



THINKING ABOUT PLAY

When Mary Springer sent me the title of our 2005 conference, I was drawn to the word “play.” What are teachers thinking in regard to play? To find out, I sent a writing invitation to a varied group. From this diverse population there may be someone whose thinking or teaching matches yours. Consider the role of “play” in your classroom or even in your life out in the world. Be playful! ~Terolle Turnham~

“What is the value of play in the development of the child? Cite examples of song games that provide opportunities for different types of play components essential in child development.” These were writing prompts I posed to my graduate and undergraduate elementary education students. In response, I received this reflection from Mandi Schufman, and I share with her permission. ~**Dr. Marty Stover**~

Through play, children are able to engage their imagination and develop their creativity. Play encourages movement, language development, social interaction and intellectual stimulation. Play is valuable for the development of the whole child. Children participate in sensory integrated activities. They have the opportunity to coordinate singing and actions through song games.

There is play that encourages timing skills, like when someone is chosen in “I’m Going Downtown.” Some song games give children an opportunity to describe actions like in the song “Circle Left.” Play invites joyful, whole body participation through spirited movement in “Puncinella.” Play also promotes language development by introducing new vocabulary like in “The Miller.” It encourages the study of language patterns when new words have to “fit” into songs like in “Someone’s Wearing Something Yellow” which also encourages critical thinking and making educated guesses. Playing song games uses memory skills as names are selected, remembered and sung in addition to the song lyrics. Song play is the work that engages the child in many varied ways that benefit his/her development. ~**Mandi Schufman**~

I am intrigued by how the word “play” is used in our language. It ranges from having a good time with friends to sitting in front of a performance watching someone have a nervous breakdown. We play chess. We play football. We play

an instrument. We asked our mothers if we could go out and play. What do all of these expressions have in common?

When we watch a play in a theater we are studying a specific aspect of life that someone has deemed important to write about. Isn't it interesting that we say a child is learning to play the piano? When we play the piano, what are we really playing at? Some universal resonance? When I used to build imaginary rooms in the grassy lot next to the old grocery store I was enchanted by how the rooms all fit in. I think I was actually studying geography.

I think play is an activity people do to learn about reality. It usually means taking a part of life and practicing it over and over until we gain some sort of satisfaction. It usually occurs in a physically safer context than real life and it almost always has rules and parameters. I think there is a fortunate frustration in a lot of play. Fortunate in that it sends us back to real life. Play makes life tangible and certainly a lot more enjoyable. I'll even go one step further and say that the closer play imitates life the more aesthetic it becomes! ~**Tony Williamson**~

Play. How do we justify the value of play at school? Can we credit higher test scores with a direct relationship to excluding play in our schools? It seems the drive to raise test scores is taking a toll in Tacoma, Washington where the school board has decided to eliminate all recess except the lunch recess. According to an assistant superintendent, the schools need to allocate as much time as possible to instruction so they can meet requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. A third grade student explained that he/she no longer has recess, but has a 'gross motor skills break' instead.

Last week 6th graders in one of my schools were requesting a number of games they had played when they were in 1st – 3rd grade. I had made the mistake of not planning to do typical October activities thinking the students were far too sophisticated to want to play them. They proved me wrong...again! They referred to one of the games as being "a classic" and discussed their fond memories of playing it when they were younger. We continued the class playing with gusto and energy. Not only did they want to play, they needed to play. Their joy was evident and enthusiastic. I learned an important lesson.

As I reflect on my own childhood, I'm flooded with memories of my elementary school playground. I can see the swings; recall the splinters from the seesaw; and smell the metal poles of the monkey bars. My memory of being left behind seems to be during a relay race in second grade. Perhaps it is time to consider play as a means to keep children from being left behind! ~**Mary Springer**~ Mary works with students of varied ages in the area of song and drama.

It seems to me that play energizes the learning atmosphere. It's not so much that we must be playing a particular game, but it is that the attitude of play must be a factor. Then children of all ages come alive and participate. Here is a case in point. We were all memorizing the words of the school song that had recently been unearthed. In one "hard-sell" sixth grade classes, we each took a word at a time and used a single marker and a half sheet of printer paper. I gave one child the first word, the next child the second and so on until all words of the song were assigned. Each student wrote his/her word and decorated it. Then I collected, shuffled, and redistributed the papers. As we laid them out on the floor, each student had a new word to place in order of the lyrics. The teamwork was amazing. If we got stuck we went back and reviewed. Singing happened without the traditional 6th grade angst and everyone was engaged. I was amazed at the creative touches children gave a single word using only one marker and a half sheet of paper .

