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## Exploring children's creative narratives: some theoretical, methodological and applied perspectives

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## Chapter 1

### Exploring children's creative narratives: some theoretical, methodological and applied perspectives

*Dorothy Faulkner and Elizabeth Coates*

The principal aim of this edited collection is to offer fresh perspectives on children's creative narratives and to explore what these reveal about their imagination, their thought processes and how they understand the world. Accordingly, the contributors to the collection draw on detailed ethnographic case studies, naturalistic observations, conversations and playful interactions with children ranging in age from two to eleven years to develop theoretical insights that challenge traditional accounts of creativity and narrative. Our contributors include social scientists and postdoctoral researchers, educators and creative artists who are also academics and educators. A leitmotiv of the collection is that a proper understanding of creative narratives has to be an interdisciplinary endeavour if it is to do justice to the rich, complex, multi-modal and embodied nature of the children's thought processes as revealed through their drawing and story-telling, music making, dance, drama and imaginative play.

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A second theme that unites many of the chapters is that the narratives that emerge during the course of imaginary play episodes and classroom dialogue come about through collaborative, improvisational processes. Interpretation and analyses of these processes draw on socio-cultural accounts of creativity and creative development. These challenge more traditional accounts of creativity as an attribute or talent that belongs only to certain gifted individuals and that leads to exceptional, innovatory performance in domains such as the creative arts, science, mathematics and literature. As Iram and John Siraj-Blatchford mention in the Foreword to this collection, it is customary for contemporary accounts to refer to the distinction between everyday creativity, or creativity with a little 'c', and big 'C' creativity. The latter represents those grand endeavours that give rise to historically significant scientific and artistic innovation, or to cultural and theoretical paradigm shifts. This collection is about creativity with a little 'c', although for the children themselves, the narratives, creative acts and artistic outputs described in various chapters may well have had much more personal and emotional significance than seems warranted by this notion.

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Contributors to the collection comprehensively deconstruct historical accounts based on decontextual analyses of children's creative outputs. In the past, this approach gave rise to theories that described creative development as progressing through a sequence of age-related stages. A third, overarching theme that runs through the collection, therefore, is the argument that if we are to understand the situated nature of children's creative activity it is important to examine the social, affective and cognitive processes that take place when they are immersed in such activity. Many of the contributors to the collection use a case study approach to support this argument, and offer detailed and careful interpretive, phenomenological and/or conversational analyses of these processes that draw on observations of individual children, or pairs and groups of children. The case studies draw on recordings of the running narratives and self-talk of children engaged in self-directed, creative activity. These demonstrate that for the children concerned, the meanings and interpretation of their creative outputs changed and evolved from moment to moment, such that the end product of the activity underwent many transformations. Again, as Iram and John Siraj-Blatchford point out, van Oers's claim (1998) that the nature of children's creative activity can be described as progressive continuous re-contextualisation seems to capture the essence of many of these case studies. This also means that any 'after the event' interpretation or judgement of the end product itself is bound to be inaccurate as it will fail to take into account the sophisticated, transformational nature of the thought processes that contributed to its generation.

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A final theme that many contributors comment on is the challenge to conventional educational practices implied by these re-conceptualisations of children's creativity, and the recognition of the role and influence of popular culture and the mass media on their imagination. These contributors argue that formal

educational training programmes should offer teachers more sophisticated cultural discourses and experiences which will allow them to gain a more rounded understanding of children's creative narratives.

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Although many chapters offer detailed accounts of theories of creativity and of narrative, the focus of this volume is on the children themselves and on understanding how teachers, researchers and creative professionals scaffold their creative activity. In part this focus reflects our own interests as editors. Dorothy Faulkner is a developmental psychologist whose interest lies in the relationship between creativity and learning and in narrative development, while Elizabeth Coates is an educator with a wide knowledge and experience of training teachers to work with young children. Both of us are active researchers, and in the next two sections we offer our own perspectives on the significance of the various chapters in this collection.

