

Childhood Services Week 2021

Arts at Heart

Considering Children's Creativity in Childhood Settings

A blog by Dr Mary Moloney

(Lecturer, Author, Researcher, President OMEP)

From birth, children are naturally curious, full of awe and wonder at the world around them. They have a propensity to make sense of the world through their senses: touching, seeing, smelling, hearing, and tasting. *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, perceives children as confident and competent learners, independent explorers, driven by curiosity and imagination, eager to express themselves, interact with and contribute to the world from the earliest age.

Loris Malaguzzi, the pedagogical leader of the Reggio Emilia early years philosophy, also saw children as creative communicators and conversationalists. His poem, *The One Hundred Languages of Children* recognises the multitude of ways, including dancing, playing, singing, imagining, listening, painting, sculpting, exploring and experimenting, in which children can express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Clearly, Malaguzzi believed that every child is a creative being. As such, early childhood settings, schools and school age settings can and should be sites for fostering and supporting children's creativity. In fact, the child's right to arts participation and engagement is set out in Article 13: Freedom of Expression and Article 31: Leisure, Recreation and Cultural Activities of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. These rights feature within *Aistear*, most notably through the themes Communicating and Well-being. In the theme Communicating, communication includes the use of the body and the voice in creative and imaginative expression through creative art, dance, story, sculpture and sign language. *Well-being* focuses on the children's physical and psychological well-being, to express their thoughts and feelings, to play and work with others, and to deal with challenges.

In partnership with the adult, children will: Express themselves through a variety of types of play, develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe, become reflective and think flexibly (sample-learning goals associated with Aim 3: *Children will be creative and spiritual*).

The primary school curriculum is currently under review, with the draft Primary School Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) including the competency ‘Being Creative, which recognises children’s innate creativity.

Creativity is expressed in many ways, in all areas of human activity and culture, and involves originality. Creative learners are curious, open-minded and imaginative. Through creative activity, children can produce works that are original and of value across the curriculum (NCCA, 2020, p. 8).

It appears that Sir Ken Robinson’s (2014) call for creativity to be afforded the same status, as literacy in education is gathering momentum. Not before time, as research evidence indicates that adults are 96% less creative than children are. A longitudinal study undertaken by NASA¹ of the creative potential of 1,600 4- and 5-year olds found that 98 percent scored at ‘*creative genius*’ level. Five years later at age ten, only 30 percent of the same group of children, scored at the same level, and at aged 15 years, only 12% scored at this level. When the same test was administered to adults, only two percent scored at ‘*creative genius*’ level. Like Malaguzzi, NASA concluded that the education system ‘steal[s] ninety-nine’.

But what is creativity and how can it be nurtured within early childhood and school age contexts. Creativity is about much more than the arts. In effect, children need opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of art, music, movement, dance, imaginative and role-play activities, mathematics and design technology. In the context of a play-based environment, children enact their creativity in indoor and outdoor environments. Although it is difficult to do justice to creativity in a single blog, for me, the logical starting point is music. Why? From birth, parents lull children to sleep by singing lullabies to them. From early on then, children become aware of tone, rhythm, lyrics and rhyming for example.

The Importance of Music

From humble beginnings, adults can provide rich stimulating environments that advance children’s awareness of, appreciation for, knowledge, skills and understanding of music and

¹ Land and Jarman (2000) cited in Nascimento (2017). <https://anewkindofhuman.com/creative-genius-divergent-thinking-test/>

associated experiences. Providing musical stimulus throughout childhood shapes children's thinking, imagination, memory, attention, and emotions. Musical activities support language, mathematical and physical development as children tap out, count and move their body to beats, identify and name instruments and musical notes, and experiment and sing along to the lyrics. In addition to nursery rhymes and pop music (which do have their place within reason), try introducing pre-school children to the *Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi, in which he took poems about the seasons and wrote music for the words. He wanted the music to convey the many things that go along with each of the seasons, such as rain, birds and bugs. Imagine children's delight as they learn words such as 'Allegro' (meaning fast) and 'Largo' (meaning slow) or hear the violin sound like a bird singing in 'Spring' or how the music feels like you are riding a horse in the third movement 'Autumn'. These musical stimuli can lead to a lifelong love of and interest in music, as adults' advance children's appreciation of different musical genres, including folk, bluegrass, jazz and rock and roll. The joy of music is intrinsically linked to children's musical expression through play, singing and movement.

