“Creative learning in the early years is not just child’s play…”

BORN CREATIVE

Edited by Charlie Tims

COLLECTION 29

DEMOS

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Foreword

In a way, it is strange to be talking about creativity. Why should we be in a position of having to justify something that is at the heart of human thought, activity, endeavour and emotion? The explanation can be found in the documents and rationales that have bombarded teachers over the last 20 years. This was the ‘instruction model’ of teaching, caricatured (pleasingly, I’ve always thought) by the description ‘the jug and mug theory of education’: the child is the empty mug, the teacher is the full jug, the jug is tipped into the empty mug – hey presto, education has happened. Though there is a huge body of theory and practice to show that by and large we don’t learn and arrive at making meaning and understanding in this way (particularly when we’re young), in the last 20 years there has been a persistent use of jug and mug. This was typified by imposing sequences and ‘units of learning’ along the lines of factory production – each child was seen as a thing to which a new chunk of taught material could be added, assessed and left behind.

There is of course another model of learning, which suggests that we are all – from the moment we’re born – reflective, interacting beings make meaning. If you watch a very young child holding and using a ball, you get a good picture: there is a flow to and fro between what the child is perceiving through sight, touch and sound (assuming these are each functioning) with what the child is thinking, with what the child is saying and with what other people are saying or have said. The child doesn’t learn how to handle a ball along one route of thought (eg from sight to brain to hand-movement). It involves all these processes interacting; so, yes, it involves responding to the stimuli but it also involves responding to one’s own response. This is what we do all the time: think and reflect and learn from how we behaved and thought previously.

All this means that learning is complex. It isn't a piece of one-dimensional travel along one axis. We make advances and retreats. The retreats may well be in the long run advances; some advances may be cul-de-sacs. These free-flowing processes can be inhibited in many ways, one of which comes from giving people a fear of failure. If you are afraid to travel about in the multi-dimensions of learning, you will be prevented from getting to the next step.

Where does creativity fit in here? In order to learn we need to be in a position in which we are open to receiving ideas, processes, sensations and feelings – the gamut of human experience; we need to have been allowed to respond to these experiences in ways that aren't inhibited through being told that this or that response is wrong or insufficient; we need to know that the response can come through thought, talk, action, activity, solo or collective; we need to have time and space to reflect on our responses – at least some of the time in cooperation with others. In these circumstances we will be creative in thought and action. We will advance in whichever field of human activity we can think of.

Far from being woolly or non-rigorous, this kind of creativity requires a good deal of organisation on the part of a leader, a teacher, a chairperson or whoever. It also requires sensitivity to difference, a strong sense of democracy – everyone has to be given their fair share of time, and attention from everyone else. The lines of communication between the group should not just pass between the leader and individuals in the group – there need to be as many lines sideways between the participants. There also needs to be a sense that there are many ways of getting things 'right', rather than a simple binary of 'right or wrong'; people will benefit from an awareness that they have caused pleasure in others through what they have said, made or thought. Where appropriate there is 'outcome' – things or ideas or statements, or movements or sounds (or whatever) are produced and presented to others. Creativity also requires time for people to reflect on that 'production' or process.

None of this is a luxury. It is essential for the advance of humankind. We are beset with massive problems concerning at the very least questions of climate, poverty, disease and war. We will never escape from this cycle through top-down instruction. Of course, it is possible to be creative about destruction – the twentieth century was particularly clever in this respect. In other words, creativity for the benefit of the human race has to be inclusive and cooperative. Whenever I work with people – no matter what their age – I try to run a checklist through my mind: are these people investigating, discovering, inventing and cooperating? They don't have to be doing all four all the time, but is this event, this process, this 'workshop' involving at least one of these? In an ideal moment, it'll be all four. What can I do to increase the amount of whichever one of the four is not happening here? In my experience, things start to happen when all four take place in a group of people.

Michael Rosen
October 2010

Introduction

Penny Egan

The single most important factor determining Britain's long-term growth is the education that the next generation receives.
Tom Leunig[1]

Over ten years ago, as Programme Development Director at the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), I was responsible for a number of projects looking at the arts and creativity in schools. Many of the themes in this collection of essays are familiar ones – school structure and purpose, creativity as nature or nurture, the roles of parents and teachers – but they are set in the new context of diminishing financial resources and shrinking central control.

The last government took on board much of what research from the 1990s was revealing and invested heavily in early years and creativity including Sure Start, Creative Partnerships and Find Your Talent. The last administration also put in place the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008, the review of which frames the discussion for these essays. Where creativity goes next – how we build on, rather than lose the gains that have been made – is the challenge for the writers of this collection.

From my RSA days, my thinking was informed by a number of projects and initiatives. The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40 (2005) was particularly influential.[2] This study examined the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school.

From 1962 to 1967, at ages 3 and 4, the subjects were randomly divided into a programme group that received a high-quality preschool programme based on HighScope's participatory learning approach and a comparison group of children who received no preschool programme. In the study's most recent phase, 97 per cent of the study participants still living were interviewed at age 40. Additional data were gathered from the subjects' school, social services and arrest records.

The study found that adults at age 40 who had the preschool programme had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool.

Other findings from this longitudinal study provided evidence of the importance of intensive support even before conception; new insights into the development of the brain proved that cognitive development is faster in our formative years than at any other time in our lives, when more connections and synapses are made. A project sponsored in the USA used the arts as an unthreatening way to include non-English speaking parents in family learning, setting out to bridge the gap between the class teachers and the one-off artist's school visit.[3] Old friends like Piaget and the nurture versus nature arguments appear to be still highly relevant.

And then there is the whole discussion around whether we have an education system still based on a nineteenth-century model, where the school year has long summer holidays to allow the children to help with the harvest, the school day ends at 3.15pm before it gets dark (and before electricity) and more importantly a curriculum still based on the concept that knowledge is power, which needs to be closely guarded by those professionals that have obtained it. A working population educated for staffing factory production lines does not need to be creative nor do the workers need to think for themselves.

Hagel, Brown and Davison have recently taken up this point in *The Power of Pull*, arguing that we are moving from an old organisational order that stacked resources and information, desired control and precision, and pushed messages from the centre to the edge to our new world where innovation happens at the edge and resources are pulled in as needed.[4]

Taking up these familiar themes these essays look at the extent to which public policy can contribute to improved creative and cultural experiences in early years settings and share examples of innovative practice in the field.

The Minister for Children and Families Sarah Teather MP and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families Tim Loughton MP hint in chapter 3 that children's future creative learning will be organised on tighter budgets and with less direction from government. They argue that government should be wary of 'stifling what it wishes to encourage by too much box ticking and not letting the professionals get on with the job'.

All the essays start with the premise that children's creativity is a matter of public concern. Loughton and Teather argue that 'promoting creativity and play in the early years is actually a first class ticket to producing a creative, prosperous economy many years down the line'. In chapter 6 Geethika Jayatilaka makes a powerful case for creativity in the early years building a bridge between parents and school, and establishing a connection between young people and cultural organisations that they might otherwise not visit.

In chapter 8 Wendy Ellyatt expands the discussion to include the importance of intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) fulfilment. She calls for 'a new, empirical "science of learning" based on an understanding of optimising natural systems'.

Many of the writers argue that children may be natural explorers, but they need to be in the right environment to be creative. In chapter 11 Shirley Brice Heath describes childhood as becoming 'one prolonged stretch of spectatorship', and she argues that 'children miss out on the kind of learning that comes through direct experience, participation and collaboration'. The implication is clear. Spaces and places that foster young children's creativity and imagination go against the grain of modern life – they no longer occur naturally; they need to be designed.

In chapter 1 Bernadette Duffy identifies the aim for this design by defining creative learning as enabling children to connect 'the previously unconnected in ways that are new and meaningful to the individual concerned, to make real something you have imagined'. She explains what this means for their practice at the Thomas Coram Centre.

Continuing the theme of how to create environments for creative learning, Tim Gill argues in chapter 5 that children need 'maps and signposts' to navigate their way through spaces and explains how that works in practice at sites managed by the Forestry Commission and National Trust. In chapter 4 Esme Ward relays the story of early years practice at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester and shows how it can improve what the museum does more broadly. She argues that museums, galleries and cultural centres that become responsive to children will become more responsive to all their audiences. Dea Birkett's personal story of her family visits to museums across the country in chapter 7 suggests that changes at the Whitworth are part of broader shifts in the work of museums. But designers, managers and early years professionals will need more than positive stories, if they are to adapt to a new reality of less money and less government.

In chapter 10 David Lammy reflects on his role in the Creative Partnerships project and suggests that if government 'is not going to have the money to actively encourage more artists, poets and drama groups to come into schools', it needs to 'make sure it does not stand in the way of them'. He also pleads for room in the curriculum for creativity, a theme picked up in chapter 2 in Anna Craft's retrospective assessment of the contribution policy has made to bringing more creativity into education since the launch of Ken Robinson's landmark report by National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) in 1999. Many of the authors are sceptical that giving more control to teachers automatically equates to more creativity in the classroom. As Bernadette Duffy puts it, 'We must not be tempted to narrow the curriculum and return to the outdated belief that concentrating only on literacy, numeracy and behaviour will strengthen early years practice.'

Just as the government has to find its way towards a new way of doing things, so too will the organisations and professionals with an interest-creative learning in the early years. If there is a hope for areas of the third sector that will take cuts in government funding, it is that they will be able to use freely available technologies to find new, more efficient ways of organising. The social franchise network described by Ruth Churchill Dower in chapter 9, which can support the long-term development of early years professionals and artists, might be one such way.

The OECD describes early childhood learning as a 'public good'.[5] If we believe that and we also worry that we cannot rely on our families to nurture and stimulate the next generation then the state needs to intervene, and provide appropriate early years provision in particular for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These years are so crucial that the government ought to be investing proportionately more per child pre-school than it does in later years in higher education. If we invested even more heavily in early years learning, it is likely that the state's return on its investment would be significant in terms of fully contributing citizens.

Penny Egan is Executive Director of the US–UK Fulbright Commission and former Director of the RSA.

Notes

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1

Using creativity and creative learning to enrich the lives of young children at the Thomas Coram Centre

Bernadette Duffy

This essay focuses on the importance of creativity and the role of the arts in promoting it, drawing on our experience at the Thomas Coram Centre. The centre is a partnership between Camden local authority and the charity Coram and is situated in south Camden. We serve a culturally, religiously, linguistically and economically diverse community with 20 per cent of the children referred as children in need and 30 per cent entitled to free school meals. For over 300 years our site has been a special place for young children and somewhere where creativity and the arts have been seen as important in the life of young children. The practitioners currently working on the campus are continuing this tradition.

What is creativity and why is it important?

Our work at Thomas Coram draws on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which highlights the importance of creativity in the early years of education. One of the four principles that underpin the whole framework relates to learning and development, and emphasises the importance of creativity and critical thinking in all aspects of children's experience, and creative development is an area of learning in its own right.[1]

For us creativity means connecting the previously unconnected in ways that are new and meaningful to the individual concerned, to make real something that you have imagined.[2] Creativity is important because it enables us to respond to a rapidly changing world and to deal with the unexpected by extending our current knowledge to new situations and using information in new ways. It encourages us to take risks, think flexibly, be innovative, play with ideas and respond imaginatively.

We have found Craft's distinction between 'big c' and 'little c' creativity very helpful in our work with children.[3] 'Big c creativity' involves invention and a break with past understanding, for example the creative process engaged in by Einstein. 'Little c creativity' enables individuals to find routes and paths to travel. It is a process of conscious invention and describes the resourcefulness of ordinary people rather than extraordinary contributors. Children are being creative when they use materials in new ways or combine new materials; they are creative when they make discoveries that are new to them. When children are being creative they go further than the information given to create something new and original for them. For young children, the process of creativity – which includes curiosity, exploration, play and creativity – is as important as any product they may create. This is what we seek to promote at Thomas Coram.

Drawing on research

Our starting point has been evidence from research. Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl describe how brain research has revolutionised our ideas about childhood, the human mind and the brain.[4] Babies' brains are designed to enable them to make sense of the world around them. More connections, synapses, are made in the first years of life than at any other time of life.

Children are born with a strong desire to explore the world around them and from this innate curiosity creativity develops. Just watching the young babies who come to the centre shows us that we are curious from birth, we want to find out about the world we are in, the people in it and how it all works. But while we are predisposed to be curious, the start of the creative process, whether this disposition develops or not, is largely the result of the environment and interactions we experience. Although creativity is a human characteristic, there are also skills involved and these need opportunities to be practised and developed. We have all seen young children who come to settings and schools full of curiosity and creativity; sadly, we have also all seen how quickly this can be suppressed when the children encounter an environment that does not value them.

Creativity across all aspects and areas of learning

We see creativity as important in its own right and also because it fosters the development of the whole child by promoting learning across the curriculum. Although the EYFS has an area of learning labelled ‘creative development’, which might suggest that creativity relates only to the arts, the underlying message is that creativity is part of every area of the curriculum and all areas of learning have the potential to be creative experiences.

The creative process is as applicable to personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; problem solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; and physical development as it is to art, music, dance and imaginative play.

For example:

- ‘Personal, social and emotional development’ includes dispositions and attitudes, encouraging self-confidence and social and emotional development. Creativity builds from children’s curiosity and encourages a positive approach to new experiences. Children display high levels of involvement and are able to select and use resources independently. Through the creative process children can develop concentration, problem solving, planning and persistence. Working together encourages a sense of self-respect and valuing of others.
- ‘Communication, language and literacy’ includes language for communicating and listening, and the arts offer plenty of opportunities to speak and listen, for example when sharing resources or creating a shared dance. Reading and writing

development draws on the understanding that marks can represent meaning and through this process children understand the symbolic nature of written language. The fine motor skills needed for writing are best developed through meaningful, enjoyable experiences which the arts provide, for instance by manipulating materials and equipment. The narratives children develop through their imaginative play provide the basis for writing stories.

- Problem solving reasoning and numeracy are supported as concepts of shape, size, line and area are used to classify and sort objects in the visual arts. Dance provides many opportunities to explore spatial concepts, and sequencing events and objects; for example, creating a pattern on a piece of clay helps children to understand patterns in mathematics.
- Knowledge and understanding of the world is developed through the investigations that occur when children are presented with unfamiliar materials and resources and exposed to a variety of materials and their properties.
- Physical development is encouraged by the many opportunities to develop and practise fine motor skills, for example through sculpting, play equipment and materials. Gross motor skills are also encouraged as children involve themselves in movement and dance and develop body control, balance, coordination and poise.

The role of the adult

The adults who work at the centre are the most important resource we have to promote and extend children's creativity. Learning is a communal activity and children's dispositions are very influenced by the adults around them.[5]

The way in which the adults frame an experience is crucial to how the children perceive it and whether they are motivated to join in or to avoid the activity.

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project stresses the importance of adult–child interactions.[6] A child's freely chosen play offers many opportunities to promote learning when practitioners recognise its importance and interact with children while they play. Planning for creativity must include time for extending child-initiated play as well as time for adult-initiated experiences. We can support learning through modelling possible ways to explore the materials and demonstrating to the children how they might use the new materials and equipment. Open-ended questioning is also very important as are pondering comments or thinking out loud, for example, asking, 'I wonder why that happened?' or 'I wonder what would happen if I add more water?' These comments draw the children's attention to possibilities and encourage thinking while discouraging the idea that their role is simply to provide the answer the adult is looking for.

