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Educating Children for Creativity and Democracy Through a Music and Drama Community of Practice

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∞ The priority of promoting children's creativity and democracy in education, which includes values such as freedom of expression, competence, respect for diversity, empathy, collaboration, dialogue and the development of critical thinking and curiosity, is strongly supported by communities of practice that foster these values and promote heuristic and sociocultural approaches to music learning and artistic expression. The research explored how children aged 5–10 years ($N = 10$) used musical and artistic forms for creative expression in music drama activities within a community of practice (music drama studio), and how elements of democratic education were manifested in these activities. An ethnographic case study in early childhood education and care was used to explore children's culture, experiences and actions through interactional and participatory observation methods. The data were analysed through a written protocol of observation, transcriptions and video recordings. An inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to better structure and interpret the data, organised into two main themes (categories): Forms of creative artistic expression and Democratic aspects of education. The conclusion emphasises that the integration of music, other arts and process drama within a community of practice, led by a skilled teacher, provides authentic learning opportunities that foster democratic artistic expression, creativity and holistic development, preparing children for active citizenship.

Keywords: children's creativity, community of practice, democratic education, music and artistic expression, process drama

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Vzgoja otrok za ustvarjalnost in demokracijo skozi prakso glasbeno-dramske skupnosti

BLAŽENKA BAČLIJA SUŠIĆ IN VESNA BREBRIĆ

~ Prednostna naloga spodbujanja ustvarjalnosti in demokracije pri otrocih v izobraževanju, ki vključuje vrednote, kot so: svoboda izražanja, kompetentnost, spoštovanje raznolikosti, empatija, sodelovanje, dialog ter razvoj kritičnega mišljenja in radovednosti, je močno podprta s prakso skupnosti, ki goji te vrednote in spodbuja hevristične in sociokulturne pristope k učenju glasbe in umetniškemu izražanju. Raziskava je preučevala, kako so otroci v starosti od 5 do 10 let ($N = 10$) uporabljali glasbene in umetniške oblike za ustvarjalno izražanje v glasbeno-dramskih dejavnostih v okviru prakse skupnosti (glasbeno-dramski studio) in kako so se elementi demokratičnega izobraževanja kazali v teh dejavnostih. Za raziskovanje kulture, izkušenj in dejanj otrok so bile uporabljene etnografske študije primerov v zgodnjem otroškem izobraževanju in varstvu, in sicer z interakcijskimi in s participativnimi metodami opazovanja. Podatki so bili analizirani s pomočjo pisnega protokola opazovanja, transkripcij in videoposnetkov. Za boljšo strukturo in interpretacijo podatkov je bila uporabljena induktivna in deduktivna tematska analiza, organizirana v dve glavni temi (kategoriji): oblike ustvarjalnega umetniškega izražanja in demokratični vidiki izobraževanja. Zaključek poudarja, da integracija glasbe, drugih vrst umetnosti in procesnega gledališča v praksi glasbeno-dramske skupnosti, ki jo vodi usposobljen učitelj, ponuja avtentične priložnosti za učenje, ki spodbujajo demokratično umetniško izražanje, ustvarjalnost in celostni razvoj ter otroke pripravljajo na aktivno državljanstvo.

Ključne besede: ustvarjalnost pri otrocih, praksa skupnosti, demokratično izobraževanje, glasba in umetniško izražanje, procesno gledališče

Introduction

The growing threats to democracy, freedom and human rights we face today (Deligiannis et al., 2021) require democracy issues to be at the heart of education. EU programmes support non-formal education for social and civic competences, promoting active and responsible participation of citizens in democratic decision making. They endorse UNESCO's mission to improve education systems for a changing world and emphasise that learning should focus on both methods and content, highlighting the importance of a transdisciplinary approach. Consequently, the ESD-Net for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-Net, 2030) promotes knowledge sharing, collaboration and mutual learning (UNESCO, 2021).

Building on the Enlightenment philosophers' emphasis that the core purpose of effective education is the ongoing reconstruction of experience, social participation in a community of practice is crucial to democratic education. By placing the child at the centre of his educational philosophy, Dewey (2024) embraced educational approaches, pedagogical issues and the connections he made between education, democracy, experience and society. Emphasising democratic education as a way of associative living (O'Neill, 2006), this approach highlights the need to adapt educational practices to the changing needs of learners and society by actively engaging with one's environment rather than passively receiving information (Mintz, 2023). Accordingly, Dewey's humanistic ideals, rooted in his democratic principles and his commitment to freedom, equality and children's experiences, advocate an approach to learning that fosters imagination, flexible thinking, communication, listening and responsiveness to the needs of others (Mason, 2017; Sikandar, 2015).

