

## FOSTERING CREATIVITY IN EARLY CHILD'S EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The whole idea of this paper spins mainly about one of the main aspects within early child's education – creativity and its meaning to a child's psychosocial development. The presented findings rely on the methodological approach supported by Reggio Emilia<sup>1</sup> philosophy. Creativity education, especially based on Reggio Emilia point of view, starts from the very young age and therefore kindergartens as well as families play much significant role to support and develop creativity roots in child's everyday routine. It is stressed that being creative is more like being initiative and innovative – the features that are mainly required by contemporary society. Also this paper is illustrated with real-life pictures from the activities in the kindergarten "Lazdynėlis"<sup>2</sup>, so it becomes much clearer for those who are interested in this topic to understand how kindergarten daily life may sustain, develop and so enhance creativity of children using many different approaches, e.g. through the game-led tools, teachers' attitudes etc.

KEY WORDS: children, creativity, early child's education, and Reggio Emilia educational philosophy.

### Anotacija

Publikacijos autoriai aptaria vieną svarbiausių vaiko vystymosi elementų – kūrybiškumo ugdymą, skatinimą ir palaikymą. Pristatomi atlikto atvejo tyrimo duomenys iš esmės grindžiami Reggio Emilia ugdymo filosofijos metodologiniais principais. Kūrybiškumo ugdymas, ypač Reggio Emilia filosofijos kontekste, prasideda nuo ankstyvųjų vaiko gyvenimo metų, šeima kartu su darželiu vaidina svarbų vaidmenį. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo įstaigoje susirenka įvairūs vaikai su savo individualiomis patirtimis – kiekvienas nori išreikšti savo emocijas ir jausmus. Pristatomo atvejo tyrimo kontekste atskleidžiama, kaip Vilniaus darželio „Lazdynėlis“ pedagogai naudoja įvairias priemones, sudarydami galimybes kiekvienam vaikui patirti ir pažinti pasaulį. Akcentuojamas sąlygų sudarymas vaikams mėgautis pačiu pažinimo procesu, o ne galutiniu rezultatu. Kuriant ir atrandant kartu su vaikais, stebint ir analizuojant, pastebima, kad kūrybiškas vaikas: siūlo naujas idėjas, lanksčiai mąsto, veikia spontaniškai, noriai įsitraukia į veiklą, fantazuoja ir juokauja, jaučiasi svarbus ir pripažintas. PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: vaikas, kūrybiškumas, Reggio Emilia ugdymo filosofija, ankstyvasis vaiko ugdymas.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15181/tbb.v73i1.1270>

### Introduction

Many scholars and practitioners would stress the fact that up to 65 percent children currently in grade school will one day work in a job that does not yet exist. By this it means that, in order to prepare kids for these jobs, children need to

<sup>1</sup> More about Reggio Emilia philosophy and education could be found at: <http://www.reggiochildren.it/identita/reggio-emilia-approach/?lang=en> [last check 04/01/2016].

<sup>2</sup> Particularly about Vilnius' kindergarten "Lazdynėlis" more information could be found at: <http://www.lazdynelis.lt/>

be creative, adaptable, problem-solvers, ready for anything in the near future to come (Davidson, 2011; Mayesky, 2013; Mills, 2014). Following Mayesky (2013) findings on children's creativity and using arts, there are eight basic ways to help children express their natural creativity by:

- Helping to accept change. Fear and anxiety are the enemies of creativity.
- Helping children realize that some problems have no easy answers.
- Helping to recognize that many problems have many possible answers. Therefore the goal is to explore and discover.
- Helping children monitor and accept their own feelings.
- Valuing children's creativity, even when it's rather messy.
- Recognizing and acknowledging children's joy in all creative endeavors.
- Helping children appreciate their own unique characteristics and expressions.
- Helping to persevere. Encouraging them to explore, discover, and explore again.

Thus both creative arts and creative approach towards children's activities in general engage the small ones across all domains – cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical. Activities are deliberately open-ended (not prescriptive), foster divergent thinking, and support the process without particular attention on the product (Mayesky, 2013; Mills, 2014 et al.).