It must be noted that 'play' is the way in which we go about those things we do with children in the classroom. This is true regarding those lessons that we must teach to meet state and national standards as well as those musical things we do for the sheer joy of it. That seems to be where 'play' fits best with my teaching and more importantly, with my students' learning. ~**Deb Eikenbary (Indiana)** ~

We are so driven by schedules in this society. Children seldom have time to reflect, to daydream, and to just "be". Their lives are dictated by endless scheduled activities of sports, music lessons, and various organizations.

Likewise their school day is schedule driven. When I observe children within the song experience game setting, I am aware of how "time" is suspended for them. I know this because, often, when it is time to go, they will remark, "already"? Within the framework of the game there is a certain passage of time, but it is time through which children are transported out of the normal constraints of the classroom. Why? They are transported because they are part of the dynamics of the experience. Through their decision-making, physical activity and social interaction students are completely involved. I try to keep that dynamic experience fresh through questioning, redirecting, and clarifying.

When one is described as in a "playful" mood, you picture someone with an engaged energy, a sense that something unexpected may happen. That "something unexpected" almost always is a new awareness, a fresh insight. That is why we must play (purposefully) with children!

PS. Five years ago, our family decided to have FFF (forced family fun). We set aside Sunday evening to just play together. No electronic devices!!!! The person in charge of the evening selects a game as well as the meal. It has become a wonderful tradition and is still carried on even when Kate is home from college. ~**Anne Mendenhall~ (Minnesota)**

“Play” is a universal language. Children love playing all around the world. Games like tag, hide-and-seeK, cops-and-robbers, and hopscotch, are found everywhere. Even though the language is different, the way to play is the same. Once children watch a game, they understand how to play and can do so easily, oftentimes without any explanation.

'Play' is accompanied by language. Most play has a song or chant. While children are absorbed in playing a singing game, they have numerous chances to listen to the song. This repetition plays a vital role in language study. It is very helpful for non-native speakers to have lots of time listening to the language.

When I use song games, I provide opportunity for playful and complete participation during which students will start singing by themselves. This is the beginning of language study. Setting the stage is very important to insure success in the reading and writing process that follow the games.

Play gives children experience with cause and effect. Children make rules when they play. If they don't follow them, they “suffer the consequences.” Once children are happily playing with others, they don't want to miss out on the rest of the game. In this type of play, no tools are needed but we do need others. I think this is the best way to develop communication skills for children. ~**Yuriko Ishikawa**~ (Yuriko teaches English as a second language to Japanese-speaking students from wee ones to graduate level.)

Teaching holds an ocean full of worries for those of us inclined to be nail biters. Thirty Grade 4's and 5's squished into a tiny box of a classroom, hours of marking, record keeping, keeping in touch with parents, and pressure to ensure that your students at least meet provincial expectations on their provincial tests. Report cards with 8 subjects requiring letter grades along with about 30 ministry outcomes that each require some kind of assessment, plus the anecdotal comments. Play? Who has time to play?

Play is a frame of mind that starts with me, the teacher. Every day I enter my classroom, the playground. There are two ways to venture onto this playground. I can look at the monkey bars and see my grip slipping. Ah, don't go too high or I'll end up with a concussion. Or I can embrace all the joy that the playground has to offer. I once met a teacher who said that he doesn't go to work he goes to play! I want my classroom to be a place where the imagination flourishes, where drama, stories, poems, and songs are woven throughout the day; a place where children want to try new things, cheer each other on; a place where we enjoy the learning journey with wonder and discovery.

In a lucky moment or two, something will happen in our classroom that will remind me of how important it is to be playful. This week I thought a little background music might make desk cleaning time a less onerous task. I popped "La bottine souriante", a French Canadian folk band, into the CD player. All of a sudden, the classroom became a frenzy of skipping, jumping, arm swinging, and conga line dancing. The exuberant spirit of play seemed to put everything into perspective for me. The classroom can be a playground for learning as long as I believe it! ~**Sandy Murray**~ (Sandy teaches a grade 4/5 combination classroom in British Columbia.)

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