

Transcript lightly edited for length and clarity.

Otto (00:00):

Today, I'm speaking with Ruby Takanishi author of the new book called **First Things First: Creating the New American Primary School**. Ruby is Senior research fellow in the early and elementary education policy division at New America in Washington, DC. She was the President and CEO of the Foundation for Child Development, a grant-making philanthropy that launched the Pre K through third grade movement in 2003. She was also the executive director of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ruby. congratulations on the new book. It's great to be speaking with you. First Things First takes a detailed look at how to evolve the American primary education system. What's your view of primary education in the U.S. today?

Takanishi (00:55):

Well, I think that primary education today reflects the social and economic divides in our country. There are some children who are getting a really outstanding world-class education that is preparing them to live and work in a global economy. That is, to be problem solvers, curious, and adaptive to rapid changes. But I also believe that many other children and many more children are getting an education that is outdated and is aligned with social and economic needs of a hundred years ago. And they are in danger of being left behind, especially in a world economy that rewards skillsets that are based on technological changes that are rapidly taking place in the world. When viewed in this way, I think that these differences in the educational experiences of American children reinforce and perpetuate the social conditions that exist and must be changed. And I think the clear evidence that we are in trouble, our educational system and certainly in our primary education system, is the uncertainty among adults, their parents, not only about their own future in the society, but certainly those of their children.

Otto (02:44):

In the introduction of the book, you start by saying that talent is universally distributed, but opportunity to develop that talent is not. How does focusing on early learning work toward closing our opportunity gaps? And how would you begin to address what you describe as the civil and human rights challenge of our times?

Takanishi (03:09):

I am a researcher by training, although a long lapsed researcher. So I always go back to what we know what the evidence is, what the disciplines are saying and so forth. And I believe that we have indisputable evidence now from different fields and disciplines, from large scale social indicators and small scale studies of how children develop, during the first years of life that these social inequalities, social and learning inequalities begin very early in life, even before the age of two. And this evidence points to the influence of different opportunities that these children experience in order to develop the amazing potential that they have from birth. In the last 40 or 50 years, we have learned so much about what children are capable of doing even in the days after their birth. And certainly during the first couple of years of their lives, most children have all of these capacities until the environment starts to, with the different opportunities, start to impinge on their lives.

Takanishi (04:30):

So the other thing is that we also know that not only do these inequalities begin very early, but learning and experiences accrue over time. So both advantage and disadvantage become compounded over

time. Starting earlier, I think makes it easier and less costly to our country and to the individual. So trying to narrow opportunity gaps from the beginning of life really should be a universal priority. I think this was the second year of the United Nations sustainable development goals that really affirm that the right to pre-primary education is a universal human right for all children. Finally, given what we know about the capacities of children from their early years, ---we're talking about the first couple of years of life -- and given the fact that there are unequal opportunities to good programs, and certainly the children who could benefit the most from these programs not only have less access, but also have access to lower quality programs. I make an argument in my book that access to these programs to develop their talent and potential is a civil rights issue in the United States.

Otto ([06:13](#)):

Obviously much of the book is, is geared toward, you know, how we develop the new primary school, what that looks like, what a different stakeholders can do, what kinds of strategies people can take, uh, many different levels, but from a sort of top line view, can you describe what the ideal new primary school would look like?

Takanishi ([06:38](#)):

Yes, I can. And I do go into great detail about it in my book. First of all, the new primary American primary school would start at least by three years of age with universal access, regardless of family resources and with full school day provisions and staffed by teachers with similar training and credentials as now is the case in the K - 12 education system. I would also like to say a couple of things about that. First of all, the United States' standing in the entire world on providing this kind of early education is really in the middle to the bottom, bottom half of the countries of the world. So we are really lagging behind certainly our peer nations and others in public investment in public education by age three. The other thing I would say is that in none of these countries of the world is the provision of, of early education or pre-K education compulsory.

Takanishi ([07:54](#)):

It is entirely voluntary on the part of families, but all children whose families want them to have access to these programs do have it. In our country. It's really largely a private good and therefore quite dependent on family economic resources. Secondly, I believe that the new primary school should have a full school day kindergarten and be compulsory starting at the age of five. What we don't know is about 25% of American children still do not attend full school day kindergarten. And in most of the states in the country, kindergarten is not required. So we know that by age five, most children have really very well developed capacities to learn, and we are not providing them with those opportunities. The third part of this is that principal leadership and teacher collaborative teams that work to align goals, curriculum instruction, and continuous assessment has to occur over the pre-K to third grades.

