

Exploring children's development of ideas in music and dance

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Abstract

Eisner maintains that the Arts education community needs 'empirically grounded examples of artistic thinking related to the nature of the tasks students engage in, the material with which they work, the context's norms and the cues the teacher provides to advance their students' thinking' (2000:217). This paper reflects on preliminary results of a collaborative research project between teachers and university researchers that is investigating how children develop and refine arts-making ideas and related skills in Dance and Music in a small sample of schools in New Zealand. Factors such as the place of repetition in the development of ideas, the relevance of offers, the place of verbal and non-verbal communication in arts idea generation, and group work as an accepted ritual of practice, are explored and discussed.

Introduction

This paper describes some preliminary results from research that investigates how a sample of primary school children develops and refines ideas in dance and music. This is part of a more comprehensive project in arts idea generation, in which three university researchers and eight generalist teacher-researchers are working collaboratively over two years to jointly identify and devise aims, methodology, analysis and related action research phases on this topic. Such collaboration is in line with a worldwide trend in educational research that is moving from research done *to* teachers, towards working *with* teachers (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The project utilises ethnographic, case study, self-study and action research traditions of educational research, and in keeping with naturalistic inquiry, recognises that 'meaning arises out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000:138).

The first phase of the project investigated the curriculum focus of the participating teachers, and subsequent learning by children in each of the arts disciplines. Hours of actual practice were captured through observation, video, audio and interviews. The raw data was collaboratively analysed using a process of categorisation based on what supports, constrains, or is interesting about children's idea development, in addition to teacher or classroom 'rituals of practice' that were seen to be of influence during this process. This phase acknowledged that there exists a growing body of research recognising that teachers' conscious and unconscious rituals of practice impact significantly on children's learning (Nuthall, 2001). From this work, case studies of teachers'

practices were produced, that identified a set of central themes and issues that in turn provided a rich platform upon which to base the next action research phase. Some preliminary data from two of the eight, co-constructed case studies in dance and music are now described and discussed.

Case Study 1: Dance

The dance unit, based on a *Kiwiana* theme, was designed for a 9-10 year old option group in an urban, high socio-economic school. *Kiwiana* is anything that is iconically symbolic of life in New Zealand (NZ). The Kiwi is a famous NZ native bird and people born in this country are frequently nicknamed Kiwis. The children in the focus group were of mixed gender. Collaboratively, they had been creating a dance that was based on the theme of *Fish and Chips*, a theme devised through teacher and class negotiation. One aspect of the NZ Arts curriculum is the practical knowledge (PK) strand, which focuses on the development of practical knowledge in the arts. This involves exploration of skills and knowledge of elements, devices, techniques and terminology in each arts discipline. This class had already completed considerable PK exploratory work on repetition, sequence, travelling steps, unison movement, levels and shapes. Within this phase of the research there were more than six hours of video data featuring groups as they devised their dances. The still photos shown in Figure 1 capture the progression of the focus group's idea development as they constructed their dance, from first response to the informal presentation stage. However, the work shown here is representative of a similar process demonstrated by the other six groups, who were working concurrently in the school hall.



Figure 1a
*Initial group discussion,
developing ideas using short
hand movements*



Figure 1b
Imitation of ideas



Figure 1c
*Starting to sequence ideas.
Same moves - same
pathway.*



Figure 1d
*Teacher intervention to
extend their movement*



Figure 1e
*Same moves - different
pathways*



Figure 1f
Travelling steps using space



Figure 1g
*Exploring relationships &
levels*



Figure 1h
*Exploring relationships &
levels*



Figure 1i
*Same moves different levels
– performed in canon*

Figure 1. Development of ideas identified in Dance research case study

While seated, all groups started by developing a mind-map of dance ideas related to the theme. This phase continued for at least 20 minutes. The mind-map was a means of charting their dance ideas graphically onto a piece of paper so that they could recall the movements later. It

