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[Book Review] Faulkner, D. & Coates, E. (eds) Exploring children's creative narratives

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FAULKNER, D. & COATES, E. (eds.) 2011. *Exploring children's creative narratives*, London: Routledge. 260pp. ISBN 978-0-415-56563-9, £31.99

The significance of creative activities to the academic and wider social development of children is becoming an increasingly important area of research and is of interest to educationalists, applied linguists and child psychologists. In *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives*, Dorothy Faulkner and Elizabeth Coates (2011) provide a timely edited collection of 11 chapters (including chapters written by both Faulkner and Coates) starting with a foreword by Iram and John Siraj-Blatchford. The chapters focus on empirical classroom based research into children's creative narratives.

In *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives*, Faulkner and Coates, in my view attempt to free the terms 'creative' and 'narrative' and extend their commonly used definitions to include spontaneous and personal narratives that are expressed through drawings (Wright; Fulková and Tipton), movement and dance (Young; Chappell and Young), music composition (Truman), including also spoken narratives as in those co-constructed in play (Sawyer), classroom group discussion (Faulkner), children's explanations about children's playground design (Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo) and their artwork (Coates and Coates; Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta).

In this review, rather than provide a synopsis of each chapter in turn, I will firstly draw together themes from different parts of the collection. I will unpick the term *creative narrative* through exploring how the chapters present a meta-narrative about what should be considered as creative narratives and additionally their potential for learning in the classroom. Secondly I will discuss the relevance of the methodological perspectives that support these studies. The studies employ a range of methods in the empirical work supported by a broadly socio-cultural approach. The commonality across the studies is the adoption of non-experimental approaches choosing in contrast, naturalistic and qualitative perspectives.

The contributors are in agreement about the significance of children's creative narratives and there are four themes throughout the collection that stand out for me as particularly insightful. Firstly, the diverse narratives considered here are not pieces of

polished work nor are they taken from children who are suggested to be ‘gifted and talented’ in the way this expression is commonly used. The children represented are mainstream children between the ages of 2 to 11 years, expressing themselves spontaneously with peers, teachers and the researchers. It is not the narratives nor the children that are unusual or exceptional but the perspective that this collection takes. These chapters allow the reader to challenge an understanding of ‘creativity’, and allow us to define it as not simply something that we aspire to or that is tinged with perfection, expertise and a sense of brilliance i.e. ‘big C’ (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford). By this I mean that the creative narratives are simply everyday classroom occurrences which, as this book strongly suggests, should be recognised, encouraged and valued as such.

The second theme is the exploration of non-written narratives, for example a piece of musical composition, a group discussion, dance and movement (see in particular Faulkner; Chappell and Young; Truman; Young). These creative narratives are valued and set in contrast to the privileging of reading and writing which is common in schools. Young, in her chapter suggests ‘Aural and bodily creativity, as expressed in mimetic acts, with their immediacy, their capacity to draw in others, their fluidity in time and space leaves no visible trace on paper or in materials....receives less attention’(p.179). This is a direct challenge to more traditional creative narratives valued in schools which she suggests are culturally situated and visually dominated in the West.

A third theme is the multimodal aspect of many children’s creative narratives which this collection argues should not be considered as singular in form but can be combined, for example art and oral narrative, using one to elaborate and develop the other further (see in particular Wright; Young; Kangas et al.; Coates and Coates). A notable example is in Wright’s study where she suggests that ‘we must view children’s drawings, combined with their spontaneous running narrative and non-verbal communication, as a single multimodal act. Thus, the artwork-narrative in its entirety is a ‘semiotic unit’ which carries a larger, unified message’ (p.160). Wright’s chapter, among others in the collection, demonstrates how children represent their realities through a range of modes and creative narratives without restriction. The multimodal aspect of a narrative encompasses not only the narrative itself and the

ways in which children combine expression but also in the cultural modes that are now so influential in a child's life, for example, advertising, brands, cartoons, television and the like, which are appropriated within their narratives.

Another theme present in this collection, which may challenge a traditional view of creativity as a lone pursuit, is that of collaboration (see in particular Kangas et al.; Sawyer; Faulkner). These studies focus heavily on co-creation and cooperation which reinforces, supports and further develops children's creative narratives. Sawyer's chapter uses excerpts from transcripts to demonstrate how children's narratives develop through the co-construction of dialogue in socio-dramatic play 'In collaborative improvisation, each child's contribution has to be evaluated before it is accepted by the others, and each child's turns in interaction successively build on the prior turns of the other children, resulting in the step-by-step emergence of a narrative.' (p.12). His work illustrates clearly how in socio-dramatic play children co-create a narrative. Kangas, Kultima and Ruokamo also explore collaborative narratives in their research into children's creative input into an outside play-ground and through this 'the role of narrativity and narrative thinking within the co-design processes of children' (p.65). Here the researchers audio and video record and participate as children draw and discuss their designs, ideas and dreams for their ideal outdoor play space. In both these chapters, and that by Faulkner, the idea that a creative narrative is constructed by an individual independently is challenged by examples of the power of collaboration and the co-construction of narratives, whether child to child or facilitated by an adult.

