

# **BROADENING THE CREATIVE BOUNDS: TOWARDS ENHANCING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN CHILD EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

Involving divergent thinking - creativity is the ability to come up with new and unusual answers as against a single correct one. Broadly speaking, every idea, big or small, that has led to the advancement and sustenance of civilization is a product of creative thinking. Modern psychology however, is still far from explaining creativity in logical terms; most people see it simply as the invention of a novelty idea. But detecting the "spark" that leads to such novelty: great paintings, an ingenious device or a masterpiece of literature, still remains a thing of great illusion to behavioural scientists. This paper highlights traits identified with the creative personality and possible means of promoting the skills. This is from the point of view of notable observations made during certain experiences, the latest of which is that of the implementation of "Interactive Child Learning Aid Project (i-CLAP)" model among Pre-primary School Children in Samaru-Zaria, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

Fowler (1997), refers to creativity generally as the ability to see problems that no one else may even realize exists and then come up with new, unique and effective solutions to these problems. Broadly speaking therefore, every idea, big or small, that has led to the advancement and sustenance of civilization, is a product of creative thinking. Modern psychology appears to still be far from explaining creativity in logical terms. Most people see it simply as, the invention of a novel idea (Lowenfeld and Brittain in Azi, 1999). But then, detecting the "spark" that leads to such novelty (great painting, an ingenious device, or a master piece of literature) still remains a thing of great illusion to behavioral scientists and psychoanalysts (McMahon and McMahon, 1980). This confirms that of all human abilities, the creative faculty has been regarded as the most mysterious. Lawson (1980) observes that, until recently, people with creative abilities depended exclusively on intuitive impulses (initiate and un-teachable). In fact., in many cultures creativity has been believed to emanate from a divine or at least an unconscious source, a power not to be summoned at will nor brought under control by ordinary conscious instincts.

Conversely, Mozart, speaking of his musical ideas, however said, "whence and how they come, I know not, nor can I force them. ... I really do not aim at originality." Adeniji (2002), reports that, people have used different approaches in an attempt to crack the nut on the concept of creativity including: characteristics of creativity; characteristics of creative individual; factors determining creativity. Interestingly in recent years, some understanding has been gained in the personality types and the circumstances in which creativity is most likely to appear.

## **The Creative Personality**

Cornforth (1977) notes that, a number of studies between a highly creative group and a relatively noncreative one reveal that children were not differentiated on the basis of their intelligence, but personality measures. On the general, the study revealed, the highly creative people tend to be introverted, reclusive and seem to have little time for what they regard as trivia of everyday life and social activity. They tend to be strongly intuitive and more interested in the abstract meaning of the outside world than in its appearance to the sense. According to the studies too, creative people are often poor at dealing with people and may avoid social occasions; tend to feel ordinary people are stupid, desire to dominate others. They are relatively free from conventional constraints and care less about what others think of them. They also have little regards for established traditions and authorities in their fields, preferring to trust their own sense of judgment. The creative men often score highly on "femininity" test indicating that they have more sensitivity, self-awareness and openness to emotion and intuition than the average man (Cornforth, 1977). Indeed, an outstanding feature of the creative mind is the preference for complexity for

the purpose of simplifying ideas. For instance, at the schematic stage of artistic development children's drawing depict complex ideas in simplified formats, that is reducing their experiences of the environment to basic visual forms.

Also, children who amaze their teachers with unusual responses to questions or display a keen sense of humour fall within this category. Even children who perhaps are nonconforming and unpredictable are thinking creatively. Such qualities, if properly tracked and nurtured are capable of making children appreciate "problems" and "problem-solving" better in other subjects like: Mathematics, English and Nature Studies and so on. Because creative thought often goes against the set rules of a strict classroom or home, adults may be irritated by the behaviour of a creative child. McMahon and McMahon (1980), adds that, all these may account for their apparent deviancy in the society. Adults often do not recognize the value creative children bring to families and classrooms. Thus, in normal classroom situation if creative children are accorded the appropriate chances then academic achievement may be enhanced. All children become adults, assert DeBord (1997), who will make a difference in our world with their creative problem-solving skills.

