

FROM PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS TO CREATIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICE: EVIDENCE FROM STUDENT TEACHERS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive mixed-methods study examined how student teachers understand educational philosophy and how philosophical learning is perceived and observed in relation to creative classroom practice in Sri Lanka. The study focused on progressivism, constructivism, essentialism, and existentialism and considered four dimensions of creative thinking: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. The quantitative component involved 40 fourth-year Bachelor of Education students from four non-state universities, with 10 students from each university, who completed a 20-item five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. A separate classroom observation was conducted with 15 student teachers during Classroom Teaching Skills, a fourth-year component intended to support subsequent teaching practicum. Questionnaire data were analysed using item and domain means, while observation evidence was examined descriptively and thematically. The questionnaire showed a high to very high positive pattern, with an overall item mean of 4.40/5.00. The highest-rated areas were supervisor and mentor support ($M = 4.90$), explicit integration of philosophical ideas into lesson planning ($M = 4.75$), and movement from teacher-centred lecturing towards student-centred facilitation ($M = 4.68$). Flexibility ($M = 4.65$), creative risk-taking ($M = 4.65$), elaboration ($M = 4.58$), and originality ($M = 4.38$) were also positively rated. Observation scores ranged from 74 to 83 out of 100, with a mean of 78.4. Observed practices included learning by doing, 5E-oriented facilitation, Socratic questioning, role play, creative teaching aids, use of authentic resources, and positive teacher-student relationships. Areas requiring further development included lesson summarising, time management, differentiation of teacher and student activities, and visibility of teaching aids. The findings indicate a positive perceived association and a plausible theory-to-practice relationship between philosophical learning and creative pedagogy, but they do not establish causation. The study concludes that the philosophy of education is most useful in teacher preparation when taught through enquiry, dialogue, reflection, and explicit connection to classroom decision-making.

1. Introduction

Teacher education has a responsibility to prepare future teachers not only to understand educational theories but also to make thoughtful, flexible, and creative decisions in complex classroom situations. Contemporary education increasingly recognises creative thinking as a capability that can be developed through education. The OECD defines

creative thinking in terms of generating diverse and original ideas and evaluating and improving ideas, and its recent work emphasises the role of classroom environments, pedagogies, and teacher preparation in nurturing this capability (OECD, 2023, 2024).

Educational philosophy has particular relevance to this task because it invites teachers to examine

assumptions about knowledge, learning, human development, values, educational purposes, and relationships between teachers and learners. Philosophy, therefore, need not remain an abstract historical study of thinkers. When student teachers use philosophical ideas to analyse classroom situations, question assumptions, and consider alternative actions, philosophy can become a practical resource for professional judgement.

The present study emerged from the researcher's experience of teaching philosophy of education for more than 15 years. In that experience, student teachers sometimes approached philosophy as difficult and abstract. This led to greater use of questioning, dialogue, philosophical scenarios, collaborative discussion, reflection, and classroom applications. The study was developed to examine whether student teachers perceive a relationship between philosophical learning and creative pedagogical practice and whether these perceptions are reflected in classroom teaching.

This study is particularly concerned with the movement from theory to practice. Progressivism emphasises experience and active participation; constructivism emphasises learners' active construction of meaning; essentialism stresses important knowledge and disciplined engagement; and existentialism foregrounds choice, responsibility, individuality, and meaning. These perspectives do not automatically produce creative teaching. Rather, they provide different lenses through which student teachers may interpret instructional problems and make pedagogical choices.

2. Background and Rationale

A central concern in teacher education is the theory-practice gap. Student teachers may be able to define philosophical traditions without necessarily using them when planning lessons, selecting teaching aids, questioning learners, or responding to unexpected classroom situations. Therefore, the present study treats philosophical foundations as intellectual resources for pedagogical decision-making.

In this study, creative teaching is understood as a practical expression of creative thinking. Fluency concerns the generation of possible instructional approaches, flexibility concerns adaptation to learners and situations, originality concerns the creation of less conventional activities or resources, and elaboration concerns extending and refining an

initial teaching idea. This interpretation is consistent with the OECD's contemporary treatment of creative thinking as a capacity that can be developed through practice and supported by appropriate educational environments (OECD, 2023, 2024).

Philosophical enquiry is also relevant because dialogue can expose student teachers to multiple perspectives. A recent three-level meta-analysis of Philosophy for Children (P4C) found significant positive effects on creativity, reasoning, and critical thinking, while also noting the influence of contextual and methodological factors (Wei & Chen, 2025). Although this evidence is mainly based on children rather than student teachers, it provides a useful basis for examining whether inquiry-oriented philosophical learning may have similar relevance in teacher education.

3. Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this study is the difficulty in translating philosophical knowledge into creative classroom practice. Student teachers may learn the concepts of Progressivism, Constructivism, Essentialism, and Existentialism, yet the educational value of these concepts is greater when they help students question assumptions, generate alternatives, design learner-centred lessons, and respond appropriately to classroom situations. The study therefore examines the perceived contribution of philosophical learning to creative thinking and the extent to which this contribution is visible in student teachers' instructional practice.

4. Research Objectives

- To assess the level of understanding student teachers possess regarding the key philosophical foundations of education, particularly Progressivism, Constructivism, Essentialism, and Existentialism.
- To evaluate the profile of student teachers' creative thinking in relation to fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration within instructional contexts.
- To examine which philosophical orientations and enquiry-oriented practices appear to foster or constrain pedagogical creativity,
- To examine the practical translation of philosophical learning into lesson planning,

teaching-aid development, classroom interaction, and problem-solving during teaching practice.

5. Research Questions

- How strongly do student teachers perceive that their B.Ed. philosophical foundations coursework has developed their understanding of different educational perspectives?
- How do student teachers perceive the contribution of philosophical learning to fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration in teaching?
- Which philosophical ideas and inquiry-oriented practices are most visible in student teachers' classroom practice?
- What strengths and areas for improvement are evident when student teachers translate philosophical understanding into lesson planning and classroom teaching?

6. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

6.1 Philosophy of Education and Teacher Preparation

Philosophy of education addresses fundamental questions concerning the purposes of education, knowledge, values, human development and the teacher-learner relationship. Frank and McDonough (2020) argue that philosophy can contribute to teacher education by encouraging attention to questions of purpose, goodness and judgement rather than reducing teaching to technical effectiveness. This is particularly relevant when teachers face situations for which procedural rules alone are insufficient.

The present study therefore distinguishes between learning philosophical terminology and engaging philosophically. Engagement includes questioning assumptions, comparing perspectives, justifying choices, considering alternatives and reflecting on consequences. These processes can support professional agency because student teachers are required to explain not only what they intend to do, but why a particular approach is appropriate.

6.2 Progressivism and Learning by Doing

Deweyan progressivism places experience, activity, and reflection at the centre of learning. For teacher education, this suggests that student teachers

should experience the kind of active, reflective pedagogy that they are expected to use with school learners. In the present study, evidence of learning-by-doing included activity-based teaching, practical demonstrations, movement, role play, and the use of authentic materials.

6.3 Constructivism and Dialogic Learning

Constructivist perspectives view learners as active participants in constructing meaning. Dialogue, collaboration, questioning, and opportunities to connect new ideas with prior experience are therefore central. Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective further highlights the role of social interaction in cognitive development. In teacher education, collaborative philosophical discussions can model the kind of classroom interaction that student teachers can later reproduce in schools.

6.4 Essentialism and Existentialism

Essentialism provides an important counterbalance by emphasising core knowledge, discipline, and purposeful curriculum content. These features can support well-structured lessons, but an overly prescriptive application may reduce opportunities for learner choice and experimentation. Existentialism, by contrast, draws attention to individuality, freedom, responsibility, and meaning. The four traditions should therefore not be treated as simple categories of 'creative' and 'non-creative' teaching. Their educational value depends on how student teachers interpret and apply them.

6.5 Creative Thinking in Education

The OECD's PISA 2022 framework defines creative thinking as the capacity to engage productively in generating, evaluating and improving ideas that can lead to original and effective solutions. The framework also stresses that creative thinking is malleable and can be developed through practice (OECD, 2023). The 2024 PISA results further emphasise the importance of school climate, engagement and pedagogical practices in supporting creativity (OECD, 2024). These ideas provide a useful basis for examining creativity in teacher education as a classroom practice rather than as an artistic talent.

6.6 Research Gap

International research provides substantial evidence on creative thinking and philosophical inquiry, but there is comparatively limited context-specific evidence on how student teachers in Sri

Lankan non-state teacher-education settings connect philosophy of education with their own classroom creativity. The present study addresses this gap by combining questionnaire evidence from 40 students across four non-state universities with direct classroom observation of 15 fourth-year student teachers during the Classroom Teaching Skills component that supports teaching practicum.

7. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposes that the contribution of educational philosophy to creative teaching is mediated by the way philosophy is learned and applied. Exposure to philosophical concepts alone is not assumed to cause creativity. Enquiry, dialogue, reflection, application, and opportunities to design and test teaching approaches are expected to provide the bridge between philosophical understanding and classroom practice.

Philosophical foundations: Progressivism, Constructivism, Essentialism, and Existentialism.

Modes of engagement: dialogue, questioning, reflection, comparison of perspectives, and application to classroom situations.

Creative thinking dimensions: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration.

Pedagogical manifestations: learner-centred facilitation, creative teaching aids, open-ended questioning, activity-based learning, role play, improvisation, and classroom responsiveness.

Practicum outcomes: lesson planning, classroom interaction, time management, teaching resource use, and teacher-student relationships.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Design

A descriptive mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative questionnaire data were combined with qualitative classroom observation evidence. The design was selected because the study sought both a broad picture of student teachers' perceptions and direct evidence of how creative and philosophical ideas appeared in teaching practice.

8.2 Participants and Sampling

The questionnaire involved 40 fourth-year B.Ed. students from four non-state universities in Sri Lanka, with 10 students selected from each university. The participating institutions follow comparable B.Ed. curricular structures, enabling the questionnaire to obtain perspectives across more than one non-state university setting. The classroom observation component involved 15 student teachers from the researcher's campus. These student teachers were observed in relation to Classroom Teaching Skills, a fourth-year subject intended to support the subsequent teaching practicum.

The two samples served different purposes. The 40 questionnaire respondents provided cross-institutional student perspectives, while the 15 observed student teachers provided direct evidence of teaching performance. The two datasets should therefore not be treated as if they represent the same individuals.

8.3 Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of 20 five-point Likert-scale items. Items 1–5 addressed conceptual understanding of philosophy; Items 6–11 addressed perceived impact on creative thinking; Items 12–16 addressed lesson planning and instructional design; and Items 17–20 addressed practical translation during teaching practicum. The questionnaire covered the four creative-thinking dimensions of fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration through specific statements about instructional practice.

The classroom observation schedule contained 13 scored criteria. The maximum possible score was 100. The observation also generated qualitative notes concerning learner readiness, greetings and classroom relationships, lesson introduction, teaching aids, voice and classroom management, questioning, feedback, peer review, activity-based learning, role play, use of authentic resources, lesson planning and time management.

8.4 Data Collection

Questionnaires were administered to the selected fourth-year B.Ed. students. Classroom observations were subsequently conducted with 15 student teachers during teaching-related activities. Observation notes were reviewed thematically to identify recurring manifestations of philosophical

and creative teaching. The qualitative material included discussion of each observed lesson and comments from school principals concerning teaching ability, creativity and responsibility.

8.5 Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analysed using item means and domain means on the five-point scale. The observation scores were summed to produce a score out of 100 for each student teacher, and the mean score was calculated across the 15 observations. Qualitative notes were coded thematically around learner-centredness, creativity of resources, questioning, adaptability, classroom management, teacher-student relationships and lesson-planning issues. No inferential correlation or causal effect is claimed in this revised paper because the supplied dataset does not include a verifiable correlation coefficient, inferential test output, control group or pre-test/post-test comparison.

9. Findings and Results

9.1 Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire produced a consistently positive pattern. The overall item-mean was 4.40 on a five-point scale. The highest domain was practical translation during teaching practicum ($M = 4.54$), followed by application to lesson planning and instructional design ($M = 4.39$), impact on creative thinking ($M = 4.38$), and conceptual understanding of philosophical foundations ($M = 4.30$).

The highest individual questionnaire item was Item 18 ($M = 4.90$), indicating very strong perceived support from school supervisors and mentors for creative teaching methods. Item 12, concerning explicit integration of philosophical ideas such as Socratic dialogue and Dewey's experiential learning into lesson plans, also scored very highly ($M = 4.75$). Item 13, concerning movement from teacher-centred lecturing towards student-centred facilitation, recorded $M = 4.68$.

Within the creativity domain, flexibility (Item 7, $M = 4.65$), creative risk-taking (Item 10, $M = 4.65$), elaboration (Item 9, $M = 4.58$) and originality (Item 8, $M = 4.38$) were positively rated. The comparatively lower scores were Item 11 on challenging conventional assessment methods ($M = 3.83$) and Item 16 on cross-disciplinary connections ($M = 3.83$). These findings suggest that students may be more comfortable modifying teaching activities than

questioning established assessment practices or making broader interdisciplinary connections. Item 3, concerning the regular use of philosophical principles when analysing complex classroom dilemmas, recorded $M = 3.95$, which was the lowest item within the conceptual-understanding domain. This is important because it suggests a continuing theory-to-practice gap: students may understand different philosophical perspectives more confidently than they can use them as decision-making frameworks in complex situations.