Takanishi ([09:14](#)):

Everybody has to be on the same page. And I think that what most parents will certainly recognize is that right now we have an educational system that has a lot of gaps, discontinuities between grades, even in the same school. So everybody is not on the same page, in most schools. And I think this contributes to some of the difficulties that children's children have. Fourth, I would say that, children experience classrooms that are characterized by mutual trust and respect, not only among the students, but between teachers and students, and based on what we know about how children actually learn, which is by being actively engaged, being interested in what they're learning, being able to work with

other children and students on projects that are meaningful to them. So I think the worksheet sheet and drill kind of scenario that we have in many of our schools is not conducive to the kind of learning that children need for the future

Otto ([10:31](#)):

Right now in the United States, the role of the states is really important in what's happening in the development of early childhood education. Different states are taking different approaches, and we, it seems like we're lacking a clear federal approach on how to do this. So can the state-by-state approach eventually give us the new primary school system that, that you're working toward?

Takanishi ([10:58](#)):

I think that while there are some serious discussions, I would say among certain circles about amending the U.S. constitution to have a role in education, to have a federal stronger federal role in education at the present time education is, is a state responsibility. And I think that the most recent reauthorization of the elementary and secondary education act of 1964 really reinforces state roles. So I think for the foreseeable future, any changes in education at any level, uh, whether it's, pre-K all the way up to even higher education, uh, will take place in the state. So what this does create is inequalities in children's access to pre-kindergarten programs based on where, where they happen to be born. And while there have been efforts to try to increase the federal role, and some people have argued that it's an appropriate federal role since most States have no responsibilities or have chosen not to have responsibilities for pre-K education.

Takanishi ([12:31](#)):

I think that the federal role is clearly limited by the resources that are available for any kind of public or federal investments in children's programs. Right now, there have been well-documented studies probably over the last decade by the Urban Institute that show that the percentage of discretionary federal funds that are allocated to children and youth has been steadily declining, and is now less than 8% of the, the federal investment. So, unless there are changes in taxation policy and budgetary policy, I think we face a situation at the federal level, which I describe in my book where the resources for any kind of children's programs or investments, whether it includes pre-K early education or any other children's programs are severely constrained.

Otto ([13:42](#)):

If we look at the preschool model and think about early learning opportunities for children, as young as three, that approach is going to change how families, parents, and communities engage with schools and engage with the public school system. What, what does that look like in terms of the new primary school you described?

Takanishi ([14:09](#)):

Well, I think what it means is that there will be clearly earlier public responsibility or investment in, in children moving from approximately age six, which is the age at which there is universal compulsory education in the United States in most states to about the age of three or four. My sense is that there will be parents -- I don't think the majority -- but there will be parents who will say my child is not ready. I don't want my child to attend... This can be for the majority of American parents, low income parents, working families, particularly a very important social benefit for them. And I'm not talking about childcare programs, per se. I'm talking about programs that will really engage their children, stimulate

them in terms of their interests, active engagement with learning, with other groups of children and adults. It will involve, I think, a shift in thinking about families responsibilities, with respect to raising children and different expectations amongst families about what the public role and the public education system can contribute to their children's development

Otto ([15:53](#)):

In this environment, what are the implications for dual language learners in the new primary school? How will our public schools meet their needs?

Takanishi ([16:02](#)):

This is a very, what shall I say, massive, set of issues. And I should say that I'm chairing a National Academy of Sciences Engineering and Medicine contentious study on fostering the educational success of dual language learners from birth, to grade 12. This is an issue that I'm thinking about on a daily basis, but I would like to really address it in terms of the American primary school idea. So, first of all, dual language learners or what federal law defines as English learners are engaged in learning two languages. They must not only learn colloquial language, the language of, you know, speaking and in informal conversation, but they are faced with the challenge of learning academic language. So it is the language of the schools and the classrooms. And what we do know again from, from research and experience is that the process of learning a second language, even at early ages under optimal conditions really takes time.

Takanishi ([17:23](#)):

And all of our policies certainly at the state level are really based on the erroneous assumption that children can learn English in one year. So we now know that children who start kindergarten with higher levels of English proficiency, this is tested English proficiency, do better academically as they go through the primary grades and the middle and high schools. You know, basically looking at the educational trajectories of different children as they move through the kindergarten to grade 12 system. It means that early education, early learning programs have the opportunity to develop English proficiency among children whose first or home language is not English. And that this can be quite advantageous to them as they continue on in school. Since most schools are English-only schools. And that is realistically based on, uh, the teaching force that we now have in place. What is really, really important for young children, is that the way in which they learn English or acquire their English proficiency is extremely critical. Research indicates that supporting and strengthening the first language particularly during the early childhood years before the child goes into a program. Early learning programs are very important in terms of developing the second language. But equally important, I would argue, is that strengthening and supporting the first language is critical in retaining family and cultural ties, as well as the value of bilingual and multilingual individuals, not only in American society, but throughout the world.

