

# Students' experiences of collaborative creation through songcrafting in primary school: Supporting creative agency in 'school music' programmes<sup>1</sup>

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*The study reported in this article investigates students' experiences (n = 41) of their primary school songcrafting, examining the potential to support creative agency within school music education programmes. Songcrafting refers to a collaborative composing practice in which everyone is considered to be a capable creator of melodies and lyrics, and where negotiation, collaboration, and openness to the situation are essential. Through semi-structured individual interviews with students who had experienced songcrafting in the past, analysed with qualitative methods, it was found that the students' narration of songcrafting included meanings related to general agency, creative agency, musical participation within the classroom community, and documented and shared collaborative musical products, or 'oeuvres'.*

*The results of this study illustrate the various often unforeseeable meanings produced through participation in collaborative musical activities. Furthermore, they highlight the potential to enrich meaningful teaching practices and pedagogy through the examination of students' experiences, and exploring the potentials in narrating one's musical stories. These findings suggest that music education practices could benefit from the inclusion of a broader range of opportunities for the students to create their own music, and the sensitive facilitation of collaborative music creation processes.*

## Introduction

Creative music making emerges in various forms in early childhood, for instance through spontaneous song-making and singing games (e.g., Sundin, 1997; Campbell, 1998; Marsh & Young, 2006; Marsh, 2008). Today's youth often compose during their free time, both offline and online (Partti & Karlsen, 2010), drawing on their sociocultural context and personal experiences to create music that is meaningful to them (Stauffer, 2002). Whilst creative music making and composing have been a central part of many nations' curricula and school practices for decades (for instance, the UK), there is a persistent claim that 'school music' fails to offer students opportunities for creative music making (e.g., Paynter, 2000; Winters, 2012). In Finland, the context of this research, composing and creative music making have been part of the educational curricula since the 1970s, (e.g., Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education [FNCC], 2004).<sup>2</sup> However, in a recent national survey, almost half of the surveyed secondary school student respondents (47%) remarked that they

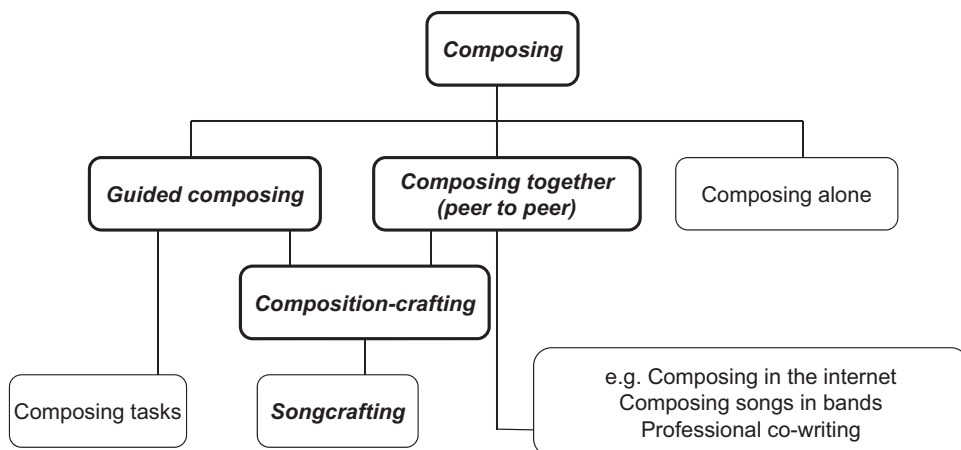


Figure 1. Songcrafting as composing

had *never* participated in ‘musical invention’ during their elementary school music lessons (Juntunen, 2011, p. 54). Interestingly, the teacher respondents reported that their lessons had included musical invention occasionally (83%), or often (11%) (Juntunen, 2011, p. 46). In this same study, the students’ perceptions of their musical capabilities were, on average, self-deprecating (p. 59).

This article considers the potentials for supporting students’ creative agency (see Creativity, Agency, and Democratic Research in Music Education [CADRE], 2009) within the school music education programme by examining how my former students recall and narrate their experiences years after a specific collaborative composing practice I implemented and termed songcrafting (Muhonen, 2004, 2010, 2014).

### **The context: Songcrafting experiences in Finnish primary education**

Songcrafting as a practice aims to create a space that emphasized participatory democracy (see ideas of Dewey, 1916, p. 105) in which all students are encouraged to invent tunes and create songs, which are documented and performed together. Songcrafting is here seen as

a collaborative creative process and inquiry in which each participant’s intentions, experiences, knowledge, and social skills are present in collective negotiation (non-verbal, verbal, musical) where there is a possibility for tactful scaffolding during the creation process that aims toward a consensus of a shared goal, a new song, that its creators experience as meaningful (Muhonen 2014, p. 192).

As a composing practice, songcrafting offers a flexible approach to combine elements of collaborative composing between students and guided composing involving the teacher (Figure 1).

