

Playing With Ideas

by Lilli-ann Buffin

I awoke this morning to the sound of my clock radio and the voice of the disc jockey announcing the death of Charles Schulz, the creator of Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the Peanuts gang. Immediately, I realized the profound coincidence of hearing this news on the day his farewell comic strip was scheduled to appear in the Sunday newspaper. There is a sweet sadness to this coincidence and a certain rightness, too. I reflect on the words of Benjamin Disraeli: "Most people go to their graves with their music still in them." How lucky for Mr. Schulz to have completed his composition. How lucky for us that he was able to hear and to play out his own special song.

Through his unique genius, Schulz brought us great joy and personal insight, comfort in our shortcomings, and a cartoon circle of friends to whom we could all relate. Since his early childhood, Schulz knew what he wanted to do, and he lived out his life doing it — a labor of love and persistence. Charles Schulz created something unique and of value that contributed much to all of our lives. He was a contemporary example of the creative mind. We feel a com-

bination of admiration, envy, and deep gratefulness to someone who "always knew," who had a dream and a driving passion that he transformed into reality. As a boy, Schulz had an idea, and he played with that idea every day for the rest of his life.

How can we be sure we won't die with the music still in us? How do we find the song? How do we string together the notes we faintly hear from time to

time? We all want to be necessary, to contribute something to this world, whether it be finding a cure for AIDS, developing a recipe for raisin bread that no one else can quite replicate, or composing the jingle made up to soothe a fussy baby who, 30 years later, will sing to his own son, not sure from where that music came or how he knows it. We all seek meaning and purpose in our lives.

Composing our lives is really a collaboration of all the lives that have contributed to our own ideas and becoming. Somewhere today in your classroom, center, or family, a few notes are beginning to stir in a young mind. Inaudible to our ears, a chord is forming. We can't know who will be the next George Washington Carver, Thomas Edison, Georgia O'Keefe, or Albert Einstein. Early development is a poor predictor of later creative talent. How then do we tune in to the music? And why is it important to do so?

Ideas are the new business capital. Most jobs today require people who think for a living. The edge will go to the business with the greatest ability to innovate, to people who can generate fresh "WOW" kinds of ideas. Attitude and motivation are key components of the innovative and competent mind.

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Your job, as an administrator or early childhood professional, is to encourage creativity in your staff who nurture the thinking, creativity, and growing minds of the children for whom you all care. Whether in the classroom or in the boardroom, “[p]eople denied the joy of creativity in their work die a little inside. With no need to create, routine becomes monotony then boredom, and, finally, living death” (Blohowiak, 1995, p. 9). When employees are inspired to reach for their potential, the quality of service at your center is enhanced and the children see from living examples what it means to be creative and competent.

How lucky we are to be in this business, to be among growing minds every day! It is so easy as we go through the school years into adulthood to learn the lessons of conformity. We become so good at coloring in the lines, remembering that the sky is always blue, the grass always green. How wonderful to be among children who can’t or won’t color in the lines, who remind us that just this morning the sky was deep purple with hot pink streaks, that the land isn’t always a green, grassy field, but the “amber waves of grain” we sing about. It is the curiosity of children that compels them to ask of us, “How?” and “Why? Why?! Why!!” Children invite us to see the world from another point of view. They give us the magic to see the world again, for the first time. What more can we do to nurture their creativity, as well as our own, and to keep our schools and centers places of discovery and innovation?

Passion

Einstein did not consider himself to have any special talent, only a passionate curiosity. Creative people have many interests and a passion for pursuing their ideas. Because of this driving force, they are able to persist in the face of difficulties. Creative minds joyfully seek out problems to be solved and abhor

monotony. We must look for our “creative intersection” — the place where our skills, talents, and interests meet (Amabile, 1989). We must remember that our creative intersection will change over time, especially for children. We need to provide meaning and real-life relevance to new ideas, plugging into our interests and those of our staff and children. Learning, even rote memorization, is not a chore when it is something we care about.

When hiring staff, we tend to look for the necessary skills to meet the basic job description. We must be careful not to overlook a prospective employee’s special interests, talents, and sense of purpose. These are the elements that affect attitude, motivation, and passion for this work. These are the areas in which staff contribute the energy needed for growth and innovation. Meeting these needs in people provides the psychic paycheck that money alone cannot provide.

