Creative Thinking in a General Music Classroom:
Process, Meaning, and Collaboration Among Second Graders

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Introduction

The second graders arrived in music class wondering what activity they would be doing that day. The teacher announced they would be singing the song the class created the week before. Andrea said, “We didn’t really make up that song. Those were mostly Elise’s ideas.” The teacher proceeded with the lesson, wondering silently, *how do I help each child make creative contributions?*

In 1994, The National Association for Music Education, MENC, published the National Standards for Music. Creativity and improvisation were included as standards to be met in the music curriculum. This change brought ideas about creativity and improvisation in school music programs into a new realm. Once creativity and improvisation became part of what students should *know and be able to do* in music, teachers and schools began to explore how to enhance their students’ creative behaviors.

Oxford Dictionaries Online describes creativity as “the use of the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work” (2010). Hickey and Webster (2001) pointed out that creativity produces something that is *original* and *valuable*, with these terms relating to the social context of the outcome. Webster (1990) suggests the term *creative thinking* should be used by educators in referring to creativity. He believes this term places the focus on the *process* of creativity and not the product. Webster (1989) defines creative thinking as “A dynamic process of alternation between convergent and divergent musical thinking, moving in stages over time, enabled by certain skills (both innate and learned), and by certain conditions, and resulting in a final product” (p. 29).

The elementary general music classroom would appear to be a natural place to discover children engaging in creative thought and expression. Experimenting with
classroom instruments, playing improvisation games, and movement often come to mind when one thinks about the activities in the elementary general music room. However, while the music classroom is often thought of as an environment in which creativity thrives, upon closer examination the environment may be more about replication of music and musical traditions than about creative expression (Webster, 1988). Most often, students are taught the exact rhythms to play or melodies to sing. Without necessary explorative choices, students learn music by repetition, and often develop into musicians who are not comfortable or confident when asked to improvise or freely create anew. This type of music education becomes what Gordon (2003) calls craft rather than art. “…craft relies on imitation, but…art relies on creativity and implementation” (Gordon, 2003, p. 40).

Webster (1988) suggests that if the goals for our music programs are to teach facts, music reading, and performance preparation “…then the process of understanding music as art and, in turn, the ability to think creatively about sound and its meaning as art, may be lost” (p. 33). The need for assessment and evidence of success in school music programs may lead to a focus on competition, instead of creative thought and originality. In her book, Growing Up Creative, Amabile (1989) discusses creativity as one of the “…four methods for killing creativity” (p. 72). She believes setting up competitive situations among students is more likely to undermine rather than inspire creativity (Hennessey & Amabile, 1987).

Howard Gardner (1982) finds that once formal training in school begins, children encounter a different experience than “…the holistic way [they] have come to think of, react to, and live with music” (p.157). Gardner believes “…the challenge of musical education is to respect and build upon the young child’s own skills and understanding of
It is important that the imagination remains engaged during the young child’s transition into formal instruction. Campbell asserts that “…children are musically expressive until they are directed to re-create only what has come before” (Campbell, 2009, p. 140).

**Can creativity be taught?**

“All children have the potential for creative development” (Hickey & Webster, 2001, p.20). Hickey (2009), in a study on the methods used to teach improvisation, concluded that current practices of traditional music teaching do not accomplish that goal. Several words that aim to convey a more accurate picture of helping children to be creative are; nurture (Cheyette, 1977; Hickey, 2009), enable (Hickey, 2009), encourage (Brinkman, 2010), develop (Sternberg & Williams, 1996), foster (Craft, 2000; Elliot, 1989) and awaken (Jacque-Dalcroze, 1921/1967). Hickey (2009) suggested that true improvisation cannot be taught, but “…is a disposition to be enabled and nurtured” (p. 286). Hickey (2009) believed that nurturing begins when students are given musical freedom in their creative and improvisational activities. Although she has not suggested chaos in the classroom, she recommends flexibility, “…led by students’ impulses and interactions with their environments” (Hickey, 2009, p. 293). Hickey suggests considering our objectives when engaging students in creative or improvisational activities. Is the goal to have students produce creative work that sounds nice? Or, is it “…to enable students to be lifelong creative improvisers and to give them a sense of freedom when doing so” (Hickey, 2009, p. 296)? Improvisation activities could be a way to improve the creative potential of students. Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves (2009) found “The level to which children develop their creative potential could be linked with the opportunities that the school and the teachers provide for creative expression” (p.256).
Review of Literature

This study of creativity focused on process, meaning, and collaboration. The literature is grouped according to the following categories:

*Process* – the approach through which the group engages in creative thinking;

*Collaboration* – the enhancement of the creative experience that might be gained by individuals through working with others; and

*Meaning* – the value and significance the children place upon their music.

