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# **Child-initiated play and professional creativity: enabling four-year-olds' possibility thinking<sup>i</sup>**

## **Introduction**

Influenced by liberal philosophers, for over 200 years Western policies have valued children's curiosity, imagination, and creativity (Craft, 2010). In England, policy on creativity was cemented with the National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999) advocating 'democratic' creativity and cultural education. In the early years, children's creativity was codified in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF 2008a, 2008b), and in earlier versions of the early years curriculum (eg QCA, 1999, 2000, SCAA, 1996). The double-stranding of creativity (a pervasive strand of 'creative and critical thinking' and defined area of 'creative development' enabled imaginative provision, much of it involving the cultural sector (eg Bancroft *et al*, 2008). By 2011, following a change of government, creativity had maintained its place as an important dimension of the early years curriculum. For the Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage reinforced a role for creativity as imagination with an inherent role in 'Expressive Arts and Design' and acknowledged critical and creative thinking together with active learning and play, as characteristics of young children's engagement with the world around them (Tickell, 2011a, 2011b).

## **Creativity as possibility thinking**

So – what is creativity in the early years? The current study has drawn on one strand of qualitative research undertaken in England over the last fourteen years, which has developed the notion of children's creativity as driven by 'possibility thinking' (PT) (Craft, 2002, 2011a), exploratory transitions from 'what is' to 'what might be'. PT involves children making the transition 'what is this?' to 'what can I or we do with this?' as well as imagining 'as if' they were in a different role (Craft, 2011b). This next section offers an account of possibility thinking from conceptual roots to empirical outcomes to date as summarised in Figs 1 and 2.

Initially a conceptual study (Craft, 1997, 1999, 2001) rooted in earlier work on imagination (Craft, 1988), this work moved into an empirical phase

investigating the nature of PT in young children (Burnard, Craft & Grainger, 2006) and pedagogy facilitating this (Cremin, Burnard & Craft, 2006) through two stages of qualitative work using observations, interviews and video analysis. The studies were undertaken in collaboration with teachers thus were co-participative. Core elements of PT were revealed, and key pedagogical strategies

Insert Fig 1 here

The seven key features of PT in young children which had emerged from the study by Burnard *et al* (2006) of question-posing, play, immersion, innovation, risk-taking, being imaginative, self-determination and intentionality, were nurtured, Cremin *et al* (2006) concluded, by a dynamic interaction between teacher and child, in an enabling context. The four core elements of pedagogy which nurtured PT were adults placing a high value on enabling children's agency, offering children both space and time to develop their ideas and perhaps most importantly, standing back from the children in an acutely sensitive way, with close scrutiny of the children's engagement so as to choose wisely when to step in to provoke, clarify, support, extend, challenge.

A key component of the enabling environment for PT is the opportunity for exploratory, combinatory play – components highlighted by Craft (1999, 2003) and also by Boden (2004). Play had been proposed as 'logically necessary' to PT (Craft, 2001, p58) in the conceptual phase of the work on PT, and was confirmed as inherent in episodes of PT from this first phase of empirical work which had focused on the nature of PT and how it was nurtured.

Following on from this, a second stage was launched narrowing its focus to characterise some of the finer detail of PT in children's play. Through the analysis of video data and transcripts of these, the study focused on the nature of children's question-posing and question-responding during episodes of PT in playful contexts. From this study emerged a taxonomy of children's question-posing and question-responding (Chappell, Craft, Burnard & Cremin, 2008).

In terms of question posing, an important aspect of this taxonomy was the inherent breadth of possibility in any opportunity, from 'possibility narrow' to

'possibility broad'. The narrower the inherent possibility the less elaborated creativity could be developed by children either alone or with others. A second important aspect was the nature of the questions being posed, with *leading questions* clearly driving children's activity, whilst *service questions* enabled children to develop strategies to address their over-arching leading question, and *follow-through* questions drove the fine detail of execution of an idea (ibid). Thus, a leading question might be something like 'how can we make a house from these blocks / fabrics / stones?', a service question might be 'how can we make the windows and doors open?' and a follow-through question might be 'where is the right-sized stone for the door-bell?'

The nine types of question responding, common across possibility broad and possibility narrow, and leading, service and follow-through questions, were categorised as predicting, testing, evaluating, compensating, completing, repeating, accepting, rejecting, undoing. Questions were expressed both verbally and – more frequently – non-verbally through enacted expression.

The analysis which generated this taxonomy of question-posing and question-responding showed how this engagement related to the other key features of PT. The activity occurred in context of imaginative self-determination in which children were following through their own intentions. As shown in Fig 2, the overall context was one of playful immersion. The one key feature of PT previously identified but not evidenced this second phase of the study, was risk-taking.

Insert Fig 2 here

In this last reported phase of PT in young children, then, the episodes of PT were identified within children's immersive play. Even where the playful context had been determined by the adult, teachers 'stood back' to enable children's question-posing and responding to drive their creative activity. As the performative pressures on educators continued to rise (eg Ball, 2008), a set of pertinent questions emerged for this research team, revolving around the nature of creativity in child-initiated play, and the role of the adult in enabling this.

Some research work has been undertaken exploring PT in other playful contexts in the primary classroom (notably Craft and Chappell, 2009 who studied dance in the primary classroom, Lin, 2010, 2011 who explored drama in the Taiwanese primary classroom and Clack, 2011 who explored mathematics in the English primary classroom). However, these studies have been undertaken with upper primary children. The present study, undertaken as co-participative reflective practice as discussed below, sought to extend understanding of the *balance* between PT nurtured through child-initiated play in the early years and the role of the adult in this.

