

Early Years Teacher Insights about Creativity

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Abstract

Creativity is important for children during early years because it fosters the holistic development of a child. Teachers play a key role in enhancing children's creativity. The aim of this article is to examine how creativity is fostered among early grade children in our country.

In 2014 a qualitative study was conducted by BIED, BRAC University to explore teacher's attitude and belief in regards to emotional well-being of young children. It was carried out in selected government and private schools in Dhaka city. It has utilized qualitative approaches involving classroom observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion with teachers. The study findings highlight different aspects of creativity; for example teacher's perception about creativity, how teachers encourage/discourage creativity, teachers' creativity in teaching, and limitations for fostering creativity in school. This article elaborates the findings about creativity from the study and discusses the way forward to bring change in the school.

Keywords: Creativity of Young Children, Fostering Creativity, Creativity in Bangladesh School

I. What about creativity?

“Creativity? There is nothing like creativity in such early grades.” This was one of the comments obtained from a teacher while observing a number of urban and semi urban pre-primary and primary classrooms in Dhaka. This instigated us to delve deeper into the issue of how creativity is fostered among early grade children in our country.

Creativity has been described in many ways. The Oxford Dictionary defines creativity as “The use of imagination or original ideas to create something.” A renowned developmental psychologist Howard Gardner viewed creativity as “liberating human energy” (Gardener, 2009). An account of creativity can be seen from a research summary of Education Scotland (2012) which notes that creativity has different meanings for different people. To some people creativity means imagination, inventiveness, risk taking or questioning tradition. For some it is the uniqueness in thought process and generating some new ideas. Artistic talents are considered by some the only benchmark of creativity. On the contrary, research shows

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that creativity is not exclusively related to any specific personality type. Any activity which involves intelligence can be creative. Thus, everyone has creative capacity although we may be unaware of it. Even a regular day-to-day activity can manifest creativity, but in reality it is often underrated at a personal level (Education Scotland, 2012). Michael Gove, the United Kingdom secretary of state for education, reiterated that creativity is neither only about arts or self-expression, nor is creativity limited to some people, but that it requires great discipline and many different skills (Robinson, 2013).

Creativity has an important role for children during early years because it fosters the holistic development of a child. Addressing child's emotional need is crucial in promoting creativity. If children are provided new opportunities to try new ideas, it develops their ability for self-expression, thinking process, and problem solving skills, thus fostering the mental growth of the children. Creativity promotes socio-emotional development of a child. Through dancing, singing, acting children gradually understand the social norms, learn cooperation and also are able to explore and get familiarized with their surroundings. Physical development of a child is also supported by creativity. When children perform creative acts such as making crafts or drawing, it develops their fine and gross motor skills. Children's language and literacy skills are also developed by their engagement in various creative activities.

Teachers play a key role in enhancing children's creativity. The four principles of social learning formulated by Bandura (1977) are Attention, Retention, Reproduction and Motivation, which indicate adults' role in augmenting creativity in children. Social modeling plays a very significant role in children's learning. Children learn very effectively through observing someone being rewarded or punished for a particular thing he or she has done or said. Positive consequences from a particular type of behavior motivate children to repeat that behaviour themselves. In the same way, negative consequences teach a child to avoid doing that same thing. Therefore, when a novel idea expressed by a child in the classroom is recognized and appreciated by the teacher, it motivates other children to think out of the box (Wheeler, n.d).

From the socio-cultural perspective of learning, creativity and teaching-learning are overlapping. According to the socio-cultural approaches of learning propounded by Plucker, Beghetto & Dow (2004) creativity is an essential component of learning which depends on social, interactional and collaborative processes. Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen (2004) who are proponents of the knowledge-creation metaphor of learning, said that creativity is about creating new practices. They place an emphasis on going beyond the given information. Learning is a process of inquiry whereby new knowledge is either created or previous knowledge is greatly changed. Thus, there is a close connection between learning and creativity. In fact, to some extent the two are synonymous. Lonka, Hakkarainen & Sintonen (2000) advocates progressive inquiry learning that emphasizes inquisitiveness and questioning in the learning process.

