Critical reflections: A research approach for exploring Creative Arts teaching and practice

Rebecca J. O'Hara

The primary focus of this paper is to provide an overview of the theoretical influences shaping my study into Creative Arts teaching and practice. After providing a brief overview of the research topic, the main theoretical themes document a qualitative context. Importantly, the research approach centres on symbolic interactionism, the Creative Arts and grounded theory individually, but also stresses the dynamic relationship between each of these key research components.

The Creative Arts

The *Creative Arts* is the collective title given to a group of subject areas characterised by their ability to express language and thought in different ways. These subject areas have been acknowledged as: music; drama; dance; and visual arts, in the New South Wales' *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus* (BOS 2000). The breadth of the Creative Arts encapsulates varieties of media and presentation including movement, sound and visual imagery. Collectively they are a representation of subject areas portraying life and evoking emotion (Walling 2000). Representations in the Creative Arts allow people to experience what others have encountered. This is because they have the potential to enable the individual to experience, understand and be challenged by what others have chanced upon, realised and contested. They are an amalgamation of the senses and the intellect (Abbs 1996).

Creative Arts teachers

In the New South Wales primary education system the teachers who are largely responsible for teaching the Creative Arts are classified as *generalist* teachers. As generalists, they are expected to teach all six Key Learning Areas of the primary school curriculum. As a compulsory component of teaching and learning, an education in the Creative Arts requires teachers to engage students in learning experiences in visual arts, music, drama and dance. Engaging students in each of these subject areas requires an attention by teachers to the strands of *making*, *performing* and *appreciating* (BOS 2000).

As one of six Key Learning Areas in the primary school curriculum, the Creative Arts should occupy an equal position to the other areas within this setting. Nevertheless, authors and researchers from a variety of educational perspectives around the world note that the Creative Arts have often been undervalued in the educational environment (Abbs 1993; Cox 1992; Duncum 1999; Rademaker 2003). While there are other components that contribute to the underestimation of this Key Learning Area, these authors stress that the

problem has often been attributed to generalist teachers and the way they present the subject areas within the classroom (Eisner 1994; Dewey 1939; Welch 1995).

Although it seems easy to blame these professionals for facilitating 'limited' learning experiences, the fact remains trainee-teachers are provided with very little Creative Arts training. Additionally, teachers are often expected to develop specialist skills, knowledge and in turn positive values in students, despite lacking the skills and confidence to improve the situation (Senate Environment, Recreation, Communication and the Arts Reference Committee [Senate Committee] 1995). It is important to emphasize that factors appear to affect the manner in which teachers present the values, skills and knowledge of the Creative Arts.

The research question

The question guiding the framework and structure of this study was: What are teachers' Creative Arts perspectives and in what ways do their perspectives affect their teaching and learning approaches? In answering this main research question the researcher addressed two specific sub questions. These are:

1. What personal and professional experiences guide teacher understandings of the Creative Arts and Creative Arts pedagogy?
2. How have these experiences shaped, guided or limited the way teachers are able to present and form Creative Arts experiences for their students?

This study into the approaches and perspectives of primary teachers worked to record the viewpoint of teachers from rural and regional settings in northern New South Wales. This was achieved through in-depth interviewing where the questions focused on gaining informed insights into the influences affecting teacher practices. With informants responding reflectively through descriptions of their own Creative Arts experiences, techniques and strategies used in teaching and learning practices, the researcher gained an understanding of the skills and knowledge being presented to primary students. This focus has worked to show the influences teachers perceive affect their practice.

The theoretical perspective

From a qualitative perspective, the study relays the meanings and understandings the informants gave to their approaches and perspectives for the Creative Arts as a pedagogical practice. Importantly, Bouma & Ling (2004 p.3) stress that 'knowledge does not hang in space; it is a product of social processes'. Therefore, qualitative researchers and Creative Arts educators alike present knowledge as socially constructed.

The scope and direction of this study was guided by the curriculum area of the Creative Arts. As a group of educational subject areas that works to develop critical thinkers, through the strands of *making*, *presenting*

and particularly *appreciating*, it was apparent early within the planning of the research that statistical data alone could not adequately represent the situation at hand. The choice of a qualitative context, in which description and exploration are key, better reflects the influence of an area where personal experiences guide an individual's understanding.

