

The big problem with early childhood education^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Research in child development over decades as well as modern neuroscience clearly show that young children learn best when they are active. That means they get to put their hands on things, interact with other kids and adults, move a lot, create, play. But in the current school reform era, that's not what is happening in too many classrooms. The emphasis is on "rigorous instruction," and young children are forced to sit at their desks doing academic work — sometimes with little or no recess and/or sufficient physical education.

Here is part of a speech about this issue by Nancy Carlsson-Paige, early childhood education expert and a founding member of a nonprofit called Defending the Early Years, which commissions research about early childhood education and advocates for sane policies for young children. She is professor emerita of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Ma., where she taught teachers for more than 30 years and was a founder of the university's Center for Peaceable Schools.

Carlsson-Paige is author of "Taking Back Childhood." The mother of two artist sons, Matt Damon and Kyle Damon, she is also the recipient of numerous awards, including the Legacy Award from the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps for work over several decades on behalf of children and families, and the Deborah Meier award by the nonprofit National Center for Fair and Open Testing. She recently was the keynote speaker at a New York conference where some 500 kindergarten and pre-K teachers came together to talk about their mission.

This is part of her speech, which I am publishing because it speaks to the continued emphasis on academics — and lack of sufficient play — for our youngest students:

Hello everyone.

It's really inspiring to learn about early childhood education in the Nordic countries where play is so valued and children don't begin formal instruction until the age of 7. We have a very different situation here in the United States, where the pressure to teach academic skills to young children has been increasing over recent years.

For the last 15 years or so, our education system has been dominated by standards and tests, by the gathering of endless amounts of data collected to prove that teachers are doing their job and kids are learning. But these hyper requirements have oppressed teachers and drained the creativity and joy from learning for students. Unfortunately, this misguided approach to education has now reached down to our youngest children.

In kindergartens and pre-K classrooms around the country we've seen a dramatic decrease in play. There are fewer activity centers in classrooms and much less child choice, as well as less arts and music. At the same time, teacher directed instruction has greatly increased, along with more scripted curriculum and paper and pencil tasks.

This unfortunate change in early childhood education can be described as a shift away from child-centered classrooms to skills-centered ones.

Given that we have decades of research and child development theory to support whole child early education, the shift from child-centered to skills-centered education often seems inexplicable and bizarre. But early childhood educators have not been at the policy-making tables to be able to advocate for developmentally appropriate, play-based learning for young kids.

In addition, we have a longstanding problem in our country that does not seem to plague the Nordic countries. Here in the U.S., there is an enduring misconception about the nature of play. Play is typically not seen as valuable or essential to learning. It's more commonly viewed as an activity separate from learning rather than as one in which students learn.

Children all over the world play. They all know how to play, and no one has to teach them how. Any time we see a human activity that is wired into the brain and accomplished by all children worldwide, we know it is critical to human development.

So much is learned through play in the early years that play has been called the engine of development. Children learn concepts through

play; they learn to cope and make sense of life experiences; and, they develop critical human capacities such as problem solving, imagination, self regulation and original thinking.

When we watch children building in blocks for example, we can see that they are naturally working on many math and science concepts (classification, seriation, 1:1 correspondance, causality, symmetry, etc.) Teachers encourage this kind of play-based learning and build onto it with new concepts and skills that relate to what children are doing. If kids build a tall tower, the teacher might suggest they measure it with unifix cubes or paper tubes. Enthusiasm grows as kids find out how tall their building is. They count, measure, compare. Based on a teacher's judgement, they might draw or write what they find out. But the new skills children are learning are meaningful. They are connected to them and an experience that came from them. The new skills make sense and enrich the activity.

In the U.S. today, skills are often separated from children's play and active experiences. Many teachers, under pressure to meet mandates, teach isolated skills and facts directly to groups of children. This makes the skill or fact become an end in itself rather than an integral part of a more holistic and meaningful experience. And it takes the joy, excitement and empowerment out of learning.

When I think about this, I remember a letter I read years ago that was burned into my memory forever. It was from a school principal, written to his teachers. The principal was a survivor of a concentration camp. In the letter, he said he had seen educated people — nurses and engineers — build gas chambers and kill innocent children. And so this principal said he was suspicious of education. He said: "Reading and writing and math are important only if they serve to make our children more human."

The principal understood that you can be very smart and have lots of knowledge and you can use it to destructive ends. He understood that it is dangerous to use knowledge outside of a context of meaning, mind and heart, and morality.

I think when we have the kind of education common in the U.S. today — where we separate skills children are learning from their experiences and what they care about — we begin the process of dehumanizing education. We teach children that knowing facts and skills, letters and numbers, is enough. That how we use these tools is not what matters in education.

Two summers ago I spent a week with another family I'm close to. At the end of the week, my friend Lynne had to leave to visit her mom who was ailing. Lynne explained to Quentin, her 5-year-old grandson who adores her, that she had to leave a little early to go see her mom. When Lynne drove out of the driveway, Quentin cried loud and hard, an anguishing cry. I tried to comfort him, and for a while he was inconsolable. But after a while, Quentin's cries grew quieter. I said, "Quentin, I have an idea. Why don't I get some paper and markers and you can make a drawing for Nana. Then we can go to the post office and send it to her. She will be so happy to get a drawing from you in the mail."

Quentin shook his head yes, this seemed like a good idea. I got the drawing things and set him up at a table. When I came back a while later to see what Quentin had drawn, I was most amazed. On the paper he had written letters

He read it to me. You might be familiar with early invented spelling; this is a great example. Quentin had written: "I miss you Nana. Why did you have to leave? I really love you."

Quentin's mom, a school principal in New York City was in the room, and she said in amazement, "Quentin has never written before this." Then Quentin turned to me and said, "I surprised myself!"

The need to write to his Nana, to convey his strong feelings, led Quentin to find the letters to express himself, his love for Nana and his sadness over her leaving.

Letters, words, and numbers are tools that we use for greater purposes of all kinds — to express ourselves, to solve problems, to investigate questions we want to pursue. But they aren't the end point. They are a means to greater ends. Ends that have meaning and are connected to us. We should learn in school that we own these tools and can use them. And we should have educational experiences that help us develop the morality, heart, and civility to know how to use what we know for the greater good.

I hope we early childhood educators in the United States can strengthen our advocacy for children so they can have a more child-centered education. And I hope that we can advocate for a schooling where reading, writing and math are connected to what children care about and experience. This is the way to help children learn optimally and learn to love school. And it's the path we have to be on if we want to educate not just children but future citizens who will contribute to making a better world.

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