Internationally, several studies have been conducted in regards to creativity. In 2012, researchers worked with 89 Finnish teachers and student teachers to identify the conceptions

of creativity teachers and student teachers had. It also investigated the connection teachers and student teachers saw between learning and creativity. It revealed that the participants viewed learning as assimilation and learners as implicitly passive which in fact could be an obstacle for creative collaboration in classrooms and schools. The study results suggest that if teachers would see learning as a creative act and the role of learner as active participants, they are more likely to foster creativity in the classroom (Vedenpää & Lonka, 2014).

Creativity and learning in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh not much research can be seen in regards to young children's creativity and how it can be fostered in different contexts. In 2014 a qualitative study was done by BIED, BRAC University to explore teacher's attitude and belief about emotional well-being of young children (Dutta, et al, 2014). It was carried out in a few government and private schools in Dhaka city. The study findings highlight different aspects of creativity; for example teacher's perception about creativity, how teachers encourage/discourage creativity, teachers' creativity in teaching; and also the limitations for fostering creativity in school. This article elaborates the findings about creativity from the study and discusses the ways to bring change in our schools

The findings from the investigation pointed out teachers' lack of understanding regarding children's creativity. Teachers did not seem to know much about children's creativity. They had the mindset that children could not have creativity at an early age. Some even viewed creativity negatively as an interference in teaching. According to rural government school teachers, creativity was to answer exam questions creatively. They did not practice or promote creativity as they did not have an understanding of it. Outcome of class observation and discussions with teachers of the study revealed that teachers' understanding regarding creativity was unclear and shallow. They were skeptical about young children possessing creativity. As a teacher in our interview put it, "I do not have any creative children in my class."

Participants from an urban private school had an ambiguous view regarding creativity. They mentioned, the same as their rural counterparts, that creativity was the means of answering creative questions in the examination. One observation was, "We tried to maintain a link between the reality and the book, so that the students can answer any creative questions they face in the examination." Teachers were referring to questions in public examinations which required analysis of factual information and drawing inferences from factual knowledge, which came to be known as "creative questions."

These findings are similar to different studies overseas in which teachers have been found to have insufficient knowledge and understanding of creativity. Research findings of Renzulli (1976) had asserted that teachers lacked understanding of the nature of creativity. Another researcher, Alencar (1993), also found that teachers tend to focus only on students' academic characteristics as indices of creativity.

Views of participants in our study suggested that most of the teachers possessed a relatively positive mindset, but a shallow and superficial understanding about it. Expressions of a teacher of government pre-primary level illustrates the point. She saw recreational activities

as important in promoting creativity and child development. However, in describing her pre-primary class students' engagement in creative activities, she said:

Till now they cannot draw. They sketch what they like to draw. Some of them can sing song also but usually they feel shy. If I ask them to sing a song, they refuse. Then I try to inspire them, "Look, kids I am singing, follow me. Don't you watch television? The children on television do not feel shy, why should you?" Then some of them come forward. They come to the desk and sing one or two lines and go back to their seats quickly. This way they get encouraged. This is necessary for their development.

When a teacher in a private school was asked if she saw creativity among children in her class she stated that none of her students were creative and all of them were of average ability. It shows that teachers are not aware enough about children's creative abilities which need to be nurtured from early years. Not only that, many of the teachers' ideas about creativity of children is limited to children's ability to draw, sing or color.

Joyful and creative learning

On how teachers encourage creativity among their students, Thomas Edison's edict can be quoted, "creativity is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration." The research summary of "Fostering creativity," however, emphasized the value of inspiration, "for many people, it is not the hard work that is difficult; it is waiting for inspiration" (Education Scotland, 2012).

Discussion with the teachers of an urban private school revealed that some children have the ability to express themselves innovatively when they are assigned to write creative essays. A teacher illustrated her experience with an example of a Grade 3 student. He was asked to write an essay on "A memorable event of your birthday." The teacher appreciated the way that student related his learning from his Religious Study lesson to his real life. The boy met a very poor disabled man on his birthday and didn't hesitate to donate all the money he had received as birthday gift. Moreover, the teacher was really moved by the fact that when she read aloud the essay to the class, the boy's eyes filled with tears. This shows that creativity has many dimensions and that children are very much capable to express themselves creatively if they are given the opportunity. Teachers have to come out of the tradition of giving stereotype assignments to students in order to foster creativity.