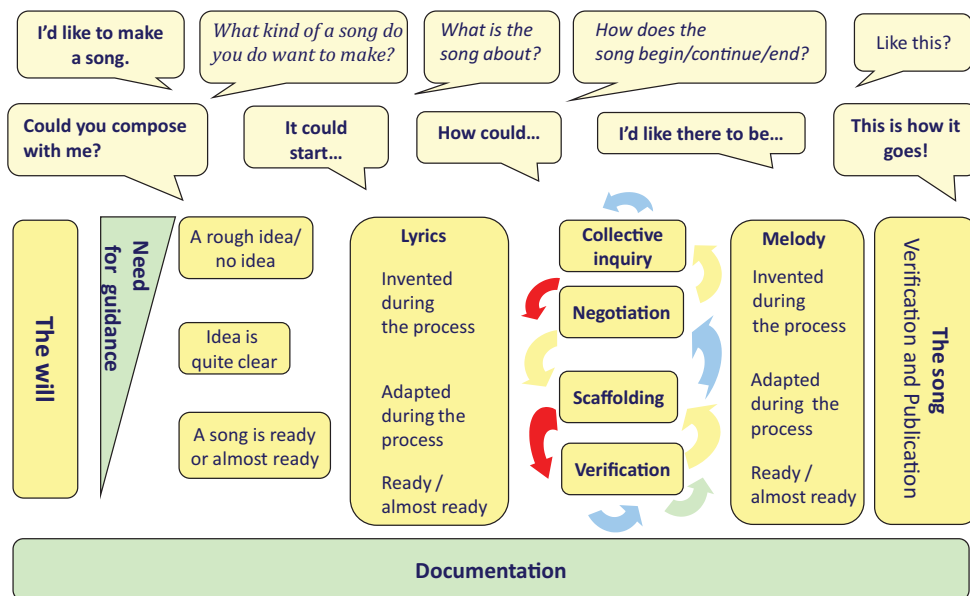


Figure 2. (Colour online) Songcrafting process

Songcrafting practice was developed and implemented in three Finnish primary schools (grades 1 to 6, students aged 7 to 12) in which I worked as a general classroom teacher as well as a music teacher.<sup>3</sup> Because I spent most of the school day working with my own class, I enjoyed the typical Finnish classroom teacher's freedom for selecting my own preferred methods and content (see Sahlberg, 2015), which enabled integration between class subjects and allowed for a flexible approach to classroom activities. Songcrafting took place in various ways: sometimes involving the whole class, sometimes a small group of students, and at other times individual students.<sup>4</sup> The practice included elements of voluntary participation, as well as teacher-led group tasks. The songs were 'crafted' by the students in collaboration with their peers and myself as their teacher, with the roles of leader and learner being open and negotiated. As their teacher, I took part in this collaborative creation in a variety of positions, from facilitator, where facilitation was seen as situational, inquiring and offering sensitive support (e.g., defining/expanding questions, supporting group dynamics, taking notes), aligning with what Lev Vygotsky (1978, pp. 84–91) called 'scaffolding', to co-creator (e.g., brainstorming, improvising), depending on the students' needs. In general, the process included the composers' will to compose, supportive inquiry, negotiation and decision making, verification and publication (see Figure 2).

Every participant's (including the teacher's) knowledge and earlier experiences contributed towards the creation of the songs, with the students' impulses and initiatives, interests and capabilities, being essential components of the process. The song-products were documented (e.g., through notation, recordings, CD's, song-books) and shared with the class, as well as with audiences inside and outside the school. A detailed description and

analysis of the songcrafting practice has been presented elsewhere (Muhonen & Väkevä, 2011; Muhonen 2014).

### *Theoretical underpinnings*

The Finnish curriculum (FNCC, 2004; FNCC, 2014) emphasizes the fostering of meaningful experiences as an important goal for music education. In exploring how these meanings are 'lived, experienced and interpreted by the human person' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 125), a narrative understanding of these 'lived experiences' (van Manen, 1990) was seen as an appropriate approach. The ways in which students narrate themselves, for instance as musical creative agents, is dependent upon how they 'interpret and use the past in meeting the challenges of the present and in anticipating the future' (Chawla, 2006, p. 364). In this way, individuals build narratives of their experiences and also relate and make sense of their experiences as narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bruner, 2004). Moreover, as Bruner (2004) argues, people not only *construct* themselves in their narratives (p. 702), they also eventually *verify* these narratives (p. 694), *living out* their own narrative realities. In this article, the ways in which school experiences (e.g., musical and social) are formed are seen as crucial, for they have an influence on how the students view themselves (e.g., musically and socially). Experiences are understood as a continuum wherein present experiences build upon the earlier ones, and in turn shape those that come after (e.g., Dewey, 1916, 1938; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Westerlund, 2008).

From this viewpoint, in this study the particular focus was on what kind of interpretations and meanings the students gave to their songcrafting experiences. Students' experiences of *agency* in their music studies was seen as an essential component of how they developed, understood, and experienced meaning. Agency is here defined as twofold, involving both the intertwined individual and the social dimensions of human life (e.g., Westerlund, 2002; CADRE, 2009; Karlsen, 2011). The individual dimension of general agency refers to a person's meaningful and intentional behavior, and to one's potential 'to have an influence in the course of events' (Barnes, 2000, p. 25). Following Bruner (1996), experiencing oneself as an agent implies both 'the capacity for initiating, but also for completing our acts' (p. 36), thus connecting agency to one's skills, where '[s]uccess and failure are principal nutrients in the development of selfhood' (p. 36). The social dimension of agency arises as an individual active and 'agentive mind' (Bruner, 1996, p. 93) is often connected to collaboration, seeking out dialogue with others. Focusing specifically on the practices and processes of songcrafting, *musical agency* is here understood as an individual's perceived capacity for action in relation to music or in a music-related setting (see Karlsen, 2011, p. 110). Musical agents may 'change their own experience and social environment' (Westerlund, 2002, p. 25) and employ their musical skills for self-regulatory strategies, as well as using music as an 'arena' for social co-ordination and interaction (Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010; Karlsen, 2011). A 'musical agent' may therefore utilize music as a means for the formation and expression of individual and collective identities (MacDonald, Hargreaves & Miell, 2002). Within this, *creative agency* includes any activity that brings something musically new to the musical process.

