In this edition of Quarterly, we explore our understanding of “creativity”. Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (p.33) reminds us that creativity, along with curiosity and persistence, is an important disposition that supports children’s learning. There are many attempts to define creativity. Some common phrases across these definitions include “perceiving the world in new ways”, “making connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena to find new solutions”, “the ability to generate different ideas” and “applying knowledge and imagination to problem solving”.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has studied and written about creativity and he proposes the following:

Creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives…First, most of the things that are interesting, important and human are the results of creativity… The second reason creativity is so fascinating is that when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life (pp.1-2).

He goes on to suggest that a requirement for becoming a creative adult appears to be a keen interest and curiosity about one’s surroundings (p.156).

What does this mean for early childhood education? Some writers suggest that children’s creativity can be nurtured in three respects – the creative environment, creative programs and creative teachers. Teachers, in particular, have an important role to play in children’s creativity by helping them to construct their own interpretations of the world and explore ideas and theories (Sharp, 2004). Go on to read our feature article by Gai Lindsay for her insights into creativity at young children.

References


Do you love messy art making with children? When you see social media images of children covered in paint do you cheer or cringe? Many will have seen (or even made) foyer display posters which feature a deliberately paint splattered outfit surrounded by words such as engagement, respect and creativity and urging families to embrace messy play as an inevitable, fun-filled pathway to exploration and creativity. Does art-making that results in stains and splatters truly achieve the creative and developmental outcomes these display posters claim?

As a parent and early childhood practitioner of many years and now as a university lecturer responsible for training pre-service teachers, I truly appreciate the much-contested fine line between open-ended, free exploration with materials and the point at which such exploration has the potential to become destructive or even disrespectful of the preferences and dispositions of individual children and adults. Many early childhood educators unquestioningly believe that messy visual arts play is automatically a form of creative expression. However, as reflective educators, it is important that we ask questions and challenge our assumptions about messy visual arts experiences.

For example:

- Does mess-making always equal creativity?
- Do I avoid planning arts experiences because they might be hard to manage and clean-up?
- Do my pedagogical choices and preferences constrict or expand children’s visual arts learning and development and creative potential?
- Do messy visual arts experiences challenge notions of sustainable practice and use of materials?
- How can I respectfully consider the cultural and personal preferences of parents in relation to visual arts experiences that may be messy?
- Do ALL children love messy play experiences or do some children experience distress?

My PhD research, which explored the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators in four Australian early childhood centres, revealed a range of contradictory beliefs about messy arts experiences. Several participants valued messy play, while others questioned the assumed links between visual arts mess-making and creativity. Some paid lip service to the creative
benefits of messy arts experiences, yet ironically avoided mess-making activities in practice. Other participants noted the tensions created between staff and parents about mess-making, concurrently explaining the need to advocate for children’s right to free expression through messy play, while admitting the demands of child supervision sometimes restricted the types of experiences offered in order to avoid the need to clean up messes. Additionally, educators who romanticised messy arts play as a therapeutic experience tended to be those who defined a child-focused curriculum as one where all choices made by children are accepted, regardless of whether the choices were wasteful or destructive with materials or had questionable educative value. This confusion about how to define quality in relation to artistic and creative experiences suggests that there is a great deal of confusion regarding the types of pedagogical approaches that best support visual arts related learning and development. Perhaps you experience such contradictions in your own workplace?

To support theoretical reflection about the issue of messy art-play, it is interesting that well-respected scholars suggest the belief that messy visual arts activities build creativity is a long held early childhood myth (Eisner, 1973-74; Jalongo, 1999). Eisner (1973-1974) clarified that while visual arts engagement can foster pre-dispositions for creativity, it should not be positioned as the therapeutic key that exclusively unlocks the child’s innate creativity. My own research suggests that educators hold very tightly to a range of visual arts myths when then they lack confidence and knowledge with visual arts processes (Lindsay, 2016).

