



CREATIVITY *IN THE* EARLY YEARS

Engaging Children Aged 0-5

SIMON TAYLOR



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This book is dedicated to the memory of a good friend, artist, arts manager, director and cultural fundraiser - Laura Pottinger (1970–2023), who did so much throughout her life and work to support an inclusive approach to the arts and creativity.

About the Author

Simon Taylor is a Senior Lecturer with the Department for Education and Inclusion at the University of Worcester. Prior to this he worked in the arts and cultural sector for many years; as Head of Learning for Birmingham's Ikon Gallery (2011–2015) and Education and Community Outreach Manager for The Making (2004–2011), an arts development agency based in Hampshire.

Originally a graduate of the University of Brighton, Simon started his career as a professional artist in the South East, teaching in a range of settings including Special schools, Children's Centres, Prisons and FE colleges, and working with a diverse range of learners from adults to young people at risk from exclusion, children with special needs, prisoners and young offenders.

Simon is married with two 'grown up' children, is a keen drummer, loves live music and is hoping his potter's wheel is still waiting for him somewhere buried in the garage...

About the Contributors

Janet Harvell is a Senior Lecturer at the Department for Children and Families, University of Worcester. She has worked in the Early Years sector for 28 years with experience as a child-minder, pre-school supervisor, nursery manager and registered Ofsted HM Inspector. Janet's research interests are focused on international approaches, including extensive experience in China and a collaborative learning and teaching project linked to refugee children and their families in Calais.

Nicola Watson is a Senior Lecturer at the Department for Children and Families, University of Worcester. She has worked as an educator in the early years, primary and higher education sectors for over 20 years. Prior to this, Nicola was a family lawyer and mediator. Her professional interests include creativity and social pedagogy. Nicola is passionate about social and environmental justice and exploring creative ways of promoting the interests of the least powerful in society, including human and non-human animals.

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Thank you!

INTRODUCTION

My own varied career over the last 30 years has given me wonderful insights into the power of creativity in a wide range of educational settings; from the early days as a hands-on artist-educator, dragging bags of clay and my potter's wheel into schools in the South East of England, to commissioning artists to collaborate with the newly established Sure Start Children's Centres that emerged whilst I was working as a community arts manager in Hampshire. My subsequent move into museum and gallery education in the West Midlands gave me real insights into the innovative work that is taking place in terms of early years practice outside of the classroom. More recently I have had the privilege of teaching undergraduates studying education and early childhood courses at university level and this has opened my eyes to a multitude of new theories, concepts and research from around the world.

On a more personal level, from my own experience of having two children go through nursery and pre-school in England and seeing the amazing work taking place, it is my firm belief that early years practitioners are in a unique position to encourage the value of creativity: they can support children's agency and enable their voice to be heard in the world. However, I am also aware that many early childhood professionals lack confidence in their skills or abilities, or struggle with outside expectations and worry about how to make the case for new or more innovative approaches.

It is also true to say that the field of creativity itself is vast and ever-evolving, and so this book cannot claim to be comprehensive and can only ever be a 'snapshot' of this particular moment in time. What I have attempted to do is include all those practical ideas, theories, philosophies and approaches that I have seen to be so effective over the years, with the caveat, of course, that new ones are emerging all the time and every educator has their own personal philosophy and set of values.

My sincere hope is that this book will provide an inspirational and practical, research-based resource for all those involved in this sector whatever your role, whether you are a student, artist-educator, academic, parent, practitioner, support staff or nursery manager. Collectively, we can become real advocates for creativity, creative thinking, teaching and leading for creativity in the early years.

Simon Taylor

SECTION I

DEFINING CREATIVITY

1

WHAT IS CREATIVITY? DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES...

One of the most important questions of child psychology and pedagogy is the question about creativity in children, its development and its significance for the general development of the child. Lev Vygotsky (1967)

Chapter overview

The main purpose of this opening chapter is to put creativity in context and begin the debate, exploring different definitions and contested ideas around creativity. The discussion is wide-ranging, and many of these ideas and theories will be examined in more depth in subsequent chapters. Readers will be encouraged to develop their own definition of creativity and reflect on how this might evolve and change over time in the light of experience and a deeper understanding of the literature.

