



Supporting children's learning in the early years

Creativity and early years

Linda Miller

Creativity, whilst being an early learning goal in the formal curriculum, may also permeate all that a setting does. We visited Thomas Coram Early Excellence centre in London, to see how this can be done. We started by joining Ben Agbaimoni, who was working with a group of six children on a drawing activity. Having discussed their appearances, the children are each drawing a picture of themselves and their family. As the group works, individuals drift away to the white board behind them, and start to experiment with colours. Listen to the way in which Ben encourages two members of the group, Stephanie and Apollinaire.

Ben Agbaimoni

Stephanie, would you like another sheet?

Child

Look on your other, what about the other side.

Ben Agbaimoni

Oh it's up to Stephanie, lovely, so what have you done here. Nothing, that's cool, I can write that down, can I write that on the back?

Stephanie

Yeah.

Ben Agbaimoni

Okay. And your name is.

Child

Apollinaire.

Ben Agbaimoni

Apollinaire, and you have done, nothing.

Child inaudible Ben Agbaimoni

You've got two cousins, I can't remember their names though, can you remember their names, are you going to tell us, no okay.

Child

And my mummy got a cousin.

Ben Agbaimoni

And mummy's got a cousin. Going to put your name on that Stephanie. Can't, well you do the "S" I'll finish it off. No. Okay then you do the "T", alright. "S", where shall I write it.

Stephanie

At the back.

Ben Agbaimoni

Right, S. Use (INAUDIBLE) Is there anybody else in your family. Just, just David.

Child

And you, and your mum.

Ben Agbaimoni

No no mummy, no daddy, no Stephanie, just David.

Child

LAUGH

Ben Agbaimoni

Are you sure, so, nobody brings you to nursery, and nobody takes you home, and you don't have...

Stephanie

Only my dad.

Ben Agbaimoni

Oh, how about we draw daddy. That's really, really really good. Yeah.

Child

This is me, and that's my mummy.

Ben Agbaimoni

Right so this is you, and this is....

Child

My mummy.

Ben Agbaimoni

Okay, and on the other side you've got.

Child

My brothers.

Ben Agbaimoni

Your brothers alright okay. Do you think you could put your name on that? S, so you want me to do the S yeah, well how about I write it out then you write it out. No, then how are we going to know that's yours.

Stephanie

You write it all down.

Ben Agbaimoni

You want me to write it all, on the front or the back?

Stephanie

The back.

Ben Agbaimoni

Turn it over then. S. T. E. P. H. A. N.I. E., okay. You've got oh, chicken pox, okay, you've put spots on you.

Linda Miller

Ben was careful to encourage both Apollinaire and Stephanie, to exercise their possibility thinking, encouraging all of their efforts, even where Apollinaire felt he'd done nothing. One by one, the whole group except for one child, goes to the white board, and a collective activity develops. Listen for how Apollinaire and Stephanie lead the activity of the other children, developing the idea of what they call sweeping, in other words, drawing lines, and then using their hands to smudge them.

Child

You sweep your, sweep it with your hand.

Child

Sweep it with your hand.

Child

You just sweep it Apollinaire, sweep it.

Child

Ah, I did a circle for you to sweep.

Ben Agbaimoni

Okay.

Child

Do this Apollinaire.

Ben Agbaimoni

Aha, what are we going to do now.

Linda Miller

Later we discuss the two activities with Ben, who started by explaining, that he sees creativity as relevant across the curriculum.

Ben Agbaimoni

Creativity, I used to think was mainly to do with art but it's not, it's more encompassing it's more, using available materials to make and explore things in different ways.

Linda Miller

We asked Ben about the connection between the two activities that the children had engaged in. Notice how he makes sense of the children's creativity in their learning. How does he see it as fitting with the activity he had planned?

Ben Agbaimoni

The connection for me was that they're still exploring the same thing but on a different scale, so it's about size, and it was about the fact that they'd got more room to continue working on the ideas that were in their head, and also that it was not permanent. So, because I noticed, you know they started to wipe it, and they were commenting on what they were doing as they were wiping it. And sometimes, for children, it's not so much the product that, I tend to notice more the process, and it's the process that's more important sometimes. I think adults sometimes forget that. So you're always expecting children to produce things and then comment on that and, sometimes, when you're asking them, and you do open ended questions, you get 'er, er' and it's not really about that, it's more about the actual doing, and having to do over and over again. Because I noticed that, every time I looked back, hands were being smeared across, and comments were being made, and I think it was that that they were actually exploring, and not the result of what they had done, but the actual process of doing it which was important for them. And that's what I saw it as being linked, because the next time I was to do that I might use charcoal, and actually go off and, let's rub the lines as well and smudge them, and then introduce another concept, and introduce the language as well. And hopefully they will take it and go away with that as well, and then we can talk about how we can make these smudged lines permanent, and that's another concept that gets added on it.

Linda Miller

So how does Ben's practice fit into the wider picture at Thomas Coram? We talked to Jan Stillaway, a senior teacher, and creativity co-ordinator about the Thomas Coram approach.

Jan Stillaway

We're very much about hands on, concrete experiences, taking part actively in processes. We're very much about process, as much as we can be rather than product, although it's very tempting to get distracted by lovely products, I think most of the learning goes on in the process. So we're very much about valuing process. We're also very much about

children doing things individually, not necessarily always on their own, but contributing individually in a way that's meaningful to them. So I think collaboration is also important for children, but it should be something that's real to them and not something that we're dictating, and we'd also want to encourage them to experiment, to try things out to take risks, and to sort of find things out for themselves to make their own discoveries whenever possible.

Linda Miller

Jan also talked about the role of creative representation in extending children's knowledge and understanding.

