Children's creativity

Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk

Book Chapter

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Introduction

Creativity alongside play has become the western world’s panacea (Cook 2018). Because of this and because ideas and ideals of creativity are rooted in children’s everyday lives, it is important to view them critically. In this chapter, I ask: How can we think about children’s creativity? The concept gives an impression of creativity being children’s own and seems to indicate that children define and have command of their creativity. While this is certainly partially true, an adult – a parent or a teacher – is more likely to define who and what is creative or uncreative rather than the children themselves. When these adults have conflicting ideas about what makes an object or a person creative, the complexity of children’s creativity becomes especially visible.

My approach in this text is that children are not born creative, but they become creative through everyday practices – not least through leisure activities such as competitions, arts and crafts workshops, and extracurricular activities. Children are thus made creative and/or uncreative by how they are spoken and written about and the praise and prizes they receive from families, juries, and teachers.

Using the example of a children’s drawing competition, I will explore how different perspectives on creativity can simultaneously make the exact same drawing into a genuine imaginative expression and a seemingly ‘fake’ imitation. A discussion of one of the drawings from the competition on social media captures the tension between three versions of creativity, showing that the concept is far from universal or self-evident.

Children’s creativity in research

The literature on creativity and children’s creativity encompasses fields as diverse as psychology, business studies, education, cultural studies, anthropology, and childhood studies. Theories of creativity are often contradictory, however. Take, for example, the arguments of two key figures in psychology and education – Jean Piaget (2002), to whom childhood is the most creative time within the lifespan of an individual, and Lev Vygotsky (2004), who argues that children’s creative imagination is no richer than that of adults. For Piaget (2002), creativity is an “inborn aptitude” (p. 221), something the child ‘has’ and can potentially lose when they become socialised into norms and values. The inventiveness and curiosity that Piaget (2002) connects with creativity are only “deformed by adult society” (p. 229). Vygotsky (2004) argues against seeing creative imagination as an internal process and acknowledges the role of environment, although he still claims that a
child’s and adult’s imaginations function differently. He connects creative imagination to experience and skills, which small children especially have less of simply by virtue of being young. In this line of thinking, imagination is “fully mature only in the adult” (Vygotsky 2004, p. 32). While Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s ideas have certainly been highly influential, I wonder whether creativity theories require an opposition between children and adults, measuring who has more or ‘better’ imagination. Is there a way to think about children’s creativity other than in terms of age, development, or socialisation?

Most research seems to agree that in the western world children’s creativity is considered ‘good’ and valuable (Aronsson 1984). Karin Aronsson (1984) notes that ‘exhibiting’ children’s creativity – hanging children’s drawings in the kitchen or living room – is a common and nearly compulsory practice in many western homes. However, for many immigrant parents in Sweden this is not a given, which shows how differently the (aesthetic) value of children’s creativity is performed in everyday practices (ibid.). Outside of the western world, children’s creativity is equally highly valued, but there might be less separation between children’s and adults’ creative activities (ibid.). What if we think about children’s creativity as a space for both children and adults?

**Thinking anew**

More recent theories offer an understanding of creativity as a social practice. This means that age or development are not seen as the main criteria for what counts as creative. Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam (2007) argue that creativity is first and foremost a relational process that is part of our everyday lives. Creativity is not something to have, but something to do – it is distributed across everyday activities and practices. Because it is not contained either within the creative person or product, the burden (or privilege) of being creative does not fall on the shoulders of a single individual, whether a child or an adult. Instead, creativity is relational and collective and is done through engaging with the people, objects, and materials around us (Ingold & Hallam 2007). Rooting creative improvisation in everyday practices allows Ingold and Hallam (2007) to question the idea of novelty and to argue that imitation and copying are no less creative. ‘Standard’ psychological definitions of creativity tend to emphasise novelty as its defining feature (e.g. in Runco and Jaeger 2012), implying that creativity stands opposite to imitation. Instead, Ingold and Hallam (2007) say that imitation is not a mechanical process of making an exact duplicate but always includes improvisation. The following discussion shows what happens when these distinct perspectives meet in practice.
What makes a child’s drawing creative?

One of the leisure time activities that many children engage in is competitions. I borrow an example from the international drawing competition organised by the Swedish company Ikea for children up to 12 years old. In the Australian round of the competition, one of the drawings published on Ikea Australia’s Facebook page sparked a controversy (fig. 1). Some users commented that the drawing is creative and even ingenious, while others claimed that it is an uncreative copy. How can one drawing be both at the same time? This becomes less surprising if we look closer at the different ideas about children’s creativity in the comments.

The drawing shows a character that 8-year old Stephanie (pseudonym) calls Fairybread Kitty. The character is a combination of a blue cat and fairy bread, a popular Australian dessert of sliced bread covered in sprinkles. Out of nearly 100 public comments on Facebook, the majority praise the child and her imagination: “Awesome design! Such a creative girl!” (Ikea Australia 2017). A smaller critical group of comments questions the creativity of both the drawing and the child: “Fairybread kitty is almost a copyright infringement! some kid has been watching too much youtube [sic]” (Ikea Australia 2016b). Several users have spotted a resemblance between Fairybread Kitty and the popular meme character Nyan Cat (Means TV 2011). But the resemblance only becomes problematic if imitation is opposed to creativity, if novelty and uniqueness define creativity. But if imitation is seen as equally creative, the question of who is copying what and which character came first is no longer important. Several commenters express this last idea of creativity, which is closest to Ingold and Hallam’s (2007). They
acknowledge the similarity between two characters but do not deny Fairybread Kitty its creative value. What they praise is Stephanie’s improvisation in adding to her character an ‘Aussie’ element, the fairy bread. Ikea’s drawing competition is an example of how children’s creativity is negotiated in practice by everybody but the children themselves. The controversy around Fairybread Kitty illustrates tensions between creativity as an individual property and a collective process. The adults’ grappling with issues of originality, novelty, and ownership shows that the concept of children’s creativity is diverse, conflicting, and fluid.

Children are continuously encouraged to engage in creative activities: at school and preschool, in supermarkets, and even churches many of which have play corners equipped with paper and coloured pens. Because ideas and ideals of creativity are rooted in children’s everyday lives, it is important to critically view them in a similar way that child studies have scrutinised innocence, agency, and other normative ideas about children (see e.g. James & Prout 1997; Prout 2005). I call for the need to consider and reconsider what notions of creativity and children we bring into children’s creativity both in theory and in practice. If children’s creativity is disputed in practice, is there any reason why it should appear homogenous and stable in research, policy documents, and institutional practices? Ingold and Hallam (2007) offer a broad and inclusive notion of creativity as part of children’s and adults’ everyday activities and relationships. If we approach children’s creativity as they do, it remains important to consider what notions of children and childhood we combine it with. Is it, for example, a passive or agentive child? There is a need for adults to keep on asking how creativity can be understood in relation to children and what claims it is possible to make about the role of creativity in children’s lives.

References


