

The Importance of Play in the Elementary School

By Sarah Taylor

Seattle Pacific University

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Recent conversations in the media, by elected officials, pundits, teacher unions and the general public regarding public education seem to focus on testing and standards, rarely are there any discussion concerning the importance of play and its impact on education. In my research I found three main areas where play is thought to have a powerful impact: socially, environmentally, and academically. I will be looking at how play promotes social growth, encouraging cooperation, differentiation of instruction, and humanity. Additionally how it helps provide opportunities for environmental education, health benefits, and outdoor exploration. Furthermore, how play improves brain function, academic success, and testing standards.

Play in school has become somewhat of an oxymoron. On one hand students are provided with time outside or in a play area during recess. However, on the other hand, this play is structured in such a way students are not really ‘playing’ at all. There are so many rules set in place; don’t run, don’t yell, don’t climb, include everyone, play using *these* rules, no jumping, no hand stands, no cartwheels...*et al.* Playing has become *NO FUN*. According to Sarah Thompson, in the article *Do’s and Don’ts: children’s experiences of the primary school playground*, “One 7-year-old summed it up by saying ‘there are an awful lot of don’ts, aren’t there, there should be more dos’.” What used to be a time of exploration and creative ingenuity, has become a rigid set of standards that every student must follow for fear of being disciplined. Play in the past was set up as a safe way for students to take risks, to use their imagination to create games, to cooperate with and include others, to level the playing field for English Language Learners (ELL) or other academically challenged students, and as a successful tool to turn failures into lessons learned. In our high-stakes testing society we have lost what is truly beautiful about being an elementary student which is to be a *child*. In the article, *Play Teaches What Testing Can’t Touch: Humanity* by Carol Chmelynski, she reports:

Play, not unlike education, has become scripted, rote, and routine says Susan Solomon, author of *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community space*. ...[T]he contemporary playground has become overly safe and highly predictable, Solomon says. There is no room for experimentation, no chance for error, no opportunity for kids to accomplish something they have to work hard at until they succeed.

Whether students are playing imaginatively by themselves or involved with others in a physical game of foursquare, there is a social component to unstructured play that forces children to practice the skills necessary for the development of tools to navigate society. Chmelynski quotes, Anthony Pellegrini a professor of education psychology at the University of Minnesota as saying, “Rough-and-tumble play is how kids learn social skills, and how they inhibit aggression, and to recognize aggressive facial cues. It doesn’t come naturally.” This statement raises some pertinent questions: could more unstructured play help social aggression in the

classroom? Is society heading backwards by removing unstructured play from school to focus on severely structured and heavily rule dominated play? Does the limiting of play remove opportunities for finding ways to bridge individual diversity and find common ground?

Play in school provides an essential component to developing a humanitarian society. In regards to structured play and the school's desire to protect children from social aggression Chemlynski quotes Christina Hoff Summers, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute:

Another obstacle is school bullying. While that is a positive development, it's almost to the point where they want to protect children from the remote risk of hurt feelings. There is a hyper-vigilance surrounding this issue of protection from 'hurt feelings' emerging among school communities everywhere.

There are few opportunities that allow students to trip, fall, and try again socially in order to learn from their own mistakes. According to the article, *The Influence of School Architecture and Design on the Outdoor Play Experience within the Primary School* by, Marc Armitage:

...what children do during these self-directed periods between lessons has changed for the worse in recent times. Many report increases in rough play and games and more children resorting to violence and aggression. As a counter to this, schools are tempted to reduce opportunities for this 'roughness' by reducing playtime at school, or even by removing playtime altogether.

No one would of course condone bullying or encourage school support for poor student behavior; but to teach young children the right way they sometimes have to try the wrong way first. Recognizing social justice does not come naturally. Chemlynski again quotes Pellegrini, "It does not happen by being taught morals or ethics or values; it happens by interacting with peers. And we have to give kids the opportunity to do this." It is necessary to allow students the opportunity for play and interaction with their peers to continue promoting social growth. By taking away or limiting unstructured play, is the result the creation of a society of unimaginative rule followers who may have a hard time coping in the real world?

While researching play as an opportunity to expand on a student's environmental education I found this idea of free-choice learning on the playground, to be a non-traditional and uncommon pursuit. If teachers were forced to look at outdoor play time as an additional opportunity to teach, then play outside the classroom might in fact create another "classroom" altogether. ... "[T]he school playground is an essential source for children's environmental enrichment and education," according to Thompson. "I would argue that this [free-choice learning] might be possible if the children are allowed to interact naturally and instinctively within the world around them at playtime." This interaction with the world and environment around them fosters their natural curiosity. Lessons could be planned and developed by just

taking a walk around the school, playing an extra 5 minutes outside, or even having students lie in the grass and later write about what they observe. Thompson continues by adding;

[I]f more spontaneity and freedom is encouraged at playtime young children could learn instinctively. They could explore, discover and develop further the knowledge about such things as the weather, snow and ice, topography, scenery, insects, plants, texture, natural and man-made materials, noise and in one case air pollution.

“Children are clearly affected by the environment in which they have been placed and respond to it accordingly,” according to Thompson. It is obvious that adult influence on a student’s natural interaction with nature can offer a limiting experience. Childhood experience is quite different than adults, yet as adults we dictate what children must learn. It begs the question, if outdoor play were put under a microscope would the significant benefits of unstructured play and exploration be present anymore? Thompson suggests that outdoor play and education can offer children, “...a room of childhood and childish experiences.”

