

Book Review of Exploring Children's Creative Narratives

D. Faulkner and E. Coates, Editors, Exploring Children's Creative Narratives, Routledge, Abingdon (2011), 260 pages (paperback, ISBN 13: 978-0-415-56563-9).

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According to the editors, this book brings together 'fresh' international perspectives on understanding children's creative narratives. I agree wholeheartedly; the range of content is varied and engaging and the level of detail - and quality of writing - is high. This is an accessible and inspiring text, which would appeal to a wide readership, both academic and non-academic.

The majority of contributors come from the England, but there are also chapters written by researchers based in the Czech Republic, Finland, Singapore and the USA. It is interesting to note the parallels in children's creative narratives in these different geographical contexts.

The sleeve notes say that the book is aimed at early years educators but people working in arts education would undoubtedly also find it insightful. A strong arts focus is evident and chapters cover: drama/role-play; creative thinking; music; dance; drawing and painting. It is notable that four of the 12 chapters concentrate on children's narratives in visual art, supporting Young's assertion - in her chapter - that the visual often dominates. In connection to this, there are 32 colour plates in the centre of the book and these serve as helpful and interesting illustrations.

In their foreword, Iram and John Siraj-Blatchford explain van Oers's (1998) concept of 'progressive continuous re-contextualisation' [PC-R] and describe how this relates to the examples of creativity provided in this text. Although the concept of PC-R is not mentioned by any of the contributors, it appears to be a theory which binds together not only the research discussed but also the writing style of all the authors. It is argued throughout that there is a need to listen to children's voices and watch their actions carefully. Building on children's interests and motivations is encouraged, as is the recognition of knowledge as a social construction. The overall coherence of the book is thoughtfully considered. Additionally, Faulkner, as a developmental psychologist, and Coates, as an educator, provide a well-balanced introduction, which considers research and pedagogy and the inter-relatedness of the book's content. This unity of message is one of the text's key strengths.

Given the use of the term 'narratives', those with an interest in early literacy might be disappointed that there is little mention of research into children's writing. Indeed, some of the authors criticise the emphasis on text-based literacy presented in policy documents. Fulkova and Tipton discuss the value of 'multiliteracies' and even though this term is not used by the other authors, I argue that

multiliteracies are evident in all of the other projects described. For example, Young considers the non-verbal communication of babies and Wright mentions the place of gesture in children's art making. The wide variety of narratives considered in this book are excellent evidence of multiliteracies and, as an art educator, I especially applaud this.

Technology, in different forms, is mentioned by several of the authors: Sawyer, Kangas et al., Truman, and Chappell and Young. Truman's chapter focuses on the description and evaluated application of a music composing software called SoundScape. A consistent feature of the book is that all theories are explained clearly and often related to specific illustrative examples; in this case, Truman's models concerning her 'generative framework of learning and creativity'. Interestingly, this particular chapter is the only one to consider the learning of older children: aged 11-12. I am unsure why there is this exception to the early years age range covered by the other authors, but Truman does offer some valuable insights into musical learning and the research also demonstrates children's digital literacy.

Sawyer's chapter, following the editors' introduction, could possibly be deemed the most intellectually challenging, as he describes various narrative coding schemes and these seem rather complex on first reading. Additionally the level of detail provided in his analyses could perhaps cloud the understanding of those more concerned with practice than theory. However, this chapter is a good example of the application of coding schemes in making sense of young children's improvised role play, so would be of interest to anyone conducting similar research.

A limitation noted by the editors is that the book fails to address issues of diversity; I assume this to encompass ethnic diversity and possibly also children with Special Educational Needs. However, Young briefly describes a project looking at young children's play in Early Years Centres serving Muslim communities and she highlights the need to consider parental expectations, especially in relation to gender. In addition, popular culture, which sometimes transcends social and cultural groups, is specifically referred to in the chapters by Coates and Coates and Wright, when considering its influence on children's art making.

The quality of adult interaction is a theme that echoes throughout the book. Nearly all the authors provide illuminating cases of aspirational pedagogy and these are examined in some detail. Wright suggests that adults are encouraged to act as 'a type of playmate' and this is evident in Young's observations of a nursery teacher playing xylophones. However, worthy of particular mention is the year one teacher, Sally, described by Faulkner. Sally's discussions with her class show a teacher who is fully engaged with the principles of dialogic teaching and she responds to her class's ideas and

questions with enthusiasm and sensitivity. In stark contrast, Hallam et al's chapter describing the painting of dinosaurs in an English reception class stands out as a notable example of negative practice. The teacher described in this research lacks confidence in art teaching and has limiting expectations for the children's work. It is useful to see some discussion of poor practice, as this only serves to emphasise the many positive examples elsewhere.

Collaborative creativity is discussed by some of the authors and the work of John-Steiner (2000) is mentioned in relation to this. However, Chappell and Young consider the concept of 'communal creativity' and this is a concept that I feel this book is seeking to promote. The stimulus for the publication arose from a conference workshop, which left participants with unanswered questions. Having read *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives* I, too, have many unanswered questions, but I also feel more engaged in an international community who cares about the creativity of young children. In conclusion, the book is a very welcome addition to a growing field of interest and I am certain that other readers will also find it enjoyable and inspirational. I recommended it highly.

References

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