

The Importance of a Creative Approach to Education

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Early Childhood Education.

My submission specifically addresses the importance of a creative approach to learning. As a teacher, mother and now grandmother I have over the years sadly seen the erosion of a creative approach in education. When the creative approach is understood children's thinking, learning and wellbeing is fostered, but where there is a lack of understanding early childhood educators are failing children at this most critical time.

I started my teaching career in 1966 by attending the then recently established Hobart Teachers College. One of the lecturers was Margaret Roberts who had been recruited from England and had published articles on children's thinking. Her thinking helped form a foundation into my own thinking around children's development.

Following graduation I was lucky to be appointed to a school that was adopting a child centered approach to education. With department connections with England, our school had many visitors from the West Riding of Yorkshire an area that was pursuing a creative approach to education. We even had a visit from Sir Alec Clegg, a leading educationalist, highly regarded for his innovation in education.

At this time our staff were involved in many discussions regarding these new approaches. These changes needed a shift in understanding. It was a bold move to begin the day with one and a half hours of 'Creative Activities,' a time usually the domain of the 3R's

These Activity sessions helped foster children's cognitive, physical and interpersonal relationships. Materials were provided for the children to use in their chosen activity. Activities included building with wooden blocks, painting, drawing, collage, clay modeling, sewing, puppetry, dramatic play and box-work construction.¹ Where there was easy access to the outdoors sand and water activities are also included

¹ As I understand box-work arose after WW2 when resources and funding was scarce. It basically involves making models using small grocery boxes and other suitable found objects and gluing these together with paper-strips It is such a worthwhile activity needing both logical and creative thinking and perseverance. It benefits both sides of the brain.

In the late 1960's and early 70's Education Department class sizes were in the range of 34 to 38 children and there were no teacher aides. The 7 to 8 year olds that I taught, however, would all be actively engaged during Activities session. It was always a vibrant learning time. It might seem that the activities on offer were fairly ordinary, however the richness was in the way the children used the 'materials.' Sometimes, when needed, different materials were added or ideas presented to stimulate thinking or provide challenges. Each session culminated with the children presenting their work which led to interesting discussions. The children learnt from and were inspired by their class-mates.

The importance of being able to revisit these same activities gave the students an opportunity to build on their past learning. This was in contrast to what I observed in another situation where other teachers frequently added new activities to their sessions. In these classes the children showed initial excitement but their interest soon waned, the involvement was superficial and the children were merely being entertained and consuming the materials provided.

Following this experience I spent some time teaching in England and then took time off to start a family. Our eldest son began school at the same local school where I had taught. Even though the teacher was straight from University it was clear that creativity was not valued.

An opportunity arose for our son to be enrolled at the recently opened Cottage School, in Bellerive, which had been established with a grant from the Whitlam government for innovation in education. Many parents at this time were finding larger schools were not catering to their children's needs, and this led to a growth of small schools called cottage schools.

After further study in Early Childhood Education I began teaching at The Cottage School. At this time unemployment was rising, the future was uncertain and most schools decided it was important that more time was devoted to basic subjects so that children would be guaranteed a job on leaving. Industry was also beginning to influence education, influencing decision-making within the system.

The Cottage School's philosophy was that with an uncertain future the students would need diverse and creative thinking skills. In thinking about education in this way, the children would be better equipped to meet these changing times. I was lucky enough to hold a teaching position at Cottage School from 1982-2013, teaching Kinder, Prep, and Grade 1 classes.

My teaching philosophy has grown not only from my teaching experiences but also from my observations of the pathway Education itself has taken over the years. My recent experiences with grandchildren, has given me the impetus to take part in this enquiry.

From seeing such creative philosophies in the 1960's and putting these into my own teaching practices I have felt aghast by some of the education practices that are accepted today. In 2021, one grandchild aged 4 who was attending a childcare centre was being taught how to draw!

Children develop at their own rate and they should not be hurried through the important developmental stages. Educators need to be patient and know that scribbles and early representations are the right path for children.

Art is not something children have to be 'good' at. Early marks on paper are natural development, like crawling before walking. For young children drawing is their way of telling a story and so forms a foundation for literacy. Later their drawings scaffold their writing and as they progress their drawing helps them to organize their thoughts.

