Title: Developing Creativity in Early Childhood Studies Students

Abstract:

The study aimed to identify first year BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies students' perceptions of and confidence in, their own creativity, in an East Midlands university in the   United Kingdom and to inform the teaching of a first year Play and Creativity module at the same institution. The Play and Creativity Module makes use of the 'democratic' definition of creativity (NACCCE 1999) and Jeffrey and Wood's (2003) concept of 'teaching for creativity' by encouraging students to engage in practical activities to develop skills and confidence in their own capabilities. Though there is plenty of research which explores these ideas within the field of early childhood there is less research which focuses on best practice in Higher Education. The study identified a clear improvement in students' confidence in their own creativity and their confidence to implement the activities experienced in the module sessions within their own practice. Students developed a deeper understanding of the concept of 'little' c' creativity' (Craft 2002) and the 'democratic' definition of creativity (NACCCE 1999) and recognised the importance of providing a wide range of opportunities and resources for children to develop creativity. The practical activities within the module also supported students' professional skills such as team working, listening to others and the importance of collaboration and reflection on practice. In addition, the practical and procedural elements of practice 'how to do with children' was identified as being an area which was illuminated by completing the module and contributed to professional practice.

1. Introduction

Creativity is a complex and difficult to define concept yet remains central to learning for young children and adults alike and has been a central component of the curriculum in England over the last 50 years, since the Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools (HMSO 1967). Many adults however lack confidence in their ability to be creative, and have a narrow understanding of what constitutes creativity, usually equating creative activity with 'art and craft' or 'recipe- type' activities where outcomes are pre- determined. According to Duffy (2006) creative activities in the early years are often adult directed, and about learning techniques rather than about developing creativity in children.

There is also a popular view of creativity as pertaining to an elite population of people, limited to a select proportion of the population and specific activities (NACCCE 1999).

The 1999 National Advisory Committee for Creativity Culture and Education report 'All Our Futures; Creativity, Culture and Education' (NACCCE 1999) was influential in policy change and resulted in placing creativity at the centre of early years education. As a result of the report creativity was identified as an 'area of learning' in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DFES 2007) and practitioners working with young children were charged with ensuring creativity

retained high priority within their planning. The most recent Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2014) revised by the coalition government, has shifted the emphasis of creativity to *'Expressive arts and design'* which focuses on children expressing their ideas through activities in art, music, movement, dance, role-play, and design and technology. The place of creativity as a cross-curricular approach is given much less emphasis. This new curriculum places an increased focus on 'school readiness' and 'formal learning at year 1' (DfE 2014:1:8 pg 9). This is clearly exemplified in the approach to teaching reading through the 'synthetic phonics' approach, 'fast and first' (Perkins 2015) ; where this single technical approach takes precedent over other methods and children's existing knowledge and understanding is largely ignored. (Levy 2011) Similarly, Duffy (2006) suggests that young children arrive in early years settings, *'full of curiosity and creativity'* (2006:48) which is quickly suppressed when their ideas are not valued by practitioners. For this reason it is important that children's creative potential is both recognised, valued and nurtured by the practitioners who work with them. The place of the arts and aesthetics remains a central 'orientation' within the Finnish Curriculum as identified by Aerila and Ronkko (2015) In their study they identify how adults supported children's own ideas and their interaction with others.

May (2009) recognises the benefits of creativity on a long term scale, claiming that nurturing creative activity when children are young will provide a society of imaginative thinkers and leaders of scientific discovery and business.

Another popular international approach to creativity exists within the Reggio Emilia approach inspired by Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1998) Children are recognised as agents of their own learning and practitioners form a supportive role within this. Emphasis is placed on the environment and on the importance of children communicating with others to determine outcomes to problems and in the production of new ideas (Kim and Darling, 2009).

It is therefore important when educating the emerging early years workforce such as when students are studying degrees, they are aware of the issues highlighted here.

1:1 *Definitions*

In the government report produced 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' (NACCCE, 1999) creativity is defined as a process which refers 'to producing something original' (NACCCE, 1999: 28). The report notes that there are many different opinions from individuals about what is involved with the term 'creativity'. They propose that there are in fact three different definitions of creativity these include a sectoral definition, an elite definition and a democratic definition.

The sectoral definition produced by NACCCE (1999) notes that individuals recognise creativity as being very 'arts' based. The elite definition suggests that it is only the most talented of people that are creative and the democratic definition proposes that everyone can be creative given the right environment and conditions. Despite recognising these three definitions NACCCE (1999) offer their own definition of creativity to be 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value' (NACCCE, 1999:30).Craft (2002) distinguishes between Big 'C' creativity, which describes those who create new knowledge in disparate domains and little 'C' creativity which is described as

involving 'possibility thinking' or a questioning attitude, which asks 'what if?' (Craft, 2002: 57)   Craft (2002) further suggests that little 'c' creativity is part of everyday life, and is within the capacity of us all, given the right skills, resources and opportunities. Interestingly these definitions reflect the NACCCE (1999).

Vernon (1989:94) considered creativity to mean 'a person's capacity to produce new or original ideas, insights, restructurings, inventions, or artistic inventions…….' Wyse and Dowson (2009) point out that this definition highlights the idea that creativity requires originality. They further reflect that we should not in fact be considering creativity as a fixed concept but as something that can change, depending on an individual's own perception of the process. This would therefore suggest that this definition aligns with the 'democratic definition' within the NACCCE (1999) report.

1:2 Practitioner Perceptions of creativity

Myhill and Wilson (2013p.102) state that historically, creativity has been viewed as a personal trait however, they identify that there has been a move away from this thinking, to one where creativity is viewed as being 'framed by cultural values and specific social contexts' suggesting a more fluid definition of creativity. These ideas are further supported by Craft (2005), and Alfonso –Benlliure et al (2013). Myhill and Wilson's (2013) research into creativity and poetry suggests that teachers' conceptualisations of creativity within their study were *'not fully theorised' (pg 108)*. They identify the use of a *'schooled version' (pg 108)* of creativity which does not align with the concept of creativity as defined by authors and others within the field of creative writing. They further identify a disconnect in teachers' understanding of creativity and their unwillingness to embrace activity and behaviour associated with creativity such as risk taking, independence and impulsivity. Davies et al (2004) cited in Myhill and Wilson (2013:103) consider the role of teacher training and the lack of time provided for learning about creativity in teacher training courses, they suggest this may lead to *'contradictory notions of the nature of creativity' (pg103)* and result in teacher practices that focus upon reproducing information and providing correct answers rather than opportunities for creative thinking. When considering the social and environmental factors, Wright (2010:4) highlights that practitioner's support of children's creativity largely depends on their own 'attitudes' to shaping children's environments in order to promote creativity.

1:3 Practitioner confidence and experiences of creativity

Craft (2002) suggests that in order to develop creativity in children, teachers and practitioners need to develop their own creativity in order to support others. This is

supported by NACCCE (1999) which suggests that it is imperative for practitioners who intend to work with children to develop both confidence and competence in their own creativity in order to support the creative abilities of children in their care. The report states, *'teachers cannot develop the creative abilities of their pupils if their own creative abilities are suppressed'* NACCCE (1999:103) Dehouske's (2006) research underpins these ideas and she suggest that early childhood teachers ' ..*must first have an authentic adult experience with the arts'* and untap the 'artist within' (2006:294) Dehouske asserts that if students experience 'feeling like an artist' they are more likely to support risk-taking and self-expression in children and more able to identify and nurture creativity in every child.

Aubrey and Dahl (2013) identify a number of international research projects that highlight the importance of skills and training for teachers to provide a high quality arts education. Garvis (2011) identifies the need for practical experiences as ways to develop skills and capability while Eckhoff (2011) notes the lack of academic instruction received by trainee early childhood educators in the United States. Aubrey and Dahl (2013) suggest that the quality of arts education within United States early years settings is predominately dependant on the expertise and interests of individual teachers. (*Aubrey and Dahl 2013)* Although this research refers to 'arts based education' these principles are relevant for creativity in its wider context within the early years.