### The developmental psychologist's viewpoint

As a developmental psychologist, I have long been interested in the development of children's story comprehension and production, and the development of thinking and reasoning in collaborative contexts. Originally, my own research drew principally on the paradigms of experimental, cognitive psychology and on quantitative analysis of video observations of children in classroom contexts. This approach is roundly criticised by many contributors to this volume, including Jenny Hallam, Helen Lee and Mani Das Gupta (Chapter 6), and Kerry Chappell and Susan Young (Chapter 11). Fortunately, in recent years I have been able to collaborate with social psychologists and educational researchers who have introduced me to the power and elegance of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Having seen the error of my 'experimental ways', (although I still argue that there is considerable merit in the quantitative analysis of systematic observation data to compare children's language and behaviour in different naturalistic contexts), as the chapters began to arrive, I became intensely interested in the many different qualitative, methodological approaches to the exploration of children's creative narratives taken by their various authors.

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Given that many authors agree that children's creative narratives are improvisational in nature, evolve through processes of creative emergence and are contextually situated in time and place, this raises the question of what researchers should use as the unit of analysis. R. Keith Sawyer (Chapter 2) and Susan Wright (Chapter 8) both discuss this in their chapters on play and drawing. In his chapter, Sawyer uses his discussion of the relationship between social pretend play and narrative to propose that the unit of analysis should be the discursive event, by which he means a single conversational turn or sequence of turns that together make up a play sequence. He argues that using conversational analysis to study the contingent, processual nature of children's improvised dialogue offers a more fruitful way forward than traditional, analyses of the structure and form of children's narratives.

My own chapter (3) and the chapter by Marjaana Kangas, Annakaisa Kultima and Heli Ruokamo (Chapter 4) offer accounts of children's creative and narrative thinking and conversation that use the discursive event as a unit of analysis. Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo describe a research project designed to uncover what activities children would build into an ideal play environment. They did this by inviting groups of children to participate in playful co-design sessions where they drew and discussed their ideas for play environments. This research had a practical application, and was intended to inform the design of technology-enhanced play environments in Finland. In their chapter, Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo identify key features of the shared, collective narrative thinking that emerged through playful activity. They go on to outline a new, multidimensional framework for the analysis of children's narratives that moves beyond the notion of the story (or verbal narrative) as the fundamental unit of narrative analysis.

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In my chapter (3), I describe a research project that investigated the impact of creativity training on teaching and learning in an English primary school. I draw on an analysis of the conversations that took place between a teacher and her pupils, first, to examine how the teacher used various organizational 'process' tools offered by the training programme to scaffold children's creative thinking, and second, to discuss the improvisational nature of the creative collaborative thinking that emerged. Relating the findings to published research on the development of children's communication and inferential thinking, my analysis raises questions concerning the perceived need in some educational quarters for children's thinking to be trained.

\_\_\_\_\_ Drawing on research that has investigated children's mark-making and drawing, Susan Wright (Chapter 8) argues that as the activity of drawing emerges as a multimodal event, the semiotic unit of analysis should be the event rather than the marks children produce. She argues that when they draw, children depict the meaning and content of their drawings through body-based action, talk, discussion and free-form narrative. It makes no sense, therefore, to take the picture or marks on the paper as the unit of analysis. This view is elaborated further in the chapters written by Maria Fulkova and Theresa Tipton (Chapter 7) and by Elizabeth and Andrew Coates (Chapter 5). In their chapter, Fulkova and Tipton develop a distinctive interpretive framework that draws on discourse and semiotic analyses to understand the nature and quality of children's visual language. Both Coates and Coates, and Tipton and Fulkova, offer an account of how the analysis of children's drawing has changed and developed over the past century, and Fulkova and Tipton describe how postmodern analyses that conceptualise art as a social practice allow us to approach the topic of children's drawings as coded, interdisciplinary, intertextual discourses with their own narratives and interrelated sign systems. In their chapter Coates and Coates offer a contextual analysis of the discursive events and conversations that take place between pairs of children engaged in self-directed drawing activity. They use this account to discuss how the subject matter of the drawings draws on the immediate environment, significant people and objects in children's lives, as well as on rich metanarratives that draw on images and characters from popular culture.

