

Creative representation: the child's unique response to experience

by KATHY RING

One of the key ways in which young children show their uniqueness is through the individuality of their responses to experiences. In environments where children have ownership of the ways in which they respond to the stimuli of well-chosen objects and materials, and where adults are knowledgeable about the possibilities for extension and transformation inherent in these materials, children's representations take the form of personal innovation. They are able to experience the excitement and joy of having an idea or doing or making something new to them, which is valued by themselves and others.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) uses the concept of the 'flow state' to describe children who are fully immersed in what they are doing. He sees this state characterised by a feeling of great absorption, engagement, and fulfillment, where the whole being is involved and skills are used to the utmost. Intrinsic motivation is supported by an environment that ensures that skill level and challenge level are matched and high.

Alongside developing skills in using open-ended media such as blocks, clay and paint, the importance of children having the freedom to combine resources in many different ways must be emphasised. The powerful ongoing transformations in thinking, that are part of the playful process of, for example, cutting, sticking, marking and layering paper and card or building, re-arranging and connecting blocks and plastic crates, cannot be underestimated. The products of such a process are continually changing as children adapt their meanings in mind to the nature of the available resources. These 'in the process of change' makings are both original and expressive. They are often underpinned by fleeting or transitory ideas that cannot always be explained in words, but are shown through child-appropriate physical action. As recognised by Duffy (1998), 'creativity is about connecting the previously unconnected in ways that are meaningful for the individual'.

In many settings practitioners have a well-developed understanding of what constitutes creative representation. This has been honed over time and has been part of ongoing staff development. They can recognise it when observing young children and have learnt how to extend it without taking away the child's sense of ownership. Many early years practitioners however, do not feel so secure in their understanding. The following material, adapted from the High-Scope document *Young Children in Action* (Hohmann, Banet & Weikart, 1979), offers support and identifies how children use representation to develop understanding of how the world works. They identify some key experiences that support young children in making links between experience and representation that are cumulative and often take place concurrently.

Recognising objects by sound, touch, taste and smell

"A child who has had a wide variety of active experiences can identify many objects from their sensory cues i.e. a siren being heard calls to mind (stands for) a picture of the whole object, an ambulance." This is an intermediate step between the infant's sensori-motor perceptions and the older child's understanding of symbols.

Imitating actions and sounds

From early imitations of adult actions such as drinking from cups, preschoolers begin to imitate increasingly complex actions e.g. driving a car. Through imitation they learn to represent with their own bodies and voices what they know about the world. This is the beginning of pretending or role-play, in which children integrate a series of imitations into a recognisable role.

Relating models, photographs and pictures to real places and things

'This truck's like my dad's truck, but his truck is great big and it's blue and I can honk it and I can really turn it on. This one, you have to push it like this.' This kind of experience helps children to make sense of the many representations that occur in their everyday world. Experience in interpreting such representations also gives children the background for the more abstract interpretations that they will be interpreting later e.g. letters and numbers.

Role-playing

Pretending to be someone else by doing and saying what that person does and says, is another way young children



represent their experiences and their knowledge about people and situations. Through role-play they sort out and use what they understand about events they've seen or taken part in, consolidating and strengthening what they know about their world. Role-play helps children make their own sense of things happening in the adult world that they only partly understand.

Making models

Using boxes for filling and emptying, dough for squeezing, rolling and flattening, blocks for stacking and moving from one place to another gives children opportunity to explore three-dimensional materials. These materials become tools for representation, as they enjoy making models of people and objects. Children's representations vary in the amount and arrangement of details and in the similarity of the representation to the thing represented. These differences depend on the degree of the child's familiarity with the object she is representing and her skill with the material being used. A child's clear mental representation of a dog may translate into a primitive shaped dog at the workbench because she hasn't acquired the skill to saw out the detailed pieces needed. In contrast her ability in the shaping of clay to fit her internal picture may allow more details to be represented because of skills she has developed in the medium.

Making drawings and paintings

Children use paint or implements for drawing to put down on paper what they can hold in mind about a person, place, object or situation. This might not always be its shape (figurative representation). Boys spend longer than girls, generally, representing action (Ring, 2010), the movement of the brush or pen representing the action of the object/ person in time and space (Matthews, 1999). The child's interest at the moment of making the mark will become the criteria for what will be represented (Kress, 2010).

Observing that spoken words can be written down and read back

The dictation process fascinates many children of pre-school age and is a way adults can model for children another



way of them representing their experiences. Their dictated stories may be about familiar people and situations, pictures they have made, structures they have built and situations they have enacted in role-play. Their stories may be a series of coherent sentences or words or phrases. Through hearing their own words read back, children begin to get a sense of the power of their words to communicate their experiences and ideas, realising they can be makers of stories as well as listeners.

(Adapted from Hohmann, Banet & Weikart, 1979)

The walls and windows of some early years settings are adorned with child decorated but adult produced templates of butterflies, ladybirds and flowers. These product-driven makings reflect the

limits of an adult's understanding of what constitutes the process of creative representation and their imagining of what the resulting product should look like. They do not reflect the child's unique response to experience or what a young child is truly capable of. The images included alongside this article, taken from the research project *Supporting Young Children Drawing* (Ring, 2010), show children, driven by their own interests and fascinations, enacting and representing within the social context of the EYFS setting. They are engrossed in the process of meaningful learning.

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Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention by M Csikszentmihalyi (HarperPerennial, 1997)

Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years by B. Duffy (OUP/McGraw-Hill, 1998)

Young Children in Action by M. Hohmann, B. Banet and D. Weikart (High/Scope, 1979)

Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication by G. Kress (Routledge, 2010)

The Art of Childhood and Adolescence: The Construction of Meaning by J. Matthews (Falmer Press, 1999)

Supporting a playful approach to drawing by K. Ring in Play and Learning in the Early Years by P. Broadhead, J. Howard and E. Wood (Sage, 2010)