Not only does outdoor play foster environmental education but it is a valuable tool in promoting healthy habits and exercise. With obesity in America at an all-time high it is imperative that we foster a healthy start for the youngest members of our society- our students. According to Chemlynski, “The national Association of Sports and Physical Education recommends that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily...” Yet schools nationwide are considering removing recess altogether to increase academic success. Chemlynski writes, according to John Kinnee a Superintendent for K-5 students in Oregon, “[W]e’re taking recess away from kids... simply because we are trying to be more competitive in terms of academic success.” Increased demands for academic accountability puts pressure on schools and administration to tighten up the school day to reflect academic success in the classroom. The problem here is people are not looking at activity and play as a vital component to academic success or failure. Additionally, play can be considered a health benefit because it relieves stress. With high stakes testing becoming more and more the focus for schools, stress reduction must be included as part of the school dynamic. The article, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* by, Edward Miller and Joan Almon examines the pressures school face every day regarding high standards and high stakes testing, even in the earliest years:

Kindergarteners are now under great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade. At the same time, they are being denied the benefits of play- a major stress reliever.

We as adults are told over and over the benefits and risks of exercise in our lives, how is it any different for children? How is it possible to take away the development of good habits for a successful and healthful future for students by limiting or eliminating play in the school day?

Lastly, I found how play and exercise is linked to brain function and how that directly relates to academic success. The pressures to improve test scores dictate the school's academic daily schedule and are causing some schools to cut back on playtime or recess. However, this seems to be a direct contradiction to what research proves to be beneficial for increased cognitive performance. As John Medina writes in his book *Brain Rules*;

Exercise improves cognition for two reasons:

- Exercise increases oxygen flow into the brain, which reduces brain-bound free radicals. One of the most interesting findings of the past few decades is that an increase in oxygen is always accompanied by an uptick in mental sharpness.
- Exercise act directly on the molecular machinery of the brain itself. It increases neurons' creation, survival and resistance to damage and stress.

Not only does play/exercise help mental sharpness but it improves brain function and cognitive clarity. What arguments could possibly be made to counter the benefits that provide students with enough exercise to feed their brain valuable oxygen to increase brain function? Wouldn't this mean that test scores would improve if students had enough play/exercise to support this increased cognitive sharpness? Academically kids need this unstructured play to improve test scores. Chemlynski quotes Hara Estroff Marano editor-at-large of *Psychology Today*, "We trivialize kids' play. It gets in the way of other things that we want to do on our way to achievement. Social play helps program higher brain areas that will be required later in life." Play can foster improvements in the brain that help with appetite control, emotional control, and help regulate behavior. This would help with student stress during testing and any emotional outbursts that could ensue due to testing pressure. Many even think that there could be improvements in Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a common diagnosis in young children today. Chemlynski again quotes Marano;

Marano believes the lack of sufficient play time could be a factor in 'the impulse control problems we label attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.' She says the explosion of ADHD diagnoses has emerged at the same time that recess is vanishing.

Play not only helps improves brain function but it increases students ability to think fast, challenge ideas, maintain required flexibility and mental dexterity and supports adaptability. Each one of these components can also be offered as key elements to being a successful test taker. The questions I am left asking: can we learn to incorporate more play into classroom learning? For example: How can we change a math lesson into a physical lesson that helps to retain concepts and improve brain function at the same time? How can we support literature and reading through active play? Chemlynski states Marano's idea of play by simply saying, "It (play) thrives on complexity, uncertainty, and possibility, which make play just about the perfect preparation for life in the twenty-first century."

Play needs to be integrated with curriculum to share a healthy balance inside and outside the classroom. Even in kindergarten, according to Miller and Almon, there seems to be a “disappearance of children’s play.”

High stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating as schools increasingly are required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs or special education classes on the basis of test scores.

It seems as if policy makers for education are at a crossroads. One direction holds the path to more testing and meeting state standards, the other a path of play and freedom of years past. I am offering another path: one of balance. Like anything in life balance is the key to healthy, thoughtful, and wise choices. If we are to promote more testing and increase the standards to be met in education, shouldn’t we also promote equally, more physical movement by incorporating play into lessons and more unstructured, yet safe, outdoor exploration and play? In the article, *Crisis in Kindergarten*, there is a call to action list set forth for policy makers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents listing six important ideas to bring play back to the schools and ensure that it does not disappear altogether. As I read through these ideas I was particularly impacted by the fifth one:

Give teachers of young children first-rate preparation that emphasizes the full development of the child and the importance of play, nurtures children’s innate love of learning, and supports teacher’s own capacities for creativity, autonomy, and integrity.

If we are to truly foster children’s ‘innate love of learning’ we must encourage a love of school. What better way to support this love than in the early elementary years, through play and activities that keep children moving and learning. Through developing educational curriculum that integrates movement and play and continues to strive for academic excellence, a balance would be achieved for diverse and well-rounded opportunities for students to find success and enjoy the journey through school.

Overall, I found a rich argument for the support of efforts to keep play in the elementary school setting. The immediate and constructive impact that play has on social structures, environmental education and awareness, and positive increase in academic performance and the decrease of academic stress levels, makes the removal of such play unfathomable. I found a fierce passion creep up when I read that playtime is in danger of becoming extinct. I feel that in the future I will have to be an advocate for play. As a teacher we take on many diverse roles: teacher, advocate, investigator, mentor, guide, and companion. This role of advocate for play is going to be one more constant role that I feel strongly in supporting.

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