



## FEATURE

### Promoting creativity

Alice McGonigle, [amcgonigle@north-ayrshire.gov.uk](mailto:amcgonigle@north-ayrshire.gov.uk)

North Ayrshire Council, Scotland

DOI Number: <https://doi.org/10.26203/dv01-5212>

Copyright: © 2007 McGonigle

**To cite this feature:** McGonigle, A., (2007). Promoting creativity. *Education in the North*. 15 pp.51-54.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

## Promoting creativity

*Pupils and teachers are enthusiastic about their new approach to learning, says Alice McGonigle, Quality Improvement Officer, North Ayrshire*

Many teachers and parents will readily testify that children and young people are 'always creating' but such comments are usually sarcastic or ironic. They do, however, lead to an interesting debate about what is meant by creativity, what influences the ability to be creative and how these skills may be developed and nurtured. Chambers Dictionary defines 'creative' as (1) having or showing the ability to create; (2) inventive or imaginative. These definitions acknowledge the universally accepted view of creativity but also take it further. For most people, creativity is associated with artistic ability in areas of music, art and drama but, while these are significant means of expressing talent or ability, the concept of creativity should not be confined to these fields.

This broader perception of creativity is the basis for some of the measures included in the National Priorities in Education. When reporting on progress with these, authorities are asked to identify how they 'equip pupils with the foundation skills, attitudes and expectations necessary to prosper in a changing society and to encourage creativity and ambition'. More crucial to the challenge of this statement is how such progress will be measured and what evidence may be available to support any evaluations.

One key issue to be resolved is what teachers understand by creativity. The 2006 report by HM Inspectorate, *Emerging Good Practice in Promoting Creativity*, highlighted the differing views of teachers about what constitutes creativity and also whether environment or innate ability is central to it. The report indicates that there are also differing opinions about how creativity links with other aspects of cognitive development and whether certain subjects or activities are more conducive to creativity than others. Some teachers express the view that subjects requiring logical and deductive thinking, such as mathematics or science, are less likely to provide opportunities for the type of lateral or innovative thinking that being creative requires. This, the report says, is not necessarily the case:

Some pupils may not be creative in one particular area but show creativity in a range of contexts across the curriculum. Where staff organised opportunities for creativity across the curriculum, pupils were more likely to find and develop their creative talents in particular areas.

Why has creativity become a key focus in education? As with many educational initiatives, the main driving force is the perceived needs of society and the role that education plays in equipping children, young people and adults to become responsible citizens. Promoting creativity is important to individuals and to society because doing so leads to individual fulfilment and is a major factor in achieving success and building confidence.

In North Ayrshire, schools have taken on the many challenges which national and local priorities have presented. Incorporating initiatives such as enterprise, citizenship and healthy living into an already crowded curriculum requires a high level of innovative thinking and planning. Where these have been successfully introduced, teachers and managers have regarded these aspects as integral to the work already undertaken within the school rather than as additional burdens. They have reviewed their planning to identify opportunities to promote and develop the appropriate skills. There has been a growing emphasis on how skills are developed and promoted and a move away from the previous content-based approach.

In *Thinking for Learning* (Network Press, 2002), M. Rockett and S. Percival write:

The potential is there for shaping creative and critical thinkers in our schools. The modern world of work, and modern life, demands that people should be able to learn. How better to meet that challenge than to show pupils how they learn and to motivate them so that they are open to and excited by the whole experience? Even now, traditional subjects can be taught in an innovative, stimulating and relevant manner.

The introduction of research-based classroom practice in matching activities to pupils' learning needs and styles has led to some radical changes in methodologies and teaching approaches. Probably the greatest of these is the increased involvement of pupils in deciding what and how they will learn. This is the view expressed by P. Adey and M. Shayer in *Really Raising Standards* (Routledge, 1994):

It is not what pupils learn, but how they learn it that matters. How they learn depends on their cognitive processing capability, and intervention in the process by which this capability develops is the route to fundamental improved life chances in the population of learners.

The implementation of strategies from *Assessment is for Learning* and the development of *A Curriculum for Excellence* have been significant triggers for teachers and pupils in developing relevant new approaches to teaching and learning. Prior to these developments, however, a number of teachers were already evaluating their practice and seeking alternative means of delivering the curriculum. Looking at broader achievement rather than the previous narrow focus on attainment, trying to address under-achievement of boys and attempting to deal with disaffected pupils led teachers to look at how pupils could become more engaged with learning.

