

# How Creative

## is Your Early Childhood Classroom?

by Vanessa Ewing and Laura Tuthill

Our complex world continues to face many problems. In Colorado alone since the start of 2012, we have seen a senseless act of violence in an Aurora movie theatre taking away many lives, as well as thousands of acres of destruction from countless wildfires. And every year millions of people are diagnosed with cancer or other potentially debilitating diseases and conditions, all of which require novel answers and creative solutions. Howard Gardner (2006) discussed the critical importance of a 'creating mind': advancing new ideas, questions, and answers to help tackle problems such as these. Solving these complex problems requires future generations to utilize creative thinking abilities.



Dr. Vanessa Ewing is an adjunct professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs where she teaches in the Departments of Teacher Education, Psychology, and Curriculum and Instruction. Dr. Ewing's

research focuses on differentiation, creativity, and gifted education in early childhood and elementary classrooms. She currently serves as the Education Advisor at Broomfield Academy and served the school previously in the roles of preschool and kindergarten teacher as well as School Principal.



Dr. Laura Tuthill is an assistant professor and director of Teacher Education at Western State Colorado University. Dr. Tuthill's research focuses on the Reggio Emilia philosophy, teacher research, gifted education, and creativity in early childhood and

elementary education. Her previous experience includes teaching PreK-3, directing early childhood centers, and serving as an educational consultant.

One of our roles as educators is to prepare our students for future success; this means preparing them to be creative thinkers capable of solving problems that do not yet exist. This is a challenge requiring us to re-examine our educational practices and infuse creative thinking skills into our curriculum and instruction.

One such problem was recently highlighted in a *Newsweek* article "The Creativity Crisis" (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). This article highlighted how important creative thinking is to the success of our country, both to us as individuals and collectively. Suspected factors in the decline in creativity include the excessive amount of time children spend in front of the television and an inordinate focus in our schools on achievement, standardized tests, and other endeavors that focus on a singular 'correct' response.

### What Exactly is 'Creativity'?

Creativity goes beyond possession and use of artistic or musical talent. Creativity is evident in curricular areas including science, math, and social studies. Being creative requires divergent thinking (generating many unique ideas) and convergent thinking, which combines those ideas into the best result.

Educational psychologist Howard Gardner (2006) proposed a theory describing the "five minds for the future" that successful individuals must possess. One of those mental capabilities is the 'creating mind' that breaks new ground, puts forth new ideas, poses unfamiliar questions, conjures up fresh ways of thinking, and arrives at unexpected answers. As technology rapidly connects people and information, knowledge and communication are at the tip of our fingers. It is believed that individuals without the ability to create will be replaced with computers.

### What Can Teachers Do to Develop Creative Thinking?

Children can learn how to enhance their creativity, and it is our job to support them. In order to teach children to be more creative, teachers need to be aware of barriers to creativity and minimize these in their classrooms. Some roadblocks to encouraging creativity include excessive use of rewards, highly structured materials and instructions, as well as 'correct answer fixation.'

When children do not expect a reward they are more inclined to explore, take risks, try something new or different, and enjoy the process. Intrinsic motiva-

tion is driven by one's own interest and enjoyment and should be nurtured as an element of creative thinking. Being offered rewards, some children actually begin to spend less time on activities that they once found rewarding; that is, they begin associating their work with getting rewards. Highly structured activities that are teacher-directed, often with an example or model provided by the teacher, do not leave much room for children to use their own minds and creating abilities.

Some young children like to be 'teacher-pleasers' or are fixated on always having the correct answer. These children cannot look beyond the factual truth and become unable to generate multiple ideas or answers. Teachers also may inadvertently focus their instructional time on providing activities and discussions geared toward one correct answer, such as "Who was the main character in the story?" and "What is 1+1?" rather than questions requiring unique and divergent thinking: "What adventures should Pippi Longstocking go on next?"; "How are Goldilocks and George Washington similar?" or "How would they celebrate Independence Day together?" Using open-ended questions instead of closed-ended questions, it is easy to see how very diverse and unique children's responses would be.

