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Creativity Crisis: Awakening the Creative Classroom Environment

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Abstract

This narrative acknowledges a creativity crisis enabled by a regulated curriculum and then provides a clear path for teachers to incorporate creativity into the classroom environment to nurture creative thinkers. In order to frame a creative mindset, it is critical to implement active engagement, instructional flexibility and differentiated goals during all aspects of the learning process for both children and teachers. Eight attributes have been compiled to provide teachers with a scaffold to implement a creative classroom environment with innovative opportunities, critical thinking experiences, and problem-solving instruction.

Introduction

We are in a creativity crisis. Creativity is declining and schools are not providing adequate support for teachers to increase children's critical thinking and the ability to problem solve (Cho et al., 2017; Powers, 2015). Teachers are not the only ones to see this issue; researchers across the nation confirm the reality that creativity is not an included focus in the classroom (Berliner, 2009). In fact, if teachers are not able to incorporate the four C's (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication), children are less likely to engage in the creative process as they grow older (Alabbasi et al., 2022). Knowing the crisis exists is only the beginning. Teachers need support in knowing where to begin. Building creativity into the classroom can be a daunting task without direction.

Teachers' Role in Constructing the Creative Classroom Environment

It is important that educators understand, and have confidence in, how they construct the creative classroom environment and their role in nurturing children's learning. Effective educators understand teaching is more than instruction and learning is more than curriculum (Berliner, 2009). The classroom teacher becomes the decisive element in a child's day and ultimately determines not only what a child learns, but, as well, frames how each child views future learning. It only takes one negative situation, one negative teacher, or one negative event where a child is not provided with an opportunity to express, represent, and/or resolve the event that may change his or her perception toward learning. Ginott (1972) connects classroom management with children's feelings and describes how vital the role of the teacher is in creating the social/emotional classroom environment. This proactive environment further supports children's abilities to think critically and provide equitable education for all children (Berliner, 2009). Additionally, Ginott (1972) describes why it is essential teachers' interactions should be grounded in acceptance rather than the rejection of feelings, emotions, or interpretations of learning. This positive relationship suggests creativity flourishes when children initiate opportunities to interact with the environment and become valued in their individual learning; thus, teachers listen to their children (Cho et al, 2017).

So, how do classroom teachers engage children in meaningful learning while continuing to support emotional growth as well as maintain instruction?

The Importance of the Creative Classroom Learning Environment

Creating a classroom environment that stimulates children as well as the teacher through ongoing, investigative learning requires a combination of strategies and supports to enhance learning (Azzam, 2009; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Providing opportunities for children to think in new and autonomous ways, teachers not only increase children's creativity, but also their engagement, persistence, and critical thinking skills (Azzam, 2009; Berliner, 2009; Burgess, 2012; Pianta et al., 2008).

Sir Ken Robinson (TED, 2007) describes in a Ted Talk how creativity is as vital in education as other subject areas and emphasizes the use of creativity with the same importance as content learning (Azzam, 2009). To achieve creativity in the classroom, the teacher is willing to support children in unorthodox ways; reimagining teaching (Robinson & Robinson, 2022).

Davis (2018) cautions how schools are on the verge of experiencing a gap in creativity in the classroom. Currently, children do not achieve the outer limits of thinking; instead of constructing understanding, children are taught to merely receive information (Berliner, 2009; Cho et al., 2017; Powers, 2015). It appears children experience far more creative activity outside their school than in the classroom. An IBM global CEO study (2010) sought to determine the role of creativity in future success (Powers, 2015). Data reveals that more than any other attribute (rigor, management, discipline, integrity, or vision), successful navigation of the increasingly complex world we live in requires the ability to be creative (Azzam, 2009; IBM, 2010). Therefore, creativity is needed in the classroom now more than ever (Cho et al., 2017).

Planning for Creativity in the Classroom

There are eight different strategies common in classrooms where children are naturally creative and included in learning goals. By incorporating these eight attributes to enhance creativity, teachers discover ways for the classroom to transition to the next level of encouraging and supporting creativity. These attributes invite the teacher to 1) share power with children, 2) encourage risk-taking in the classroom, 3) provide active learning, 4) engage in meaningful conversations with thought provoking questions, 5) create positive energy, 6) provide open-ended opportunities and materials, 7) increase value in learning and 8) include children in assessment (See Image 1).



Image 1: Eight attributes to enhance creativity in the classroom.

The teacher's role in creative expression is more than simply being present in the learning experience. These attributes become essential for a teacher to enhance creativity throughout the classroom.