### Developments in North Ayrshire

Staff in North Ayrshire schools have been offered a wide range of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities to enhance their skills, and this has led to an increased awareness of the need for a flexible, but focused, approach to classroom practice and to examining various theories about learning and teaching. Through events organised by the Tapestry organisation, staff have accessed the work of high-profile educationalists such as Howard Gardner, Tony Buzan and Galina Dolya. Follow-up work within North Ayrshire schools was a key aspect of this. Psychological Services in the area have also played an important part in promoting these strategies. Galina Dolya's *Key to Learning* materials were piloted in nurseries and early primary years, and psychologists worked in several schools promoting various strategies such as paired maths, critical thinking, More Effective Learning (MEL) and Let's Encourage Thinking (LET) at classroom level.

A whole-school approach has had more immediate impact than when individual teachers adopted the practices. The resultant culture and continuity of approach means that, as pupils progress through school, they consolidate and expand their repertoire of approaches. There are issues in the transition from primary to secondary school where pupils who have learned in a culture of creative approaches throughout primary school do not have the same opportunities in the early stages of secondary school. Although the whole-school approach works well in schools where some teachers employ the methods on an individual basis, there is still scope for other staff to observe and discuss what is happening. Sometimes this 'toe in the water' approach is more useful for teachers who have reservations or anxieties about changing their practice. The authority has organised a wide range of local events where teachers and support staff reflect on and share good practice.

In pre-school establishments and the early years in primary school, there is a strong emphasis on learning through play. Encouraging a young children's natural curiosity and sense of wonder is central to engaging them in developing creative thinking. In his book, *Assessment for Learning* (R S Publications, Salford, 1995), R. Sutton writes:

The best way to encourage effective involvement is to expect it from an early age and make it part of normal learning activity, using techniques appropriate to particular needs and circumstances, rather than bolting it on as something separate.

Unfortunately, the systems within education and the demands of society very often lead to this initial creativity and mental flexibility being steered into a more conforming and easily measured form. It is therefore hardly surprising that teachers feel challenged by the concept of creativity in the classroom. How do they set about delivering the required elements of the curriculum, meeting the pastoral needs of pupils, fulfilling the expectations of parents and society and still find scope to encourage creativity?

Discussions with staff in those North Ayrshire Council schools which are working at reconciling these various demands show that there are three main aspects to promoting creativity – the role of the teacher, the environment for learning and the outcomes for pupils.

Teachers need to resume the role which the profession had a decade or two ago - as professionals who truly educate rather than those who deliver a curriculum and hope that pupils will learn what is required of them. Through the authority's CPD provision, teachers are re-discovering the joy of helping children to learn and also of fulfilling the role for which many feel they were trained. D. Hargreaves wrote in a *Guardian* article (November 2000):

If teachers are not involved in innovative activity, they are not likely to understand how to create the conditions in which students learn how to be innovative.

The North Ayrshire teachers have looked closely at their own practice and taken account of the needs of pupils, their learning styles and relationships and have matched these to the methodologies employed within the classroom.

Research has shown that the environment for learning is more significant for creativity than ability or heredity. The learning experiences which a child has will set the pattern for his or her ability to think 'out of the box' and to explore ideas in an



uninhibited way. Teachers who promote creativity will ensure that key elements are present in the learning environment and they are also aware that learning takes place in a range of contexts. Children do not always learn what we teach or tell them. In those North Ayrshire schools where teachers have engaged with the theories of creativity and learning, there are many examples of children who are confident, articulate and eager to learn.

### Evaluation

The North Ayrshire report on progress with the National Priorities in Education contains information gathered from schools about specific aspects of creativity and which stages or year groups are involved. In order to evaluate accurately the types and level of activity in this area and its impact on pupils, a group of schools was identified and a more in-depth study of their practice was undertaken.

Children in one school, when asked about some of the practices mentioned in the survey, were enthusiastic about the impact that these activities had on their learning experience. When asked why using mind maps in science rather than traditional note-taking was particularly successful, one P6 pupil said, 'It's neater and less confusing'. His fellow pupil in P7 pointed out: 'Learning to use mind maps and work with other people is good practice for later life. It also helps your social skills and that's important because you need to get on with people when you start work.' In another school, a P5 girl said: 'Mind maps show your ideas. You can add to it and it gives you all the ideas on one page.'

