



Developing creativity in early childhood studies students



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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to identify first year BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies students' perceptions of and confidence in, their own creativity, in an East Midlands university in the United Kingdom and to inform the teaching of a first year Play and Creativity module at the same institution. The Play and Creativity Module makes use of the 'democratic' definition of creativity (NACCCE, 1999) and Jeffrey and Wood's (2003) concept of 'teaching for creativity' by encouraging students to engage in practical activities to develop skills and confidence in their own capabilities. Though there is plenty of research which explores these ideas within the field of early childhood there is less research which focuses on best practice in Higher Education. The study identified a clear improvement in students' confidence in their own creativity and their confidence to implement the activities experienced in the module sessions within their own practice. Students developed a deeper understanding of the concept of 'little' c' creativity' (Craft, 2002) and the 'democratic' definition of creativity (NACCCE, 1999) and recognised the importance of providing a wide range of opportunities and resources for children to develop creativity. The practical activities within the module also supported students' professional skills such as team working, listening to others and the importance of collaboration and reflection on practice. In addition, the practical and procedural elements of practice 'how to do with children' was identified as being an area which was illuminated by completing the module and contributed to professional practice.

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1. Introduction

Creativity is a complex and difficult to define concept yet remains central to learning for young children and adults alike and has been a central component of the curriculum in England over the last 50 years, since the Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools (HMSO, 1967). Many adults however lack confidence in their ability to be creative, and have a narrow understanding of what constitutes creativity, usually equating creative activity with 'art and craft' or 'recipe-type' activities where outcomes are pre-determined. According to Duffy (2006) creative activities in the early years are often adult directed, and about learning techniques rather than about developing creativity in children.

There is also a popular view of creativity as pertaining to an elite population of people, limited to a select proportion of the population and specific activities (NACCCE, 1999).

The 1999 National Advisory Committee for Creativity Culture and Education report 'All Our Futures; Creativity, Culture and Education' (NACCCE, 1999) was influential in policy change and resulted in placing creativity at the centre of early years

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education. As a result of the report creativity was identified as an ‘area of learning’ in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DFES, 2007) and practitioners working with young children were charged with ensuring creativity retained high priority within their planning. The most recent Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014) revised by the coalition government, has shifted the emphasis of creativity to ‘Expressive arts and design’ which focuses on children expressing their ideas through activities in art, music, movement, dance, role-play, and design and technology. The place of creativity as a cross-curricular approach is given much less emphasis. This new curriculum places an increased focus on ‘school readiness’ and ‘formal learning at year 1’ (DfE, 2014:1:8 pg 9). This is clearly exemplified in the approach to teaching reading through the ‘synthetic phonics’ approach, ‘fast and first’ (Perkins, 2015); where this single technical approach takes precedent over other methods and children’s existing knowledge and understanding is largely ignored. (Levy, 2011) Similarly, Duffy (2006) suggests that young children arrive in early years settings, ‘full of curiosity and creativity’ (2006:48) which is quickly suppressed when their ideas are not valued by practitioners. For this reason it is important that children’s creative potential is both recognised, valued and nurtured by the practitioners who work with them. The place of the arts and aesthetics remains a central ‘orientation’ within the Finnish Curriculum as identified by Aerila and Rönkkö (2015) In their study they identify how adults supported children’s own ideas and their interaction with others.

May (2009) recognises the benefits of creativity on a long term scale, claiming that nurturing creative activity when children are young will provide a society of imaginative thinkers and leaders of scientific discovery and business.

Another popular international approach to creativity exists within the Reggio Emilia approach inspired by Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) Children are recognised as agents of their own learning and practitioners form a supportive role within this. Emphasis is placed on the environment and on the importance of children communicating with others to determine outcomes to problems and in the production of new ideas.

It is therefore important when educating the emerging early years workforce such as when students are studying degrees, they are aware of the issues highlighted here.

1.1. Definitions

In the government report produced ‘All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education’ (NACCCE, 1999) creativity is defined as a process which refers ‘to producing something original’ (NACCCE, 1999: 28). The report notes that there are many different opinions from individuals about what is involved with the term ‘creativity’. They propose that there are in fact three different definitions of creativity these include a sectoral definition, an elite definition and a democratic definition.

The sectoral definition produced by NACCCE (1999) notes that individuals recognise creativity as being very ‘arts’ based. The elite definition suggests that it is only the most talented of people that are creative and the democratic definition proposes that everyone can be creative given the right environment and conditions. Despite recognising these three definitions NACCCE (1999) offer their own definition of creativity to be ‘Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value’ (NACCCE, 1999: 30). Craft (2002) distinguishes between Big ‘C’ creativity, which describes those who create new knowledge in disparate domains and little ‘c’ creativity which is described as involving ‘possibility thinking’ or a questioning attitude, which asks ‘what if?’ (Craft, 2002: 57) Craft (2002) further suggests that little ‘c’ creativity is part of everyday life, and is within the capacity of us all, given the right skills, resources and opportunities. Interestingly these definitions reflect the NACCCE (1999).

Vernon (1989:94) considered creativity to mean ‘a person’s capacity to produce new or original ideas, insights, restructurings, inventions, or artistic inventions. . . .’ Wyse and Dowson (2009) point out that this definition highlights the idea that creativity requires originality. They further reflect that we should not in fact be considering creativity as a fixed concept but as something that can change, depending on an individual’s own perception of the process. This would therefore suggest that this definition aligns with the ‘democratic definition’ within the NACCCE (1999) report.

1.2. Practitioner perceptions of creativity

Myhill and Wilson (2013 p.102) state that historically, creativity has been viewed as a personal trait however, they identify that there has been a move away from this thinking, to one where creativity is viewed as being ‘framed by cultural values and specific social contexts’ suggesting a more fluid definition of creativity. These ideas are further supported by Craft (2005), and Alfonso-Benlliure, Carlos Meléndez, and García-Ballesteros (2013). Myhill and Wilson’s (2013) research into creativity and poetry suggests that teachers’ conceptualisations of creativity within their study were ‘not fully theorised’ (pg 108). They identify the use of a ‘schooled version’ (pg 108) of creativity which does not align with the concept of creativity as defined by authors and others within the field of creative writing. They further identify a disconnect in teachers’ understanding of creativity and their unwillingness to embrace activity and behaviour associated with creativity such as risk taking, independence and impulsivity. Davies et al. (2004) cited in Myhill and Wilson (2013:103) consider the role of teacher training and the lack of time provided for learning about creativity in teacher training courses, they suggest this may lead to ‘contradictory notions of the nature of creativity’ (pg103) and result in teacher practices that focus upon reproducing information and providing correct answers rather than opportunities for creative thinking. When considering the social and environmental factors, Wright (2010:4) highlights that practitioner’s support of children’s creativity largely depends on their own ‘attitudes’ to shaping children’s environments in order to promote creativity.

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