



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of Reach Teach Talk. I am thrilled this morning to have as our guest, Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, who is a professor of early childhood education at Lesley University. Dr. Carlsson-Paige is the author of over five books and or co-author as well in several, several articles about early childhood education, and also about media violence, conflict resolution, and setting up how to set up peaceable classrooms.

Nat:

This idea of the peaceful classroom, the secure classroom, the inclusive classroom, where every young spirit has a sense of belongingness. Also Dr. Carlsson-Paige has taken a global view of education, she has researched schools around the world and looking at their work with young children. She's also the founder of the Center For Peaceable Schools and also defending the early years, which is an incredible consortium.

Nat:

If you haven't taken a look at defending the early years on their website, please you really, really should. It's just amazing. And it's full of amazing resources. They had an incredible week long workshop this past summer, and it got ... Brought together thousands of people who are really looking at ... And I'll let Dr. Carlsson-Paige explain this, but ... Or Nancy explained this.

Nat:

But defending the early years, what are we defending the early years children from, and what is that we should all keep in mind? But really the reason why I'm particularly thrilled at this time to have Nancy as a guest on Reach Teach Talk, is because she's done incredible work, focusing on connecting exploration, creativity, collaboration, imagination in early childhood teaching and learning. And her work really confirms what this podcast truly believes is instinctive yet needs a voice.

Nat:

Which is the idea that great teaching and meaningful learning involves both mind and heart. Yet is educating to the spirit of children possible in this remote world. It is early autumn right now. I saw my first school bus yesterday, and this area from where I'm recording, yet many of us are learning and teaching remotely. We're doing this through our screens. And what Nancy and I are going to have a conversation about today is really going to be focused on relationships in the remote classroom.

Nat:

Is relational teaching truly effective? Is it possible even while we are teaching through screens? So without much further ado Nancy, I would love to just welcome you on Reach Teach Talk. I'm thrilled to have you here as a guest today.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

I'm so happy to be here Nat, thanks so much for inviting me, and I look forward to our conversation.

Nat:

Me too. So let's get started then. A simple basic question, right, which is basically, how can we ... A lot of your work focuses on empowering the student, right? Empowering the young child. And let's actually focus on this topic of empowerment with children. When you speak of empowering younger children, what are you truly speaking about?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

That's really an interesting question that no one ever asked me, and I've used that word empowering for my whole career assuming that everyone knew what it meant. So I haven't deconstructed it until this minute. I'm really happy to have the opportunity to do that. What I mean by that word empowerment, is giving ... Is helping children get an internal sense of security and let's say efficacy or mastery.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Or knowing within a confidence that they can act on this world, be in this world, interact in this world in a way that's going to bring them satisfaction. Where they feel an inner strength about the ability to do that.

Nat:

Is it almost like a confidence in one's capabilities?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Yes. Yeah, it would be at an intuitive level for children. It would be confident in capabilities. That is, you want to try things out in the environment as a young child and feel some ... And see some positive effect. If it's riding a tricycle or throwing a ball or making a drawing with a marker and seeing what it looks like on the paper. But getting a sense of satisfaction and even mastery about that.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

The most central way that young children feel a sense of empowerment is actually when they play. And the reason that is, is that when children are playing, they are a hundred percent in tune with themselves. When it's valuable play. There are things that interfere with healthy place. So, I'm talking about when children are playing in a way that's really beneficial and true to who they are and their capacity to do that, they are fully themselves.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

They're self-directed, they're in charge of the play, they know how to develop it. They know what they want to do. They reach for props, they invent things. They might be playing with other kids, so they're doing it collaboratively. But they're in tune with who they are. And when children are playing they're usually drawing on themes from their own lives. Lots of times, ones that have been confusing or troubling to them, and like right now I'm getting reports from people that kids are playing out COVID.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

They're killing the virus, they're making medicine and helping people feel better. Children play out the themes of their lives. And as they play and they play out what they've experienced, but they're also making up stories at the same time, from their own imagination. It's a phenomenally creative process,

but in doing it, it's giving them at an emotional level a sense of empowerment, a sense of I can handle life.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

I can have experiences, I can play them out, I can be in charge of how I play, and I can understand what I'm experiencing as I do that. And I feel a sense of confidence, empowerment mastery.