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\_\_\_\_\_ Other chapters offer further evidence which confirms that children rarely confine themselves to a single form of creative expression even when ostensibly engaged in specific curricular activities such as art, drama or music. Contributors to the volume argue that explanations of children's creativity that fail to take this into account can not allow us to capture its true inventiveness and originality. Similarly, impoverished explanations of children as static consumers rather than active producers of creative products, cannot inform the design of technology-enhanced instructional programmes that aim to harness children's creative potential, such as the Finnish SmartUs (described by Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo), SoundScape (described by Truman) and the MIT KidStory project (described by Sawyer).

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\_\_\_\_\_ From the standpoint of one trained originally in cognitive, developmental psychology, and later in socio-cultural accounts of development, what also struck me about the research reported in several chapters were the authors' accounts of the rich, affective nature of children's creative narratives. Emotion and affect are rarely taken into account in discussions of children's cognition and social development. Like other contributors, Susan Young (Chapter 9) argues that we need to understand creativity and creative processes in relation to the wider socio-cultural context. She also argues that the analysis and interpretation of children's creative activity is incomplete without due consideration of the intense emotional energy that fuels much of this activity. In her chapter she draws on accounts of turn-taking musical exchanges between very young children and adults to develop the argument that creativity is rooted in non-verbal, embodied forms of expressivity and that moreover, this expressivity is the fount of the temporal arts. She goes on to claim that the interpersonal dimension, — that is, the desire to make and sustain sociable contact through non-verbal means such as sound and gesture — is an important source of very young children's musical ideas. Young also draws attention to the importance of the intimate and highly supportive nature of the relationships that develop when adults act as sympathetic, playful partners. She argues that during three-way interactions between children, adults and sound-making objects, various forms of time taking structure children's creative activity and reciprocal musical exchanges. She also reminds us, however, that many children are fearful of letting go and engaging fully in such exchanges, and that for other children, there may be cultural constraints and educational expectations on their behaviour that preclude their involvement. Even where children may not want to participate fully in creative activity, however, their body language and the quality of their watching and listening demonstrate absorbed engagement in the activity.

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\_\_\_\_\_ Jenny Hallam, Helen Lee and Mani Das Gupta (Chapter 6) and Kerry Chappell writing with Susan Young (Chapter 11) also address the issue of the nature of children's engagement in their chapters. Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta argue that the wider social and educational contexts that shape the reception and interpretation of children's art and creative activity act to constrain this activity, so much so that as children get older, this often deteriorates in quality and falls by the wayside. Sylvia Truman makes similar arguments in her chapter (10), where she discusses the inhibiting effect of the traditional music education curriculum in

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the United Kingdom. Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta point out, however, that many children adopt a position of resistance and refuse to produce artistic work that conforms to teacher expectations and direction. They adopt a postmodernist analytic framework to explore the gaps that appear between children's constructions of the meaning of their artistic creations and the interpretations and constructions offered by adults. By contrast, Chappell and Young describe a project that provided opportunities for disadvantaged children to develop positive learning dispositions by working with a range of creative artists. They argue that many children are inhibited and fearful of expressing themselves through movement. This means that they find it difficult to engage with the playful exploratory responses that allow children to express creative thinking and to develop narratives through movement and dance, and other rich kinaesthetic experiences. In their chapter they offer case studies of such children who, over the course of a number of weeks, eventually allowed themselves to participate in improvisational collaborations with other children through movement and drama. Two dancers, a film-maker and a clay artist who assumed the role of playful partners supported these improvisational collaborations. Some of the joyful emotions the children experienced through these collaborations are captured in the photographs that accompany Chappell and Young's chapter.

Finally, in one way or another, all contributors to this collection address the notion of the role of children's voice in research, and there is general agreement that postmodernist and socio-cultural approaches allow children's voices to be heard, and their views and opinions to be taken seriously. The chapters by Truman (10) and Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo (4) demonstrate this by co-opting children as researchers to inform the development of design-led educational technology. As well as offering their own interpretations and theoretical accounts of children's creative and narrative thinking, for the most part, chapter authors present many rich and varied examples of children's creative activity in their chapters, either by reporting children's own interpretations of conversations, or through the photographs of children's art work and experiences that are reproduced as plates in the middle of the collection.

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I recognize that in this section of the introductory chapter, I have not been able to capture many of the sophisticated theoretical arguments represented in other chapters. I have commented on those aspects that I found interesting from a methodological and conceptual point of view, and invite readers to explore the chapters from their own theoretical and conceptual viewpoints.

