



How teachers perceive factors that influence creativity development: Applying a Social Cognitive Theory perspective



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teachers view personal and behavioral factors as contributors to successful creativity.
- Teachers describe environmental factors as only hindrances to creativity.
- Teachers do not believe creativity is reserved for the eminent.
- Pre-service teachers believe their environments will support them, unlike in-service teachers.

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This mixed methods study examined teachers' perceptions of creativity using Social Cognitive Theory factors (e.g., personal, behavioral, and environmental). When describing hindrances to creativity, teachers often discussed macro-environmental factors, yet when explaining or defining creativity, teachers often used personal and behavioral characteristics. Teachers did not seem to hold limited views on who can be creative or that creativity always results in products; however, some teachers' conceptions were too vague to guide the explicit facilitating of creativity. Compared to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers expressed more optimism in their future environmental support and lower self-efficacy for developing creative thinking.

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Developing creativity is mutually beneficial for individuals and societies. Fostering students' creativity has the potential to promote healthy psychological functioning (e.g., [Rasulzada & Dackert, 2009](#)), learning and long-term knowledge retention (e.g., [Elaldi & Batdi, 2016](#); [Gajda, Karwowski, & Beghetto, 2017](#)), and student intrinsic motivation and creative self-efficacy ([Beghetto, 2006](#)). National educational systems oscillate from promoting to deemphasizing teachers' efforts to develop creativity, despite a consistent, practical need to prepare students for an ever-changing professional landscape ([Craft, 2003b](#); [Hall, 2010](#); [Regnier, 2016](#); [Sternberg, 2015](#); [Wyse & Ferrari, 2015](#)). For example, over 1500 CEOs identified

creativity as the top leadership competency for future success ([IBM, 2010](#)). Despite the importance, students are not demonstrating creative growth from previous generations, as opposed to the growth they demonstrate on intelligence tests ([Kim, 2011](#)). Moreover, teachers are uniquely poised to provide instruction to facilitate that development, but many factors may impede teachers' capacity to develop students' creativity. Using Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as a theoretical anchor, we explored teachers' perceptions of personal characteristics, behaviors, and environmental factors that may facilitate or inhibit the promotion of creativity in the classroom.

1. Theoretical framework

Members of the creativity field have proposed and adapted

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many definitions for creativity, yet almost universally, researchers agree that creativity includes both “originality and effectiveness” (Runco & Jaeger, 2012, p. 92). This, however, does not seem to encompass the full construct. Corazza (2016) argued this definition narrowly represents creativity as a static creative achievement, failing to recognize its dynamic nature as an iterative process. Specifically, Corazza suggested that creativity is the “dynamic interplay between inconclusiveness and achievement” (p. 265). As creators work, creativity is not just exhibited in the final unique and useful product, but it also is seen throughout the process.

Corazza was not the first to suggest that originality and effectiveness did not fully encompass creativity. Plucker, Beghetto, and Dow (2004) exposed the field’s definitional issues when they reviewed 90 articles and found that only 38% of them provided explicit definitions. Further, those definitions varied wildly; while most included novelty and usefulness, they also included many other concepts. After this synthesis, Plucker and colleagues proposed the following definition to represent and unify multiple perspectives represented in the literature: creativity is “the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context” (p. 90). This definition includes Corazza’s more recent request as it indicates a dynamic interaction with the process. Further, the definition encompasses research that examines creativity more as a creative personal attribute (e.g., James & Asmus, 2001) or as specific types of product (e.g., Haught-Tromp, 2017). While scholars may never reach perfect consensus, Plucker’s definition encompasses many individuals’ ideas, representing the complexity of the construct. Further, this definition seems to be gaining momentum in the field (Batey, 2012; Plucker, Kaufman, & Beghetto, 2015). For these reasons, we selected this definition to anchor our own work, acknowledging, however, the varied perspectives that may be represented in other conceptions.

