

Training Teachers for Creative Learning Experiences

by Margie Carter

When I ask colleagues if they are familiar with the Reggio Emilia program, those who know of it respond, "Oh, yes, that's the wonderful children's arts school in Italy." Many offer glowing comments, but make it clear they see no possibility for such a program in this country. This view misses the connection that the Reggio program is a model for our catchword "Developmentally Appropriate Practice."

Lella Gandini reminds us that creativity is much broader than artistic expression. It is profoundly central to the disposition, flexibility of thought and skills children need going into the 21st century. In addition, Gandini's definition of creativity — the production of novel thoughts, solutions, or products based on previous experience and knowledge — sheds light on the conditions needed for autonomy which Piaget describes as central to moral development.

So what are the elements of translating this creativity into our classroom practice, and how can we assist teachers in gaining this understanding? As outlined in the first issue of the new **Beginnings (Exchange, March/April 1992)**, the teacher training methodology my colleague, Deb Curtis, and I have developed has four components and can be applied to most teacher education topics.

Helping Teachers Identify Their Own Filters and Agendas

Teachers come to our programs with preconceived views on creativity and the whole notion of play.

Experiences in their own lives have influenced the value they place on experimentation, trusting and venturing into the pursuit of their own ideas and interests. Things such as their culture and previous teacher education influence their behaviors, along with current demands and scheduling dilemmas of their jobs.

It is helpful to get these out in the open for examination so that the staff as a whole better understand each other and the children in their care. This also sets the stage for problem solving as a team. Questions to explore in the area of creativity include the following:

- What childhood messages encouraged or discouraged your feeling secure in pursuing your own curiosity, interests, and ideas?
- How do you feel about making a mess? Are you at ease with these feelings or are you working to change them?
- How do we know whether we are wasting time or needing more time to learn what we are after?

These questions can be pursued in staff meetings or discussed when debriefing some of the activities described below.

Examining the Environment

At the heart of an environment that fosters creativity is an ample supply of open-ended materials and an organization of space that invites involvement

independent of the teacher. The articles on Reggio in this magazine and the September 1990 issue of **Young Children**, along with the description of Caroline Pratt's City and Country School in the November 1991 issue of **Young Children**, provide us with examples of what this looks like. Yet teachers understand this best from some concrete experiences to reflect on.

• **Strategy — Contrasting Small Groups**

Divided into small groups, ask each group to designate someone as the teacher. Give one group a small supply of straws and tape and teacher instructions to direct the group in making something based on her model. Give the other group a large supply of straws along with tape, scissors, and "twisty wire" or pipe cleaners. Teacher instructions for this group are to place the materials on the table and invite the group to explore them, adding other supplies which her observations indicate might assist in the pursuit of ideas, such as play dough, styrofoam, or cardboard boxes for a building base, paper, markers, and collage material for further elaboration.

After ten minutes or so call the groups together for a discussion of their experiences. Ask individuals to talk about how they felt, their level of engagement, feelings with regard to creativity, and their desire to continue on. Some of the questions listed above could be included as well.

• **Strategy — Time with Loose Parts**

During an extended workshop period, provide teachers with an unusually large supply of similar materials — for instance, hollow blocks, cardboard boxes of different shapes, or a multitude of hair rollers of all sizes. Tell them they will be given lots of time to play with these things and explore what they can do.

As their involvement gets under way, make additional materials available, modeling the teacher role of prop manager. Additions should continue to be open-ended, such as a supply of large pieces of fabric representing various textures and cultures; objects from nature including rocks of all kinds, shells, driftwood, plants, or flowers; clothes pins, wire, lace, rope, yarn, or masking tape to aid in holding things together.

With an extensive period of time to experiment and create with "loose parts" (Nicholson), teachers gain a

wealth of insight into how to structure their classroom environments, including issues of organizing, space, the type and quantity of materials needed, and the amount of time and communication required to foster relationship with the material and people around. They also come to a clearer picture of appropriate roles for the adults to play in fostering creativity — observer, prop manager, scribe, documenter. (See Carter and Jones and Jones and Reynolds for further elaboration.)

Deepening Understandings of Child Development

Teachers who value creativity recognize that curriculum emerges out of the themes children are investigating and expressing, rather than from a teacher's theme planning book. To become adept at planning for and from children's themes, teachers need to continually assume the role of researcher, focusing most of their time listening and observing, rather than talking and demonstrating.

If this implies a dramatic change in behavior, directors may initially want to create some new structures or rules for their teachers. For instance, instead of requiring curriculum plans in advance, ask teachers to turn in a "curriculum web" which documents things individual children said and did with materials provided over a period of days in the classroom, along with props and responses the teacher made. These webs can be discussed in staff meetings with group brainstorming on additional materials to provide and what Irving Sigel calls "distancing questions," which could help children in the development of symbolic thought. Articles by George Forman and Judith Leipzig in **The Wonder of It: Exploring How the World Works** (Neugebauer) offer excellent examples of the kinds of questions adults can ask to further their own as well as the children's understandings.

Central to the creative process is the ability to see relationships and to think symbolically. Gandini reminds us that, "One of the premises of creativity is that the process of knowing finds connections with the process of expressing what is known." Help teachers learn to recognize this by practicing with video clips of classroom events. During staff meetings have them bring examples of things children have said or made that signify an aspect of symbolic thinking. Then ask, "What does this indicate the child already knows? How can we build on this?"

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Refining Skills and Techniques for Interactions

To foster creativity, teachers need to assume roles not traditionally thought of as teaching. Books in the bibliography offer examples of specific roles and classroom schemes teachers can try. Directors can extract short segments from these for staff workshop activities and discussions. Teachers can choose a role or technique to practice and get feedback on, for instance, assuming the “teacher as scribe” role described by Jones and Reynolds, refining the skill of asking “distancing questions” Sigel proposes, or the “play-debrief-replay” approach outlined by Wasserman. Above all, teachers need to bring their own creativity to providing for the children’s discovery process. In turn, they can extend this to the process of documenting and broadcasting examples of the creative curriculum the children have invented.

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