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Creative Activism – learning everywhere with children and young people

Dr. Penny Hay, Ruth Sapsed, and Dr. Esther Sayers with Melissa Benn (Foreword) and Professor Sue Rigby (Afterword)

Abstract

Creative activism is an approach to education that asks, 'What can happen when we take learning outside the classroom and think of it happening everywhere?'. Two charities - House of Imagination and Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination - have been asking this question in their creative place-making programmes working with socially engaged artists and communities linked to primary schools in Bath and Cambridge. Young children and adults co-create and speculate about the future of their communities and environments in these different geographical locations. This article draws together our shared understanding of creative pedagogies and the value to everyone of working in this way.

Foreword

In the autumn of 2019, I was asked by Penny Hay of Bath Spa to offer an 'opening provocation' in an important debate on 'how do we prioritise creativity?' held at Bath Spa's new Centre for Creative and Cultural industries. Among the speakers were Penny Hay, Ruth Sapsed and Esther Sayers whose extraordinary projects are described in this piece. It was my job to frame the debate in broader political terms, including identifying the multiple ways in which creative education has been sidelined in England's primary and secondary schools, as well as pointing some ways forward.

Accordingly, I argued that there are three principal reasons for the worrying marginalisation of both the creative subjects, and a generally more creative approach to the art of teaching and learning, in English education today. First, dramatic reform of exam curricula and accompanying accountability measures introduced under Michael Gove have produced a highly prescriptive and over-busy programme of study, from primary school through to A level. Accountability measures now prioritise evidence of success in the so called 'academic subjects', both in the all-important SATs and at GCSE level.

The impact of these reforms has been dramatic. The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education recently published the latest figures on the reduction of the status of arts subjects in England's schools, with a nearly 70% drop in those taking the performing and expressive arts at both GCSE and A level, and over 50% fewer entries for GCSEs in media and film studies.

Secondly, the work of the arts in schools has been imperiled by dramatic cuts to funding: school budgets have dropped in real terms, by 8% since 2010. Resources are a pressing problem for many head teachers with budgets cut to the bone and some schools shutting for half a day a week. Such pressures make it harder to schedule lessons in subjects that aren't going to be used to measure the so called 'success' of a school.

But the third reason is perhaps most significant of all. For accompanying these structural changes has been the rise of a particular and powerful ideology around learning, knowledge and social disadvantage (with strong connections to powerful elements of the academy and

free school movement.) Like the charter school movement in the US, this approach, relentlessly pushed by what I call the new educational establishment, prioritises 'a knowledge rich curriculum.' This immediately begs two distinct questions: was knowledge not being taught in our schools before? And who gets to decide what knowledge is worthwhile - and how it should be taught?

The Conservative government and its allies have clearly won this argument for now. Whatever the particulars of the content of any given curriculum, academic learning is now prioritised and the creative marginalised: not just in content but approach. Student questioning or decision making, in terms of what should be studied or how, is strongly discouraged. We have returned to a rigid traditionalism, with encouragement of a highly controlled school environment policed by tough 'no excuses' behaviour policies.

The cumulative impact of all these changes has been dramatic, with generations of experience and innovation at risk of becoming lost from view as our schools develop draconian yet diluted versions of deeply out-of-date forms of private education, while contemporary private schools work hard to promote all forms of creativity. Such policies are promoted as part of a campaign to drive social mobility, yet as Diane Reay argues in her latest book *Miseducation* many of these changes have led school to become a dreary and unhappy place, particularly for working class children.

How to combat this dramatic change? In part, the answer lies in the continuing creation and celebration of alternatives such as those discussed in this article. We also need to disseminate the achievements and creative reach of schools that have taken a different approach, from Wroxham Primary School in Hertfordshire (one site for the Learning Without Limits project) and XP Doncaster, a small secondary school in Doncaster whose approach is based on the work of High Tec High in California. Schools such as these put children - their curiosity, their imagination, their innate desire to learn - at the heart of their teaching, emphasising beautiful work and encouraging high standards but framed within a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Beyond that, those of us out in the unforgiving marketplace of ideas, need to hold onto the significance of certain key principles in public education, such as the importance of human scale learning and a beautiful school environment. We also need to renew the emphasis on learning by doing, not as some sort of low grade 'vocational' alternative for those not fit for 'real' academic work, but as part of a rich and multifaceted approach to acquiring and embedding meaningful knowledge for all.

