Musical creativity and the teacher
An examination of data from an investigation of Secondary school music teachers' perceptions of creativity

Oscar Odena
University of Barcelona
Barcelona, Spain
oscarodena@ub.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper examines data from an investigation of creativity in music education, with particular reference to the perceptions of six teachers in English Secondary schools. Adopting a qualitative approach, videotaped extracts of lessons on composition and improvisation with pupils aged 11-14 were used as a basis for discussion during in-depth interviews with participants. Two of the three original research questions are considered in this paper focusing on (a) how participants characterised creativity in their discourse and (b) the relationship between their perceptions and their backgrounds. Twenty-eight categories and subcategories that complemented a four-fold framework outlined from the literature review (i.e. Pupil - Environment - Process - Product) emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Some of the categories and their educational implications are discussed with reference to the framework and the above research questions[1].

Keywords

Creativity, Secondary schools, composing, teachers' think-

ing, teachers' perceptions

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

The centralised production of National curricula during the last decade has made activities labelled as 'creative', such as composition and improvisation, compulsory in many countries. 'Creativity' is often referred to in two ways within music curricula texts: (a) the description of activities under the label of creativity, such as improvisation and composition, and (b) statements concerning the value of creativity as a desirable 'thinking style'. Examples of this duality are evidenced in the curriculum in Catalonia, Spain (Generalitat de Catalunya, 1992), and the National Curriculum for England and Wales (DfEE & QCA, 1999). Nevertheless, the term creativity and how creativity might be identified is rarely examined. Recent studies suggest that art teachers (Fryer & Collings, 1991; Fryer, 1996) and music teachers (Odena, 2001a) interpret creativity and its assessment in personal terms. England is an ideal setting for this enquiry, with a third of its Secondary school curriculum for music devoted to 'creative skills'.

This investigation is concerned with how music teachers interpret the meanings of creativity. In this paper issues related to two research questions are considered focusing on (a) how participants characterized creativity in their discourse and (b) the relationship between their perceptions and their backgrounds[2].

---

[1] For further information on this four-year research project see the articles listed in the References.

[2] A discussion of the differences between these teachers' perceptions and the music education literature is available in Odena, Plummeridge &

METHODOLOGY

Adopting a qualitative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), videotaped extracts of lessons on composition and improvisation with pupils aged 11-14 were used as a basis for discussion during in-depth interviews with six teachers. They were selected on the basis of their different backgrounds and schools. Their characteristics were thought to be sufficiently diverse as to correspond with what Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe as a "maximum variation" approach when deliberately selecting participants. All teachers were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the project. Between 3 to 5 hours of participants teaching was observed and videotaped. Teaching units involved composition and improvisation activities with students aged 11-14. During the final interviews, each teacher watched a selection of extracts of his/her lessons and discussed these with the author. The extracts were the starting point and skeleton for the interviews or "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1988). Two-hundred and twenty pages of transcripts were subsequently analysed with the assistance of the computer programme NVivo (Gahan & Hannibal, 1998). Content analysis (Kvale, 1996; Weber, 1990) was undertaken with a process akin to the one described by Cooper & McIntyre (1993, p. 384) as "recursive comparative analysis". This involves the categorisation of the data, which is continually "tested and refined" until all categories are compared against all the responses. 87.2% of the transcripts were categorized in the analysis, i.e. 236,636 characters from a total of 271,438 that included the interviewer's questions and the teachers' responses. Two independent researchers who read randomly selected parts of the categorised interviews validated the analysis.

Participants were also asked to reflect on their backgrounds by completing a Musical Career Path questionnaire, derived from methods developed by Denicolo & Pope (1990). Using an undulating path drawn on a single sheet, participants were asked to think back over their life experiences and write down specific instances that had shaped the direction of their musical outlook.

The investigation was divided into four stages: (1) examination of the meanings attached to the word 'creativity' and review of previous studies (*e.g.* Beetlestone, 1998; Brinkman, 1999; Burnard, 2000; Burnard & Younker, 2002; Craft, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; De Souza Fleith *et al*, 2000; Green, 1990, 2000, 2001; Hickey, 2002; Kennedy, 1999) after which a four-fold framework for researching teachers' perception of creativity in music education was put forward (Pupil-Environment-Process-Product); (2) discussion of the methodological assumptions underpinning

Welch (2005). A detailed explanation of the teachers' backgrounds (Odena & Welch, 2006), a consideration of research dissemination issues, and a discussion of the use of video recordings in this type of methodology are also available (Odena, 2001a, b, 2002, 2004). Other aspects have been analysed from a Spanish perspective (Odena, 2005a, b, 2007).

the research, including issues relating to data collection (*e.g.* Cox, 1999; Eisner, 1991); (3) examination of data using content analysis with the assistance of the computer programme NVivo (Gibbs, 2002); and (4) implications.

