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Awakening Creativity in Children with Mild General Learning Disabilities

In attempting to simplify difficulties experienced by pupils with mild general learning disabilities, do teachers remove opportunities for looking outside the obvious? Do teaching methodologies that promote clear and linear thinking, deny pupils necessary experiences that could result in the development of creativity?

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INTRODUCTION

Creativity belongs to all people and the benefits of approaching life in a creative manner need to be shared. Maslow (1972) states that "it does very frequently get lost, or covered up, or twisted or inhibited or whatever, and then the job is to uncover what all babies are, in principle, born with" (p. 292). Once the absence of creativity becomes apparent in a child, it is the responsibility of educators to actively seek out the motivation that will encourage its return. According to the author's observations, children with mild general learning disabilities (GLD) often appear to rely on the motivation of others to advance their education experiences. Qualities of creative individuals, which include risk-taking and self-determination, appear to be absent in their daily learning. When asked to examine problems, there is a reluctance to explore a variety of options. The need to arrive at a single correct response remains a priority. It is as though the system has corralled them into believing that every problem has a single appropriate solution.

Cropley (1967) is adamant that "appropriate teaching methods can encourage children to think creatively, or discourage them from doing so" (p. 19). If we are to believe what Cropley proposes it should be possible to combine present teaching methodologies with opportunities to develop attributes associated with creativity.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Defining creativity has produced conflicting arguments. One does not immediately relate this term to the activities of children with mild GLD. Instead it conjures up images of artists, musicians and scientists whose unique work inspires us. However, if one is to accept that all people display levels of creativity relative to their experiences, then perhaps it may be suggested that people operate along a continuum of creativity and can be facilitated in their advancement. If this is the case then a definition of creativity might include the progressive nature of the attribute. While accepting the relationship between creativity and originality, Beetlestone (1998) states that "creativity consists of what is unique to each individual and original to them, rather than what is original to the world"

(p. 95). For educators this definition offers a starting point from which to begin to address the conditions that promote or hinder creative processes.

The active role of the individual in addressing his or her needs suggests that creativity embodies issues of self-motivation. Starko (1995) reminds us that embarking on a creative journey is not the easier option and it involves risk. However, "If new paths cause occasional stumbles, they also bring adventure and understanding" (p. 328). A further development of the risk-taking definition of creativity requires individuals to embark upon "thought that enables them to imagine conditions other than those that exist or that have existed" (Egan, 1992, p. 47).

In a study of educational objectives, Torrance (1964) examines the following mental operations: cognition, memory, convergent behaviour, divergent thinking and evaluation. He identifies cognition as the priority of most teachers. Developing divergent thinking and evaluation skills receive minimal attention. It may be suggested that when measuring creativity one needs to be cognisant of the varying levels of creative opportunities to which children have been exposed. Amabile (1989) reminds us that all human beings are capable of producing creative work in some area, at some time. Therefore it may be unacceptable to suggest that an individual lacks creative thinking skills. Alternatively, one may state that there is a level of creative thinking being portrayed with potential for development. Guilford (1950, cited in Webberly & Lift, 1980) adopts the continuum argument and states that, "Whatever the nature of the creative talent may be, those persons who are recognised as creative, merely have more of what we all have"(p. 72). The dilemma then remains as to how this potential may be fulfilled.

THE VALUE OF CREATIVITY FOR CHILDREN WITH MILD GENERAL LEARNING DISABILITIES

For children with mild general learning disabilities, it may be suggested that the need to develop the creative process is of greater importance than for those who are deemed to be of average or above average intelligence. The latter group automatically generalise learned information and skills. However, children with mild GLD may adopt passive, recipient roles rather than participatory ones. They are brought to a particular level of conceptual understanding and need then to be encouraged to take responsibility for the next step in learning. As a result of their taking control of the creative thinking process they become intrinsically motivated towards further cognitive development.

Watson (1996) cites Flavell's description of children with learning difficulties and their bewilderment when faced with errors. They view the errors as destructive rather than constructive. Flavell proposes that for children with learning difficulties, "learning is as difficult to control as the weather and that its regulation lies outside their control" (p. 37). Avoidance by the child of the teacher and his or her new learning experiences may result.