9.2 Classroom Observation Findings

The observation schedule was applied to 15 student teachers. Individual scores ranged from 74 to 83 out of 100. The mean score was 78.4/100. Thus, the observed group demonstrated a generally satisfactory to strong level of classroom teaching performance, while also showing variation that can be used to identify areas for professional development.

The observation evidence is consistent with the questionnaire pattern. Student teachers demonstrated understanding of their target learners, used activity-based and student-centred approaches, and often acted as facilitators rather than relying only on direct explanation. Several lessons reflected Dewey's learning-by-doing orientation and the 5E approach, with the teacher facilitating participation.

Creative classroom practices included the use of pictures, quizzes, readiness questions, Socratic questioning, attractive teaching aids, sticker-based encouragement, movement, singing, dancing and practical resources. In history lessons, students used role play and costumes to represent cultural contexts, urbanisation, lifestyles of ancient people and cave life. In Western Music, a student teacher brought musical instruments into the classroom, creating a more authentic learning experience.

The observations also showed variation in voice modulation, language use, patience, questioning and classroom management. Some student teachers used a strong voice and controlled the class confidently, while others were softer in delivery but demonstrated patience and supportive interaction. Feedback was provided to students, and lessons were discussed after observation. Peer review was also reported as useful because peers offered additional ideas.

The observation notes identified several areas for

improvement. Teacher and student activities in lesson plans needed clearer differentiation; lesson summarising required strengthening; and time management needed further attention. Some teaching aids contained small text or pictures that were not sufficiently visible. These are practical areas where the connection between philosophical understanding and technical lesson execution can be strengthened.

10. Integrated Interpretation of Findings

The two sources of evidence show substantial convergence. Questionnaire respondents reported very high perceptions of philosophical understanding, creative thinking and practical application. The classroom observations provided concrete examples of learner-centred, experiential and creative teaching. The strongest quantitative findings—mentor support, explicit philosophical integration and student-centred facilitation—are compatible with the qualitative evidence of practical experimentation, questioning and activity-based teaching.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as proof that philosophy alone causes creativity. The questionnaire measures perceptions and the observations provide a practical snapshot. Student teachers are influenced by many factors, including prior teaching experience, school context, mentor support, curriculum requirements, time, available resources and personal confidence. The evidence supports an association and a plausible theory-to-practice relationship rather than a causal conclusion.

The observation findings are particularly valuable because they move the study beyond self-report. The use of historical role play, musical instruments, creative teaching aids, Socratic questioning and activity-based learning demonstrates that student teachers can translate learner-centred philosophical ideas into classroom actions. However, the need for improvement in time management, summarising and lesson-plan activity mapping shows that creative teaching must be accompanied by systematic instructional planning.

11. Discussion

The findings support the view that the philosophy of education can become a practical resource when student teachers are encouraged to engage with it through questioning, dialogue, reflection, and classroom application. This interpretation is

consistent with Frank and McDonough's (2020) argument that philosophy can enrich professional practice by drawing attention to judgement and purpose.

The strong questionnaire ratings for flexibility, creative risk-taking, and student-centred facilitation are also consistent with contemporary understandings of creative thinking. OECD (2023, 2024) emphasises that creative thinking involves generating, evaluating, and improving ideas, and that educational environments can either support or restrict this development. The present study similarly shows a positive disposition towards trying alternative teaching strategies, while the lower rating for challenging conventional assessment indicates that institutional structures may constrain some forms of creativity.

The classroom observations provide a particularly clear illustration of Progressivist and Constructivist principles. Learning-by-doing, activity-based learning, learner participation, and facilitation were visible in the observed lessons. The history role-play and Western Music lesson using real instruments are examples of teaching that moves beyond verbal transmission towards experience. Such practices also provide opportunities for fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration.

The findings concerning mentor and supervisor support are important. Item 18 obtained the highest questionnaire mean (4.90), while observation notes reported positive comments from school principals about student teachers' creativity, responsibility, and teaching ability. This suggests that institutional and interpersonal support can provide the conditions necessary for student teachers to experiment with creative methods.

However, this study also identified a practical gap. Knowing that teaching should be student-centred does not automatically ensure effective time management, summarising, or precise lesson plan sequencing. Therefore, teacher education needs to integrate philosophical enquiry with repeated micro-teaching, feedback, observation, and revision. Creative thinking should not be treated as separate from lesson mechanics; rather, the two should develop together.