The researchers in the current study therefore sought to investigate two areas which provided the main research questions (RQ's) throughout the project reported here. These were:

**RQ1:** How is children's creativity/possibility thinking manifest in child-initiated play?

**RQ2:** What is the role of the practitioner in supporting this?

### **Practitioner provocations**

The investigation of balance in child- and adult-initiated creativity was undertaken through the use of stimulus provocations triggered by adults. This was a new development for the staff at the Centre who with the university team were intrigued to explore adult-framed but child-initiated learning. Siraj-Blatchford et al, (2001) distinguish in their empirical research between adult-initiated but child-extended play, child-initiated but adult-extended play and child-initiated and child-extended play. Seeking to explore the first category but framing the adult-initiation as an open format through provocation as an initial stimulus (Bancroft et al, 2008). Influenced by the interpretation by Bancroft et al (ibid) of the philosophies of the pre-schools in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy, these practitioners were struck by the potential of the view that 'the essential ingredient of children's relationships with materials gives them multiple possibilities' (Gandini et al, 2005:15). Practitioners in this study thus worked together to consider and provide appropriate provocation material and events, informed by joint reading of material from Reggio on the role of the teacher (Edwards, 1998). They were also informed

by approaches to narrative development and story making developed by Hendry and Toon (2001) who explore the role of the adult in improvisational dramatic storymaking in the classroom, informed in turn by Bruner's (1986) perspective that narrative storymaking offers children access to multiple imaginative worlds. Drawing too on the deliberate valuing of children's stories embodied in the work and observations of Paley (for example, 2001) and the work of Egan (1988) on the depth and power of narrative in learning, the intention of this project was to spark child-initiated play from the provocations, enabling children's own narratives.

## Research Design

In keeping with earlier studies of PT (eg Burnard *et al*, 2006, Cremin *et al*, 2006, Chappell *et al* 2008), and reflecting the commitment of the University team to democratic reflective practice in the early years (Paige-Smith, Craft and Craft, 2008, 2011a), the three University researchers co-enquired with practitioners at the research site. The focus of the study, on PT in child-initiated play, and how practitioners enabled this, reflected interests of the practitioner team alongside those of the university researchers.

As a collaborative case study, in what Yin (1984) refers to as the exploratory tradition, this research adopted a purposive sample, involving an early years site known nationally for its work on developing children's creativity, and also encouraging researchful practice among staff. This is also a site which the researchers have previously collaborated and where there were previous relationships, and there was some familiarity on both sides.

The study was, then, set in the nursery based at Central Children's Centre<sup>1</sup> located in the inner-city of London. Central Children's Centre provides high quality care and education for children in their early years of life from 6 months to 5 years of age. Children from all sections of the community are welcomed at the Centre which reflects its vibrancy, and the richness of opportunities provided for the children through partnerships between the staff and the parents and carers of the children within the community itself. The Centre is constantly

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym: names of all adults, children and the Centre itself, have been altered.

striving to achieve the best outcomes for all of its children and has a reputation of excellence, documented in national curriculum guidance documentation over a least a ten year period, together with inspection reports.

Throughout this study in keeping with previous studies on PT as detailed above, there is a relativist awareness of the reflexive nature of social knowledge which reflects the epistemological constructionist view 'that meaningful reality is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998:42). Chappell and Craft (2011) refer to this as a living dialogic space where academics, teachers, artists and students co-participatively research and develop knowledge of their 'lived space' together.

This study is essentially interpretivist in nature as it seeks to explain how people make sense of their social worlds and is an exploration framed by culturally negotiated, shared meanings, and complex social relations. High value was therefore placed on documenting and interpreting multiple perspectives seeking to characterise complex lived experience rather than to measure this. The team sought to design a tight fit between epistemology and ontology and the methods of data collection and analysis so as to strengthen the rigour of the study (Gavin, 2008).

## **Methodology and Methods**

There are elements of the underpinning principles of grounded theory that resonate with this study; Glaser and Strauss's (1967) seminal work rejected simple linear causality and the de-contextualisation of data, arguing that the world is multivariate and connected. Strauss and Corbin (1994) later acknowledged that grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in the data, systematically gathered, and analysed.

In this study the creative system of the children's centre is defined as the dynamics between the children, the practitioners, the researchers, and the environment and hence provided the context for data collection. In order to capture deep, insightful, rich data the study was framed by a case study strategy encompassing multi methods of data collection demonstrating the combination

of appropriate perspectives and methods suitable for taking into account different aspects (Flick, 2006). Oschner (2001:254) defines this as ‘a comprehensive research strategy aimed at explaining, describing, illustrating, and/or exploring contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context of a single individual, group, event, institution, or culture’.

The methods adopted for this study were determined by the team as a whole and included naturalistic observations, practitioner and university researcher reflections and interviews, yielding data in the form of written fieldnotes, still digital images, digital sound files, digital journal entries. These are shown in Tables 1 and 2 later in the paper. The reflective nature of the study which seeks to dig into the professional creativity involved in nurturing children’s possibility thinking, was emphasised by the use of methods which enhanced opportunities to discuss what it is and means to be a creative practitioner by providing insightful accounts of events, relationships, experiences, and processes in order to unravel the complexities for individual cases and how they relate to each other and the Centre’s community as a whole.

## **Participants**

The staff at the Centre were informed about the research team’s interest in developing a co-participative study and four key members of the team identified themselves as potential participants expressing a keen interest in the nature of the project. These key members paired up and two working groups were established. Relationships within the groups were formed on the dynamics of interchangeable mentor and observer roles recognising that each member of the group would bring their own individual and creative ways of working; encouraging a philosophy of respect. The Centre adopts a key worker system with a ratio of one adult to ten children in the kindergarten section of the nursery; each of the practitioners invited the children in their key groups to take part in the project.

