

Little People Big Ideas Take Art 2024–2027

Youth Music Energiser Fund

Case Studies September 2025 – June 2026

By creative practitioners Richard Tomlinson, Victoria Deelchand-Bee and Jasmine Smail, with support from Jane Parker, project lead.

These case studies form part of the second year of our *Little People Big Ideas* creativity project, delivered between September 2025 and June 2026. Working alongside children, practitioners and families in two rural early years settings in South West England, creative practitioners explored how young children express creativity through open-ended materials and experiences.

This research was guided by two key questions:

- What does a child do creatively when observed without adult intervention?
- What does a child do creatively when an adult joins and supports their play?

The eight case studies presented here offer snapshots of individual children's creative thinking as it emerged through everyday experiences. They demonstrate that creativity is not confined to art activities or finished products, but can be observed in problem-solving, storytelling, movement, collaboration, exploration and meaning-making.

Each case study has been developed from observations, video documentation, practitioner reflection and conversations with children. Together, they reveal the many ways young children communicate ideas, test possibilities and make sense of the world around them.

To protect privacy, all children's names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed or altered. The case studies are intended not as assessments of individual children, but as examples of the rich creative capacities that emerge when children are offered time, trust, responsive adults and open-ended resources.

Case Study 1: Molly Becomes a Butterfly

Richard Tomlinson (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

Background and Context

The child depicted in this sequence of events is Molly, age 4 and 2 months. We have changed her name and all the names of those who consented to participate in this research. Molly's parents both work in professional full-time jobs. Molly attends nursery 4 days per week for 10 hours per day, all year round. Molly has no siblings.

I positioned myself as artist working collaboratively with a fellow artist at the setting. In this sequence my primary role is one of video documenter, recording the sequence of events. I document the gentle interaction between Molly, her peers and my fellow artist, as well as capturing the development of an idea.

To minimise bias I sought the opinions of my fellow artist, early years practitioners and of Molly herself.

The sequence of events takes place in a small outdoor play area at the front of the setting, the space is approximately 4 x 6 metres. There is larger outdoor playing field, to the rear of the setting, which lends itself to more expansive play. However, the smaller outdoor play area is adjacent to the conservatory, which is a space the setting are trying to develop at an atelier, therefore creative ideas often spill out of the conservatory door into the small outdoor play area.

Prior to the children entering the space my fellow artist and I used string to create overhead washing lines. We suspended a variety of colourful scarves from the lines using wooden pegs. We made no plans regarding how the children should interact with the scarves, our motivation was to simply create an inviting environment and to transform the usually brown and grey space into a colourful location. The scarves gently swayed back and forth in the breeze, which added dynamic movement to the space we were creating. We also placed wooden pegs on the ground as an additional provocation.

Observation Narrative

The sequence starts with the children already exploring this familiar, but transformed, environment.

Molly locates herself next to one of the suspended scarves, which hangs high above her head and drapes on the ground. Molly envelopes herself within the scarf. Molly is interested in how the wooden pegs can be used to secure herself within the scarf. It appears as though she is interested in being encapsulated within the fabric.

Molly asks my fellow artist:

"Can you piece it back together again?"

She replies:

"Hold it together then, hold it together, that's it."

My fellow artist and Molly are involved together in some sort of imaginative play, it appears as though a potential idea might be emerging. Molly, from within the scarf, and the artist, from outside of the scarf, put the peg in place. Molly appears to be asking the artist for her support in the creation of her imaginary space.

Molly says:

"And another one."

The artist repeats:

"And another one."

and goes off to find another wooden peg.

As the artist leaves the scene a space is made for one of Molly's friend's to peer inside the enclosure Molly has created.

Her friend says:

"Get out, get free Molly, get free, get free."

Molly looks up at the artist, who has just arrived back on the scene, and shakes her head.

The artist declares to the assembled children:

"She's not ready to come out yet."

At this point an imaginative idea, developed through collaboration between Molly, the artist and the assembled children, seems to emerge.

The artist says:

"Maybe it's a caterpillar turning into a butterfly."

followed by:

"You let us know when you're ready to come out."

The artist then steps back whilst Molly's friend attaches one last peg to the scarf.

"How does it feel in there?" asks the artist.

Molly says:

"I'm hatching."

and proceeds to spread her arms out wide so that the pegs slip off the scarf.

Molly emerges, flapping her arms as though they were wings.

The artist exclaims:

"Wow, she's transformed, what are you Molly?"

Molly slowly, gently and deliberately walks around the small outdoor play area, weaving herself in and out of the suspended scarves, flapping her arms gently.

The artist follows Molly for some of her journey, also flapping her arms.

After completing one circuit of the outdoor play area Molly returns to the place where the event began and we hear from the other children a chorus of:

"My turn!"

Analysis of Molly Becoming a Butterfly

Creativity Through Symbolic Play

This episode provides a powerful example of how creativity emerges through the relationship between child, adult, materials and environment. What begins as Molly's exploration of a suspended scarf gradually develops into a rich imaginative narrative in which she transforms herself from a caterpillar enclosed within a cocoon into a butterfly. Importantly, this narrative is neither planned nor directed by adults. Instead, it emerges through Molly's own thinking, supported by open-ended materials, sensitive adult interaction and an environment designed to invite exploration.

At the heart of the episode is Molly's capacity for symbolic and imaginative play. She transforms an ordinary scarf into a cocoon and uses her body, movement and language to enact the process of transformation. The significance of the activity lies not in the production of a finished artefact but in the development of an idea. Molly demonstrates an ability to assign new meanings to familiar objects and to communicate those meanings through gesture, language and movement. Creativity here can be understood as a process of meaning-making rather than product-making.

The Role of the Adult

My fellow creative artist plays an important role in supporting this process. Throughout the sequence she affirms Molly's thinking without taking ownership of it. Initially, this support is practical, helping Molly to locate and attach pegs as she attempts to create an enclosed space. As the activity develops, she acts as an attentive collaborator. When another child encourages Molly to come out of the cocoon, my colleague responds by saying, "she's not ready to come

out yet”, effectively protecting the integrity of Molly’s emerging idea whilst ensuring that Molly remains in control of the narrative.

My fellow artist also demonstrates a genuine curiosity about Molly's thinking through the use of open-ended questions such as, “How does it feel in there?” Rather than directing the play towards a predetermined outcome, this question invites Molly to reflect on and develop her own ideas. This approach reflects what Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2004) describe as sustained shared thinking, where adults and children work together to develop ideas, solve problems and construct meaning. Throughout the sequence, the adult's role is not to lead the activity but to create the conditions in which Molly's ideas can flourish.

The interaction can also be understood through Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. Learning occurs first through social interaction before becoming internalised by the child (Vygotsky, 1978). My fellow artist provides a form of gentle scaffolding, offering just enough support to sustain the activity whilst leaving Molly as the primary creator of meaning. When my fellow artist suggests that Molly may be “a caterpillar turning into a butterfly”, she is not imposing a narrative but offering language that helps to crystallise an idea that is already beginning to emerge. Molly immediately develops this further by declaring, “I’m hatching”, before physically enacting her transformation. The adult’s intervention expands rather than limits the child’s imaginative possibilities.

Mirroring and Shared Meaning-Making

A particularly significant moment occurs when Molly emerges from the cocoon and begins slowly flapping her arms whilst moving through the outdoor space. My fellow artist mirrors Molly's movements, also gently flapping her arms as she follows her. This act of mirroring demonstrates a high degree of attunement and respect for Molly's ideas. Rather than asking Molly to enter an adult-defined activity, my fellow artist enters Molly's imaginative world. In doing so, she validates the child's thinking and communicates that her ideas are worthy of attention.

Possibility Thinking

This observation also provides a compelling example of possibility thinking. Craft (2000) argues that creativity often involves a shift from asking “What is this?” to asking “What can this become?” Throughout the episode Molly engages in this form of thinking. The scarf is no longer simply a piece of fabric and the pegs are no longer merely fastening devices. Together they become a cocoon. Molly transforms everyday materials into something new and meaningful, demonstrating her capacity to imagine alternative possibilities and create new realities through play.

The Environment as the Third Teacher

The physical environment plays an equally important role in supporting the development of Molly's ideas. Within the Reggio Emilia approach, the environment is often described as the “third teacher” because it actively shapes children's thinking, interactions and learning

(Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). Prior to the children entering the space, my fellow artist and I effectively became set designers. We transformed an otherwise ordinary outdoor area by suspending colourful scarves from washing lines and placing wooden pegs nearby. The movement, colour and texture of the scarves created an invitation to investigate, explore and imagine.

What is particularly interesting is the distinction between preparing the environment and planning the learning. We could carefully prepare the space, but we could not predict what would happen within it. We could arrange the scarves, create visual interest and provide open-ended resources, but we could not plan Molly's butterfly narrative. That story belonged entirely to Molly. In this sense, we prepared the stage, but the performance itself was created by the children. This reflects an emergent, child-led approach to learning in which adults create possibilities rather than predetermined outcomes. This interpretation is supported by Day (2022), who argues that the environment plays a pivotal role in children's learning and describes it as the "third teacher". Day (2022) argues that creative environments should be respectful, collaborative and centred on children's exploration. She suggests that open-ended resources can encourage imagination, experimentation and creative thinking. Molly's butterfly narrative illustrates these principles in practice. The resources did not dictate what should happen; instead, they created the conditions in which creative ideas could emerge.

Loose Parts and Open-Ended Resources

Similarly, Sharp (cited in Fumoto et al., 2012) emphasises that children are naturally inclined to explore their environment and develop ideas through experimentation. She argues that adults should create opportunities for children to investigate, question and extend their thinking through play. The suspended scarves provided exactly this kind of opportunity. Their open-ended nature allowed Molly to interpret the environment in her own way and create a narrative that held personal meaning.

The episode also highlights the value of loose parts. Nicholson's (1971) theory of loose parts suggests that creativity is enhanced when children have access to flexible materials that can be manipulated, moved and transformed. Extending Nicholson's work, Keyte-Hartland (2022) argues that loose parts play encourages children to communicate and express their thinking whilst exploring the affordances and possibilities of materials. The scarves and pegs served exactly this function. They had no fixed purpose and therefore invited multiple interpretations. Molly's cocoon represents just one of countless possible responses. The materials became tools for thinking, imagining and communicating rather than resources with a prescribed use.

Creativity as a Social Process

Another notable feature of the sequence is the social nature of creativity. What begins as Molly's individual exploration gradually becomes shared with others. My fellow artist contributes to the developing narrative, another child helps attach pegs to the cocoon and the surrounding children become increasingly invested in the unfolding story. By the end of the episode, a chorus of children call out, "my turn!" Creativity is therefore shown not as an isolated act but as

a collaborative and relational process that develops through shared imagination and participation.

Child Voice and Documentation

Perhaps the most compelling evidence comes from Molly herself. When I later showed her the video of the event and asked what was happening, she replied, “I was pretending to be a butterfly with Sam and Mary. Sam was fixing me in a cocoon.” This reflection is significant because it confirms that the butterfly narrative was not an interpretation imposed retrospectively by adults. The symbolic meaning originated from Molly's own thinking. Revisiting the documentation therefore provided valuable insight into her perspective and supports the use of pedagogical documentation as a means of understanding children's creative processes (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998).

Summary

Overall, this episode demonstrates how creativity flourishes when children are provided with open-ended materials, time, space and responsive adult support. Through symbolic play, possibility thinking, sustained shared thinking and a carefully prepared environment, Molly transformed a collection of scarves and pegs into a rich and meaningful imaginative experience. The observation suggests that creativity is not simply something that children produce but something they actively construct through relationships, materials, environments and play.

References

- Craft, A. (2000) *Creativity Across the Primary Curriculum: Framing and Developing Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Day, L. (2022) *Discover Creativity with 2–5 Year Olds: Promoting Creative Learning and Development Through Best Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. 2nd edn. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Fumoto, H., Robson, S., Greenfield, S. and Hargreaves, D.J. (2012) *Young Children's Creative Thinking*. London: Sage.
- Keyte-Hartland, D. (2022) ‘What is loose parts play in the EYFS?’, *Early Education*, 20 December. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/what-are-loose-parts-play-in-the-eyfs/> (Accessed: 25 July 2026).
- Nicholson, S. (1971) ‘How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts’, *Landscape Architecture*, 62, pp. 30–34.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2004) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Case Study 2: John Exploring Clay and Sticks

Richard Tomlinson (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

Background and Context

The child depicted in this sequence of events is John, age 3 and 9 months. We have changed his name and all the names of those who consented to participate in this research. John's parents both work in full-time jobs. John attends nursery 3 days per week, each day for 10 hours per day, all year round. John has a 2-year-old sister who also attends the setting.