It was observed that teachers encouraged students through verbal praise mostly for their drawing or singing. The teacher promoted students' creativity by saying words of praise, such as "very good/very beautifully done" or by clapping. In this regard a classroom observation from an urban government school can be noted:

One girl student informed the teacher that she had learned how to draw a dog from number "5". The teacher asked her to draw it on the board for everyone to see and learn. Everybody in the class clapped her for the drawing. Most of the students in the class were motivated to draw similar pictures.

Another teacher of a private school was seen to deal with her students with flexibility to draw as they liked even in the English class. The teacher not only encouraged and appreciated

students' effort, but also gave them tips about drawing. This is an example of how teacher's appreciation makes students confident and thus promotes students' creativity.

In contrast, an opposite scenario was observed where teachers discouraged students' creativity by being rude about their activity, by questioning, and by making negative or disparaging remarks about students in front of their peers. For example, a girl in grade 1 drew a mixed colored cloud and grass. The teacher did not approve of it, said that the student had drawn it wrongly and showed it to others as a wrong example. The girl seemed to be very embarrassed. It was revealed that the teacher's instruction was mechanical and emotionless even in the art class. The teacher came into the class and wrote on the board what students had to draw and started checking copies.

Some teachers discouraged students' creativity by ignoring their interests and imposing teachers' decisions on them. The following description from a rural government school illustrates the scenario:

The teacher announced that now it was time to do some extracurricular work. Everybody clapped their hand and the teacher asked them, What shall we do today? What do you wish to do? Someone said he liked to draw a house but the teacher decided it to be a flower garden. She drew a flower garden on the board and students just copied it. One girl even said that she did not like to draw a garden, did not like to draw flowers, but the teacher completely disregarded her. It was also noticed that students did not take much interest in drawing due to the fact that the teacher was not creative and innovative enough and students were not given enough scope to display their creativity.

Overcoming some obstacles

Rigid instructions and inflexibility of teachers stifle students' creative mind. As seen in a kindergarten classroom of a private school, a student was coloring her drawing. The teacher said, "Have I asked you to color it? I said to draw only. Why are you coloring it without showing it to me?" Here the teacher discouraged creative activities by providing negative feedback to student's art work; and also insulted students for immature drawing. For example, a teacher from an urban government school remonstrated, "Why are the Ducks' lips so thick? It looks like a Stork. Your drawing is the same as your writing, your writing is bad, and drawing is also bad".

Learning can be made enjoyable in various ways. In regards to creativity in teaching, a study done by Chan in 2007 emphasized the nurturing of creativity for students' whole person development. He compared teaching for creativity with creative teaching and pointed out that it is the teachers who can make learning interesting and effective by teaching creatively and by using imaginative approaches. Chan exemplified his view by suggesting that mathematics can be made exciting; science can be developed as a passion for enquiry, discovery and experimentation and the arts can be valued as opportunities for expression of diverse emotions.

Chan concluded that while creative teaching does not necessarily lead to students' creativity, it may provide suitable contexts for both teacher and student to be creative in a number of

ways. Specifically, as teachers model the expression of their own ideas, students are encouraged to be expressive and innovative (Chan, 2007).

In our country, many teachers have the concept of creative teaching. They also know the strategies to make teaching and learning enjoyable and child-friendly. A private school kindergarten teacher shared her knowledge in this regard. "Today I taught word making in my class. I could have drawn or displayed pictures of cucumber or fox on the board. This would have made my lessons more attractive to the children. But due to time constraint and class test I did not do that." This shows that in favorable situations teachers can make learning experiences relevant to students by ensuring that the curriculum and pedagogy are relevant to students context and appropriate for age.

