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Critique of the Creative Curriculum for Preschool

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CRITIQUE OF THE CREATIVE CURRICULUM FOR PRESCHOOL

The following article was a joint effort by early childhood professionals and graduate students Hannah Gullickson, Raelynn Cameron, Lucy Marose, Irene Tiefenthaler, and Tasha Van Nice with support from Dr. Julie Bullard, their professor. This study reviewed all relevant research and conducted an in-depth review of the Creative Curriculum for Preschool. Each team member independently conducted an investigation and completed an in-depth analysis using a rubric to determine whether the curriculum reflected constructivist philosophy and whether it was developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and evidence-based. The individuals then met to share their research, ratings, and findings and to develop the final ratings.

An overview

The *Creative Curriculum for Preschool* is a comprehensive curriculum, first released in 1978, that is currently in its 6th edition. The curriculum is published by Teaching Strategies for Early Childhood. Diane Trister Dodge, the founder of Teaching Strategies is the lead author and is assisted by 13 other authors. The current cost for the curriculum is \$2,149.00 or \$3,149.00 for an expanded deluxe edition.

One of the features of the Creative Curriculum is studies. “The study approach is a method of integrating content learning through children’s in-depth investigations of a meaningful topic. Children raise questions about the topic and, through exploration and discovery, find answers to their questions” (Teaching Strategies, 2016, p. 9). The basis edition includes studies on beginning the year, balls, buildings, trees, clothes, and reduce, reuse, and recycle. The deluxe edition includes an additional five units; simple machines, insects, tubes and tunnels, signs, and sand.



The Balls Unit

Each unit is based on five investigations each lasting a week that are organized around questions. For example, during the buildings unit children explore the following questions. What do buildings in our neighborhood and in other places look like? What happens inside buildings? Who builds buildings? What are buildings made of? and What is special about our building?

The curriculum focuses on 38 objectives and covers 10 areas of learning: social – emotional, language, physical, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, the arts, and English language acquisition. Five fundamental principles guide the curriculum:

1. Positive interactions and relationships with adults provide a critical foundation.
2. Social-emotional competence is a significant factor in school success.

3. Constructive, purposeful play supports essential learning.
4. The physical environment affects the type and quality of learning interactions.
5. Teacher-family partnerships promote development and learning (Dodge, Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010, p. 3).

Creative Curriculum takes a comprehensive, integrated approach toward curriculum stating that, “Research indicates that children’s development does not occur in one discrete, isolated area at a time but is interdependent” (Teaching Strategies, 2010, p 2).

Suggested schedules and learning formats

Creative Curriculum promotes a predictable, consistent schedule and provides examples for half-day programs, full-day program, and an extended full-day program. There are opportunities for children to explore independently and times for direct teaching in small groups, in large groups, and individually. In addition, children use skills during daily routines and during the active learning that takes place in interest areas (dramatic play, blocks, toys and games, art, library, discovery, sand and water, music and movement, and computers).

The schedule includes a balance of active and quiet activities and includes a minimum of 60 minutes for choice time regardless of the length of program. There is also a minimum 40-60 minutes of outdoor time for each outdoor period. Together the indoor and outdoor choice time allows approximately one third of the day for children to engage in purposeful play. Two to three read-alouds are also included each day (Dodge, Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010, p. 83).

Does the curriculum promote constructivist beliefs?

Creative Curriculum is based upon theory and research grounded in a constructivist philosophy. Theorists that underlie the curriculum include Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Howard Gardner, and Sara Smilansky. *Creative Curriculum* promotes a child-centered curriculum that fosters social-emotional competence in children, supports positive relationships in the learning environment, promotes constructive play, and encourages strong family engagement. Teachers are encouraged to set up the classroom and lessons in a way that children can construct their own learning through discovery and play.



The curriculum advocates being intentional and responsive in planning and facilitating curriculum. The range of promoted teaching strategies is extensive: acknowledge and describe children's learning; coach children's efforts and make suggestions (encourage them to attend,

engage and persist in the learning); extend children's thinking with open-ended questions; demonstrate effective learning behaviors (modeling); expand children's knowledge base and let them know what is expected of them (Dodge, Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010, p. 164-167). Consistent with constructivist philosophy, teachers are viewed as facilitators, or the "guide on the side rather than as the "sage on the stage."

Is the curriculum developmentally appropriate?

A developmentally appropriate curriculum considers typical child development and learning, what is individually appropriate for the children in the group, and what is culturally important. The developmentally appropriate curriculum is designed to be relevant to the children in the group considering their areas of strength, needs, interests, background knowledge and experiences, and cultural beliefs and practices.

The *Creative Curriculum* learning experiences are appropriate based upon typical development and learning. Methods that are used are consistent with developmentally appropriate practices. For example, the teaching guides provide opportunities for inquiry-based learning.

