

THE ECOLOGY OF CREATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE THINKING IN MUSIC EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL AND NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

This narrative review explores the ecology of creative and sustainable thinking in music education through an integrative analysis of theoretical and empirical literature published between 2019 and 2025. Drawing on transdisciplinary frameworks proposed by Burnard, Glăveanu, Rosa, Bresler, and Mező, the study investigates how creativity can be sustained rather than exhausted in educational contexts. Findings reveal that creativity in music education is shifting from a performance-based paradigm to a relational and reflective model grounded in resonance, emotional awareness, and ecological interconnectedness. The review also highlights the increasing role of digital environments and inclusive pedagogies in supporting sustainable artistic learning. In alignment with UNESCO's 2021 educational framework, this paper positions creativity as both a pedagogical and ethical

responsibility - an ongoing rhythm that connects knowledge, emotion, and culture in a dynamic process of renewal.

Keywords: sustainable thinking, music education, creativity

Discipline: Educational Science

Absztrakt

A KREATÍV ÉS FENNTARTHATÓ GONDOLKODÁS HÁLÓZATAI A ZENEI NEVELÉSBEN – ELMÉLETI ÉS NARRATÍV ÁTTEKINTÉS

A tanulmány a kreatív és fenntartható gondolkodás összefüggésrendszerét vizsgálja a zenei nevelésben, a 2019 és 2025 között megjelent elméleti és empirikus szakirodalom narratív elemzése alapján. Burnard, Glăveanu, Rosa, Bresler és Mező transzdiszciplináris megközelítéseire építve a kutatás azt tárja fel, miként tartható fenn - és nem kimeríthető - a kreativitás az oktatási folyamatokban. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a zenei nevelésben a kreativitás a teljesítményközpontú paradigmáról egyre inkább egy relációs és reflektív modell felé mozdul el, amelyet a rezonancia, az érzelmi tudatosság és a kapcsolatrendszerek dinamikája jellemez. A tanulmány kiemeli a digitális tanulási környezetek és az inkluzív pedagógiai megközelítések növekvő szerepét a fenntartható művészeti tanulás támogatásában. Az UNESCO 2021-es oktatási keretrendszerével összhangban a kutatás a kreativitást pedagógiai és etikai felelősségként értelmezi - mint egy folyamatos ritmust, amely az ismeretet, az érzelmet és a kultúrát dinamikus megújulásban kapcsolja össze.

Kulcszavak: fenntartható gondolkodás, zenei nevelés, kreativitás

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány

Introduction

In an age when education is increasingly shaped by digital acceleration and global uncertainty, understanding how creativity can remain both human and sustainable has become a pressing question. This narrative review highlights the growing importance of creative and sustainable thinking in contemporary music education, integrating sociocultural, ecological, and transdisciplinary perspectives to reima-

gine how creativity supports both artistic learning and human connection. Creativity in music education has evolved from a focus on individual talent to an exploration of relational, emotional, and ecological processes. Recent scholarship (Burnard, 2022; Glăveanu, 2020; Rosa, 2019) frames creativity not as a product but as a sustainable mode of connection - a way of thinking, feeling, and learning that renews itself through interaction.

This shift coincides with broader social and educational transformations: the acceleration of knowledge production, the digitization of learning environments, and the growing awareness of sustainability as a cultural and ethical imperative (Bresler, 2020). In this context, creativity is increasingly understood as both an artistic and pedagogical responsibility.

The aim of this narrative review is to map and critically interpret recent theoretical and empirical contributions (2019–2025) concerning the intersection of creativity, sustainability, and music education. The review integrates transdisciplinary perspectives to clarify how creativity can be sustained rather than exhausted in educational practice.

Three guiding concepts underpin this inquiry: *relational creativity* (Glăveanu, 2020), *resonance* (Rosa, 2019), and *artistic sustainability* (Bresler, 2020). Together, they form an emerging framework that views learning as an *ecology of meaning* - a system in which cognition, emotion, and culture continuously interact.