Interestingly, while the creativity field developed independently of general educational psychology, both fields have arrived at similar points. Specifically, Plucker et al.’s (2004) creativity definition closely aligns with Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a learning theory that emphasizes the reciprocal relationship and interaction among personal characteristics, behaviors, and environment (Bandura, 1986) while also recognizing the agentic, active role of individuals (Bandura, 2001). When applying this framework to consider teachers’ perceptions, the personal characteristics include teachers’ perceptions of their own preferences, beliefs, and motivational factors as well as their students. This personal characteristic factor of SCT most closely represents Plucker et al. (2004) “aptitudes”. Second, behaviors include teachers’ demonstrations of the creative process (e.g., modeling) resulting in creative products (physical products or ideas). Further, the environment consists of teachers’ perceptions of level of support, constraints, and/or requirements embedded within a social context at both micro- and macro-levels.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) acknowledged how the child was embedded within multiple systems, and each system played a unique role on the child’s development. In this paper, we recognize that teachers’ and students’ environments includes multiple layers, specifically (a) the microsystem, which is the most immediate environment, the classroom, and (b) the macrosystem, which includes all factors outside the classroom, including social/cultural values and political/economic systems. Interacting with these microsystem and macrosystem factors is the teachers’ sense of agency. This agency refers to the teachers’ ability to intentionally produce outcomes based on the actions or behaviors they engage in within these environmental systems (Bandura, 2001).

In general, the reciprocal interaction among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors facilitates learning and creativity. Thus, considering how teachers perceive these factors may be particularly important. Further, the roles and responsibilities of teachers in the classroom demonstrate the importance of teachers’ sense of agency in acting intentionally and directly to influence student creativity in the classroom. Few creativity studies have examined these SCT components. One exception is Edwards-Schachter et al. (2015) work examining engineering students’ perceptions; however, to the authors’ knowledge, no studies have examined teachers’ perceptions through the SCT framework.

In general, using SCT to explore creativity is beneficial for a number of reasons. As recognition of creativity’s value continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to consider how people learn to become creative within educational environments. Many creativity-specific theories/models exist to explain the creative process in stages (see Sawyer, 2012 for a review), and several new models have been proposed to situate creativity in the learning process (Beghetto, 2016a; Ma & Van Oystaeyen, 2016); however, situating creativity within the existing, broader educational psychology field encourages the mindset that creativity can be learned, that it is not dependent on muses, and that anyone can improve. This SCT framework addresses longstanding misconceptions that persist within the creativity field: creativity is reserved for the eminent, creativity cannot be taught, and ideas simply emerge (e.g., Aljughaiman & Mowrer-Reynolds, 2005; Mullet, Willerson, Lamb, & Kettler, 2016; Plucker et al., 2004; Sawyer, 2012). These misconceptions are directly contrasted by the agentic perspective of SCT, such that SCT proposes an intentional, active role of individuals in producing outcomes (Bandura, 2001). Using a SCT framework, therefore, also highlights the role of teachers’ in intentionally producing creative processes and outcomes in the educational environment and modeling that those processes for their students. Beyond promoting the concept that creativity can be learned, this framework illustrates how broader research done using an SCT framework may inspire future explorations in the creativity field. This could lead to new assessment methods, new coding schemes for qualitative work, and new experimental designs.

2. Using SCT factors to organize existing creativity studies

Below, we organize existing creativity research into the SCT framework to illustrate how robust this framework is and to demonstrate how existing work on teachers’ perceptions fit within components of this framework. Each of the major SCT components will be explored separately in conjunction with the related, exiting creativity work with the understanding that all three components interact and overlap. Within each section, we also highlight specific concerns related to teachers’ perceptions that we considered while analyzing our current data set.

2.1. Personal characteristics

Personal characteristics include a variety of aspects such as one’s aptitudes, skills, attitudes, and beliefs (Bandura, 1986). Within the creativity field, several teachers’ personal factors have received considerable attention, in particular their beliefs and attitudes regarding creativity (e.g., implicit conceptions of creativity, perceptions of students, and self-efficacy).

2.1.1. Implicit conceptions

Many researchers have expressed concerns that if teachers misperceive creativity, they may be ineffective at promoting it or worse, unknowingly suppress it (e.g., Mullet et al., 2016). Two more recent literature reviews demonstrated that researchers and

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