Chien and Hui's (2010) research on Early Years teachers in Hong Kong suggested that the teachers lacked confidence in their competence to support and enhance young children's creative development. The teachers *' tended to prefer expected ideas, discouraged further exploration of unexpected or creative ideas'* (Cited in Cheung 2013:141) Cheung highlights that this finding could be partly reflective of strong Chinese values, nevertheless is relevant when considering practitioner confidence. Cheung asserts that in order to develop creativity in early childhood education, policy alone is not enough, teachers need to be equipped with *'the knowledge and strategies necessary for good creative practice' (2013:141)*This involves basics skills and knowledge and the ability to utilise appropriate strategies to foster creativity in children

1:4 Role of practitioner in supporting children to be creative

Craft and Jeffrey (cited in Miller and Deveraux 2004) distinguish between 'creative practice' and 'practice which fosters creativity': in the first example 'creative practice' is described as being flexible and inventive, the role of the adult is to adopt creative and innovative approaches to the curriculum to support learning through identifying possibilities and differences and to utilise a range of different methods in their practice. This in itself however may not necessarily develop creativity in children as it may still be adult-led and may not provide opportunities for children to use and develop their own ideas. The second approach, 'practice which fosters creativity' is described as being learner inclusive, providing

choice and open ended activity. This approach supports individual learning with supportive and sensitive intervention and focuses more on the learner, allowing for children's agency by providing children with more control and opportunities to make their own decisions, use their own ideas and follow their own interests. According to Craft and Jeffery,

> *'Creative practice may, but does not necessarily lead to learner creativity. Practice which fosters creativity is more likely to succeed where learners are included i.e. where the approach is a learner inclusive one.'*
> *Craft and Jeffrey (cited in Miller and Deveraux 2004:11)*

This approach is adopted within the Play and Creativity module which is the focus of the study. Aubrey and Dahl's (2013) study of a creative partnerships project with teachers and artists in the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) highlighted key issues for the teachers involved in the study to enhance creativity. They identify *'the role of teachers as collaborators in a child's learning, rather than transmitters of knowledge' (2013:15)* They advocate a strong educational philosophy which values children's aesthetic awareness, the arts and letters, and propose an integrated project method incorporating all areas of the curriculum which involves discussion and links with the wider community. The study also places emphasis on the importance of *'aesthetically beautiful spaces'* within early years settings which links to the concept of an 'enabling environment'(DFES 2007) as provided by the practitioner.

2. Design and Methodology

2:1 Background to the Study

The research was completed as a case study within an interpretivist paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2013) and used a qualitative, mixed methods approach .The study took place over one semester as part of a first year Play and Creativity Module on a BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies Degree. The module included five practical sessions where students took part in creative activities and then reflected upon their learning by completing reflection sheets. The reflection is an existing part of the module but was utilised within the research with informed consent. The research also utilised two self- completion questionnaires, one at the beginning of the module and a second at the end. The limitations of the research include the variability of responses from reflections, and the fact that only two methods were used. Further to this, students may have felt obliged to take part in the research, as it was presented as part of a module in the first year of their degree. For this reason, the researchers made efforts to reassure students that their involvement was entirely voluntary.

Table 1   The practical Teaching sessions with Theoretical focus

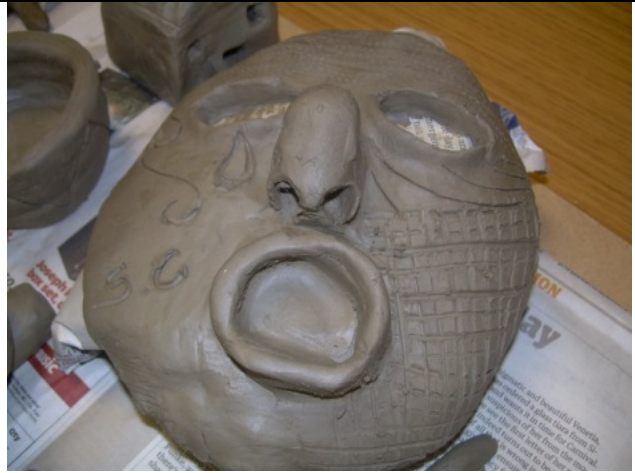|	
Session 1 – Lizard Activity **Theoretical focus:** definitions and barriers to play & creativity In this session students experience some of the barriers to creativity, such as time limits, lack of resources and research opportunities. The barriers are subsequently removed and students work in groups to create a lizard in a form of their choice.	
Session 2 -Mark Making **Theoretical focus:** cognitive development, meaning making through drawing/ emergent writing In this session students are encouraged to consider how mark making begins and explore with malleable materials, graphic materials and printing techniques.	
Session 3 - Sensory Toy **Theoretical focus**: Multi -sensory approaches for inclusion In this session students engage in sensory play activities using malleable materials, music and movement.	

Session 4 -Clay Activities **Theoretical focus:** Role of the adult in teaching skills and 'sustained shared thinking' In this session students consider the importance of learning skills for creativity, and how to use tools and techniques for specific purposes. (in this case clay)	
Session 5 -Tepee building **Theoretical focus:** The enabling environment In this session students work collaboratively in groups to construct a woven tepee using willow and fabric alongside staff and visiting artists.	

The five practical sessions in the Play and Creativity Module were split into two 90 minute sessions comprising a formal lecture section and a practical activity section. At the end of the practical activity section, students completed their reflection sheets.

2:2 Aims of research

The key aims for the research were

- To identify students' understanding of creativity in relation to their practice with young children.
- To determine students' confidence in their own creative ability.
- To determine students' confidence in promoting creativity in young children.
- To identify how the practical elements of the play and creativity module sessions impact upon their understanding of creativity and their practice with children.

2:3 Sampling

The cohort were purposively sampled (Silverman 2010) and consisted of 90 students, 89 female and 1 male in their first year of study on the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies Degree . Of this group 25 were selected as a study group using opportunity sampling (Silverman 2010) from those who agreed to fill in both of the questionnaires.

2:4 Materials

2:4:1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were completed on commencement of the module and on completion of the module and were based on findings from the literature review. The first questionnaire aimed to identify students' existing conceptualisations of creativity in relation to their work with young children, before they had been introduced to authors and theorists in the field through the play and creativity module. Duffy (2006) highlights that many adults have a narrow concept of what constitutes creativity, equating creativity with 'art and craft' and 'recipe like' activities. The questions also aimed to identify students' confidence in their ability to support children to be creative and their confidence in their own creativity. It has been suggested that teachers and practitioners need to develop confidence in their own creativity in order to support others. (Craft 2002) The questionnaire completed at the end of the module aimed to identify how the module and the practical activities had changed or informed students' ideas and confidence in the area of creativity.

2:4:2 Self Reflection sheets

The self- reflection sheets were completed by students at the end of five teaching sessions, each of which had involved practical activities. The reflection sheets were an existing part of the module, but for the purpose of the study permission was asked by the researchers to use the information in the research, to provide contextual information and insights into students learning from the practical activities. The 5 practical activity sessions included:
Session 1 - Making a lizard
Session 2 - Mark making session
Session 3 – Making a sensory toy
Session 4 – Making objects out of clay, and
Session 5 – A tepee making session
For this reason the responses for each session were variable from week to week ranging from 35-12 and decreased as the module neared completion. Students had to agree that the reflections could be used for the research by ticking a yes/no box, so numbers changed from session to session.

