

1

Teaching music creatively

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Introduction

Creativities in childhood and education have long been seen as central pedagogical principles in the primary curriculum. Music, too, is a vital part of childhood. It is a subject which deserves to be taught with skill and depth as part of the primary curriculum and should be a vital part of what children learn as part of their primary schooling entitlement. Today's primary teachers need not feel divided and unsure of their individual capacities for teaching music because they are, in reality, well positioned to provide unprecedented opportunities for nurturing the musical and creative capacities of children. We now have a spectrum of research evidence, which is firmly aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ It describes the purposes which the primary phase of education should serve and the values which it should espouse, and suggests a primary curriculum and learning environment that places arts and creativity generally, and music specifically (whether statutory or non-statutory elements), at the 'heart' of effective primary education (Alexander, 2010).

Teaching music, whether discretely or in combination with other subjects, and fitting it into the life of the school as a whole, requires the confidence to develop a

pedagogy of repertoire rather than recipe, and of principle rather than prescription; this should be implemented in a flexible and creative way that is specific to children's needs as they move through the primary phase. It should provide a broad and balanced education that involves the school community and engages with the environment.

While no one will argue that at the heart of the educational process lies the child, the evidence tells another story. While there should be no hierarchy of subjects, the reality is that not every subject will receive as much time as others. The most conspicuous casualty is music. However, building capacity to ensure that the entitlement to music in the primary curriculum, and its inclusion into the life of the primary school as a whole, becomes a reality for children in the primary sector is paramount. Music matters because children find immense pleasure in musical participation. Children's culture matters and culture is what defines them (Campbell, 2002).

Children find immense pleasure in musical participation, whether in formal roles as performers, composers, improvisers, song makers, notators and audiences or in the multiple forms of children's musical play genres (exemplified in the chapter by Marsh and Young on 'Musical play', in McPherson, 2006, as a central principle of teaching creatively) that constitute part of an oral tradition (such as singing games that are owned, spontaneously performed and orally transmitted by children, and incorporate the elements of text, music and movement). Whether their music is made alone or in the company of others, children use music to help maintain emotional and social well-being and celebrate culture and community in ways which involve entertaining or understanding themselves and making sense of the world around them. Children initiate musical activities for themselves, exciting the imagination either as an individual or within a friendship group,

community or family setting in their varied daily experiences. Yet, despite such childhood experiences, there are many adults around the world who have trained as primary teachers for whom the associations between music and creativity are not positive. It is the aim of this book to encourage and enable teachers to review and adopt a more creative approach to the teaching of music in the primary phase.

There is another way

In this increasingly digital age, exposure to music is everywhere, both by design and by accident. Children download files from the Internet and engage with the Wii and PlayStation games, they watch and hear music videos online, attend concerts, overhear music in shopping centres and play music games in the community playground or in recreational settings. They may even participate in musical practices in diverse communities within their wider socio-cultural environment. Music permeates children's lives; from lullabies at bedtime to the sung and chanted games in the playground, from the attraction they feel for novelty and their capacity to create and innovate to the popular phenomena of iPhones, iPads, video games and mainstream technology that can be found in the living rooms of millions of homes worldwide. Research indicates that we are all 'wired' for music from birth and that musical ability, like creativity, is not the preserve of the gifted few ([Barrett, 2006](#)). For all of us (not just some people) music manifests itself in our lives in a variety of ways and significantly enhances and enriches our understanding of ourselves and the world. For everyone, music has the power to lift us out of the ordinary, to elevate our experience beyond the everyday and the commonplace.

Another aim of this book is to invite readers to question their own cultural assumptions and the stereotypical views that divide learners (and teachers) into distinct categories: those who are ‘musical’ and those who are not, and those who are ‘creative’ and those who are not.

