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CHAPTER 1

An approach to creative learning in the early years

This chapter will give you ideas to consider concerning:

- The importance of developing creative activities in the early years.
- Developing an ethos and structure to support creative activities.
- Further reading.

Creativity is about representing one's own image, not reproducing someone else's. (B. Duffy, *Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years*, p.10)



Figure 1.1 This little boy explored a whole range of creative activities via his senses, culminating in the observation of the shadow of his hand in the water tray

The importance of developing creative skills

We have the evidence in archaeological remains and historical artefacts that humans have always commented on the world they live in, using available materials as well as their voices and bodies to record stories, songs and dance. The need to describe and share experiences seems to be very important to us. Studies of child development have revealed that children must have the opportunity to produce representations that reflect their own experiences, thoughts and feelings. Offering young children the opportunity to explore a rich range of creative experiences will help to develop a child who is able to:

- Make connections with others by 'speaking' feelings in verbal/non-verbal ways.
- Express thoughts and possibilities on a given subject.
- Challenge ideas and problem solve in a variety of situations.
- Develop a personal definition of aesthetic beauty.
- Consider cultural issues.
- Demonstrate good self-esteem.
- Extend physical skills.

These are life skills that will enable young children not only to access all areas of learning but to develop their full potential as human beings.

How does creative development feature in the Early Years curriculum?

At the time of writing, the curriculum guidance for Early Years is undergoing a revision with the intention to bring together, in 2008, the Birth to Three Matters framework with the QCA Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage to create an Early Years Foundation Stage framework for services to children from birth to five.

The Early Years Foundation Stage framework for services to children from birth to five has Creative Development as one of its six areas of learning and development, dividing it into four concepts:

- Being creative – responding to experiences and expressing and communicating ideas.
- Exploring media and materials – 2D and 3D representations.
- Creating music and dance.
- Developing imagination and imaginative play.

Each concept describes the pathway that the children's progress might take, illustrated by the 'development matters' section in the framework guidance, culminating in the Early Learning Goal which most children should achieve by the end of their Reception year.

Early Years practitioners will be aware of what a huge area of learning this is and how many important connections it can make to the other five areas of learning and development.

If a setting cultivates a creative approach to any area of learning, the practitioners will be encouraging children to:

- Have the confidence to air new ideas and develop them as far as possible.
- Learn from past experiences and relate this learning to new situations.
- Invent individual methods of problem solving.
- Create something that is unique and original.

Current research which supports this approach to learning

The ethos of the **CreatAbility Project** has been heavily influenced by the interesting results emerging from the Reggio Emilia approach to pre-school education in Italy. In essence, the young child is considered to be already capable, strong, possessing curiosity and the ability to construct his/her own learning. The importance of the child's collaborative skills and relationships with family, peers and community is given a high profile. The children are stimulated to communicate in many different forms, such as symbolic representation, word, movement, building, sculpture, dramatic play, shadow play, music. The environment the child plays in is considered to be the third teacher, with much thought being given to the use of space and light. The practitioners take the role of partner, nurturer, friend and facilitator of the children's exploration of themes. (See further reading suggestions.)

This approach is further supported by the **Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)** report, which focused on the effectiveness of Early Years education and was able to identify elements of effective practice, including the importance of the quality of the adult-child verbal interactions and the balance of child- and adult-initiated activity. An environment in which play was valued alongside new skills being introduced was seen to be very beneficial to the child, as was the active engagement of parents in their children's learning.

Thirdly, the Government's Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, produced in 2003, outlined five outcomes for children, one of which was that children should be able to enjoy and achieve. This has had a big impact on the quality of children's learning, particularly in the way in which children's views are being taken into account and developed.



Figure 1.2 A monoprinting session which entailed much more than just making a print

Definition of Early Years

The focus of the book is about working with children in the Foundation Stage (3–5) range, although some of the ideas could easily be adapted to suit the needs of older or younger children. In terms of curriculum planning the book refers to

possible learning outcomes relating to the appropriate Creative Early Learning Goals and potential links to other areas of the curriculum.

What do we need in place to support an imaginative delivery of the creative arts?

This section will look at factors that will support the planning and delivery of the creative area of learning and give the practitioner some questions to consider within individual settings.

