

Beautiful Stuff Treasure Boxes: Leveling the playing field

This is the story of how I became the “Beautiful Lady.”

With 25 years of experience in early childhood education, I am a staunch advocate for play. The need for meaningful free play and creative engagement opportunities is urgent. Young children suffer when schools make inappropriate

**By Marina
Seevak**
*The Beautiful Stuff
Project*

academic demands, which create anxious and demoralized young learners who feel disinvested in the learning process. Students’ mental and physical health suffer from

the stress of academically driven environments, and they lose the opportunity to gain the skills that creative play generates. Many teachers report that on those rare occasions when they give children time for free play, the children do not know what to do!

Not only do children suffer; teachers do as well. Constant assessment leaves them little time for creative endeavors or work with individual students. Many experience the stress of knowing the benefits of play yet having to adhere to a curriculum that excludes it. We



don't always know, however, how to make play happen enough in classrooms today, which are often characterized by a fast pace, intense academic demands, and constant assessments.

My solution is Beautiful Stuff Treasure Boxes, low-cost tools that are efficient and easy to manage, making it possible to play while staying on schedule. The term “beautiful stuff” comes from a Reggio Emilia-inspired book about children collecting, organizing, and creating with ordinary things. The curated “treasure boxes” contain recycled, small collectible items, or “beautiful stuff,” that invite children to think and build creatively. All our treasures are scrap from a wide range of places and we source them for free. The bonus we offer to local teachers is our storefront, stocked with tubs full of treasures for their taking by the bag.



Beautiful Stuff Treasure Boxes in the Classroom

In 2013, I started making these boxes as a labor-of-love. I casually approached a teacher I knew in Somerville, Massachusetts, and asked if I could use her classroom as a pilot site. She took one look inside a sample box I had brought and said, “They won’t know what to do!” But she was wrong. The students had no trouble finding numerous ways to engage playfully and creatively with the materials.

Within months, my treasure boxes were all over the Capuano Early Childhood Center; by the next year, I had been dubbed “Beautiful Lady” and I was trekking to schools all over the city. We are now reaching hundreds of students a week, having expanded to the cities of Cambridge, Boston, and Everett. This growth is completely teacher driven.

We visit early childhood classrooms in local public schools and Head Start, bringing a classroom set of beautiful stuff treasure boxes, individual work mats, a related children’s book, and a journal for each child with a black pen. Working in classrooms on a four-week cycle, we start by explicitly modeling how to play with the treasure boxes. We dump out the “beautiful stuff” onto a mat, carefully looking at each piece to prompt inspiration, and encouraging the children to make whatever they want. We value process over product by showing children how to put everything back in the box and “give it a little shake” before dumping it out again to make something new. We end our first session by reading a children’s book that features a child using imagination.

The next two sessions each feature a different set of treasure boxes and book. I have created sets that inspire building and balancing, designing with geometric shapes, making all kinds of sounds, magnet play, and experimenting with shadows (to name just a few). Each session starts with the book and ends with the children writing about what they did in a journal with their special black pens. We conjure up the wonder of play, reading, and writing through intentional choices of materials and modeling. Everything is special, from the plastic bottle cap in their treasure box to the black pen they use for writing.

In our last session, each child makes something to keep as a reminder of their own creative power. They may leave with a bead necklace complete with a key to their imagination or a crown they can put on and feel like imaginary royalty.



Generating a variety of funding streams is integral to our growth and sustainability so that I can solidify a team of teachers and pay them for their work. Continuing to secure contracts with local public school systems in addition to pursuing grants is critical. We are trying a sliding scale fee model encouraging private schools to pay on the high end so that we can continue to subsidize our work in other places. So far, we have had success appealing to the generosity of those who can pay at higher rate.

The Power of Free Play

Our approach showcases free play as a worthwhile,



manageable, and affordable endeavor for every classroom. We give children and teachers permission to play together. There is power in playing together. The engagement, creativity, collaborative problem solving, language development and joy is palpable.

In hundreds of classroom visits to date, children have engaged with the gems, acorns, and bottle caps in a way that standardized curriculum precludes; a kind of “magic” happens when they have free rein to design and construct.



Teachers' comments:

“Treasure boxes benefit ALL children because they are open-ended and allow children to differentiate for themselves! Kids joyfully create while practicing positive social interactions, problem solving, and perseverance. This is so important now with the tendency to urgently teach and not stop to breathe, acknowledge children as children, and give them time and space to play.”

“Often, during academic tasks there are students who always excel and others who never do. With treasure boxes, there are no wrong answers; it is a level playing field. Students who struggle academically find routine success and self-confidence.”

Students' comments:

“I really didn't want to come to school today. I didn't remember we had Beautiful Stuff. I'm glad I came.”

“It's always so fun when you come.”

www.thebeautifulstuffproject.org
mseevak@thebeautifulstuffproject.org

Our “beautiful stuff” prompts children to engage in a variety of disciplines, including engineering, science, social studies, literacy, and art. Importantly, they invite children to have “a mindset that promotes positivity—“I can/I will” as opposed to “I can't,” according to a recent teacher user.

When I hear students whisper excitedly, “Here comes the Beautiful Lady!,” I feel the power of our work. We bring the play young students desperately need with treasure boxes that level the playing field because they are accessible to all students, no matter their experience, backgrounds, or challenges. Our boxes have been successful in ELL, SPED, and Head Start rooms. There are no barriers to using them.

We impact the dispositions of young learners. Our work inspires joy and thus is creating more engaged learners. We spark curiosity, problem solving, risk taking, and collaboration, all critical to success, especially in STEM fields as learners enter higher grades and ultimately the workforce. By implementing our curriculum at such a young age, we are ensuring more equity across the board.