**Process**

Cheyette (1977) made an analogy between creativity and a seed. “For the seed to flourish it must be nurtured by an enriched environment which must be prepared to encourage the seed to take root, to flower, and to produce fruit” (p.256). Several elements are required to provide the necessary environment for the process of creative thinking.

**Teacher Modeling.** Teachers can encourage creative behaviors by presenting a model of their own creative process to students. “The most powerful way to develop creativity in your students is to be a role model” (Sternberg & Williams, 1996, p. 7). Teachers can provide an atmosphere for creative thinking by making the creative process a natural occurrence in the classroom through modeling.

**Freedom from control.** The atmosphere of the classroom plays an important part in enabling creative thinking. Teachers need to provide a safe emotional atmosphere or *climate* for creative work (Edwards & Springate, 1995). Students need a certain amount of freedom from control in order to think creatively (Hickey, 2009). The traditional structure of the classroom needs to shift in order to allow students to be in control of their own work. The teacher should assume the role of facilitator. The teacher
needs to provide a framework for a creative assignment that will not hamper the student’s creativity and that provides them with interactive activities (Wiggins, 1999).

**Time.** Time is an important element in developing an environment for creative thinking (Brinkman, 2010; Davidson, 1990; Elliott, 1989; Strand, 2007; Sternberg & Williams, 1996). Students need time to think about the creative problem and to re-work and re-vice their original ideas. Time away from the project is also necessary. This is the incubation step in the creative process (Hickey & Webster 2001; Webster, 1988).

**Skill in the domain.** Amabile (1989) finds that children need to have skills in the area in which they will be creating. In a general music classroom this might be a repertoire of songs, knowledge of how to play an instrument, an understanding of musical form, and a vocabulary of rhythm and tonal syllables.

**Intrinsic motivation.** According to Amabile, intrinsic motivation- the desire to do something because of one’s interests in an activity, or the satisfaction or enjoyment derived from the activity, is necessary for creativity (Amabile, 1989, Elliott, 1989). Intrinsic motivation can be increased by focusing attention on student strengths and working toward building their self-esteem (Hennessey & Amabile, 1987). Amabile (1989) believes intrinsic motivation is the missing link of creativity because it is so often neglected. Giving students the opportunity to choose creative activities they enjoy will help increase their intrinsic motivation as well as help them maintain a positive attitude toward their creative work (Hennessey & Amabile, 1987). Intrinsic motivation gives us the desire to explore a project for our own sake instead of completing it in the simplest, quickest way. This difference in approach has an impact on the enjoyment of the process as well as the quality of the creative product (Amabile, 1989). Wolfe & Linden (1991)
found that Amabile’s Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity appears to generalize to musical creativity.

Several elements come together to provide the proper environment, preparation, and comfort level for the process of creative thinking to occur. Teachers need to provide students with a role model for creative work, a relaxed classroom structure to help students feel comfortable and at ease during their work, and enough time to express their thoughts in a way they feel is satisfactory. Students also need to have skill in the medium of their creative project and be intrinsically motivated through the framework of the assignment. Providing students with the proper physical, intellectual, and emotional environment makes the process of creative thinking more approachable for students.

Collaboration

Creative projects as group projects can add to a child’s enjoyment of an activity and consequently, to their intrinsic motivation. Children share ideas that often add meaning to their collaborative work. In addition, the creative process is seen more clearly as a result of the interactions between students.

Whole-part-whole. Wiggins (1994) conducted a study of fifth-graders involved in small-group composition projects. The purpose of her study was to look at the nature of strategies used by children as they worked with peers to solve compositional problems. Wiggins (1994) found that students working in groups planned together, worked individually on their parts, and then put everything back together resulting in a whole-part-whole approach. Although not discussed in this study, it is possible that planning is a more defined stage of composition when children work in groups than when they work alone.
Individual benefits. In another study, Wiggins (1999/2000) found that working in groups seemed to promote and nurture independent musical thinking by creating a rich and safe environment within which students seemed to feel at ease generating original musical ideas. As they work, students draw upon or intentionally oppose ideas of others within the group. In a group setting, students receive immediate feedback, which may cause them to restate, justify, defend, or alter their ideas. Beegle (2010) found that children working in groups “…gained skill in listening, performing in ensemble, communicating, group problem solving, decision making, and sharing improvisational techniques and musical ideas with one another” (p. 235).