was common to see children in groups using hand movements as a type of shorthand to demonstrate their intent, while they discussed their ideas (Figure 1a). Shorthand examples included undulating hand movements from low to high levels to represent waves, or wriggling movements with hands joined at the palms and fingers to show the wriggling of a fish. Once the music started, the children immediately stood up and proceeded to negotiate their way, verbally and non-verbally, into their series of sequenced dance moves. This process, which was driven by the children, not the teacher, involved improvising and imitating each other in a repetitive way, sometimes together as a group, or in pairs (Figure 1b). Significantly, all groups appeared to be linking or sequencing a number of different moves together in a similar method of negotiation. At times, individuals became engrossed in refining a move out of phase with the others. There was clear evidence in all groups of parallel imitation of favoured moves between individuals in a group, or even between groups. This kinaesthetic trial and error method of developing ideas occurred for over 25 minutes.

The focus group appeared to have a very clear picture of what move followed the next in the sequence and as one move became refined, they added the next (Figure 1c, and Figures 1e to 1i). The progression in their *Fish and Chip* scene was clear as they moved from fish moving in the water, either on the same or individual pathways, to fish which were caught. Here their moves suggested that the fish were killed and battered and cooked unceremoniously in hot oil and this was shown graphically by jiggling of their arms and legs as they sat in a wheel formation on the floor (Figure 1h). The focus group favoured either unison moves, or individual repetition of the same move one after another, in sequence. On several occasions, the teacher modelled aspects of their work in an

effort to help extend and refine some ideas (Figure 1d). For example, she encouraged them to make their initial wave movement in ways that explored size. *What might happen if you make your moves using a wider range of levels.*

Case Study 2: Music

This teacher was working on a bush unit with a class of 6-7 years olds, who were from an urban, mid to high socio-economic school. The bush theme was part of an integrated science, language, music and visual art project based around not only the lushness of New Zealand bush, with its green ferns and evergreen trees such as rimu, totara and kauri, but also the animal life contained within it. This case study relates to a lesson very early in the teaching/learning sequence. At this point the children had not experienced the bush first hand. A regular ritual of practice for the teacher was extensive experimentation (PK) with the class, while they were seated in a large circle. Using stones and ribbons as sound makers, the children individually explored different techniques of playing to represent bush sounds (Figure 2a). They listened to each other's efforts and imitated some of these, after teacher directed discussion related to the sound qualities. This experimentation, where the teacher established a raft of sound making techniques and possibilities, continued for at least 25 minutes. Such an emphasis on exploration was seen in subsequent lessons too. The follow-up activity to this experimentation involved a small group composition, where the children were required to sequence sounds to represent the bush, using the same sound makers, stones and ribbons (Figure 2b).



Figure 2a
Whole class sound exploration



Figure 2b
Group idea generation

Figure 2. Development of ideas identified in Music research case study

The groups generated ideas for approximately 17 minutes, with minimal verbal negotiation. In the focus group, there was no evidence of a negotiated 'game plan'. Rather, the children engaged in parallel, exploratory play, which involved little apparent organisation. Most other groups operated similarly, with an emphasis on generating sound as opposed to talking about it. In the focus group, there was evidence of imitative behaviour between pairs as well as the whole group. This involved a high degree of repetitive sound making such as swirling ribbons in the air and snapping them tautly while holding both ends, as well as the scraping of stones in circles on the floor. These sound ideas (motifs) appeared to change little over their time together. On presenting to the class, the children improvised their piece and a greater sense of ensemble awareness appeared to develop. They made some new moves and revisited favourite

old ones, which they layered over each other, moving in and out of the sonic texture, all the time using non-verbal visual, kinaesthetic and listening cues as they worked together. Group unison and individual work was evident as they played in parallel, imitated and repeated ideas. The piece showed no evidence of musical structure, as adults may understand it, and there was little sonic idea development, or repetitive refinement.