By synthesizing these perspectives, the study addresses three questions:

1. How do current theories conceptualize the sustainability of creative processes in music education?
2. What role do affect, relationality, and digital mediation play in sustaining creativity?
3. What methodological and conceptual gaps remain in this field?

In aligning creativity with sustainability, this review positions music education as a key site for rethinking the human dimensions of learning in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Background: Relational, Affective, and Ecological Frameworks of Creativity in Music Education

The theoretical roots of creativity in music education have evolved from individualistic and cognitive models toward relational and ecological paradigms. Early psychological approaches (e.g., Guilford, 1950; Torrance, 1974) viewed creativity as a measurable trait, located within the individual's divergent thinking abilities. However, recent approaches in creativity studies have shifted attention from the isolated mind to the interactional field in which creativity unfolds (Glăveanu, 2020; Sawyer, 2019). This perspective reframes creativity not as a static ability but as a dynamic system of participation, communication, and shared meaning-making.

Within this paradigm, Vlad Glăveanu's (2020) sociocultural theory of creativity positions the creative act as a dialogical exchange between the person, the material world, and the community. Creativity becomes a process of repositioning—a continuous negotiation between what exists and what might be possible. This theoretical framework is especially relevant to music education, where the act of learning and creating music inherently

involves intersubjectivity: the student's gesture, the teacher's response, and the resonance of sound form a living ecology of meaning. Sawyer (2021) describes the classroom as an evolving ecology of learning, where creativity emerges through collaboration and dynamic interaction - an idea that complements the ecological perspective adopted in this study. Pamela Burnard (2022) expands this perspective through her transdisciplinary creative pedagogies, emphasizing that creativity in education should be understood as "a polyphonic phenomenon that integrates artistic, cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions." Burnard argues that sustainable creative education is grounded in dialogic spaces-contexts where learners and teachers co-construct knowledge through curiosity, empathy, and improvisation. In these spaces, music functions both as a medium of expression and as a model for relational learning: sound becomes a metaphor for understanding how human connections and meanings evolve over time. The affective turn in creativity research has also transformed pedagogical interpretations of musical learning. As Csikszentmihalyi (2014) observed, creativity involves not only the production of novelty but also the experience of deep engagement - what he calls "flow." More recent studies in affective pedagogy (Nielsen, 2023; Barrett, 2022) emphasize that this engagement depends on emotional attunement and empathetic responsiveness. In music education, affective

presence the teacher's ability to sense, reflect, and respond to students' emotions-emerges as a central factor in nurturing creativity. As Mező and Mező (2022) argue, creativity unfolds as a temporal process that requires emotional awareness, reflective pacing, and the capacity to sustain openness over time.

At the intersection of these perspectives lies the concept of resonance (Rosa, 2019), which provides an integrative framework for rethinking creativity as an ecological phenomenon. Resonance refers to the reciprocal transformation between self and world, mediated by attention and response. In music education, resonance manifests in the subtle exchanges between sound and silence, teacher and learner, intention and improvisation. It is a state in which learning becomes more than acquisition—it becomes a lived relationship with meaning.

The ecological dimension of creativity thus extends beyond metaphor. It implies a systemic understanding of how learning environments, cultural contexts, and digital spaces interact. Bresler (2020) identifies artistic sustainability as a mode of being that preserves the integrity of aesthetic experience within educational systems increasingly dominated by standardization and acceleration. In this sense, ecological thinking in music education entails an ethical reorientation—from production to connection, from efficiency to presence. It recognizes that creativity thrives not in acceleration but in resonance, in the

quality of relationships that sustain inquiry and reflection. Kupers et al. (2018) underline that fostering creativity requires temporal and affective spaces for exploration, where error is reframed as experimentation and time becomes a medium of understanding rather than a constraint. The convergence of these theories—relational, affective, and ecological—suggests that sustainable creativity in music education is less about novelty and more about continuity: the ongoing capacity to connect, listen, and respond meaningfully to the world. As such, ecological models of creative learning call for pedagogies that are attentive, reflective, and human-centered—pedagogies in which the artistic act regenerates both the learner and the learning environment.

