

# Banana fibres and oil cans: constructing pedagogical understandings of creativity through childhood play memories in a Ugandan context

Ruksana Beigi  
University of East London, UK

## ABSTRACT

In this small-scale study, pedagogical connections are made, by a student educator on an early childhood studies degree, by identifying creative processes within their childhood play memories in Uganda. Using narrative inquiry, student educators tell their stories and are able to explore and examine creativity in their lived experiences. This informed how they view and understand the critical role of nurturing creativity in children, but also how as educators they think about and allow for a creative pedagogy in practice. Further, it is concluded that the use of narrative inquiry in this way can be a thought-provoking tool for research within the field of early childhood education.

## INTRODUCTION

Memories are something that we, as humans, hold close. They can shape who we are and who we become. They can be evoked by any external factor in our immediate environment such as a scent, a photograph, someone's actions and much more. Memories associated with childhood often (but not always) provide nostalgia and opportunities to reminisce. In the context of early childhood degrees, memories can also provide valuable opportunities for student educators to come to know and understand the why of pedagogy. This is because research studies have shown that when studying, early

childhood is understood implicitly, if not explicitly, through the influence of the student's own experiences and memories (Horsley & Penn, 2014). This short paper explores a narrative of one student educator's childhood memories which was used to develop a pedagogical understanding of creative learning in early childhood education (ECE). By exploring, identifying and unpicking memories in the diverse contexts they grew up in, not only does it provide a grounding to acknowledge that creativity is happening always, but it is hoped that it will build a foundation for future practice on what creative learning looks like and hence a

creative pedagogy in practice.

## CREATIVE PLAY

The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1968) believed that creativity is a characteristic given to all at birth. Others have also noted that it is most present in the early childhood years, where it has the potential to be nurtured and developed the most (Marzollo & Lloyd, 1974; Robinson, 2006; Mohammed, 2018). At the same time, much is written about play for young children as their natural language and the principal means through which they learn (Brock, 2019: 20; Beigi, 2020). Creativity scholarship

## KEYWORDS

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goes on to confirm that it is, in fact, play that is key to, and fosters, creativity (Thompson, 2015: 17; Smith, 2016: 17) – Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (cited in Lindqvist, 2003) has argued that all human beings are creative and that children’s play and creative development are linked. This connection then gives rise to what is known as creative play as both are happening simultaneously where children transform information and make new connections. Creative play involves the enjoyment of creations with a range of materials and tools, with freedom to make whatever is wished without an end result. Here is where creative play is at the heart of a creative pedagogy.

## CREATIVE PEDAGOGY

A creative pedagogy refers to teaching that enhances children’s creative development (Liao *et al.*, 2018: 213). It consists of creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and creative learning (see Lin, 2009). Whereas creative teaching and teaching for creativity lie predominately within the educator’s role, creative learning is all about the children and what they do – creative play. Creative pedagogies involve ‘imaginative and innovative arrangement of curricula and teaching strategies’ (Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2011: 265), where a range of approaches are used to create conditions in which creativity can flourish (Grainger *et al.*, 2004: 261). However, this requires first and foremost educator understanding of what creative learning is. What do children do or say when they are learning creatively? Barnes (2016: 280, cited in Beigi, 2020) defines it as an ‘imaginative activity that generates original (to the child) connections that are considered to be of value (by the child and those around it)’, Rosen (2010: 11) has advocated that creative learning involves investigating, discovering, inventing and cooperating. At least one of these will be present in creative learning experiences; ideally, it will be all four. However, how do student educators build this pedagogical understanding?

## PEDAGOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

‘Understanding’ is connecting new learning to previous knowledge. It can be said that you may know of a concept, but it is not necessary that you understand it. For example, it is known that creativity is something that should be nurtured in children, yet educators may not understand the why, how and when of it. Studies such as Cheng *et al.*, (2014) conclude that educators who are more adaptive to children’s needs are those who possess not only content knowledge but also understanding. However, this understanding can be diverse amongst individuals, and, whereas there is research on student educators’ cognitive engagement and learning outcomes on degree programmes, there is currently a gap where very little is known in how student educators come to form pedagogical understanding – how does one come to know? One way to overcome this is for student educators to explore their own childhood memories in identifying where creativity was evident, and where it was just as natural as breathing and eating. This may strengthen knowledge, form understanding and ultimately increase engagement with a creative pedagogy.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea that individual lives and lived experience have a major contribution to make to one’s understanding is not a particularly new one. Psychologist Bruner (1991) argued that the use of narrative is an essential structure in human meaning-making. This is where memories are narratively constructed and narratively lived as a storied phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990: 19; Clandinin *et al.*, 2015). Narrative researchers collect memories as stories from the participants and write the narratives from them. Stories of lived experience (data) are co-constructed and negotiated between the people involved as a means of capturing complex, multilayered, and nuanced

understandings so that one can learn from them. Analysis (meaning-making) then occurs throughout the research process rather than being a separate activity carried out after data collection. Narrative methodology was deemed most appropriate for this study in bridging student educator life experiences inside and out to build pedagogical understandings by fostering reflection of their own childhood memories.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants were students on an undergraduate degree programme undertaking a pedagogy module in their second year at university. The population offered many unique opportunities to investigate diverse personal experience and were selected purposely to be able to provide the greatest amount of insight to help understand the phenomenon under investigation. Eight participants were recruited ranging from 21 to 49 years of age to offer a cross-life perspective. This article, however, reports on a small finding of one participant, as the exploration of individual cases in depth allows for most richness of learning.

