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Introduction

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This book explores theories, research and practice concerning young children's creative thinking, particularly in the context of their relationships with others. Whether we are parents, early childhood practitioners, teachers or researchers, we try to listen to children's thoughts and imagine what their understandings might be. We reflect on what we do with them, and wonder whether the environments that we create with them extend and stimulate their experiences. But what do we actually mean by creative thinking? Do we know when we see it in action? How do we go about investigating this? Importantly, what are the implications of understanding children's creative thinking for early childhood practice? We address these questions by placing children, parents and practitioners at the centre of our discussion in order to stress the significance of the collaborative environments that they create with one another.

Case study

John, a 5-year-old, arrives at school a little late with his father. He looks around the room where other children are all engaged in various activities, and says to himself with a grin: 'Everyone's playing a hundred games!' (cited in Fumoto, 2011: 27).

In the 3-year-olds' room, Thomas approaches his teacher, Ms Sheila, who is listening to Laura telling her a story, and says: 'I want to do some painting'. Sheila replies: 'Bring me a shirt and I'll help you put it on'. Thomas goes over to the easel and gets an old shirt that is used by the children when they paint and Sheila helps him

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put it on. Thomas goes to the easel and turns around, and says: 'Ms Sheila, can you write my name?' Sheila responds: 'Why don't you get started because I'm talking to Laura now'. Thomas looks around and says 'OK' but does not start. He calls out again: 'Ms Sheila, can you write my name?' Sheila says with a smile: 'I'll come and write your name in a minute. Don't you worry'. Ms Sophie, an assistant teacher, walks over and writes his name instead. Thomas picks up a brush and starts to paint. Sheila laughs joyfully and says: 'Creative juice doesn't flow without his name!'

These are two children's experiences in an early childhood setting. John's comment makes us think about what children see, feel and think as they walk into their schools every morning. Thomas, who did not want to start painting until he had his name written on his paper, makes us wonder what might have been going through his mind as he looks at the white sheet of paper in front of him. Was John expressing his ownership of the environment, and Thomas, of his activity?

Our focus on social relationships in discussing children's creative thinking is by no means new. Indeed, historically, social relationships have been seen as the foundation of early childhood pedagogy. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), for instance, emphasized that the underpinnings of early childhood education were the 'unity' between and within individuals, and that children are more likely to follow their 'self-active instincts' when the relationships they form in early childhood settings resemble those of a loving family environment (Froebel, 1888). Liebschner (1992) suggests that, for Froebel, education is equivalent to the process of children and teachers living in harmony based on their mutual respect. The aim of Robert Owen (1771–1858), who established the UK's first nursery-infant school at New Lanark in 1816, was also 'to create communities made up of people who are motivated by the principle of mutual consideration, and who could live together in harmony' (Bradburn, 1967: 22). The idea of respect between children and teachers has also been the basis of work carried out by pioneers of early education such as Maria Montessori (1870–1952), and Rachel and Margaret McMillan (1859–1917, 1860–1931, respectively) (e.g. McMillan, 1930). More recently, Malaguzzi's (1993) *Reggio Emilia* approach, promoting children's intellectual development through its focus on symbolic representations of the world, has also emphasized that 'the three protagonists – children, teachers, and parents' are seen as the underpinnings of learning in early childhood settings (Edwards et al., 1998: 9).

This book builds on this historical basis of early childhood practice and demonstrates not only the uniqueness of children's, parents' and practi-

tioners' experiences, but also the methodological and theoretical complexities involved in understanding them. To this end, we draw on materials collected through the Froebel Research Fellowship project, *The Voice of the Child: Ownership and Autonomy in Early Learning (FRF): 2002–present*, (see Froebel Educational Institute: http://www.froebel. org.uk/fre.html) funded by the Froebel Educational Institute, and conducted by the authors. The project derives from our distinct but overlapping research interests: young children's thinking (Sue Robson), parent partnership in early childhood settings (Sue Greenfield), teacher–child relationships (Hiroko Fumoto) and creativity (David J. Hargreaves). Through collaboration, we have brought together our areas of interest in order to further our understanding of the ways in which we can promote the development of young children's creative thinking, and develop new ways of looking at young children's activity.