RESULTS

Twenty-eight categories and subcategories that complemented the four-fold framework emerged from the analysis of the interviews (a full list of categories is included in Odena, Plummeridge & Welch, 2005). The participants' perceptions exemplified, although in different ways, the idea of creativity as a capacity of all students. They viewed creativity in terms of what Elliott (1971) described as the 'new concept', where creativity is imagination as successfully displayed in any valued pursuit. Nevertheless participants did not agree on how 'creativity' was to be described. They commented not only about pupils' creativity but about their own creativity as well ('Teachers' own creativity'). This category was left outside the four-fold framework as it is focused on the teachers' perceptions of their own teaching and music-making skills. Even if the teachers did not always have a clear understanding of the concept of creativity, they expressed interesting and illuminating views about creative pupils, the environment for creativity, the creative process and the creative products.

Regarding the teachers' backgrounds, even though there were recurrent patterns in all participants, the relationship between these and their perceptions of creativity is not immediately obvious. However, analyses using NVivo reveal that some of the teachers' experiences appear to have influenced their views of creativity. After examining all data it emerges that these teachers' experiences can be summarised as falling within three main strands[3]:

- The *musical strand*, which refers to the teachers' past and present musical experiences, including their school and undergraduate education, and any musical activities undertaken in addition to teaching;
- The *teacher-education strand*, which refers to the participants' comments regarding their teacher-education courses;
- And the *professional teaching strand* that includes their teaching experiences in their current and previous schools.

DISCUSSION

Selected issues related to the original framework are discussed in four separate subsections, after which the significance of the strands on the teachers' perceptions is considered.

---

[3] While these three strands were established in the analysis, the experiences included in them are interconnected.

311

Creative Pupils

Creative pupils were described by participants as 'able to pick up the ideas quickly' and 'develop them', able to practice hard and able 'to adapt the task in a more individual way'. Cropley (1992) argues creative individuals display similar personal traits such as being impulsive, non-conformist and capable of sustained hard work, coupled with a desire to seek change and a certain disregard for plans and rules. A combination of these traits can lead to apparently disorganized behavior. However, the 'creative personality' as described by Cropley (1992) and Kemp (1996) includes lists of traits that do not seem match all the cases reported by participants in the present study.

Four teachers observed that pupils experience music activities with different ways of learning - 'Adaptor' and 'Innovator' pupils (Brinkman, 1999). It is suggested that if teachers have pupils with different ways of learning in the same classroom, the same activity could be affecting students in different ways. Four participants observed that the majority of their students were excited and engaged throughout the units videotaped, which had different degrees of 'open' composition activities. This finding is along the lines of the cases reported by Brinkman (1999) regarding pupils' preference for open composition exercises. In contrast, there were pupils who preferred working within a set of music parameters, and found it difficult to come up with the initial ideas when the music activity was openly defined. For this latter type of student, closed activities with a range of set instructions seemed more appropriate to develop their musical creativity. Borrowing Entwistle's (1981; 1991) terms, some pupils preferred to work following small steps in a 'serialist' style of learning, whilst others learned in a 'holist' way, taking the activity as a whole. The former can be compared with 'adaptor' pupils and the latter with 'innovator' pupils. What emerges from the pupils' preference for unprompted composition is the suggestion that teachers using closed activities should also provide an open door for more 'innovator' students.

Creative Environment

Comments on the most appropriate environment to enhance creativity were coded under two broad categories ('Emotional environment', 'Physical environment'). The emotional environment was characterized as an emotional climate where pupils could feel confident playing their compositions and improvisations in front of their peers without fear of disapproval. Additional subcategories included in this theme, such as 'Motivation' and 'Time requirements', illustrated practical issues in accordance with suggestions from previous studies. Other subcategories were not found to be examined in the literature to the same extent. For instance, 'School culture' included comments on the schools' music activities and its aims and the status of the Music Department within the school. Four participants observed that the classroom music experiences at Key Stage 3 (age

11-14) were crucial for the subsequent choice of subjects at a later stage. Participants offered several activities that were regarded as accessible to all students including 'junk bands', choirs, rock groups, and 'talent shows'. They commented that receiving support from the school management when needed was important in keeping alive this positive music school culture. A case was reported by one of the teachers where the relations between the Music Department and the school senior management were not positive. This school had a lack of space and instruments and severe budget restrictions - the contract of one music teacher was not renewed the previous year. However, this participant offered valuable insights on how to counterbalance this situation by making use of the pupils' instruments, getting bids from outside agencies and sharing resources with other schools.