The children who were ultimately involved in the study overall were aged between two and four years, but the part of the project discussed in this paper



involved fifteen children aged four years, who participated over the four main weeks of provocation-stimulated project activity.

Although use of provocations was a new approach for the practitioner team, pairing practitioners in planning and reflecting on evidence collected around the research question, was more familiar as some staff had been involved in another research project involving 'paired teaching'.

The fact that the University research team were already known to the Centre meant extra care needed to be taken so as not to over-assume familiarity or trust – however staff repeatedly reinforced how glad they were to work with the team and welcomed the University researchers into all aspects of the Centre's work as relevant to this particular project.

### **Ethics and rigour**

Following the initial invitation to both staff and children, ethical procedures were negotiated within the guidelines of the Open University and University of Exeter Ethics Committees which were each in turn bound by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Code (2004). The procedures followed involved written informed consent forms for parents and practitioners, and the children's assent was also sought prior to the commencement of the sessions by informing them of their right to choose if they wanted to take part. The right to abstain or withdraw from the project at any time was upheld and both raw and analysed data material was anonymised and stored in a secure project-specific data system.

The secure data system also held protocols and procedures making each stage of the project transparent and thus the project team sought to maintain quality and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in terms of credibility and dependability/confirmability. It was hoped that by maintaining transparency in our own research process, others would be enabled in exploring possible transferability in other contexts.

### **Data Collection**

The project was carried out in three stages, the first of which focused on familiarisation with the setting and the participants. Two of the three university

researchers visited the centre in order to introduce themselves and discuss the project in further detail aims of all involved. The initial visit also incorporated a recorded interview / reflective stimulated by the researchers and gave the practitioners an opportunity to think about children's creativity and how this is fostered in child-initiated play. This discussion also involved negotiating with the practitioners the types of provocations they wanted to instigate.

The second stage of the project was divided into four weekly data collection visits which consisted of one-and-a-half hours' observations by the researchers, including note taking and still digital photographs (taken in quick succession to provide a continuous record of events as they unfolded), as well as interviews and reflective discussions with practitioners that were recorded before and after the provocations that were set up during the children's play sessions. The four practitioners worked in two groups of two – taking it in turns to act as mentor and observer to each other. Group one's practitioners decided to use natural materials; logs, sticks, leaves and stones, whereas group two used puppets and props as a provocation. Immediately after the session had taken place the researchers uploaded the still photographs to a laptop to share with the children for reflection and discussion. The children's parents were also invited to view the photographs at home time. After the children had left the setting the researchers and practitioners (mentor and observer) re-convened in order to stimulate reflective discussions and debate about the creative aspects observed and experienced throughout the sessions. According to Chappell and Craft (2011) creative learning conversations are defined by the characteristics of 'partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action, and embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas' (p366); all of which were evident throughout the study. After each session the researcher made an entry into a reflective journal documenting their thoughts and feelings on what they had observed and participated in during the visit. Once all of the sessions had been completed the researchers returned to the setting a few weeks later to carry out the third and final stage of data collection which focussed on in-depth structured interviews with the practitioners and the head of the centre. The researcher led interviews aimed to probe and investigate

certain aspects of the study which had emerged over the course of the project. All of the reflective discussions and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The methods used reflected those undertaken in previous PT studies (Burnard *et al*, 2006, Cremin *et al*, 2006, Chappell *et al*, 2008) as well as those used in other studies led by members of the team (eg Chappell and Craft, 2011, Paige-Smith and Rix, 20011) enabling collaborative reflection and analysis through prioritising participant voice.

Table 1 shows what data were collected, mapped to research questions. As indicated in the above discussion, two of the researchers collected the data, sometimes together and sometimes solo.

Insert Table 1 here

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis focused around the two driving questions throughout the project given earlier; that of how is children's creativity/possibility thinking manifest in child-initiated play? And what is the role of the practitioner in supporting this?

Once the final interview data had been collected and the audio recordings transcribed this was merged together with the observation notes, researcher journal entries, and photographs which provided the material for analysis.

Key episodes of children's immersive play were chosen from the data sets which were deemed as authentically child-initiated and also displayed evidence of PT, 'what if and as if thinking' (Craft, 2002; Burnard, *et al*, 2006) and creative pedagogical strategies in practice (Cremin *et al*, 2006). Associated with these episodes which were observations (with fieldnotes and summaries of these together with digital images and sound files), practitioner reflections and interviews (transcriptions of sound files) and researcher reflections.

A further narrowed set of two key episodes were then identified, focusing on the four-year-old children and all data pertaining to each of these episodes, were then analysed by two of the research team, each triangulating the other's

work. This narrowed set offered contrasting kinds and locations of child-initiated play in the context of a practitioner-initiated provocation. One provocation occurred outdoors and involved the provision of large smooth, newly-cut sections of small tree branches and small logs which were gathered in the outdoor space for children to discover, underneath a cloth; the logs and branches were placed close to some plastic crates which the children chose to incorporate into the play as will be seen. The other provocation occurred indoors and involved a set of puppets which were introduced as a provocation by the practitioner who having introduced a particular familiar story with the children, then moved away from the playspace as the children took over with their own narratives. Each of these episodes were drawn from the second round of provocations experienced by these children, and in each case one practitioner was leading whilst the other acted as mentor.