The ethos of the setting

Process over product

Observations of children at play clearly reveal that young children are fascinated by the exploration of materials and tools and we know that children learn as much from the 'doing' as from the potential end product. Figure 1.2 illustrates the child's fascination with the experience of using paint and a roller. The planned creative activity was to explore mono-printing but practitioners were amazed at how long some children spent investigating the properties of the materials and using them in unexpected ways. This illustrates that the sensitive interaction between the child and practitioner is an important part of this discovery process and it is not just a question of the adult standing back and supervising the activity. The child will be watching the practitioner's reaction to their investigation and needing reassurance that they are not doing something wrong. If there is an end product, and sometimes there has to be, it should be unique and meaningful to the child. The understanding of this ethos should be clear and carried out positively throughout the setting.

Routines

Young children really need the time to play, to discover the possibilities and potential of the world around them. If this time is given sparingly within the confines of too rigid a routine, the learning outcomes for the child will be limited. This has big implications for planning because practitioners need to ensure that there have been planned opportunities for children simply to explore materials before a specific skills activity takes place. Settings also need to consider their daily structures and observe whether, as far as possible, these allow for freedom of exploration. If this exploration is facilitated in a sensitive way with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated play and the opportunity to return to an activity, the children's emotional and communication skills will flourish and the practitioner will be able to observe a wealth of important steps in the child's development.



Points to consider

1. Do we have an agreed ethos within our setting, which describes the way in which creative learning will be facilitated? Do all practitioners understand and deliver it or is further training needed?
2. If we offer flexible sessions are we sure that all children can access a wide and varied range of activities?
3. Does our daily routine allow time for children to explore materials? Are there opportunities for children to revisit an experience?
4. Does our assessment process complement the learning which is taking place through play?
5. Are the children currently producing their own unique creations?

The learning environment (inside and outside)

Physical space

Whatever the type of setting, this should be maximised to allow real potential for exploration and creativity. Young children naturally move about a great deal when taking part in activities, operating at different levels, and consideration needs to be given to the arrangement of the furniture and flexibility of its use. An easy way to assess this is to make a series of tracking observations of the children to see which areas of the learning environment are being used and which are being ignored. Observations of the children's learning styles will also support any decision to rearrange an area. Involving the children in this decision is really useful and offers them the opportunity to express their views and to realise that their opinions will be listened to and acted on. Many settings have made 'before and after' books illustrating the changes they have made to an area of their learning environment.

Some settings are now considering the effects of different lighting on children and are experimenting with lower levels of light in some rooms. When planning a creative activity it is important to think about the space that is going to be used and whether the available lighting will affect the children's participation in and understanding of the activity. For example, if you want the children to really observe the fine detail in a natural object, such as a shell, the activity needs to take place in a well-lit area and not on a small dark table well away from the window. Colours are very affected by light and for children to appreciate the vibrancy of the colour they might be mixing it is essential that the available light is good. Most activities planned for young children can take place either inside or outside and many of the examples in the book happened in the outside environment. There are many arguments for children to have the availability of an outside space, one of which is that children have the opportunity to really explore and expand an activity when they are outside and practitioners often feel more relaxed in a less constricted space. The outside space does not have to be huge,



Figure 1.3 By the simple hanging of items on a bush, an outdoor area suddenly offers more possibilities

but can be imaginatively set up, as shown in Figure 1.3 in which objects have been displayed on a bush to stimulate the children's imagination. In the same way as young children often like small, cosy areas indoors, it is possible to offer them similar opportunities outside with the use of draped materials, small tents and builders' trays with an assortment of natural objects to explore, such as shells and pebbles.

It would be ideal if children were able to have free access to both indoor and outdoor spaces for a significant part of their session.

Organisation

The organisation of the indoor and outdoor space needs to be logically planned to ensure that children can access what they need easily and staff can locate appropriate resources when setting up an area. A well-organised learning environment, such as the area illustrated by Figure 1.4, encourages independent learning and supports a child who may need to access materials to develop an idea. The involvement of the children in the arrangement of the learning environment is recommended as it helps them to identify the resources that are available and to make their own suggestions about what they might like.

The organisation of the resources is equally important so that all children, whatever their level of development, can access equipment. Containers should be clearly labelled with words and/or pictures, and resources such as glue and

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Figure 1.4 Well-organised resources support children's ability to select the piece of equipment they think they might need for the task ahead

scissors should always have a base to which they can be returned. Many resources will 'travel' round a setting and practitioners should agree that in a creative learning environment children would need to have the freedom to experiment with resources. Of course, there may need to be ground rules about clearing-up time.

Resources

It is important that children are offered a wide variety of resources, many of which can be obtained very cheaply, because these will contribute to a broad and balanced curriculum. It is also necessary for practitioners to appreciate that different media will allow children to address problems and explore materials in different ways. For example, items such as large plastic magnifying mirrors which are easy to grasp can be used for a variety of activities. Figure 1 on the companion website illustrates a starting point for an exploration of colour. The children had been mark-making on paper and the little girl realised she had inadvertently got colour on her nose! She was fascinated by her reflection in the mirror, which she then used all around the learning environment to look for different colours.

