Focus Group Interviews: Music Teachers’ perspectives on Promoting Creativity in Young Children

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Abstract
This paper will present the findings of a research project whose major objective was to investigate how teachers think and behave about using a new approach in music education centered on promoting creativity in young children. Focus group interviews were conducted with 30 participants from 2 local kindergarten with nearly equal socio-economic status. These interviews were transcribed and video-recorded for later analysis. The interview questions covered five main topics on the theme “Early Childhood Teachers’ Promoting of Creative Music Education for Young Children” and included: definition of musical creativity, observable characteristics of creative kindergarten teachers in music, types of teaching strategies/activities that stimulate musical learning, social interactions and problem solving and characteristics of musically creative kindergarten children.

Preliminary analysis of the findings revealed different views and perspectives concerning musical creativity. Observable characteristics of creative kindergarten teachers in music included flexibility, and willingness to try different methods to encourage enjoyment in children. A creative musical classroom should provide access to musical instruments, integrate music elements into the daily curriculum and provide free play experiences. Music teachers should apply teaching techniques that make use of demonstration and encourage problem-solving skills. Musically creative children express themselves readily are willing to take risks.

Introduction
This study is part of a larger study aimed at exploring and documenting music teachers’ beliefs and practices in relation to a number of issues: general process of creativity, particularly as applied to music education; the classroom setting and how this influences the way music educators approach creative teaching and learning; children’s thinking and behaviour while engaging in creative music; and the structuring of musical curricula to encourage higher levels of musical thinking in children. A combined quantitative and
qualitative research approach were applied to provide the flexibility and investigative strategies needed to examine the multi-faceted nature of teachers’ beliefs and practices in relation to creative music activities. In addition, qualitative research supports a style of investigation that is well suited to the research questions and problems proposed in this particular project. Quantitative researchers have often conducted focus groups to acquaint themselves with new research areas before constructing questionnaire measures (Converse & Presser, 1986). Focus group interviews were used in this study as it is a valuable tool for gaining insight into how teachers think and learn about music activities.

Participants and Sites

Focus group discussions were conducted to solicit views, beliefs and practices of 30 music teachers at two kindergartens: Kindergarten 1 (research group of 15 teachers) and Kindergarten 2 (comparison group of 15 teachers) (see Table 1) for a description of the participants and research design. A total of four focus group meetings were held in August 2001 with each session lasting approximately two hours. The qualitative data and content of the discussion were valuable in providing a direction for drafting the survey questionnaire.

Table 1. A Description of the Participants and Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Group: Kindergarten 1</th>
<th>Comparison Group: Kindergarten 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>15 teachers (randomly assigned by the Principal) Questionnaire &amp; Focus Group Interview</td>
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<td>Intervention</td>
<td>No Intervention</td>
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<td>Two teachers are selected from Groups A &amp; B for the small case study for illustrative comparison.</td>
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<td>Re-administration of: Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion</td>
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Research Questions – Focus Group Interviews

The theme set for the focus group discussions is “Early Childhood Teachers’ Promotion of Creative Music Education for Young Children”. The questions focused on the five main research questions (See Table 2 for the research questions from which are derived the focus group interview questions as suggested by Kruegar, 1994; Morgan, 1997)

Table 2. Focus Group Interview Questions in Relation to the Main Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Main Research Questions of the Study</th>
<th>Focus Questions for the Focus Group Interview</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Do music teachers’ beliefs about creativity appear to influence the way in which they approach music education in the classroom?</td>
<td>1. How do you define musical creativity? i.e. What are the general processes of creativity, particularly as applied to music education?</td>
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<td>2. What are observable features of teachers’ actions that distinguish different styles of creative behaviour (personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?</td>
<td>2. What are observable characteristics of creative kindergarten teachers in music?</td>
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<td>3. How does the context, in which the teachers work, affect their creative behaviour?</td>
<td>3. What types of kindergarten learning environments are best for encouraging musical creativity in children? i.e. What is a creative classroom setting and how does this influence the way music educators approach creative teaching and learning? i.e. How should the music curriculum be structured to encourage higher levels of musical creativity in kindergarten children?</td>
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<td>4. What types of creative processes do teachers encounter in the general music class setting, and how does this affect the creative behaviour of children?</td>
<td>4. What types of teaching processes (i.e. strategies, activities) stimulate children’s musical learning, social interactions, and problem-solving (i.e. children’s thinking and behaviour while engaged in creative music)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Are there similarities and differences in the children’s creative behaviour, which</td>
<td>5. What are characteristics of musically creative kindergarten children?</td>
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</table>
might relate to principles of musical creativity (personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?

