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Creativity in childhood: The role of education

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Abstract

Creativity in adults is highly valued in our society. Personal creativity contributes to inventiveness, innovation, social and cultural change as well as political development and economic progression. The creator is an innovator, a problem solver, an entrepreneur, an artist. Creative people have rapid and effective responses that help them to achieve their life goals and allow them to enjoy the journey. Creativity is both a skill set and a unique and individual personality structure that is developed throughout childhood and fine tuned in adolescence and adulthood. Education has a key role to play in its development. Positive creativity inspiring experiences at every stage of the educational journey are needed. This is especially true in both early childhood and the infant primary classes. Educators who rise to the creativity challenge will be well rewarded in rich teaching experiences and the joy of seeing children reach their creative potential in supportive and integrated learning systems.

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Chapman (1978) writes that children develop thinking and sensory learning through engagement with creative activities and that it is essential that they are offered an opportunity

to engage with their creativity in the early stages of their education. Arnold (2003) and Bruce (2004) agree with this line of thought, stating that it is engagement with creative activities that promotes children's developing abilities to think of new ideas, express them, identify issues and problem solve. Donahoe and Gaynor (2007) believe that activities that enhance creativity and imagination are what lead to children embracing divergent forms of thinking that in turn leads them to innovation through the processing of unique ideas and experiences. Ken Robinson (2001) argues that we don't grow into creativity, it is present in early childhood and we are educated out of it. From all of these viewpoints, it is evident that engaging creativity in children is essentially an important milestone in the development of creative thinkers and innovators in adult life. Marzollo and Lloyd (1972) believe that if creativity is not engaged with during the naturally creative childhood years that it is not something that can then be developed in later life. Bamford (2005) and Burke (2005) both write that the pleasure factor in creativity or children's enjoyment of the creative experience is a key component in their learning and in the nurturing of their innate creative abilities with their desire to engage more and more with creativity and thus become more and more creative.

Creativity is developed in the early years but also through the wider spectrum of play. As all developmental learning in the early years is centred within play as a medium for learning, here too lie the foundations of creativity development. Play that has value for creative learning has its own set of defining characteristics which serve to intensify its value with their increasing presence (Wood & Attfield, 2005). These essential characteristics of valuable early play are first and foremost that it is fun and enjoyable, chosen by the children or invented by the children. It is also essential that it is integrating in nature involving the minds, bodies, spirits and senses of the children involved (Wood, 2009).

The element of 'pretend' is central to early creativity development through play (Wood & Attfield, 2005) The children weave easily between real and pretend worlds, real and pretend situations and real and pretend actions with real and pretend items that have real and pretend consequences (Wood & Attfield, 2005). They make symbolic transformations easily and freely and calling a sheet a cape makes it so. This process involves image making and image transformation, inherently creative skills (Wood, 2009). These creative skills are also naturally and inherently present in young children and utilised by them daily in their urge towards play that enhances their learning. Learning gives satisfaction and a measure of how successful a play session has been from a learning point of view, is how satisfied the child is by the play experience. This personal motivation gained through truly successful play is both stimulating and exciting for the child as they learn and learn and learn.

It is for this reason that free play is the essence of early learning and that the freer the play, the richer the learning outcomes for the child (Broadhead, 2004). This is especially true in relation to learning that stimulates creative development. Playfulness and an exploratory drive are ignited through being free to play. Self confidence and self discipline come through self directed free play (Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001). The abilities to take risks and exercise judgement have their roots in early risky play (Ball 2002, Sandseter 2007). Even knowledge acquisition skills are laid down through a love of learning developed in early childhood through an internalisation of the fun that learning can bring and a lifelong sense of joy through learning by association (Montessori, 1996). Reflection, the essence of critical and analytical skills can only come through experience of self initiated experimental learning. Although this only appears as the faculty of judgement nearer to secondary school age, the younger this occurs the deeper ingrained the integrated reflective abilities (Steiner, 1981).

Early Creativity Development in the age group 0-3

What distinguishes early creative developmental learning from other types of play is the child's freedom to choose and control their activities without undue interference from adults (Broadhead 2004). Obviously, this can pose questions for early years practitioners about their role and what type and level of input they should be making in order to maximise the learning opportunities for the children. There are three main functions that the practitioner needs to fulfil to achieve this (Craft, 2001, 2002). Firstly, they must adopt a proactive and thoughtful approach to providing the best play environment and materials. This includes not only an understanding of what a creatively stimulating environment is but also a commitment to the principle that a good toy is 10% toy and 90% child. Secondly, a good practitioner must also adopt a principle of 'attentiveness to the children through both an awareness of their development gained through observation and reflection as well as an openness and willingness to being responsive to children's agenda and interests (Katz & Cesarone, 1994). Inappropriate interventions merely interrupt the children's flow. A supportive practitioner understands the magical and transformational power of play and has respect for the directions the children lead themselves in. This is the third contribution of the developmentally supportive practitioner – respect for the child's choices underpinned by an understanding of and commitment to children's wisdom in relation to their learning needs (Malaguzzi 1993).