Otto ([19:21](#)):

You've talked about this idea of the early learning or early childhood sector, kind of existing in a separate galaxy from how we think about elementary school or K through three or K through five. That seems to be the, in most states, the existing state of affairs. But as early learning for three and four year olds changes and better prepares children for kindergarten, what kinds of changes will we see to elementary school or kindergarten and, and how we think of the early learning and elementary school system?

Takanishi ([20:00](#)):

I think they're really two ways of looking at this. And I think one is the first way in which I think you have framed the issues there too. That is, there are two galaxies: early education and K to three or K to five education. And they're based on different ways of looking at how children learn and therefore how their educational experiences should be structured. I think one one big divide is the role of instruction and content or subject matter learning in early childhood programs. And on the other hand, how the K to five system takes into account more than the academic or subject matter learning of the child, but some of the social, cultural and peer relationships that occurred during that period. I think that one can try to bridge those areas or those two galaxies which is what is going on now and proving to be quite daunting.

Takanishi ([21:14](#)):

What I tried to do in my book is to sort of, to really try to describe a more seamless system that really starts with pre-K and goes all the way to age five, with a common set of ways of looking at how children learn, therefore, how should they be taught and really looking at subject matter, learning in a more continuous way. For example, on reading, we have a really good understanding about how children learn to read, from their early childhood years into the elementary grades. And one can construct a curriculum and instructional sequence that takes into account other countries. They don't have kindergartens. For one, they, they have overlapping primary systems that go three, four and five; five, six, and seven, for example. So I think what we have to understand is the way that we have constructed an organized learning for children from, let's say, three to 10 is not universal. I mean, it's the system that we have now. And I think we need to think about how we might want to reorganize or transform it into something that more attuned to not only how children learn, but also what we know about how they live.

Otto ([22:47](#)):

As the system evolves, how will your preparation and professional learning for teachers need to evolve to meet the demands of students in the new primary school?

Takanishi ([23:01](#)):

Well, they would have to be very, very different than what they are now because teacher preparation and professional development mirrors what we have in our schools today. The preparation of educators, which not only includes teachers, but principals and superintendents and other allied education professionals and professional development really needs to be reformed. And we certainly need in our teacher or educator preparation licensing at the state level, and then reflected in our higher institutional preparation programs, teacher preparation that maps to the primary school as being a teacher, being trained and able to teach children from pre-K all the way to grade five.

Otto ([24:07](#)):

In Oregon -- thinking about improving teacher preparedness and quality for the preschool setting, we are currently evaluating the bachelor's degree requirement for lead teachers. That is where lead teachers need to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field. This is a requirement for the state's new preschool program called Preschool Promise. What's your opinion on the importance of that credential?

Takanishi ([24:41](#)):

Well, I support the BA for the teachers in all pre-K programs. I think what's really important is to just briefly look historically in the development of the early education professions. The early history of this, probably until the seventies, was that teachers of young children should not only have a bachelor's degree, but have a master's degree. And it was really based on the notion that there, there actually is a research or scientific basis for understanding children as a starting point for being a teacher of young children. And I think basically what happened, and I sort of saw this myself, is that in the seventies and eighties, there was a kind of a counter movement in the welfare reform programs, to put women -- low income women, particularly -- into work situations. Early childhood programs was seen as one of the places to do this.

Takanishi ([25:51](#)):

So it's really been documented that if you were to look at the qualifications of teachers and directors of early childhood programs, let's say from the seventies on to maybe the end of the 20th century, you see a decline, you actually see a decline in the qualifications. But in 2016, I think that the two major arguments for the BA is that one, if you take seriously that there is a, let's say a research and scientific basis for understanding and therefore educating children and particularly young children, I would argue that in order to understand that knowledge and to be able to use it in daily teaching with children, certainly the completion of a bachelor's degree is necessary to use that knowledge base. I would also say that the degree and the base of knowledge is a very important part of the professionalization of the field.

Takanishi ([27:08](#)):

The second has to do with the compensation issue, which is a very important one in terms of not only the lives of teachers, but also in terms of attracting individuals to the field in the future. While the fact is that BA attainment has not led to increases in the compensation for that workforce. And I think Head Start is the best example of this. It is an important qualification for future efforts to address compensation in this issue. It's hard to think about how you can argue for equal compensation with the K to 12 education teachers if pre-K teachers don't have at least the same qualification.