## DATA GENERATION

For this study, field notes were generated over a six-month period through interviews and researcher notes, with interviews being the primary data source. Questions were semi-structured and open-ended to allow for stimulation and engagement of childhood memories. The interviews aimed to capture a living picture, where specific data was selected from the participants’ lives to support the objective of the research. They were asked to describe their memories by telling in their own words. Further, both researcher and participants kept a journal of reflective notes where thoughts and ideas relating to the investigation were expressed that informed and guided the research. The aim was to provide insights and deeper understanding.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data occurred in two

stages. In stage one, all interviews were transcribed and read and reread. This was essential to search for threads, themes and challenges. The data was then written as a narrative to retell the participants' memories. The transcripts were used to form this using, as much as possible, the participant's own words and were passed on to them to read and review for accuracy, omit any data they wished, and to go through a mean-making process for pedagogical understanding. The second stage was to look for thematic connections where we identify and look for patterns. These were combined with secondary research regarding connections amongst play, child development, creativity, creative learning and pedagogical understanding. This allowed for the exploration of whole narratives and to build theory and interpretation.

### THE NARRATIVE

Dorcus is 49 years of age and came to the UK in 1997 when her father sought asylum here. She joined the early childhood studies degree to further her career opportunities. Dorcus is one child out of her seven siblings and says that she is the 'middle child'. When her mother passed away, all the children were placed in boarding schools. Dorcus grew up in Kampala, Uganda, in the police barracks as her father was a police officer and accordingly given housing for his family. She recalls all the houses being the same, and lots of children residing there. Her mother was a housewife and looked after the children and everything to do with the home.

Uganda has approximately 35.5 million people, of whom 50% are below 14 years of age (Ejuu, 2018: 282). Early childhood in Uganda has been handled the traditional way, with children growing up fairly independent while following the guidance of parents and the community at large. Teaching and rearing children was a collective, communal responsibility carried out through engaging, entertaining and instructing them both mentally and physically. Storytelling and oral traditions

are used to socialise children through songs, games and working with peers, while the parents monitor growth and development (Ejuu, 2018: 289).

Dorcus's first words to me were 'Creativity is not the first thought that comes to mind when I joined the degree – to be honest I didn't even think of it until now.. This set the scene for the rest of the narrative.

'When I sit and think of my childhood memories, I now wish there were photographs – we were so dirty! Bare feet even when we have slippers, end of day had to bath so made sure we pushed it till last min 7pm, then bath time otherwise no dinner. My memories are associated more with outside because we always wanted to be out. There was concrete roofs and verandas, I would crawl up on the roof by putting my feet outside the window, my brother and cousin would go up there to eat something delicious – we would then see them and go up there. Sit, talk, see people on main road, police cars, the vantage point of seeing if dad is coming and quickly go and do what we needed to do before he got in.

'Our roof was the most popular in the neighbourhood. When it was harvest season, we called it the de-weeding season, where we collect grass, let it dry and then burnt it, it became our cushion. We would collect dry grass like this and then laid it out onto the veranda and jumped from the roof. Because we wanted to jump from the roof and dared each other too we had to make sure we were safe from broken bones. Because I see my mum burning grass and using it under her cushion, I thought let's do it for jumping onto. I created massive ones which broke our fall for a number of days until I had to make new ones again.

'We didn't have the luxury of toys in our childhood it was all about using our environment to create things to play with. I would use banana fibres; these are the leaves and dried stem left over once you take off the bananas. I would make dolls and slippers from them and walk

around in them for ages until they broke themselves. I would play the dolls with the other girls in the barracks and often we would collect all the banana fibres and sit together to make the dolls and slippers.

'In Uganda, we have large cans that contain the oil we used to cook with or start a fire with. Once these were empty, we use to cut them open with sharp stones and made charcoal stoves out of them. It was something we use to see mum doing. So, we would light our own fire. To begin with we use to do it in a sneaky way, then mum found out and she encouraged us to cook alongside her like mini cooking. I would cook pieces of cassava and sweet potatoes. When the fire would run out, I would blow the coals and my eyes would turn red. The can would have an opening where ashes fell, so I would scoop them out and fan it, and then face it towards the wind to keep the fire going. Me and my friends did eat what we made, but because they were raw, we had to be dewormed every month.

'Like us, the boys created things; they would make their own footballs. In Uganda we get milk in really thick plastic bags where we cut the corner to pour it. When these were empty, I use to take them for my brothers who use to leave them in the heat to dry. They would then blow one up and tighten it with a rubber band and then moulded it with more bags and wrap an old internal rubber of a tyres, cut them into strips and tie around it. They would also sit for hours and hours making cars from wires of old bike wheels and use the rubber strips to tie in place. They then cut circles out of old slippers as the tyres and burn hole in to insert them. They would use sticks as steering wheels – I always managed to steal one!