We also need to change our attitude to time itself, to shift the current obsession with schools as mere staging posts in a rigidly prescribed route, places where children are 'got ready' for the next point in the journey - be that university or apprenticeships or paid work. Instead, we need to see our schools as kinds of laboratories in their own right, places where 'slowness' - to use Ruth Sapsed's lovely term - is encouraged and the urge to measurement marginalised.

And yes, this will need far greater resources. It will also need teachers who are permitted to be autonomous, more rested, more supported, better paid - in order that their own

creativity can be encouraged to flourish and that rather they are not reduced, as they are now, to mere technicians delivering pre-set content and ever better 'results'.

Introduction

As artists and educators, we¹ seek creative ways to bring about social and educational change, thinking with communities about how together we can make a better future for everyone. We describe this work as 'creative activism'. We are making change happen locally in small groups and then working collectively to lobby for everyone to have access to these forms of authentic creative education.

In our work 'creative activism' involves thinking carefully about the places where learning happens. Where possible we take learning outside the classroom to construct effective creative pedagogies and learn together how these can impact on what is learned. Our focus is on learning in the real worlds around us and the potential for it to be meaningful, experiential, motivating, and for it to effect self-esteem and contribute to social and emotional development, health and well-being (Learning Outside the Classroom 2019).

Through creative place-making we have been learning how to capitalise on local community assets, leveraging the power of the arts to serve a community's interests. We have observed how this drives change, growth and transformation (Sayers, 2018). In the case studies offered here socially engaged artists create collective acts that affect the public sphere in meaningful ways. They engage communities in co-creation, speculating together about environmental futures and formulating creative pedagogies that drive social change. This work is happening at a time when The Kids Rights Index (the annual global index which ranks how the 181 United Nations member states that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child adhere to and are equipped to improve children's rights) sees 'children as 'changemakers' who have the power to move the world, and facilitates them in voicing their opinions and taking action in order to bring about change' (Kids Rights Foundation, 2019).²

We believe that arts practice research is not simply research about the arts; instead art making is an integral part of learning, understanding the world and taking an active role. The impact of this work is pedagogic, a learning, teaching and understanding of the value of how materials, specifically art materials and our environment, teach us and enable us to work in a materially focussed way has on learning and social change. The Durham Commission Report (2019) makes recommendations around teaching for creativity through system leadership and collaboration, with opportunities for learners to problem solve, experiment, take risks, make mistakes and try again, giving learners space for self-directed learning.

¹ For the purposes of this paper we write as a team. The projects that form the empirical aspect of this paper are treated as case studies. House of Imagination is described by Penny Hay and Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination by Ruth Sapsed. Esther Sayers designed the original educational framework which informed the ArtScapers project and worked with CCI to bring it to fruition. She brings her research interests in pedagogy for social inclusion to the paper. Melissa Benn and Sue Rigby were invited to contribute to the paper following their inspiring involvement in the Creative Education Debate.

² The UK is currently ranked 170 out of 181 (<https://kidsrights.org/news/kidsrights-index-2019-inadequate-priority-childrens-rights-developed-countries/>)

Research into creative pedagogies is important to inform how we think about who we are and how we relate to others in a material world. Through the explorations of arts practices and pedagogies, philosophical, political, aesthetic and material dimensions of learning and practice become evident and impact our understanding and knowledge of our world and empower us to change it.

In this paper we share two examples of practice from cities that superficially appear affluent and packed with cultural wealth and opportunities but are also riven with inequalities for the young people growing up in them³. We aim to draw together our shared understanding of a creative pedagogy and the value to everyone of working in this way. Through our work we want to ensure that every child can have these kinds of authentic experience in their learning.

House of Imagination

House of Imagination (formerly 5x5x5=creativity) works with children and young people, artists and educators to co-create 'learning everywhere', both in school and in the city as a campus for learning. *House of Imagination* researches and supports children and young people's creativity through partnerships between educational settings, artists and cultural centres. It is committed to ensuring that every child, no matter what their background or circumstance has access to an authentic arts education. Central to this vision is children's perception of their own identity as artists and of how the arts can be transformational in their lives.

