

# "They're Not Just Playing"

**Y**oung children are meaning-making savants. In the few short years in which they are first introduced to reality, these brilliant minds make great headway in figuring out what is important in the world. During this period, as their brains expand, these children are able to discern meaning in the world around them. But they need our help to distinguish the important from the less-than-important and the useful from the useless. It is our responsibility to direct their meaning-making. There is no better time to do this than in the years before the need to get the right answer overwhelms the need to know by asking, "What's this, Ms. Jones?"

Allowing young children the time, space, and place to ask "What's this?" is important to principals like Kathy Taber at Jefferson Elementary School in Norman, Oklahoma. To savvy early childhood instructional leaders like Taber, creating classrooms where rocket-propelled young brains are gently guided into the lifelong habits of the mind is a fundamental commitment. In fact, it is the very foundation upon which her school is built, a foundation on which children can build happy and successful lives. Unfortunately, for most children in our country today, having the good fortune to start school in a place like Jefferson, where their brilliance is nurtured, is the exception rather than the rule.

## Learning How Children Learn

Jefferson Elementary, a Pre-K-5 school, is located on the site of the first school in Norman. It is a Title I school with 64 percent of its population eligible for free or subsidized lunch. Although Taber has a master's degree in reading and a doctorate in elementary education curriculum and supervision, she has also taught preschool and has taken courses in early childhood education, where she was introduced to the most up-to-date concepts of how children's brains develop. "We've learned a lot about how children learn," she says. "When I was in kindergarten, the big thing was to learn to tie your own shoes!" Because of her strong and informed interest in young children,



she was asked to be a member of NAESP's Early Childhood Standards Committee.

Today, she points out, it is critical for early childhood educators to create "purposeful" activities, where brilliant but immature minds can prepare themselves for the rigors of the academic reality that await them. To Taber and experts like Lilian Katz, early school experiences should

strengthen and guide a child's natural disposition to seek meaning and understanding. This is a period when aspiring minds can be "damaged," Katz says, "from too much teaching" and from premature demands to "get the right answer."

## All Children Can Think

To Katz, the best form of school readiness is to create purposeful environments where a child's inborn intellectual "dispositions" to reason, hypothesize, and make and test predictions about the world, can thrive. Too often, educators believe that this process must wait until prescribed knowledge and certified skills are acquired. Too often also, Katz

argues, children who come to school without middle-class skills and knowledge are seen by overworked and over-accountable teachers and administrators as deficient in intellectual ability. But all children can think and reason, and are curious about the world. If only we would give them the chance to show us by creating venues where this brilliance can shine.

To Kathy Taber, demonstrating to her teaching staff that "these children are not just playing" has become an important part of her efforts to align her school to a more "minds-on" curriculum for all students in all grades, and for her teachers to especially recognize that "disadvantaged" students use their minds.

Thinking is, after all, the birthright of all of us, and NAESP's new *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities* begins with this profoundly important insight. From this we can build early childhood communities that not only acknowledge but can actually increase the thinking power of all American children. ■

Cheryl Riggins-Newby is NAESP's Associate Executive Director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances. Her e-mail address is [criggins@naesp.org](mailto:criggins@naesp.org).

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