2:5 Analysis

The results from the questionnaires and the reflection sheets were collated using 'inductive coding' (Savin- Baden and Howell-Major 2013:422) then compared and analysed. The codes emerged from the responses to the questionnaires and the reflection sheets, based on frequency of student responses. These were: increased confidence, increased understanding, ideas and skills , changed thinking and behaviour, diversity of creativity,

expression of emotion/ideas, originality/own ideas, imagination, and use of tools and resources. Participants' responses were first colour coded, based on key words used, then researchers met to discuss and agree how the responses could be coded into categories to ensure parity and consistency. Some responses were clear and easy to code, others however were more ambiguous. Where responses were unclear, the researchers discussed which code the response best fit. The data was then reproduced based on the codes in the form of charts which allowed comparisons to be made.

2:6 Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the University's Ethics committee, before the research took place. The researchers talked to each group of students at the beginning of the module and they were provided with a detailed letter explaining the research intentions. Prior to the collection of data, students were fully informed of the voluntary nature of the research and of their right to withdraw their information at any time. In the first teaching session students were provided with a consent form which indicated how information from the questionnaire and the reflection sheets would be used. There were then provided with the first questionnaire and invited to participate if they chose to. Some students at this stage chose not to participate.

After each teaching session, all students completed a reflection sheet. For the purpose of the research students were required to identify whether their reflections could be used through a tick box on the form stating 'yes' or 'no'. Voluntary participation and withdrawal was reiterated to students at each point in the study, this was highlighted after each teaching session where the reflection sheets and questionnaires were used. Some students declined consent for their reflection sheets to be used, so for this reason there was variability in responses for each session. To protect student identity, students were asked to place all questionnaires and reflection sheets on a table at the end of the session. This ensured that the researchers were unable to identify who had responded and who had not.

3. Results

3:1 Analysis and discussion of questionnaires:

Twenty five questionnaires were analysed in total. Both questionnaires were analysed together in order to elicit variations or similarities in relation to the research aims. The findings are presented under the research headings previously identified:

- To identify students' understanding of creativity in relation to their practice with young children.
- To determine students' confidence in their own creative ability.
- To determine students' confidence in promoting creativity in young children.
- To identify how the practical elements of the play and creativity module sessions impact upon their understanding of creativity and their practice with children.

3:1:1 Identifying students' understanding of creativity in relation to their practice with young children:

Five key themes emerged whilst analysing the results from the questionnaires in relation to how students would define creativity these were; *Diversity of Creativity, Expression of emotion, Originality/Own Ideas, Imagination and Tools and Resources.*

Table 2: Key themes identified from question 1

Question One – HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE CREATIVITY? KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED:	QUESTIONNAIRE AT THE START OF THE MODULE	QUESTIONNAIRE AT THE END OF THE MODULE
Diversity of Creativity	12	13
Expression of emotion	9	11
Originality/Own ideas	12	5
Imagination	7	4
Tools and Resources	0	3

When defining creativity, all students were able to comment on their understanding of the concept. It was interesting to note that there was a diverse understanding of the term creativity. This was reflected by 12 students in the questionnaire at the beginning of the module and 13 students in the questionnaire at the end of the module. Students commented that creativity was about *'drawing', 'painting', 'writing'* and *'role play', 'drama'* and *'songs'.* This was particularly interesting given the narrow view the literature suggests, that many define creativity as 'arts and crafts' (Duffy, 2006).

'Expression of emotion' featured highly on both questionnaires in relation to students' understanding of creativity. Interestingly definitions of creativity do not specifically highlight the expression of emotion being a key feature of creativity however, Cheung and Mok (2013) state that creativity can be seen as a means of expressing oneself and similarly Wright (2010) notes that creativity is linked to personal expression.

The biggest change evident within both the questionnaire responses was that of originality/own ideas. Twelve students commented that this was how they would define creativity within the questionnaire at the start of the module however, this decreased within the questionnaire at the end of the module to just five. Wyse and Dowson (2009) argue that creativity does not have a fixed definition and is dependent on the individuals own perception. This change in thinking could suggest that once students had been given the opportunity to engage in a range of activities and had the opportunity to critically consider definitions of creativity, that in fact it had led to the recognition that to be creative there does not necessarily need to be the generation of new ideas, but that suggested ideas can be adapted and still show an element of creativity. This can be viewed quite positively

given that students may now have a heightened awareness that creativity is in fact 'a multifaceted concept' (Cheung and Mok, 2013:130). The same could also be suggested in relation to the decrease in the idea of imagination being part of creativity. Seven students in the questionnaire at the start of the module highlighted that the use of imagination defines creativity, whereas only four stated imagination in the questionnaire at the end of the module. It is very evident that imagination features in a large percentage of the definitions put forward for creativity (NACCCE, 1999; Rogers, 2007) however, as suggested by Wyse and Dowson (2009) the recognition of creativity is very dependent on an individual's perception which may change dependent on the experiences they engage in. It is interesting to note that tools and resources only featured within the questionnaire at the end of the module with three of the 25 students highlighting this. This may be as a result of completing the play and creativity module, where during the practical sessions students were given a variety of tools and resources to 'play with'/'use'. These resources were given to enhance student's own understanding and confidence in the use of a variety of tools/resources and consequently then, for them to use within an early years setting. These findings may suggest that students, through the module developed an enhanced understanding of creativity, in that to be creative tools and resources can also be used.

Table 3: Key themes identified from question 2

QUESTION TWO – DO YOU THINK WE ARE ALL CREATIVE OR ONLY SOME PEOPLE?	QUESTIONNAIRE AT THE START OF THE MODULE	QUESTIONNAIRE AT THE END OF THE MODULE
All individuals	25	25
EXPLAIN YOUR REASONING:		
Skill level	15	5
Environment	2	2
Inspiration	1	2
Encouragement	1	2
Understanding	2	0

It was interesting to note, that bearing in mind no taught sessions had taken place prior to completing the first questionnaire, all students (25) felt that all individuals have the ability to be creative. Fifteen of the 25 students in the questionnaire at the start of the module explained their reasoning around why all individuals can be creative. They noted that although everyone has the ability to be creative, there are varying skill levels that are associated with how individuals display that creativity. Students commented that:

> '…….we are all creative but there are different levels and different areas. Some are more creative than others.'

> 'We are all creative but some express it more than others'

This thinking reflects the thoughts of Craft (2002) who considers that little 'c' creativity is evident in everyday life and apparent within us all. Conversely big 'C' creativity considers creativity in its highest form such as the fundamental change in knowledge. This finding would however suggest that students were considering the concept of Crafts (2002) little 'c' creativity.

Even though there is consensus that creativity is a skill evident in us all, students commented that individuals need to be *'inspired'* and *'encouraged'* to be creative. This would suggest that students feel that there is a role for a facilitator (in this case the module tutor) to encourage creativity. Amabile (1996) suggests that there are three factors that influence creativity in an individual these are; social facilitation, modelling and motivational orientation. These three categories not only suggest facilitation and modelling from the tutor but also the important role of peers within this.

Further findings in relation to the role of peers, has been highlighted through the reflection sheets suggesting that in fact, the students felt the role of peers was beneficial.

