Possibility Thinking

CREET
The Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology
This project is just one of the many innovative research projects being undertaken within the Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET). CREET is one of the leading education research units in the UK. It is an internationally respected centre of excellence, pursuing innovative and rigorous research that influences policy and practice.

To find out more about the work of the centre go to:

www8.open.ac.uk/creet/main

The Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET)
The Open University
Stuart Hall Building (Ground Floor)
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

Tel: +44 (0)1908 655364

CREET-Enquiries@open.ac.uk

For information about applying for postgraduate study:
www8.open.ac.uk/creet/main/postgraduate

For research student enquiries:
CREET-Student-Enquiries@open.ac.uk
WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH?

This research began as a conceptual account of creativity at a time (mid 1990s) when creativity in education in particular with regard to young children, was not well understood by teachers or researchers.

Professor Craft was concerned to map out how creativity could be understood as everyday and as an inherent capability in all, rather than the preserve of the gifted few. Her theoretical account of creativity as possibility thinking, or ‘what if’ and ‘as if’ thinking driven by questioning and imagination, then became the focus of this empirical research, undertaken by a team of researchers including Professor Teresa Cremin and Bob Jeffrey, at The Open University, Dr Pamela Burnard at Cambridge University and Dr Kerry Chappell at Exeter University, supported by various research assistants.

There have been four main foci in this qualitative, close-grained observational research.

Focus 1 What is Possibility Thinking?

Research outputs:

Focus 2 (2004-2012) What nurtures Possibility Thinking?

*Research outputs:*


Focus 3 (2006-207) – what is the nature of children’s question-posing and question responding in Possibility Thinking?

*Research outputs:*

Chappell et al (2008) – taxonomy of question-posing and question-responding and relationship between these and key features of PT

Focus 4 (2008-2012) – What is the nature of children’s question-posing and question responding in Possibility Thinking?

*Research outputs: being written up*

Since 2007, Possibility Thinking (PT) has also been researched by a wide range of doctoral students at both The Open University and Exeter University and supervised by Professor Craft. Completed PhDs: PT in mathematics (Clack, Exeter), PT in drama (Lin, Exeter), PT and innovation education (Jonsdottir, Iceland). Ongoing PhD studies include PT in creative partnership (Alderson, Open University), PT in secondary art (Ting, Exeter), PT in social exclusion (Greenwood, Exeter), PT in early years (McConnon, Exeter), PT in museum education in Cyprus.
(Gregoriou, Exeter), PT in drama (Aristeidou, Open University), PT in piano tuition in Taiwan (Yeh, Exeter), PT in blogging (Pye, Exeter). Additional studies have also been undertaken, for example PT in creative partnership (Craft with Chappell and Rolfe, Exeter, 2008-10: AHRC funding), PT in dance (Craft and Chappell, 2007: Arts Council funding), and PT in professional development (Craft with Greenwood and Jonsdottir, Poltimore Foundation funding). The work has informed two European Union funded studies in which Prof Craft is the Open University Principal Investigator: *Creative Little Scientists* and *C2Learn*.

**WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OR IMPACTS?**

*Possibility Thinking* has been embraced by early years, primary, secondary and tertiary practitioners and teachers in England and abroad. Australian practitioners and policy makers are also implementing the findings from this research and it has informed development of a national framework for creativity in education in the USA. In England and Spain, colleagues supporting children with special educational needs have adopted the theory also. Professor Craft has been asked to talk to audiences about Possibility Thinking in countries as diverse as China, Norway, Estonia, Iceland, Poland, Spain, Cyprus, Qatar and Macau. Findings from Possibility Thinking research informed elements of the creativity curriculum guidance developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England in the mid 2000s and the National Strategy for Early Years developed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2010. Professor Craft is regularly invited by local authorities to work with practitioners on how to recognise and foster it in the classroom.

Examples of such Local Authority initiatives include those in Suffolk, Bath and North East Somerset, also Newport, Wales. Higher Education Institutions in England, Spain, Ireland, Malaysia and Thailand have all drawn on the theory to help inform the development of creative teaching and learning in higher education. National organisations such as Creative Partnerships, Optimus Education, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, Teaching Leaders and Early Education have also requested training in recent years as has the European Council of International Schools and Nordic-Baltic IB Schools.

*Possibility Thinking* has been closely documented as enabling the transition from ‘what is’ to ‘what might be’. It involves a range of features: questioning, play, immersion, making connections, imagination, innovation, risk-taking and self-determination.
Teaching for creativity, or enabling possibility thinking, demands classroom and school practices which encourage, nurture and celebrate what if and as if thinking in students. The research reveals that teaching for creativity involves the development of an inclusive learning environment in which:

- children’s ideas and experiences are highly valued
- dialogue between children and between children and teachers is encouraged
- an ethos of respect is nurtured and children as well as teachers experience meaningful control, ownership, relevance and innovation in learning.

Our findings highlight the breadth of possibility inherent in tasks, distinguishing between those which are ‘possibility-broad’ and ‘possibility-narrow’. The seven-year-olds who have learned about how to fold, bend, shape and fasten newspaper and who have been set the challenge of designing a hat which will stay on their head and keep out the rain are able to engage in a much broader kind of Possibility Thinking than children of the same age given a range of hat templates to choose from in order to cut out, fasten and decorate one. The 12-year-olds who work together in teams to research, cost and schedule a field trip are offered much greater inherent possibility in what if and as if thinking than those who are handed a sheet of paper to take home informing their parents that a field trip has been arranged by staff. Possibility-broad tasks invite much richer and deeper learning, and allow children to use and develop their creativity in greater depth, pushing out to the boundaries of their knowledge, understanding and skills, making mistakes and learning from them.

Another of our findings concerns pedagogical strategies that enable such possibility-broad experiences, teachers creating time and space for children to engage in rich possibilities closely focused on developing agency, or activism (as opposed to passivity). Teachers are alert to the dilemma of providing enough but not too much structure, and enough but not too much freedom. Recognising the framing and understanding how and when to bring in provocations and responses to
children’s idea-realisation is a skilful aspect of this rather active ‘standing back’ together with stepping forward to ‘meddle in the middle’ alongside children, representing dynamic dialogue and implying an approach to teaching which is less about simply passing on knowledge and more about enabling the construction of meaning, in social and practical contexts.

Contexts which enable Possibility Thinking value children’s ideas, involve both collaboration and independence, value highly a stimulating learning environment and encourage reflection among both children and adults. They recognise the vital importance of a depth of knowledge with which to generate possibilities and to realise ideas.

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

The programme of research into PT is qualitative, generating in-depth, rich phenomenological studies. Some of the research has been undertaken in collaboration with classroom practitioners, and some with pupil researchers

WHAT MIGHT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH BE FOR POLICY MAKERS/ PRACTITIONERS?

The outcomes of this research programme can support teachers in recognising how children manifest their questions both verbally and non-verbally, in a range of learning contexts. The research offers insights and practical strategies enabling teachers to make careful choices about how to nurture curiosity and thus creativity.
Possibility Thinking

Professor Anna Craft
The Open University and University of Exeter
anna.craft@open.ac.uk, a.r.craft@exeter.ac.uk

Key Publications


These papers are available from The Open Research Repository Online http://oro.open.ac.uk

More information


This idea was developed with reference to work done by Jeffrey and Woods in the 1990s from ethnographic enquiry in primary classrooms which highlighted possibility spaces in primary classrooms - and has been extensively researched since this time.