Is Self-Directed Education the Answer to the Creativity Crisis?

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Abstract

This paper examines the creativity crisis and its effects on our children and our future. It explains

Self-Directed Education (SDE) and reviews its history. It looks at the role of intrinsic motivation

in creativity and learning and proposes an *Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Learning.* The

interrelationships of educative drives and self-determination needs are explored.

The author asserts that SDE is the answer to the creativity crisis.

   Keywords: creativity crisis, self-directed learning, Self-Directed Education, intrinsic

motivation

Is Self-Directed Education the Answer to the Creativity Crisis?

My youngest daughter's academic struggle started in first grade. By middle school, she was defeated, depressed, and starting to change in a way that was heart-breaking. She shredded her self-esteem by comparing herself to others; we were losing her bit by bit. After two unsuccessful years at two different high schools, I considered a form of Self-Directed Education (SDE) called unschooling, in which children don't go to school and instead are given freedom to explore the world in whatever way they choose (Farenga, 2016). I had recently heard of the concept and loved the idea, but I didn't trust her, myself, or our relationship to bear the full responsibility for her education; I regret that. The last two years were better, but too little too late. She launched into the world unprepared to "adult." Her strengths, which are mostly creative, were never acknowledged or developed in school, and her weaknesses, despite the school's aggressive attempts, were never remediated. I wish this was an isolated story, but it isn't: I worked in a high school for three years and saw this pattern repeated over and over again. We can do better. Our children, and our world, deserve better.

E. Paul Torrance, considered the father of creativity in education, articulated the words that would become the *Manifesto for Children* after reflecting on the findings of his 22-year longitudinal study of creative behavior of children into adulthood. The manifesto reads:

> Don't be afraid to fall in love with something and pursue it with intensity. Know, understand, take pride in, practice, develop, exploit, and enjoy your greatest strengths. Learn to free yourself from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games they impose on you. Free yourself to play your own game. Find a great teacher or mentor who will help you. Don't waste energy trying to be well-rounded. Do what you love and can do well. Learn the skills of interdependence. (Torrance, 1983b)

Imagine if every child was read this at bedtime or the start of each school day. Imagine how much more creative children might become if more parents and teachers supported and empowered children to live this way. Sadly, this is not happening. Instead, America is facing a creativity crisis (Kim, 2011).

But what if the creativity crisis could be averted through SDE? This paper will examine the creativity crisis and explain SDE. It will unpack intrinsic motivation in relation to creativity and learning and explain how SDE can end this crisis.

The Creativity Crisis

Creative thinking in Americans of all ages has continually declined since 1990; the biggest drops are in children in grades K-3, with the second largest drop in children in grades 4-6 (Kim, 2011). After a thorough analysis of decades of Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT; Torrance, 1966) scores, Kim (2011) concluded that beginning around 1990, younger children were tending to grow up:

> less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less
> humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less
> perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesizing, and less
> likely to see things from a different angle…steadily losing their ability to elaborate upon
> ideas…less capable of the critical thinking processes of synthesis and organization and
> less capable of capturing the essence of problems [and] more narrow-minded, less
> intellectually curious, and less open to new experiences. (p. 292)

Kim (2017) found that the creativity crisis has gotten even worse since 2008. Creative abilities are not being nurtured in childhood, ultimately creating a society of stunted adults (Kim, 2011). Can SDE nurture these creative abilities and end this crisis?

What is Self-Directed Education?

Life is our greatest creative teacher; lessons are abundant everywhere, every day. When we are first born we start to learn by doing. We make connections in context, and learn through repeated failure before success. Parents and facilitators of SDE seek to provide the environment that keeps learning a natural part of life past early childhood.

The Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE, n.d.-a) offers the definition driving this paper: "Self-Directed Education is education that derives from the *self-chosen* activities and life experiences of the person becoming educated, *whether or not those activities were chosen deliberately for the purpose of education* [emphasis added]" (para. 5).