Table 4: Themes identified from question 3

How confident are you in your ability to be creative?
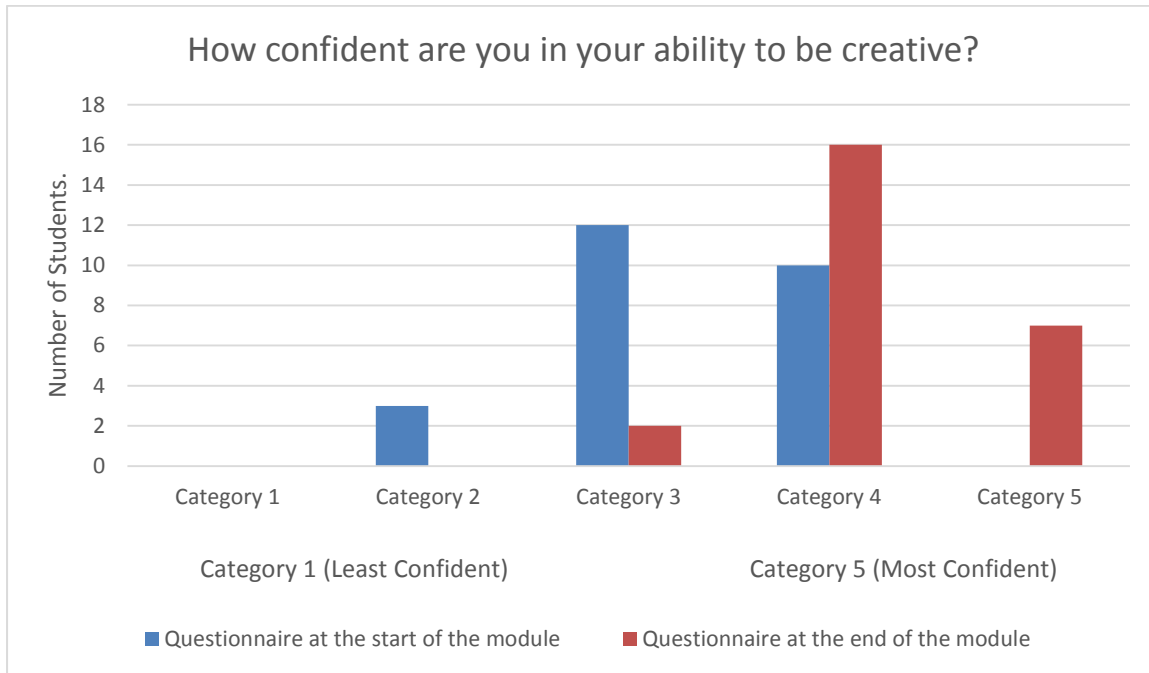
Students were asked in both questionnaires 'How confident are you in your ability to be creative?' Students were asked to grade themselves depending on their confidence. One being that a student did not feel confident at all and Five on the recognition that a student felt very confident in their ability to be creative. There was an evident movement within the questionnaire completed at the end of the module, towards students being more confident in their ability to be creative after completing the play and creativity module. As seen within table 4; seven students became very confident (category five); two graded themselves as having a confidence level of category three and 16 graded themselves as category four, after having completed the module. This would suggest a very positive move towards students' enhanced confidence despite literature suggesting that early year's teachers lack confidence in their own ability resulting in practitioners discouraging children to explore their own creativity (Chien and Hui, 2010).It is highlighted that the role of the practitioner is very important when promoting creativity in young children (Lee and Kempe, 2014) especially in their approach to children's learning. On this premise students were asked to rate their confidence level in promoting children's creativity after having completed the play and creativity module. Again the findings within questionnaire two were very encouraging with students rating themselves predominately at category five (Eight students) 'very confident' and category four (14 students). This may suggest that the opportunity for students to complete an activity based module enables them to find their own confidence and therefore an enhanced confidence in supporting children to be creative. Some authors (Lee and Kempe, 2014; Cheung and Mok, 2013) question this. Given that for some, creativity is recognised as being very much a cognitive process and therefore

a very personal trait, it could be argued that although this may be perceived as a personality trait, individuals still need to be encouraged and inspired to become confident in their ability to be creative.

Given the importance placed upon practitioners having the skills to support children to be creative, students were asked whether they had been supported themselves to be creative in the past. The findings were highlighted as below:
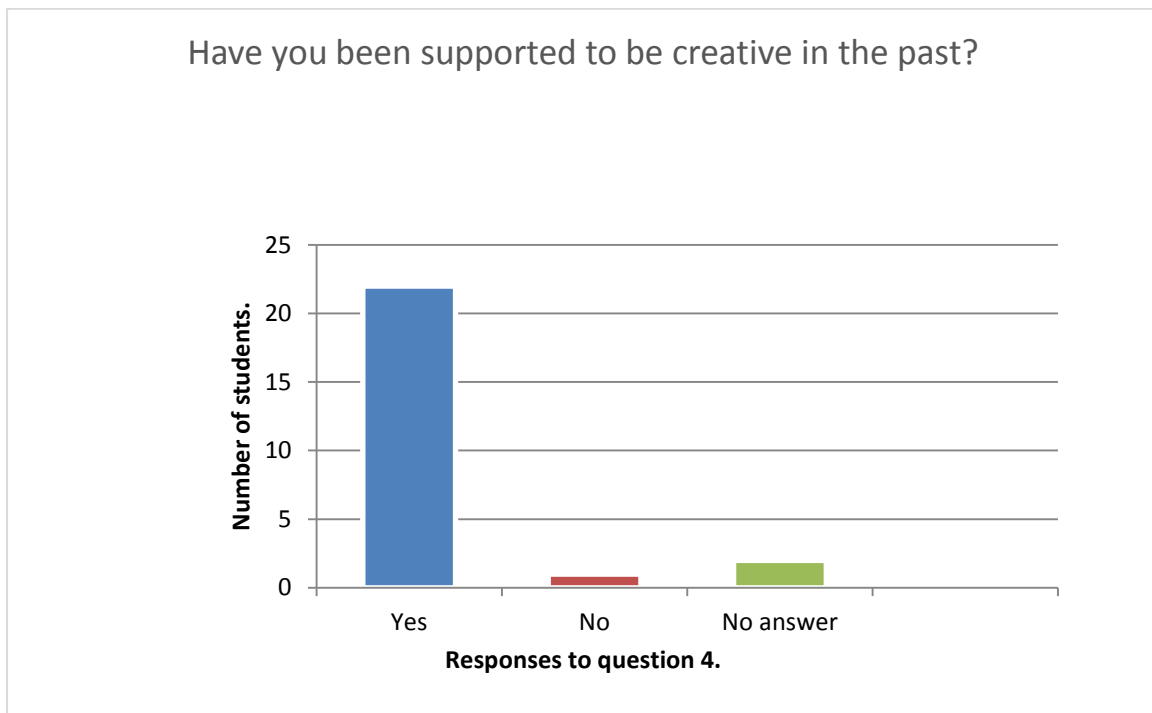
Table 5: Themes identified from question 4

Table 6: Responses to question 4

| QUESTION FOUR – HAVE YOU BEEN SUPPORTED TO BE CREATIVE IN THE PAST?	QUESTIONNAIRE AT THE START OF THE MODULE
EXPLAIN:	
Education	16
Family	4
Work/previous placement	4
Leisure Activities	2

Twenty two of the 25 students stated that they had been supported to be creative in the past, two did not answer and one student stated that they felt they had not been

supported. Sixteen of the students felt that this support had come from education either at school or whilst at college. This is encouraging given the fact that much of the literature indicates that children within the United Kingdom do not always learn in an educational culture which fosters creativity (Lee and Kempe, 2014). Other responses to this included family members (Four students) and work/placement (Four students). It is continually highlighted throughout the literature that practitioners need to be confident in their own creative abilities before promoting children's creativity (Lee and Kempe, 2014). This would suggest that this module is in fact a crucial part of the degree especially at stage one, when students are just starting to embark on their placement practice.

3:1:3 Identifying how the practical elements of the play and creativity module sessions impact upon students understanding of creativity and their practice with children.