In the next section, Elizabeth Coates discusses the main themes and messages that are likely to resonate with readers interested in the educational implications of the research studies reported in the collection.

### The educator's viewpoint

What do educators understand by 'creativity' and how do they interpret its role in early years settings? In this book each author approaches the concept of creativity in a different way, but all stress the importance of constructive collaboration between children and the role of rich imaginative narrative to the development of creative solutions when solving problems and conceptualising outcomes. It would seem that creativity can be expressed through multiple narrative forms such as socio-dramatic play, music, art and dance, although these are often regarded by educators as merely part of the 'creative arts'. However, in the early years children delight in problem solving in all aspects of the curriculum, seeing learning as holistic rather than divided into subject areas. This involves the use of the imagination and verbal and non-verbal narrative, suggesting that areas such as scientific investigation are equally valid as a focus for future research in this respect. In England, as in many countries, there have been attempts to recognise the value of creative thinking throughout the curriculum, but this has been hampered by the nature of the National Curriculum, which is too closely aligned to the achievement of standards by means of precise cognitive objectives. These have largely militated against the development of innovative and imaginative methods of teaching. The projects contained in this publication, however, aim to show what can be achieved if children are encouraged in imaginative thinking, enabled by teachers who participate through collaborative dialogues.

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Throughout, there is an emphasis on pedagogy since much of the research is classroom based, often involving explorations of the context in which most education is located. The prescribed curriculum common to most early childhood settings suggests that the direction and outcome of a lesson should lead to

a specified set of results, and as Hallam, Das Gupta and Lee (Chapter 6) suggest, it is teacher-led and teacher-dominated as the children are guided to produce work that accords with their perceived requirements of the curriculum. There is little opportunity here for imaginative thinking, and too often the child is assessed by the end product rather than by the process leading to it. It is often the case that teachers fail to pay attention to what children say, or observe what they are doing. Perhaps this is a result of the pressures of organising a busy schedule and the need to produce assessable outcomes, but one of the first lessons to be learned as a young teacher is that each child is a person in their own right. A class is not a homogeneous whole but is composed of individuals, each with their own thoughts, personality and culture. It is this sense of individuality that permeates all the chapters in this book, coupled with the importance of collaboration between peers, and between children and adults. The narratives show how strong this collaboration can be as boundaries are pushed and notions of communication are extended far beyond the verbal to include visual and non-verbal expression. The question most frequently addressed in this book is how we can understand children's narratives successfully if we only pay attention to the end product. Throughout there is an emphasis on communication, with teachers recognising the creativity underpinning children's imaginative discourses and building on them. In England as a result of the longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE) based in the Institute of Education, University of London, this extended dialogue between child and adult is described as 'sustained shared thinking'. Faulkner (Chapter 3) provides fascinating examples of this as she describes the ways that skilful adults draw out children's ideas, moving their thinking forward by valuing and responding to their contributions. This dialogue, sometimes between two people but often involving more, shows not only how it is possible to engage in imaginative thinking, but also that the ideas children contribute are often highly innovative.

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There is a tendency in education circles to think of creative narrative purely as a verbal element, either spoken or written, but the variety of projects discussed in this book move beyond this. Three chapters, Wright (Chapter 8), Tipton and Fulkova (Chapter 7) and Coates and Coates (Chapter 5), focus on the visual narrative related to children's drawings, and emphasise the richness of the accompanying interaction as children tell or act out the underlying story. The whoops, shouts and singing are invisible in the end product, but to the observer they convey the excitement and intensity of the activity, and attention paid to the interaction often reveals how the content of the drawing has changed and evolved. Seeing such drawing activities as occasions where children reveal their interests, use their imagination, engage in a kind of creative role play and develop social skills moves them far beyond the mark-making being seen merely as the precursor to letter formation and formal writing which has been highlighted in recent curriculum documentation.

