

Creativity and Possibility in the Early Years

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Introduction

Fostering children's creativity involves more than resourcing the 'creative corner' in our classroom spaces. As the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS: DfES 2007) which comes into force in all early years settings from September 2008 makes clear, nurturing children's creativity involves close scrutiny of processes of meaning-construction for each learner, recognizing the sheer creative engagement manifest by young learners, as they move beyond the given, or 'what is', to the possible, or to 'what could be'. It involves, in other words, what might be called 'possibility thinking', which is what this short article explores.

Possibility as the core of creativity

I have long argued that 'possibility thinking' is at the heart of all creativity in young children, whether they are working alone, in parallel or in collaboration with others. Possibilities are generated by children (and adults) in all areas of learning, whether imaginative play, musical exploration and composition, cooking, mark-making or writing, outdoor physical play, mathematical development or early scientific enquiry. Possibility thinking is the means by which questions are posed or puzzles surfaced – through multiple ways of generating the question 'what if?' (Craft 2000; 2001; 2002).

'What if?' may be experienced unconsciously in the flow of engagement (for example, in a two-year-old realising that, in crawling through the long grass, it starts to make a 'track'; in an eight-year-old realising that a number pattern can be made in following the 9x table, or in a pair of three-year-olds making 'soup' from daisy petals). Possibility thinking, then, essentially involves a transition in understanding; in other words, the shift from 'What is this?' to exploration – i.e. 'What can I/we do with this?' Fostering possibility children involves enabling children to find and refine problems as well as to solve them. This distinction between finding and solving problems has been explored through studies in primary classrooms (Jeffrey 2004; 2005; Jeffrey and Craft 2004).

Fostering children's possibility thinking can be seen as building their resilience and confidence and reinforcing their capabilities as confident explorers, meaning-makers and decision-makers. In recent years, it has become a focus of policy development for education

in many parts of the world. This in turn has impacted policy for early years education and care.

In England, 1999 can be seen as a turning point in policy-making on creativity. In that year, the National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE 1999) advocated that alongside having high standards of academic achievement, young people now needed to leave formal education able to 'adapt, see connections, innovate, communicate and work with others' (ibid:13). Concrete proposals in the NACCCE Report provided a foundation for educational policy moves in England, including the codifying of Creative Development into the early years curriculum for three-to-five-year olds in 2000 and, later, the complete review of the curriculum for birth-five-year olds leading to a seamless care and education policy in which creativity was to play a key role (DfES 2007).

As well as impacting on curriculum development, the NACCCE Report influenced shifts in the wider policy agenda which, in turn, influenced early childhood education, such as the introduction of *Every Child Matters* from 2003 (Every Child Matters 2004a), designed to ensure the well-being of children and young people from birth-to-19 years, by supporting the development of resilience and resourcefulness (Craft 2005). It also led to focused engagement by policy makers and policy advisers, such as the establishment of The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority *Creativity Project* (QCA 2005a; 2005b), also the publishing of *Excellence and Enjoyment* for primary schools in May 2003 (DfES 2003), exhorting primary schools to take creative and innovative approaches to the curriculum and to place creativity high on their agendas, followed by materials to encourage this (DfES 2004b). In late 2005 and early 2006, a further government review of creativity and the economy was undertaken (Roberts 2006).

These wide ranging policy initiatives in England have focused on all phases of education from the early years through to higher education. Common to them all is the commitment to the idea of 'little c' creativity (Craft 2000; 2001; 2002), in other words, everyday, lifewide creativity. There is a democratic assumption built in to much policy work following on from the NACCCE Report (1999) which suggested that we are all capable of creative engagement and that all learning involves elements of creativity.

Creative practice and practice which fosters creativity

In her work on creativity with babies and toddlers, Tina Bruce proposes the idea of 'cultivating' creativity, emphasising the role of adults in supporting rather than imposing. This acknowledges the vital role that adults play in the early years. Bruce argues that, without sensitive engagement with children and with their families, 'emergent possibilities for creativity that are in every child do not develop or can be quickly extinguished' (Bruce 2004:12).

There is an equally compelling case for the ways we work with older children. Adults in early years settings have multiple opportunities to develop practice so as to foster children's creativity, focusing on each child's motivations and interests and, in valuing and appreciating these, encouraging exploration without 'invading the child's creative idea or taking it over' (Bruce 2004: 25).

