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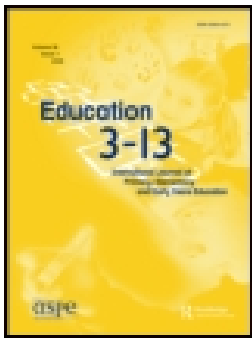
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# Why working creatively is still important in English primary classrooms in 2022: an appreciative empirical inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the current situation regarding children working creatively in schools. With two colleagues, I used a form of action research called Appreciative Inquiry, working in collaboration with teachers. Though it took courage for the teachers to plan and implement activities in which children worked creatively, they valued this work for several reasons. It can result in highly memorable and meaningful learning; it offers rich assessment opportunities by allowing children to express their understanding; it guards against underestimating children's capabilities; and it provides opportunities to fulfil the more holistic purposes of education. Therefore this pedagogical approach still matters.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Children; creativity; learning; memory; pedagogy

## Introduction

A lot is being asked of English primary schools at present. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) has returned its attention to inspecting the quality of the whole curriculum after a decade of relative neglect of 'non-core' subjects (Spielman 2018). While schools have been assimilating this development, they have also been prioritising English and Maths to help children 'catch up lost learning' after the coronavirus pandemic (Department for Education 2021, 2022). Meanwhile the Government continues to push for all schools to 'academise', with executive heads of multi-academy trusts (MATs) and federations often requiring the close data-driven accountability of staff (Shah 2018).

Weaving through all this, moreover, is the impetus to espouse a 'knowledge-led curriculum', as findings from cognitive science are disseminated through initial teacher education (ITE) courses (Department for Education 2019) and schools (Education Endowment Foundation 2021). There is much to be commended about this focus on the systematic long-term memorisation of key declarative knowledge as the basis for further learning and thinking (Rosenshine 2012; Christodoulou 2015; OFSTED 2019a), and there is a strong social justice argument too (Rata 2016; Young 2018).

While primary teachers strive to ensure that children experience 'changes in long-term memory' (OFSTED 2019a), demonstrable in sometimes narrow timeframes dictated by their line managers, it is understandable if they feel uncertain of their core pedagogic expertise and practices. Advice and suggestions abound online. Dyer (2016) for example disparages various familiar teaching approaches, advocating instead drill and didactic teaching. There seems to be some confusion between the ends and the means of education: the desired 'impact' of teaching and the way teaching and learning is 'implemented' in the classroom, to use the OFSTED (2019b) terminology. Do the

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'means' (i.e. the processes of teaching and learning) have to be narrowed to certain strategies only, to achieve the 'ends' of a knowledge-led curriculum?

There is also a wider debate about the sufficiency of a high-stakes knowledge-led curriculum as the desired 'end' of education. Might we want other things from it, too? Kautz et al. (2014) find that 'achievement test scores predict only a small fraction of the variance in later-life success' (1), stating:

Achievement tests do not adequately capture non-cognitive skills such as perseverance ('grit'), conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy, resilience to adversity, openness to experience, empathy, humility, tolerance of diverse opinions, and the ability to engage productively in society, which are valued in the labor market, in school, and in society at large. (Kautz et al. 2014, 2)

This paper focuses on one aspect of pedagogic practice: children working creatively. Not so long ago, teachers were being encouraged to ensure that children had opportunities for this, as it was seen to have educational value (Robinson 1999; Craft et al. 2013; Cremin and Chappell 2021). Recently my two music education colleagues (called K and E here) and I have sensed in our work with schools and teachers that creative opportunities for children are becoming rare. Does that matter? What is the place for children's creativity in schools, in the current educational climate?

## Methodology

This qualitative project (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 288–289) based within a social constructionist ontology (Cunliffe 2008) seeks to understand and also to highlight the phenomenon of working creatively, as currently perceived and practised (or not) by teachers.

Methodologically our approach most closely aligns with action research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 440–456). As McAteer (2013, 13) says, action research 'both explores and theorises practice; changes, evaluates and develops practice; provides a platform from which to critique ideology; and in doing so incorporates a moral as well as an epistemological dimension to the research'. The underlying question in action research is 'How can I improve my practice?' (McAteer 2013, 13). Our version of this question is 'Can supporting children to work creatively improve practice?' This obviously begs further questions about what 'improvement' means within the educational, political and sociological context outlined earlier. Improvement might be judged in terms of children gaining and retaining factual knowledge. It might also be judged within the wider educational debate about the purposes of education.

