



Creativity in Every Irish Childhood: Agency, Enquiry and Experience



Author(s): Mags Walsh

Date first Published: February, 2015

Type: Provocation Paper for the Clore Leadership Programme Fellowship 2013-14

Note: The paper presents the views of the author, and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the Clore Leadership Programme or its constituent partners. As a ‘provocation paper’, this piece is a deliberately personal, opinionated article, aimed at stirring up debate and/or discussion.

Published Under: Creative Commons



Creativity in Every Irish Childhood: Agency, Enquiry and Experience by Mags Walsh is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Your use of the Clore Leadership Programme archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use of this particular License, available under Creative Commons.



The Clore Leadership Programme

Mags Walsh has worked in the area of cultural and arts provision for children and young people for more than a decade, having previously worked at The Ark, a cultural centre for children and as Executive Director at Children's Books Ireland (CBI). She holds both an advanced certificate and an advanced diploma in Management Practice for the Arts from University of Ulster. She was the 2013/14 recipient of the Jerome Hynes Fellowship to participate in Clore Cultural Leadership Programme and is also a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Mags currently provides a range of consultancy advice and project assistance to clients both in Dublin and London. She is the current Arts Council of Ireland adviser in the area of Children, Young People and Education and is working with A New Direction to develop the London Cultural Education Challenge. In addition, Mags is completing Arts Humanities Research Council Funded research into the construction of cultural value in media coverage of cultural leadership.

This paper was written as a part of the author's Fellowship with the Clore Leadership Programme in 2014.

The Clore Leadership Programme is a not-for-profit initiative, aimed at developing and strengthening leadership potential across the cultural and creative sectors in the UK. The Programme awards its flagship Clore Fellowships on an annual basis to exceptional individuals drawn from across the UK and beyond, and runs a choice of programmes tailored to leadership needs of arts professionals at different stages of their career. This provocation paper has been produced under the aegis of Clore Leadership Programme. For more information, visit www.cloreleadership.org.



The Clore Leadership Programme

Creativity is not something that is given to you, taught to you or supplied to you. It is the unlocking of your own innate potential to imagine, generate ideas and make sense of your world. It is awakened by the opportunity to explore, to experiment and to learn in environments which nurture and value creative agency, creative enquiry and creative experience.

The understanding of childhood and the place of children in Ireland has shifted in recent decades. Much has been done to recognise that children are not simply 'un grown-ups' but citizens with rights, responsibilities and who deserve a state that values and supports them.

Unfortunately there remains within our national discourse a belief that children are simply bundles of needs. There remains an unwillingness to see them as locations of boundless potential. For example, some still view children's education as a place for teaching instead of a place for learning and some view children's health as a place for treatment instead of for well-being. Why else have we called our first ever national policy framework for children and young people, "*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*"? Have we so instrumentalised childhood that our headline aspirations for children are better outcomes and brighter futures, rather than better experiences and brighter lives?

To manifest better childhoods it is necessary to plant more creativity into them. Of course, I doubt you could find anyone who would argue for less creativity in childhood, but creativity as a word has been devalued. Its use in phrases like 'creative accounting' and 'creative differences' regularly demean its value. The power of creativity needs to be reasserted.

To ensure that all children can unlock their potential, they need to be born into a nation that values creativity and understands it a core ingredient in the lives of all citizens. A narrow definition of creativity as something that is confined to particular individuals, age ranges, communities or opportunities reduces its potency.

A wider definition recognises that creativity is a process rather than an outcome. Creativity is not the same as innovation and its benefits move far beyond economic success and business development where it is so often placed. Creativity is a more deeply felt, more personal and more enriching phenomenon than is currently expressed both in public discourse and in public policy.

In fact, policy may never be able to adequately capture the value of creativity. Any policy we do devise will struggle to keep up to technological and social advances. Creativity resists narrow

The Clore Leadership Programme



definitions and the harder we try and hold onto a static definition of it for policy making, the quicker it will allude us.

Instead I propose that we take three key aspects; creative enquiry, creative agency and creative experience and ensure we make them central to Irish childhoods. These three interlocking elements can be used to frame creativity within childhood. They do not represent a complete framework for examining or evaluating creativity but their presence can serve as key indicators of a stronger place for creativity in Irish childhood.

Creative enquiry is a natural state throughout childhood for many. It is the ability to observe and experiment when the outcome is not yet known. It is often an innate and instinctual position for babies and children. Psychologist Alison Kopnick expressed it eloquently when she said "babies and young children are like the R&D division of the human species".

Of the three elements proposed - agency, experience and enquiry - this one is perhaps the most obvious. Nonetheless, its inclusion is important as it partially addresses the inequality with which creativity is burdened. If enquiry is so natural within childhood, how is it that the stages of creative enquiry are not yet more widely recognised?

Elements of enquiry, such as observation and hypothesis, are seen as core ingredients of success in the sciences, but their role in creativity is much less valued. Enquiry and experimentation coexist and to exclude either from the development of creativity is to withhold a core process from our creative selves.