Creativity in context

Why is creativity important? In the words of Lev Vygotsky ‘one of the most important questions of child psychology and pedagogy is the question about creativity in children, its development and its significance for the general development of the child’ (Vygotsky, 1967). This is indeed true, but I would argue we need to go beyond questions of child development and advocate for a rights-based approach to creative education and an inclusive approach to creativity in the early years. Why is this significant? Even before the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), we have experienced a decade of austerity in the UK and have seen a widespread rise in economic insecurity, persistent levels of child poverty and widening attainment gaps for children from the poorest areas. According to the Children’s Commissioner for England (2020), these

differences in school attainment emerge as development gaps even before the age of five. Educational settings, especially those specialising in early years are on the front line in this battle to tackle disadvantage and inequality in our society. This issue will become more pressing over the next decade and could be said to be a matter of social justice.

It is important for practitioners and those aspiring to work in this context that they understand the complexity of children's lives and the many challenges families face, whatever their social background or status. Issues of social mobility and unequal access to opportunities persist. This book explores an inclusive pedagogy and the importance of providing children access to the arts, culture and creativity and the many and varied benefits that this access can provide.

In 2019, the Durham Commission published a report on the value of creativity in education, saying 'The evidence shows that teaching for creativity confers personal, economic and social advantage. As a matter of social justice and national interest it should be available to all young people, not only to those who can afford it' (2019, p.9). Whilst many of these issues will be explored in more depth in subsequent sections, this chapter will offer different perspectives so the reader can start to form their own personal view about the value of creativity in education.

Views of creativity

In this section, we will explore seemingly opposing views of creativity: the elite view versus the democratic view. These two views may appear mutually exclusive, but it is a mistake to consider this an 'either/or' question in my opinion. A more useful approach is to perhaps consider the strengths and weaknesses of each argument. The democratic view is that 'everyone is creative' and that creativity manifests itself as curiosity, imagination and divergent thinking in young children – the ability to think of multiple alternatives to any given question or scenario (Robinson, 2016). The late Ken Robinson, educationalist and inspirational speaker, was a passionate advocate for children's innate creative ability and considered it part of a life-long process of 'finding your element' or natural talent (2010). Early Years expert Tina Bruce also believed this, stating that, 'creativity is part of the process through which children begin to find out they have something unique to "say", in words or dance, music, or hatching out their theory' (Bruce, 2011, p.12).

This idea of creativity enabling a child's 'agency' is something we will explore in later sections of this book. Some writers and commentators make the case that children are fundamentally 'born creative' (Tims, 2010) and that every child can be considered to have creative potential and to be capable of creative expression. English author and former Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen, is passionate about the potential of every child and the importance of supporting creativity to enable real learning. He is also very clear about the complexity of this process,

...learning is complex. It isn't a piece of one-dimensional travel along one axis. We make advances and retreats. The retreats may well be in the long run advances;

some advances may be cul-de-sacs. These free-flowing processes can be inhibited in many ways, one of which comes from giving people a fear of failure. If you are afraid to travel about in the multidimensions of learning, you will be prevented from getting to the next step. (Michael Rosen, 2010, p.12)

What is the fundamental role of creativity in this process? Rosen firmly believes it is the ability to be 'open to receiving ideas, processes, sensations and feelings' (2010, p.12) and then being allowed to respond by being given a sense that there are many ways of getting things 'right', rather than a simple binary of 'right or wrong'. Also important is having time to reflect on any 'product' or simply the process itself, and perhaps doing so in co-operation with others. In this way, we make personal meaning and true learning can take place (see Chapter 5: Art and children's drawings: making meaning and visual literacy). Rosen also suggests we use the following 'checklist' for creativity, asking: are we investigating? discovering? inventing and co-operating? and in an ideal world, doing all four of these at the same time? (2010, p.13). Using these definitions, we might consider that all people are capable of creative achievement in some area of activity, provided the conditions are right and they have acquired the relevant knowledge and skills. Moreover, a democratic society should provide opportunities for everyone to succeed according to their own strengths and abilities.

Others hold what might be called a more 'elite' view: that only very rare people are creative and that creativity involves unusual talents. Historically, the literature on creativity often tends to focus on the great men (and sometimes women) who have produced or made ground-breaking compositions, paintings, inventions or theories. Often referred to as 'geniuses', these people, it is sometimes said, make their mark without special help and may even gain strength from educational failure. For both reasons, it is assumed that there is limited scope and little point in trying to educate for creativity. Obviously, there are many people with exceptional creative talents, but the elite conception of creativity is important because it only really focuses attention on creative achievements which are of historical originality, which push back the frontiers of human knowledge and understanding.