House of Imagination involves multi-professional teams working in partnership to support children and young people in environments of enquiry, challenging orthodoxies and developing new ways of thinking. Working as artists allows children to have opportunities for exploration, to find and follow their fascinations, stimulating the imagination and encouraging creative thinking. This approach integrates a creative and reflective pedagogy, with research at the heart of the process.

We have a clear set of values and principles that underpin all the work we do together. These include the image of children as creative active citizens; trusting in children's ideas, their curiosity and questions; valuing the processes of co-enquiry and reflection; prioritising space, time and the quality of attention, with adults as companions in learning and inviting children to express their ideas in a 'hundred languages' (Malaguzzi, 1996). Inspired by real art, our work invites children to be immersed in learning inside and outside the classroom, building bridges between theory and reality, schools and communities, young people and their futures.

School Without Walls is a co-enquiry residency-based model of experiential and creative learning that transforms both the curriculum and the learning culture in schools. *School*

³ Cambridge was the least equal city to grow up in for the second consecutive year in 2018 with parts of County being amongst worst in UK for social mobility. Cambridgeshire is also one of the worst funded education authorities in England. The County receives £400 less per child than the average funded authority and £1600 less per child than Westminster.

<https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/deprivation/social-mobility>

Without Walls is doing school differently. Transposing 'school' to an arts environment – the egg theatre⁴ and local museums - prompts both teachers and children to interrogate and reshape teaching and learning. Children are placed at the centre of their own learning, so themes, programmes and content of learning are largely directed by the children, facilitated through a method of co-enquiry. Adults (including artists, educators and mentors) work alongside the children 'as companions in learning' to facilitate meaningful, creative enquiries in real life contexts.

This process develops a repertoire of 'learning to learn' skills and competencies and has generated increased motivation, purposeful engagement, authentic learning and social empowerment. Children are engaged in the cultural life of the place where they live as active citizens and stewards of the environment, helping them become confident, purposeful, connected and progressive thinkers. Children practise habits of mind that are characteristic of artists - curiosity, self-awareness and critical thinking - to perceive, to think and to imagine alternatives. Such intensive experiences of creative education offer many opportunities for children to explore their relationship with school and their own learning, with their peers, educators and artists, and with their community.

Supporting children and young people to be engaged in meaningful creative enquiries as protagonists of their own learning, we have witnessed how authentic learning in real world contexts promotes learning. This year, three areas were identified for evaluation through consultation with Headteachers. Informed by their School Development Plans, we have collected evidence of positive and measurable impact on well-being and engagement, on progress in the school's chosen focus areas including oracy and learning resilience for all children. There have been specific learning benefits for vulnerable children and improvements in teachers' professional practice.

Children's Voices:

School Without Walls is amazing because you take charge of your own learning and there's no limits to your imagination.

School Without Walls gives us an opportunity to look at life differently and you can work with different people and discover your profession.

Usually in our school in normal lessons I think I can't do it but in School Without Walls I feel I can.

My imagination is stronger so I can think more clearly with my imagination.

School Without Walls is amazing because there are so many opportunities and things will sometimes change you as a person.

House of Imagination is also a space which provides children and adults with opportunities to work with creative professionals in a studio environment in pop-up spaces in Bath and

⁴ <https://www.theatreroyal.org.uk/your-visit/the-egg/>

local schools. We are researching how working in a studio environment contributes to the creative process, the relationship between the arts and other fields of knowledge and the interstices that lie between them. *House of Imagination* emphasises the importance of co-enquiry and co-production. Artists and creative professionals engage in open-ended, critically reflective and collaborative forms of engagement that are central to and inspired by the nature of creative practice itself.

Forest of Imagination is a contemporary and participatory arts event that makes creativity visible in the city of Bath and engages new audiences with contemporary arts, design and creativity through a participatory and creative learning programme working alongside artists and creative professionals. Co-founded by Grant Associates and House of Imagination, *Forest of Imagination* is a unique collaboration between the creative and cultural industries and the community of Bath that has grown out of a collective ambition to make a difference in the city. Since 2014, *Forest of Imagination* has each year reimagined a familiar space to inspire everyone's creativity and heighten a sense of nature in an urban environment. We want to create spaces that inspire and feed the creativity of our children. *Forest of Imagination* deliberately brings the inspirational experience and sensations of nature and wildness to our doorsteps. Creative Installations in the heart of the city address bigger themes about the environment and climate change, sharing ideas through our collective imagination.