Working with friends. Miell & MacDonald (2000), in a study of 11- and 12-year olds engaged in creating group compositions, found that student work was more successful when friends worked together. When friends work together, they can anticipate each other’s ideas and draw on shared experiences. The allocating of compositional roles in such a group is efficient because the children fall into their established social roles as they work in the group. Miell & MacDonald (2000) believe:

This is likely to be because their established shared knowledge and pattern of interacting allows them to anticipate each other’s ideas, draw on experiences they have shared or previously discussed and work efficiently by allocating roles and tasks based on their established expertise and preferences. (p. 365)

Skills acquired through group work. In another study of collaborative creativity, Beagle (2010) worked with fifth graders who responded to a poem, a painting, and a percussion piece for the creation of three different collaborative projects. She studied the social interaction of the groups and how those interactions related to their improvisation. Beegle found that the students “…gained skill in listening and performing
in ensemble, communicating, group problem solving, decision making, and sharing improvisational techniques and musical ideas with one another” (2010, p. 235). These findings support the possible positive effects of group work for creative outcomes. Sternberg & Williams (1996) note that while working collaboratively, in addition to sharing technique and strategies, “…students absorb the enthusiasm and joy many creative people exude as they go about the business of making something new” (p.40).

Children working in groups participate in verbal interactions that can be captured by the teacher or researcher and illustrate the creative process as well as the mode of their creative collaboration. Working in groups can provide benefits to students in planning, feedback from peers, shared experience from which to draw creative ideas, and an acquisition of skills through the nature of collaboration.

**Making Meaning**

Children attach meaning to music that is often not apparent to educators or parents. Making meaning is the understanding of associations children apply to the music they are creating or listening to. The way children describe and define their compositions can provide important information for music educators. “Musical meaning is at the heart of who we are and what we value” (Campbell, 2005, p.27). Through the method of interview, researchers can learn what a child thinks about the music they create.

**Learning what children know.** In addition to illustrating the process of creativity, the student’s knowledge about the skills and tools they are using to create can be identified by a child’s conversation about their music. Campbell (1998) found that discovering what music means to children helps educators understand what children know and value about music. “Getting a grasp on what music means to children is
coming to understand what they know and value” (Campbell, 1998, p. 171).

**Shared meaning.** Burnard (2002), in a study of collaborative improvisation, found that it was very important for students to discuss the music they made. What improvisation came to mean to each child was not generated within one mind, but constructed among the students.

**Informing music education.** Kanellopoulos (2007), in a study on the importance of investigating children’s discourse on music and its making, finds that children’s reflections on their musical creations are important tools for music educators. He suggests one of the main purposes of creative music education is to look at the way children construct and explore ideas and make that an integral part of the music education process. As children create in groups, their conversations about the music can show, not only what they know, but can give us a model to assist others in the creative process. Creative music education can be informed by learning the process of how children construct ideas (Kanellopoulos, 2007).

Children’s conversations about their music can inform educators about their skills and understanding. Meaning can also be created collectively when students work together. When children make their own meaning from music, they express ideas and understandings that are important for educators to be aware of, and use in guiding future creative explorations. Kanellopoulos (2007) suggested that knowledge to improve creative music education needs to come from the study of children’s music making and its meaning to the composers. Educators can look to children themselves to gain a better understanding of the imaginative world of children’s musical experiences. “Children’s own words of wisdom about music and its meaning in their lives allow us insight for better pedagogical pathways that take them forward” (Campbell, 2005, p.29).
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to observe the interactions of second graders as they worked in groups to respond creatively to a story using rhythm, speech, and melody. Questions that were explored:

1. What process do the students use in solving the creative problem? Is it similar among the groups?
2. How do students interact with each other during the process of creating music—what roles are assumed?
3. What meaning do the students make individually and as a group, as they re-create a story in chant, rhythm, and melody?

This study attempted to inform my future design of creative musical activities and encourage more individual participation in creative activities through observations and discussions with children about their music. It is hoped that this information will contribute to the field of creative music education at the early primary level by providing insight into the way children feel about their music.