Coghlan (2015) describes how action research was developed on 'the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself' (418). Researcher positionality is a thus crucial factor. Hordern (2021) points out the challenges of conducting truly 'insider' research *for* education to the high standards achieved by outsiders doing research *about* education. But he also stresses its importance:

... the 'outsider' will have only a second-hand experience of the discussions and engagements that take place within the practice. An outsider may be able to gather plenty of information about the practice ... However, the outsider view cannot substitute for direct acquaintance with, or immersion in, the practice, in terms of making judgements about what is appropriate performance of the practice ... (2021, 1456)

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that the description of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in educational research projects is over-simplistic and that a more nuanced consideration is needed. They carefully explore the 'space between'. Given the methods used in the present study it is important to articulate my positionality, and that of my two music-educator colleagues E and K.

As primary educators and creative musical practitioners we are all insiders. I work with student primary teachers, particularly in primary music, having been a primary teacher and headteacher for many years. K and E are professional musicians and educators who undertake musical activities with children in primary schools in the Southwest. However, we are outsiders when it comes to belonging to a primary school staff within the present educational climate. We cannot 'feel' that directly.

In terms of the research paradigm we are insiders as we participated in all the practical research activities in partnership with class teachers. We had professional conversations with the teachers along the way which formed our data-set alongside our own reflections and thoughts. However, we are outsiders in the sense of being the researchers, which brings another layer of purpose to the activities and conversations beyond the educational and will have been noted by the teachers involved in our study.

In terms of research methods, we are ‘outsiders coming in’ and thereby changing the very situation we wish to explore. Purely by communicating our focus on children working creatively, we have prompted teachers to think about this and pay attention to it, which they might not have done otherwise. Reed (2007, 64–65) says of action research: ‘the idea of *engagement*, that the act of carrying out research has an intended and acknowledged effect on the world being researched, contrasts with other models of research that would see this as “contamination”’. Reed points out that research as a means of changing thinking has a long history, at least back to Marx’s work in the nineteenth century, and that this understanding is built into the ideas of action research (2007, 63).

Finally, we are insiders as believers in the human capacity for learning and development. We have reflected on how we are all three ‘relentlessly positive’ and naturally adopt what Dweck (2017) would call a ‘growth mindset’. This has underpinned our priority of facilitating the in-school work sensitively and effectively.

In short, our position is in the ‘space between’ inside and outside (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), sufficiently ‘close-to-practice’ to get a real sense of ‘practice purposes, accountabilities, dynamics, and ... concerns’ (Hordern 2021, abstract) rather than just describing behaviours.

Aware of our position within this research, and in tune with our approach to work in schools, we chose to adopt the ethos of Appreciative Inquiry or AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly 2011), itself a development of action research. Rather than framing our research in terms of ‘solving a problem’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 440), especially when teachers may be feeling unsure of themselves professionally, we approached this study in a spirit of opportunity and curiosity. As one of the participating teachers said:

That’s a lovely way to go into the project ... ‘Let’s find out what you’re doing and let’s build on that and let’s express the positives out of it’ rather than ‘You must teach it this way, and this is the content you have to teach as well’ – that’s beautiful! (School 1 teacher, 200521)

## Method

Our sample of English primary schools was opportunistic. K had taught music in three schools within a federation of seven in the Southwest. We asked this federation if we could facilitate creative projects in all seven of their schools, working in partnership with school staff. We felt this would enable us to get as close as we could to an insider’s sense of how working creatively is currently perceived, practised and valued (or not) by teachers. Given our expertise as music educators, we offered music as one choice of creative medium for the projects.

Ethical approval (British Education Research Association 2018) was secured from the University of Plymouth Institute of Education, with funding from them and Devon Music Education Hub. In April 2021 we presented our plans to a meeting of all the headteachers in the federation.

The schools decided how to make use of our offer, and which teachers would lead their creative projects. In many of the schools (Schools 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) we worked with the music lead teachers. In Schools 3, 6 and 7 projects were led by teachers who were comfortable working in visual media. (The school 6 teacher fits both descriptions.)

With each school in its turn, we then held at least one planning meeting with these teachers. The initial discussions were pivotal to each project’s success, as they allowed time for the teachers to become comfortable with our dual ‘facilitator’ and ‘music educator’ roles and to begin to generate ideas for what their particular project would focus on, in conversation with us. At this stage the

research aspect of the project was also outlined and informed consent sought and given for the use of teachers' written and spoken words as data (British Education Research Association 2018).

We then made three visits to each school at times suggested by the teachers. Often the first visit was to help launch the project with children. We were also able to see how the projects were evolving, to work alongside the teachers as 'extra pairs of hands' and to take the lead as appropriate on musical aspects of the projects. We had interim 'facilitative' reflective conversations with the teachers, plus a final meeting in each school to gather teachers' thoughts and reflections.