- 1) *Sharing power* with children is not typical in classrooms; however, it is through this act that a classroom transforms from a place of knowledge receiving to knowledge seeking. The teacher shares power by sharing learning, materials, and classroom space with children. It is not sufficient to merely provide a safe space for children; rather, collaborating in rule creation and discussing classroom materials and their use with children become integral toward nurturing creativity (Willis, 1997). It is through the sharing of power that children feel most comfortable and in control of their learning.
- 2) *Encouraging risk-taking* is another attribute observed in more creative spaces. Those

teachers who provide a safe space for children to take reasonable risks in their learning find them more eager to try something new (Bianco, 2018). These same children are more confident in sharing in class discussion, working with peers, and risking being wrong (Pianta et al., 2008). Teachers who strive for risk-taking frame learning as a part of the community structure where-in children discuss with peers before sharing, practice opportunities to reflect on their answer, and revise according to additional insight. Other strategies to support children include providing opportunities for contacting a friend across the room to elaborate on their spoken response, allowing children to pass when unsure or not yet prepared to share, or relying on a group huddle before discussing with the full class. Teachers need to understand how to nurture children's creative processes by encouraging risk-taking.

- 3) *Active learning* applies to the teacher who understands and values that creativity is embedded in the learning process and provides children with active experiences in the classroom. In these creative classrooms, teachers interact and communicate with children on their level (Pianta et al., 2008). Teachers provide opportunities for children's active engagement by including them in the planning process and inviting children to share where they want the learning to go. Including children in planning for learning requires a teacher's confidence. Planning sessions can include strategic discussions where children share what they want to learn more about, how they want to learn, or even sharing questions they still have about something already learned. This can be through individual or larger group questioning.
- 4) *Questioning strategies* support children's ability to think for themselves and build on their prior knowledge. Incorporating open-ended questions, higher order thinking questions, and back-and-forth exchanges encourage children to consider answers to "I wonder" statements and support understanding of central concepts in learning (Pianta et al., 2008). Teachers who plan to include open-ended questions throughout learning investigations find children seek a deeper level of understanding. By asking how and why questions, children engage with the subject rather than being a receiver of information. This makes learning relevant and new for children and teachers in the classroom. Investigative language encourages children to take ownership for their own learning (Robinson & Robinson, 2022). Effective and engaging questions excite children in learning new information and help to make valuable connections to making them life-long learners.
- 5) *Positive energy* begins with the teacher. How the teacher responds to children is reflected in the classroom. When the teacher is eager to encourage children through positive statements and reflective discussions, children are more eager to do well. Teachers in creative classrooms embrace the ability to encourage judiciously by focusing on the learning process rather than the product of a child's work. When teachers focus on positive interactions, they support and encourage children through words, actions and working through problems together. In creative classrooms, teachers celebrate successes and empower children by learning through their mistakes (Young, 2014). These teachers do not praise; rather, they encourage children to continue to think for themselves (Pianta et al., 2008). Positive energy increases children's self-confidence to open their minds to

imagination and wonder in their world (Robinson & Robinson, 2022). It is in these classrooms that children become self-motivated to learn.

- 6) *Open-ended materials* support ongoing learning in the creative classroom. Teachers who plan with creativity in mind choose open-ended materials and effective teaching strategies to engage children in more meaningful learning. Creativity does not have to be expensive through purchased materials or purchased lesson plans. Teachers who truly understand creativity know that children need hands-on learning, open-ended materials with more than one way to use them, and the time to experience learning through trial and error.
- 7) *Placing value on the learning process* enhances creativity and work output in the classroom. Children who see value in their learning are more eager to share their thinking and overall creativity with their teacher. Teachers can change the culture of learning by placing value on children's work through transcription. Transcription allows teachers to capture children's thinking in the moment and is a powerful tool in the classroom (Katz & Chard, 1996). When the teacher takes the time to capture the child's words, the child notices. Some opportunities to capture children's thinking occur during journal work, reflections on learning, and through planning for play (See Image 2). When incorporating play plans in work with children, they can think about their plan and reflect on their choices during a particular learning experience. By transcribing children's work, teachers model language and literacy, as well as capture children's ideas (See Image 3). In Image 3, the child provided more details as the teacher labeled his work. When transcribing children's words, teachers place value on their thinking, analyzing, and reflecting. Children recognize this and are encouraged to be even more reflective in their learning. Always ask children for permission prior to transcribing on their work. There are appropriate times to transcribe for learning and there are times when children are creating and choose for adults to not write directly on their work. It is important to understand the difference and ask children when in doubt. This contributes to the respectful relationship between teacher and child and supports the value teachers place on child work.



Image 2: Placing value on learning using transcription during journal work and center time activities.

