

Arts-rich play with clay

Supporting Pedagogy Arts and Creativity Everywhere

100 YEARS 1923 - 2023
Early Education
The British Association for Early Childhood Education

“Clay is a raw material dug from the earth and has been used as a material of expression and design since the earliest known human beings. Clay enables children to give shape to their thoughts and their ideas. It is a material of multiple possibilities, affordances and properties in that it can be both hard and soft; liquid and solid; and can be used in greater quantities than play dough and in more sustainable ways too. Clay is a material that can be reused over and over again and there are many different types of clay available, from terracotta to porcelain. It is a soft, transformable and inviting material which can be shaped by hands, bodies and tools and by children of all ages. Clay can be fashioned in two-dimensional and three-dimensional ways and it can be used flat on a surface or built up vertically. It can be carved and combined with other materials that can be inserted into it and is a material of wonder and creative discovery for all children.”

Debi Keyte-Hartland

The Language of Clay

Pressing, pulling, pounding, sculpting, spraying, engraving, marking, building, coiling, slabbing, extruding, manipulating, forming, printing, shaping, combining, representing, carving, firing, playing, layering, rolling, joining, connecting, claying …

Becoming pedagogically active with clay

"You always remember an inspirational teacher, just one. And there was one for me and his name was Mr Mortman… He gave me a lump of clay at the age of 11 in my art class and quite frankly the rest is history,"

Keith Brymer-Jones, British potter and designer

We invite you to think differently about clay:

- How might your children come to understand what clay can do and build a relationship with it?
- How might clay incite and activate play, curiosity, critical thinking, and storying?
- How do you enable children to find out where clay originates from?
- What companions or tools might enhance your children's clay experiences?
- What might be the different ways that you curate clay? (eg coils, cubes, spheres, tiles, extruded shapes)
- How often is clay available for your babies, toddlers, and young children to investigate, explore, experiment, and discover?
- What techniques might you decide to offer, when, and how? (eg joining, scoring, armatures, coiling, slab work)

Being pedagogically active with clay

- **Notice** how children explore both the clay and the effects of the available tools
- **Engage** with their ideas and meaning making as they make discoveries and express ideas (and possibilities)
- **Wonder** alongside them… I wonder what would happen if…?
- **Notice** and be **present,** show value in what they do and think, as well as what they say
- **Provide opportunities** for repeating and revisiting
- Make it a more **social process -** work on a large scale so that children can collaborate
- **Listen carefully** to gain insights into their big ideas and meaning making
- **Go deeper** - do more - and again
- **Make collections** of interesting objects to press into the clay and make marks (eg nuts, bolts, shells, etc)

Materials and tools



Companions with clay











Caring for clay

- Store clay in airtight containers, keeping it moist with a damp cloth, or cover it in plastic.

Working with clay

- Clay dries out in the air, so keep it covered on the table with a damp cloth

Putting away your clay

- When finished, block smaller pieces of clay into large cubes by banging it on the table to knock the air out. Insert a thumb or a finger into the cube to create a well and fill with a little water. Then, place it in your airtight container.

Tools

- Hands
- Scrapers and spatulas
- Palette knives
- Brushes
- Bamboo canes cut into 4-inch lengths
- Wire-cutters
- Sponges
- Extrusion tools
- Toothpicks and cutting wheels
- Rolling pins
- Loop tools and lollipop sticks
- Objects like shells, bolts, pinecones for mark making

Encounters with clay





Questions to provoke our encounters

- What would you like to create with clay?
- What do you think the clay wants to be made into?
- What would like to meet with the clay?
- What does the clay remind you of?

Clay holds the memories of hands and fingers. It holds the memories of things pressing into it to leave their own particular mark. It is like a skin that can change and transform.

Children can play with textures, traces, prints, and lines creating different variations on clay surfaces. Look around your environment and see what textures you can find such as lace, plastic or leaves, that can leave an imprint and memory. We can invite the children to think about the marks that are left behind and what they now look like or resemble.

Getting to know clay for ourselves

“Is it enough I wonder to just see what children do with clay? I have learnt that educators’ own understanding of the possibilities of clay amplifies the conditions for creativity offered to children. If we as adults have only a little understanding, then we do not always notice what children do and can do. Our knowledge of the materials we offer to our babies, toddlers, and young children are important. Just like our knowledge and understanding of phonics or how children learn number, we too need to understand what is possible with clay so as to be the best educator alongside children in their clay-based discoveries.”

Debi Keyte-Hartland



Observing mushrooms with clay

Children aged 3 at Madeley Nursery School, Telford & Wrekin

Staging and curating clay contexts

Preparing a clay context can be described as staging. It is about curating the relationships between the clay itself, the tools offered to explore that clay, the time, the place, the decisions and questions that as adults we might ask of the clay and of the children and perhaps ourselves.

It is about thinking intentionally of what you are trying to evoke and imagine, and of what might happen when the clay meets with the children.

In Reggio Emilia they call this designing and thinking of the pre-figurations of what might come to be between the connections of all the different elements at play in the context.

Combinations of art forms

Try combining clay and drawing, or clay and light, or clay and digital projection that children can work within. In the left image below, children at the International School of Beijing are working within a projected photograph of a shell which they had become curious about. On the right, children at Madeley Nursery are working with leaf drawings made the previous day, overlaying prepared clay coils and “drawing on top” of their original drawings that have been enlarged on the photocopier.