On the other hand, according to Reggio Emilia philosophy founder and famous educationalist – an Italian pedagogue Malaguzzi (1998), every child has a hundred ways (i.e. languages and hands) to express him/herself and these ways may appear much differently and unique. Thus one of the main principles of this learning philosophy says that children get to know the world and close surroundings through their senses: touching, seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, and acting as an independent explorers. Therefore in this sense creativity is the ability to generate new ideas and solutions, develop new things and concepts which can be useful to other people. Based on Reggio Emilia approach, child stays in a very center of education and all the other supportive measures (i.e. community, environment as the third pedagogue, teachers, family, arts & craft, project activities, children experiences, philosophy, light-color-action, children's work documentation etc.) serve as the assistants for assuring both the quality of learning and possibilities to develop creativity (Malaguzzi, 1998; Markevičienė, 2010, 2012; Lindsay, 2015).

Creativity as such is mainly identified through the following elements, such as:

*creative person* (we usually accept it as the aftermath of other external and internal factors that lead to being creative), *creative result* (it has to be: smart, simple, well crafted, familiar, sharable, resonant, original, flexible, challenging), and *creative process* (this part remains most significant one as it consists of many different variables, such as: action, creative thinking skills, knowledge, motivation, personality, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, environment etc.). Putting all this into other words, we do not learn from experience, but we do learn by reflecting on our experience (Dewey, 2010).

The goal of this paper is to describe and discuss the significance of creativity in early child's education and the role of all other sociocultural contexts that facilitate creativity processes.

Research methodology is based upon Reggio Emilia educational philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1998; Lindsay, 2015). The theory points out the meaning of child's closest environment as a key element in his/her further development and also reveals child's enormous abilities to explore, understand, create, and invent using "100 languages".

Methods used in this work are the following: i) interpretation and analysis of scientific, educational and philosophical literature on creativity; ii) case analysis of Vilnius' kindergarten "Lazdynėlis", describing creativity education and implementation of supportive tools/instruments in child's daily activities. The quantitative survey with pedagogues ( $N = 25$ ) of early child's education (using the multiple choice questionnaire) was carried out in the periods of 2013 and 2014; iii) descriptive quantitative data analysis and interpretations in relation to creativity phenomenon.

## 1. Why creativity?

As Robinson<sup>3</sup> (2014) would point out, creativity is as important now in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status. By saying this, the fact of child's unmeasurable abilities are indicated. Thus, within Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, every child is perceived as:

- With unlimited potential.
- Eager to interact with and contribute to the world.
- Driven by curiosity and imagination.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Robinson, K. (2014). NPR/TED Radio Hour: *How Do Schools Kill Creativity?* Interactive: <http://sirkenrobinson.com/nprted-radio-hour-how-do-schools-kill-creativity/> [last check 22/12/2015].

- Delighted in taking responsibility for his or her own learning.
- Being able to listen and is listened to.
- Having an enormous need to love and to be loved.
- Valued (see Picture 1).



Picture 1. Child creates and has unlimited potential for creativity

Another important variable for creativity education is *environment*, which has a significant place in Reggio Emilia philosophy and educational practice, as the environment is seen as the third most important teacher (see Picture 2).



Picture 2. Environment supports creative approaches and the ways to express kids' abilities

In regards of environment, we should stress the meaning of instruments / tools as well. Here we will mention some of the instruments that are actively used in the kindergarten “Lazdynėlis”. For creative activities on the *educational light table* children use sand, paper, glass stones, leaves, transparencies etc. *Projectors* and *light tables* encourage exploring of light penetration. *Mirrors* allow children to see themselves and their creations from all sides (see Picture 3).



Picture 3. Light tables, mirrors, and projectors enable children to free their imagination and creativity

Also other instruments, such as creative soft boxes (puzzles), are encouraging children to explore, invent, and create their own style in their imaginary world. Therefore it is worth to point out that playing with all the above mentioned instruments creates rather a magical experience for children and adults alike. Besides the light, soft boxes (puzzles) and other measures undoubtedly serve for developing: *social skills, language competence, cognitive competences, and self-expression*.

Even Piaget have found that 3–4 hours per day of learning and playing on the light table increases IQ of children, their innovative memory, and creative potential (Shaffer et al., 2005).