Analysis and Reporting

The transcripts of the discussion went through a process of careful coding, analysis and interpretation. The following measures were taken to minimize threats to validity and reliability:

- Setting up meeting and venues for the focus group teams A and B at each kindergarten:
  
The interviewer would meet the principal from Kindergarten 1 and 2 and explain the research study.

- Tape and video-recording of the discussion and transcribing of the data: with the permission of the participants, all discussions were taped and video-recorded to ensure proper data collection. The raw data were transcribed in Chinese to prevent possible inaccurate translation.

- Member-check in the coding and interpretation of data: The interviewer checked for coding and interpretation of data, and compilation of the report for each focus group.

- Validation by respondents: Participants were invited to validate the findings presented in the report.

The first of the two group meetings was conducted at the two kindergartens. To allow for maximum interaction, the fifteen teachers in each kindergarten were divided into groups of 7-8 teachers, and each of these four groups were interviewed on separate days (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1998). The interviews were taped and video recorded, and each teacher wore a different coloured ribbon to assist in distinguishing the participants when coding the tapes.
In addition, each teacher held a microphone so that their comments were clearly recorded. Each group interview lasted for approximately an hour.

In preparation for the Focus Group Discussion meetings, the two kindergarten principals were asked to have the furnishing arranged within a meeting space to facilitate an after-school-hours group discussion. The kindergarten in Kowloon Tong prepared a meeting room, and the one in Hong Kong Island arranged the open hall for the interviews. Both environments were comfortable, with walls decorated with several children’s artworks, and music was playing in the background to set the participants at ease. In both contexts, adult-sized chairs were arranged in a circle and a video camera was set up in the corner to capture the discussion and to allow for repeated viewing during data transcription and analysis (Silverman, 2000).

At the beginning of each session, the interviewer welcomed and thanked the teachers for their time and assistance, and ensured them that the content of the interviews would remain confidential. Written consent had been provided prior to the interview, along with a statement that the interview would be recorded, and all teachers were assured that they could withdraw from the project at any stage if they desired. I then outlined the purpose of the interview, and teachers were given a question sheet which provided an overview of the key topic.

The style of interaction was informal, utilising semi-structured questions, with many opportunities for examples and elaborations (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The meeting was constructive, participants were asked to be open and articulate in the process, and I ensured that all members of the group had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Questions were repeated or explained whenever
any misunderstanding or uncertainty was detected. Within the one-hour interview, the teachers were generally willing to answer the questions and share their views, although some were more actively involved than others and more eager to express their ideas. Teachers presented different views during the discussion, and rich material concerning musical creativity was obtained.

Complete transcriptions were made of the interviews and follow-up comments of the participants. Although the discussions were conducted in Chinese, I fully transcribed these into English while attempting not to misinterpret the meaning of the participants. After data analysis, member-checking was used to validate the accuracy of my interpretation.

**Selection of Case Study Participants**

Four teachers (T1, T2, and T3, T4) were selectively sampled from the total sample of 30 (15 per Kindergarten) to participate in the Case Studies. Criteria for selection were based on the following characteristics demonstrated by the participants during the Focus Group Discussions (described in the Data Collection Tools):

- Showed a high level of involvement in the focus group discussion (e.g. paid attention to the discussion topics and others’ experience in promoting musical creativity)
- Contributed to the focus group discussion (e.g. responded with examples of teaching strategies and relevant musical concepts)
- Had a sharp focus on the establishment of an appropriate music setting and environment
- Had a strong motivation to attend musical workshops to increase their
knowledge in music (e.g. were self-motivated to obtain growth in musical aspects of teaching)

- Had talent in teaching as recognized by the researcher
- Had a willingness to be involved in a study investigating musical creativity

Findings

Recall that the five main research questions were:

1. Do music teachers’ beliefs about creativity appear to influence the way in which they approach music education in the classroom?

2. What are the observable features of teachers’ actions that distinguish different styles of creative behaviour (i.e. personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?

3. How does the context, in which the teachers work, affect their creative behaviour?

4. What types of creative processes do teachers encounter in the general music class setting, and how does this affect the creative behaviour of children?

5. Are there similarities and differences in the children’s creative behaviour, which might relate to principles of musical creativity (personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?

Question 1: Do music teachers’ beliefs about creativity appear to influence the way in which they approach music education in the classroom?
The teachers interviewed expressed that musical creativity was enhanced through composing and improvising with sound sources. In fact, children were interested in using any sound sources for the expression of musical creativity. For example: T4 suggested that the teacher should “accompany the music with more sounds (e.g. beats), using materials from the environment to make music and songs”. Moreover, sensitivity to music in the day-to-day environment could enhance children’s awareness of sound and possibly become incorporated into their musical creativity. For example, familiar stories can act as stimuli for improvisation. Making associations with weather, animals and movement can stimulate musical creativity as illustrated by T3: ”To express themselves by using a story to present their own story, musically”. Movement to music seems to enhance musical reactivity. Imagery enhances creativity, and the children’s imagination could be expressed through dance and music. Motivation and creativity were also linked as T1 illustrates: “children think of the objects around them, and can imagine something to put on a demonstration, which can be translated through language or dance”. And teachers should improve the teaching and learning that is offered, particularly during playtime.