Creative teaching is an art; it involves practitioners in using their imagination to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective to ensure that all children want to become involved and are enthused about learning. Sadly, too many experiences offered to young children are dull, repetitive and far from creative, rather a way of occupying children and covering the walls; creating something does not necessarily indicate creativity. Creative teaching involves taking risks, leaving the security of structured lessons behind and learning from the children,[7] such as in the example of the Dolls' House Project.

Dolls' House Project

Tom, a teacher at the centre, was discussing presents with his key group of three- and four-year-olds. The children decided that they would like to make a dolls' house as a present to themselves and the other children at the centre. Although this was not what Tom had planned to do with the children, he felt that he should capitalise on the children's enthusiasm for the project. With Tom's help the children spent time researching how to make a house – what did they need to include in their design? How did the different pieces fit together? What were the best materials to use? They used the woodwork skills they had previously acquired to construct the frame and during the process had plenty of opportunity to understand why accurate measuring is important. Once the structure was complete they *used their knowledge of paint to create wallpaper for each room and designed and made furniture.*

Tom documented the process as they worked, especially the children's comments. He used this to plan retrospectively, to look at what the children had learned and relate this to the different areas of learning demonstrating the cross-curricular nature of creativity. The children had meaningful opportunities to develop mathematical concepts and real reasons to communicate clearly. Working together was essential and the particular skills of different children were used. Boys and girls worked collaboratively on the project and once the house was complete it was interesting to see how much the boys in particular enjoyed playing with it, developing and acting out their own stories.

The role of the arts in promoting creativity

Frequently creativity and the arts are seen as the same thing. However, involvement in the visual and performing arts does not necessarily mean involvement in creativity. The arts do have a particular contribution to make and when they are introduced to children in appropriate ways can enrich and stimulate, providing meaningful links across the curriculum. For example, music gives practitioners a vehicle for getting to know children as unique individuals and for bringing them together as a group, which reinforces a sense of community.[8] At Thomas Coram we have been fortunate in receiving support from the National Foundation for Youth Music to develop a music programme aimed at encouraging the innate musicality of adults and children. Finding Our Voices is an example of one such project.

Finding Our Voices

The starting point for this programme is the belief that musicality is an innate human characteristic and that involvement in music making not only gives children a chance to develop musical concepts and skills but also encourages self-esteem and well-being. As a staff team we were aware that

> *music making was an area in which many of us lacked confidence and we needed an experienced music maker to support our own musical development alongside that of the children. We wanted music to be embedded into the life of the centre, not to be something a music teacher does once a week with the children. Children, parents and staff attend regular music sessions with the music maker and as staff confidence develops they take over the sessions with the support of the music maker. The sessions are linked to the ongoing work of the centre and the songs and music from the sessions become part of its day-to-day life. The children also have the opportunity to listen to and work with visiting musicians from a range of musical traditions and to share their music making with their parents and the wider community.*

Creativity through the arts enables children to communicate their feelings in non-verbal and pre-verbal ways and to express their thoughts. Translating ideas, concepts and experiences into representation involves many thinking skills. Through the arts children can comprehend, respond to, and represent their perceptions. They can develop their understanding of the world, experience beauty and express their cultural heritage. Such experiences help children to gain self-esteem and create a view of the world that is uniquely their own.

Conclusion

Children are not empty vessels but are creative in their own right and indeed they have much to teach us about being creative. Children are freer from inhibitions about what ought to be and so are more open to possibilities. Our role is to ensure that we build on children's current skills and understandings and expand this by providing new opportunities that develop their attitudes, skills and knowledge across a broad range of experiences. At Thomas Coram our experience has been that the best way to do this is by tapping into children's innate curiosity and creativity.

This approach has improved outcomes for all children at the centre, especially the most disadvantaged. Of the cohort of children who left in 2009, although only 56 per cent reached expectations for their age at entry to the centre, by the time they left 90 per cent reached or exceeded expectations for their age. Encouraging creativity clearly leads to better outcomes.

Over the last few years policy has rightly emphasised the importance of creativity in early education. If we are to sustain the improvements that have been made this policy must continue. We must not be tempted to narrow the curriculum and return to the outdated belief that concentrating only on literacy, numeracy and behaviour will strengthen early years practice. For the sake of children's happiness and well-being now and their success in the future we have to continue to promote creativity in the early years. We are preparing today's youngest children for adulthood in a world which is likely to be very different from the one we have experienced. The pace of change is rapid and we do not know all the skills and knowledge they will need to address the challenges they will face, but we do know that a creative mind and a positive disposition towards others will be their best chance of addressing them.

Bernadette Duffy is Head of the Thomas Coram Children's Centre in Camden. She was made an OBE in 2005.

Notes

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2

Deconstruction or reconstruction? New directions in policies for creativity in the early years

Anna Craft

For over 200 years, in Western societies, supporting children's learning in the early years has included nurturing their creativity. Over time, Europeans have been inspired by Rousseau's 'Romantic' view of early childhood first voiced in the eighteenth century.[1] Rousseau's acknowledgement of children's curiosity and capacity to make new meanings was developed by many, including Montessori, Pestalozzi, Owen, Fröbel, Steiner and Malaguzzi, most of whom devised their own brands of early years education and care.[2] In different ways, each of these theorists has had an influence (particularly in the West) on state policies for exploration and play-based early years provision.

Creativity and early years provision in England

Policy on creativity in England was cemented in 1999 with the publication of a report by the National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE), which advocated that alongside high standards of academic achievement, young people now also needed to leave formal education able to 'adapt, see connections, innovate, communicate and work with others'.[3] The NACCCE report proposed a 'democratic' view of creativity reflecting a growing perspective over the last years of the twentieth century in recognising creativity as a pervasive human capability and the multiple ways in which originality could be cast.[4]

NACCCE defined creativity as 'imagination, fashioned so as to produce outcomes which are original and of value',[5] a definition with far-reaching implications for educators and learners. It provided a foundation for a range of educational policy innovations in England, in all phases of education from the early years through to higher education. Common across them is the commitment to the idea of 'little c' creativity,[6] in other words, creativity as everyday – a recognition that all learning involves elements of creativity. NACCCE played a key role in reinforcing creativity and cultural education as core to early years provision in England, with 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 children from birth to five-year-olds leading to a seamless care and education policy in which creativity was to play a key role.[7] More widely, NACCCE can be seen as having influenced the introduction of Every Child Matters from 2003,[8] which focused on well-being from birth to age 19, by developing children's resilience and resourcefulness. It led to the establishment of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's Creativity Project,[9] the publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment* for primary schools in May 2003,[10] which exorted primary schools to adopt creative and innovative approaches,[11] and later proposals to place creativity more centrally in the curriculum following Jim Rose's independent review of the curriculum.[12]

The Early Years Foundation Stage

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw guidance for the foundation stage published and reframed with the most recent version and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS),[13] for birth to age 5, introduced from September 2008. EYFS ensures creativity and critical thinking are developed through play-based learning across the curriculum, and that children learn in an environment encouraging exploration and active and playful learning. It reflects the perspective that play offers significant benefits for children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development and is key to creativity.[14]

Gradual professionalisation of the early years workforce placed increasing demand for greater professional imagination and the capacity to nurture young children's creativity. Thus, all early years providers – whether childminders, day nursery workers in maintained and independent schools, playgroup leaders, reception class and nursery teachers, breakfast and after-school clubs, holiday clubs and play schemes, and Sure Start children's centres – work with the EYFS, which underlines the centrality of creativity in young children's lives.

Creative construction: a double-dose

In EYFS, creativity and critical thinking permeate all provision, in stretching practitioners to conceptualise and develop well beyond the 'messy corner' and 'where we do sand and water'. Key aspects of creativity and critical thinking include making connections, transforming understanding and sustained shared thinking, and so creativity and critical thinking are present at multiple levels in the setting, from how children move around to what access they have to resources, to how they learn and play with others, how they interact with adults and vice-versa.

In addition to this permeation, EYFS also names creativity as one of six areas of learning and development which early years settings must foster: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; creative development; problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; and physical development. Seen as equally important, each contributes to a rounded approach to learning and development.

Forming part of this holistic curriculum, creative development includes responding to experiences, exploring media and materials, expressing and communicating ideas, creating music and dance, and developing imagination and imaginative play. Rooted in play-based learning, creative development depends on, and encourages, development of imagination.

This double emphasis, together with the play-based orientation of the EYFS, means young children are deeply supported in what I call 'possibility thinking' – the transition from ‘what is’ to ‘what might be’. EYFS encourages possibility through ‘what if?’ thinking, encouraging children’s questions[15] and also ‘as if’ thinking, encouraging imaginative play.

Partnership, culture and learning

Alongside the EYFS curriculum framework sit creative and cultural practices triggered by the recommendations of the NACCCE in 1999, in particular Creative Partnerships, which was established in 2002. Initially a pilot scheme in 16 regions, it became a national scheme in 2004. Operating in areas of urban and rural deprivation, its remit is to broker partnerships between schools, early years settings and creative practitioners, to nurture the creativity of children and young people. Children work on creative investigations in arts and culture with a range of specialists including artists, historians, scientists, architects, entrepreneurs, designers, technologists, broadcasters and so on.

Over the decade following the NACCCE report, two clear narratives had emerged, one focusing on how children’s creative talents could be nurtured, the other on how these could be linked with existing and prospective cultural development. Local and regional initiatives were developed supporting these, rooted in the cultural fabric of English society.[16] At national level, from 2008, Find Your Talent provided a pilot in ten regions of England working with children aged 0–19, regardless of ability, to facilitate a government commitment made through the Children’s Plan for five hours per week of high-quality cultural experiences for all young people, within and beyond formal education, participating in positive activities aimed to develop their talents. In this way it was hoped that Find Your Talent would extend learning opportunities and help improve outcomes for all children. In its first 18 months it worked with hundreds of thousands of children and young people.

Although claims were made for its strengths, notably the ways in which strategic and local priorities and arrangements were integrated in each of the ten pathfinder areas, the interim evaluation also identified a range of challenges for this programme, including increasing awareness and participation and engaging children and their parents more.[17] In addition, operational issues were identified including in building capacity. In mid-2010, as part of a wide range of spending cuts, Find Your Talent was cancelled with immediate effect.[18]

Evaluating creativity in the early years

During the decade of development following NACCCE, researchers and policy makers have explored and evaluated aspects of creativity in the early years and beyond as enabling children's capabilities in creative construction. Duffy reminds us that creativity is relevant in all aspects of learning, being as relevant in mark making as it is in imaginative play, and as relevant in role taking during computer play as it is in solving a dispute or in exploring textures in paint, dried pasta and sand.[19] Work in the early years continued to acknowledge that, as far as young children are concerned, the creative process is as important as its products.[20]

Creative practice and practice that fosters creativity

Studies of practice in English early years settings have emphasised the distinction between developing creative practice – practitioners nurturing imaginative approaches to how they work with children – and practice which fosters creativity where the focus is mainly on encouraging children's ideas and possibilities. Work by Jeffrey and Craft suggests that practice which fosters creativity can be seen as being 'learner inclusive', in taking children's ideas seriously.[21]

Possibility thinking

Focusing on possibility ('what if' and 'as if'[22]) as the heart of creativity in underpinning the capacity to be self-determined and not passive, a series of studies has explored characteristics of possibility thinking, and the characteristics of pedagogy which nurture it. These have demonstrated that inherent in possibility thinking is a willingness and capacity to be immersed, to pose and respond to questions, to make connections, to use imagination, to innovate and to take risks.[23] They have generated a taxonomy of learner questioning, often embodied and non-verbal.[24]

Pedagogy nurturing possibility thinking is characterised as occurring within an explicitly enabling context and demanding of practitioners that they value highly children's agency, that they offer children adequate time and space to explore ideas, and that they stand back sufficiently to notice what intrigues, confuses and inspires the children they are working with, such that intervention occurs from this place of closer understanding.[25] Evident in the possibility thinking studies and other studies of children's creativity is the quality of relationship between adults and children.

Creative partnership

On the policy side, the Roberts review evaluated progress following NACCCE, highlighting creativity in the EYFS.[26] Roberts mapped out a framework for creativity with a very wide remit from the early years through to early adulthood, encompassing extended schools, building schools for the future, leadership issues including initial teacher education and professional development, creative partnership and frameworks for regulation and support.

Roberts argued that the early years sector should be prioritised, keeping creativity high profile in early years settings and working on continuing workforce development, recognition schemes and parental and family support programmes. The government response to Roberts stated, 'We will ensure that creativity continues to be of fundamental importance in the Early Years Foundation Stage. We will also examine ways of recognising and rewarding practitioners and settings which demonstrate particularly effective creative practice.'[27] Although the former point was further developed, it is debatable that the latter was.

Roberts also influenced the House of Commons Education Select Committee, which focused on the analysis of Creative

Partnerships and its achievements in its first five years. It recognised the significant value of working in partnership[28] and the government response to this in 2008 recommended Creative Partnerships continue to be tied in to the arts and culture and more broadly.[29] It identified a range of new priorities, including the need to find ways of assessing incremental progress in creativity, a point taken up by an Ofsted probe into creativity in 2010, which drew links between creativity, creative partnership and high achievement.[30]

Alongside these policy reviews are a range of studies of partnership within and beyond Creative Partnerships.[31] Studies suggest that partnership can introduce a more permeable and democratic approach to curriculum and pedagogy, and that the artist frequently acts as co-learner alongside children, integrating their artistic practice with the pedagogy and developing a distinctive sort of atmosphere in learning. A range of benefits of Creative Partnerships work across the age range includes improving educational progress, behaviour, attendance and parental involvement, and enhancing student leadership and pupil voice.[32]

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, then, creativity of young children was increasingly highlighted by government and government policy, and by development of practices in early years settings for nurturing creativity across provision and in partnership.

2010 Coalition policies: creative deconstruction or reconstruction

The election of a new government in the UK in May 2010 brought the end of New Labour's frame on how to best support children and their families. Faced with a huge budget deficit, cuts to public services have been a major driver of post-election policy making. In education, alongside cuts, the coalition government has expressed a firm commitment to 'a focus on the basics'.[33] By June 2010 the planned Rose primary curriculum (integrating with the holistic EYFS, and due for implementation in 2011) had been cancelled. In August a review of EYFS was announced to be carried out by Dame Clare Tickell.[34] The online consultation form did not reflect the double role of creativity in EYFS and nor did it mention creative partnership. The remit letter to Dame Tickell, however, does ask how young children should be prepared to cope with 'more formal learning' in primary school – signalling overall a different kind of future.[35]

From a ten-year policy position where creativity was highly valued and creative co-construction was valued and encouraged between practitioners, children and creative partners, future direction for policy and thus for early years providers is currently shrouded in uncertainty. However, the signs are that far from creative construction, the early years may face a period of deconstruction in relation to creativity.

