

“It’s our brains doing what they do.”

Deb Wilenski illustrates why creativity and imagination are vital for young children’s education

Edgar’s family spoke only Polish at home. Shirley’s spoke Italian, and my grandparents spoke to us in Yiddish, but in play we shared a language in common. On the intimate landscape of make-believe we invented community and discovered one another’s true identities.

Vivian Gussin Paley, A Child’s Work

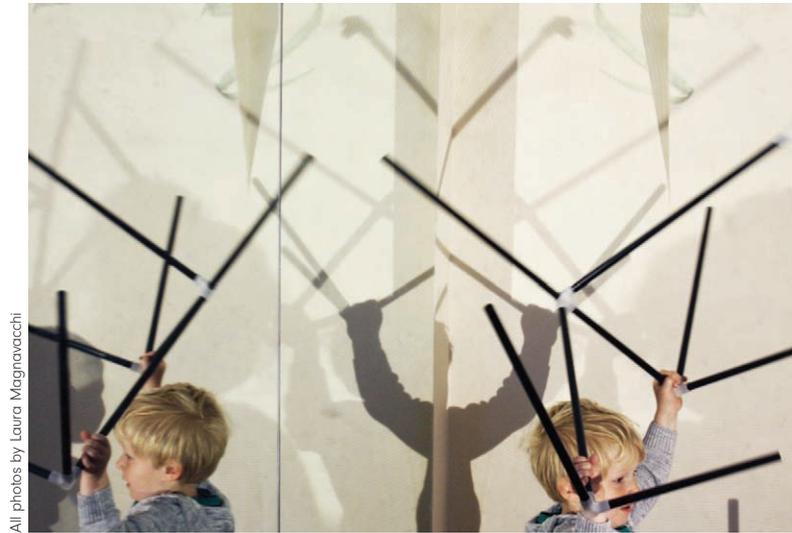
Truth and make-believe are curiously related. In some ways they are opposites and the differences between them are obvious. We don’t expect fiction in a documentary, we don’t mistake a landscape painting for the physical place itself. But the relationship is not so straightforward. There is a creative art to communicating factual knowledge well and a physiological reality to a painting which evokes deep emotions or memories in us.

I have worked with young children and educators for the last twelve years and have seen first-hand how this exchange between truth and creative imagination is one of the most powerful ways in which children and adults learn together. As we build big concepts about life we want to know what others know already, our shared human understandings. But we also need the freedom to create new possibilities by questioning and inventing. Our creative imaginations are perfect for this job and they are big; they won’t be satisfied with an art lesson a week or a small corner of the classroom.

This article explores a recent project example from Reflections Nursery and Small School (in Worthing) to pose two important questions:

- why is creativity vital for children’s education and wellbeing?
- what kind of creative community can educators and children build together?

Reflections Nursery draws inspiration from the educational



All photos by Laura Magnavacchi

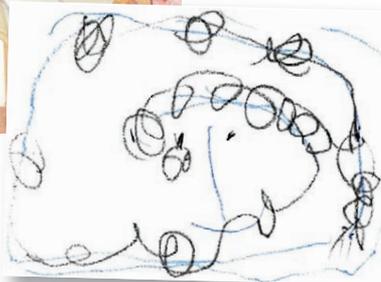
philosophy and approach of the pre-schools and Primary School in Reggio Emilia. We also share values and ways of working with Scandinavian Forest kindergartens and draw on the rich legacy of progressive education in the UK. A fundamental part of our educational approach is to listen to children’s imaginations and ask ourselves ‘in what way can we understand this as true?’ and, given the truth of what we are hearing and seeing, ‘what do we need to do next?’

It is September 2016 and many of the children in the nursery are moving into new spaces. Lillian is part of a closely connected group of 2 and 3 year old friends who often choose to work in the Atelier, a studio for creative exploration and research. For the last six months their interactions have been characterised by inventive drawing, drama, and laughter. The group has moved to the Preschool section together but Lillian often now stands alone, watching the fish in the fish tank in silence. Laura Magnavacchi, Atelierista in this part of the nursery, asks Lillian ‘Why do you like to stand by the fish so much?’ Lillian answers ‘Fish are my friends.’

When a child makes a surprising statement there are many ways we can hear it. We may respond to its eccentricity or humour; we may hear it and not know what to think. But what if our own creative imaginations can accept that the words are straightforwardly true?



Lillian at the fish tank and her drawing



**Darcey (above, second from right)
drawn by Martha from life**

In Lilian's case the fish can console her when nobody else can; the fish literally stop her feeling lost and alone, as friends do. And if this is true, what might we do next with Lilian's surprising idea? Laura invited Lilian to spend more time next to the fish, at a table with drawing and writing materials. She did not insist that Lilian join the other children's conversations but made space for her to carry on exploring silently. These were the creative decisions of the adult educator and they allowed Lilian to become absorbed in an astonishing piece of creative work herself.