In the FRF project, we have had the pleasure of listening to children who have enthused us with the ways in which they express their creative thinking. Practitioners and parents have also inspired us with their dedication to supporting children's learning and development. They have shared with us the joy of observing, and being part of, children's thinking, as well as their anxieties. For instance, practitioners have told us of their frustration with the structural and curricular constraints that they encounter which put strain on providing what they believe is the 'best' environment for promoting children's thinking (Robson and Fumoto, 2009). Many parents have also voiced their concerns about not knowing enough of what children are doing at school. In this context, practitioners and parents have repeatedly raised the importance of the nature of social relationships in early childhood settings. Their views have motivated us to look further into the link between children's creative thinking and social relationships, and to think carefully about how we, as researchers, collaborate with them.

The early childhood field and creativity research

In recent years, the fields of early childhood and creativity research have undergone considerable development and change in terms of the ways in which we understand young children's development and learning, and how we conceptualize creativity. These changes have proved to be particularly relevant to the ways in which we explore children's creative thinking in early childhood settings. For instance, creativity, once seen as an ability that is possessed only by 'exceptional' individuals, is now seen as inherently present in all of us, including young children. Creative thinking is increasingly seen as permeating our everyday life through the ways in which we confront difficulties, think of new possibilities, and engage with our physical and social environments. It touches the realms of empathy, wisdom and social responsibility. The necessity for thinking and expressing our creativity is now considered as crucial for our own as well as for our

collective well-being in society (e.g. Craft et al., 2008c). In particular, Craft's notion of 'possibility thinking' as an aspect of creativity, which encourages children to think of 'what if' questions, has been important for early childhood practice as it adopts a 'learner-inclusive approach' through emphasizing the importance of collaborative enquiry (e.g. Craft, 2002).

As creativity research has come to talk about 'democratic', 'wise' and 'good' creativity, demonstrating the shift from an individualized approach to a process that is embedded within the social aspects of our society (Craft et al., 2008c), so the early childhood field now also embraces the complexities of children's lives and their development, both in practice as well as in research. As Fleer and Robbins (2007) argue, the field has moved on from the developmental-constructivist tradition to incorporating cultural-historical or socio-cultural perspectives on children's development. Children's lives are no longer approached simply from the 'developmental milestone' view which takes them out of their contexts, but are understood as being embedded in their families, society, culture and history, highlighting the diversity of their experiences. Early childhood provisions are increasingly seen as settings in which children's learning is facilitated through 'communities of learners' which promote the process of creating the environment *with* children rather than from an adult-led agenda (Rogoff et al., 2001). In line with this, there are strong advocates for ethnographic approaches to research that consider these provisions as 'a cultural reality embedded deeply in the social fabric of everyday life – for both children *and* their caregivers' (Buchbinder et al., 2006: 46). These ways of understanding a child reflect an ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the approach of life-span developmental psychology (Lerner, 2002), which remind us that a child's existence is intimately related to his/her physical and social environment: these approaches also resonate with socio-cultural theory (e.g. Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) and developmental systems theory (Ford and Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 2002), upon which this book draws. The implication of these changes is that young children's creative thinking cannot be understood without considering the ways in which it is shaped by their social relationships, and vice versa.

Policy and curriculum: international perspectives

Internationally, at policy and curricular level, there is clear evidence of the valuing of creativity, and of supporting young children's creative thinking, for both its present and future importance in their development. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review of 2004, for example, which features a number of well-known early childhood education and care curriculum outlines from around the world, cites 'creativity' as something that should always be present in an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programme, ranking it alongside other aspects such as children's questions, exploration, fantasy and chal-

lenge (OECD, 2004). In the same publication, Laevers identifies the development of (future) adults who, amongst other things, are creative, as one of the key aims of the Belgian Experiential Education (EXE) programme. Vecchi links creativity and the place of the atelier, or studio, with pedagogical identity in Reggio Emilia, invoking Malaguzzi's view that the atelier should 'act as guarantor for the freshness and originality of an approach to things' (Vecchi, 2010: 1).

