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Cultures of creativity:

**NURTURING CREATIVE MINDSETS
ACROSS CULTURES.**

A TOOLBOX FOR TEACHERS

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Nurturing creative mindsets across cultures – A toolbox for teachers

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I began my career as a primary school teacher and immediately began to worry that our schools were killing children's motivation and creativity. Almost without exception, the five-year-olds in my mixed-age classroom began their educational journey wide-eyed and excited about everything put in front of them. They took risks and were blissfully unconcerned about what might happen if they made a mistake or got a wrong answer. In essence, they had a playfulness about them, and, like children at play, they felt free to explore any and all possibilities without the fear of negative repercussions. Yet by the time these same students had reached the age of 8 or 9, far too many of them had become rule-bound and self-conscious. Their intellectual fearlessness in the face of challenges had been replaced with a cautious, "let's keep it safe" attitude and a reluctance to try new things.

My concerns about my young students' plummeting excitement, curiosity and creativity eventually propelled me back to graduate school where I studied social and developmental psychology. Early on, I discovered a paper authored by Mark Lepper and David Greene entitled "Turning Play into Work" (Lepper & Greene, 1975). This empirical study has now come to be viewed as one in a series of seminal investigations underscoring the many ways that teachers unknowingly undermine children's motivation and creativity. Over the years, my colleagues and I have discovered that intrinsic motivation, the motivation to engage in an activity out of sheer interest in and excitement about a task, is essential for creativity; and extrinsic motivation, motivation driven by someone or something out-

side the task itself, is almost always detrimental (Amabile, 1983, 1996). To produce a creative piece of writing or art, generate a creative concept, build a creative Lego structure or come up with a creative solution to a problem, children must be willing and able to play with ideas. They must be willing to take risks and be undaunted by the possibility of hitting a "dead end." The intrinsic motivation inherent in play keeps the child focused on the excitement and challenge of an activity and not on the possibility of failure or over-concern with how well he or she is doing in the eyes of others.

The problem lies in the fact that the typical school culture, the typical classroom is fraught with killers of student intrinsic motivation: Expected reward, expected evaluation, competition, surveillance and time limits all serve to make it almost impossible to maintain a playful attitude and a willingness to take risks. As a researcher, I have found that it is much easier to demonstrate how to undermine intrinsic motivation than it is to foster it. No child is intrinsically motivated 100 % of the time. In fact, an intrinsic motivational orientation is an especially delicate and fleeting state. Even the most creative and adventurous students fall prey to the pressures of the classroom. **Motivational orientation is in large part determined by environmental factors; and virtually every day, classroom teachers are unintentionally killing their students' intrinsic task interest and creativity of performance** [see (Hennessey, 2002, 2003)]. My challenge as a researcher has been to discover how to help teachers to help their students to maintain and grow their intrinsic task motivation and creativity.



Decades of careful empirical study allow my colleagues and me to offer educators a toolbox of concrete suggestions that do not necessitate sweeping curricular modifications or policy reform. Instead, as outlined below, I suggest changes that teachers interested in preserving the intrinsic motivation and creativity of students can readily implement in their own classrooms. Borrowing from Lepper and Greene, these guidelines have, in essence, been designed to “turn work into play” (Lepper & Greene, 1975).

- Teachers must work diligently to create an interpersonal atmosphere that allows students to feel in control of their learning process.
- Students should be helped to feel like “agents” rather than “pawns.” In other words, the classroom should be a place in which student behavior is self-determined. If increases in students’ intrinsic motivation for school activities and creativity is the goal, there is no room in classrooms for intimidation or coercion.
- Teachers, administrators and policymakers must step back and critically review the incentive systems that are currently in place.
- When presenting lessons and subject matter that are inherently interesting to students, teachers should work to use tangible rewards extrinsic to the task or educational activity as little as possible; they also must avoid setting up situations that encourage students to compare their progress to that of others in the classroom. Performance on in-class, school-wide or nationwide tests must not be

driven by a sense of competition and teachers must work to deemphasize the extrinsic incentives built into the school evaluation system.

- In situations where extrinsic incentives are in place, students must be helped to distance themselves from those constraints as much as possible. They must be reminded that what is most important is that they try their best and enjoy what they are doing.
- Every effort should be made to encourage students to take risks, to experiment, and to have fun with projects and assignments. Students must be given the opportunity to take pride in what they have already accomplished and to dream of what lies ahead. And at all times, teacher evaluation and surveillance of student work must be kept to a minimum.
- Students must be helped to become more proficient at recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses.

