

TeachRock Curriculum and Creativity in the Classroom

A Mixed-Methods Study on How TeachRock Curriculum Supports Teacher Well-Being and Creativity

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PREPARED FOR

TeachRock — Rock and Roll Forever Foundation

Evaluation Report | 2024

ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study examining how TeachRock curriculum influences teacher creativity, well-being, and student engagement. Drawing on a national questionnaire (N=293), creativity and motivation diagnostics (RDCA/RDMA), twenty in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the study identifies three consistent qualitative themes: (1) increased student engagement, (2) enhanced teacher well-being through creative expression, and (3) development of critical thinking skills. Findings confirm the central thesis that music-integrated curriculum improves teachers' classroom experience by facilitating critical thinking, supporting relationships, and building creative engagement with students.

Keywords: *music education, teacher creativity, student engagement, curriculum, mixed-methods, well-being*

1. Introduction & Research Background

TeachRock is a free, standards-aligned curriculum resource used by more than 60,000 educators across the United States and internationally. Founded by musician and education advocate Stevie Van Zandt, TeachRock integrates the sound, story, and history of popular music into core academic subjects — History, ELA, Science, Math, Special Education, and more.

Despite wide adoption and strong anecdotal evidence of impact, TeachRock had not previously been the subject of rigorous academic research. This study was designed to address that gap: to develop scholarly evidence documenting how TeachRock curriculum affects teacher creativity, professional well-being, and student engagement.

1.1 Research Objectives

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

How does TeachRock curriculum impact teachers' experiences of creativity, well-being, and job satisfaction?

This study was designed to address four primary objectives:

1. Provide qualitative, research-based evidence for the positive impacts of TeachRock curriculum on teacher experience and classroom dynamics.
2. Document how teachers successfully integrate principles of creativity and motivational theory within classroom instruction using TeachRock materials.
3. Establish a scholarly foundation for ongoing grant applications, particularly around the Harmony Student Wellness Program.
4. Support the development of professional development training based on research-validated practices.

2. Review of Related Literature

A substantial body of research connects creativity, teaching, and well-being. The foundational premise of this study is that creative engagement is not incidental to good teaching — it is central to it.

2.1 Creativity and Teaching

Research consistently demonstrates that effective teachers exhibit creativity across multiple domains: lesson planning, adaptation of instructional methods, teacher-student engagement, problem solving, and professional collaboration. Creative teaching is not an innate trait but a set of practices that can be supported, developed, and measured. The Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA) provides an operational framework for assessing these practices in individual teachers.

2.2 Creativity and Well-Being

The correlation between tasks involving creative expression and subjective well-being has been repeatedly demonstrated in cognitive and psychological research. Engagement in creative activities — including music, visual art, writing, and creative problem-solving — consistently predicts positive affect, reduced stress, and improved life satisfaction. For teachers, creative engagement within the classroom is both professionally meaningful and personally sustaining.

2.3 Creativity and Student Engagement

Creative engagement enhances student attention, time-on-task, and cross-disciplinary connections within the learning process. When students are invited to engage creatively with content — through discussion, project-based learning, personal choice, and arts-integrated activities — they demonstrate higher retention and deeper understanding. TeachRock's curriculum is explicitly designed to create these conditions through the culturally relevant vehicle of popular music.

2.4 Creativity and Teacher Job Retention

Creative expression improves well-being, job satisfaction, and reduces symptoms of burnout, including low intrinsic motivation — a significant concern in current educational contexts. Teacher attrition is a national crisis, with burnout identified as the leading cause of early career exit. Curricula that support teachers' creative professional identity represent a meaningful structural response to this challenge.

3. Research Design & Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and integrating findings at the interpretation stage. This approach was selected to capture both the breadth of teacher experiences (through survey data) and the depth of those experiences (through interviews and focus groups).

3.1 Data Collection Process

Data collection proceeded in three stages:

Step 1 — Online Questionnaire (N = 293)

An online questionnaire was distributed to active TeachRock teachers, collecting demographic information, professional experience, TeachRock usage patterns, curriculum alignment ratings, Net Promoter Scores, and self-report experience data. Respondents were then invited to participate in the full study.

Step 2 — RDCA / RDMA Diagnostics

Participating teachers completed the Reisman Diagnostic Creativity Assessment (RDCA), a validated instrument assessing 11 creativity factors including originality, fluency, flexibility, elaboration, resistance to premature closure, convergent and divergent thinking, risk-taking, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Administered in under 10 minutes, it provides an immediate creativity profile. The complementary Reisman Diagnostic Motivation Assessment (RDMA) was administered concurrently.

Step 3 — Individual Interviews & Focus Groups

Twenty teachers completed individual semi-structured interviews averaging 40 minutes in length. Focus group sessions provided additional qualitative depth. Interviews were transcribed using AI-assisted tools (Otter) and analyzed in Dedoose qualitative software using a quasi deductive-inductive coding approach. To achieve inter-rater reliability, each data source was analyzed by at least two team members. In total, 816 code applications were made across the qualitative dataset.