"Many teachers feel strongly that current priorities and pressures in education inhibit the creative abilities of young people and those who teach them" (Kohl, 1999). Our research very realistically portrayed the current classroom teaching-learning situation. It showed the pressure on teachers to go through large amounts of the curriculum content in order to prepare pupils for national examinations. This became a factor in inhibiting the development of teaching and learning methodologies that fostered creativity. It is very natural that teachers and parents give high priority to academic attainment and consider promotion of creativity and enterprise as added extras. This is due to the fact that the effectiveness of schools is measured in terms of their academic achievement only. They consider promoting creativity as a distraction from the real business of schools, i.e., to prepare students for tests and examinations.

The examination oriented education system in Hong Kong is considered as a constraint on creative teaching. No matter how constructivist the teacher is, their creativity could be seriously compromised with the prescribed common curriculum and centralized pedagogy or teaching frameworks. As mentioned by Chan (2007), "It is likely that a curriculum which is fixed and compulsory, which involves a great deal of content and which takes up a great deal of learning time, could pose great challenges to stimulating creativity in the teacher who needs to balance creativity and judgments against the requirements to teach in certain prescribed way."

Similar situations prevail in Bangladesh too. Teachers named a number of reasons which hindered creativity of students. In an interview with government school teachers it became clear to us that teachers confine creativity only to the subject Arts and Crafts and the practice of drawing objects such as a glass or a flag. This is because these are in their syllabus and are included in the examination. Thus creativity has become exam-oriented. Teachers identified the large number of tests and exams students have to take as a hindrance. The number of class tests, monthly tests, and term exams drives the students in such a speed and keep them so busy that it takes them away from real study and learning.

Teachers also held rote memorization responsible for discouraging creativity. In a discussion with a group of urban private school teachers, concern was expressed that our system requires and encourages memorization. Students are taught abstract concepts which they learn by heart without getting any concrete experience. This makes learning monotonous

and uninteresting. For instance, they learn about chlorophyll without experimenting with real leaves. Students learn about food and nutrition from their textbook. But this could be taught in a more interactive manner through cooking or showing video clips. If teachers were allowed to spend more time and use resources, learning would be long-lasting and enjoyable. Teachers could assess learning through students' overall class performance. Students' enthusiasm in learning can be noticed when they are allowed to take part in the Science Fair where they prepare project work and present their work very enthusiastically.

The volume of content for each academic session is another reason for neglecting creativity among students. Teachers confessed quite honestly that at times they realize the type of questions they ask the students and the methods they use in teaching do not help students to relate with their real life and diminishes a child's creativity.

Research participants suggested their expectations regarding the teaching-learning in the future. A discussion with participants from an urban non-government school revealed some of the flaws of our present education system. They offered suggestions to deal with these, especially, regarding the burden of the syllabus and the examination dependent teaching. As one participant put across her views:

Actually we all agree that our system has many problems. Children are going through a vast syllabus every year. As a result, the creative aspects are not remaining creative any more. The system has become pretty much focused on examination. Kids are just busy with memorization. They just want to have good grades and so the whole system has become memorization based. We should be given some freedom regarding policy making and have some independence in this respect. It is often impossible for me to complete the syllabubs and pay attention to examination properly within the limited time. I have to go on in a mechanical way. I certainly should be given some role in school policy making.

Research findings of Moore (1993) and Chan (2007) support what we have observed, especially, the need for restructuring the curriculum. Teachers need to have the chance to introduce flexibility into the curriculum to address the constraints of an inflexible and factual content-focused curriculum. Moore (1993) suggested that in planning, teachers could be encouraged creative problem finding and problem solving in lesson plans. Teachers' own initiatives for promoting creativity in class cannot be undermined. Creative teachers who inspire children to learn can also help them to do well in tests (Education Scotland, 2012).

II. Conclusion

To conclude, to foster creativity among young children the teacher has to value creativity and respect students' individual differences in expressing and creating. Teachers need to involve students in real-world challenges to promote creative thinking. Awareness-raising activities are needed. For example, day-long work-shops can be held for primary and pre-primary teachers to strengthen their understanding about creativity and its importance in child's holistic development. To promote creative teaching, interactive teaching-learning needs be pursued relying on the creative faculties of teachers and students. Research initiatives should

be encouraged to find appropriate methods for effective teaching and classroom practices that will help the flourishing of children's creativity.

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