Forest of Imagination reveals the collaborative and creative ecology of the city in a new and engaging way and gives permission for a new way of experiencing nature in a city environment. The city becomes a place for new approaches to learning. *Forest of Imagination* is free and actively inclusive. We invite children and adults to explore, make and learn in a creative, intuitive and imaginative way, engaging with a thought-provoking series of experiences for all ages. Learning outside the classroom, in the city, invites a new space for conversations about creativity and imagination in our lives.

Key themes of the *Forest of Imagination* include the importance of nature, creativity, engagement and wellbeing. Artistic and architectural installations connect the natural and urban landscapes with creative experiences. Every year *Forest of Imagination* draws on local skills, inspiration and ingenuity and engages a wide public audience. This creative place-making involves meaningful and experiential 'real world' learning, engaging different communities in co-creation of natural and immersive spaces in an urban context.

At a time when schools are being cut so much that they have no glue sticks in my eldest daughter's class, the chance to play with huge amounts of clay, to take part in incredible storytelling and music, to build and explore the 'world's biggest marble run', to see the world through a bee's eyes, are all amazing learning experiences and something my children have carried with them and continued to create from in the weeks since the festival. They have become storytellers of their own travelling theatre, they have made homes for bees and they have shared their bee facts with friends and family encouraging all of us to take better care of our natural world'
Parent

Forest of Imagination gives children and people of all ages chances to experiment creatively and to experience the city differently. This work encompasses educational, creative and cultural approaches that are intuitive and responsive to the natural environment through local engagement but with wider impact in society.

Art is a powerful medium through which we can understand ourselves and transform the world around us. Through being encouraged to pose questions and to identify problems and issues together, learners can debate and discuss their thinking; they are brought into the heart of the teaching and learning process as co-participants. We want to develop this sense of imaginative, creative activism through art and ideas connected to the world, making an engagement resonate beyond the immediate. Our question or proposition is of 'researching children researching the world' and how this approach can resonate more widely in our lives.

ArtScapers and the work of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI)

It was a concern for inequality but also what we saw as the continual erosion of freedoms for all children everywhere that prompted a group of artists, educators and other professionals to come together 15 plus years ago to form arts and well-being charity Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination. As with the creators of *House of Imagination*, there was a shared commitment to the transformative impacts of the arts and a desire for children's lives to be different. The charity has been exploring how creativity can be at the heart of children's learning experiences (in and out of schools), developing programmes that have pushed chinks of light into all sort of spaces and places. In the words of John Dewey, we have been thinking with children and their communities how 'to look at things as if they could be otherwise'.

Our approach has been carefully researched and documented (see the resources and research section of our website and also the further research links at the end of the article). We have worked alongside all ages and like our colleagues in Bath have thought about the learning that can happen in spaces as diverse as recycling centres, graveyards, and hospitals (as well as within the more obvious cultural settings of museums, libraries and of course schools). Everything we do starts with the principle of children leading, showing their educators and each other the way. We think together how we can be co-creators and companions. The artists in CCI take play seriously. They draw on their own creative practice to find ways to 'explore the unexpected' and 're-imagine the familiar', two of our other core principles. Careful decisions are made about how we work with space, time, language, body and materials. 'Slowness' is also a core principle, a commitment to making time for creative processes and languages to be fully explored and noticed. Key influences on the group have included the pedagogy and thinking of Reggio Emilia, in particular the conceptualisation of the child as strong and powerful. The work of the Learning without Limits team (based at the University of Cambridge) and their emphasis on co-agency and the ethic of everybody has also been important to us.⁵

⁵ <https://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/about/key.html>

An approach to creative place-making has evolved in the east of England with significant parallels with our colleagues in the south west. We too focus on the very local, the world to be found just outside the door, and we think hard about how these can be opened up as spaces of curiosity and imagination for everyone. We have written on the importance of these connections with colleagues and created a series of fantastical maps of different pockets of the county that celebrate them.

