

In praise of Creativity – Exploring the potential of the new EAD ELGs

The late, great, Ken Robinson, a champion of the Arts in education, famously regarded creativity as just as important as literacy, a view which is likely to evoke an unequivocal response from both sides of the debate. However, the revisions to the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which become statutory in September 2021, offer the chance to reconsider each area of learning and in respect of Expressive Art and Design (EAD), to highlight and affirm the value of the Arts to young children's wellbeing, learning and development. The key changes to this specific area of learning were considered in the EYE November issue and this article takes a closer look at how the new ELGs for EAD can be viewed in order to optimise children's creativity and thus, their positive impact.

Children's Wellbeing

Covid-19 has created huge challenges for everyone and no-one is exempt from its malign effect on wellbeing. Those who work with and care for them, will be anxious to ensure that the wellbeing of young children is well-supported. This involves making sure that children have a voice and that their expressions are received as meaningful and responded to with sensitivity. Perhaps because it is hard to define, EAD is sometimes seen as a nebulous area of learning and its benefits regarded as harder to measure. As a specific area of learning, EAD can be overshadowed by Literacy and Maths which have more easily- identifiable, discrete skills. Tina Bruce (2011, p.4) has written extensively about creativity and her observation on its value is particularly pertinent now, during the pandemic. She writes that by supporting children's creativity we can help them learn 'how they contribute to the world as well as finding the fulfilment that creativity brings into their lives. Fulfilment is deeper than

happiness or enjoyment – it helps us through the difficult times as well as the easier side of our lives’. The modes of creative and artistic expression such as music, dance, drawing and painting invite children to communicate what might otherwise remain unsaid. As well as providing a way of expressing anxieties and uncertainty, the Arts offer children other ways of being, channels for imagination, the exploration of possibilities and for the satisfaction of agency within a safe space. The aesthetic elements of the Arts are represented for the first time in the new EAD ELGs. The new Educational Programme provides for children being able to ‘appreciate’ and develop awareness of artistic and cultural aspects of experiences. This is a welcome recognition of the potential for the sheer pleasure and intrinsic satisfaction of exploring and experiencing sound, colour, texture and form and the development of an appreciation of beauty. Open-ended opportunities for children to engage with multi-sensory resources in variety can support them in finding expression both individually and in collaboration with others.

Defining Creativity

Although difficult to define, most commentators agree that creativity involves elements of imagination, flexible thinking and originality. When considering creativity in young children, it’s helpful to adopt a democratic definition, (Sharp, 2004, p.6) which emphasises the creative process rather than any outcome, focusing on that which is original *to children* as individuals rather than on any extrinsic value.

Malaguzzi,(1993, p.77) recognised the potential for practitioners to gather more finely-grained insights into children engaged in the creative process when he observed that, ‘Creativity becomes more visible when adults try to be more attentive to the cognitive processes of children than to the results they achieve in various fields of doing and understanding’. The ‘democratic’ definition of creativity also helps

in moving away from the myth that only some of us are creative; those who are gifted and talented artistically. Everyone can be creative.

Positive Changes

The new Educational Programme and two EAD ELGs; **Creating with Materials** and **Being Imaginative and Expressive**, can be analysed in terms of their subjective and social possibilities which in turn, help to highlight links to other areas of learning and opportunities for holistic learning and development.

The first sentence in the new Educational Programme for EAD states that, 'The development of children's artistic and cultural awareness supports their imagination and creativity'. This is a recognition of the dynamic interplay between the interpersonal (social) and the intrapersonal (subjective) elements of EAD and offers insights into just what we mean by 'creative development' and why it is essential to holistic practice. It evidences a return to a long-held view that "Just as different modes of thinking interact in a single mind; individual creativity is affected by dialogue with others. In these ways, creative development is intimately related to cultural development" (NACCCE 1999, p.43.).

The old 'Being Imaginative' ELG, becomes 'Being Imaginative and Expressive' thereby placing emphasis on the social element of EAD and indeed, this is evident throughout the revised EAD ELGs by the new expectations for children to 'share', 'explain' and 'recount'. This provides clear links with Communication and Language development (and reflects the government's stated aim to 'focus on strengthening language and vocabulary' in the EYFS). In applying the new ELGs here, motivating rather than requiring children to share and explain their thinking involves creating an environment which values and respects children's voices and their fledgling

interpretations of, and responses to their worlds. Young children, who may not yet be developmentally able to produce outcomes recognisable as 'Art' deserve to have their efforts taken seriously and their efforts respected as legitimate forms of communication.

The elements in the new EAD ELGs which relate to children's subjective experience include the expectations that children will 'explore' and 'experiment'. These elements link clearly to the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL), (DfE, 2017) and ensuring that children have access to a wide range of media, materials, quality and variety remain stipulated in the Educational Programme. This reflects a recognition that children need access to multiple modes of expression through which to realise their own, unique expressions.

The expectation for children to 'create' warrants further scrutiny. Nancy Stewart (2011, p.78) provides a very useful distinction between the elements of the CoEL, **Creativity and Critical Thinking** when she suggests that whereas critical thinking can be seen as comprising 'rational approaches such as analysing information, comparing and classifying, using reasoning to draw conclusions,' creativity involves 'the ability to think flexibly- to see things from different points of view and recognise multiple possibilities'. Each of these elements necessitates imagination which is essential to enable individuals to 'interpret' 'invent', 'adapt' and 'create.' Each of these elements feature as expectations in the new EAD ELGs. Isolating these subjective elements within the EAD ELGs helps practitioners to make links with the CoEL with regard to creativity and add specificity to its value in terms of identifying and assessing learning and development.

Whether or not you agree with Ken Robinson's provocative statement on the importance of creativity and whatever your view on the revisions to the ELGs, it's clear that creativity is an essential element of what it is to be human; imaginative, exploratory, social and expressive. The revisions to the EAD ELGs offer opportunities to refocus pedagogy on optimising children's modes of expression which in turn, builds their multiple vocabularies including oral, aural, cultural and aesthetic and so can make a valuable contribution to children's holistic wellbeing, learning and development.

Summary of Key Points

- EAD supports the development of children's creativity and as such offers a vehicle for learning in areas which are less obvious but equally important for children's holistic development
- EAD has unique features which include the development of aesthetic appreciation and alternative ways of thinking and processing experiences in ways over which the child can exercise agency and control. These aspects can help support children's emotional wellbeing
- The multiple modes of EAD offer opportunities for children to express themselves in a variety of ways and so can amplify the voice of the child, thereby providing practitioners with richer insights into children's responses to their experience
- The new ELGs recognise that EAD can be seen as a subjective and a social endeavour and this helps to clarify some of the discrete skills involved including interpreting, adapting and imagining (subjective skills) as well as explaining, sharing and recounting (social skills)

- The EAD ELGs highlight the government's emphasis on developing children's vocabulary. EAD also provides opportunities to develop alternative modes of communication including the physical, visual and musical as well as expressive language.

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy

- Provide a wide-range of loose-parts and open-ended opportunities to develop children's imagination and flexible thinking and enable their unique responses?
- Recognise the value of time and space to support children's deeper engagement in experimentation and possibility thinking?
- Tolerate and value ambiguity in respecting children's unanticipated and varied interpretations of and use of resources?
- Motivate children to take pride in their ideas and creations so that they want to share and explain their thinking?
- Explicitly value and model creative thinking and behaviour in EAD and across all areas of learning?

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