I positioned myself as artist working collaboratively with a fellow artist at the setting. In this sequence my primary role is one of video documenter, recording the sequence of events. I purposefully do not interact with John, my interest is in how John explores the resources available to him without adult intervention.

To minimise bias I sought the opinions of my fellow artist, early years practitioners, John's mum and John himself.

The following description takes place in the setting's conservatory, an area the setting is developing as an atelier*.

Observation Narrative

John is sitting at a table on his own. He is manipulating a lump of clay that has two wooden sticks inserted into it. There are other children in the vicinity but John is occupying his own space at the table. John appears to be engaged in his own creative investigation of the materials, rather than exploring collaboratively with others. He appears to be completely focused on the elastic qualities of the clay. He kneads, separates, squashes and pulls the clay. John is not distracted by any other sound or activity in the conservatory. It appears as though John could be in any environment, containing any amount of noise and distraction, and all of his attention would still be focused on the clay and the sticks.

At the beginning of the sequence we see John grasping the two sticks that are inserted into the clay and moving them backwards and forwards, as though they were levers. We hear John vocalising mechanical sound effects, perhaps the noise he associates with hydraulic machines or pistons. John makes a high pitched "vvvrrrrrrrr" sound whilst moving the sticks backwards and forwards within the clay. He continues to manipulate the clay around the two sticks, lifting, squeezing and rotating it. He uses a lot of energy, a combination of both fine and gross motor skills, to mould the clay into his desired shape. It appears to be the two sticks that are the main focus of his imaginary play, the clay seems to be a necessary material that holds the imaginary 'levers' in place. On occasion John removes the two sticks from the clay, he then proceeds to reinsert them. Throughout his exploration of the materials he vocalises the sounds of machines.

John removes the two sticks from the clay, he proceeds to bang his fists down onto the clay vigorously, he exclaims:

"Jack Hammer, Der Der Der Der Der Der"

whilst repeatedly crashing his fists down onto the clay.

For the first time in this sequence of events he looks around the conservatory, but he keeps his hands on the clay. His attention appears to have been only momentarily distracted away from the materials and his imaginary play.

A number of other children then enter the conservatory. John now appears to divide his attention equally between his imaginative exploration of the materials and the events taking place in the room. At one moment he looks around to see who has entered the room, however, despite the fact that there are now quite a few distractions, he continues to refocus on the materials he's been exploring, now jabbing the sticks repeatedly into the clay.

The conservatory is now a much noisier room, containing many more children. John now appears to divide his attention simultaneously between his exploration of the materials and the events taking place in the room. The early years practitioner's voice is the dominant sound in the room, she is talking to another child about finding a 'red hammer'. John appears to be listening to what the practitioner is saying whilst also gently manipulating the clay.

John then, for the first time in this sequence, engages with the activities that are taking place in the room, he says:

"Where will we get it?"

possibly referring to the red hammer.

John is then joined by his friend at the table. His friend says:

"We need to get it for me and you"

possibly referring to the red hammer.

John now appears to have moved out of his internal imaginary world, into a more public-facing world where he interacts with others.

What follows is some dialogue between the two children. During the exchange John watches his friend. John is at a slightly higher level than his friend, who is kneeling on the floor looking up at him. There may be a subtle power dynamic within their relationship at this moment. John appears to be very confident in his own, self-initiated, imaginative world, perhaps his friend wants to join in too.

Analysis of John Exploring the Clay and the Sticks

Standing Back as a Pedagogical Strategy

This observation provides a rich example of child-led creative exploration. Unlike Molly's case study, where creativity emerged through social interaction and imaginative narrative, John's creativity appears initially to be deeply individual, embodied and material-based. For much of the sequence, John is immersed in a self-directed investigation of clay, sticks, movement and sound. His concentration is striking. Despite the noise and activity around him, he remains intensely focused on manipulating the materials and exploring the ideas they generate.

Before considering John's actions, it is important to reflect on my role within this observation. Although I positioned myself primarily as a video documenter and deliberately chose not to intervene, I was still actively engaged in the research process. Standing back is not a passive act. It requires attentive observation, careful listening and a willingness to notice moments that might otherwise appear insignificant.

Cremin, Burnard and Craft (2006) identify standing back as an important pedagogical strategy that enables adults to observe children's thinking and give ideas space to develop. They argue that observing, listening and prioritising children's engagement can be a powerful way of supporting creative learning. Rather than directing children's activity, adults create opportunities to notice how ideas emerge and develop. In this sense, standing back becomes a resource in itself because it creates space for children's thinking to unfold (Cremin, Burnard and Craft, 2006).

The use of video documentation is also significant. Within the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation is regarded as a way of making children's learning visible (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). Recording moments such as these allows practitioners to revisit events, reflect upon them and develop a deeper understanding of children's interests, motivations and creative processes. It also enables adults to see details that may otherwise be missed within the pace of everyday nursery life.

Sustained Engagement and the Characteristics of Effective Learning

One of the most striking features of this sequence is John's sustained involvement with the materials. For a considerable period he remains entirely absorbed in his investigation of clay and sticks. He repeatedly pushes, pulls, rotates, squeezes and reforms the clay. The sticks become levers, tools and machines within his imaginative world.

Throughout the observation John demonstrates what the Early Years Foundation Stage describes as characteristics of effective learning, particularly active learning and creating and thinking critically (Department for Education, 2023). He persists with his exploration, returns repeatedly to similar actions and remains highly motivated despite numerous distractions around him.

Possibility Thinking

John's activity can also be understood through Craft's concept of possibility thinking. Craft (2000) argues that creativity develops when children move beyond asking "What is this?" to asking "What can I do with this?" John's use of the materials reflects exactly this process. The sticks are not simply sticks and the clay is not simply clay. Through his actions and imagination

they become components within a mechanical system. John continuously explores new possibilities, testing ideas, manipulating materials and generating alternative uses.

Open-Ended Materials

The importance of open-ended materials is also evident throughout the episode. Neither the clay nor the sticks have a predetermined purpose. Their flexibility allows John to assign his own meanings to them. Nicholson (1971) argues that environments rich in loose parts encourage creativity because they provide children with multiple possibilities for exploration and interpretation. John demonstrates this repeatedly as he transforms the materials into imaginary machines, tools and mechanisms. The materials do not dictate what should happen; instead, they invite creative investigation.

The Atelier and the Hundred Languages

The setting itself also plays an important role. The observation takes place in the conservatory, a space the nursery is actively developing as an atelier. Within the Reggio Emilia philosophy, ateliers are creative spaces designed to encourage experimentation, exploration and expression through multiple forms of communication (Reggio Children, n.d.). Rather than viewing creativity as a separate subject, ateliers recognise what Malaguzzi famously described as children's "hundred languages" - the many ways children express and construct meaning. John's exploration of clay, sound, movement, gesture and language demonstrates several of these languages working simultaneously.

Family Knowledge and Sociocultural Learning

A particularly interesting aspect of the observation is John's use of technical and specialised language. During the sequence he exclaims, "Jack Hammer, Der Der Der Der Der Der", whilst forcefully striking the clay. On the surface this might appear to be simple imaginative play. However, closer analysis suggests something more sophisticated.

John combines technical vocabulary with sound effects and physical action to communicate his understanding of how machines operate. The term "Jack Hammer" demonstrates specific subject knowledge, whilst the repeated "Der Der Der Der Der Der" functions as onomatopoeia, recreating the sounds and rhythm associated with construction machinery.

In fact, John regularly uses technical terms such as "compressor", "impact driver", "excavator" and "hammer drill". This suggests that his imaginative play is informed by substantial prior knowledge.

To understand this more fully, I spoke with John's mother. She explained that John's father is a tradesperson and that John spends significant amounts of time with both his father and grandfather in the shed. She described how he is allowed to use real tools such as screwdrivers and hacksaws under supervision and frequently incorporates these experiences into his play. John's mother also works within the tool industry. Within this family context, tools, machinery and construction language form a familiar part of everyday life.

This observation can therefore be understood through a sociocultural perspective. Vygotsky (1978) argues that children's learning is shaped by their social and cultural experiences. John's

play does not emerge in isolation; it reflects the cultural knowledge, language and experiences available to him within his family. The observation demonstrates how children bring knowledge from home into the nursery environment, transforming personal experiences into creative exploration.

Building on Children's Interests

The importance of building upon children's interests is widely recognised within early years practice. As Early Excellence (n.d.) notes, children feel valued when their interests, experiences and expertise are acknowledged.

John's fascination with machinery provides a powerful example of this principle. Rather than viewing his interest in tools as separate from creativity, this observation suggests that it is central to his creative thinking. His knowledge of machines enables him to construct imaginary scenarios, explore ideas and communicate understanding through play.

From Solitary Exploration to Social Interaction

Another significant feature of the observation is the gradual transition from solitary exploration to social interaction. For much of the sequence John appears completely immersed in his own imaginative world. However, as more children enter the room he begins to divide his attention between his personal exploration and the wider social environment.

Initially he observes others whilst continuing to manipulate the clay. Later he responds to conversations taking place around him, asks questions about the "red hammer" and eventually engages directly with another child.

This shift illustrates that creativity does not exist solely as an individual process. Whilst John's ideas originate within his personal exploration of the materials, they eventually become available for social interaction and collaboration. His friend appears interested in John's imaginary world and seeks to participate within it. The observation therefore demonstrates creativity as both an internal and social process. John first constructs meaning independently before gradually sharing that meaning with others.

Summary

Overall, this episode highlights the importance of observation, documentation, open-ended materials and child-led exploration. John's creative thinking emerges through the interaction of materials, personal interests, family experiences and imaginative play. His fascination with machinery is not a distraction from learning but a vehicle through which learning occurs. Through clay, sticks, movement, language and sound, John demonstrates the ability to make connections between home and nursery, transform experience into imagination and develop increasingly complex ideas.

The observation reminds us that creativity can be quiet, focused and deeply personal, yet simultaneously connected to the wider social and cultural worlds that children inhabit.

References

Craft, A. (2000) *Creativity Across the Primary Curriculum: Framing and Developing Practice*. London: Routledge.

Cremin, T., Burnard, P. and Craft, A. (2006) 'Pedagogy and possibility thinking in the early years', *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 1(2), pp. 108–119.

Department for Education (2023) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: DfE.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. 2nd edn. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Early Excellence (n.d.) *Building on Children's Interests in the EYFS*. Available at: <https://earlyexcellence.com/practice-and-pedagogy/building-on-childrens-interests/> (Accessed: 25 July 2026).

Nicholson, S. (1971) 'How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts', *Landscape Architecture*, 62, pp. 30–34.

Reggio Children (n.d.) *Ateliers*. Available at: <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/rc/ateliers/> (Accessed: 25 July 2026).

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Case Study 3: Sally Balancing Driftwood, Clay and Play

Richard Tomlinson (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

Background and Context

The child depicted in this sequence of events is Sally, aged 2 years 9 months. I have changed her name and all the names of those who consented to participate in this research. Sally's parents both work in full-time jobs. Sally attends nursery 2 days per week for 8 hours per day, all year round. Sally has attended nursery since the age of one. Sally has a younger sibling.

To minimise bias, I sought the opinions of my fellow artist, early years practitioners, Sally's mum and Sally herself.

This sequence takes place in the main room at nursery. My fellow artist and I had already prepared tables in the centre of the room with clay, different lengths of bamboo cane and pieces of driftwood.

I positioned myself as artist working collaboratively with a fellow artist at the setting. In this sequence I am actively engaged with Sally in the exploration of resources, my interest is in how Sally explores the resources available to her, and how her ideas develop, whilst simultaneously interacting with an adult. We were also interested in how the children might explore the open-ended resources we had provided. The sticks and pieces of driftwood fall into the category of 'loose parts', essentially everyday items and natural materials. The clay essentially is providing enormous scope for tactile, sensory and three dimensional exploration.

Observation Narrative

Sally is standing at the table that has been prepared with the resources. She is accompanied by Jane, probably her best friend at nursery, they are always together. I sit opposite Sally at the table. With one hand Sally reaches up high to place a piece of driftwood on top of a tower that has been constructed from the clay and the sticks. In her other hand she holds onto a doll. The doll clearly means a lot to Sally, she carries it around with her everywhere she goes, day after day.

The driftwood sits on top of the tower precariously but does not fall off. Possibly sensing the delicate nature of this balancing act, Sally grasps the sticks that support the tower and, in doing so, the tower wobbles and the driftwood falls to the ground.