### **Circumstances for Personality Type Trait**

Musicians and creative scientists tend to be more emotionally stable than the average individual. Yet, when this is not so their stability emerges as anxiety, depression, social fear and excitability, rather than a full-blown neurosis. Among artists and writers, however, geniuses often appear to be akin to madness; serious neurosis, drug or alcohol addiction or insanity appearing with abnormal frequency. According to McMahon and McMahon (1980), study of creativity in schools reveals that creative children are wild, silly and unpredictable. Such contribute to arouse divergence of subliming or conflicting opinions (Adeniji, 2002). This creative personality type can be subdivided roughly, into two types - the artistic and the scientific. The basic characteristics remain however the same in both, but on the whole, the artist is more likely than the scientist to express his unconventionally in his work and life generally. Art is the only one-way children can express themselves but because it develops before writing, or abstract thinking, adults can see creativity expressed in art more easily with young children. Experts (DeBord, 1997; Lawenfeld and Brittain, 1975; and <http://core.ecu.edu/art/newmauj/6070/casey/artguide.litml>) observe the following artistic developmental stages which, normally, children past through for creative self expression:

- *Scribbling Stage (Approximately 2 to 4 Years):* A stage of pure experimentation;
- *Pre-schematic stage (Late Preschool to Approximately Age 7):* Make first attempts to representational art (people or objects) and use variety of colors, one idea at a time;
- *Schematic Stage (Approximately 7 to 9 Years):* A stage of increased use of symbols, such as a heart for love or dark colors to represent night. The child shows improved eye-hand coordination at this stage;
- *Realistic Stage (9 to 12 Years):* The child gets affected by peer influence. He or she begins to develop a set of values and wants to do things "right";
- *Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage (12-14 Years):* At this stage the child begins to use a more adult-like mode of expression.

### **Obstacles to Creativity**

Maslow defines self-actualization as: acceptance and expression of the inner core or self that is actualization of these latent capacities and potentialities "full functioning" (McMahon and McMahon 1980). However, the inability of an individual to express his innermost feeling due to internal or external forces, go a long way in impeding creativity. When asked his opinion on the greatest obstacle to creativity, Kaufman responded the "older we get, the less chances we take being wrong, so we shut-up and stop learning". That "such fear renders us creatively constipated", he concludes (Hartsock, 2001). Having identified the creative personality type and the circumstances that ginger such peculiarities, we shall assess the means through which such traits can either be obstructed or developed as compiled by DeBord (1997). These can be categorized into:

#### **A) Intrinsic Impulse**

Most of the obstacles to creativity can be found within the personality, which include the

following:

- Fear of criticism.
- Lack of confidence.
- State of mind and body (for example experiencing negative stress like hunger, anger sickness etc).
- Being too busy and getting too involved with a problem.
- Having conflicting goals and objectives.
- Not allowing yourself enough time to relax.
- Reliance on serendipity and not on challenging and stimulating environment.
- Concerns with job procurement, stability or security as opposed to job satisfaction.
- Bureaucratic hierarchy and dogmatism as opposed to a democratic and free flowing set-up.

McMahon and McMahon (1980), also, noted that, difficulty involving a disease or injury, which results in faulty brain development could obstruct creativity. Furthermore, from our experiences in some art activities with children such as in Art and Culture Week at Zaria Academy, Shika, Art Competition/Exhibition for the Gifted and Talented Children of Primary and Secondary Schools in Zaria, Interactive Child Learning Aid (i-CLAP) and others at the Society of Nigerian Artist's (SNA) (Maiduguri Branch) Art Exhibitions and Workshops. These activities reveal that children that were caught in-between two or more attractive impulses simultaneously and lacked the mechanism to create dominance of one over the other, suffered in their creative processes.

From our observations, the main thing that hinders creative thinking is the belief that we are not creative. For instance, if you tell yourself: "I am a creative person", then you need to have the belief to support that identity. If you tell yourself, "I am just an ordinary' human being", then you will have a different set of beliefs. Once you have a particular identity and set of beliefs about yourself, you will become interested in seeking out the skills needed to express your identity and beliefs. If you believe that you are "uncreative", then there is no need to learn how to become creative. What can be said with certainty according to Fletcher (1978) is that, to achieve success both natural talent and blood and sweat and tears will be called for. For example, when children from public schools were invited to participate in the implementation of the "i-CLAP" project, at the Iya Abubakar Computer Centre (IACC), ABU Zaria, their approaches to the processes and exercises given appeared timid initially, but when given greater sense of freedom and support their attitudes and behaviors positively changed rapidly.