Otto ([27:58](#)):

What advice do you have for Oregon as we work to expand early childhood education opportunities and preschool? We have the new Preschool Promise program. That's just started serving students in September. We have another network of districts that have cobbled together preschool programs in a variety of different ways as a state. What should we do to build a stronger early learning system?

Takanishi ([28:34](#)):

Well, you know, I'm always reminded of what my, one of my mentors Ed Ziglar said. He was one of the, developers of Head Start. And he was the first head of the Office of Child Development in the Nixon administration. And he always said, when people asked him what party he belonged to, he said, I'm not a Democrat, I'm not a Republican. Kids aren't going to my party. And I think what it means is that in this field, I think we really need to take seriously keeping the needs of children and their future at the forefront. I think so many of the issues and barriers that we are encountering, I see as more being constructed by adults and serving adults rather than serving the interests of children, I think it's really important anywhere, but certainly at the state level to really ask the question, is this good for kids and their future rather than is it good for, you know, us adults or one group of adults over another group of adults?

Takanishi ([29:45](#)):

So I think that's one thing I would say. I think the other thing is that, you know, we're like 50 years again into Head Start, for example. And I think it's really time to think transformatively, if we were starting today, what would we design as programs for children given what we have learned in the last 50 years? One of the things that I suggest in my book is that not should states take responsibility for the public education of children starting at the age of three, but that federal funds, what little there is of it when it's distributed among the 50 States, should be focused on birth to five because we know that there are so many children whose talents are not being developed right now. And it's a really huge human loss. Targeted programs using federal funds seemed entirely appropriate for these children.

Otto ([30:53](#)):

The focus of your book obviously is on primary education and children ages three to 10. But what I enjoyed in reading it was that it also asks us to consider the role of public education in American society. And given where we're at today, we have an environment where our public school system and the teachers working in it are under siege. And in that environment, I just wonder how you think we'll be able to commit to further investments in preschool, which is not a new idea. As you say, it's something that's nearly a century old. How do we move forward on this?

Takanishi ([31:43](#)):

I think I would go back a step and say that a country that doesn't invest in the education of its people is basically cutting itself off at the knees and is really creating the conditions for dissatisfaction and unease among the population. And I really think that the current situation that we're now in is created by a number of forces, but I also think that the education of the American people is certainly a contributor to it.

So going forward, I think we really need to engage in some serious and fundamental thinking about the purpose of public education in American society and how we are going to go forward in the future. I think the most important part of that conversation to go back to my first remarks is to what extent the public education system creates a more equitable society.

What can we do in our public education system to develop the talents and potential of larger numbers of individuals? I have a section in my book that talks about teacher unions, because I do believe that teachers are under siege. I think that's one of the reasons why we are having some teacher shortages in some areas. And I think there is some sign of this, particularly in the younger generation of teacher organizers to think differently about what a professional teachers union is like. Obviously, teacher compensation is a very important issue. There's no question about that, but there are other issues as well, they're work condition issues, which I talk about, which can make it more advantageous for teachers to engage in the kind of a reflection on their work with other teachers, which they barely have time to do now under most circumstances. And for teachers to themselves contribute to the future discussions about what the public education system should look like.

Otto ([34:43](#)):

Ruby, I appreciate your time today. It's been wonderful talking with you. Is there anything else that you want your potential new readers of your new books to hear about today?

Takanishi ([34:56](#)):

Well, you know, there's a whole idea -- and I quote, Samir Khan on this -- of the one room schoolhouse. And I think it's really an important part of my book and the way I think about things and certainly cross-

nationally. I think it's absolutely true that the system we have now is a system that we have created. And we can change it and we must and need to change it. And so I just hope that everyone, including educators and citizens and advocacy groups and so forth will really try to think more creatively, imaginatively about what a new system would look like. I think that unless we do this fairly soon, we may not find ourselves in a good society.

Otto ([35:52](#)):

I think it's a great comment and a great concept because sometimes in our political environment, things feel so intractable or issues feel like they're difficult to solve, but we have an opportunity for many people across many different sectors, including parents and community members to get involved. And if they do, we can make some real change.

Takanishi ([36:19](#)):

Yes. And I think they're very good examples. In Portland, the problem that we have is that those sites are too far and few, and we need so many more. So I do think that civic engagement and participation is very important in creating change. I was looking at the table of contents in my book before I spoke with you. And, you know, it clearly has what some people might call a bottom-up approach. The whole notion that you can have some, you know, pronouncement from the federal government. I mean, obviously leadership and bully pulpit and creating a climate and so forth is very important. But I think our educational system as currently structured, is very much a local system and a community system. And so we should really take advantage.