The researchers adopted an inductive-deductive approach to the analysis; the early stages of the process systematically examined all of the data sets relating to each of the chosen key episodes inductively using an open coding strategy, searching for emergent categories. The open codes were clustered into themes and refined by axial coding seeking relationships, links, and associations between them. Whilst generating new empirically grounded categories the researchers also worked deductively by seeking direct evidence of PT (Cremin, *et al*, 2006; Chappell, *et al*, 2008). The existing PT conceptual frameworks were then synthesised with the selected new and established emergent categories through a process of 'disassembling and reassembling the data' (Ezzy, 2002).

The researchers acknowledge the complexities of using inductive and deductive frameworks to inform the latter stages of the data analysis, however reconcile this by referring to what Denscombe (2007:98) describes as selective coding: 'the ones that have emerged from open and axial coding as being vital to any explanation of the complex social phenomenon'; where the data has been gathered in stages, analysed, and evolved overtime.

## Findings

The findings to each of the two research questions are discussed consecutively below starting with Research Question (RQ) 1. In each case the discussion is followed by consideration of how the findings relate to existing work in Possibility Thinking.

### **RQ 1: How is children's creativity manifest in child-initiated play?**

In response to this first research question, three sets of behaviours in action emerged across the key episodes from the analysis, as follows. The first of these is more fully developed below than the second two, in that the first introduces the narratives in the two key episodes to which the other sets of behaviours then refer. The ensuing discussion shows how these three sets of behaviours relate to the PT characteristics previously documented in other studies.

***Behaviour 1 - Stimulating and sustaining possibilities:*** children were seen to be generating ideas, leading on possibilities, and maintaining interest, focus, ownership in the evolution of ideas. Children responded in different ways, looking for and finding new ideas in materials, reacting to the provocations and to one another, connecting use of materials and involvement of other children with their own ideas for narratives. This stimulating and sustaining of possibilities can be exemplified in the outdoor episode.

Carl's idea for making a big fire cage which he announced at the start of the outdoor play episode: "we gonna make a big cage" is embellished as other children join and the plastic crates are combined with the wooden logs so that the task evolves, as Carl explains to the researcher: "we are making a big cage to keep the fire in". Later still, when other children who have not been involved in the making of the cage try to enter it, Carl shouts, "it's only for acrobats!" and when challenged by the practitioner that perhaps his friends are acrobats too, further elaborates the narrative saying, "they haven't been to acrobat school".

Children played in unique ways to generate and extend ideas, acting out their intentions, seeking and initiating further possibilities, sometimes collaboratively, thus sustaining their play.

Each episode was by definition constrained slightly in relation to its breadth of inherent possibility by the fact that each provocation was set up by the practitioner however in each case, within the outdoor provocation, the possibilities inherent in 'what if?' and 'as if' play were fairly broad. The indoor provocation was initially limited to the narrative introduced by the practitioner as the enactment of the drama through puppets, however once the practitioner left the play space, the children immediately broadened the inherent possibility to enable emergence of any characterisation and narrative they chose. In each case, a key child (in each episode, a boy) took ownership of the narrative and became a gatekeeper to others' participation. This can be seen in the case of the indoor play episode where Jared takes firm control of the narrative, delimiting initially what Caterina, the practitioner, can do in the play space that she has entered into with him, as follows.

Jared's crocodile puppet bites off the arm of the man puppet being held by the practitioner, Caterina. Despite her protestations – first announcing, "he is biting him," then asking "so what did the man do?" and then starting to make a whimpering sound, and making her puppet curl up as if in pain, then urging Jared to look after the man once his arm has been bitten off, even negotiating to retain the other arm: "he has eaten his arm and doesn't really want you to eat his other arm in fact he probably would like two arms", Jared continues to play with his puppet in such a way that hurts hers, taking the narrative in a shocking direction and 'undoing' the previous narrative of peaceful, co-existent way ('undoing' being one of the question-responding categories revealed in Chappell *et al*, 2008). Caterina confirms who is in charge here, as Carl arrives and wants to suggest how the story develops, saying clearly to Carl: "Jared is making up the story" and so confirming Jared as the dominant

narrator. When Jared decides to use the crocodile to heal the man's arm by rubbing it better she again follows his lead, reinforcing his plan: "what a kind crocodile". The possibilities are then broadened by the children themselves who decide that far from the story being resolved, the crocodile may still be hungry and that it needs feeding. Caterina narrows this to ask, "do you think that the crocodile would like some porridge?" and although she almost immediately addresses the group of children now playing to say "maybe you could all work out what is going to happen", she returns to porridge as a theme asking a series of porridge-related questions as the crocodile eats hungrily: "is that hot porridge?... the crocodile ate all the porridge, what could we do to make some more?" – and as other puppets require porridge to heal: "would your puppet like some porridge to make it better?". She reflects on the porridge side of this play episode later, recognising that the provision of materials (for example in the home corner) may have narrowed the inherent possibility for the children at that point. She remembers afterwards that the children were actually talking about feeding the crocodile sweetcorn – highlighting the delicate balance between children's and adults' narratives in a play-space.

Evident in both episodes is also sustained dialogue, not only with the adults but between the children and themselves, evidencing profound pedagogic interaction where collaboration extends a shared narrative; or 'sustained, shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007, p18).