Creative Process

The teachers' descriptions of their pupils' creative process focused mainly on the stages followed by pupils to complete the requirements of the lessons. In this process improvisation was seen as a step prior to composition, or as part of the preliminary stages in the compositional process. Five participants observed that in some cases, the process of creativity appeared to operate beyond a given structure ('Unstructured process' category). These observations were compared with Koestler's (1964) 'bisociative' thinking where the mind is conceived as a pyramid in which skills and habits at various levels and distances from one another can suddenly come into contact. The success in bridging these gaps may be conditioned by the level of skills and habits of the students. The role of these teachers appeared to be important in helping pupils to develop the habit of engaging in the study of different possible solutions.

Creative Products

These teachers were looking for a 'sense of style' and 'musical awareness' in the students' work. Two teachers preferred to use terms like 'originality' and 'style' instead of creativity. It seems from the variety of views found in the study, that having a compulsory curriculum does not necessarily unify the views of the practitioners, especially when the topic is a concept as multifaceted as creativity. All teachers nevertheless, had criteria to assess the pupils' work, which were largely negotiated. Indeed, participants suggested that discussing the assessment with the students was essential to make them aware of the qualities of successful work.

The Significance of the Strands on the Teachers' Perceptions

Amongst the three strands described in the previous section, the *musical strand* emerges as the most influential on the teachers' views. It becomes apparent that having experiences with a variety of music styles and activities, including composition, helped three of the teachers to de-

scribe perceived features of an appropriate environment for creativity. They keenly put forward comments regarding the factors that might hinder this environment. For instance, 'anxiety' due to exams or preparation of concerts and 'lack of time' due to the compartmentalisation of the school timetable within slots, would distort or even break the appropriate 'emotional environment' for creativity. They also commented on factors that facilitate such an environment (e.g. pupils' motivation). They were able to acknowledge all of these conditions and act upon them. In addition, participants with a variety of experiences with different music styles were more prepared to accept as 'creative products' the work by pupils who did not necessarily keep to the style or the structure of the activity originally given by the teacher.

The importance of the *professional teaching strand* can be seen in the comments regarding the perceived cause-effect link between creative pupils and their families. One teacher, who was working in a deprived area in a school with shortage of staff and resources, remarked that the pupils' home background had a 'large effect' on what they 'come out with'. In contrast, another teacher, who was teaching students with similar backgrounds in a relatively affluent city area, concluded that a musical family background was not a condition for musically able students.

Surprisingly for music education at postgraduate level, the experiences included in the *teacher-education strand*, although acknowledged as helpful by two teachers, did not emerge as having a major impact on their thoughts. They commented on being introduced during their teacher-education to 'different styles of music', but at the same time regretted not being 'taught very well how to compose'.

CONCLUSIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The three strands in the participants' backgrounds were unevenly represented due to the weighting of the musical strand, which was the most influential. Participants with composing experience and practical knowledge of different music styles were more articulate at describing the environment for creativity and the assessment of the pupils' work.

Taking this into account, it would appear that beginner teachers need opportunities to work creatively in different musical styles. This investigation corroborates suggestions by Pilsbury and Alston (1996) that point to a need for teachers to have appropriate composing experience if they are to be more able to assess musical compositions from a wide range of styles. This is necessary not only for the assessment of the final music products but, as Berkley (2001) points out, for the teachers to engage with the pupils' composing processes.

However, the purpose of this investigation was not to seek for generalisations, but to try to accomplish a deeper understanding of the issues under enquiry. The methodology helped to illustrate particular cases with "thick descriptions" rather than generalised statements (Lamont, 2002). This study is an insight into the views of these teachers over a limited period of time. It would be interesting to study more teachers and over a longer period of time to explore the evolution of the participants' views; and also, to explore the students' perceptions and compare them with those from their teachers. These are two areas that will need further research.

REFERENCES

Berkley, R. (2001). Why is teaching composing so challenging?: A survey of classroom observation and teachers' opinions. *British journal of music education, 18*(2), 119-138.

Beetlestone, F. (1998). *Creative children, imaginative teaching*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brinkman, D. J. (1999). Problem finding, creativity style and the musical compositions of High School students. *Journal of creative behavior, 33*(1), 62-68.

Burgess, R. G. (1988). Conversations with a purpose: The ethnographic interview in educational research. In R. G. Burgess (Ed.), *Studies in qualitative methodology: A research annual, Vol. 1*. London: JAI Press Ltd.

Burnard, P. (2000). How children ascribe meaning to improvisation and composition: Rethinking pedagogy in music education. *Music education research, 2*(1), 7-23.

Burnard, P., & Younker, B. A. (2002). Mapping pathways: Fostering creativity in composition. *Music education research, 4*(2), 245-261.

Cooper, P., & McIntyre, D. (1993). Commonality in teachers' and pupils' perceptions of effective classroom learning. *British journal of educational psychology, 63*, 381-399.

Cox, G. (1999). Secondary school music teachers' talking. *Music education research, 1*(1), 37-45.