There is also strong evidence in curriculum documentation of the linkage between creativity and creative thinking and young children's opportunities to communicate and represent their experiences with others. In the Republic of Ireland, *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), cites the importance of creative thinking and creativity in all four of its themes of well-being, communicating, identity and belonging, and exploring and thinking. However, the strongest links are made in the theme of communicating, with Aim 4 being that 'Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively' (NCCA, 2009: 35). This includes through language, visual arts, music, problem solving, pretence and role play. This breadth is similar to both the Reggio Emilia idea of the 'hundred languages of children' (Edwards et al., 1998) and the Communication strand of the New Zealand *Te Whāriki* Early Childhood Curriculum which specifies, as one of four goals, the provision of an environment in which children can 'discover and develop different ways to be creative and expressive' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1996: 80). These ways encompass all forms of expression, including pretend and dramatic play.

Policy and curriculum within the UK

Within the United Kingdom, government interest in ensuring that creativity is actively fostered in nurseries and schools across the whole age range has been evident in a number of initiatives. In England, the then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority published *Creativity: Find It, Promote It* (QCA, 2005). The English Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) published a survey of creative approaches to learning in 44 schools (2010). Similarly, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education in Scotland reported on evidence from inspections illustrating good practice in promoting creativity (HMIE, 2006). All three cases are efforts to ensure more widespread implementation of the practices described. The curriculum documents for young children of all four countries of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) contain explicit reference to creativity, though much less to either creative thinking or even to creative learning. Strongest in this regard is the extensive 'Building the Curriculum' series from Scotland, as part of the *Curriculum for Excellence*. In this, the ability to 'think creatively and independently' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2008) is seen as part of being a successful learner. At the 'Early level', the development of creative think-

ing and learning are highlighted (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2007, 2008), with creativity having parity with 'important themes such as enterprise, citizenship, sustainable development [and] international education' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2008: 23), to be developed in a range of contexts. Both the Welsh and English frameworks similarly suggest that creativity cuts across subjects: 'Children should be constantly developing their imagination and creativity across the curriculum' (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Wales), 2008: 39), and that it is linked to many forms of representation: 'art, music, movement, dance, imaginative and role-play activities, mathematics and design and technology' (DCSF, 2008: 106). At the same time, however, both the Welsh and English frameworks identify an 'area of learning' called 'Creative Development', which locates creative activity within arts-based areas such as dance, music and drama. This leaves room for very different interpretations of what might constitute creative activity, and, albeit unwittingly, may continue to focus practitioners on these subjects as 'creative', to the possible detriment of others. This contrasts markedly with the Swedish Curriculum for the Pre-School, which describes creativity as one of a number of 'every-day-life-skill(s)' (Pramling in OECD, 2004: 23), to be seen as general, and a part of all subjects.

At the same time, this rediscovered emphasis on creativity raises some questions. For example, the title of the 2010 Ofsted report, *Learning: Creative Approaches that Raise Standards,* is significant in positioning creative thinking and learning as of value in so far as they do not conflict with a 'standards' agenda. In addition, whilst creativity may be valued as an approach, it is conspicuously absent in assessment requirements in the UK. The English *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DCSF, 2008), for example, makes welcome mention throughout of the importance of extending young children's creativity, through play, and across the curriculum. However, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (QCA, 2008), designed to provide a summative assessment of children's achievement and competence at the end of the Foundation Stage, has no items which involve creativity or creative thinking, although the proposals in the Tickell Review (DfE, 2011) (see below) are more positive in this respect. Similarly, the Outcomes for the Welsh *Framework for Children's Learning for 3- to 7-year-olds in Wales* has just one reference to establishing how 'children use materials/resources and tools to make creative images' (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Wales), 2008: 57). This may have the unfortunate impact of depressing the status of creative thinking, in the eyes of practitioners, parents and children alike. As Pramling suggests, 'When only small details are evaluated, a literacy/numeracy syllabus for instance, teachers tend to start training to teach these details, and the whole idea of fostering young children's thinking, reflection and creativity becomes lost!' (OECD, 2004: 29). Whilst we are not necessarily suggesting that assessing creativity will either improve

children's knowledge, skill and understanding of it, nor enhance practitioners' efforts in developing it, Eisner's comment that 'our nets define what we shall catch' (1985: 6) is an important reminder that what is assessed is often what is valued. As Prentice (2000) suggests, one important rationale for focusing on creativity and creative thinking is to counter such a narrowing of curriculum emphasis.