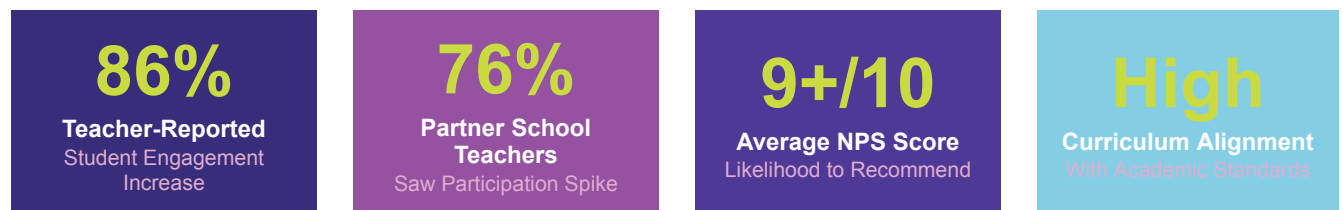
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS NOTE

Pre-determined codes derived from the RDCA/RDMA framework were applied first; emerging unanticipated codes were documented as the analysis proceeded. This approach balanced theoretical grounding with openness to unexpected findings.

4. Quantitative Findings

The online questionnaire (N=293) provided quantitative context for the qualitative findings. Key metrics included curriculum alignment ratings, likelihood to recommend (NPS), usage frequency, and demographic information across grade levels, subjects, and years of experience.

4.1 Summary Statistics



4.2 Curriculum Alignment

When asked how well TeachRock resources align with their curriculum requirements, the large majority of respondents (approximately 88%) rated alignment as either “Excellent” or “Reasonable.” Fewer than 5% indicated that resources “usually do not align” or were “useless.”

4.3 Net Promoter Score (Likelihood to Recommend)

On a 0–10 scale measuring likelihood to recommend TeachRock to a friend or colleague, respondents scored overwhelmingly in the Promoter range (9–10), consistent with “world-class” NPS benchmarks. Scores of 3 or below represented fewer than 2% of respondents.

SAMPLE PROFILE

N=293 active TeachRock educators. Grade levels: Elementary through College. Subjects: History (largest group), Music, ELA, Science, Special Education, Math, and others. Teaching experience: 1–30+ years. Gender: 122 Female, 80 Male, 4 Non-binary or other.

QUALITATIVE FINDING #1 · DREXEL UNIVERSITY STUDY · N=20 PARTICIPANTS

Theme I: Student Engagement

Students Come Alive with TeachRock Curriculum

Overview

The most frequently cited outcome across all 20 interviews was an increase in student engagement. Teachers described students who had previously been disengaged, reluctant, or resistant to participation becoming active, curious, and self-directed when TeachRock curriculum was introduced. This transformation was attributed to music's unique capacity to create personal connection to academic content, lowering affective barriers to learning and creating opportunities for students to bring their whole selves to the classroom.

Supporting Evidence

"I think the number one thing is the connection it builds with students — because right away, even if they don't know some of the groups, they hear music, and they kind of light up!"

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

"Middle school kids go to school because their parents send them. But for some of those kids, this class is one of the reasons they get up — because it gives them a chance to be themselves."

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

"I think they have a bit of a reputation in history for being quite boring. But even people that don't really love history get involved. They'll be in the back like "That's not right!" — and that is how you know a class is engaging."

— Student, Emergence Collective Focus Group

"I feel like every day at the beginning of the year I was going home and re-teaching the lesson to my parents because I was so excited."

— Student, Emergence Collective Focus Group

Indicators of Engagement

Interview and focus group participants identified multiple indicators of meaningful student engagement:

- Students who had not been participating began asking unprompted questions

- Learning transcended the classroom — students re-taught lessons to family members at home
- Attendance visibly increased on TeachRock lesson days
- Students with diverse learning needs demonstrated participation in ways suited to their strengths

KEY FINDING

Student engagement emerged as the most consistent and widely reported outcome of TeachRock curriculum use. The mechanism appears to be music's capacity to create genuine personal relevance, lowering the affective barriers that typically prevent participation.

QUALITATIVE FINDING #II · DREXEL UNIVERSITY STUDY · N=20 PARTICIPANTS

Theme II: Teacher Well-Being

TeachRock Supports the Whole Teacher, Not Just the Curriculum

Overview

Teachers consistently described TeachRock as more than a curriculum resource — it was a professional lifeline. In the context of widespread teacher burnout, TeachRock offered something rare: a curriculum that invited teachers to bring their own musical interests, cultural knowledge, and personal passions into the classroom. This integration of identity into professional practice was described as a primary source of renewed purpose, motivation, and creative satisfaction.

Supporting Evidence

“That’s why TeachRock is important — we’re burned out. We need a new path to kind of keep things going. That’s what TeachRock is.”

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

“When I can see students just come alive... I feel like I’m doing my job. I am inspiring them. But TeachRock keeps ME inspired to find the medium to make it happen.”