### **B) Extrinsic Impulse**

A too hectic environment that does not provide quiet time for reflection and introspection hampers creativity. It is also hampered by:

- A sterile environment that does not feed the senses.
- Demands for quick production of results.
- Noisy environment like dog barking, children screaming, phone ringing, water drips can drive them bananas (McMahon and McMahon, 1980).
- Harsh words from others or from ourselves.
- By rigid rules and barriers that prevent us from gathering information and/or from connecting with others.

### **Developing Creativity**

Adeyanju (1996) affirms that, nowadays creativity is being closely related to the thinking abilities and attitude development. Hence lessons that would heighten creativity should be planned emphasizing among others: (a), fluent thinking (b) flexibility (c) originality (d) risk taking and (e) curiosity. According to Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) in Azi (1999), there is nothing more difficult to carry out, more doubtful of success, or more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things. Creativity is more than a product - it's a process. An interesting painting, a thought-provoking writing, a unique comment - these may be examples of creative work, but the decisions people make as they paint, sculpt, write, speak, play, and think are at the core of the creative

process. This involves a high level of brain activity, even when resting; their brain-wave pattern reflects considerably more activity than the noncreative (McMahon and McMahon 1980).

Woods and Barrow (1974), however advocate for some inducing investigation. Wondering, "How does one expect to produce a creative composer or painter if one does not teach the child how to compose or paint?" Also, how does one produce someone creative if one does not familiarize them with what has already been done in those fields and what at the present time counts as music or painting? Art and music are common examples of creativity, but creative thought appears in almost all aspects of life - from the way a parent quiets a crying child to the methods a scientist uses to discover a cure for a disease. Hence, Adeyanju (1996) and McMahon and McMahon (1980), streamline the factors likely to aid in the successful development of creativity to include: environmental, social and child personality. DeBord (1997), however, elaborates the strategies as follows:

### **(a) Encouragement Method**

Teachers and parents can help children learn to think and solve problems in creative ways by giving them the freedom to make mistakes and by respecting their ideas. This happens with greater mobility and use of language through modeling and being allowed to experiment without fearing failure. To solve a problem creatively, children need to be able to see a variety of perspectives and to generate several solutions. For instance, attempting thought-provoking activities like; questioning the Ten Commandments, patriotism, two-party system, monogamy, how parents get their children and the laws against incest (McMahon and McMahon, 1980). When working on a problem, adults should teach young children to examine their surroundings for "cues" that will help them generate a pool of possible solutions. After all, genius, Fletcher (1980) argues, is only 1 % inspiration and 99% perspiration. Adults can further encourage creative thoughts by simply providing:

- **Choices** - Children who are given choices show more creativity than children who have all choices made for them.
- **Stimulation** - Physical environments designed to stimulate the senses can enhance creative problem solving. For example, when shown an object in the shape of a half-moon and asked, "What can we use this for?" children will exhaust their first mental images and begin developing ideas from what they see in their surroundings. Research has found that children who keep looking around a classroom or playroom for cues are using a creative problem-solving method. An environment that provides both novelty and variety will greatly aid creativity.
- **Time for Play and Fantasy** - Dramatic play just before engaging in problem solving tasks can lead to more creative thought.
- **Love** - Children develop a feeling that they are liked, of course not hated, wanted not refused, accepted not rejected from being treated as though they were so.

### **(b) Leave - Reality - Behind Method**

The joining together of two or more irrelevant elements, called synectics, can lead to creative" answers. The process of synectics can take many forms:

- **Independence (with Reasonable Limits)** - Parents and teachers should encourage children to think and act without adult direction but within the limits of rules.
- **Exposure to a Diverse Community** - Give children the opportunity to see and experience other; cultures and ways of living, acting, and being to teach them how to respect the choices of other people.
- **Brainstorming Sessions** - Encourage children to tackle problems as a group by freely expressing their ideas with no fear of a negative response. Brainstorming can take place between a child and an adult or between two or more children.

