

## Thought Leadership

# Voyaging beyond the horizon...

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## Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Creativity:

From Colouring-in to Innovation

**Wendy Cobb**

*The immense potential for our children to effect change begins in early childhood; those important first few years of life, set the stage for each child's and our whole world's future.*



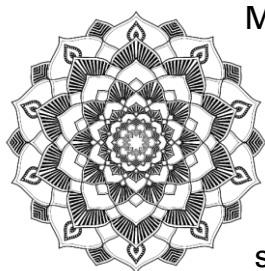
A series of papers  
engaging  
critically and creatively  
with the world  
around us as we  
voyage  
beyond the horizon...

## Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Creativity:

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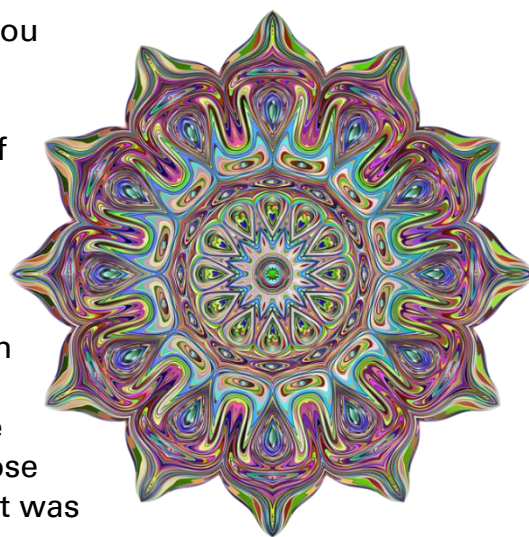
What a challenging time the last few months have been! It has taken every ounce of my creative ingenuity to focus on the positives, and to hold on to the hope and possibilities of my inner child. Carl Jung linked his concept of the inner child to his past experiences, such as memories of innocence, playfulness, creativity and hope for the future. Jung was heavily influenced by his interpretation of the concept of the



Mandala. Mandala is Sanskrit for circle and is a geometric design symbolic in Hindu and Buddhist cultures which Jung referred to as 'probably the simplest model of a concept of wholeness' (Jung, 1963). The circular design symbolises life as never ending and points to the interconnectedness of everything. As Cursio (2015) states, 'to look at a Mandala, one is immediately given a striking sense of the centre about which all turns'.

A quick rewind – innocence, playfulness, creativity – what have we seen of these things during the past months? Certainly, plenty of playfulness (for example, TikTok) and creativity (such as NHS rainbows and creative responses to home learning) but at what loss to childhood innocence, with daily news of death and despair, and families locked in, doors closed, tears shed and hopes snatched away?

Perhaps during lockdown, if you ever had a time when you were not juggling work and child or other caring responsibilities you engaged in some mindful colouring of a Mandala. I have never understood any judgement of colouring-in during the school day as a 'waste' of time. I remember my last, often challenging class, emerging from an amazingly silent lesson spent 'colouring-in' with my class-share co teacher, which she timetabled as PSHE, and whispering to me one by one as they left in total awe – 'Miss is amazing!' Later in the term we held an open afternoon for parents, with some children in the class electing to sit on the carpet modelling a mindful pose to the gentle hum of a Tibetan singing bowl. Of course, it was mostly chaos in the classroom the rest of the time!



Duffy (1998, p. 10) describes creativity as 'about representing one's own image, not reproducing someone else's'. For Skinner, creativity is about 'speaking' feelings in both verbal and nonverbal ways, but although nowadays definitions of creativity abound, Skinner's behavioural analysis didn't really have any answer for the inception of the discovery process. Skinner's own creative leaps to him just seemed to happen (Epstein, 1991). But creativity in childhood and beyond does not just happen, contexts are key to unlocking the creative possibilities and associated links of belonging, enabling and human flourishing.