According to *Creative Curriculum Foundation* manual, learning topics should come from things that children are curious about, a social concern, or an unexpected event. The topic should address children's interests, be relevant and age appropriate. Children should have experience with the topic, it should build on what the children already know and children should be able to experience it first-hand. However, the studies for *Creative Curriculum* are predetermined. Each study does begin with a web which provides the opportunity to individualize the content for each child in the group and to honor the culture and values of each family. Yet, there seems to be

little emphasis on the child's ability to influence the curriculum. The topics are set and the learning activities are already determined regardless of children's experiences or interests. The Teaching Guides are scripted providing the question of the week, question of the day, what small group lessons will be taught, what transition games will be played, what books will be read, even what games are played during outdoor time.

Does the curriculum focus on higher level thinking?

Creative Curriculum has objectives that include a developmental scale so teachers are provided information for scaffolding children's thinking over time from the simple towards the complex and from the concrete to the abstract. Ongoing assessment for intentional teaching is encouraged, teaching strategies are provided, and teachers are encouraged to interact with children by asking open ended questions, challenging children's thinking, and providing experiences to open the children's world view. However, within the context of the Teaching Guides the curriculum studies are not always challenging. The guides provide both weekly and daily questions to explore. But, the activities often lack the depth and inquiry that the questions could encourage from the children. For example, during the building study the questions that lead the curriculum could lead to a deeper understanding of buildings and even bigger ideas of culture and community, yet the individual activities do not allow for a deeper investigation based on children's interests and current knowledge. Children are expected to complete an activity and move on, ultimately disallowing true understanding. Some examples of lack of fluid and in depth exploration of materials and concepts is an instance where one day blue prints and architectural tools and a digital camera are to be added to the block area and then removed only two days later. There also seem to be no books or other intentional teaching moments related to

architecture or the art of designing buildings. Also, the architectural tools and design elements are introduced late in the unit. The children have already explored the idea of construction far before there is any information presented about planning. This seems like an illogical jump and highlights the focus on smaller skills such as patterning and motor skills over deeper understanding.

Is Creative Curriculum Preschool Edition evidence-based?

The *U.S Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance guide to Identifying and Implementing Educational Practices Supported by Rigorous Evidence: A User Friendly Guide* (Coalition for Evidence Based Policy, 2003) states that for an intervention to have strong evidence of effectiveness that the” intervention be demonstrated effective, through well-designed randomized controlled trials, in more than one site of implementation and that these sites be typical school or community settings” (p. 10) To meet the criteria for possible evidence, there must be a closely matched, well designed comparison-group study that demonstrates effectiveness. Pre and post studies do not meet the threshold for “possible” evidence of effectiveness (p.12).

While *Creative Curriculum* is clearly grounded in research based practices, it does not appear to be backed by strong or possible evidence. The What Works Clearinghouse, a clearing house that reviews research to determine what works in education, found that “Creative Curriculum has no discernable effects on oral language, print knowledge, phonological processing or math for preschool children” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2013, p.1). They reported that only two of fourteen studies of *Creative Curriculum* met their evidence standards. The two studies reviewed were part of the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER).

- As part of the PCER (2008) project, researchers from Vanderbilt University evaluated *The Creative Curriculum*. Twenty-one full-day, state prekindergarten classrooms in seven school districts in Tennessee participated in the study. Teachers in the control classrooms used teacher-developed curriculum. No significant impacts on the

prekindergarten or kindergarten child outcomes were found between the *Creative Curriculum* and the teacher-developed curriculum (Chambers, Cheung, Slavin, Smith, Laurenzano, 2010).

- A research team from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte also evaluated The Creative Curriculum as part of the PCER project. They recruited full-day Head Start programs in North Carolina and Georgia. There were eight classrooms in North Carolina and 10 classrooms in Georgia. A sample of 18 classrooms and 194 children (97 treatment, 97 control) participated in the study. In the control classrooms teachers used teacher-developed curriculum. No significant differences on the preschool or kindergarten child outcomes were found between the *Creative Curriculum* and the teacher-developed curriculum (Chambers, Cheung, Slavin, Smith, Laurenzano, 2010).

The Creative Curriculum website describes another study containing a control group. According to the report, the Teaching Strategies Gold was used to assess children in classrooms using *Creative Curriculum for Preschool* and children in classrooms using other curriculums. They reported that children in classrooms using *Creative Curriculum* scored higher in language, cognitive skills, literacy, and math than children in other classrooms (Teaching Strategies, 2013). Since the study is unpublished and basic information about the study format is missing it is difficult to critique the trustworthiness of the data. It should also be noted that Teaching Strategies Gold is a linked assessment with Creative Curriculum. Due to alignment between the curriculum and assessment, one would expect children who received the *Creative Curriculum* to perform better.

Creative Curriculum for Preschool is based upon constructivist philosophy with developmentally appropriate activities, schedules, and learning formats. The curriculum contains developed units based upon inquiry questions. However, as a scripted curriculum it might not always meet children's individual or cultural needs or provide for in-depth learning. *Creative Curriculum for Preschool* has not met the standards to be considered evidence based.

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