Discussion

Although these case-study findings represent a small sample, they are indicative of some compelling issues, tensions and points of interest relative to the development of ideas in the arts. These findings have also been replicated in other subsequent episodes of the data collection. Three aspects will now be discussed.

1. What is the place of repetition in development and refinement of dance and music ideas?

Repetition of several kinds was observable in the generation and development of ideas in music and dance. There was repetition and imitation of idea fragments, or motifs, between group members, which was demonstrated as a type of improvisatory play. Repetition was also used as a means of developing and extending ideas, such as a structuring device. Thirdly, repetition was used as a refining technique. These will be discussed in turn.

The repetition and imitation of ideas that were demonstrated through improvisatory play between individuals, pairs or the whole group, appeared to be integral to the idea generation phase in both disciplines. For example, in dance, such repetition involved the seeding of a movement by one child, such as undulating the hands in parallel, which

would then be quickly picked up in peripheral vision by another child. As each child *caught* the move, refinements such as size or level variation were often added. This imitative parallel play occurred with seamless fluency, almost as if by osmosis. In addition, the children repeated the moves and sounds over and over again, as if they derived kinaesthetic pleasure from this repetition. In music, ribbon waving or snapping and stone rubbing or scraping were motivic cell ideas, which were quickly imitated and repeatedly played. It is possible that such repetition and imitation is an instinctive means of validating the efficacy of an idea; that is, a winning idea is one taken up by others, as idea possibilities are explored. This may be a subtle way of accepting or rejecting offers that are made in the group and is a concept that will be discussed later in the paper.

The dance group utilised repetition of ideas as a structuring device to extend, or develop their sequences. For instance, their undulating hand movements representing fish swimming in water were introduced and enacted by one student, and each student in turn repeated this identical movement in canon. This move was then transmuted to a sideways wave which two groups of three then repeated in unison on different pathways, so reinforcing the affect. The researchers observed other groups who also repeated previous material that had been used earlier in their piece. It is feasible that the verse or chorus nature of the music may have triggered such repetition. However, these children seemed to be aware of the importance of repetition in their dance structure. In contrast, the younger children in the music group did not significantly develop their ideas structurally past improvisatory, parallel play, generally just repeating their favoured moves over and over. Kratus cited by Glover (2001:31) maintains that there is an age related continuum of idea generation in music, which

starts with exploration, followed by an ability to develop ideas, which occurs around nine years of age. The same may be true for dance. The issue as to whether development and extension of ideas past initial exploratory response is an age related phenomena, begs further scrutiny.

In both disciplines, sound and movement motivic ideas generated and discussed in the exploratory work of the whole class (Practical Knowledge, or PK) were utilised in the children's follow-up group work. For instance, children in dance had explored repeating ideas one by one in canon as opposed to all enacting the move in unison. In music, the scraping and tapping of stones and ribbon waving or snapping ideas had also been explored in the ritualistic, PK class experimentation stage.

The fact that both groups used ideas seeded in earlier class work can be considered from several perspectives; follow-through from deliberate teacher scaffolding can be heartening. The children's joy in repeating the favoured moves and sounds that were seeded earlier, indicates that the need to copy may be a necessary stage in developing ideas, and perhaps fosters confidence to create further. In addition, imitation of structuring devices such as canon is historically an inherent component of musical composition. Take for instance 12 bar blues in jazz, or sonata form from the classical period, both of which are used as a structural scaffold for creative invention. Such a structural blueprint, within which innovation can occur, has undoubtedly provided security throughout composition history. On the other hand, there can be a tension for teachers between honouring children's intuitive knowledge and teaching to explicit techniques, elements or structural understandings, as the latter can impact on the originality of creative work. The delicate balance between these positions and its relationship to what we teach, or not, is

an ongoing area of debate (eg. Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001; Sternberg, 2000).

Repetition as a refining technique in idea development is an interesting area to interrogate. The older dance groups were willing to move past a first response, and to repeat and rework their creative work, independent of the teacher. However, this differs from the younger children in the music focus group who did not rework, or refine. What promotes the need to repeat and refine ideas?