Alongside Dewey, Rousseau recognised the importance of aligning education with democratic values (Ovens & Lynch, 2019), while John Locke similarly emphasised the creation of an education system that teaches individuals to be functional and contributing members of civil society (Jordan, 2023). Building on these perspectives, democratic education not only benefits the classroom, but also contributes to the broader development of a democratic society by raising awareness of its principles and benefits (Alshurman, 2015; Tuhuteru, 2023). As these skills are not naturally developed, this approach serves as an important tool for educating children about democratic principles and practices, encouraging self-discovery and engagement with the world, and preparing them for responsible and engaged citizenship (Kochoska, 2015; Subba, 2014).

In line with this, contemporary education programmes should provide children with opportunities to express themselves creatively through aesthetic

activities, including various forms of artistic expression, and to engage with democratic principles through participation in decision-making processes and responsibilities (Ministry of Education and Research of Sweden, 2018).

This approach builds self-confidence, strengthens cooperation and promotes constructive conflict management (Ministry of Education and Research of Sweden, 2018). While Hasen et al. (1999) highlight the basic characteristics of democratic education as freedom of speech and thought, efficiency and competence, acceptance of difference and empathy, and respect rather than domination, Moss (2011) identifies additional characteristics such as cooperation, solidarity, dialogue and listening, the promotion of curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity, and the development of critical thinking that recognises multiple perspectives and paradigms (Moss, 2011).

From a sociocultural perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) have identified communities of practice as fundamental to democratic education, viewing learning as progressive engagement within diverse communities. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the influential role of peers and communities in shaping the individual's learning journey (Wenger, 1998; 2006). In the context of artistic and aesthetic expression, musical activity within a community of practice is defined as a group operating within a particular sociocultural setting in which individuals collectively learn, share and teach musical knowledge (Brashier, 2016), with both experts and learners working together to foster a mutual exchange of musical impressions.

In this way, musical activity can create spaces in a democratic environment where everyone has the right to be heard, regardless of their background, and where plurality is accepted as the basis for individual and collective growth (Thorgersen, 2015).

The term *musical community of practice* (Barrett, 2005) describes an informal environment in which children lead and control musical activities. In these settings, children, as experts in their own musical play, demonstrate creativity and navigate rules and norms while considering the perspectives of others. Observing music and music-making as a narrative art/act not only demonstrates the incorporation of shared symbols and forms of expression as powerful tools for constructing meaning and representing culture (Barrett, 2016), but also acknowledges children's need for syncretic artistic expression, where they explore new ideas and ways of artistic expression based on their imagination and creativity (Bačlija Sušić & Brebrić, 2022). In this regard, research with children also highlights their development of auditory imagery as a highly creative process from an early age (Wong & Lim, 2017). This capacity for imaginative musical engagement is further supported by children's need for

non-verbal expression of musical experiences, as evidenced by the finding with children aged 7–9 years that “[...] the more they engaged in making music, the fewer words they needed” (Zalar, 2020, p. 134). Through these shared musical experiences, children actively participate in social interactions, develop a sense of belonging and learn the implicit norms of their communities. These communities help children learn and adopt group norms and engage in the adoption, resistance, transformation and reconstruction of the social and cultural practices they encounter in their everyday lives (Barrett, 2005; Gee & Green, 1998).

From the earliest moments, young children use sound to communicate their thoughts and wishes, with their early musical expression reflecting communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010). This engagement promotes a two-way, meaningful and emotional dialogue with caregivers/teachers. Through music, children connect with and represent their world (Nyland et al., 2015), while enhancing their socioemotional skills and overall well-being by improving emotional expression, social interaction and self-regulation (Bačlija Sušić & Buerger Petrović, 2023).

Considering music as an aural art that stimulates the ears and engages the mind, often evoking pleasure and satisfaction, cultivating the ability to listen attentively and insightfully is arguably the most important and enduring musical skill for children (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2018). Research shows that listening to music begins in the womb, with babies remembering music heard before birth, and by nine months children are actively listening and showing preferences (Graven & Browne, 2008). Listening to music has a multisensory effect, influencing how information is processed and communicated and shaping children’s musical perception (Washburn, 2010).