## **2. Experiences and development of creativity in kindergarten “Lazdynėlis”**

As for the introduction to this chapter, it is worth to stress some basic features on enhancing children's creativity in kindergarten setting. Reggio Emilia ideas are implemented only in a few kindergartens in Lithuania, however, mainly these ideas are realized in Vilnius' kindergarten “Lazdynėlis”. Here, following the Reggio concept, kindergarten's community organizes different creative activities where children are engaged into the creative processes and enjoy their results.

Also at the kindergarten children are free to creatively interpret the teachers' ideas (see Picture 4).



Picture 4. No teacher points out the instructions

In such a creative activities at the kindergarten not only children or pedagogues are involved into education, experiments or inventions, but also parents get the possibility to know closer about their children achievements, communicate and share ideas of education and child's upbringing with others, also get the feedback from the creative results about things where child is strong and something about what is still need to be developed or require more attention (Markevičienė, 2012; Malaguzzi, 1998; Lindsay, 2015 et al.). Putting in other words, through education and creative processes kindergarten community together with families creates safe and open environment for children's positive socialization. Educational institution becomes a place of creativity, learning, development, and sharing for all.

#### Presenting the quantitative research data

As it was mentioned previously in this paper, the survey took part in the periods of 2013 and 2014 while questioning 25 teachers (tutors) in the kindergarten "Lazdynėlis". However the research data, presented below, doesn't represent the whole situation about all kindergartens in the country in regards of fostering creativity among young children, but only this one being as a specific and rather unique case.

Therefore different children gather in early child's education institutions – kindergartens, and each of them wishes to express him/herself in rather various ways. Thus pedagogues at "Lazdynėlis", in order to meet the philosophy of Reggio Emilia and its approach of child's expressions in "100 languages", create such conditions that would suit every child's needs, especially to experience and explore the world that surrounds. Most important aspect in this educational process is to let children enjoy of getting-to-know process instead of being oriented towards achievements. While working and being together with children, teachers at the kindergarten have noticed that creative kids would:

- Initiate new ideas.
- Think flexibly.

- Act spontaneously.
- Join new activities eagerly.
- Phantasy and make fun.
- Feel as being important and appreciated.

After all it is worth to discuss the main factors that make an influence for children's creativity and what are the key elements of creativity as of the whole (see Figure 1).

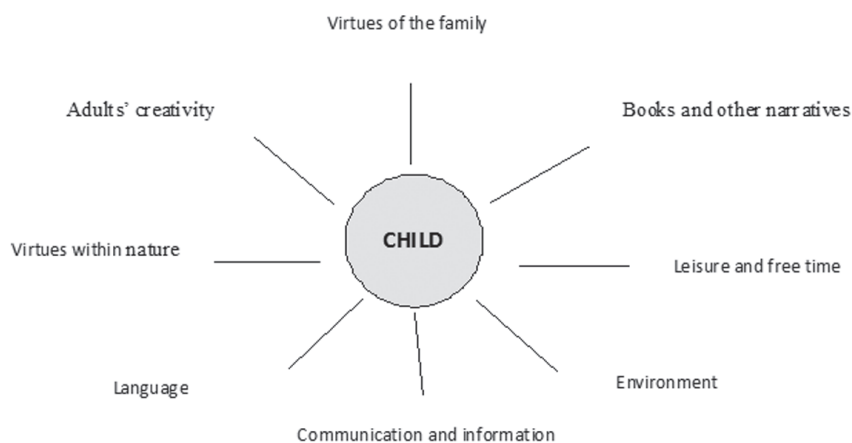


Figure 1. Factors that influence children's creativity

It is worth to stress that all components mentioned in the figure above are necessary for the purposes of fostering, developing and sustaining creativity of each child. All these elements should find the place in every kindergarten's educational activities.

This was also one of the reasons to analyze much deeper how those elements of child's creativity are met in the kindergarten "Lazdynelis". The multiple-choice questionnaire was mainly targeted to cover *environments' and adults' creativity* aspects and how they support children's creativity development.

#### Peculiarities of the creative environment

- Research data revealed that almost all participants ( $N = 21$ ) agreed that *safety, respectfulness, naturalistic approach, activity, simplicity, openness, mobility, and being social* are the key elements within creative environment, and also these elements foster creativity as the phenomenon.