Methodology

Design

This qualitative study followed a descriptive single case study design. Seven groups of second graders from an intact class were the units being analyzed. The rational for a single case study design as described by Yin (2009) is one that represents a unique case. These second grade students have shown a unique ability and willingness to participate in creative work. My past experience with this group of students inspired me to study the way they work together, and to listen to their thoughts about the experience of making music.
The teacher/researcher for this study has been the music specialist in the school where study took place for ten years and was a participant-observer (Yin, 2009). As an action research project this study followed the model of teacher as researcher. It also followed the description of qualitative research given by Phillips (2008) as a study that observes participants in their natural setting with the hope of discovering new information about the learner and their environment.

**Participants**

The setting for this study was a pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade Catholic School located in a small city in the Allegheny Mountain Region of the United States. The total population of the school is 194 students, 88 boys and 106 girls. The ethnic background of the school is 99% white. The participants were members of one self-contained second grade class (seven and eight year olds) with a class size of 26 students.

I have worked with the students in this study since they were in kindergarten with the exception of three students who were new to the school in first grade, and one student who was new to the school in second grade. Students at this school have music once a week for 40-minutes in kindergarten, and twice a week for 40-minutes in first and second grade.

These students have had several experiences with whole-class creative projects led by the teacher/researcher. They have used stories as a starting point for creating speech, rhythm and melody. As a class, they have created speech patterns and simple melodies to re-create ideas from a story. The students are familiar with the form- intro, ABA, coda and have used Orff xylophones for accompaniments and ostinati. The students have also had experience writing rhythms using stick notation.
Method

Andrea’s comment, referred to at the beginning of this paper, led me to believe that perhaps students needed to work in smaller groups so they could each have more of a voice in a creative work.

Students were intentionally grouped with friends based upon the work of Miell & MacDonald (2000) who found that students worked more efficiently and effectively when composing in groups with friends.

In the current study, each group was engaged in a single creative activity over a period of three weeks. The activity was to create group compositions based on the book, *The Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats (1962) and perform them for the class. I chose a story as a starting point to provide the students with material they could use as a theme in their compositions, similar to Beegle (2010). I chose *The Snowy Day* because many of the things Peter, the main character, did in the snow; crunching, climbing up and sliding down, and making snow angels, were actions that might easily be transferred to musical ideas. *The Snowy Day* was also appropriate to the time of year during which the study was conducted.

Each group performed their piece twice on the last day of the unit. Following the performances, I spoke with the students about their compositions during individual and group interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to learn how the students felt about their music-making experience and what part of the experience, if any, was important or significant to them.

Procedures

In accordance with the Internal Review Board, parental consent and student assent were obtained for each participant. Activities for the study took place during regularly
scheduled second grade music classes that met each Monday and Wednesday morning from 8:25 to 9:05. The students groups were created with the assistance of the classroom teacher in order to keep groups of friends together as much as possible.

Students were provided with pencils, crayons, and paper to write down anything they thought might help them remember their group’s composition. Levi (1991), in a study about music notation and creativity with second graders, found that writing musical notation did not inhibit creativity when the students created their music first and then wrote the notation. He noted parallels between children’s created notation and non-traditional spellings used by young children when they begin to write sentences and stories. Strand (2007) suggests first and second graders invent maps of their pieces using crayons and paper.

The overall plan for the instruction of this lesson is found in appendix A.

Data Sources

Two groups were video recorded during each class for more complete information about the interactions of the groups. This follows a model used by Wiggins (1994) where she targeted two individuals in a study of fifth graders solving compositional problems with peers. One of the video-recorded groups in the current study contained four close friends. The other video-recorded group contained three newer students, and the group’s members were not close friends. Grouping the newer students together was done to observe any variations in approach that may have emerged due to the newer students’ previous experience.

Video recordings were made of group work, composition performances, and individual and group interviews. Created or traditional notation and text generated by the students was collected. An audio recording of all student interactions (questions and
requests) with the teacher/researcher during group work was made and transcribed. Field notes were taken by the teacher/researcher during each day of the study.

The data collected for this study included -

1. Video recordings of group work (Transcribed)
2. Video recordings of composition performances
3. Video recordings of individual interviews (Transcribed)
4. Video recordings of group interviews (Transcribed)
5. Physical artifacts (Notation and Text)
6. Field notes from direct observation and participant-observation
7. Audio recordings of interactions between students and participant-observer (Transcribed)

Results

The analysis of data was based upon the theoretical propositions used in the literature review for this study (Yin, 2009). Process, collaboration and meaning provided the lens used to organize the various data sources. Themes emerged within each of these areas. The process used by students to solve the creative problem is explained through their approach to choosing instruments, repeated practice of their musical ideas, and preparation for the performance. Collaboration was described by group dynamics, and individual feelings about contributing a part to the group product. Meaning was represented by associations the students made to other events in their lives and thoughts they shared about the music inside themselves.

