
Empowering creativity: Exploring teacher agency in creative arts education

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Abstract

This study examines the vital role of teacher agency in creative arts education, focusing on how autonomy, identity, and reflective practice contribute to pedagogical innovation. In creative disciplines, agency enables educators to build expressive, student-centred learning environments, even when constrained by rigid curricula, time limitations, and limited institutional support. Drawing on global literature, the paper highlights how teachers navigate these challenges by designing adaptable curricula, co-creating knowledge with students, and integrating culturally relevant, experimental methods. Emerging trends in the field are also explored, including transdisciplinary approaches that bridge the arts with science, humanities, and social justice. Arts-based professional development is emphasized as a means to foster long-term creative growth, alongside a growing awareness of the role of AI in education. While digital tools offer potential to enhance creativity, their impact on teacher voice and autonomy depends greatly on how they are implemented. Using a quantitative descriptive survey design, data were gathered from 387 creative arts educators to understand their perceptions of agency in areas such as curriculum adaptability, instructional decision-making, and institutional participation. The findings reveal that teacher agency is supported by ongoing reflection, collaboration, and active engagement with aesthetic practices, though it remains uneven across institutional levels. The study contributes to policy and professional development discourse by advocating for reforms that centre teacher voice, creativity, and well-being. It calls for systemic support structures that empower educators not only in the classroom but within broader educational decision-making processes.

Keywords: creative arts education; pedagogical innovation; professional development; reflective practice; teacher agency

INTRODUCTION

Teacher agency has become an essential concept in educational discussions, especially in the field of creative arts education. Teacher agency fundamentally denotes the ability of educators to act intentionally, make informed choices, and impact their educational contexts despite structural limitations (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). In the creative arts, where imagination, expressiveness, and non-linear teaching methods are fundamental, the need of teacher agency is greatly amplified. Educators in this domain are



distinctly equipped to formulate context-sensitive methods that correspond with their creative identities and the varied requirements of learners (Ferrari & Taddei, 2017).

Recent global literature has enhanced the comprehension of teacher agency by conceptualising it not solely as an individual characteristic but as an emergent property arising from the interplay between teachers' professional beliefs, identities, and the socio-institutional frameworks they encounter (Biesta, et al., 2015). This agency is often manifested in the creative arts through reflective practice, collaborative learning, and arts-based inquiry. Schindler et al. (2025) characterize this phenomenon as autoethnographic praxis, when educators partake in artistic and narrative reflection to scrutinize their instructional values. Hoskin (2025) contends that aesthetic engagement is crucial for fostering teacher agency and should be bolstered by professional development that aligns with creative beliefs and goals (Power & Goodnough, 2019).

The identity of a teacher is crucial in the exercise of agency. Creative arts educators frequently serve as professors, cultural curators, artists, and facilitators. Elfreich and Weltsek (2025) emphasize the manner in which transnational preservice teachers cultivate critical identities and autonomy via collaborative, arts-based pedagogies. Reflective practice, especially in decolonial or postcolonial contexts, enables educators to challenge prevailing neoliberal educational paradigms and advocate for culturally genuine pedagogy (Pauly et al., 2019). Such identity construction is reinforced through critical engagement with professional communities and continuous negotiation of values (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Notwithstanding these potentials, teacher agency is frequently compromised by structural impediments, including inflexible curricula, inadequate time, and insufficient institutional support (Griffiths & Sills-Jones, 2025; Elfreich & Weltsek, 2025). These structural issues are particularly pronounced in countries where arts education is marginalized, underfunded, or deprioritized in legislative frameworks. Okediji et al. (2025) contend that these educational institutions suppress innovation under the pretense of advancement, thereby constraining the ingenuity of both teachers and students. In response, numerous educators implement transdisciplinary learning and arts-based professional development practices to reclaim and maintain agency (Stephenson et al., 2025).

An essential growing issue in this discourse is the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education. Although AI technologies might enhance differentiated learning and foster creative output, their unexamined application may diminish teachers to mere passive facilitators of algorithmic education (Katsenou et al., 2025; Prajapati, 2024; Bouchareb & Ghedir, 2024). The conflict between technological efficiency and pedagogical autonomy highlights the necessity to investigate how digital instruments redefine the limits of teacher agency.

This research is situated within the ecological model of teacher agency articulated by Biesta, et al. (2015), which defines agency as temporally contextual and dependent on the dynamic interplay of individual competencies, beliefs, and structural conditions (Priestley et al., 2015). In this context, creative arts educators are perceived as navigating various layers of influence—professional, institutional, and political—while endeavouring to uphold significant and adaptive educational practices. This framework guides the study's interpretation of how teacher autonomy, identity, and institutional dynamics interact to shape agency in creative arts education.

