

Nurturing Creativity in Early Years Education

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Introduction

The discourse surrounding global education increasingly emphasizes creativity as a core competency for educators, children, and young people. While fostering creativity is recognised as essential for holistic development, a critical gap exists in acknowledging its foundations in early childhood. It is here that early years education plays a pivotal role in nurturing the roots of creativity, which extends beyond artistic expression to encompass innovative thinking, exploration, and discovery.

Recognising this early foundation necessitates a deeper understanding of the core characteristics of creativity and the developmental trajectory of creative and critical thinking skills in young children. By comprehending and supporting these abilities, educators can lay the groundwork for a lifelong capacity for innovation and adaptability. This fosters a well-rounded approach, ensuring that children are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate the ever-evolving complexities of the world.

Through thoughtfully designed learning environments and engaging activities, early years educators have the potential to significantly impact children's development of creative and critical thinking skills. This article explores practical strategies that educators can employ to nurture these essential abilities in young children, ultimately preparing them to thrive in the years to come.

(Re)Defining Creativity

The concept of creativity has undergone a significant shift in educational discourse. The landmark report, "All Our Futures" (1999), championed democratic creativity, emphasizing that the capacity for creativity is inherent in all individuals, regardless of age or background. It defined creativity as an "imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value" (29). This aligns with Pascal and Bertram's (2017) definition of creativity as "an imaginative activity fashioned to produce something—whether a process or outcome—that is both original and of value".

However, within the context of early years education, these definitions require further exploration. Claxton (2012) argues that creativity in young children transcends linear, rational thought patterns, encompassing a broader spectrum of human functioning – physical, social, reflective, musical, aural, and visual. It encourages children to forge novel connections between ideas, domains, processes, and materials, nurturing their inherent creative potential.

The challenge lies in the inherent complexity of defining creativity. The perceived value and novelty of a creative idea are often context-dependent. Home environments, cultural backgrounds, and educational settings all significantly impact how creativity is expressed and nurtured in young children. These contextual nuances make it difficult to capture all possible influences and variations within a single definition. Furthermore, early years education often emphasises the creative process over the final product. This focus on exploration, experimentation, and discovery suggests that traditional definitions, emphasising novel, and useful outcomes, may not fully encompass the essence of young children's creative activities and abilities.

Therefore, while aspects of the aforementioned definitions remain valuable, educators in early years settings must simply recognise creativity's role in human expression and cognition. Here, it can be viewed as a holistic "state of mind in which all our intelligences are working together, involving 'seeing, thinking and innovating'" (Craft, 2000: 38). This broader lens allows educators to foster creativity in young children by nurturing their innate curiosity, exploration, and the freedom to experiment within a supportive and stimulating learning environment.

Core Characteristics of Creativity in Young Children

Creativity in young children is a multifaceted phenomenon, expressed through a constellation of distinct characteristics. At its heart lies a sense of *wonder*, a spark of innate curiosity that fuels their exploration and discovery (Bazhydai & Westermann, 2020). This wonder fuels a fascination with the unknown, prompting children to ask insightful questions and seek out novel experiences. It ignites a desire to explore, which translates to constant engagement with their environment, a drive to ask questions, and a hunger for new experiences.

Imagination, a cornerstone of creative development, allows children to transcend their immediate surroundings and envision possibilities beyond the present. *Originality* shines through when children generate unique ideas and solutions, demonstrating their ability to think outside the box during problem-solving tasks. *Flexibility* is another key characteristic, enabling children to adopt different perspectives and adapt to new situations, fostering creative approaches to problem-solving. Finally, *persistence* is crucial, as the creative process often involves trial and error. Persistent children demonstrate a willingness to persevere through initial failures and continue working on tasks.

Beyond these core characteristics, creativity in young children manifests through various forms of play. *Spontaneous play*, a natural expression of creativity, allows them to invent new games and activities. They readily blend reality with fantasy, transforming everyday objects into tools for imaginative narratives. *Social interactions* during collaborative play provide fertile ground for shared creativity. Children learn from one another, co-creating narratives and solutions, and fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

Emotional expressiveness is another facet, as creative activities provide a platform for children to process and express their feelings. This exploration can lead to innovative ways of coping with emotions and making sense of the world around them (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). These diverse behaviours collectively support and enhance creative growth, laying a strong foundation for future learning and problem-solving skills.

Nurturing the Characteristics of Creativity

My 2018 book, "Creative Learning in the Early Years: Nurturing the Characteristics of Creativity," emphasises the crucial role of educators in fostering children's creative potential. This requires cultivating a supportive environment that encourages exploration and experimentation. Unfortunately, educational settings can still view creativity as disruptive or a form of nonconformity (Beghetto, 2013). Despite children's inherent creativity, adults often fail to recognize their unique perspectives and expertise. Consequently, unconventional questions and ideas may be disregarded or overlooked, inadvertently stifling creativity. These contributions, even if seemingly irrelevant to adult expectations, may hold immense creative potential. Therefore educators must focus on specific capacities to nurture creativity in children.

Confidence is paramount, as children need to feel empowered to take creative risks and express themselves freely, without fear of judgment. This confidence can be nurtured through positive reinforcement and a supportive learning environment. *Autonomy*, a sense of control over their activities, fosters independence and self-motivation, which are essential for creative expression. *Resilience*, the ability to cope with setbacks and persevere through challenges, is equally crucial. Resilient children are more likely to embrace the iterative nature of the creative process and persist in the face of initial failures. *Collaboration* fostered through social interaction and collaborative play, allows children to share ideas, negotiate, and build upon each other's concepts, enriching their creative problem-solving skills. Finally, *diverse experiences* play a critical role in enriching children's creative capacities. Exposure to a wide range of stimuli broadens their perspectives and sparks new ideas, providing fertile ground for creative exploration.