Enquiry is nurtured by giving children and young people the opportunity to take creative risks and to present them with opportunities where there is no draft outcome or indeed no outcome at all expected. Enquiry can be nurtured for and of itself not merely as a stage of a wider process. For example, teaching someone drawing skills is often predicated on showing them first how to see an object and disentangle it from the wider contexts and meanings we assign to objects. What if we acknowledged that learning to see is just as creative as learning to draw?

We need more and better longitudinal research into the role that creativity plays in childhood, starting with its inclusion within the existing national study of children in Ireland. To truly value creative enquiry we need to consistently enquire about creativity.

Children are natural creators who revel in their naturally felt creative agency. A young baby is attracted to mark making and toddlers are drawn to noise makers. This instinct to make something that is apart from ourselves drives our creativity and is abundant in the early years.

The Clore Leadership Programme



Creative agency is, of course, linked to other natural facets of childhood like learning and experimentation, the everyday activities of trial and error which characterise particularly the early years. That is not, however, to say that they are the same thing.

Creative agency is at risk of being structured out of childhood by the limited value assigned to creativity specifically within education. Often within education, creativity is viewed as primarily either a means of self-expression or an avenue with which to build other more valued skills. Where self-expression is the goal, as it often is for example within time tabled art activities, agency, although granted to the participants, is often limited by poor resources and understanding. How often do we see a visual art experience limited to a photocopied sheet to complete or colour in? How often is the experience of music confined to a standardised response frame?

The physical provision of spaces that encourage creativity in schools is often poor. In other disciplines, particularly sport, we accept that physical spaces are necessary and conducive to good experiences but often creative experiences are not afforded the same status. Likewise within teacher education the status and provision for creativity is currently a small element. A broader inclusion and examination of creative agency must be included within teacher education. To recognise and support creative agency, teachers themselves must engage in creative experiences throughout their training and professional development.

The controlling of agency within narrowly prescribed confines of art form, methodology or paradigm limits the potential of education. Much has been written recently about the place of creativity in business success. See for example, Ed Catmull's book *Creativity, Inc.* about the culture at Pixar animation. It can be argued that the type of creative culture so valued at companies like Pixar is built on the return of creative agency to the individuals who work there. Wouldn't it be better if it was never removed in the first place either in work or education?

The final aspect is creative experience. When creative agency and creative enquiry are in place, they form firm foundations for engaging and high quality creative experiences throughout childhood.

Somehow within arts and cultural practice a false dichotomy has emerged with regard to creative experiences for young audiences. The young person's experiences of events such as performances and workshops are wrongly plotted on a scale of passive audience member to active participant. On the audience end of the scale we may have a child attending a traditional theatre performance as a member of the audience, and on the other we may have a child creating

The Clore Leadership Programme



a sculpture piece in an entirely self-led experience. The assumption that one requires greater creativity than the other is the false basis for this dichotomy.

Presuming that there is greater creative experience in participatory settings diminishes the value of an intense individual and solo creative experience. For example, reading is a naturally creative act, encouraging as it does the reader to create an imagined fictional world inspired by the author. It is no less and no more creative than collaborative theatre making, yet its value is often diminished by its personal and private nature. The narrow emphasis on creative experience limits the possibilities for creativity and increases the likelihood of poor quality work for younger audiences.

As long as enquiry and agency are embedded in an experience it will stimulate creativity. Experience breeds creativity but that creativity is not increased by the addition of a participatory element that confines, limits or controls enquiry and agency. For example, there is nothing more likely to diminish the experience of reading a book as the production of a standardised book report.

A robust and skilled cultural sector can deliver exceptional creative experiences for young audiences. Public and private financial support to arts, cultural and creative projects should be recognised as investment in those experiences and the creative potential of its young citizens.

Cultural provision which celebrates personal creativity based on agency, enquiry and experience is the right of all children and young people. Ireland has the highest proportion of young people under the age of 25 in the European Union. We have a responsibility to construct a place for them that enables their innate potential to be fulfilled.

Everyone should lead a creative life. We need to trust that the creative process enriches our lives - especially the lives of our youngest citizens - and that in turn enriches our society. Creativity is simultaneously robust and fragile, private and shared, valued and demeaned. It should be nurtured and treasured as it unlocks the potential of all our citizens.



The Clore Leadership Programme

References

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures

Ed Catmull (2014) Creativity, Inc. Ed Catmull. Bantam Press.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs Growing up in Ireland, National Longitudinal Study of Childhood. <http://www.growingup.ie>

Alison Gopnick (2011) What do Babies Think?

http://www.ted.com/talks/alison_gopnik_what_do_babies_think

Acknowledgements

The concept of this paper was sparked by Matthew Taylor's 2014 lecture at the RSA entitled 'Power to Create'. Many of the ideas have come from engaging and enjoyable conversations with colleagues and friends. Thanks to Eamon Nolan, Jane O'Hanlon, Aoife Murray, Niamh Sharkey, Jenny Murray, Elaina O'Neil, Anna Cutler, Nessa O'Mahony and especially all of the Clore Leadership Fellows and team 2013/14.