Engaging with different types of information in different modes enhances musical thinking and understanding by stimulating mental processes that improve analytical skills, deepen musical insight and strengthen memory retention (Godinho, 2018). Integrating creative listening into music education can contribute to the development of fluency, flexibility, elaboration and originality in listening skills. This approach not only engages children more deeply in musical activities, but also enhances their ability to think creatively and critically about music, providing a contrast to traditional methods (Kratus, 2017). Essential conditions include adequate space, time and equipment, engaging musical pieces, and a responsive teacher who supports children’s personal interpretations and acknowledges the influence of music (Gluschankof, 2018).

The heuristic and sociocultural perspective of musical learning

Advocating a heuristic and sociocultural perspective on music learning, Partti and Westerlund (2012; 2013) suggest that informal learning environments and new digital/virtual technologies allow individuals to express artistic freedom and develop musical skills in line with their personal aspirations. This approach promotes what they call the “democratic revolution” of the twenty-first century, increasing opportunities for social participation in music, musical learning and artistic expression. This learning perspective emphasises active engagement through performing, manipulating and interacting with music, and offers significant heuristic value in music education (Abril, 2006; Partti & Westerlund, 2012). Despite these advances, however, children’s creative thinking in the context of music improvisation remains a relatively underexplored area (Larsson & Georgii-Hemming, 2019; Siljamäki & Kanellopoulos, 2020), with the specific nuances of improvisation pedagogy for young children only beginning to attract scholarly attention (Johansen et al., 2019). Accordingly, group music improvisation is defined as a process in which some or all of the content is created spontaneously during performance, with participants actively collaborating and shaping the music in real time (MacGlone, 2019). In this context, collaborative improvisation, group creativity, music education and communities of practice emphasise negotiation, reflection and shared decision making in collaborative music making, highlighting the role of the teacher as a facilitator in fostering deliberate reflection and meaningful collaboration (Partti & Westerlund, 2013). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of prioritising democracy in education, particularly in facilitating students’ growth towards democratic artistic expression (Partti, 2014).

The concept of a community of practice serves as a heuristic tool for exploring how participation can enrich learning, while also highlighting potential constraints and certain ways of making sense that are favoured over others (Goodfellow & Lea, 2005; Partti & Westerlund, 2013). Accordingly, in out-of-school settings, participants typically focus on the making of music itself rather than the learning of how to make music (Folkestad, 2006).

Process drama as a pathway to creative expression within the music drama community of practice

As a powerful educational tool, process drama facilitates the exploration of a problem, situation or issue (Brown, 2017), while emphasising the crucial and implicit need for children to explore, create and reflect (Vangsnes &

Økland, 2017). This approach provides opportunities for children to freely express their desire to explore, innovate and reflect. The audience is not involved, except for the participants themselves, who observe each other in the process. Thus, by going beyond traditional teaching methods and relying on creative improvisation rather than a predetermined script (Ødemotland, 2020), process drama becomes a highly engaging form of learning that focuses on collaborative inquiry and problem solving within an imaginary world (DICE, 2010). Guided by a facilitator or teacher, participants explore themes, ideas and emotions through a variety of working methods and drama conventions, making the educational experience dynamic and immersive.

It is therefore crucial to emphasise the role and attitude of the teacher in process drama, which involves showing a deep interest in children's contributions, such as their ideas, thoughts and attitudes, while challenging them to think more deeply, acting as a guide, questioner, participant and observer rather than determining the exact outcome (Wagner, 1999). The changing roles of teachers reflect a conscious understanding of their professional role in the teaching process, with process drama serving as a teaching strategy that accommodates directive, supportive and distal roles, encouraging various forms of democratic participation by children. Leading a process drama, whether as a teacher or facilitator, requires an open attitude towards the children, moving from being the one who knows to the one who wants to know, at times supporting and at times stepping back to let the children lead the exploration. In the supportive role, the teacher guides and reinforces the students' leadership in the learning activities with comments, gestures and smiles, while in the distal role, the teacher withdraws to the periphery as an "awaiting observer" and allows the students to lead (Vangsnes & Økland, 2017; 2018).

Since there is no drama without tension, the facilitator's role is to create tension by starting with real questions that have no clear answers (Ødemotland, 2020). Facilitating process drama requires a teacher who is willing to be spontaneous, take risks (Dunn, 2016), improvise and anticipate the next steps ahead of the children (Ødegaard et al., 2022). Accordingly, it requires a teacher who is open-minded and playful, who has both pedagogical and artistic skills, and who can subtly encourage the dramatic tension that ignites action in a play (Bowell & Heap, 2001). In line with this, process drama and other educational drama activities should be "both an artistic and an educational journey" (Nee-lands, 2009, p. 14).