Approach and Scope of the Narrative Review

This paper employs a *narrative review* design that seeks not merely to summarize but to interpret and integrate diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives into a coherent conceptual framework (Snyder, 2019). The choice of a narrative approach over systematic or scoping methods reflects the study's aim of achieving *conceptual synthesis* rather than quantitative exhaustiveness. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic-spanning music education, creativity studies, psychology, and sustainability—this approach enables a deeper exploration of theoretical paradigms and

emerging epistemological shifts instead of a statistical overview of research outputs.

Search Strategy and Selection Process

The literature search was conducted across two major academic databases - *Web of Science (WOS)* and *Scopus* - focusing on publications between 2019 and 2025. The search combined thematic descriptors such as “*music education*”, “*creativity*”, “*sustainability*”, “*resonance*”, “*ecological learning*”, and “*creative pedagogy*”. Additional sources were identified through *backward citation tracking* and cross-references in high-impact journals.

The inclusion criteria targeted peer-reviewed articles that: 1) Address creativity or sustainability in educational or musical contexts; 2) Engage with relational, affective, or ecological dimensions of learning; 3) Provide theoretical depth or empirical evidence relevant to creative pedagogies.

Publications that focused solely on instrumental techniques, technical performance assessment, or lacked conceptual grounding were excluded. The selection process followed a qualitative interpretive logic, ensuring that the studies retained contributed substantively to the thematic synthesis. While a systematic numerical accounting of studies (e.g., total retrieved, included, excluded) was not performed—as the emphasis lies on interpretive integration rather than exhaustive quantification—the review adheres to transparent

and reproducible academic standards. Only peer-reviewed, WOS- and Scopus-indexed sources were considered to ensure the credibility and scholarly validity of the synthesis.

Analytical Orientation

The analysis followed a *qualitative interpretive synthesis* approach (Bearman & Dawson, 2013), emphasizing *conceptual convergence* and *thematic resonance* across studies rather than methodological uniformity. The review integrates three major analytical dimensions: (a) Conceptual frameworks - sociocultural, transdisciplinary, and ecological theories of creativity; (b) Empirical findings - linking creative learning with affective engagement and relational pedagogies in music education; (c) Emerging directions - exploring how sustainability-oriented and digital pedagogies reshape contemporary music education.

Through both *horizontal reading* (comparative analysis across multiple studies) and *vertical reading* (close engagement with foundational works by Burnard, Glăveanu, Rosa, Bresler, and Mezõ), the synthesis reveals creativity as an *ecological mode of engagement*-a relational process connecting emotion, cognition, and cultural continuity.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

As a narrative synthesis, this review does not aim for exhaustive coverage but rather for *interpretive completeness* and *theoretical coherence*. The selection of studies

reflects the author's disciplinary lens within music education, acknowledging that creativity and sustainability are culturally situated constructs.

Ethically, the review seeks *representational balance* by including studies from diverse geographical and linguistic contexts, recognizing that no single cultural model can encompass the multifaceted nature of creativity in education. The overall objective is to illuminate relational and sustainable patterns of thinking that can enrich both research and practice in contemporary music education.

Findings and Thematic Synthesis

This review contributes to the field by articulating a relational framework that integrates resonance theory with sustainability-oriented creative pedagogies. Recent scholarship in music education and creativity studies (2019–2025) converges toward a shared understanding of creativity as *relational, sustainable, and contextually grounded*. The literature reveals four inter-related thematic directions that reframe creativity not as an isolated cognitive ability but as a cultural, emotional, and ecological process.