Aligning with understandings of the school context as both individual and collective experiences and meanings, educational researchers have long called for collaborative

teaching approaches in schools that enable *participation in a learning community* (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Wenger, 1998). From a sociocultural perspective (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978; Sawyer, 2006) the whole classroom learning situation may be seen as a collaboration wherein the students' ideas and initiatives are regarded as resources (e.g., Muhonen & Väkevä, Muhonen). It has been claimed that social experiences, and recognizing oneself as a capable contributor to the classroom community, may be of the utmost importance in the general development of a child (e.g., Reay, 2006). Such social experiences may also be supported through 'peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that begins from low-risk activities within the community.<sup>5</sup>

Building upon the aforementioned perspectives, this study views *collaborative creation* (e.g., Sawyer, 2006) as an agentive form of participation wherein musical creative agency is desirable for the participants. Collaborative creation often results in a product, for instance a musical piece, referred to by Bruner (1996) as '*oeuvres*' (p. 22). *Oeuvres* may be seen as an '[e]xternalization [that] produces a *record* of our mental efforts, one that is "outside us" rather than vaguely "in memory"' (p. 24).

#### *Research questions and methodology*

In this instrumental case study (Stake, 1994), I explore the narrated songcrafting experiences of my former students, asking: *What meanings (if any) do students assign to their prior primary school songcrafting experiences?* This is examined by analyzing how their agency is constructed while narrating their songcrafting experiences. My own role in this research is from the position of teacher-as-researcher (Stenhouse, 1975), adopting an 'inquiry as stance' approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Engaged in a research topic that is personally meaningful, and one that builds upon my earlier work studying the practice from the teacher-perspective (WRITER, 2014), I was particularly aware of the need for sensitivity in the data analysis.

Working under a 'broad narrative umbrella' (Riessman, 2008, p. vii), the narratives sought in this study are not seen as representations of past events or earlier experiences, nor seen as reviving the past as it 'really happened', rather they are viewed as re-evaluating one's earlier experiences from one's experiential point of view (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2008; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Bendien, 2012). As meanings are constructed and changing, the students are seen to make sense of the past within the narration process (Riessman, 2008, p. 8) and to give 'meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11). Focusing on how the students (re)tell their agency within musical creation, these told experiences are analyzed in order to discuss, not generalize, the issue of creative agency within music education.

#### *Participants*

Of the 58 students who had participated in the songcrafting practice during the years 1997–2004, 41 were interviewed as part of this study. Interviews were conducted in three groups (Table 1) three to four years after students' songcrafting experiences, to allow for some maturity of reflection and meaning-making and aiming to explore if some of the

Table 1. *Research participants (N = the whole population, n = sample)*

Group	Songcrafting during	Interviewed when
A (N = 14)	1st grade (7 years) 1997–1998	5th grade (11 years)
B (n = 12 of 23)	3rd to 6th grade (9–12 years) 1998–2002	9th grade (15 years)
C (n = 15 of 21)	1st to 2nd grade (7–8 years) 2002–2004	6th grade (12 years)

students had utilized their experiences afterwards at a later time, whilst also facilitating the contacting of students before they continued to secondary or high school.

The students' musical backgrounds varied. Three to five students in each group had had some musical training outside of school prior to their songcrafting experiences (e.g., piano lessons). In groups A and B, everybody created at least one song during songcrafting. In Group A this was set as a small group task within a science education week theme, and in Group B, this involved composing a class song together. Later, in groups A and B most students composed up to five songs in varying groups, and often initiated the composition process independently. In Group C, all songs were composed in small groups. Some students also composed at home, with family members documenting the songs. In all groups, some students were more enthusiastic composers than others.

#### *Data Collection and researcher position*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (e.g., Boeije, 2010, p. 62), for which the students and their parents gave informed consent. The interviews lasted approximately one half-hour each. Being aware of the importance of the manner in which the recalling process is guided (e.g., Chawla, 2006; Boeije, 2010), and viewing the emotional intensity of the interview situation as a co-constructed process (Riessman, 2008, p. 31–32), I aimed to give the students space to formulate their thoughts and attempted to keep the questions open-ended. In aiming for equality between participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 422), the interviews thus had a conversational tone, including 'attentive interviewing' (Boije, 2010, p. 63) and 'attentive listening' (Riessman, 2008, p. 26). Song artifacts such as notated pieces and audio recordings as well as singing were utilized in the interview situation to facilitate the process of recalling and reflection. The students' abilities to recall and narrate their experiences were varied and took many forms, from long, plotted narratives, to short, hesitant answers. Thus, as Polkinghorne (2005) remarks, the data is deeply dependent on the participants' ability to reflect and communicate their experiences. All groups included a variety of narrations on student experiences of songcrafting, from enthusiastic to regarding the whole process as relatively unimportant. This suggests that the students, at least to some extent, had the courage to express their actual thoughts, rather than those they believed the teacher-researcher wanted to hear.