I say:

"Oh, again, again."

Sally, with a broad grin on her face, picks up the piece of driftwood and reaches up high again to place the driftwood back in its position on top of the tower.

The driftwood falls off immediately and I express my disappointment exclaiming:

“Awwwww, again again, again.”

Through all of this Sally continues to hold onto her doll.

At this point Sally appears to apply logic to the problem of how to balance the driftwood on the top of the tower. She picks up the driftwood in her right hand, places it into her left hand (the same hand that is holding the doll) and uses her right hand to adjust the platform on top of the tower to make it slightly more stable. This significant action is seamless, subtle and almost imperceptible.

I say:

“Yes, good thinking”.

Sally reaches once again and carefully places the driftwood on top of the tower. This time it stays in place. I spread my arms and smile and clap my hands. Sally sits back on her chair. Sally and I were communicating all the way through this ‘in the moment’ exchange of ideas, even though there was very little dialogue.

I now take on a different role. I stand up and mischievously blow the driftwood off the top of the tower, making it fall to the ground. Sally, with a big smile, jumps up from her chair and proceeds to place the driftwood back in its rightful place on top of the tower. On her second attempt she makes the driftwood balance again.

I repeat the action of blowing the driftwood off the tower again.

Sally, again, attempts to balance the driftwood on top of the tower and it falls off.

My role in this sequence is multifaceted, at one moment I’m encouraging Sally to try and balance the driftwood on top of the tower, at another moment I’m playing the role of a mischievous character who wants to blow the driftwood away. This becomes a game between the two of us.

Analysis of Sally Balancing Driftwood, Clay and Play

Creativity Through Playful Problem-Solving

This episode differs from both Molly’s and John’s case studies because the creativity emerges through a playful interaction between child and adult. Whilst Molly’s case study focused on symbolic and imaginative transformation and John’s centred on self-directed exploration, Sally’s experience demonstrates how creativity can develop through shared play, problem-solving and responsive adult interaction. The most powerful aspect of this sequence is not simply the balancing task itself, but the playful relationship that develops around it.

At first glance, Sally appears to be engaged in a simple activity: balancing a piece of driftwood

on top of a structure made from clay and bamboo sticks. However, closer observation reveals a much more complex process. Sally is investigating relationships between balance, gravity, stability and cause-and-effect through repeated experimentation with the materials. She repeatedly tests possibilities, observes outcomes and modifies her actions in response to what happens. Although she is only two years and nine months old, she demonstrates persistence, concentration and problem-solving throughout the sequence.

Creating and Thinking Critically

One particularly significant moment occurs when Sally subtly adjusts the platform supporting the driftwood before attempting to balance it again. The action takes only a few seconds and could easily be missed in a busy nursery environment. However, it demonstrates a sophisticated process of thinking. Sally recognises that the structure itself is contributing to the problem and independently modifies it before trying again. This is a clear example of what the Early Years Foundation Stage describes as children "creating and thinking critically" (Department for Education, 2023). Rather than simply repeating the same action, she evaluates the situation and develops a strategy to achieve her goal.

Possibility Thinking

This observation also reflects Craft's concept of possibility thinking. Craft (2000) suggests that creativity flourishes when children move beyond "What is this?" to "What can I do with this?" Sally continually explores possibilities within the materials. The clay, bamboo and driftwood become resources through which she can test ideas, solve problems and construct new meanings. The activity is not directed towards a predetermined outcome. Instead, Sally develops her own goals and repeatedly experiments with different solutions.

Open-Ended Materials and Loose Parts

The open-ended nature of the materials is particularly important. The clay, driftwood and bamboo can all be classified as loose parts. Nicholson (1971) argues that loose parts support creativity because they offer multiple possibilities rather than fixed outcomes. Sally's tower could have become many different things. Interestingly, when I later showed Sally the video of the event, she revealed that she understood the structure as a "cake". This insight is important because it reminds us that adults often see only part of what children are thinking. Whilst I observed balancing and problem-solving, Sally attached an additional layer of imaginative meaning to the experience.

The Role of Play

The role of play is central throughout the sequence. Day (2022) argues that play is one of the most important foundations for children's development because it supports problem-solving, collaboration, communication and resilience. Sally's learning occurred precisely because the activity was playful. She remained highly motivated despite repeated failures because the balancing challenge had become enjoyable. The driftwood falling from the tower was not experienced as failure but as part of an ongoing game.

Whitebread et al. (2012) challenge the idea that play is somehow less valuable than formal learning. They argue that play is one of the most significant ways through which children develop thinking, language, self-regulation and social understanding. Sally's experience supports this argument. Through play she explores concepts of balance and stability, develops persistence, practices fine motor control and engages in complex social interaction. The learning is powerful precisely because it is embedded within a playful context.

The Role of the Adult

Unlike the previous case studies, where adults primarily observed or gently supported children's ideas, my role here was more active. For much of the sequence I was a co-participant in the play. Initially I encouraged Sally's attempts to balance the driftwood and celebrated her successes. Later, I introduced a new playful challenge by pretending to blow the driftwood from the top of the tower. In doing so, I temporarily adopted the role of a mischievous character whose actions disrupted Sally's carefully balanced creation.

This change transformed the activity from an individual investigation into a shared game. Rather than becoming frustrated when the driftwood fell, Sally appeared delighted by the challenge. Each time I blew the driftwood away, she enthusiastically attempted to restore it. This playful exchange created a cycle of action, response and adaptation that sustained her involvement.

However, this observation also highlights the delicate role adults play in children's creative learning. Because I was actively involved, it was important that my interventions supported rather than controlled the activity. Had I become overly directive, corrected Sally's actions or taken over the problem-solving process, the learning opportunities might have diminished. Instead, I attempted to contribute to the narrative whilst leaving ownership of the ideas with Sally.

This aligns closely with Fisher's (2016) discussion of effective adult interaction. Fisher argues that skilled practitioners are attentive, sensitive, responsive, respectful and genuinely interested in children's thinking. The challenge is to know when to engage and when to step back. Throughout this sequence, my intention was not to teach Sally how to balance the driftwood but to participate in a shared exploration that allowed her own thinking to emerge.

Sustained Shared Thinking

The observation can also be interpreted through the lens of sustained shared thinking. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2004) describe sustained shared thinking as occurring when adults and children work together to solve problems, develop ideas and construct understanding. Sally and I were involved in precisely this type of interaction. Although there was relatively little verbal communication, we were engaged in a shared dialogue through actions, gestures, expressions and responses. The learning emerged from our joint participation rather than through formal instruction.

Child Voice and Documentation

Video documentation proved particularly valuable in understanding the significance of this episode. Reviewing the footage allowed me to notice subtle moments that would have been easy to overlook in real time, particularly Sally's adjustment of the platform before her successful balancing attempt.

Documentation therefore enabled a deeper interpretation of the learning that was taking place. As Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998) suggest, documentation helps make children's thinking visible and allows adults to reflect on learning processes that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

The follow-up conversation with Sally further strengthened this understanding. When I showed her the video several weeks later, she immediately identified familiar aspects of the scene, including her doll and her friend. She described the activity as "balancing" and clearly remembered the playful element involving the driftwood being blown away. Most significantly, she revealed that the structure represented a cake. This demonstrates the importance of involving children in reflective conversations about documentation. Without Sally's explanation, this symbolic layer of meaning may never have been recognised.

Summary

Overall, this observation highlights the importance of playfulness within creative learning. Through open-ended materials, shared exploration and responsive adult interaction, Sally demonstrated persistence, problem-solving, imagination and critical thinking. The episode illustrates that creativity is not always found in dramatic artistic outcomes. Sometimes it emerges through a child repeatedly attempting to balance a piece of driftwood whilst holding a favourite doll, laughing with an adult and transforming a simple structure into a cake. It is within these small moments of shared play that some of the richest learning takes place.

References

Craft, A. (2000) *Creativity Across the Primary Curriculum: Framing and Developing Practice*. London: Routledge.

Day, L. (2022) *Discover Creativity with 2–5 Year Olds: Promoting Creative Learning and Development Through Best Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Department for Education (2023) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: DfE.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. 2nd edn. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Fisher, J. (2016) *Interacting or Interfering? Improving Interactions in the Early Years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Nicholson, S. (1971) 'How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts', *Landscape Architecture*, 62, pp. 30–34.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2004) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvalja, M. and Verma, M. (2012) *The iimportance of Play*. Brussels: Toy Industries of Europe.

Case Study 4: Lily Building a Clay Structure

Richard Tomlinson (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

Background and Context

The child depicted in this sequence is Lily, age 2 and 9 months. We have changed her name and all the names of those who consented to participate in this research. Lily's parents both work in full time jobs. Lily attends nursery 2 days per week for 8 hours per day, all year round. Lily has no siblings.

To minimise bias I sought the opinions of my fellow artist and early years practitioners.

I positioned myself as artist working collaboratively with a fellow artist at the setting. In this sequence my primary role is one of video documenter, recording the events. I record the way Lily explores the open ended resources on offer, I also record the development of her ideas and interaction with other people in her vicinity. I purposefully do not interact with Lily, I'm interested in how Lily develops her ideas without my intervention. There is a moment, at the beginning of the sequence, when Lily does acknowledge me. She says "I want to see it, I want to see it", referring to the video I'm shooting, however, over time she becomes more engaged in exploring the resources and less interested in me.

The sequence of events takes place in the outdoor play area to the rear of the setting. When my fellow artist and I arrive at this setting, on a weekly basis, we usually notice that the majority of the children are outside in this outdoor play area, whatever the weather.

Observation Narrative

Lily is standing at a table onto which we have placed a big bag of clay, a bucket of bamboo canes of varying lengths and a print out of the Eiffel Tower. Lily is rolling small chunks of clay into balls and worm shaped pieces. She is building a structure made up of these component parts. Lily vigorously manipulates the clay into worm shaped pieces in her hands, and then very carefully places each piece onto the bigger structure. The contrast between these two actions, rolling the clay in her hands and placing the clay carefully on the structure, is very evident. The act of rolling the clay in her hands requires a lot of effort and use of gross motor skills, by contrast, the act of placing the worm shaped pieces on the bigger structure is a very delicate operation, making use of fine motor skills.

Lily repeats this process and momentarily looks up at the camera. She then looks around and says:

"look at this snowman".

She then stands back from her structure and appears to appreciate her work and says:

"I made mommy and daddy",

this statement is followed by a little laughter.

Lily continues to vigorously manipulate the clay into worm shapes and place them carefully onto the structure she is building. Again, Lily steps back from her creation to see a wider perspective, because she is doing this for a second time its reasonable to believe that she is stepping back to appreciate her work, perhaps even consider its aesthetic qualities. This is an action we associate with visual artists.

Lily says:

“aaarr, it’s a bike, it’s a bike, it’s a bike, a bike, a bike, it’s a bike, a bike”.

Whilst saying this she draws attention to her creation by pointing at it. It appears as though Lily can see something in the structure, when she steps back to appreciate it, that is reminiscent of a bike.

She continues to vigorously roll the clay into worm shaped pieces in her hands and place these pieces onto the bigger structure.

She momentarily engages with the very talkative child opposite her at the clay table, he says he is going to try something with the clay, Lily replies:

“I will try it too”.

At this point we hear an early years practitioner say to Lily:

“what have you made?”.

Lily replies indistinctly:

“mommy and daddy and bike”.

The practitioner responds:

“who is Mike?”.

Lily replies:

“it’s daddy’s bike”.

Lily then proceeds to mime the actions of daddy riding his bike and vocalises the sound of a motorbike:

“bbbbrrrrr”.

This is followed by a lot of laughter.

Lily continues building her structure made of balls and worm shapes.

Analysis of Lily Building a Clay Structure

Creativity Through Symbolic Representation

This episode provides a fascinating example of how very young children use materials to think, communicate and make meaning. Unlike Sally's case study, where creativity emerged through playful interaction with an adult, or John's case study, where creativity centred on personal interests and sustained exploration, Lily's creativity is expressed primarily through symbolic representation. Throughout the sequence, Lily uses clay to construct, interpret and reinterpret ideas that appear to draw upon her experiences, relationships and imagination.

At first glance, Lily appears to be carrying out a simple construction activity. She repeatedly rolls pieces of clay into balls and elongated worm-like forms before carefully attaching them to a larger structure. However, closer observation reveals that she is engaged in a far more complex process. The structure changes meaning several times throughout the episode. At different moments it becomes a snowman, "mommy and daddy" and later a bike. Rather than producing a fixed outcome, Lily continually reimagines and reinterprets her creation.

