Exploring Creativity in Depth: An Elementary School Program for Activating the Creative Imagination

Austin Clarkson, Ph.D.
York University, Toronto

The Exploring Creativity in Depth program is based on ideas and practices that were pioneered over a century ago by educators who sought a more holistic approach to formal education. They believed that it was as important to educate the creative imagination as the reason, personal values as collective ideologies, and they placed the arts at the core of the curriculum. John Dewey, who founded an elementary school in Chicago in the 1890s, stated, that art and music were important not only in the development of the child’s moral and aesthetic nature, but also from a strictly intellectual point of view. I know of no work in the school that better develops the power of attention, the habit of observation and of consecutiveness, and of seeing parts in relation to a whole (Dewey [1902] 1990, 174).

The leading school for progressive education in the arts and crafts after World War I was the Bauhaus at Weimar. Founded by the architect Walter Gropius, the curriculum emphasized the creative imagination, intellectual enquiry, mastery of practical skills, and the constructive role of the artist in society. Paul Klee, Vassily Kandinsky, and Johannes Itten, were among the masters who taught students how to liberate their imaginations and experience the power of the creative drive. Klee wrote: The power of creativity cannot be named. It remains mysterious to the end. But what does not shake us to our foundations is no mystery. We ourselves, down to the smallest part of us, are charged with this power (Klee 1961, 17).

At about the same time Carl Gustav Jung developed a therapeutic method for activating the imagination. He encouraged patients to express images and feelings spontaneously in painting, body movement, and writing: For here the conscious and the unconscious flow together into a common product in which both are unified. Such a fantasy can be the highest expression of a person’s individuality, and it may even create that individuality by giving perfect expression to its unity (Jung 1971, 428).

After World War II holistic approaches to education were sidelined by the emphasis on cognitive science, stimulus response behaviorism, and analytical philosophy. The claims of such authors as Northrop Frye (1963) that an educated imagination is essential to all citizens of a free society were dismissed. Educators followed Jean Piaget, who viewed the symbolic thinking of children as a passing phase on the way to mature thought, which should be relatively free of symbolic representations. Today neuroscientists no longer liken the brain to a computer, for they have discovered that thought is a flow of images that involve the body, mind, and spirit, and that the mind and the brain are intimately linked (Edelman 2000; Damasio 1999, 2003). Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) demonstrates that the willful act of forming a mental image of an object with the eyes closed selectively activates the same place in the brain as seeing that object with the eyes open. And further, that the information reaching the brain from the outside world is conditioned by the mental state of the viewer: “Mental states contribute to the final perception even more powerfully than the stimulus itself.” The mental and spiritual force that sustains attention in meditation and other reflective practices can produce “plastic and enduring changes in the brain and hence the mind. Intention is made causally efficacious through attention” (Schwartz and Begley 2002, 336-337, 360).
The Exploring Creativity in Depth program was developed from a university course on the creative imagination for candidates in fine arts and education during the 1980s and 1990s (Clarkson 2005). The experiential component of the course consisted of an extensive series of reflective exercises that activate the imagination in a variety of expressive media. One such exercise is for activating the imagination while viewing a work of visual art. The exercise was adapted for an exhibit in a museum (Clarkson and Worts 2005) and is also the basis of a workshop program for school children, Exploring Creativity in Depth. Since 2002 the ECD program has been adapted for various populations—regular classes of elementary school children, secondary school art students, youth at risk and with special needs, and teachers. With funding from local, city, and provincial agencies, the ECD has since 2002 been given to some 60 classes of children from over 20 schools in the Greater Toronto Area. 60% of the children were nine to ten years old (grades 4/5), 20% were eleven, and 20% were twelve. The remaining 10% were high school students, and young adults.

The ECD program begins when between 25 and 35 children, accompanied by one or more teachers and parent volunteers, arrive by bus at an art centre. They are greeted by the team of facilitators and introduced to the program. The adults are invited to participate. All go into the gallery and view the show. Over the PA a facilitator asks the participants to select an artwork that attracts them and to sit down in front of it. She gives them a brief relaxation, asks them to scan the artwork all over slowly, then to close their eyes and see the artwork with the eyes of the imagination. This phase is repeated. They are asked to choose a special place in the artwork, imagine going to that place and looking around from that place; to imagine the temperature (do they feel warm or cool), listen for sounds, sense the different textures, and go for a walk and explore. She asks them to choose a colour, focus on that colour, and note the feelings that the colour brings. Then choose a shape, imagine being that shape and moving around as that shape. They are then given one minute in which to let the imagination continue to play with the images.

