Creative Learning in the Early Years

Nurturing the Characteristics of Creativity

A David Fulton Book
Creative Learning in the Early Years

Taking a fresh look at the role of creativity within the early years, this accessible guide explores what is meant by creativity and considers how creative skills, behaviours, and thinking can be identified and fostered in the individual child. Underpinned by the latest research and policy, chapters illustrate how creative attitudes can be adopted in all subject areas and opportunities for creativity maximised.

Creative Learning in the Early Years acknowledges the power of creative processes in helping children reach their full potential in the early years and beyond. Photocopiable work tools enable the reader to plan, observe, assess, and record progress as they develop playful and creative approaches, whilst practical advice and demonstrable examples are easily integrated into existing practice. Topics addressed include:

- Recognising and encouraging creative tendencies
- Stimulating the child’s imagination
- Developing adult creativity and self-awareness
- Creating enabling environments and creative spaces
- Using documentation and planning to inspire creativity

An exciting and accessible guide which encourages exploration, experimentation, reflection, and development, Creative Learning in the Early Years will support current and future early years practitioners as they discover the rich opportunities opened by creative practice.

Ruksana Mohammed is Senior Lecturer for PGCE Primary, MA and BA Early Childhood Studies and Programme Leader for Early Years Initial Teacher Training at the University of East London, UK.
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Ruksana Mohammed
For my Bubba.
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Thank you to all the children, practitioners, educators, teachers, leaders, managers, lecturers, students, and parents whose creativity never ceases to amaze me. Your many possibilities have made this book a possibility.

Thank you to my family, for being here by my side, and choosing to be my supporters and cheerleaders. Your many insights and discussions in our often-dysfunctional unit helped sow the creative seeds of my success today. You truly are my tribe!
Ruksana Mohammed is a Senior Lecturer in higher education, with a career of 20 years in educating children, practitioners, teachers, educators, and students in the early years. Her background is predominately in early years education and practice, which she has an undeniable passion for. Ruksana has worked with young children, families, and professionals and uses this experience and knowledge in her teaching and training to educate all those who have an interest in the education of young children. She still maintains a key involvement with early years settings, schools, and early years practitioners. Ruksana’s educational interests include, of course, creativity, play, the early years curriculum, leadership and the early years workforce, student identities in teaching and learning, and the arts.
Preface

ELVES AND THE SHOEMAKER (FAVOURITE TALES) – OBSERVATION OF A STUDENT TEACHER

I’m on a busy train making my way to a primary school. I have an observation of a student on a teacher training programme. She sent me her lesson plan the night before and I was excitedly reading it whilst sandwiched between two huge men in the morning rush hour. Based on a story, it was a science lesson for children in Reception. Children had been introduced to the story two weeks earlier and the planning incorporated the themes set for the term.

For this particular lesson, children were to explore the properties of shoes and then plan and design their own to make the following week. There I was, imagining a range of shoes and children busy exploring them, then various materials laid out for them to touch and feel during the design process: a stimulation of all the senses, and to get the ideas flowing! After all, many learning experiences are initiated, developed and assimilated through the senses, right? Children would have to think about materials suitable for their shoe design, try them on, think about weather resistance — oh, how exciting indeed!

So I got in, settled myself into a chair, and started to record. As the lesson unfolded, I could see all the thoughts I had on the train slowly popping as if pricked by a needle. No real shoes, just laminated cards with pictures of shoes — pop! No real materials on the tables, just paper and pencils — pop! I don’t even want to comment on the disruptive behaviour that I witnessed — pop! I know this isn’t appropriate, but I just sat there wishing the lesson would end. It was the longest 40 minutes of my life. I looked at the drained faces of the children, and then remember writing on the observation feedback form for the student, ‘were you teaching creatively?’ ‘were children engaging with the content in flexible and innovative ways?’ When providing verbal feedback to the trainee, her response was ‘but it was not an art lesson . . .’. And this ultimately was the driving force behind the writing of this book!
This short story is not placing blame on the student teacher; after all, she is learning, and in her training programme, the concept of creativity is not explored. But what it does highlight is that the role of creativity in practice, and its mere process, is still unclear to the many adults working, or about to work, with children today. It is commonly associated with the arts only. I wrote this book because I believe in the importance of creativity in children's learning – especially in this rapidly changing world.

