TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

Episode #283

Dr. Crystal Loose and Dr. Aimee Ketchum:

Driven by Goals.
Guided by Strategy.
Powered by Intention.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Look at the testing. Is it necessary? Is every piece of data that you are collecting necessary and useful? And if it's not, get rid of that testing and instead put more engagement opportunities, collaborative opportunities, and time for play.

Annalies Corbin:
Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. This is your host, Annalies Corbin. And as always, I am excited to talk with another great innovator, or in this case, innovators, in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Crystal Loose and Aimee Ketchum, authors of The Early Childhood Promise. So, Crystal and Aimee, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
It is a pleasure. We're very excited.

Annalies Corbin:
Excellent. We're going to have so much fun today. So, let's just set some context for our listeners as we get started.

The Early Childhood Promise is a result of years invested in early learning research and involvement in collective community impact pertaining to parent engagement. It brings decades of expertise to this essential guide, offering insightful strategies and evidence based solutions to make a difference in the lives of our youngest learners. From the importance of play to the critical role of early education, this book dives deep into the challenges and opportunities that shape a child's earliest years.

Ketchum and Loose provide actionable advice and real-world examples to help every child achieve their full potential, regardless of their starting point.

So, that's a lot, but super, super important. So, I want to start with the hundred-thousand-foot view, ladies. So, why this book, and why now?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
It's a labor of love for Aimee and I both. We've had many discussions on early childhood education, but what's happening now in the kindergarten landscape is really inspiring because there's more play-based education happening than what we have seen during No Child Left Behind when we saw the kitchens being taken out of the classrooms. We saw more testing in the kindergarten setting. We saw a lack of play, in general, and more high stakes testing in the kindergarten classroom. And this trickled down to the preschool setting.

So, that is one impetus behind writing this book and for the chapter on Play, because we wanted to create an awareness of the importance of play and also the research behind play, so that people, and families, and teachers, policymakers have a better understanding that there is learning through play and we need it. Our brains need it. We need the dopamine that's released during play to help create a more engaging classroom setting.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. Aimee, you want to add to that?

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Yeah. I mean that is so, so, so important. And I am a pediatric occupational therapist. So, a child's occupation literally is play. So, we are always trying to find ways that our education and our therapy can be playful in nature, whether we're working on developmental milestones, or rehab, or rehabilitative skills, or kindergarten readiness, or school learning activities, we need to include that playful component. So, that is a whole chapter of our book–the importance of play and how play is integrated into curriculum and therapy and is such an important part of early childhood.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. So, let's talk a little bit about, sort of, the need, the shift that happens, right? And so, we've had some pretty destructive federal policies over a very long period of time. You could debate proper intent from the outset. We won't go there. That's not our purpose today. But ultimately, we did see a lot of the destructive sort of opportunities, if you will, for children based on the high stakes, both the testing or the high stakes assessments of teachers and teacher quality. It was all sort of rolled into one. And at the end of the day, oftentimes, it was children who were losing out based on all of these adult needs and decisions.

So, I'm really, really curious when you sort of step back and think about the journey we have been on over the last two decades really – well, more than that really – so why do you think there's been this sort of I would call it a radical recalibration that's been happening?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Well, I can speak from the K to 12 lens because I used to be in the classroom setting before going to higher ed, and I had great opportunities as a kindergarten teacher, elementary teacher, and etc., and then administration. So, I was in the classroom quite a bit and I saw the transformation as it was happening during No Child Left Behind. And I think it was... you can't really blame anybody. Things happen because we saw testing, or we assumed that testing results weren't as high as they should have been.

So, with that came this creation of urgency where we need to do more. Nothing frivolous can happen. So, no movies, nothing like that. And then, the Common Core Standards came And with the Common Core Standards came a tone of rigor in the classroom settings. So, as teachers, we looked at those standards and we realized, "Wow, they are really hard." And we had to shift instruction in the classroom setting. And because of that, we were kind of playing a catch-up game and play got shoved out the door because we knew we had to increase learning.

However, what we didn't realize was that students weren't learning more because they couldn't learn more with the content we were throwing at them. So, I think everyone took a step back–teachers, administrators, policymakers, higher ed professionals, and even physicians–and saying that we need to put the brakes on, we're missing a key component in classroom instruction. And one of those areas was classroom engagement, so student engagement and instructional techniques, and play, and then came along the digital learning landscape. More on that later.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, exactly. That's a whole nother topic. Aimee, I want to, sort of, round out what Crystal is saying by acknowledging the fact that some of the greatest learning that children have actually comes through play. And so, the idea that there's no rigor or limited rigor–maybe that's a better way to put it–in those opportunities for children to engage in that deep, meaningful, creative, play-based exercises or experiences that they have, that's a child's foundational learning journey. So, I'm curious how you sort of see those interplay.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Yeah. I'm so glad you asked that because we really wrote the book, our subtitle is "For Parents, Early Childhood Professionals and Policymakers." So, we really want to reach everybody because there is such amazing data out there now that is telling us that play builds a child's brain architecture. And it builds their language and

communication. It builds their physical development. It builds their problem solving and imagination and their flexible thinking. And there are so many scenarios built through play that lend themselves to learning, especially when it comes to social and emotional development.