Relational and Communal Dimensions of Creativity

A dominant trend in the recent literature is the redefinition of creativity as a *relational and communal phenomenon* rather than a purely individual achievement. In this perspective, creativity emerges from

interaction-between individuals, ideas, and environments-and is co-constructed through dialogue, participation, and shared meaning-making. Pamela Burnard and colleagues (2020; 2023) describe this as *multi-voiced creativity*, emphasizing plural forms of creative expression embedded in social and cultural networks. Similarly, Vlad Glăveanu's sociocultural theory positions creativity as an act of *participatory sense-making*, where personal imagination and cultural context continually shape one another. This relational perspective resonates strongly with musical pedagogy: every performance, improvisation, or interpretive act becomes a negotiation of meaning - a dialogical process between teacher and student, sound and silence, self and community. Music education thus functions as an *ecology of co-creation* rather than a site of individual performance.

Sustainable Creativity: Between Artistic, Emotional, and Pedagogical Balance

The notion of *sustainability* in creativity has gained momentum, integrating artistic, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions. Bresler (2020) and other scholars frame *artistic sustainability in education* as the capacity to maintain balance between creative vitality, emotional well-being, and social responsibility. In this sense, sustainable creativity resists the logic of overproduction and constant novelty that dominates contemporary culture. Instead, it emphasizes slowness, reflection, care, and long-term relational investment. This

approach aligns with educational practices that value *process over product*, *empathy over evaluation*, and *presence over performance*. In music education, sustainable creativity manifests in learning environments that prioritize resonance, attention, and human connection. Teachers are not transmitters of knowledge but facilitators of meaningful engagement, nurturing spaces where students can *inhabit* rather than *consume* creativity.

Mező and Mező (2022) reinforce this perspective through their distinction between *small-c* and *Big-C* creativity. The former - *everyday, adaptive, processual creativity*-is the foundation of educational and pedagogical practice; it cultivates flexibility, problem-solving, and personal expression. The latter - *Big-C creativity* - represents extraordinary, transformative insight. Yet, as the authors emphasize, sustainable creative development in education relies on nurturing the *small-c* realm: the everyday relational micro-acts that allow *Big-C* moments to emerge organically. Thus, sustainability in creativity does not imply preserving a static state, but maintaining *continuity, regeneration, and balance* between the individual and collective, the cognitive and affective, the immediate and transcendent.

Resonance, Emotion, and the Affective Turn in Creative Pedagogy

Affective and emotional dimensions have become central in recent creativity and education research, marking a shift from

cognitive to *embodied and relational learning*. Hartmut Rosa's (2019) concept of *resonance* provides a theoretical lens for understanding how emotional engagement sustains creativity: creativity emerges where attention meets affect, and where the world "responds."

Music education offers an exemplary case of this phenomenon: learning through resonance entails more than technical skill - it involves emotional attunement, empathetic listening, and responsiveness to others.

Recent empirical studies (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; McPherson & Welch, 2023) confirm that emotional engagement and interpersonal attunement significantly enhance creative learning outcomes, fostering resilience, motivation, and well-being. These findings position resonance not merely as a metaphor, but as a *pedagogical condition* for sustainable creativity.

Digitality and the Emerging Ecology of Creative Learning

Contemporary music education operates within a digitally mediated environment that profoundly shapes creative practices. The literature shows a growing recognition that *digitality* - understood not only as technology but as a cultural condition - redefines how creativity and learning occur. Digital platforms allow for new forms of collaboration, multimodal expression, and intercultural exchange, yet they also risk fragmenting attention and disembodiment creative experience.

Authors such as Coppi (2025), and Burnard (2023) argue that the challenge is to construct *digital ecologies of learning* that preserve human connection, empathy, and authenticity within hybrid educational spaces.

In this sense, *sustainable digital pedagogy* requires more than technological proficiency-it demands ethical and emotional literacy. The digital classroom can become a *resonant space* if it supports presence, reflection, and intersubjective meaning-making, rather than acceleration and distraction.

