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Creativity, Policy, and Practice in Three States:

An Exploration of Definitions of Creativity among State Art Education Policies, the Life Contexts, and Professional Practice of Middle Level Art Educators

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Abstract

More than any other time in history, creativity is a necessary outcome for education. A global and networked society requires creative people to innovate within a variety of economic, political, and social realities. The need for creativity highlights a crucial role for art education in contemporary education. Yet, a lack of understanding about creativity in art education inhibits actionable activities from policies to classrooms. In order to forward creativity as an educational outcome, a clear understanding of the definition of creativity in U.S. education policy and practice is necessary. Therefore, the focus of this research is to gain knowledge on the representation of creativity in the art education policies of U.S. states. This study also examines the definitions of creativity held by middle level art educators in order to identify relationships between the contexts of policy and practice. Other factors explored as possible mediating factors on definitions of creativity include the life experiences, education level, and work contexts of middle level art educators. Additionally significant, this study provides and tests for problem-based, practical categorizations of creativity, a new and meaningful way to frame creativity within and across domains.

Keywords

Creativity, Policy, Middle Level Education

Introduction

Creativity is an increasingly essential outcome of education. The global, networked society necessitates citizens to possess a variety of creativity skills for successfully navigating contemporary economic, political, and social realities (Americans for the Arts, 2006; Craft, Creativity and Education Futures: Learning in a digital age, 2011; Florida R., The Great Reset, 2010). This need highlights a crucial role for art education in schools.

Regardless of creativity's value in contemporary society and despite a belief that art education is a source of creativity in schools, confusion about what constitutes creativity challenges its prioritization in U.S. education policy and practice. Creativity remains a powerful piece of education rhetoric, but not an empowering outcome of education's reality (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011). Ambiguous definitions of creativity along with disrupted communication among research, policy, and practice complicate student empowerment (2010; Craft, Creativity in Schools: Tensions and Dilemmas, 2005; Fleming, 2008; Kimbell, 2001, Zimmerman, 2009). Research about creativity across research, policy, and practice is rare (Bachar & Glaubman, 2006; Burch, 2007; Pajares, 1992; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002). The absence of such studies limits knowledge about how art educators conceive of creativity. Additionally, how knowledge networks among art education research, policy, and practice function is unknown.

This exploratory study analyzed relationship variables between state level art education policies, the self-reported practice of middle level art educators, their life experiences, and their teaching contexts. This mixed methods study addressed the following research question: In what ways does the impact of life experience shape middle level art educators definition of creativity relative to state education policies? The following four sub-questions was also addressed:

Sub-Question 1: What relationship exists, if any, between family economic status during childhood and teachers' definitions of creativity?

Sub-Question 2: What relationship exists, if any, between middle level art educators' educational background and teachers' definitions of creativity?

Sub-Question 3: What relationship exists, if any, between the school context of a middle level art educator and teachers' definitions of creativity?

Sub-Question 4: What relationship exists, if any, between definitions of creativity in state education policies and teachers' definitions of creativity?

Context and Significance

In order to forward creativity as an educational outcome, it is necessary to develop a conception of creativity for the overlapping contexts of research, policy, and practice. However, the contemporary education landscape is not a three-layered cake of federal, state, and local policies in which federal policies flow into states and are realized through local implementation. Instead, the implementation of education policy is complex and uneven (Hatfield, 1999). The complexities of education policy are increased for art education because it is not a policy priority; art education is neither assessed at the state level nor tied to funding incentives.

In order to identify regularities that connect art education policy and practice, this study utilizes a least-similar case design (George & Bennett, 2005; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). The use of three different state cases increases the descriptive accuracy of this study. Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota were selected from within the Midwestern Region. Illinois represents relatively standard art education policies, Iowa holds relatively less robust art education policies and Minnesota possesses the most robust policies within the region.

The unique attributes of Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota provide a nuanced examination of both formal and informal networks in differing states. Since policy-to-practice in art education is a loosely coupled relationship, significant connectedness is necessary to legitimize across-context relationships. Referred to as process tracing, this method involves linking variables from macro-level activities to micro-level operationalization (cite) In this case, macro-level activities are state and federal art education policies, the micro-level context of this study is the life contexts of middle level art educators, and conceptions of creativity are the linking variables between policy and practice.