Question 2: What are the observable features of teachers’ actions that distinguish different styles of creative behaviour (i.e. personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?

Some of the observable characteristics of creative teachers were: allowing and providing opportunities for children to express and create freely. Teachers must be flexible, and not be too concerned about what others think of his/her actions. Teachers should be open-minded and willing to try different methods that encourage risk-taking and creative
participation. Moreover, a teacher’s personality, experience and music knowledge also contributed to their ability to model musical enjoyment and creativity for children. Observing other colleagues and sharing experiences might improve a teacher’s creativity and ability to nurture creativity in children as T3 expressed: “Share experiences with colleagues and learn from one another”. Teachers could also model creative behaviours by having open attitudes and a willingness to learn creativity. They must have musical knowledge in order to model musicality for young children. Although some teachers would have a stronger musical background than others, all teachers can learn with the children through discovery-based, problem-solving processes in music. Traits of creative behaviour in children were personality and flexibility. Children’s personal experiences were important for their ability to apply their ideas creatively. Children develop creative experiences by interacting with their peers and teachers through problem solving. An example provided by T1 illustrates the point: “the teachers should be willing to try, accept the challenge, and solve problems with the children’s”.

Question 3: How does the context, in which the teachers work, affect their creative behaviour?

Teachers must show a willingness to learn by applying new teaching techniques, show a sensitivity to the children’s emotional states, a willingness to flexibly adapt the program to maintain children’s interests and to enhance children’s abilities, and an awareness of how using many musical genres can stimulate children’s musical creativity and awareness of music as a cultural phenomena. Encouraging active participation and creating a musical atmosphere in the classroom (e.g. access to musical instruments and exposure through background music), integrating music elements into the daily curriculum, (e.g. integrating
musical and art-science learning and maximising the creative potential of learning experiences), introducing music through group activities in naturalistic experiences, and providing free play, instrument making and performance experiences (acting, singing, playing instruments) can promote children’s creativity. Integration could also include integrating musical and bodily-kinaesthetic domains through games, thus making use of personal experiences as a stimulus for learning throughout the day as T1 illustrates: “Making use of group activities, not just during the music lesson, helps to integrate a music element into the children’s daily curriculum. This would create activities which would allow them to play with what they have made”. Teachers must show a willingness to learn by applying new teaching techniques, show a sensitivity to the children’s emotional states, a willingness to flexibly adapt the program to maintain children’s interests and to enhance children’s abilities, and an awareness of how using musical games can stimulate children’s musical creativity and awareness of music as a cultural phenomena. An example provided by T2 illustrates this point: sometimes it is good to listen to music from other countries, such as Brazil, drums from Africa, rock and roll. This would allow children to learn about the culture of other societies and understand that music is not so simple, and other countries have their own way to express themselves”.

Question 4: What types of creative processes do teachers encounter in the general music class setting, and how does this affect the creative behaviour of children?

Demonstration and participation with children could better help children learn. Musical activities could affect children’s social interaction and problem-solving skills. Requesting children to partner with a friend can detract from the purpose of the musical activity if the children are not with a friend as T3 stated: “the relationship between the children and teacher
is also important, depending on whether they help each other or will add more stress. The feelings between them are important. You may have the opportunity to motivate them to solve problems together as a whole class.” Awareness of children’s physical abilities is important when encouraging creative movement and the expression of feelings and personal ideas as T1 states: “The teaching of music can stimulate the children’s ability in social interaction and problem solving. For example, when teaching a piece of music or a song, we can use group games, or first ask them to find a good friend, hold their hand, and sing together. Some problems may arise, such as a child who does not have a partner, or someone who wants to be with a certain person, not the other. They have to solve this problem by themselves, and learn to deal with it”. Awareness of children’s personalities in relation to their willingness to participate in music and movement was important as T1 illustrates: “social interaction will be encountered more frequently.” T2 also thought that “children’s personality may have an effect. For example, if the child is shy, no matter how you encourage him/her to move, he/she may not be able to do it. On the other hand, if the child is active, he/she is happy no matter what you tell the him/her.”

Question 5: Are there similarities and differences in the children’s creative behaviour, which might relate to principles of musical creativity (personality, intelligence, creative processes and thinking style, motivation and commitment, flexibility in problem solving, musical intelligence and knowing)?