Therefore, it is believed that developing creative and naturally pro-active thinking processes will assist pupils with mild GLD as they attempt to take responsibility for their learning. With this newfound control will come an element of choice. The pupil becomes an active organiser of information and can begin to examine a variety of responses to problems. Ultimately, the understanding that a number of solutions may be identified to address any one problem will replace the 'quick-fix' response sometimes made available to children with learning difficulties. Watson (1996) cites Dockrell and McShane's conclusion regarding factors that lead to slowness of response in children with learning difficulties. She believes that "poor strategic processing" (p. 22) can be addressed through developing metacognitive strategies. These thinking skills require reflection and the element of creativity that promotes problem solving.

Torrance (1964) believes that "…we cannot say that a child is fully functioning mentally if the abilities involved in learning and thinking creatively remain underdeveloped or are paralysed by excessive prohibitions" (p. 46). Perhaps then, the value of creativity for the child with learning difficulties is to ensure full cognitive functioning according to the child's potential.

CHILDREN WHO DO NOT APPEAR TO OPERATE CREATIVELY

Accepting the theory that people operate along a continuum of creativity does not presume that one is automatically fulfilling one's potential. Children with mild GLD may not display behaviours and skills that suggest divergent or flexible thinking. They may not be extremely self-motivated with a curiosity for learning. They may not be risk-takers who gravitate towards problem-solving situations. These traits, which often appear in children of average intelligence, are conducive to developing creativity and therefore need to be promoted in the child with mild GLD. Watson (1996) points out that "Anxiety, experience of past failures, lack of confidence and a tendency to withdraw from, rather than engage with, challenge, are very frequently found among pupils receiving special education" (p. 3). This profile of a child with mild GLD who does not appear to be operating creatively, may be influenced by previous experiences and relationships. Perhaps creative development is reliant on the social aspects of learning.

Other characteristics of these children include, according to Watson (1996) a "tendency to react in an emotional way to challenge" (p. 9). The feeling that one is at the mercy of the world of learning suggests a lack of control. Amabile (1989) addresses this lack of control stating, "Children who attribute their failure to insurmountable factors like low ability, will perform poorly and show less persistence" (p. 88). Torrance (1964) reminds us that the creative person is marked by "…his self-starting ability…" (p. 57). Particular obstacles may make it impossible for the child with mild GLD to explore the creative thinking process. These include the level of cognitive development reached by the child. In addition to home environment and the family's perception of creativity, school environment and teaching methodologies may also be obstacles.

OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY

Intelligence

In an attempt to identify the reasons why children with mild GLD may not instinctively operate creatively, it is necessary to explore the relationship between intelligence and creativity. Jones (1972) states that "Intelligence and creativity are by no means synonymous but one cannot exist without the other" (p. 5). Therefore, it would appear that the child may need to have acquired a particular level of knowledge before creative interpretation and generalisation can take place. Cropley (1967) states, "Creative thinking occurs when the boundaries of the known are first mastered, through convergent processes, and then extended, by the application of divergent processes" (p. 29). It is at this point that one might again refer to the concept of a continuum of creativity. Jones (1972) states, "Creativity varies in depth and scope rather than type" (p. 27). The child with mild GLD is capable of operating creatively and in order to do so requires a particular level of skill mastery or knowledge. Once this has been acquired the child should not have difficulty adopting a creative thinking process at her or his level. If difficulties arise this may suggest that factors aside from intelligence are acting as obstacles.

Quality of Educational Experience

Amabile (1989) is adamant that "The areas in which children display creativity and the levels of creativity they show, depend on their education, their experience, and their level of both cognitive and physical development " (p. 29). Amabile has no doubt that the quality of education the child receives will affect his or her creative output. While the extent to which a child's creativity depends on the classroom environment is unclear, it is accepted that school has a role to play. If so, it may be suggested that there are school environments that are not conducive to developing creative thinking in children with mild GLD.

The Teacher as Problem-Solver

Amabile (1989) identifies four situations which may militate against opportunities for creative thinking in the classroom - evaluation, reward, competition and choice restriction (p. 72). Cropley (1967) expands on these areas when he refers to anti-creative aspects of the conventional classroom. He appears to direct criticism at the teacher who promotes successful solutions to clearly defined problems. The teacher who sees himself or herself as a provider of solutions may be removing from the pupil the sense of control required for creativity. A teacher may imply that logic, facts and laws will provide answers to all problems which may result in a lack of flexibility in the child's thought processes (p. 88).