All students, including the most gifted and talented children, must be helped to identify the activities and subject areas that give them the most pleasure and ignite their passion. Students must be helped to recognize their own excitement for learning. Rather than relying on the feedback of teachers, they must be taught to monitor their own progress; and, whenever possible, they must be given choices about what they will do and how they will accomplish their goals. They must be encouraged to become active, independent learners, confident in their ability to take control of their own learning process.

Importantly, while each of these recommendations is based on close to four decades of empirical research, the majority of studies that have focused on the impact of classroom environmental constraints on student motivation and creativity have been conducted in western, primarily US, school settings. Virtually everything that we know, or think we know, about the psychology of creativity has filtered through the lens of Western study participants and investigators. Even Geert Hofstede, one of the most influential pioneers in the study of cross-cultural behavior, has lamented that his is a Western constructed model subject to all manner of ethno-centric bias (Westwood & Low, 2003).

Psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists tell us that creativity is an integral part of the human experience. Every cultural group incorporates some form of visual or performance art, music, literature and even technology. Yet just because creativity is a universal phenomenon that does not mean that it plays the same role across cultures, nor can it be assumed that creative efforts receive similar kinds of social support worldwide (Simonton & Ting, 2010). The impact of culture cannot be overstated; yet when it comes to questions of creative potential, there is no reliable evidence of widespread cultural differences. Comprehensive reviews of the literature [e.g. (Leung, Au & Leung, 2004)] show that most psychologists and scholars who have focused on the components of the creative process agree that creative behavior results from a normative human cognitive capacity [see (Ward, Smith & Finke, 1999; Weisberg, 1993)]. Easterners and Westerners have been found to hold similar, although not identical, conceptualizations of creativity (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Rudowicz, 2003); and researchers have observed a consistency across cultures in terms of creative ability. As an example, all around the globe, creativity has a tendency to increase with age (Oral, Kaufman & Agars, 2007); and when it comes to judgments of product creativity, there is a significant consensus of opinion among experts across cultures (Niu & Sternberg, 2001, 2003). Oral and colleagues also offer evidence of a universal link between intrinsic motivation and creativity (Oral, Kaufman & Agars, 2007); and, perhaps most significantly, the intrinsic task motivation and interest of children in rural Chinese schools has been shown to be undermined by the same kinds of threats to autonomy or restrictions of task choice that have proven so detrimental in US classrooms (Zhou, Ma & Deci, 2009). Hypotheses abound about how extrinsic and intrinsic motivation might affect creativity differently across cultures, but no study has as yet provided clear evidence to support this claim (Kim et al., 2012).

Importantly, however, the story does not end here because there is also strong research evidence indicating that cultures do differ substantially not only in their social expectations but also in terms of the relative emphasis they place on certain personality factors, problem framing approaches and solution “styles” (Westwood & Low, 2003). Cultural norms have important consequences at all phases of the creative process. For example, most Western cultures focus on novelty and originality in design, and emphasize the importance of “thinking outside the box” and generating products and ideas that are dramatically different from those that came before (Weiner, 2000). Yet in the East, creativity is often thought to emerge from subtle improvements on existing products and processes, with less emphasis placed on novelty (Averill, Chon & Hahn, 2001; Gardner, 1989; Li, 1997).

In years to come, it will be important for researchers and educators around the world to identify the specific motivational dynamics in force in classrooms in their countries of origin. Their lists of classroom variables that kill (or promote) intrinsic motivation and creativity may prove to be somewhat different from the lineup presented here; yet their overarching goal must be the same. As much as possible, the culture of schools ought to be reworked so as to promote children’s playful exploration and risk-taking. Whether they are designing science experiments, composing poetry or building bridges with LEGOs, students of all ages must be free to meet their creative potential in an environment that allows time to become entirely immersed in a challenge. Teachers must strive to deemphasize competition and encourage exploration. They must help their students to understand that they can learn from their mistakes and need not shy away from the possibility of making wrong turns. All children deserve to learn and play in environments that support the development of their creative potential, for their own, individual growth as well as the betterment of society.

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