Synthesis: Toward an Ecological Model of Creative Sustainability

Across these four thematic directions, a unifying insight emerges: creativity, when grounded in relationality, affectivity, and sustainability, forms an *ecology of meaning*. Rather than treating creativity as a finite resource or performance metric, recent scholarship views it as a *living system* – a dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, social, and digital dimensions. In music education, this means shifting the focus from the product (the performance, the grade, the innovation) to the process (the resonance, the dialogue, the shared sense of becoming). Teachers and learners alike participate in a *continuum of co-creative transformation* – where every gesture, sound, and silence contribute to the ongoing renewal of artistic and educational life. This relational view of creativity resonates with the notion of *artistic*

sustainability (Bresler, 2020), emphasizing the interdependence between aesthetic experience and educational resilience. These findings align with broader global trends emphasizing creativity as a driver of sustainable and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021).

Discussion and Gaps in the Literature

While the field has conceptually matured, empirical operationalization remains inconsistent. Yet this growing body of scholarship also reveals significant *conceptual tensions*, *methodological fragmentation*, and *contextual blind spots* that merit closer examination.

From product to process – but how is sustainability enacted? While most contemporary authors advocate for a process-oriented and relational understanding of creativity, relatively few studies operationalize what *sustainable creativity* means in practice. Empirical research tends to remain descriptive-documenting innovative practices without systematically analyzing how these practices sustain creative energy, emotional balance, or community continuity over time. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are still rare, leaving open questions such as: 1) How can we measure or trace the persistence of creative engagement across years of learning? 2) What pedagogical variables (time, feedback, collaboration, emotional

safety) most strongly predict sustainable creativity?

The emotional turn and its methodological challenges. The so-called *affective turn* in music and arts education research foregrounds emotion, resonance, and empathy. However, most evidence relies on qualitative observation or self-report, which limits generalizability. There remains a methodological gap between the *experiential* richness of qualitative data and the *analytical* precision of quantitative approaches. Future studies could integrate physiological, neuroscientific, or multimodal data to understand how affective engagement and creative performance mutually reinforce each other - bridging the subjective and measurable dimensions of creativity.

Digital mediation: opportunity or dilution? Digital transformation has expanded the accessibility of creative experiences, yet the literature remains divided regarding its impact. Some scholars highlight *digital co-creativity* as an inclusive and empowering practice; others warn of *disembodiment* and *attention fragmentation*. A major gap concerns *digital ethics and affectivity*: how to ensure that creative learning in online or hybrid spaces maintains human resonance rather than accelerating cognitive fatigue. There is a need for empirically grounded frameworks of *digital sustainability*-pedagogies that combine technological innovation with emotional literacy, aesthetic sensitivity, and cultural inclusion.

The neglected micro-level: everyday (small-c) creativity. Drawing on distinction between *small-c* and *Big-C* creativity, it becomes evident that much of the research privileges the exceptional over the ordinary. Everyday creativity – the subtle, adaptive, interpersonal forms emerging in classrooms – is rarely quantified or even recognized as a legitimate object of study. Yet it is precisely this micro-level creativity that sustains educational ecosystems. Future research should explore *how small-c processes accumulate into Big-C outcomes* – and how educators can design environments where the ordinary becomes extraordinary through reflection and relational care.

Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary blind spots. The field remains predominantly Anglo-centric. Studies from Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, or Asia are underrepresented, despite the fact that cultural context profoundly influences notions of creativity, community, and sustainability. Moreover, interdiscip-

linarity is often proclaimed rather than enacted: music educators cite psychology or sociology but seldom engage in genuine cross-field collaboration. Building a truly *ecological model of creative education* requires transdisciplinary research teams capable of integrating artistic, pedagogical, environmental, and technological expertise.

