The early childhood field has been flooded with demands from families, departments of education, and politicians to make sure children are learning. From diverse sources such as No Child Left Behind legislation, the pre-k movement, and worried families, teachers often feel pressure to make sure they are preparing children academically. This issue of Beginnings Workshop reminds us that “thinking” is a critical skill for children to learn. Barbara Bowman starts the dialogue by explaining the effects of culture on children’s thinking and how teachers subsequently teach. Teresa Walton-Helm describes how she keeps the focus on children’s thinking in her classroom. Considering the families’ perspective is the focus of Janet Gonzalez-Mena’s article. And, Christina Aubel reminds us all that everything we do with young children has the ability to have life-long impact on creative thinking. Each is guaranteed to make readers “think” as well!

Available in August! A new Out of the Box Training Kit based on this Beginnings Workshop article: “Thinking About Thinking: How Can I Get Inside Your Head?” — Item #4400406

For reprint permission, contact Exchange, PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073 • (800) 221-2864 • info@ChildCareExchange.com.
Thinking is a high priority in the United States today. As brain, rather than brawn, power increases in importance, one of our most pressing economic priorities is to raise the educational achievement of our children. Yet, our goal of educating all children is made more difficult by our history of educationally excluding and marginalizing people who are not white, English speaking, and Christian. Until quite recently, schools (and the nation) shunned poor and minority children, contending they are inherently unable to master the academic curriculum. Genetic research over the past quarter century has challenged this assumption and concluded that the human capacity to learn exists across all racial and social groupings. With a growing population of people of color, speaking a variety of different languages, belonging to many religious groups and ethnic and national communities, the question is not can all children learn, but how to teach them. One of the barriers to teaching and learning is caused by differences in how people think.

We now know that there is a great deal of similarity in human thinking. Piaget’s (1967) work is based on the genetic disposition of children to develop in certain ways. He contends that there are universal patterns in development caused by the interaction of the human genetic code and experience. This idea is consistent with the enormous biological overlap scientists have found in all human capabilities.

There is also considerable research that shows some individuals are able to think better than others — earlier, faster, and/or more profoundly. Presumably, their individual genetic make-up and their specific experiences better prepare them for thinking. More recently, Howard Gardner (1993) pointed out that there are different kinds of thinking and that some of us are better at some kinds than others. We may be more artistic and relational, rather than scientific and logical; or better at verbal tasks than at manual ones. What this tells us is that although people are similar in their potential for thinking, there are individual differences that reflect each person’s unique blend of genetic potential and personal experience.
Culture is less often recognized as a factor in thinking. However, individuals are shaped not only by their individual genes and experiences, but also by the meaning these are given by the groups within which they live. Culture consists of patterns of beliefs, attitudes, and relationships that a group of people share with one another, including values, morality, myths, language, as well as customs, practices, roles, communication styles. The role of culture in thinking has been highlighted in recent years by the work of Vygotsky (1978) and others who have focused on the role of social interaction in thinking. This has spawned a new understanding of group differences and the role of social experience and language in shaping our human capabilities. Barbara Rogoff (2003), Shirley Brice Heath (1983), and others have called our attention to how groups of people make sense of their world and teach it to their children. While there are certainly individual differences within each group (the range for any characteristic is probably as broad within groups as it is between groups); nevertheless, groups do have shared social structures and practices that give meaning to their thinking.

Most American children share a culture; however, some of us live in more socially isolated groups than others. Children from these groups — segregated by ethnicity, social class, language, and religion — are most likely to have cultural patterns that are different than those found in the mainstream. Unfortunately, they and their parents are frequently misunderstood and they, in turn, often misunderstand the larger society. We miscommunicate because we think our culture’s ways of thinking is the right way and if others do not see the world the way we do, there must be something wrong with them.

Most of us are aware that different groups have different practices; but we often assume that these express the same thinking, although we may think they are peculiar. Muslims show their respect for God by taking off their shoes and putting on their hats, while Christians do just the opposite. Both groups honor God, though they do it in different ways. Often when we think of cultural difference we expect just such minor variations — like whether you eat bagels, corn bread, or fry bread for Sunday breakfast. We tend to be blind to real differences in how people think, differences that set us wondering, “what is wrong with them.” For example, many of us see the weather mainly through a scientific lens. When a phenomenon — like thunder and lightning — are explained by science, we are satisfied, even if we are not scientists ourselves or prefer other types of thinking. Yet, there are groups who think that metaphysical events are more real than those that are explainable with science. They live in a world inhabited by ghosts and other magical objects that cause claps of thunder and flashes of light. We wonder why they don’t use science to explain the world the way we do and they wonder why we don’t believe in what seems real to them.