***Behaviour 2: Communicating possibilities.*** Distinct from stimulating and sustaining, children communicated their ideas into action, slipping with ease into the narrative engagement that Egan (1988) advocated of the early years curriculum some two decades earlier. They verbalised but as in earlier studies (Burnard et al, 2006, Cremin et al, 2006, Chappell et al 2008), their ideas were also communicated through embodied action and expression. In verbalising, children communicated ideas to both adults and children, without necessarily

being asked although a noticeable feature in both episodes was the desire of practitioners for children to articulate their ideas by posing them questions. In neither episode did children respond particularly directly or with particular alacrity to such practitioner-initiated questions, suggesting greater salience to children's own multiple verbal narratives, including those of observers. The analysis distinguished between communicating and expressing possibilities both verbally and non-verbally through emergent behaviour. Expressing possibilities included making a declaration of the story to others, and exposed tensions and differences of opinion and ideas. An aspect of communicating possibilities was involving others, enabling momentum in the original story to grow, as ideas and intentions were shared and play co-owned.

***Behaviour 3: Children's agency, roles and identities.*** Each episode revealed ways in which children's agency is expressed in relation to individual, collaborative and communal play, these three forms of engagement evidenced throughout the data. It is evident that in these episodes, agency is enabled through ownership (reinforcing ethnographic work by Jeffrey and Woods, 2003, showing ownership, control, relevance and innovation, are present in creative learning in the primary school). In our study, there was an initial owner or director of possibility play, supporting peers and/or permitted collaborators and actors, and additional peers, collaborators and observers. The emergent narratives held distinctive individual, collaborative and communal flavours. In each case the children's agency was enabled by practitioners giving children (some) time and space to play, but also evident was these adults' active interest in listening to and, in the case of the indoor episode, engaging in the children's play, extending and supporting the play story, encouraging use of props. Interventions by adults can be seen as having three roles: supporting, provoking and managing the children's agency. Adults *support* by inviting and supporting both individual narratives (the two lead narrators in each episode) but also encouraging collaboration (inviting others in, posing possibility questions to the group, sharing materials, engaging others through suggestion, new story statements etc). Adult interventions also *provoke further possibilities* (through mirroring, open questions, emotive action, direct statements and questions).



And the adults also *manage the play* in the moment, through interventions which effectively suspend play, by simply re-entering the play space, by resolving disagreements, by taking the power back in order to integrate others, or by changing the story or managing risk (this latter particularly in the outdoor play episode where there was a concern that a wooden box might fall on a child's head though even here the adult leans toward encouraging the story emergence saying "a little bit of hurt is OK if it is not too heavy" and reflecting later that, as an experienced practitioner she now has an acute sense of when she needs to intervene from the perspective of safety). Thus whilst the research question focused on how the children's creativity manifest, the responses to this could not be completely separated in the case of behaviour 3 from pedagogical involvement.

### **Possibility thinking in the behaviours in action**

Across all three sorts of behaviour (i.e. stimulating and sustaining possibilities, communicating possibilities and children's agency, roles and identities), reinforced all aspects of PT as follows. In both the outdoor and the indoor episode, the context was a playful and immersive one. Children's self-determination, imaginations, intentionality were all evident as were their innovative ideas and the questions which seemed to lead these (about which more below). Each episode revealed 'what if' and 'as if' behaviours blended together as children inhabit their narratives.

But whereas in other studies, of the core features of PT, risk taking was rarely evidenced, in these two episodes, ***risk-taking was clearly present***. In the indoor episode Jared appears to take a risk in his silence, choosing not to be guided by Caterina's play questions as this interchange suggests, after Jared takes the lollipop puppet from the stand, puts it on his hand and says, STOP!

C: what are you saying stop to?

C: are you saying stop to me or the car?

J: the car

C: the car has to stop, is there a car coming?

C: oh dear

C: right where is it going?

In his silence, it is possible that Jared is building up to a more explicitly observable behaviour or action, which Clack (2011) has called '*micro-possibility thinking*'. Meanwhile in the outdoor episode, Jared has such a 'hold' over the narrative of the fire cage that it is hard for Neil to join in. When Heather asks if Neil could have a stick, her intervention enables Neil to 'take a risk' in getting involved. Similarly David decides later in the narrative to take a post it note out of his pocket so as to 'light; the fire, announcing, "it's the fire flame!". Again the practitioner encourages this possible risk-taking by saying, "yes, good idea, put the fire flame on to start it" thus accepting his contribution to the narrative. Whereas in the case of Jared's puppet play, he seems to be taking his own risks in dynamic tension with the practitioner, in the case of the outdoor episode, Neil and David are able to take risks because the path is mediated by the adult.

In terms of the questioning inherent in the episodes, the degree of possibility (Chappell *et al*, 2008) was wide in the outdoor episode, with materials being placed and children taking a lead on what then to do with these. In the indoor episode the degree of possibility was narrower to begin with as the resources were less abstract (a set of puppets including a school crossing patrol person with a 'stop' sign, a crocodile and a man), and in becoming part of the play, the practitioner's own perspectives narrowed the possible directions at times (for example where she tries to get the crocodile to stop hurting other puppets, or where she suggests porridge might solve the hunger and hurt).

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the questioning in these episodes and where they extend the previous work of Chappell *et al* (2008) is the ***evident role of the leading question and the person who 'owned this' in each episode, in shaping the narrative*** as we can see in each case.

The outdoor play episode: Carl's fire cage, its conceptualisation and enactment, and who could be part of it: "we can only get in here" he repeats, over and over again, was controlled by him and despite attempts by the practitioner to have other children join: "can Neil have one of the sticks please he would like one," and "maybe your

friends are acrobats too” when Carl makes this a condition of entry – even contradicting him when he says they are not qualified: “your friends have been to acrobat school”... and later, “your friends would like to come in”. Yet Carl continues to control the narrative until so many children try to squeeze in that cage falls apart – and even after this, the practitioner supports the narrative he has created by suggesting he teach other children his acrobat skills.