In England, the Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2011) was published in March 2011, and, at the time of writing, its proposals are being examined and discussed by practitioners, academics and policy makers. In the context of creative thinking, it is potentially encouraging. In particular, the review proposes replacing the current 'Creative development' area of learning with 'Expressive arts and design', as well as the creation of three 'characteristics of effective learning' (DfE, 2011): playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically. These three 'enduring' characteristics are described as underpinning all areas of learning, 'play[ing] a central role in learning, and in being an effective learner' (DfE, 2011: 87). Crucially, they are also included in the proposed replacement EYFS Profile, thus helping to ensure that practitioners focus on them. The third characteristic, 'creating and thinking critically' has obvious links to creative thinking. However, what is most interesting to note is that the strands within all three characteristics reflect much of our approach in identifying and describing young children's creative thinking, as set out in this book. These strands include 'finding out and exploring', 'being involved and concentrating', 'keeping on trying', 'enjoying achieving what they set out to do', 'having their own ideas', 'using what they already know to learn new things' and 'choosing ways to do things and finding new ways' (DfE, 2011: 79). The *Analysing Children's Creative Thinking* (ACCT) Framework described in Chapter 8 includes similar items as aspects of creative thinking behaviour.

The aims of the book

The book has three aims. The first is to explore the meaning of creative thinking and its link with social relationships. Despite the political, curricular and social interest in the promotion of creative thinking in early childhood worldwide, there is still a lack of coherent understanding of the concept, especially where young children are concerned. This is problematic, as we found in the FRF project that the ways we interpret children's creative thinking seem to be directly relevant to the ways in which we talk about pedagogy, and about the enhancement of children's well-being (Robson and Hargreaves, 2005). In this book, we do not attempt to provide a straightforward definition of creative thinking. Rather, we critically review the current notion of creative thinking in an effort to bridge the gap in our understanding and raise questions about how we might go about promoting it.

The second aim is to critically evaluate the ways in which we engage children, parents and practitioners in research. In the FRF project, we have employed a wide range of approaches such as video-stimulated reflective dialogues, interviews, observations, questionnaires and a measurement instrument. By considering some of these approaches, we hope the book will help readers to reflect on the methods that they employ in their own work. We have paid particular attention to the ways we listen to the research participants. For instance, we have considered the ways in which we, as researchers, develop relationships with children, parents and practitioners, and the ethics of our entering into their everyday lives. We think that the issues examined in the book are also relevant to how practitioners, parents and children come to work together in early childhood settings.

The third aim is to contribute to the professional development of early childhood practitioners, both pre- and in-service, by raising pertinent questions that are useful for those who are in a position to influence early childhood practice directly. We do not attempt to provide a 'quick fix' solution to practice, but instead, explore theoretical and methodological complexities in understanding children's creative thinking and social relationships, without losing sight of what is important in day-to-day practice. In doing so, we are not arguing that the promotion of children's creative thinking and social relationships are the most important aspects of early childhood practice. Rather, we think that the promotion of children's creative thinking and social relationships are vital in enhancing the quality of early childhood practice as a whole, which matters to children's learning and development.

All of us, including academics, policy makers, parents and early childhood professionals, are trying to sustain and expand high quality early childhood provision. However, especially in times of economic uncertainty, the challenge of implementing this remains enormous. High quality provision does not come cheap, and there is a need for political commitment and investment if we are to provide quality experiences for all children. There are other difficulties that add to this challenge. For instance, Greenfield (2011) reports that communication between parents and practitioners is not always adequate in early childhood provision. Despite the increasing attention paid to the significance of parental involvement in early learning, in reality, this remains a complex challenge. In addition, through the FRF project, we have uncovered the frustration that practitioners in England experience about the lack of time available to engage in meaningful interactions with children (Fumoto and Robson, 2006). In the United States, there is also a growing unease in the early childhood profession about the diminishing opportunities available for children to play once they start Kindergarten as a result of the possible 'standard overload' experienced by the teachers (Miller and Almon, 2009; NAEYC, 2009). These difficulties are particularly worrying as meaningful interactions between children, parents and practitioners and the quality of play are key

ingredients in promoting children's creative thinking. In this book, we argue especially for the importance of promoting ownership of and autonomy in learning in this process (Robson and Fumoto, 2009).

