

# Preschool

## Insights & Research

### HARNESSING CREATIVITY, DEVELOPING SELF-EXPRESSION, RAISING SELF-ESTEEM

**“If my children are to leave the preschool classroom with one thing, it would be a sense of their self-worth. Nothing else is more important to me than kids feeling like they contribute and achieve.”**

– Hannah, preschool teacher, San Diego, USA

**“I was scared of the stage. Now I love it.”**

– Liliana, 5

Hannah’s classroom is a large space. She feels very lucky to be able to teach in the biggest room in the school. “But it isn’t enough just to have the space,” she says, “you have to fill it with meaningful things.” The bigger the space, the more meaningful things you need.

The classroom is divided into 5 sections, plus an outdoor space, and the children have free-flow between all six areas. However, there is a method in the division, Hannah explains, and she has found that the space has a natural rhythm that energizes the learning. She admits nothing about the *creative stations* is ground-breaking. There is a roleplay corner with dress up clothes, a craft table and water table, a reading area, an area for play construction tools and building blocks – everything you’d expect. The final area, though, is key to the system.

Around the whiteboard is a display of artwork, examples of mark making and early math, and models the children have completed. Among these pictures are Polaroid photos of the children, taken by the children. They are re-enacting scenes from their roleplays, explaining show and tell items, or proudly holding up their creations. Each child has a beaming smile. This area is called the *stage*. For Hannah and her class, the diverse outcomes of the day’s self-directed creativity are to be celebrated and shared.

Too often, the little moments of wonder and excitement can be lost. The less confident child does not have their work displayed. Hannah’s greatest fear is that a child in her class could go through a whole school day without being noticed or praised – not just by her, but by their peers also. So the *stage* has been set to give children the opportunity to be self-expressive, and be recognized for it.

It is clear that the children love this area. They constantly weave in and out of this space. They take their photos, celebrate each other’s efforts, and then head off back to their own spaces and into the flow of play and creativity. There are even children simply standing on the *stage* just looking. Hannah remarks that she likes to think they are learning to appreciate their own and each other’s artistic and creative skills, and be self-reflective. She observes the children seeking out the owner of artwork or photos that they really like.

This is where the high-five comes into play. Hannah has two autistic children in her class, and noisy applause and cheering is often overstimulating. So the children have learned a system where they celebrate creativity and expression by finding the friend and asking for a high-five.

There is a lot of high-fiving in this class.

## What does the research say?

Early Years researcher, Anna Craft (2002), says that creativity has five main constituents: imagination, intelligence, self-creation, self-expression, and know-how. This shows that self-expression is part-and-parcel of the creative process. It is not just a means for showing others your creativity, it is a creative skill in itself. The more creative a child can be in their approach to problems, the more they are able to express a part of themselves.

Craft says that exercising choice, making decisions, and route-finding, builds self-identity, and with it, self-esteem. To be able to communicate those choices clearly and confidently at an early age prepares a child for navigating future challenges.

In Hannah's classroom, like many other similar preschool settings, self-identity and self-esteem are inextricably linked to what the children create and how that creativity is celebrated. Creativity is at the heart of this process: bringing together what a child knows, what they can imagine, and challenging them to find new and exciting ways to express this knowledge in a manner that suits them best. Citing the work of Woods (1995) and Jeffrey (1997), Craft's research reinforces the importance of relevance, ownership and control the children should have in the process, for creativity to be fostered successfully. That ownership, of the tasks and the rewards, is definitely clear in Hannah's class.

## What the teachers say

"We love the *stage*, so much so that other teachers in the school have a similar area in their classrooms. We have a very creative mindset [in our school] and we love to share and celebrate achievements. No, 'achievement' is the wrong word. We love to celebrate our skills and how we express them. Confidence and self-esteem are paramount to being successful in life, feeling like you are a successful person. We want every child to value themselves and know that they are a successful person – whatever it they choose to do."

- Victoria, Hannah's principle

## References

Craft, A. (2002) *Creativity and Early Years Education: A lifewide foundation* (London: Continuum)