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

“I have had several parents tell me: ‘My kid was dreading taking history and they actually really enjoyed it.’ If I can have that impact so they are more engaged citizens, more engaged humans — my job is done.”

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

Connection to the RDCA Framework

Analysis of RDCA and RDMA diagnostic data provided a motivational framework for interpreting the qualitative themes. Teachers who described the highest levels of creative engagement with TeachRock curriculum also demonstrated stronger profiles on the autonomy, social cohesion, and competency dimensions of the RDMA — the three primary drivers of well-being in self-determination theory.

KEY FINDING

TeachRock supports teacher well-being by fostering stronger student relationships and enabling teachers to bring their authentic creative identity to their practice. The mechanism is not merely

pedagogical — it is personal: TeachRock gives teachers permission to be themselves in the classroom.

QUALITATIVE FINDING #III · DREXEL UNIVERSITY STUDY · N=20 PARTICIPANTS

Theme III: Critical Thinking Skills

TeachRock Creates the Conditions for Genuine Inquiry

Overview

Teachers described a strong, shared desire to go beyond the test — to develop in students the ability to think critically about core content, historical events, social issues, and their own lives. TeachRock's discussion-based, open-ended approach was consistently praised for creating exactly this kind of intellectual space. Rather than presenting answers, TeachRock lessons ask questions that students genuinely have to think through. Students develop habits of inquiry, form and defend opinions, and make connections across disciplines.

Supporting Evidence

“TeachRock does a great job of asking the questions without leading students to the answer. Students really have to think: What is my response to this? What did I gather from this? It’s not just “I found it right here in the text.””

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

“The kids that succeed in education are not necessarily the smartest — they think critically and ask questions. They’re curious about everything. And that is why I use TeachRock. It creates so many questions.”

— Teacher, Drexel Study Interview

“There wasn’t really an explanation given to us. It was more: look at this, analyze it, let’s hear your opinion. And then we can debrief together. I find that everyone has a voice.”

— Student, Emergence Collective Focus Group

KEY FINDING

TeachRock's discussion-based, open-ended approach directly supports the development of higher-order thinking skills. Teachers report students asking unprompted questions, making cross-disciplinary connections, and engaging with social issues in nuanced ways — hallmarks of genuine critical thinking.

8. Conclusion

THESIS CONFIRMED

TeachRock curriculum improves teachers' classroom experience by facilitating critical thinking, supporting relationships, and building creative engagement with students.

Across 20 in-depth interviews, 816 coded qualitative segments, and a national survey of 293 teachers, three themes emerged with striking consistency. Wherever teachers used TeachRock, they reported students becoming more engaged. Wherever teachers brought their own creativity to TeachRock lessons, they reported feeling more effective and more satisfied. And wherever TeachRock's discussion-based, open-ended approach was employed, students developed the capacity to ask harder questions and think more critically.

These findings are significant not only because they document TeachRock's effectiveness but because they reveal the underlying mechanism: TeachRock works because it invites both teachers and students to bring themselves fully to the learning experience. Music is not a hook — it is the substance of a different kind of educational relationship.

The Three Pillars of Impact

Building Connections

TeachRock facilitates educators' desire for meaningful, mentoring connections with their students. Music's universal resonance creates immediate common ground across differences in background, age, and interest.

Teacher Well-Being

Integrating creativity was essential for supporting teacher well-being via autonomy, social cohesion, and competency. TeachRock gives teachers permission to bring their whole professional selves to the classroom.

Supporting Identity

TeachRock was exceptional among educational resources at helping teachers bring authenticity to their classrooms. Teachers who feel seen in their professional identity are more effective and more likely to remain in the profession.

9. Implications & Future Directions

9.1 Publication & Academic Credentialing

Findings from this study are intended for submission to peer-reviewed academic journals, providing TeachRock with the scholarly credentials that support institutional partnerships, educator licensing programs, and school district adoption. Publication will position TeachRock's curriculum alongside evidence-based educational resources in academic literature.

9.2 Grant Funding — Harmony Student Wellness Program

Published research directly supports ongoing efforts to secure grant funding for the Harmony Student Wellness Program, TeachRock's social-emotional learning initiative. This study establishes TeachRock as a vehicle for addressing priority areas among government and private funding agencies, including student mental health, teacher retention, and educational equity.

9.3 Professional Development at Scale

The three qualitative themes — student engagement, teacher well-being, and critical thinking — provide a research-validated framework for professional development curriculum. This study's findings will inform the design of training programs that help teachers integrate TeachRock materials with maximum effectiveness, expanding awareness of TeachRock's curriculum at the district and state level.

9.4 Stage 2: NSF Grant Proposal

This pilot study is designed to provide the evidentiary foundation for a Stage 2 funded research proposal to the National Science Foundation. The proposed project will examine creative engagement (using RDCA factors as indicators) with TeachRock curriculum as an ethical, equity-informed approach to promoting STEM education — extending this study's findings into a new disciplinary domain.

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