- Half of participants ( $N = 11$ ) have doubts about *virtual and academic* aspects as those who might be supportive for fostering the creativity.

#### Child's personality features that are obvious within creative environment

- Also almost all research participants ( $N = 19$ ) have pointed out that within creative environment such personality features are seen as: *curiosity, creativity, openness, being friendly, attentiveness, and concentration*.
- Only less than a half of respondents ( $N = 8$ ) said that within creative environment child shows his/her *sensitivity, openness, kindness, attentiveness, non-responsibility* or even *irritableness*.
- However more than a half of participants ( $N = 14$ ) stated that such child's personality features as *non-responsibility* or *irritableness* are not revealed within creative environment in the kindergarten.

#### Pedagogue's/tutor's – child's interaction ways within creative activities

- Almost every pedagogue ( $N = 21$ ) at the kindergarten said that main interaction ways with children are through their *individual approach, motivation to create, motivation to try/test and explore, through the games, consultations, and individual support*.
- Most important aspect that covers the whole Reggio Emilia ideology is that no strict orders for a child's activities are used at all. Child initiates and implements his/her ideas free and only with a kind support provided by a tutor.

#### Factors that influence creativity in the kindergarten

All research respondents ( $N = 25$ ) have agreed that the following factors have an undoubted positive impact for a child's creativity in a kindergarten settings:

- Meeting all possible child's needs "Hic et Nunc".
- Language used and literature.
- Emotional support and guidance.
- Initiating the creative ideas.
- Independent choices by children.
- Modeling of activities.
- Acting in front of children.
- Renewing the environment – resetting a playground.
- Creating of non-traditional areas for children's activities.



- Family traditions.
- Motivating to reset the game area.

Of course, in these processes for fostering, developing and sustaining child's creativity we cannot deny or forget the importance and the meaning of the pedagogue's role. Despite tutor's constructive assistance it would not be possible to achieve the development of those child's personality features that were presented above, as pedagogue still remains:

- Influencer and supporter.
- The source of love and knowledge.
- Connection with reality.
- Motivator to improve.
- Model for further activities.

Therefore, while being together with children and their families, pedagogues/tutors continue to believe in every child's dreams and his/her daily success (see Picture 5).



*Picture 5.* Children invent and joyfully present their creative results.

Summing up – in developing creativity competence, involvement in the processes of artistic self-expression has a long-term impact on the abilities of a child to understand, observe, and listen. *Imagination* plays a key role in the child's search for knowledge and understanding, which in early child's education processes is more important than a result (though results are more wanted by parents and regulators, in some cases – teachers).

## Conclusions

1. Creativity remains one of the main features within Reggio Emilia philosophical approach and practical actions. According to many scholars (i.e. Malaguzzi, Kohl, Robinson, Lindsay et al.), creativity focuses on the process of forming original ideas through exploration and discovery. In children, creativity develops from their experiences with the process, rather than concern for the finished product. Thus creativity should stand on the one line with literacy.

2. Children get to know the world and close surroundings through their senses: touching, seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, and acting as an independent explorers. Therefore creativity is the ability to generate new ideas and solutions, develop new things and concepts which can be useful to other people.

3. Based on Reggio Emilia philosophy, every child is perceived as: *with unlimited potential, eager to interact with and contribute to the world, driven by curiosity and imagination, delighted in taking responsibility for his or her own learning, being able to listen and is listened to, having an enormous need to love and to be loved, and valued.*

4. Research data has revealed that *safety, respectfulness, naturalistic approach, activity, simplicity, openness, mobility, and being social* are the key elements within creative environment, and also these elements foster creativity as the phenomenon in every child's action. Also the majority of participants have pointed out that within creative environment such child's personality features are seen as: *curiosity, creativity, openness, being friendly, attentiveness, and concentration.*

5. Rather important variable for creativity education is *environment*, which has a significant place in Reggio ideology and educational practice, as the environment is seen as the third most important educator. Instruments and tools (*light tables, projectors, mirrors, soft boxes / puzzles*), used in kindergarten's educational activities, allow children to free their imagination and creativity, and thus play quite an important role in developing the creative personality.

*Received 2015 11 20*

*Approved for publishing 2016 03 07*

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