So, we know now so much more than we knew even five or ten years ago about all the benefits and importance of play and how that impacts and helps children ongoing. So, I think when we know better, we do better. And now that we have this data, and which we know we tried to put so much data in this book in the Play, and the Kindergarten Readiness, in the Child Development chapters, and just that importance of not only play but parents interacting with children. Those back-and-forth conversations are critical. That scaffolding of learning that parents and teachers do with children. That children playing in social groups and learning from older children and being able to be in situations where they sometimes have play on their own and, sometimes, they have more structured play, more guided play, and how much they can learn from both of those scenarios.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. Crystal, I'm really curious, as you made the shift from being in the K-12 system, now you're in the K-12 ecosystem with your work in post-secondary being reflected back with all of that. I'm really curious, how does the work that you see going on tied to early childhood and the potential that early childhood really, really brings... we've always known from a foundational standpoint, it sets us up for all kinds of things in life, no question. But how do we then make that shift on the ground? And specifically, how do we make that shift with our early childhood and our early elementary educators to really, really not just value that because our educators do value those pieces but, sometimes, the implementation is incredibly difficult, especially when we find ourselves employed in very traditional settings?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
That's a great question. You have to incorporate early learning strategies early on. It's fundamental. And we are aware of this through courses, child development courses. Every student and many universities get this when they're training to be a teacher. So, hoping that they bring this to the classroom setting is one area that is really important. We also offer child development courses for graduate students. So, we're constantly revisiting theory and the literature to help prepare teachers and practicing teachers. But most importantly in that K-12 realm, we have to make connections with early learning centers early on.

So, right from birth... and I love this question because a lot of my work starts at birth with hospitals. And so, I always partner with local hospitals, in particular in Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, because that's where I'm from. But through that work there

was recognition that that was a missing piece in the education system. We used to think that education began in kindergarten but it doesn't. It begins at birth. And so, the importance of connecting with teachers and families and forming relationships with parents and caregivers right when they have the baby is so important.

So, we know families come to the Lamaze classes and all the training that happens before the baby is birthed. But important to note in those sessions is that we have to talk about what's happening with brain development and development as a whole when baby's in the womb and when the baby is born because parents often don't know that reading to a baby and singing to a baby is really crucial for development. And talking with your baby instead of pulling out your phone in the supermarket, but actually talking with baby while you're traveling around getting groceries is really, really important.

And so, making those connections early on sets families up for success as they're entering the school systems. And so, it's the success that they bring, but then the school districts have to be aware. Those K-12 areas have to be aware of the connections that need to be made not only with families but with the pre-K's in the communities. Immersing themselves in the pre-K centers and just helping to facilitate areas that they need help with or resources that some of these early learning centers need because, oftentimes, the early learning centers are left without training and necessary resources to make things happen.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. And I think that it's worth stating that in most states, not all, but in most states in the US, at least, that early childhood centers aren't required to have licensed educators in the traditional sense, like we think about in K-12. If you're a kindergarten teacher, you're going to be a licensed educator, elementary educator. That is not the case, necessarily, in many circumstances in that early childhood or pre-K programming.

I'm curious, Aimee, maybe this is one tossed at you, are there ramifications of that system? I mean, these people tend to be on the lower range of the pay scale. Oftentimes, the individuals working in that space have a minimal amount of education, right? It's an interesting paradigm, right? It's a very interesting paradigm, especially when you make statements, which I think almost everybody who probably listens to this program would agree that that foundational education sets us up for everything in life. It's so critically important. And yet, it seems to be an industry that we are not appropriately resourcing, providing enough education, our professional development for, and I think funding. It probably goes on and on and on, right? So, how do we think about that? And I'm wondering if maybe that's where you're talking about policy makers in that subtitle of your book.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Yes, absolutely. There are 100% ramifications when the early childhood industry is underserved. They are underpaid. They are underserved as far as having the opportunities for education. Their levels of stress because of the situations they're often living with trickle down to the children that they're working with on a daily basis. So, yes, there are many ramifications with that.

And it's so unfortunate because as you said and as we all know, these are the critical years. These first five years are the time when children need an educated person that understands child development, that, like we said, is helping to form that architecture of their brain. So, it's critical that they have not only the education and resources and compensation but also the support.