### DISCUSSION

The excerpt from Dorcus's story reveals insights into creativity being present in her childhood memories. The words 'create', 'created' and 'make' seem to occur naturally when she narrates, yet creativity is not the first word that she

thought of. When I turned her attention to this in our final meeting of building pedagogical understanding, she stated, 'It's so natural; we do it all the time.' By telling and retelling her memories, it was apparent that they were embedded in play where creative activities took place as imagination in action – a creative process that develops in play because a real situation takes a new and unfamiliar meaning (as with the dried grass, banana fibres and milk bags) – or play being a reproduction of reality (as with the oil cans) (Leontiev, 1982; Vygotsky, 2004). Here, creativity was evident throughout and it was demonstrated that it required few resources, little facilitation and lots of imagination. Dorcus's memories also made clear that children will play and create anywhere, everywhere and with anything. The following early years concepts were discussed and linked to Dorcus' memories and she was able to see how embodied creativity is in children's everyday lives.

### LEARNING BY DOING

Rosen's creative learning frame of investigating, discovering, inventing and cooperating was linked to the memories, and Dorcus was able to see how through the exploration of raw materials (dried grass, banana fibres, oil cans, milk bags) she was able to make, build and invent, which gave her the 'toys' to use as objects and enhance her play with others. Educational practice teaches student educators that children learn as much from the 'doing' as from the potential end product, and this link was made here. The memories also made apparent that unexpected materials had brought forward new forms of creativity. A similar study by Talu (2018) of six- to eight-year-old girls' play activities concluded that daily life objects and waste materials were used in children's learning naturally. The key use of waste materials and imagination was central to Dorcus's creative play memories.

### CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT.

Play is a means of supporting children's cognition and is one of the main ways that they explore the world and mean-make. Through exploration and experimentation, children develop the ability to think, understand, communicate, make memories, imagine and work out what might happen next. The cognitive processes of thinking and generating ideas in Dorcus's memories were prevalent and these are also processes within creativity. The pedagogical connection was made in how creative play such as hers broadens cognitive skills for children to visualise new options by being inventive (Shipton *et al.*, 2016), as with the banana fibres and milk bags. This led into the idea of understanding the role of creative thinking in pedagogy.

### CREATIVE THINKING

Creative thinking is about generating ideas and approaches in all areas of learning. It is where children create and think critically. Fumoto *et al.* (2012) suggest that creative thinking is at the heart of all creativity, because it is within this that thought processes are activated and engaged with. This was demonstrated in the narratives through a thread known as 'possibility thinking' (Craft, 2001). This requires learners to explore ideas and use their imagination to generate lots of possibilities and problem-solve (Beigi, 2020: 224). Dorcus problem-solved 'we had no toys' and 'break our fall' by using items in her environment to be creative and inventive. The possibilities of what to do to make 'toys' using dried grass, oil cans, banana fibres and much more developed her imagination and playful forms of thinking. It also demonstrated that creativity starts with children and their original ideas and insights (Runco, 2014).

### SELF-INITIATED ACTIVITY

Self-initiated activity is where children have control and ownership of their activities by being the first to start it. In enhancing creative learning, it is the self-initiated activity that is the most

important as it gives time to explore, engage with and get deeply involved in creativity. For high-quality involvement to emerge, children need to know that they have long enough for the creative process, and then to play with their creations. As ECE advocates for a child-centred pedagogy that is underpinned with play, exploring one's own memories can make this meaningful. Dorcus was the owner of her creative endeavours and, as well as having the time to create, she had the time to play with her creations.

### CONCLUSION

There has been a recent call and growing support amongst ECE scholars for a turn to narrative inquiry research as it has the potential to bring new lenses to our understanding (Wright & Blair, 2015 219). This small-scale study illustrates the rich pedagogical understanding that may emerge when such research is adopted to investigate questions of pedagogy. Dorcus's story allowed insights into how creativity is inherent in childhood memories of play and ultimately in our stories. The use of narrative inquiry in this way can empower student educator voices in mean-making from their lived experiences to build pedagogical understandings. How do I view creativity? Live it? And how can it evolve in my professional practice? A creative pedagogy was dependent on understanding the creative process and linking what we know to how children engage, and through the exploration of memories we were able to do this. Understanding of creativity and creative practice was widened, with student educators believing that they can contribute to the formation of pedagogy, both personally and professionally.

Of course, no study provides all the answers, and therefore I conclude with recommendations for research by first urging the use of narrative to probe further against creativity frameworks in education. Secondly, the study demonstrated the essential role of the outdoors in the memories of play and how it enabled Dorcus to engage with

creative play opportunities in a way that may not be possible indoors. Outdoors is also somewhere that children easily engage in creative activity. It would be worthwhile to explore creativity and outdoors further. As this study was in a Ugandan context where outdoors is used differently to what is found in other countries, creativity in diverse childhoods, and diverse contexts should be explored further through narrative to add to our pedagogical understandings for teaching and learning creatively. ■

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