Developing the Sixth Sense: Play

by Lawrence A. Baines and Ruslan Slutsky

> Play is by its very nature educational. And it should be pleasurable. When the fun goes out of play, most often so does the learning.
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> —J. Oppenheim, 1984

A sign posted above the teacher's desk in a classroom we recently visited announced in large red letters: "Absolutely no displays of emotion will be tolerated." Although the motivation behind the sign—the desire to control outbursts and to keep students on task—is understandable, legislating emotion out of the classroom often leaves nothing but apathy to fill the void. In many ways, the "no emotions" sign symbolizes the current uber-seriousness that has become the norm in K–12 schools. Today, any activity that does not directly contribute to enhancing the quality of the bottom line—the test scores of students—has become suspect. Once the movement to tie salaries of teachers and administrators to test results gets fully under way, levels of stress and fear will only rise. Yet stress and fear do not help build positive dispositions or encourage creativity: they inhibit them (Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Seligman 2002).

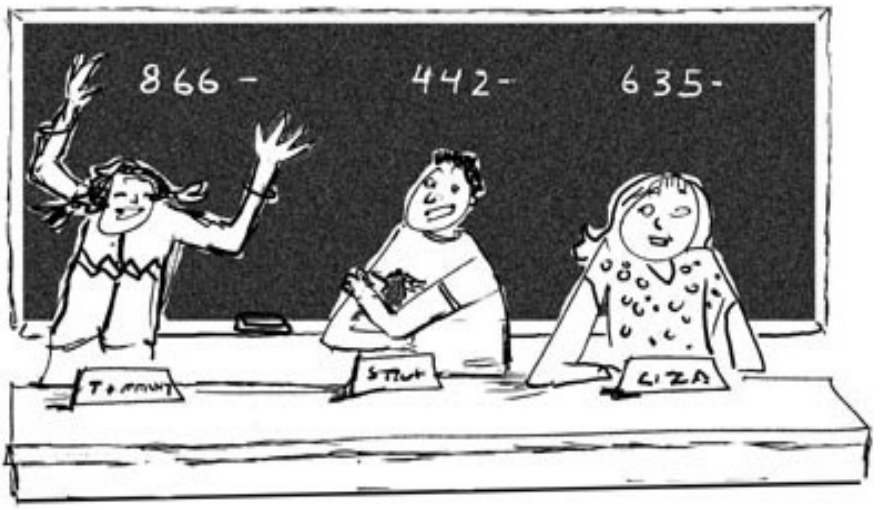
Traditional ways of teaching—working from a textbook, designing quizzes, and assigning seat work—are predicated on the idea of students' ability and desire to self-regulate. However, these sedentary techniques are ineffective with unmotivated students and poor readers. Teachers commonly invoke fear of failure in an attempt to engage students in the activity at hand. "This will be on the test!" has become a modern-day mantra. But such an appeal does not work with students who do not fear failing grades.

Student apathy is one reason "traditional" approaches to teaching have yielded such mediocre results in recent years, at least

according to national and international benchmarks. Reports from the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), Program for International Student Achievement (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are more likely to induce panic than hope because many students care nothing about how well they perform.

The OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) conducted an exhaustive study of achievement in the K–12 schools of thirty countries and found no correlation between the amount of homework and student achievement levels. In fact, in countries where more homework is assigned, national achievement is actually lower than in countries where almost no homework is assigned (Baines 2007). Similarly, no correlation has been found between achievement and high-stakes testing, measured by various international and national exams (Baker and LeTendre 2005). The contention that higher academic achievement can be attained through more examinations, longer school days, additional homework, and a narrowed curriculum has little empirical support.

Yet these initiatives remain popular throughout the United States, while student dispositions are systematically ignored. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, 70 percent of American adolescents claim that they are bored every day at high school (Yazzi-Mintz 2006). Among those who wind up dropping out, about half identify boredom as the primary factor contributing to their decision (Azzam 2007).



Ennui is seeping into the earlier grades as well. In Head Start programs children only three years old are expected to cultivate alphabetic awareness and other skills that will supposedly enhance their future academic achievement (Zigler, Singer, and Bishop-Josef 2004). In elementary grades, testing mandated by No Child Left Behind focuses upon pre-established achievement levels in reading and mathematics. As a result, instruction in reading and mathematics has increased dramatically, while time devoted to art, music, physical education, recess, and even lunch—all the fun periods—has declined; in some schools, it has disappeared completely (McMurrer 2008).

The relentless emphasis on test scores in K–12 schools has resulted in an erosion of play and an active skepticism about fun, even among our youngest children. Not so long ago, early childhood and elementary education was devoted as much to social and psychological development as to academics. Of course play, an essential component of healthy human development, has been shown to affect creativity, cooperation, openness, and intelligence positively (Hair and Graziano 2003; Russ 2004). An unintended consequence of NCLB's overemphasis on performance has been the declension of children's social and psychological development.

When a teacher turns learning into play, students no longer need to be coerced: they are intrinsically motivated to participate and they become eager to engage in the activity again in the future. From this perspective teachers who deliver a somber regimen of testing and homework may actually work against student achievement.

Willing involvement would seem a desirable prerequisite for most educational endeavors. Toward this end, the entry point for lessons, especially at the beginning of a unit, should be accessible, low-stress, and fun. The teacher's job, as guardian of intellectual as well as social development, is gradually demonstrating to students how to play appropriately. High standards and academic rigor, while laudable goals, cannot be achieved without voluntary participation by the students themselves. Amalgamating play to learning can direct the focus and energy generated by play toward academic goals.

One teacher in Florida had great difficulties getting his students to learn vocabulary. He tried coercion, bribery, and frequent repetition. Nothing worked. His students not only continued to fail their vocabulary exams but also learned to loathe "vocabulary days." In desperation the teacher developed a game in which teams of students competed against one another in the mode of a television game show. Eventually, his students began looking forward to

"vocabulary days," grades crept into the A and B range, and the classroom began percolating with intensity and laughter.

Early one morning, an assistant principal caught students trying to enter this teacher's classroom an hour before the start of school. After some prodding, the students confessed that they had been trying to obtain the latest list of vocabulary words. Imagine. One day, you might think students could not care less about vocabulary—that they will never learn any new words; a few weeks later, students start showing up unannounced an hour before the morning bell just to get their hands on the latest list. The difference in student attitudes and performance can be attributed to a single strategy—turning the study of vocabulary into play.

Although researchers (Marantz 2008; Shiner, Masten, and Roberts 2003; Singer and Singer 2005) have found that play enhances creative thought, fosters trust, helps develop divergent and conditional thinking, and reduces stress—all of which can lead to increased learning—another reason for injecting more play into schooling is more fundamental. Play simply enriches the quality of life. As Stuart Brown (1995) has noted, a life without play isn't much of a life.

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