I've heard politicians literally within the past couple months call it babysitting. Early learning, I've heard them call it babysitting and it is so unfortunate that it's not getting the respect and the people doing the hard work in that field are not getting that respect that they deserve, that they should be able to pass along to the children. So, there's definitely a need for increased pay. A lot of people working in early childhood in these critical years are working at poverty wages. You know, they're not compensated. So, it tells you a lot about what we value as a country and as Americans and where we invest.

And we know the return on investment. We all know some calculations show up to $16-$17 per dollar invested in a child before the age of five. Yet, that's unfortunately not where the bulk of funding goes a lot of times because they're looked at as glorified babysitters versus people who are teaching these very critical foundational skills in those early years.

I mean, I practice in the neonatal intensive care unit. I work with babies who are two pounds and should not even have been born yet, but they are already exploring their world. As soon as I come up and open the door, and open up their incubator, and start to talk to them, they open their eyes, their heart rate slows, their respirations slow down, they turn their head and look for my voice, they are engaged, their eyes track, they're focused, they're learning, and they should not even have been born yet. So, that early sense of wonder and curiosity is already there, and we need skilled individuals to cultivate that and to bring children to that school readiness place.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. So, Crystal, what do we do about this?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
I just read something fascinating today, in fact, and there's a lot of revitalization that happens in towns where the social economic standing isn't thriving. So, they'll build

these low-income housing units and families move in. However, there's never a survey, there's never a follow-up to find out, are these families thriving in those locations? And oftentimes, these locations are areas with poor parks, no community connections, no early learning centers. So, are children going to thrive in these areas? Probably not.

So, I think we have to do better for our families and it has to start early. And so, if we're going to put low income housing in locations, we need to ensure that there are support systems for families because we know families can't thrive without support systems. So, sometimes, this falls back on school districts to open their doors in the evenings to add extended child care hours for families for them to work with early learning centers or to help develop early learning centers by placing pre-K counts, headstarts into the school district locations.

We know headstart goes down to age three, I believe. We can start as early as age three to help families that aren't thriving. So, just thinking about the systems that are in place when we put these low-income housing places in place, so essential. So, I think that's one way that we can't just band-aid the problem. We have to think about all of the necessities that will help families thrive.

Annalies Corbin:
Is there a follow-up question to that, Crystal? Is there a post-secondary opportunity here that has largely gone unexplored that could help solve or catalyze solutions around this issue?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Oh, most certainly. We're training teachers. So, providing paid opportunities for the students that are in education programs to work in child care centers, I think that would be fascinating because they're learning about brain development, they're learning about instructional practices, and to be able to pay them while they're in school helps offset the cost of tuition. So, I think models that look like that could be very beneficial early on.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah. Somehow, especially for elementary teachers to spend one of their rotations in a pre-service environment, I would imagine, even if you wanted to be a fifth grade teacher and not a kindergarten teacher, would make you a better fifth grade teacher, right?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Yes, because you're learning where they start. So, you're seeing that some students in those early learning settings are lacking particular skills. And if they don't catch up, that will be an issue in grade five.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. I think so too. Aimee, I'm really curious in your work, since you get our learners at their very earliest days there in the NICU, and as a parent of a NICU child, I agree with you. It's remarkable to me to sort of watch how quickly learning... it's like that little lever it gets clicked on immediately, right? I don't think we can discount that. But I'm really curious from your experience, you know, what are those ahas in your work that you have found that really, really have been instrumental or influential in the way you think about the sort of why of this work?

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
The biggest takeaways would just be how early learning starts and also how malleable a child's brain is. That neuroplasticity, they're like little sponges for language. Babies can understand every sound of every language in the world before six months, and then they sort of focus in on their own language that's spoken around them. So, just that importance of providing them so many different experiences and opportunities for learning, getting in different venues, going outside, going to different places, experiencing different things.

Babies take in all the information around their world and learn through all of their senses–what they see, what they hear, taste, smell, movement, touch on their bodies. So, just thinking all day long about how much input we're giving the child to give their brain opportunities for those synaptic connections to occur so that learning is happening through all those experiences. So, I think, it really comes back to that importance of offering a multitude of rich learning experiences throughout those first couple years and we know the science, the data tells us that that human interaction is what is really best.

So, I see so many children on screens at a very very young age. Crystal referenced opportunities for learning in a grocery store, and I see children staring at a screen, sitting in a shopping cart. So, I just wish every parent understood that the importance of that sensory stimulation equating into new learning, there's a lot of opportunity, a lot of education that can happen there.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. I agree with that. Crystal, same question to you. What has been an aha moment in your journey that has really influenced the way you think about this work?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
A recent aha has been talking to new moms and how much they think that screen time is beneficial for children. So, even with the youngest learners about age one, they're starting to be placed in front of screens, maybe it's learning to sing songs or do simple activities like patty cake. And I caution them that yes, we understand that

new moms need a break because we've been there. I have four kids of my own. I completely understand the need for a break. I used to place my kids in front of Baby Einstein. We've all learned and looking back, think, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't have done that so much."