Should such deconstruction be on the cards, and should politicians wish to enforce 'basic' in learning, those who care about early years provision will need to bring collective understanding of learning to the table. And, since some cultural norms may be under challenge, we would do well to remember the words of psychologist Jerome Bruner: 'How one conceives of education… is a function of how one conceives of culture and its aims, professed and otherwise.'[36]

For the youngest children, the perspective that play, exploration, making sense and construction form the heart of learning has a long pedigree in Western philosophy and psychology. It reflects a culture of imaginative innovation, which is driven by possibility – or by asking 'what if?' At this point in the history of provision for the youngest children, it may be time to oil the wheels of creative constructions by asking, 'what if not?'[37]

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Notes

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3

Creating conditions: trusted professional and targeted resources for creativity in the early years

Tim Loughton MP and Sarah Teather MP

Child's play is not normally considered to be a bedrock of long term fiscal viability. In the economic lexicon of demand and supply, opportunity cost and multipliers, there is little room for the rattles, dolls and sandpits of what has, perhaps unfairly, been dubbed the 'nappy curriculum' by sections of the media. And yet, as difficult as it is to imagine how a child banging a drum at nursery could possibly affect this country's future prosperity, we know that promoting creativity and play in the early years is actually a first class ticket to producing a creative, prosperous economy many years down the line.

Not only is cognitive development faster in those formative years than at any other time in our lives, and therefore more important to nurture, but scientists have also argued for some time now that play in childhood creates a brain that has greater behavioural flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life thanks to its complex evaluations of playmates, ideas of reciprocity and the use of specific signals and rules. In other words, the creative inputs we receive in the nursery very directly translate into the educational and industrial outputs of tomorrow.

However, at a time when the value of this link has never been greater, there is mounting concern that the very regulations we have put in place to promote creativity, like the Early Years Foundation Stage, could actually be proving counterproductive, with a debate ongoing as to whether well-intentioned guidance and legislation is stifling free thinking and innovation from those very first weeks, months and years of our lives. As a society, we are beginning to ask whether we have become so risk averse, and our services are so strictly delineated, that we are in danger of suppressing future creative talent in this country.

This is an important question, and its answer may help us explain why organisations like the National Children's Bureau have openly questioned the 'richness' of the creative experience currently enjoyed by our youngest children in comparison with other European countries. Has a build up of bureaucracy left early years professionals with less independence and scope to provide imaginative, creative settings for young children?

The coalition philosophy is straightforward: if we trust professionals and target resources at those children and families most in need, we will create better futures for all our young people and produce a more socially just society. More research undoubtedly needs to be done on creativity in early years, but we know that a good pre-school education can particularly benefit the most vulnerable children, who are more likely to lead chaotic home lives and have less creative input from their parents – and therefore less opportunity to develop – than their peers.

We cannot, however, achieve that greater creativity in the early years simply by legislating and regulating – any more than you would be able to guarantee great art by passing laws on the types of oil and canvas artists have to use. What we can do is create the conditions for success – partly by accepting that it is parents, ultimately, who know what is best for their children, and partly by accepting that early years professionals – rather than government officials – know best how to foster creative, high-quality support for families in local communities.

This is one of the major reasons why we announced a review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, led by Dame Clare Tickell, in the first few weeks of forming a government. The review will focus on young children's learning and development, and attempt to determine whether we have got the balance between them right, or whether there is more we can do to free up early years professionals – particularly in smaller providers – to spend more time with children, rather than box ticking.

The potential prize is greater social justice, and greater economic prosperity in the years ahead, along with the possibility of a more imaginative and creative education for our youngest children. The challenge will be to widen access to great services so that all children and communities have the opportunity to gain from them. For instance, we would like to see creative projects encouraged like the one at Lillian de Lissa Nursery School in Birmingham, where children have been shown how to use a potter's wheel, encouraged to mess around, to build, to paint, to knock down, to make sounds and to think independently.

Similarly, there is a great deal professionals around the country can learn from projects like the one at a reception class in Leicester, where young children who had difficulties in relating comfortably to classmates were invited to work with an artist, parent or class teacher over a series of sessions. Here the impact of a creative environment on young people has been profound, with normally shy, introverted children becoming calmer and more sociable when encouraged to paint, draw and express themselves artistically.

For its part, the coalition has signalled the huge moral importance it places on this kind of quality early years education by protecting Sure Start revenue spending this year, by announcing an increase in the number of health visitors attached to children's centres and by extending the offer of free childcare to 15 hours a week for all three- and four-year-olds. At a time of considerable economic uncertainty, that represents an unprecedented commitment to the youngest among us.

Given the current very tough financial situation, it remains more important than ever for government to continue to stress the moral and economic value of early childhood education, which the OECD has described as a 'public good' in the strictest sense of the term. We must deliver externalities beyond the benefit of immediate, personal interest and consumption, while contributing to what the OECD describes as: 'the general health of a nation's children, future educational achievement, labour market volume and flexibility, and social cohesion'.[1]

We are aware though that quality services for young children form only a part of the broader equation. As we all know, families and parents are the biggest influencers on children's lives, and it follows that the government's job should be to empower them to navigate their way through the stresses and strains of twenty-first century life.

The Childhood and Families Task Force, which is chaired by the prime minister and includes ministers from across government departments, is now playing a key role in achieving that ambition. It was set up to identify and prioritise a few specific policy proposals that have the potential to make the biggest difference to families, or, as the deputy prime minister described it on its launch, the 'hardcore of everyday bottlenecks that frustrate family life'.[2]

This will play a fundamental part in our ambition to raise levels of opportunity for all children, and to redress the balance between those from the poorest backgrounds and their peers. The success of that programme starts with creativity and trusting professionals to do their job, a principle that goes to the very heart of the coalition values of freedom, fairness and responsibility. In practice, that will mean three things:

- giving early years professionals, social workers, teachers and local authorities the chance to determine the look and feel of their local services and educational priorities, free from centrist intervention
- promoting opportunity for all children and young people regardless of their background or circumstances, which is why we are working to make special educational needs provision more transparent and accessible to parents, and why we have asked Professor Eileen Munro to review social care and investigate how we look after this country's most vulnerable children and young people
- empowering individuals and communities by giving them greater freedom and responsibility through the big society, which marks the final move away from the centrist idea that government can act as a grand old puppet master in an age where the flow of information ripples out from every section of society, not just from top to bottom.

There's an old quote, 'creative minds are rarely tidy'. We live in an incredibly exciting age, full of opportunity and creativity, but if we obsess too hard in manufacturing a neat and tidy centrist solution to all of the challenges and risks we face, we will simply build greater complexity and suck creativity out of the system as the pendulum swings from under regulation to over regulation.

The simple reality is that we cannot always wrap our children up in cotton wool: the rough and tumble of informal play will take place no matter how many regulations a government passes. Rather than obsess about a lack of control, we should recognise that it can be a terrifically fortifying experience, arming young children with the resilience, robustness and creativity they will need to deal with the challenges of the big wide world.

It is time to restore the balance by trusting professionals in local communities to promote that experience.

Tim Loughton MP is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families. Sarah Teather MP is the Minister of State for Children and Families.

Notes

1 OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care*, Paris: Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development, 2006, www.oecd.org/dataoecd/38/2/37417240.pdf (accessed 13 Oct 2010).

2 Quoted in P Wintour, 'Nick Clegg to unveil new taskforce on childhood and families', *Guardian*, 17 Jun 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/17/nick-clegg-family-task-force (accessed 11 Oct 2010).

4

New spaces for watchful creatures: family learning at the Whitworth Art Gallery

Esme Ward

A young boy, torch in hand, creeps into a darkened gallery space and peers into a case containing world textiles. Something catches his eye – two crows, made of grey and black cotton fabrics, patched, stitched and stuffed with hay, the feet of black painted wire. He looks around and then starts squawking, flapping his wings and encouraging other children and adults from his group to take a look and join in. The crows were made by Pakistani artist Ruby Chisti. In South Asia, the crow has mythical status. They are watchful creatures that herald the arrival of guests but their appearance is also regarded as an ill omen. The children start to imagine other creatures they might find in the gallery. One child asks if they can search for them, another wants to hunt them. The group heads off on their adventure, encountering unicorns and wolves among the artworks on the walls and imagined monsters under the floor.

The above group observation was part of a recent early years visit to the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. The early years practitioner firmly believed 'the gallery encouraged imagination, creativity and freedom of expression – after all, it is very important for toddlers to be allowed to be toddlers'. Over the last four years the Whitworth has developed a specialism in working with early years and family learning and a growing commitment to becoming a space where young children can, without hesitation or deviation, express and be themselves.

In partnership with early years children, practitioners, families and specialist networks, our work at the gallery and off site focuses on low numbers and high impact experiences alongside broader participatory programmes. The majority of our early years visitors are two- to five-year-olds and they come from early years settings within a five-mile radius of the gallery. Situated in Moss Side in Manchester, the local communities that make up our neighbours come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, many living in areas of extreme social and economic deprivation. This has directly informed our approach – one that is social, participatory and imaginative – to engaging young children and their adults.

As a result, the Whitworth aspires to be an exploratory and participatory space where young children take the lead, an imaginative space, which draws on visual culture and artists, their work and practice as well as children's own capacity for curiosity and imagination, and a social space which encourages cooperation, creativity and connectivity.

A participatory space

How can museums and galleries ensure they become a site for exploration and discovery that follows or responds to the child's interests, ideas, thoughts and feelings?

Over the last three years, alongside other museums and galleries in Manchester, we have worked closely with Sure Start to develop our awareness of how we engage and support young children's development.[1] After several years of uncoordinated and often short-term engagement with other early years providers, we took a more strategic approach to developing a long-term partnership with Sure Start. Senior Sure Start staff and practitioners now form part of the Manchester Museums Early Years Advisory Group and have contributed to a wide range of programmes and development across the city.

At the Whitworth, we focused on working with four local centres, all within pushing or toddling distance of the gallery. Training programmes were jointly developed for Sure Start practitioners, parents, and museum and gallery staff. Rusholme Children's Centre has been a key partner and members have visited the gallery little and often. This process has led to the development of a 'child-led approach' at the Whitworth – being guided by children's inquisitive nature is the basis of a participatory space. It contrasts considerably with a collections-led or practitioner-led approach to visits, where children are shuffled from artwork to artwork and visits are rigorously planned and timetabled with little room for manoeuvre. A wide range of rich, experiential and multisensory activities have emerged from the process, including singing and music making, walking activities, chocolate painting, role-play and dance sculptures.

The impact of this has been considerable. It shows that if we fail to respond to the child's motivations, the young boy described at the beginning of this piece has a very different and poorer experience:

A young boy creeps into a darkened gallery space and peers into a case containing world textiles. Something catches his eye – two crows, made of grey and black cotton fabrics, patched, stitched and stuffed with hay, the feet of black painted wire. Something else catches his eye. The adult, impatient to move on, directs him to an activity in the next gallery.

The moment and the opportunity is lost. As Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, observed, 'if we take away the child's ability, possibility and joy in projecting and exploring then the child dies'.[2]

In the past, 'engaging' and 'creative' experiences for children were developed and delivered predominantly to link with learning objectives and classroom or centre topics, often at the expense of child-initiated activity. In recent years, as the themes and principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage have become embedded, there is a growing acknowledgement that best practice in early years skilfully interweaves child-led play with playful adult-led activity in a stimulating environment.[3] Now, by promoting enquiry-based and child-led activity, by developing our role as facilitators rather than teachers or leaders, we are learning how to be more confident and comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity this approach necessarily entails.

To some, it looks chaotic and unplanned. One of the challenges for the adult world and museum staff is to hold back and resist the temptation to intervene and structure the child's encounter. If we are able to do this, children will have the freedom to express and communicate their feelings and thoughts, to discover, experiment and of course learn. We are learning to expect the unexpected and want the Whitworth to be a place where good, odd things happen.

Our approach to working with and engaging early years children is informed by young children's inquisitive nature and capacity to imagine on the one hand, and our collections, artists and their practice on the other.

An imaginative space

A longing to recapture the child's fresh perception of the world was shared by some of the most well-known artists of the avant-garde, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Jean Dubuffet:

> *The artist has to look at everything as though he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child and if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is, a personal way.*
>
> Henri Matisse[4]

Arguably, these modern artists recall an idealised and romantic notion of children's creativity that has little to do with the sometimes complex, emotional experience of young children's lives. However, what they did identify and what we witness every day in the gallery is young children's ability to move from the real to the imaginary, from the physical to the conceptual. The gallery is a space in which children have the freedom to imagine, dream and play and it is valued by practitioners and parents precisely because it is not the classroom and output or outcome oriented.

So we like to take inspiration from the collections and artists we exhibit, such as the video artwork *Apollo Pavilion, Peterlee* by Jane and Louise Wilson (2003). Apollo Pavilion was designed by the artist Victor Pasmore as a place for relaxation, thinking or just hanging out with friends. The video shows a neglected pavilion overrun with children. The straight lines and order of the concrete structure are disrupted by the playful misrule of the boys. This artwork became a catalyst for wide-ranging discussions with visitor services staff about the relationship between freedom, creativity and the capacity to play, especially in young children.[5] It led to a broader discussion about the value of creating spaces and opportunities for imaginative play for children, early years practitioners and parents, but also for adult visitors, artists and staff themselves.

Our engagement with art and artists reminds us to be playful and that divergence, experimentation and ambiguity surround. By holding on to what makes us distinctive – our collections, building and the people who make it work – we are able to introduce new ideas, objects, materials and experiences to our visitors. This is exemplified by a recent programme with Education Other than Schools (EOTAS) and families with under 5s.

Manchester has a large community of families that home educate their children. In partnership with EOTAS at Manchester City Council, we work with them to help combat the isolation these families can suffer and to explore more child-focused autonomous learning. In the gallery we actively involve early years children in planning and evaluating their learning. Alongside the weekly gallery-based sessions, a home schoolers' Ning – an online social and reflective space – has been created for participants to reflect on and share their experiences. We receive over 40 families (with children aged up to 5) each week.

The exhibition Outsider Art: The Musgrave Kinley Collection of Outsider Art has paintings, sculpture, drawings and textiles made by self-taught artists operating outside the mainstream art system. What emerged from the children was an often visceral response to the intuitive, playful and sometimes disturbing art they encountered, described by Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate, as art that 'tapped into the mains electricity of the imagination'. Some of the children expressed their feelings through dramatised responses to key works, creating stories and characters, masks and costumes that transformed the gallery into a performative space. For others, it was the life stories of particular outsider artists that caught their imagination. One outsider artist, Scottie Wilson, spent little or no time at school and was illiterate. He began his drawing career by listening to a piece of music and 'doodling on the surface of the table'. After two days of 'doodling' the surface of the table was covered in designs. He continued drawing in this manner throughout his life. This story fascinated the children and they explored their own 'doodling' while others played music so they might make marks in response. This exhibition clearly resonated with many of the home educators, themselves operating outside the mainstream education system. They are strongly committed to autonomous learning and the gallery has proved to be a significant learning-rich environment and meeting place for parents and children.[6]

A social space

The importance of social interaction in the early years is widely acknowledged by practitioners and currently underpins key policy frameworks. A significant number of the early learning goals set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework relate to this theme. These range across the learning and development requirements and include forming a good relationship with peers; interacting with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation; showing awareness of space, of themselves and of others; and working as part of a group or class, taking turns and sharing fairly, understanding that there need to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people, including adults and children, to work together harmoniously.