Does this mean there are no developmental regularities that cut across cultural differences? Not at all. At one level all humans have the same basic abilities. They can all use language and their senses.
categorize, sequence, symbolize abstract experience, play with ideas, etc. And these abilities come to fruition at similar times. For example, no matter what language children learn, it begins with babbling at 4 to 6 months and ends in community speech by six years. So, there are universal characteristics to thinking. However, the way children use these abilities is determined to a large extent by the cultural experiences they have. How children learn to talk, whom they talk to and who talks to them, and what they talk about is learned. The language children speak also affects their thinking. Most people who speak more than one language say that some ideas are more easily expressed in each language. For instance, base 10 is illustrated more clearly in Chinese where the word for twelve is ten and two than in English where there is a new word for this concept.

Early childhood professionals sometimes misunderstand culture because of our emphasis on developmental norms. We have studied some children, noted the similarities in their development, and assumed that the average represents what normal children do. Children whose ideas and behavior do not conform to normative expectations are often considered delayed, deviant, and or disadvantaged. While in some instances this is true, other times the differences have a cultural explanation. For example, American norms call for children as young as 3 months to sleep by themselves, while other cultures expect children to sleep with someone else most of their lives. Americans expect children to dress themselves by age 4 or 5. Many groups expect to dress children until they are 6 or 7. Americans often think children cannot sit still for long periods, and meals are usually completed quickly. In other countries, quite young children sit much longer as they finish 3-course meals without showing the least discomfort. These differences mean that what is considered normal in one group may not be in another. The differences are neither bad nor good but may be more or less adaptive in some situations. For example, an American child in a French child care center may not sit quietly through a long meal and be seen as hyperactive.

Low-income adults use fewer words in their interactions with their children than do middle class parents; consequently, their children learn fewer words (Hart & Risley, 1995). These children are developmentally competent in their own community, even though their vocabulary may be so small that learning to read is difficult. Children learn to think as their own culture; does it mean they can’t learn others’ ways of thinking? Not at all; it just means their prior knowledge may or may not easily support the new thing you want them to know. Many kinds of thinking transfer from one language to another, from one situation to another, from one culture to another. For example, if children know a home language in which they understand a concept, they can grasp the same idea in another language quickly, although they must still learn the new word. Similarly, if children are accustomed to responsive parents at home, they will expect alternative caregivers to also be responsive and be better able to get the care they need in a new situation.
Frequently, however, there is not an easy fit between what children already know and what we want them to know. This can create the illusion that there is something wrong with their development. This often is not the case. It may be simply a difference in how they have learned to think. For example, some African American children, accustomed to a more authoritarian interactional style with adults, are confused and misunderstand teachers who are more indirect (Delpit, 1988). Children whose families do not use much formal speech may not understand the language in a book. While listening to a story they may enjoy the rhythm and intonation and never think about what the words mean. For meaning, a child may look at facial expressions or body language and be quite skilled in interpreting these clues to adult thinking.

Children, from birth on, are exposed to their own culture’s meaning system, expectations, and practices and their ways of thinking are deeply embedded in these. Understanding cultural differences is not easy. Many of them are subtle and the variations hard to see. Equally difficult is avoiding stereotyping; that is, attributing characteristics to children simply because they belong to a particular group. Children and families live in concentric cultural circles, drawing more from the heritage of one group this time and of the mainstream the next.

As early childhood professionals, we must challenge our cultural myopia and become more sensitive to these differences among groups in order to help children learn new ways of thinking. The onus is on us to find out how best to teach each child and to adapt curriculum to the differences among children, including their cultural differences.

**Bibliography**


**Name-dropping?:** Lots of important names are dropped in this article. Do you and your faculty know them? Are you familiar with the theories of Piaget, Gardner, Vygotsky, and the research findings of Hart and Risley? If not, make an effort to find out and understand the writings of these important educators. Consider using a book club format to read, discuss, and come to understanding with your teachers. It may take time AND it will be worth it. Don’t stop at understanding. Look for applications such as the ones suggested in the article.