Bearing all this in mind, the following case study is of particular interest in the fact that it subverts this either/or debate and provides an example of a creative activity which is both at the same time, 'elite' and 'democratic'...

Case study - Musicadoodleo

Cheng has been attending a series of family-friendly drawing-based activities organised by a contemporary music group at a local art gallery in Birmingham. They take the form of collaborative community workshops in local libraries and art galleries that cleverly combine participatory elements for children with 'elite' classically trained musicians in an informal learning context.

(Continued)

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During the workshop, Cheng draws large doodles spontaneously on the walls and floor, and these form graphic scores for the musicians to play on their instruments live in the moment. The experience (combining sight, sound and touch) has been profound and will stay with him for a long time. However, there was no 'final product' or final performance and the experience now exists only in Cheng's memory, and in the material form of photographs and audio-visual recordings kept by the gallery.

Reflective questions

- What aspects of creativity are being explored here?
 - Why do you think it is such a memorable experience for Cheng?
 - Which elements had to be planned in advance? and which were spontaneous do you think?
-



Figure 1.1 Musicadoodledo - Birmingham Contemporary Music Group's early years project, mixing listening, adult-framed and child-initiated music play

Source: Image courtesy Simon Taylor.

Knowledge, skills or imagination?

Having laid out these two quite different concepts of creativity, it is worth looking at other, perhaps more nuanced assessments to see how they might help to inform our own understanding. Some people view creativity as being based on acquiring skills in literacy, numeracy and fundamental subject knowledge which manifests itself as expertise that makes a difference in the world (Leunig, 2016), whilst others take a more inclusive approach, noting the difference between ‘everyday creativity, specialist creativity and world-shaking creativity’ (Bruce, 2011). This term ‘everyday creativity’ might encompass such banal activities as choosing your outfit in the morning, cooking a meal with new ingredients, or even putting together a playlist for your daily exercise routine. As Bateson notes, denying everyday creativity ‘deprives us of a range of models for the creative process’ (1999, p.153).

In an educational context, however, encouraging creativity is not without its own problems and dilemmas, practical and theoretical, psychological and pedagogical. Craft (2006) has highlighted several of these tensions, from the assumption that creativity is universal in nature and always a ‘good thing’ in the classroom, to the more pragmatic relationship between knowledge, the curriculum and creativity. These tensions are explored further in subsequent chapters. Also, viewing creativity as solely or mainly the domain of ‘creative’ subjects such as art, drama or music is unhelpful according to some, because it can lead to a denial of the role of creativity in other areas, such as science and mathematics. Indeed, creativity is not subject-specific and if we see it as a way of approaching problem-solving then it can be utilised in different domains. It does not take place in a vacuum and the way in which children express creativity will be different in different curriculum areas (Sharp, 2004) (see also Chapter 11: Children as researchers: Supporting children’s natural curiosity through science, technology, the arts and mathematics). Breakthroughs in science and theoretical physics for example are often due to creative people who like ‘adventures with ideas’ (Bruce, 2011, p.13). If, therefore, using one’s imagination is a critical cognitive skill that is used throughout life, then it is important to encourage imagination in childhood. Possibly, the most famous scientist of them all, Albert Einstein, is quoted as saying:

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create. (Albert Einstein, cited in Bower, 2005, p.3)

Reflective questions

- To what extent do you agree with Einstein?
 - Is imagination more important than knowledge in your view?
 - What might happen if we have one without the other?
-

Cultural understandings

Some might question these assumptions and take the position that it is our different cultural and social readings of society that determine what we value about creativity. On the one hand, we might have a structural, institutional and highly formalised vision of culture, based on the passive reception of a traditional ‘canon’ and the work of great creative ‘genius’ (think-national museums, opera, ballet, literature and classical music) whilst on the other hand, we can hold a vision of culture that is open, active, dynamic and filled with the everyday productions of ordinary people and communities (think-local festivals, bedroom DJs, murals/street art/graffiti, etc.) (Glăveanu, 2011).