In order to develop children's creative thinking abilities, teachers need to examine their own attitudes, curriculum, instructional strategies, and the educational environment itself. A child is more likely to try new ideas when he or she is in a safe environment that encourages risk taking. Teachers need to be accepting of children's ideas, no matter how 'off the wall' they may be. It is also important for teachers to show genuine excitement and enthusiasm for children's discoveries to reinforce children's exploratory attempts.

In early childhood classrooms, the materials used in the environment play a key role in learning. Teachers can create an intentional environment conducive to creative thinking by incorporating materials that have 'functional freedom' that allow for individual expression. Materials with high levels of functional freedom let the children's imaginations decide the use of an object rather than the object dictating how it should be used. For example, a refrigerator box can be used as many different things other than a refrigerator box: a spaceship, a train, a bus, a house, or a boat. Teachers need to provide a variety of materials for open-ended discovery. If children start to lose interest in the materials available, teachers can add new or more complex materials to push the children's imaginations further and provoke their interest: boxes, cloth, or markers. What was once a boat may transform into a maze, a castle, or a theatre.

### Putting Theory into Practice

At Broomfield Academy, a private school in Broomfield, Colorado, offering preschool through eighth grade classes, differentiated learning and creativity are critical components of the educational mission.

As an example of utilizing materials with functional freedom, preschool *Explorers* have Creation Stations where children are free to utilize the materials (cardboard, plastics, and other 'trash' items from home) to create whatever they like. These creative works are prized possessions for the *Explorers* and a favorite part of their school experience. The exercise also teaches the importance of recycling and reuse in a creative and fun way.

A preschool example is highlighted by the *Flowering Shoes* project. Children brought in a

variety of old shoes to redesign as flower pots for plants and flowers.

In first grade, students write and illustrate their own stories of new and unique adventures for the characters they've studied in class. Sharing their original ideas fills them with pride.

Once students have reached the third grade, they are playing musical instruments of their own choosing and performing in school plays. They serve as "Big Buddies" (photo below), reading and doing projects with the younger children and choosing much of their readings independently (with some teacher guidance). This teaches reading *and* responsibility.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

At all levels, each student is given an individual student learning plan with unique goals for him or her. Teachers utilize a variety of individual, small-group, and whole-group lessons and activities throughout the day. Children have the opportunity to learn swim-

ming, art, dance, music, chess, and a host of other interesting subjects based on their interests.

At a recent community event, children and parents sang songs while helping to create



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

a mural entitled *Color the Earth*. Families used pop cans, candy wrappers, and other trash materials to create images of people that they placed on a mural of the world (photo 3) to reinforce the concepts of respect and recycling. This project encouraged parents to join their children in creative endeavors, with many parents participating in the arts for the first time in decades.

### Question the Materials

#### You Provide:

- Functional freedom:* Do you have materials in your classroom that have high levels of functional freedom or are the majority of materials in your classroom highly structured with little opportunity for creative expression?
- Expressive capabilities:* Do children have regular access to expressive

### Question the Activities and Lessons

#### You Offer:

- Open-ended:* Do the activities you conduct with children produce products that all look alike? Or, is there room for divergent thinking and variation?
- Process-oriented:* Do you ask children to describe the process of creating or doing their work? Or, do you focus your attention on the final product?
- Knowledge/skills:* Do you provide children with a strong knowledge and skill base upon which they can build in developing new ideas?
- Interests:* Are children permitted to follow and explore their interests?
- Collaboration:* Do children have frequent opportunities to work with peers, to exchange ideas, and to collaborate?
- Problem solving:* Do children have the opportunity to identify problems and generate solutions?

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



### Analyze Your Classroom

Consider the following questions in examining your own classroom for evidence of your efforts to nurture children's creativity.