The researcher-participant relationship during interviews and the research as a whole raises a number of ethical points for consideration (Ethical principles . . . , 2009; The responsible . . . , 2012, also e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Boeije, 2010).<sup>6</sup> I was well aware of the ethical dimensions and considered the issues of

care and responsibility, recognizing the potential to 'shape their lived, told, relived, and retold stories' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 422) as well as my own. Although my former position as their teacher may be seen as problematic due to power issues, knowing the students and the local 'micro' context (Riessman, 2008, p. 54), or 'scene' (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 416), also enabled enriching the questions in ways that facilitated recalling (e.g., describing the place of performing), as well as the creation of a sensitive interview atmosphere. Such comfort and trust with the researcher allowed for a 'more open and giving' sharing of experiences (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 267).<sup>7</sup>

#### *Organising and analysing narrated experiences*

Audio recorded interview material was transcribed as verbatim 'field texts' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 420). The focus of the analysis was on examining the meanings assigned to songcrafting experiences in the students' narrations. In analysing the data I first aimed to get a sense of the big picture through multiple readings, by looking at the data from cross-case and within-case viewpoints, focusing inward (feelings, hopes) and outward (environment), and backwards and forwards (temporality) (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417).

Through these readings, *initial, concrete themes* were identified from each individual student interview (e.g., I can/I can't, my/our/their song, joy, sharing, empowerment, peripherality). Through data driven but theory-saturated *coding* (e.g. Huberman & Miles, 1994; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Boeije, 2010), where prior theory served as a resource for interpretation, I tasked back and forth between the data and relevant literature. Students' narrations were further analysed by the *meaning condensation* process, where 'natural meaning units', thematising the statements from the student's viewpoint as understood by the researcher's viewpoint, were sought (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 205–207). While analysing the data, the meaning of agency theme appeared, focusing my theoretical perspective. This then led to the formation of the themes of *agency* (general, musical, and creative agency), *participation*, and *collaboration*, taking into account the whole data set, my experiences of songcrafting practice, and the context and theoretical framework of the study (see Figure 3).

Following this, 'working narratively with data' (Riessman, 2008, p. 3), the interpreted meanings in the students' narrations were condensed into three analytically formed, researcher-created *storylines*, to illustrate how the agency theme appeared in the data. These storylines: *Peripheral Participation*, *Experimentation*, and *Deep Participation*, are presented here as broad narratives within the data, while still acknowledging individual narratives' uniqueness.<sup>8</sup> Each of the three storylines was then exemplified by one researcher-constructed individual-case *vignette* (see Riessman, 2008 p. 57), for which I chose student 'cases' presented in a narrative form (temporal ordering), using the students' original narration in condensed form (see e.g., Riessman, 2008). Vignettes were translated into English (from the original Finnish), aiming to preserve the meanings within the text and being aware of the challenges inherent in language transitions (see Polkinghorne, 2005). Vignettes are to be seen here as the researcher's interpretive accounts of the students told experiences (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 416; Riessman, 2008, p. 6; Boeije, 2010, p. 14).



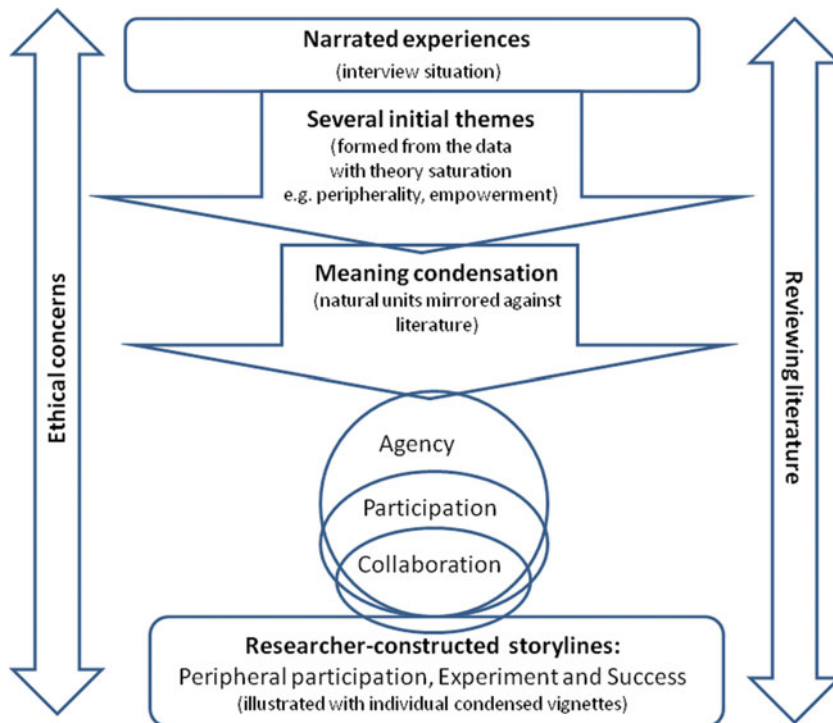


Figure 3. (Colour online) Interlaced phases of analysis related to agency theme

#### *Findings: Three agency storylines*

Whilst all of the students had something to narrate about songcrafting, those who were older when interviewed (Group B) and who had participated in songcrafting practice for several years narrated their experiences often vividly. In this section of the article I present the results of the study, showing the many ways in which students narrated themselves as musical agents. For instance, it was found that the student as an ‘agent’ could utilize music when connecting with others within songcrafting practice. Recognizing oneself as a potentially capable contributor within the classroom community was seen to be a valued experience in students’ narrations, and the possibility for teacher and peer-facilitation during the songcrafting process was narrated as being very important. The teacher was often referred to as ‘a helper’ (Katri/B)<sup>9</sup> and ‘a supporter’ (Reetta/B) and the composition groups as such where ‘everyone invented equally’ (Aleksi/A) in which ‘many opinions’ (Vili/A) were expressed, and learning from and with each other (the teacher included) was present. Such groups of composing might be understood through Bruner’s (1996) notion of ‘communities of mutual learners’ (p. 22). Group support and collaboration, when at their best, fortified the students’ capabilities and beliefs in themselves as music creators. For instance Marja/A narrates, that ‘someone had invented a little bit, and others wanted to come along’, and the song ‘developed with the teacher’s support’. Also Matti/A describes



that 'first Erkkö invented something, then Mio invented, and then Timo, so everybody contributed a little'. However, not all the narrations were positive. For instance, Iina/A felt a sense of isolation during the process, saying 'the others decided, and did not let us contribute a lot'. She reveals how power was also being negotiated within these social situations (see DeNora, 2000, p. 17).