Process

Choosing instruments. Choosing the “right” instrument to play was the first part of the process of creating music for each group. Students needed to try out ideas and be
able to realize sounds they were thinking about. One student said, “I need an instrument to try out my beat.” On the first day of group work, students from each group experimented with several different instruments until they each found one he or she liked, or that “worked” with the instruments of other members in their group. Some students enjoyed the freedom of playing any instrument they wanted during the first two workdays. Max, a child who is usually very quiet in the music room, brought a classroom-timpani and a suspended cymbal to his workspace and began to drum and crash so loudly that everyone stopped their work to watch him.

Some groups were looking for instruments they could use to describe a particular part of the story. Group Two used the cabasa to play the “crunch, crunch, crunch” of Peter walking in the snow. Nicholas, a group member, explained how they chose the cabasa. “We thought we could use the maracas for the crunch, crunch, crunch, but that sounded like a rattling sound. Then we used the cabasa. It made more of a crunching sound than the maracas.” Nicholas also relayed how his group chose a drum for the sound of Peter sliding his feet in the snow. Aaron, another group member, was going to slide his hand across the top of a drum to make the sliding sound. They tried different kinds of drums and finally chose the smaller side of a bongo drum. Nicholas said, “The slide was very loud when the drum was big.” When I asked why they did not want it to be loud, Nicholas said, “Because when you are dragging your feet in the snow, it doesn’t make very much noise.”

Group Four chose to use the wind chimes. The members of the group thought they looked like icicles, so they seemed like a natural fit for their song about playing in the snow. Group six did a lot of instrument switching until they each found something they liked. Gabby was considered the lucky one by the rest of her group because she
found an instrument right away. She said, “I found an instrument that I really liked, and I’m like, oh wow! I’ll use this!” By the fourth class, each group had identified its singers. The students saw the singing as one of the parts to be assigned in the group, just like the drums and xylophones. Andrea said, “I am a throat player – that means I sing.” Four weeks after they began their compositions all of the groups were able to tell me which instruments they each tried, and what the exact order of instruments had been for each person in the group. Choosing instruments was an important part of the creative process for these students.

**Practice.** The repetition and practice of musical ideas emerged as another important part of the creative process for each group. When a group made up something they liked, they played it over and over again. Elise made up a rhythm pattern that she played on a drum during the first class. She taught the pattern to Mary, another student in her group. At the beginning of the next class, Elise and Mary played the pattern several times until they felt comfortable with it. This pattern was practiced at least 15 times during every work session. By the second class, group four had created a section for their composition in which each student played a rhythm pattern and sang in a particular order. They practiced this many times each class. In addition to helping them memorize their parts, they seemed to enjoy practicing because they were working together. Eliza, a member of group six, said, “We found out what we were gonna do and then we kept practicing it and practicing it until we were really good at it and then we performed.”

**Performance.** A few students made comments about the group performances during the last three class periods. However, my understanding of the significance the students placed on their composition performances and how that affected their process, developed during individual and group interviews. Although the students knew they
would be performing their compositions for the rest of the class, they worked for the first three class periods without any mention of that event. During the fourth class period, students became more serious about their compositions and most groups had an agenda for their work time. During the fifth class period the students started to think about the performance. Simon asked, “Will everyone be gathering in the music room for the performance?” Keith asked, “So we’re gonna be doing this in front of people?” Some group members began to get frustrated with each other because they did not have their compositions ready and were having trouble agreeing on the way parts of their compositions should be played.

The sixth class period consisted of twenty minutes of practice time in groups and the performance in the music room. Mariah’s last comment in her group was, “I have a feeling we’re not gonna be very happy on our presentation.” Keith was nervous about singing and wanted to practice for me again, even though his group was ready. Jake started group work on the last day by saying, “No fooling around or nothing,” to the other members of his group. Evan responded, “Yeah, ‘cause we’re gonna be taping and I don’t want to be embarrassed.”

The members of group one - Mary, Keith, and Kevin had to work during last half of the classes without Elise, who was absent. The group was initially very concerned, because Elise had been the leader from the first day of the project. They gradually gained confidence in their ability to complete the project and perform without Elise.

Mary – “When we said Keith was singing, he got a little surprised.”

Keith – “I was scared at first, but then I’m like, ok.”

Mary – “I was scared too. I was kinda scared singing in front of an audience ‘cause I never did it before. It kinda was a new
experience for me, but when I did it, it actually felt good.”