**What is normal?:** Bowman points out that “normative” may not reflect “normal” for all cultures and groups. Discuss what this idea might mean to your program and to teachers in their classrooms.

**Challenging cultural myopia:** “Finding out how to best teach each child and adapt curriculum to the differences among children, including their cultural differences” sounds like worthwhile work. Start by having teachers consider their own culture’s meaning system, expectations, practices, and ways of thinking by telling their cultural stories. Then move on to sensitizing each teacher to the differences among groups of children within their own classrooms. This journey may be difficult and lengthy, but, as Bowman says, “the onus is on us.”

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht
Imaginary Soup, Homemade Books, and Tattered Blankets: Creative Thinking in Early Childhood

by Teresa Walton-Helm

I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

— Albert Einstein

As we prepare young children for the students they are to become, we often prioritize the behaviors and patterns of thinking we believe are indicative of school readiness. We may delight in response to a child building a tower using several wooden blocks or correctly answering questions of facts. When the child counts to ten or specifically identifies a breed of dinosaur, we overtly express our pleasure. To the contrary, we may not encourage the child’s pretend playmates with quite the same enthusiasm. Yet, imagination is the primary tool we use across the lifespan to penetrate the mysteries of our world.

Pretend Play. Over the years in my work with young children, I admit that I have auditioned for countless acting roles in spur-of-the-moment pretend play episodes. I have cheerfully appeared in the productions envisioned by multiple great child directors. Although, even with much practice, my dramatic abilities have never risen beyond low-average, my enthusiasm for the spontaneous creativity of young children has rocketed. In the wonderful world of children’s imaginative play, I have been chosen to take on such personas as a fairy whose magic wand was broken, a nosey next-door neighbor, and a gracious dinner guest. Without much resistance, I have been known to agree that the invisible china plates are beautiful and the pretend soup, although steaming hot, is quite delicious. I have blown on the “soup” to cool it before taking a sip, simply because a child has directed me to do so; and I have silently waited to be fed the next line in our script.

From the safe arena of pretense play, children can explore the complexities of human life to include culture, society, emotions, meanings, and the daily activities that guarantee human survival. During pretend play the child has the capacity to transform an ordinary room into any scene imaginable and may take on the perspectives of others. From the view of play, the child not only develops empathetic feelings for others, but also gets a feel for what it means to be a person. The child at play displays a most remarkable economy of thought, using what she has observed to form new ideas about life, family, and community and likewise, using what she “has” to represent props she doesn’t have. In this way, a block “becomes” a car and the kitchen floor “becomes” a superhighway.

Book Writing. Other times I have used my own version of shorthand to transcribe the exact words of numerous creative story tellers. I have my favorites. Three-year-old Jackie is still the most talented “writer” I have ever met in person. Her most notable work was a short biography simply entitled, “My Dad.” Page one revealed, “My dad is fat from eating beans and macaroni, but he looks good to me.” Page five, even after ten years, remains my favorite quote: “I like it when my dad puts on his sparkling shoes and pretends he is dancing with a woman.”

On the day when these words were written, I held the pages straight while Jackie stapled them together. When the book was properly illustrated with several circular Cyclopes representing Dad, we began our book tour. I read “My Dad” to individual children, my assistant, on the telephone to Jackie’s mother, and once again to Jackie’s classmates when they sat collectively around the reading circle. The book was later celebrated by a dozen or more extended relatives who heard the story read by Jackie’s father. Jackie experienced, first hand, the power of the written word.

Teresa Walton-Helm earned her BA in English/Writing Emphasis from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock; her MA and PhD in Early Childhood from Arizona State University. She formerly directed a Montessori preschool/kindergarten in Tempe, Arizona. Currently Teresa is an Assistant Professor for Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia where she teaches child development and serves as graduate program director for a summer-intensive focus in gifted and talented education. Teresa admits she has spent most of her life studying textbooks; still her most important understandings were gained from her young students, her parents Shirley and Charles, and her creative sons, Nathan and Givan.
Although I have long since lost track of Jackie, her words remain with me.