Students were asked to comment within the questionnaire completed at the end of the module, with regards to how the play and creativity module had impacted upon their practice with children whilst out in the work place. A number of key themes were identified. These included: *Increased Confidence, Increased Understanding, Ideas & Skills and Changed Thinking and Behaviour.*

Table 7: Themes identified from question 5
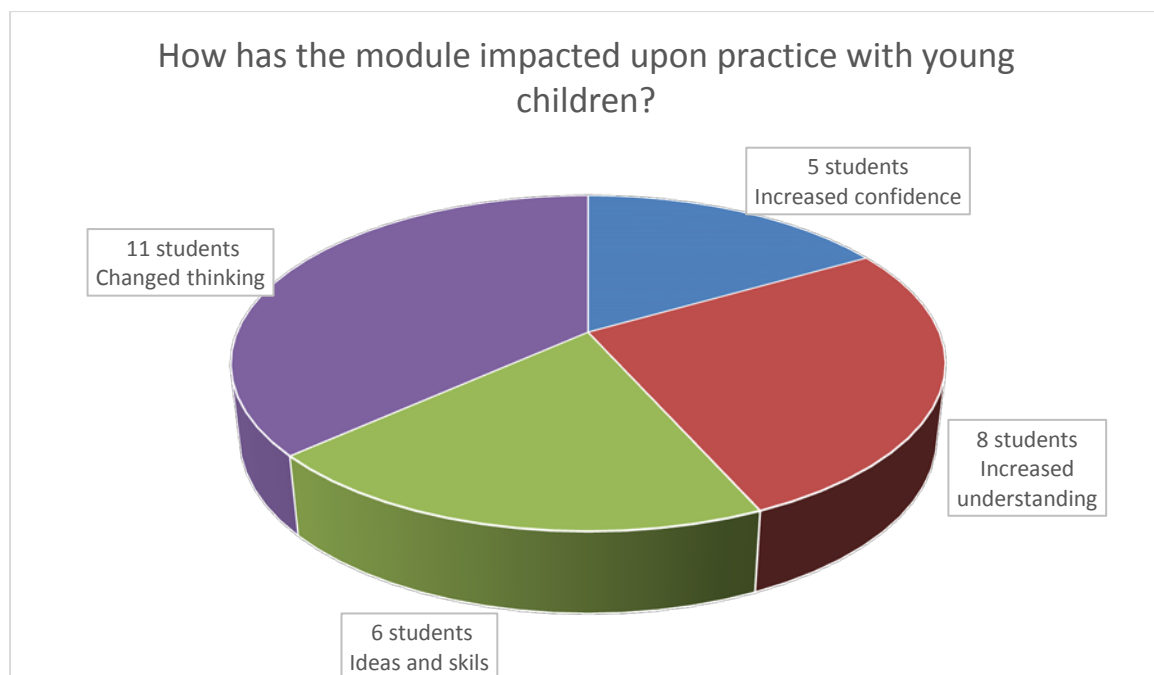
Eleven students reported that the module had changed their thinking/behaviour in relation to their understanding of creativity. Comments from students included:

> *[I now understand] ….'to encourage creativity with no final outcome needed to be creative.'*

> *'Yes it has made me think about how many different ways there are to be creative everyone's creativity is unique to them'*

This also follows in the responses of eight students who highlighted that the module had increased their understanding of creativity. These responses indicate that the module has evidently allowed students to look at their own practice and consider changes they would make when supporting children within the early years setting. This should be taken forward as a positive aspect of the existing play and creativity module, suggesting that the module has allowed students to be critically reflective in their own approach to creativity; a skill 'early years practitioners are increasingly expected' to carry out (Craft and Paige-Smith, 2011: 1).

Six students commented that the module had given them skills and ideas which had directly impacted upon their practice with children. This could suggest that students have particularly found the practical aspects of the module (as also highlighted within the reflection sheets) to be useful when giving them ideas and skills that can be taken into the work place to use with children. Comments from students included:

> *[The module has]…..'allowed me to use the skills learnt and experience these in practice.'*

> *'Loads of ideas to take back to setting.'*

Lastly five students commented that the module had given them increased confidence in their ability to work with children. This again highlights a positive aspect of the play and creativity module. This section has shown a summary of the findings from the questionnaires given to the students as part of this research. Some interesting points have emerged as discussed throughout. An analysis of responses from students in relation to the completed self-reflection sheet follows.

3:2 Analysis and Discussion of reflection sheets:

Students were asked the same four questions each week in relation to the practical task they had completed in that specific session. 'How did you feel about the activity?' 'How did you feel after the activity?' 'What did you learn from the session?' and 'How does this relate to your practice in settings?' The two final questions ' What did you learn from the session?'

and 'How does this relate to your practice in settings?' were of particular interest to the researchers, due to the focus of the research on student confidence in creativity and their role in supporting children to be creative . Responses from the collated reflection sheets were variable and responses were inconsistent however results highlighted five key categories as being most frequently referred to: these were *increased confidence, increased understanding, ideas and skills, changed thinking/behaviour and use of tools and resources.*

Table 8 Collated results from Reflection sheets 1-5

| Questions What did you learn from the session? How does this relate to your practice in settings?						
CODES	**Session 1** Lizard activity 32 responses	**Session 2** Mark making 28 responses	**Session 3** Sensory activities 35 responses	**Session 4** Clay activities 12 responses	**Session 5** Teepee activity 28 responses	TOTAL responses across 5 sessions
Increased confidence	14 (43%)	4 (14%)	16 (45%)	1 (8%)	3 (11%)	38
Increased understanding	19 (59%)	17 (61%)	27 (77%)	5 (41%)	6 (21%)	74
Ideas and skills	14 (43%)	25 (89%)	18 (51%)	9 (75%)	22 (79%)	88
Changed thinking/behaviour	17 (53%)	4 (14%)	9 (25%)	6 (50%)	12 (42%)	48
Tools and resources	7 (21%)	7 (25%)	15 (42%)	5 (41%)	6 (21%)	40

3:2:1 Students understanding of creativity in relation to their practice with young children:

Table 9 Results coded as 'increased understanding' from reflection sheets
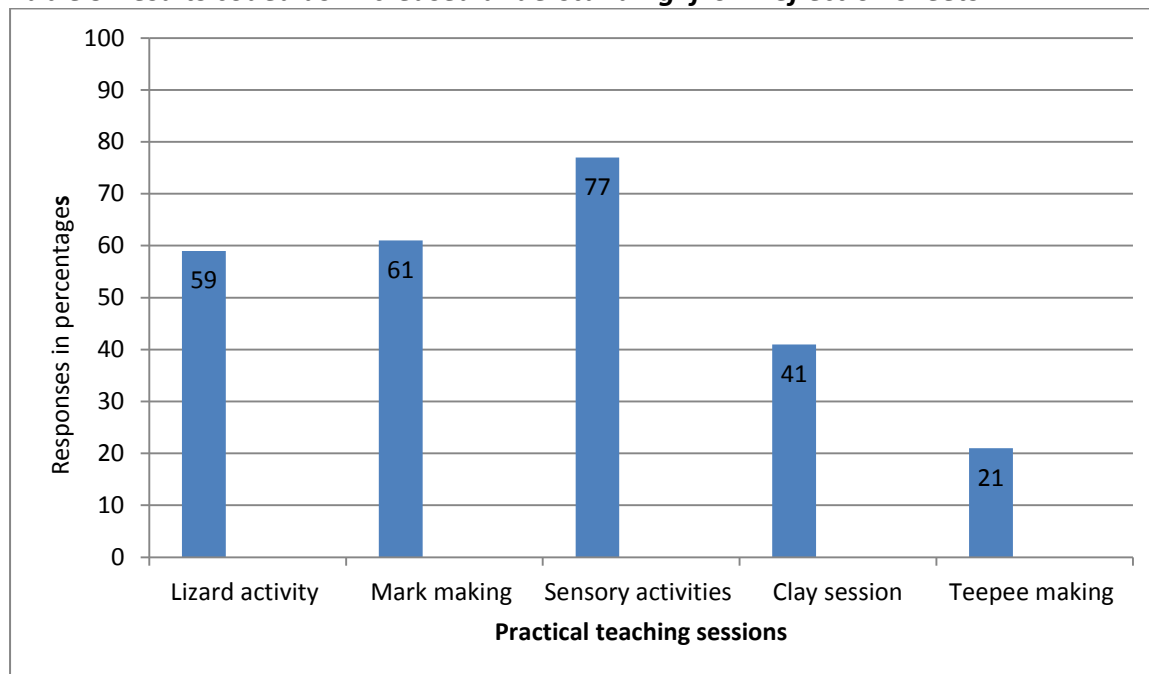
Overall the results suggest that students appeared to have developed a deeper understanding of both the nature of creativity and how to support children within their practice. The code '*Increased understanding'* was the second highest in total (74) across the five sessions (59%, 61%, 77% 41% 21% sessions one to five respectively) identified in the reflection sheets, which is encouraging and expected based on the module aims. The responses were diverse, but focused on clearer understandings of the nature of creativity, such as the importance of risk taking *'Perseverance/ making mistakes' (Three responses session one), 'Not to be afraid to explore different ideas' (session one)* the need to be flexible and adaptable *(session one)* and the importance of open ended exploration; *'Experimenting with ideas' (session four)* The highest responses were from the mark –making and sensory sessions, which suggest that students were making links between the practical activities experienced and how these support children's holistic development. Mark -making and sensory activities form a large part of the Early Childhood practice and are activities that students would be familiar with within their work placements. It is encouraging therefore to see that their understanding of the use and purpose of these activities is indicated.