This study investigates the intricate aspects of teacher agency in Creative Arts education, utilizing both contemporary scholarly literature and original empirical evidence. It examines how Creative Arts educators assert their instructional autonomy, construct and negotiate their professional identities, and engage in reflective practices while navigating institutional structures, systemic conditions, and emerging technological contexts. Situated within the broader discussions on educational reform and teacher professionalism, the study aims to provide empirical insights that can inform policy development and the design of professional learning programs that foster teacher creativity, decision-making authority, and meaningful institutional engagement.

The primary objective of the study is to explore how Creative Arts educators perceive and enact teacher agency in their professional practices, particularly concerning curriculum design, instructional autonomy, and interactions with institutional frameworks. It also investigates the relationship among professional identity, instructional autonomy, and institutional support, recognizing these factors as crucial to the realization of agency in complex policy environments.

To guide this exploration, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Creative Arts educators perceive and enact teacher agency within their professional practice?
2. What is the relationship between Creative Arts educators' perceptions of professional identity and their level of instructional autonomy?
3. To what extent do institutional support and systemic conditions influence the enactment of teacher agency in Creative Arts education?

METHOD

Research design

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive survey design to investigate the extent to which teachers perceive and exercise agency in creative arts education (Parsons et al., 2018). The design was selected to capture statistically significant patterns in teacher responses regarding autonomy, decision-making, curriculum adaptability, and instructional confidence (Deehan et al., 2022; Yasin et al., 2024). This approach enabled the researchers to systematically quantify teacher perceptions and identify prevailing trends across diverse educational contexts.

Respondents

The target population consisted of Creative Arts teachers from both public and private primary schools. A total of 387 teachers were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation across different school types and levels of teaching experience. Participants were categorized into four groups based on their teaching experience: early-career teachers (1–5 years), mid-career teachers (6–10 years), experienced teachers (11–15 years), and highly experienced teachers (over 15 years). This stratification allowed the study to capture variations in teacher agency related to both the institutional context and professional experience. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure various dimensions of teacher agency within the Creative Arts curriculum, including instructional autonomy, professional identity, and institutional engagement.

Instruments

The main data collection instrument was a Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 9 items, each rated on a five-point scale: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire items were validated through expert review and pretested to ensure reliability, yielding a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87 (Izah, et al., 2023). The items were designed to assess key dimensions of teacher agency, including curriculum autonomy, instructional confidence, and participation in decision-making.

The data collection was conducted in March 2025 using both online and paper-based formats to accommodate varying levels of internet accessibility among participants. Prior to administration, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Participants were informed of the study’s objectives, assured of confidentiality, and provided written consent before completing the questionnaire. Respondents were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey, which was distributed through school administrators and teacher networks. Completed responses were collected, securely stored, and coded for statistical analysis using SPSS (version 26).

Data analysis

Data was collected in March 2025 and analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and ranking). Responses were interpreted using a scale benchmark: 1.00 – 1.79 = Strongly Disagree, 1.80 – 2.59 = Disagree, 2.60 – 3.39 = Neutral, 3.40 – 4.19 = Agree, 4.20 – 5.00 = Strongly Agree. SPSS (v26) was used for quantitative analysis. SPSS (v26) was used for quantitative analysis (Pallant, 2020). This method provided a clear overview of response trends, allowing the researchers to identify dominant perceptions and areas of divergence across the sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1, results from the teachers’ questionnaire indicate that the overall mean of mean scores was 3.54, positioning most responses within the "Agree" range, while the average standard deviation was 1.03, indicating moderate variability in responses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Responses on Curriculum Autonomy, Confidence, and Participation in Creative Arts Education

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation	Aspect
1	I actively adapt the creative arts curriculum to suit the needs of my students.	3.96	0.93	Agree	Curriculum Autonomy
2	I can choose the teaching methods I use in the creative arts curriculum.	3.81	0.91	Agree	Curriculum Autonomy
3	I can adapt the creative arts curriculum to address the diverse needs of my students.	3.67	0.93	Agree	Curriculum Autonomy
4	I am confident in making instructional decisions regarding the creative arts curriculum.	3.63	1.01	Agree	Instructional Confidence
5	I can take independent actions to improve creative arts curriculum delivery.	3.47	1.09	Agree	Instructional Confidence

6	School leadership values my suggestions about the creative arts curriculum.	3.42	1.03	Agree	Institutional Participation
7	I have autonomy in selecting teaching methods for the curriculum.	3.40	1.04	Agree	Curriculum Autonomy
8	My input is considered in decisions about the curriculum implementation.	3.27	1.13	Neutral	Institutional Participation
9	I participate in curriculum decision-making at my school.	3.19	1.18	Neutral	Institutional Participation

The findings from this study suggest that teachers perceive themselves as having moderate to high levels of agency in the delivery of creative arts education. The highest-ranked item “I actively adapt the curriculum to suit my students” ($M=3.96$) reveals a strong commitment among teachers to customize instruction based on learners’ needs, aligning with literature that views curriculum adaptability as a hallmark of teacher agency (Stephenson et al., 2025).

