

## How Pre-service Teachers Notions and Use of Creativity in the Classroom were Impacted during Student Teaching

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### Abstract

Pre-service teachers entering the field of education are excited about the idea of touching children's lives in positive ways, helping their students learn and incorporating their love of teaching and being creative. That excitement can easily be drowned out as they enter their student teaching experiences and discover a world of education that is very structured, standards focused, and rigid. This study looks at how a group of 13 pre-service teachers defined creativity, tried to use it in their student teaching placements, and reflected upon the challenges of being creative and how they were planning to use creativity in the future. Implications for this study include a call for more creativity training in the field of education and encouragement for using creativity as an important pedagogical tool. The topic of how we are using creativity in classrooms is significant because several practitioners enter the field hoping to capitalize on their creativity and if they are not able to use it in classrooms, then they are more likely to leave the field (Berry, Byrd, Wieder 2013). The topic of creativity in classroom spaces is also significant because it speaks to a skill we are either offering students to engage with or neglecting to put into the structured curriculum. Without giving our students a chance to be creative, what are we giving them a chance to be?

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### Introduction

In a world of standardized testing and mandated curriculum, creativity is being looked at as a lost space in classrooms (Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Berliner 2011). Many teachers enter the profession hoping to be able to conduct creative activities with their students. There is a time and space for creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013) and teachers new to the profession are trying to navigate their passion for being a creative educator alongside trying to make sure they meet all of their deadlines and interact appropriately with the school culture they are assigned a placement in. It is a battle of how teacher's can successfully integrate creativity with building pressures in the education world and little leeway (Henriksen & Mishra 2013). This study looks at how a group of pre-service teachers are defining creativity, what creativity they are observing in their classrooms, and what activities they instituted that they considered creative. The pre-service teachers were also asked to reflect on things that inhibited creativity in the classroom space and what they are doing in the environment to help or hinder the development of creative potential (Beghetto, 2013). The findings in this article reveal how even when pre-service teachers intend to be creative, they might end up not using as much creativity due to factors such as curriculum demands or a lack of confidence in their place in the classroom. Implications for this article lend themselves to push people to find their creativity in classroom spaces even in the current demanding field of education. The findings lend themselves to a call made by researchers in the field that it is urgent for future teachers in the field to receive training in order to help them build creativity in themselves and in their students (Budnky, Fomin, Novoselska & Voitovych, 2020).

### Context

The pre-service teachers that are part of this study were in the student teaching spring semester of their senior year. There were 13 elementary education pre-service teachers that were a part of the study. The pre-service teachers were part of a teacher certification program at a liberal arts university in Central Pennsylvania. Each of the pre-service teachers was required to student teach for a total of 15 weeks in two different placements. Some pre-service teachers in this study had placements in special education classrooms and some had placements in pre-K classrooms. All of the pre-service teachers in this study had an elementary placement.

### Methods

The method that was used to collect data from the pre-service teachers was through written reflections. They were first asked to reflect on how they defined creativity and what they observed their cooperating teachers doing that they would define as creative. The pre-service teachers were then asked to set a written creativity goal in their student teaching experience. Finally, the students were asked to reflect towards the end of their student teaching experience on if they had met their creativity goals and what their plans were for being creative in their

classroom in the future. The pre-service teachers were also asked to reflect on any factors that inhibited creativity in their student teaching placements. The reflections were then analyzed and coded for common themes. The codes and data will be presented and discussed in the following sections.

## **Findings**

### **Defining Creativity**

It was found that several pre-service teachers are defining creativity in similar ways. Some of them said that creativity is to make something new and something from the imagination and that some people have more creativity than others. Others said that creativity was about making up new ideas. Still others said that creativity was aligned with a particular skill. Below are samples from the pre-service teacher participant definitions.

Student 1. Creativity is to make something new, something from one's imagination. Some people have more creativity than others.

Student 2. Something out of the box, thinking or acting in a way that is different than what is expected.

Student 3. I think creativity is anything unique that a child or person can dream up. Yes, all ideas stem from experiences or past encounters, but creativity strays from the norm and helps us in our individuality, it sets us apart from everyone else.