Group three had fun making the composition and worked well together. During their group discussion, Katie introduced her feelings about being nervous and the other two group members immediately joined in.

Katie - “It was nice to perform. We were really nervous to perform.”

Marci - “We were nervous.”

Katie – “I actually felt butterflies in my stomach.”

Lee showed her heart beating – “Boom, boom, boom.”

None of the students actually told me they were nervous before the performances. I could tell that some of them were, but I was a little surprised to find that each group experienced some anxious feelings about performing their pieces for the class. Evan said, “It’s just like the football field out there, we’ve gotta try to win no matter how much we get embarrassed, we gotta win.” When I asked him what winning was, he said, “I’d say it’s making it through our song without being embarrassed.” Jessica tried to think about how she felt at her cheerleading competitions. She said, “There are a lot more people than the people that were in here.” Eliza said, “Well, if I wouldn’t have to make up the song, it would be stress…gone. ‘Cause you’ve gotta really think in your brain and you’ve gotta make up a song that goes with the book and it was really hard.”

Collaboration

Group dynamics. Most of the groups had one individual who emerged as the leader of the group on the first day. The students worked, primarily in groups of friends, however, it was not possible to have every group be made up of close friends. One of the groups being videoed during each work session, group five, had two students who were new to the school last year, one who was new this year and one student who had been
part of the class since Kindergarten. This was not a group of close friends. The members of group five were not able to focus on their product as well as most other groups, and were not on task during a good deal of work time. This was the only group to have a power struggle for control and actually “kicked out” one of the group members. Group five created words and chose a pre-existing melody during the third class, but did not develop their composition beyond that point during the next three classes.

A dynamic that emerged in group one, a group of close friends, was the way they helped each other to understand the music and work through necessary changes. This group was able to play and sing together and did more editing of their composition than most other groups. They used a bass xylophone to accompany both the A and B section of their composition. They had several group discussions about the exact notes that were best for each part, how many times they should be played, and at what speed. They made several changes along the way and documented those changes on their “notation” paper. Mary wrote the notes for Kevin’s bass xylophone part and then held the paper for him to read while he practiced. This group worked without Elise, it’s original leader, for the second half of the project. The remaining students each contributed more to the project than they had done when Elise was there. Group one was able to create a composition that had all of the sections required for the assignment, and perform them in the correct order. The group completed their work in time and used the last day to practice. Although they expressed feeling nervous, they were well prepared and were successful performers.

**Playing a part.** Students seemed to enjoy working together to make music. During individual and group interviews, students described the way they made their piece in terms of what each person did in the group. Most of the groups organized their music
and instruments so that individuals took turns playing. When I asked Gabby what her favorite part of the song was, she said, “When Jessica patted and then I patted.” Gabby enjoyed the feeling of contributing her part at just the right time. In describing the preparation of her group’s composition to me, she said, “I forgot my line.” For Gabby, the collaboration seemed to be more about each person contributing his or her own part, than the entire group playing at the same time. Natalie (group four), in speaking about how her group made their composition, said, “All of us had a part to do and they chose me to go first and then Sonya and then Jenny and Annie, and that’s the intro/coda.” In this group, each person played their part in a specific order. Each one was confident about their part, and trusted that the next person would come in at the correct time as well. This group even took turns in a row when talking to me about their composition during their group interview. Annie said, “My favorite part was that we do it all together…we were working together.”

Meaning

Associations. The children seemed to connect the story with their own experiences and these became part of the compositions. Some instrument sounds, or note combinations were meaningful to certain individuals due to the memories they inspired in those children. Two groups added ‘hot cocoa’ to the lyrics of their songs. This idea was not present in the story, but was something the children associated with playing in the snow. Several children said the songs they made up reminded them of times when they played in the snow with siblings or made snow angels. Some of the groups, as described in the ‘choosing instrument’ section, were interested in representing ideas in the story with instrument sounds. A few of the instrument sounds reminded children of other events in their lives. Steven played a low C on a bass metallophone and announced –
“Time for church.” He thought it sounded like the church bell that rings before mass begins. Nicholas, the bass metallophone player in Simon’s group, played three ascending notes – A, C, D in the second section of their composition. These notes, played after words that described Peter finding the snowball he had put in his coat pocket had melted, were meant to represent the “sad ending.” During the interview with group two, I asked, “How did the music make you feel?” Simon said, “Well, at the ending, the sad part, when I lost my Gram, it made me feel a little sad ‘cause it made me remember her, but then the good memories came in, and I started, like, my body started feeling a little better.”