Our work with early years children and their adults foregrounds social learning. Recently commended by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education as an example of best practice in whole family learning and creating a 'social space' that inspires learning among all participants, the

Whitworth's programme Arty Picnics is a monthly drop-in session aimed at families, child-minders and local early years settings.[7] Owing to Manchester's famously inclement weather, the picnics are more likely to take place in our large, airy, park-facing gallery space than in the gallery grounds. Picnic rugs are strewn on the floor and artists and gallery staff facilitate a range of activities. Group activities and games, including den building, music making, collaborative drawing and printing, develop cooperative skills between young children, their peers and adults. Arty Picnics participants, artists and gallery staff sit, chat, eat, play, look, make friends, discover and create.

The role of the gallery as a space that supports the development of social skills underpins tailored training programmes for childminders and parents, developed in conjunction with Sure Start and SWIIS Foster Care, exploring creative ways to support some of the key early learning goals for personal, social and emotional development. The significance of the gallery as a social space is most apparent in our work with international new arrivals – families with under 5s who have been in the UK less than a year, many less than three months, some a matter of days. The gallery is one of the first public spaces they visit. In partnership with Manchester Adult Education Service and International New Arrivals Team, we aim to combat isolation, encourage connections with other children and families, and develop awareness of how the gallery and other cultural settings can provide a supportive social context for learning. As a predominantly visual space, it is particularly suited to engaging those with limited or no English and we place a strong focus on non-verbal communication and expression. We take a multi-sensory approach, using handling collections with textiles from around the world (including from countries of origin) as a catalyst for drawing, drama activities and song.

Whenever there is a point of contact between us and partner communities or organisations, we look for what we can learn about ourselves. Early years practitioners from local children's centres work with a range of gallery staff to develop our awareness of how to communicate with young children, and encourage them to play, join in, socialise and learn.

Our early years work has rightly changed how we welcome, approach and engage very young children and their families. It has also been at the forefront of significant organisational change, which aspires to locate audiences at the centre of all our work. As a result, we have become increasingly aware of the limitations of our infrastructure to fully support the quality early years engagement to which we aspire. Commitment to young children and their adults is firmly embedded in future plans. As part of a capital development programme, we will improve our infrastructure (toilet facilities, buggy parking and access). In addition, we aim to build on the social, exploratory and imaginative approach outlined – developing an atelier or learning studio (inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to learning and creative spaces) with natural light, wall-sized windows, opening out into an art garden and park, communal tables and seating. This will be an exciting new resource and additional space for our work with early years, enabling us to get wet and messy and explore more fully the relationship between inside and outside, creativity and play. However, it will be predominantly in the public gallery spaces, surrounded by collections and objects that are unfamiliar and unknown to them, that young children will, if we let them, start to make meaning of the world around them and each other.

Esme Ward is Head of Learning and Engagement at the Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester Museum.

Notes

1 Renaissance North West funds early years partnership programmes in museums and galleries across Manchester and the north west region. Renaissance is the MLA's programme to transform England's regional museums.

2 Quoted in C Rinaldi, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning*, London: Routledge, 2006.

3 DCSF and QCA, *Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage: The national strategies for early years*, London: Dept for Children, Schools and Families and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority Learning, 2009.

4 J Flam (ed), *Matisse on Art: Documents of twentieth-century art*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995. For further discussions about the relationship between childhood and modernism see J Fineberg (ed), *Discovering Child Art: Essays on childhood, primitivism and modernism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

5 For more on play, creativity and its relationship to child development see L Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978; JW Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; and M Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*, New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

6 See J Holt, *How Children Fail*, London: Pitman, 1964, and I Illich, *Deschooling Society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, for more on autonomous learning.

7 NIACE, *Families, Learning and Culture: Inspiring families through museums, libraries and archives*, Leicester, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2009, www.niace.org.uk/current-work/museums-libraries-and-archives (accessed 10 Sep 2010).

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5 Keeping it real: why and how educators should be expanding children’s horizons

Tim Gill

It is a commonplace that children in the UK today are growing up with more limited horizons than in previous generations. For a whole host of reasons (discussed in my book *No Fear*[1]), time and space for children to play freely, travel around independently, and in general get to grips with the people and places around them has been declining over the last 20 or 30 years.

This decline in everyday freedom is part of a wider pattern of the ghettoisation of children from the wider world. The expansion of group childcare, the explosion in indoor, screen-based activities, the growth of risk aversion across society, and an increasingly atomised, consumer-oriented, car-based lifestyle for families are all leading children to spend more and more of their time in what the German sociologist Helga Zeiher has called ‘islands of space and time’[2] – home, nursery or school, after-school activity, shopping centre, car.

In a globalised, urbanised world, it is hard to imagine a task more worthy of the attention of early educators than supporting children’s growing sense of themselves as engaged, competent, curious human beings who have a meaningful interest in, and concern for, the people and places around them. But what is needed is not pre-school citizenship classes, kindergarten life coaching sessions or a nursery environmental studies curriculum. Rather, we need to break down the barriers that have grown up between educational settings and the social, environmental and cultural experiences and offers that are unfolding around them. As Richard Louv says in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods* (quoting fellow American environmentalist Deborah Churchman): 'your job isn't to hit them with another Fine Educational Opportunity, but to turn them on to what a neat world we live in'.[3]

So my plea to those who wish to create engaging, relevant, powerful learning offers for children is to ask some basic questions about what they can do to expand the horizons of childhood: to give children not more ghettos, but instead maps and signposts (real or metaphorical) that invite them to explore places and landscapes and make their own voyages of discovery. For any museum, gallery, visitor attraction or public space, this means making playful offers a central theme. But what does 'playful' mean?

The key quality of playfulness I want to emphasise – inspired by ideas from playwork, and applied in projects I have carried out in the last few years with the Forestry Commission and National Trust – is the insight that active play in real-world spaces remains a potent vehicle for engaging children's attention and learning. This in turn highlights the value of exploration, discovery and creative use of loose materials (in other words, stuff that children can make and do stuff with).

Recent work by the Forestry Commission at Westonbirt Arboretum provides a valuable case study. Westonbirt is the home of one of the country's most important collections of trees. It is a Grade 1 listed landscape, visited by many thousands each year. When Learning and Interpretation Manager Ben Oliver first arrived a few years ago, children and families were notable by their absence. As Ben put it, 'we didn't really want children'. Their presence was seen as a source of worry and anxiety, especially about safety and the reactions of other visitors.

Growing Adventure, a change programme across the Forestry Commission that I facilitated, sowed the seeds for a fresh approach. This led the Commission to focus more on reconnecting children and young people with outdoor and woodland settings, and it made free play, rather than structured offers and activities, central to achieving this. This meant looking beyond fun days and fixed equipment play areas (though these still have their place). Rather, the goal was to create springboards or ‘ladders of engagement’ that allow children and families to explore and discover woodland settings at their own pace and in ways that they feel comfortable with.

At Westonbirt Ben Oliver applied this idea of ‘ladders of engagement’ by building a trail of playful interventions around the site. The structures are simple, bespoke, extremely low-cost yet highly creative: they include a meandering network of raised pathways through the woods built out of tree stumps, a clearing containing unfinished shelters and hut frameworks with a generous stock of timber and natural loose materials, an area of ‘play forts’ and a simple timber bridge over a stream (incorporating a playful reference to the Three Billy Goats Gruff).

The whole programme at Westonbirt was based on an explicit ‘play philosophy’. The guiding principles of this philosophy – reproduced below – would, with only minor adaptations, make an articulate and intelligent manifesto for play in almost any public institution or space:

- *positive natural connections* – to foster positive interactions with the arboretum that allows children to construct meaning from their experiences so that they can gain deeper understanding about trees
- *creative, active, imaginative* – to encourage interaction through a variety of different kinds of play activity
- *supporting spontaneity for self-discovery and exploration* – to support unplanned, unstructured self-directed spontaneous play
- *balanced sympathetic delivery* – to use the arboretum’s natural features and landscaping to enable play to take place without damage to the environment or impact on other visitors
- *opportunities for all* – to support children of all ages and those accompanying them
- *provide challenge* – where possible to provide play opportunities that provide challenge and risk
- *beyond our boundaries* – to support transferable play ideas that enable participants to continue play outside the arboretum in their own homes and local environments

Visitor surveys showed that creating the right ambience was vital: children and families were very sensitive about what might or might not be allowed. Overcoming this meant encouraging a culture of permission. Signage, staff interactions and leaflets all give clear, reasonable, positive messages about such activities as using natural materials and climbing trees.

The changes have been very popular with visiting children and families, without compromising the experience of other visitor groups. The initiative has also brought Westonbirt to the attention of a host of other agencies. One of these is National Trust, which I have been working with since the summer of 2009.

National Trust has begun to realise that playful offers are central to their goal of helping visitors to truly get under the skin of its portfolio of properties, coastline and countryside. Families are currently under-represented, and hence are a key focus. This is not just for marketing reasons, but also in order to safeguard the long-term future of the Trust as a broad-based membership organisation with widespread public support for its work. The agency is working to shed its stuffy image, and is thinking seriously about how playful offers can help it to encourage children and families to discover its special places. The work is in its early stages, but one indication of the direction of travel was the publication of an internal document, aimed at property managers, entitled *If a Play Area is the Answer, What is the Question*? This document (which I wrote) encourages managers and staff to 're-imagine their properties: to see them through the eyes of children' and hence to generate fresh thinking about play, learning and engagement that moves well beyond the 'play ghetto' model. Initial feedback has been very positive: in one property, staff are planning to create playful cues throughout the grounds that invite children and families to climb trees, play pooh-sticks and build dens. Other properties are looking at play trails and unconventional play structures such as tree-houses and rope swings, while regional and central support staff are devoting growing amounts of time and effort to promoting playful initiatives across the Trust's portfolio.

As Westonbirt found through its visitor surveys, offering loose materials is the 'magic ingredient' of any rich play offer.

This should be obvious to anyone who has watched children of any age immersed in their chosen construction project, be it at an adventure playground, a beach or a building site. (Anyone who is unconvinced on this point should watch the YouTube video of Bristol Scrapstore's remarkable 'playpods' initiative.[4] This has persuaded dozens of head teachers in the south west to bring shipping containers filled with recycled and reclaimed materials into their playgrounds, which are instantly transformed into junk-filled laboratories crackling with creativity, energy and imagination.)

There is more to loose materials than simply filling a space with the contents of a scrap project. Different materials will make sense in different contexts, and they need to be chosen with care. Dressing-up clothes and household objects may work well in a heritage setting, for instance, while recycled electrical items – telephones, calculators and keyboards – may be more relevant where communication or science is the focus. As well as having the materials, of course, supervisory staff need to be able to support children's explorations and imaginative journeys without taking too much of a lead; this is a tricky but unavoidable balancing act, and a topic on which good play workers have much to share with other professionals.

For children, all play involves grappling with uncertainty and pushing at the limits of the familiar. In the past, there has been enormous confusion about risk in childhood, and one of my main aims in writing *No Fear* was to help people to find a way through the muddle. Thankfully (in part, I believe, because of the influence of *No Fear*) the climate around risk in childhood is improving.

Practices that even five years ago might have been deemed a step too far – using fire in forest school sessions, or allowing superhero play in nurseries – are now becoming much more common, and their rationale better understood. (But do not be misled by some recent discussions among early years educators that implies children need something called 'risky play' – see for instance Helen Tovey in her otherwise excellent book *Playing Outdoors*.[5] Risk runs through children's play like blood though their veins, and giving them more freedom and choice inevitably means allowing them to take more responsibility, whenever, however and wherever they play.)

Of course, children sometimes make mistakes; indeed errors and misjudgements are among their most powerful learning experiences. So a thoughtful, balanced approach to risk is essential: one that recognises that even young children need to be given the chance to deal with situations in which risk cannot and should not be eliminated, and the outcomes cannot be completely controlled.

The key to taking a thoughtful approach to risk – one that avoids the pitfalls of risk elimination, while still giving an effective focus on reducing the likelihood of the most severe adverse outcomes – is to bring benefits into the picture. This move – sometimes characterised as a shift from risk assessment to risk-benefit assessment – was originally developed for use in municipal play settings, as set out in the government-funded publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision*.[6] The approach is now gaining support from others, including those working in the early years and learning outside the classroom and outdoor activities.[7]

Significantly, governments and regulatory bodies are becoming more proactive in tackling the problem of excessive risk aversion, and in England at least, this process looks set to accelerate as a result of the new government. It is conducting a broad-based policy review on health and safety, and revisiting the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006. (This legislation was set to increase dramatically the bureaucratic barriers facing those who wanted to work or volunteer with or alongside children, but implementation has thankfully been put on hold after an outcry from children's authors Philip Pullman and Michael Morpurgo, among others.)

Educational debates have for centuries swung between the poles of, on the one hand, top-down, didactic teaching and, on the other, child-initiated, self-directed learning. Clearly this paper plants its flag firmly in the latter territory. If we want children to understand and care about the world in which they live, we must feed their undeniable appetite for experience and engagement with the real places, people and objects – everyday and extraordinary – that surround them. Their future, and perhaps even our future as a species, may yet hinge on us getting that right.

Tim Gill is a leading thinker on childhood. His book No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society *was published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 2007.*

Notes

1 T Gill, *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*, London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007.

2 H Zeiher, 'Children's Islands in space and time: the impact of spatial differentiation on children's ways of shaping social life' in MS du Bois-Reymond et al (eds), *Childhood in Europe: Approaches – trends – findings*, New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

3 D Churchman, 'How to turn kids green: reinstilling the love for nature amongst children', *American Forests* 98, quoted in R Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005.

4 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqi1KyJJeKg (accessed 18 August 2010).

5 H Tovey, *Playing Outdoors: Spaces and places, risk and challenge*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007.

6 D Ball, T Gill and B Spiegal, *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide*, London: Dept for Culture, Media and Sport, Play England and Big Lottery Fund, 2008.

7 T Gill, *Nothing Ventured: Balancing risks and benefits in the outdoors*, Lifton: English Outdoor Council, 2010, www.englishoutdoorcouncil.org/publications (accessed 18 August 2010).

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Creative futures: a ‘new deal’ for the early years sector

Geethika Jayatilaka

Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) is a national independent arts education charity established to support children and young people’s access to the arts and culture. We achieve this by designing and delivering high quality arts and cultural programmes, building a strong independent evidence base and supporting debate among policy makers.

CCE manages Creative Partnerships, the leading creative learning programme designed to develop the skills of children and young people. It matches schools, teachers and students with creative professionals such as artists, architects, multimedia developers and scientists. Together they consider the challenges the school faces – which could be, for example, low results, lack of parental engagement or pupil motivation – and use creative thinking to design programmes that tackle them. Projects are linked to the school’s improvement plan to ensure sustainability of the practice, and independent research shows Creative Partnerships can have a significant impact on reducing truancy and improving motivation and attainment. It has worked with over 1 million children and over 90,000 teachers on more than 8,000 projects since 2002.