These resources should reflect a range of different cultures and social structures to ensure that all children feel represented in their learning environment. Families are usually very willing to contribute resources once they know what would be useful and if they are able to see it being used – for example, an



Figure 1.5 A builder's tray (mixing spot) filled with natural objects provides a starting point for an exploration of printmaking

interactive display of children's printmaking inspired by beautiful textiles which their families have contributed. It is really important that resources are sorted regularly, well maintained and removed if they appear too shabby, as children deserve access to high quality materials. An essential and easy resource to build up, as shown in Figure 1.5 would be an extensive range of natural objects, for example shells, stones, pieces of wood, all of which can provide a stimulating start to an activity. Each creative arts activity example in the book suggests resources that might be used, and at the end of the book is a list of useful resources which a setting could build on.

Displays

Visually, the environment that the children play in should be stimulating to encourage curiosity. Displays need to be at an appropriate level for the children so that they can see and respond to them and can also include items to encourage interaction. It is important that displays reflect a wide range of cultures, incorporating materials, pictures, photographs and music. They should celebrate individuality and could illustrate the wide range of activities that take place in the setting, as shown in Figure 2 on the companion website, thus ensuring that the families feel well informed and included in the learning process. Many parents and carers are unable, due to work commitments, to spend much quality time in

their child's setting, so these displays will make a big difference to their knowledge about the experiences their child is having on a daily basis.

Displays of children's work should represent all the children and could show the process of the activity, supported by photographs and children's comments, as much as the finished piece. It is important that displays are well maintained, beautifully presented and changed regularly, because if practitioners have stopped noticing the displays then the children certainly have.



Points to consider

1. Does the indoor space layout make sense – if not, how can we improve it? Have we asked the children what they think? Have we then told parents about the process?
2. Do we really need all the furniture? Do we offer activities at different levels?
3. Consider the outside provision opportunities. What do we like and what else would we like? How do practitioners feel about being outside?
4. Do all areas look stimulating and inviting. Would you like to play here?
5. Can the children access the resources independently and does everyone know where resources are stored?
6. Are the resources stimulating? Are they in good condition? Do they reflect a wide range of different cultures?
7. Do the displays reflect the many activities that are taking place daily?
8. Do the displays inform families about the value placed on their child's contribution to the setting?

The role of the practitioner

Attitude

Practitioners working with young children set the scene for the emotional environment that the children play in. It is important that they are able to represent a secure world in which the children are encouraged to take risks knowing that they will be supported if necessary, as demonstrated by the practitioner in Figure 1.6. The little girl was not sure how she felt about being asked to lie down on the material but there was a grown-up beside her demonstrating that it would be fine. The value that the practitioners place on creativity will be recognised by the children, who are constantly watching their reactions and picking up on often very subtle body language. Each practitioner really needs to 'know' the children so that through sensitive observation he or she will know when to intervene, when to extend, when to keep out. Ideally the practitioner should frequently play alongside the child, demonstrating that he or she also has things to find out about the materials and tools.

Training

It is important that practitioners understand the process and potential development of a creative activity so they are prepared to support the child. This can only



Figure 1.6 Staff are actively involved in the exploration process and the girl is reassured that it is safe to lie down on the material

happen if they have tried it out themselves. If the preparation is inadequate the practitioner will lose confidence and the session will turn into an instruction. They need to develop the skills that enable them to have valuable conversations with the child and to appreciate the importance of observing, recording and reflecting on the child's development. This training can take place in a variety of ways, either formally through courses, in the setting as part of a specific in-house interest in developing an area of learning or often simply through one member of staff having a particular interest or enthusiasm for a creative activity and passing this on to colleagues.

Reflection

A reflective practitioner will appreciate the necessity to ensure that all children are given equal opportunities to explore an idea and this could involve adapting and expanding activities. It might also sometimes be necessary to challenge one's own prejudices when delivering the curriculum. For example, it is very easy to avoid planning, usually quite subconsciously, for an activity that we personally do not enjoy doing. Examples of this could be cooking food that we personally don't like or playing with the clay if we personally don't like the feel of it on our hands.



Points to consider

1. Are we agreed about what we mean by the word 'creative'?
2. Do we find out about or try out the process of the creative activity before we introduce it to the children? Do we play alongside the children often enough? This means in a range of situations such as child-initiated play as well as an adult-focused activity.
3. Are we sure that we are not allowing any prejudices we may have, for example not liking the feel of clay, or the taste of a particular food, to influence the children?
4. Can we identify any training needs?