This changing meaning is significant. It suggests that Lily is not attempting to create an accurate physical representation of an object. Instead, she is using clay as a medium for thought and communication. The structure becomes a vehicle through which she can express ideas about her family, relationships and experiences. Creativity in this context is not about realism or artistic skill; it is about using materials to explore and communicate meaning.

Possibility Thinking

The observation also demonstrates Craft's concept of possibility thinking. Craft (2000) argues that creativity develops when children move beyond asking "What is this?" to asking "What can this become?" Lily repeatedly demonstrates this way of thinking. Her structure is not fixed in meaning. Instead, it remains open to reinterpretation and transformation. The same arrangement of clay becomes different things at different times as her ideas evolve. This flexibility of thought is a powerful example of possibility thinking in action.

Clay as an Open-Ended Material

Clay plays a particularly important role in supporting this creative process. Throughout the project, clay repeatedly proved to be one of the most engaging and versatile materials available to children. Unlike many manufactured resources, clay has no predetermined purpose. It can be rolled, stretched, broken apart, reshaped and reconstructed endlessly. This makes it particularly effective for supporting imaginative thinking.

Craft (2000) argues that creativity involves imagining alternatives and asking "what if?" questions. Clay naturally invites this kind of thinking because it remains constantly open to change. A child can reshape it repeatedly without fear of getting it wrong. The material itself encourages experimentation, flexibility and invention.

The significance of clay is also discussed by Mohammed (2016), who suggests that children's hands are often the most valuable tools when working with clay. She argues that young children are instinctively drawn to the material because of its sensory qualities and its responsiveness to touch. This idea is clearly evident in Lily's actions. She repeatedly squashes, rolls and manipulates the clay with energy before carefully placing each piece onto her structure. The contrast between these vigorous and delicate movements highlights the range of physical and creative skills involved in the process.

Loose Parts and Open-Ended Exploration

The episode also reflects Nicholson's (1971) theory of loose parts. Nicholson argues that creativity increases when children have access to materials that can be manipulated, combined and transformed in multiple ways. The clay provides exactly this opportunity. There is no single correct way to use it. Instead, Lily is free to explore and assign her own meanings to the material. Her ideas emerge through interaction with the clay rather than being determined in advance.

Reflection and Revisiting Ideas

Another particularly interesting feature of the observation is the way Lily repeatedly steps back from her creation. On multiple occasions she pauses, physically distances herself from the structure and observes it from a wider perspective before assigning new meaning to it. These moments are easy to overlook, but they provide important insight into her thinking. As adults, we often associate this act of stepping back and reviewing work with artists, designers and architects. Lily appears to be engaging in a similar process.

She constructs, observes, reflects and then reinterprets. Whilst it would be inappropriate to assume that she is consciously evaluating aesthetic choices in the same way as an adult artist,

her behaviour suggests a developing awareness of her own creative process. She is not simply making; she is also looking, thinking and responding to what she has created.

The Hundred Languages of Children

This observation aligns closely with the Reggio Emilia view of children as capable and competent meaning-makers. Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998) argue that children communicate through many different "languages", including movement, gesture, sound, construction and visual media. Lily demonstrates several of these languages simultaneously. She uses clay construction, spoken language, gesture and imaginative role play to communicate her ideas.

The moment when Lily explains that the structure represents "daddy's bike" is particularly revealing. Following the adult's question, Lily not only identifies the structure but immediately begins miming the actions of riding a bike whilst making engine noises. The meaning therefore extends beyond the clay itself. The structure becomes part of a wider narrative that incorporates movement, sound and memory. This illustrates the multimodal nature of young children's creativity.

The Role of the Adult

The observation also highlights the importance of adult interaction. When the practitioner asks, "What have you made?", she invites Lily to explain her thinking. The question does not seek a correct answer. Instead, it creates an opportunity for Lily to articulate and develop her ideas. This reflects Fisher's (2016) argument that effective practitioners are attentive, responsive and genuinely interested in children's thinking.

The dialogue with the practitioner also demonstrates how adults can help make children's thinking visible. Without the conversation, the reference to "daddy's bike" might have remained hidden. Through sensitive questioning, the practitioner gains insight into the personal meanings Lily has attached to the structure.

Creativity, Experience and Meaning-Making

Perhaps most importantly, the episode reminds us that creativity is often deeply connected to children's experiences and relationships. The recurring references to "mommy", "daddy" and "daddy's bike" suggest that Lily is drawing upon familiar elements from her own life. Her creation becomes a way of representing and revisiting experiences that matter to her. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) argument that children's thinking and imagination develop through their social and cultural experiences.

Summary

Overall, this observation demonstrates how open-ended materials can support children in exploring, expressing and communicating complex ideas. Through clay, Lily combines construction, imagination, memory, language and symbolic thinking. The changing meanings attached to her structure reveal a child actively engaged in the process of making sense of the world around her. Rather than producing a fixed object, Lily is producing meaning. It is this process of representation, interpretation and reinterpretation that makes the episode such a rich example of young children's creative thinking.

References

- Craft, A. (2000) *Creativity Across the Primary Curriculum: Framing and Developing Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. 2nd edn. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Fisher, J. (2016) *Interacting or Interfering? Improving Interactions in the Early Years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Mohammed, R. (2016) *Creative Diaries: Clay Work in the Early Years*. Available at: <https://eyfs.info/articles.html/teaching-and-learning/creative-diaries-clay-work-in-the-early-years-r203/> (Accessed: 25 July 2026).
- Nicholson, S. (1971) 'How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts', *Landscape Architecture*, 62, pp. 30–34.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Case Study 5: Ava: Clay, Monsters and Glow Lights

Victoria Deelchand-Bee (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

The child who is the first focus of this research is Ava, aged 4 years and 6 months. I changed her name and the names of all participants to preserve anonymity. Ava is an only child who lives with her mother and father, although her 14-year-old half-sister stays with the family every fortnight. Ava attends nursery four days each week from 8.00am until 6.00pm.

Practitioners describe her as "a bright, capable girl" but note that she sometimes lacks confidence in aspects of her personal, social and emotional development. Staff explained that Ava's parents regularly complete school-readiness activities at home, including practising CVC words and engaging in structured learning alongside her parents. Ava is in the preschool room with approximately twenty children aged two to four years. There are two permanent Early Years Practitioners in the room alongside several staff who work there intermittently.

For the purpose of this case study, it is important to acknowledge that Ava was working alongside me in my role as a creative practitioner. As both participant and researcher, I became actively involved in Ava's play whilst carefully observing the ways in which her creative thinking developed both independently and through our shared interaction. Throughout this analysis, I therefore write in the first person to reflect the co-constructed nature of the experience.

I am aware that my role as a creative artist creates a potential bias and that my presence may influence the child's behaviour. I am also aware how I could be biased in how I interpret the child's actions. To counter this, I sought out the opinions of others – my fellow creative practitioners and the staff at the setting – so my observations are triangulated. This helped to ensure that my analysis of the child's behaviour was less subjective.

The observation takes place during a clay provocation where Ava and I begin constructing a sculpture using clay and bamboo sticks. What starts as a construction activity gradually evolves into imaginative role play before naturally returning to collaborative problem-solving.

For context, this observation was Ava's second or third time exploring the clay at the setting. Ava's initial relationship with using one hand and seemed to not like the feeling of clay on her fingertips. Ava would ask to finish and wash her hands within a very short time of engaging with the material. On reflecting with her key worker about this, she told me that she had been pottery painting outside of preschool with her family, but often avoids "messy" activities at preschool. During the first couple of sessions I asked if she would like to play with the clay, and she would always reply, "no thank you". However, it was noted by staff at the setting that Ava would often appear drawn towards me and curious about my presence. On this particular session, I told her, "If you need me, I will be at the clay table", to which she replied, "I want to play with you with the clay".

For this observation, Ava is working alongside me at the clay table. In front of us is a selection of wooden bamboo cane sticks. Five sticks are joined diagonally in the middle with small amounts of clay at their bases, creating a structure which some could describe or resemble a tipi. At the

top of the structure is a larger lump of clay wrapped around the sticks. One stick stands vertically from this lump, while another is positioned horizontally. Halfway along the horizontal stick I hold another lump of clay while Ava pushes a further stick vertically through it.

Ava manipulates the stick up and down with her left hand while I support the structure. She pauses to inspect it carefully before pulling the stick slightly higher. Looking first at me and then back at the structure she says, "Now, now, now it needs to be... now it needs more clay." As she speaks, she picks up a small cardboard box, looks at it briefly, places it back down and reaches her right hand into the clay bag beside her. I repeat her words aloud to Rich, fellow creative artist in the room, and Ava, "Now it needs more clay."

"Got more clay," Ava says as she pinches off a small piece of clay. Suddenly she stops, drops the clay and peers into the bag with a smile. "There's something in there!"

Curious, I ask, "What's in there?"

Ava reaches deeper into the bag, leaning forward to look inside. She lets out a small gasp. "I see it!" she says, smiling at me, her eyes widening.

"What is it?" I ask as I lean closer to inspect the bag. Ava sits herself down on a nearby chair and points excitedly. "There! There inside!"

"Inside? Let me take a look," I reply, holding the bag open with one hand before reaching carefully inside. I quickly withdraw my hand.

"I feel it! What was it?" I ask.

Ava reaches back into the bag and pauses, looking intently inside. After a few moments she withdraws her hand, smiles at me and says, "Just a bag!"

Smiling back, I echo her words. "Just a bag! Ahh... let me check..." I reach into the bag once more before suddenly changing my expression. "It moved!" I look towards Ava and together we immediately direct our attention back to the bag.

"Hold on a minute..." I say.

Ava watches intently.

"It's moving!" she says excitedly while rolling a tiny piece of clay between both hands. Looking at me she adds, "I think it's gonna be a lil' monster!"

I slowly bring a small lump of clay out of the bag, accompanying its appearance with playful alien/monster sounds. "Br, br, br, br, br, br... bruh!" I make the clay jump onto the top of the bag and pretend it is making little noises of its own. "Oooh..." I say.

Ava quietly giggles before picking up the clay and asking, "How did it get here?"

Repeating her words, I wonder aloud, "How did it get here?" Ava gently rolls the clay between her fingers, looking backwards and forwards between me and the clay before dropping the "monster" into the cardboard box.

Leaning closer to the box I say, "Hello, monster!" Picking up the box I continue speaking to the clay. "Oh... is he OK?"

Ava immediately turns back towards the clay bag, reaching her hand in and out repeatedly.

"It's moving! It's another one moving!" she says excitedly.

"There might be another one!" I reply as I hop my own clay "monster" back inside the bag before making more playful creature noises. "Llllbduh... llllbduh..." I make the clay jump back out into the cardboard box.

Ava gasps with excitement once again. She moves her hand towards the bag before quickly pulling it back, looking towards me.

"Are there any more coming out?" I ask, pointing towards the bag.

Ava reaches inside and pulls out another piece of clay.

"Got another one!" she announces as she squeezes it gently between her finger and thumb before dropping it into the cardboard box.

"We've got two monsters!" I say.

Ava watches the clay "monsters" in the box while continually rubbing the clay residue from her fingers. She picks up both pieces of clay, squeezing them together as she says, "These are just clay... it's just clay."

"It can be whatever you want it to be," I reply.

Ava squashes the two pieces of clay together before suddenly returning her attention to the stick sculpture.

"Now we need to put some glow lights on!"

Looking carefully at the structure she continues, "We need some more glow lights!"

She picks up two more sticks.

"Got some more glow lights!"

She passes them to me.

"How are we going to put them on?" I ask.

"Um..." Ava replies as she positions her finger and thumb around two small lumps of clay attached to the highest vertical stick.

"Those... the glow lights there," she explains, directing me as I gently push the stick into the clay.

"If I push that like that, shall we see what happens?" I ask before placing the stick on top of the clay. "How's that?"

Ava carefully inspects the stick before pushing it more firmly into both lumps of clay.

"Yeah..."

Almost immediately the stick falls off.

Without hesitation Ava picks it up and tries again.

"This stick needs to be..."

Before she finishes speaking it falls away once more.

She drops the shorter stick and reaches instead for a much longer one.

"I think we need longer sticks," she explains before pushing the longer stick into the two clay lumps. Ava presses the lower part of the stick firmly into the clay while I support the top by gently pressing it into the larger lump above.

"How's that?" I ask.

Ava studies the structure carefully from top to bottom before confidently replying,

"Good!"