Children who do not yet write can still express themselves with your assistance. They are dazzled by their own words especially when these expressions are carefully recorded in written form. It is important to allow a child to author his or her own story. This is easily accomplished when the adult listens closely and creates immediate opportunities for the child to think more deeply and to elaborate on their good ideas that arise in everyday situations.

One morning three-year-old Cody entered the classroom announcing, “When I grow up, I’m going to marry my mom.”

“When you marry your mom, where will your dad be?” I asked him as I settled in the chair to help him write a book.

His creative and emergent problem-solving abilities quickly became obvious as he answered, “My dad can go to California to live with Meiko.” (A brilliant answer because Meiko was Cody’s imaginary friend.)

“Hmm,” I thought, “if that could happen, his dad would be completely under his command.”

Then Cody had second thoughts: “But I still want my dad to be in the family, so when I marry mom, he can take my room.”

“Yes because I will be growing bigger and bigger and dad will be getting littler and littler.”

I visualized the transformation as Cody added: “When I am the dad, my dog Buttons can come into the house, and when dad is little, he will be just as cute as a mouse.”

It is rewarding to become a “creative partner” with a young pre-writing child. It only requires a caregiver or teacher to listen and to ask open-ended questions that are logically sequenced. The possible answers are limitless and require children to articulate their imaginative thinking. If I asked Cody, “So do you think you will someday marry your mom?” He might have answered with a simple “yes” and his story would never have materialized. Cody, however, learned early to “think” like a writer.

Noticing. From the children, I have learned to be mindful of the warmth of the sun upon my back, the little spider that scurries across the art shelf. I have also calmed children by inviting them to notice the common miracles and marvelous events happening across an ordinary day. Too often, behaviors associated with “noticing” are deemed unwanted, off-task behaviors. In the creative environment, these happenings are the stuff that motivates exploration, stories, paintings, and songs. There should be time set aside in every busy day to devote to a child’s interests and chosen activities.
I have waited for five-year-old Erin to hear the entire recording of her favorite cello song and I have allowed Laura to be late to line because she had discovered how to mix the color “purple.” It was out of respect. It was the least I could do for them. I understand the value creativity will have across their lifetimes, and I know their creativity will be threatened often by well-meaning teachers and parents. Undisputed by child development researchers is the idea that creativity endures many obstacles to its development until it finally all but disappears sometime around third grade.

**Security Blankets.** I have spent a good many minutes upon this earth searching for misplaced security blankets and stuffed toys that have had their fur loved off them. Theorist Donald Winnicott (Albert, 1996, cited in Runco, 1996, p. 47) suggested that these transitional objects of childhood may well represent a child’s first creative product. A favorite blanket or toy may symbolize the love and warmth provided by a parent, serving to soothe the child’s stress and loneliness when that parent is needed, but not immediately available. A lost security item can cause fear and sadness to a young child, and this is understandable if one respects the reason the object was chosen to be cherished. Out of respect for these early creations, I reserve a cozy corner in the classroom where the child can choose to visit treasured items, as needed, throughout the school day. A weary child can independently enter the security corner, spend several minutes with a cherished item and reenter the classroom with renewed energy and confidence.

Children use a creative mode of thought as a quite natural means of exploring a novel experience. They may often form associations between distinct things occurring together in ongoing and past experience. Examples of such associations are especially visual as young children make the first transition from the safety of home to the larger world of school.

During the initial days of his first experience at school, one young child arrived each morning with his pockets stuffed with small stones he gathered from the flower beds in his front yard. In the child’s transport to school, the significance of the rocks inflated with symbolic meanings reflecting the countless memories and experiences of his primary environment of belonging. In this way, the stones served to link school with home. We soon realized that any suggestion of discarding the stones caused extreme crying and protest.

Such home-to-school transitional objects may function to allow the child to cope with the stressors associated with a novel environment, with unfamiliar expectations, rituals, and people. Perhaps a teacher’s high regard for these items displays a respect for the creative meanings of the child. As we acknowledged the meaning of the stones, the child trusted us to place the stones in the “security” corner — the corner of the room that held a child’s link to the comforts of home.
Art versus Craft. My classrooms have always featured a well-stocked creativity center. On the shelves are book making materials, colored paper, white paper, glue, feathers, watercolor paint, etc. I resist calling craft projects “creative” because the important choices have already been made and this certainly limits a child’s opportunity to insert her own meanings and ideas.