The study was influenced by the standpoint that social stimuli and interactions guide what individuals know of the world (Blumer 1969). In this way, what each of us knows and understands is directly linked to our interactions and communications with others. It is appropriate to acknowledge that this includes the natural and built environments surrounding an individual, as these stimuli play a role in the construction of knowledge that is equal to the role of the 'social world'.

In summary, the key perspectives and methods used in this study were shaped, in particular, by symbolic interactionism. This perspective views that knowledge is formed through social interactions. To support this perspective, the research approach utilised the data collection method of in-depth interviewing to gain a teacher's perspectives of the Creative Arts. The approach was also focused by the data analysis method of grounded theory, used to identify central concepts and relationships. This method worked to gain a holistic view and ensure the research findings reflected a truthful representation of the situation. The approach also borrows from Eisner's (1998, 1991) model of *qualitative thought*, as a way of approaching the data. Together, these research perspectives and methods establish the theoretical context of this study.

The guiding influences of a qualitative choice

Punch (2001) states that qualitative research is an 'umbrella term'. This is because it spans a huge variety of research methodologies and practices. As ways to studying human behaviour, qualitative research contains a number of different 'research traditions' (Gall et al. 1996).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003a, 2003b) believe there are difficulties defining qualitative research practice because strategies and methods are eclectically borrowed. However, what unites qualitative research traditions is that overall they intend to *explore* a situation or phenomenon, rather than *explain* it (Punch 2001). This places an emphasis on exploring the intricacies of a situation and taking particular note of finer details.

When noting the 'distinct character' of qualitative research, Snape and Spencer (2003 pp.3-5) identify six key features for a qualitative approach. These established the guiding framework for this study and are summarised below as:

- a thorough interpreted understanding of the social world of participants
- small-scale samples that are selected according to set criteria

- collection methods that involve close contact with participants and are interactive, allowing exploration of emergent issues
- the gathering of rich and extensive data information
- analysis that focuses on emergent concepts that identify patterns of association
- outputs or methods of presentation that focus on mapping and 're-presenting' interpretations of research participants' social meanings.

To ensure 'close contact' with the field, the researcher sought teachers' perspectives and reflections on their own Creative Arts pedagogical practice. In this study, this insight was achieved through the process of in-depth interviewing. This application was used 'in order to give access to knowledge—a knowledge of meanings and interpretations that individuals give to their lives and events' (Minichiello et al. 2000 p.1). The technique emphasizes understanding from the position of the *actors' perspective* as 'people are uniquely conscious of their own behaviour' (Minichiello et al. 2000 p.6).

By exposing the informants' reality, as they see it, the aim was to understand their interpretations and show how they assign meaning to their role in the teaching and learning situation. This position views the individuals involved in this research as both *participants* and *informants*. They were vital to expanding our understanding of the Creative Arts as a teaching and learning practice.

The symbolic interactionist perspective

There are various points of view about how human beings should be studied in research. The qualitative research approach places an emphasis on learning from other human beings, on broadening our understanding of particular actions and reactions to situations, rather than simplifying them in order to understand and predict their lives and the world they live in (Shank 2002). There are also many positions taken on how to understand the world human beings live in and how they interact with the world. Shared between the various qualitative research methodologies is the common viewpoint that people 'think', 'feel' and 'react' to things they encounter, emphasizing differences between the ways individuals react to their physical and social worlds (Andrews et al. 2004). This social standpoint appreciates that human beings can:

- *think and reflect on their behaviour;*
- *use language to describe their thoughts and experiences; and*
- *control their reactions to situations, in line with the meaning they ascribe to situations.*

(Andrews et al. 2004 p.61)

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism places an emphasis on the meanings individuals associate with their encounters. Primary to the theory of symbolic interactionism are Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) who coined the term. According to Vaughan & Hogg (2004 p.74), Mead's (1934) focus was on the way people interacted using 'words and non-verbal cues', rather than on their observed behaviours. These cues or symbols are considered abundant in meaning. Cuff et al. (1998 p.134) state the concept of 'interpretation' is essential to symbolic interactionism:

> *The key point is that people do not respond to situations as they are defined in terms of the latest scientific categories; rather, they respond to situations as they perceive (or define) them, even if they may not be real in scientific terms.*

The concept of *self* is also fundamental within the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969; Dewey 1934; Mead 1934). By combining *self* and *interpretation*, the process may be likened to a sorting or sifting procedure. An individual involved in interactions with other people acquires different understandings and meanings of particular objects or situations according to other people's understandings of the same situation. With a variety of understandings gained the individual is responsible for sorting and interpreting the meanings presented to them. The result is a 'best fit' for the situation according to the influences and interactions with other people and the situation to which it is applied. Thus, an individual, by way of interaction and reflection, creates meaning. *Self* and *interpretation* within symbolic interactionism work as a self-reflective development. Overall, symbolic interactionism is concerned with uncovering the individual meanings each participant gives to their experiences in life, attributed to the social interactions they have encountered.

Charon (2001) describes the symbolic interactionist perspective as 'dynamic'. This is as a chain of interactions in which ways of understanding link people and what they understand and convey. Driving the theoretical perspective of this study was the unique position of primary teachers. Their position, as professionals, has included interactions from multiple first-hand encounters in the disciplines of the Creative Arts, particularly pedagogical practice from a number of perspectives. The position of primary teachers is unique, as they have firstly experienced the practices of numerous teachers in the Creative Arts as primary and high school students themselves. In addition to this, many may have experienced the Creative Arts as extracurricular activities outside school hours. Furthermore, they have encountered the Creative Arts as trainee pre-service teachers in pedagogical training for primary practice. Finally, they have practised and taught the Creative Arts as qualified teachers in the school context. In this situation they are the facilitators of interaction on a symbolic level. It is symbolic because these teachers have the potential to shape what students know in the area, according to the skills, knowledge and values they hold.

The nature of symbolic interactionism and the Creative Arts

Symbolic interactionism and the Creative Arts within the theoretical context of this study formed a dynamic relationship. In short, both the research methodology, and the Creative Arts as epistemology focus on communications or interactions where understandings about aspects of life emerge as the result.

The disciplines of the Creative Arts are mediums for conveying understandings about aspects of life to others. The reason they are uniquely poised and able to do this is, as Creative Arts educationalists point out, artists require intellectual and sensory collaborations (Goldberg 2001; Lewitzky 1989). Because the Creative Arts are orientated towards public presentations and representations in a variety of forms, interaction between people is accentuated on a highly symbolic level. Nevertheless, it is important to note not everyone will necessarily 'receive' the same message from the one source. Both the Creative Arts and symbolic interactionism demonstrate key associations in ways of 'knowing' (Bamford 1999). In this way, the central areas of symbolic interactionism and the Creative Arts place an emphasis on *what* and *how*. Both draw on methods of constructing an individualised understanding of *what* is known by a person and seek to show a reflective or introspective perspective of *how* the knowledge is built from his or her interactions with the world.

In exploring the *what*, to uncover the *how* of Creative Arts practice in primary classrooms, the researcher has borrowed from Eisners' (1991, 1998) model for educational research. By utilising the Creative Arts as a frame for understanding and gathering meaning, Eisner (1991, 1998) presents and integrates a variety of concepts in regard to recognising the qualities of experience. As a way of approaching the data, this model is based on the functions of the 'enlightened eye' (1998). Central to the perspective is the contrast between seeing and looking. Both Eisner (1998) and Mortimer (1976) alike have considered that seeing and looking present significantly different understandings. Seeing, rather than just looking, is to experience qualities, and to appreciate the knowledge and understanding people have for their situation and practices (Eisner 1998). Overall, the enlightened eye has two aims: to be perceptive, but also to articulate (Eisner 1998). Ultimately, the aim is to enable others to see and understand that which the enquirer has gained from informants.

Uncovering understanding and meaning

Understanding and meaning are major components of qualitative research, symbolic interactionism and the Creative Arts. They are guiding influences despite the somewhat tentative nature they present. The 'tentative' character acknowledges that an individuals' understanding may differ from the next person's. Meanings are not necessarily a determined entity, or typically fixed. The contextual perspective of this study emphasizes that knowledge is developed through interactions with the world and other people, and is defined by the combination of physical and mental processes that occur as a result.

