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Problem-Solving through Play: What Children Miss with Age-Inappropriate Expectations

JUNE 11, 2023 BY [NANCY BAILEY](#) — 2 COMMENTS

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Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.

~Fred Rogers

Lately, when do children get chances to solve problems through unstructured play? How much time do they spend in school thinking, discovering, and figuring things out independently?

Problem-solving is a large part of life. Our world revolves around solving problems, scientific, technical, social, and more. Most careers are built on fixing problems, which can be rewarding.

Unstructured play doesn't mean adults leave children to learn alone. Teachers and parents observe children as they play, trust them as they develop, keep them safe, help work out conflict, and glean valuable information about how students acquire information and socialize with others.

Teachers who understand child development can tell a lot about a child's progress by observing gross and fine motor coordination, how children socially connect to others, and how they see the world around them.

Problem-solving occurs in new and unconventional ways when children are given time to play. The picture above is a good illustration of this. The child has made Play Dough dresses for dolls instead of dressing them in regular clothes. The child is solving a problem in their way, with a unique solution.

The expectations for early learning became tougher with NCLB, and unstructured play has been largely crowded out. Children get little time to think independently for themselves.

Consider the loss of recess which happened before NCLB. The idea was that recess took too much time away from students preparing for high-stakes standardized tests.

However, studies show that children who get recess do well academically (Hodges et al.,

2022). See also, **The Crucial Role of Recess in School by the Academy of American Pediatrics.**

Yet, many states continue to **withhold time for unstructured recess play.**

Play-based learning has returned somewhat due to the realization that children *need* play, but this is guided by adults and differs from unstructured play. Children don't get to problem-solve as they do with unstructured play.

In eagerness to teach children to read at younger ages, including repetitive testing, adults may deny children the necessary play to understand how to solve problems.

Will children who lose this critical foundation have problems problem-solving later in life?

Britz and Richard (1992), in *Problem Solving in the Early Childhood Classroom*, state:

As a dynamic learning process, problem solving has many benefits for children. It offers them the opportunity to increase self-esteem, autonomy, and a feeling of competence.

Avoiding difficulties in life is not always possible, but learning how to stand up to problems and develop strategies for finding solutions is extremely valuable (p.92).

Will problem-solving become a lifelong chore or a rewarding endeavor? If children are allowed to play freely, it will also help them have the ability to enjoy the learning process.

Developmental psychologist Angela Gopnik describes how through *active learning*, children choose the objects that will teach them the most (*TIME*)!

She found that children (preschoolers) chose objects to play with that would teach them the most. They played imaginatively not only to learn how those objects worked but

imagined other ways the world and people could work.

She states:

People have long thought intuitively that play was important for children. But we've only recently begun to show this scientifically.

Problem-solving is often related to solving math problems but is important for daily life and other areas.

Charlesworth and Leali (2011) describe three types of learning experiences important for math knowledge and more:

- **Naturalistic.** Learning is initiated and controlled by the child.
- **Informal.** When another child or adult comments or questions what the child is doing.
- **Adult Guided.** This involves preplanned and sometimes direct instruction by the adult.

All the above are important, and early education *used to be* the time for much unstructured or naturalistic play. Now the concern is that the earliest instruction is mostly adult guided.

When early learning activities are always adult guided, children lose time to think independently.

Without free time to learn independently, for a child to think for themselves, cognitive learning will be depressed, and this could hamper learning for a lifetime.

We need to reconsider the pressure placed on children due to age inappropriate expectations in early childhood, and provide more opportunities for *all* students to play and problem solve.

References

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Comments



Karen says

JUNE 28, 2023 AT 11:51 AM

Great post. I worked with ELLs for many years. What they lacked in formal schooling, they more than made up for through active problem solving and

resilience. The conditions in their home country required them to make due with what they had. They learned to be resourceful because they had to be. Most of them knew how to adapt and persevere. These are important life skills that young people cannot learn from sitting in front of screens.

I learned a great deal about my students from observing them. It helped me understand how to best help them in both content subjects and language arts.

Reply



Nancy Bailey says

JUNE 28, 2023 AT 6:32 PM

Excellent! I love this. I love that you observed your students and focused on what was important. They can't get that from a screen. Not yet anyway. Thanks for sharing, Karen. You sound like a great teacher.

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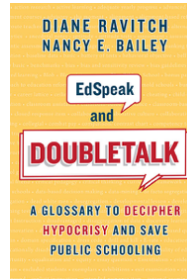
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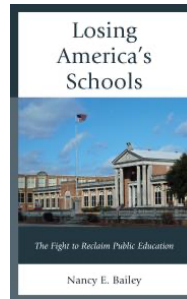
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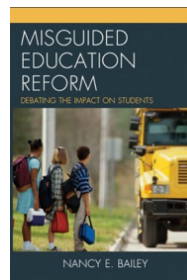
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Heidi Echternacht



gh



Also I'm damn proud to keep working to put more joy in learning for all children and people. Learning is not and should not be a chore. That doesn't mean it's not hard sometimes, but rather a joyful pursuit of unending interests. ❤️💕❤️

1 1 Twitter

Nancy E. Bailey Retweeted



Carol Corbett Burris 15h

When I dug into CREDO--its history and former reports--I was shocked by what I found. Why are states giving them access to personal student data? [@jeffbcdm](#) [@theprogressive](#) [@DianeRavitch](#) [@marla_kilfoyle](#) [@ProfessorJVH](#)

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Nancy E. Bailey Retweeted



Helen Proulx 14h

"With our nation's population becoming increasingly diverse, it is essential that the books we read aloud and make available for our children to read independently allow them to see reflections of themselves." Excellent suggestions [@tkkelly14](#) [@lester_laminack](#)

2 10 Twitter


Nancy E. Bailey Retweeted



Christine Langhoff 1 Aug

Excellent analysis of how we got here in public education. A reminder that schools can't fix social problems. It isn't even their purpose. <https://janresseger.wordpress.com/2023/08/01/when-did-we-tak...>

2 3 Twitter

 Nancy E. Bailey Retweeted



Carol Corbett Burris

1 Aug 

Ed Next thinks the "most interesting part" of vouchers is scamming. If public schools wasted tax \$\$ like this, they would be howling.

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