Teachers and parents may often come to equate arts and crafts with creative development. Too often, craft opportunities present in the early school environments emphasize providing the child experience using various media to produce a preconceived product. Whereas these activities will display individual differences in technique, skill level, and accidents, the products are not conceived of in the child’s imagination. Rather, the child will follow a step-by-step procedure to bring about a product. There is a place for such activities, and children do enjoy crafts. However, in truly creative projects, the choices belong to the child. Creative thinking may be more adequately addressed by showing high regard for meanings created by individual children and by providing the opportunity to make their ideas visible in some product that can be both shared and applauded.

Reference


Asking the right questions: Imagine the outcome of the interchange between the author and Cody if she had just told Cody he couldn’t marry his mother. Role-play this vignette and others like it collected from your observations of teachers. Explore how teachers figure out which question to ask.

Art versus craft: Are both open-ended creative art activities and closed-ended craft activities available in your classrooms? Find out by having teachers observe in each other’s rooms to see what predominates in the art center. Facilitate a candid discussion about what was found out from the observations. Make and implement action plans to be sure creative art activities abound.

How do you show high regard for thinking?: Walton-Helm challenges us to show high regard for meanings created by individual children. How do your teachers show this regard? Ask teachers to survey their classrooms for evidence and products that demonstrate their high regard for creative thinking. Share the findings and make plans to do even more to validate creative contributions equally as much as other products of children’s play.
Thinking About Thinking: How Can I Get Inside Your Head?

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

We study about how to understand children’s thinking, but do we learn how to understand each other — the people we work with and the families we serve? It’s usually easier to understand people who think like we do and harder if they don’t — especially if we disagree with either what they say or what they do or both. It’s easy to label those people as wrong. Once we decide someone is wrong we’re tempted to argue; or if we don’t like confrontations, we might ignore that person. Neither approach will put us into the kinds of interactions that help us either get inside another person’s head or to take a different metaphor — walk in their shoes. If we are to truly understand the people who don’t think like we do, we need a different kind of interaction. We have a better chance of getting both in their heads and in their shoes if we stop judging and labeling.

As a diversity advocate, I learned a long time ago to put a brake on judgments and remind myself when I’m tempted to judge, that the chances are I just don’t understand the person or their patterns of thinking and behavior. On the other hand, part of my problem may be that I am not aware of my own thinking and behavior patterns. Barbara Rogoff (2003) said it well:

We must separate understanding of the patterns from judgments of their value. “If judgments of value are necessary, as they often are, they will thereby be much better informed if they are suspended long enough to gain some understanding of the patterns involved in one’s own familiar ways as well as in the sometimes surprising ways of other communities” (p. 14).

As Rogoff suggests, when trying to understand somebody else, it helps to do some self reflection to learn more about yourself. You may discover unconscious motives, hidden feelings, not to mention the stereotypes that may be influencing you.

Some strategies for getting inside another’s head

Over the years, I have come up with three other tips of what to do when thinking about thinking and trying to understand “the other.”

■ Build relationships and work on trust as your first and most important step toward understanding another person. The goal is to move beyond “othering” people and work to make connections that help make “you” and “me” into “us.”

■ Move from arguing with people you disagree with and create a dialogue instead. The difference is that when you argue, you only try to understand them so you can win the argument. That’s different from really trying to see their point of view. Rumi, the 12th century poet, has advice about how to see another’s point of view. He said, “Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there lies a field. I’ll meet you there.”

■ Practice your communication skills. Remember to listen at least twice as much as you talk. We have two ears and only one mouth, which is a good reminder that communication isn’t only talking. Don’t just listen passively; use “active listening” to check out if what you heard is what the other person meant. And pay attention to nonverbal communication too — both what you send and what you receive. Realize that we often pick up signals that we aren’t even aware of. Some people call that intuition. Use your intuition to help you get inside another’s head.
These tips apply to all kinds of situations that can arise when early care and education professionals relate to each other and work with families. Here is an example of a hypothetical situation where a director is in a cross cultural conflict with a parent. I’m using myself as the director, because this example is very real to me.