She gently squeezes the top of the stick to test its stability. As the structure begins to lean slightly she immediately adjusts the surrounding sticks, carefully straightening the sculpture.

Looking at it once more she says, "We need... more clay. Got more clay!"

She hands me another piece of clay.

"Where should we put this clay?" I ask as we both study the sculpture together.

Ava points towards the top before slowly tracing her finger down the length of one of the sticks. I follow the direction of her finger until she indicates where I should stop.

"Here?" I ask while holding the clay in place.

"Yep," Ava replies confidently.

Shortly afterwards her attention is drawn to the microphone attached to her clothing, bringing this episode of her clay exploration to a natural conclusion.

Analysis of Ava's Creative Learning

Throughout the observation Ava demonstrates all three Characteristics of Effective Learning described within the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (Department for Education, 2025). Rather than appearing separately, these characteristics continually overlap as she explores materials, generates imaginative ideas and solves practical problems.

Playing and Exploring

Ava immediately shows curiosity and independence in her approach to the materials. As we build the structure together, she pauses to observe it before deciding, "Now it needs more clay." Rather than waiting for adult instruction, she evaluates the stability of the construction herself and proposes a solution.

The direction of the play changes unexpectedly when Ava notices something inside the clay bag. Instead of dismissing her discovery or providing an explanation, I simply respond with genuine curiosity by asking, "What's in there?" This open-ended question allows Ava to remain in control of the investigation. She repeatedly reaches deeper into the bag, peers inside and excitedly announces, "I see it!"

The EYFS describes Playing and Exploring as children "finding out and exploring", "using what they know in their play" and "being willing to have a go". Ava appears to demonstrate all of these behaviours. She follows her curiosity wherever it leads, shifting naturally from construction to investigation and then into imaginative play.

Ava's discovery of the "monster" emerges entirely from her imagination, illustrating how play enables children to transform their experiences into new meanings and possibilities. The clay becomes symbolic; first it is malleable material to squish, squeeze and glue objects together, then an imaginary creature, before later becoming "just clay" again. This fluid movement between reality and imagination reflects Bruce's view that play creates alternative, imagined worlds where children explore ideas, develop symbols and make sense of their experiences through creative transformation (Bruce, 2023). This ability to move fluidly between reality and imagination further resonates with Malaguzzi's belief that children communicate and think through many "languages" (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards, Gandini and Foreman 2012).

Active Learning

Ava remains highly motivated throughout the observation and shows persistence when faced with practical difficulties.

When one of the shorter sticks repeatedly falls from the sculpture, she does not become frustrated or abandon the activity. Instead, she studies what has happened before concluding, "I think we need longer sticks." She immediately tests her own hypothesis by quickly selecting a different stick before checking whether it is more secure.

I deliberately avoid solving the problem for her. Instead, I support the structure while allowing Ava to decide where materials should be positioned. When I ask, "Where should we put this clay?", I am not seeking an answer based on where I think the clay would be best, but encouraging Ava to think for herself and articulate her own ideas. She confidently points to the area she wants reinforced and directs my actions.

This sustained concentration, resilience and willingness to revise ideas illustrate the EYFS characteristic of Active Learning. These characteristics describe *how* children learn rather than what they produce. Ava's learning lies within the process of investigating, adapting and persevering rather than simply completing a clay sculpture.

Creating and Thinking Critically

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Ava's creativity lies in the flexibility of her thinking. Throughout the observation she continually generates, tests and revises ideas. Initially she is constructing a sculpture. Moments later the clay becomes "little monsters". Shortly afterwards the sticks become "glow lights" for her sculpture.

These rapid conceptual shifts illustrate what Craft, McConnon and Matthews (2012) describe as possibility thinking. Ava repeatedly asks herself, in effect, "What else could this become?" Rather than seeing objects for only one purpose, she continuously transforms their meaning.

Her creative thinking also extends to problem-solving. After noticing that one stick repeatedly falls, she analyses the problem before selecting a longer one. She evaluates whether the new solution works and adjusts the structure once again when it begins to lean and fall.

Robinson (2006) defines creativity as the process of having original ideas that have value. Ava's ideas are undoubtedly original within the context of the play while simultaneously serving practical purposes in developing the sculpture.

What does Ava do creatively when I engage with her?

A central aim of this research is to understand what happens to children's creativity when an adult actively joins their play.

Reflecting on this observation, I notice that my role is not to introduce ideas but to help sustain Ava's own thinking through shared curiosity and wonder. When Ava first tells me that something is inside the clay bag, I deliberately resist explaining or identifying it. Instead, I ask simple, open-ended questions such as, "What's in there?" and later, "There might be another one?" These responses invite Ava to continue investigating rather than looking towards me for the answer.

As the play develops, I contribute dramatic sounds, facial expressions and pretend dialogue. However, I remain careful not to determine what the clay should become. Instead, I provide space and extended periods of time for Ava to think for herself where she declares, "I think it's gonna be a lil' monster!" The imaginative narrative develops collaboratively rather than being imposed by the adult.

One particularly significant moment occurs when Ava pauses and says, "These are just clay." Rather than correcting her or encouraging her to remain in pretend play, I respond, "It can be whatever you want it to be." Reflecting on this interaction, I recognise that this response validates both imagination and reality simultaneously. Ava is free to move between symbolic thinking and literal understanding without either being considered wrong. Throughout the play, I was sensitive to the sensory needs of Ava and let her decide how long she wished to engage with the clay. Immediately afterwards she extends the play independently by announcing, "Now we need to put some glow lights on." This suggests that responding openly rather than directing the play creates further opportunities for creative thinking.

Reflecting on how my interactions foster creativity

Reflecting on my own practice, I can identify several aspects of my interaction that appear to support Ava's creativity.

Throughout the observation I consciously follow Ava's lead. She decides where the play goes, what the materials represent and how problems should be solved. Rather than directing the activity towards a finished product, I respond to her ideas as they emerge naturally.

I also make deliberate use of open-ended questions. Rather than asking closed questions, I ask: "What's in there?", "How are we going to put them on?" and "Where should we put this clay?" These questions encourage Ava to think aloud, generate possibilities and explain her own reasoning. I also recognise that I provide gentle scaffolding throughout the activity. During the construction I steady the sculpture while Ava positions the sticks and decides where additional clay is needed, being mindful to only offer enough support to enable Ava to take ownership of the learning and succeed.

Finally, I notice that I deliberately model curiosity rather than expertise. Instead of evaluating Ava's ideas or correcting her thinking, I wonder alongside her, join her imaginative play and

explore possibilities together. In doing so, I try to create an emotionally safe environment for Ava in which there are no right or wrong answers. This was a deliberate approach, where I chose to tread carefully due to Ava's seemingly lack of confidence and overall opinion of clay and its properties.

Reflecting on how I could unintentionally hinder creativity

Although I believe my interactions largely supported Ava's creative thinking, reflecting critically on my practice also highlights areas for consideration.

As the imaginary monster narrative develops, I contribute dramatic sounds and pretend dialogue that help sustain the play. However, I recognise that there is a delicate balance between extending children's ideas and unintentionally influencing their direction. Had I become more dominant within the narrative, Ava may have begun following my ideas rather than generating her own. Looking back, I still wonder whether my playful monster noises enriched the narrative or subtly shifted ownership of the play towards me. Although Ava quickly continued the story herself, it is impossible to know whether she would have imagined something entirely different had I remained silent. If I had asked Ava for more details about her monster, for example, "I wonder what the monster sounds like?", would this have provided a richer opportunity for Ava to bring her ideas to life?

Similarly, there are moments where I ask questions such as, "How's that?" While intended to encourage reflection on my placement of sticks, these questions could be interpreted as seeking approval from others. In future interactions I might instead ask questions closely linked to Anna Craft's possibility thinking such as, "What do you notice?" or "What could we try next?". I wonder if such questions may encourage even greater ownership of the thinking process and richer dialogue. This reflection reminds me that supporting creativity requires continual awareness of when to participate, when to scaffold and when simply to observe without saying a word.

Child's perspective: What did Ava see?

I invited Ava to have a look at a video with me, away from the main classroom into the conservatory space. I showed the video back to Ava and asked her "Tell me what you see?" She immediately leans forwards pointing at the screen and says, "What did I have on?" She seems to notice the microphone clipped onto her apron. She continues to smile and watches the video with wide eyes. I ask her again, "What did you notice?" She says, "A monster came out!" Ava seems to enjoy watching the video back and I then ask, "I noticed you put your hand in the clay bag... and then what happened?" Ava looked away from the video and towards the doors into the main classroom. She appears to hear another child raising their voice in distress. "Can we go back now?" she asks. I take the signal that she does not wish to be questioned further and I guide her back to the classroom with her peers.

Watching the video back with Ava offered a brief insight into what appeared to be most significant from her perspective. Interestingly, the first thing she noticed was not the clay sculpture or the imaginative "monster" play, but the microphone attached to her apron, asking, "What did I have on?" This suggests that details which may seem insignificant to the researcher

can become highly significant for the child. Only after continuing to watch did Ava comment, "A monster came out!" indicating that the shared imaginative narrative had remained meaningful to her after the event.

However, unlike during the observation itself, Ava seemed to show little interest in discussing the experience in depth. When I asked follow-up questions about her actions, her attention shifted away from the video towards the classroom, where she appeared to hear another child become distressed. She asked, "Can we go back now?" I interpreted this as an indication that she no longer wished to engage in the discussion and chose not to continue questioning her.

Reflecting on this process raises questions about whether watching video recordings individually is always the most effective way of gathering young children's perspectives. Although the quieter space reduced distractions and allowed me to tune in to Ava's response, it may also have removed Ava from the familiar social context in which the creative episode originally took place. Given practitioners' earlier observations that Ava sometimes lacks confidence within her personal, social and emotional development, it is possible that being away from her peers, key person and the ongoing activity influenced her willingness to reflect. On reflection, it may be that revisiting the experience alongside friends who shared the play, within a small group discussion, or even as part of whole-group reflection, would have prompted richer conversations and more sustained recollections.

The experience also questions about whose perspectives are captured when researching children's creativity. The key worker has described that Ava's parents engage in school-readiness activities at home, and her older half-sister plays an important role in her life. Inviting family members to watch selected video clips and share their interpretations may have provided valuable additional insight into Ava's creative dispositions across different contexts. Their reflections might have revealed whether the imaginative, playful thinking observed during the clay activity reflected familiar aspects of Ava's behaviour at home or whether they represented something new and unique for them. Incorporating multiple perspectives, including those of children, practitioners and families, may therefore offer a richer and more holistic understanding of young children's creative capacities than relying on a single reflective interview alone.

Summary

Looking back across this observation, what stands out to me is how naturally Ava's creativity unfolded through play, imagination and our shared interaction. Rather than following a planned activity, her ideas developed moment by moment as she explored the possibilities offered by the clay. Ava seems to strongly show all three Characteristics of Effective Learning by exploring materials with curiosity, persisting through challenges and continually adapting her ideas. Her creativity is characterised by symbolic thinking, possibility thinking and practical problem-solving.

Reflecting on my own role as a creative practitioner, I recognise that my most effective contribution was not providing ideas but creating the conditions in which Ava's own ideas could flourish. Through curiosity, sustained shared thinking, open-ended questioning and sensitive scaffolding, I aimed to support rather than direct her learning. This observation aligns with Craft

et al.'s (2012) concept of possibility thinking, where children's imaginative thinking is gently nurtured through responsive, collaborative adult interaction, rather than predetermined teaching outcomes.

The observation also reveals the creative potential of clay as what might be considered an “intelligent material”. Giudici et al. (2026 p. 12) describe clay as a material that ‘speaks a delicate language and is an intelligent holistic material that takes on a posture of its own when close to children’s bodies: it can be manipulated in small pieces that fit easily in the palm of a hand, but can also appear in large blocks for riding, jumping, embracing.’ This highlights clay’s unique capacity to invite exploration, responds to children’s actions and continually opens up new possibilities for thinking, imagination and expression. Rather than remaining a passive resource, the clay evolved alongside Ava’s ideas, transforming from a structural material into hidden “monsters”, and later becoming part of an imagined world of “glow lights”. Its tactile, malleable nature supported sensory exploration, symbolic representation and collaborative storytelling, illustrating how open-ended materials can act as partners in children’s creative meaning-making. In this scenario, the clay did not simply facilitate creativity; it appeared to provoke and sustain it, enabling Ava’s imaginative world to unfold through touch, play and shared narrative.