Those who believe in the former vision, or ‘cultural lens’, might ask if children have ever added to a culturally significant body of knowledge. This might seem like a simplistic provocation, but it could be argued that it is legitimate to ask these questions. Should adult and child creativity be seen as different, distinct and valued accordingly? Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi certainly thinks so and asserts ‘...children often appear to adults to be original, imaginative, or nonconforming. One could just as well interpret such behaviour as ignorance of rules, or inability to follow them’ (Csikszentmihalyi in Sawyer et al., 2003, p.220). He goes on to state that what children produce does not relate to notions of adult creativity as we might understand them, that is to say, ‘an original response that is socially valued and brought to fruition’ (2003, p.220). He does, however, acknowledge that children’s productions can be ‘valuable’ to parents and teachers but maintains that they remain ‘peripheral to every culture’ and as a result ‘not very relevant’ (2003, p.220).

Some would argue that children cannot produce ‘great creations’ because they lack the intention or ability to plan and do not have mastery of a skill that meets the ‘10-year’ or ‘10,000 hour rule’: the minimum time it is believed that is needed to reach the level of an expert in a particular field (Gardner, 1982). Gardner’s critique draws our attention to the child’s lack of control or intention and an inability to select from among alternatives, ‘from this point of view, children’s *apparently* imaginative activities are best written off as happy accidents’ (Gardner, 1982, p.169). It could be argued that these critiques, despite their seeming disregard for small and mundane acts of creation, relate back to Tina Bruce’s (2011) concepts of ‘everyday creativity, specialist creativity and world-shaking creativity’, distinctions that we explored earlier in this chapter. Anna Craft talks about ‘little c creativity’ extensively in her work and the ‘resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people’ (Craft, 2001, p.49), but that is not to say that ‘ordinary’ creativity cannot have ‘extraordinary’ effects, amongst them the maintenance and continual re-generation of human culture (Glăveanu, 2011). It could be argued that this also reveals the false dichotomy or apparent divide between ‘high culture’ and ‘low’ or ‘popular culture’, when in reality, one informs the other in a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship.

Psychological perspectives

Some commentators have looked into the psychology of creativity and have asked if it is merely an act of ‘rediscovery’ of what has gone before in a particular culture, ‘discovery for

others' (e.g., scientific or artistic breakthroughs) or 'discovery for oneself' (i.e., subjective novelty)? (Kudryavtsev, 2011). Vladimir Kudryavtsev, from the Vygotsky Institute of Psychology in Moscow, goes on to acknowledge that 'childhood is almost the only part of a person's life where creative work is a universal and natural way of existence' (Kudryavtsev, 2011, p.46).

What is the role of the adult as a key influence in this important period of a child's life? Again, psychologist Kudryavtsev claims it is as a result of the combination of children's and adult's imagination working together that the children's imagination is activated (Kudryavtsev, 2011, p.49). This idea has been developed into a pedagogical approach within the early years known as 'sustained shared thinking' and is explored in greater depth in Chapter 2.

Some have questioned if our ideas about children's creativity are perhaps influenced by our ideological convictions and cultural beliefs as much as they are based on observation (Bruner, 1996). In this way, creativity and culture appear intimately linked,

...for everyone, creative achievement always draws from the ideas and achievements of other people: from the books, theories, poems, music, architecture, design and the rest that mark the trails of other people's creative journeys. Just as different modes of thinking interact in a single mind, individual creativity is affected by dialogue with others. In these ways, creative development is intimately related to cultural development. NACCCE (1999)

It could also be argued that the classroom context is a cultural system in itself, comparable to the artist's studio, the scientist's laboratory or the inventor's test space (Engel, 1993). If that is the case then it is essential that we recognise the characteristics of creativity and then do our best to facilitate the creative process, that is to say, 'teaching for creativity'. This is explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

Characteristics of creativity

If defining creativity is challenging, or even impossible in some people's eyes, then it might be argued that it is more productive to look at the characteristics of the creative process or creative thinking, that is to say, 'What does creativity look like in practice?'