Jan Stillaway

Whenever children are representing things, which obviously is a creative skill, they're also learning about those things, so we often represent things to teach children about things. I mean as an example, we made some giant autumn leaves using the OHP, and then when the children painted them they had to really look at their leaf, to work out what colours to use, and then that involved a lot of colour mixing, so there's a great deal of creativity representation. So there was a big cross over, and I think that's actually quite common to early year's settings.

Linda Miller

So how does the setting go about developing coherence in its approach, to developing children's creativity?

Jan Stillaway

As a staff team you need to have a shared understanding of where you're going, and that can be quite an obstacle to moving forward. Because people have all sorts of different experiences and all sorts of different training, something that I think we're lacking a bit, is our understanding of what some of the things we do with children really means to them. I mean children spend an awful lot of time drawing, but we don't spend an awful lot of time actually just sitting and listening to what they're saying about that drawing, and having a really genuine conversation with them about it. We're often really preoccupied with our goals of like, 'No no you've got to draw the rabbit because we've got a rabbit and that's why we're here and we're learning about rabbits and draw the rabbit!'. We don't actually just sit with children, and let them talk to us about what they're doing and why, and that's something, I actually think that we actually don't really understand very well what's going on for children, when they're doing quite a lot of creative things, and I think we need a deeper understanding of what children are getting out of this experience, and then we'd perhaps be a lot more creative ourselves about what we offer them and I think what is essential there, is that we need to have really good relationships with children, where we can genuinely have serious conversations with them.

Linda Miller

So far we've been exploring creativity as connected with art-based activity. But what about the perspective of creativity across the curriculum? We asked Bernadette Duffy, Head of Thomas Coram about her interpretation of the early learning goal, creative development, as a cross-curricula experience.

Bernadette Duffy

I think at Thomas Coram what we're trying to do is see creativity, not as a set of activities that children do, certainly not as a form of interior design, making the walls look pretty, but to see it instead, as being about a process that children and adults undertake together, that helps them deepen their understanding. So a very deep, very thoughtful process, that gives them time to really delve into things and explore them fully, rather than a superficial way of looking at creativity which is about producing an end product in a sometimes relatively short time span.

Linda Miller

How far then in creativity in the early years about an approach to teaching and learning, rather than about specific knowledge and skills. Bernadette Duffy takes the broad view, and tells us how she sees the adult's role in fostering children's broad creativity.

Bernadette Duffy

I think the key thing for the adults, whether they're the practitioners and the key workers working with the children in the Centre, or parents at home or anybody who comes in contact with the children, is that, adults themselves understand the creative process in their own lives, and feel comfortable with that creative process, and are able to, in effect act as role models for the children, that that idea of taking risks of trying things out, of experimenting and, the importance of, realising that when things go wrong, we learn things that we didn't know before. If adults are modelling that for the children, that's a very powerful message that it's okay, indeed it's creative to make mistakes, because through that mistake you understand something you didn't understand before. I think the other, the way that adults are really important is as facilitators in feeling comfortable about allowing the children to explore their creative ideas, and not feeling, that they need to drill the children down one line of thinking, but feeling comfortable about children exploring all sorts of possibilities, and going off on all sorts of avenues, rather than having such a set of goals in mind that they forget there are all sorts of other possibilities.

Linda Miller

Bernadette also talks about establishing links and shared understandings between home and the centre. Listen out for the challenges that she highlights, in helping children move between the expectations of them at home, and in the Centre, as far as exercising their creativity is concerned.

Bernadette Duffy

Throughout children's lives, but certainly in the early years, it's important that the significant adults in their lives, are giving them common messages, and familiar messages, and that they're not feeling that they're pulled between different ideas about what's important, and what's appropriate. I think at the Centre we try very hard, to make sure that we establish a dialogue with parents from the very beginning, and that we talk about our approach to creativity, and we talk about what we believe is important for the children. So we do induction meetings for parents and children to come into the Centre. We talk a lot about the sorts of experiences the children will be having, and the sorts of expectations we'll have of those experiences. We spend a lot of time on the settling in process, which is an opportunity, for the parents and, to be with the children in the Centre, to understand what's going on and how it works, and to see the sorts of things the children do, and that they do have access to a lot of materials, and there's an expectation that they'll access those materials freely, in a way that probably in most homes, is not seen as necessarily desirable, and that sort of difference between home and Centre could be very strange for the children. At home you tend not to take everything out the fridge and play with it for very good reasons, but in centres such as this, we have an expectation, children will help themselves to things from shelves, and they'll combine them in new and imaginative ways, which may not be so appropriate at home. So it's talking through the parents about the value of that, connecting things that, transforming things, how important that is for the children. I think for some families, for some communities, there is an expectation that education, and that includes early education, will be more a passive process of receiving knowledge, so the idea that children will come to a centre such as this, and explore materials freely can feel very strange to some families. It can feel, as if this isn't quite what they were expecting for their children, and I think then that dialogue becomes even more important, and give them an opportunity to come in and try for themselves, and certainly our experience has been, that when parents have tried some of the experiences the children are engaged in, that's been a very powerful way for them to understand what their child might be getting from it when they, they get the satisfaction and pleasure of trying something out and seeing how it works and experimenting.

Linda Miller

Finally, as Bernadette explains, supporting creativity across the curriculum can be challenging because for the role of risk. You might like to reflect on how close this is to your own experience in early years settings.

Bernadette Duffy

Having an environment where we try to encourage everybody to feel confident to take risks and to feel secure enough to try new challenges, can be pretty intimidating when you come as a new member of staff, and we need to give people a lot of support if they've perhaps come from environments where that hasn't been the expectation, where the expectation has been far more about getting things right, and achieving targets, rather than, spending a lot of time involving a creative process. So I think, that's another challenge we have is, ensuring that the staff who work for the children feel comfortable about the creative process.