

Open-ended Materials: Tools to Stimulate Imagination and Creativity

This article is written by Julie Sullivan, Executive Director of the Materials Resource Center.

Scraps of fabric, empty yarn cones, unused paper from printers, landscape photos from old calendars, scrap wood from furniture makers and all the other materials businesses discard become the building blocks of a powerful learning experience called *open-ended play*. According to Walter F. Drew, EdD, a nationally known early childhood consultant whose inspiring workshops feature hands-on creative play with open-ended reusable resources, open-ended play helps foster happy talent in a relaxed way. "There are no expectations, no specific problems to solve, no rules to follow, and no pressure to produce a finished product. It's all about free play—the freedom to invent and discover. Thus, imagination and creativity are stimulated in the act of making sense of the unstructured nature of the materials."

Open-ended materials are particularly effective in free play because they have no predetermined use. Based on field research, observations, and interviews, Doctor Drew identified seven key principals about the use of creative, open-ended materials in early childhood classrooms and how their use affects the teaching/learning process.

1) Open-ended play is a state of mind that brings into being unexpected, unlearned forms freely expressed, generating associations, representing a unique sense of order and harmony, and producing a sense of well-being. Thus, children's spontaneous, creative self-expression increases their sense of competence and well-being now and into adulthood.

2) Because children extend and deepen their understandings through multiple, hands-on experiences with diverse materials they have direct and compelling experiences and multiple ways to express their thoughts, curiosity, and questions. Teachers can then help them focus and produce, expressing their thoughts and feelings in a positive way.

3) Working in small groups and conversing about their creations, children express something direct and clear from within themselves. Thus, children's play with open-ended materials supports endogenous expression, learning and a growing sense of competence.

4) When children play with open-ended materials they explore the look, feel and function of them and develop a sense of aesthetics, balance, cause and effect. The child produces and learns mathematical patterns and rhythms, building and combining shapes and creating new forms.

Thus children learn art, science, and mathematics joyfully through active play with diverse, open-ended materials.

5) When children have the chance to notice, collect, and sort open-ended materials, and when teachers respond to their ideas, children imagine themselves as artists, designers and engineers.

6) When teachers see what children can accomplish, they gain a greater appreciation for them and for the creative arts and materials.

7) Just as children learn and grow, so do their teachers. Teachers learn and pass on the art of reuse--doing more with less in order to conserve resources--to the next generation.

Most businesses generate an abundance of unwanted by-products, overruns, rejects, obsolete parts, and discontinued items and dispose of them in landfills and incinerators. With the establishment of local reuse centers throughout the nation, these unique, unwanted materials serve as much-needed resources for creative play, classroom projects, and school activities.

Sponsored by the town of Islip and funded in part by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Materials Resource Center is a nonprofit reuse center dedicated to solid waste reduction. In its new bright and inspiring 5,000 (continued on Page 2)

Materials Resource Center Users Have Said.....

"The center has been a constant source of inspiration for me to promote hands-on interdisciplinary instruction to my art program. I also teach in-service and graduate Art courses to other educators. I take them on class field trips to the center because of its limitless abundance of education resources that every classroom should be a part of." says **Janice McLachlan, Art Teacher, East Quogue UFSD.**

"Materials Resource Center is vital to my art program. The incredible variety of mediums available offers an art program an unbridled aesthetic experience. The possibilities for creative expressions become limitless, only bounded by the individual teacher's and student's imagination...." says **Kathryn M. Curran, Senior Art Teacher, Idle Hour Elementary School, Connetquot UFSD.**

"...For seven years we have visited the MRC in search of items to extend our budget and, more importantly, extend our way of thinking. Being able to present students with new and unusual materials that promote flexibility, elaboration and originality is truly exciting." says **Karen McGinley, Art Teacher, James Wilson Young Middle School, Bayport Bluepoint UFSD.**

NYS Teacher Center Online Academy

Courses open to all can be found at the Rockland Teacher Center website at www.rockteach.org. Click on Online Courses, then Online Academy Catalog and follow the directions. Be sure to check with your district for course approval.

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Autism Spectrum Disorders: Tell Me More.....

A recent article in Newsday (11/2/07) brings attention to the rising percentage of students classified as autistic in Long Island's schools and the implications for parents and school districts. Whether this rise is due to more sophisticated understanding and testing or a change in criteria is being debated, since as autism diagnoses have increased, learning disabled and mentally retarded diagnoses have decreased. Since inclusion policies place all special needs students into your classroom, it is important to know what the diagnosticians look for. Here's a short primer.

Autism spectrum disorders are a group of closely related developmental disorders characterized by abnormalities of social interactions and communications. Skill development can be very uneven. A person with one of the disorders may be extremely gifted in one academic area and poor in others. Another may have minimal social and self-management skills.

ASDs can affect one person completely differently from another, and are life-long.

Expert diagnosis is important since every student with an ASD will have a unique combination of characteristics and needs.

The "triad of impairments" found in all ASDs in varying degrees are those of:

- social interaction — difficulty in making friends, appearing distant to others, reluctance to relate to peers,
- social communication — not knowing when it is appropriate to start or to stop talking, missing non-verbal communication cues such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice,
- imagination — difficulty with thinking creatively and with engaging in symbolic play, resulting in repetitive thoughts and actions.

As the expectations for classroom teachers become more demanding, the challenge is to implement strategies that will bring success to ASD students while integrating their efforts with those of the rest of the class. Look for strategies you can try in the next issue.

Get to Know Your Teacher Center...Personally

Suffolk's Edge Teacher Center's sole purpose is to serve you, the teachers and administrators of our member districts and educational agencies. We offer professional development opportunities, run graduate and NYSUT programs, have classroom craft resources at the center, offer grants for innovative curriculum projects that you develop and publish an e-newsletter and newsletter to keep you informed. Our Policy Board is composed of teachers and administrators from your districts. Do you know who they are?

Would you like to know the Teacher Center better? Find those Policy Board members from your district in the list below. Talk to them, ask questions, voice your concerns, offer your suggestions. They'll be pleased that you've done so, happy to listen and willing to provide answers.

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Babylon UFSD: Jane Herbst

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MRC: Tools to Stimulate Creativity and Imagination (continued)

square foot warehouse in Ronkonkoma, Materials Resource Center provides thousands of teachers of art, special education, MSTE and a myriad of other disciplines with reclaimed materials from local businesses to satisfy their school and classroom project needs. For more

information, including pictures of all kinds of materials and links to environmental websites, visit www.MaterialsResourceCenter.org.

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