Additionally, teachers demonstrated high confidence in selecting teaching methods ($M = 3.81$, *Agree*) and making instructional decisions ($M = 3.63$, *Agree*). They also reported being able to adapt the curriculum to meet diverse student needs (Item 3, $M = 3.67$, *Agree*) and take independent actions to improve curriculum delivery (Item 5, $M = 3.47$, *Agree*). Responses indicated moderate agreement that school leadership values their suggestions (Item 6, $M = 3.42$, *Agree*) and that they have autonomy in selecting teaching methods (Item 7, $M = 3.40$, *Agree*).

However, responses were more neutral regarding whether their input is considered in curriculum implementation decisions (Item 8, $M = 3.27$, *Neutral*). These findings are consistent with Schindler et al. (2025), who argue that creative arts educators often leverage their pedagogical freedom to implement reflective, student-centered approaches. This level of autonomy enhances both instructional quality and professional fulfillment. However, lower scores on items related to institutional involvement such as “I actively participate in decision-making processes” ($M=3.19$) indicate that many teachers feel excluded from formal curriculum planning. This resonates with findings from Roberts (2017) who noted that structural barriers such as top-down leadership and rigid policies often constrain agency in the arts.

The findings also reveal a tension between individual classroom-level autonomy and institution-level authority. While teachers feel empowered within their own instructional domains, they express limited influence over systemic decisions. Wilkins et al. (2021) suggests this disjuncture is common in neoliberal educational systems, where performative metrics and centralized mandates undermine professional voice. This reflects broader patterns in educational research where teachers’ voices are shaped and sometimes constrained by national reform agendas and accountability cultures (Kennedy, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Moreover, the average standard deviation of 1.02 across responses suggests considerable variability in perceptions of agency, likely reflecting contextual differences in school leadership, resources, and teacher experience. This supports Hoskin’s (2025) claim that teacher agency is an ecological construct, contingent on cultural, relational, and material factors (Parker, 2016; Leijen et al., 2020; Pantić, 2015; Soares Gomes & Gomes, 2024).

This study investigated the dimensions of teacher agency within the context of creative arts education, focusing on how autonomy, confidence, curriculum adaptability, and institutional participation shape educators' experiences. Through a synthesis of current literature and the analysis of empirical data collected from creative arts teachers, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how teachers perceive and enact their agency in schools. The findings reveal that while creative arts teachers exhibit strong classroom-level autonomy as shown in their high ability to adapt teaching methods and respond to diverse student needs, they often experience limited influence in broader institutional decision-making regarding curriculum development. The highest-ranked item in the data ($M = 3.96$) reflects teachers' willingness and ability to tailor the curriculum to student needs, suggesting a strong sense of agency in instructional design. Similarly, high levels of confidence in choosing teaching methods and making instructional decisions reflect an environment where teachers feel pedagogically empowered.

However, the lower-ranked items, particularly concerning participation in decision-making and curriculum implementation planning ($M = 3.19$ and 3.27 respectively), highlight systemic limitations. These results echo broader literature suggesting that structural constraints, hierarchical leadership models, and rigid curriculum frameworks can inhibit teachers' broader professional agency (Griffiths & Sills-Jones, 2025). While autonomy within the classroom is evident, full agency requires that teachers are also trusted partners in policy development and school-wide educational decisions.

Moreover, the moderate variability in responses suggests that teacher agency is shaped by a dynamic interplay of school context, leadership practices, and individual teacher identity. Differences in institutional culture, resource availability, and leadership orientations toward curriculum flexibility significantly influence educators' capacity for professional judgment and creative decision-making. In Creative Arts education, where experimentation and contextual responsiveness are integral, these disparities are often magnified. Teachers in enabling environments are more likely to adapt curricula, integrate culturally relevant materials, and engage learners through innovative pedagogical approaches, while those in rigid accountability structures may experience constrained autonomy and reduced professional agency (Biesta et al., 2015).