All seven of the schools participated fully, despite competing agendas.

... it sounded like more work, and I've already got a lot of work to do ... Yeah, but like I say, once I met you guys, that was abundantly clear that that was not the expectation on the school. And once that was very clear, it was just really enjoyable. (School 7 teacher, 140322)

In the set-up meetings teachers were encouraged to explore suitable starting-points or inspirations for working creatively. Three schools chose to explore children's rights (United Nations 2001), partly because this underpins the federation's curriculum intent. One school seized the opportunity to focus on building community relations which had lapsed, while another wanted to work within the outdoor environment. Two were more concerned with re-starting musical activity after the coronavirus lockdowns.

Project outcomes included new songs and artwork about children's rights, minibeasts and school pride; a new backing-track for a school song played on acoustic instruments by pupils; and the launch of an ongoing whole-school multi-media project to build strong connections with the local community through linking young and old people, which has since extended to the adoption of local 'cultural champions' to help children develop as global as well as local citizens.

All of this was conducted within the positive ethos of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). We adhered to the 'basic idea of asking questions that were *appreciative*' (Reed 2007, 22). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) introduced us to the concept of 'ordinary magic' coined by Hayward (1984), which was a helpful way for us all, researchers and teachers, to orient to and notice the importance of the minutiae of school life which can sometimes be taken for granted because they are 'usual'.

On completion of the seven projects an iterative, interpretive thematic analysis of data from the teachers was undertaken (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2017) to derive themes and meanings. Although by its nature subjective, as 'the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis' (Nowell et al. 2017, 2), this work was conducted with thoroughness and honesty, adhering to the principles of credibility, dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al. 2017, 3). All interview data were transcribed, logged and entered into a database. Coding and re-coding took place as themes began to suggest themselves from the data-set. Potential themes were represented in mind-maps and cross-referenced against the original data to check viability. Notes were kept of the process and provisional themes were sense-checked with project colleagues E and K, the participant teachers and the federation.

## Findings

### *How do teachers in this study view 'children working creatively'?*

The teachers in our project appreciate that to work creatively, children need some freedom and agency (Baker and Le Courtis 2022) whether in choosing media, selecting colours and tools, putting their own ideas into their artwork, contributing ideas for song-lyrics, creating rhythms for existing music and harmonies for new songs, recounting visitors' stories in their own way, or deciding what to photograph.

There wasn't like, that 'you've got to do this' – they could just do whatever made them happy and however they wanted to convey their ideas. (School 1 headteacher, 240621)

the children had ... that freedom to make suggestions and get involved. (School 3 headteacher, 211122)

it's been their ideas that have gone into that song. (School 4 teacher, 240522)

playful thinking ... for them [the children] to be able to use their ideas, and to contribute just their basic thoughts. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

However, there is also a recognition that total freedom is not helpful:

having a sense of freedom ... to create ... and to be able to not have the confines of any rules, I suppose, or working within a rule but being able to – [I] liken it to a big room, rather than having quite a small room (School 1 teacher, 181021)

Yeah, the huge amount of freedom is wonderful. But in another way, it's like, 'Oh God, I don't even know where to start'. (School 2 teacher, 170222)

Most of the teachers understood that in allowing children to work creatively the exact outcomes could not be known at the start:

It's genuinely going with ... actually not planning too much. Because I love planning, and I love having a to-do list, but I have to say with something like this it will be really interesting just to see what comes of that first session and how we want to take it. (School 1 headteacher, 200521)

When [the children] are coming up with those lyrics as well, those words and phrases they're generating together, what I'm going to try is ... to not be too prescriptive about it, that it should be thinking about ... what does the [song] title even mean? ... Well then, if this is our song, ... what is of value to us? And then that's what can drive the creative thought and the description that comes with that. (School 2 teacher, 170222)

So – not going in with pre-destined ideas is a good idea, I think. It gives you scope to actually adjust what you're doing ... When I was at primary school, it was very much driven towards 'well this is the finished product, this is what we want it to look like'. But really that's not creative. That's not art. That's manufacturing, really. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

Some teachers need to find courage to work in this way while others, who describe themselves as 'creative', seem relaxed about it:

In all areas, teaching as it is, you have an objective: you know what you want the children to be able to do, and this is how we're going to do it and how we're going to record it ... but I think it was just letting go a bit of knowing where we were going to, if you see what I mean ... just being creative, and going with the flow ... it's having that confidence, isn't it, to actually just go with something. (School 1 headteacher, 200721 and 221121)