Development and refinement of ideas past first response means that parts or all of a work need to be repeatable. However, this can be difficult with the performance arts, which tend to be temporal and intangible; what is produced is transient, in the moment. There are particular challenges in asking children to develop, or refine something that is located in the past and is reliant upon memory. The children in the dance example were applying a *repeat* factor to their project, which, by deduction, means that they could remember what they had done in order to repeat it.

We can speculate as to what factors supported the dance groups' memory recall to repeat and refine. Certainly, the visual mind-map, the kinaesthetic movement cues and the music cues appeared to aid memory and triggered movement recall. Notably, the focus group and all other groups repeated and refined their work over and over again. Because the music was on a continuous loop over an extended period of time, it is likely that the children were subconsciously triggered to go back and start again. Interestingly, as soon as the music stopped, they sat down.

The relevancy of the creative theme could be significant in the children's willingness to refine. The dance groups had co-constructed the theme with their teacher, which arguably gave them ownership over the outcome. In fact, they asked for two more sessions to keep reworking. This tends to corroborate that learning embedded in students' personal life-world intensifies the level of engagement (Bean 1997, Efland 2002). On the other hand, the music groups were working to a prescribed task outlined by the teacher, and although they may have complied with the requirements they may not have been so personally involved in the process.

It is highly likely that the pre-planned group mind-map facilitated the dance devising process, in that it helped them clarify their ideas and provided the group with cues to prompt memory. Data from a follow up interview with the focus group confirms that most of them could clearly articulate their group idea development process; ("I usually think about it first. If you leave the thinking to the last minute, you don't really know what to do". Participant "Z").

In contrast, no such overt planning was evident at any stage with the music group. Their end product was as delightfully spontaneous and haphazard as their initial group devising process. When asked in interview to talk about what they had done, they had clear difficulty in recalling or articulating any of the choices made.

We can speculate that age plays a significant role here, which raises several questions. Is the ability to imagine and negotiate a common sound or dance piece of any sequence or length, age related? Does this demand a schematic maturity that younger children do not necessarily

possess, as it requires the retention of sequenced segments in memory for a long period of time? Or, is it harder to imagine or retain in memory sound bytes (as opposed to movement) information that can be triggered visually, symbolically, or kinaesthetically? This does raise the question of the place of symbols in music composition to prompt the memory of a momentary, intangible event. All these questions require further investigation.

2. What is the place of verbal and non-verbal communication in the idea development process?

The major difference between the two groups in regard to group collaboration was that the dance focus group's process revolved around a negotiated common goal that they were actualising, verbally and non-verbally. In contrast, the music group did not appear to negotiate a common sonic outcome, verbally or non-verbally. Their outcome was more sonic exploration and an improvised free-flow of ideas, devised through parallel play. There is arguably value in children working out their structural overview by discussion, as shown by all the dance groups' process. However, it is clear that an initial lack of confidence to create through sound, or movement can pressure children to default to words as a means of working out their ideas. It begs the question as to what extent verbal discussion might be given supremacy over kinaesthetic and sonic exploration. Teachers need to be conscious that each art form is a language in its own right, which should have supremacy over verbal language as a communicative medium. Clearly, teachers need to encourage children to tease out their ideas through experimenting and improvising physically with the art form, as opposed to becoming entrenched in a verbal discussion phase for too long.

Creative collaboration demands the ability to negotiate both verbally and non-verbally and raises the place of 'offers' of ideas within the process (Torelle & McNamara 1998). In dance and music the children made verbal, kinaesthetic or sonic offers of their ideas, which were unceremoniously accepted, ignored, or rejected by others. In music, sonic and kinaesthetic cues appeared to be accepted, if they were picked up and imitated in parallel play. Words were not needed. In comparison, there was considerable verbal negotiation accompanying the giving and receiving of dance offers, at both the idea generation and development and refinement stages, although there was greater time devoted to dancing overall.