Creativity. Creativity is essential for participation in the 21st century jobs market and for the economic health of the United States (Easton, 2012; Education Commission of the States, 2011; Partnership for 21st Century Skills). Even more importantly, creativity is crucial for leadership and the civic engagement of students and citizenry (freedmand, craft, others).

Creativity has a long history shaped in diverse contexts and for different purposes. As a result, creativity is a construct with overlapping definitions. Research on creativity in art education has only recently reemerged as a priority topic. For example, the first fifty years of *Studies in Art Education*, saw 62 published articles on creativity; 42 of the articles occurred

during the first two decades, 1959-1979. The two decades between 1989 and 2008 contained only nine published articles about creativity. Research in psychology experienced a similar knowledge gap, compounded by a belief of creativity as incommunicable (Sternberg and Lubart, 2010).

Creativity's global relevance has given it resurgent importance in art education research (Boughton, 2009; Burton, 2009; Craft, 2005; Freedman, 2010; Zimmerman, 2009). Formal and informal education organizations, like state boards of education and non-for-profits, also promote creativity as an important learning outcome. Still, creativity is articulate differently in each of these contexts. Problematically, ambiguity in an outcome-based education context signals that creativity (and art education) is an unwise investment for schools. A clear conception of creativity for education policy and practice is necessary to expand the role of arts education in P- 12 settings.

Policy. Unlike other countries, the United States does not have mandated federal policies relative to creativity or art education (Craft, *Creativity in Schools: Tensions and Dilemmas*, 2005; Fleming, 2008). Because of creativity's importance and a lack of relevant, actionable policies, the national dialogue has included concerns that students are emerging from schools less creative, referred to as the "creativity crisis" (Bronson, P., & Merryman, A.). The dialogue has also included concerns that art education (a site of creativity in schools) is inequitably accessed by students, particularly those in lower socio-economic communities (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Despite this, no policy solutions addressing either creativity or art education have been explicitly pursued in the United States at the federal or state levels.

Policy studies aim to understand the relationships that affect the development and results of policy through methods of process tracing (Castiglione, 1991; George & Bennett, 2005). General education policy studies have examined the effects of intervening variables on the policy-to-practice relationship, including urban-centric locale, socio-economic status, and an educator's level of professional development. Such studies document the shaping of pedagogical practice and student learning outcomes within specific policy contexts (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Pajares, 1992). Since this relationship complicated and indirect, efforts to develop research designs that bridge this gap increasingly utilize complex systems analysis (Maroulis, Guimera, Petry, Gomez, Amaral, & Wilensky, 2010; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002). However, these general education studies focus on assessed content areas that are tied to funding incentives, not policies in art education. Only a small number of studies that have examined the impact of policy and intervening variables on art education outcomes; one of

these is the Structural Model for Secondary Analysis of NAEP Visual Arts Data (Burton, 2001; Chapman, 2002; Diket R., 2001; Diket, Burton, McCollister, & Sabol, 2000; Hope, 2006; Sabol, 2001; Sabol, 2008; Sabol, 2013).

The Structural Model provides a framework for examining the systematic and non-systematic variables that shape the ways that art educators define creativity for their practice. The present study expands an analysis of variables within the Structural Model. Along with a designation of each state's held definition of creativity, policy level variables include the urban-centric locale of the respondents' school. In order to align with the model, which utilized data from students in eighth grade, this study examines the creativity and policy in middle level art education.

Middle Level Art Education. In general, middle level students often have more than 45 minutes of visual art per week, more than they experience in grades K-5. It represents the most significant amount of time that students receive visual arts instruction (Arts Education Partnership, 2012; Education Commission of the States, 2011). 41 states require middle level arts courses while only 25 states require courses in art education for high-school graduation (Arts Education Partnership, 2012). Curricular and developmental commonalities between both elementary and high school overlap in the middle level, making it representative of art education across all grades.