The SDE philosophy can be traced back to A.S. Neill, who founded the Summerhill Boarding School in England in 1921, and Daniel Greenberg, who founded Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts in 1968 (Gray, 2017). This philosophy gained traction in the 1970s when John Holt coined the term *unschooling* (Farenga, 2016). There are also a small number of public schools, usually alternative, democratic, or free schools, where SDE is taking place (Gray, 2017), but it has predominantly taken place through the unschooling form of homeschooling. Today, the homeschooling movement is growing rapidly (Farenga, 2016) and SDE is poised to grow as well, due in part to the founding of the Alliance for Self-Directed Education in 2016, and the growth of SDE centers, micro-schools, and unschooling cooperatives. While there are many differences between SDE environments and the standard school model, one of the most prominent is the underlying motivation for learning (Riley, 2015).

The Role of Motivation in Learning

There is no question that students who perform well in school are usually motivated. Good grades are often a motivator for these students. Since grades are comparative, they may be

motivated to do better than their classmates, or at least to not get a bad grade. They may be motivated to avoid failure. They may want to make their teachers and parents happy; maybe they will even get a special treat if they do well. These are extrinsic rewards based on external evidence of performance, and there is a limit to the benefits of this type of motivation (Amabile, 1998; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The limit of extrinsic motivation is evident in underperforming students. Who hasn't heard the dismissive complaint that "kids just aren't motivated anymore"? The real question to consider is "What *else* is motivating these students?" Kim (2011) attributed underachievement to schools' inabilities to meet students' creative needs. Kim and Hull (2012) found a strong correlation between higher levels of creativity and the odds of dropout. I believe that many underperforming students are simply not motivated toward the goals established by school, but can feel strong intrinsic motivation towards personally meaningful goals which would meet their own creative needs. Therefore, focusing on intrinsic motivation is a better option for all students.

Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Learning

"Learning, by its very nature, is a creative act" – Sandy Speicher (2017, para. 17)

The importance of intrinsic motivation to creativity has been documented for decades (Amabile, 1983, 1998; Hennessey, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017), as is the relationship between intrinsic motivation and learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Amabile (1998) even articulated an Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity: "people will be most creative when they feel motivated primarily by the interest, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself—and not by external pressures" (p. 79). This paper extends Amabile's principle to the creative act of learning and proposes an *Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Learning:* people

will *learn* the most when they feel motivated by the interest, satisfaction, and challenge of the exploration itself—and not by external pressures.

Unfortunately, many classrooms are not designed to optimize intrinsic motivation, which can diminish both learning and creativity. Hennessey (2015) espoused the influence of the classroom environment in supporting or undermining student motivation. Her frustration at the current state of affairs is evident. She stated, "expected rewards, expected evaluation, competition, time limits, and surveillance—how is it that this laundry list of killers of student intrinsic motivation and creativity reads like the recipe for the typical contemporary American classroom?" (Hennessey, 2015, p. 188). Her conclusion is supportive of SDE, encouraging training so that educators could learn "how best to serve as a facilitator of students' self-directed and active learning" (Hennessey, 2015, p. 191).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), considers intrinsic motivation to be inborn, the "human tendency toward learning and creativity" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), a subtheory of SDT, specifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as three essential nutrients in an intrinsically motivating environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is "the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). When people do something because they feel they have to, rather than choose to, it is called *external perceived locus of causality* and they feel controlled or manipulated like a pawn; true autonomy in relation to intrinsic motivation is *internal perceived locus of causality*—it is when you voluntarily, willfully engage and self-endorse an activity (de Charms, 1968). Competence refers to feeling capable and having a sense of mastery around the things in your life (Ryan & Deci, 2017); it has a lot in common with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). Relatedness refers to feeling cared for and socially connected; it is belonging and feeling

that you truly matter (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These are three needs of the psyche, and the greater

an environment meets these needs, the more intrinsically motivated the individual will be (Ryan

& Deci, 2000).

