

# The Pursuit of Play within the Curriculum

Evan T. Ortlieb

Play has been traditionally recognized as an activity within early childhood education, but in actuality, it has substantial importance to learners at all levels. Since the idea of play is abstract and has no pre-determined outcomes, some teachers feel uneasy about allowing students to play with concepts and materials, especially with the advent of increased accountability and scripted curriculums. However, discovery learning is one of the single greatest ways in which students develop critical thinking skills to solve academic problems in every subject area.

After conducting a thorough literature review, the investigator concluded that play is an ideal avenue in which creativity is sparked through open-ended explorations that are largely student driven. Specifics regarding what to do and what to avoid are discussed so as to provide guidance for infusing play into the curriculum.

## Conceptual Framework

Without question, human beings have urges and tendencies to play at various times. Children explore their environments, adolescents engage in athletic competitions, and adults travel on vacations in hopes of experiencing the "new." Within social settings, like school, play can foster cooperative learning skills, adaptive abilities, and much more, allowing students to better handle situations throughout their lives.

Although play is commonly referred to within social contexts, the meaning of play is obscure. According to Huizinga (1930), "Play is a function of living but it is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or aesthetically. . . the play-concept remains distinct from all other forms of thought in which we express the structure of mental and social life" (p. 6). Although it is illogical to attempt to define such a vast concept, providing a clear conceptual framework for discussing play is obligatory, while hopefully satisfying those reductionist thinkers as well.

Play is a minimally-scripted, open-ended exploration in which the participant is absorbed in the spontaneity of the experience. Since there is such plasticity and no predetermined outcome of such an experience, educators are often frightened at the prospect of using play within their instruction. Elementary school teachers can be regularly heard saying "one has to meet standards, have goals, and get her students ready to pass the standardized tests." Although the thoughts of students playing in class could seem daunting, the benefits are overwhelming. Through play, students gain critical thinking skills from solving problems, become more creative, and ultimately learn from reflecting on their experiences.

The concept of play is very intriguing because it is unique in that humans can live in a carefully crafted environment of play without ever thinking about anything else. For example, when a child is playing a game of football at recess, the game engulfs his mind to the point that every thought is game-oriented. Every impulse, reflex, and movement is an attempt to succeed in the game to the best of his ability. This concept is truly powerful, but more importantly, can be captured in a classroom setting just like at recess or at home. Would not students learn to a higher extent if play were used to teach subject content? Of course, if students could engage in play to learn, they would

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Evan Thomas Ortlieb, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Texas A&M - Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, TX.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Evan T. Ortlieb at [evan.ortlieb@tamucc.edu](mailto:evan.ortlieb@tamucc.edu)

give every effort to succeed and exceed the highest expectations.

#### History and Beyond

In the time of colonial America (1690), American students were taught using moral virtues as the foci of instruction. Many of whom had to memorize such admonitions as "Work while you work, play while you play. One thing each time, that is the way." This separation of work and play was seemingly brought about with the intentions of eliminating the latter within "work" settings like educational and career-oriented applications. This substitution was deemed necessary because play was viewed as being fun. "Fun – representing the 'purposeless' – can only be had at specific times and occasions and it is clearly and severely prohibited from all other activities and environments" (Bruner, 1996). This separation of play from work resulted in a devaluing of play within many cultures, influencing both learning theory and educational design.

The learning theory, also referred to as a theory of child development, stresses that play is simply a catalyst with which children use to advance to a higher level of cognition. Then, once the child reaches this level, play is useless (Makedon, 1991). This could also be referred to as a means to an end, and not having any value of its own. "Consequently, ... the use of play as an instructional tool or strategy is restricted to the early grades with decreasing interest among teachers and parents in middle and secondary schools" (Reiber, 1996). Indeed, the use of play is limited within certain grade levels and only at certain times of the day.

In the 1950s, teachers instructed in what is known today as highly traditionalized classrooms. Instruction consisted of mostly lecture, while students were drilled with rote memorization tasks. Students were called on to state the one right answer, and students were required to complete their work without speaking to one another (Greenberg,

2000). Although the dictator-like methods of instruction may have worked for some, they do not provide for optimal learning experiences for most children today. Many students find school boring and do not exert any effort to learn within the confines of school; yet, when they go home, they play with their friends and are excited at the opportunity to participate in activities. This contrast results from school structures, which eliminate play from their curriculums. Instead of running away from the idea of students having fun at school, one should grasp the notion and build upon it so that school can become meaningful to children. Together, teachers and students can socially construct knowledge from the process of learning, and not just the product. Since this view of effective learning differs from many traditional views, a drastic undertaking needs to occur in order for educators to provide successful educational environments.

