

Creating and thinking critically.....

A practical guide to how babies and young children learn

by Di Chilvers

Contents

Foreword by Jennie Lindon	2	Chapter 3: Children make links	44
Introduction	3	Sustained shared thinking	49
		Adult support	53
Chapter 1: Creating and thinking critically	6	Chapter 4: Choosing ways to do things	58
The characteristics of children's learning	7	Self-regulation	63
Children's dispositions	10	Play	66
Chapter 2: Children have their own ideas	26	Chapter 5: A thoughtful approach	72
Describing children's ideas	27	Key themes and messages	73
Mindsets	34	Case study	75

Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

© MA Education Ltd 2013

Design: Alison Cutler **fonthillcreative** 01722 717043

All images © MA Education Ltd. All photos taken by Lucie Carlier with the exception of pages 9, 32, 36, 71 photos taken by Di Chilvers; pages 22-23 photos taken by Anni McTavish.

Page 20: *The Hundred Languages of Children* by Loris Malaguzzi, translated by Lella Gandini, © 1996 Preschools and Infant-toddlers Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy, published by Reggio Children (www.reggiochildren.it).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopied or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-907241-36-9

Foreword



Learning and Teaching in the Early Years

Anyone with children's best interests at heart will agree upon the crucial importance of experiences over the earliest years. However, good intentions are not enough to champion young learners. During early childhood, genuinely helpful adult behaviour – 'teaching' – looks very different from the version that suits older children and the classroom environment.

Those adults, who make a real difference, are knowledgeable about child development and committed to a warm relationship with individual children and their families. They are also confident to be led by young children's personal time frames and learning journeys. They pay close attention to the current

interests of young girls and boys and their enthusiasm for further discoveries.

The authors of this informative series close the gap of meaning that can exist between familiar phrases and a full understanding of what the words mean in best early years practice. Di Chilvers shows the ways that even the youngest children are already thoughtful and motivated to make sense of their world. Readers are supported to understand how to come alongside babies, toddlers and young children in shared conversation and playful enterprises.

By Jennie Lindon, early years consultant

Introduction

About the series

This book is one of a series of three:

- Playing and exploring
- Active learning
- **Creating and thinking critically**

The starting point for all three books is that babies and young children are already, from birth, creative and competent thinkers and learners – actively involved in their play and gathering information, ideas and knowledge to build their development and learning.

The youngest babies and children are able to use most of the same strategies that will support them as learners all their lives, such as imitating others, playing with things and finding patterns in their experience so they can predict what will happen. These books unpack how children learn and how adults can best support them in being and becoming learners for life.

Playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically are key characteristics of how children learn and have been linked in recent developmental psychology research to the concept of ‘self-regulation’. Self-regulation involves attitudes and dispositions for learning and an ability to be aware of one’s own thinking. It also includes managing feelings and behaviour. Self-regulation underpins learning across all areas, developing from birth and supporting lifelong learning (Bronson, 2000).

All babies and young children are different so there is no ‘one size fits all’ way to foster these characteristics of learning. Young children respond to, and join in with, experiences in different ways depending on a host of factors, including their temperament and the opportunities they have already had. However, the essential message of this book, and the others in the series, is that children (and their families) are entitled to

practitioners who are open to learning from the children with whom they work and who:

- Provide emotional warmth and security
- Tune-in to each unique child by observing and interacting sensitively
- Use observation and knowledge of child development to assess where children are in their learning and plan for next steps and challenges.

All three books provide many illustrative case studies and examples of real-life encounters with children’s **active learning**, their **play and exploration** and their **creative and critical thinking**. All these examples show practitioners and children engaged together in supporting and extending children’s learning.



Introduction



Practitioners should find these examples useful in reflecting on their own practice and the early years framework with which they work. The books focus particularly on the English Birth to Five framework: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). However, the characteristics of effective early learning are not tied specifically to any one cultural frame of reference and we hope practitioners working with other frameworks will find the discussion of learning and the ways in which adults support it, transcends national boundaries.

The characteristics of children’s development and learning were embedded in previous English frameworks and recognised in the commitments, which uphold the principles of the EYFS. The Tickell review (2011) of the EYFS drew on recent research and evidence from practitioners and academics across the early years sector in re-emphasising and highlighting those commitments as the **characteristics of effective learning** and they are an important part of the revised EYFS (2012).

As we look at the three characteristics and the underlying aspects of each one, it is important to remember that they are all interlinked. So imagine that the grid below is like a child’s piece of weaving, where they have carefully woven individual strands one way and then another so that they are criss-crossing. This is how it should look and is, in reality, how all children develop and learn.

The three characteristics emphasise **how** babies and young children go about the business of learning, rather than simply focusing on **what** they learn.

How children develop and learn is about the way in which they grow as thinkers and learners and involves them developing learning dispositions such as: curiosity, persistence, concentration, motivation, confidence and excitement. It is about becoming an independent thinker and learner who is able to make decisions and choices and interpret their ideas and solve problems.