At the outset, then, we need to question some of the myths underlying views of who can and cannot teach music; we need to explore why teachers should develop and be empowered by an understanding of what constitutes teaching music creatively in primary school; and we need to examine the many interacting influences that can enable them to use their powers as educators to transform children’s learning. As with other aspects of the primary curriculum, the ability to teach music and teach it creatively is neither fixed nor measurable in terms of a so-called ‘ability’ (a label which deterministically views learning and ability as a fixed internal capacity, which one either has or does not have). On the contrary, children’s musical learning capacity can be enabled and expanded in all its rich variety and complexity (through building their skills, confidence, imagination, curiosity and inventiveness in music), by teaching music creatively and planning experiences and opportunities that promote deep engagement – experiences that fill children with a sense of agency, that endow them with creativity, motivation, courage and belief in their own capacity as musical thinkers, makers and creators. In this book we argue that teaching music creatively has to do with the creative involvement of the teacher working collaboratively alongside children and how best to set about educating children unfettered by labels (Robinson and Azzam, 2009).

We know, thanks to research, what children need in their primary schooling. They need the opportunity to build their social skills, their language and their confidence. They

do this best through structured play and talk, by interacting with each other and with interested and stimulating adults. Teachers can facilitate teaching music creatively, while fostering children's creativity in music, by working together and learning alongside children as active co-learners, making choices and decisions together about how to expand opportunities for expressing themselves effectively as performers, song makers, composers, improvisers and listeners, in a creative context where music is at the core. Teachers need to foster a strong positive sense of themselves as competent, complex, creative people, each capable of playing a full part within a collaborative learning community and recognising that they have the power to transform themselves by building a community of powerful professional learners. Teachers need to become innovative leaders of exploration in an environment of possibility. To achieve this, they need to dispel myths and confront long-held beliefs, both individually and collectively, as the whole staff of a school work together day by day to create their vision of a primary curriculum that includes the development of educational practices and specific pedagogies for teaching music creatively – practices and pedagogies in which teachers and children are engaged imaginatively, making connections, taking risks and innovating together. In a lecture called 'What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?' given as the John Dewey lecture for 2002 at Stanford University, Elliot [Eisner \(2004\)](#), p. 10) offers this inspirational advice to teachers who see the development of creativity as a distinguishing mark of their teaching:

a greater focus on becoming than on being, places more value on the imaginative than on the factual, assigns greater priority to valuing than to measuring, and regards the quality of the journey as more educationally

significant than the speed at which the destination is reached. I am talking about a new vision of what education might become and what schools are for.

In this chapter I will discuss how both teachers and learners, individually and collectively, can see each other in a different light, and work together to lay foundations for building a school-wide culture of change, moving away from the use of ‘ability’ labels to create opportunities for learning from high-quality, open-ended authentic musical experiences from which to acquire confidence and competence. As they sing and play, listening carefully and talking about music making, they will build the dispositions that are characteristic of powerful musical learning as it occurs formally and informally, traditionally and otherwise. I will highlight particular features that show how forces affecting making music together are socially generated in classroom communities. I will also outline how the principles of learning music creatively together and the creative consensus around extending freedom to teach music creatively can best be provided. All of this implies approaches to fostering and shaping creatively oriented activities that allow room for children’s, as well as teachers’, creativity to be explored. The narrative that follows reviews the nature of teaching *creatively and for creativity* in music so that: (i) the core elements of children’s creative music making can be developed; (ii) the children initiate, execute and ‘control’ a musical practice – whether as performers, composers, improvisers, notators, listeners or reflectors; and (iii) the music itself can be defined within the parameters of its community of practice as developed in the primary classroom ([Barrett, 2006](#)).

Developing your own music pedagogy and principles

Whether taught by generalist or specialist primary teachers, teaching music creatively does not mean short-changing the teaching of the essential knowledge, skills and understanding of the subject; rather it involves teaching musical skills and developing knowledge about music in creative contexts that explicitly invite learners to engage imaginatively and stretch their generative and evaluative capacities. Creative teachers work as creativity generators. Creative teachers work with the tools and resources given to them for the process of extending children's music learning and music making as composers, song makers, notators, performers, improvisers, listeners and cultural makers/consumers. Creative teachers help children to express themselves effectively, and create music as well as critically evaluate their own work. Both UNESCO and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognise the importance of creativity and highlight the role of teachers in fostering children's musical capacity to make connections, take risks and innovate.

