

Research to reflect on: the power of creative methods for talking about sensitive issues with young people



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Working in the creative mode, such as story-telling, crafting, movement or music, can support children and young people to share what matters to them across a range of relationships and sex(uality) education (RSE) issues.¹ These educational approaches have broader application than RSE as they are shown to support social and emotional aspects of learning across the curriculum and whole school environment.

Teachers increasingly incorporate the expressive arts into their RSE work with children and young people, combining creative methods with creative pedagogy where uncertainty and curiosity is folded into the mix (see for example, AGENDA 2020; Hoyle and McGeeney 2019; Renold, McGeeney and Ashton 2020; TIGER 2020; Sexplain 2017; Tender 2012).

This work is backed up by decades of research that demonstrates the value of creativity and the arts for exploring sensitive and taboo topics with children and young people (Kara 2020; Mannay 2016; Thomson 2008). See the chapter by Libby et al. (2018) for an example of using the visual arts to address sexual harassment in school, co-authored with young people. Watch this short film, "[Making Space](#)", which shares the journey of one secondary school undertaking a creative audit to listen to the views of young people.

Research indicates that co-productive creative methods can:

- Support the creation of safe and inclusive environments to feel, think, question and share sensitive, sensitive or difficult issues
- Enable children and young people to articulate experiences and feelings that rarely surface in solely talk-based approaches
- Aide educators in finding out what children and young people do and don't know, and what they would like to learn more about and why
- Facilitate a wide range of expression and discussion so that ideas can take-off and new connections can be made

¹ England refers to 'Sex' in the new 2020 Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) Guidance whereas Wales refers to 'Sexuality' Education in their forthcoming [Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum](#).

The latter is the preferred term in Wales and draws upon the [World Health Organisation's](#) definition of sexuality as the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (Renold and McGeeney 2017). See the [NEU's RSE Guidance](#) for members in England.



But what does it mean to get creative? The following is a summary of six key elements involved in working creatively with children and young people.²

Each element is accompanied by teachers' reflections on undertaking a 'creative audit'³ - that is, using creative activities that invite "children to feel, think, question, and share sensitive or difficult issues, without revealing too much of themselves" (see Renold, McGeeney and Ashton 2020, p.22).

It's a way of bringing Article 12 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child to life by creatively making pupil voice matter on issues and decision-making that affect them.



Becoming IMAGINATIVE

Working creatively and critically can enable children and young people to imagine other lives, identities, families, experiences and ways of being in the world. This is often achieved through fictional stories, drama and visualisation.

Imagination – *the process of forming new images in the mind that have not been previously seen, heard, or felt before.*

"Our focus has been on stories, film-clips, songs, movement and art to explore feelings and to develop children's communication skills around their emotions. We watched the Inside Out film. We named the emotions and the characters and then thought about other words for emotions such as sadness, joy and anger. We took photos of the children pulling different faces and expressing different emotions and used this to talk about how we feel in different situations and when we are with different people. Finally the children drew portraits in the style of Picasso that captured some of the emotions we had been exploring" (Inside Out, primary school case study, in Renold et al. 2020, p.49)



Becoming SENSORY

Working in the creative mode can encourage new responses to familiar or unfamiliar feelings, ideas, movements, concepts or situations. Objects and artefacts crafted through a creative process on what matters to children and young people can also be shared for others to interact with in multi-sensory ways.

"Each person had a box with a piece of material stretched over. They were asked to place rocks on the material to show the pressures on relationships and take them away to show how positive actions can relieve pressures. They also poked holes in the material using pencils to symbolise permanent damage and used water to wet the material as an example of an action that could weaken a relationship (make it wet) but that could be repaired (the material will dry)" (Canvassing Voice, special school case study, in Renold et al. 2020 p. 38)

Humans are **sensate** creatures: sight (vision), hearing (audition), taste (gustation), smell (olfaction), and touch (somatosensation) are the five most commonly recognized senses. The ability to detect other stimuli beyond these senses also exists.

² This summary was co-written by Professor EJ Renold and Professor Gabrielle Ivinson and can be found in the section, 'Be Creative' in the AGENDA resource <http://agendaonline.co.uk/be-creative/>

³ The 'audit' in the 'creative audit' draws from the Latin *auditus*: a hearing, a listening, to perceive.



Becoming CURIOUS

Being creative very often involves learning to unlearn what we think we know, so that we can be curious about 'what matters' to children and young people. This requires an openness to listen to what children tell us, and being able to adapt activities to their interests and needs.

Curiosity – from Latin *cūriōsus*, meaning “careful, diligent, curious” and *cura* “care” - a quality related to inquisitive thinking such as exploration, investigation, and learning.