#### Opposition to Play

Many educators feel that play in a classroom setting is too subjective for school-wide use. If students engage in play in an attempt to learn, how can teachers ensure that learning has actually occurred? Who is to say whether or not a student even learned subject-based material through the play activity? Assessing students through play would also seem like an impossible endeavor. Accordingly, when children play, no physical product is created, so teachers cannot assign grades to the students; thus, there is no differentiation between student achievement. This creates additional problems because teachers must essentially rate their students' performance according to a grading scale. For all of these reasons, many believe that playing cannot be very beneficial, productive, or meaningful within a classroom setting. This common viewpoint on play ultimately leads to teachers not allotting time for play to occur during their instructional periods.

After all, there cannot be a valid reason

in allowing children to play in class if they do it all the time outside of class. It is imperative to utilize class time for meaningful, instructional purposes, and not for activities like play. The school's purpose is to provide an environment in which students can learn information, not play the entire day. More than ever, children need instruction from their teachers, because many students do not receive guided assistance at home.

Work and play are two different concepts: each of which should occur at separate times. While outside of school, children can play all they want, but during school hours, this time should be used for more formal instruction. Play is an aimless activity in which children amuse themselves, but do not gain any knowledge. Since there are no prescribed goals of play, the children do not educationally benefit from the activity.

With this in mind, teachers must meet standards; therefore, they have to teach using certain methods like reading from textbooks, using content-related worksheets, and similar types of drill and practice routines. With continued scrutiny and accountability, teachers are forced to teach to tests, so that their students can pass them and go to the next grade. If the students do not pass them, they are held back; thus, ensuring moving to the next grade is much more important than allowing children to play.

#### Benefits of Play

If teaching skills is of utmost importance in educational environments, what purpose does play serve? To answer this question, one must look at play's role in not just education, but its total affect on the human being. Many people agree that play is an essential element of childhood, but they also feel that it is not important after a child matures. Then why is it that after adults leave work, they often participate in activities in which they find relaxing in comparison to their daily stressful jobs? Many people participate in forms of recreation that include gambling, drinking,

watching television, and other hobbies. These participants see those activities as ways of disengaging from their work-filled lives. The reason that many feel this is necessary is because of the separation of work from play. They have no chance to play during "work" hours, so they are forced to play in various forms of recreation afterwards.

If the human body longs for opportunities to play, which it constantly does, why then is it necessary to separate work from play? Well, it is not necessary. In fact, it is quite the contrary. According to Dewey (1916), "Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier" (p. 194). These words are at the base the proposal — in order for children to learn at their potential, they must be engaged. Very few students love to sit and complete tedious exercises all day long; however, they do wait in anticipation to play games and activities. Many times, students are only allowed to play at recess or during physical education class; however, the notion of play can exist within all classrooms. In reading class, for example, students can engage in discussion, creative writing, and critical thinking, based on literature selections. When students actively participate in a constructive learning environment, they play with concepts in a deeper, more meaningful context. If this spirit to play is so prevalent among most children, it should be harnessed within all classroom environments.

How can teachers create such an environment where students can play, learn, and build knowledge on subject content all at the same time? The method is rather simple in form, but its implementation takes practice to reach its potential. In science class, children act as scientists — observing, formulating, testing, and making surprising discoveries. "This is what stimulates mental neural development, and without it you don't get that development" (The National Institute for Play, 2000).

Through reflective play, the mind becomes expanded, enriched, and experienced.

Not only does play have considerable importance for student learning, but it is also crucial for motivation. Once students participate in play activities in the classroom, they will soon realize that they can excel without having to worry about getting the wrong answer or having to select the correct choice on a multiple-choice examination. In this type of open-ended, experience-based setting, nothing inhibits children from reaching their learning potential. The expectations change from being school-board directed to limitless, and they are no longer bounded. Students no longer worry about whether or not their answer is correct or not. Instead, students can focus on the information at hand.

William E. Doll, Jr. (2005), a curriculum theorist, gave me an example of play-based instruction. His second graders were having difficulty learning mathematical concepts. Instead of continuing to test the students, he told the students to get into groups of four. Within those groups, students paired up, created mathematical word problems, and tested the other two students in their group. Doll facilitated the students during this process but allowed them to create their own unique questions from playing with concepts. Through experience in an open system or classroom, the students learned more in those two months than anyone could have taught them in that time. Further, his students learned from one another, enriching and broadening their perspectives; after all, learning ceases in stagnate classrooms. Needless to say, when Doll's students took standardized tests later in the year, all of his students performed in excess of the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. This attests to my view of the power of play within a classroom setting.