CCE also managed the Find Your Talent pilots, which ran in ten areas across England looking at how to provide high-quality cultural experience for all children and young people 0–19, helping hundreds of thousands of children and young people to access cultural experiences and working with thousands of schools, early years and youth settings, cultural organisations, teachers and artists.

Creativity and arts in the early years: not just child's play

Children who have been exposed to the arts are far more likely to access opportunities in the arts in adult life, enriching the quality of their lives and also helping them develop their creative abilities including critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills. This helps improve their life chances by developing the skills they need to perform well, not only in exams and extracurricular activities, but also to succeed in the workplace and wider society. The recent Dept for Culture, Media and Sport review of learning outcomes for young people participating in the arts also highlighted the impact of arts participation on improving early literacy in preschool and primary school-aged children.[1]

The importance of creativity has largely been recognised within the mainstream of early years thinking through the Early Years Foundation Stage; however, CCE's work through the Creative Partnerships Programme and Find Your Talent suggests a number of areas where a greater emphasis on creativity, arts and culture could build on the investment and commitment already within the sector.

This includes using creative approaches to build greater self-reflection, and stronger partnerships within the early years sector, building relationships between learning in the setting and learning at home and using access to arts and culture as an opportunity to progress a child's social, emotional and intellectual development and build social and cultural capital.

This will not be an easy ask or a quick fix – CCE has learnt from nearly a decade of bringing creativity and the arts into the educational environment that success depends on meeting the particular needs and demands of the setting rather than taking a one size fits all approach, that successful creative approaches need to have the buy in of leaders and staff and time for planning and reflection, and that creativity and the arts need to be seen as part of the fabric of the setting rather than just an optional extra to be brought in ad hoc.

In this chapter we will explore some of these issues further, looking at areas where an increased focus on creativity, arts and culture within the early years sector offer real possibilities for progress.

A new direction for the early years workforce?

Over the last decade the importance of encouraging and developing the early years workforce has been recognised with longitudinal research from the OECD and others showing the presence of highly skilled staff to make a 'decisive impact' in securing positive outcomes for children,[2] while a key objective of the last government's strategy was for high-quality (childcare) provision delivered by a skilled early years and childcare workforce, with full day-care settings professionally led and with a strengthened qualification and career structure.[3]

Within this debate (and others about the children's workforce more broadly) the European and Scandinavian model of social pedagogy has repeatedly surfaced as a way of working with children in a more holistic way but without successfully becoming mainstream policy in the UK.

Social pedagogues in Europe and Scandinavia exist at the 'crossroads between education and care' and represent education in its broadest sense. They look at the way children 'think, feel, have a physical and spiritual existence and are creative'.[4] The model focuses on creative practice and the skills to help relate to the 'whole child' across these domains. By contrast, the debate in the UK has tended to focus more on 'upskilling' the workforce in more basic qualification terms with some criticism that development and training has concentrated on moving good practitioners into management rather than making them more skilled or expert practitioners.[5]

Rather than reopen previous debates about which professional model to choose, it may prove more productive to explore how to secure a more social pedagogic approach (including the emphasis on relationships with children, self reflection and partnership) within the current workforce model, and a greater focus on arts and creativity in training and practice could be seen as a way of moving towards this.

A study of pedagogues in Denmark[6] highlighted that participating in the arts opens the eyes of student pedagogues to the particular values of discovery and creativity, while other students were sent on a 'study visit to their own city' to gain an understanding of the cultural resources available.

Many of the principles of the social pedagogic approach are echoed in the way in which Creative Partnerships works within schools; using partnerships with creative professionals to support change, encouraging staff to become increasingly self-reflective, and working with students to co-construct their learning are all features of the Creative Partnerships model.

Those in early years settings which have embraced arts and creativity in different ways have also cited the benefits of more reflective thinking across the workforce. For example, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) supported the research project '5x5x5', which links artist, early years setting and cultural centre to establish strong reflective partnerships; it talks about a 'startling and bold alternative to the culture of obedience and compliance, the most unwelcome, and unintended, outcome of the last decade of top-down initiatives' as a feature of its work.[7]

Similarly, a report on the Creativity Matters programme working with early years settings in Enfield highlighted the increased enthusiasm from staff to initiate, offer and implement creative ideas, and to collaborate with each other and on the way they saw and related to the children.[8]

Bridging the 'home–school' divide

Despite the recognition of the fundamental importance of parents as the 'first educators' of their children and the positive impact which their involvement can have on children's outcomes and achievements in the longer term, educational settings from early years through to secondary school frequently struggle to find ways of successfully engaging parents in school life.

Early findings from the Parents as Partners project[9] highlighted a number of barriers to engaging parents in their children's education including:

- the poor experiences of parents in their own educational history and a mistrust of education
- little knowledge of the importance of games, rhymes and stories in developing children's learning
- lack of knowledge of the local educational opportunities available for them and their children
- the over-use of jargon or unfamiliar concepts

CCE's experience of working with parents shows us that arts and creative work even within the formal school setting can have real impact on breaking down home–school barriers. Researchers for *Their Learning Becomes Your Journey* found that the enjoyment and enthusiasm which children had for their activities meant they talked and described them extensively at home, helping to bridge the traditional home–school divide.[10] One parent describing it thus: 'Usually you ask them and they're doing "nothing!" at school. They actually come home and tell you – and they can't wait to tell you, rather than you having to ask them.'

The report shows that when creative projects in school are longer term, these home discussions appear to influence parents with some parents feeling more able to be involved in school as they understand more about what their children are doing.

Arts and creative projects which look to engage parents into school offer 'low-risk invitations', which encourage some parents to engage with teachers and the whole school, in a way in which projects looking at more traditional areas or the more formal parent–teacher events may still discourage. One teacher said, 'We have more parent helpers in school as a result of them coming in during creative weeks and asking about helping on a more full-time basis.' In some cases the researchers noted that these opportunities have led to parents taking on employment at the school as a result of initial involvement in creative projects and to take up cultural and other learning opportunities for themselves as well as for their children.

A greater use of arts and creative activities within the learning environment linked to information and suggestions for activities at home and in local community settings could help take this further, bridging the home–school divide and encouraging children and parents to support learning within the home environments.

Maximising the early years as a gateway to building stronger local communities

Britain has a rich and varied landscape of arts and cultural activity, from major national and international tourist attractions and museums to smaller arts or performance groups which form the backbone of local communities coming together – or the big society in action.

Increasingly, access to creative and cultural activities are seen as a vital part of what it means to prepare young people for a future in the twenty-first century for a number of reasons. At a very functional level, the creative and cultural sector is helping to power the UK economy; it is one of the fastest growing sectors over the last decade and fundamental to the economic recovery.

In addition, limited access to creative and cultural activities remains a proxy for more deep rooted problems as identified by the Fair Access to the Professions Panel. Its report highlighted the creative and cultural industries:

> *The arts and cultural industries are a case in point. They will be one of our country's major professions in future. There is strong evidence that children who are exposed to the arts early in life more actively engage with them when they become adults but it is clear that middle- and low-income parents wishing their children to participate in a range of cultural activities often find there is no structure to support them in doing so.*[11]

But there is still very unequal access to arts and culture. An Ipsos MORI study in 2009 showed that one in five children had not taken part in any cultural activities in the past year with their family.[12] It also revealed links between a child's engagement in arts and culture and the educational levels of their parents. It showed that 60 per cent of children of parents with no educational qualifications spend less than three hours per week on cultural activities and worryingly 20 per cent spend none at all – including reading a book or doing creative things on a computer.

CCE researchers looking at this issue in more depth highlighted a number of barriers to accessing cultural activities – some of which are practical and linked to family finances, but interestingly much of the testimony revealed more emotional reasons for not taking part in cultural activities.[13] Most participants displayed a lack of knowledge of their area and many were unsure of what to expect of new experiences and what might be expected of them in new situations. One mother told us, 'I'm not very good at going anywhere on my own; I get quite nervous' and another said, 'I'd be scared to go – my mum could take him, though.' Work to reduce these barriers through group experiences or taster sessions in familiar settings can all help to make the arts and cultural activities more inclusive, especially of those parents who may have little similar experience themselves, and may be fearful of the unknown.

Better links between the local arts and cultural community and early years settings could support families to access by acting as a hub for information for parents about what's on offer in their local areas and extending the concept of school trips – which have always formed an integral part of early experiences of culture – to include 'parent and child trips' as an opportunity to try out different activities in a communal and safe way.

Building up the knowledge of the early years workforce about arts and culture within their local community will also be vital in order to achieve this. One way of helping to build capacity within settings is to offer and promote the current Artsmark[14] as the process of applying for and gaining an Artsmark provides a useful audit tool, to understand current provision, and the process itself can act as a driver for improvement through heightened awareness and understanding. For younger members of the workforce the Arts Awards could be promoted as a way of strengthening qualification and leadership.

Reviewing the Early Years Foundation Stage: arts and creativity – a 'new deal' for the early years sector

The launch of the review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) acknowledged the concern of ministers that the EYFS framework is currently too rigid and puts too many burdens on the early years workforce.

However, a recent report from the Department for Education surveying practitioners noted that most expressed 'overwhelming satisfaction with the current requirements', which were 'widely viewed as embodying the beliefs, principles and practices to which most practitioners adhere', with criticisms tending to be of the framework's implementation rather than the principles.[15]

For any review, therefore, the question will be how to deliver a change in implementation without losing the positives of the current regime. A renewed emphasis on arts and creativity as a way of delivering learning across the entire curriculum could be seen as a way of signifying a 'new deal' for the early years sector.

This move would encourage those in the early years workforce to be more creative in how they deliver the curriculum – trusting in the professionals who work with children by supporting a culture of innovation and imagination in making learning as much fun and exciting as possible for the children they work with but also requiring a greater emphasis on self-reflection and learning within the workforce. This approach can also deliver better partnerships between children and workforce who work together on their learning and with parents by bridging the gap between the home and school. A greater openness to partnerships into the community also offers opportunities to play a role in making the big society a reality and helping to build cultural capital for all families rather than just those with the confidence or means to access the wider social and cultural offer.

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Notes

1 C Bunting, 'The impacts of engagement: a systematic review of the research on learning outcomes for young people participating in the arts', commissioned by the Culture and Sport Evidence (CASE) programme, a research partnership between the Dept for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, English Heritage, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and Sport England, 2010.

2 G Cooke and K Lawton, *For Love or Money: Pay, progression and professionalisation in the 'early years' workforce*, London, IPPR, 2008.

3 HM Treasury, *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: A ten year strategy for childcare*, HM Treasury, Dept for Education and Skills, Dept for Work and Pensions and Dept of Trade and Industry, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/02_12_04_%20pbr04childcare_480.pdf (accessed 8 Oct 2010).

4 P Petrie and H Chambers, *Richer Lives: Creative activities in the education and practice of Danish pedagogues*, London, University of London/Institute of Education, 2009.

5 Cooke and Lawton, *For Love or Money*.

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7 MJ Drummond, *The Report 5x5x5: Challenges and changes*, London: National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, 2010.

8 A Bamford and D Sally, *Creativity Matters: When is yesterday coming again?*, London: The Engine Room, Chelsea College of Art and Design, 2007.

9 Dept for Education, *Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) Project: Parental involvement – a snapshot of policy and practice PPEL Project Phase 1 Report*, London: Dept for Education, 2010.

10 K Safford and O O'Sullivan, *Their Learning Becomes Your Journey: Parents respond to children's work in Creative Partnerships*, London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2007.

11 Cabinet Office, *Unleashing Aspiration: The final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions*, London: Cabinet Office, 2009.

12 Ipsos MORI, *Parents, Views on Creative and Cultural Education*, London: Ipsos MORI, 2009.

13 Creativity, Culture and Education family focus group research, 2009.

14 Artsmark provides a benchmark for arts provision that encourages schools to consider the opportunities they offer in art, dance, drama and music. Applying for Artsmark is said to have a beneficial impact on the range of curriculum activities and experiences available for pupils, but early years settings are not eligible to apply unless they are linked to a school with key stage 1 pupils. See www.artscouncil.org.uk/ artsmark/?location_id=185 (accessed 20 Sep 2010).

15 Quoted in C Gaunt, 'Practitioners want EYFS left as it is', *Nursery World* (Sept 2010), www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/bulletin/NurseryWorldUpdate/article/1026796/?DCMP=EMC-CONNurseryWorldUpdate (accessed 20 Sep 2010).

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7 Permission to play: how museums can leave room for creative learning in the early years

Dea Birkett

On 11 March 2003 I was visiting the Aztec exhibition at the Royal Academy in London with my three children. The youngest, then almost 3, was strapped in his buggy when he spotted *Eagle Man*. He pointed excitedly at the statue and shouted, 'Monster! Monster!' at something that looked rather like, well, a monster. As I bent down to congratulate him on such a lively response to pre-Hispanic art, a room warden walked up to us. She told us we were being far too noisy, and threw us out.

My story proved to be only one among many. I wrote about this incident in a national newspaper and, in unexpected response, received hundreds of messages from other families who'd had similar experiences with children in Britain's museums. They wanted change. Visitors with very young children were particularly angry. I was angry, too. A museum should have welcomed my son's cry. Isn't that what should be encouraged – an enthusiastic, direct response to an object before him? What did they expect him to do? Write an essay about it? So Kids in Museums was born – an independent, visitor-led charity working with museums to make them more family friendly, in particular those families who have never visited before.

What counts as appropriate behaviour is often at the heart of how a museum includes young children. Jo Graham, an expert in early years learning in museums and author of the report *Which Way Shall We Go?*, which is about providing resources that help parents and carers support pre-school children to engage with museum collections and buildings, says museums have to give families and young children 'permission to play'. This many include behaviours they have traditionally wagged a finger at, such as shouting and touching. It may also include using the gallery floor in ways the designers didn't originally have in mind: 'Families with babies need safe, engaging sensory resources and a baby friendly space where they can sit, lay or crawl independently, even if this is just a rug or set of cushions,' says Graham.[1]

Many museums are now embracing new ways for children to act when they interact with their collection. When I visited Falmouth Art Gallery in Cornwall, winner of the Guardian Family Friendly Museum Award, a sign was pinned up at the entrance: 'Welcome. Noisy Workshop in Progress. Please Come in.'

Falmouth is recognised nationally as pioneering work with the very young, believing high art and small children are natural partners. Mess and noise is welcomed as evidence that creativity and learning is under way. 'Baby painting' sessions are held not in a separate learning space, but right in the centre of the gallery, where children of just a few months crawl about in paint, smothering their hands and feet. The work of these mini-artists is hung with the same respect as the masters they were inspired by, giving the message that their responses count: 'Museums aren't schools. They're not appropriate for teaching but they're brilliant places for learning. This approach underpins our philosophy,' says Natalie Rigby of Falmouth Art Gallery.