Student 4. Something different from the regular curriculum or when someone takes an idea and makes it their own or comes up with a new idea

Student 5. Using our imagination to make learning fun

Student 6. I think being creative means to stray away from what is original and construct something unique. I think creativity becomes a piece of art or artwork produced by teachers. Being creative also means to construct new, original, and unique ideas.

Student 7. A different way to learn that incorporates different aspects/parts of your brain. Creativity can occur in different ways such as a thought or action.

Student 8. The use of imagination throughout the mind, process of bringing something new to the table, originality, artistic sense of mind

Student 9. Creativity is introducing a new way of doing a thing, or doing something new. It means using your own ideas. While you can be inspired by someone else, creativity means making your own process or product for something.

Student 10. Creativity is the ability to apply yourself to come up with ideas. It can be used artistically or as solutions.

Student 11. Out of the box thinking or original thinking. Creativity is a departure from the norm.

Student 12. Creativity is doing something in a different way from the norm. Sometimes being creative is something (like art) but it can also involve being flexible and spontaneous (like changing your plans if something is not working)

Student 13. I would define creativity as putting an artistic spin on something you create. I would describe a person as creative if they enjoy crafting, drawing, painting, designing, or making music. Creativity is thinking outside the box in various situations in different ways. Creativity is the ability to look at problems or life in general in an interesting way. It often involves changing and adapting existing resources and changing them to send or modify a message.

All of the 13 pre-service teachers involved in the study came up a definition of creativity. Many of them defined it as something new you do or used the word imagination. Some of them saw creativity as a quality or skill people have.

### **Goal Setting**

All of the 13 pre-service teachers were asked to set a creative goal during their student teaching experience. The goals that pre-service teachers set fell into the following three categories. The first category was handouts to supplement curriculum or visuals. The second category pre-service teachers set goals towards were activities to support Math instruction. The third category was game based learning. Below each category, the sample goal the pre-service teacher set will be listed.

#### **Handouts to supplement curriculum or Visuals**

Student 1. I want to create a lesson from scratch and a summative assessment

Student 2. I am planning on publishing a book with my first grade classroom

Student 3. I want to come up with a rewards system for my class

Student 4. I want to incorporate songs into my writing and grammar instruction.

#### **Activities to support Math instruction**

Student 5. My students will create a creature for measurement

Student 6. I want to do something fun and creative to introduce long division

Student 7. I want to create a game about Money in my math instruction.

Student 8. I plan on creating a rounding game for my students

Student 9. I plan on using manipulatives to teach Math

### **Game-based learning**

Student 10. I want to create a game in my language arts lesson next week.

Student 11. I plan on having my students use role play and debate topics.

Students 12. I want to use review games in both Math and Science

Student 13. I plan on finding games related to content and use them in centers.

The creative goals that were set by the student teachers tended to involve the student teachers introducing something new to their class or using a prop or material that was not worksheet based. Many of the goals also involved introducing something different to help students learn a more difficult concept.

### **Meeting Goals that were set.**

Below is the reflective data after student teachers were completing their experience. The reflections showed if they met their goals set to be more creative. The data is organized according to themes that emerged. The themes were Creativity used in planning, Math and Science, songs, games, and motions.

### **Planning**

Student 1- I ended up being more creative in my planning and found my own materials.

Student 2- I incorporated a lot of games and interactive activities that made my students want to learn and grow.

Student 3- I created a bulletin board about growing and had the student's plant flowers.

Student 4- I tried to add more creative transitions and cueing

Student 5- I did come up with a new reward system that included positive messages.

Student 6- I came up with a unit about visiting museums for my life skills class and it concluded with an art reception at the end of the day.

### **Math/Science**

Student 7- I ended up being creative in Math and coming up with lessons that were fun and made my students want to learn.

Student 8- I used the science of food and made donuts with my students to discuss Shrove Tuesday.

Student 9- I started a coffee cart in the building to help my students think about Math, business, and life concepts.

Student 10- I was able to do some science experiments with my kindergarteners which they loved.

Student 11- They worked with play-dough to create visual models of the planets.

