

Encouraging Creativity in Children

by Kathryn Starke

“Okay my fabulous authors, today is “Free Choice Friday,” I say to my first graders every Friday morning. “You need to get out your paper, pencils, crayons, markers-whatever you’d like to use today in your writing.”

My classroom is silent while my six and seven-year-olds rifle through their desks to determine what tools they will select today to create the perfect piece of writing. They love this time of the week when they get to make a choice and write and/or draw about anything they want to. I put on classical music for background noise to stimulate our minds and the creativity begins. Some students prefer to work at their desks while others choose to sit at the back table close to me; others lie on their stomachs drafting away because they are excited to use a clipboard to organize their papers.

It sounds so simple and is definitely easy planning for me, but it really only happens once a week. We have so many language arts objectives to teach and required writing prompts for our students to complete that we often forgo this special time of day which the children love because they are free to be themselves and write what makes them happy, which includes stories, poems, plays, comics, recipes, and even rap songs.

Some children decide to illustrate their words and add beautiful artwork to their text, while other students beg me to share their original piece with the class. Since I do have at least four other subjects to teach during the instructional day, I ask if they can plan for their performance during recess. The response is always, “Can we?!?”

We are out on the playground with forty additional students, basketball courts, kickball games, swings, slides, and jungle gyms. I see a group of girls practicing their parts in the play they want to act out for the class and a crowd of boys choreographing a dance and creating a beat that will accompany the lyrics of rhyme they wrote earlier in the day. Students from other classes have gathered around to watch. The children are naturally engaged because, unfortunately, this type of self-directed learning, individuality, and creativity rarely happens in school.

Creativity is one thing that is not formally assessed or evaluated on tests or report cards, so teachers don’t plan lessons that encourage it. In fact, many teachers, without meaning to, stifle children’s creativity when they cut off a student’s oral response or stop them from adding more to their work in order to bring them back to the topic or task at hand. Instead, we should find ways to celebrate imagination at home and in the classroom and encourage our youngsters to think outside of the box. Debbie Miller, a literacy consultant from Denver, Colorado says to put children’s writing on display to show their thinking is valued. How true that is! Hanging a child’s words on the kitchen refrigerator or classroom bulletin board provides him or her with a sense of pride and a boost of confidence, which will lead them to further their thinking.

We can stimulate creativity by sharing captivating and innovative literature; Dr. Seuss is expert at this. After reading his stories, we all want to find a truffula tree from *The Lorax* and spend “a night in Na-Nupp” like they do in *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think*. We want to ask our students questions like *how*, *why*, and *what if*, and quality literature allows us to do so. *Tuesday* by David Wiesner and *If Dogs Were Dinosaurs* by David M. Schwartz are just a few examples that are well worth a read.

Music and art are great outlets for children to show their creativity. If your child shows a passion for either one, he or she should be given the opportunity to explore it further. Enroll your child in a dance class, choir, or sign them up for lessons to play a musical instrument. Many children's and art museums offer programs throughout the year in painting, pottery, drawing, mosaics, and even culinary arts.

Finally, make believe or playing "pretend" allows our children to visualize and imagine themselves in another world, often in the future. Think about when you were younger and loved to dress up to pretend you were a mommy, teacher, model, or businesswoman. Kids love this and do it all of the time. When they're playing with blocks, they are building a skyscraper. When they're in the play kitchen, they've become a renowned chef. Play and exploration foster creativity, and creative adults are innovative and successful in their field.