One can speculate as to why offers are received, rejected, or not given at all. Torelle & McNamara discuss the place of offers in drama improvisation where group members need to be '...open and ready to accept new situations.... saying 'yes' to ideas and actions that evolve' (1998:93). However, some team members can stall or block offers, so hindering the development and extension of ideas completely.

Fear of losing esteem may influence whether a student will make an offer in the first place, as individuals in a group need to feel emotionally safe to offer ideas (Smith 1993). Significantly, in music there is evidence to suggest that creative collaboration is facilitated by shared tastes, commitment to the task and friendship amongst the group members (Davis 2005; Meill & MacDonald 2000). It is likely that grouping on such a basis would help establish the emotionally safe environment required to give and receive offers, without the threat of put-downs (Smith 1993).

The novelty of the idea to engage may also influence the viability of offers. But more importantly, so does the status of the offerer. For example, one student in the dance group whose principal language was not English could not contribute verbally in the discussion phase. During the subsequent dance idea development phase, she made movement offers but these were ignored. Because of her previous non-contribution in the verbal pre-planning stage, it can be speculated that her status in the group was minimal, and therefore her contributions were not consciously seen.

Craft (2000) describes creativity as idea generation embedded in possibility thinking, which requires one to be open to a wide range of solutions. By default, this means that creators, who are uncomfortable with delayed closure, may feel compelled to find a quick solution to a creative task. This could explain why some offers are not received, or developed in groups, especially if there is a time restriction placed on producing an outcome. Teachers could help enable children in this respect, if more emphasis and time were given to generating multiple solutions coupled with sensitising children to the notion that first response is not necessarily best response.

3. What is the place of group work as accepted ritual of practice?

We are seeing group work as an accepted ritual of practice in dance and music creative work in all primary classrooms involved in the research. It is likely that group work as accepted practice in these arts disciplines is for pragmatic and management reasons, rather than for arts pedagogical reasons. Group work clearly helps children to learn from each other, and to develop, extend, vary and contrast ideas that require more than one or two people to be actualised. What we are not clear about is: what is the

best use of group work in the classroom creative process. Clearly group work is one way of children developing ideas, but it should not always be an unchallenged practice.

Arguably, group dynamics influence the idea development pathway and outcome, as collaborative, creative outcomes inevitably require compromise. This can mean that idea generation and development by individuals can be thwarted by the collective power of the group, or subgroups within it. One might question whether group work is necessarily the only way for children to develop their dance and music ideas, as it takes a level of maturity and skill to verbally and non-verbally negotiate a desired group outcome (Webb and Dean cited by Kutnik and Rogers, 1994). Group work may also impact on the quality and depth of creative idea development and imaginative possibility thinking of which an individual child is capable and it is debatable whether, as a ritual of practice, mixed-ability grouping necessarily allows for this. Further investigation is required as to when individual or paired work, divorced from the negotiation demanded in large groups, might better extend children's imaginative capabilities in dance and music, or when larger groups might be preferable.

Conclusion

These preliminary findings raise a number of factors for dance and music educators to consider. It may require us to review rituals of practice regarding group work, and to provide more extended opportunities for individual, or paired idea development work; to be sensitive to the composition of groups, recognising that shared interests, and commitment to a creative project play an important role in the arts; to teach to the mechanics of giving and receiving offers and what may block

offers; to increase the level of ownership children have over the design of a creative project; and to give greater supremacy to the language of the Art form as opposed to verbal language in artistic idea development. It may require an increase in the amount of time given for creative production, and an increased awareness of the need for repetition in refinement. It may also necessitate greater teacher acceptance of children's improvisation as a valid creative outcome, so that what children actually bring to creative work can be observed more objectively, unfettered by adult lenses.

We are heartened by the ownership and empowerment shown by the teachers in the project and feel privileged to be part of this on-going collaboration. Although the sample is small, these snap-shots of arts practice in New Zealand provide a significant catalyst for further investigation.

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