#### Question Your Attitude:

- Respect:* Do you respect the children's ideas? Do you encourage the children to follow their interests and ideas, even when their ideas and interests are different from yours?
- Choices:* Do you provide children with choices in their projects or are the majority of the activities teacher-directed?
- Excitement:* Do you share excitement and enthusiasm with the children about their discoveries?

materials such as clay, wire, charcoals, paint, and chalk?

- Provocative:* Are the materials in your classroom exciting and do they invite the children to use them? Do you change the materials in your classroom often to provide children with new experiences?

#### Question the Class Schedule:

- Time:* Do children have ample time to explore and create without being interrupted?
- Flexibility:* Is your schedule flexible, allowing you to allocate more time for an activity if children are interested and engaged?

### Question the Environment:

- Aesthetically pleasing:* Is your physical environment beautiful and pleasing to the eye? Is it a place you and the students enjoy being in?
- Accessibility:* Is the environment child-sized and are materials easily accessible to all children?
- Documentation:* Do you display your student's work, giving it value? Or, are your classroom walls full of commercially-produced items?
- Emotionally safe:* Are the children comfortable in making mistakes without fear of ridicule? Are the children willing and encouraged to take risks in their work?

### Creating a Personal Action Plan

Reflect on your answers to the previous questions. On what areas would you like to focus your improvements?

In order to make changes to your classroom and teaching practices it is important to set concrete goals and timelines. Choose two or three things that can be changed over this next year. If a classroom offers little in terms of toys with

functional freedom and the schedule is too rigid for active and creative exploration, plan the addition of a Creation Station for recycled materials and choose a morning and afternoon time that can be dedicated to non-structured games and activities. In order to put this plan into practice, create an implementation timeline for these changes. In this timeline be sure to include checkpoints throughout the year to review and reflect on how these changes have worked.

### Early Childhood Education: Looking Towards the Future

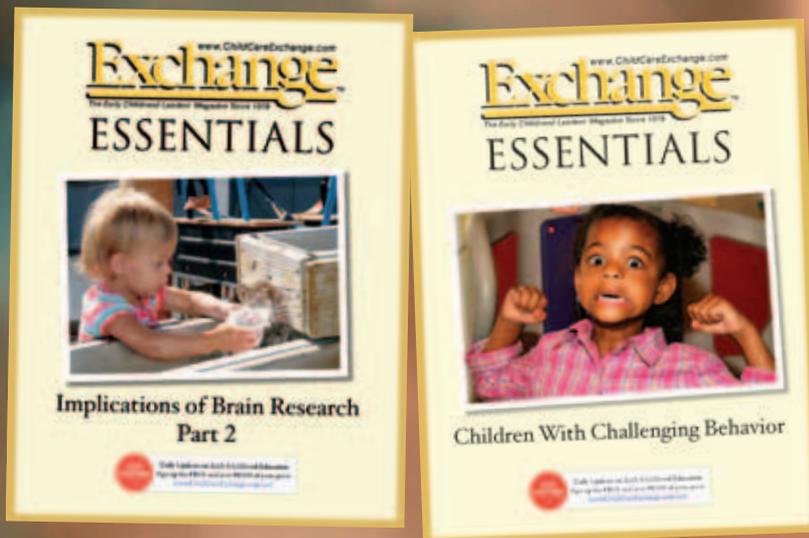
#### Emergent Curriculum

Many early childhood classrooms are moving away from 'packaged' curricula or theme-based approaches and an emergent curriculum. Emergent curriculum develops out of the children's interests and questions, which then guide the activities and experiences the teacher plans. The two major differences between emergent curriculum and a theme-based approach is:

- 1) How the curriculum is developed.
- 2) Who takes the lead. For example, children may look out the window and notice a building being built across the street. The teacher notices the children talking about the construction site and asking each other questions. The teacher follows the children's interests and develops activities around the idea of construction, letting the children's questions and ideas guide the curriculum.

Creativity can flourish in an emergent-based approach by capitalizing on the children's investment in the curriculum. By including children in the decision-making process the teacher is respecting the children's ideas, giving them choices, and encouraging children to explore their own ideas. In packaged curricula and many commercially-produced curriculum guides, there is little room for children to take the lead.

