

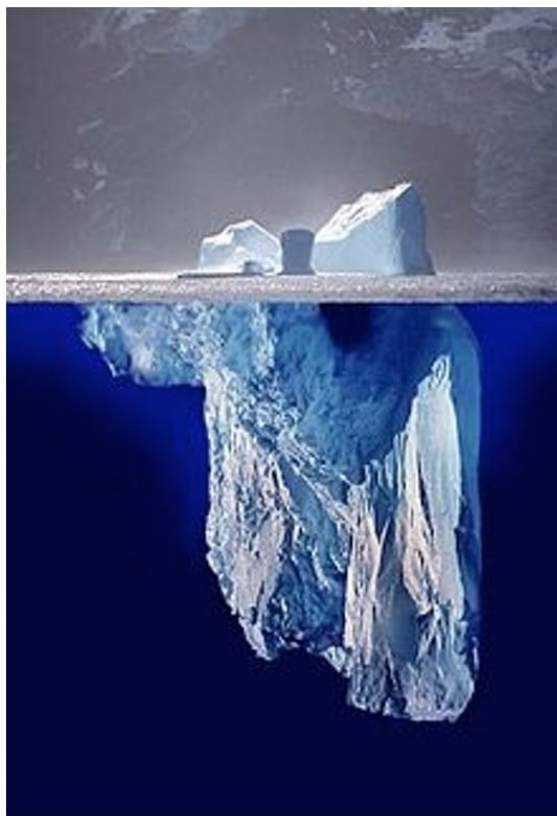


Early Childhood Learning: Let's Go Deeper

In the race to improve educational outcomes, forces are at work to load up Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten with academic skill-building. But such efforts may actually thwart long-term academic success by depriving children of the play and unstructured interactions they need to develop in other more important areas.

Our director of curriculum and instruction at The Children's School, Ms. Christina Martin, recently shared a great blog post from Dale C. Farran, PhD, Research Professor at Vanderbilt University. "[Early Developmental Competencies: Or Why Pre-K Does Not Have Lasting Effects](#)" shows why improving lifelong academic success has much less to do with early training in reading or arithmetic than most people think.

Farran shows how focusing on outward signs of academic accomplishment, so-called "concrete skills" such as recognizing numbers and letters, misses much larger developmental goals and skill sets that form critical foundations for *all* academic learning and success in the future.



Concrete skills:

Letters
Sounds
Numbers
("School Readiness")

Underlying skills:

Broad vocabulary
Interest in language
Curiosity
Persistence
Attentiveness
Incidental learning
Drive to learn
Predictability
Memory
Self control

"The underlying traits of curiosity, persistence, interest in language, self-control, and others turn out to be much more important in terms of future academic achievement," says Ms. Martin.

Farran found:

"Descriptions from a number of large studies of the instructional strategies used in current pre-k classrooms show them to be dominated by whole group instruction focused on basic skills (the tip of the iceberg).

"Teachers talk at children a majority. of the time, seldom listening to children, and multi-turn conversations are a rare occurrence. Learning opportunities that involve other than right-answer questions are almost never observed, and a high level of negative control from teachers characterizes many classrooms."

The larger submerged area of the iceberg includes skills that are not addressed in a rigid, academically focused Pre-K. This is because key developmental areas in early childhood rely on activity that stimulates the pre-frontal cortex. These include executive function skills that help a child learn how to evaluate, choose, and make self-determined decisions. It also includes the child's abilities in

areas of self-control, attention, participating in a group, expressing and following one's own curiosity.



That's why progressive education in early childhood stresses time for unstructured play. It also includes opportunities for the child to choose what and how they wish to learn, to participate and be heard in group conversations, learning that their voice matters - as does hearing and honoring the voices and opinions of others. Progressive teaching provides learning opportunities that involve movement, sensory stimulation, decision making, negotiating with others, and only rarely rely on passive sitting and listening to a one-way lesson from a teacher.



Older Elementary and Middle School Students

While Dr. Farran's study is of pre-Kindergarten programs, the iceberg model is just as powerful when applied to older students. Classrooms that rely primarily on teacher-led activities and drill of concrete academic skills do not provide deep, rich learning opportunities for older students either.

In a middle school math class, for example, the "tip of the iceberg" is a demonstrable skill such as using a formula to find the slope of a line--but what's underneath is the conceptual understanding and the sense-making that allows a student to comprehend what they are doing and why.

Older elementary and middle school students benefit enormously from

opportunities to think deeply about topics, collaborate with peers and adults, pursue their own interests and curiosities, make mistakes and learn from them, and develop agency and engagement in their own learning. These "soft" skills are hugely important for students' current well-being as well as their future success, whether in high school, in college or graduate school, or in the workplace.

By creating a rich, varied, play- and project-based environment that honors students' voices at all ages, we find that TCS students cultivate a love of learning, a strong sense of self-esteem, and an enthusiasm for coming to and participating in school that lasts throughout their educational career.



Play-Based Learning is Rich, Deep, and Important

Watch a video from the founder of The Children's School, Daniel P. Ryan, EdD, on the value of play-based learning. We are committed to honoring childhood by maintaining play as a right and an important learning component, not only in our early childhood classrooms but in all grades at TCS.