Importantly, Neuman (1997 p.69) states: 'social reality is based on people's definitions of it. A person's definition of a situation tells him or her how to assign meaning in constantly changing conditions'. This outlook realises that the effects of human experience and social interactions may resound differently in each and every one of us, as they are dependent on our individual experiences and how they have been interpreted.
Given that understanding and meaning are viewed as evolving and individual to each of us, the aim of the qualitative researcher is to gain his/her own understanding of the data. This recognises that interpretation is central to the qualitative research process. Subsequently, theorising becomes an important facet of the research process. Strauss and Corbin (1998 p.21) state: 'theorising is work that entails not only conceiving or intuiting ideas (concepts) but also formulating them into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme', This involves 'testing' certain propositions (Browne 2004), and it is stressed that in the process all interpretations remain provisional until repeated or verified. The process also relies heavily on the interplay between concepts, and highlighting the relationships between issues identified in the data (Babbie 2001; Strauss & Corbin 1998). This allows for greater accuracy in understanding the informant's meaning. As a result, the researcher's understanding of the social situation 'matures' with time and depth of insight achieved (Browne 2004 p.628).

The data in qualitative research is likened by Denzin and Lincoln (2003a, 2003b) to a *montage*. As a practical approximation of qualitative methods, the montage image:

> *create[s] the sense that images, sounds, and understandings are blending together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. The images seem to shape and define one another, and an emotional, gestalt effect is produced.*
> *(Denzin & Lincoln 2003a p.6)*

This montage analogy highlights many of the important features of a qualitative research approach. Initially, it conveys the detail and complexity of the data that is produced, which is conveyed as 'rich', 'textured' and 'illuminative' pictures of the informant's situation (Shank 2002 p.7). It establishes that individual perspectives are gathered, emphasizing 'different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision' (Denzin & Lincoln 2003b p.7). By comparing these personal understandings, key interpretations can emerge.

Grounded theory

The emergence of interpretations of individual realities is based on the identification of key patterns, categories and concepts from the data. This goal is best achieved through the practices of the grounded theory strategy (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Grounded theory is a process for analysing the data, and builds on a symbolic interactionist approach to research and data collection. Symbolic interactionism and grounded

theory both necessitate an attention to people in real situations, understanding the relationships that exist, with an appreciation of what the data presents (Charon 2001; Crotty 1998).

Tesch (1990) provides further clarification of grounded theory by emphasizing its position in Figure 1. Key to all the qualitative research types presented in this map are the regularities data presents or noting the 'conceptual order' that may be found in words (Tesch 1990 p.63). According to Tesch (1990 p.64), grounded theory stresses exploring, sorting and comparing incidents or occurrences to form conceptual categories. These categories illustrate relationships as they are discovered in the data.