The charity's relationship with one particular school in north Cambridge illustrates well our exploration of how things can be different, how together a place can be created that everyone wants to part of. The school is Mayfield Primary School. We met through a project called *ArtScapers*, an education programme created for a new area of Cambridge (now called Eddington) being built by the University of Cambridge. Their journey over the last four years is offered here as an example of brilliant creative activism by one school community, of what can happen when learning is taken outside of the classroom and recognised as happening everywhere.

The project began back in 2016 when Eddington was a building site and no community had yet moved in. In this rapidly changing landscape there were plans for homes for 8,500 people, a school, a community centre, a postgraduate centre, shops and parks. There was also a public art programme. The school, staff and CCI artists set themselves these questions:

How can art and the work of artists help children relate to their city as it grows? How can children help others to think creatively about these changes?

This project was not to be about artists painting pictures to hang in a gallery (as one early benchmarking exercise revealed to be the assumption of many of the children involved). Rather this was an invitation to the children to be artists, exploring their world as archaeologists, planners, scientists, and builders – as activists involved in their world, being curious and thinking critically about what they found there. Core principles for the programme were: imagining, being curious, looking differently, co-creating and reflecting. Processes that supported these were woven through all the invitations to the children, both as they adventured in the new spaces of Eddington and also crucially back in their classrooms and their own outside spaces at school. Jared's (8) testimony in the first year of the project is significant here:

Being an ArtScaper means to look at something and make your own ideas. Then, just think of the idea you thought of before and mix it up so you can make something even bigger and newer. Then just design it... then just find stuff that might be used in the future and use that to help you build it.

These words hinted for the school how the CCI approaches could be developing the traits they knew they wanted for the children – to be creative, reflective, adaptive, and innovative. The school's two headteachers (an arrangement itself an innovative approach to shared leadership) embraced the essence of *ArtScapers* into a major project for the school called 'Out and About'. Alongside this they have introduced an approach called 'Spirals of Enquiry', an initiative supported by Whole Education, a network of schools and partners

dedicated to values-led, fully rounded education. They were convinced these initiatives would enable them to get to know their children better and so improve the learning opportunities made available to them.

Paula Ayliffe, one of the headteachers, recounts a recent conversation with three eight-year old boys:

We always have to copy someone else's idea and get our work to look like theirs.

When you're an ArtScaper you use your own idea and then show it to others.

Actually you show it to yourself too because it helps you to sort out what your own brain is telling you.

She reflects on what this reveals about the power of ArtScapers:

Teachers are constantly modelling the 'right' way to write, the 'right' way to draw, the 'right' way to calculate, and dare I say, the 'right' way to think. The second and third parts of this conversation tell of the power of ArtScapers. The children have identified ArtScapers as a vehicle for their learning. It provides a space for ideas to develop and a theatre and audience to show these ideas to others. It enables thinking. Additional evidence from teachers, teaching assistants and parents corroborates this. Staff who have accompanied the children have commented on how being an ArtScaper - engaging and interacting with the local and often immediate environment alongside the children, has impacted them as educators:

This is different - a joint thing, everybody's experience is valued...children have learnt loads about themselves and working with friends but it hasn't felt like school and teachers haven't felt like it's teaching.

It reminds me why I came into teaching in the first place.

This last comment was a bold statement and particularly telling for Paula. *ArtScapers* was reminding teachers of the qualities and essence of teaching that drew them into the profession. She concluded it was because of the time and space it gives, the working alongside children rather than the practice of talking at or to them.

Every child at Mayfield in years 1 to 6 now spends an afternoon out of the classroom every week; their 'out and about' time. A practice begun in September 2018, it is 'non-negotiable'; i.e. it is expected whatever the weather. Paula describes how the time is structured:

Teachers are encouraged to be brave and experiment with this allocation of time. They are encouraged to not just take a lesson outside that could be taught inside, they are encouraged to do something different, let the children take much more of a lead and work at something that might not be subject or topic based. They are encouraged to observe the children, watch them, and ask themselves: what am I learning about these children from being outside that I didn't know before? We knew this was something that some teachers would find difficult to do, that sense of not

being in control every second of the school day and wondering whether a whole afternoon away from an allocated subject would essentially reduce our maths and English time.