The research problem, aims and research questions

In line with the theoretical framework outlined, the research problem stems from the need to educate children for democracy and to nurture their creativity through music and other artistic fields in the context of a community of practice. Consequently, the aim of the research was to explore how children used musical and artistic forms for creative expression in music drama activities within the community of practice (the music drama studio), and how elements of democratic education were manifested in these activities. In line with the problem and the research aim, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ1: What musical and artistic forms of creative expression did the children use in the music drama activities?
- RQ2: What elements of the democratic aspect of education were represented in the activities carried out within the music drama activities?

Method

Participants

The activities took place in an informal setting at the *Magic Wand Music Drama Studio* in a small town in an earthquake-affected area of Croatia. A group of 10 children ($N = 10$), aged 5–10 years (preschool and early school age) participated in the research. The study involved process drama sessions that took place over a two-month period, consisting of five sessions, each lasting 90 minutes (450 minutes in total), allowing for an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon (Hallgren, 2018).

Instruments

While the observation protocol, based on the theoretical framework of democratic education (Hasen et al., 1999; Moss, 2011) in the form of a checklist, allows analysis according to predefined categories, the second protocol, related to process drama and music, offers a more open approach. It focuses on children's implicit needs to explore, create and reflect (Vangsnes & Økland, 2017) through process drama, which facilitates the exploration of problems, situations or issues (Brown, 2017; Vangsnes & Økland, 2017). Therefore, the observation protocol did not include predefined characteristics of musical and artistic forms of expression, but was more flexible and focused on the children's natural flow of expression and creative process.

Research design

Ethnographic case study research was used to gain a deeper understanding of the culture of a particular group bounded by space and time. Ethnographic research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provides insights into childhood by exploring children's experiences and social interactions, supporting their development and well-being (Köngäs & Määttä, 2023). It shares key features with its parent approaches, such as addressing subjectivity and bias, while using data triangulation to ensure validity and reliability (Fusch et al., 2017).

The present research used interactional and participatory observation methods (Crossman, 2021) to explore sociocultural understandings and practices within a group (Siraj-Blatchford, 2020). Using inventive processes such as storytelling, drama and drawing, these creative methods emphasised knowledge production and enabled the participants to analyse and make sense of their experiences (Veale, 2005).

The transcribed data were analysed and coded using inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by the research questions. This process included notes from written observation protocols using checklists based on key features of democratic education (Hasen et al., 1999; Moss, 2011), music and drama as key features of the activities carried out within the process drama, transcriptions of video recordings and analysis of the children's artefacts.

Data analysis and coding

Activities related to musical and artistic forms of expression (RQ1) were analysed inductively based on the notes and video recordings. The elements of the democratic aspect of education (RQ2) were analysed deductively using checklists based on key features of democratic education (Hasen et al., 1999; Moss, 2011). This type of semi-structured observation protocol provides an initial framework for observing specific behaviours and allows the observer to systematically record both expected and unexpected behaviours during the observation (Palaologou, 2019).

Following the thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which offers theoretical freedom and a highly flexible approach, the following stages of data analysis were undertaken: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. Although these categories are interrelated in

practice, they provide different perspectives for observation in accordance with the research questions.

After familiarisation with the data and identification of initial patterns and ideas, the coding process was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on an analysis from the aspect of RQ1, the following codes were identified: rhythmic play (RP) and spontaneous musical improvisation (SI); choreography (C), expressive gesture (EG) and non-verbal communication (NVC); scenography (S), props design (PD), costume design and creation (CDC) and drawing (D); and character play (CHP) and narrative improvisation (NI) (Table 1). In the next step, themes and categories were developed from the initial codes to capture the key elements observed in the data: *Musical expression and improvisation*; *Dance, movement and expressive gesture*; *Visual artistic expression*; and *Narrative-driven improvisation*.

After reviewing the defined themes to assess their validity and to ensure that they accurately reflected the meanings evident across the dataset, the main theme/category was named and defined to represent the creative and expressive processes observed in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Accordingly, based on the codes and categories identified (Table 1), which encompassed various forms of creative expression and improvisation through different artistic forms and modalities, the overarching theme of *Forms of creative artistic expression* was established.

