



Creative Arts and the Development of Early Childhood Learners' Full Potential- A Review of Literature

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Introduction

Teachers have known for many years that young children often understand more than they are able to verbalise and their understanding can be observed in behaviour other than verbal. The teaching and learning of creative arts therefore brings about a holistic development in the learners. Through creative arts, the learners are provided with valuable opportunities to experience and build knowledge skills in self-expression, imagination, creativity, communication and respect for others (Leer, 2006). Through these, the learners develop intellectually, emotionally, socially and physically. In general, the arts positively affect the overall academic achievement, engaging in learning and development of empathy in learners towards others. It is against this background that the importance of creative arts in the development of the learners' full potential is seen. This essay thus seeks to justify this claim, prior to which key terms, creative arts and early childhood education (ECE) shall be defined.

Literature Review

Beach and Reignhart (2009) state that Early Childhood Education is the formal teaching of young children outside the family or in a setting outside the home. Morrison (2007) defines Early Childhood Education as imparting knowledge and skills to children who are from zero to eight years. Consequently, we can say Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the organized practice of educating children between the years zero and eight years.

According to Walcot (2004) creative arts reflect how children think and can also reflect their inner feelings outwardly through music, dance, art, drama and many other ways. Lear (2002) asserts that creative arts is the ability to think about something in a new and unusual way. From the foregoing definition, creative arts, at ECE level, is therefore the ability to produce new combinations through manipulation of objects, colours or stories.

Creative arts subjects through which creative learning can be promoted, assist the ECE learner to develop intellectually that is have the power or capacity to reason. It should also be noted that creative arts complement the sciences because they nurture different modes of reasoning. Read in Fowler (2004), asserts that while art is the representation, science is the explanation of the same reality. Furthermore, the arts are able to develop divergent rather than convergent thinking and encourage children to come up with different rather than similar solutions to problems. Many ECE learners can use their knowledge in rhymes, poems and games to solve addition and subtraction problems and also learn how to count. A good example is the "Tsoro" game where the child is able to dig and arrange the hole in an artistic way, arrange in set and count logically the number of stones in each hole. This encourages the learner to reason and be creative at the same time.

Secondly when young ECE learners are involved in creative problem solving, they are also regarded as partners in the learning process. Instead of the educator telling them what to think the arts engage the minds of the learners to sort out their own reaction and articulate them through the medium at hand. Dreyfuss (2006) sees the arts as a powerful path towards a well-rounded mind when he points out that the learners do not need to always look up to the educator for problem solving rather they work among themselves and use available material to solve problems. For example, the learner can use word games, songs, artistic pictures or puzzles to solve a number of problems.

Creative arts are important in the development of the learner's full potential in that they help the learner to think independently. Thus the learner is able to develop intellectually as he or she actively participates in the world rather than being a mere observer. All the learners are involved in various activities according to their interest such as singing, dancing, drawing, drama and poetry just to mention a few. If these are successfully developed and scaffolded as Vygotsky (1998) states and reinforced, the learners become useful and self-reliant future members of the society. Perrin (2004) asserts that the arts bring about long-term educational aims as workers at all levels need to be creative thinkers, problem solvers and should be able to push themselves towards high levels of achievement. The educator's role is to provide a conducive environment that allows for all learners to participate freely in activities of their choice. It is also pivotal to help and encourage all the learners in their endeavours.

Creative arts are a way of communicating. Through it the early learner is able to use both verbal and non-verbal forms. Such visual and aural systems of communication include using sound, movement, gestures, marks, image and form. Perrin (2004) asserts that the arts nurture musicians, dancers, visual artists, writers and actors. For example, in sound the learner talks his/her feelings by word of mouth, recites rhymes and say poems like, "if I were a flower under the soil, I would grow and grow". Eventually the child smiles, jumps and claps his/her hands over his head whilst jumping. This way the child is communicating and expressing a happy mood. Without even telling the audience that he/she is communicating happy feelings the audience can see and understand what is being communicated. Sad feelings are also communicated in various art forms. For example, by use of gestures like throwing hands, facial cues like frowning and crying the audience can see that the actor is communicating sad feelings. Polanyi (2007:48) propounds that there are other ways of "telling" besides verbal language.

Still under social development creative arts allow for trans-culturality, that is, invite cross-cultural communication (Leer (2006). For example, even when watching drama, dressing and the way people present themselves we can identify that their cultures are different from one another for example, Swatis dress, Nguni's putting on a skin head gear and around their wrists, the Vatonga with their smoking pipes, Indians wrapping cloths and piercing nose, Moslems dressing long robes, Rastas to name but a few. By just looking and observing all these forms of communicating, we can learn, the varied cultures found in the world. Thus different people from different cultural backgrounds are able to co-exist, co-habit, share and live together harmoniously. This realisation is very important even as early as at early childhood as it helps groom and develop the child into one who is able to fit into society and world at large.