As Beetlestone (1998) and Duffy (2006) remind us, creativity is relevant across all aspects of learning; it is as relevant in imaginative play as it is in solving a dispute or generating ideas in mark-making. It is as relevant in making the next game come up on the computer, as it is in exploring textures in paint, dried pasta and sand.

It is important to distinguish between creative practice and practice which fosters creativity. In developing creative practice, we are nurturing imaginative approaches to how we work with children. In practice which fosters creativity by contrast our focus is mainly on ensuring that we encourage children's ideas and possibilities, and that these are not suffocated (Jeffrey and Craft 2003; Craft and Jeffrey 2004).

Studies suggest that practice which fosters creativity can be seen as being 'learner inclusive', in taking children's ideas seriously. Learner inclusive practices involve children and teachers co-participating in the learning context.

Such close interplay between children and adults in relation to fostering creativity has been documented closely in recent research work in a small number of classrooms in England with children aged three-to-seven years (Burnard *et al.* 2006; Cremin *et al.* 2006). The study has involved working closely with staff in three separate settings to investigate both their pedagogic practices and children's learning. The research team identify a number of distinct but interlinked core features of learners' and teachers' engagement which are valued and fostered in each setting:

- **Posing questions** – children's questions; both those posed aloud and others implied through actions, were closely documented by practitioners with a concerned, deep knowledge of each individual. Questions were treated with respect and interest, nurtured and celebrated. Question-posing often occurred in imaginative play.
- **Play** – children in these settings were offered opportunities to play over extended periods of time. Children were highly motivated and engaged, deeply interested and very serious in their playfulness, engaging closely with one another's ideas and experience, imagining all kinds of scenes, encountering and solving problems.
- **Immersion** – the children were deeply immersed in a caring, positive, loving environment in each setting. In each case this was combined with overt cognitive challenge involved.

- **Innovation** – children in these three settings made strong and playful connections between ideas in their own ways, and were encouraged to do this. Practitioners sought to further the children’s growing understandings, offering provocations to stimulate connection-making.
- **Being imaginative** – Through imagining and being imaginative, children were able to be decision-makers about the quality of ideas, content of their learning tasks, and ways of conducting them.
- **Self-determination and risk-taking** – Children were enabled in taking risks, working in safe, secure and supportive environments in which they were expected to exercise independence (agency) in making decisions and where their contributions were valued. Adults encouraged learning from experience as both empowering and generative. Each adult worked hard not to rush children.

The study highlighted the significance of the *enabling context* in supporting playfulness in teachers and children, encouraging self confidence and self esteem. Adults intentionally valued children’s ‘agency’, that is, children’s abilities to have ideas and see these through into actions. They assumed and encouraged children’s motivation (which Laevers 1993; later Pascal and Bertram 1997, demonstrated was vital to high engagement as an indicator of quality learning in early childhood education). The practitioners in our study offered children time and space to have ideas and see these through. They stepped back, enabling children’s activity to lead their support of learning.

Implications of possibility thinking in early years practice

The practices of children and teachers documented in the studies described earlier, emphasize co-participation, a learner-inclusive approach and deep respect for children’s ideas as vital to fostering children’s creativity. Creativity is fostered effectively through learner-inclusive approaches because as children contribute to the uncovering of knowledge they take ownership of it. When control over the investigation of knowledge is handed back to the child (Jeffrey and Craft 2004) they have the opportunity and authority to be innovative. A learner-inclusive approach, then, includes children in determining what is to be investigated, values their experiences, their imagination and their evaluation (Jeffrey 2001). It involves children experimenting and playing with ideas (Craft 2002). As children become more and more involved, the degree of inclusion increases.

So what could this all mean for early years practice?

First, it means ***standing back***, and considering what children are telling us through their engagement with the world around them.

Second, it means **documenting these moments** in some way, as a mental snapshot, as actual still or moving images, as notes or, in special circumstances, as recordings which may be later played back. Our documentation enables us to note and respond to pertinent events, responses, comments.

Thirdly, it means **reflecting on what we learn from both standing back and documenting**, so as to appropriately support and stimulate learning by being deeply engaged with children's learning, responsive to their ideas and engaging in what Schon (1987) called reflection-in-action.

Fourthly, it means **working with others**, the children and other adults in the setting, where possible, to share perspectives on what is being observed.

Dilemmas in fostering possibility thinking in early years practices

As we develop practice, we are faced with dilemmas involved in fostering children's creativity. These include **how to get the balance right between structure and freedom** in opportunities offered to children, **sensitivity to cultural context**, and **offering continuity between key stages**.