Table 1

First category – Forms of creative artistic expression

Codes	Themes (categories)	Main theme (category)
rhythmic play (RP) spontaneous music improvisation (SI)	Musical expression and improvisation	Forms of creative artistic expression
choreography (C) expressive gestures (EG) non-verbal communication (NVC)	Dance, movement and expressive gesture	
scenography (S) props design (PD) custom design and creation (CDC) drawing (D)	Visual artistic expression	
character play (CHP) narrative improvisation (NI)	Narrative-driven improvisation	

A deductive analysis was conducted, driven by the theoretical interests of the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in line with the theoretical framework (Hasen et al., 1999; Moss, 2011) and RQ2. The analysis focused on the overarching category of *Democratic features of education*. Within this category, several key themes were identified: *Freedom of expression and decision making; Collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills; Communication and listening skills; and Respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity*.

From these themes, the following codes were developed to guide the analysis: role choice (RCH), expression of preferences (EP), original ideas (OI), taking initiative (TI) and cooperation (C); non-verbal and verbal dialogue (NVD) and listening (L); conflict resolution (CR) and admitting mistakes and forgiveness (AM); and friendship through reconciliation (FR) (Table 2).

Table 2

Second category – Democratic features of education

Codes	Themes (categories)	Main theme (category)
roles choice (RCH)		
expression of preferences (EP)	Freedom of expression and decision making	Democratic features of education
original ideas (OI), taking initiative (TI), cooperation (C)		
non-verbal and verbal dialogue (NVD), listening (L)		
conflict resolution (CR)	Collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills	
admitting mistakes and forgiveness (AM)	Communication and listening skills	
friendship through reconciliation (FR)	Respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity	

Results

After a casual discussion about the story, scenario, roles and music, the chosen story in the process drama serves as a starting point, “raising the curtain” (O’Neill, 1995) on creativity and free play, and providing a framework for narrative play (Hakkarainen & Berdikyte, 2014). The children improvised and recreated the suggested story framework, starting with a simple narrative structure:

In a kingdom there lived a king, a queen and a princess, as well as little fairies, one of whom was particularly fond of the music played by the

royal orchestra during festivities. To enhance the musical experience for the guests, who were mostly focused on food and drink, she sprinkled them with magic dust, creating bracelets that encouraged them to dance. Thus the court became a place where all of the guests at the royal parties enjoyed the beautiful music.

After listening to the short story that formed the basis of the process drama, the children were encouraged to shape it according to their preferences. The teacher guided the narrative, asking questions, giving hints and staying ahead to maintain focus, encouraging the children's creative expression through active participation.

Following the identification of themes and codes based on inductive and deductive methods, the final stage of data analysis, "write-up of a report", provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and engaging account of the data across the defined themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to considering how each theme fits into the overall narrative of the dataset and how it is relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the inclusion of direct short examples and quotes from participants supports the understanding of specific points of interpretation and demonstrates the prevalence of themes (King, 2004). Based on the consistency of using a deductive or inductive methodological approach throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the results of the data analysis are presented in Tables 1 and Table 2, highlighting two key themes/categories: *Forms of creative artistic expression* and *Democratic features of education*.

Forms of creative artistic expression

The main theme/category *Forms of Creative Artistic Expression* includes the following categories: *Musical expression and improvisation*; *Dance, movement and expressive gesture*; *Visual artistic expression*; and *Narrative-driven improvisation*.

Musical expression and improvisation

This theme includes the following codes: rhythmic play (RP) and spontaneous music improvisation (SI). Two girls who had chosen the roles of the *Princess* and the *Lady* proposed including the singing game "Spread, Peep, Colourful Butterflies". When they presented it to the other children at the first meeting, they spontaneously improvised a melody (SI/1) and enjoyed it so

much that the other children immediately agreed to include it in the play. At a later meeting, two girls suggested reciting “Winter”, which they also enriched with an improvised melody (SI/2) and movement (RP/1). Throughout the activity, the children also improvised on songs such as “Crazy House” (SI/3).

Dance, movement and expressive gesture

The children’s forms of creative artistic expression included various ideas for choreography (C), including dance, movement and expressive gestures (EG) as a means of non-verbal communication (NVC).

One girl, after expressing her desire to be a lady, immediately felt the need, despite the lack of musical accompaniment, to perform “*a dance that she would do after the fairies had sprinkled her with dust*” (C/1). Pointing out that “*the music played at court must be elegant*”, the children spontaneously added various forms of expressive gestures, stressing the importance of “*bowing to the king, queen and princess*” (EG/1), while the ladies who appeared on stage should “*walk with their heads held high and smile when they bow*” (NVC/1).

