



A look at creativity in public and private schools

Roberta Eason^{a,1}, Duane M. Giannangelo^{a,*}, Louis A. Franceschini III^b

^a The University of Memphis, Instruction & Curriculum Leadership Department, 3798 Walker Avenue, Memphis, TN 38152, USA

^b The University of Memphis, Center for Research in Educational Policy, Memphis, TN 38152, USA

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ABSTRACT

This research study investigated the perspectives of teachers on student creativity. A group of 15 teachers from public schools and 24 teachers from private schools completed an Early Childhood Creativity Rating Scale (ECCRS) on four of their students. A total of 156 students were rated on this ECCRS. The major question asked in this study was: How do teacher perspectives of student creativity differ in public and private schools, between kindergarten and grade 3, and are these perspectives influenced by teacher characteristics. Results found that private school teachers rated their students higher on creativity, third grade students were rated lowest on creativity, and teachers who perceived themselves as most creative also rated their students as most creative.

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1. Introduction

The classroom has long been a very important environment for children to develop and learn to function in society. Teachers of early childhood children are obligated to empower each child to develop to their greatest potential. Tapping into their creative skills and allowing children the freedom to explore, experiment, question, and create may foster a lifelong love for learning and enable the children to lead more enriching and creative lives. It is important for teachers to examine their perspectives in the classroom. Are they comfortable with ambiguity? Are they genuinely interested in the children's ideas? Are they willing to let the children lead a bit more as they listen more?

Most teachers have experienced moments of glorious creativity in the classroom; moments when the students are deeply engaged in their discoveries and intrinsically motivated to learn more, fully pursuing their interests. Conversely, educators are also perplexed at times when no student seems interested in the topic of the day, and learning seems to come to a complete standstill. There are days when teachers struggle to gain the attention of their students while the students wait desperately for recess and lunch time. Parents experience this dilemma about school as well, when their own children sincerely do not want to go to school; yet on other days, the children leap from the car and race into their classrooms ready for the next adventure in learning. Conscientious educators want to know what makes the difference. What is the magic combination to unlock a child's creativity and foster a love for school and learning?

* Corresponding author at: Instruction and Curriculum Leadership Department, The University of Memphis, 3789 Walker Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee 38152, USA. Tel.: +1 901 678 2373; fax: +1 901 678 3077.

E-mail addresses: easonx5@comcast.com (R. Eason), dginngl@memphis.edu (D.M. Giannangelo), ldfrncsch@memphis.edu (L.A. Franceschini III).

¹ 6558 Westminister Place, Memphis, TN, USA.

2. Creativity in the classroom

Teachers and administrators today are under tremendous pressure to have children perform well on standardized tests. As a result, teachers feel obligated to engage youngsters in monotonous drills which will in theory prepare the students for the tests. Early childhood teachers in particular have been misguided to push more and more academic drills down to the lower grades. In reality, early childhood educators are given specialized training to nurture children from birth to age eight. That includes kindergarten, first, second, and even third grade. Teachers and administrators should remember this early childhood training, and strive to foster the precious learning and creations taking place during each of these early years. Instead of testing and drilling these youngsters, teachers should be allowed to modify their curriculum for these distinctive young minds (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Early childhood students should not be seen as empty vessels to fill, but as individuals with creative potential to be nurtured.

There is a great need for this generation of children to have an environment that encourages the development of creative and inventive talent (Isbel & Raines, 2003). Teachers should be encouraged to recognize and value the creativity and creative potential in every child, and to nurture this creativity in all students (Schurig, 1992). Every child needs the opportunity to be creative in a low-risk environment without external evaluation (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993). Creativity may not always have a finished product to evaluate. Educators should learn to value the process, and place more emphasis on thinking and the way a student approaches a problem. If too much emphasis is placed upon the products children make, the creative efforts of young children may become discouraged (Isbel & Raines, 2003). The creativity of young children is most often reflected in the process of their thinking, rather than in the products they bring home (Shipley, 1993).

Children should be empowered to seek out the problems they are to solve and develop their ideas further. When the children create and own the questions, they also own the answers (Behar-Horenstein, Ornstein, & Pajak, 2003). Children who are purposefully engaged in inquiries of their own invention could never be described as having short attention spans, yet this is a characteristic we hear about many students in the classroom today (Wassermann, 2000). A creative classroom should allow more time for open-ended questioning, digression from the text, and for the development of creative thought (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Jones, 1993; Wassermann, 2000).

3. Purpose of the study

During the early childhood education years, teachers determine the types of activities and kinds of thinking in which the children engage. To a great extent these are guided teachers' perspectives of their own creativity as well as their perspectives of students' creativity. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of teachers of early childhood student creativity in public and private schools. Information about each teacher's background provided insight into how these perspectives are influenced. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a difference in teacher perspectives of student creativity in public school and private school in grade levels kindergarten through third?
2. Is there any change in teacher perspectives on student creativity between grade levels kindergarten through third grade?
3. How are the teacher perspectives influenced by the teachers' age, ethnicity, number of years teaching, and degrees held?

4. The participants

The participants of this study consisted of 24 public school teachers and 24 private school teachers of kindergarten, first, second, and third grades. The students' ages ranged from five to nine years old. The public schools are funded by tax revenue and administered by publicly elected government bodies. Public schools are required to admit all students and must follow state guidelines for funding, program development and curriculum. The private schools are funded through tuition, donations and private grants. Admission is selective and somewhat competitive. Because private schools are privately funded, they have more freedom in designing curriculum and instruction. Both public and private school teachers received similar training in the knowledge, skills and understanding with regard to Early Childhood Standards as mandated by the state of Tennessee.

The teachers who participated were chosen by the principals of 12 schools in a large urban area. Six schools were private schools and six schools were public schools. Each teacher was asked to complete the Early Childhood Creativity Rating Scale on four of their randomly selected students in the spring semester. A total of 192 students were to be rated on the scale. Of the 48 teachers who were given the ECCRS, 9 of the public school teachers chose not to participate. This reduced the number of teachers to 39 and the number of students to 156.

Of the teachers who completed the scale, 15 were from the public sector and 24 were from the private sector. There were 10 kindergarten teachers, 9 first grade teachers, 10 second grade teachers, and 10 third grade teachers. Of these 39 teachers, 31 were Caucasian, 2 were African American, and 6 preferred not to answer about their ethnicity. In the educational degrees section, 24 teachers held bachelor's degrees, 10 held master's degrees, 4 had a master's plus 45 additional hours, and 1 teacher had a doctoral degree. 54% of the teachers had taught 15 years or less and 46% of the teachers had taught for over 16 years. The teachers' ages ranged from 25 to 65. When asked to rate their own creativity, 72% of the teachers responded that they were often, very often or almost always creative in the classroom.

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