Striving For More or Thriving With Less — What We Know About Childhood Creativity Today.

What We See Happening

Consider this:

Amelia's weeks start the same. First, her mother drops her off at school, where she hurries along a straight, concrete sidewalk to join an assembly of students. Next, Mrs Har introduces the subjects, writes instructions, and displays visual aids for the class. Then, the rest of the day follows a rhythm of textbooks, notes, and pens. Sometimes, Mrs. Har pairs them in groups; other times, they work independently. Amelia plays with her mates at recess while minding what their teacher dictates they can and can not touch on the playground. Finally, Amelia goes home at noon, completes her assignment, and spends the evening on her iPad. Occasionally, Amelia's school offers twists and turns, such as trips to theme parks, where the students meet their favorite characters and immerse themselves in the treats, themes, and fun. Half of Amelia's weekend is usually spent on her iPad, although she sometimes follows a set of rules on a brick game to build demo designs. Amelia rarely goes in the sand, grass, or sun. The closest park to her is an hour's drive, and Mommy only makes that call when the streets are calm. Amelia is turning seven in a week and looking forward to seeing Daddy at her party."

Amelia, from the vignette above, may only partially capture every child's immediate reality. Nevertheless, she offers a glimpse into trends such as conventional education, active screen time, toy commodification, urbanization, and risk-averse parenting that threaten childhood creativity today. Also in this continuum are conditions such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and poverty, especially for children who do not share Amelia's luxury. These complex factors collectively shape childhood experiences today, suggesting a looming scarcity, which, in this context, is not about a lack of creative potential but the confining space and opportunities for it to flourish.

What Pablo Picasso Says

In the 1960s, Dr. George Land started a study to assess the creativity of 1,600 children aged three to five enrolled in a Head Start program. This creativity test was the same one he had developed for NASA to recruit innovative engineers and scientists. Land was impressed by the effectiveness of the assessment and chose to test it on children, subsequently leading to a thorough longitudinal study. The first results were impressive, but they took a surprising turn that neither Land nor the world had expected. From an initial 98% of young children labeled as creative geniuses, the label dropped to 30% at the age of 10 and further declined to 12% at 15. Compared to adulthood, only 2% sustained this level of creative genius that Land had discovered in early childhood. Land's study produced groundbreaking, insightful, and wild results, and many began questioning how society constructs creativity. "What we concluded," Land later wrote, "is that non-creative behavior is learned." (Browder, 2020)

Four decades later, Dr. Kyung Hee Kim, an internationally acclaimed researcher in the field of creativity, conducted a study similar to Land's. Kyung Hee analyzed data from the six normative samples of The Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT), administered to 272,599 kindergarteners through the 12th grade and adulthood. According to Kim (2011), creative thinking decreased significantly since the 1990s, starting in the sixth grade. Kim's (2011) conclusions reiterated Land's and caused another societal uproar.

However, these points of view were not entirely novel. Pablo Picasso, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, came to this conclusion without conducting a longitudinal study. Picasso described every child as an artist, but questioned the ability of their creativity to remain as they grew up. Picasso might have explicitly referred to art, but his, Land's, and Kyung Hee's sentiments uncovered some critical, relevant childhood creativity issues that demand attention today. First, the vibrancy of childhood creativity fades as young children transition into adulthood. Second, societal priorities need reform to prevent childhood creativity from waning further.

Creativity at Its Best.

Defining creativity in a modern and digital era like ours remains one of the most daunting tasks. For one, researchers studying creativity clash over what constitutes a creative idea, leaving tests like the TTCT under critique. TTCT's most robust critique is that it is relatively independent of knowledge and distorts creativity's essence by emphasizing divergent thinking, such as fluency, originality, and abstract thinking (Baer, 2011). Critics believe these features overlook other dimensions of creative expression and undermine individual differences. Baer (2011) concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to defining creativity, rendering creativity metrics subjective. Conversely, in ordinary society, the meaning of creativity is frequently interchanged with art. This interchange is most apparent in how the public describes those who demonstrate keen artistic perception, raising the question of where the boundaries lie.

Art is a facet of creativity (Cole, 2017), yet the precise definition of creativity varies among academic scholars. The article How Scholars Define Creativity lists several definitions of creativity in academia. Shedding some light on this, Simonton (2016) posits that defining creativity begins with distinguishing between creative and uncreative ideas. Based on his findings, Simonton (2016) introduces the three criteria for defining creativity. They are the initial probability, final utility, and prior knowledge of utility. Simonton (2016) maintains that these three criteria collectively define creativity by checking the likelihood of occurrence, the effectiveness of the idea, and the individual's knowledge about the idea's utility. Thus, creativity is the ability to produce novel and practical ideas that are not predetermined or fully known at conception. Creativity is novel, multidimensional, and continuous. Unfortunately, a growing shortage of wholesome experiences, conducive environments, and opportunities threatens children's creativity today.

Threats to Childhood Creativity, A Looming Scarcity

"Children are not things to be molded, but are people to be unfolded." – Jess Lair.

Threats to childhood creativity loom on multiple fronts, with conventional education systems facing criticism for stifling creativity. For example, critics blame standardized testing and rigid curricula for limiting open-ended thinking and innovative problem-solving skills in childhood education. In his TED talk, Sir Ken Robinson argues that the pressure to conform within structured learning environments curtails the flow of creativity among young learners, raising concerns about the adaptability of the education system to the challenges of our modern world (Robinson, 2006). However, findings from emerging research indicate that schools are not the only threat to children's creativity.