Staging and curating clay contexts

“As young children bring their whole bodies to their relationship with the clay, they experience the responsiveness of the clay. This first encounter, body to body, begins the dialogue between children and clay.”

Ann Pelo



Ideas and ways of working

- Work on a large-scale on the floor inviting children to add their pieces to a collaborative whole.
- Offer clay as different shapes and forms that can be built up and combined in different ways.
- Use wire and sticks as armatures to build around and give strength to tall structures.
- Play with clay in both 2 and 3 dimensions - work flat on large tiles or create simple large vessels for children to add to or transform by making holes and apertures in.
- Use slip (watered down clay so it becomes like a liquid) as a clay glue. This holds clay pieces together - or simply paint with slip on paper or other surfaces.
- Combine different kinds of clay, experimenting with the different textures and colours.
- Use different surfaces to add clay to such as trees or perspex surfaces, experiment with what clay can stick to - work vertically as well as flat.
- Add torches to the clay to create interesting shadows from the forms created.

Indicators for creativity

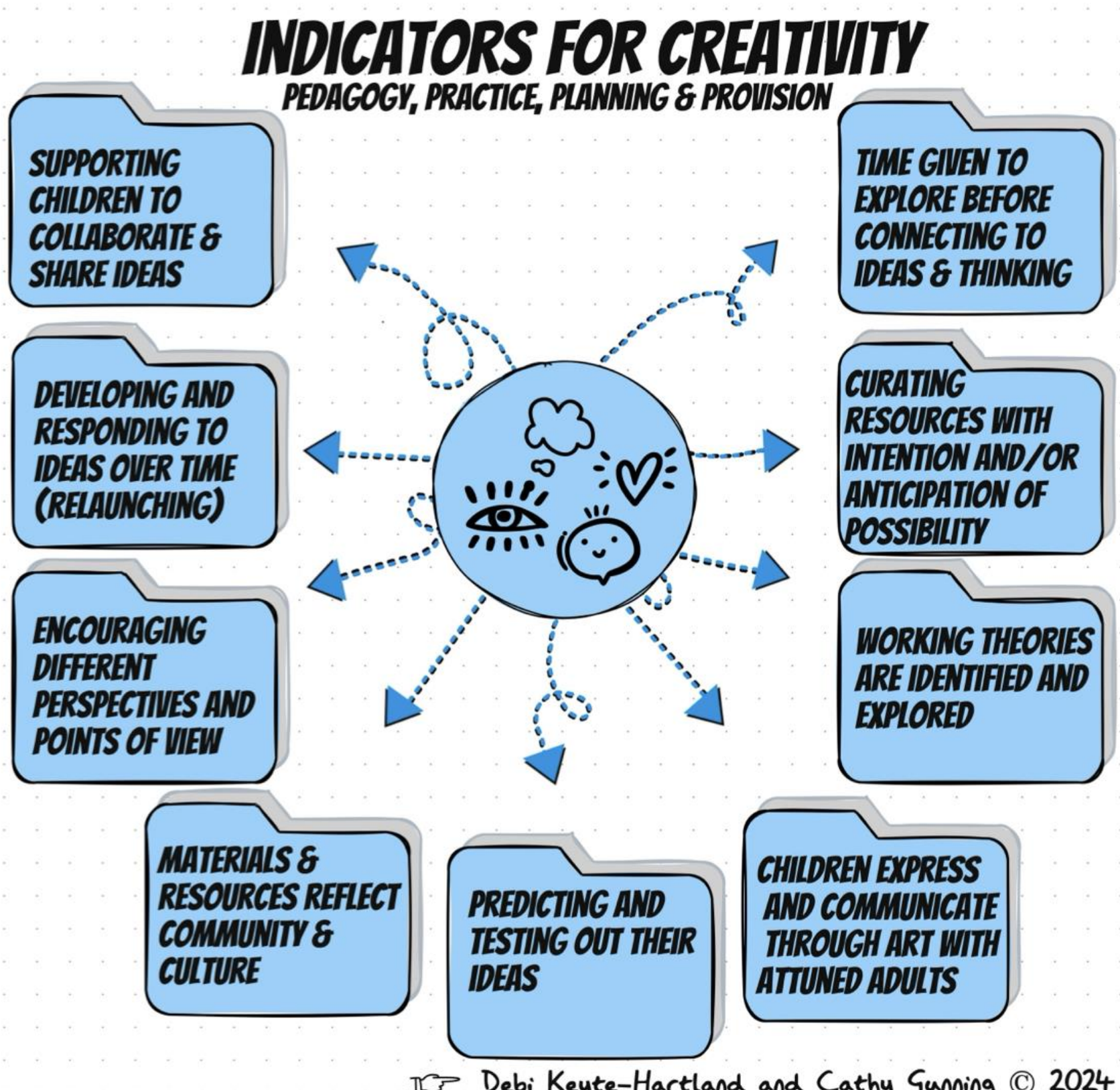
“Happiness lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort.”

Franklin D Roosevelt

Creativity doesn't happen within a vacuum. It needs feeding, inspiring, encouraging, and feeling valued and wanted.

These indicators are for educators to think about how they enable and support children’s creativity to occur, and relate to pedagogy, practice, planning and provision.

Look at each section, one by one, and think about and reflect on how you activate and generate these indicators and/or conditions for your children’s creativity. These indicators are about creating rich foundations and fertile conditions for children's creativity to emerge, grow, evolve and flourish with any material, but especially clay!



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Fountain Court, 2 Victoria Square, St Albans AL1 3TF
T: 01727 884925
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