At Oxford University Museum of Natural History, also a past winner of the Guardian Family Friendly Museum Award, the emphasis is again on informal rather than formal, structured learning. Janet Stott, Oxford's Head of Learning, says:

> *The wonderful thing about learning from real objects is that it's the child who poses the questions about what interests them about the object they have just picked up. It's the child who builds on that answer and then follows it up with other questions to build upon that knowledge. As a museum educator my role is to facilitate these lines of investigation, occasionally helping them to rethink or twist their questions slightly to get to the answer they are looking for.*

Often supporting young children's learning is about having not adequate resources but the right attitude. Oxford University Museum of Natural History's neighbour and joint winner of the Award, the Pitt Rivers Museum, hands out cheap torches to small children, enabling them to peer into the back of the darkened cabinets and make discoveries for themselves. Graham's report also spotlights torches as excellent, simple, family learning tools, making even very young children feel like explorers.

There are museums that have developed major projects for young audiences. Big Art for Little Artists at Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery was the first dedicated children's fine and decorative art gallery in a national institution. At first glance, Big Art looks rather like a well-equipped nursery, with boxes of thick wooden pencils and cupboards stuffed with bejewelled dressing-up clothes. But this is play with a fine art purpose. On the circular drawing table are three lions from the sculpture collection for the children to copy. And the dressing-up garments are all copied from the costumes of the characters in the painting collection, from the Admiral in Maclise's *The Death of Nelson* to the dragon in Leighton's *Perseus and Andromeda*.

Big Art is conceived not as a segregated space for pre-school children, but as a launch pad for discovering the rest of the world-renowned collection at the Walker Art Gallery. A child can dress up as Henry VIII and follow a footprint trail to the North European Art Renaissance and Reformation 1350–1600 Gallery, where they'll find the king's portrait. Or they can put on a hand puppet of the boy in Yeame's famous *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* and search for the character in the nineteenth-century collection.

Big Art is for everybody. But many museums welcome children as long as they're in school uniform or with a recognised group. What they fail to embrace is the uninvited family. Ironically, some of these families visit because they've had a good previous experience on a prearranged visit, enabling them to feel confident enough to come on their own later. But many then find their second visit isn't nearly as easy or welcome. Without being handed out their pencil and paper by a learning assistant, they may struggle to find what resources are available to them. They may then struggle to use them. I remember visiting Tate Modern with my young children on an unaccompanied visit and being given the family trail. One of the first questions was to find a painting with 'architectural sense'. I had no idea what I was supposed to be looking for. I felt a fool. Worst of all, I was made a fool in front of my own children. Many resources for young children in museums still rely on a member of staff to interpret them. Resources are also sometimes reserved for organised visits. For example, at the recently reopened Florence Nightingale Museum, the dressing-up box – full of wonderful bandages to mimic injuries in the Crimean War – was locked up, only brought out for groups. When we visited as a family we had to make a special request to have them taken out of the cupboard.

It is also important to emphasise how central practical arrangements are in making a museum a good learning environment. It is no good having all the toddler-friendly educational resources in the world if you don't have toddler-friendly toilets. And if your cafe doesn't cater for kids, families with kids won't come back. Over half of the points on the Kids in Museums Manifesto – 20 ways to make a museum family friendly – have nothing to do with the displays or the collection. They're about the practical arrangements that will make a visit comfortable for a family, from having somewhere to store a pushchair to unlimited tap water. You can't learn and have fun if you're not comfy.

Museums are changing. Fairly recently, I went with my same noisy son to the Victoria and Albert Museum. I held up my hand to the foot of the fake statue of Michelangelo's David and said to him, 'Look! Toes as big as my hand!' 'Not big toes,' he said, pointing even higher up: 'Big willie!' He then began to design his own trail around the museum, spotting big willies as we went along and cheering each one. I was very worried. If we were thrown out of one museum for shouting 'Monster!' what would happen to us for crying 'Big willie!' Then a gallery assistant approached us, and I prepared for the worst. The assistant bent down to speak to my son. 'You seem to be enjoying yourself,' he said, then left us to continue on our trail.

Now that's putting creative learning in the early years at the heart of a museum.

Dea Birkett is the Director of Kids in Museums.

Notes

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8 A science of learning: new approaches to thinking about creativity in the early years

Wendy Ellyatt

Someone asked me recently when I was at my happiest and I replied that it was when I knew that I was in creative flow, no matter what the project. The flow that I was talking about is intimately connected to dynamic processes rather than any end result and has a thrill that stems from the unknown and the unpredictable. It has an energetic ‘quality’ to it, which invites intense focus and concentration that seems to go beyond the simple accumulation of information. When I am in flow I lose track of time and can achieve crazy amounts of work with what feels like the minimum effort. It is a state that is common in musicians and artists. Creativity is not only about being good at the expressive arts, though – it is about tapping into who we really are and how we express it.

The traditional approach to learning has relied on the transmission, accumulation and reproduction of information on the assumption that we need constantly to build on what has been acquired before. It is like a long linear staircase that we must climb, building a wall as we go, fearful of any cracks or holes in the structure that might weaken the edifice. The ultimate aim is to achieve externally imposed end results that then reflect our value to the system as a whole. In his recent TED Talk Charles Leadbeater called it a ‘Bismarkian nineteenth-century model that no longer serves the dynamic needs of the information age’.[1] Many voices are now coming together in the call for a new approach, however, and this is one that relies more on the essential nature of personal ‘meaning making’ – learning focused on the excitement and discovery of something new rather than simply a function of memory.

Creativity in natural systems

Learning is a journey of personal, meaningful discovery and development rather than the ingestion of a programme of externally prescribed knowledge. It echoes the dynamic efficiency of other autocatalytic systems and ecologies. In the words of Fritjof Capra, the theoretical physicist, ‘A living organism is a self-organising system, which means that its order in structure and function is not imposed by the environment, but is established by the system itself.’[2]

Chaos and unpredictability are fundamental qualities of self-organising natural systems and they thrive on the creative edge, with just enough order to give them patterning, but not enough to slow their adaptation and learning. It is this ‘chaordic’ space between chaos and order that is the essential source of creativity. It is a place of ‘deep learning’ through which competencies and dispositions can be explored and brought to a place of balance. It is also the kind of free-floating mental space that births new thinking and inspiration.[3]

Natural learners

We know that children have an innate motivation – a ‘natural attraction’ – to explore those aspects of the environment that best serve them at any moment of time. When a child carries out an activity purely for the fulfillment that he experiences in the learning process itself he increases his contentment, self-confidence and general sense of being in harmony with the world. Children seek out meaningful work, demand responsibility and are capable of extraordinary creativity if left to their own devices in a supportive environment. What matters is not so much what they are doing, but how they perceive and interpret the activity.

Researchers into creativity and intrinsic motivation have discovered an underlying similarity that is common to all intrinsically rewarding activities: they all give the participants a sense of discovery, exploration and problem solution. They also appear to need no goals or rewards external to the activity itself. In Chicago Professor Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi spent many years studying states of optimal experience in adults – those times when they report feelings of intense concentration and deep enjoyment – and has showed that what makes experience genuinely satisfying is the state of highly creative consciousness, which he also calls 'flow'.[4] According to him the state of flow occurs when the experience of learning becomes its own reward – what he terms an 'autotelic' or self-rewarding experience. In the 'flow state' the achievement of goals is no longer a priority. Rather, the freedom from having to focus on any specific end result allows the individual to escape the confines of boredom or anxiety and to fully enjoy the experience for itself.

Perhaps the state that we most associate with childhood 'flow' is that of play, but from a psychological point of view work and play are not opposites and what matters is the intense involvement of the participant. There is a powerful force at work that seems to be inviting children to interact in unique ways with the environment. The most effective activities seem to need to be originated by the individual and to be open-ended, with the outcome determined by the participants. There is also frequently a feeling of togetherness and friendship with a consequent loss of self-centredness. Such social traits were observed in the 1960s by the psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow and were the characteristics that most astonished and inspired the Italian scientist and pedagogue Maria Montessori. They can now be seen in the extraordinarily creative learning environments emerging throughout the world where children are taking control of their own learning processes. Sugata Mitra's 'Hole in the Wall' project is a good example of this; it explored how children learn in unsupervised environments and Mitra has gone on to establish more than 300 'learning stations' covering some 300,000 children in India and Africa.[5]

Children, therefore, are active learners in their own right. They do not simply passively absorb the strategies of the adults around them, but strive to be the causal agents in their own environments.

The demands of a culture

Children are natural learners but the culture in which they develop has a great influence on them. There must, therefore, be a very fine balance between the advantages of instruction and the very real dangers of outside assistance undermining the child's independent intuitive thinking. Under instruction children may well learn the expected knowledge and demonstrate the skills, but they may also do so, as Professor Lilian Katz says, 'at the expense of the disposition to use them'.[6]

In this respect it is also interesting to examine the research that has been carried out on external rewards. If learning is to be about the excitement of discovering something new, rather than a function of memory, children will tend to be rewarded by the joy of the discovery. External reward systems can even distort the developmental process itself. Classroom reward structures tend to implicate the children's self-worth in their achievements, a problem that was recognised by many previous researchers in the field.[7]

Providing the correct degree of structure, however, seems essential for the child to make sense of the environment and to provide choices that lie within the ability of the chooser. Too many choices or too few can depress motivation and subsequent achievement. Creativity is therefore about allowing children to create their own questions and to find their own answers, to enjoy problem-solving for its own sake. There needs to be a 'reaching from within'.

The danger is that instead of us freeing children to become truly independent, creative learners, we must, by nature of our own conditioning, bind them primarily to fit the demands of the culture. As children internalise, they personalise or adapt cultural information. A culture that is predominantly *externally* motivated creates a particular social pattern that young children must adapt to if they are to be accepted.

Very early on in such cultures children learn to make a clear distinction between 'play' and 'work', and have no illusions about what it is that reaps acceptable rewards. The moment that an early years teacher is given a 'target' or 'outcome' to achieve, the dynamic between teacher and child is subtly changed and an adult agenda starts to shape the environment. These adopted value systems become part of children's personalities even though they may go against their feelings and experiences. Once the source of evaluation lies outside the self the individual must seek the approval of others in order to feel self-regard. The natural and highly intuitive capacity for seeking out levels of unique personal challenge and fulfillment diminishes and we are disconnected from the extraordinary and joyful learner that lies inside.

Classrooms, by their very nature, express the values, preoccupations and fears found in the culture as a whole and parents and teachers convey the value systems that they have created and measured themselves by.

The demands of policy

Our culture has championed the accumulation of information together with the power of the analytical mind. The focus is on the parts rather than the whole and we have become very good at dissecting bodies of knowledge in order to better understand them. The problem is that our focus on content rather than context may have profoundly eroded the essentially joyful nature of human learning and development. The National Advisory Committee's report All Our Futures: Creativity, culture and education states:

> *We are all, or can be, creative to a lesser or greater degree if we are given the opportunity. The definition of creativity in the report… is broken down into four characteristics: First, they [the characteristics of creativity] always involve thinking or behaving imaginatively. Second, overall this imaginative activity is purposeful: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective. Third, these processes must generate something original. Fourth, the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective.*[8]

And a recent report undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media and the Institute of Education says:

> *The project will provide a detailed analysis of how educational stakeholders understand and conceive creative learning and innovative teaching, and to present examples of good practice within the wider context of educational policy and institutional innovation. Building on an understanding that creativity and innovation must go far beyond the arts in education, considerations of creativity and innovation must encompass discourses around social critique, justice, citizenship, technology and economic regeneration as well as play and everyday cultural practices.*[9]

Both look at the structure of the issue very efficiently, but totally fail to emphasise the essential nature and importance of deeper 'meaning making'. They are indicative of the way that our culture approaches education and we need to ensure that we, instead, open our minds to the wider context. It is too simple to say that we will now foster and encourage right-directed thinking (representing creativity and emotion) over left-directed thinking (representing logical, analytical thought). What is really needed is a profound revision of the way that we understand the learner and an appreciation that we all need a sense of purpose and contribution to something larger than ourselves.

A science of learning

So what does all this mean for educational policy making? We need to see children within the context and demands of the unique systems within which they live and to better understand their need for relationships, personal meaning and contribution better. This entails better science, better collaborations and better evaluation:

- *better science* – understanding more about brain development, what it is that nurtures human creativity and well-being (rather than achievement) and how to accommodate different styles of learning and development

- *better collaborations* – building connections and partnerships to establish new and innovative forms of global collaboration that bring together scientists working in the field with leading thinkers, practitioners and policy makers
- *better evaluation* – investigating the efficacy of alternative cutting-edge approaches and to encourage and nurture innovation and to develop new criteria for success based on personal fulfillment, flow, well-being and contribution

The Dana Foundation recently bought together 70 top neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, education researchers, practitioners and policy makers to explore the possible relevance to schools of recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. It is these kind of multi-disciplinary alliances that we now need to encourage.

The most important and beneficial development would be that of a new, empirical 'science of learning' based on an understanding of optimising natural systems. In the same way that we are now revising our understanding of the importance of natural ecological sustainability, so we need to look again at how we achieve individual and community well-being and sustainability. As Einstein said, you can't solve a problem using the same kind of thinking that created it. In our work as experts and policy makers we need to understand that we are products of the system ourselves and there is a real danger that we will play comfortable and safe rather than having the courage to accept that we might be perpetuating systems that are no longer fit for purpose:

> *Education reform movements are often based on the fast food model of quality assurance: on standardization and conformity. What's needed is a much higher standard of provision based on the principles of personalized learning for every child and of schools customizing their cultures to meet local circumstances... Standardization tends to emphasize the lowest common denominator. Human aspirations reach much higher and if the conditions are right they succeed. Understanding those conditions is the real key to transforming education for all our children.*
>
> Sir Ken Robinson[10]

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9

Social franchising: a networked approach to nurturing early years creatives

Ruth Churchill Dower

Early years professionals have much in common with professionals in the arts and cultural sectors. When it comes to working with children in the early years, they have much to share and learn from each another, yet current models of initial and continuous professional development do not make this easy. Training in creative and cultural practices is too episodic, short term and vulnerable to funding cuts. This model often fails to build the kind of enduring relationships between professionals that can improve the learning experiences of very young children. Taking Earlyarts' practice as a starting point, this essay outlines how networks can provide a new approach to supporting professional development within the sector.

Much in common

Many early years, arts and cultural professionals may be uncertain of how they could benefit from working together, but in truth they have much in common when it comes to using creative practices with young children and families.

First, their early years or family learning programmes are all dedicated to supporting the youngest, most precious people in our society. For all of them, in practice as well as policy, the children come first.

Second, creative and early years professionals love to play. They all have different names and spaces for it – from singing and story-building to dance and den making. But essentially they are in their element and sometimes at their most creative when they have space and time to play – whether with ideas, equipment, concepts, spaces or stories.

Third, through playful environments, arts and cultural professionals are adept in the kind of meaning making that helps us make sense of who we are as people, our cultures, values and ideas. Early years professionals are equally adept at meaning making that helps young children to do the same.

There is an obvious opportunity here to share those approaches, skills and understandings between the sectors to enable an increased sense of purpose, identity and belonging for adults and children alike.