Nat:

Wow. And I'm also thinking about the word agency. Also because there's the alliteration effect of agency over anxiety, that was going through my mind as you were giving this incredible example of the power of play. And you gave the example of the kids, fighting against COVID. Right? That is to me anyway an example of surmounting anxiety, but with agency.

Nat:

So I guess my next question would be then, what ingredients are ... Do you view really important for ... To develop this sense of agency through play? I guess if I were the teacher or if I were a parent or an adult, watching children losing themselves in a world of play, what's my job then?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Yeah. You're coming up with some good questions. Your job is to actually observe what's happening. And I think the field of child development has so much to offer, because it does help us understand the complexities of play. And all the amazing aspects of it that occur, and how it progresses in a lot of situations, and how kids are working things out as they do it. When we know a little bit about that, it gives us a stronger lens for watching.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

One of our problems as adults collectively, is that we dismiss play. We think it's unimportant. It's something kids do, they all know how to do it. By the way, they all know how to do it. All over the world, kids know how to do it. That's pretty profound and gets to a pretty spiritual level or it's as significant as walking, talking, and all the other things we humans are capable of doing worldwide and through time.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But often adults think it's not productive, because they can't see where it's going or what it's achieving. And the more we know about play fostering sense of empowerment, fostering imagination, fostering critical thinking, social skills, coping mechanisms, resilience, self-regulation all of these capacities develop through play. And the more we know about that, when we look at children doing it, instead of saying, "Oh, he's just playing."

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Let's get on with learning letters. We can actually start seeing what is going on there, which is so profound and critical. Step one is actually on us as adults, I think, to recognize the significance of this activity and then provide for it in classrooms. I think teachers do really well to set up, imagine it to play areas, and areas where kids play with materials, build with blocks, draw.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

It should be just a play based classroom, really when we're talking about classrooms for younger kids. But parents can provide for this at home too pretty easily. And I brought my two sons up in a city

apartment with very little space, but I set an area off where it was theirs. They could go in there and play. There were building materials and there was playdough in there. And they could really explore materials and interaction themselves without my interference.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Actually that's when I got interested in the early childhood field, because I got so fascinated seeing what they were doing. And I started taking classes and doing the very thing I'm talking about now. Reading about all the complexities of play and then seeing it in these two little boys I was living with, was ... It was a profound experience for me. And it turned out to be life changing.

Nat:

We are now in this age of anxiety with COVID, with all the different events going on in this world, that's really going through some [inaudible 00:10:37] with all of us hoping that through the tunnel will come this incredibly more ... We'll be in a better place than we were. That's that's the hope that we're ... I've been thinking about agency and control a lot.

Nat:

And what you're just sharing Nancy about play and the role for adults to just observe, just watch don't feel like you have to inject your control, even if it's ... because oftentimes it's for the adults sake that they're doing this, I would imagine than for the kids. If you're going to be a fireman, put the red hat on, not the green hat. And that instinct in the adults is a natural one.

Nat:

Yet what you're advising it sounds like is, "Nah, just let them play." Even if it seems like it's wrong, or there's better choices to be the person that you're trying ... That you're imitating or ... Right?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Yes. If you're going to get involved, get involved in a way that supports what's happening for the children. So let's say they're doing COVID play. Okay, what can you find in the house? If you have a stethoscope ... I actually do have a stethoscope. Do you have a stethoscope? Do you have masks you can let them use? Do you have a thermometer, an old thermometer or a ... What do you call it, the stick that you put in your mouth? A tongue depressor.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Do you have bandages? Anything can you put in the play area, that's going to support the theme that you see that they're interested in. So there's a lot of work for us to do as teachers and parents. Early childhood teachers are great at this to support the play. I mean, there's needs to be a space for it. There needs to be props or dress up clothes or materials to build the props with. It's much better for kids to build whatever props they want to build than to be handed them.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Talking about war play, something I've written about. It's a long subject, more than we can go into now. Many children especially boys will want to make guns at a certain stage of development. I'm not in favor of handing them a toy gun, but I think if they make it out of Legos or bristle blocks and they're using it for what is really good guy, bad guy played that ends up making ... Helping them feel very empowered when they do away with bad guys. And it's understandable for their developmental level.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But the making of the prop is part of the process, and giving them materials to make the props with is a great support rather than handing them a premade prop that actually can affect their play. Because a lot of those premade props are connected to media, or they have buttons to push, or they do little actions that draw kids attention to the material, and then they start losing that inner guidance of how they want to play, and what they need to play for the play to really benefit them.