Structure and freedom

Too much structure restricts children's self-determination. So, the template approach to making a flower, where every child is issued with a shape and some coloured tissue paper cut up into small squares and their job is to scrunch up the pieces of tissue so as to produce an identikit flower, can lead to children feeling locked out of the creative process.

On the other hand, total freedom can be confusing and producing a model can help to structure children's ideas. Finding the right balance is not easy and is a matter of judgement, trial, careful noticing, documenting and reflecting on this alone and with others that leads us to adjust our practices and work toward a balance which is appropriate to a particular child or group of children.

Sensitivity to cultural context

As creativity has, since the late 1990s, been increasingly recognized as significant in early years and other learning contexts around the world, much policy development has been located in relation to both economic and cultural development (Bentley 1998; Jeffery 2005; Seltzer and Bentley 1999), making this a distinctive approach to creativity in learning as compared with previous periods (Craft 2002).

Current policy perspectives on creativity see it as developing hand in hand with cultural development, both feeding from, and helping develop, the economy. The case is made explicitly in policy initiatives in many parts of the world.

However, the cultural dimension, whilst recognised and indeed funded and supported in various ways in England (Creative Partnerships 2006; QCA 2005a; 2005b), makes the link between creativity and culture seem unproblematic. Yet, the model of creativity – a Westernised one, placing high value on innovation, on standing out from the crowd and therefore on individuality – is also based on a capitalist economic system. This contrasts deeply with what is valued in the much more collectivist orientation in far Eastern cultures (Ng 2003), which raises questions for practitioners working in multi-cultural environments. It also raises dilemmas for staff making constructive and collaborative links with parents.

Continuity between key stages

In 1999, I published an article (Craft 1999) expressing concern about the transition between creativity as conceptualised in the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* being planned for three- to five-year olds (later published as QCA/DfEE 2000) and the way in which creativity was described in the National Curriculum. Eight years later, this concern remains live, for there are remarkable similarities despite the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfES 2007) and attention paid to the primary curriculum. Now, as then, the creativity curriculum for children not yet aged five, involves ‘opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings’ (DfES 2007: 15). There are some changes: the expanse of potential areas of learning in which creativity may be nurtured and manifested is much broader than it was, including mathematics and design and technology, as well as the creative and performing arts and imaginative play previously named. And creative development is seen as being predicated on ‘curiosity, exploration and play’ (DfES 2007: 15).

Whilst the expansion of creativity beyond the arts and the recognition of curiosity (possibility thinking at core) is most welcome, the disconnection which I previously identified with the Key Stage 1 curriculum still exists, in particular in relation to play. In 1999 I asked ‘*How far should children be encouraged to explore the ten National Curriculum subjects through play? What will happen to some of the physical resources for play which now appear more marginalized in the curriculum – the home corner, the shop, the doctor’s surgery, large and small blocks, figures, puppets, etc?*’ (Craft 1999: 142-3).

Yet, years later we continue to see tensions experienced by primary classroom practitioners around how to square the circle of national strategies for literacy and numeracy and a perceived pressure from OfSTED to focus on the ‘basics’, often, although not always, at the expense of creativity (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). Whilst the Key Stage 3 art curriculum revealed in the summer of 2007 promises a more prominent role for pupil creativity (and for

teacher artistry in working out how best to offer a slimmed-down curriculum), the curriculum for Key Stage 1 and for Key Stage 2 continues to tread a tightrope between subject-focused performativity and a more creative approach, but with the weight of accountability perceived by teachers on content-teaching. This poses a continuing challenge to early years practitioners working in Key Stage 1 classrooms to know how best to organise time, space, content and how to focus their pedagogical strategies.

Concluding provocations

At a time when creativity is increasingly becoming seen as a vital disposition in adult life – in surviving and thriving in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing world, one in which creativity is being seen as perhaps unproblematic – the need to develop our reflective practice to encourage and nurture possibility thinking in young children seems unquestionable. The responsibility on early years practitioners, particularly those in Key Stage 1, to resist the continued pressure toward an over-structured, one-size-fits-all, performative approach to nurturing young children, is high.

What are your views?

- **As a KS1 teacher – or early years practitioner – how do you organise time and space for creativity?**
- **How do you nurture ‘possibility thinking’?**
- **How do you try to get a balance between ‘structure and freedom’?**
- **And what about issues of continuity for children between the FS and KS1?**

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