

Creativity and the Arts in the Primary School

Discussion Document and
Proceedings of the Consultative
Conference on Education 2009

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We need now to systematise these across whole systems and not see them as eccentric capacities which are the preserve of a few gifted teachers. Einstein put it well when he said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create.”

Somebody once said the great problem with humanism is we aim too low. For education for the future I think we all have to accept that for now and for ever we have to aim very high in education and we have to succeed. Thinking differently, making and doing things differently were never more necessary or more important for this society. As Declan McGonagle Director of the National College of Art and Design said recently, we have suffered in Ireland, from short-termism but we cannot allow long term potential to be impeded or capped by short term thinking or mindsets. It is creativity in thinking long term that is needed most, but most importantly needed now.

In whose image? Cultivating creativity in a culture of compliance

Dorothy Morrissey, Mary Immaculate College

I’m going to begin this morning by inviting you to close your eyes for a few moments and to imagine the impact on your life if there was no creativity in the world, none at all. What are the things or the experiences that you would miss most?

Open your eyes. Chances are you would probably miss things like television, the cinema, cooking, reading, doing crosswords, DIY, listening to music, the radio, your laptop and lots more. Chances are, too, that you were able to imagine many other possible impacts on your life.

This capacity to imagine, to form mental images of things that are not actually present in the here and now, things that we may have experienced in the past, things that we might never have experienced is probably something that we take for granted. Yet through imagination we can revisit the past, reframe the present and anticipate future possibilities. The American philosopher of education, Maxine Greene, argues that our capacity as human beings to imagine, to ‘look at things as if they could be otherwise’ is what accounts for the yawning differences between us and other species.¹²

Einstein has claimed that

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited while imagination embraces the whole world.

Imagination involves all of the senses. It involves being curious, noticing deeply, making connections, identifying patterns and asking questions. It is a capacity that very young children have in abundance. Brendan Kennelly captures this wonderfully in his poem, ‘Poem from a Three Year Old’

¹²Greene, Maxine (1995) *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass p.19. The work of Maxine Greene and the Lincoln Center Institute NYC underpins many of the ideas presented in this address. The development of these ideas has also been influenced by the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Parker Palmer, Kieran Egan and Ken Robinson.

And will the flowers die?

And will the people die?
And every day do you grow old, do I
grow old, no I'm not old, do
flowers grow old?

Old things – do you throw them out?

Do you throw old people out?

And how do you know a flower that's old? ¹³

Imagination, however, is not the same as creativity. You could spend your whole life imagining and nobody would notice. But you couldn't possibly say that someone was creative if they never *did* anything. Being creative involves actually doing something. It involved Kennelly actually writing the poem.

While some of you may be poets, most of you probably aren't. But you are probably creative in other ways. Consider, for a moment, ways in which you are creative. Consider some of the creative things you do. Now, I'm inviting you to rate your creativity on a scale of 1-10. Hands up, those of you who would rate yourselves at 10, 9 . . . 2. Now let's do the same with intelligence. Hands up, those who would rate yourselves at 10, 9 . . . 2. How many of you gave yourselves a different score for intelligence than creativity? Why is that? Is it because you believe that intelligence and creativity are entirely different things? Are they?¹⁴

Csikszentmihalyi¹⁵, a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, defines two types of creativity: Creativity with a big C and creativity with a small c. Creativity with a big C is the Creativity that changes culture. Einstein (in Physics), Picasso (in visual art), Marie Curie (in physics) and Martha Graham (in dance) were creative in ways that changed culture, or the domain of culture in which they worked. Creativity with a small c refers to the personal creativity involved in discovering things that may be important to one's own life or work, making it more fulfilling and enjoyable but not necessarily resulting in fame or renown.

Csikszentmihalyi spent five years interviewing one hundred exceptional individuals who had made a difference to a major domain of culture such as the sciences, the arts, business or government, and who were still active in that or another domain. He found that these people were complex individuals who tended to exhibit opposing characteristics, that instead of being either extroverted or introverted they were:

- Extroverted *and* introverted
- Physically energetic *and* quiet and rested
- Convergent *and* divergent thinkers

¹³ Kennelly, Brendan (1999). 'Poem from a Three Year Old' *A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990*. UK: Bloodaxe Books.

¹⁴ The idea for this activity was borrowed from Ken Robinson.
Robinson, Ken with Lou Aronica (2009) *The Element: How Finding your Passion Changes Everything*. London: Allen Lane (an imprint of Penguin Books) p.35 and p.55

¹⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Collins.

- Playful *and* disciplined
- Imaginative *and* rooted in reality
- Humble *and* proud
- Traditional and conservative *and* innovative and rebellious
- Passionate *and* objective
- Prone to suffering *and* enjoyment
- People who did not conform to rigid notions of gender stereotyping¹⁶

At various times either one of two opposing characteristics might be dominant in these individuals, but these individuals were just as likely to be exhibiting both simultaneously; to be holding the tension between them. Csikszentmihalyi¹⁷ claims that it is unusual to find conflicting characteristics in the same person, as we tend to specialise in certain characteristics and to neglect what might be complementary ones.