Visual artistic expression

Based on the children’s initiative during the visual artistic expression activities, the following codes were defined: scenography (S), props design (PD), custom design and creation (CDC) and drawing (D). Some of the children already had ideas about scenography when they chose their roles. For example, one girl suggested: “*Ladies come and sit at the table, drink juice, soda, eat cookies, popcorn with masks on their faces*” (S/1). When describing the scenography, the children emphasised that “*the table must be special, royal, different from the others... on the table, glasses, plates, cakes... royal details...*” (S/2).

Listening carefully, one girl suggested candlesticks, while another girl added that she wanted “*real biscuits and juices*”, which the other children accepted (S/3).

The children created their costumes independently from the options given. For example, one girl found a long black skirt, which she wore under her dress to give it the shape of a crinoline, and she also found an umbrella to walk with like a real lady (CDC/1). They also suggested and designed props such as crowns and hair ornaments (PD/1), which they illustrated while explaining their imaginary outfits (D/1).

Narrative-driven improvisation

This theme included the following codes: character play (CHP) and narrative improvisation (NI). In line with the girls' discussion at the beginning about choosing a fairy character (CHP/1), the four fairies spontaneously created a conflict resolution through story improvisation within the process drama. The four fairies found themselves on the empty dance floor where people used to dance.

Two of the fairies shouted: "*What have you done?!*" One of the fairies, who had not been present during the spell, replied: "*We didn't do anything; you two did when you decided to have fun without us.*" The other added: "*And we've always done everything together!*" One of the absent fairies replied: "*Oh, you're right... we were so caught up that we forgot about you*" (NI/3).

Democratic features of education

The democratic features of education are defined by the following themes/categories: *Freedom of expression and decision making; Collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills; Communication and listening skills; and Respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity.*

Freedom of expression and decision making

In line with the given examples of spontaneous music improvisation (SI/1) and rhythmic play (RP/1) within the first main theme/category, after listing the characters (king, queen, princess, royal staff, elegant ladies and fairies), the children were given the freedom to choose their roles (codes roles choice (RCH) and expression of preferences (EP)).

They explained their preferences and motivations, reflecting key democratic values in education, such as autonomy, self-expression and respect for different perspectives and needs. The only boy in the group declared that he wanted to be the king, and one girl immediately said, "*I'm going to be a princess*" (RCH/1). This empowered other children to express themselves authentically by choosing roles with or without text and expressing their preferences, thereby promoting their autonomy and self-expression (EP/1). Similarly, the children expressed their preferences when choosing the music to be used in the activity (EP/3).

The example given within the category of Artistic Expression (CDC/1) of the girl who chose the role of a court lady and at the same time created her outfit with a crinoline and an umbrella also points to the democratic aspect within the category of Freedom of expression and decision making (EP/2 and

CHR/2). This was particularly evident in her complete absorption in her role, as she continued to dance enthusiastically after the other children had finished the activity.

Collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills

The plot development and resolution in the activity further highlighted the democratic features of education by emphasising collaboration, decision making and problem solving, which are further reflected in the following codes: original ideas (OI), taking initiative (TI) and cooperation (C). These codes were particularly evident in the following activities: “At one point the room went dark, the music of Johannes Brahms’ *Hungarian Dance No. 5 in G minor: Allegro*, which had set the tone for the energetic parts of the drama, stopped and the dancing stopped.” This change in atmosphere allowed the children to take the initiative and collaborate with other roles (TI/ 3 and C/5) in order to come up with an original idea to solve the situation in the resulting plot twist, as presented above within the category *Forms of creative artistic expression* (SI/3).

Respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity

This category includes the following codes: conflict resolution (CR), admitting mistakes and forgiveness (AM) and friendship through reconciliation (FR).

The conflict between the four fairies, divided into pairs, was resolved within the resolution phase: “*Oh, you’re right... we got so caught up in the game that we forgot about you.*”

- Fairy 1: “*Where have you been?*”
- Fairy 2 and 3: “*We were playing with a butterfly. It took us all the way to the flower bed in the garden of the manor...*” (CR/1).
- Fairy 3: “*Do you forgive us?*”
- Fairy 2: “*Please forgive us... it won’t happen again!*”
- Fairies 1 and 4 looked at each other, nodded and said in unison: “*We will!!!*” (AM/1)

They stretched out their hands, blew and ran across the hall, sprinkling magic dust (FR/2).

The resolution emphasised the importance of mutual respect, understanding and reconciliation.