12. Implications for Teacher Education

Educational philosophy courses should move beyond memorisation of definitions and historical thinkers towards enquiry, dialogue, comparison of

perspectives, and classroom-based problem solving.

Student teachers should regularly connect philosophical concepts with concrete lesson decisions: how to begin a lesson, how to question learners, how to select resources, how to respond to errors, and how to provide learner choice.

Classroom teaching skills should explicitly bridge philosophical foundations with teaching practicum by using micro-teaching, peer review, and reflective lesson analysis.

Teacher educators should model Socratic questioning and learning-by-doing so that student teachers experience the pedagogies they are expected to use in their own teaching.

Creative lesson design should be accompanied by explicit training in time management, summarising, lesson sequencing, teacher/student activity mapping, and the design of visible teaching aids.

Schools and mentors should continue to provide supportive environments in which student teachers can try innovative approaches while receiving constructive feedback from their peers.

13. Recommendations

Strengthen the philosophical foundations course by embedding dialogic enquiry, classroom scenarios, and reflective problem-solving activities.

Use structured micro-teaching cycles in which student teachers plan, teach, receive peer/supervisor feedback, revise, and reteach.

Develop a practical creativity rubric covering fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration in lesson design.

Provide targeted support for time management, summarising, and differentiation of teacher and student activities in written lesson plans.

Encourage the use of authentic and locally available resources while ensuring that visual materials are readable and appropriate for the age group.

Develop closer collaboration between university lecturers, school mentors, and supervisors to reinforce creative teaching practices during practicum.

Future studies should be conducted with larger

samples, validated observation instruments, pre- and post-course measures, and inferential statistical analysis if the data structure permits.

14. Limitations

This study has several limitations. The questionnaire sample consisted of 40 students from four non-state universities and therefore cannot represent all B.Ed. students in Sri Lanka. The observation component involved 15 student teachers from one campus and was based on one observation schedule. The questionnaire measured perceptions rather than directly testing creative thinking ability. The two datasets also involved different participants and therefore cannot be used to calculate a direct individual-level relationship between questionnaire scores and observation scores. In addition, the available dataset does not contain a verifiable inferential correlation coefficient, control group, or pre-test/post-test comparison. Consequently, causal claims have been deliberately removed from this revised version.

15. Conclusion

This study provides evidence that student teachers perceive educational philosophy as highly relevant to creative pedagogical practice and that many of the corresponding principles are visible in classroom teaching. Across 40 questionnaire respondents, the overall mean was 4.40/5.00, with particularly strong ratings for mentor support, philosophical integration into lesson planning, and student-centred facilitation. Among 15 observed student teachers, scores ranged from 74 to 83 out of 100, with a mean of 78.4. Classroom observations showed practical manifestations of learning-by-doing, student participation, Socratic questioning, creative teaching aids, role play, and authentic learning resources.

The most important conclusion is therefore not that philosophy automatically produces creativity, but that philosophy becomes more educationally powerful when student teachers are given opportunities to enquire, question, reflect, design, practise, and revise. Progressivist and constructivist ideas were particularly visible in the observed learner-centred practices, while the findings also demonstrated that creative teaching requires strong technical competencies such as time management, summarising, lesson sequencing, and effective resource design.

For teacher education in Sri Lanka, the implication

is clear: philosophical foundations should be deliberately connected to classroom teaching skills and teaching practicum. When theory is translated into classroom decisions, philosophy can help future teachers develop the flexibility, originality, responsiveness, and reflective judgement required for contemporary teaching.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire Structure

Table A1. Questionnaire structure

Domain	Items	Focus
Exposure and conceptual understanding	1-5	Understanding perspectives, assumptions, frameworks and ambiguity
Impact on creative thinking	6-11	Fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration, risk-taking and assessment
Application to lesson planning and instructional design	12-16	Philosophical integration, facilitation, inquiry, improvisation and interdisciplinary connections
Practical translation during practicum	17-20	Creative teaching, mentor support, classroom constraints and professional reflection

Source: Author’s survey and analysis.

Appendix 2: Observation Summary

The observation schedule contained 13 scored criteria with a maximum total of 100 marks. Qualitative observation evidence included learner readiness strategies, culturally appropriate greetings, creative lesson introductions, teaching-aid use, voice modulation, questioning, feedback, peer review, movement and activity, historical role play, use of real musical instruments, positive teacher–student relationships, and school-principal appreciation of student teachers’ creativity and responsibility.