Expert or onlooker?

Alison Mawle

The most significant relationship in developing pupils' creativity is that of the teacher and pupil.

One of the challenges with the visual arts specific to the primary context is managing the shift in role of the teacher at different stages of a unit of work, most critically from that of instructor to facilitator.

In a secondary school the students move to the art room which looks and feels different to the more formal set-up of the regular classroom. Pupils arrive ready for a different kind of experience, and a different relationship with their teacher. In the primary school, both teachers and pupils are required to make that shift without any physical or personal distinction, which can be difficult to manage for both the teacher and the pupil. Being aware of this tension enables the teacher to manage it more effectively by, for example, changing the way they use the space or in the communication of their expectations.

Another tension that exists in the teacher-pupil relationship within art and design education in particular is in the nature of the teacher's intervention while the children are exploring ideas or making.

At the two extremes are no intervention at all for fear of inhibiting the child's creative flow, compared with explicit direction at each stage. This applies to the behaviour of every adult, not just the teacher. Both approaches may be driven by a number of factors other than one's beliefs about a child's creativity, for example personality or the pressure of time.

Clearly there is a place for both, but it is helpful to refer back to the values that one holds with regard to children's creativity to determine the timing and nature of each. When children are equipped with the relevant skills, inspiration and level of challenge, they require and relish the time to explore the possibilities for themselves. However intervention of a supportive and expansive nature can be helpful and is sometimes necessary to support pupils within this process.

On occasion it may require direct instruction or the offering of an 'expert' opinion, preferably invited by the child, but usually a carefully-phrased prompt is much more effective. Adults often have to consciously rein in a tendency to jump

in, often unsolicited, and instead take that moment longer to watch and identify the appropriate question or observation which supports the pupil in working something out for themselves. In this way the control remains with the child and their confidence remains intact. It is by overcoming challenges for themselves that pupils develop the stamina and perseverance needed to learn independently.

In the context of the primary classroom high-quality, individual exchanges with all pupils on a regular basis are not a realistic proposition. There are however more opportunities for pupils to reflect independently or in pairs. It is worth modeling and supporting this process; the rewards are enormous.

The importance of expecting and enabling pupils to find their own solutions to the challenge set cannot be underestimated. By providing the opportunity to do so and by encouraging pupils' to work through their ideas, an intangible transaction takes place.

The child moves from being at best a compliant bystander to an active decision-maker. The subsequent motivation that they experience as a result of this sense of ownership enables them to exert some control over the direction in which the process is going. They develop the confidence to communicate their ideas because they are now 'within' the process rather than simply a willing onlooker.

Children who experience this will want to talk about their work. They can explain their decisions and speak with pride about the difficulties they encountered and the steps they took to overcome them.

This is an edited extract from Ali Mawle's essay in the recently published *Creativity in the Primary Curriculum* (edited by Jones & Wyse)

Ali Mawle is Head of Schools at The National Gallery Education Department, and is a NET Leading Thinker.