For over an hour, filling a whole page in her book, Lillian made these elegant, distinctive, individual marks. When Laura

only has room for one child's truth but for community, the connections formed between people by stories, images and ideas.

'It's our brains doing what they do' is how neuroscientist and engineer Michael Grybkob has succinctly defined creativity. And he has described it this way for a reason. Creativity, he argues, isn't a mythical, special ability but a fundamental way we work and think. We take what we know and reinvent it, we use what is to hand in new and extraordinary ways. Creativity is for everyone, not just the chosen few.

At Reflections this means that children's own ideas are often used to build long-term projects and creativity runs right through our emergent curriculum. From Lilian's feelings of disorientation and the children's conversations about fish and friends, Laura defined a research question for the Atelier which launched a year-long project: Who or what can be a friend?

At first the children's thoughts were literal – they drew the friend who was sitting next to them, friends in other parts of the nursery and family members who were important to them. A series of portraits and conversations developed over many days. Then Eileen introduced a new idea. Pointing to her own drawing she said 'That's my friend duck... Hello duck! I made the body, the beak. That's my duck.'

Can you really create your own friends on paper? In what way can this be true? Eileen's duck provoked reactions as strong as any human friend:

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asked Lilian what she was doing, her reply was even more fascinating:

I am writing families.

I am writing all the fishes' names.

They are all fish there.

Yesterday I was with mummy and a fish kissed me.

Fish are playing together.

The story is called 'Family'.

My daddy, my fish, my sister.

On the page there were over eighty marks. Although Lilian worked silently and separately, in her imagination she was completely connected to a large and extraordinary family. When Laura shared Lilian's story with the other children in the Atelier this made immediate sense; they recognised themselves as part of a family which included children, sisters, parents and fish. The 'intimate landscape of make-believe' not

Eileen: My friend the duck.

Lily: My friend the duck!

Eileen: No! That's my friend the duck. I did it yesterday.

Holly: I am not friend of a duck!

The duck quickly became an important character in the children's collaborative stories and illustrations and from one story many more grew. An unlikely family of parents, children, fish and a duck extended to include dead bumblebees, 'the naughty cat', 'the ugly mum'. The children's explorations became complex and many-layered. They told stories about friendship, but also about loneliness and rejection. In one story the duck loses everybody, cries so much she falls into the mud, and in one devastating line the children tell us 'Everyone was sleeping and the duck was crying, but nobody could hear the duck'.

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Here is the power of imagination in full force. In imagined worlds children encounter the truth of extreme and opposite feelings – being loved and surrounded by friends or losing everyone and standing alone in the world. The narrative experience is complex too: although the children told stories about characters with no friends, they were simultaneously offering their own friendship and empathy, and strengthening the connections in the room through shared story-telling.

Looking back at Lilian’s first story of ‘The Family’ we began to understand it as a radical statement of equality: ‘My daddy, my fish, my sister.’ Parity characterised the children’s ideas about friendship. Friends could be human, friends could be fish, friends could be present or remembered, friends could be invented and narrated. Each kind of friend had its own language and stories, but all were accepted as genuine and important. And then something unexpected happened.

The children were making plasticine models of themselves as babies when Elodie introduced her friend ‘the snake’. A serious disagreement broke out about whether snakes and babies could ever be together:

Sophie: My baby is scared of the snake

Elodie: But this is such a friendly snake

Lilian: Elodie, we need to put a lid on the bumblebees and the snake, so they don’t scare us

Elodie: No, no, no, no! I love them, I love them, don’t put the lid on please!

Sometimes, as creative educators, we need to make space for children’s fascinations, as Laura did when Lilian stood watching the fish. Sometimes we need to provide materials that will add detail and depth to an exploration. Occasionally we choose to introduce a new provocation, with a specific purpose in mind. The argument about Elodie’s snake was clearly important to the children. We decided to introduce a real snake into the Atelier to explore the limits and powers of friendship.

When the children entered the Atelier it was clear they had already welcomed the snake in their imaginations. They moved quietly, whispering, asking ‘Where is Secret?’ – the name they had spontaneously given to this animal who made no sounds. And Secret responded in kind; he moved slowly towards each



The children making plasticine models

child, his tongue tasting the air. It was the beginning of an extraordinary friendship that, more than any other, showed how children enter imaginatively and actually into another individual’s world.



It is not just the children who learn in creative projects. When imagination is valued educators find ways to meet the radical proposals of very young children and their thinking and practice can only grow as a result. Our learning from this project continues to deepen, but even at the time it was profound. We saw children in only their third or fourth year of life express a powerful belief that connection and communication with all things is possible. We followed the children’s detailed and deep explorations not only of friendship but its opposites – loneliness, enmity, abandonment and despair. We realised how complex children’s meaning-making can be and saw clearly how creative languages work together to carry different layers of the same exploration. And we understood that silence, too, is a powerful language of communication.

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Meeting Secret the snake (left) and large scale snake painting (right)