Nat:

Can you share the anecdote of growing up with ... I think it was one of your sons who was a ... You share the story about him being a fireman. And I just love this story so much because it ties so much into what you're just saying.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Yeah. Well, I lived in an apartment with my two sons. At the time of this story, my younger son, Matt was five and my oldest son, Kyle was eight. And we were in an apartment and it was winter. I came home and I was making a fire in the fireplace and it was a ... There was a wooden mantle around the fireplace. I guess it wasn't very well made fire, but the flames began to lap up onto the mantle.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

And I yelled, I mean, it's me single mom with two little boys and I yelled Kyle, Matt get water. They were playing right near me. And so they go running out of the room and they come running in and Kyle has a Dixie cup this big, with water in it. Which I learned later, he needed a lesson on fire. But Matt wasn't showing up for the longest time. And I'm like, "Where is he?" Now, this was a period of time when he was doing fireman play a lot.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

I was recently divorced from their father and that superhero rescue play was something that he was doing all the time. And it was really helping him feel that word empowered or masterful or not anxious and scared about the changes in the family, but rather that he could handle things when he got into his costume and took care of stuff. Anyway, he shows up in the living room and he's got on his red bathroom, his fireman hat, black boots, black rubber boots, and a sea diver's mask.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

And this little tube that wasn't connected to anything. And he's just spraying all over the living room. I mean, just the fire had gone out by now. So the worry about the house burned down and had long gone. It was more like, "Where's my kid?" But then he showed up completely in costume, and that was such a revelation to me. He was five, and I recognized again, wow, kids don't separate fantasy and reality very clearly in the early years and play helps them do that.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

I mean, one of the things, when they go in and out of play, you'll hear them say, "Let's pretend." And they know I'm going from the real world to my imaginary world. But in this case, it really showed the confusion of fantasy and reality in Matt's mind, because he believed if he got the whole costume on and showed up in the room ready to fight the fire, that that was the best he could do. And that's the way he was going to help mom and help his brother and himself. Yeah, it was a revelation for me.

Nat:

I love that story so much. Thank you so much for sharing it because it is like, "Until I am the fire man, we've got all the trappings. I can't put out the fire." So, he took the time to throw himself together this fireman's outfit and it's still a [inaudible 00:16:49] it was a hose. But he was the fireman. He was the fireman and that's what we're hoping for our kids.

Nat:

Is that they can be those creatures and people and aspirational adults and superheroes that they truly can be those. It's the rule of aspiration, is a whole other element of extension of this focus on play. Yet, I want to move into and really what I want to focus on this discussion, the timeliness of it which is, how do you ... What advice could you give for teachers or parents on how to be able to maintain that focus?

Nat:

This vigilant observing of children in their imaginative worlds yet, if your classroom is through Zoom, then how ... Is it possible to encourage play, to promote a classroom environment, for example, that gives students a sense of empowerment, a sense of agency, but through the screen? So feel free to riff on that a little bit, I'm curious.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

We haven't been through anything like this before obviously. And I think one of the most helpful things for us to do those of us who are with young children, is to remember what we know from how children develop, and how they learn, and how they play and what they need. To bring those things forward, to try to apply to the situation that we're in.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