Working collaboratively was important to all the pupils who were interviewed. There were examples across the whole curriculum but particular mention was made of the benefits when tackling creative writing, problem-solving and design tasks. Another pupil commented, 'If there's something you're not quite good at and you work with a partner you can learn from them'. This simple statement reflects the insight that this boy had about his own ability and understanding and also an awareness that learning is not a solitary process. In these schools, which deliver the same curriculum as others within the authority, the approach to creativity was evident across all classes. A whole-school approach meant that every teacher was committed to the principles of promoting creativity, had researched well and was supported initially by Psychological Services. What made the difference to the quality of educational experience for pupils in these schools was the approach taken to learning. Children at every stage were familiar with many aspects of creative thinking, and while schools adopted the

infusion method rather than teaching skills as a separate curricular area, the evidence that these approaches were in place was in teachers' planning, in the teaching and learning within the classrooms and in the impact on pupils. Children at all stages talked knowledgeably and enthusiastically about learning styles, graphic organisers, brainstorming, paired activities, as well as De Bono's techniques such as Six Hats, Plus Minus and Interesting (PMI), Consider All Factors (CAF) and Eight Square Technique.

When researching a topic, a popular approach in one class was for pairs of pupils to use sticky notes to make statements about prior knowledge. These were then edited to provide notes for a personal talk. As one pupil commented, 'You get to know other people, their feelings and their ideas. You can put two brains together and work together.' In a variation on this, the notes were added to by other children in the group and a report drafted for presentation. Pupils also shared information by providing an answer or statement for which another pair or group compiled a series of questions. These were used by other groups or as a whole-class activity to generate ideas or assess knowledge about a theme.

A key feature of these approaches was that the teachers provided the model for pupils, a role urged by Sternberg and Williams in *How to Develop Student Creativity* (ASCD, Alexandria, 1996):

The most powerful way to develop creativity in your students is to be a role model. Children develop creativity not when you tell them to, but when you show them..

Many of the staff used mind maps or brainstorming as part of their planning and participated in the activities with the children. The role of the teacher was particularly important and many had to work hard initially to break the familiar pattern and be facilitators rather than teachers. Knowing when to intervene and when to step back was central to the success of the practice.

Although there was an ease and flexibility of approach, the amount of planning did not decrease. Considerably more thought was given to planning for working in this way than for following a prescribed format or familiar method. But teachers pointed out that planning was less of a chore and really 'got me energised and motivated'. This enthusiasm was picked up by the pupils who in turn enjoyed their tasks. Teachers felt that their own, and pupils', pleasure in work was greatly increased.. Because pupils were engaged with the tasks and were involved in the planning and organisation of these, there was less scope for pupils to become

uninterested or disaffected. Children, especially boys, behaved better and were more considerate and respectful to each other. Staff commented that they were often amazed by the ideas and strategies which children devised and particularly enjoyed observing how children interacted with each other. Group dynamics were important and teachers were careful in their organisation of groups or pairs to take account of the personalities, abilities and learning styles of the pupils and of the type and intended outcome of the activity. Sometimes children would be given responsibility for deciding on groupings.

The initial outcome of this shift towards a more creative approach to learning and teaching has been the development of creativity itself. Teachers are welcoming the increased flexibility and see the positive impact on pupils. They subscribe to Plutarch's philosophy that 'The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be lighted.' Pupils are becoming more engaged with learning and see a clear purpose in learning for its own sake because of

the pleasure and gains that it brings and that learning is a lifelong pursuit.

As more schools, staff and pupils discover and adopt a wide range of techniques for learning and teaching and develop creativity, they will have reached the heart of a true curriculum for excellence.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to North Ayrshire Council Psychological Services, and to staff and pupils of:

Ardeer Primary School, Braefoot Nursery, Caledonia Primary School, Corsehill Nursery Class, Glebe Primary School, Hayocks Primary School, John Galt Primary School, Kilmory Primary School, Mayfield Primary School, Rainbow Cottage Nursery, Shiskine Primary School, Skelmorlie Primary School, Springside Primary School, St. Luke's Primary School, St. Mary's Primary School, Whitehirst Park Primary School, and Winton Primary School. Some of these primary schools also have nursery classes which participated in the projects.