How Self-Directed Education Can Solve the Creativity Crisis

The success of SDE is not built on a specific formulaic curriculum; it is built on

harnessing the natural learning process of children, a process driven by intrinsic motivation.

Young children learn very challenging things in their first few years simply because they are

curious, playful, and sociable (ASDE, n.d.-b, para. 1). These three educative drives produce

monumental feats, such as walking and talking, without instruction.

Intrinsic motivation can be optimized by supporting these three educative drives in an

environment that meets autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. While all learning

environments may proclaim to support these drives and needs, there is clearly a greater level of

autonomy extended to children in SDE than in the standard school model. It is this difference

that really sets SDE apart and provides the means to support all of the other drives and needs of

children, and ultimately adults, to the fullest extent. Let's explore the relationships between these

drives and needs, and their effects on intrinsic motivation (and therefore creativity and learning),

in greater detail.

Curiosity and Playfulness

Human beings seem to be born rather curious. Play starts between mother and baby,

establishes the basis for human trust, and is important for brain development and learning (S.

Brown, 2008). Children are innately powered by curiosity; if given the freedom to explore and

play, the result is "self regulation, curiosity, increased perseverance, progressive mastery and

optimism" (Brown, 2014, para. 4). Play allows children to explore and test possibilities, learn to build things, role-play, collaborate, and make and follow rules (T. Brown, 2008).

SDE proposes that the self-chosen activities of children should be the starting point for learning. A counterargument may be that children, if left to choose, would play video games all day. Craft (2011) focused on the changing nature of childhood in the digital age and explained how children are being empowered by the pluralities, possibilities, participation, and playfulness of online and virtual spaces. She stated:

> The digital environment is a space which offers many possibilities for learning by doing and doing by learning. In other words, it is a space where projects and ideas can be generated and developed and where mistakes can be made and learned from. (Craft, 2011, p. 63)

Despite valid concerns about the impact of video game usage, there are actually extensive benefits (Craft, 2011; Gray, 2013), including how multiplayer online role-playing games allow children to flex their creativity and problem-solving muscles in impressive ways (Gray, 2013). Even though activities are ideally chosen by the child in SDE, in the case of video games, many parents and facilitators may negotiate some boundaries and provide explanations so the child can autonomously endorse those boundaries.

Gray (2013) argued that curiosity provides the motivation for learning, while playfulness provides the motivation to practice towards mastery. Curiosity is important to creativity, so an environment that allows a child to follow their curiosity will also help that child naturally develop their creativity (Phillips, 2014). Ekvall (1996) found playfulness to be important even in creative work environments for adults. How much more important might it be to keeping creativity alive for children? The National Institute for Play believes that if we apply the science

of play we can transform education (National Institute for Play, n.d.), and that's exactly what SDE does.

Competence

When a child's curiosity drives their education, they are much more likely to follow their own interests, discover their own strengths, and work to their optimal level of challenge. This is part of the search for identity which Torrance (2002) considered "one of the most important things that a person ever does" (p. 32). Torrance (1983a) found that adults with the most creative achievements had fallen in love with something at an early age and pursued that.

However, Waters (2017) warned that "we may feel so pressured to help our children grow into the person society says they *should* be that we may not be allowing them to grow into the person they actually *are*" (p. 5). Waters (2017) explained how strengths develop over time; early childhood play and exploration allow children to have fun with potential strengths. Signs of strengths in a specific area are frequency of use, above-average functioning, and engagement in the activity or skill (Waters, 2017). By supporting our children's strengths, we can help them meet their competence need and build confidence, greater levels of happiness, better performance, increased self-esteem, enhanced ability to handle adversity, and reduced risk of depression (Waters, 2017). Supporting strengths helps children's self-efficacy and allows them to develop the tools to take control of their own lives (Waters, 2017). This approach also helps children develop optimism and resilience (Waters, 2017); sadly, schools tend to take the opposite approach, attempting instead to eliminate weaknesses.