Schools are now delivering a recovery curriculum following a government announced school recovery package which includes £650 million to be spent on ensuring all pupils have the chance to 'catch up'. But what are they catching up on? The Education Endowment Foundation Covid-19 Guide suggests that a particular focus for interventions is likely to be literacy and numeracy, quite rightly citing the long-term negative impact of beginning secondary school without secure literacy skills and goes on to say 'Interventions might focus on other aspects of learning, such as behaviour or pupils' social and emotional needs' (2020, p. 5). I am not sure why I hate the word 'intervention' so much. Perhaps it is the sense of being done to rather than done with and so often done after, for instance as 'arts therapy', rather than a proactive prevention as part of a wider lived experience.



Our government's school budget decisions are understandably closely linked with future proofing our economy and developing the workforce of the future. Interestingly an American study of science and technology graduates found that graduates majoring in STEM subjects are more likely to have extensive arts and crafts skills than the average American. Most STEM graduates in the study believe that their innovative ability is stimulated by their arts and crafts knowledge. The study also found that lifelong participation and exposure in the arts and crafts yields the most significant impacts for innovators and entrepreneurs (La More et al, 2013, p. 221)

We know that protective factors for positive mental health include routines, social connectedness and a sense of belonging. Other protective factors include what we understand to be the characteristics of creative individuals, including a sense of positivity and having a belief in an ability to effect change. In terms of creativity 'catch up', some returning children are way ahead of their peers, their creative experiences, including for instance environmental change initiatives, having been nurtured and stimulated by families with multiple resources, such as gardens or nearby parks. Other families without access to such resources have been working together to create from what others might term 'junk' something visually, aurally or emotionally inspiring. This creativity in all its myriad forms needs to be celebrated in the recovery curriculum and more importantly provided as 'catch up' for those children who have not benefited from these experiences, or who need both 'catching up' and 'moving beyond' the life limiting consequences of adverse childhood experiences and not least the multiple impacts of Covid-19.



The immense potential for our children to effect change begins in early childhood; those important first few years of life, set the stage for each child's and our whole world's future. Communities throughout the world use creative spaces to unlock children's potential, such as through the work of the Paper Boat charity's Children's Hubs, community-owned spaces operating predominantly in Tamil Nadu and Southern Asia, where children come to play and learn after school, encouraged by community leaders and inspirational artists such as Guna, who paints alongside the children, 'helping them to use art so that they can 'discover their passion' early.' (Shaheen, 2020)



The paper boat is a symbol of hope, the Mandala a symbol of wholeness. Colouring-in may be just the tonic our classrooms need to develop the future hope of each developing inner child.

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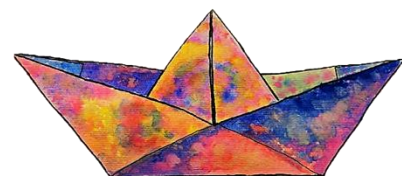
This piece was originally prepared by Wendy Cobb ([wendy.cobb@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:wendy.cobb@canterbury.ac.uk)) for 'Conversations on Wellbeing and Early Childhood' conference, Early Childhood Community of Practice Canterbury Christ Church University, October 2020.

Wendy is a member of Paper Boat's Strategic Education Community.

If you would like to find out more about Paper Boat or are interested in working with us please get in touch with Dr Kemal Shaheen ([kemal@paperboatcharity.org.uk](mailto:kemal@paperboatcharity.org.uk))



Inspiring and enabling **children** to change their world

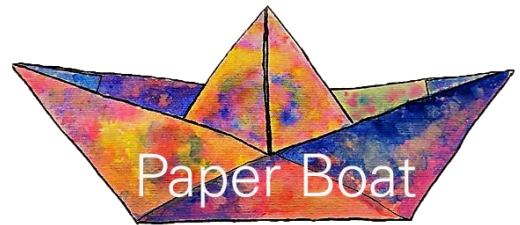






## Our Vision

A world that unlocks the  
infinite potential  
of every child



## Our Purpose

To listen to young people –  
inspiring and enabling them to  
change their world

## Our Mission

To establish playful and  
creative learning spaces at the  
heart of communities through  
innovative partnerships

## Our Values

**Courage** – child centred

**Creativity** – innovative action

**Collaboration** – stronger together

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