Musical creativity was related to musical intelligence, such as a sense of rhythm, and strategic thinking in relation to musicality. Musical ability seemed to be linked to musical memory and the ability to detect pattern and musical structure in songs. Thus, children should have opportunities to listen to music of all types as this could increase their musical
memory. Musically creative children had the characteristics of being relaxed in any kind of classroom setting, express themselves vigorously, readily accept new things, have a strong self-image, were open, extroverted, and confident, active, and not afraid to take risks and make mistakes. T4 said that “personality is important. They are happy, talkative, quick thinking, and know that after they speak out, they will be appreciated and encouraged and will not be afraid of making mistakes. I think personality is important”.

Teachers must acknowledge children’s practical experiences and assist them in personal and group learning as stated by T3: “Children have different interests, and many have their own experiences. Some children have done it before, and may enjoy it. If children have never seen a ‘shoemaker’ before, then they will not know who they are and teachers will try to think of some ways to help them”. Another example by T1 illustrates this point: “The children readily accept new things, they are not surprised by new things, they are very interested and curious, and get bored easily. They will push away on thing after a few glances, or try to explore new ways of manipulating it”. Teachers must accept that some children might have strong interests in some learning experiences and not in others. They should help both introverted and extroverted children to be musically creative. They should also accept popular culture as a means to learning music. They should be aware of how out-of-school musical exposure can influence children’s musical learning and awareness of a variety of musical games. Teachers should be aware of how out-of-school musical exposure could influence children’s musical learning and awareness of a variety of musical genres as T1 illustrates: “Not actually, mass media includes what they hear at music concerts, in nursery rhythms, and those from their background”. Teachers and parents could enhance children’s musical attentiveness, aural discrimination and bodily-kinaesthetic response through exposure to music. T2 thinks that “starting at early age is important. We learn to
speak first by listening through our ears. Parents should allow their children to listen to music at a very young age”.

Summary of Main Findings

A music teacher’s belief about creativity appears to influence the way he/she approaches music education in the classroom. The teachers interviewed felt that the type of teaching and learning offered, especially at playtime, and was important. Opportunities should be provided for children to be creative. The provision of opportunities to compose and improvise with sound sources, using stories as a stimulus for improvisation, facilitating associations with weather, animals, and movement, creating imagery all served to enhance children’s creativity and imagination. Thus the music teacher needs to embody such beliefs about creativity before she can motivate children to be creative.

Some of the observable characteristics of creativity (in teachers and children) are flexibility, open-mindedness, a willingness to try different methods that encourage risk-taking and creative participation. Personality traits also play a part. However, personal experiences are also important in influencing one’s ability to apply ideas creatively. These experiences are gained through interaction with peers and teachers through a process of discovery and problem-solving. It is also important for teachers to model creative behaviours for young children.

The context in which teachers work can affect their creative behaviours. On their part, teachers can make efforts to create a musical atmosphere in the classroom. It is important for teachers to integrate music into the daily curriculum by introducing music through group activities through naturalistic experiences, integrating music and body-kinaesthetic domains,
providing free play and games, providing opportunities to make musical instruments and opportunities for performing by acting, singing and playing instruments. Teachers should be sensitive to children’s emotional states and thus adapt the program to cater to children’s interests and abilities and making use of diverse musical genres to stimulate children’s creativity. Teachers should be aware of music as a cultural phenomenon.

Creative processes teachers encounter include: demonstration and participation. Teachers should be aware of children’s physical abilities and personalities when encouraging creative movement and the expression of feelings and personal ideas. Some characteristics of musically creative children were identified: They were more relaxed in the classroom setting. They were more expressive, more accepting of new things, open and extroverted, confident, unafraid of taking risks or making mistakes, and had a sense of rhythm.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study provided insights into the views, beliefs and practices of the teachers selected for case study. They revealed that music teachers’ beliefs about creativity appeared to influence the ways they approached musical creativity. Observable characteristics of teachers’ creative behaviours as well as the contexts affecting their creative behaviours could be identified. The types of creative processes that teachers encountered in the classroom that affected children’s creative behaviour were also highlighted. Similarities and differences in children’s creative behaviours related to music creativity were also identified. The study has implications for research methodology as well. The focus group interviews and case studies, which became a large source of data, involved triangulation through the use of transcriptions of videos, teachers’ stimulated recall, teachers’ reflections about their planning documentation, and member checks with the participating teachers. In
this way, multiple sources of evidence were used to uncover convergent lines of inquiry from a variety of sources (Yin, 1984). The recycling of descriptions, analyses and conclusions, and the subsequent refining of the findings in the light of participants’ feedback provided confirmatory power (Lather, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1984). These data collection and analysis processes addressed issues of credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Silverman, 1993).

References


Oaks: Sage Publications.