In what follows, I present three researcher-constructed storylines, *Peripheral Participation*, *Experimentation*, and *Deep Participation*, to illustrate how the agency theme manifested in the students' narrations. Each storyline is illustrated with vignettes, constructed by the researcher as described above.

### *Peripheral Participation*

Some students described experiencing songcrafting from a distance, and rarely directly contributing to the collaborative processes. Although they may not have actively participated in the creative negotiations, these students often recalled having 'good memories' (Juuso/B), described songcrafting as a fun (Aku/B) or even a great (Ali/C) experience. For instance, one student said that it was 'quite nice that our class made our own songs' (Eemeli/C), and another that it was 'nice to be with others and to sing the songs when recording the CD' (Janne/C). Some of the students wished they had been able to take a more active role, as Eemeli/C explained: 'Though, it (songcrafting) would have been nice, and I knew that I could have come to compose, it was somehow interesting'. Yet he did not. Aku/B explained his own view on this matter (N.B. phrases pertinent to the theme of agency are shown in bold text):<sup>10</sup>

***I did not compose my own song*** but it was fun, ***I would have liked to, but I did not invent anything***. Yet, it was very nice to sing the songs my friends had made. My family is musical, ***perhaps I don't have a good head for music***. – I like music very much, it just isn't somehow . . . and composing felt very hard, ***I had no ideas***. My friends from other schools were astonished that we could compose in our class, it was really great. (Aku/B)

However, this did not necessarily lead to Aku feeling that he was cast as an outsider to the songcrafting activities,

. . . ***together we made, not just those who composed, but we who sang those together, it gave us a good atmosphere in every way***. – ***Perhaps I could compose***, but for me it would be very hard. (Aku/B)

As seen in Aku's vignette, the reasons for not taking an active part in songcrafting were related to perceived conceptions of his capabilities and traits. The collaborative composing itself, however, was still seen as interesting and valuable. Notably the students often reflected on their beliefs concerning their skills: 'I'm not a very musical person anyway' (Aatto/B), and 'I can't invent any music, or tell what would go well together' (Eemeli/C). Yet, the students recalled being encouraged to take part, and appreciated that they could choose their own ways of participating: 'Luckily I was not pressured, I was allowed to

choose (Aatto/B)' and 'You asked, but I did not dare (to compose)' (Janne/C). Withdrawing from participation was primarily seen as 'an issue of confidence' (Elli/C). Other reasons included 'not being so interested in composing' (Aatto/B), seeing it as difficult, and not being able to invent anything, or not having an interesting topic.

The narrations in this storyline rarely included references to abundant musical experiences or developed musical skills. Interestingly, two students who played musical instruments and whose *musical agency* was already quite strong, were exceptions who reported that they 'would much rather play ready-made music' (Janne/C). Thus, for these two students, formal instrumental tuition outside school had not necessarily supported their desire or perceived ability to compose. For some students, neither composing music, nor music at school in general, seemed to be important. For instance, Tuomas/B saw composing as unimportant. His narration described him as having weak creative agency in songcrafting, contributing only 'something little'. However, he was the only one within this storyline who narrated having composed music after the activities in the classroom, using a computer. Even then, he explained being interested in 'using the program', not in the composing itself, and described his pieces being 'terrible – more noise than music'. A non-musician identity and lack of confidence was also seen in many other narrations within this storyline. Nevertheless, narrations still included clues that the students had become more confident that musical creation *might be* possible. Juuso/B, for instance, explained: 'I think that I could compose if I tried' and Aku/C believed that with support he 'might get a song done'. Aatto/B also believed that he could perhaps create music with a computer.

#### *Experimentation*

Within this storyline, the narrations included descriptions of students' musical families (e.g., Marja/A), music as an enjoyable school subject (e.g., Mira/A), singing as something nice (e.g., Mira/A, Valo/B, Nea/C), and instrument playing (Erno/B, Tua/B). The stories often included narrations of 'not being so good' (Maija/A) at music or 'not being so musical' (Katri/B). Yet the narrations also revealed that songcrafting was perceived as a nice and interesting activity (Eemeli/C). Whilst some of these students created several songs, and used active words to describe their participation, others saw that they did not contribute much to the process (e.g., Lilli/B). For some students, one or two experiments were sufficient: 'I have my own song now too!' (Henna/A). A common element throughout this storyline was that although the students were not very confident with their musical skills, they were surprised by their success with composing collaboratively. Katri/B explains:

*I was surprised* (that I could compose), *for I was not so very musical then. I was one of the last ones that came to compose with my friend and now we luckily have made our own song. I recall that we started to invent the lyrics, that the koala went higher and higher, and then we came to you, and we started to make it together. – You helped us to create. . . that if we had no ideas, you proposed. . . it is hard to explain (laughs). – I asked Jatta during one break whether she remembers when we made the song and we laughed. – I think it was really great that everyone could do those, even though they were not really musical. – The songbook was not so important for me, but I was really proud of that CD, and that we really sang those songs together, that they were not just*