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To anyone who has worked or is working with young children, play is regarded as central to all areas of development. While role-play offers an opportunity for children to examine their experiences of the world, such play often expands to include fantasy by drawing upon characters from popular culture and creating new adventures for favourite heroes. Such play episodes see children as story creators, often changing direction as fresh ideas emerge, but also as scriptwriters, since when play is interrupted they often return to the same scenario, carrying on where they left off. Creative/socio-dramatic play forms the basis of Young's chapter (9), since she discusses the links between theatre and play when working with the under-fives, although she sees the main theme of creativity as being rooted in non-verbal, embodied expressivity. This is echoed in Sawyer's work (Chapter 2), as he suggests that there is a place for scripts in children's play, not in the formal written sense but in the way that children improvise play discourses. The provision of objects may affect the initial direction of play, but Sawyer found that it was the children's interpretation of the situation, their references to the media, films in particular, as well as their personal experiences, that controlled the way the play script developed. The richness of the narratives illustrated in his chapter provided ample justification to me, as an educator, for the provision of creative play areas in early years settings. The project undertaken in Finland by Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo (Chapter 4) suggested that creativity could be integrated with curriculum-based education, setting groups of children the task of designing play areas. What started out as a fairly formal activity took flight as the adult sensitively encouraged the children to look beyond the ordinary, and extended their thinking to the point where the ideas were flowing profusely, incorporating not only technological devices but also fantastical characters.

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Globally the influence of media permeates all aspects of education, and teachers incorporate the latest technology into their planning on a regular basis. Since children seem to assimilate such technology with an ease not often emulated by adults, this does seem a natural progression, and one which may afford the opportunity to provide more creative and flexible approaches to learning. There is a danger that new technology in inexperienced adult hands might be used in an unimaginative way, for example with interactive whiteboards being used as electronic work sheets, but judging from the creative way that new technologies have been used in many of the projects in this book they can become an integral part of children's developing creativity.

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However, what about the natural exuberance of young children, with their need to express themselves through physical activity and vocal manifestation, as opportunities for children to move, dance, sing and create music in early years settings seem to be diminishing since the introduction of curriculum requirements? The influence of the more formal compulsory stages of schooling is strong, and there is pressure placed on early years teachers to introduce children to literacy and numeracy as soon as possible. Both Young (Chapter 9) and Truman (Chapter 10) focus on music as part of their research, although Truman's work examines the creation of composition when the domination of black notes is removed, and Young looks at creating music with three and four year olds. Young's second project with Kerry Chappell (Chapter 11) provides some insights into the possibilities of dance education with five year olds, drawing on the expertise of dancers, a film-maker and an artist in clay. This combination offers support to teachers who often feel unskilled in this area, and the project suggests that building up children's ability to think creatively through dance may give them a confidence which will be beneficial to all aspects of their school performance. This use of outside professionals forms part of the discussion in Faulkner's chapter (3), as she describes the Creative Partnership scheme established in England in the past decade and the government documentation designed to promote creative thinking across the curriculum. More influential in many countries, however, is the work in Reggio Emilia, where teachers, children and the local community work together on multiple projects.

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Throughout this discussion of the diverse narratives revealed in these research studies, several things stand out. There is a need to remember that children come to pre-school already established as creative thinkers, and one only has to eavesdrop to recognize this. Does what we do to them in an educational setting extend or stifle this thinking, as while we are encouraged to listen to children's voices the other forms of narratives, visual and non-verbal, displayed by children are often forgotten? These studies show how important it is for adults to widen their horizons and pay attention to the social interaction, collaboration, imagination and playfulness that are central to children's creative narratives.

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Unlike practice-based accounts of creativity in schools, the contributors to this volume offer theoretical explanations and novel frameworks to account for the collaborative, meaning-making processes when young children enter narrative modes of thinking. The collection draws on the experiences of researchers and educators from several countries, and does not rely on any single national perspective. The central focus of most of the chapters is on describing and understanding what children do and what they talk about. Although some chapters offer accounts of the professional development of teachers and practitioners and the design of educational tools to support young children's creativity, this is not primarily a collection about curriculum design and how to develop creative pedagogy. It is primarily a text about how detailed observations by sympathetic adults can reveal insights into the creative processes that emerge spontaneously between children, and about how these processes reveal the multi-modal nature of children's creativity. We hope that, as we did, other interested researchers and professionals will enjoy getting to know and understand the creative narratives and works of art that the children have generously shared with us through their participation in the research projects described in this volume.

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## References

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