I'm just not frightened to get stuck in and have a go. I don't know where it's going to go half the time, but I think creative people generally [feel that way]. (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

Creativity is risk-taking isn't it? (School 6 teacher, 010922)

Once children have had opportunities to generate initial ideas, some of the teachers recognise that there may be a process of development, working with the children to a point where emerging creations are 'finished':

... sort of refining it ... in the second and the third session. (School 4 teacher, 240522)

[The children] talked about – we checked, we switched some of the words around. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

[The children] felt they could change things, they could add things, they could ... suggest things ... they could actually put their ideas forward and together they could, you know, find a way. So it was very creative for that reason, as well ... they felt that they could build on what they were doing themselves. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

However, other teachers are unsure what might need to happen after the initial-ideas stage:

... guiding [the children] or collating their information to create an end product is something that we are finding difficult to pinpoint ... (School 1 headteacher, 230621)

A planned finish-time for a creative project is felt by many to be one good way to avoid the aimlessness of total creative freedom, without pre-defining its exact details:

Wouldn't it be amazing if we could do something that brought together the arts and the music, and we put on something that we could do as a school? (School 1 headteacher, 200521)

It would be good to have a final performance/something to show to the parents. (School 1 headteacher, 230621)

I think it's having something at the end of it that you've worked on together, that's a product, you know ... gives people a target to work towards. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

However, one teacher found that their project started to have the most profound value when they 'let go' of trying to fix an endpoint, and instead followed where the project led:

[Our] project ... started as one thing and kind of evolved into something completely unexpected which was the really nice thing about our project, in a sense, in that I think it showed true creativity! Because it did take itself off into different directions. ... we've had lots of really positive outcomes from the project ... creative ones, community ones ... (School 3 headteacher, 211122)

### ***What factors help or hinder children working creatively?***

There was a tangible feeling in this project that teachers' normal planning approaches were being challenged, which was uncomfortable for some but also thought-provoking and exhilarating. We facilitated a planning approach that allowed children some 'wobble-room' in *how* they explored, applied and consolidated an area of knowledge.

I think we've reflected a lot on ourselves ... that we're very similar in – 'right, what are we doing? This and this and this'. Where actually we, and the kids, really enjoyed those sessions where we just went for it and came up with something ... (School 1 headteacher, 200721)

Having that flexibility. Not necessarily having a set outcome. It was very different, I guess, to the way we would normally approach things. (School 1 headteacher, 221121)

Initially, it wasn't frustrating, it was more just like, the unknown ... So it's just a little bit like hoping for the best, really, but it has turned out well. (School 2 teacher, 170222)

I was expecting ... a very neat little project that would start-finish and that would be the project. Whereas, what's actually happened is each session we've gone 'ooh, let's do this' and it's kind of taken off ... It's a slightly different way of scaffolding the learning. (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

... we are addicted these days to lesson planning and ticking boxes and making sure all these objectives are covered. But what we've lost is the ability to adjust and listen to the learner and actually change on that moment. Without thinking of a box that needs to be ticked as a result ... I think you have to go into it with an open mind ... and be aware of what the National Curriculum is, but not hold it too close. So when you do review it afterwards, and you reflect on what you've done, you can say 'oh yes, we did this, this and this today ... (School 6 teacher, 010922)

Planning for a block of time seems to be helpful when children are working creatively:

... just being a bit more flexible [with the timetable] (School 1 headteacher, 221121)

... for it to be a whole afternoon, rather than kind of 'oh, you've got singing assembly for 20 min at the end of the day'. Actually giving it time (School 4 teacher, 240522)

... if it's spread out too far it can be that they've forgotten what they did before, and so they have to have some time to pick that up before they can move forward. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

However, finding such time can be very hard to do:

We don't have the time, in the curriculum, to write a song like that. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

... There's no free time in any week, there's never any time that we have to do a lesson that is not a sort of national curriculum ... but we just know the children would benefit from it. There's never any time allowed for that. (School 7 teacher, 140322)



I think that the pressure on curriculum time is so great. You know, I don't necessarily disagree with any parts of the curriculum. But you know, what we try and fit into a school day is so rammed ... we are very precious about our time and a lot of the time we spend moaning about how little time we have! [This project] reminds us how important those situations are and actually how spending that a little bit of time, in all fairness, actually helps create a really quality learning atmosphere and children that are actually really revamped and recharged in lots of ways ... (School 7 headteacher, 250322)

There was a sense of the courage needed to accommodate the project:

There's a lot about, 'oh, you've got to prove that you've got a broad and balanced curriculum', but underneath that is actually another agenda, which is very much 'standards, standards, standards' and what that ends up doing is it dampens any type of creativity ... Maybe people don't feel they have permission to do that anymore. I don't know ... Feeling like – do you have permission to explore the curriculum in a more creative way and to hold onto that creativity? (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

Well that's what we used to do so well. And that's why we were ranking top in education, you know, the fact that we were – what shall I say – not just technically but psychologically adaptable and creative. And unfortunately I think it's been taken away [from] us with micro-management. ... The [accountability measures in schools] are very short-term and they don't really plan for the future and make people resilient or willing to take risks. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

Skill levels in visual, digital, textual and/or musical media varied considerably amongst the teachers and children in this study. Clearly, a greater level of technical skill in a medium allows for greater precision and ambition of expression. However, children can still work creatively without expertise if the chosen medium is not too technically difficult:

I think for the children's sake, it's good for them to have again a way of creating where they don't need to have a formal training or anything like that but they are able to express themselves. Where you can take simple ideas and just create with those simple ideas. And not worry about it 'looking like something' or being what someone else expects it to be. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

An unexpectedly helpful thing has been the opportunity to 'doodle' in the chosen medium/media at an early stage of the process. None of the projects specifically devoted time for this, yet it had a transformative effect when it happened. In School 1, for example, the two staff members along with K, E and I were all jamming on musical instruments as the children came in from break at the very beginning of their project. The children spontaneously joined in too:

We started creating the music for the children. And the children then started to join in, and it just created a beautiful atmosphere. There were lots of dynamics within it. Lots of layers of sound as well. Sometimes the children faded out, or we faded out and then came back in. And that was just, so, beautiful and moving, and something that the children hadn't done with me before. (School 1 teacher, 200721)

Afterwards we realised how helpful it had been in allowing us all to loosen up in the medium and to accept the idea of 'permission to explore' without judgement:

... it's having a sense of freedom, as you say nothing's right, nothing's wrong, and just having that freedom to create sounds (School 1 teacher, 181021)

Collaboration between adults, and between children, is also seen as a helpful feature.

... having more than one person in there was really beneficial ... the professional dialogue, after ... we always spent a lot of time talking about it. That professional discussion, and the conversations that we had after the sessions, were really valuable. (School 1 headteacher, 221121)

To have that – bouncing ideas, sharing and then working out what would be best for us as our school. (School 2 headteacher, 170222)

Having that time to talk it through, to share ideas, that to me is invaluable. (School 7 teacher, 250322)

What was really nice was to see the children working together across the key stages as well, because we haven't done loads of that. (School 1 headteacher, 240621)

I think [the children] were quite supportive of each other. (School 2 teacher, 170222)

[The children] were helping their neighbours. (School 4 teacher, 240522)

It's really nice ... to have something where [the children] can work together. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

[The children] got to work in groups as well, collaboratively, on one picture. So it wasn't just about being precious about the one thing that you'd produced, or competitive in that way. It was about working together, so there was a lot of discussion and talk. You know, needing ground rules to allow other people to have their say as well ... the collaborative working ... And then they created a song together. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

It was a really good opportunity for [the children] to do collaborative art. Because that element in the art curriculum is quite hard to produce at the same time as showing individual growth. So that opportunity to do collaborative work is quite unusual. So it was really nice to see them working together ... to create a piece together. (School 7 teacher, 140322)

Another factor that made a difference was the attention paid to specific details amongst children's ideas and contributions. Teachers in our study, surprisingly, tended not to be good at this noticing of the 'ordinary magic' (Hayward 1984). Perhaps this is because they have had to become experts in criterion-referenced assessment (Green 2002), looking for indicators of 'achieving the objective' rather than keeping eyes, ears and minds open to unexpected delights.

An example of noticing this 'ordinary magic' comes from School 7, where the Year 1 class were discussing children's rights. The conversation focused on the right to sleep safely, and through noticing the details mentioned by the children, a song verse emerged:

We need to sleep

To sleep somewhere safe

To put on pyjamas

To brush our teeth

To rest our bodies

To cuddle our teddies

We want to dream

Dream sweet dreams

### ***Why might working creatively be educationally valuable for children?***

Some teachers in the study view this type of activity as a treat for the children, a break from 'the curriculum':

I know [the teacher's] doing a lot more of it, really continuing it ... alongside their curriculum learning as well. (School 1 headteacher, 221121)

I know it's in the news all the time, but every year-group from whatever, they've got external assessments and blah di blah. And it's all English and Maths. Just to give them that break. (School 4 teacher, 240522)