Group four used wind chimes. Annie, a group member said, “I really like that instrument because it sounds like ‘once upon a time.’ It really reminds me of all the fairy-tales I watched when I was four.” Natalie, who played the wind chimes in group four said, “At the beginning of Beauty and the Beast, it reminds me of the charms.” During her individual interview, Lee, a member of group three, was discussing her favorite part of her group’s composition. She told me she liked the “thing that rings a lot.” She was referring to a soprano metallophone that another student in her group played. She said she liked the way it sounded. I asked what it reminded her of. She said, “When I use to go with my Grandpa to the beach, ‘cause there was a bell and it kind of made me think of him because he’s in heaven.”

The music inside. The interview segment of this study provided me with an opportunity to speak with the students about their thoughts and feelings related to their music. The casual comments made by these children were an indication of their musical worlds that we don’t usually see at school. Marci said she was humming beats in her head for a couple of days before they started work on their composition, and then she
taught them to the other two girls in her group. Katie said, “I like making things up at home. That’s what I usually do.” Lee said, “Me too.” In our group discussions, many of the students were already planning our next project. Jake thought that he might be better off working by himself. He felt his group could have done better and compared their work to that of other groups that had more “detail” and “catchier” songs. Jake said, “For me, I make up a lot of songs, but I never made up a song about snow.” Evan told me he should pick the song next time. When I asked what he meant by that, he said, “Make up the words and stuff, ‘cause my Uncle, before he passed away, he gave me his guitar and he says, I know that you have a really good singing power inside of you.”

**Discussion**

This study demonstrates benefits of providing students with an environment that encourages and nurtures creative expression. Students learned from each other in an atmosphere where they guided their own progress through an activity. Students who worked in groups of close friends were more interactive and spent more time discussing and refining their compositions than non-friend groups.

Themes that emerged within the area of *process* were each related to a “doing” activity. Choosing instruments and practicing were ways for the students to engage in the creation of their music. Campbell (1998) believes that “doing” music is very important for children. “For many, to ‘do’ music is to come to understanding it, in that their physical involvement brings them a fuller intellectual and emotional experience” (Campbell, 1998, p. 187). The activities in this study seemed important to the children because the “doing” was student-led. The amount of practice they engaged in would have become unpleasant, had the teacher led each repetition. Guiding their own process enabled them to see their needs as a group and work until they were satisfied with the
results. The students needed to play the instruments first, then began to discuss the story within their group, and then decide what they wanted to represent in their compositions.

When designing this study, I saw the performance as a natural culmination for the project. My intention was to make the students feel that their creative products were important and valuable. The students had performed as a class in the past and I did not expect them to have difficulty with a performance for their peers. I was surprised to find that they all experienced some concern about the performance. Each group was videoed performing their piece twice. This was done to give the group a chance to practice in the new setting, and to see how alike each repetition of the group composition would be. Once the groups had played their piece for the first time, they became a little more comfortable. Some students expressed having enjoyed performing during the second time through their compositions. The performance experience enabled each group to assess their own work by providing them with other models for comparison.

A construct that developed within the area of collaboration was the importance of the social and interactive dynamics of the groups. This supported the work of Miell & MacDonald’s (2000) study where they found that groups of friends worked more efficiently as a result of their pre-existing social roles. In addition to efficiency, the dynamics of the group directly affected how productive the group was and how happy they were with their product. Groups of close friends were able to discuss the music, make changes, and improve their compositions. Some of the children talked about how much they liked working together with their friends. The activity seemed to strengthen the bonds among some of the groups of friends. They liked the feeling of making their contribution at a particular time, whether that was an eight-beat rhythm pattern, three notes on a bass metallophone, or two hand-slides across the top of a drum. Beegle noted
this idea of performance organization in her study of fifth-graders’ planned improvisation. She begins her discussion of organization with the student quote, “You gotta know when you’re gonna do it” (Beegle, 2010, p. 233). Students in the current study who worked well together clearly trusted each other to come in with their part at the correct time.