The characteristics of effective learning

<p>Playing and exploring</p> <p>Engagement</p>	Finding out and exploring	Playing with what they know	Being willing to ‘have a go’
<p>Active learning</p> <p>Motivation</p>	Being involved and concentrating	Keeping on trying	Enjoying achieving what they set out to do
<p>Creating and thinking critically</p> <p>Thinking</p>	Having their own ideas	Making links	Choosing ways to do things

“

The starting point for all three books is that babies and young children are already, from birth, creative and competent thinkers and learners – actively involved in their play and gathering information, ideas and knowledge to build their development and learning.

”

If children have all these internal ‘tools’ at their fingertips as well as a good dose of self-confidence, well-being and resilience then **what** they learn will be encountered in a much more meaningful and enjoyable way.

What children learn is about the actual content or knowledge, so, for example, in the EYFS in England this is the **prime** and **specific** areas of learning – although there are many crossovers, particularly between the content of Personal, Social and Emotional Development and the characteristics. All learning is underpinned by social and emotional development. Generally we can see the **what** of children’s learning, or the content, as being like the bricks of a building with the **how** children learn and their social and emotional development as the cement and foundations – without which everything would topple over. The rest of this book explains this in much more depth across the age range from babies to children in school.

Just as the characteristics are woven together, so the three books in this series link together.

For example, in Chapter 1, there is a shared case study about Jago as he plays with a box of balls. Each book looks at Jago’s experience and learning from the different perspectives of active learning, playing and exploring and creating and thinking critically.

Throughout all three books there are further case studies, observations, suggestions for supporting children’s language development, reflection points and recommended reading.

About this book

Creating and thinking critically looks in depth at what is meant by ‘creating and thinking critically’, the developmental theory behind this and how it links to good practice.

It unpicks each aspect of creating and thinking critically in terms of what it means and how it can be observed and developed in practice. Some of the key themes in this book are:

- How children’s own ideas and interests form the basis of their thinking and learning
- How children play with their ideas and make connections to other aspects of their thinking
- How sustained shared thinking arises out of children’s creative interests and how you can support this in practice
- How you can follow children’s creative ideas and support their creative and critical thinking.



Chapter 1: What does 'Creating and thinking critically' mean?



“Creativity is rather like play. It anchors us and makes us integrated, whole people. Creativity helps us to get our lives ‘together’” (Bruce, p.10, 2004).

We begin to see and understand the complexities of children’s learning and development when we start to look closely at their creativity and how this plays a central role in their lives from birth. New babies have the rich potential for becoming creative explorers with the curiosity, desire and inclination to

understand the world they are now a part of. But what do we mean by ‘creativity’ and what does ‘thinking critically’ look like? We need to know in order to value the creativity of all our children, acknowledge them as competent and capable creators and support their current and future development.

With this in mind, a good starting point is to explore the complex meaning of creativity and critical thinking, the underpinning theory, child development and importantly,

how these relate to good practice in early childhood. Chapter 1 focuses on these key aspects:

- The characteristics of children's learning
- The theory behind creativity and thinking critically
- What this looks like in practice as we observe children
- Weaving together the strands of creativity and critical thinking.

The characteristics of children's learning

The characteristics of learning form the backbone of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and have been included in the themes and commitments since 2008. They are in the **Learning and Development** theme, which focuses on the following,

'Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of learning and development are equally important and inter-connected.'

There are three commitments that shape the characteristics of children's learning:

- **Play and exploration**
- **Active learning**
- **Creativity and thinking critically.**

It is important to remember that the characteristics do not stand alone, but should be seen as meshing together holistically as children think, develop and learn. As Loris Malaguzzi once explained, when he was referring to children's thinking and learning, it is like a bowl of spaghetti where play, exploration, active learning, creativity and thinking critically all tangle together in one mass. This is how it should be. He went on to say that it is the job of the adult to untangle the spaghetti to understand what they are seeing and what is happening. As we look across the characteristic of creativity and critical thinking in this book, we are 'untangling the spaghetti' in order to make sense of it and improve our knowledge of children and ultimately our practice. It is possible to do this across the other two characteristics in the parallel books: *Active learning* (Helen Moylett) and



The *how* of children's learning incorporates all the aspects of development which support them in becoming good learners and learning how to learn, including all the skills and dispositions children will need like problem solving, exploring, asking questions and concentrating.



Playing and exploring (Anni McTavish), which, with this title, form the Learning and Teaching in the Early Years series.

Importantly, the characteristics of learning are firmly focused on **how** young children learn and not on **what** they learn. The **how** of children's learning incorporates all the aspects of development which support them in becoming good learners and learning how to learn, including all the skills and dispositions children will need like problem solving, exploring, asking questions and concentrating. For the characteristic of **creating and thinking critically** this also includes children:

- Having their own ideas (Chapter 2)
- Making links (Chapter 3)
- Choosing ways to do things (Chapter 4).

If you imagine children having an internal 'tool kit' for thinking and learning, these are some of the 'tools' they need to help them become motivated, positive and creative learners, tools which they can use confidently at any time, to build their current and future learning and development.

What children learn is bound up in the **seven areas of learning** (EYFS 2012) and mainly consists of all the things they will need to know (knowledge) such as literacy, mathematics and understanding the world. It is much easier for them to learn if they have a full, ready to use 'tool kit' which should also include confidence, self-esteem and well-being.