For the most essential information  
rely on Exchange Essentials.



Background Photograph by D. Sharon Pruitt

**Exchange Essentials** – the title says it all. This series will support you in your work as an administrator, and serve as the platform for on-going training to help your staff perform to their highest potential.

Every article in this series has been carefully selected for its timeliness and appropriateness to some of today's most challenging issues. Each title is presented in digital format so you can easily download to your desktop for immediate use.

To view a complete table of contents and author listing, visit [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) and click on **Exchange Essentials**.

[www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com)  
**Exchange**<sup>TM</sup>  
The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine Since 1978

17725 NE 65th St, B-275, Redmond, WA 98052 • (800) 221-2864

## Multicultural Curriculum and Developmentally Appropriate Practices

When working with young children, teachers must ensure that their teaching practices adhere to developmentally and culturally appropriate practices. Creating a classroom that celebrates creativity also honors the child's familial background and developmental need for freedom. Children have much to share about their background and interests when given the opportunity.

Teachers who encourage children to follow their interests, change the classroom materials often to generate excitement, and provide ample time for exploration are doing much to assist their students. By creating such an environment, these teachers are encouraging children to share things such as stories, foods, and other customs from their homes. In addition, by partnering with children in the creation of emergent curriculum and allowing time for independent exploration, we are honoring the developmental needs of our youngest students.

## Conclusion

In order to prepare young children to be successful in the future, we must teach them to think creatively. It is essential that teachers and administrators review their classrooms, teaching methods, and curriculum with creativity in mind. By creating a classroom that celebrates creativity, we are helping pave the way for developmentally appropriate practices that include an emergent and differentiated curriculum based on student needs and interests. We are helping children to be divergent 'outside of the box' thinkers, skills they will need to both solve problems and innovate.

Educators must ensure that their own attitudes, classroom practices, and the classroom environment support children's creative expression. With our commitment to an ongoing review of our teaching practices and implementa-

Opportunities for Growth	Action Steps
Teaching Style	Respect children's ideas. Encourage children to follow their interests and ideas. Provide children with choices. Share excitement with children about their discoveries.
Materials	Provide a variety of materials with high levels of functional freedom. Provide a variety of expressive materials such as clay, paint, and chalk. Choose materials that will provoke the children's interest. Change or rotate materials in and out of your classroom frequently.
Schedule	Allow children to have uninterrupted periods of time to explore and create. Modify your schedule based upon children's engagement and interest.
Activities/ Lessons	Offer activities that allow for and encourage divergent thinking. Take a process-oriented approach to activities, rather than product-oriented. Provide children with basic knowledge and skills to be able to connect and create with. Allow children to explore and follow their own interests. Give children ample opportunities to collaborate and work with each other. Encourage children to pose problems and then find the solution.
Environment	Create an aesthetically-pleasing environment that you and the children enjoy being in. Ensure that the furniture is child-sized and materials are accessible to children. Display children's work and other documentation. Develop an emotionally-safe environment where children are comfortable to take risks.

tion of additional methods to enhance creativity, our students can more easily develop the creativity that is essential to their success in our increasingly complex world.

## References

- Bronson, P., & Merryman, A. (2010, July). The creativity crisis. *Newsweek*, 44-50.
- Gardner, H. (2006). *Five minds for the future*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

## Resources

### Books

- Gandini, L., Hill, L., Cadwell, L., & Schwall, C. (2005). *In the spirit of the*

*studio: Learning from the atelier of Reggio Emilia*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Isaksen, S., & Treffinger, D. (1985). *Creative problem solving: The basic course*. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Limited.

Weisman Topal, C., & Gandini, L. (1999). *Beautiful stuff: Learning with found objects*. New York: Sterling.

## Websites/Organizations

The Center for Creative Learning:  
[www.creativelearning.com](http://www.creativelearning.com)

National Association for Gifted Children Creativity Network:  
[www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)