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Dissertation - Brief Research Summary

Catharine M Dishke Hondzel, *Western University*



Research Findings

FOSTERING CREATIVITY: ONTARIO TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS, STRATEGIES, AND EXPERIENCES

Catharine Dishke Hondzel, PhD

cdishke@uwo.ca

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This research study was conducted between January and December 2012, and involved the participation of 22 teachers from the Avon-Maitland District School Board, London District Catholic School Board and Thames Valley District School Board. Teachers who participated in this study were currently, or had recently taught in a grade 5, 6, or 7 classroom. Teachers had between 1 and 33 years of teaching experience.

Background

Creativity is an essential, but elusive human skill (or set of skills). As humans, we know there is something special about those who are highly creative – we build museums and art galleries to showcase these talents, and love to see our students come up with new and useful ideas.

What we sometimes have trouble understanding is what conditions or environments foster creativity, and which ones prevent creativity from developing. And everyone has a theory!

The purpose of this research study was to better understand, from the perspective of teachers, what exactly creativity is, and what teachers think encourages or discourages creativity in their students.

This study had two stages – the first consisted of an online survey, and the second was a day long observation and interview with a teacher who volunteered to participate and provide their insight.

Teachers were asked to describe and identify the strategies they used to foster creativity, discuss the nature of

creativity and how it was visible in their students, and the range of environmental conditions in their schools that influenced the development of creativity in children.

Teachers were also asked to provide insight into the ways 21st century learning strategies, technology, EQAO, and collaborative learning influenced creative development in students.

Results of this study were presented and defended in front of a multidisciplinary committee on April 17, 2013, and were accepted and approved. The full document can now be accessed on the Research Western website:

<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/1173/>



What is Creativity?

Creativity is, for the purposes of this study, a distinct and independent human capacity that plays a role in many behaviours – such as problem-solving, adapting, learning, coping, and critical thinking.

It is considered a personal trait; a characteristic way of thinking and behaving, that reflects our ability to adapt to changing circumstances and our effective cognitive abilities to combine and improve upon ideas to which we are exposed.

Teachers who foster creativity in their students are more likely to:

1. Encourage students to learn independently.
2. Have a co-operative, socially integrative style of teaching.
3. Motivate their students to master factual knowledge so that they have a solid base for divergent thinking.
4. Delay judging students' ideas until they have been thoroughly worked out and clearly formulated.
5. Encourage flexible thinking.
6. Promote self-evaluation in students.
7. Take students' suggestions and questions seriously.
8. Offer students opportunities to work with a wide variety of materials and under many different conditions.
9. Help students learn to cope with frustration and failure so that they have the courage to try the new and unusual.

(Cropley, 2001)

"The key question isn't 'What fosters creativity?' But it is why in God's name isn't everyone creative? Where was the human potential lost? How was it crippled? I think therefore a good question might be not why do people create, but why do people not create?"

- Abraham Maslow

Results and Significant Findings

Perceptions

Teacher perceptions refer to the ways in which teachers identify creativity and label children as creative or not. In this study, teachers identified creativity as a general construct, typically including one or more elements of art, music, or drama, but also considered creativity to be making connections and having choices in the types of work that students do.

When teachers identified creative children, they often described them as having a particular skill, talent, or struggle, and frequently indicated that they 'thought differently'.

One of the participants in the study said it this way:

"I find some of the most creative kids in my class are ones that actually struggle in other ways. Which I find interesting, [is] you know that their brains just work a little differently."

Strategies

Teachers who were interviewed spoke about a wide range of teaching strategies they used to foster creativity in their students.

Most frequently, teachers' strategies could be broken down into one or more of the following four categories:

1. Differentiated Instruction

Embracing learning styles (such as multiple intelligences) and altering how tasks or assignments could be completed, based on the child's interest and preferences.

2. Emotional Climate

Actively promoting a classroom environment that is safe, trusting and where students feel confident.

3. Collaboration

Frequent use of group activities and problem-based learning strategies.

4. Exploration, experiences, and making connections

Several teachers mentioned how exploration activities, such as field trips, authentic experiences, and learning one topic in-depth promoted creative thinking skills in their students.

Environmental Factors

Many factors influence the development of creative and critical-thinking skills in students. Frequently, teachers mentioned how the environment of their particular school impacted the ways they were able to implement creativity-fostering strategies, or promote creative thinking in students.

Teachers identified resources, support, and accountability/EQAO as the major environmental factors influencing creativity.

Lack of resources, including time, money, and materials was commonly mentioned by teachers as a barrier to fostering creativity. These included art

materials, prep time, and money to support learning activities.

Many teachers indicated that they could foster creativity because they had excellent support from fellow teachers, principals, parents, and staff at the school.

EQAO was indicated as both a challenge and a way to prepare students' basic skills. Several teachers mentioned that EQAO preparation 'killed' any creativity, while others found it to be a way to encourage depth of knowledge in a subject area. Reactions on this topic were diverse and often mixed.

Conclusions & Applications

- Teachers use a variety of strategies to foster creativity in their students.
- There is some indication that teaching experience influences the number of strategies teachers use, and the way in which they assess the strategies they can use.
- Most teachers who participated in this study had positive perceptions of creativity, used a variety of strategies, and felt that they were working in an environment that promoted creativity.

If you want to learn more about creativity, as well as techniques to foster creativity, you may find the following resources useful:

Books

- Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of our minds: Learning to be creative*. Capstone.
- Starko, A.J. (2010). *Creativity in the classroom: Schools of curious delight (4th ed)*. New York: Routledge.
- Trilling, B., Fadel, C. (2009) *21st century skills: learning for life in our times*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Websites & Videos

- <http://21stcenturyskillsbook.com/>
- <http://vimeo.com/41492835>
- <http://www.thersa.org/events/rसानimate>
- www.edu.uwo.ca/HIRG

If you have any questions about this study, or wish to learn more, please contact:

Catharine Dishke Hondzel — cdishke@uwo.ca