The students go to the studio and sit at tables supplied with white cartridge paper, trays of oil pastels, and sheets of paper towel. They are asked to choose a colour like the one they focused on in the gallery and cover the sheet of paper with that colour. They are asked how that colour makes them feel: happy or sad, peaceful or anxious, brave or scared, loving or angry, hopeful or lonely. They are asked to take a different colour, draw the shape that they selected, and fill in the shape with the new colour, then take the piece of paper towel and scrub the two colours together to make new textures and shades. More prompts are given: “You are making your very own, original picture, not a copy of the artwork you looked at in the gallery. Let your imagination guide you. There is no right or wrong way to make your picture. You can use any colours, shapes, and textures. Your picture doesn’t have to look like anything you’ve seen before. You can make abstract designs. You don’t have to like what you’re doing. What you think is a mistake may give you a chance to do something different. You can use your fingernails to make lines, you can even scribble.” The artist-teachers circulate, giving encouragement and lending a hand where needed. After about 30 minutes the facilitator asks them to think about words that describe the feelings and images in their pictures. She then asks them to turn their pictures over and write the words on the back—separate words, poems, and stories.

They take their pictures to the gallery and in small groups led by the artist-teachers they talk about what they saw in the artwork in the gallery and how they made their pictures. They discuss the colours, shapes, textures, symbols, and designs, and how these convey feelings and
meanings, and they read the words they wrote. After lunch the students gather in the gallery, where the team of artist-teachers tell how they became artists and show some of their work. The children are fascinated to meet real artists and ask many questions.

Back in the studio they take their places and sit facing the pictures they made in the morning, which are on the floor beside their tables. They do the focusing exercise again, this time while looking at their own pictures, and make a second picture as before. They take both pictures to their groups and compare them. How do the two pictures differ in form and content, feelings and meanings? The students, teachers, and parent volunteers fill out the evaluation forms. The five-hour program ends at about 2:30 in the afternoon.

The response to the ECD has been extremely positive. A grade 5 teacher wrote on the evaluation form: “The guided visualization, the accepting atmosphere, the wonderful work space with individual tables and supplies — allowed focus.” A grade 7 teacher: “This is truly amazing to see everything (aesthetics, techniques, personalization, poetry, enjoyment, authentic writing and talk) come out so naturally.” A grade 8 teacher: “Well-organized! Thoughtful, interesting, relevant. Well supervised. A great confidence builder for students who think they can’t do any art.” The teachers comment on the sensitivity of the facilitators to the needs of individual students and say that they learned techniques that they can apply in their own teaching. They are impressed by how the small groups encourage the students to interact and are amazed by how well they express themselves about their images and feelings. Several teachers bring their classes year after year.

The focusing exercise activates the imagination by calling up several sense modalities (vision, hearing, touch, proprioception). This generates a strong flow of mental energy between the viewer and the artwork, and the heightened state of sustained attention allows images and feelings to emerge. In answer to the question, What did you find out about your imagination? Grade 5 students responded: • I found out I have one. • It's huge. • Very powerful. • Very big. • Very fun. • It goes wako sometimes. • Full of details. • A great place to be. • It's cool. • Very creative. • It's not right or wrong.