Relationships between policy and implementation have many intermittent variable, including an educator's K-12 experience, their pre-professional education program, and the socio-economic context of the school in which they work (Pajares, 1992; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Sabol, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This study includes two variables relative to middle level art educators in Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. The first was the economic status of art educators during youth, delimited as low-income, lower-middle income, upper middle income, and high income. The second was the type of post-secondary institution from which they received their highest art education degree, delimited to associate's colleges, baccalaureate colleges, doctorate-granting universities, master's colleges and universities, special focus institutions, and tribal colleges.

Methodology

Creativity. A review of the literature included art and design education, general education, psychology, and creativity assessments. six categories of creativity relative to problem solving and art education were identified through an emergent content analysis. These categories

served as codes for the concept analysis of policy documents, the construction of the survey instrument, and the analysis of middle-level art educator's open-ended responses (Creswell, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The theoretical framework holds creativity as a form of normal thinking and as a form of problem solving (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; de Bono, 1990; Sawyer, 2006; Silvia, 2008; Weisberg, 2006). Creativity as problem solving, has been and continues to be a basis for understanding creativity in art education (Burton, 2000; Eisner, 1960; Eisner, 1961; Eisner, 2002; Henrickson, & Torrance, E.P., 1961; Lanier, 1955; Marshall, 2005; Packard, 1973; Rush, 1989; Sandell, 2009). The parameters of creative problems represent different knowledge domains within a problem space.

Categories from the emergent analysis did not develop new language about creativity, but to refined and linked existing definitions based on implied problems to which they respond. Descriptive categories of creative thinking skills are seldom univariate and never all encompassing (Chase, 1985; Hebert et al., 2002; Kim, 2006; Simonton, 1990).

The literature review identified six groupings of creative thinking with unique attributes:

- Originality and primary processes: Rooted in Romantic and psychoanalytic ideas, this category includes responses that are deeply personal and irrelevant to domain-based problem spaces.
- Divergent thinking and flexibility: This category includes formal and semantic analogies, including cross-domain responses to creative problems.
- Elaboration and ideational fluency: This category encompasses a high quantity of within- and across- domain responses in a problem space.
- Metacognition and problem finding: This category includes reflection on problem spaces in the construction of new, relevant problem parameters.
- Socio-cultural theories: This category represents creative problems collaboratively defined and assessed in a classroom, school, or social community.
- Composite theories: When creative problems have set heuristics, either procedural or strategic, such as SCAMPER.

These categories were used in the generation of six sets of six rank-ordered statements in the survey. The statements within sets adhered to common themes, including: application of

visual art skills, the creative problems presented to classes, the assessment of creativity, and thinking skills. The survey also included open-ended questions, with the above categories used as codes for analysis. 153 secondary art educators in Illinois piloted the full survey.

Policy. Identifying state cases with enough relative difference to facilitate a least-similar case design required criteria for evaluating state art education policies. A number of nationwide organizations actively engage in reporting state policies and implementation relative to art education; organizations include The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) and The Education Commission of the States (ECS), which served as starting point for constructing evaluation criteria. Selection criteria also included an analysis of state statutes for verification. Delimiting to three states within the Midwestern Region increased the capacity of this study to generalize to that region and compare with NCES and DOE data. It was found that Minnesota held the most robust art education policies in the region, Illinois held relatively average art education policies, and Iowa held the least robust among region states. Urban-centric locales, along with categories of creativity in state art education policy, are additional variables. Urban-centric locales were delimited to City, Suburb, Town, and Rural locales.

Middle Level. Respondents reported their economic status during their K-12 education. and the type of higher education institution from which they received their highest art education degree.

Open-ended responses about the definitions of creativity required content analysis.

Synthesized Contexts. A correlational analysis provided an indication of the strength and direction of intervariable relationships across aggregate contexts, which addresses the core research question (Maroulis, Guimera, Petry, Gomez, Amaral, & Wilensky, 2010; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002).