### **Try These Brainstorming Activities**

- Hand a child a piece of modeling clay and ask the child to imagine that he or she is the modeling clay.
- Place a child in a different time and place. For instance, ask a child to describe how he or she

would cook a meal without electricity, silverware, dishes, etc.

- Ask a child to describe: A problem or an event using pictures instead of words.
- Ask a child to solve a problem using the most unusual solutions he or she can come up with.
- Encouragement - When children show special aptitudes, such as an ability to generate many questions, a keen memory, advanced reading or pre-reading skills, artistic skills, or other above-average abilities, adults should encourage them to build on and expand their skills.
- Honest critiques - Evaluate students' work constructively so they can see ways to improve their work and still feel positive about themselves and what they have created.
- An environment where there is no one right answer for every problem - Teachers who enthusiastically encourage children to develop more than one solution to a problem see greater creativity in problem solving.

### (c) Eliminate - the - Barrier Method

Often people are not able to perform at their best because of outside influences that make them feel pressured or insecure:

- **Reward** - When people do not expect a reward, they are more creative and enjoy the process more. An unexpected reward that comes after a project is completed is valuable but not necessary to the creative process.
- **Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation** - As in the case of reward, external motivation (such as money or special privileges) undermines creativity. Artists say that when they are working for the enjoyment of the process, they are far more effective and productive than when they are commissioned to create for money.
- **Expected External Evaluation** - Knowing beforehand that a piece of art is going to be graded can lead to a decrease in creativity.
- **Peer Pressure** - There is some evidence that pressure to conform can lead to temporary decreases in creativity.
- **Surveillance** - Being observed by others while engaged in a creative process can undermine creativity.

### Recommendations

- (i) Children need to be taught that art is not limited to copying what they see. Adults can show children other styles of art (such as impressionistic or cubist art) to help them see that the free expression of ideas and emotions is more important than creating a mirror image.
- (ii) Never compare one child's works to another's or select one piece to be the "model" or "ideal", this is important because children will go through developmental stages in the same order, but the pace at which they enter and leave them will vary.
- (iii) It is noteworthy that children learn who they are and what they are from the way in which they have been treated by those who surround them in the process of their growing up. Hence, helping them break-through creative naivety or narrow mindedness is one major route to their creative independence. This can be achieved through the following among other ways:
  - Avoid projects that can be completed in only one way (for example paint-by-numbers, kits to be assembled);
  - Do not use art as indoor recess or as a reward for behaving well. Art activities should be well thought out and planned;
  - Make a wide variety of materials available to children e.g., clay, paint, sand, chalk, water, wax, wood, etc.;
  - Suggest options, but let children make the final decisions for art projects;
  - Ask children about their art while they are creating it, not just at the end;
  - Praise the effort, use of color and uniqueness rather than just the final product, the trip is more important than the destination;
  - Expose the child to a diversity of cultures, experiences, people and way of thinking;
  - Set an example of the enjoyment of life experiences and the willingness to appreciate novel thinking processes, your enthusiasm can be contagious;

- Model perseverance. Encourage the child to complete a project by encouraging each step of the process and helping the child to understand his/her own strengths and weaknesses;
- Display art at a child's eye level;
- Encourage individual expression;
- Use creative questioning, for instance ask them how they would change or improve the quality of things;
- Use creative play;
- Use role-playing to help children see the view-points of others and to explore their feelings;
- Ask "in-how-many-different-ways" questions; and
- Ask what would happen if the state of things changed from their original nature.

### **Conclusion**

In view of the foregoing, breaking the barriers in academic performance especially among children involves among others never telling them how to do things, rather telling them what to do and watching with surprise their ingenuity. This technique is discovery in nature and has the potential for both enhancing their problem-solving capabilities and sharpen their tendency towards originality. Children want their art to look like the object they are looking at and discovering by themselves and such an opportunity aims at disclosing and reflecting our inner selves through a transparent reality demanding the presence of the subject and the eclipse of the object. Failing in this attempt can discourage them from a continuous projection of themselves towards self-awareness. It is believed that parents who encourage their child's creativity have an opportunity to learn about their child's thinking processes. Moreover, by encouraging new ways of perceiving the world together, parents foster children's abilities to prepare for a future of dealing with change in a resilient manner by training their child to make a unique contribution in the future.

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