Combining Music and Art

With adult support, children can combine music and art in both early childhood and school age contexts, in indoor and outdoor environments. Consider the works of art created by children as they paint draw or sculpt to music playing in the background. As they focus on the musical rhythm, children become conscious of the emotions that the music stirs in them, and their painting, drawing or sculpture takes on a life of its own, as lines, swirls, smears and sprays of colour form into an original piece of art that is unique to each child. Equally, introducing children to paper, fabric or wood marbling using floating acrylic paint and thickened water brings joy wonder and awe to their art experience, resulting in original unique artistic endeavour. Crucially, these open-ended child-led activities support children's sense of agency and autonomy

Aistear highlights the need for relevant and meaningful learning experiences. The activities outlined are far more relevant and meaningful for children than templates or adult-drawn outlines that tend to feature in many educational settings (i.e., early childhood, school and school age). These tools (templates and adult-drawn outlines) do not support creativity, and can, unintentionally give children a subliminal message that the adult version is superior to theirs, thus impeding creativity. How much more meaningful for a child's parent/guardian/grandparent to receive an original work of art rather than the standardised

Mother's Day, Easter or Christmas card? When reflecting upon the use of templates or adult-drawn outlines, it is important to ask whether they follow the one hundred languages of children, and what purpose they actually serve.

Originality is key

Originality is key. Is there anything quite as uplifting or joyous as the child's first attempts at mark making on a piece of paper, on the floor, or outside on a rock, or the ground. When the opportunity presents, toddlers will happily engage in this sensory and physical activity. The natural world provides lots of inspiration for mark making: leaf and bark rubbing, flower pressing, sticks, rocks and creations using fir cones and seed pods. Washable chalk is ideal for writing on the ground. Providing a range of paper in different sizes, colour and texture adds to the experience. Large sheets of paper and card enable children to work together, exploring, imagining and creating. Adult appreciation for these initial original art works leads to deeper engagement with the creative process later as children use a variety of materials pencils, chalk, markers, paint, crayons, acrylics, sponges, feathers, and progress from mark making, to drawing, to painting, to printing, to dyeing. Providing cameras for children to explore their environment, using the photos to make books and stories narrated by the children is an empowering experience for them. Provocations and multiple opportunities to explore and experiment with a wide range of materials, enables the fashion designers, engineers, woodworkers, sculptors, poets, writers and artists of the future to flourish. Barry Goldberg (2014) cautions adults not to ask children to describe their art using words, suggesting that the meaningfulness of the child's work is rooted in the visual and the material. Until we recognise this he argues, we may find that while a child's work is pleasing to our eyes, its sense and meaningfulness eludes us. 'The young child has no need to translate the experience into words in order to make it meaningful. The child is, in every sense, seeing meaning' (Goldberg, 2014, p.28).

I am certain that Amanda Gorman, the youngest inaugural poet in U.S history, and the youngest poet ever to share her work at a presidential inauguration, operates at '*creative genius*' level. While Amanda says that she follows in the footsteps of literary luminaries like Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Alexander, and Robert Frost, she also credits an after school programme for her love of writing. Indeed, school age settings are generally associated with enrichment activities, including those mentioned in this blog (music and art).

Coding as an Expression of Creativity

Another example is the coding for children movement, exemplified by CoderDojo a global volunteer-led community of free programming workshops for young people between 7 and 17. This movement perceives coding as an important expression of contemporary creativity. It lends itself to school age activities. Establish a camera club to empower children to deepen their understanding of themselves, others and the world around them and expand their photographic skills capturing light, frames, perspective, action, water and much more. Photography enables children to be innovative. It gives them opportunities to communicate their ideas, thoughts and feelings, motivating them to develop their own ideas on design. Use school age environments to deepen children's interests and emerging skills. A stimulating and enabling environment that satisfies children's innate curiosity, supports and nurtures their imagination is therefore, an essential pre-requisite for fostering creativity.

Adults must provide opportunities both indoors and outdoors for children to try new experience, explore resources, and communicate their thoughts and feelings in an emotionally safe environment.

The Importance of Time

Time is also essential. Time for children to think, explore, imagine without pressure or adult-imposed boundaries and directives. Time to engage with the creative process, rather than focussing upon the finished product. Indeed, during early childhood in particular, children have little if any interest in the finished product. Instead, they relish the opportunity to experiment and explore with their senses, developing confidence and competence through the creative process, which they experience in the mind and the body. As such, it is a holistic experience.

The Adults Role

While adults do not necessarily need to be creative themselves, they must however have a disposition for creativity. They must observe children, listen to them, provide provocations and stimuli and above all, give them space, time and opportunities to be creative. They must value and respect children's creativity. In an emotionally secure environment, where their creativity is valued and respected, children are empowered to think creatively and develop confidence in their abilities. As well as providing rich opportunities that foster children's creativity, adults must consider their attitudes toward creativity and their responses to children's endeavours. In

the right environment, the one hundred languages of children abound. In the right environment, children will dance, sing, paint, sculpt, write, make music, and act like no one is watching.