

Thoughtful planning – strategies to liberate innovative and collaborative learning

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There is not one universal definition of creativity in early childhood educational contexts. Indeed if we are to assert that creative learning or creative outcomes are desirable it is essential that we describe what we mean by creativity as this underpins the environments that we prepare. We have to consider what is the understanding of the whole setting when creativity is discussed between educators, written into policies and influences the structure and planning of the experiences for children?

Creativity

Describing and developing creative education and contexts that value creative learning are part of the daily professional discussions at Madeley Nursery School, informing how we reflect on the children's learning experiences during the day and informing how we plan and prepare for learning. Indeed Malaguzzi in conversation with Gandini (2012) asserts that creativity is not a novelty, but part of our ways of "thinking, knowing and making choices."

At Madeley Nursery School we position creativity as active expressions of meaning-making by individuals and in groups. Indeed the values of individual expression, although acknowledged and respected, are always encouraged into an encounter with the ideas and creative expressions of others as we work towards collaborative learning amongst the children.

Gregory Bateson (1972) a thinker who influences the pedagogical ideas of the preschools and infant toddler centres in Reggio Emilia proposed that what is needed when thinking about learning and creativity is a synthesis of two views purposiveness and the unconscious.

In this article I shall propose how this belief, that creativity and meaning-making coexist, influence the ways in which we at Madeley Nursery plan for children's creative responses to their curiosities and investigations.

Curating and designing learning contexts

In designing learning contexts that reflect children's enquiries and thinking, we curate and make pedagogical choices about the range of materials that are made available for children to use. It is more than having a continuous range of a variety of materials that children can access and choose from. It can appear to some that we limit or restrict children's creative learning and this aspect of our pedagogy at Madeley Nursery School therefore could be seen as controversial. However

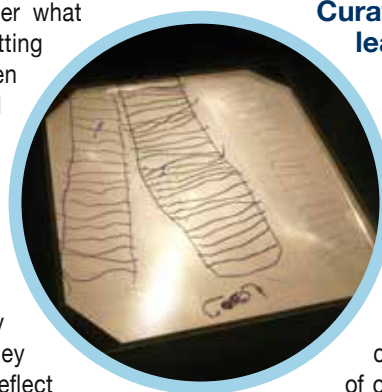
we believe that an essential part of our preparation in readiness to meet with children's own ideas and theories is to decide upon which materials and tools are made available to children and carefully consider the ways in which they are prepared and presented.

We offer materials, resources and contexts that are:

- ▶ multimodal
- ▶ poly-sensorial
- ▶ flexible and transformable
- ▶ inclusive of analogue and digital
- ▶ supportive of children's desires to communicate and represent the world around them

And which have:

- ▶ empathy and connection with the children's enquiries whilst allowing for innovation and the unexpected
- ▶ aesthetic sensitivity
- ▶ aesthetic of proposal and questioning





Intra-action and agency of materials

Karen Barad (2007) references the ideas of intra-activity in which materials, resources and environments are given agency in relationship with humans.

Intra-action is a Baradian term used to replace 'interaction,' which necessitates pre-established bodies that then participate in action with each other. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human being to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces in which all designated 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably. (Barad 2007:141)

This perspective gives another urgency to the choices educators make when planning and preparing the material environment for children's creative learning. Further, Taguchi, examines the need for preparation and openness.

We need to make plans for our learning endeavours with the children. Plan ahead, but also always be on the edge and be prepared to immediately diverge from or let go of that plan when necessary (Taguchi, 2010:116)



When visiting a setting as part of a study week with Sightlines-Initiative in 2019 we were fortunate to spend a morning in the Bruno Munari preschool in Reggio Emilia. This is an example from that visit where we observed learning in a prepared learning context in the classroom for 3 year olds.

We were told how the experiences in the 3-year-old classroom were focused on the children, teachers and parents "becoming a group". The teachers proposed many ways to give children opportunities to become a group yet, at the same time as encouraging groupness, developing children's familiarity with materials and techniques and encouraging creative responses of the children to the contexts and areas prepared by the teachers. In the classroom, a table was beautifully prepared with a range of vegetables in two baskets, on several circular mirrors. Three choices of small-scale paper, water pots and small brushes, watercolour blocks, water soluble pencils, and felt-tipped pens predominantly in shades of green and yellow with an occasional red or pink option, a laptop computer linked to a digital microscope and a couple of magnifying glasses were available. Six children were invited to look closely at the vegetables and to draw them:

- ▶ The table was prepared with a consideration of aesthetics, whilst the mirrors reflected the underside of the vegetables.
- ▶ Pencils and pens were lined in colour and shade order.
- ▶ The digital microscope focused on a particularly intriguing part of the cauliflower.
- ▶ The vegetables chosen had a strong structural and

Table 1

What questions do the educators ask of themselves during their reflective dialogues that influence their decisions on how to prepare the environment?	Planning and preparation of materials and resources arising from the reflective dialogues.
What found materials and fixings could we offer that have the potential to be assembled into a variety of ladders?	"-Twigs of various sizes and thicknesses -Wooden lolly-sticks -Paper straws -Masking-tape, glue, string -Clay"
What construction sets have a sensitivity and empathy to the idea of ladders?	"-Mobilo -Lasy -Construction Straws"
What graphic materials could support the children's investigations into woodlice and ladders?	"-Fine and thick felt pens for drawing both on paper and on acetate sheets -Pencils -Paper of different proportions, small large, rectangular, narrow strips and acetate sheets"
What resources could scaffold links from the outdoor enquiries into the studio classroom?	"-Petri dishes with live woodlice in them -Photographs taken by the children -Pedagogical documentation, notes, photographs and video created by educators whilst children have been discovering and researching outside in previous encounters"
What digital media could be used to amplify ideas and/or give further research opportunities?	"-Light-box with acetate sheets -Digital microscope attached to a computer and projector -Electronic tablet on a stand"
What visual resources could support the children's interests?	"-Unusual images of ladders from picture books or from the internet -Non fiction books about woodlice and other garden insects -Detailed drawings and diagrams of woodlice made by artists and scientists"
What other resources could be useful in meeting the ideas of the children?	"-Small plastic insects -Small step ladder -Small straight ladder -Large mirrors"

textural shape that had the potential to be represented with graphical marks that could be interpreted and read by other children (celery, Lollo Rosso lettuce, Calabrese broccoli, Romanesco cauliflower).

This preparation drew the children's attention and, working alongside the educator, they readily participated in the invitation to observe the vegetables. They created a diverse range of drawings that they shared and discussed together and which had recognisable elements that the group could talk about together. In this way, children's own acute sense of evaluation and critical thinking dispositions were amplified in this context.

The next example is from Madeley Nursery. It has been chosen to show how the educators prepared and curated and designed the indoor studio space for children to continue to research their ideas. In this instance it was about the perceived needs of the woodlice they had been observing in the nursery garden.

The children had identified a problem; the woodlice in the nursery garden needed ladders to climb trees.

In Table 1 you can see how the educators prepared the studio space to respond to the curiosities and propositions of the children.

The planning and preparation of materials that liberated innovation amongst groups of children were based on our pedagogical choices. At Madeley Nursery School, learning and teaching in the areas of expressive arts and design always coexist with the other curriculum areas. We see creativity, curiosity, theorising, innovation, learning and collaboration as interconnected ideas.

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