But what do we mean by *teaching for creativity* and *teaching music creatively*? What can we (as teachers and as a society) learn by listening to children's voices, observing their experiences in creative actions, and creating with them? Teachers will gain immeasurably from listening to children's own initiatives, learning about teaching for creativity and teaching music creatively with them. But first, how should we view creativity? What should teachers make of the policy issues that say creativity is to be 'put' into all individuals (more softly conveyed as being 'fostered in' or 'taught to')?

What are the gains for students and for teachers who make creativity blossom in reality when teaching music in the primary classroom? Children's musical and creative participation, in practice, means opening up opportunities for decision-making, with children and teachers engaging in music making together.

Gains for children

- Developing a practical, principled, positive sense of agency as musical learners.
- Developing inquiring minds and the capacity to generate and innovate with music.
- Developing musical skills and increasing learning capacity as musicians.
- Building the dispositions characteristic of powerful autonomous musical learners.
- Having the opportunity to create a shared language for engaging creatively with music.
- Ensuring the creative involvement of the teacher.

Gains for teachers

- Experiencing a way of learning and working together with children for change.
- Acting to build and expand opportunities for engagement with music.
- Increasing musical confidence and competence, commitment and creativity.
- Gaining insights that enhance and support professional development.
- Developing practices that are life-enhancing for everybody.

Gains for schools

- Creating a vision of an education based on children's and teachers' capacity to build a learning environment that is musical and creatively enabling for everybody through collective action.
- Creating a vision to guide school development.
- Improving and enhancing the capacity to learn as a learning community.
- Diversifying the curriculum, with distinctive views on music education that find expression in every aspect of school life.
- Developing a creative ethos and musical identity for the school community.
- Reshaping pedagogy and curricula to include shared values about teaching music creatively and the celebration of the classroom practices of teachers.

Harnessing the musicality and creativity and the curiosity and enthusiasm of children and teachers in collective action can prove very powerful in bringing about change in school communities. The assumption that continues to have currency, and that we challenge throughout this book, is that 'being musical' and 'creative' is confined to particular teachers and children rather than a human potential possessed by all and one that is open to development. The next section examines these areas. Whatever the context of education, both music's value (whether represented as a cultural practice, a way of knowing, a way of thinking, a way of feeling, a cognitive process or a symbolic form) and creativity are exercised in all aspects of life and learning and, by definition, increase

the life- and learning-force, empower the life- and learning-drive, and release all our instincts to savour life and learning as the manifestations of essential feeling, the senses and the imagination.

The pedagogical principles of practice

It is crucial for teachers to clarify their own and children's views of music (for some, in essence, a form of discourse, cultural practice, a way of knowing, the life of feeling, etc.) and creativity (for some, in essence, the generation of novel ideas), and what this means to them in terms of teaching and learning, both for the school community and across the curriculum. Considerable debate revolves around issues concerning the personal significance of music and creativity, the symbolic form of musical experiences, the role of process versus product, the influence of individual components such as learner personality, disposition and learning style, the role of skills, knowledge and environmental factors, and the importance given to various layers of musical activity such as materials, expression, form and value. These issues will surface later on.

However, as argued by [Barrett \(2006\)](#), p. 205), a key factor 'in any discussion of children's creativity is whether children's culture is viewed as distinctive, moderated and developed through children's agency, or as an adult-regulated precursor to adult culture'. When teachers engage as learners (and as musicians) alongside children they get to view children's active engagement with their worlds. Teachers learn to trust their own and the children's creativity, and recognise opportunities where children's music making is seen working as an active agent, internalising the structures of adult worlds and reproducing

these in novel, context-dependent ways, rather than the children being passive consumers of adult-generated culture.

Creativity as a concept covers a lot of ground and its meaning shifts in response to changing cultural contexts and conditions. A widely endorsed definition of creativity includes the creation of domain-relevant skills (themes particular to music making and children's creative endeavours and learning) and creativity-relevant processes (threads particular to teaching and teachers). Creativity includes the creation of an original (novel, unexpected) and useful (appropriate) product, including ideas as well as concrete objects. Creative people are those who create new and useful products, and creative processes occur when a new and useful product is created. Person-centred and environment-centred considerations are essential for understanding human creativity. The social environment is fundamental in Csikszentmihályi's (1997) systems view of creativity. He argues that in order to be creative an individual has to put personal effort into the creation of a product that is then valued as creative by other experts within the particular field and that the creative process or the creation itself brings some change to the domain it enters. Creativity is then jointly constituted by the interaction between and across the domain, field and person; therefore, the practices of both personal and social creativities are important.