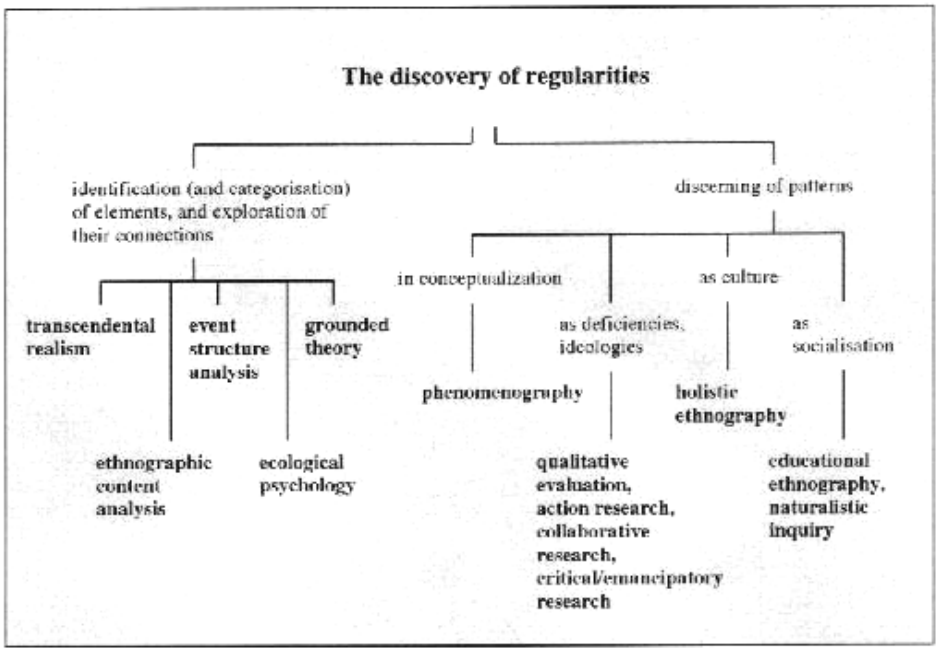

Figure 1: *The discovery of regularities (Tesch 1990 p.63)*

The benefit of the grounded theory approach is that, as an analytical strategy, it emphasizes three key phases. These are:

- description
- conceptual ordering
- theorizing (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

All these phases are 'intimately intertwined' as grounded theory is based on allowing interpretations to emerge from the data (Babbie 2001 p.359). Fundamentally, the grounded theory strategy 'fractures' the data down into concept and category groups (Tuettemann 2003). Links or connections can then be formed between concepts and categories which, in turn, expose the underlying issues of the individual interpretations, meanings and understandings gained from informants (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

The data in this study was composed of direct spoken communications between the informants and the researcher, where teacher/participants described their approaches and understanding of Creative Arts practice in the primary classroom. The role of the researcher was to attend to the interpretations and meanings presented in these communications. This involved exploring the informants' understandings and interpretations of individual words and phrases they used.

Browne (2004) considers that a number of principles are associated with the process. With the intention of making propositions about the data, the basic functions of the grounded theory analysis include:

- *integrated data analysis with data collection*
- *identifying concepts among the data, through the simultaneous processes of making comparisons and asking questions about the data, and recording provisional answers to those questions*
- *classifying those concepts into meaningful categories (usually referred to as 'coding')*
- *proposing and testing links between categories*
- *identifying and verifying conclusions.*

(Browne 2004 p.631)

This approach allows concepts and categories to *emerge* from the data, as key components are not pre-imposed before collection and analysis occur (Wildy 2003; Denzin & Lincoln 2003a, 2003b, 2000; Punch 2001; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Glaser & Strauss 1967). In this way, the ideas and understandings of the participants are discovered in parts, building ideas inductively to show how the whole has been shaped. By also employing deductive mechanisms that compare concepts, categories and links, propositions and interpretations of the data can be verified (Browne 2004). A simple representation of these processes is depicted in Figure 2.

For strategic purposes, grounded theory analysis employs the use of a 'two-step process' or multiple procedures of coding (Denzin & Lincoln 2003a p.251). Denzin & Lincoln (2003a p.260) state that, by using more than one procedure emerging theories are 'denser, more complex and more precise'. In the following paragraphs both of the coding techniques used in this study are described. These descriptions are followed by a specific example from the study (see Figure 2). As a simplified representation of the category formation process, this example shows how the data looked at different stages of the coding and analysis process, from seeming disorganisation to distinct categorical groupings.

Open coding was the first step in the two-step process described (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Through the action of open coding, the information contained in the participants' interviews was 'fractured' by separating out text into concepts (Tuettemann 2003). The use of computer data files for this action proved invaluable in the process. By breaking down the informants' responses, the aim was to discover components of understanding and meaning given or applied to the topics, issues and themes they discussed. These concepts have been described as the 'building blocks of theory' (Strauss & Corbin 1998 p.101). Initial open coding in this study took the form of exploring and identifying what the central concepts were. Subsequent open coding aimed at verifying concepts by checking for repetition. This process generated a large number of categories as each informant was unrestricted and could use their own words to describe their understandings and meanings. Initially the open coding process looked for descriptive words, but also included phrases to ensure meanings were not taken out of context.

Key to open coding and the subsequent process of axial coding is the method of comparing and contrasting groupings. Denzin & Lincoln (2003a) state that to 'ground' theory in the data, analysis procedures aim to make direct comparisons within the data. LeCompte and Goetz (1982, cited in Tuettemann 2003 p.10) establish that comparisons are a way of ensuring the units reflect the reality of the informants. Also, Denzin & Lincoln (2000) assert that, by dividing the data into manageable units, making comparisons is performed with more ease.