So why, for these authors, are creative narratives considered important? I have discussed above how the contributors to the book highlight narratives as spontaneous, non-traditional, collaborative and involving a number of activities. However the significance of these diverse creative narratives is that they encourage thinking and learning whether they are facilitated by a teacher or during peer to peer collaboration. The significance of the classroom basis for the research is, as Kultima and Ruokamo argue, that 'one of the core drivers of knowledge and process in society is creativity, and that one of the key missions of schools is to educate for the creation of knowledge and innovation' (p.63). The suggestion through the collection is that the opportunities in classrooms to develop these creative narratives must be encouraged because of

their direct link to increasing children's learning potential. Faulkner investigates how teachers make use of a specific educational programme (Synetics) and how this supports teachers' approaches to developing creative collaboration in the classroom and the resulting dialogue in group discussions among the children. Through two extracts she underlines the point that not only is creativity jointly constructed but that creativity in this collaborative activity promotes learning. Learning, and in addition the significance of understanding how children think, is emphasised in the chapter by Coates and Coates (among others). They examine children's drawings but their study is not the developmental aspects of the drawings, nor the drawings themselves, but the children's spoken narratives that accompany and explain the drawings. 'While pictures often stood as images in their own right, the addition of narrative provided insights into the stories behind them and deepened our understanding of the way children think' (p.100).

Historically, psychological and educational research with children has employed experimental research methodology. In methodological terms this collection takes a broadly social constructionist approach and a range of naturalistic and context-sensitive methods are employed. Faulkner's self-reflection about her own experimental methodological approach during her early career allows her to challenge this approach and be open to qualitative and naturalistic perspectives which are represented in this body of work strengthening the conclusions. For example, Hallum, Lee and Das Gupta set out specifically to challenge traditional experimental approaches to child research with an explicit social constructivist and ethnographic perspective, Hallum acting as a teaching assistant within the classroom where the research took place. The naturalistic approach to the data collection in this study and others permits a range of data collection methods to be employed including the use of video and audio recordings, informal discussions with children, interviews with teachers and observations. So how does this alternative naturalistic methodological perspective contribute something new to research into children's creative narratives? To answer this, I draw on the work by Hallum et al. who suggest that experimental methods would not have fully explored the potential of the 'wider social cultural and educational context which shape the creation and interpretation of children's artwork' (p.111). This statement resonates strongly throughout the collection.

A justified challenge of these classroom based studies might be that teachers already record and assess children's drawings and talk, and the curriculum allows the dance, movement, music making under discussion, so what is it that makes these studies significant? Some of the chapters challenge current classroom practice and policy; however the strength of this work is the perspective and inquisitive attitude of the authors towards these creative narratives. It is the recognition that they are of immense value and can provide important insights and alternative classroom opportunities for learning. As Hallum et al. suggest strongly 'All too often creative arts-based activity is still being co-opted to serve the main curriculum drive, rather than being valued and recognised for its intrinsic benefits' (p.226). I agree with this point and in my view what this collection of work promotes and concurs is the potential for children's creative narratives to be missed. The insightful nature of the narratives is not always heard, seen, combined nor (most importantly) encouraged in order to develop thinking and learning.

This review would not be complete without a mention of the nature of the examples used in the chapters and the collection of supporting colour plates. I point this out as I believe these illustrations, which range from transcriptions of speech, children's drawings and writing, to photographs in classrooms and screen shots of computer systems, help to bring to life the texts and environments that the researchers were working with and within. In presenting these examples, the authors contextualise the research topic of creative narratives and remind the reader of the children's voices that they present and translate into academic prose, bringing to the fore the child's 'voice' through the language, drawing, movement and music.

In *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives*, Faulkner and Coates, as editors, achieve the aim set out in their opening sentence of their Introduction, to offer 'fresh perspectives on children's creative narratives' (p.1). I highly recommend this book which will appeal to anyone working within the area of early childhood. Research is often valuable when there are tensions to discuss, debate and unpick, but this work with the same higher level focus and objective, is of huge value, and satisfying to read as it builds the story of children's creative narratives chapter by chapter. This is a book about common features of childhood and classroom activities and how we can harness creative narratives from different perspectives to encourage learning,

thinking, development and most importantly enjoyment. *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives* feels like the beginning of a journey rather than a fixed conclusion into this fascinating area of research with children and I conclude by citing Coates and Coates' own concluding statements: 'Observing and listening to children, is after all, vital if we are to achieve one of the most important aims of early childhood education, that of enabling them to grow in confidence and discover their own voice.' (p.108)

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