Creativity is not just confined to the arts; in fact, it has a much broader place in the curriculum. Yet it is through elements of art that the youngest child can express their creativity – i.e. ideas in drawings, visible thinking in sculptures, and making connections in constructions. Creativity is also not just about preparing children for the economy, which the literature heavily advocates, and rightly so, but also significantly supports with developing children as individuals. This, then, makes the role of early years practice not just about imparting knowledge and facts, but also about fostering creative thinking and creative behaviours as well as building creative identities. It is about encouraging children to learn and apply creative thinking processes in all that they do, with the overall aim of supporting them to be creative regardless of when and where it may be used.

This book draws on my own experiences, first and foremost, as an early years practitioner, where I have observed many times creative abilities of children that have left me in awe and wonder. I draw on my experience as an educator and the many interactions I have had with adults that work with children, as well as the many creative moments I have had the pleasure of witnessing in early years settings, primary schools, and universities, as well as in many lectures and seminars. This book intends to support creativity in children's learning by giving examples of it in action. For example, literature tells us to foster creative attitudes, skills, and experiences in teaching and learning, but what exactly are these? How are they visible? And how can they inform early years practice? This book intends for you, the reader, to visualise creativity through practical approaches with the use of work tools, practice stories, case studies, activities, research notes, reflective thinking, and other tasks to engage with. It is hoped that this book will excite you, as it did me when I was writing it. Most of all, it is hoped that it will support you in capturing the creativity of children which enables them to learn, and to capture your own in order to teach.
Decades of literature and research support the power of creativity. Predominately studied by psychologists as a phenomenon, and only available in the very rare ‘and only available in rare individuals’, it was the education discipline that advocated its inherent role in children’s everyday lives. A landmark 1999 report by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE), *All Our Futures*, was the key driving force, urging educational systems to change by embedding creativity in the curriculum. This was so that creative individuals, with curious minds, can evolve for the futures to come. The report went on to define creativity as ‘imagination, fashioned so as to produce outcomes which are original and of value’ (p. 29). This provided the foundation for a range of educational policy innovations in England across all phases of education, from the early years through to higher education. Creativity, then, was here to stay, and it has become a much-debated subject in the academic research field over the last 20 years or so for its place in teaching and learning.

In present times, the rise of modern technology and changes in the economy towards global innovation have seen creativity as critical to survival through generative problem-identification and problem-solving across life (Craft and Hall, 2015, p. 7). Creativity is now seen to contribute to inventiveness, innovation, and social and cultural change, as well as political development and economic progression. It is regarded as a skill set, a characteristic, with education having a key role in its cultivation. In early years education, the manifestation of creativity is at its highest, and this is where it has the potential to be nurtured and developed the most. By developing the skills they need to perform in the work place and wider society as entrepreneurs and citizens here, children are more likely to succeed in adult life.

Continual research in early years education acknowledges that, as far as young children are concerned, the creative process is as important as its products (Craft, 2010, p. 33). The early years curriculum framework, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), supports a play-based pedagogic approach and advocates the centrality of the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning (CoETL), which are fundamental to the development of every child as a lifelong learner (Pascal and
Bertram, 2017a). It is the early years practitioner’s responsibility to support the development of these skills through playful and creative approaches. Yet, since the NACCCE Report in 1999, despite what is known about creative learning, I still witness children turn from enthused learners to goal and standard conformers, and not by choice. I still observe children in the early years being given ‘worksheets’ to determine what knowledge they may hold, or to follow dotted lines to create a letter of the alphabet. I still watch a child cut out a caterpillar from a ready-made sheet that has even been coloured in for them by the computer, and then pin it together exactly as the one just shown on the carpet session by the adult. And I still sit and ask myself, where is the creativity in that? Yet, I’m also told to hang out and learn from 3-year-olds, because they are the real experts in creativity. So, where is it going wrong?