### **Songs/Games/Motions**

Student 12- Every day I incorporated music and movement into my lessons and I have done four art projects to promote fine motor skills.

Student 13- I did come up with games for my students and it was a big success. I incorporated music for my students throughout the day and I did do review games.

All of the student teachers involved in the study felt like they used creativity in their final reflections. They reflected on how they were able to incorporate small moments of creativity into a lesson or part of the day. A few wrote about how they were able to use creativity in a bigger portion of the day. Only a few mentioned how they did something consistently that they thought was creative. Below are some of the reflections student teachers wrote about the challenges that they felt prohibited them from being more creative in their placements.

### **Factors that Inhibited Creativity**

Student 1. I believe the subjects I was teaching led to a bit of stifled creativity, it isn't like I could invent new writing prompts. Additionally, while I created my own lessons, I generally followed the basic format given to me.

Student 2. I feel like a factor that determined my creativity was how my cooperating teachers both valued creativity in different ways. My general education teacher had creativity in her classroom set up and my special education teacher used creativity in her group work and in the art projects that she did.

Student 3. A lot of my difficulties in being creative lied with struggles in time management and finding enough time to think of creative activities. Also time and money. A worksheet is both cheap and fast, having students make slime from scratch on the other hand is time consuming and REALLY expensive.

Student 4. I think I was able to use creativity more in my Pre-K environment because there is not as much structure. My second grade classroom was harder because everything was curriculum and standards based.

Student 5. I felt less creative because I was trying to learn and feel confident in the curriculum with my second

grade. I was more creative in my special education class because there is not a curriculum and standards to follow.

Student 6. I feel as if I do not get the chance to be very creative in either of my placements, which I wish was different. In my special education placement they used a program that was really strict and in my first grade placement I had more opportunities but not as many.

Student 7. I feel as if I had a lot more room for creativity in Special Education seeing that my students are all on different levels academically and cognitively. I am able to really tailor my creativity to meet their needs.

Student 8. Sometimes I feel both I can be creative and other times I feel my creativity cannot come out. Sometimes I feel less creative because we are constantly testing and catching up on work. There are also times I feel more creative when doing reading, phonics, or spelling because I will come up with creative ways to practice or to discuss.

Student 9. I think most of my lessons were scripted; I couldn't provide any more support or introduce extra activities. I had Fridays for different activities that I could add but I couldn't teach most of those days because of delays.

Student 10. I have more leeway to be creative with my life skills placement. I was given topics for lessons and told to come up with ideas.

Student 11. I think the presence of my third grade cooperating teacher contributed to me being less creative. I felt like I didn't have a lot of autonomy in the classroom, so I was timid to change anything. I feel like in my middle school special education classroom, I feel more comfortable and supported so I am more willing to be more creative.

Student 12. Much of the curriculum that my coop had already established in the classroom did not allow the extra time to be creative, unfortunately. I personally learn better when there are songs or catchy videos to go along with lessons so I did try to incorporate music and movement into lessons when possible.

Student 13.

I think time is a big factor in making me feel less creative in the classroom. Sometimes I feel that it takes a lot of time to come up with creative projects and ideas while other times I feel like implementing them in the classroom takes a while. I felt that I was willing to be more creative when I was passionate about the subject matter or if my co-op was willing to share creative projects she did in the past to give me ideas.

## **Discussion**

Below is a discussion about the findings of the study. Each of the discussion sections is labeled according to the themes that emerged from the findings. The first discussion section is about the students defining creativity. The second discussion section is about the student's goal setting for creativity. The next section is a reflection on how they did use creativity, and the final section is a discussion of their reflection about the challenges to using creativity.