These patterns align with ecological and sociocultural perspectives on teacher agency, which view it as emerging from the interaction between individual capacities and structural conditions rather than as a fixed personal attribute (Priestley et al. 2015). As highlighted by Hoskin (2025), teacher agency requires supportive environments that nurture reflective practice, collaboration, and sustained aesthetic engagement. Leadership practices that foster trust, shared decision-making, and professional dialogue are central to creating conditions in which Creative Arts educators can enact agency meaningfully. Similarly, Biesta et al. (2017) argue that agency is achieved through teachers' engagement with cultural, material, and structural resources over time, underscoring the importance of institutional and systemic support. Variability in teacher agency should be interpreted not as an individual shortcoming but as an indicator of uneven contextual and organizational conditions shaping professional practice.

The data indicates that teacher agency in Creative Arts education exists but is inconsistent. There is strong evidence of individual instructional autonomy, yet this often exists alongside limited engagement with institutional and systemic structures. Many educators show confidence in adapting their teaching methods, experimenting with materials, and responding creatively to their students' needs. However, these practices typically occur in isolation instead of through coordinated institutional support. This

inconsistency suggests that teacher agency relies more on personal commitment and professional identity than on organizational cultures or policy frameworks that genuinely value Creative Arts pedagogy (Alhassan et al., 2025). Supporting teacher agency thus requires more than just empowering individuals; it necessitates institutional recognition, inclusive decision-making processes, and ongoing arts-based professional development that legitimizes teachers' creative and pedagogical contributions. As Hoskin (2025) argues, teacher agency thrives in environments where reflective practice, collaboration, and aesthetic engagement are structurally supported, rather than solely dependent on individual initiative. Similarly, Priestley et al. (2015) highlight that agency is achieved through the interaction of personal capacities, professional cultures, and material conditions over time. In the realm of Creative Arts education, Biesta et al. (2017) further assert that systemic support—such as leadership endorsement, curriculum flexibility, and professional dialogue—is crucial for transforming individual autonomy into collective educational change. Without these enabling conditions, teacher agency risks remaining fragmented, inconsistent, and vulnerable to policy pressures that marginalize arts-based learning.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study hold several practical and policy-level implications for enhancing teacher agency in creative arts education. First, school leaders and policymakers should actively include arts educators in curriculum decision-making processes, valuing their expertise in shaping responsive and inclusive curricula. Second, professional development initiatives should prioritize arts-based and reflective learning models that enable teachers to explore and expand their pedagogical identities. Third, educational institutions should establish formal structures that promote collaborative curriculum planning, giving teachers greater voice in systemic reform. Finally, the integration of AI and digital tools in arts education should be pursued with caution and sensitivity, ensuring that these technologies augment rather than diminish teacher autonomy. By implementing these recommendations, educational systems can foster a climate that sustains creative and empowered teaching practices across diverse contexts.

In conclusion, this study affirms the critical role of teacher agency in delivering effective and responsive creative arts education. For teacher agency to thrive, educational institutions must do more than allow classroom freedom they must actively engage teachers in shared decision-making, provide continuous arts-based professional development, and build inclusive policy structures that position teachers as co-creators of educational practice. Future frameworks should integrate reflective, dialogic, and context-sensitive practices to sustain agency, as emphasized in ecological and sociocultural models. Empowering teachers in this way is not only essential for fostering creativity in the classroom but also for sustaining meaningful and transformative education systems.

Future research is needed due to several limitations of the present study. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts insights into how teacher agency in Creative Arts education evolves over time, hindering the ability to capture developmental trajectories or shifts in response to changing policies and institutional conditions. Longitudinal and comparative case studies would be valuable for examining how agency is enacted across different school systems, cultural contexts, and policy frameworks. Additionally, the study did not address the role of digital technologies and artificial intelligence, which is relevant in post-pandemic hybrid learning environments where Creative Arts pedagogy is increasingly mediated by digital tools. Future research could explore how emerging

technologies reshape teachers' autonomy, pedagogical choices, and creative practices. Finally, the focus on teacher perspectives is a limitation, as it overlooks how students perceive teacher agency and how such agency influences learner engagement and outcomes. Including student voices and learning-related indicators in future studies would enable a more comprehensive understanding of teacher agency within Creative Arts classrooms.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and led the development of the introduction and literature review. Additionally, supervised the overall research process and provided critical revisions to enhance the intellectual content of the manuscript, referencing, proofreading of the manuscript and coordinated the formatting. **Author 2** is responsible for data collection, processing, and analysis. Also developed the methodology section, contributed to the presentation of results, and participated in interpreting the findings in relation to the research objectives. **Author 3** drafted the discussion and conclusion sections and furthermore, facilitated communication among the authors during the writing process and ensured that the manuscript adhered to journal guidelines.

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