The ECD does not direct the creative process to a specific outcome, but rather sets up a framework within which each student discovers his or her own path. Letting the creative imagination direct the art-making process allows children to discover something about themselves that they had not known before. In answer to the question, What did you find out about you and your artwork? Grade 4’s replied: • I found that I am very talented. • That my artwork was very weird to me, but the second picture I liked better. • That I like the way I made it. • I figured out that me and my art is funny. Grade 5’s: • They [artworks] reflected on me. • That I can be good at art if I take my time. • I had a big imagination and it expressed my feelings. • I have a lot of imagination. • I could draw good if I try. Grade 6’s: • It was really creative. • It was about my imagination. Grade 7’s: • That art doesn’t need to be a specific thing – it can come from your imagination. • It [the artwork] represented a part of me. • That I use my imagination when I draw. • That if you let your imagination loose you might just create something very nice. Grade 8’s: • That I can do anything and to let my hand take over instead of my mind. • That it can be whatever I want it to be. • My work reflects my mood and personality. • I found out a new method to start painting and that you can draw from your emotions. • It can be very abstract. • I learned that I have a lot of things stored up in my imagination waiting for me to imagine them.
Allowing the imagination to direct the creative process gives children confidence in their creative potential. A grade 5 boy was one of the few black students in his class (Figure 1 Grade 5, Boy 1). The picture he chose in the gallery was the portrait of a black postman named Ismail. His first picture, Picture A, repeats the frontal view of the portrait but depicts a boy named Lucaleshish, who, because he was different from the other kids, was bullied and ran away. His second picture (Picture B) provided the answer to this difficult situation. It is a mountain or island surrounded by golden light, two trees on each side, and flocks of birds flying freely overhead. He described it as, “A place where you can be alone, safe, and can grow.” He had pictured a refuge where he could flourish in a place of peace and beauty. On the evaluation form (text in italics) he said that the program showed him that his artwork was good. And on the follow-up questionnaire several weeks later (underlined text) he said that what he remembered about the program was the picture of the man called Ismail. He added that the program had showed him how to travel in his imagination, to draw his imagination on paper, and that art was fun. I asked the teacher what effects of the ECD program she had observed in her students, and she singled out this boy. She said he was very extraverted and throughout the year had never finished an art project, as he didn’t follow instructions and gave up easily. She was amazed by the pictures that he made in the
ECD program, and that he was proud of them. The program had “allowed him to be in his own material.”

**Figure 2, Grade 8, Girl 1**

![Picture A](image1)

When the creative imagination is activated, it stimulates a flow of images and feelings between the ego-system and the self-system, the core of the personality. Such affect-images are unique, surprising, captivating, and meaningful, as they bring to the ego an experience of the totality of the personality. The first picture by a grade 8 girl was of a lone figure amidst a dark blue scene of lightning and thunderclouds (Figure 2 Grade 8, Girl 1). She feels abandoned (“the whole world has turned its back on me”) as she looks out the window and sees people dying. People are watching but no one is helping. She too is watching, frozen in despair. In her second picture the clouds have dissolved into a whirl of large and small energy spirals in a field of warm colours. The oppressiveness of the first picture has opened up into a joyous, untrammeled space of hopefulness. On the evaluation form she wrote that she was surprised by all the human qualities that appeared in her pictures. Indeed, her loneliness and despair were transformed into happiness, hope, and the desire to live life to the full in spite of the many things that put her down.
The ECD ensures that participants can address personal thoughts and feelings in a calm, safe, and nurturing environment. By engaging the deep structure of the creative process, they address their concerns in their own way and at their own pace. As we have seen, the first pictures often present problematic personal issues. A grade 8 boy drew a disembodied face floating in space and wrote the phrase “feeling alone” twice to emphasize how he felt (Figure 3 Grade 8, Boy 2). His second picture is of a sunny island that nobody knows about. As with the grade 5 boy (Figure 1), he created a place of refuge where he can be alone, but in a place of peace and beauty. He wrote that the workshop showed him how to get in touch with his feelings and how colours influence the mood of a painting.

The difference between boys and girls in respect to the imagery calls for another study. In general girls prefer scenes of home, nature, flowers, trees, hearts, and peace symbols, while boys prefer images of fire, volcanic eruptions, monsters, and battles in space. Boys also have more difficulty than girls in doing the focusing exercise for activating the imagination (Gee 2006, 27). A great majority of students write on the feedback forms that the workshop changed their attitude to art, a change that can be linked to their discovery of the power of the imagination. In answer to
the question, ‘What did you learn about your imagination,’ typical answers are: • It can take you anywhere. • I found out how to go somewhere without moving. • I could do things that I don’t ever think about. • Almost everything can be imagined. • I never knew I can imagine like that. • Your imagination has no limits. • A million times better than TV and video games. • I have a great creative imagination [it] opens mysterious and unknown doors. • That once you really focus on something your imagination will start to open up. • I have a very imaginative brain.