Creativity emerges as children become actively engaged in exploring ideas, initiating their own learning, making choices and controlling decisions about how to express themselves using different sounds and practices (such as invented song making and other ways in which children make original music). Creativity, in essence the ability

to respond creatively, arises when children produce imaginative activity which leads to creative products that are judged to be novel variations, original and unexpected.

Looking at creativity from the perspective of Csikszentmihályi's system view (1997, p. 330, as discussed in Burnard, 2006), creativity can be remarkably increased and enhanced by changing the field (i.e. the classroom) to make it more sensitive and supportive of new ideas, and by making sure that society (i.e. in the educational context, being the class) provides opportunities to participate more widely (seeing the field as a part of a broader social system). Creativity also emerges from the interaction between individuals working together through handling, making and elaborating in a *domain* (e.g. children's music making). The experts in the *field* (values) that support and inform that domain, in the primary classroom context (practices), are usually teachers who judge the products of children or other students. Resources (e.g. time, space, goals and group sizes) are a way of showing investment made in the creative production process and its valuation.

Drawing on the work of Malloch and Trevarthen (2009), the study of spontaneity in the musicality and music learning of childhood and children's creative and musical endeavours stems from views of creativity that acknowledge children's agency and their musical culture as practices which can be high in quality and meaning (Robinson and Azzam, 2009). In lessons that involve little or no creativity, ideas or tasks are presented that are already worked out or follow some generically prescribed method. It is, however, the teacher's creativity that makes an impact on the child's creative engagement and endeavours. A key aspect of creative teaching is the teachers' self-belief – their belief that they too are creative and are creativity generators. Creativity may, or may not,

happen in all musical situations; every situation may be addressed creatively, but may not in itself be creative. Creativity in music, however, is often connected with composing and improvising. But in order to promote musical growth, teachers must constantly endeavour to encourage and help children to respond creatively in their dealings with music. The creative response is not a separate thing that only happens on some occasions and not on others; rather, the creative response must go on all the time. Only then are we making musical connections of the quality that is necessary for children's musical growth, which is, as we see it, the primary aim of musical education. The essential core of this is the role of the teacher. The promotion of musical creativity requires creative teaching. To map the way forward, to encourage, to guide and engage creative responses in children is itself a creative act.

Like musical ability, creativity is something we all have. We know it is not simply a gift given to the Mozarts or Michael Jacksons of the world. As teachers, we might not be as in touch with music and creativity as we once were as children, but take a moment to consider just how creative and musical we all are. When you teach, if you enjoy singing, sing. If you don't enjoy singing, then you owe it to your students to provide a highly musical environment and encourage intense interest in expressive musical performances. If you enjoy listening to and playing music, which all of us do, then playing and listening to music should be a central part of your teaching. Every day we tap into natural creativity and engage creatively with music. As infants, we develop a wide range of skills that can be described as musical. These skills do not necessitate extensive knowledge of the musical conventions of a particular culture, but rather an awareness of the aspects of music that are perceptible, memorable and pleasurable for children. Many

of these skills are learned before birth, as the foetus becomes familiar with the internal sound patterns of its mother's body and associates these patterns with her physical and emotional state.

It is a skill that we have already learned both during very early formal music instruction or informally and spontaneously through our experiences of the familiar music of our culture. The best way to promote a child's musical ability is to acknowledge that all of us (and particularly children) possess a musical brain. We all respond to the intimacy of mother–infant vocal interaction and the reciprocity in the improvisatory musical performance of sound patterns that stimulate hearing, pattern recognition and the emotional connotations of sound patterns that underlie music. Our musicality grows through continuously evolving interactions in 'hearing' and 'performing' music in multiple settings – from the habit of singing lullabies after birth (which is musically, cognitively, emotionally and socially beneficial) to playing skipping games in the playground. Social factors, such as parental support, teachers' personalities and peer interactions, are central to how the musical brain develops. It grows inside the developing individual, who lives in a particular home environment, possesses internal proclivities, experiences external motivations and so on. As teachers, it is our responsibility to support an inquisitive and exploratory approach to children's learning through musical play and experimentation (see [McPherson, 2006](#), chapter by Trehub on 'Infants as musical connoisseurs').

