

Playful Learning and Creative Societies

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In the 1980s, there was much talk about the transition from the “Industrial Society” to the “Information Society.” People began to see information, not natural resources, as the driving force in the economy and society. In the 1990s, researchers started to talk about the “Knowledge Society,” focusing on how people manage knowledge for themselves and their organizations.

Information and knowledge are certainly important. But, in my view, they are not enough. Success in the future – for individuals, for communities, for companies, for nations as a whole – will depend not so much on how much we know, but on our ability to think and act creatively. The successful societies of the 21st century will be Creative Societies.

The proliferation of new technologies (and the resulting increase in the pace and complexity of our transactions and interactions) has accentuated the need for creativity in all aspects of our lives. Creativity is critical for fulfillment in our personal lives, enrichment in our cultural lives, participation in our civic lives, and achievement in our work lives.

How can we help today’s children prepare for life in a society in which creativity and innovation are more important than ever before? We must nurture the playful spirit that all children are born with. It is through play that children develop and refine their imagination, curiosity, and creativity. As children playfully explore and experiment, they develop new ideas and new ways of thinking about the world around them.

But there are some worrisome trends. A recent study commissioned by the LEGO Learning Institute found that “free play,” the fertile time when children initiate their own play activities in an unstructured environment, is coming under pressure. Increasingly, parents are steering their school-age children towards structured, organized activities. In schools, the trend is also away from play. More than 30,000 elementary schools in the United States have abolished recess to free up more time for academic “basics.”

Even kindergartens are starting to get more “serious,” becoming more like the rest of elementary school. In my view, just the opposite is needed. The rest of school – indeed, the rest of life – should become more like kindergarten.

In classic kindergartens, play and learning are fluidly integrated. When children create pictures with finger paint, they learn how colors mix together. When they make bracelets with colored beads, they learn about symmetries and patterns. When they build towers with wooden blocks, they learn what makes structures stand up (or fall down).

Through these types of playful-learning activities, children test out ideas, exercise their imagination, explore new possibilities, refine their creative instincts. As our societies and economies grow ever-more reliant on creativity and innovation, we need more playful learning in our lives, not less. We need to support playful learning not only for five-year-olds, but for 15-year-olds and 35-year-olds and 55-year-olds. The ultimate goal: to keep alive the child inside each of us, so that the creativity of childhood persists and grows throughout a lifetime.