Replies to the question as to what they learned about the imagination differed significantly according to gender. Of the 20% of students who said that they did not learn anything about their imagination, 17% were boys and 3% were girls (Gee 2006, 27). This suggests that boys have more difficulty than girls in sustaining focused attention on the images and feelings. It would appear that more preparation is required for the focusing exercise.

Many students have the idea that art is about representing objects in the real world. Those that have no confidence in their ability to draw lack interest in art and associate the subject with an activity in which the whole class makes products that are more or less alike and can be judged to be good or bad. The ECD relieves them of these anxieties, as they are told there is no right or wrong way of making their pictures, that mistakes may lead to something new and exciting, that it is OK to make abstract designs, and that they don’t have to like their pictures for them to be good. Letting the imagination organize the creative process frees art-making from directed thinking and expectations and allows the individual personality to come through. Students describe the experience of letting the imagination direct the creative process as letting their hands be free to create and as an alternative way of thinking. They are surprised to learn that everyone’s imagination is different. When several students view the same artwork during the focusing exercise in the gallery, they are impressed how different the resulting pictures are. They conclude that there is no single correct interpretation of an artwork: • I learned that everyone can have a different view of the same thing. • That I could imagine different things that no one could in the picture. • That your imagination could be different from the rest.

**Figure 4 Grade 8, Girl 2**

![Picture A](image)
The ECD program is structured around a three-step process: imaginative response to an artwork, making an artwork, and sharing the results. Going through the sequence twice, once in the morning and again in the afternoon, has a cumulative effect. Students gain confidence in organizing the creative process. They find that repeating the sequence of activities takes effort and concentration, but that if they keep practicing they will be successful. A grade 8 girl made two strongly contrasted landscapes (Figure 4 Grade 8, Girl 2). The first is a peaceful, moonlit scene without human figures, while the second is a sunlit scene of fun by the sea. The transformation is from night to day, introverted peace and quiet in the woods to extraverted sports on the beach. On the evaluation form she wrote that she found that imagining was difficult, but that now she can accomplish any artwork with her imagination.

Figure 5 Grade 5, Boy 3
The first pictures are often disorganized and unfocused, the primal material out of which something new will be born, the alchemist’s massa confusa. The first picture of a grade 5 boy is an all-over design of faces, monsters, and assorted objects titled “Confusion” (Figure 5 Grade 5, Boy 3). Remarkably, he understood that the purpose of his confusion is to get him thinking and asking questions. His questions were answered with a second picture that addressed his anger. He was torn between loving his brothers and fighting with them. The anger took the form of a fight in the sea between a giant frog and a giant fish. He came to terms with his anger in a fight between fantastic creatures that takes place far from the eyes of others in the depths of the sea. He wrote that he was not used to drawing with pastels and so was surprised by his first drawing. His second picture was more satisfying because it was more “detailed.” That is, he had learned how to use the pastels to make a picture of which he could be proud. He discovered that “letting his imagination run free” was liberating and empowering. “I can do anything with my imagination.”

Many students state that they learned that art expresses feelings. Grade 4’s wrote: • I learned that art has a lot of feelings. Art can leave you cold, or warm, happy or sad, strong or weak just by looking at it. • I learned that art can be wonderful when it comes from the heart.
Grade 5 boy: • I found out a lot of art comes from feelings and ideas that are put together.
Grade 5 girl: • I found out that I had a lot of feelings that I could share in my artwork.
Grade 6 boy: • My first drawing surprised me because it was expressing my feelings.
Grade 7 boy: • My first drawing brought out strong emotions.
Grade 8 girl: • My imagination is crazy but has a lot of feelings and that I have a lot of love.
Grade 8 boy: • I found out the place I should go in my imagination when I’m sad, mad.
Students feel affirmed when their images and feelings are valued as authentic and unique. They experience their pictures as meaningful expressions of their personalities. Showing their pictures and discussing them in small groups gives the students confidence in their individuality and greatly enhances their self-esteem. A grade 5 boy drew a picture of a star inside a ring, and a brighter star outside (Figure 6 Grade 5, Boy 4). His story is about a star enclosed in a ring that wanted to be as bright as the other stars. The ring told him that it doesn’t matter if he is not as bright as the others, and he shouldn’t care what others think, because he is a star. The boy had told his own story. His teacher said that the boy was good at art but had no confidence in his work. Indeed, the boy wrote on the feedback form that he didn’t think he was any good at making art from his head, but that the workshop had showed him that his imagination was creative. He was good at classroom art, with its focus on realistic drawing and expected outcomes, but found it difficult to draw from the his own imagination. The teacher remarked that the boy had low self-esteem and that the ECD had given him a sense of success. She added that he now accepted the fact that others thought he was a really good artist, that the workshop had transformed him, and that he now felt proud of his pictures. The picture depicted a parallel process between his inner and outer worlds.