The principles and practices of arts, cultural and early years professionals are based on building strong, trusting and respectful relationships and exploring processes inspired by children's ideas. Why? Because this is the key to finding out who our children really are, what engages them and rocks their boat, what breaks through their obstacles to learning, and what unlocks and fulfils their incredible potential.

As Luciano Astudillo, a Swedish Social Democrat MP, said:

> *Creativity is a goal in its own right. When people strive at fulfilling their dreams, when they work with their own ideas, when they refuse to subdue themselves and when they prove to themselves that they are capable of creating their own business or artwork, a better society is, in fact, being created.*[1]

Current professional development models are insufficient

Although the most common professional development training courses, such as the early years professional qualification, cover practical and theoretical skills around child development, many miss the mark where the values of creative play are concerned. Facilitating creative play requires high levels of emotional intelligence, intuition and leadership in order to know how and when to help our youngest children have confidence in themselves, practise using their imaginations, and build expressive languages, a strong sense of worth, a positive disposition to trying, doing, making, creating and playing with opportunities in the world around them.

As well as demanding sophisticated approaches, working with the early years is also fraught with complex high jumps over funding, pay, working conditions, learning assessments, varying levels of professionalism and complex staffing structures, which must be cleared in order to fulfil this genuinely meaningful and important principle of offering our children the best possible start in life.

Conventional thinking would perhaps lean towards the provision of more skills development through standards based training, risk assessments, or ongoing monitoring of outputs to justify public expenditure in difficult times. However, I am a firm believer that making a significant impact on young children's learning requires a new approach to the way we develop the skills and aptitudes of the adults who teach or care for our children and families. We need professionals who can work in new ways – so we need to think about developing them in new ways too.

A national survey conducted by my organisation, Earlyarts, the professional development network for those working creatively with young children, indicated that professionals wanted opportunities for their own experiential learning.[2] They wanted to connect with others, be inspired, share ideas, and develop creative skills. By understanding their own creative potential, professionals are more able to engage with, and model, the processes of exploration and discovery that lead to deeper level learning.

Current models of early years training and practice simply don't offer the opportunity for this to happen and professionals' own creative development is generally achieved through short-term collaborative projects (many of which are profiled as case studies on the Earlyarts website). We need more models of training and professional development that provide a better match for the needs of our professionals.

Developmental networks, not imposed structures

We need to focus on building enduring networks and relationships that can sustain the long-term development and evolution of early years, arts and cultural professionals practice. Earlyarts is aiming to build such a model. It is based on the concept of social franchising whereby an independent organisation offers their partners (franchisees) the opportunity to join a network that supports them in delivering selected services to a tried and tested model. In return for their buy-in (in this case paid for with 'social capital' – staff time and resources), partners benefit from a significant amount of marketing, fundraising, IT, administration and business development support. The aim is to achieve a proportionally higher return on investment in social and economic terms.

The ethos of Earlyarts is one of working smarter together and not harder alone – it aims to empower grassroots practitioners to take control of shaping their future and strengthening their organisations. By connecting knowledge, skills, resources and key people across the country, the network aims to achieve more sustainable collaborations than are possible working in isolation or competition. The intention is that this will lead to longer-term, purposeful relationships between the arts, cultural and early years sectors, and ultimately meet individual children's needs more effectively.

So how does this work in practice? Earlyarts offers three levels of engagement with its arts, cultural and early years stakeholders:

- a professional development programme[3] for all network members some of which is free, and other parts accessible via individual purchase or an annual subscription scheme
- a cluster of pathfinder partners (exemplar organisations in the arts, cultural and early years sectors) who commit an agreed amount of time and resources (social capital) to designing and delivering four Earlyarts professional development days per year across the country, recruiting new members, and sharing their training approaches with each other; they do this in return for significant core support in marketing, IT, online bookings, subscriptions and fundraising, a strategic voice at policy levels,

and wide national and international connections that can help to spread the impact of their work far afield
- a strategic programme for national agencies to work collaboratively on early years issues, using the network for research, information distribution and consultation on workforce development or policy issues

The benefits of networked approaches

Networked approaches like this have three key advantages over traditional approaches. They are cheaper, more agile and smarter.

Cheaper

Networks are cheaper. Helping people to help each other does require some investment, but is considerably more efficient than aiming to help everybody as individuals. Earlyarts also aims to overcome the obstacle of short-term funding and ultimately reduce the competition for dwindling grant aid as it generates more income through alternative means. Finally, the cross-agency framework helps to make sense of multiple policy agendas, enabling joint provision of more intelligent services at a more affordable level.

More agile

Networks are better able to respond to local challenges. They offer an opportunity to achieve a self-sustaining demand-led (not funding-led) programme, which can flex more easily to meet changing climates. In addition, they provide bespoke training designed to meet local needs more meaningfully, and enable the widespread sharing of exemplar practices among grassroots deliverers.

Smarter

Networks build collective intelligence. They help to reduce the isolation of running smaller creative projects, enabling the collation of a comparable national evidence base demonstrating impacts. Bringing knowledge together helps to manage it more effectively to increase its reach and usefulness, and also enabling the national championing of the importance of creative early learning pedagogies. At the same time, it increases the awareness of early years pedagogies, helping arts and cultural professionals design their family learning provision more purposefully.

Networked communities vs commercial franchises

It would not be unreasonable to ask, why not simply charge a commercial franchise fee to each of the pathfinders, enabling them to retain any immediate profit they can make on a local level? But there would be considerable risks in this approach.

First, many of the pathfinder partners are public-funded bodies or consortia which cannot make a profit out of their endeavours without running the risk of having it clawed back at year end or, at worst, having their budgets cut having created a 'surplus' to requirements. Rarely is creative learning seen as important enough to have budgets ring-fenced and profits reinvested in local development. It is much more useful for a central body to bring the partners around the table as expert advisers on how profits are reinvested.

Second, business development, sales and marketing, income generation, social media, online bookings, research and publication are not the core jobs of many of Earlyarts' partners, whose expertise lies in arts, cultural or early years delivery. To expect local partners to provide a version of this critical infrastructure in each of their locations would be neither efficient nor strategic.

Third, such a fragmented network of local hubs would struggle to find ways of understanding each other's languages or approaches where no incentive exists to do so. As well as being positioned to respond extremely well to the training needs of local professionals, the other strength of the pathfinder partners is that, by sharing their ideas and supporting each other, they can enable each other's approaches to programming training to develop and flourish.

Finally, collating and sharing the immense amount, breadth and depth of knowledge held within the sectors nationally is a core function of the network as a whole, and one which could not be achieved through a more commercial franchise model because of the conflict of interests that would arise.

Looking to the future

A social franchise has its fair share of challenges that will be familiar to all who work in partnerships.

Creating a shared culture

The network's partners come in all shapes and sizes, from arts and cultural organisations to children's centres and local authorities. They have different ways of working, some of which are by necessity fairly traditional even where there is the will to deliver services more efficiently. A strong and clear focus on the shared principles of the network is important to keep the pathfinder partners grounded and able to communicate with a shared voice nationally.[4]

The natural difficulties of creating a shared culture among diverse partners are exacerbated by a lack of shared way of communicating – half of those in the Earlyarts' market are highly tech-literate while the other half spend little time online and may not even have access to computers at work. Currently Earlyarts is piloting new ways of using mobile phones, which will offer much greater access for the early years sector and a valuable feeding back of ideas into the network.

Accounting for the added value of a social franchise

Despite the excellent work done in the last few years to raise the awareness and understanding of social enterprise as a valid and viable part of the business community, there is still a lack of 'fit' as a third sector social franchise operating within a public sector marketplace. Although the concept is fairly straightforward to understand, the practice of trading social capital to achieve greater efficiencies, reach and impact is neither familiar nor easy to establish as currency within mainstream public institutions.

We need appropriate tracking mechanisms to measure the value of the social return on investment (SROI), in order that the case for investment by all stakeholders can be made and is recognised in monetary terms. As London Business School states, 'SROI makes it possible to weigh social benefit against the cost of investment. SROI also offers a framework for exploring how change is happening as a result of an intervention, showing ways in which this can be improved upon.'[5] A monetary value set against the social capital of the networks' members and pathfinder partners would enable a much greater understanding of its reach and impact, and it is to be hoped a real incentive for engagement. There are a number of SROI frameworks in existence that can help to clarify where the biggest difference is being made, but most are complex and resource intensive, and not well suited to a small organisation like Earlyarts.

Building a sustainable business model

Making the figures work is the fundamental challenge for any small business growing up. There is a fine balance (and much nerve holding) between responding to the window of opportunity for achieving Earlyarts' objectives versus managing the risks of a growth programme in highly volatile times. The key to garnering support lies in keeping the programme simple, relevant and focused. After much review of income generation schemes, Earlyarts is planning to move its subscription scheme to a 'freemium' model in 2011 so that everyone can benefit from being an Earlyarts network member, with those who can afford to buy additional services helping to spread the support to those who cannot. Self-sustainability and independence from funders is not always the panacea it promises as income needs to be generated somehow, and revenue targets are currently a moveable feast.

Having new eyes

It is important regularly to review the purpose and value of networks like Earlyarts to ensure the content and infrastructure is adding value to other mainstream provision – and that the social and economic return on the initial cost of the programme is worth it. As well as not making over-claims about its effectiveness, Earlyarts has to be clear on the real causes and effects of creative practice on the learning and development of young children and Earlyarts members. Many professionals have experienced the incredible transformational impacts on young children who have started communicating and expressing themselves through creative opportunities, where previously they didn't engage with their environment.

Ultimately, we know that high-quality, deep level, bespoke creative experiences within a trusted environment can be a trigger for many positive developments in children. So it makes sense to find a way to bring people and resources together with the common purpose to help make this stick harder and longer in the future, both for our children and the adults who live and work with them.

Earlyarts is about enabling a democratic community of passionate, skilled, creative and powerful professionals with one of the most important jobs in the world not just to survive but to thrive and flourish. It is not such an outrageous ambition – the picture was designed long ago and all the jigsaw pieces are now out of the box, they just need assembling in the right order. As French novelist Marcel Proust wisely said, 'The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.'

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Notes

1 Quoted in S Wright (ed), *After the Crunch*, London: Creative and Cultural Skills, 2009, www.creative-choices.co.uk/ creative-economy/.

2 Earlyarts, *Joined Up Future*, London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2009.

3 Including professional development days, an international resource bank, an online network, regular e-bulletins, an artists' database, a bookshop, a creative project planner, an international exchange programme and an annual conference.

4 These are the Earlyarts principles: children are human beings and good people to be with; adults can be great partners in children's play; an active learning environment is one that promotes an ongoing researchfulness, playfulness and happiness; creative processes and environments have an important role to play in nurturing crucial learning dispositions; arts and cultural forms provide a fundamental pathway to expressing and defining our cultures and identities; artists or creative professionals can bring different skills, and perspectives to support children's own stories; and children and adults all have lots of creative potential.

5 Quoted in D Leighton and C Wood, *Measuring Social Value: The gap between policy and practice*, London: Demos, 2010.

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10

Seeing with new eyes: new ways forward for creativity and culture in education

David Lammy MP

Perhaps my favourite job in government was Minister for Culture. People who know me well will understand why. I grew up devouring books from local libraries in Tottenham, where my mum lived. I got my first big break as a chorister at Peterborough Cathedral, where I was exposed to classical music for the first time. My favourite course as a student at Harvard Law was one which explored the ethics of law through film. And I am now married to an artist whose work inspires me enormously. The cultural sector, public and private, has played a huge role in my life and I have a deep affection for it.

These things made the job special but it was not just that it combined work and pleasure. It was that culture, at its best, provokes a conversation about who we are and where we are going as a society. It provokes us to stop and reflect, to see the world with fresh eyes. When he taught his course on ethics through film, my old professor and mentor at Harvard called it ‘the moral adventure’.

Modern culture increasingly helps us become participants, not just spectators, in this moral adventure. Today people watch a great film and respond by remixing clips and posting them on YouTube. One artistic act inspires another. Museums and galleries are getting in on the act by enabling people to create their own routes round exhibitions, according to their own moods and interests. We are getting beyond a passive consumerist approach to culture and reaching towards something more fulfilling and meaningful, in which people are given the tools to be part of the conversation themselves.

The programme that I oversaw as culture minister which most captured that spirit was Creative Partnerships, a ground-breaking initiative that brought artists from a range of disciplines into schools. To date, the programme has worked with over a million children across the UK. Its goal was not just to give people 'access' to culture, but to equip young people to lead 'expressive lives', as others have put it.

Few projects survived under New Labour without some sort of economic rationale and of course Creative Partnerships had one. The creative industries are a growth area for Britain and contribute around 6 per cent of the UK's gross value added. Across sectors, employers increasingly look to employees who can think on their feet, tackle problems creatively and add value by using their imagination. Creative Partnerships was one way of preparing children from a young age to play a part in that future.

But what was fantastic about the programme was that it spoke to higher ideals and visions of a good life than could ever be captured in tables, targets and measurements. That is because it helped people to become not just productive workers, but also citizens in the fuller sense of the word. As young children learned to express themselves creatively they were also learning how to play their part in democratic life – to express an idea, move, motivate and mobilise other people. This is a fuller, more rounded version of citizenship than the contractual, legalistic rhetoric of rights and responsibilities that people became used to hearing from us.

Today, the programme is drawing to a close and money is short, to say the least. The question for those of us who valued the programme and what it aspired to is what can we learn? How can we build the goals of the programme into children's educational experience without driving it with instructions and funding streams from Whitehall? I draw three lessons.

The first is that children benefit enormously when they come into contact with excellence. The great thing about bringing artists into schools was that they were brilliant at what they did. That children experience this and are stretched and inspired in this way is vital. I remember singing as a chorister in Peterborough Cathedral and realising for the first time in my life what true excellence was. I was given the opportunity to sing some of the greatest music ever produced, standing in surroundings I could not have dreamed of. I learned what it meant to experience the transcendent moment when you are applying yourself completely. For young people of all backgrounds to experience that same thing is priceless.

What government must do, if it is not going to have the money actively to encourage more artists, poets and drama groups to come into schools, is to make sure it does not stand in the way of them. Too often this has been the case, in a legalistic culture that has made schools fortresses, making all outsiders de facto suspects. This is a problem that has grown over the last decade, stemming from a perfectly honourable concern for children's welfare. But the risk is that we deny children the kind of developmental experiences they need because we are not prepared to trust teachers and parents to make judgements about who they allow into schools and when.

Second, the curriculum must be conducive to creative learning. In part this is an argument for avoiding cramming the curriculum too full to allow the space for creative learning and activities. But it is also a question of how the curriculum is constructed and taught. In a project in Peterborough, the RSA is working with the local council to develop a local curriculum to be taught in schools in the area. One effect of the curriculum will be to teach children more about the areas they grow up in; another consequence should be to connect the school to the wider community, opening up new and interesting ways of learning.

The Peterborough example demonstrates that curriculum can be a spur for creative new approaches, not a barrier to them. This is a challenge for the government's review of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It will need to strike the right balance between ensuring proper standards are met and allowing the space for professionals to use their discretion about what is right for children's wider development.