While a balance of play activities is necessary for holistic child development and learning, the more present the will of the child is within a play activity then the better it is for many types of development, particularly creative development (Broadhead, 2004). Free play where the will of the child is paramount is the most effective play for creative development. Making choices, making mistakes, reflecting, taking risks, being explorative, curious and playful are all distinct features of both free play and creative development. Free play also increases

children's communication and negotiation skills which have a direct impact on their developing sense of judgement and self confidence. These skills are key elements of transformational creativity in adulthood. It appears therefore that the less rigid the play approach in the early years, the higher the opportunities for creative development. Wood (2009) argues for an integrated pedagogical model where the practitioner aims to create a balanced and combinational curriculum for the under 3's where a mixture of child and practitioner initiated and responded activities are carefully blended to maximise children's learning. She identifies four main types of interaction. The first is child initiated and child directed play. This is where all activities are freely chosen and can lead in any given direction. The children engage, collaborate, plan, build on previous themes or start new projects, choose their playmates and the resources as well as the location for the play (indoors, outdoors etc). The second type is child initiated and adult responsive play where the children initiate the play, the adult observes and reflects in order to meaningfully respond to their prompts or requests for involvement. The third type is adult initiated and child responsive activities where the adult structures and directs activities with learning goals in mind. This type of play comes with built in flexibility to develop the activity in accordance with the children's responses and the play can lead in unplanned directions. The fourth type of play is adult initiated and adult directed play. This is where the activity is linked to specific learning outcomes. While every effort is made to ensure that the play remains fun for the children, they have little choice or freedom within these structures as the adult retains control all the time. While the fourth type of play is common in early year's educational settings, the first three types of play hold the most potent learning potentials for young children's creative development as well as the emotional and social developmental learning which underpin creativity. The greater the degree of freedom, the richer the creative growth.

Creative Development in Preschool and Junior Classes –Ages 3-6

The centrality of freedom and free play is just as important within this age group. However, as this age group is so much more communicative and sociable, they often seek and are appreciative of teacher involvement. In addition, this age group are required to develop certain school readiness skills which form much of the teacher agenda as prescribed by various national policy and curricular frameworks. The balance between the child's natural development needs and educational specific developmental needs are finely balanced within positive examples of educational settings for this age group (Humphries & Rowe 2001).

While structure can progress development for this age group, this structure still needs to be balanced with their input and freedom to input as well as punctuated by opportunities for pure and varied free play.

The innateness of children's creativity was demonstrated through the figurative and verbal tests devised by Torrance (1970). These show that preschool children aged 3-5 demonstrate more spontaneous creativity than those aged 6 and upwards. Ní Mhurchu (2003) and Kellogg (1979) wonder if this is evidence of the creativity stifling effect of education (Robinson 2001) where a 'grown up' expectation is placed on the representations of students creations, thus limiting the creativity of the children by imposing an expectation that their 'creation' will conform to the naturally limited understanding of their teacher. Other creativity theorists build on this idea and promote the concept that children's creative outputs should not be subjected to judgement by adults but instead viewed as a developmental process of creativity building rather than an 'end result' production process that requires comment (Kess 1997, Matthews 1999). If this magical age of creativity found between the ages of 3-5 is to be maintained and developed rather than stifled then great care is needed during the preschool years to add value to its evolving process. The age of 3-6 are most often the preschool years

in much of the developed world including Europe, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand with an overlap phase of 4-6 known as the infant or Kindergarten classes within primary/elementary schools in Britain, Ireland, Canada and America. Many creativity theorists that write on this age contribute to an evolving agreement on the following four main principles for supporting creativity development during these crucial years (Beetlestone 1998a, Craft, 2000, Shagoury-Hubbard & Power 1996, Woods 1995, Humphries & Rowe 2001). The first echoes what I have previously discussed in relation to free play. It is that children must be both free to make choices within their play and be supported in these choices by the teacher, the environment and the ethos. The second is that fun, pleasure and enjoyment are essential ingredients in any activity if valuable and positive creative development is to occur, this will also foster a love of learning which will contribute in later developmental stages to knowledge acquisition. The third is that learning at this age needs to integrate the senses and the intelligences within this phase of learning. Engaging the senses of vision, aroma, taste, sound and touch and integrating them through play activities with result in greater creative awareness and development. The fourth principle is the incorporation of an element of risk into children's play activities (Ball 2002, Sandseter 2007). Risky play aids the development of a significant number of creative traits. It contributes to an evolving ability not only to take risks but to exercise good judgement within risk taking.

Play incorporating the senses is vital at this age. Children's cognitive development and brain activity is mostly sensually stimulated through smell, touch, taste, sound and sight. Activity experienced through the senses internalises the learning within the child so that it is remembered on a deep level throughout the body as well as the brain. This integration allows them to process learning in a much more meaningful and profound way than non- sensory related learning (Humphries & Rowe, 2001). This allows for strong creative foundations upon which knowledge and skills can be built. In this way, it is the role of a creatively

stimulating curriculum aimed at the 3-6 age groups, to meet the learning needs of the children across the five senses. Sensory rich activities such as cooking, baking, outdoor play, nature play, play with spices, fruits and oils, building with natural materials, celebrating festivals with a sensory theme such as the inclusion of frankincense and myrrh at Christmas and incorporating the theme of light into the festival of Diwali will greatly enhance the developing creative personality. The guiding philosophy for a pro-creativity educator within this age group is freedom, fun, risk and sensory integration. Supporting this philosophy within the classroom will result in happy children. Happiness is the central milestone for engagement in childhood. When children's developmental needs are being met, happiness is the most visible result. Creating the 'amiable classroom' (Malaguzzi 1993) is the kingpin of creativity development.

Conclusion

Creativity in adults is highly valued in our society. Personal creativity contributes to inventiveness, innovation, social and cultural change as well as political development and economic progression. The creator is an innovator, a problem solver, an entrepreneur, an artist. Creative people have rapid and effective responses that help them to achieve their life goals and allow them to enjoy the journey. Creativity is both a skill set and a unique and individual personality structure that is developed throughout childhood and fine-tuned in adolescence and adulthood. Education has a key role to play in its development. Positive creativity inspiring experiences at every stage of the educational journey are needed. This is especially true in both early childhood and the infant primary classes. Educators who rise to the creativity challenge will be well rewarded in rich teaching experiences and the joy of seeing children reach their creative potential in supportive and integrated learning systems.

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