Well, so much has changed at all levels of education since All Our Futures – socially, politically, and economically. These changes, at whatever level they occur, always filter down to impact the youngest children. Those working in early years education face daily pressures and frustrations such as qualification overhauls, funding cuts, redundancies, lack of resources, changing policy, and a curriculum that focuses on the outdated belief that concentrating on literacy and numeracy will strengthen early years practice. This places creativity on the fringes, rather than at the centre, of adult thinking for children’s learning and quickly drains away any creativity in both children and adults alike. However, it is also true that many adults undervalue and underestimate the role of creativity in the learning process of children. This is mainly because they don’t understand it, don’t know what it is, or associate it with the arts only, which then prevents them from fostering it, regardless of what informs them of creativity’s importance. Sir Ken Robinson famously argued during his celebrated TedTalk that we don’t grow into creativity; it is present in early childhood and we are educated out of it – but how? and why?

From an alternative perspective, there is innovative early years practice that exists which not only allows for ‘teaching creatively’, but also ‘creative learning’. There are early years practitioners, teachers, nursery nurses, and nursery managers who all place importance on making a difference to early childhood learning by using creative processes. They seek innovative ways to shape the curriculum by testing challenges and barriers daily. It is the people who work on a daily basis with young children who have the biggest influence on their learning, and therefore need the most support to get it right – especially during times of change. It is hoped that this book sets out to achieve this for you. Early years practitioners need to capture the creativity of children to enable them to learn; it is about the here and now, the being and becoming. This book is designed to support this process by encouraging practitioners to rethink and develop their skills set, practical approaches, and understanding of creativity. It aims to help contextualise creative early years approaches which directly support and extend children’s progression, and raises awareness of how and why creative approaches in all aspects of early years practice can develop all areas of early learning and, in turn, the creative child.
Who is this book for?

The terms ‘early years practitioner’ and ‘creative adult’ are used throughout this book to describe practitioners, managers, teachers, students, early years professionals, support staff, parents, graduates, tutors, lecturers, and all those that have an interest in the teaching and learning of young children, whatever their qualification route or training experience. This book is designed for adults who are keen to support creativity by incorporating approaches in their daily work with children and other adults. Although the book focuses on the early years, it is intended for the contents to be adapted and used across the early years and primary sector, and even beyond!

How to use the book

If this book sounds like more work on top of an already busy agenda, fear not! This book not only offers a discussion of the issues involved in creativity, but for those reading, it also offers useful ideas and strategies to adapt and apply to existing practice. The book is intended to provide creative approaches that work, approaches that are worth thinking about, and approaches that can be explored and experimented with. For this reason, this book has been designed to give you a sense of a ‘guide’, with easy to read chapters, which can be used to navigate your way through its contents. It is hoped that you can use this to reflect on and support you in your early years practice.

This book deliberately prioritises approaches over theoretical discussions, although everything written has been informed by theory, research, experience, and knowledge to ensure it is intellectually stimulating and at the same time accessible. It is hoped that practitioners reading this book take it as practical steps to infuse their teaching and learning with passion and creativity! How far you go, and how much you get involved, depends on how you will use this book. It can be all or any of the following:

1) As an overview on the use of creativity in the early years.

2) As a key piece of reading for examining creativity in your studies – what it is? How is it used? How it will support what you are writing?

3) As a starting point for all the coming creative possibilities in early years practice and lifelong learning (highly recommended!).