Gallup (2014), through their student engagement poll, found that students whose schools and teachers built strengths and got them excited about the future were almost 30 times more likely to be engaged in their learning than students whose schools and teachers did not.

Unfortunately, less than half of students reported getting to do what they do best every day at school (Gallup, 2014), which negatively affects motivation and enthusiasm about learning. Gallup (2014) recommended that schools employ a strengths-based approach and personalize students' education plans.

SDE allows children to immerse themselves in their strengths and stay engaged long enough to fall in love with something, and provides the time necessary to develop those strengths and passions to the fullest extent. SDE is the solution that allows each child to individualize their learning so they can do their creative best with their own life.

Sociability and Relatedness

Children learn through social interaction, and so a valid concern frequently raised about SDE is that children will be socially isolated. However, Riley (2015) found no difference in relatedness satisfaction between young adults who had been educated in the standard school model and those that were homeschooled. The rise in SDE centers, micro-schools, and unschool cooperatives are creating SDE learning communities, which will expand and enrich the relationships of unschooled children.

In my experience with both SDE and Creative Problem Solving (CPS; Osborn, 1953), I have observed that the facilitators of both processes have much in common: they stay out of the content, help the child or client get unstuck, and are most successful when they can embody playfulness. Torrance (1979) captured the essence of the facilitator's relationship in SDE when he said:

> In this creative relationship a parent, teacher, counselor, or therapist must be willing to permit one thing to lead to another, to be ready to get off the beaten track or to break out of the mold, and to *relate to the child as a person* [emphasis added]. (p. 75)

Torrance (1979) went on to explain that it is "only when the child is convinced that you are not trying to reform him that he is able to open up and behave creatively" (p. 79). Yet this open, trusting relationship goes beyond creative behavior: it is important for the development of the whole child. Since SDE is strengths-based and assessment is not comparative, the relationship between child and parent or facilitator is much more relational and nurturing than is possible in the standard school model. This is vitally important for an intrinsically motivating environment.

There is no evidence that suggests that command-and-control, coercive education is good for children or learning. While skeptics of SDE on social media seem to believe that it will breed self-indulged children who have no respect; the reality is quite the contrary. Aaron Eden, education innovator and designer of LEAP Academy, an open-source school-within-a-school model built on the principles of SDE, believes the term *co-creative learning* better describes the relationship in SDE. According to Eden, "Self-Directed Education doesn't work *outside* of a healthy connected environment...it doesn't work through neglect and permissiveness. It works through a strong community that has within it the means to negotiate shared, parallel and divergent goals" (A. Eden, personal communication, November 22, 2017). All children deserve to pursue their interests freely in collaboration with and alongside others in a caring environment where they truly matter; this is *the pursuit of happiness* our democracy guarantees all people.

Autonomy and Planfulness

Children are born with the three educative drives of curiosity, playfulness, and sociability but the fourth educative drive, planfulness, develops over time (ASDE, n.d.-b). Once a child has a vision of their future, whether that future is tomorrow, next week, next year, or even longer, that child is inherently interested in planning for that future. She will take the steps necessary to

make her desired future happen (ASDE, n.d.-b). Assuming she has not lacked autonomy throughout childhood, she is unlikely to see this responsibility as anyone else's but her own.

The rise in parental fear over the last decades means children are under almost constant surveillance (Gray, 2013) and are rarely in charge of their own lives. Barker et al. (2014) found the more unstructured time a child experienced, the greater that child's self-directed executive functioning. Most school interventions seek to improve children's externally-driven executive function, "where they are instructed on what goal-directed actions to carry out and when," as opposed to self-directed executive function, "where they must determine on their own what goal-directed actions to carry out and when" (Barker et al., 2014, p. 1). The latter seems more sophisticated, and more needed today, than the former. Self-directed executive function is connected to the CPS process executive step, *Assessing the Situation*, which requires being able to decide where to begin and when to make changes (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011). Therefore, self-directed executive function is important for both learning and creativity.