Axial coding enables the data *fractured* by the researcher in open coding to be re-positioned emphasizing connections (Strauss & Corbin 1998 pp.123-142). In this action, the concept groups are organised, compared, re-organised and re-compared allowing categories to *emerge* (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

In searching for key patterns, the segments of data were comparatively scrutinised in a number of ways. This ensured that their relationships held true and the informants' meanings were reflected in a way that worked reflect an accurate representation of their understandings.

The coding process identified the categories listed in **Table 1**. These categories emerged from the descriptions, understandings and meanings provided by the participants.

Table 1: Coding: Table of abbreviations

abbreviation	Categories	abbreviation	Categories
CA	Creative Arts	GT	Generalist Teacher
VA	Visual Arts	Sp	Specialist Teacher
M	Music	UOWT	Utilising Others/Working Together
Dr	Drama	Te	Training Experiences
D	Dance	PD	Professional Development
S/Ch	Singing/Choir/Choral Activities	Op	Opportunities
Cr	Craft	AV	Availability
PS/Dc	Public Speaking/Debating	R	Resources/Galleries/Performances
CW	Creative Writing and Poetry	Pr	Promotion/Performance
PW	Pracwork (coaching/learning)	B	Budget
CAS	Creative Arts Syllabus	RM	Role Model
UW	Units of Work	G	Gender
T	Time/Amount	St	Students
RP	Regularly Programmed	FCu	Family/Parents/Culture
RV	Revisiting/Developmental	G&T	Gifted and Talented
LA	Limited Amount	HOT	Higher Order Thinking
P	Positive Attitude	S	Skills/Outcomes
N	Negative Attitude	Ap	Appreciation
AC	Attitude – changed	C	Creativity/Creative
OE	Own Experience in the Creative Arts	CC	Crowded Curriculum
E	Enjoy/Interested	In	Integration/Themes/KLAs
Co/Cf	Feeling Comfortable/ Confidence	In-L	* Integrated with Literacy
		In-PDHPE	* Integrated with PDHPE
SE	Self-Esteem	In-SS	* Integrated with Social Skills
V	Valued/Importance	In-HSIE	* Integrated with HSIE
Ach	Achievement/Success	In-Ma	* Integrated with Maths
Df	Difficulties	In-Sc	* Integrated with Science
LE	Limited Experience	In-T	* Integrated with Technology areas

Table 1: *Coding: Table of abbreviations*

Figure 2 is an example of how conceptual and categorical groups were formed in this study. As a simple representation of the category formation process the figure shows the concepts contributing to the category: *Feeling Comfortable/Confidence* (Co/Cf). In short, the figure indicates:

- fracturing
- comparing
- re-organising
- categorising
- the action of proposing and testing links between categorical groups.

As a simplified depiction, this figure makes use of the *montage* analogy, of qualitative methods moving from data to interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln 2003a, 2003b). The figure starts with the data. In this form it is represented as a mass of words. Then open coding singles out individual words. These words are compared in a variety of ways and links noted. Through axial coding the data is reorganised, highlighting central associations. Again, comparisons occur and categorical groups can be formed. From this point, patterns and relationships between categories can be proposed. Subsequent processes attend to testing the validity of the proposal.

Following the fracturing, comparing, re-organising and categorising of the data, the proposing and testing stage of the analysis process was performed. This tested the relationships between the categorical groups. The action looked for patterns within the data. These patterns were then able to be presented and discussed.