In summary, the book aims to contribute to the growing resources available to academics, undergraduate and postgraduate students and practitioners in Early Childhood Studies and other related fields. There are currently several 'how-to' textbooks that give us ideas about how children's creative thinking might be promoted. There is also an increasing volume of research-based literature that explores creative thinking in relation to social relationships based on its theoretical underpinnings. These two areas do not often converge, and so miss the opportunity of informing one another. This book attempts to bridge this gap by integrating theories, research and practice.

The case studies and data that illustrate our discussion are gathered mainly in early childhood settings in England, and in the United States where one of the authors is currently based. The settings involved in the studies were from the private, voluntary, independent and maintained sectors. Those who took part in the studies were children between 3 and 5 years of age, their parents and practitioners. The qualifications of practitioners in the studies included the English National Vocational Qualifications level 3, Qualified Teacher Status (degree level), Montessori Certificate and Masters in Early Childhood Studies, to name just a few. Their experience ranged from new entrants to the field to those who had been working with young children for over 20 years. What they had in common (apart from their interest in and support for the children!) was that all of them had responsibility for planning and implementing activities and young children's experiences in the setting.

Whilst the book is largely concerned with practice in the United Kingdom, the links that we are trying to make between conceptual aspects and practice are not limited to the UK. Indeed, the general concepts of creative thinking and social relationships cannot be considered without referring to other cultural interpretations. Accordingly, we explore these concepts from multiple perspectives, including those developed in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. This is particularly important as many early childhood settings involve children and families from culturally diverse communities, and because the practitioners themselves often come from different personal and professional backgrounds.

This book concerns young children, their parents, and the early childhood practitioners who work with them, by building on the literature that explores the development of thinking in children under 3 (e.g. Gopnik, 2009), amongst others. When we talk about parents, we include all primary caregivers. We also use terms such as 'teachers' and 'practitioners'

interchangeably in order to make reference to a wide range of literature on those who work with young children and their families in their professional capacity.

How the book is organized

The book is in three main parts. In Part 1, we discuss the ways in which creativity and creative thinking can be conceptualized, and explore the links with young children's social relationships. While our focus is on the creative thinking that children express in their everyday lives, this does not mean that everything that children do is creative. We examine various ways of considering their creative thinking by taking a broadly social constructivist approach, highlighting its characteristics and diversity.

Part 2 addresses the methodological issues of investigating children's, parents' and practitioners' experiences. This includes the possible benefits of using approaches such as video-stimulated recall, which is becoming increasingly popular in eliciting young children's understanding of their own experiences. We also consider the complications of involving parents in research: of parents who are hard to reach, and those who speak English as an additional language. Another methodological issue that is highlighted in this section is the use of a mixed methods approach in early childhood research. In recent years, ethnographical and other methods have increasingly been seen as the key to understanding people's experiences, and 'democratic' ways of conducting research and co-constructing meanings with participants have been popularized along with the development of socio-cultural approaches to childhood. Part 2 explores how current research has developed the idea of conducting research *with* participants rather than *on* them, and considers the implications of this for mixed methods approaches.

Part 3 focuses on the experiences of children, parents and practitioners. It explores the ways in which these three protagonists engage with one another, and how they promote ownership and autonomy in their own and in others' learning and practice. First, young children's experience of their own creative thinking is explored by drawing on observations of children made in the FRF project, and by investigating the conversations that we, and the practitioners, had with children by means of video-stimulated dialogue with them. Detailed analyses of the video clips of children's day-to-day interactions with peers and adults, and also of their own surroundings, are presented in order to explore some of these new ways of understanding children's experiences.

Second, parents' understanding of young children's creative thinking is explored: this includes the opportunities that they provide at home for children to express their creativity and the difficulties they may experience
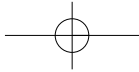
when working along with practitioners to facilitate these opportunities. Third, the practitioners' perspectives on developing the environments that promote young children's expression of their creative thinking are examined. The ways in which some settings are able to overcome the structural constraints upon their interactions with children are presented so as to explore some realistic and productive ways of engaging meaningfully with children and their families.

The final chapter in Part 3 draws together the discussion, and considers its implications for early childhood practice and theoretical and methodological approaches towards understanding young children's creative thinking. We conclude with some thoughts for future research and thinking on the promotion of young children's creative thinking at home and at school.