Core features of a creative approach to teaching music

A creative approach to teaching music encompasses several core features or dimensions of creative practice that enable teachers to make informed decisions, both at the level of planning and in moment-to-moment interactions in the classroom. Woven throughout this book are the threads and themes shown in Figure 1.1.

[Insert Figure 1.1 Here]

Figure 1.1 Themes (for teaching creativity in music) and threads (for generic teaching creatively).

This, then, is the vision of music permeating and expanding the practice of primary teachers at every level.

First principle: threads

Threads seek to foster *teaching music creatively*, thus engaging teachers to make music learning interesting and effective and use imaginative approaches in the classroom.

- 1 Developing a culture of creative opportunities and ensuring the creative involvement of the teacher.** Significant research into effective teaching shows that creative teachers are creative role models themselves; professionals who continue to be self-motivated learners value the creative dimensions of their own lives and make connections between their personal responses to experience and teaching. This can involve collaboration between children and teachers, and reflection has priority over time. These interactions emphasise the importance of creating a 'holding environment' for learners, leading them to a shared understanding of how best to participate and learn.

- 2 **Watching and listening to children.** The commitment to extending choice is intimately bound up with another equally important focus of teachers' practice and development work: listening to children and taking on board their ideas, thoughts and feelings.

- 3 **Building learning environments of enquiry, possibility and trust.** Giving specific choices is one very practical way of encouraging children to express their preferences and act on them. Children need to be given opportunities not just to make their own selection from a range of activities offered by the teacher but also to contribute to the process of planning the tasks and activities to be undertaken by the class. [Barrett \(2006\)](#), in a valuable study of how young children create meaning through creative musical participation in their early years, notes the importance of distinguishing different kinds of involvement in terms of children's participation. This participation should not be limited simply to activities and structures that have already been decided upon but should enable them to actually influence the overall organisation and learning possibilities by mapping moments of reflection and contemplation and encouraging children to incubate and contribute their ideas about the relevance of the activity set by the teacher. By standing back and letting children take the lead, teachers set up open-ended contexts where control is devolved, at least in part, to children, who are then more likely to adapt and extend activities in unexpected ways. The learning relationship needs to develop in ways that sustain and foster an increased freedom to learn and nurture creativity by risk-taking, communicating acceptance and building a shared

understanding between the teacher and the children, and between the children themselves, as a common theme discerned among the class community as a whole.

- 4 **Fostering learning through imaginative play, exploration and experimentation.** For the teacher to find ways of being and learning together with children, which are personally and collectively satisfying, the learning journey needs to be characterised by practices such as teamwork, sharing one's thinking with a learning partner, learning through play and the teachers' empathy for children's feelings (a corollary being a child-centred approach, including listening to children as a vital tool for teachers and teachers' values). It needs to provide a route to creative thinking and problem solving across all aspects of children's learning through a steadfastness of purpose in exploring and experimenting. The teacher should trust the child, believing that the child has the desire and the potential to explore and experiment with music. The teacher should show care and respect for the individuality of each child.

Second principle: themes

Themes that seek to foster *teaching for creativity in music*, by contrast, focus on the development of children's creativity in music and their capacity to experiment with musical ideas and information, alone and with others.

- 1 **Creating a community of musical practice (encouraging ownership, collaboration, autonomy).** Teachers and children need to share responsibility for

creative activities along with an understanding that the learning journey may be uncomfortable at times but that the shared experiences and supportive learning community ethos will enable everyone to flourish as musical learners.

2 **Making connections and working with the unexpected and the familiar.**

Children are constantly growing and changing, seeking new challenges and new learning. This is also true of creative teachers. By seeing creativity as a set of dimensions and behaviours which focus on making connections – exploring the unexpected as well as pushing boundaries on the familiar – practices developed in the classroom and brought to the classroom by external creative and cultural partners can then challenge and stretch both children and teachers. Exploration of these dimensions can be ongoing within the curriculum programme.