To support this new initiative, CCI ran a day in the woods for the whole staff team on January 4th 2019, enabling them to be ArtScapers for the day themselves. The staff ended the day with these reflections:

We came away with the desire to think further about how to help children be unselfconscious and do their own thing. We were struck by how the outdoors works so well as a place to get things wrong. We want to think how to offer comfort so everyone can be confident and brave and how to shift our mindset so we can relax even when it's not looking how we expected.

There is striking evidence already of real insights from the children when they talk about their learning. Here's a year 5 child (aged 9) describing how their learning has become powerfully self-directed:

I've finally got control of my writing it's like I've leashed a horse and have power over it.

Paula has noticed a whole range of benefits:

The school grounds seem so much bigger as everyone gets to know them better. The children have adapted to this time more quickly than the adults; their enthusiasm for outdoor learning is infectious. They comment that they enjoy the space and time to think – 'no one is looking over my shoulder to check, the pressure is less'. Teachers are no longer worrying about what to specifically plan for these sessions, but instead are saying 'this lesson needs to happen outside'. The result being that even more time is spent outdoors in excess of the afternoon allocated.

Summary

All pedagogy has the potential to be creative. All teachers have to adapt their material to the needs of the learner. Through creative activism we are asking for more than that. We are lobbying for the rights of the child, that they be given the experiences and learning that come with engagement in the arts. We think this can happen very effectively in schools but it also happens outside of school. We want to stimulate a kind of everyday activism in which creative engagement is a part of every aspect of our lives.

The Durham Commission Report (2019) evidences the power of creative pedagogies and the importance for arts and culture to be an essential part of every child's education. It argues that young people should be better prepared for the changing world of work where they need the creative capacities that employers seek which will enable them to be resilient and adaptable, to pursue portfolio careers and engage in lifelong learning. Our belief is that creative pedagogies are more crucial than that. They enable young people to be active citizens, participating locally and globally in all aspects of their future.

Learning through creative, material pedagogies involves children and adults speculating together about the future of their community and environment. Creative pedagogies help us to become active in our environments, to experiment, take risks, be imaginative. Through these projects we see examples of the creative arts significantly motivating young people's learning. Creative skills have enhanced the social skills needed to be in a classroom; teachers have created more space and time for imaginative work and schools have gained the confidence to forge new paths to take creative action.

It is no coincidence that both the projects explored here use the word 'imagination' in their titles. Imagination extends us beyond the world we know and the way we normally think. It allows us to imagine different spaces, places, and situations, and to go beyond the present. Imagination is inextricably linked to creativity; imaginative activity happens in the mind and creative action gives it purpose (National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education, 1999).

You have to use your imagination if you are to live effectively in a society. Never has it been more essential to equip children with the skills they need to live in an inclusive and creative society. Creative tools can help them use their imaginations, allow them to take other people's perspectives into account and 'look at things as if they can be otherwise'. House of Imagination and Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination's work deliberately plays with children's capacity to be in an imaginary world as well as the real world, to reject a purely 'rational' approach.

Questions posed during ArtScapers workshops included: how can I imagine the world differently? How can I understand someone who is not like me? These questions relate to issues arising in attempts to create an inclusive society. They resonate with Arendt's (1978) call to see the world from another angle, change our position, use our imaginations, and take other perspectives into account.

Through creative, collaborative approaches participants can be conceived as collaborators, co-researchers, as 'changemakers' taking action. The impact of this is that it disrupts the practices and discourses that make and remake the identities of researcher as subject and participant as research object. In this way children can be conceived as co-researchers, co-developing creative pedagogies. Such foregrounding of co-production empowers learners to undertake more self-directed learning now and in the future. Such strategies are self-determining, aimed at supporting young people in the arts but also in their interactions with society. Creative activity can support young people to become confident citizens constructing their own cultural lives. The terms 'peer-led,' 'co-production,' 'collaboration,' and 'co-operation' are based in a social pedagogy where more can be gained by working together than working alone (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). This approach is in stark contrast to the prevailing ethos in the English education system that emphasizes individual achievement and competition between peers.