John Dewey challenged the romantic belief that children’s choices should always determine the curriculum, suggesting such beliefs potentially substitute chaos for education and restrict children’s access to meaningful learning experiences and subject content knowledge (Weiss et al., 2005). Dewey (1938, p.13) challenges us, stating:

“The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.”

This idea, that the experiences presented to children may not always be valuable in educational terms, reminds me of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996, p. 28) assertion that genuine creativity (defined as “any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one”) is only possible when a person has gained mastery within a domain. I therefore wonder, whether instead of automatically describing children’s early play and exploration with arts materials as creative, we might instead describe them as being inventive, experimental, focussed and curious – all characteristics that potentially foster a sense of wonder and a joyful attitude to learning? Choosing to position creativity in these terms removes it from the realm of prodigy and giftedness and places it firmly in the everyday practices we employ in early childhood settings.
This story of friendship starts with Paul spending his days alone swimming round and round the fish tank in every direction. After all, there is nothing else to do! That is until Bernadette drops into his life. Suddenly Paul is exposed to adventure and possibilities outside the fish tank.

Bernadette helps Paul to see familiar items in different ways – a banana becomes a boat; a vase of flowers becomes an enchanting forest. The story explores the idea that we all observe things differently but can also look at the world through someone else’s eyes – it just takes openness and a little creative thinking.

Children will enjoy exploring and discussing how Bernadette sees a clock as a cactus and a teapot as an elephant. They might also be able to continue the story – what can children see “anew” in their world? The illustrations are simple paintings but have enough colour and detail to draw the eye and help tell the story. We recommend this book as one that will capture children’s attention and creative minds.

CHILDREN’S BOOK REVIEW
BY THE KU PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM

Paul Meets Bernadette, Written and Illustrated by Rosy Lamb

So, does mess-making foster children’s creative potential? I suggest that the answer to this question is sometimes “absolutely yes!” - and sometimes “absolutely no!”

The answer to this question depends on many things. It depends on the child. It depends on the context and it also depends on the intentionality and sensitivity of the educator. When it comes to messy arts experiences, rather than assuming that mess-making is an inevitable pre-cursor to learning and creativity, I suggest that we must be willing to accept that sometimes mess is just mess. Sometimes it may actually close down opportunities for growth and learning.

Messy arts exploration can be an important first stage of exploring materials, but I would like to propose the challenge that it should only ever be the beginning and not the end point of a child’s relationship with visual arts materials and processes.

References
The purpose of World Creativity and Innovation Day was, and still is, to remind and encourage people to use their creativity to make the world a better place and to make their place in the world better too.

April 21, the day before Earth Day (April 22) was chosen as World Creativity and Innovation Day to emphasise the importance of using new thinking to create a decent life for all on a sustainable planet. April 21 is a placeholder in time to give people a reason and opportunity to use imagination productively, to release new thinking, and to celebrate that.

In 2006, World Creativity and Innovation Day April 21, became World Creativity and Innovation Week April 15-21. World Creativity and Innovation Day/Week is a time to allow people to free up and encourage using creativity in problem-solving.

For more information go to https://wciw.org
Upcoming Professional Learning Events

UNDERSTANDING INFANT PEDAGOGY – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY

This professional learning day will provide delegates with practical perspectives on infant development and learning.

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>9:00am – 10:30am</td>
<td>The Developing Brain: Translating Neuroscience into Practice</td>
<td>Karstens, Level 1, 111 Harrington St, The Rocks, Sydney</td>
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<td>Keynote</td>
<td>Nathan Wallis – Neuroscience Educator</td>
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<td>11:00am – 12:30pm</td>
<td>Participants will explore the science of brain development and what it means for how we interact, nurture and educate our youngest citizens.</td>
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<td>Workshop</td>
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<td>1:00pm – 2:30pm</td>
<td>Infant Directed Speech and Early Language Development</td>
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<td>Keynote</td>
<td>Dr Christa Lam-Cassettari and Dr Karen Mattock – Western Sydney University</td>
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<td>The quality and quantity of speech provided to infants and toddlers and its implications will be discussed with tips for how early educators can positively influence language development.</td>
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To find out more or to register, click here.