Table 10 Results coded as 'importance of tools and resources' from reflection sheets
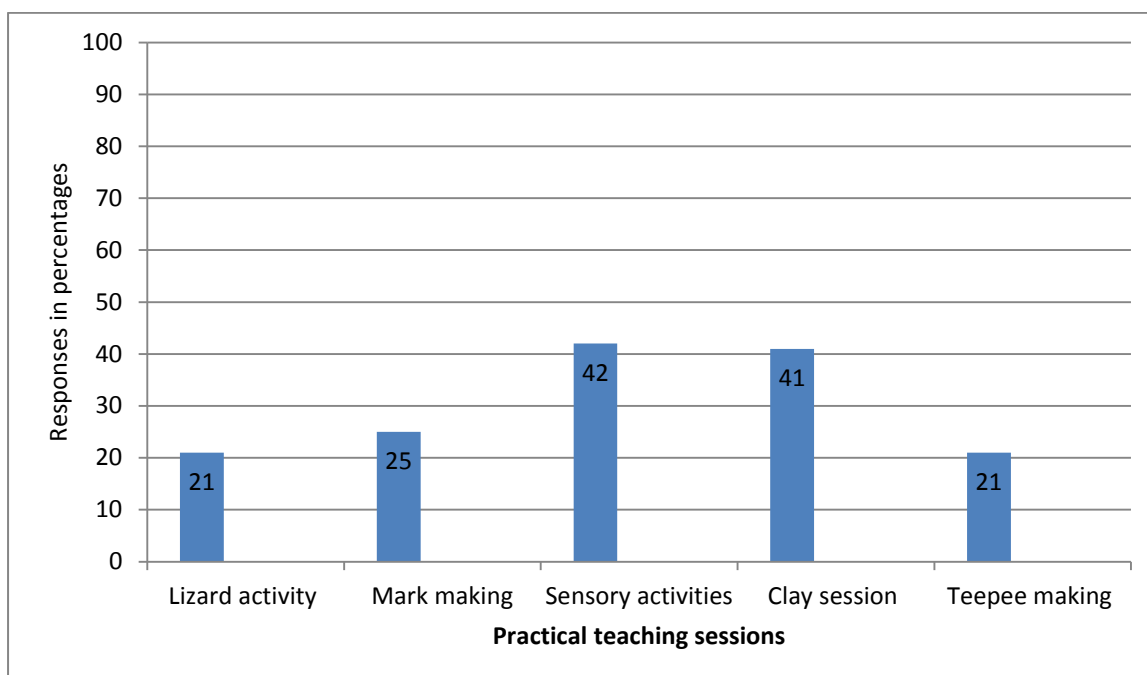
The importance of different and varied resources was identified clearly with 40 responses in total across the five sessions, based on the code '*Tools and Resources'* (21% 25%, 42%, 41%, 21% sessions one to five respectively) . There was also a recognition that these resources did not need to be expensive or specific: responses included, *'You can be creative with the use of limited resources'* (Session one) *'Can use really simple materials'* (Five responses session three) '*everyday materials'* (Three responses session three).This suggests that students were developing clearer ideas around the concept of 'creative practice' (Craft & Jeffery, 2010) and the need for the practitioner to be flexible and innovative . It also was recognised that a range of resources was helpful: '*Importance of range of materials'* (Five responses session one) and that resources could extend ideas: '*Amount of resources supported ideas'* (Session three). This is supported by Nicolson's (1971) 'loose parts' theory which suggests that the number of possibilities for creativity is directly proportional to the number of variables available (Canning 2011) The importance of time (session five) and opportunity was identified: *'Importance of opportunities to create '* *(Four responses session two)* Another important area identified was the need to match activities to the age group planned for *(*Four responses, session three) which suggests some application of knowledge relating to children's age and stage of development as discussed in other modules. These ideas seem to demonstrate students' developing knowledge and understanding of little 'c' creativity (Craft 2002) and the importance of providing tools, resources, time and flexible approaches in practice.

3:2:2 Students' confidence in their own creative ability

Table 11 results coded as 'increased confidence' from reflection sheets
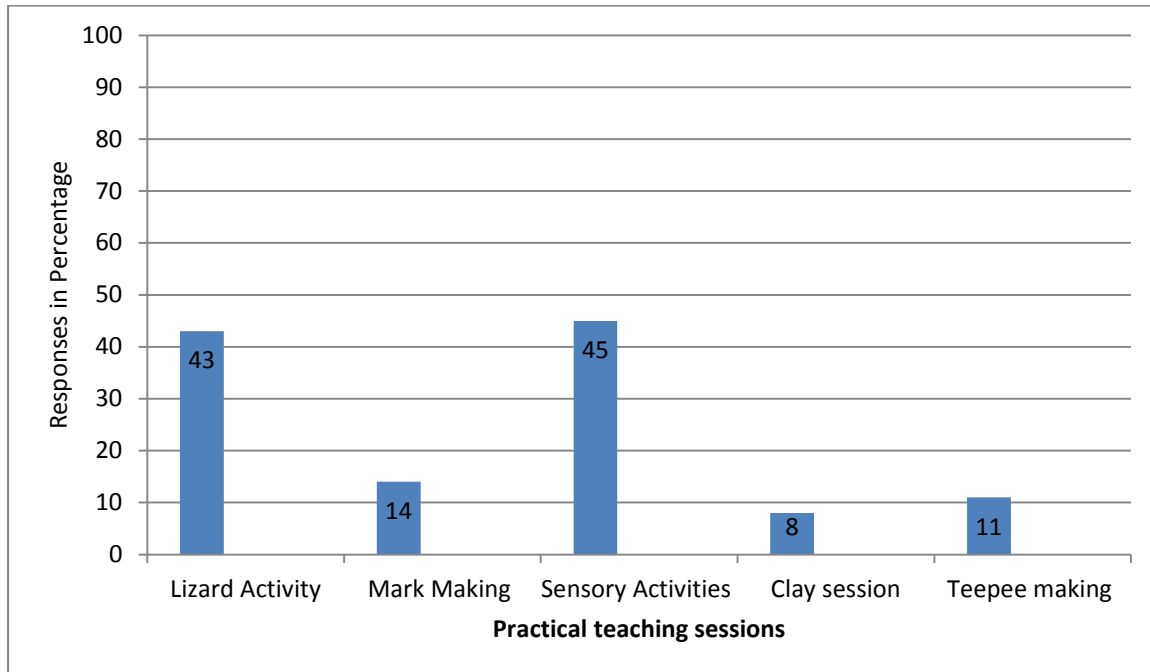
According to Cremin the creative teacher '*is one who is aware of, and values, the human attribute of creativity in themselves and seeks to promote it in others*' (cited in Wilson 2015:42). One of the key aims of the practical sessions is to develop students' confidence in their own creative ability and the researchers were keen to see if this area would be reflected in the responses. The code '*Increased confidence*' was the least popular response overall, with 38 responses in total relating to this area over the five practical sessions (43%, 14%, 45%,8%,11%, sessions one to five respectively). This was interesting especially as increased confidence was reflected clearly in the questionnaires. It was noted ,however, that responses coded as '*Ideas and skills* ' and '*Changed thinking/ behaviour*' were higher overall, this could suggest that as skill levels , ideas and understanding increased, confidence also increased, though it was not referred to directly. This supports the ideas of Garvis (2011), who identifies the need for practical experiences to enhance mastery and capability. In the first reflection sheet, a number of negative responses were received, words used included, *apprehensive, unsure, frustrating, challenging, difficult, and 'learning curve'* possibly indicating a lack of confidence at this point in the module. In subsequent sessions the majority of responses to this question were positive, though session three and session five were both referred to as '*a challenge*' by two students and one response was '*unsure*' in session three. This could be due to the nature of the activities completed within the sessions, as session three was a sensory workshop which involved singing, music and movement and session five was a willow weaving workshop, which was a new experience for many of the students. Increased confidence was identified directly in responses in sessions one and three; in the first session 14 students (43%) cited '*Confidence to*

