

Proactive Parenting: April 2018

Endless Possibilities; Pathways to Inventive Thinking

As we head into Spring, we also head into the season of testing, and yet; "Not everything that counts can be counted" (William Cameron, sociologist). Perhaps data from tests is only part of the story, and the kind of learning and teaching extensive testing engender has led us to closed ended paths instead of endless possibilities? In quality early childhood education a premium is put on creating and preserving time and space for children to engage in what is called open-ended, process oriented learning. It may be difficult to quantify the rich possibilities for deep learning that result from this approach, but the benefits and outcomes are tangible and observable.

The following excerpt from: "The Importance of Being Little", by Erika Christakas", beautifully illustrates this kind of learning in a section entitled, 'The Importance of Sand Castles'. "Early in our marriage my husband and I discovered that we had both, as children, loved to make elaborate sand castles with our siblings. We'd look for pebbles of uniform size on the beach and space them out (learning how to estimate distance), and we'd find the right diameter of stick to etch the sand. Some were too thick and didn't write well, or the stick was too flimsy and couldn't make an impression. We'd make rows of inverted pails as walls and then, as we got older we learned a whole new technique of dribbling sand on the turrets to make them look fancier and more ancient. We'd learned about the stability of sand when we made crenellations on the fortress walls. Those fragile turrets would dry faster than the heavy areas. Moat construction took a lot of ingenuity too. The sides would collapse if we weren't careful, and sometimes we were so deeply immersed in our work that the tide would come in with a sudden rush, and we'd divert our energies to make an enclosure. I'd dredge up some seaweed (to make the fish feel at home), and we'd pop the slimy seaweed bubbles, which made a wet squishy sound under our fingertips." "As an adult I started noticing something strange about sand castles. Stores were selling buckets with prefabricated castle shapes. You could put the sand in the pail and dump it out and *'presto!* You've got a castle. No guess work, no labor either. I find something very depressing about those buckets that remove all the thinking from castle building. Since sand castles are by definition ephemeral, which in a way adds to their splendor, building and admiring them brings us back again to a familiar motto:

Process, not product. I can't imagine four year olds are getting as much joy (and yes, learning) from ready-made sand castle construction as children once derived from their harder-fought (and won) creations."

A renowned early childhood educator and former professor at The Yale Child Study Center, Christakis reconnects us to the power of natural exploratory learning, and reminds us that children are naturally curious; discoverers, engineers, designers, artists, and learners. Her thought provoking treatise cites evidence that children exposed to spoon-fed, top-down, rote learning, demonstrate fewer problem-solving skills and less curiosity than children who learn in a more investigative, collaborative fashion. She goes on to share examples, like Harvard Physicist Eric Mazur, who is adopting a similar pedagogic model, where; "The students' messy struggle with ideas becomes a strength in the learning process, not a liability".

So what are the concrete benefits of open-ended, process focused learning? It appeals to and can accommodate children with a wide range of interests and skill levels, and without a 'teacher model', or set goal, anxiety around producing a specific product decreases, opening up children to increased possibilities for experimentation. Ideas and plans come from children, empowering them to be uniquely creative, and making their work more personally meaningful. It allows teachers to authentically observe children's approaches to learning; interests, strengths, persistence, resilience, imagination, collaborative skills, and skill levels across domains; social, emotional, language, fine motor, and conceptual. Allows children to engage in symbolic play, where they use actions, materials, or words, to "symbolize" something else. Pretending a stick is a magic wand, or a block is a telephone, are examples of symbolic play which is the foundation for all reading, writing, and math. All are based in learning and playing with symbols; letter and numbers. Recently at school we embarked on an informal study of the benefits adding natural 'Loose Parts' to children's open-ended play opportunities. The theory of loose parts comes from architect Simon Nicholson; "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it." The connections to education abound, and with the added appeal and endless variations of natural materials, namely nature's loose parts (rocks, sea shells, pine cones, sticks, seed pods, etc.), we did in fact see an increase in inventive and creative thinking and play. While teacher directed time is certainly important, time to synthesize

content (vocabulary, concepts like classification and patterns, etc.) requires time and space for synthesis. Engaging with materials and each other in truly unique, inventive, and creative ways is essential for empowering children to explore boundaries rather than just fill in the blanks.

“The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivation and the richer their experiences” Loris Malaguzzi (Founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education)