Children are intrigued by play, but not always intrigued by learning through old-fashioned methods of instruction. This is why play is the ideal medium for learning

today. It excites the students so they want to learn — a crucial element that is often lacking within classrooms. When students are at play, they expand their problem-solving skills and adaptive abilities, enriching the students' social skills as well. Children who frequently participate in play gain confidence in any situation that arises. After all, who does not have fond memories of childhood play? Playing allows humans to stay mentally and physically healthy.

Methods of engagement include various forms of games and activities. Games can be created in any subject area, and just the fact that the students think they are playing a game excites them. Mentally challenging games include those like: How many ways can you combine two numbers to equal the number ten? Students immediately begin to internally strategize, and are motivated to record all of their answers. A sense of competition may begin within some games; however, this often serves as a catalyst for students to excel to an even higher extent. Many abilities and skills will become heightened through the use of games to engage in play during class.

Activities are not just students doing something; they are opportunities for students to experience and take part in active learning. These activities can range from skits and plays to competitions and hands-on experiments. When students actively participate in learning concepts, skills, and other information, they retain this knowledge in their long term memory, securing it within their schemas. Children are born to be discoverers, thinkers, and problem solvers. This innate ability must be harnessed within a classroom environment. Since many students are fearful of failure in today's test driven society, it is a perfect time to implement play so students can learn through their own experiences. In contrast, when teachers stress rote memorization, students memorize something long enough to take a test, forget the information, and no longer have the ability to recall it. One of

the most common difficulties for teachers is to get their students motivated to learn. Not many people, let alone children, would like to listen to someone talk repetitively for an hour each day. People want to keenly participate, playfully engage, and thoroughly discuss ideas in an exploratory fashion; therefore, it seems so obvious that play should occur within classrooms so that students remain excited, actively acquire knowledge, and desire to learn more.

Both individual and group play belong within classrooms. When students are involved in individual play, they learn from their own successes and failures as well as the people with whom they are playing. Through both success and failure, children learn which of their actions were beneficial and which were detrimental; success and failure are part of progression. If one never fails, one cannot succeed.

Along with individual play, group play is crucial to foster in the classroom. Through peer group work, students can collaborate, debate, co-create, and relate various types of information. Learning from one another often proves more substantial than learning from the teacher. Students share ideas and often see the information from multiple perspectives, once they work in groups during play.

Reflection is also necessary in both individual and group play. Teachers should encourage their students to reflect back on their play experiences to see what went right, what went wrong, and how to make improvements. Through reflection, students critically analyze their own as well as other students' incidents to gain a broad, contextual viewpoint. This step is necessary for play to become meaningful within a school setting. Once students learn to reflect, they will automatically begin using this skill in many other settings as well. One of the most powerful aspects of play is how it transforms students into critical thinkers, adaptors, and more-able individuals.

### Conclusion

Several aspects of play have been analyzed and scrutinized to see just what, if any, benefits play has within the scope of advancing education. Although there are many who argue that play has few benefits within a school setting, there is substantial evidence that play is a meaningful, satisfying endeavor that can have lasting positive effects on the lives of those participants. Looking back at the statement, "Play is a minimally-scripted, open-ended exploration in which the participant is absorbed in the spontaneity of the experience," one can see that it is a difficult idea to describe; however, this does not take away from its importance.

The idea that play is minimally-scripted means that teachers can brainstorm about various concepts that they would like their students to discuss. Once the teacher shares some of these concepts with the class, the students will likely engage in conversation about the concepts forming links and relationships between the ideas. This scenario enriches the students in many ways: learning from one another, seeing ideas from multiple perspectives, and analyzing concepts in relationship with each other. A great deal of meaning naturally occurs when play is used as the medium for learning.

Open-ended experiences extend the minimally-scripted aspect of play. Generally, there is not a defined end to play activities. In a discussion in which students play with ideas, the students' minds direct the conversation, and that is where the learning occurs. A teacher can make a possible prediction to get a generalized idea, but nevertheless, the students' thoughts control the direction of the discussion. Of course, if the conversation gets off topic, in that it has nothing to do with the predicted topics, the teacher should reflect to see why the students' discussion shifted in that direction. Open-ended experiences like play require teachers and students alike to reflect to realize all that happened in class.

When students experience play, their

minds are not on anything else. Wow! What a magnificent prospect—having students totally engaged. This notion is plausible, if teachers use play to allow their students to enjoy their learning experiences, reach their potentials, and become better adapted to flourish in every social setting. Play-based curriculums allow students to flex their muscles through physical and mental exercises, showing those around their true abilities and skills.

Curriculums must not seem like an “abnormal reality” (to use Bruner’s term) to students. School must be an environment in which students feel their sentiments and opinions have worth and meaning. Through creating environments, which allow students to pursue knowledge and social interaction, students enjoy going to school, interacting, engaging, pursuing, and accomplishing. This is how play can change curriculums, school environments, and lives for the better.

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