The indoor play episode: Jared again controls this narrative which begins with a traffic crossing patrol person saying ‘STOP’ to the (imaginary) car, seemingly resisting the questions Caterina asks him about who is supposed to stop and why, through his silence and when he moves the play scenario to another area of the carpet (which Caterina follows) and the emergence of a new story about a hungry and vicious crocodile. As discussed earlier Jared’s crocodile is not repentant until he is ready for this to happen. Caterina maintains his ownership of the story throughout, even preventing Carl from taking over the narrative: ‘Jared is making up the story’ and although she lays her values into the play encouraging kind behaviour and suggests porridge as a device later on, it is Jared who invites her to feed his hungry crocodile and who maintains control of the leading narrative until the end of the episode.

What the two episodes reveal then is the ***vital role of the leading narrative throughout*** and the role of the practitioner in supporting this in order to encourage child-initiated creativity. Thus, both risk-taking and the leading question – both existing aspects of PT - are further exemplified and articulated. Table 2 summarises the strength of existing features of PT as they were evidenced indicating which are developed further through use of bold type. Play and immersion are not included in the table since the episodes were chosen for the play and immersion inherent in them.

Insert Table 2 here

In addition, two new aspects of the children's PT were revealed by this analysis. The first was the way in which ***individual, collaborative and communal creativity*** were evidenced in the outdoor episode (though not in the indoor one where Jared held firmly to the narrative for himself). The distinctions between individual, collaborative and communal creativity are drawn by Chappell (2008, 2011). Her empirical work in primary and secondary classrooms in the context of dance, reveals how creativity is rooted not solely in the individual's ideas but in collaborations between people but also in creativity that has shared ownership, or communal creativity, which involves active group change. What Chappell's most recent work highlights is the interconnections between all three kinds of creativity as part of the emergent story.

Chappell's notion of 'humanising creativity' which combines individual, collaborative and communal creativity, values creativity for its own sake and not for its role in contributing to a performative culture (Chappell, 2011). Our analysis of these episodes revealed strong powerful evidence of individual children's ownership (particularly clear in the case of the two narrative leaders, one in each episode) as well as collaboration – building narrative play together with others, and also – although temporary – commitment to a shared emergent story.

Thus - in the outdoor episode, although it was Carl's ideas (reinforced by his stating 'my idea' ), the children developed a collective ownership through their collaboration, urged by the practitioner who encouraged others to be able to join in. Carl, whilst owning the story (and resisting the involvement of other children on one level), does refer to 'we': "we are making a big cage to keep the fire in," "we only can get in here," – although he also separates those who are 'in' from those who are not: "you haven't been to acrobat school, only baby acrobat school". Other children whilst excluded in this way by Carl nevertheless join in to the point at which the fire cage collapses because too many people are getting into it.

And in the indoor episode, whilst Jared leads the action (starting strongly with 'STOP' as he holds up the traffic crossing patrol puppet, and

continuing with the vicious crocodile biting the arm of the man puppet, then leading the shift into healing the hurt), he moves during the resolution stage of this narrative into collaborating with Caterina, the practitioner, to 'feed' the crocodile with him, taking a spoon from the table and asking her to feed the crocodile the porridge. Caterina then becomes engaged in a shared endeavour – a communal activity – in which she feeds the crocodile and Jared holds open its mouth. This communal activity has emerged from two individual narratives – Jared's 'hungry crocodile' one and Caterina's 'making it better and feeding the crocodile other food' one.

This new feature of individual, collaborative and communal blend in PT has not been revealed in previous episodes of analysed immersive play in earlier PT research. And what the indoor episode reveals in particular, is the ***imaginative dynamic between practitioner and child***. Caterina's and Jared's narratives develop alongside one another driven by Jared's self-adopted lead narrative role, until he chooses to invite her in as an equal in feeding the crocodile. The fact that this happens at the end of the episode, combined with the fact that before Jared invites Caterina to feed the crocodile with him, he invites in the researcher as her notes show: "Jared shows me the crocodile is still very hungry by allowing me to take a photo of him with his mouth wide open", suggests perhaps this is a development of their usual relationship. This interpretation seems supported by the reaction of other children to this dynamic between Jared and Caterina is also revealing; when Jared's crocodile eats the arm of Caterina's puppet she starts to make a crying sound and her puppet curls up as if in pain. The children respond loudly – documented by the researcher as "screams of delight that Caterina is joining in acting out the story". It seemed, then, that Caterina has crossed a line with the children. Later she reflects on this episode with her reflection partner comparing their approaches, and reflecting collegially, saying "I take more risks". Her reflective partner by contrast expresses greater ease and confidence in 'stepping back' during the children's play whilst being present in their moments.

An aspect of such dynamism is where adults are drawn into the play partially in role, enabling inclusion. In the outdoor episode the practitioner reflected afterward on how the self-determination and intentionality of a child who was excluded by Jared's assertion that he had 'only been to baby acrobat school', made it impossible for her to step back – she was needed to mediate, countering immediately, 'your friends have been to acrobat school'.

## **RQ 2: What is the role of the practitioner in supporting creativity in child-initiated play?**

The analysis revealed five ways in which practitioners supported children's creativity in child-initiated play: by provoking possibilities, allowing time and space, being in the moment, making interventions and mentoring in partnership. The first four of these blended child-initiated with adult-initiated impetus reflecting earlier work (eg Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) exploring children's play.