Craft, A. (2001). Little c creativity. In A. Craft, B. Jeffrey & M. Leibling (Eds.), *Creativity in education* (pp. 45-61). London: Continuum.

Cropley, A. J. (1992). *More ways than one: fostering creativity.* Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: flow and the psychology of discovery and invention.* New York: Harper Collins.

Denicolo, P., & Pope, M. (1990). Adults learning – teachers thinking. In Ch. Day, M. Pope & P. Denicolo (Eds.), *Insight into teachers thinking and practice* (pp. 155-169). London: Falmer.

Department for Education and Employment & Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1999). *Music: The national curriculum for England. Key stages 1-3.* London: HMSO.

De Souza Fleith, D., Militao Rodrigues, M. A., Alves Viana, M. C., & Siqueira Cerqueira, T. C. (2000). The creation process of Brazilian musicians. *Journal of creative behavior, 34*(1), 61-75.

Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Elliott, R. K. (1971). Versions of creativity. *Proceedings of the philosophy of education society of Great Britain, 5*(2), 139-152.

Entwistle, N. (1981). *Styles of learning and teaching.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Entwistle, N. (1991). How students learn and why they fail. In J. Radford (Ed.), *Talent, teaching and achievement* (pp. 77-96). London: Jessica Kingsley.

Fryer, M. (1996). *Creative teaching and learning.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Fryer, M., & Collings, J. A. (1991). Teachers' views about creativity. *British journal of educational psychology, 61*(2), 207-219.

Gahan, C., & Hannibal, M. (1998). *Doing qualitative research using QSR NUD*IST.* London: Sage.

Generalitat de Catalunya (1992). *Currículum: Educació primària.* Barcelona: Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya.

Gibbs, G. (2002). *Qualitative data analysis: Explorations with NVivo.* London: Open University Press.

Green, L. (1990). The assessment of composition: style and experience. *British journal of music education, 7*(3), 191-196.

Green, L. (2000). Music as a media art: Evaluation and assessment in the contemporary classroom. In J. Sefton-Green & R. Sinker (Eds.), *Evaluating creativity: Making and learning by young people* (pp. 89-106). London: Routledge.

Green, L. (2001). *How popular musicians learn: A way ahead for music education.* London: Ashgate.

Hickey, M. (2002). Creativity research in music, visual art, theatre, and dance. In R. Colwell & C. Richardson (Eds.), *The new handbook of research on music teaching and learning* (pp. 398-415). Oxford: MENC and Oxford University Press.

Kemp, A. (1996). *The musical temperament: Psychology and personality of musicians.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kennedy, M. A. (1999). Where does the music come from?: A comparison case-study of the compositional processes of a high school and a collegiate composer. *British journal of music education, 16*(2), 157-177.

Koestler, A. (1964). *The art of creation.* London: Hutchinson.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* London: Sage.

Lamont, A. (2002). Music education and research. In G. Spruce (Ed.), *Aspects of teaching secondary music: Perspectives on practice* (pp. 228-236). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* London: Sage Publications.

Odena, O. (2001a). The construction of creativity: using video to explore secondary school music teachers' views. *Educate~: The London journal of doctoral research in education, 1*(1), 104-122.

Odena, O. (2001b). How do secondary school music teachers view creativity?: A report on educators' views of teaching composing skills. *Education-line*, free access in www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003133.htm.

Odena, O. (2002). Using videotaped extracts of lessons during interviews to facilitate the eliciting of teachers' thinking: An example with music schoolteachers' perceptions of creativity. *Education-line*, free access in www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002206.htm

Odena, O. (2004). Some considerations on research dissemination with particular reference to the audience and the authorship of papers. *Music education research, 6*(1), 101-110.

Odena, O. (2005a). Creatividad en la educación musical: Teoría y percepciones docentes. *Eufonía: Didáctica de la música, 35*, 82-94.

Odena, O. (2005b). Un estudio sobre creatividad musical en escuelas de secundaria de Inglaterra. *Música y educación, 63*, 99-107.

Odena, O. (2007). Creativitat musical a secundària: Un estudi del pensament del professorat sobre activitats de composició i improvisació a l'educació secundària anglesa. *Temps d'educació* (in press)

Odena, O., Plummeridge, C., & Welch, G. (2005). Towards an understanding of creativity in music education: A qualitative exploration of data from English secondary schools. *Bulletin of the council for research in music education, 163*, 9-18.

Odena, O., & Welch, G. (2006). The influence of teachers' backgrounds on their perceptions of musical creativity: A qualitative study with secondary school music teachers. In H. Price (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 21th international seminar on research in music education* (pp. 134-144). Bali, Indonesia: Research Commission of the International Society for Music Education.

Pilsbury, Ch., & Alston, P. (1996). Too fine a net to catch the fish?: An investigation of the assessment of composition in GCSE Music. *British journal of music education, 13*(3), 243-258.

Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis*. London: Sage.