A parent arrives in my center for the first time and tells me that her baby is toilet trained. The baby is only one year old and is not wearing diapers. The mother seems surprised that I am surprised. I explain that in our center all babies wear diapers because we never start training at least until after the second birthday, and not even then if the child doesn’t show clear signs of readiness. She tells me that in her culture toilet training starts long before that and is accomplished easily. Even if I really want to believe her, it just doesn’t make sense to me. In real life it took me a lot of years to even listen to someone who wanted to talk to me about what I call early toilet training.

But let’s say that this is now and I am willing to not only listen, but to follow all my own tips. Let’s suppose that I get to the place where I can see this mother’s point of view so clearly that I come to understand that her way is right for her and her daughter. I want to support her cultural difference, but I still have my own view, best practices, and center policy in my head.

What do you do if you can’t figure out what to do?

I can’t seem to figure out a solution to this situation. I feel like I’m stuck with some kind of paradox. If she’s right and I still believe I am right, then what? Three questions keep going around in my head:

- Do I throw out what I believe in and try to change my center policy? In other words, do I turn my back on my own European-American culture?
- Do I use the power card and just quote the policy and give her a choice — my way or the highway?
- Do I figure out how to offer a compromise, even though neither of us will probably be satisfied with it?

I’m thinking dualistically — that’s why I can’t figure it out. I don’t have to stay in that mindset. I can think more holistically, but I’m not used to thinking that way.

Bredekamp and Copple (1997) explained this tendency of mine for dualistic thinking in the second edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs. They said, “Some critical reactions to NAEC’s (1987) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice reflect a recurring tendency in the American discourse on education: the polarizing into either/or choices of many questions that are more fruitfully seen as both/and” (p. 23).

To come up with a solution, I need to stay with the mother out in that field of Rumi’s — the one that lies beyond ideas of right and wrong. When we are there we can figure out together what to do. Isaura Barrera, a special education professor at the University of New Mexico calls Rumi’s field third space. To get to third space, according to Barrera, I have to believe that it exists. I also have to accept that there is no one version of reality, but rather multiple realities. (Mine is different from the parent’s.)

I was already there when I gained access to the mother’s perspective. I got inside her head by suspending judgments long enough to begin to see the patterns that she was using that weren’t like the ones I was used to. I began to understand her perspective on toilet training. When I put aside ideas about determining which is the one right way, I opened my mind and learned something new that I didn’t know. I not only learned about the mother’s thinking, I also discovered some things about myself, when I followed my own advice about self reflection. I realized that what I believe is best practice in toileting relates to cultural patterns that were reinforced in my training and in the parenting books I read as a mother. I’ve also discovered I have some hang-ups about toilet training left over from what I believed was done to me as a baby.

Synergy is another name for third space

Stephan Covey writes about what he calls synergy in the foreword to a book called Crucial Conversations, (Patterson, et al., 2002) which has excellent strategies for getting inside another’s head and making it to third space. According to Covey, synergy makes for a better relationship, a better decision-making process, better...
decisions, and more commitment to actually carry out the decisions made. He talks about how synergy transforms people and relationships. He mentions what Buddhism calls the “middle way.” It’s not meeting half way by compromising, but rising above the plane and meeting at a higher level — like the apex of a triangle. In other words, the people involved in a synergistic solution have taken a creative route to coming up with new solutions that avoid the dualistic — in my way or your way, but result in something that both consider “our way.”

What is a third-space solution to this situation with the diaperless baby coming into the center? Because this is a hypothetical example, I can’t tell you. But I can tell you what one caregiver described to me about what happened to her in real life when she was in a similar situation. She asked the mother to show her what she did. The caregiver did what the mother showed her and it worked. The baby remained diaperless, the policy remained in place (because after all the baby had already been toilet trained), and everybody was happy. The caregiver said it didn’t take more time to put this baby on the potty than it did to change diapers on the other babies.

Of course, every situation doesn’t result in a happy Hollywood ending. As Barrera and Corso (2003) say, “A third space perspective does not ‘solve the problem.’ Rather it changes the arena within which that problem is addressed by increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions. In so doing, an optimal response to the situation becomes more likely” (p. 81). Another point to consider is that even if you aren’t stuck on the idea that there is just one right way, that doesn’t mean that all ways are fine.