implement' in relation to their practice in settings and in session three 16 responses (45%) mentioned increased confidence. This was the sensory workshop and suggests that this is an area that students may not have been confident about previously. As sensory activity are central within early years practice, it may suggest that students were developing a clearer understanding of the value and purpose of these activities, which increased their confidence in implementing them.   Confidence did not feature highly in responses in other sessions. One comment received in the final session was quite surprising   *'Slightly disappointed that we spent the afternoon doing this and didn't receive 'formal' teaching.'*   (Session five) This suggests in this case, that there was an expectation of being 'taught' to be creative through 'formal teaching' rather than practical activity. Joubert (2001 pg21) observes,

> *'one cannot teach teachers didactically how to be creative : there is no fail- safe recipe or routine. Some strategies may help to promote creative thinking, but teachers need to develop a full repertoire of skills which they can adapt to different situations.*

(cited in Wilson 2015:34)

This suggests that the teaching of skills and creative thinking is more likely to be successful than 'didactic teaching' and this underpins the module ethos. The practical activities were designed to promote a wide range of skills and approaches which students could then apply to practice in their own ways. The importance of 'ideas and skills' is further reflected in the following section.

3:2:3 Students' confidence in promoting creativity in young children:

Table 12 Results identified as 'importance of ideas and skills'
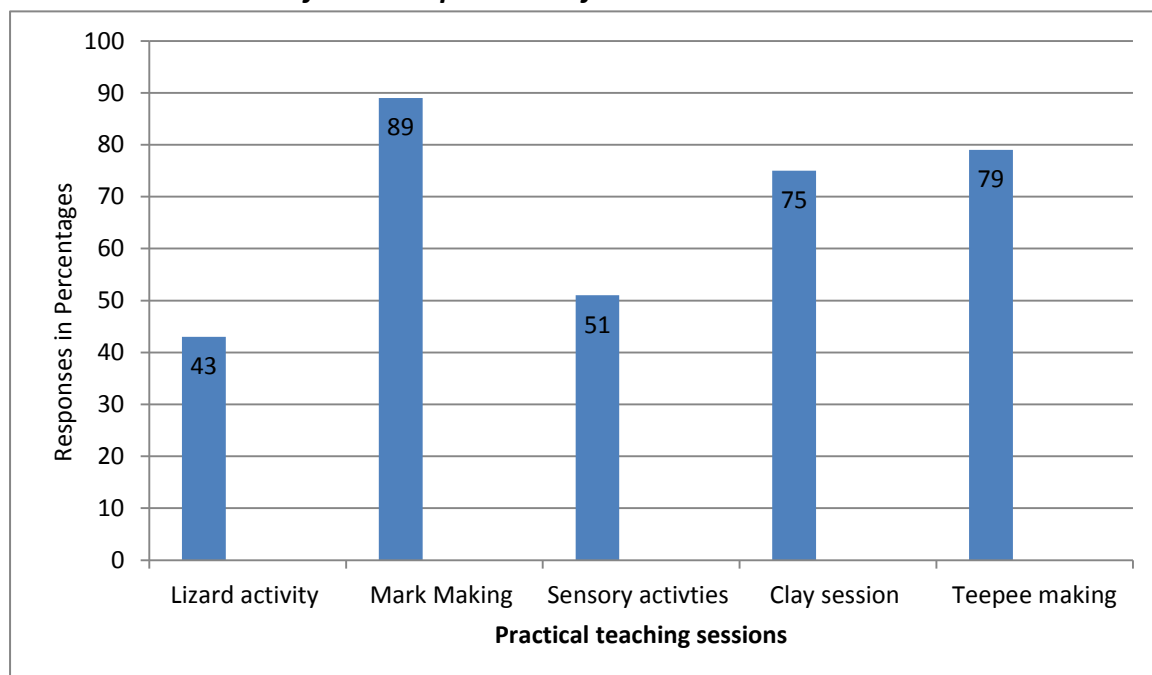
The code that was most evident from the reflection sheets was 'ideas and skills' (88 responses in total) and many students commented upon how they would replicate the activity completed in the session within their own settings with children. The response 'ideas to use within settings' was the highest response in each of the five sessions (43%, 89%, 51%75% 79% sessions one to five respectively). Using new and original ideas is one of the conditions of many of the definitions of creativity cited in the literature review (Vernon 1989:94 cited in Wyse and Dowson 2009: NACCCE, 1999:30) The fact that students intended to use the activities they had completed within the teaching sessions and apply these directly to their own practice may point to a lack of confidence in using their own ideas. However, it could be argued that the activities within the teaching sessions were providing students with specific ideas and starting points from which to develop their own practice.

The highest responses came from the mark-making session (89%) the clay session (75%) and the teepee making session (79%). It is perhaps not surprising that mark making activities received the highest response, given the high value placed upon 'writing' and literacy within the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2014).

The clay session and teepee involved the use of unfamiliar tools and techniques and provided students' with the skills and techniques needed to develop their own ideas and activities. Students commented upon learning new skills, such as – 'How to use materials' (Seven responses session three) 'How to use natural resources to make a fun activity for children to take part in'. (Three responses session five) Some mentioned specific skills related to particular activities for example, 'I learnt how to use clay tools and techniques.' (Four responses session four) 'I learnt how to weave the willow' (Two responses, session Five). This suggests that some of the activities (clay work and willow weaving in particular) were new to some students and that they would be unlikely to apply them within their settings without prior experience.

A significant number of responses within the reflection sheets focussed on increased confidence in how to support children to be creative in practice. The importance of scaffolding children's learning and allowing children to make choices and mistakes was identified. One response identified, 'When to intervene and when to leave children to themselves' (Session two) The importance of children's involvement and an emphasis on process rather than product was also clear.

'It is important that activities that take place allow the child to become involved and promote enthusiasm' (Session five) Garvis (2011) notes the need for practical experiences supported by Cheung(2013:141) who asserts, 'creativity does not arise in a vacuum, but requires a certain degree of basic knowledge' which seems relevant here. It would appear that teaching skills and approaches in the sessions is important and had a direct effect on students' practice.

3:2:4 How the practical elements of the Play and Creativity module sessions impact upon students' understanding of creativity and their practice with children.