Our formal education system supports and promotes such specialisation and neglect. Indeed, our entire Western cultural tradition is based on what Parker Palmer¹⁸ calls 'thinking the world apart': dividing it into this or that, black or white, male or female, arts or science, academic or non-academic, us or them, good or bad. Even the nursery rhymes and fairy tales we teach very young children induct them into this way of thinking. Take, for example, this nursery rhyme:

Sugar and spice and all things nice
That's what little girls are made of

Rats and snails and puppy dogs' tails
That's what little boys are made of.

And this one, which demonstrates, to paraphrase Palmer, 'thinking the individual apart'

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good
She was very, very good
But when she was bad she was horrid.

Undoubtedly *either-or* thinking has its usefulness. By dividing everything into opposites children can bring some order into their world. And it has given human beings great power, particularly in the areas of science and technology. But it also fragments reality and in its denial of complexity and chaos it denies the wholeness, wonder, excitement and uncertainty of life.

As teachers, we have been successfully shaped and moulded in a predominantly *either-or* education system. A system based primarily on measurable results in a limited range of competencies: learning things off and figuring things out. And this has been equated with being intelligent. In this system imagination, creativity, divergent thinking, risk-taking, and the capacity to learn from mistakes have been underdeveloped, devalued or ignored.

¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi (1996) pp.55-76.

¹⁷ Csikszentmihalyi (1996) p.76.

¹⁸ Palmer, Parker (1998) *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass p.62.

But as Einstein, someone who was Creative with a big C, puts it

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted

Ken Robinson jokes that our education system did a good job in training us to operate from the neck up and then only with one side . . . as if the most important function of our bodies was to be a form of transport for our heads. That it actually educated us out of our creativity.¹⁹

Today creativity in classrooms has been identified as the answer to the nation's problems. It is expected to produce the innovators and entrepreneurs of the future, the ones who will make a difference to our economy. But this drive for creativity is accompanied by an even greater drive for accountability. Teachers complain about an ever-increasing amount of paper work, increased regulation and scrutiny, and pressure to ensure that children perform well on standardised tests. And when it comes to Whole School Evaluation reports there is scant, if any, reference to the status of creativity in the school. The reports give most attention to those subjects high in the traditional hierarchy: English, maths and Gaelge and least to those low in that hierarchy: namely the arts. The drive for greater regulation and scrutiny has found its way into teacher education too, with the focus on student achievement of measurable learning outcomes within the context of a national accreditation or regulation process. Such control and governance is, I would suggest, far more likely to encourage the creation of a culture of compliance than a culture of creativity; a culture in which teachers encourage children to perform as they have performed; a culture in which they educate children 'in their own image'.

Teachers complain about an over complicated and broad curriculum. But people who are Creative with a big C are specialists in only one or two domains. They have extensive knowledge of the rules and traditions of those domains and this enables them to mindfully break the rules while being simultaneously attentive to them. As Isaac Newton observed:

If I have been able to see farther than others, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants

All of which raises questions, at the very least, about the value of a broad and balanced curriculum in educating for creativity. It also raises questions about the capacity of teachers to deliver on it without extensive collegial and professional support: the limits of human psychic energy make it impossible to specialise in more than a few discrete domains.

The task then of cultivating creativity in classrooms is an onerous one; and one which must surely begin with the cultivation of the teacher's own creativity.

Learning to love
the open-ended mystery
of not knowing why

(Elizabeth Carlson)²⁰

¹⁹ http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

²⁰ Carlson, Elizabeth. 'Imperfection'. Published in Intrator Sam M. And Megan Scribner (eds) (2003) *Teaching with Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass

This requires courage. It requires us to move beyond compliance; beyond the *either-or* thinking for which we ourselves were rewarded with good or good enough grades; to move beyond our fears. It requires us to move outside our comfort zones, to be curious, to question, to play, to take risks, to develop ideas, to consider things differently, and to frame mistakes as opportunities for learning. In the words of Thomas Edison

I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work

It also requires the courage to cultivate the characteristics that we lack, the ones opposed to those in which we have specialized: if extrovert, learning to experience the world as an introvert; if analytical, learning to trust intuition. And it requires us to look beyond ourselves and, to paraphrase Palmer again, to think not only ourselves but the world together by embracing paradox

Paradox is another name for . . . a way of holding opposites together that creates an electric charge that keeps us awake. ²¹

Wide awake we are less likely to inadvertently advocate that children play safe, to give assignments without choices or to only allow particular answers to questions. And it makes it more likely that we can support children to have wild imaginings, ask questions, make connections, examine things from a variety of perspectives, take calculated risks and value the opportunities for learning presented by their mistakes.

Undoubtedly the cultivation of classroom creativity requires committed creative teachers. And if these teachers work in schools in which there is a culture of creativity, playfulness and collaboration the potential to enhance children's creativity is greatly increased. If these schools participate in any of the initiatives and projects described in this conference's discussion paper, or in other initiatives and projects fostering creativity, then the potential for classroom creativity is even further enhanced.

Cultural transformation is incremental. It must start somewhere. Why not with you, and you, and me? Let us be the ones. In the words of Arthur O'Shaughnessy

We are the music-makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams ²²

²¹ Palmer p.74.

²² O'Shaughnessy, Arthur. 'Lines from the Music Makers'. Published in Turley, Margaret (Ed) (1997) *First Anthology of Poetry*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy of Music.