A long time ago, I was involved in a workshop called “Play as Practice for Paradox.” Three of us got together to plan it. Two were play experts, Elizabeth Jones and Patricia Nourot (a dear friend of mine who died last August). The workshop was a great success, but unfortunately we never wrote up the wonderful ideas that came out of it. One of them, though, sticks in my head. It’s this: Children can teach us about how to work with paradox. They do it naturally when they play pretend. They suspend reality and explore the realm of imagination in ways that remove the limits on possibilities. Adults can do that, too.

References

Getting inside someone else’s head: Present the vignette related in this article to your faculty. Using the ideas suggested in the article, work through some possible responses from the teachers in your program. Then, talk about synergy and the third space. Try it out and see if you can find the third space in this example. Then, take some of your own dilemmas — either those presented historically or ones that are occurring now. Repeat the process until teachers can see the possibilities.
When was the last time your curiosity was sparked by a blank canvas? When was the last time you stood at an easel, center stage, in a room full of your peers, dipped a brush into a jar of thick red paint, and created one bold stroke after another on a sheet of crisp white paper?

Most of us don’t remember. Some of us deny we ever did. Many of us would say, “We might have once, but that was before we understood that we weren’t real artists.” Too many of us believe that the only people who can present art to children, beyond cutouts and stencils, are those who call themselves artists. But there is no denying that we were children who put the strength of our whole being into a creative process. We were artists then and we are artists now.

It is essential for early childhood educators to remember that as children we held the same confidence as of the young artists in our classrooms. When we remember that we once thought ourselves as artists, we will believe in our own capability to think through a creative process.

So often adults ask children to behave in ways that we are unwillingly to do ourselves. We ask that they share, use words, and have a gentle touch. We ask them to listen, explore, take a risk, create, and think. We ask that they extend themselves socially, emotion- ally, physically, linguistically, and cognitively. And what is most stunning is that they do so with courage and little inhibition. Children will walk towards anything that interests them and begin an in-depth investigation. They are able to approach an easel, a brush, and a jar of red paint with intense curiosity.

Every child uses a different technique. Some circle the easel looking into each jar and at every brush. Centering their body in front of the blank sheet, they ponder their next move. They run their fingers along the length of the brush to find a comfortable place to grip. After pulling the brush from the jar, they study a thick glob of tempera as it rolls down the side of the jar. Lifting their arms, they push the reddened bristles against the clean white paper. Eyes focus on the splat as if looking through a microscope. Then in one powerful gesture, a twist from head to toe, they create a slash of red — the beginnings of a rainbow.

There is a book entitled *Orbiting the giant hairball: A corporate fool’s guide to surviving with grace* by Gordon MacKenzie. In it he...
tells a story of being a visiting artist at a grade school. He spent time in various grades asking children:

“I’m curious. How many artists are there in the room? Would you please raise your hands?” The pattern of responses never varied.

First grade: En masse the children leapt from their chairs, arms waving wildly, eager hands trying to reach the ceiling. Every child was an artist.

Second grade: About half the kids raised their hands, shoulder high, no higher. The raised hands were still.

Third grade: At best, 10 kids out of 30 would raise a hand. Tentatively. Self consciously.

And so on up through the grades. The higher the grade, the fewer children raised their hands. By the time I reached sixth grade, no more than one or two did so and then only ever-so-slightly — guardedly — their eyes glancing from side to side uneasily, betraying a fear of being identified by the group as a “closet artist.”

Each of us once held the capability and the intuitive intelligence of an artist, but that thought was stolen from many of us. Why? Because someone told us or insinuated to us that our way of making art was wrong, so we shut down. We were told that the thing we were creating, our product, didn’t look like everyone else’s, therefore our way was wrong. The ability we had to communicate through the language of art was taken from us. We believed we were not creative or capable. And when we think we’re not creative, when we think we’re not capable — we stop questioning. We become followers, not leaders or thinkers.

Think back to when you were a child. Whether or not you held a brush full of red paint, certainly you held some implement that caused you to draw a line in the dirt or onto a sidewalk. If your only tools were a stick, a rock, your hands, or your feet, you were once curious enough to create a mark of some sort onto some thing.