Teachers and parents emphasize the effects of the workshop on self-esteem. A grade 4 teacher noted that the students develop the courage to try and gain self-esteem from the effort and the feedback. A parent volunteer for a grade 4/5 class said that the students learned risk-taking, discussing processes, and accepting compliments and criticism. A grade 5 teacher said that the discussion was great for self-esteem and for boosting creativity (Gee 2006, 17). The students also state why the workshop helps build confidence. Grade 5 boy: • I found out I know more than I knew I knew. Grade 6 boy: • This picture represents myself and what I like. Grade 7 boy: • I found out I used all the elements and texture to make my imagination come true in my artwork. Grade 7 girl: • I never thought my imagination was so deep. I found out my artwork symbolizes me. Grade 8 girls: • I didn’t know that my first drawing was going to have so many human qualities in it. • I found out that my ideas are really good and if I look into them I will be good. • Even though some people didn’t like my art, I thought it was with my imagination a good drawing. • I learned there is all kinds of art, messy and neat, rough and plain, etc. I also learned to not care about my art, the way it looked and be proud of my work. • I learned that I could do
anything I put my mind to.

**Figure 7 Grade 5, Girl 3**

![Picture B](image)

The words and pictures can be of such transcendent beauty and wisdom that the facilitators are awestruck. The painting that a grade 5 girl selected in the gallery was of a house with a large front door, and her first picture was a representation of that house. During the afternoon exercise, while focusing on her picture, she imagined going through that door (Figure 7 Grade 5, Girl 3). Her vision was of seeing the world through the eyes of her heart, and of flying free, dancing to the music of her dreams. She drew the door through which she passed into the world of the imagination and surrounded it with concentric rings of flowers, a dolphin, and energy spirals swirling in a golden light. On the evaluation form she wrote that the workshop had changed her idea about art because now she could imagine what cannot be explained. Several weeks after the workshop she stated in detail on the feedback form what it meant to her to learn to use her imagination: it enabled her to understand a work of art in a new way; that the imagination is a place of freedom; that each person’s imagination is unique; and that the imagination can be trusted to be right. The teacher said that this grade five girl was one of the youngest in her class and usually felt left behind, but that she had blossomed in the workshop and that she had gained greatly in self-confidence. Her ecstatic picture and poetic words are emblems of the riches that lie waiting to be revealed in children’s imaginations.

**Summary**

The ECD program teaches children: that everyone has an imagination and that everyone’s is different; that the imagination is a personal place of freedom and discovery and provides a new way of relating to art; that the imagination can be activated with a simple reflective exercise; that expressing personal images and feelings in pictures and words produces artwork that is surprising and meaningful; that sharing creative work promotes mutual understanding and reciprocity in the group; that art can be fun. Teachers learn from the ECD that the creative imagination stimulates a flow of images and feelings from the self-system to the ego-system, and thereby releases energies from the core of the personality that promote confidence, self-esteem, and motivation for creativity. The “reality principle,” that is, the consensual world of objects, concepts, values, and relations, is the principle on which most educational curricula are designed. The responses of
children to the ECD indicate the importance of giving them access to the principle of inner reality. The value of inner reality is affirmed by the images and feelings, and the meaningful and often transformative experiences that arise from engaging the deep structure of the creative process.

References