starts with an idea or intention and finishes with a creative product. The four stages of Wallas' (1926) creative thinking – *preparation*, *incubation*, *illumination* and *verification* – have often been used to talk about engagement in the creative process and show how an initial idea or intention can develop and lead to a creative product. The creative process becomes functional, however, within an enabling, 'scaffolding' environment (Sawyer, 2006), where the teacher, for instance, might set up initial boundaries and provide certain material for pupils to use during the creative activity (Wilson, 2001), or decide that a balanced interdependence of constraints and freedom (Burnard & Younker, 2002) might work better in some cases in helping pupils think more imaginatively and make the most appropriate aesthetic choices. Exploration, improvisation, composition and creative performance are the four types of creative activity that pupils are expected to engage in as part of the process objectives, according to Kratus (1990).

Finally, musical products could be analysed on the basis of how musical elements or musical principles such as repetition, development and contrast, are used in an original way (Kratus, 1990). A key element of the creative product is that it cannot be predetermined by the teacher and, therefore, its exact nature can be largely unpredictable. This seems to contribute to the difficulty in assessing originality when referring to pupils' music making (NACCCE, 1999). A vital stage, however, after the completion of the musical product is the evaluation or reflection phase where the musical product is verified and assessed by both the teacher and the pupil that created the piece of work. The aim is that by reflecting on and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the musical product against the initial objectives, pupils can move to the next cycle of creating music with renewed knowledge and understanding, and make effective musical progress as a result. Balkin (1990) has emphasised