Discussion

The results presented in Tables 1 and 2 provide answers to the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2), highlighting both categories: *Forms of creative artistic expression* (musical expression and improvisation, dance, movement and expressive gestures, visual artistic expression and narrative-driven improvisation) and *Democratic features of education* (freedom of expression and decision making, collaboration, group problem solving, critical thinking, communication and listening skills, respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity). The answers emerged through the children's engagement in music drama activities. Some examples of the activities carried out fall into both categories.

Since process drama inherently taps into children's implicit desire to explore, create and reflect (Vangsnes & Økland, 2017), while allowing them to express themselves freely, the activities that took place within the music drama activities in the music drama studio as a form of community of practice also have an implicit heuristic value. Development was driven by the tension between ideal and real behaviour, with play and imagination playing a key role (Vygotsky, 1977; 2004). Collaborative creative play fostered the children's creativity and social-emotional skills (Garaigordobil et al., 2022), as well as the democratic aspects of education within the category *Democratic features of education*, such as freedom of expression and decision making, collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills, communication and listening skills, and respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity (Hansen et al., 1999; Moss, 2011). Thus, for example, the process of reconciliation between the fairies within the plot twist within the categories *Respect for diversity, empathy and solidarity* and *Collaboration, group problem solving and critical thinking skills* symbolised how collective creative expression through music and dance can restore relationships and encourage community action emphasising the importance of dialogue, listening, cooperation and solidarity, acknowledging mistakes, maintaining friendships and achieving forgiveness. Finally, encouraging all of the guests to dance illustrates how embracing uncertainty, diversity, subjectivity and empathy fosters respect and different perspectives in children rather than dominance.

Through collaborative group music improvisation, where the participants actively shape the music in real time (MacGlone, 2019), within category of *Musical expression and improvisation*, group creativity, music education and communities of practice emphasise negotiation, reflection and shared decision making. This approach also emphasises the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Partti & Westerlund, 2013) and highlights the importance of prioritising

democracy in education and fostering students' growth towards democratic artistic expression (Partti, 2014).

These elements are also implemented through narrative improvisation and character play within the category *Narrative-driven improvisation*, in line with the concept of narrative play as central to children's play (Brèdikytė & Hakkarainen, 2011; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2014), as well as in spontaneously occurring musical improvisation and rhythmic play within the category *Musical expression and improvisation*. The category *Visual artistic expression* included the children's creative ideas about set design, costume design and drawing, providing valuable insights into their thinking (Angell et al., 2015). Their comments also highlighted democratic decisions about music and decorations, demonstrating their active participation in both creative and democratic processes. This free expression of ideas and emotions through music increases children's self-confidence, imagination and creativity, which has a positive impact on their overall development (Bačlija Sušić, 2018).

The classical music chosen by the children themselves (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Serenade No. 13 in G major KV 525 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik/A Little Night Music*, and Johannes Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*) served as the foundation of the whole activity, illustrating the content and adding depth to the narrative; encouraging the children's involvement as well as their non-verbal and verbal communication, interaction and movement; creating tension in the drama; and demonstrating the children's understanding of the role of music in creating atmosphere. In this way, the music facilitated the children's ability to express thoughts and experiences inspired by both the narrative and the music while creatively and actively interpreting their roles. Accordingly, unlike conceptual approaches to music listening that emphasise the identification of the characteristics of musical sounds, this creative approach prioritises children's unique personal experiences and embraces their diverse and individual ways of listening (Kratus, 2017).

The activities carried out also demonstrated how listening to music can be made more accessible to children through different approaches and strategies that encourage their experience of music, while at the same time contributing to their free, original way of expressing themselves through different modes of expression. In addition, by interacting with music in this way, this learning perspective provides significant heuristic value in music education, helping individuals to develop a personal connection with music, and promoting identity formation and artistic expression (Abril, 2006; Partti & Westerlund, 2012), thus fostering children's development towards democratic artistic expression (Partti, 2014).

Process drama with children in the music and drama community of practice relies on an open-minded and playful facilitator with both pedagogical and artistic skills. Using the “teacher in role” technique, the facilitator introduces new elements into the children’s scenarios, develops roles and supports the use of materials (Loizou et al., 2019), starting with open-ended, authentic questions that have no clear answers (Ødemotland, 2020) and skilfully creating dramatic tension through subtle hints that catalyse the action in the play (Bowell & Heap, 2001). The facilitator shows a deep interest in the ideas, thoughts and attitudes contributed by the children and challenges them to think more deeply (Wagner, 1999). Their role is similar to that of an early childhood educator, providing varying degrees of guidance during play, primarily through indirect involvement in process drama. This approach encourages children’s creative and critical thinking while promoting the values of democratic education.