**Practitioner Role 1: Provoking possibilities.** The decision by the practitioners to use provocations as a stimulus meant that these child-initiated play episodes were structurally and inherently linked to them. Practitioners provided props, offered open access to materials and sought to open wide possibilities in terms of where children might take their play. They also became involved in the play by leading at times, by directing the learning at times, by introducing resources and ideas. So – this was child-initiated play in the context of an adult's involvement.

**Practitioner Role 2: Allowing time and space for children's responses.** This feature of adult activity reflected the previous work on PT and pedagogy (Cremin et al, 2006). Here allowing time and space for children's authentic responses involved at times setting up and creating play-spaces, stepping back, observing, holding back from interrupting, following children's interests – but it also involved as documented earlier in this article, playing alongside children as a partner. This aspect of allowing time and space gave children the opportunity to *respond* to the provocations. Practitioners also created space for children's *participation*. This cluster of adult behaviours involved encouraging children to

work through their own play scenarios, going with children's ideas and the flow of activity, valuing children's ownership of ideas. Children in both episodes sought to access the play space through the negotiative gatekeeping of the adult who reasoned with the lead narrator in each. They were not always successfully though and in one case, the practitioner prevents another child from sharing the narrative judging it appropriate to say 'Jared is making up the story' as if to imply that it belonged to him and could not be shared.

**Practitioner Role 3: Being in the moment with the children.** Adults played alongside children, were evidently present 'in the moment', being in the thick of the action, combining observing with intervention. They were available – so this was a very active engagement with the children's play. This is discussed further in the section on PT which follows shortly.

**Practitioner Role 4: Interventions – supporting, sustaining, suspending.** The analysis surfaced three intervention-types: supporting (where children's experiences were scaffolded, the role being one of enabling children), sustaining (where the effort was on extending the play in different contexts, continuing threads from child-initiated moments, seeking to sustain the play, engaging in sustained shared thinking [need ref], encouraging children to stay in the moment), and suspending play (by managing the moment in terms of dynamics between children, modelling acceptable or preferred behaviours, managing frustrations, offering advice, managing space, guiding, resolving conflict).

**Practitioner Role 5: Mentoring in partnership.** Finally the analysis showed how practitioners mentored in partnership. Throughout the project practitioners worked interchangeably within mentor and observer roles, at times each taking the lead with the children and critiquing each other's practice. Key themes emerged, that of challenging, comparing, contributing and confidence. Practitioners openly acknowledged that they enjoyed the supportive experience of working together with the shared assumption that they wanted to learn from each other. There was an observable openness when practitioners engaged in reflection, which sometimes involved challenging, for example Gilly expressed that one play session "didn't really go as I thought it would" and Caterina tested, "why how did you think it would go?". At times the challenging was quite strong,

as shown here by Caterina and Gilly when debating child-initiated play and considering Gilly's strategy of leading before standing back,

G: "I start off with something and then I lead it and then I do stand back and I leave the children to explore by themselves..."

C: "I think children are very good at creating their own spaces... they'll take an object ... and do something with it you may not be aware of... we all have different strengths... you're very strong at doing the formal tales and giving the children those images and experiences for them to take on and develop...and I've been risk taking a bit".

Contributing was defined by professional development and was expressed strongly by senior members of staff who showed a keen interest in seeking ways to demonstrate skills, alter practice, and make a contribution to the early years profession. Professional confidence was a prominent theme in this respect in terms of trusting the children's abilities to manage and sustain their own play and one's own professional practice. Heather, the Deputy Head of the setting, captures this succinctly: "as a senior leader within the school, allowing someone to do that [step back] and feel confident in that as appropriate to learning is something that I will need to support staff with".

### **Relating practitioner strategies to possibility thinking research**

The study reinforced the key aspects of pedagogy for PT already documented in earlier work (Cremin *et al*, 2006). Adults were seen 'standing back' at times and offering children space and time to develop their ideas, valuing children's agency. They demonstrated sensitivity to the emotional environment forming part of the enabling context for children, co-reflecting critically after each episode to consider the extent to which they had got the balance of emotional comfort right. Noticing children seemed to drift to the provocations with their key worker and key group, in their reflections, practitioners surmised the importance of the 'comfort' of the key group. Interestingly, every practitioner noted children exceeding their expectations in this initiative, expressing surprise at how easily children had developed personal narratives. Gilly notes the children had had less



arguments than expected, and “took to the story straight away, it was theirs, like they were saying ‘we know all about it’ ”.

The analysis extends previous work on PT in three ways, first by revealing more about the enabling context, particularly the ***role of the provocation, emotional space and encouragement***, second by showing how at times practitioners stepped forward into the children’s play ***balancing standing back with co-authoring***, and also in revealing how ***professional co-investigations involved ‘meddling in the middle’***.

In terms of the enabling environment, ***the role of the provocation*** was important in this project, together with the emphasis on emotional space and encouragement. The children became involved in the project through their key worker groups and moved toward the provocations in these groupings which seemed to offer emotional security. Each practitioner considered carefully what might be an appropriate provocation, the extent of their own input and the relationship between the last provocation and the next, seeking to further stimulate children’s existing interests whilst maintaining sufficient ambiguity to enable children’s own imaginations.