References

Bruce, T. (2023, October 5). *Play and creativity* [Froebel Trust Annual Lecture]. Froebel Trust. <https://www.froebel.org.uk/training/films/froebel-trust-lecture-2023-professor-tina-bruce> (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Craft, A., McConnon, L. and Matthews, A. (2012) ‘Child-initiated play and professional creativity: Enabling four-year-olds’ possibility thinking’, *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 7(1), pp. 48–61.

Department for Education (2025) Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework: For group and school-based providers. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (2012) *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation*. 3rd edn. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Giudici, C., Ruoizzi, M., Tedeschi, M. and Vecchi, V. (eds.) (2026) *Clay: Techniques, experiences, imaginaries*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.

Jeffrey, B. and Craft, A. (2006) ‘Creative learning and possibility thinking’, in *Creative learning practices: European experiences*. Stoke-on-Trent: Tufnell Press, pp. 73–91.

Robinson, K. (2006) *Do schools kill creativity?* TED Conferences. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Case Study 6: Ben: Making Meaningful Marks with Charcoal

Victoria Deelchand-Bee (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

The child who is the second focus of my research is Ben, aged 4 years and 4 months. I changed his name and the names of all participants to preserve anonymity. Ben lives with his mother and older brother. Ben attends nursery five days each week from 8.00am until 6.00pm. Practitioners describe him as "intelligent, inquisitive and curious". Ben receives Level 4 SEND funding to support his Social Emotional Mental Health needs in the setting and is often supported 1:1 throughout the morning to manage his emotions and feelings.

Staff explained that Ben's home life "is a little tough" and "it's not been the easiest for him" due to his parents separating and attending nursery every day for long periods of time.

Ben is in the preschool room with approximately twenty children aged two to four years. There are two permanent Early Years Practitioners in the room alongside several staff who work there intermittently.

For the purpose of this case study, it is important to acknowledge that I was filming Ben's exploration with charcoal during my role as a creative practitioner on the project. As both participant and researcher, I became actively involved in Ben's play whilst carefully observing the ways in which his creative thinking developed both independently and through our shared interaction afterwards. Throughout this analysis, I therefore write in the first person to reflect the co-constructed nature of the experience.

I am aware that my role as a creative artist creates a potential bias and that my presence may influence the child's behaviour. I am also aware how I could be biased in how I interpret the child's actions. To counter this, I sought out the opinions of others – my fellow creative practitioners and the staff at the setting – so my observations are triangulated. This helped to ensure that my analysis of the child's behaviour was less subjective.

The observation takes place during a creative play session in the setting's conservatory where we placed large piles of paper on the table alongside a box of chunky graphite sticks and thin willow charcoal sticks for the children to access independently. There was also a single rubber eraser in the box.

For context, this observation was Ben's second time exploring these mark-making materials at the setting. On reflecting with his key worker, she told me that he often avoids any drawing or painting activities at preschool, and this was the first time they had seen Ben engage with materials in this way. I observed Ben exploring the materials for around five minutes and chose not to ask any questions or use any vocals prompts while Ben was making his marks. Once he had chosen to end his exploration, I then asked Ben to "tell me about what he noticed".

Prior to the observation that was captured, Ben spent some time rubbing willow sticks onto white A4 paper using his hands and then using the eraser to rub his marks frantically and continuously, passing the rubber from hand to hand and adjusting the force with which he pushed down upon the eraser. At the end of his rubbing, he noticed that small fibres appeared. He picked them off, outstretched his arm to show me and said, "This came off".

He then picks up the willow stick again using his left hand, still holding on to the eraser with his right hand, and begins making one continuous line drawing with swirling movements that loop over and trace up and down the page. Ben drops the eraser and passes the charcoal into his right hand and holds it gently with a pincer grip. He makes a small circular shape with a single line through one edge. Moving his hand to a different space on the page, Ben draws another circular shape, which is slightly larger this time. Ben makes two more circular shapes in the empty space between the first two shapes, revealing four circular marks at the top of his page. He adjusts his stance and then makes a series of quick linear marks next to the first circular shape.

Ben then removes his willow stick and hovers over the centre of the page to make a larger circular shape. This time he slows his pace slightly and moves his willow stick to the top of the shape and then back down, not touching the paper, but seemingly thinking about where to place his next mark. He then adds a slow line from the bottom of the shape, and then another, which he joins up to the first.

He draws two more lines diagonally down, this time slightly shorter than before. Then back to the largest of the circles, where he makes three smaller circular shapes within the space, resembling facial features. He then draws two lines on top of the circle and a squiggle, and then two more lines coming outwards from the main “body” of the drawing which resembles “arm-like” marks.

Ben steps away from his drawing and immediately smiles at me with his tongue hanging out his mouth as he looks back at his artwork. He places his willow stick down on the table, and seemingly ending his activity.

A conversation about Ben's marks

Once Ben had finished drawing, I invited him to tell me more about his marks. Without hesitation, he pointed to the central figure and exclaimed, "That's you!"

"That's me?" I replied with excitement.

Ben smiled broadly, jumping up and down and panting with enthusiasm. Leaning closer to the drawing, I observed, "I can see my head... body."

"I got a body book at home," Ben responded. "...It's got all your skeleton in... 'cause it's got all your skeleton in."

We paused together, quietly observing the drawing before I gently drew Ben's attention to the series of circular marks across the top of the page. Pointing to each one, I asked, "Can you tell me about these bits here?"

With confidence, Ben explained, "Those bits are the lungs what are at the top of my body book."

Repeating his words back to him, I said, "The lungs at the top of your body book?"

"Yeah... at home," he replied, placing particular emphasis on the word *home*. "I got one at home... one body book at home," he continued.

As our conversation moved towards the swirling lines surrounding the figure, we briefly spoke over one another. I heard Ben begin, "And also I got..." before he redirected his attention back to the drawing and continued explaining his ideas.

"Those are the things... they're the windpipes," he said, tracing one of the long lines with his finger from top to bottom.

"The windpipes... that's amazing!" I responded. "Shall we hang it up and show all your friends?"

"First..." Ben muttered quietly under his breath as he reached for the charcoal once more.

Returning to his drawing, he carefully retraced one of the marks that resembled a leg. He paused for a moment, studying the page before adding another short line to alter the shape at the bottom of the limb. After another thoughtful pause, he looked up at me and declared confidently,

"Finished!"

"Finished," I echoed, stepping back to admire his work as he gently placed the charcoal back onto the table.

Ben's decision to put the charcoal down marked the natural conclusion of his exploration.

Analysis of Ben's mark-making with charcoal

This observation offers an insight into how open-ended mark-making materials can support children's creative thinking, communication and emotional expression. Although practitioners described Ben as typically avoiding drawing and painting experiences within the setting, his sustained engagement with charcoal suggests that the material itself invited a different kind of exploration. Rather than producing marks to create a predetermined picture, Ben appeared interested in discovering what the charcoal could do. His movements evolved from rubbing and erasing to continuous flowing lines before gradually becoming more controlled and seemingly intentional.

Throughout the observation Ben demonstrates all three Characteristics of Effective Learning (Department for Education, 2025). Firstly, he shows 'Playing and Exploring' by investigating both the charcoal and the eraser with curiosity. Before creating representational marks, he experiments with rubbing, smudging and removing the charcoal, closely observing the changes this creates. When fibres appear on the eraser, he immediately notices them and proudly shows them to me saying, "*This came off.*" Draper and Arnold (2008) describe mark-making as an exploratory process in which children investigate the properties of materials as well as the marks they leave behind. Ben's fascination with the fibres and changing qualities of the charcoal suggests that his attention was as much on the behaviour of the material as the drawing itself.

Ben also demonstrates 'Active Learning' through his sustained concentration and persistence. Rather than abandoning the activity when marks disappear under the eraser or change through rubbing, he continues exploring, adjusting the pressure he applies and switching the charcoal between his hands. His willingness to revisit marks, alter them and continue developing new ideas suggests he is motivated by the process of discovery itself. This sustained engagement is

particularly significant considering practitioners' earlier comments that Ben usually avoids mark-making activities. It raises questions about whether traditional expectations of drawing may unintentionally limit some children's willingness to engage creatively, whereas open-ended materials such as charcoal remove the pressure of producing a recognisable picture.

Perhaps most significantly, Ben demonstrates 'Creating and Thinking Critically' as his marks gradually begin to change in purpose. Initially, his movements appear exploratory, consisting of large looping gestures across the page. Gradually, these become smaller, slower and increasingly deliberate. The repeated circular forms, the pause before placing subsequent marks and the addition of particular details all suggest that Ben is thinking as he makes his marks. His hesitation before adding further lines indicates thoughtful decision-making rather than random movement. The transition from exploratory marks to what appears to become a representational drawing illustrates how children's ideas often emerge during the process of making rather than being fully thought of beforehand.

What particularly interests me is Ben's changing physical relationship with the materials. At first his whole arm moves energetically across the page as he rubs the eraser back and forth. Later his grip becomes gentler and more controlled as he uses a pincer grasp to make smaller, more intricate marks. These changing movements suggest that his body is thinking alongside the material.

As a creative practitioner, I made the conscious decision not to speak during Ben's exploration. Having observed him during previous sessions, I wanted to resist the temptation to ask questions or interpret his marks while they were emerging. Instead, I chose to watch closely, allowing his ideas to unfold naturally. Looking back, I think this silence was important. Had I asked, "What are you drawing?" too early, Ben may have felt pressure to name or explain marks that were still evolving. By waiting until he had finished, I hoped to communicate that the process itself was valued rather than any particular outcome. This approach reflects Malaguzzi's belief that children construct knowledge through active exploration, relationships and encounters with materials, with adults acting as co-learners who carefully listen to and support children's emerging ideas rather than directing them towards predetermined outcomes (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012).

Reflecting further, I wonder whether the choice of charcoal itself contributed to Ben's engagement. Unlike pencils or felt-tip pens, charcoal is unpredictable. It smudges, breaks, erases and leaves visible traces of movement. The *Mark Making Matters* guidance (Early Education, 2021) suggests that rich mark-making experiences depend upon children encountering varied materials. In this observation, the charcoal appeared to encourage experimentation through its responsiveness to pressure, movement and touch. Equally, the presence of the eraser became an important creative tool rather than simply a means of 'correcting mistakes'. Ben repeatedly alternated between making and removing marks, treating both actions as equally valuable parts of his exploration.

The observation also highlights the creative potential of charcoal as what might be considered an intelligent material - one that actively invites investigation, responds to children's movements and continually offers new possibilities for exploration. Unlike more conventional drawing tools commonly used in early years settings, charcoal encourages children to work with

their whole bodies, varying pressure, movement and touch to discover the marks it can make. Throughout this observation, I noticed how Ben moved fluidly between rubbing, smudging, erasing and drawing as each action revealed new possibilities. As the Early Education (2024) *Encounters with Charcoal* guidance suggests, charcoal invites children to explore process over product, allowing ideas to evolve through movement, touch and playful enquiry rather than through the expectation of producing a finished drawing.

Reflecting on how my interactions foster creativity

Throughout this observation, I consciously chose to adopt a quiet, observant role whilst Ben explored the charcoal. Rather than asking questions as he worked, I wanted to allow his ideas to emerge naturally without feeling the need to explain or justify his marks. Looking back, I believe this created a space in which Ben could become fully absorbed in the activity. My role was not to direct or intrude upon his thinking but to notice it carefully and respond once he had indicated that he had finished.

When Ben chose to tell me about his drawing, I responded with genuine curiosity rather than evaluation. Instead of naming his marks or assuming what they represented, I invited him to explain them in his own words. When he pointed to the central figure and announced, "That's you!" I listened and responded with interest. As he described the lungs, windpipes and body book from home, I repeated his words back to him, demonstrating that I was listening and valuing his interpretations. This type of sustained shared thinking enabled Ben to elaborate upon his ideas whilst maintaining ownership of the conversation.

The interaction also recognises the importance of responding with open-ended prompts such as, "Can you tell me about these bits here?" as demonstrated in Craft et al.'s (2012) concept of possibility thinking, where adults create conditions for children's thinking to develop rather than directing it towards predetermined outcomes. The drawing therefore became more than a product; it became a shared space for dialogue through which Ben communicated his ideas, experiences and understanding of the world. This reflects Draper and Arnold's (2008) view that children's marks become increasingly meaningful when adults value them as acts of communication rather than simply assessing what has been drawn.

Reflecting on how I could unintentionally hinder creativity

Reflecting critically on my own practice also raises questions about how my interactions may have unintentionally influenced Ben's creative thinking. Although I deliberately remained silent during the mark-making process, my questions afterwards inevitably directed Ben's attention towards particular aspects of the drawing. For example, by pointing to the circular marks and asking what they represented, I may have encouraged him to give meaning to those areas that interested me, rather than allowing him to decide what was important for him.