However, for most of the teachers the value is clearly educational. Rather than another thing to squeeze into the crowded timetable, they see that working creatively can be a pedagogic strategy, a way for children to learn effectively:

Yeah, I think if people didn't think of it as another thing to do, but it's something that's used to bolster what you're already doing or trying to do ... You know, like you're teaching a history topic, so how is that going to look? Where's that going to go and how? What creative things can we do as part of that? (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

[What] we really want to do from this project is actually use this model for other things that we do within the curriculum. (School 1 headteacher, 200721)

Teachers give several reasons for the educational value of children working creatively. Firstly, there is a clear perception that it makes learning memorable:

... actually using song, the rhythm and stuff, was really helpful, to help children remember things. (School 1 headteacher, 221121)

I think also it's creating memories for the children, isn't it ... they remember these experiences because they are ... using more of their senses, I suppose, and different types of learning than just sitting down and doing pencil and paper exercises. (School 1 teacher, 200721)

'OK, how can I deliver this content in a way that they're going to remember?' ... arts, music, making, investigating, getting messy ... That is how you learn things best I think, by experiencing it in lots of different ways. Because if you just if you just see it, or you just hear it and you don't taste it or feel it or try it in different contexts or just don't contextualize it, then it's very hard for it to go in and to stay in and to be part then of your bank of knowledge, really ... Because otherwise it does become very – almost like lecturing the children, and they're not going to remember that. (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

I loved the [children's] painting ... because they kept on talking about it ... It really kind of hammered home that key right that we were thinking about ... Yeah, it really concreted the thing ... And if we're going to be a rights-respecting school, it can't just be ten minutes telling them about a right and then not mentioning it at all the rest of the month ... They need something to kind of tack the memory on to. (School 7 teacher, 140322)

[Eight months later] I went back to speak to the children this morning actually ... the children were able to talk to us about the rights still, they remembered the song. (School 7 headteacher, 211122)

There is also a strong perception that because working creatively allows children to express their understandings and feelings, their learning holds great meaning for them:

We ... got [the children] to take photos [of] what was important to them within the confines of the school, what made the school good to them or great to them. (School 1 teacher, 181021)

... we've always had the song. But actually, has it meant anything to the children? So now we're taking it that next step. (School 2 headteacher, 170222)

[Children] don't need to have a formal training or anything like that but they are able to express themselves ... So art is where you find something in the world you're looking at and you show it to other people in an expressive way. You know, and get them to look at it too. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

Teachers pointed out that children suddenly realised how songs and artworks are human creations, not ready-made. This is indeed 'powerful knowledge' (Rata 2016):

I think that the children saw a different side of music to what they normally see. They normally see recorded perfection, I suppose, and this one, it just evolved. And they don't see that very often at all. And I think that's in general. People don't see that. (School 1 teacher, 181021)

it shows them how ... to think about the structure of the song and how to create it ... because in the first session, they watched E make it up as it went along. And I think they were all quite fascinated by that, the fact that that's how we did it and that's how the song was made. I just think – they hear the songs on the radio, don't they, and that's a ready-made song. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

Children feel a strong sense of ownership, enthusiasm and pride in their work and their learning. This is deemed an important feature by the teachers, who are themselves manifestly proud of what the children create:

[A KS2 pupil] said 'Can I please just write [my new poem] out before I go home?' She didn't want to forget it ... So she's sat there, her Dad's waiting outside, and she wrote down the whole thing! (School 1 headteacher, 100621)

The kids definitely feel like it's their song. 'It's our song' ... the way you've kind of structured, how you've done it, means that you've led it, but they don't know that you've led it. They feel like – 'it's our song!' ... I think the

project has made a difference in terms of my class, feeling like they have ownership of that. Feeling like it's their song, it's their song to teach. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

... you've got them valuing what they produce, as well. So when they've produced it as a group and they've discussed it – nobody wants to deface that piece of work. They want to retain it and look after it and refer back to it. (School 6 teacher, 010922)

It actually makes me a bit emotional, because I'm so proud of them ... performing that song that they had really written, that they had really done themselves and they and you could just see how proud they were, like just absolutely proud as punch. (School 7 teacher, 140322)

I hope it comes across, you know, [that I am] enthused again, which is really nice because I haven't felt enthused, if I'm completely honest. I think, there's a lot of heads out there that have felt quite jaded about things, and it's lovely to bring that passion and that enthusiasm back into it. And that not only helps me as an individual, but collectively, the school as well. (School 7 headteacher, 250322)

Teachers have been able to get to know their pupils more fully through working in this way:

It's a bit like on a residential. Having the time when you're not in full teacher-mode and being able to observe your class ... And then being able to use that, to get to know the class and to, I guess improve the relationship, between me and them. And just get to know them in a different way. And those individuals that do stand out in those sessions, that may or may not stand out in the rest of the school day. (School 4 teacher, 240522)

The children have frequently surprised their teachers with what they have been able to do in terms of their behaviour, listening, resilience, concentration and social skills, as well as with the outcomes of their creative work. This is educationally important, in terms of teachers pitching their expectations of children appropriately:

One of the [children] can really struggle behaviourally in the classroom but was completely engaged and loved the afternoon which his teacher fed back to his parents ... he was wonderfully behaved every session ... Very calm through the whole session, waited his turn, enjoyed it, wanted to play. So for him it's been a really positive place for him to be. ... And ... for him to feel valued and part of something is really important. (School 2 teacher and headteacher, 191021 and 170222)

[A KS2 girl's] Mum said in the parent's evening that her confidence has grown hugely ... she was really reluctant to come and join in. Second session though, we'd managed to win her round. ... Mum said she's starting to see parts of her coming out of her shell ... there's just parts of her character she said 'I haven't seen before' that's now starting to come out. (School 2 teacher, 170222)

I think I was really surprised at how interested the children were in the stories from these visitors, because I think the assumption nowadays is that children aren't respectful or that they don't have good manners ... But actually, if you give them the opportunities to interact - I was really proud of them. And I don't know that I went in expecting to be. Sounds really awful and that wasn't because I don't think that we've got lovely children, because I think our children are lovely, but I was surprised at how respectful they were and they sat and listened. The second time, they did listen for well over an hour. (School 3 headteacher, 230622)

I think what was quite nice actually as well [was] to see the TA and how she responded ... after the very first session she sat there and she was like 'I can't believe they're doing that! That's amazing!' (School 4 teacher, 240522)

I think you could see that everyone enjoyed it. And some children who don't always enjoy music ... enjoyed it, they were all participating and all joining in. Even like – I've got some children in my class who don't sing because ... they can't pick up the words and they don't really understand. Even they were joining in. And like kind of just enjoying the process of it. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

If you'd said 'oh I'm going to write a song with the class' I'd be like 'good luck!' Like I didn't – I think I'd be sceptical if it would work. Now I know that they can do it. I was like 'oh I don't know how they're going to go with this, I don't know if they're mature enough, I don't know if they're going to lose interest in it' – but they haven't. They've been interested and intrigued all the way. So yeah, I've definitely – It has surprised me, how much they've enjoyed it. [and] how much they've kind of participated in it. I don't think one person has sat back ... And for my class in particular. They don't have the longest attention span. (School 5 teacher, 150322)

Some of the children, when you were asking ‘who would like to have a kind of little solo moment?’ [in the singing] and some of the most unlikely children were putting their hands up ... One of the children, he has a stammer, so I was very, very surprised and he’s very – he finds it – not that he should not want to speak, but he is always thinking about it and knows that may happen. And he wanted to do it, and he was one of the first ones with his hand up. And I was like, ‘That’s genuinely amazing’. He’s the last one I would think of putting his hand up. (School 7 teacher, 140322)

When we started this project, my first question to you was, ‘We’d love to do this project with Year 1, but do you think they’re too young?’ And I think actually, it’s been a real reminder that if we have these high expectations ... ‘You know what? Yeah, they’re Year 1s. They can do this.’ And what we end up with is something that’s really, really quality. And I think, to say it exceeded what I initially thought, would be completely true. And actually, it just reminds me of how capable even our youngest children actually are – given them the opportunity to do it. (School 7 headteacher, 250322)

## Discussion

The teachers in this study articulate ‘working creatively’ as allowing children *some* freedom and agency to explore, apply and consolidate knowledge and understandings. The teacher decides on the area of focus and the medium (or media) to be utilised, and the children decide how to make use of the medium to explore and express their learning. This needs some faith and courage from the teacher because the exact look or sound of the final product is not known at the start. To plan for this type of work, the learning focus needs to be clear but not too ‘tightly held’, and the teacher facilitates the children’s learning, noticing evidence of their deepening understanding as they develop their creations. Our study also uncovered two aspects of working creatively that were only recognised on hindsight: ‘doodling time’ was a useful strategy, as was time to refine initial creative outputs.

Some teachers in our study view working creatively as ‘another thing to cover’, akin to a curriculum subject. On this view it is not surprising that teachers express worries about time constraints. Yet it is interesting to note that creativity is indeed part of the primary National Curriculum (Department for Education 2013). As well as mentions within English, mathematics and science, creativity features strongly within art & design, computing, design & technology and music. It is also implied in languages and in history (Cooper 2018). Therefore, schools should be building in opportunities for working creatively as part of children’s curriculum entitlement, helping them develop the skills and resilience that go with ‘possibility thinking’ (Craft et al. 2013).