In terms of ***balancing standing back with co-authoring***, the three-way relationship was revealed between creative teaching, teaching for creativity and creative learning which Lin (2010) describes in PT in drama in the primary school. Also visible in such moments were other characteristics noted by Lin (2010), of teacher encouragement and, perhaps, a sense of humour for example when in the indoor play episode, Caterina says having been told to ‘STOP’ by Jared’s traffic patrol officer, ‘Oh dear’. The co-authoring with children which becomes evident in both episodes reveals how ‘standing back’ is in these episodes of child-initiated play, only a part of the story. Adults allowed and encouraged children’s self-determination, by following the child’s lead, often verbalising what they were doing. This can be understood as a form of ‘meddling in the middle’ (Craft, 2011c) which means co-constructing alongside and with children. Coined by McWilliam the concept of ‘teacher as meddler’ (2008, p265) represents a distinct approach to pedagogy, beyond the ‘sage on the stage’ and the ‘guide on the side’. McWilliam’s meddler notices with care, compassion and interest what

seems to be important to children. 'Meddling in the middle' therefore involves humility, care, collaboration, giving and receiving, working alongside with intense sensitivity as to appropriate interventions.

Accordingly, in this project we documented a delicate balance between adult and child narratives, as the adult's expectations had the potential to permeate the child's actions. Analysis of the practitioner reflections after the play episode, reveals acute practitioner awareness of dilemmas around the extent of stepping back, and how far to enable children's agency to guide the amount of time and space appropriate.

The role of children's own spontaneity in delicate balance with the adult's own role, was indeed keenly felt by staff, and could help sustain play as Heather put it: "because I was there very much involved in play, it helped them stay at the learning experience and continue past the point of frustration....when the turning points came where children could get frustrated and leave, I was able to support them through that.... they continued to stay ... and explore.....'

***Professional co-investigations involved 'meddling in the middle'.*** The opportunity to reflect with a colleague for each practitioner meant comparison of perceptions. As shown above, practitioners challenged and clarified one another's interpretations and their collegiate reflection in developing pedagogical possibility space opened up a form of professional co-authoring or 'meddling in the middle'; this was evident from the very first reflective discussion. This means of professional development studies by Paige-Smith and Rix (2011), Chappell and Craft, 2011, Craft, 2011c. It was immensely powerful for these practitioners and as Gilly put it during her final reflection, "It's not something that happens unless it's organised". Undertaking co-enquiry so that planning and reflection were integrated within the learning session, was highly valued. Caterina described it as 'joyous to work with two people together, because one of you can go off and deal with the interruptions leaving the other to stand back and be engrossed with the activity, which is a very obvious pragmatic thing.....' Heather corroborated that planning together was powerful leading to the development of stronger ideas.

Meddling in the middle in this way was partially provoked by the opportunity to seek to stand back in classroom practice which was seen as progressive, as expressed by one practitioner in the wider group:

‘Standing back is kind of anti what I’ve been sort of trained to do over the years. As an early years educator, you know, I’ve learned a lot about standing back and observing, but then using that standing back to then become involved and help scaffold and develop the learning’ (Heather, end of project reflection)

The new PT features in relation to pedagogy, evidenced in both the indoor and outdoor episodes, help to develop a new representation of PT, given in Figs 3 and 4. Fig 3 shows the heart of the nature of PT as shown in these episodes. The figure represents children’s immersive play showing the significance of the emotionally enabling context driven by careful use of provocation. These children’s play blended individual, collaborative and communal and was driven by a leading question or narrative, co-imagined, some of the time, with adults. Children’s risk-taking, which had not been seen in earlier studies, was evident in this study.

Insert Fig 3 here

In terms of how the pedagogy relates to PT, Fig 4 shows how this study extends our understanding of how pedagogy nurtures PT, by adding the new features to the existing representation. Pedagogy nurturing PT in this study involved practitioners offering children emotionally enabling opportunities driven by a provocation, involved practitioners valuing highly children’s agency, offering them time and space but what is much clearer in this study is how practitioners blended standing back with stepping forward into the children’s play-space, co-imagining with the children, and how the children’s play involved a blend of individual, collaborative and communal play, driven by a leading narrative and also encompassed risk-taking along with the other features of PT previously identified: question posing and responding, innovation, being imaginative, self-

determination and intentionality. The new material offers further insight into the dynamic between children and between children and adults.

Insert Fig 4 here

### **Concluding remarks**

This research offers a new landmark in the study of possibility thinking, in revealing the blend between individual, collaborative and communal creativity, in the play of young children, together with insights into the role of the leading question or narrative and the delicate balance for practitioners between standing back and stepping forward, and thus between child- and adult- initiated play. This professional creativity was melded with the children's, reflecting McWilliam's (2008, p265) meddler in the middle who recognises:

- it is not possible to 'know' it all and that we should spend more time 'being a usefully ignorant co-worker in the thick of the action'
- it is important to recognise the vital role played by risk in today's world and to prioritise this over being a 'custodial risk minimiser'
- children benefit from teachers designing, assembling and editing alongside them rather than seeing their role as being one of 'forensic classroom auditor'
- Moving beyond counselling into being 'a collaborative critic and authentic evaluator' provides a valuable dynamic in learning.

This work differed from previous investigations of possibility thinking being focused on the relationship between practitioner and child creativity in the context of the use of a provocation. It revealed the power of the provocation in stimulating changes in practice and hence in the children's experiences. The provocations could reinforce and develop key resources, narratives and roles.

Practitioners in this setting, supported strongly by the head teacher and deputy head, concluded this phase of their co-enquiry by considering how they might develop the use of provocations to so as to further develop creativity in child-initiated play, by integrating the practice into weekly or daily planning. There was a shared commitment in the setting to continue to collaborate through paired teaching.

But perhaps most importantly the possibilities for professional understanding and for children's own creativity enabled by co-enquiry were profound, and revealed the role of 'risk' in terms of children's resistance and adults' willingness to allow a narrative to lead. The co-authoring of stories between adults and children and between adults, as revealed in this study, may offer insight into ways in which democratic reflective practice may further emerge to nurture creativity in children and adults alike.

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