Many people are concerned that giving full autonomy to children means they won't learn the basics. Gray (2013) pointed out that children often attempt to emulate what they see; activities that are truly important, like reading and math, are such an integral part of life that unschoolers and children in SDE centers learn them rapidly, when they are ready. It would not be surprising, for example, for an unschooler to learn fractions while baking.

Autonomy is important to creativity (Amabile, 1998; Ekvall, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It allows a child to follow their curiosity and choose play, video games, or whatever other means of learning that sparks their interests. These "integrated and self-endorsed" actions provide greater "access to the person's cognitive, affective, and physical capacities" which impacts performance, behavior, and

creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 97). In this way, each child is able to grow into the unique, integrated, and whole (Ryan, 1993) individual that many adults spend their entire lives trying to find, or recover.

Recommendations for Further Research

Schools were designed before we knew much about how people learn, and educational research predominantly focuses on how to better deliver the current school model (Sawyer, 2008). A relatively new field of interdisciplinary study called the learning sciences looks at teaching and learning in formal and informal settings and includes "cognitive science, educational psychology, computer science, anthropology, sociology, information sciences, neurosciences, education, design studies, instructional design, and other fields" (Sawyer, 2008, p. 45). Sawyer (2008) recommended that existing schools work closely with self-directed, informal, and non-school learning environments to redesign for the future. Education systems and the learning sciences researchers alike would benefit from looking at new SDE models such as Agile Learning Centers, LEAP Academy, Liberated Learners Network, and the student-designed, student-run, school-within-a-school called the Independent Project, which reads like a page from the learning sciences handbook itself (Levin & Engel, 2016).

For the link between SDE and creativity, we need data on how self-directed students score on measures of creativity, motivation, problem solving, and creative self-efficacy. We should compare SDE environments against creative environment measures such as Ekvall's 10 climate dimensions for creativity (1996) and Amabile's KEYS (1995). It would behoove us to develop a creative environment scale specifically for educational environments. I suspect many SDE principles would be represented in such a measure. Further research can be done into the

role of autonomy in creativity and learning, and much could be gleaned from studying the facilitator-student dynamic within SDE and how it may encourage creative development.

Conclusion

Like many young adults, my daughter is going to have to find her way without a strong education foundation built on her creative strengths. We will continue to work together to develop the creativity skills I wish she had had the chance to cultivate in her school years. How many more children will endure a similar struggle? Are we ready to do better for the next generation?

The creativity crisis is one of many crises that will not get any better if we fail to protect and nurture creativity through disruptive changes in education. We have no idea what the future holds, but we know it will require creativity. Making children passive consumers of content for twelve or more years not only makes learning less effective, it also fails to cultivate the creative skillsets that children need to navigate the changes of the future.

SDE may seem like an extreme change, but this is how active learning took place for most of history. It extends the natural learning process of childhood and develops the self-directed executive function needed in adulthood. It is Torrance's (1983b) *Manifesto for Children* brought to life. The SDE environment supports curiosity, playfulness, responsible autonomy, strengths development, and healthy relationships, among many other benefits to learning, creativity, and well-being. Education customized by the students themselves is optimized for intrinsic motivation and promotes lifelong self-directed learning. If we want motivated, creative, lifelong learners, then mainstream education should seek to adopt SDE principles, as SDE is the creative education answer we've been looking for!

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Nicole is on a mission to disrupt pervasive mindlessness and set people free from self-imposed constraints. She is exploring what might be all the ways to achieve this mission in service of the growing Self-Directed Education movement. Her areas of interest include education practices and environments that create self-directed learners and she is currently intrigued by unschooling, open education, connectivism, and rhizomatic learning. Her other interests include entrepreneurship education, mentoring, community building and cooperative business.

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