But the importance of being the engager, being the one who's talking to your child, not the computer. Even if they're learning something from the computer, it's really better to have those conversations with your child, not the computer. Even if they're learning something from the computer, it's really better to have those conversations with your child, to sing with your child. Even if you have a terrible voice, children don't care about that. They'll just remember the songs that you sang to them. So, I would caution our new moms about the importance of the serve-and-return conversations and the silly play that is really essential.

And then, something also for our moms of children that play outside, the risky play. We used to–and I'm guilty of this–follow our kids everywhere to make sure they didn't fall off a rock. But there's so much coming out now in the literature about the importance of risky play. And by risky play, I just mean climbing over a rock and jumping off. We used to climb trees and not high trees, but jumping out of trees. And there's so much to be learned through problem-solving behaviors like, "Oh, if I go too high, this is what happens," or "If I jump this way off of a rock, it's not so good." That really helped them later as they're encountering problems of their own. So, really important to understand that they'll be okay, you can watch from the sidelines and everything will turn out all right.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, that's very interesting. I appreciate you bringing that up because we definitely have created, I would say, several, now, generations of kids who are incredibly terrified of risks. And it's gonna translate. And I'm thinking about our Gen-Zers, let's just go that close in time, right? They're taking that fear of risk into the workplace. They're in their early career right now and they don't take risks.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
No.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
No. And that's how we learn resilience by taking mini risks as young children, and then figuring things out, problem solving skills, all that prefrontal cortex stuff that doesn't get practiced. Yeah, teaching at the secondary level, I think we see that young adults are extremely terrified to take any risks. And yeah.

Annalies Corbin:
There are also many, not all, but many are also afraid to do things on their own

because, again, I would argue, they didn't have the opportunity to play on their own, to be unattended, either by a device or by a parent. But there's so much creativity that happens when young children just are imagining.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Exactly.

Annalies Corbin:
But I think we've short-circuited that for a lot of these young people. And now as adults, I think we're seeing the vacancy of that experience. I couldn't agree more.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
I couldn't agree more.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Yeah. It has led to a generation that's afraid to make phone calls on their own because-

Annalies Corbin:
They are.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
... they are so used to the parent doing everything for them or they're so used to texting and not having to speak to people in person and it is really creating a generation, as you said earlier, that is afraid to take a risk.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Yeah, so many playgrounds don't even have swings anymore. They just don't exist.

Annalies Corbin:
They don't at all. So, ladies, as we wrap up this conversation, so a couple of things. So, the first one is I wanna remind all the listeners that, you know, grab the book. It's called Early Childhood Promise, The Early Childhood Promise: Sparking Change for Parents, Early Childhood Professionals, and Policymakers. So, reach out, grab a copy. There will be links in the show notes for you to be able to get your hands on one of these fabulous books and also to be able to reach out to Aimee or Crystal.

But as we wrap, ladies, thinking about those school district administrators who are wrestling with all the things that we've just talked about, including recognizing that the students graduating from their districts, getting ready to either go off into post-secondary, or career tech, or right to work, are not risk takers. And we've got a whole nother generation, our Gen Alphas are coming right up. What do you recommend to these administrators right now? What do we do right now to ensure a different trajectory for those kids who haven't yet graduated?

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Yeah, I would say start young, reach out to those young families. We have some local districts that are doing an amazing job of really reaching out to families that have incoming kindergartners, finding them through holding events on campus, bringing families on for story time with the principal, or bring your siblings to school day, or things like that where they could start to identify those younger children.

But also, I think, that parent education is so important. Like just holding education nights where they provide data on child development. Academia has access to the resources and the data that the common lay person often doesn't have. They're not probably reading child development journals. So, translate that information, like take that data and get it out to the families that are in their communities and in their school districts.

Annalies Corbin:
Crystal, what would you add?

Dr. Crystal Loose:
I would say look at your classroom practices, starting in pre-K to grade 2 specifically in those early learning classrooms. Is there enough play happening? Is there enough creative opportunities? Are there genius hours? You can do that at an early learning level. Or is there a lot of testing? And if there's a lot of testing, look at the testing. Is it necessary? Is every piece of data that you are collecting necessary and useful? And if it's not, get rid of that testing and instead put more engagement opportunities, collaborative opportunities, and time for play.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely, absolutely. Well, ladies, thank you so much. I appreciate you making time out of your day. And for our listeners, thank you for joining us on Learning Unboxed. Grateful to have you all.

Dr. Aimee Ketchuma:
Thank you so much.

Dr. Crystal Loose:
Thanks for having us.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely.

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to

be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.