Conceptual convergence: toward an integrated framework. Despite these gaps, the literature points toward a convergent understanding (Mező and Mező, 2022): 1) creativity as a *dynamic system* rather than a trait, 2) sustainability as *continuity and balance* rather than conservation, 3) education as *ecology of relationships* rather than instruction.

The next step for research is to synthesize these insights into an integrated theoretical model - a *Creative Sustainability Framework* - capable of guiding both curriculum design and empirical evaluation.

Table 1. - *Summary of Identified Gaps*

Domain	Main Limitation	Research Need
Conceptual	Ambiguity of “sustainability” in creative contexts	Clarify through cross-disciplinary frameworks
Methodological	Lack of longitudinal and mixed-methods studies	Develop integrative designs combining qualitative and quantitative data
Emotional	Limited operationalization of resonance and affect	Use multimodal data and embodied cognition approaches
Digital	Ethical and affective aspects underexplored	Create models of digital sustainability in music education
Cultural	Western-centric perspectives	Expand to multi-cultural and local epistemologies
Pedagogical	Neglect of small-c creativity	Investigate everyday creative micro-practices

Interpretive Conclusion

The reviewed scholarship collectively signals a movement away from linear, performance-based models toward an ecological and sustainable understanding of creativity. However, this transformation is still in progress. Bridging the conceptual, emotional, and digital domains of creative learning requires not only new theoretical models but also pedagogical courage: the willingness to slow down, to listen, and to treat creativity as a shared resource rather than a competitive product. As music education continues to evolve, its future relevance will depend on how successfully it can harmonize sustainability, relationality, and digital awareness—turning creative practice into an enduring form of human resonance. This aligns with Luo and Wang’s (2025) perspective on sustainability in music education, which links critical reflection with ecological awareness and transformative learning.

Conclusion

and Future Research Directions

The synthesis of contemporary literature reveals that creativity in music education is no longer viewed as a singular cognitive act or an isolated artistic performance. It is increasingly understood as a *living ecology* – an ongoing negotiation among thought, emotion, relationship, and context. This ecological framing positions creativity not as a finite skill to be taught, but as a *sustainable capacity to connect, to respond, and to renew meaning* within

changing educational and cultural environments. The review also underscores that sustainability, in its artistic and pedagogical sense, cannot be achieved through acceleration or productivity alone. It depends on *time, resonance, and relational depth* – on cultivating spaces where learners and educators can engage reflectively, emotionally, and collaboratively. In this light, music education emerges as an exemplary field for rethinking creativity itself: it fuses cognition and emotion, individuality and community, technology and human presence. However, this transformation is still at an early stage. The existing body of research, while rich in conceptual innovation, remains fragmented and uneven across contexts. Future investigations should aim to: 1) develop *integrated theoretical frameworks* that link creativity, sustainability, and pedagogy within a coherent system; 2) conduct *longitudinal, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary studies* to assess how creative and sustainable learning evolves over time; 3) explore *embodied and affective dimensions* of creative engagement using new mixed-method approaches; 4) and define *ethical-digital practices* that preserve empathy, presence, and artistic authenticity in hybrid learning environments.

In moving toward this next phase, the challenge for scholars and educators is not merely to define creativity, but to sustain it – to foster educational ecosystems where creative thinking remains both human and humane. As music continually

reminds us, true creativity is not about producing more sound, but about learning to listen – deeply, attentively, and together. Ultimately, the ecology of creative and sustainable thinking in music education reminds us that creativity is not achieved through innovation alone, but through the ongoing resonance between learners, teachers, and the cultural worlds they inhabit. It is not a resource to be consumed, but a rhythm to be sustained – one that connects knowledge, emotion, and humanity in a continuous act of renewal.

Author's Note

This article was developed with the assistance of an AI-based language model (ChatGPT, Open-AI), used exclusively for language refinement, structural organization, and stylistic coherence. All conceptual ideas, theoretical interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the author's own.

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