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Encouraging Creativity in Early Childhood Classrooms. ERIC Digest.

Adults are often amazed by young children's unexpected perceptions of the world and the unique ways in which they express their imagination. We also know, however, that children usually need adult support to find the means and the confidence to bring forth their ideas and offer them, day after day, to teachers, parents, and friends. This digest

considers both teacher-initiated and child-initiated strategies for enhancing young children's self-expression and creativity.

While trying to explore new and better ways of bringing the arts to young children and children to the arts, it helps to examine not only what American teachers do but also what teachers in other nations have discovered. Models developed in other countries, such as in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, can be a universal resource.

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

In Reggio Emilia, Italy, home of some of the best preschools in the world, children grow up surrounded by centuries-old masterpieces of architecture, painting, and sculpture. Citizens are especially proud of their artistic heritage, and art becomes a natural vehicle in educational approaches for helping children explore and solve problems. In the American context, science and technology are specially regarded. Many Americans acquire an interest in tools and machines and enjoy trying to make things run better, fixing things, and solving functional problems. An investigation of "what's inside" and "how things work" makes a natural starting point for in-depth work that integrates art with science, social studies, and literacy activity.
The documentation of young children's work provided by Reggio Emilia educators highlights young children's amazing capabilities and indicates that it is through the unity of thinking and feeling that young children can explore their world, represent their ideas, and communicate with others at their highest level. When educators fully understand how exploration, representation, and communication feed one other, they can best help children achieve this potential.

Several aspects of young children's learning are important to consider when thinking about art and creative activities (Edwards & Hiler, 1993). First, young children are developmentally capable of classroom experiences which call for (and practice) higher level thinking skills, including ANALYSIS (breaking down material into component parts to understand the structure, seeing similarities and differences); SYNTHESIS (putting parts together to form a new whole, rearranging, reorganizing); and EVALUATION (judging the value of material based on definite criteria).

Second, young children want and need to express ideas and messages through many different expressive avenues and symbolic media. Young children form mental images, represent their ideas, and communicate with the world in a combination of ways. They need increasing competence and integration across formats including words, gestures, drawings, paintings, sculpture, construction, music, dramatic play, movement, and dance. Through sharing and gaining others' perspectives, and then revisiting and revising their work, children move to new levels of awareness. Teachers act as guides, careful not to impose adult ideas and beliefs upon the children.

Third, young children learn through meaningful activities in which different subject areas

are integrated. Open-ended discussions and long-term activities bring together whole-language activities, science, social studies, dramatic play, and artistic creation. Activities that are meaningful and relevant to the child's life experiences provide opportunities to teach across the curriculum and assist children in seeing the interrelationships of things they are learning.

Teachers have many opportunities to integrate curriculum. For example, the arrival of a new sibling is a common occurrence. Teachers might ask parents of children in their class to contribute photographs of the children as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, so that the children who are interested can make scrapbooks. If such photos are unavailable, the children can draw or cut pictures from magazines, or dictate stories about remembered foods, toys, or bedroom furnishings. Such activities, designed to help a child deal with a new baby, also help children to use spoken and written language and to select and organize materials.

Fourth, young children benefit from in-depth exploration and long-term, open-ended projects which are started either from a chance event, a problem posed by one or more children, or an experience planned and led in a flexible way by teachers (Edwards & Springate, 1993; Clark, 1994). The adults act as resource persons, problem-posers, guides, and partners to the children in the process of discovery and investigation. They take their cues from children through careful listening and observation, and know when to encourage risk-taking and when to refrain from interfering.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

Given what is known about young children's learning and about their amazing competence to express their visions of themselves and their world, how can the classroom be modified to best support children's emerging creativity?
TIME. Creativity does not follow the clock. Children need extended, unhurried time to explore and do their best work. They should not be artificially rotated, that is, asked to move to a different learning center or activity when they are still productively engaged and motivated by a piece of creative work.

SPACE. Children need a place to leave unfinished work to continue the next day, and a space that inspires them to do their best work. A barren, drab environment is not conducive to creative work. Rather, children's work is fostered by a space that has natural light, harmonious colors, comfortable and child-sized areas, examples of their own and others' work (not only their classmates, but as appropriate, also their teachers' and selected adult artists), and inviting materials.

MATERIALS. Without spending great amounts of money, teachers can organize wonderful collections of resource materials that might be bought, found, or recycled. These materials can include paper goods of all kinds; writing and drawing tools; materials for constructions and collages, such as buttons, stones, shells, beads, and

seeds; and sculpting materials, such as play dough, goop, clay, and shaving cream. These materials are used most productively and imaginatively by children when they themselves have helped select, organize, sort, and arrange them.

CLIMATE. The classroom atmosphere should reflect the adults' encouragement and acceptance of mistakes, risk-taking, innovation, and uniqueness, along with a certain amount of mess, noise, and freedom. This is not a matter of chaos, or of tight control, but instead something in between. In order to create such a climate, teachers must give themselves permission to try artistic activity themselves, even when they have not been so fortunate as to have had formal art training or to feel they are naturally "good at art." Through workshops, adult education classes, or teamwork with an art teacher or parent, classroom teachers can gain the confidence for, and experience the pleasure of, venturing some distance down the road of self-expression in a medium in which they did not know they could be successful. Their skill will then translate into the work with the children.

OCCASIONS. Children's best and most exciting work involves an intense or arousing encounter between themselves and their inner or outer world. Teachers provide the occasions for these adventures. Children find it hard to be creative without any concrete inspiration. Instead, they prefer to draw on the direct evidence of their senses or memories. These memories can become more vivid and accessible through the teacher's provocations and preparations. For example, teachers can encourage children to represent their knowledge and ideas before and after they have watched an absorbing show, taken a field trip, or observed and discussed an interesting plant or animal brought into class. Teachers can put up a mirror or photos of the children in the art area, so children can study their faces as they draw their self-portrait. Teachers can offer children the opportunity to check what they have drawn against an original model and then let them revise and improve upon their first representation.

CONCLUSIONS

All of these activities can be combined with the teachers' goals of gradually introducing children to new art materials and techniques. Finally, there is no "one right way" for helping young children achieve their creative potential. Teachers will need to continue to experiment and test alternatives to see what is effective in their situation.
Adapted from: Edwards, Carolyn Pope, and Kay Wright Springate. (1995). The Lion Comes Out of the Stone: Helping Young Children Achieve Their Creative Potential. DIMENSIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD 23(4, Fall): 24-29. Adapted with permission of the Southern Early Childhood Association and the authors.

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