Table 13 Results identified as 'changed thinking /behaviour
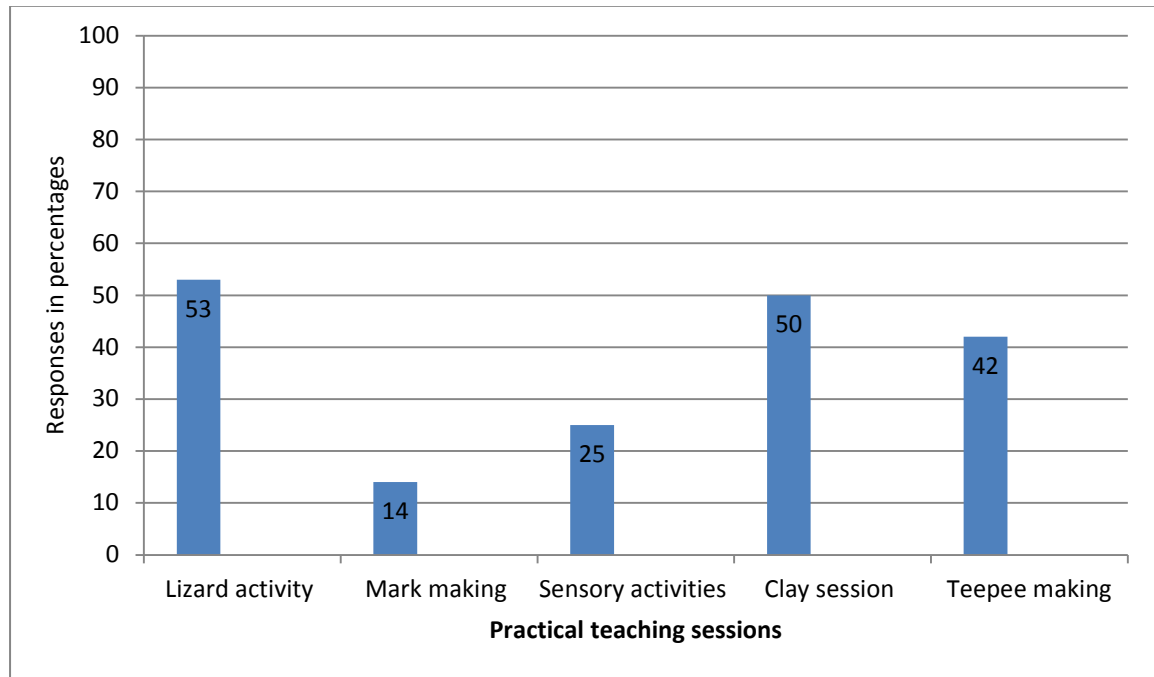
The third highest code was 'Changed thinking/behaviour' (48 responses) and reflected students critical reflection on their own assumptions about the nature and process of creativity and creative products. Responses included '*Experimenting is fun*' (Two responses, session two) '*Outcome not so important*' (Session three). Some students appeared to recognise that creativity is within everyone's' capability '*You can make anything even if you are not creative*' (Session four) and that there are multiple ways of approaching tasks, '*I learnt that there isn't a wrong way even with adults*' (Session four). This area was also identified within the questionnaire responses and is very encouraging in relation to the module aims. These responses suggest that students were developing a clearer understanding of 'little c' creativity as being within the capability of us all (Craft 2002) The responses were highest in the lizard making session, the clay session and the teepee making session. As identified previously , this could be because the activities used unfamiliar materials and tools which students may not have experienced before.

According to Cheung (2013) in order to develop creativity in early childhood education, policy alone is not enough; teachers need to be equipped with '*the knowledge and strategies necessary for good creative practice*' (2013:141). Increased knowledge was referred to directly in session three (Six responses) as well as 'Understand *the role of the practitioner* (Two responses session one) and '*Enable me as a practitioner to encourage and support children*' (session four) indicating that the role of the practitioner in providing opportunities was being recognised. It was clear that students were also developing strategies for use in their practice from the procedural; '*How to do with children*'(Seven responses session one) , '*How we can encourage and*

support children' (Four responses session three) ; to the theoretical *'Applying theory to practice',*
'Importance of sensory play on development' (Session three). The practical sessions were
designed to provide students with the opportunity to learn new skills, to explore with these new
skills and to apply them in a safe, shared and non- judgemental context, similar to how one would
implement in practice with young children. Indeed, one respondent in session two referred to the
'Importance of opportunities to experiment with materials, tools and resources' possibly mirroring
her own experience in the sessions.

The importance of team work and sharing ideas featured highly in sessions one, three and
five (11, 15 and 8 responses respectively). One response *was 'Learnt to work with people I
didn't know very well.'* (Session five). These particular sessions required students to produce an
outcome working in groups, so this may explain the higher response levels here. The
interactive, practical nature of the sessions allowed students to build friendships, find out
about each other and communicate with others, which is imperative for effective team work
at university and in professional settings. Furthermore one response highlighted a more
open approach, '*Made me explore resources I may not have before'* (Session two). Cremin (2015)
supports these ideas stating

> *'creative teachers are prepared to take risks and remain open to new ideas, sharing any
> particularly inventive practice they trial and develop'*

(Cremin cited in Wilson 2015:40)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion a number of interesting points have emerged through the results of this
research, these include:

- Students understanding at the start of the module regarding creativity
- The changed thinking of students through the module
- The increased confidence that students have gained having completed the play and
  creativity module, and
- The importance of the practical sessions within the module in influencing students'
  practice with children

It was evident very early on within the research that all students had an understanding of
the term 'creativity'. All students thought that everyone can be creative and when asked to
define their understanding, all comments captured a range of activities that students
perceived as involving some form of creativity. This to some extent challenges the views of
Duffy (2006) who suggests that practitioners define creativity in relation to just art and craft
based activities. The responses from the reflection sheets however, suggest that students
did not necessarily see themselves as creative at the beginning of the module, but that this
perception changed as they developed more skills and understanding.
The questionnaires highlighted a change in students thinking in relation to the diversity of
creativity. As stated previously this was shown within 'originality/own ideas' and

'imagination'. According to Garvis, 2011 (cited in Aubrey and Dahl 2013) this change in thinking is dependent on the experiences that the individual is involved in, this corresponds with findings from both the questionnaires and the reflection sheets that the practical activities were helpful for students and provided them with a deeper understanding of 'creative practice , and practice which fosters creativity' as identified by Craft & Jeffrey (2010) and the concept of 'little c creativity' (Craft 2002)

The findings suggest that most importantly the practical activities had a direct impact on student's confidence to attempt new ideas and activities with children in settings. Students developed new skills and techniques, learned how to use a range of familiar and unfamiliar tools and resources and also learned to work collaboratively. The students developed a deeper understanding of the nature of creativity and for some this was an empowering experience and demystified a complex concept making creative activity more approachable. Students clearly began to move towards a clearer conception of little 'c' creativity (Craft 2002) as their knowledge, skills and confidence increased. Further to this, the play and creativity module provided students with the opportunity to experiment, problem solve and explore in a safe environment, allowing them space to find the 'artist within' (Dehouske 2006) in preparation for providing creative opportunities for children in the work place.

The procedural elements of practice do not often receive much attention, but these elements are fundamental to successful work place practice and it is suggested that the module provided students with opportunities to develop confidence in their own abilities, knowledge about the nature of creativity and importantly strategies for how to apply their learning in practice. Ultimately, this research suggests that the play and creativity module provides early childhood studies students with opportunities to learn through experience and to begin to find the 'artist within'. (Dehouske 2006)

The authors recognise the limitations of their findings, due to the limited research methods and the variability of responses. It could be argued that students may have felt obliged to take part, despite the voluntary nature of the research and also may have felt that not participating would impact upon their relationship with the researchers as tutors. This therefore lays the foundation for a more detailed approach for the future and the authors intend to extend the research by focussing on students' experiences of practice on placement during their second year. This future research will examine how students' understanding of creativity and its place within early childhood practice compares with their experiences on placement. It will explore how the skills and knowledge developed from the Play and Creativity module have impacted upon students' practice and in what ways. It will also seek to capture the views of Early Years practitioners on the place of Creativity in Early Childhood, given the continual changes within the Early Years Curriculum. This research will adopt a different approach with a focus on students as partners in research.

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