Similarly, my enthusiastic response to Ben's explanations and my suggestion that we should "hang it up and show all your friends" reflected my desire to celebrate his achievement. However, I now wonder whether this emphasis on displaying the finished drawing subtly shifted the focus from the creative process towards the final product. Fortunately, Ben immediately redirected the interaction by returning to his drawing and making further marks before announcing that it was "Finished!" This response reminded me that children often know when

their work is complete and may continue refining their ideas long after adults assume they have finished.

Looking back, I also wonder whether I could have deepened my understanding of Ben's thinking by asking better open-ended questions and allowing longer periods of silence. Had I simply observed him revisiting the drawing, perhaps he would have continued to talk about his ideas without my prompting. This reflection reminds me of the importance of practitioners remaining sensitive to children's ownership of their creative processes and recognising that knowing when to step back may be more valuable than stepping in. Maintaining this balance is not always straightforward and requires practitioners to continually reflect on how their interactions shape children's creative thinking.

Child's perspective: What did Ben see?

Inviting Ben to revisit the video several weeks later offered an interesting insight into what remained significant for him. Rather than describing the physical process of mark-making, Ben immediately recognised himself engaged in the activity, explaining, "I was drawing... in the conservatory yesterday." Although the event had taken place some time before, his response suggests that the experience had remained memorable.

As we watched together, Ben continued to give meaning to the marks he had created. The circular forms became "stomach... kidneys", whilst other marks transformed into "the lights" and "a car that I'm driving." Interestingly, these interpretations differed slightly from those he had shared immediately after completing the drawing, when he had spoken about lungs and windpipes. Rather than viewing these different responses as inaccuracies, I wonder whether they instead illustrate the fluid and evolving nature of children's symbolic thinking. The meanings attached to the marks were not fixed; they appeared to develop and change as Ben revisited his drawing and generated new narratives.

Watching the video also reinforced the importance of revisiting children's creative experiences over time. Rather than asking Ben to recall what he had intended during the original observation, the video appeared to stimulate fresh thinking and new interpretations. This raises interesting questions about whether children's reflections should be viewed as recollections of past thinking or as new acts of creative meaning-making in themselves. It also suggests that revisiting documentation may reveal not only what children remember, but how their ideas continue to evolve over time. Reflecting further, I also wonder whether sharing the video with Ben's family to hear their thoughts and observations may have offered an additional perspective on his creative thinking. Throughout our conversation, Ben repeatedly referred to a 'body book' he had at home, suggesting that his drawing may have been influenced by experiences and interests beyond the preschool environment. Hearing from his family may have provided a richer understanding of these connections, revealing how his creative ideas were shaped across different contexts and offering further insight into the knowledge, experiences and fascinations that he brought with him into the setting.

Summary

This observation illustrates how creative learning can emerge through children's interactions with open-ended materials, thoughtful observation and responsive adult engagement.

Throughout the experience, Ben demonstrated all three Characteristics of Effective Learning by investigating materials with curiosity, persisting in his exploration and gradually developing complex ideas through his marks. His creativity was characterised by experimentation, symbolic representation and meaning-making, revealing that mark-making can become a powerful “language” through which children communicate their thinking (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards, Gandini and Foreman 2012).

Reflecting on my own role as a creative practitioner, I recognise that my most effective contribution was creating time and space for Ben's ideas to unfold before inviting him to share their meaning. Through careful observation, active listening and open-ended dialogue, my aim was to support rather than shape his thinking. At the same time, reflecting critically on my practice has highlighted how easily adult questioning, praise or assumptions can unintentionally influence children's creative processes. Remaining aware of this tension is an important aspect of working collaboratively with young children.

Finally, I feel that this observation demonstrates the creative potential of charcoal as an “intelligent agent” (Early Education, 2024). Its responsive, tactile and unpredictable qualities seem to provoke Ben to investigate, revise and transform his ideas through movement, touch and wonder. The charcoal was not simply a drawing tool; it became an active partner in Ben's exploration. This seems particularly significant given the staff's earlier observations that Ben typically avoided drawing and painting activities within the setting and that this level of sustained engagement with mark-making was not his usual choice of activity. I wonder whether the responsive qualities of charcoal – its softness, crumbliness and capacity to smudge and transform – reduced some of the pressures often associated with drawing. Rather than expecting precision and accuracy, the material appeared to invite experimentation, allowing Ben to engage with mark-making through movement, curiosity and discovery. This seems particularly significant given practitioners' observations that Ben would not normally choose drawing or painting activities. In this observation, the material itself appeared to become an invitation into creative learning, illustrating how carefully chosen open-ended resources can enable children to express ideas in ways that more conventional mark-making experiences may not (Early Education, 2024; Draper and Arnold, 2008; Bate, n.d.).

References

Bate, K. (n.d.) Early mark-making in action. Bright Futures North West Early Years Stronger Practice Hub. Available at: <https://www.strongerpracticehubs.org.uk/hubs/nw/bright-futures-nw-ey sph/resources/early-mark-making-action> (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Craft, A., McConnon, L. and Matthews, A. (2012) ‘Child-initiated play and professional creativity: Enabling four-year-olds’ possibility thinking’, *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 7(1), pp. 48–61.

Department for Education (2025) Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework: For group and school-based providers. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Draper, C. and Arnold, C. (2008) Mark Making Matters: Young Children Making Meaning in All Areas of Learning and Development. Nottingham: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Available at: https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Mark_Making_Matters.pdf (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Early Education (2024) Charcoal. Arts and Creativity Everywhere. London: Early Education. Available at: <https://early-education.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Charcoal.pdf> (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (2012) The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation. 3rd edn. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Case Study 7: Bobby: Clay interaction

Jasmine Snail (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

In this study, I position myself as a creative practitioner working with Bobby and Sarah. My role as creative practitioner creates a potential bias. I am aware that my presence may influence the child's behaviour. I am also aware of how I could be biased in how I interpret the child's actions. To counter this, I sought out the opinions of others - my fellow creative practitioners and the staff at the setting - so my observations are triangulated. This helped ensure that my analysis of the child's behaviour was less subjective.

Bobby

One case study child is Bobby, aged 3 years. Bobby's parents both work full time. Bobby attends the setting on Wednesdays and Fridays from 7.30am to 12 noon. Bobby's grandmother also provides childcare. Bobby is in the pre-school room with children aged 2 to 4. His keyworker does not usually work on a Friday when our sessions took place.

Bobby interacting with clay

Bobby is standing at the clay table with two other children. The clay table has been set up in the setting's outdoor area. There are large clumps of clay scattered and piled on the table along with bamboo sticks. Another pot of bamboo sticks is on the floor to the left-hand side of the table. There is ambient music playing in the background. Bobby is wearing an apron over his clothes. His fingers and hand are coated in clay as he has been at the clay table for a while before the video recording.

Initially Bobby removes a small piece of clay from his finger and then reaches over the lumps of clay and grabs pieces furthest away from him on the table. Then he grabs full fists of clay in both hands and scrapes it towards him. He lets go and wipes his hands together whilst looking at something off camera to the right and licking his lips at the same time. Bobby faces back towards the table and grabs two full fists of clay and reaches them up to his shoulders. Whilst this is happening the boy to Bobby's left begins taking off his apron and walks away from the clay table. Bobby throws the two lumps of clay in the direction of the boy. First with his right hand and then moves some of the clay in his left hand over to the right and throws again. Bobby smiles and looks around after throwing the pieces of clay. He brings the remaining clay in his left hand over to his right again by bringing it down and gently touching the table with the clay whilst holding on with both hands. He then lets go with his left hand, brings his right hand up to shoulder height and drops the pieces of clay on the floor. Off camera, the child to Bobby's left also leaves so Bobby is now at the table alone.

Bobby then goes to pick up a large clump of clay using both hands and moves his whole body towards it preparing to use a lot of strength, then quickly changes his mind and stands up again. Bobby makes two fists with thumbs upright and twists slightly from side to side with his body whilst looking at something off camera to the left then down towards the bamboo sticks in a

pot. He grabs a bamboo stick with his right hand and pulls a piece of clay off the stick with his left hand and drops the clay on the floor. Bobby gives the clay on the table one tap with the long side of the stick. The clay briefly sticks to the bamboo stick as he pulls away. Bobby moves the position of the stick to vertical and pushes the short end into the clay. He attempts to do the same again, adjusting the position of the stick on the clay so it enters in an exact spot. When he goes to press down, the lump of clay falls from the pile onto the table and the stick slips. Bobby pushes the short end of the stick into the clay once more with his right hand. He switches to his left hand to pull the stick out and pushes it back in again. This time the clay is stuck to the stick as he brings it up. Bobby brings the stick and lump of clay up to his face and looks at the clay briefly then brings it over his head and back down forcefully to make the clay fall onto the table.

Whilst sticking his tongue out, Bobby repeatedly pokes the bamboo stick sometimes hitting the clay and sometimes hitting the table. He then brings the stick between two lumps of clay and bounces each side repeatedly back and forth. He brings the stick up and pokes the clay two more times then throws the stick on to the clay. He takes off his apron and walks away from the table indicating he is finished with the activity.

Analysis of Bobby interacting with clay

Clay as a material was introduced eight sessions previously and it has been available each week since then. Bobby would often spend time at the clay table for a period of time in the sessions. Therefore he is very familiar with it as a material. The bamboo sticks were also consistently available for the children to use with the clay in previous sessions. The EYFS framework states “frequency, repetition and depth of their [children’s] experiences are fundamental to their progress in interpreting and appreciating what they hear, respond to and observe” (Department for Education, 2025, p. 11).

In the video, Bobby displays many of the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Bobby is repeatedly “playing and exploring” (Early Education, 2021) the clay as a material particularly in how he can manipulate it with the bamboo stick. He responds to what he finds by repeating actions, for example, when he discovers the feeling of bouncing the stick between pieces of clay.

Bobby is displaying “active learning” (Early Education, 2021) through concentrating on the activity for a long period of time. The video only shows a snapshot of the time Bobby spent at the table as beforehand he had been interacting with the clay and another child at the table for a sustained period of time. You can also see him enjoying what he set out to do, another feature of active learning, in his smile after throwing the clay in the direction of the child walking away.

The throwing of the clay could be interpreted as an invitation from Bobby to continue engaging with the other child, as he had been before. Throwing the clay, especially when thrown in the direction of another child, can be interpreted as risky. It is risky because of the potential harm if it hit a child, but also because of the vulnerability of the interaction not being returned. Burnard et al. (2006) conceptualise risk taking as an inherent feature of possibility thinking and therefore

creative thinking. Anna Craft supports this by arguing that possibility thinking “is a language that stimulates creativity and is used to translate learning experiences into creative learning” (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003, p. 1). Although this potential attempt to engage the other child was unsuccessful, Bobby was happy to continue interacting with the clay alone.

There are multiple instances where Bobby engages in throwing the clay. This can be categorised within the Trajectory Play Schema. Chris Atthey suggests that repetition is fundamental to children’s learning, defining schemas as “a pattern of repeatable behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and that are gradually co-ordinated” (Early Education, 2021). These repeated actions allow Bobby to better understand the clay as a material and manipulate it to his desired effect as a result.

An EY practitioner commented in the session this video took place, that it was good to see Bobby being so engaged with the clay. They described that he can often be very physical in his play which can cause upset in some of the other children. They suggested that it was nice and surprising to see Bobby involved in an activity that was more delicate and fine motor focused for such a long period of time.

Child’s perspective: What did Bobby see?

I showed the video back to Bobby four times on two occasions in the same session to get his perspective.

On the first occasion we were in the setting’s outdoor area. Before showing Bobby the video, I asked if I could show him something on the tablet. I pressed play on the video and I asked Bobby “What can you see?”. Bobby responded, “That’s Bobby,” showing that he recognised himself within the video. We watched the video in silence for about 20 seconds and then I prompted him again saying “What is Bobby doing?” Bobby said “I don’t know.” I prompted him again and said “What can you see?” Bobby leaned in very close to the tablet screen, so his face was about five centimetres away and said “What is he doing?” Bobby continued, “He’s doing something.” I said “Yeah” encouraging him to say more. Bobby smiles and says “Well, he’s got some dirt.” “Some dirt!” I said in response and then I asked, “What is he doing with the dirt?” The video finished and Bobby said, “It’s finished”.