*done, that I think was the greatest, we all sung out at full blast, I really still know those lyrics by heart. – I think I could compose if I tried, at least if I got support. (Katri/B)*

Katri/B's vignette highlights that although the motivations to compose were generally internal ('I wanted to compose'), extrinsic motivations also existed, such as 'as everyone composed, I felt that I had to compose, too' (Nea/C). For some students, the prime reason to engage was more social than musical. For instance, Valo/B describes that, 'we wanted to belong to the cool group that made songs.' This may refer to a feeling that, at least for some students, songcrafting may have been a distinctive activity, since other classes in the school did not compose. When he succeeded in his efforts, Valo/B reflected that 'now I believe that almost anyone who wants to, can compose.' Trying, experimenting, and succeeding led to building confidence as the students *believed* in their ability to create music in the future. However many narrations included expressions of doubts, and thoughts that perhaps a little help would be needed in the composing process (e.g., Marja/A), and only Iina/C had 'invented small tunes' after songcrafting experiences in class.

#### *Deep Participation*

Within this storyline, the narrations related to the students' already developed musical skills, which were often established in out-of-school contexts (e.g., piano lessons). Their instrumental skills, and/or general interest in music, resulted in narrations characterized by strongly realized general and musical creative agency within songcrafting. These students were also very confident with regards to their prospective musical creative agency through songcrafting, which, despite their musical skills (e.g., playing already composed music), seemed to be a new venture for them. Two students noted that they had composed tunes previously, although the songs composed in songcrafting were seen as 'the first one that became a Real Piece [sic]' (Reetta/B). These students used many active and enthusiastic words when describing their activities. Even Kira/B, who spent a long time as a peripheral participant, later took an active role. She described:

*As everybody else had composed something, I also wanted to create one – and when we made it you somehow facilitated it, somehow, in the right direction, but I probably had a certain idea of how it would go. – You probably provided a rhythmic frame, and maybe with the melody too, but it was so, that it somehow supported the doing, and facilitated the process, and somehow gave us confidence. – it felt that WOW, I have made something, although being so small, something so great, anyway, composing is, it is quite difficult in the end. It (songcrafting) is something, that one feels that one could do, that one really could, it feels somehow so great. I recall that it was extremely fun and nice, for I had never made anything like that with anyone, it was somehow new and great. We sang our songs – and it felt so great that all the parents were so WOW – so it felt even more awesome, that we got all the parents' respect. – It was somehow so great – that not very many classes ever have an opportunity to make such a thing, and it somehow gives confidence even to small kids, at least it feels now that it must have felt very important... for it was such an expression of confidence: that you were trusted that you can compose. And also, it brought, that we are somehow 'higher' or better than the other classes... which I'm not so sure*

*whether it is so positive then (laughs). – But somehow it is so great, for not many may ever experience a thing like that, and you have at least once in your life made a song, so, that is so great. After this I continued creating some songs, since I somehow got more confidence. That I somehow knew that I could.* (Kira/B)

Kira's story highlights that when the instrumentalists had the possibility to confirm their creative agency, this new or quiescent side of their musicality was strengthened. The result was often an agency-enhancing: 'Wow, I can!' (e.g., Reetta/B). As with Kira, many students described a newfound belief in their own creative capabilities, and that after the class they had either composed with instruments, invented their own melodies by singing, or 'tried to make' their own music (e.g., Eeva/A, Reetta/B). They clearly valued their experiences, believing that songcrafting may have influenced their later interest in composing. For instance, Jan/B describes: 'I was so fortunate to be in a class that composed – this had quite a big impact on me, I would say that from this all my composing began, as I understood that I can.' This clearly refers to developing a strong sense of creative agency.

## Discussion

Collaborative songcrafting was described in some narrations as fairly irrelevant and in others as an 'educative experience' (Dewey, 1938)<sup>11</sup> that offered potential for creative agency and prospective musical creation. In the latter case, songcrafting enabled an expansion of student abilities, and they (re)told new understandings of their own potential for musical creation: 'I thought that I can't, but then I could!' (Marja/A). When interviewed, most of the students believed, either hesitantly or confidently, that they would be able to compose songs. Only three of the forty-one students said that musical creation would not be possible for them. Interestingly, as seen through the narration of Janne/C, the data did not indicate that musical tuition outside of school necessarily supports students' creative agency in the classroom context.

Although examples of individual and collaborative composing processes exist (e.g., Burnard & Younker, 2008; Kaschub & Smith, 2009; Wiggins, 2011), the building of learning communities that feature collaborative musical creation and support creative agency has often proven to be challenging. The data analysis identified two themes: participation and musical oeuvres. Each of these, and their relations to students' agency are presented below. Discussion ends with examining the issue of narrating agency within music education.

### *Participation and agency*

The students' narrations revealed that the collaborative and facilitated process of songcrafting enabled participation, and their *potential* for musical action was supported by the teacher's belief in their capabilities as music creators and social negotiators. From my teacher's perspective, fashioning open and creative spaces did not always result in students volunteering to take advantage of becoming active participants. Whereas an approach foregrounding participatory democracy was valued by all the students, assuming agency in

such spaces was often tied to students' perceptions of their own abilities in music. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that there may be students who have already adopted 'personal narratives' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14) of themselves as the 'musically-(in)-capable-ones'.