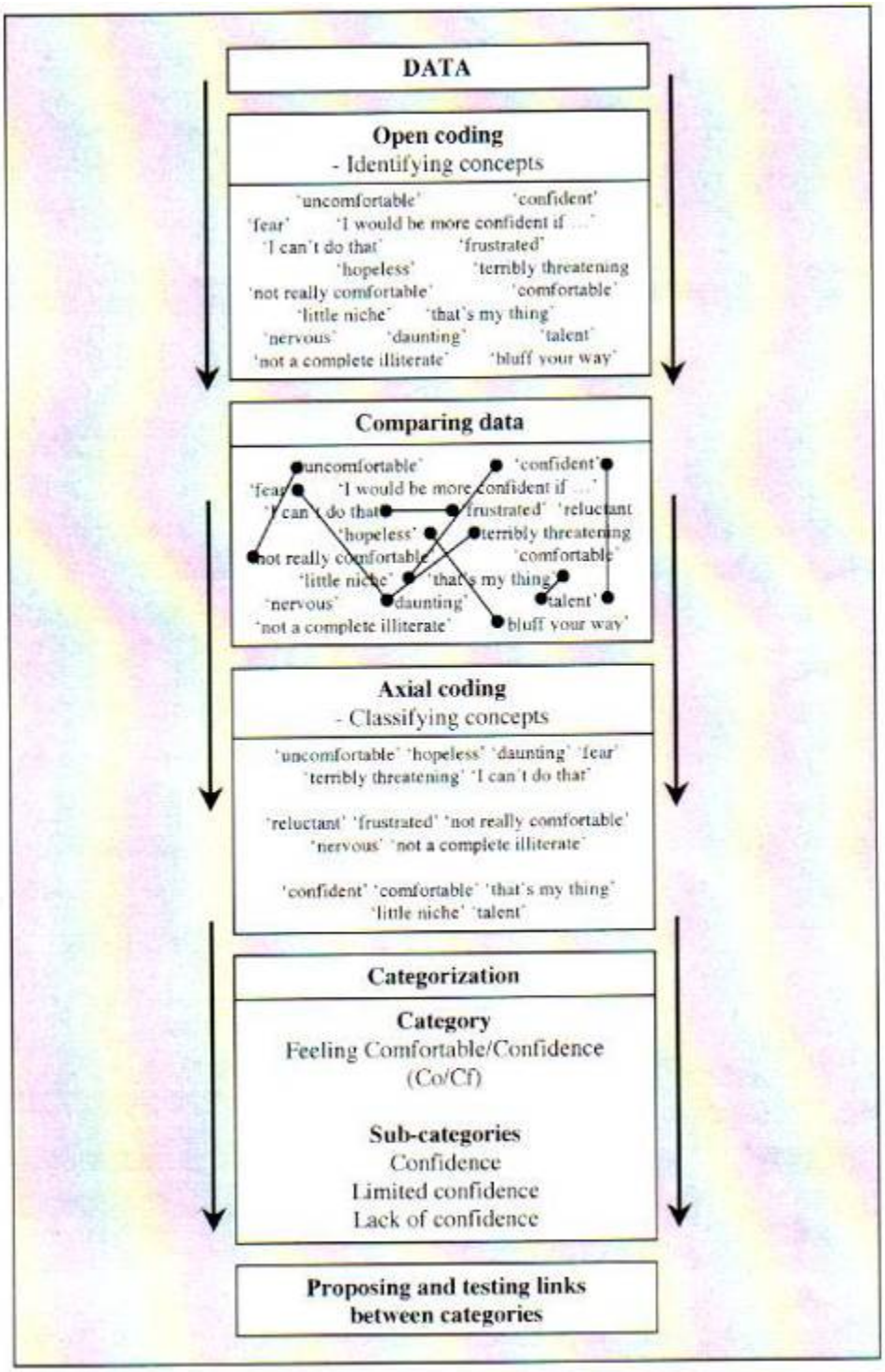

Figure 2: *The category formation process*

It is important to note that the outputs of qualitative research centre firmly on allowing others to appreciate what the informants have encountered in their particular circumstances, and from their perspectives. This was achieved by articulating the 'voice' of the participants (Eisner 1998). While other methods of inquiry

represent *reality* via statistical data, inevitably they have diminished or suppressed the individual meanings and interpretations brought to the study by the informants. In this way, the data in this study was effectively presented as excerpts of the participants' own speech accompanied by detailed interpretations of the informants' understandings.

In using the methods, theoretical perspectives and underpinnings of the Creative Arts, symbolic interactionism, in-depth interviewing, and grounded theory, including both open and axial coding, the researcher has been able to explore the Creative Arts teaching and learning processes. Together these main theoretical themes within the qualitative research context have provided an effective way of identifying that personal life experiences and understandings of the Creative Arts significantly influence how this Key Learning Area is pedagogically practised in some primary classrooms of rural and regional New South Wales.

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