### **Defining Creativity**

Several students chose to define being creative as a product you end up with. Creativity is art work for instance. A few students chose to define it as a way of thinking outside of the box or going against the norm. All of the students looked at creativity as a quality that people have. No one defined creativity in a negative way. All of the students wrote about it as a way of being or thing you have. No one talked about it as a thing you can learn, or build, or gain over time. It is interesting because I find several student teachers I work with use the statement repeatedly, "I am not that creative" when they are asked to come up with planning ideas. It's as if creativity has been put inside the Arts and Crafts closet instead of being found in all aspects of a teacher's handbook. The few students who looked at creativity more broadly were able to see it as a skill you need in order to work with the most minor moments in your classroom. How do you handle bullying, plans that don't work out, homework turn in routines, chatty moments? If you choose to think about all of these situations and come up with solutions that end up working for your particular students, I would say you are being a creative person without doing an art project. Maybe we need to let go of a very specific definition of creativity and embrace the larger definition defined by researchers in the field of creativity.

### **Goal Setting for Creativity**

Many of the students set a goal that put them in charge of actively making a material or finding a material to use that was not in a worksheet format. The students who wanted to make sure they tried to be creative in Math might have chosen that subject particularly because they found the topic hard for the students to grasp so if they incorporated something different, maybe the students would remember the concept more. The same idea might have been how the student teacher decided they wanted to incorporate something creative in the writing or grammar section. Four of the students set a goal around being creative when they used game based instruction. In the twenty years I have been in the education field and taught or observed teachers, games have been used.

Using game based instruction definitely is effective in most cases. Maybe student teachers feel like if their students are not using worksheets, engaged with the instruction, and having fun then that activity was creative.

### **How Creativity was Used**

All of the student teachers who were a part of the study were able to reflect that they had used creativity in small ways. A few were able to conclude that they had felt creative during the entire process. Many of the reflections on how creativity was used involved the student teachers doing something outside of a scripted curriculum. It involved creating moments where their students were singing, playing games, using motions, or creating something themselves. This makes one think that using creativity in the classroom is closely associated with creating a play based environment. The student teachers felt like they were being creative when their students were having fun, when the classroom felt more playful. This idea is closely associated with the research being done on how play is highly beneficial in educational settings and has an important role in helping to stretch our imagination and explore our creativity (Robinson 2016)

### **Factors Inhibiting Creativity**

Several pre-service teachers felt that several factors inhibited their creativity. They talked about how having the time to come up with ideas and execute them was inhibiting. Also the time that being creative would take away from an already very packed and structured standards based curriculum. Several student teachers mentioned how their creativity was directly related to the student teaching placement or cooperating teacher that they were placed with. It seemed that some found it easier to be creative in placements that gave them more freedom to plan. Others found it easier to be creative if their environment was more unstructured. Many of the student teachers alluded to their newness in the field for being a reason that they chose to not be more creative. A few student teachers fought through the challenge of being in another teacher's classroom with a given curriculum in order to do some creative practices. It is refreshing to think that even though several of the student teachers wished they could have been more creative, they all tried to do something creative no matter what placement they found themselves in.

### **Implications**

As a result of conducting this study, several implications for practice can be concluded. First, it would be great if more schools came up with a creativity mission statement for their practice considering how several teachers crave a creative license in their profession. If they feel their creativity is not being valued and if that lends itself to retention issues, having a working mission towards being creative in a school building might help to retain teachers because they feel that their creativity is being valued. In short, schools would benefit from adopting a common creativity definition that could be applied to how they build curriculum and set goals to be creative.

The second implication for practice is that several pre-service teachers were dissatisfied with the level of creativity they were able to practice in their classroom spaces. Maybe there should be more focused professional development on how to incorporate creativity techniques. All of the student teachers tried to incorporate creativity in small ways. If there was more training on how to really build creative moments in larger ways within the scripted curriculum or alongside the standards, teachers might not be as hesitant to take a creative chance.

Lastly, Personal perseverance is an important implication in this study. Several student teachers found several reasons for why choices were made to be less creative. While these reasons could be completely valid, it is important to take note of the few student teachers who reflected on being able to be creative in both of their placements no matter what the restrictions were. It makes one think that using creativity in a classroom ends up being a choice that you have to personally make as an educator, make a priority, and at times fight for. Future research should include studying the creative measures educators who design curriculum are taking. Research could also look at how veteran teachers feel about creativity and if they feel like they have been able to be creative in the profession. Finally, research could look at if students themselves want their teachers to use creativity in classrooms and how.

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