3 **Valuing openness to unusual ideas, curiosity and questions.** Childhood is characterised within a wide variety of contexts, and children's musical creativity may involve spontaneous song making, singing and dancing through the process of enculturation, in their home environment. Teachers need to be open to the creative experiences of children making music, exploring sounds, using expressive vocabulary and developing manipulative skills in response to specific cultural environments. Children's cultural competencies as consumers and users of digital multimedia technology in the context of leisure and the ever-widening range of music technologies increasingly enables them to draw on their own musical experiences and access any number of highly desirable sound worlds that support creative music making. Being open and curious about their creative ideas

and cultural practices are the building blocks of musical communities in the primary classroom.

4 **Profiling agency (musical decision-making/choice/musical interests).**

Importantly, this dimension recognises that what may be a creative endeavour and achievement in a child's musical world may not necessarily be viewed, judged or defined as 'creative' within the adult musical world in which the child finds her/himself. What constitutes creative choice, and the freedom to make decisions where cultural dynamics interact within the social worlds of the child in which musical creativity grows, is important. This is about creative inclusion, creative choice and how children construct and enable repertoires from the interactive possibilities, experiences and expressions of 'peer worlds'.

Creative teachers and creative teaching in music

Music is indispensable to the creative teacher. It is a subject that constitutes a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that has intellectual depth and critical rigour as challenging as any school subject area. Like any subject, it needs to be taught by committed and creative teachers and given the necessary time and resources. There is clear evidence that creative teachers produce creative learning and positive learning outcomes. Creative participation in music helps children to learn more effectively, thus developing their musical skills and inspiring new ways of thinking about, experiencing and doing music. Creative participation in music helps children to do better right across the whole curriculum. By embedding music in the primary school curriculum on a daily

basis, teachers have demonstrated that they are able to improve literacy and numeracy. They are also able to harness children's passion for culture and create environments where they feel valued, empowered and motivated – attendance, attitude and well-being are all improved by engagement with music.

The creative teacher:

- is not an instructor but a co-creator, supporting children as they develop their own music learning;
- constantly looks for ways of engaging children's imagination and invention;
- supports children in taking risks – to ask themselves 'what if' and go ahead and try a new approach; and
- encourages children to evaluate and assess their own and each other's work.

Some challenges involved in teaching music creatively

Why does a vision of what teaching music creatively is so often get lost in what music teaching turns out to be? Perhaps it is that music is particularly hard to manage in the relentless schedules of primary schools. It is difficult for teachers to hold on to its nature and value. There are also issues of status, resources and commitment to extending choice, which are intimately bound up with teachers' practice and development work. As with the other arts, music suffers relegation to the corners of the curriculum and is elevated to the top of the lists of spending cuts. Even in the best circumstances, however, something

less than musical transactions may often be taking place. I have seen music taught uncreatively in conditions where time and resources were more than sufficient and I have seen music taught creatively in unpromising circumstances. This, of course, is not an argument for starving music education of resources but a recognition that resources alone are not sufficient. As well as understanding the essential qualities of music there also has to be a sense of what it is to engage in lively and authentic music education. To this end I welcome readers to read on through the chapters of this book, engaging with the principles of practice and research that inform the key points that are made. These principles have their roots in the basic premise that musicality and creativity are possessed by all and can be developed in a learning environment where each individual knows that it is safe to take musical risks – an environment in which confidence is nurtured and where everybody can become caught up in the excitement of learning music creatively.

Note

Further reading

Alexander, R. J. (ed.) (2010) *Children, Their World, Their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. London: Routledge (especially pp. 239–45, 471–4, 496–500).

Barrett, M. (2006) Inventing songs, inventing worlds: The ‘genesis’ of creative thought and activity in young children’s lives. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 14(3), 201–20.

Burnard, P. and Kuo, H. (2015) The individual and social worlds of children's musical creativities. In G. McPherson (ed.) *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development* (2nd edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 486–99.

Campbell, P. S. (2002) The musical cultures of children. In L. Bresler and C. Thompson (eds.) *The Arts in Children's Lives: Context, Culture and Curriculum*. Netherlands: Kluwer, pp. 57–69.

1 All children can and should benefit from receiving a wide-ranging, adventurous and creative cultural education.