The digital age is a boon and a challenge. On one hand, it offers unprecedented access to information, diverse perspectives, and collaborative platforms that foster creative expressions. On the other hand, the constant influx of stimuli, digital distractions, and the pressure for instant results can impede deep creative thinking and challenge original ideas. No words express this delicate balance better than the words of Bukhalenkova and Almazova (2023): "There is likely some optimal amount of time to spend playing computer games that increase the level of imagination, while the complete lack of playtime with gadgets or excessive playing time will reduce creativity scores in preschoolers."

Other threats to childhood creativity are commercialization, evolving toy trends, urbanization, and Adverse Childhood Experiences. Research has yet to inform how they influence creativity. Nevertheless, emerging trends suggest the need to acknowledge their roles. For example, contemporary toys excessively include predetermined scripts and specific instructions that steer away from spontaneous and creative play identified by education pillars like Friedrich Fröbel. In the article, *9 Ways Lego Has Changed Since We Were Kids - Today's Parent* (2014), Emma Waverman, a blogger and a parent, notes that some Lego sets never came with instructions in the past, adding a 1974 letter from Lego reminding parents to embrace creativity. That has changed today. This shift towards rules, commercialization, and consumerism undermines the spontaneity and creativity identified by Friedrich Fröbel as inherent in children's play.

Similarly, urbanization encroaches on open spaces and natural environments that foster unstructured outdoor play. After the Real Play City Challenge 2022, Dr. Sara Candiracci, a member of the Real Play Coalition, elucidates why urban planners must design 'play' into cities. According to her, these communities have barriers to creative play, underscoring the need to initiate a redesigning process (Candiracci, 2022). This diminishing availability of spaces contributes to risk-averse parenting, as parents are usually conscious of the environment. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and poverty are exacerbating these challenges. ACES are toxic childhood experiences such as "sexual, physical, and verbal abuse; physical and emotional neglect; witnessing domestic violence; a household member who is an alcoholic or drug user; a household member who has been imprisoned; a household member who has been diagnosed with a mental illness or loss of a parent through separation or divorce" (Counts et al., 2017).

The adverse impact of toxic stress resulting from ACEs can detrimentally influence children's brain development, immune systems, and stress-response mechanisms. These alterations affect children's attention, decision-making abilities, and learning processes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Collectively, these threats can harm

young children's perspectives and behaviors, emphasizing the urgent need for proactive intervention and action.

Why We Should Be Concerned

"Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future."— John F. Kennedy.

NASA worked with Dr. George Land to create the test that measured the creative potential of NASA's scientists and engineers. The test focused on identifying divergent thinking capabilities, which meant the ability to look at a specific problem and generate multiple solutions. The only requirement for participants was to develop as many ideas as possible to solve a problem. NASA's effort demonstrates our high value on creativity and suggests we live in a world where the human condition consistently demands diverse change-making solutions. Therefore, creativity solves current and future societal needs. Since our younger generation holds the future, fostering their creativity is imperative.

Going Forward, Thriving With Less

"I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better." ― Maya Angelou.

One might expect that after Dr. Land's and Kyung Hee's revolutionary studies, society will look inwardly to readdress the practices that do not pique and sustain childhood creativity. Instead, the emphasis remains on more. More testing, more structured games, more urban buildings. The world continues to raise the bar, making the prospect of thriving with less seem counterintuitive. However, embracing simplicity in various aspects of our lives can pave the way for a more sustainable and fulfilling existence for our younger ones. Thus, there is a need for our societies to rethink our needs, demands, and reliance on abundance.

One significant way to do this is by reevaluating consumerism and our relationship with the material world. Our modern era often equates success with accumulating wealth and possessions, fostering a culture of overconsumption. Embracing a minimalist lifestyle, decluttering physical spaces and landscapes, and focusing on essential and meaningful possessions gives our younger ones room to breathe in creativity. This shift breaks the glass ceilings we inadvertently impose on the little ones. While providing unparalleled access to information, the digital age has also contributed to information overload and digital clutter. Thriving with less in this context involves mindful technology designs and digital detoxes for children. Parents have the most significant role to play. Streamlining digital interactions, prioritizing physical interaction over the screen, and setting boundaries can enhance the younger generation's focus, mental well-being, and creativity.

Addressing urbanization challenges is another facet of thriving with less. Urban areas often symbolize hustle and bustle, but a more sustainable approach involves creating green spaces, promoting walkability, and embracing play-friendly urban designs that stimulate creativity. These measures contribute to environmental sustainability and enhance the overall well-being of urban dwellers, young and old. Similarly, thriving with less extends to the experiences we create for children. ACEs and poverty are changing the narrative for these young ones, making them vulnerable. Our collective responsibility is to protect their emotional safety and mental well-being by mitigating ACEs.

Education plays the most extensive role in shaping young people's mindsets. Thus, there is a need to reimagine educational paradigms that can contribute to a thriving-with-less ethos. Prioritizing critical thinking and lifelong learning over testing and memorization aligns with the idea that quality education must be synonymous with joyful, individualized experiences. These experiences are building blocks for the future generation.

Conclusively, thriving with less is not a call for austerity but a paradigm shift towards intentional living. We are reassessing our values, prioritizing meaningful experiences, and simplifying our needs. We are doing them to offer the younger generation, our children, the creativity to navigate the complexities of our modern world more gracefully.

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