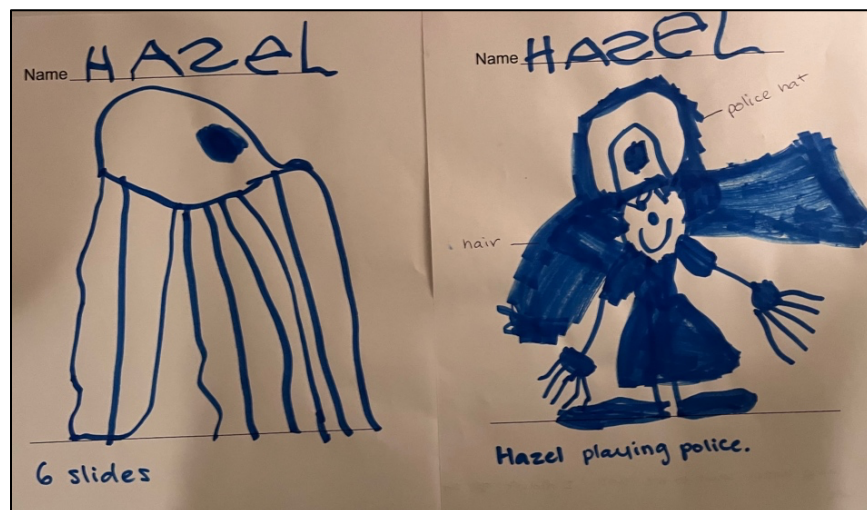


Image 3: Using play plans to model language and literacy

The teacher can also share an investigative role with children in their learning. In this strategy, children and teachers learn new information together, side by side in their investigation (See Image 4).

- Standard: Writing
- Goal: Uses writing as a means of expression/communication
- Indicator: Tells others about intended meaning of drawings and writings.
- Comments: Matthew drew on both sides of the paper. After he was finished, he told the teacher that his work represented a cowboy. When the teacher prompted further, he shared that cowboys wear boots that are tall. He described how the boots look when they are on the cowboy. The teacher asked what else he would like to know about cowboy boots. Matthew asked to see cowboy boots at school and meet a cowboy.



Image 4: Documentation of individual discussion leading to planning for future learning

Children learn how to investigate through the teacher's modeling of asking questions, researching, and reflecting. It is through these shared experiences that children learn how to find answers to their questions as well as how to process information gathering. Teaching children how to find the answers to their questions empowers them for a creative future. Examples including KWL charts, topic webs, and a parking lot (to park questions during investigation) guide children to learn how to ask questions and seek out their own answers. Teachers provide children opportunities for exploration through gathering of information, documenting questions children have, and researching topics together.

- 8) *Assessment of learning* is not just for teachers. Teachers can create a collaborative relationship with children through reflecting on learning together. Teachers who already include their children in the planning process may find it natural to also include children in the assessment process. In fact, in many elementary and middle school classrooms, children plan for parent-teacher meetings using child-led conferencing (Cromwell, 2015). Allowing young children to take an active role in their assessment prepares them for a world where they can set goals and feel positive about their accomplishments without relying on external gratitude. Teachers who include children in assessment share what they observe and ask what they notice. These teachers provide photos to the child and allow them to respond with their perceptions of what is occurring.

Image 5 is an example of including children in assessing their own learning. The photo was taken by the classroom teacher. Later, the teacher showed the photo to the child and asked him to share what he was doing. The child shared, “I wanted to know how long the black piece of plastic is. I wanted to measure it using a tape measure to find it out. It was 6”. The teacher captured the child’s words to include in his portfolio. By including children in the assessment process, they take ownership of their learning and experience meaningful evaluation of learning in age-appropriate ways.



Image 5: Children involved in the assessment process

Summary and Conclusion

When the teacher constructs a classroom environment where learning happens naturally and is celebrated, child outcomes exceed expectations. Children feel free to investigate and learn in the classroom, seeing value in their ideas and creative thinking (Cho et al., 2017). The pairing of educators willing to embed content with authentic learning experiences becomes important. The risk for teachers includes carving time to be creative and taking a stand for critical thinking practices in line with an ever-changing world (Berliner, 2009). Additionally, children’s discussion stimulates growth in creative processing for their own learning and that of their teacher.

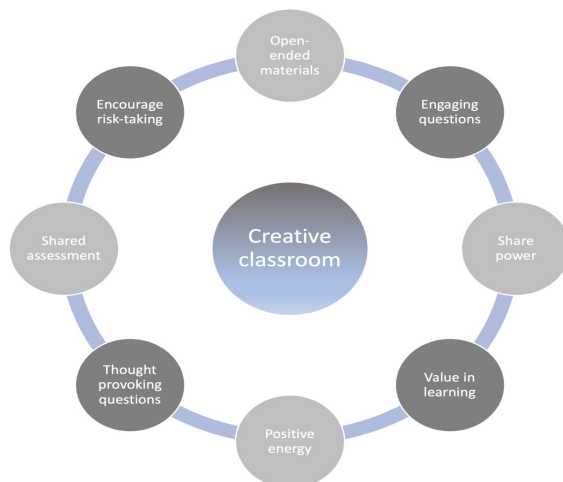


Image 6: Attributes for a creative classroom

Incorporating the eight attributes supports a higher order thinking classroom through creativity in teaching and in learning. Just as Image 6 portrays, there is no starting point or specific order for implementing these strategies; the classroom teacher may incorporate attributes where most comfortable and increase creativity as the school year progresses (Azzam, 2009). *Taking an initial first step* is a positive beginning to increasing creativity in the classroom. This model of teaching and learning benefits teachers, children, and our future (Azzam, 2009; Berliner, 2009; Cho et al., 2017). It is the combination of instruction, guided practice and reflection that provides teachers the confidence and ability to be successful in implementing a creative classroom environment where children are prepared for an ever-changing world in need of creative leaders!

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