If we do that, we recognize right away, because children learn through play and through active interaction and materials, because their brains develop as a result of this whole body, whole senses interaction. So when we understand that, then we realize this learning from a screen is going to engage a very small part of the brain and a very small part of a child's interest. We have to accept that.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

That doing lots of online learning in the early years would be a big mistake because it's not going to foster their whole child, whole health development. I think it's good for teachers if they can, if they've already had a classroom of kids, preschool, kindergarten, first grade to meet whatever amount of time works for the community and the teachers and the children. But to have the Zoom connection maybe once or twice a week briefly, where the kids can see each other and can see the teacher.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

We shut down so fast that there were kids who ... I talk to parents all the time who say, "It was disturbing, it was upsetting. The transition was confusing for kids because they lost everything so suddenly." So I think the Zoom connection is important and helpful, but it has to be brief really. With younger kids, it has to be brief. And the challenge then would be how to use the Zoom connection or the video connection to encourage children's agency and active play.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

So what I think is that, you give challenges to kids or tasks or problem solving challenges, or things to do that are developmentally appropriate, that they can do. And then when you meet again as a group, each

child can share what it is they did. With really young kids, it has to be a really short term little task. For example, pick your favorite toy in your house that you love the most or whatever thing in your house you love the most, and bring it to our next meeting and let's share what that is.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

That's what I would do with four year olds for example. With five or six year olds, I would be inclined to read a story. And by the way, I think teachers ... It helps teachers if they can collaborate and share resources. I know some teachers here I've talked to are sharing, Read Aloud. So maybe they make a video of themselves reading two or three children's books they share it in a consortium with other teachers.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

We're actually trying to develop a clearing house for that at defending the early years. So teachers could go on and pick stories to have ... To read to kids for half an hour that they don't have to do every single day. Then if the children are five or six years old, I'd say, "Read them a story." Let's say, Abiyoyo. "Today, we're going to read a Abiyoyo." Okay. So now I'm at home find a way to show us what you loved about the story.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Maybe with crayons and paper, maybe with playdough, maybe with a building material or anything else you find to show us what part of this book you really liked. And when we meet again, let's talk about what part of the book each of you really like. Of course, that's great because it deepens meaning for every child in the more deeply week, make meaning in the early years. The more easily children understand language and symbols that are precursors for being able to learn, to read and write. Yeah.

Nat:

You speak about making meaning, and I was just reflecting on a previous podcast that I had Mary Helen Immordino-Yang who is a neuroscientist and professor of education at the university of Southern California. And she focuses all her work on this idea of meaning making and learning. And you just got me thinking about this as you were speaking Nancy, because so much of play, it just dawned on me right now. I mean, the connection to what Dr. Yang, Immordino-Yang's work is.

Nat:

So much of play is about fostering a sense of meaning making. Whether it's broad, like me making meaning from of the world around us, or whether it's making meaning of the story that was in the Read Aloud that day and making that meaning through creative expression of what really stood out to you. So, I'm just making that connect. I love it.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Well, I'm glad you're making it, because actually that's a core concept in child development. Which is, you're making meaning through using symbols. Play is this symbolic experience because you're re-enact ... A child is reenacting something. When Matt put that fireman's outfit on, he's not a real fireman, he's pretending he's a fireman. He's symbolizing himself as a fireman. So symbols organize our adult life.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Letters or symbols, words, numbers, but how do children come to understand them? Well, all these early years are the years when children build through interaction and understanding of what symbols are. They make meaning of symbols in a whole range of ways through imaginary play. When they draw,

it's symbolic, they draw a house or they draw a tree or a duck it's a symbol of one of those things. And letters are just conventional symbols.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But in order to understand them, a child has to have had a lot of previous experience making meaning through symbols, that they bring to an understanding of understanding the alphabet and words and so forth. It's the same with numbers, it's a complex process. But a letter four or a digit five, these are symbols that represent concepts that are very complicated and have to get constructed in kids' minds over time through play and with materials. None of that happens on a screen.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

So a lot of these tech online programs, they're getting marketed now to families of young children in called preschool. They're a complete sham and should be out, not rejected, because they're getting kids to memorize letters, memorize the names of numbers and colors, but this isn't true learning. And it's actually interfering with the learning I've just been talking about.