Many teachers in our study view working creatively as a pedagogic approach: a means for children to achieve learning. This concurs with the recent systematic review conducted by Cremin and Chappell (2021) into creative pedagogies. Like Cremin and Chappell we identified child agency, the generation of ideas, collaboration and exploration in our study. Our findings on the use of time and the balance between freedom and limits also echo theirs.

While planning models, time and close accountability can be inhibiting factors, there appear to be valuable educational consequences of allowing children to work creatively. It seems an effective means of memorising knowledge and consolidating understanding in a meaningful and ‘owned’ way, fully compatible with the current ‘cognitive turn’ in education. Thus, if the primary aim of education is to focus on helping children commit factual knowledge to long-term memory, like the ‘teachers whose classrooms [*sic*] made the highest gains on achievement tests’ (Rosenshine 2012, 12), then working creatively may have a role to play as an attractive alternative to ‘drill and didactic practice’ (Dyer 2016). As Young (2018) points out, there is currently ‘pressure on schools, their teachers and pupils to focus more on examination outcomes and less on the pedagogic strategies that might facilitate better access to knowledge’ (Young 2018, 4th paragraph). The Education Endowment Foundation (2021) also warns that the ‘principles [of cognitive science] do not determine specific teaching and learning strategies or approaches to implementation. Considering how cognitive science principles are implemented in the classroom is critical’ (Education Endowment Foundation 2021, 46). We suggest that

working creatively can be an effective way for children to consolidate their knowledge, make it more meaningful and remember it in the longer term.

We found additional reasons, , for allowing children to work creatively. In this study, children were emotionally engaged; they behaved, concentrated, listened and collaborated well; they enjoyed enhanced self-esteem and made genuine contributions to their school projects, of real and lasting value. Thus working creatively can have an important part to play in the more holistic purposes of education (Kautz et al. 2014).

We noted benefits for the teachers, too. They saw 'new sides' to children, were genuinely impressed by just how much children were capable of and were stimulated to reflect on the wider importance of education. A key finding from our study is the importance, for teachers, of reclaiming the art of noticing children's learning in the round like this. In education-speak this is, after all, 'appropriate assessment' (Cowie, Harrison, and Willis 2018). That teachers frequently expressed surprise at what their pupils had achieved, when they took a wider view of what was happening in their classrooms and noticed the 'ordinary magic' all around, implies that expectations of children's capacities may currently be too low in some respects.

## Evaluation of the process

Perhaps our findings are overly positive because we invested time in the schools who might therefore wish to give us favourable feedback. However, the data show a good deal of honesty in the teachers' reflections. Time pressures, close professional accountability and the current priority of ensuring children's acquisition of factual knowledge were all discussed. We feel our position in the 'space between' being insiders and outsiders was a strength in this regard. As experienced practitioners not on the payroll of any particular school we could be appreciative inquirers with whom teachers felt comfortable having professional conversations.

Clearly our findings are indicative only, though they do suggest some interesting avenues for further enquiry. At this point our study represents an incomplete action research cycle, and in fact might be better viewed as a case study (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 375), though some of the schools have since gone on to provide more opportunities for children to work creatively, indicating that they do indeed see benefits to this way of learning.

## Conclusions

There is still a place for allowing children to work creatively in English primary classrooms in 2022. It can effectively support the long-term retention and understanding of knowledge, as well as providing a means to achieving many of the more holistic purposes of education.

In the present educational climate it can be hard for teachers to incorporate this kind of activity into children's education, as 'the pervading atmosphere of performativity means the reality is that schools' priorities lie elsewhere' (Davies, Newton and Newton 2017, 890). Our study found the same prevailing pressures. We would like to thank the teachers who took part for their willingness to explore creative work despite this.

Young (2018) describes the thinking of some in education currently as "'get the content right and all will be okay" and, as a result, the vital and difficult role of teachers ... gets lost and teachers become little more than transmitters of knowledge' (Young 2018, third paragraph). It is important to remember our pedagogic expertise and to exercise our professional judgement as to *how* we teach children to learn and remember (and develop more holistically). As Young (2018) goes on to say, 'There are signs ... of new thinking that combines a pedagogy that engages students with a curriculum based on the disciplinary knowledge. This is an important development' (Young 2018, final paragraph). We hope our study makes a small contribution to this new thinking.

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