Third, we cannot rely on nurseries and schools alone. Children need to grow up with the space to play and express themselves from a young age. For every acre of land in Britain occupied by playgrounds there are more than 80 acres for golf courses. The Children's Play Council has estimated that children today have, on average, just a ninth of the outdoor space in which to play compared with just a generation ago. That says something worrying to me about our priorities as a society – or at least the democratic means we have of expressing them. Too often people have a voice as consumers but not often enough as citizens.

This must become an agenda for not just public services but also public spaces. Children may not be economic actors with purchasing power of their own, but they should still have a voice. For years, children were expected to be 'seen and not heard'. In urban planning we need them to be both. 'Localism' has to make the transition from a sometimes bland agenda about public service reform to a more meaningful discussion about the role and limitations of the market in shaping the places we live in.

What is striking about the subject of the set of essays in this collection is that children are born curious, inquisitive and creative. Some of the most expressive and imaginative people in Britain are aged under seven. The danger is that this joyful inquisitiveness fades away as children grow up sitting in front of the TV, as they disappear from increasingly privatised public spaces and as they experience education merely as preparation for a stream of tests and exams.

The challenge for policy is to make sure the very opposite is possible, helping nurture rather than nullify the natural desire to create. Creative Partnerships was one expression of this. At a time of greater prosperity it was driven by central direction. As circumstances change the baton will have to be taken up by those in schools and local areas who believe in what it was trying to do. I hope its legacy will not just be a formative experience for those children who benefited directly from it, but also some inspiration for those who took part in a national experiment that I am proud to have played a small part in.

Rt Hon David Lammy MP is the MP for Tottenham and former Minister for Culture.

11 Play in nature: the foundation of creative thinking

Shirley Brice Heath

'Let's pretend....'

'We could play like we are explorers.'

'We'll dig here for dinosaur bones. My dad said they could be anywhere.'

'We could build a secret cave, if we get some blankets and chairs from my house.'

Sound familiar? If so, you are fortunate, for this means you have been in the company of the dwindling proportion of young children who take their imagination into the world of nature in the great outdoors. Young children who command their friends to pretend, explore, discover or build have spent time with adults who still remember what childhood play can be and how far the journeys possible through the imagination will take us.

Child development experts currently plead with adults to understand the importance of play for children's maturation into healthy, creative and attentive adults. Joining them are neuroscientists and paediatricians who urge parents to get their children outdoors and away from the incessant pull of electronic media.[1] Childhood is becoming one prolonged stretch of spectatorship. Passively waiting to be entertained by others, children miss out on the kind of learning that comes through direct experience, participation, and collaboration. Thus they have little opportunity to hold their visual and auditory attention on one phenomenon and to develop ideas about how things work in the natural world. This kind of development in early childhood comes about primarily through seeing the self as an observer, hypothesis-builder and active partner in the play of imagination. Children in advanced economies now spend nearly eight hours a day on average interacting with electronic media, generally as a passive spectator. Each day, many children spend no time outdoors in free play. Soon a majority will reach adulthood without ever having built a sand castle on a beach, discovered insects in a rotting log, or experienced an autumnal day in a forest of deciduous trees.

Why does outdoor free play matter for young children? How do economic and political decisions shape children's possibilities for discovery, exploration and imagination in the natural world? What implications – individual and societal – follow from the fact that children are lost to nature?

How play in nature matters

In advanced economies where the work of parents takes place primarily in offices and other locations widely separated from the world of young children, opportunities for parents and children to play together in the great outdoors are disappearing rapidly. Working parents must struggle to find time to create projects with their children and to discover and explore nature – where the unknown and unexpected, as well as the patterned and predictable, appear at every turn. In the expansive world of the outdoors, layers of insects, rocks and plants demand a closer look. The calls and songs of birds require listening while absorbed in silent observation. A quest for further clues may follow immediately or days later, as children mull over their experiences and return to pose hypotheses or to generate ideas.

However, adults find it difficult to believe that children must have models and practice if they are to learn to listen, observe and imagine possibilities in the natural world. Children cannot learn on their own how to attend visually to cues from the natural world or how to discriminate one bird call from another or one tree from another. Nor can they learn on their own how to be members of a 'thought collective' – a partnership for learning and doing by seeing, listening and exploring.

Children have to learn how to make plans for collaborative exploration and how to cooperate with others in exploratory projects that have no predetermined outcomes. These skills consistently appear at the top of qualities that employers want in their employees in the current economy. Employers want to know that members of their team listen, observe, imagine and hypothesise. Adults give the essential guided practice children need to develop habits of putting all their senses to work. Adults also model the kinds of language that support hypothetical thinking and deliberative consideration of ideas that derive from what has been observed, compared and based on data or facts that can be confirmed or revisited.

The plans that adults and children make together for camping or hiking provide only the beginning step in the practice that young children need to learn the skill behind discovery in the arts and sciences. What is an acorn? Why do some plants have thorns while others do not? How old are these hills? Answers in nature do not come ready-made; only by looking closely and following-through on ideas can children come up with possible answers. The information they can collect from the internet, through reading and talking with experts takes on meaning primarily when the child's curiosity and direct experience lead to questions. Curiosity gives incentive; experience motivates enquiry.

Today many young parents have never experienced for themselves the free play of imagination that comes with being out in nature. Thus the incentive to take their children to the seaside, on hikes in the hills, and birding in forests often has to come from others – elders or peers who advocate for such pursuits. Internet searches, conversations with friends who know local surroundings, and expeditions to botanical parks and forestry centres can help young parents build the sense of what is possible for their children's development through outdoor experiences. Fictional works of children's literature bring to life birds, fish and creatures of the forest, modelling the power of animating the outdoor world through imaginative play.

Unending connections for policy

Scientists and artists who reflect on their creative talents and powers invariably point to their childhood play. They remember seeing themselves as capable of discovering, building, planning and exploring. Today's scientists who work in biochemistry, bioengineering, genetic research and agriculture remember their first discoveries in the natural world. The naturalist Edward O Wilson believes that every child has a 'bug period', a time when curiosity about the natural world leads them to want to know why the size and variety of insects varies from year to year or which insects have poisonous bites. Without exception, botanical illustrators, sculptors and architectural designers remember projects they planned, attempted and aborted in their childhoods. They point to mentors who inspired them as they matured through their teenage years and into young adulthood. These mentors let them join in exploratory ventures to search for specimens or to grasp the interdependence of organic life forms. The early creative exploits of most scientists and artists result in sketches, drawings, photographs or models that generate talk with others about the meaning of details, how comparisons work, and how to show depth and proportions of different scenes.[2]

Economic and educational policies currently reduce the likelihood that coming generations of scientists and artists will have such childhood experiences. The spread of agribusiness, along with taxes on farm land passed down through families, rapidly decreases the feasibility of making a living wage and sustaining families in rural areas. The fields and surrounding forests of these farms are not open to exploration by neighbouring children. City-centre financial districts and industrial parks restrict access to open spaces for outdoor leisure. Few urban transportation systems encourage urban families to travel to nearby countryside locations for weekend or vacation explorations. Accommodation located in rural areas steadily stretch their ways of entertaining guests rather than letting them explore nearby natural sites. Travellers ask, 'What is there for the children to do?', 'Will television and internet be available?' Rare are questions about opportunities to explore, discover, build, imagine and free the family from being 'plugged in'. On family vacations, children do not take in the scenery along the way; instead they entertain themselves with their individual electronic devices for playing DVDs.

Educational policies that range from eliminating recess and fieldtrips to emphasising standardised curricula and testing rule out the imaginative learning that comes from free play in the natural world by young children. Children are tested on their ability to read the illustrations, photographs and diagrams that others create rather than on their own skills of representing in sketches and drawings what they observe through direct experience. In recent celebrations of Charles Darwin's achievements, exhibitions, publications and documentary films reminded educators of how important his background in the visual arts had been to the discoveries and comparative examinations he made in his explorations around the world. Close observation and detailed representation of specimens in the natural world characterise the history of both art and science.[3]

Individual and societal development

Until the first decade of the twenty-first century, only scientists and artists pointed out the close connections between creativity and free play in the natural world. Historians of science and biographers of scientists and artists chronicled ways that imaginative explorations of the natural world have led to discoveries across the subfields of the arts and sciences. As use of robotics in diagnostic medicine, surgeries and explorations in space and underwater increases, scientists invariably describe their developmental research by drawing analogies to their own childhood play.

Today new technologies for exploring the brain enable neuroscientists to understand what happens during play, in social interaction, and during explorations in the natural world. Cognitive neuroscientists now measure brain activities through fMRI technology, which tracks hemodynamic changes in the brain, and MEG technology, which allows scientists to track magnetic field changes in the brain over time. In-the-moment learning, as well as recollected memory, can be measured and described. Neurological research can be combined with ethnographic data to correlate environmental factors in the socialisation of the child with neurological changes in the brain. Scientists now know much more about how learning under certain environmental conditions, such as those involving play, collaborative social interaction and emotional commitment, induces changes in how memory works. Cognitive scientists document changes in the brain's response to being outdoors in comparison with staying tied to heavy use of digital devices. Experiences sculpt the brain.

Outdoor experiences correlate with not only abilities linked with attention and creativity, but also the ability to remember and detect details in visual representations. Doing so helps individuals mentally monitor not only what they believe but also how they believe. Individuals who discern visual details are likely to reason effectively about the use of certain kinds of evidence to test and re-examine their beliefs. For example, children's earliest drawings tend to include the sun, a horizon and plant life. Gradually, children who have opportunities to explore the outdoor world develop a penchant for drawing again and again one particular animal or scene from nature. In so doing, they represent not only what they have seen but their changing beliefs about what they see. As children develop their understanding of representation and of themselves as coming to re-present (or re-enact) certain actions, they intentionally enter into the cognitive loop of acknowledging as they view a scene that they have certain beliefs about it that need to be monitored.[4]

Core to such beliefs are children's expectations of roles and role behaviours. Children seem to know that they must test their beliefs by sampling the scene or by seeing and integrating more details as they go along, discovering and exploring along the way. In other words, children with such practice in using their sensory perception skills in the natural world intuitively set out a pace and place towards which their learning moves. Doing so within nature opens endless possibilities, for here exploration and observations can only turn up more clues and more questions. Children exploring with others benefit when others repeat their ideas, show interest and express emotional responses. In the outdoor world of play, these kinds of social interactions with adults reinforce children's volition (as well as attentiveness) and their willingness to try these actions and accumulate experiences that lead to more participatory exploration.

The circle of joint attention of child and adult to outdoor scenes and the specific components of these scenes offer young learners 'double exposure' – learner-looking, expert-looking and perceiving the scene or action to hold in memory, repeat in narratives to others, and often as the basis for 'inside jokes'. Relationships to creative learning develop for young children through repeated opportunities to practise the reciprocity of joint attention in this kind of double exposure.[5]

Such reciprocity often involves or leads to imitation. Imitative learning in humans is exceptionally valuable, especially when accompanied with high emotive responses from on-lookers ('See, I can catch a fish like my dad'). 'Mirror neurons' in the brain appear to be active when an individual sees another perform an action or the individual does the action. Through the late 1990s neuroscientists were very excited about the possibility that 'mirror neurons' explained imitative learning in humans. However, as research with other higher order primates showed that they also have mirror neurons, researchers began to see something quite different in the nature of imitative learning by humans. Mirror neurons cannot be a primary explanation for how human beings learn from seeing what others do.

Humans imitate, to be sure, but their renderings of the actions of others involve creativity. Humans create from what they see, and their creativity benefits from being engaged in socially interactive collaborative endeavours. Humans observe, to be sure, but beyond seeing, they imagine and extend or transform what they see. The child out fishing with grandpa has to read the cues of when and how to cast into the stream. But the action of the novice is never the same as that of the expert or model; the action is transformative. The human ability to take the perspective of the other and to collaborate in a jointly planned endeavour goes a long way towards explaining human creativity. Humans take on the perspective of the other; they cannot be the other. Knowing this, they create from and with what they learn from others, but they do so through applying their individual unique perspectives, talents and personalities – inherent creative interpretive potential.

Increasingly, parents engage in concerted cultivation that provides action-scripted learning instructed (lessoned) for children in highly scheduled school and 'safe' after-school activities. Directed by 'intimate strangers' – coaches, camp counsellors, park guides and museum docents – these latter activities are increasingly oriented toward formal schooling successes for children. If societies wish young learners (and learners across the lifespan) to be creative, especially in the sciences and arts, the young must have free play to watch, imitate, model, discover and explore in the openness afforded by the outdoor world. Most sciences and all arts rely in one way or another on direct experience, sustained practice and creative reflection around meaning.

Today philosophers and social theorists predict major shifts in the hierarchy of national powers and valuations of human endeavours before the century's end. These critics place responsibility for these changes on the shoulders of policy makers who insist increasingly that children's times for informal learning through exploration and discovery be decreased in favour of formal education. Instruction within a proscribed curriculum cannot foster in children a sense of contextual or environmental frameworks or the ability to grasp how various factors and conditions affect change, lead to innovation or alter prior knowledge. Formal education available to the majority of the young ignores the whole in favour of selective attention to bits and pieces of an often-unspecified whole.

Researchers across the disciplines show the decline in creativity of today's young in comparison with their peers of two decades ago. Neuroscientists point out the advantages to individuals that result from spending time in natural surroundings. Reflective powers, clear headedness and attentive focus increase after time spent in the rhythm of nature with reliance only on human powers of observation, touch, hearing and imagination. Tough ethical challenges are sure to present themselves to policy makers as technologies multiply faster than human competencies to keep track of them and their effects on humans and their environmental surroundings. Public attention and considered debate will have to take into account findings from research in the humanities and the sciences. The current focus on the temporary and disposable will have to give way to some consideration of the permanent and sustainable.

The more institutions of power manipulate their successes, financial and political, on the back of being plugged in, entertained and unconcerned about the 'end of memory', the more rapidly creativity among the young will retract and empathetic identification disappear. Play, curiosity and exploration matter for individual development and the sustainability of societies that care about and for one another. Art and science – long reliant on free play in natural surroundings – will consequently shrivel in impact on the human connectivity critical to the planet's future.

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Notes

1 Social science research across fields demonstrates the extent to which absorption in electronic media correlates with reductions in attention span, vocabulary development, empathetic responsiveness and creativity of young children. See, for example, S Brown, *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*, New York: Avery, 2009, and N Carr, *The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains*, New York: Norton, 2010.

2 See, for example the autobiography by EO Wilson: *Naturalist*, New York: Grand Central, 1995, and Ludwig Fleck's descriptions of his medical laboratory: *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

3 See D Edwards, *Artscience: Creativity in the post-Google generation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009; B Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment entertainment and the eclipse of visual education*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990; and M Richtel, 'Outdoors and out of reach: studying the brain, *New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

4 See Richtel, 'Outdoors and out of reach'.

5 The combination of possibilities that lie within the circle of joint attention by adult and child has seemingly unending possibilities for stirring recall and re-examination of ideas, facts and hypotheses. Formal instruction, by comparison, cannot afford the time and openness of these types of exploration. For further discussion of these points, see DT Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2009.

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