Cropley disagrees with efforts to have students 'zero-in' on facts and skills. Strict adherence to rules with a lack of ability to generalise may develop. Teaching methodologies that view the teacher's role as a model of correct techniques and a monitor of the child's responses, are questionable according to Cropley. He is clear in his condemnation of a solely skills-based approach to learning. He suggests that strategies such as errorless learning may reduce opportunities to develop creative thinking. Traits such as flexibility and curiosity with opportunities for metacognition may suffer where

emphasis is placed on product rather that process. Watson (1996) suggests that children with mild GLD require a variety of teaching approaches ranging from those that are structured to those that encourage reflection.

Teaching Methodologies

In a summary of curricular change by Daniels (cited in Watson, 1996) it is suggested that an objectives approach with the use of task analysis may become "… fixed and inflexible, allowing only one route for the pupils to follow" (p. 24). Watson (1996) reminds us that what may begin as "…helpful simplifications and clarification of curricular material…" (p. 24) could result in a reinforcement of a pupil's compliance and passivity. Watson repeatedly returns to "the development of pupil autonomy" and insists that "a mentally challenging situation" is necessary for learning (p. 25). Peter (1998) observes that instruction in special schools can involve "… focusing on the development of clearly observable skills, often in contexts that lacked meaning or relevance…" (p. 168). While Watson acknowledges the role of task analysis as an approach, she believes that teachers must encourage students to "develop and use their own plans" (p. 33). In her study of the teaching of children with learning difficulties, Watson finds a reluctance to adopt "… a challenging teaching approach which views mistakes as potentially fruitful avenues to cognitive advance and resolution…" (p. 38). Teachers may need to examine methodologies with regard to the level of challenge presented to the child with mild GLD. The idea that the child requires a safe unthreatening environment needs to exist alongside an element of risk. Amabile (1989) claims that "risk can do a great deal to expand your child's sense of himself, his capabilities, and his interests" (p. 123).

DEVELOPING CREATIVITY IN THE CHILD WITH MILD GENERAL LEARNING DISABILITY

There are many factors at play in the encouragement of children with mild GLD, along the continuum of creativity. The question remains as to how creativity should be encouraged. An evaluation of the most appropriate learning environment must address strategies and methodologies in use in classrooms, as well as curriculum and resources available to teachers.

Though theories exist that creativity can be taught as a discrete skill, Cropley (1967) states "Attempts to teach creativity formally as a subject in the school curriculum are unlikely to meet with much success" (p. 83). "Thinking skills" programmes examined by Mercer, Wegerif and Dawes (1998) do not appear to improve reasoning abilities when transfer is necessary. Starko (1995) calls for "…a community of enquiry"(p. 16) which she sees as requiring a curriculum organised around the processes of creativity, the provision of content and processes which allow investigation and communication, the facilitation of creative thinking using specific techniques and the provision of a supportive classroom ethos.

The pupil-teacher relationship, according to Torrance (1964), holds the answer to developing an environment conducive to creativity. He believes that this relationship is not a stimulus-response situation but involves interaction. He calls it 'a co-experiencing'.

Montgomery (cited in Sherlock, 1998) encourages teachers to have respect for students' ideas so that the students feel that they can risk sharing them. This leads to the belief that adults and pupils have a role in maintaining an atmosphere of enquiry and creativity.

Sinnott (1970) advises: "The invariable precursor of unconscious creativity is a strong conscious desire for something…" (p.112). An environment that regards self-motivation as a primary element of the creative process will examine the interests of the individual pupil. Jackson (cited in Watson, 1996) points out that "… no educational goals are more immediate than those which concern the establishment and maintenance of the student's absorption in the task at hand…" (p. 3). Therefore, construction of an appropriate setting that prioritises the pupils' interests will begin the process of developing a creative classroom. Amabile (1989) believes "True creativity is impossible without some measure of passion" (p. xii). This may prove difficult to identify in the child with mild GLD. Again the teacher's role as facilitator is vital.

An environment that presents frustrations at a challenging rather than threatening level encourages problem solving, with the emphasis on process rather than product. The teacher of children with mild GLD may find himself or herself in a protective role ensuring positive experiences and avoiding possibilities of failure. Literature reminds us that a critical level of anxiety will spur on creativity. It is necessary therefore to address issues of increasing self-esteem through positive learning experiences and developing creativity in a challenging environment.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Amabile (1989) states the obvious when she says "people need skills in an area before they can be creative" (p. 43). She reminds us that the combination of a child's talent in a particular domain and enriching educational experiences can result in the skills required for creativity. This theory has implications for the child with mild GLD whose talents may not always be obvious.