Working Findings

For the final study, 1,721 middle level art educators received an invitation to participate. 788 from Illinois, 571 from Iowa, and 362 from Minnesota. The survey began in September of 2014 and concluded in December of 2014. It included 17 total questions, with 6 questions rank-ordering, 2 open-ended questions, and three likert-type questions. 496 art educators began the pilot survey and 260 completed every section. 28.7% of invitations were accepted and 258 of the responses were complete, for a total successful response rate of 14.9%.

The amount of respondents met criteria for a two-tailed test, with medium effect size (.30), $\alpha < .01$, and power .99; a bivariate correlation model required a minimum $n \geq 254$, which was exceeded in this analysis.

Creativity and Policy. The analysis of federal art education policies and those in Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota highlighted the impact of historic policy norms. Larger policy events occur less frequently in art education, but their occurrence creates a status-quo bias that shapes future policies.

Additionally, the role of non-system actors in forming art education policy is significant. The directionality of policy creation is neither a top-down nor a bottom up model, but is instead a middle-out and outside-in model. Non-system actors, or non-governmental organizations, are hybrid political and research organizations (such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the Education Commission of the States, and Americans for the Arts). The political facet of these organizations provides access to the policy process, which in turn requires research to fit comfortably in the policy context.

Illinois is increasingly engaged in an informal networked approach to policy. Arts Alliance Illinois, an Americans for the Arts affiliate, manages the adoption of the National Arts Standards in Illinois for the Illinois State Board of Education. Illinois-based philanthropy organizations have provided funding and political access for this effort, which has networked and aligned other arts organizations. Meanwhile, categories of creativity in Illinois policy reflect the activities of DBAE and the JDRIII initiative (which had Illinois-based, arts education participants).

Iowa has had a long history of supporting the arts and art education, but the networks of support existed outside of the formal education policy sphere and lacked philanthropic support that encouraged connectedness. Organizations have traditionally worked in a less networked way, occupying a reactionary position to policy. For example, the Arts Educators of Iowa generated a series of guides that translate the Iowa Core Standards into visual arts applications, so they might align with a policy priority.

Minnesota's art education policies have developed from a long history of philanthropic giving. These funds created non-governmental organizations that operated alongside and within the formal education policy network, such positions of access created a strong network for communicating knowledge, thereby strengthening the consistency of language between policy documents and implementation organizations.

Creativity and Middle Level Art Education. Most respondents characterized themselves as growing up in low income and lower middle-income households (72%). The majority of respondents in Illinois taught in suburban contexts, while the majority of respondents in Iowa and Minnesota were from rural contexts. This trend is reflective of the location in which all visual art educators in these three states teach.

Middle level art educators demonstrated a preference for statements of creativity as Elaboration and ideational fluency. In this, there was a preference for the process of loosely structured brainstorming, as opposed to developing concrete analogical or novel solutions. Respondents did not prefer statements that characterized creativity as psychoanalytic, but they also did not prefer statements rooted in socio-cultural definitions of creativity.

Preferred statements did not relate to the urban centric locale of middle level art educators, nor did they relate to the economic status of middle level art educators during childhood. Preferred statements did not relate to the type of institution from which middle level art educators received their highest art education degree.

However, Minnesota's stronger knowledge network of system and non-system actors minimized the selection of creativity as "Originality and primary processes" and encouraged more contemporary, research-based notions.

Working Conclusions

Research and knowledge about creativity remains absent from the policy to practice network. This is largely because formal and informal policy networks are not based on knowledge, but the connected access to and leverage in the policy process. The reliance on access and leverage in these organizations fosters a status-quo policy bias, including a preference for educational equity and economic outcomes over civic engagement and knowledge enhancement. As economic aims continue to shift away from democratic participation and knowledge refinement toward economic outcomes, there will be a promotion of only a limited range of creative thinking. This limited range will be well suited for economic participation, but not creative social and civic engagement.

Nonetheless, formal and informal policy networks are necessary for advancing art education, since art education is not a policy priority. The role of non-system actors in shaping education policy may help forward new directions for art education, including the inclusion of research knowledge in the policy-to-practice networks.

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