We didn’t call it making art, yet we were artists because we took one thing and changed it so that it became another thing. The process of art is in the making of layers that build one upon another or rest next to each other. The process is one of building, whether using fingers in sand or chalk on a sidewalk. Whatever the medium, artists create change through a process of building and re-building. Mixing colors creates a new color. Pulling apart a lump of clay and putting it back together creates a sculpture. Making marks with a pencil creates lines that become a drawing. Pouring water on dirt creates mud for a pie.

It is in the process where children are constructing knowledge about how the world works and how their
ideas will work. The process of making art is a language. It is a form of communication that happens through the use of color, line, texture, intensity, detail, light, and choices. Through this the artist is communicating beauty, ugliness, humor, opinion, history, and their story.

Time is the key. It takes time, because often it happens in collaboration and in relationship with others. The process takes time because it is a process of thinking in which artists rebuild, experiment, and repeat in order to learn what we can do with a medium before we can ever consider making a thing. If I do this, the clay will fall down. If I add too much color, it will be too bright or too dark. If I use a different tool, I'll get a different result. Artists have to learn to manipulate a medium in order to make their stories and ideas visible.

It takes time for the process to unfold. This is not a one-time shot between 9:30 and 10:00 every morning. A process is repeated for hours, days, weeks, maybe months. When we make time for the process to unfold, we give ourselves the opportunity to listen to what children are saying. It’s through the listening that we know how to facilitate their learning. We learn whether children are visual, tactile, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. We understand what stimulates them, inhibits them, and moves them. We sense what they fear, what brings out the best in them, and what they love.

“Nobody sees a flower, really, It is so small. It takes time. We haven’t the time, and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.” — Georgia O’Keefe, artist

Children meander through a process like only a child can. “I’m looking now” or “I’m doing,” they say. They are experts at telling stories. Children use the art making process to tell us stories about themselves, what they see in the world, what they know about the world, and what they are discovering about the world. Their stories may include their families, friends, helicopters, tunnels, dark scary caves, flowers, fire, and the moon. They can tell a fantastical story with clay. They can draw the ocean with a small blue crayon.

Children possess an intuitive intelligence about the process of making art. They are at ease with creating change and delving into a process of building and re-building. Children know that it is in the doing, in the attempt, that one creates anything. In the process children, all artists really, use their six senses; the sixth one being their intuition. Intuition tells us, I’m done — I’m satiated — I’ve said what I have to say within this process and I can walk away and leave it be. Children are artists because they immerse themselves in the creative process with their whole being. Children put the strength of their body and mind into the doing, building, and change.

Whatever the children we teach choose to do for a living and whatever contributions they choose to offer the world, they will need to believe they are capable. They will need to think through processes. Whether they grow to create paintings, scientific formulas, music, poetry, prose, businesses, inventions, laws, or buildings — it’s all the same type of creative thinking.

Remembering we are artists means acknowledging our own capability to think, create, and imagine.
Knowing what creativity feels like means knowing it is a unique and individual process. Taking the time to think through processes in our own work means we can understand the steps children must go through in their work to tell their stories. It means empathizing with each child who requires a different approach and length of time to feel satiated. Not only will we better facilitate this process, we will appreciate the necessity for the creative process to occur.

Seeing ourselves as artists means we are able to converse fluently with children speaking to us in the language of art. It does not mean we will change professions and become artists for a living. It means we honor the process of learning for each child. It means we honor their autonomy, how they think, and what they want to express through their art making. If we can see ourselves as artists, we will value and foster the artistic spirit in children.

Unless children are told otherwise, they believe they are capable of thinking through a process. They believe their ideas have worth. They believe their stories are important. They believe a slash of red is a rainbow. We will believe it with them, when we can see ourselves as artists.

Reference


Think back: Explore with teachers when they “shut down” their creativity. Ask for stories that reflect on the experiences of being “shut down.” Then, search for ways that the “shut down” could have been presented. Reflecting on our own experiences, particularly such important ones, will help teachers refrain from initiating “shut down” in their students.

Observe to make sure: Follow the above discussion with classroom observations to make sure teachers stay alert to keeping responses to creativity positive and meaningful for children.

What did you learn from that red paint?: Brainstorm with teachers about the learning experiences of that red paint. See what a list of what children might learn looks like. Then, put out the red paint and see what actually transpires.