The role of the family

Communication

The communication between practitioners and parents/carers will play a vital role in supporting a creative environment. Parents have the right to be informed about activities that their child is being offered and are often very willing to be involved in the activity themselves. Good communication between the setting and family ensures that the ethos of the setting is clearly understood and there will be no confusion about work in the form of Mother's Day cards, daily paintings or drawings that are or are not coming home. This communication will take place naturally via home visits and open sessions where the families are invited in to play alongside the children, as illustrated by Figure 1.7. This was a brilliant opportunity for parents to really understand what opportunities were being offered to their child during a nursery session and the children loved showing off their skills and knowledge about tools and materials to their family. It is also evident from the result of asking parents their views about settings that newsletters, displays and the day-to-day conversations are very important to them.

Relationship

The interrelationship between the child, the family and setting will inevitably play a large part in the child's creative development as the child will bring into the setting their home and past experiences, incorporating them into methods of exploration. The way in which the practitioners perceive and discuss these with the family will support the child. The family can offer a wealth of creative expertise, contributing to the richness of the offered curriculum.



Points to consider

1. How comfortable do other adults feel in the setting? How do we know?
2. How involved do adults become in their child's learning? Would we like to develop this involvement?
3. How do we show that we value each child's/family's contribution to the setting?



Figure 1.7 This little boy loves having his dad alongside him, helping to make a dinosaur at his Nursery open day

An inclusive environment

Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. (Article 31 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)

Entitlement

We all have an entitlement to reach our full potential and the seeds of this are sown in our early years at home and in pre-school settings. Practitioners must ensure, through careful planning and evaluation, that all children feel special and are given the best possible opportunities to develop their potential.

Planning

A well-planned, quality creative experience will encourage children to use all their senses, as illustrated by Figure 1.8, so that an activity that includes a child who has specific learning needs can be adapted and expanded. Adopting an open-ended approach to the learning experience facilitates planning but practitioners are advised to seek specialist help if necessary to ensure they are exploring all possibilities for that child. The (draft) Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfES, 2006) states that there should be:

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Figure 1.8 Staff adapted the available space and adult support to make sure that all children, whatever their needs, were included in the musical exploration

Opportunities for children with visual impairment to access and have physical contact with artefacts, materials, spaces and movement.

Opportunities for children with hearing impairment to experience sound and physical contact with instruments and other sources of sound.

Opportunities for children who cannot communicate by voice to respond to music in different ways, such as gestures.

Figure 3 on the companion website illustrates a group of children exploring a range of instruments, which is an activity that takes place daily in many settings. The learning intentions were the same for these children with specific learning needs as for any other children but the activities are being adapted by the practitioners to support their individual stages of development. In any setting it is important that the exploration of a creative arts activity will be available to all children and it is the task of the practitioner to adapt the activity as appropriate to the needs of the child. Activities described in the following chapters included children with a wide range of physical and behavioural needs.

Equal opportunities

All races, religions, cultures and genders must be valued and given equal status in the curriculum via stories, displays, music, dance, resources, visitors and outside

visits. It will probably be necessary to audit resources regularly to ensure that all possibilities have been considered, for example family structure, and practitioners should be aware of new publications and resources which they might like to buy to support what the setting offers. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfES, 2006) advises that to give all children the best opportunity for effective creative development, practitioners should give attention to 'accommodating children's specific religious or cultural beliefs relating to particular forms of art or methods of expression'.



Points to consider

1. What evidence do we have that the setting values each individual child?
2. Would an audit of our resources reveal any gaps that need filling?
3. Are we sure we include opportunities for differentiation in our planning?
4. Would observations reveal any gender issues that might need tackling?
5. Do we know whom to contact for advice if we have a child with specific learning difficulties?



FURTHER READING

- Duffy, B. (1998) *Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bruce, T. (2004) *Cultivating Creativity in Babies, Toddlers and Young Children*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds) (1993) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- HM Government (2003) *Every Child Matters*. Cm 5860. London: The Stationery office.

Other resources

- DfES (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications
- DfES/Institute of London, University of London. (2005) *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project*. www.ioe.ac.uk/schools/ecpe/eppe/
- DfES (2006) *The Early Years Foundation Stage (draft)*. www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/foundation_stage_practitioners/
- HM Government (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications/

Further information on projects and publications of interest to Early Years practitioners can be found on the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website: www.dfes.gov/uk