Nat:

I mean, the learning you're talking about Nancy, it's about depth. And it's about as you said from the beginning, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, learning about oneself through. Actually, when you were first speaking you were really focused on the inner world of kids, the security of knowing within.

Nat:

And so extending from that, it sounds like these companies that are online preschool, online pre-K are really ... It's the opposite. It's the external learning. It's the learning, but without any meaning behind it. Right?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

That's a profound point because they're actually taking from children something that belongs to them, which is their own meaning, making their own understanding of the world. And they're actually showing them by virtue of the online program, that knowledge is out there, something outside of yourself, it's not something you construct inside yourself through interaction, materials, play, and so forth.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But no, it's something you have to learn. We have to put you in front of computers so you can learn the names of these letters and numbers. It robs them of that word agency. Like, I have agency as a learner, learning belongs to me. I love to do it. That's what we want them to learn. And they're learning through play all the time. And we don't want interfere with that or take that from them. That's one of the worst things we can do. And it happens with a lot of online programs.

Nat:

As we wrap up our conversation, I'm thinking about another alliterative expression that just came into my mind inspired by what you were just sharing Nancy which is, that learning is not a conditional commodity. The tech companies that you're referring to, and that we're talking about refer to learning ... They imply that it is a conditional commodity. If you learn through this program, then you will acquire the commodity of knowledge.

Nat:

And wow, what a 180 degree difference that is from what you and I are talking about as we are hoping that teachers and parents can aspire for, for their kids and their students, which is, this ... It is learning is from within. You were saying earlier about this is a global play, is a global phenomenon, every kid is who's in any part of the world experiences the same effect from learning when it's intrinsic and it's invited.

Nat:

There's so much that I just ... And so inspired by in this conversation. And I'd love to leave you with the final thoughts about this learning while remote. Is there anything that you haven't shared yet that you think our audience, which is largely teachers and parents would benefit from thinking about or knowing?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

At our Website dey.org, we do have some of these webinars that I've done, we have materials on play. We have a lot of COVID related materials and a lot of suggestions for teachers and parents for how to support children during this time. I want to remind, especially parents to let go of the idea that my child is falling behind during this time.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Because really children they all know how to learn, and they all know how to play and they do it naturally. And so don't be afraid, just support that, help them do it when they're at home. They're not losing anything, they're going to be able to come back to school with a stronger foundation, hopefully for learning in school and bring forth all that experience as they start very gradually to encounter academic skills.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But one of the mistakes we've been making as a society in the last 20 years really, and technology part of this, is to be thinking that learning in the early years is learning the names of letters and numbers and not these other ways of knowing that we've been talking about up til now. So I think if parents can relax about learning the letter names and foster and support play. But also a broader definition of learning, learning new tasks at home.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Learning to set the table, helping to clear the table, baking a cake, making playdough. There are many ways to learn that engage children that are far more interesting to them and appropriate and expansive than memorizing the names of the letters of the alphabet.

Nat:

Are kids still making playdough these days?

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

I make it all the time and all the kids in my life make it with me. I think we have a recipe on *Defending the Early Years*, but it's an endlessly interesting material. And when I'm with grandkids, I find that even the older ones get into it, and it's an excuse to play with playdough again, because the little ones are on it.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

But yeah, it's an open-ended material like all the other great open-ended materials that allow for the symbols to be created from the mind of the child, rather than be dictated by somebody external.

Nat:

Let that be the final word. Right? Let the children create their own learning, do not allow your child's learning or your students' learning to be dictated from the powers that the ... That are making ... That have a different focus. So let's just say we'll put it at that.

Nat:

Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige defending the early years, I'll make sure we have this up on the [inaudible 00:31:11] so people can refer to it. And I just want to say again, and thank you so much for your time and your inspiration today.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige:

Thank you. I really appreciate talking with you and your really thoughtful questions. Thanks so much.

Nat:

Thank you so much for your wisdom and your thoughtful answers.