The final area in this study, meaning, provided the most important information for me as an elementary music teacher. I was amazed at the richness of students’ thoughts and feelings about music and themselves. Some students made associations between instrument sounds and meaningful events in their lives. They related ideas from the story to similar activities in which they had participated. I was impressed by these associations, but not surprised by them. I was however, completely unprepared for some of the more personal discussions about “songs they make up all the time,” and “having a singing power inside of me.” Why do children need to compartmentalize their love of music into ‘home music’ and ‘school music’? How can we as educators encourage them to share the music inside? Kanellopoulos (2007) believes “Through the study of talk we might locate clues which will enable us to glimpse aspects of children’s felt experience” (p. 125). My conversations with these children have changed the way I think about individuals in my classroom. It is natural to think of each class as a group when they come to the music room, however, each child comes to us with his or her own unique musical story. Our challenge is to find ways of encouraging them to share their stories.

Conclusions

Brophy (2001), in comparing the ‘creative intention’ of xylophone improvisations by a seven-year-old and a ten-year-old, found that the older student had more concern for musical conventions and than the younger student. He notes that this shift can also be
applied to the older child’s “…attitude toward creative engagement” (Brophy, 2001, p. 39). My interest in creativity in the elementary music classroom grew out of a desire to help students maintain their creative spirit as they transition into a world where they are becoming more aware of both musical and social conventions.

Through this study, I developed new understandings regarding designing composition activities for the future. In designing the activity for this study, I drew from the student’s experience as well as models of previous studies in the field (Wiggins, 1994; Miell & MacDonald, 2000; Beegle, 2010). The use of a story as a prompt was helpful for a first-time melodic composition with text. Further studies to compare this activity with a different type of prompt, or no prompt at all would be helpful in determining the most effective activity design for students. The use of the form; Intro, ABA, Coda, provided the students with a framework that enabled them to create a longer piece of music with varied parts. The form in this activity gave the students small goals for each work session, which helped them reach their final goal within the given amount of time. The length of time that students had to work in groups seemed to be appropriate for a first time group composition at this age. I do not believe future compositions of a similar nature would require as much time. Students needed to adapt to their “new” music-room environment when we began this study. The freedom allowed for experimentation with instruments and the novelty of the group arrangement extending to the hallway and the lunchroom were new to the second-graders. It took one or two class periods before they could really settle into their tasks.

Members of each group in this study sang original text to a melody. It was clear from group “notation” documents that these melodies were not written down. Students sang created melodies as they read the text they had written. In looking at the multiple
data sources of performances, “notation,” and video of work time, the question that presents itself is, how did these melodies come into being? One student mentioned having thought about their song for a few days before music class, but for the most part, melodies seemed to just appear as students shared the completed text with the rest of their group. These melodies often remained exactly the same from the first day I heard them being sung, until the performance two or three weeks later. Further study of children’s melodies is necessary to understand how the children created and remembered the melodies.

The researcher gained important information about the musical lives of children through informal discussions. Although it would be the most difficult part of this study to fit into a normal elementary schedule, conversations with children about their music proved invaluable. The informal comments made by the students demonstrated a disconnect that exists between “home music” and “school music.” Creative thinking, as defined by Webster (1989), puts the focus on the process of creativity and expects that the creator will draw from his or her previous experience and knowledge. Gardner (1982) also refers to a child’s previous experience and believes music educators should respect the skills and understanding with which young children begin school. The musical skill and understanding children come to school with is important and should be recognized and explored by music educators. The challenge for elementary music educators is to bridge the two musical worlds of “home” and “school” and to enable the child’s naturally occurring creative spirit to find an outlet in the music classroom.
Lesson Plan

The teacher/researcher read the story, *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) to the students as they sat in their groups. After the reading, each group was instructed to create a piece of music based on *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962). Students were directed to create compositions using speech, melody, and rhythm in ABA form with an intro/coda. They were reminded of other pieces they had learned as a class using this form. Students were invited to use any of the Orff instruments or classroom percussion instruments available in the music room. The following outline was used to help students stay on task.

Class Meeting Outline

1) The story, *The Snowy Day*, was read to the class. Students sat with their group to listen to the story. Students met in groups for the first time to discuss the story.

2) Group work to create the intro/coda section of the piece.

3) Group work to create the speech section of the piece.

4) Group work to create melody section of the piece

5) Group work on melody and rehearsal of piece.

6) Classroom performance of each group’s piece.

Student work groups were scattered around the classroom, in the hallway, and in the lunchroom across the hall from the music room. The study was conducted during six consecutive class meetings.
## Group Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Elise – Mary – Kevin – Keith (Video Group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Steven – Aaron – Simon – Nicholas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Marci – Katie – Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Annie – Natalie – Jenny – Sonya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mariah – Andrea – Michael – Addison (Video Group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Eliza – Alexis – Jessica – Gabby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Max – Jake – Evan</td>
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References


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