The learner develops aesthetic values through culture exchange brought by creative arts. Empathy and humanness as put by Flower (2004), are also essential if an individual's full potential is to develop.

A number of implications can be drawn from the above discussion so that an ECE learner's full potential develops. The educator should expose learners at early childhood level to various forms of communication. She/he should equip them with social skills that will teach verbal and non- verbal forms of expressing one's thought. Flower (2004), postulates that humans invented each of the arts as a fundamental way to represent aspects of reality, manage life better and share these perceptions with others.

Commonwealth of Australia (1998) is of the view that creative arts provide children with ways of communicating and understanding their own and others' ideas and feelings. The educator should avail the arts to early childhood learners and provide them with skills to reflect and depict the diversity of the world at large, its cultures, traditions and belief systems. By creating, mixing and mingling environments in the classroom the teacher could promote social skills amongst his/her learners. For example, through the outdoor play pupils will interact, discuss, play together and share playing tools and equipment thus promoting the arts. In the indoor learning areas sharing, interaction, storytelling, modelling/acting out, singing, drawing and illustrating all promote social skills and help an individual develop his/her full potential.

Creative arts help the learners to develop emotionally in that they are able to communicate and define who they are, that is, the arts convey the spirit of the one who creates them. The ECE learner acquires openness towards those who are different from him or her and learns to be in touch with his/her and other people's feelings. The greatest attribute in the importance of the teaching of creative arts is that they develop empathy, compassion and humanness in the early learners. Flower (2004) asserts that it is the feeling rather than the intellect that connects us to other people.

On the other hand, early childhood learners are at a stage where they communicate their feelings in a number of ways. They are egocentric, believing that all is theirs for example, toys or colours. If these are taken away they can easily cry, throw themselves on the floor or just refuse to communicate with others or the educators. Through the arts, the learner's emotional beings become embedded in the task so that they learn from the inside out, rather than from inside in. For example the learners can show their feelings through music as they sing and dance, through art as they draw or model various objects. This is supported by Perrin (2004), when he says that the student artist musician, dancer, visual artist, writer or actor learns by doing.

Furthermore, creative arts enable ECE learners to develop emotionally through exploring, forming, expressing, communicating and understanding their own and others' ideas and feelings. Through reciting rhymes, poems, chanting, singing, dancing and drawing, the learners achieve a positive self- satisfaction and self-esteem. Commonwealth of Australia(1998) states that the learner gains confidence and aspires to perform all other learning activities successfully due to his/her developed aesthetic awareness and perception.

The early childhood educators therefore need to have time with each learner, allow each learner to communicate freely with her/him. This will allow the learners to freely share their feelings with the educators. It is also essential to have brief counselling sessions with those learners who are emotionally disturbed. A colourful conducive environment with a variety of learning materials and objects is an added advantage as the learners can express themselves through the use of these objects.

Development of physical skills is an invaluable contribution offered by creative arts as it fosters the development of an individual's maximum capability. The fact that learning is by doing , hands-on qualifies the above notion. Perrin (2004), concurs that the student artist learns by doing. For example, when one paints, carves, models, dances, writes, acts and so on all his/her muscles are put into use which is very crucial for early childhood learners. Finger muscles, hand-eye co-ordination, hand foot co-ordination, bending forward, backward, sideways as they engage in movement and acting really provide experiences in physical skills development.

Fowler (2004), postulates that human beings invented each of the arts as a fundamental way to represent aspects of reality, manage life better and share perceptions with others. This explains why the development of physical skills is so important in developing the child's full potential because life in reality is full of challenges which cannot only be solved scientifically but also physically, hands on even without verbal communication but with actions.

It is imperative for the educators to foster the physical development of learners in teaching creative arts. For example learners should be exposed to activities that engage them in dancing to songs in music and movement, drawing, painting in art, twisting and curling as they engage in gymnastics in physical education.

In a nut shell, the teaching of creative arts is pivotal in the development of the child's full potential. It seeks to develop the learner socially as he/she communicates, intellectually as he/she tackles problems, emotionally as he/she expresses his/her feelings and physically as he/she engages in various physical activities. It is therefore the responsibility of the educators to ensure that they do all in their power to aid the development of the children's full potential through creative arts, as they are an integral and undeniable part of their development.

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