This highlights the importance of the teacher being interested in inquiring who the children are musically, taking into consideration that children already begin school with significant and various musical experiences and identities, as well as being responsible for who the children can become musically (see Campbell, 2010, pgs. 4, 5, 12). Therefore, when aiming to develop meaningful music education for the students, it is necessary to connect the school music curricula to the students' lived musical experiences, interests and needs (e.g., Campbell, 1998; Stauffer, 2002; Griffin, 2009; Juntunen & al., 2014; also FNCC, 2014).

Participating in, or withdrawing from, the creation process shaped and clarified the students' individual and collective identities (see MacDonald et al., 2002). The students also narrated 'using music as a part of shaping self-identity' (Karlsen, 2011, p. 112) and 'affirming and exploring identity' (Karlsen, 2011, p. 113), for instance by composing personal and emotional songs. Students' stories portrayed songcrafting 'as an arena for regulating and structuring social encounters' (Karlsen, 2011, p. 115) where social orders were clarified in and through music, for instance when strengthening relationships with a new or an old friend or with the teacher as appears from the quotes of 'I wanted to make a song with my friend' (Iina/C) and 'we asked you (the teacher) if we could make a song together' (Valo/B). Such socializing with friends or prospective friends is also important as part of children's free musicking situations, as Campbell (1998) has described. As collaborative participation does not automatically lead to positive experiences of the self, finding ways to engage everyone successfully using a wide variety of approaches is crucial. It requires constant monitoring on the part of the teacher, since agency, as Bruner argues (1996, p. 36), is connected to 'skill or know-how', an individual's successes and failures influence the development of selfhood.

Many students used expressions related to 'We are the composing class', which may be seen as a constructed 'preferred narrative' (Riessman, 2008, p. 7) that fortified a sense of group belonging (in contrast to a 'master narrative' for instance, as referred to by Riessman, 2008, p. 68 in reference to Lyotard's work). Whilst some students were peripheral participants to the songcrafting activities, they often described feelings of belonging to the composing-class-community and a sense of musical creation. Peripheral participation may on the one hand be seen as an active and daring form of individual agency, yet on the other hand it may be seen as a form of 'self-protection' (Karlsen, 2011, p. 118). Further, if agency is seen as a 'person's capacities to have an influence in the course of events' (Barnes, 2000, p. 25), it can also be supported by letting him or her be a follower, who perhaps utilizes the experiences afterwards at a later time, in a different way. From the perspective of a democracy-aimed curriculum, it is understandable, and normal, that students learn differently, and that difference matters (see Bruner, 1996; Westerlund, 2002). In an enabling community, multiple and varying roles are possible for all, from active contributors to peripheral participants. This raises, however, the importance of knowing one's students and considering how to ensure individual growth in each situation according to the curricula.

*Musical oeuvres and agency*

The significance of being collectively engaged in documented and shared collaborative musical products, or 'oeuvres' (Bruner, 1996) was clear in the data; 'This is definitely *my piece*' (e.g., Erkko/A) and '*our song*' (e.g., Nea/C) being common expressions. The sensitive teacher-guidance enabled connecting students' 'musical utterances', described by Campbell (1998) being typically quite brief musical fragments (p. 68), to become a finalized song. The decisions were made collaboratively, and as Jenni/C described, 'it felt cool when my idea was accepted'. Recalling the song-oeuvre, which 'will be recalled even when I am a granny in a rocking chair' (Eeva/B) and its creation enabled the recollection of relationships and events of a particular time. Many students reflected on temporality, considering who they were at a certain time (DeNora, 2000, p. 65), explaining their previous actions and assigning meaning to them (see Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11). For instance, Reetta/B reflected while laughing at her own lyrics, 'How could I have had such a dream at that time?' Jan/B also described how his piece represented 'a world of ideas in the 4th grade,' explaining how he would 'not necessarily create such a song anymore'. There were signs of empowerment through the valuation of the songs: 'the song we made in third grade is now in an official music text book — I could never have imagined that — it is awesome.' (Pasi/B). These songs, therefore, became objects of 'shared value' (Burnard, 2006, p. 364) for the members of the classroom and beyond.

Students' narrations resonated with the literature, which suggests that collaborative creation at its best fortifies the feeling of togetherness and group-belonging documented in collaborative products (Bruner, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Sawyer, 2006). Such collaborative products, even when 'local' or 'modest', are 'equally identity-bestowing', and may 'give pride, identity, and a sense of continuity to those who participate, however obliquely, in their making' (Bruner, 1996, p. 22). In the students' narrations, collective oeuvres both produced and sustained group solidarity, helping to 'make a community' (Bruner, 1996 p. 23) of 'we, the classroom-composers'. However, there were also some critical comments, for instance Timo/A felt that the song in which he participated in making 'was not so very good', explaining that 'composing was difficult when being at the first grade'. Also Aatto/B narrated that he was 'not so personally touched by the songs', but songcrafting was 'OK, and others liked it'. Also the challenges of making one's creation public were brought forth. For instance, Jenni/C narrated that 'it was embarrassing when my mom played my song and my solo in the CD everywhere'. These examples encourages for awareness of the wide variety of student experiences.

*Narrating agency*

The students' narrated experiences were not always what one might expect on the basis of a teacher's observations or predictions. What was particularly evident was the strong impact of the students' earlier perceptions of their self and their abilities (Figure 4).