The characteristics of creativity involve gaining and constructing knowledge, experimenting, playing, exploring, being active, questioning, using the imagination, generating ideas, making connections, thinking (and much more!). They give children the ability to perceive things (whatever they may be) in new ways, to find new patterns or even hidden ones, to make connections, or unpick connections, to generate solutions, or to question existing ones (processes). It can also be about turning new and imaginative ideas into reality (outcomes).
(Mohammed, 2018: 35-36)

Fostering Creative and Critical Thinking Skills

While rooted in biology, history, and culture, creative thinking is a core human capability. Fumoto et al (2012, p.28) suggest that creative thinking is at the heart of all creativity because it is within this that thought processes are activated and engaged with. Thoughts are where the birth pang of creative ideas, solutions, and problem-solving occurs. Therefore, the development of creative and critical thinking skills is intertwined and begins in early childhood. The distinction between critical thinking and creative thinking must be drawn here, as both have a differing purpose. Critical thinking is the gathering and absorbing of information, whereas creative thinking is the transformation of this knowledge to generate new ideas (Simister, 2007).

Though young children's internal thought processes are complex to observe directly, evidence of their thinking emerges through verbalisations, non-verbal cues, and activity completion (Larkin, 2000). Sensory exploration, a cornerstone of early learning, builds cognitive skills crucial for both creative and critical thinking. As children mature, symbolic play fosters abstract thinking and imagination, while problem-solving encountered during play and daily activities hone critical thinking. Language development plays a vital role, enabling children to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in complex play, all fostering creativity.

Nurturing these skills is a collaborative effort between children, their environment, and supportive adults (Tayler, 2001). Adult interaction is key: engaging with children's ideas, posing open-ended questions, and providing opportunities for exploration and problem-solving all contribute to a stimulating learning environment. The physical space itself matters – a well-designed setting with diverse materials, engaging resources, and flexible areas allows children to explore, experiment, and engage in creative activities. Observing children at play allows educators to gain valuable insights into their thinking skills – their ability to ask thoughtful questions, generate unique solutions, and engage deeply with tasks all demonstrate curiosity, critical thinking, and a budding capacity for creativity.

Creative Pedagogies for Fostering Creativity

Early years settings can implement several strategies to cultivate an environment conducive to creativity. This forms part of adopting a creative pedagogy that involves creative teaching, teaching *for* creativity, and creative learning (Lin, 2009; Beigi, 2020). Creative teaching focuses on what the adult does, and teaching *for* creativity is identifying children's creative abilities, as well as encouraging and providing opportunities for the development of those abilities. Creative learning is often characterised by the environment which fosters creativity and is about what children are learning. Creative teaching eventually leads to teaching *for* creativity and when these two elements are expertly taken care of, creative learning is birthed (Amponsah et al., 2018: 17). The

following are some approaches educators can ensure in the practice of a creative pedagogy.

Providing a safe and stimulating environment where children feel secure to explore, both physically and emotionally, is fundamental. Open-ended materials, such as blocks, playdough, and creative supplies, encourage children to use their imagination without predetermined uses. Unstructured play is essential, allowing children to explore interests, experiment, and engage in imaginative play without curriculum constraints. Encouraging exploration and risk-taking through open-ended questions and challenges and celebrating efforts rather than outcomes is crucial.

Beyond these, a variety of activities can further nurture creativity in early years settings. Storytelling and role-playing, with costumes, props, and designated spaces, ignite imaginative play and collaborative narrative building. Diverse materials allow children to express themselves freely and explore their creative abilities. Building and construction activities with blocks and bricks encourage spatial thinking and problem-solving skills. Simple science experiments spark curiosity and investigation while incorporating music and movement into daily activities allows children to invent songs, rhythms, and dance routines. Regular nature walks and outdoor exploration, equipped with tools like magnifying glasses, provide a rich, ever-changing environment that stimulates curiosity and imagination. Loose parts play, utilising materials such as stones, shells, buttons, and fabric scraps, encourages children to use them in inventive ways, promoting creative problem-solving.

Finally, educators themselves play a critical role in fostering creativity by modelling creative behaviours. Sharing stories of overcoming challenges demonstrates creative thinking and problem-solving in action. This is about fostering a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) in children, where effort and perseverance are valued over innate abilities. This helps children embrace challenges and view failures as learning opportunities. Educators' own creativity, characterized by self-awareness, curiosity, and a spirit of childlike exploration, also sets a powerful example for young children (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). By embracing their own creativity, educators can inspire children to think outside the box and embark on their unique journeys of discovery. This multifaceted approach not only enriches the learning experience but also cultivates a culture where creativity is valued and thrives.

Conclusion

Nurturing creativity in early years education is a complex and multifaceted task. It necessitates a profound grasp of creativity's core characteristics, the cultivation of critical and creative thinking skills, and the establishment of an environment conducive to these abilities' flourishing. To achieve this, educators must embrace a creative pedagogy, one that transcends traditional methods and incorporates innovative practice strategies. By

fostering a safe, stimulating, and supportive environment, early years educators can cultivate a love of learning, spark children's curiosity and imagination and instill resilience in the face of challenges. Through intentional and thoughtfully designed activities and practices, educators can empower the next generation to think creatively and critically, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of innovation and effective problem-solving.

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