A strong affirmation of these values, including freedom of creative expression, was provided by a girl dancing with an umbrella when, after a brief signal to the activity leader, the other children resumed dancing, respecting her enthusiasm. This event highlights the relationship between flow state and creative output in artistic performance (Harmat et al., 2021), while demonstrating the quality of the activities carried out in the music drama studio. Furthermore, it points to children’s need for non-verbal expression of musical experiences, reinforcing the idea that the more children engage with music, the fewer words they need (Zalar, 2020).

Accordingly, within the music drama community of practice, process drama represents a pathway to creative expression and improvisation that goes beyond traditional teaching methods (Ødemotland, 2020), with narrative and music serving as fundamental stimuli aimed at collaborative exploration and problem solving within an imaginary world (DICE, 2010).

Conclusion

By integrating music and other artistic disciplines within process drama in the informal setting of a music drama studio as a form of community of practice, process drama served as a platform to promote children’s freedom, voice and choice (Schneider et al., 2006). This holistic approach allows children to express themselves through different modalities and forms of creative artistic expression, gaining diverse knowledge and experiences, while promoting balanced development by nurturing their creative abilities and exploring democratic principles. Highlighting the importance of creativity, which can be studied through different classifications in different domains, while recognising

that each dimension of creativity involves tasks that individuals can approach and solve in innovative ways (Kaufman, 2012), it is crucial to addressing how the lack of emphasis on divergent thinking in education shapes these perspectives (Županić Benić, 2021).

In addition to the important role of teachers and activity leaders as facilitators of democratic participation within music and drama communities with children (El Shahed, 2017; Vangsnes & Økland, 2018), it is important to highlight the role of teachers who embrace spontaneity and risk-taking, demonstrating an ability to improvise and plan the next steps based on the children's needs (Dunn, 2016; Ødegaard, 2022). As facilitators, they need to engage deeply with the children's contributions and ideas, encourage creative and critical thinking, and uphold the values of democratic education. Furthermore, teaching strategies that set achievable goals while promoting curiosity, critical thinking, cooperation and respect for diversity can support children's holistic development and contribute to their inclusion in social activities within community services (Antulić Majcen & Drvodelić, 2022), such as music drama studios within cultural centres.

This child-centred approach not only fosters deeper engagement, creativity and critical thinking in music (Kratus, 2017), but also emphasises children's need for syncretic and multimodal music and artistic expression, allowing them to explore new ideas and forms of expression driven by their imagination and creativity (Bačlija Sušić & Brebrić, 2022; Godinho, 2018), in line with their holistic and integrated way of learning. Art, play and aesthetics in children's education, explored in the context of communities of practice that support creative expression and learning (Pitt, 2018), encourage children's diverse forms of creative expression and the development of democratic values. Furthermore, this approach advocates for the "democratic revolution" of the twenty-first century, expanding opportunities for social participation in music and artistic expression (Partti & Westerlund, 2012), while providing authentic learning opportunities that not only foster creativity and balanced development, the development of a democratic society (Alshurman, 2015; Tuhuteru, 2023), but also prepare children for active citizenship, ultimately contributing to individual success, social progress and positive social change in modern society.

Limitations of the study

Although the study provides valuable insights into children's expression through process drama and music activities, the small sample size, the short

duration of the study and the specific demographic group limit the understanding of long-term effects and the generalisability of the findings. The unique geographical and cultural backgrounds of the participants and the specialised music drama studio setting may limit the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Methodologically, the ethnographic ECEC participatory observation approach may introduce subjectivity through the researcher's interpretation. This is a significant challenge in ECEC ethnography, as the researcher, as part of the adult culture, needs to remain reflexive throughout the process.

Implications

In terms of research implications, greater inclusion of ECEC ethnography in research practice can deepen the understanding of childhood and support children's development and well-being (Köngäs & Määttä, 2023). Extending research to larger samples over a longer period of time and using methods such as interviews or focus groups can further enhance the understanding of education for creativity and democracy through engagement in music and drama communities of practice, while also highlighting the need for their greater presence in both urban and rural areas.

Ethical statement

This study adhered to ethical standards for educational research. Written informed consent was obtained from parents and the participants were fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the research. Participation was voluntary and data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality and privacy. The research was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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