I asked Bobby if he would like to watch it again and he nodded. We watched the video for a second time and Bobby appeared to lose interest. Whilst we were watching other children began to come over and comment on the video. Another child said “Is that Luca?” I asked Bobby “What can you see Bobby?” and Bobby replied “Luca? Is it?” After some time I asked again “What’s happening in the video Bobby?” He looked towards me and we shared a smile. Bobby then turned his body away and looked out into the garden. He looked back towards the video again briefly before it stopped.

On the second occasion both myself and another creative artist (Richard) watched the video with Bobby. Bobby recognised himself in the video again when Richard asked, “Who’s that?”

When asked by Richard “What is Bobby doing?” Bobby responded with a phrase that was difficult to make out but sounded like “He’s doing the glue”. Bobby repeats the phrase “He’s doing glue” again. I asked, “What else is Bobby doing?” and Bobby said, “I don’t know, he must be doing something”. Bobby laughed when the video showed Bobby pushing the stick into the clay. Bobby says, “digging holes”. The video finishes and I ask Bobby, “shall we watch it again?”

We began watching it a second time. Bobby laughs again and “that’s Luca” recognising the other boy with Bobby at the clay table at the beginning of the video. I ask “What can you see?” but Bobby doesn’t respond. I can see he is beginning to lose interest, so I say “Ooo! What’s Bobby doing?” to bring his attention back to the screen. About halfway through the video Bobby said “I’m finished” indicating he was ready to stop watching.

Robson argues that “...all acts of creativity must, by their nature, involve some creative thinking” (Robson, 2014) and the Reggio Emilia approach views clay as material particularly suited to stimulating creative thinking within children. Clay is classified as an intelligent material due to it being rich in potential and transformation (Keyte-Hartland, 2019). In the Reggio Children Webinar, Children and Clay, clay is described as “a malleable material, highly sensitive to manipulation. Thanks to its creative, exploratory, and transformative properties clay suggests ways of learning, stimulating the senses and imagination” (Reggio Children, 2020). Bobby’s description of the clay as “dirt” and his activity as “digging holes” suggests the clay stimulating his own imagination, therefore thinking creatively about his interaction with the clay.

This could also evidence Bobby “making links” therefore displaying “creative and critical thinking” (Characteristics of Effective Learning). ‘Digging holes in dirt’ could be something that Bobby has done himself previously or seen others do and he is making the link between this and his interaction with the clay. It is likely Bobby is recognising the similarities between clay and soil or even exhibiting previous knowledge that clay comes from the ground.

Parent perspective

At the family session, I spoke to Bobby’s mum. She had seen the video of Bobby interacting with the clay in a series of videos of children from the setting at the end of the family session. Bobby’s mum told me that he “loves” the sessions and he often talks about them at home.

Richard asked her “Is Bobby creative at home?” Bobby’s mum said “Yes, he loves it”. She described him loving painting and cars in particular.

References

Burnard, P., Craft, A. and Cremin, T. (2006) ‘Documenting “possibility thinking”: a journey of collaborative enquiry’, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 14(3), pp. 243-262. doi:10.1080/09669760600880001.

Department for Education (2025) *Early years foundation stage statutory framework: for group and school-based providers*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Early Education (2021) *Characteristics of Effective Learning*. Birth to 5 Matters. Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/overview-characteristics-of-effective-learning-and-areas-of-learning-and-development/> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Early Education (n.d.) *Schemas: repeated patterns of behaviour*. Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/schemas.pdf> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Jeffrey, B. and Craft, A. (2003) 'Creative learning and possibility thinking'. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 11-13 September 2003.

Keyte-Hartland, D. (2019) 'Intelligent materials: agency and aesthetics', *Early Education Journal*, 89, Winter, pp. 10-12.

Reggio Children (2020) *Children and clay* [Webinar]. Available at: <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/rc/education/webinar-on-demand/children-and-clay-multi/> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Robson, S. (2014) 'The analysing children's creative thinking framework: development of an observation-led approach to identifying and analysing young children's creative thinking', *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(1), pp. 121-134. doi:10.1002/berj.3033.

Case Study 8: Sarah: Tissue Paper

Jasmine Snail (Take Art Creative Practitioner)

Sarah is four years and one month old. She attends the setting from 8am to 4pm on one day and 8am to 12noon on two other days. Sarah has a mum and dad and one older sister who attends Reception class at another school. She is in the pre-school room with children aged 2 to 4. Sarah's dad often works away from the family home. Sarah's key person worked when the Take Art sessions were taking place.

Sarah interacting with tissue paper and Creative Practitioner

Sarah and I are interacting with tissue paper and glue in the setting's outdoor space. A large sheet of paper is clipped between two metal poles creating a large area to work on. The large paper sheet already has many different pieces of coloured tissue paper glued on. The video shows another child is also gluing with a paintbrush onto the paper but there are more children around us off camera. Sarah is standing up with a paintbrush in her right hand, and I am sitting below her, closest to the camera holding a stack of small squares of green and purple tissue paper. Off camera, a pot of watered down PVA glue is on the floor below the large tissue paper.

At the start of the video, Sarah is applying glue with a paint brush to the large paper directly below a line of four green tissue paper squares. Sarah turns to look at me as I get a green tissue paper square ready and hold it up to Sarah. Sarah dabs the paintbrush on the paper where she was gluing. I say "There?" and stick the tissue paper square on the paper, continuing the line whilst Sarah watches. Sarah applies glue over the whole line with the paintbrush. Sarah reaches down to get more glue on the paintbrush and moves back up to apply glue in the space below this tissue paper line. At the same time, I get another green tissue paper square ready. Sarah taps the space below the line with the paintbrush, and I stick the tissue paper square in that position. Sarah reaches down to get more glue on the paintbrush.

I am briefly distracted by some other children using the glue and Sarah watches the back of my head. Sarah sings "You've got a bun", swings back and then forward, tapping the bun on my head with her left hand. I respond, "I do!" whilst getting another green square ready. Sarah says in a slight sing-song way "My hair is coming out" and combs her left-hand fingers through her hair. I say, "Yeah, your hair's just nice and free" and I shake my head as if to toss my hair. Sarah strokes her hair with her left hand. Sarah sings again "There's clips on thereeee" and tosses her hair. I say, "You've got a clip - there" and tap the clip on the right side of her hair with my little finger. Sarah reaches up and touches the clip then tries to find the clip on the other side of her head. She turns her head to show me the clip on the left side and I reach up and tap it with my little finger, saying, "I can see it, it's there." We both smile.

Sarah reaches down to get more glue on the paintbrush. I also look down and speak to another child using the glue. Sarah applies more glue below the tissue paper square line and then says loudly "I need another square. I need a purple square!" She points to the purple squares in my

hand with the paintbrush and her voice goes higher on “purple”. I say “A purple square, okay” and turn the pile over in my hand to get one. Sarah watches me do this then dabs the space below the line firmly and jumps back excitedly whilst I place the purple square. Sarah jumps again when the square is in position. “Like that?” I ask. Sarah says, “Now we’re moving on to purple squares” and gestures downwards from the line with the paintbrush. “Okay” I say and get another square ready whilst Sarah strokes the paintbrush across the whole line. She steps back and jumps then says, “More glue”. She reaches down to get more glue on the paintbrush and says, “I need some more glue”.

Analysis of Sarah interacting with tissue paper and me

Sarah appears confident and sure of her ideas. She is leading and directing me, suggesting she has a clear sense of her own ideas in the activity displaying the Characteristic of Effective Learning “creative and critical thinking”. Her critical thinking is particularly evident as she plans and makes decisions about tissue placement and reviews her approach, deciding to switch from green to purple. When Sarah tells me she would like a purple square, her voice goes higher on the word purple suggesting it is deliberate to emphasise the difference from the green squares we had used before.

Throughout the project, Sarah has been an active and confident participant. She often has clear ideas that she sets out to achieve with the help of a creative artist or by sometimes enlisting the help of other children. Sarah watches me closely in my involvement, bringing me back into the activity when I begin to engage with other children. Robson identifies “involving others” as one aspect within the Analysing Children’s Creative Thinking Framework (2013).

Sarah also appears to “make links” (Characteristics of Effective Learning) by displaying her sense of grouping and sequences with the line of square tissue paper. Sarah directs me to place the tissue paper directly below the previous one creating a clear pattern.

The video shows only a portion of the time we spent interacting with the tissue paper together, demonstrating Sarah’s “active learning” (Characteristics of Effective Learning) and sustained involvement and concentration on the activity. You can also see her enjoyment of achieving what she set out to do, another feature of “active learning” (Characteristics of Effective Learning), in her smiling and jumping towards the end of the video. Prentice suggests that active involvement is necessary for creativity to grow and thrive in an educational setting (Prentice, 2000).

Sarah’s perspective: What did Sarah see?

I showed this video to Sarah. She had returned to nursery that day having been off for two weeks whilst she recovered from illness and surgery.

I showed Sarah the video three times on two occasions in the same session.

On the first occasion, we are sitting in the outdoor space of the setting. Sarah has scissors in her hand and begins to cut string with these whilst we watch the recording. Other children come over and comment on the video. I explain before pressing play that I'm going to show Sarah a video of me and her from a few sessions ago. Another child obscures the screen, and I ask him to move back so Sarah can see. I say "Sarah what can you see?". Just before the video shows Sarah tapping my bun, Sarah says in a sing-song way "I took my hair out." I say "Yes!" and I prompt Sarah again "What's happening?" Sarah doesn't say anything. Sarah is no longer looking at the video; she becomes occupied with cutting string with the scissors and starts negotiating sharing the scissors with another child. I ask her, "What can you see in the video?". Sarah says nothing and then comments on the scissors she is using. Sarah leaves looking for more scissors.

I decided to watch the video with Sarah again as I felt the other children and scissors were too distracting on the first watch. On the second watch I invite Sarah to watch the video in the reading corner. It is quieter and no other children are around. Before pressing play I say, "Tell me what you can see." After pressing play, Sarah immediately says "There's me." She then says, "There's Rosie", referencing the other child that appears in the video. Interestingly, Sarah doesn't say she can see me in the video.

I ask her, "What's happening?" Sarah says nothing but continues to watch. I ask, "What are you doing?" Sarah responds, "I'm painting". She then says, "That's the days when it was windy", I agree then she says "It - look - my hair was blowing". "Blowing in the wind?" I respond. The video starts playing again. I ask "What else can you see?" Sarah says nothing. After about 20 seconds I point to the screen and say, "What could this be?" Sarah says "I was painting. I was painting with glue, and I needed little squares because I'd done dots." She looked some more and said, "Now we'd already done some there and now we're doing this one too." This was referring to changing to purple squares. The video ended and I asked, "Would you like to watch it again?" Sarah shook her head no.

Interestingly, Sarah describes the process of using tissue paper and glue rather than an aesthetic or imaginative outcome. Sarah demonstrates she had a clear plan and goal whilst gluing with the tissue paper suggesting the squares were necessary to create "dots". She also recognises the decision to change from green to purple squares in her last statement. This suggests both "active learning" and "creative and critical thinking" (Characteristics of Effective Learning). She was actively involved and leading the placement and colour of the squares which links in with having her own ideas. In this video, Sarah is directing the activity with me supporting to allow her to represent this clear vision her statements suggest.

Sarah describes the activity as "painting" and "painting with glue". This shows her "making links" (Early Education, 2021) between the activity in the video and other creative activities she will have done at the setting or at home using a paintbrush.

On both watches Sarah describes her hair. This could suggest that this moment captured in the video was not just about the creative activity for Sarah but also her sense of self. The EYFS

framework states that expressive arts and design are “crucial for developing their understanding, self-expression, vocabulary and ability to communicate through the arts” (Department for Education, 2025, p. 11). Her interest in both her own hair and my hair suggests engaging in the activity gave space for Sarah to recognise the physical differences between us and describe her own appearance. This links in with another area of learning within the EYFS - Personal, Social and Emotional Development.

References

Department for Education (2025) *Early years foundation stage statutory framework: for group and school-based providers*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Early Education (2021) *Characteristics of Effective Learning*. Birth to 5 Matters. Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/overview-characteristics-of-effective-learning-and-areas-of-learning-and-development/> (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

Prentice, R. (2000) ‘Creativity: a reaffirmation of its place in early childhood education’, *The Curriculum Journal*, 11(2), pp. 145-158. doi:10.1080/09585170050045173.

Robson, S. (2014) ‘The analysing children’s creative thinking framework: development of an observation-led approach to identifying and analysing young children’s creative thinking’, *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(1), pp. 121-134. doi:10.1002/berj.3033.