“Mental health has emerged from the creative audit as something that young people would like more support with so we’ve been trying out ways of exploring mental health creatively...using glitter jars...to talk about how you can experience and manage your emotions” (Shaking Things Up, case study in Renold et al. 2020, p.54)

“[Working with objects] opened up conversations about the topics they were interested in - gender, relationships, body image, violence, pornography, anxiety, parenting. They could set the tone and pace of what they were comfortable talking about” (Shaking Things Up, secondary school case study Renold et al. 2020, p.51)

Becoming ETHICAL

Using creative methods isn't a matter of anything goes. Allowing ideas and expressions to flourish is important, but so is keeping a check on how power relations, norms and inequalities play out (e.g. how are gendered, sexualised or racialised stereotypes reinforced, questioned or challenged).

“We are learning that a high level of skill is required when teaching RSE to young people with ASD and complex ALN. Through the work with young people in the creative audit we also realised that some staff need further training around terminology and inclusivity as we noticed that when staff were helping young people to record their responses they were not always understanding and recording their responses in an inclusive way” (Canvassing Voice, special school case study in Renold et al. 2020 p.39).





Becoming ART-FUL

What makes something **art-ful** is the way an event, artefact or experience unfolds to show you the potential of what more it might become. **Runaway creativity** is the process whereby grey areas can be opened up for expression and discussion, where ideas take off and new connections are made.

“ One student is making a Medusa head with 25 snakes, each representing different gender and sexual identities ” (HeARTs and Minds, secondary school case study in Renold et al. 2020, p.42)

“ I created an activity called Diversity Street where I rolled out a long piece of paper and asked the children to design a street that housed as many family and relationship variations that they could think of...I was amazed by the diverse identities and relationships they chose to include” (Inside Out, primary school case study in Renold et al. 2020, p.46)



Creating SAFE AND INCLUSIVE spaces

Creative methods and pedagogy can support you to create safe and inclusive environments where all children and young people are listened to. By using a wide range of expression you can create spaces for children to feel, think, question, and share sensitive, sensitive or difficult issues, without revealing too much of themselves, such as **what jars them**, what is harmful, what is **fair** or what is **consensual**.

“ A key finding from the creative audit was that young people felt that LGBTQ+ young people were not supported at our school. In response we have set up a new arts-based LGBTQ+ group” (HeARTs and Minds, secondary school case study, Renold et al. 2020, p. 42)

“ I didn't think that the children would open up to me in the first session because I don't usually teach them, but they really did. They loved the activities and the discussions and told me that they wanted to do more” (Branching Out, primary school case study in Renold et al. 2020 p.33)



Examples of working creatively to explore sensitive topics

AGENDA's starter activities offer educators creative ways to support children and young people to think about what matters to them, and what they would like to change. Examples include:

- **STOP/START plates** used to create a 'line of action' on what needs to be changed
- **Skirts made from graffitied rulers** to demonstrate against unwanted touching and abusive comments
- **Glass jars** to collect and share views on how current RSE affects (jars) young people
- A '**runway 4 change**' that invites children to stamp out all the violence in the world
- Working with '**forces' concepts** in the physics curriculum to explore consent and coercive control through sound, movement and glitch art
- **Making gender equality fly with kites and activist ribbons**
- **Raging reliefies to work with the angry feelings** that can come up when you find out about all the gender injustices, discrimination and violence in the world



- **Re-imagining challenging behaviour** with masks, crystal paints and cabinets of curiosity

All of these activities have been developed and adapted to support educators respond to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

See agendaonline.co.uk/agenda-during-covid

References

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Additional Relevant Resources from Academic-Artist collaborations

Creative Research Methods, by Helen Kara

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing

Using Creative Methods to Engage Change with Young People, led by Professor Gabrielle Ivinson, Professor EJ Renold, Dr. Eva Elliott, and Dr. Gareth Thomas

Re-imagining Challenging Behaviour with Professor Gabrielle Ivinson and Dr. Mark Sackville-Forde

Digital Defence in SRE: researching young people's image-sharing experiences with Professor Jessica Ringrose, Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, Sophie Whitehead and Amelia Jenkinson

Creative Education, led by Professor Anne Harris

The AHRC Creative Margins Network, led by Professor Gabrielle Ivinson

The 'Case of Ethics': Using creative methods for ethical research practice, by Victoria Edwards'

The Odd Project: Feeling Different in a World of Education, led by Professor Rachel Holmes, Dr. Becky Shaw, Dr. Amanda Ravetz, Steve Pool, Professor Kate Pahl and Dr. Jo Ray

The Public Science Project led by Dr. María Elena Torre, Professor Michelle Fine, Dr. Brett Stoudt and Dr. Madeline Fox

Socially engaged art and affective pedagogy by Professor Anna Hickey-Moody and Mia Harrison

The Signature Pedagogies Project, by Professor Pat Thomson, Professor Christine Hall, Professor Ken Jones and Professor Julian Sefton-Green

"This is Not a Safe Space": SPARKing Change through Activist Theater by Dr. Dana Edell, Dr. Tasfia Shawlin and Dr. Nicosie Christophe in Talburt, S. ed. 2018. Youth Sexualities: Public Feelings and Contemporary Cultural Politics

Woking Curriculum: Youth, popular cultures, and moving images matter! By Dr. Ligia (Licho) López López

Young Children and their (Extra)Ordinary Things, by Dr. Abigail Hackett