Creative pedagogies prioritise habits of mind for life wide and life-long creativity, developing ideas into action, and connecting children's learning to opportunities to make a better world. Through the work in both our projects we have found that the arts engage children

and young people in authentic learning experiences to express and communicate their ideas and feelings. Co-designed creative, inclusive pedagogy supports immersion in experiential learning in and through the arts, valuing agency and individual interests. Such an approach to creative enquiry invites creative and critical thinking and supports both cognitive and affective development.

Children are growing up in an increasingly interconnected and complex world. They need to grow in a creative environment which allows them to develop their own ideas. The cultivation of playful dispositions will enable them to be creative and collaborative contributors to the world's challenges - giving children the space to be curious, to imagine new possibilities, to shape their identities and futures, to explore ideas and questions creatively and to value uncertainty. High standards and creativity do not need to be polarised. We are all guardians of children's creativity. Arts education should not be a luxury for a few. It is a pedagogical tool essential to facilitate creativity, adaptability, and social and personal transformation.

The two organisations discussed here have independently been working on their own manifestos for this work and there are brilliant echoes to be heard as you read through them.

The *ArtScapers* manifesto states that children should:

- Be free
- Imagine anything
- Have fun
- Know anyone can do it, there are no wrong answers
- Share and talk
- Not rush
- Try things out and experiment – make a mess
- See that art is everywhere
- Keep trying
- Move around, be comfortable
- Be brave and trust

The manifesto for *School without Walls* states:

- Be free to follow your fascinations
- Ask and explore your own questions
- Trust in your own ideas and interests
- Express yourself
- Work independently
- Create a safe space to take risks
- Attempt without the fear of failure
- Be ok with the unknown
- Be kind
- Remember all our ideas matter
- Choose how you do things

- Be creative!
- Do things in a different way
- Cherish everyone's individual way of doing things
- Think outside the bubble
- Use your senses
- Create time and space to explore and learn
- Make real life choices
- Be happy, engaged and achieve your best
- Feel connected to your city and community

We are working now to think how these programmes can work together but also crucially how the children involved might lead this process for others. We have heard how children feel fierce (rightly so) about their expertise and the importance of doing rather than telling:

We are the experts and it is much better to be ArtScapers together with someone new to it then they will see and feel what happens... which is much easier than trying to talk about it. Benjamin, 9

Rob Hopkins (2019), a leading environmentalist and campaigner, has just published a heartfelt call for action, a demand for us all to turn away from despair and ask what can happen if we come together and use our imaginations to shape a better future, a world we want to live in. Creative activism in education demands engagement and what better place to start than with the children's words in these manifestos?

Afterword

'We set our minds to a newt', was the way in which one young girl described her work as an ArtScaper. The odd syntax and highly focussed theme made me laugh, and then made me think very seriously about the huge value of the work described in this article. A capacity to distil, poetically and totally accurately, a complicated set of actions into a single phrase is rare and very special. It is almost impossible to imagine happening in the timetabled regime of a classroom, and unlikely in the loving and chaotic processes of being a family. But it seems almost inevitable in one of the settings described in this article.

As a country, we face an unprecedented set of challenges, from climate emergencies to a fundamental loss of any agreed sense of who we are and what our relationships and duties to others should be. A conventional model of education in a time of crisis or uncertainty tends to be one that reinforces the status quo – think of Victorian Board Schools, or the Secondary Modern/Grammar School post-war scheme of education. The rationale appears to be that we use a flawed understanding of the present to forecast future workforce needs, and conclude that the skill sets that got us into this mess are the ones to get us out.

Creative Activism offers us a different solution, and one that is not only sensible but joyful. In a world of rapid change and uncertainty, we need to unlock the full potential of all of our children, and enable them to attain in ways in which a previous generation could not. By maintaining a confidence in creativity through early years and all the way into the workplace, a generation of novel thinkers will change our world. By providing a generous understanding, a high degree of focus, and by simplifying and clarifying our ability to

question, they will be the ones who will navigate the uncertainty we have created, with authority and effectiveness. The consequences of failing this generation, or of failing to bring this activism into the mainstream of teaching in the UK, will be severe.

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