Mercer et al. (1998), in addressing children's talk and reasoning, emphasise "the value of explicitly teaching children how to use language to reason" (p. 95). They use this to support the argument for developing 'exploratory talk' where children "engage critically but constructively with each others' ideas." The result is reasoning which is apparent in the children's talk. This approach appears to embody the theories surrounding metacognition. Quicke and Winter (1994) refer to 'metacognitive dialogue' as a process of encouraging verbalising about learning (p. 430). Peter (1998) refers to metacognition as awareness of oneself as a thinking agent. She stresses the proactive nature of the individual who bases his or her decision-making on knowledge, understanding and resources.

In an effort to address creativity in children with mild GLD, is one in danger of contradicting the concepts underlying a skills-based programme? Where objectives have been defined according to the child's output, one must ask if it is possible to include the

prerequisites for creativity. What place will curiosity, flexibility and imagination have where a skill has been isolated for practice and evaluation? Perhaps the answer to this is in the curriculum and the methods used for its implementation.

TEACHING METHODS

What methodologies adopted by a teacher can contribute to Starko's (1995) notion of the classroom as "a community of enquiry" (p. 16)? Watson (1996) refers to scaffolding, finding it to be "a supportive structure to the child's thinking" (p. 6). However, she questions when the support should be dismantled and the control handed over to the learner. For pupils with mild GLD this can be an ideal opportunity to encourage ownership of ideas. Watson states that "…if scaffolding is truly skilful and truly contingent it will be successful in maintaining a pupil's interest and engagement" (p. 7). A pupil with mild GLD can operate at a level of learned helplessness that will limit opportunities for creativity. Teachers can in turn support this if they are not aware of the need to return control to the child.

Jones (1972) promotes independent thinking and expression of opinions with the teacher as role model. Opportunities for problem solving, along with examination of the 'what if' scenario, encourage pupils to move beyond more obvious responses. For children with mild GLD this may prove difficult as they are required to generalise information already gathered. Jones suggests that a level of instruction might be followed by brainstorming and lateral thinking exercises. He sees it as the child's responsibility to find solutions - a new experience for the child with mild GLD who has not been encouraged to take responsibility for learning.

Children with mild GLD need to experience an element of criticism as part of the learning process. The manner in which it is delivered requires careful consideration, as the objective is to offer real and honest evaluation. In this way, the child is also learning to express criticism in a reflective manner.

A CREATIVE CURRICULUM

The aesthetic experiences which embrace art, music and drama have traditionally been viewed as the creative element of the curriculum. According to Peter (1998), "The arts offer the potential to work in a multi-layered way, in contexts that are motivating, meaningful and energising" (p. 102). It is necessary, however, to examine other areas if one is to fully appreciate the qualities of creative thinking. Problem seeking and problem solving can be developed against the background of all subjects. This will assist in the generalising of skills associated with divergent thinking.

A curriculum that values play in a concrete and verbal way is vital for the development of creativity. According to Torrance (1964), one should be "… keeping fantasy alive until their mental development allows them to engage in a sounder type of creative thinking" (p. 62). He advocates the teacher's indulgence of the curiosity of the child, encouraging his or her natural inclination to take a closer look at his or her surroundings. Torrance

believes that an environment that permits and encourages children "… to manipulate, to play with objects, words, and ideas …" (p. 22) will allow creative development. Children with mild GLD may have difficulty constructing meaningful play situations and will rely on the teacher as facilitator. Amabile (1989) believes that it is through play that children learn, challenge themselves and discover their interests (p. 119). The curriculum delivered to children with mild GLD needs to take into account that some children may have missed out on this level of peer interaction.

CONCLUSION

While it has been accepted that intelligence relates to creative output, it is agreed that the creative potential of a child with mild GLD can be enhanced. The onus is placed on teachers of children with mild GLD to make room for creativity alongside explicit teaching. Watson (1996) believes teachers need "… to scaffold interactions sufficiently but not too much, in order to promote pupils' independence and awareness of themselves as thinkers" (p. 177). Pupils will remain dependent on others for solutions if teachers are reluctant to challenge them. Barron (cited in Webberley & Lift, 1980) believes "to create is to be more fully and more freely oneself " (p. 73) which implies that access to operating creatively is the right of the child with learning difficulties.

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