It is not possible to produce an exhaustive list of these characteristics, but as a starting point we might consider:

- Imagining
- Deep engagement
- Enquiring
- Exploring ideas and possibilities
- Tolerating ambiguity

- Risk-taking
- Self-expression
- Playfulness
- Making connections
- Composing
- Curating
- Expressing
- Responding to an aesthetic (a sensory experience)

Some commentators, like the late Ken Robinson, have usefully defined the creative process as ‘producing original ideas that have value’ (Robinson, 2010). Others, such as Caroline Sharp from the National Foundation for Educational Research, have considered evidence from research and theory and concluded that the process involves key components (Sharp, 2004), most often:

- Imagination
- Originality
- Productivity (divergent thinking)
- Problem-solving
- The ability to produce an outcome of value and worth

Sharp also identifies some common myths about developing young children’s creativity; that it is limited to arts subjects (see previous discussion and Chapter 11), that the creative process is ‘fun’ and should not be taken too seriously (in reality, it requires concentration, persistence and determination and may be a frustrating and difficult process), that free play and unstructured activities are sufficient creative experience (this can become routine and repetitive, children need stimulation and creative problems to solve), that it does not require knowledge or skill (these are fundamental to creativity, people cannot fully express their creativity without the necessary skills or understanding of the area) and that children find it easy to transfer learning from one domain to another (children can struggle with context-specific knowledge so adults should help children to make connections) (Sharp, 2004).

Can we measure creativity?

We live in an age of testing, standardisation and measurement, for good or ill, and some have asked if we can test for creativity? It is important to state here that creativity is distinct from intelligence, indeed children that score highly on intelligence quota (IQ) tests are not necessarily highly creative (Sharp, 2004). Since the 1960s, educational psychologists have been looking at the different traits of divergent thinking. To this end, Torrance Tests were developed by Dr. Paul Torrance in the 1960s to identify key characteristics of creativity. These were refined to include novelty and value, divergence from previously accepted ideas and persistence (Torrance, 1969). Most notable for Early Childhood Practitioners is Torrance’s recognition that ‘the

creative behaviour of preschool children is characterised by wonder and magic' (Bracken, 2004, p.352). However, it has also been noted that this high level of creativity is not necessarily maintained throughout childhood and into adulthood. Evidence from the United States has shown that creativity (measured by divergent thinking tests) declines when children enter Kindergarten (or Reception) at around the age of five or six (Meador, 1992).

Other theorists have explored the combination of independent or seemingly incompatible factors, known as 'bisociation' according to Arthur Koestler (1964), that leads to creativity. This creativity can manifest itself as humour, scientific discovery or art. Discerned as either a collision of ideas (producing comic effects and laughter), fusion (mentally challenging effects or an intellectual fusion) or a confrontation (tragic/sobering/disturbing or an aesthetic/sensory effect) this is certainly evident in children's imaginative play and storytelling (see Chapter 4: Storytelling, imaginative and symbolic play). The non-linear nature of creative thinking is worth reiterating here. 'Creative thinking frameworks usually include specific techniques for ideation, problem-solving and evaluation, not necessarily as a linear process...' (Churchill Dower, 2020, p.98). For example, writers of children's fiction and story books have for many years used surreal humour, visual jokes and metaphors as part of the storytelling process. You only have to consider J.M. Barrie's character Wendy sewing Peter Pan's shadow back on so he doesn't lose it, or the idea of a big cat knocking at your front door in Judith Kerr's *The Tiger who came to Tea*. Young children simply embrace these ideas; however, disturbing or illogical they may seem to us as adults (see Chapter 4: Storytelling, imaginative and symbolic play).

Understanding the process

Creativity can be seen as a two-stage process. Firstly, we might have a generative or 'ideas' stage. Useful techniques to facilitate this stage might include 'brainstorming' and 'mind-mapping' (Buzan, 2009), where participants can visualise and follow different trains of thought, and importantly, all ideas are initially given equal weight. After an idea or particular theme has been prioritised, this is then followed by an exploratory or more practical problem-solving stage which provides the basis for creative actions that follow. Another way of conceiving this might be to use the familiar imagery of 'meadow thinking' and 'mountain thinking' (Claxton and Lucas, 2010). 'Meadow thinking' involves dreaming up ideas (imagine yourself lying in a meadow on a summer's day), letting your mind wander and indulging in flights of fancy. In contrast, 'mountain thinking' is more task-focused (imagine yourself climbing a steep slope on Ben Nevis) and deals with problem-solving, assessing risk and finding alternative solutions. Claxton and Lucas explore these different modes of thinking in their exploration of the concept of 'learnable intelligence' (2010). This concept combines the latest developments in neuroscience with educational philosophy and makes the case that intelligence is not fixed, but expandable, and can be developed over a person's lifetime. This has echoes in the work of American psychologist Carol Dweck and