Summary of chapters

Chapter 1 gives a contextual overview of the role of creativity in children’s education through its past, present, and future. Although governments place emphasis on creativity for the economy, they do so in principle, while continually moving
early years towards a formalised and structured approach. The chapter argues that education should prepare children for the future, but that the use of creativity is in the here and now, and the being and becoming, for which early years practitioners need to advocate.

Chapter 2 analyses the interpretation of creativity through its key definition and key concepts that explain it. Though creativity is as ever difficult to define, this chapter attempts to identify a more early years friendly definition associated with creative processes, creative behaviours, and creative thinking. This chapter introduces the concept of ‘creativity’s characteristics’, which children exhibit and should be nurtured by the early years practitioner.

Chapter 3 provides a holistic understanding of the creative child in what they learn and how they learn. The chapter explores the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning and their inherent role in creativity’s characteristics, as identified in Chapter 2. The chapter explores how children can be observed to approach their learning in ways which makes it unique to them and a factor in exhibiting creativity’s characteristics. It pays homage to the role of play in all children say and do and its undeniable presence in creativity.

Chapter 4 explores the role of imagination in creativity through the area of the EYFS Being Imaginative. The concept of possibility thinking is reinforced, and various approaches to stimulate young children’s imagination are provided with planning prompts. This includes stories, imaginative play, the use of humour, and much more.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the early years practitioner in exploring and understanding their own creativity as the ‘creative adult’. It provides an understanding of the misunderstandings and creative blocks adults face when viewing creativity as part of their roles. The chapter provides various practices and strategies for the practitioner to use to invite creativity into their lives and to develop themselves for early years practice.

Chapter 6 discusses the notion of the creative curriculum, and although it acknowledges the EYFS as a play-based framework, it advocates that this is only one part of a broad and balanced curriculum and is open to interpretation. The chapter provides approaches to constructing a creative curriculum, around the EYFS, in which holistic experiences, pedagogical approaches, and identification of the creative skills and characteristics that children should develop are key features.

Chapter 7 analyses the differing planning approaches in the early years as a tool to devising opportunities for creativity to be nurtured. It offers a discussion for those settings that use documentation and therefore advises on good practice. However, the chapter advocates early years friendly planning in the form of cross-curricular, emergent, and the very recent ‘in the moment’ planning. These are key to capturing and extending children’s creative learning as and when it happens. The chapter explores formative assessment methods in the form of observations to identify creative learning and characteristics as important steps to help them materialise.
Chapter 8 explores the environment in nurturing, stimulating, and supporting creativity through ‘creative spaces’. It asks early years practitioners to study their environments, both indoors and outdoors, and how they may hinder the nurturing of creativity. It goes onto provide approaches for how to go about planning quality spaces with key features that allow the creative process to unfold.

Chapter 9 is all about creative approaches needed to teach creatively within creative spaces. It provides good practice and ideas to inform early years practitioners’ approaches to creativity-rich sessions, activities, experiences, processes, and much more so that children’s opportunities for creative learning are maximised.

Chapter 10 explores reflection, reflexivity, and reflective practice for practitioners to develop their work with children through continuous professional inquiry. It moves away from the cognitive tools of reflection, although it identifies thinking as a vital aspect, and offers creative practices that can enhance a practitioner’s self-awareness for teaching creatively and creative learning.

The Appendix includes the photocopiable work tools referenced in the chapters. Completing these will bolster self-reflection, analysis, and creativity, and will help you track progress.

On the next page, you will find a ‘book map’ which sets out what is included within each chapter and its purpose. This will be helpful for you to navigate your way through the many tasks and stories and consolidate what you read.

**Reflect**

Now that you have a general sense of what this book is about, think about how you will use it by answering the following:

1) Why are you interested in creativity?

2) What is your role in the use of creative approaches in children’s learning?

3) How far can you embed creative approaches? In a group, a whole class, a setting, a phase group?

4) Identify three goals you wish to achieve by the end of reading this book.
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