Relationships

People need to connect with other people to be fully human and alive. Brain research demonstrates that all learning occurs in an affective context. We all have experienced this kind of learning. That which touches our hearts — or wounds them — stays with us forever. Children and adults will take learning risks and face difficult challenges in the context of a loving, trusting relationship. When our children and colleagues trust us, they will try hard because they believe the things we ask of them are good.

We need to nurture our existing relationships and build new ones. Seek out opportunities to travel, to meet new people, and find successful and creative others to invite to our homes and centers. We must make every effort to reduce peer pressure that leads to stifling conformity and to decrease or eliminate competition which makes a negative

impact on creativity.

Model

Be a good role model to others. Demonstrate diverse interests and your own enthusiasm for new ideas. Encourage thinking aloud. This allows us into the mind of another to hear the self-talk and problem-solving strategies creative, competent people use. There is no more powerful impact than one mind encountering another.

Time

We all need time to devote ourselves to the things that interest us, to experience the satisfaction of persistence necessary to the passionately curious mind. Do you, your staff, and children have enough time to persist at activities, or are there constant interruptions? Does your day contain too many transitions?

Is there space and time in the day for quiet reflection? To play with ideas? Without reflection, children never learn the necessary skills for calming themselves and attending to their inner worlds. Without reflection, children never learn to appreciate or enjoy the pleasure and power of their own minds at work, of ideas connecting one to another. Without time for this kind of quiet reflection, adults grow stale and stressed, their music silenced.

Values

Families of creative children tend to focus on values not rules. Children in these families grow to understand the basic principles that guide behavior and decision making. There are very few discipline problems reported in these families. Without the constraints of too many rules, children have the freedom to be creative, but the guidelines to make good choices. In the classroom, we can have rules that inform and provide goals; but we don’t need to

control all the choices, thereby enabling children and staff to use creative alternatives to reach those goals.

Play

It is tragic that many people have interpreted the exciting brain research of the last decade to mean that play is frivolous. It seems that play and recess have become misunderstood tools for learning. Those of us who really connect with children every day fear the destruction of a healthy developmental process. In homes that nurture creativity, children engage in lots of activity, fantasy, fun, and play. The more opportunities children have to play, the more they learn about objects, relationships, their environment, and themselves. Richard Gardner, a contemporary child psychiatrist, has written that the sharing of pleasure is the “universal antidote” to psychopathology.

Play is important to our well-being in every way. Schedule a play day with your staff and families. Appoint or elect someone from your staff to be in charge of fun. Post cartoons. Send funny cards. Join with the children.

Get a Life

Our lives can become stress filled and overwhelming, with too many obligations to meet. In a stressed frame of mind, we don't think clearly; our emotions become a barrier to creative thoughts. We tend to choose *quick* solutions to relieve our immediate anxiety instead of allowing ourselves the time to develop *good* solutions.

Can you remember the hobbies and activities you enjoyed as a child and throughout your life? Make a commitment to rediscover them even if it is only 15 minutes a day on your lunch hour. Read. There is no better, easier way to encounter another mind. Every great mind who ever lived is waiting to

meet you at the library, newsstand, or bookstore.

Everyone is creative. None of us really knows the full potential of our own minds, but once we begin to stretch them, our minds are enlarged forever. Each of us must find and follow our passions. Constantly ask questions; get intimate with your own mind. Go outside your everyday sources of information and explore new disciplines. Don't let ideas escape! Write them down. Keep a notebook or journal. Get a small pocket-sized tape recorder. Hold idea parties. The next time you're out shopping and the salesperson asks what you are looking for, tell her you are shopping for good ideas.

Plan to do something different every day. Give yourself and staff an idea quota for the month. Don't worry, you won't run out of ideas. Creative people never do. I once read that, on average, every person has four good ideas a year, any one of which could make her a fortune.

Early childhood professionals are the most creative people I know. Creativity is a large part of what draws us to this important work. Maybe we are too tired to pursue all of our creative ideas, but pick one, just one. You never know where it might lead. I think I hear the orchestra warming up. In fact, they are playing your song!

References

Amabile, T. M. (1989). *Growing up creative: Nurturing a lifetime of creativity*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Blohowiak, D. (1995). *Lead your staff to think like Einstein, create like Da Vinci, and invent like Edison*. Chicago: Irwin Professional Publishing.