In 2022, his Kinder year, I thought at least the school would understand the importance of Art. My hopes were dashed on the very first day when the grandchild brought home colouring in sheets. Colouring in from a school that states on it's website that 'higher order thinking is at the core of their learning program.' In my opinion colouring in might be of benefit as a mindfulness practice but has no place in education.

I feel that a teacher's understanding of the creative approach is central to their whole teaching philosophy. This understanding underpins how they teach every subject. Moreover, it demonstrates their knowledge of how children learn. For me then, claims for fostering a higher order of thinking, when colouring in sheets are being provided, is not apparent.

Through the creative approach children develop sound learning practices. Given a supportive learning environment children are natural learners. Educators then, have a responsibility to nurture and build on this 'have a go' attitude, which is so important to learning and to life. Children's freedom to express encourages decision-making which drives learning skills, deep thinking and perseverance. Art therefore should be where children have ownership of their work. Ownership allows children to become self-directed learners. This increases motivation and achievement.

Art, or the creative approach, helps to develop perceptive awareness. The benefits of visual acuity are important to all subjects. Where diverse thinking is encouraged children feel free to explore possibilities in problem solving and this flows on to all other areas of the curriculum and so Art is important even to subjects like Maths and Science. In these ways the value of art is paramount to good learning practices and it is the early childhood stage that is crucial to establishing and fostering them.

Well Being and Emotional development

We are driven to express ourselves. Marks on a cave wall show that this need has been inherent in humans for thousands of years. The need to create is fundamental. In a changing world, a child's sound mental health is so important. Art helps children observe, reflect, wonder and make sense of their world. As an outlet for emotions creativity is essential for well-being.

When true freedom of expression is denied, young children can so easily become uptight and anxious. At Cottage School many concerned parents came to the school to enroll children who in other systems were failing as early as 5, 6, and 7 years of age. The opportunity to express themselves in the Activities time helped them to regain confidence in their learning journey. With renewed interest in learning, and thereby wanting to attend school they flourished and later went on to achieve highly in their chosen endeavours.

Where teachers fail to understand the importance of art and instead rely on directed activities the children are denied all the positive attributes I have outlined. Art helps children engage in learning. What they produce is appreciated and accepted, and the child knows they are valued as an individual.

Teacher 'directed art' is an anathema to the creative approach. Directed art is where children colour in or use templates to carry out the teacher's wishes, often for a display that the teacher wants parents to see. In this way children become no more than puppets. Every student's work looks virtually the same. Teacher directed art reaches dizzying heights at Christmas, Easter, Mothers and Fathers day. Surely parents would rather see their own child's masterpiece rather than the teacher's template!

When a teacher presents a 'so called' correct model it says to the children:

This is the right way. Yours is not good enough. Mine's better.

This ultimately undermines children's confidence, undervalues their capabilities, works against their 'have ago' attitude, and robs them of opportunities to build emotional resilience through freedom of expression. It causes frustration as children try to 'get it right.' There is no acknowledgement of individual differences or varying levels of competence. So it sets children up to fail.²

With this mindset, a teacher who is happy to use templates for Art, is also very comfortable in using worksheets for their Core subjects. Often with very superficial learning ends. When children do their own written recording it consolidates their learning and shows their understanding, often in far more detail than a 'fill in' sheet.

Good understanding of the creative approach flows on to all other areas of the curriculum. I am passionate about why sound approaches to Art and the creative approach to learning are so beneficial to children's development.

So what needs to happen:

We are in a time of rapid change. Our future depends on having children who are not only resilient but critical, competent, creative thinkers. We want all children to think outside the box, not be restricted to keeping within the lines.

Teachers facilitate the learning in Activities and creative learning time. This is only valuable if the teachers understands the objective and knows how to facilitate the learning. It is not simply setting up a number of activities and stepping back to allow for a free for all. Knowing the child and what they require, helps the teacher to know when to step in, and when and how to pose questions for the student to reflect on what is taking place. At times the teacher also has to step back to let the learning happen.

Education students, but particularly those studying to become Primary school teachers should be required to study the importance of creativity. This subject must be compulsory. The lecturers must be passionate about the subject.

For those teachers already in schools and childcare centres professional development needs to be available to them. Principals need to be involved too as they are leaders, and need to understand the importance of allocating time to this approach to learning.

² You might like to read 'The Little Boy' by Helen Buckley. 1961

Schools and centres need to communicate with parents to help them appreciate children's developmental stages, the importance of the creative approach and the difference between directed art and freedom of expression.