If we accept the idea that we are constantly narrating and revising our own lives and identities (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 2004), the important question becomes, how can we as educators contribute towards the positive formation these self-conceptions? If we further accept that creative musical agency, as demonstrated through children's



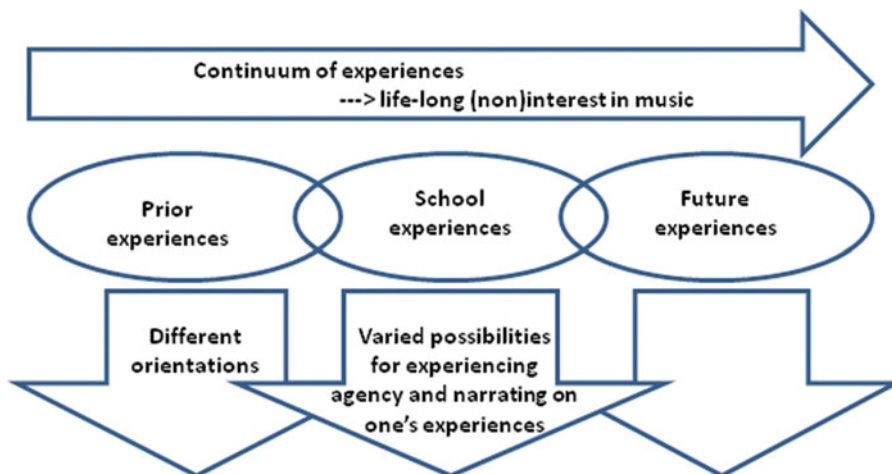


Figure 4. (Colour online) Students' prior experiences as connected to perceived and prospective agency

musical play within children's communities of practice, continues throughout childhood into adolescence (e.g., Sundin, 1997; Campbell, 1998; Harwood, 1998; Marsh & Young, 2006; Marsh, 2008) and that the development of children's musical creativity is socially constructed (Burnard, 2006), we as teachers would benefit from thinking of children as thoughtful and musical minds that are 'already taking shape through the process of enculturation', as Campbell (1998, p. ix) suggests. The findings of this study therefore suggest that we need to support the creative potentials of the students by providing sufficient and equal opportunities for all students to continue being musically creative agents throughout the years of compulsory schooling and to this potential to be also utilized in the future.

### Conclusions, implications and future research directions

This study has explored the potential for supporting creative agency in the primary classroom. The results show that students' general *agency* was supported within a setting which aimed at participatory democracy. Support for the students' *creative agency*, however, was a more complex issue. Thus, further research is needed into the kinds of engagements within music that may lead to enhanced agency, and into how both participatory democracy and creative agency might be better supported in schools by looking for new practices. The results also highlight the need to reflect on and research teachers' perceptions and presuppositions of their implemented practices in the classroom. As participation in collaborative practices produces various meanings, the results further highlight the need to examine students' narrated experiences – also in the long term research frame – in order to enrich meaningful teaching practices and pedagogy, as well as to help narrate one's own musical stories. As we live our experiences, tell stories of those experiences, and modify them through retelling and reliving them (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 418), an important aspect of music education could be to learn to view



and narrate oneself as a lifelong musical learner, which is task not only for students, but the teacher as well. Experiences and encounters at school may be turning points in students' narratives, that at best support the growth of a lifelong interest in music. Again, as this arena may also produce the reverse and discourage an interest in music, the issue of agency is of central concern.

The results further suggest that collaborative creation may facilitate the building of meaningful and enduring learning experiences within music. Based on data, such collaborative creation and its oeuvres could become important focus for music education. This study supports viewing creativity as a cultural construct in an expanded manner (see also Burnard, 2012), that one can be creative and experience creative agency in multiple ways, even when possessing novice level skills in the musical domain. Essential from the educational viewpoint is how the children gain a sense of their own 'creative potential' (Burnard, 2006, p. 360) and how this potential is nurtured. The most important contribution that collaborative creation can make to meaningful music teaching and learning is strengthened creative agency, narrating both 'I can and I shall' and 'we can and we shall'. As the contextual influences of students' individual and social worlds change, the challenge for music education is to set agentive aims that allow the students to become capable agents in the musical world.

### Notes

- 1 This article is a subproject of Creativity, agency, and democratic research, CADRE (2009-2013), and part of an article based doctoral study concerning songcrafting. This work was supported by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.
- 2 Curricula renewal shall be for the autumn of 2016, emphasis being on cutting down subject contents and increasing deep learning (FNCC, 2014).
- 3 At the time of the interviews with groups A, B and C, I had not been the students' teacher for three to four years.
- 4 Songcrafting situations are also possible outside of formal education, for instance the children may create lyrics and melodies during their free time and a parent or 'more capable peer' may facilitate the child's composing process.
- 5 Lave and Wenger (1991) further explain that through peripheral participation newcomers gradually participate in ways that are more central to the community of practice.
- 6 The ethical guidelines (e.g. interview permissions, anonymity issues) of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity were followed throughout the research process (Ethical principles . . . , 2009; The responsible . . . , 2012).
- 7 An overall class atmosphere of openness and caring was also of great importance when I was their teacher, and this formed the basis for our collaborative creation.
- 8 The students narrated a variety of songcrafting situations, with a variety of descriptions concerning their ways of participating, depending on the group composition process. The storylines are therefore intended as an overview, rather than one-to-one categories.
- 9 The names are pseudonyms to assure anonymity. The letter after the slash refers to the research group.
- 10 In the narration texts . . . signifies a thinking pause, while — marks a reduction in speech.
- 11 Dewey (1938) states that not all experiences are educative (p. 13), but that some may be mis-educative (p. 11) depending on the 'quality of the experience which is had' (p. 13). The quality of any experience in turn according to Dewey has the immediate aspect (e.g., pleasantness/unpleasantness) and its influence upon later experiences.

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