"You're It!": Thoughts on Play and Learning in Schools

Type: Horace Feature
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Source: *Horace* Summer 2008, Vol. 24 No. 2

It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them. - Leo Buscaglia

This past fall at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, after finishing the dreaded mile run, many of my middle school students took the opportunity to spend a half an hour rolling down hills. They loved it, and have since begged to go back, just to run up to the top and then come flying down on their backs and stomachs. At the time, I was wondering, "What if someone else sees this class? Is this 'worthwhile' instructional time'? Don't I need to be facilitating or teaching?" Responding to hearing about this at home, a parent of one of my advisees emailed, "Thank you for recognizing that sometimes the most important thing for a kid to do is to roll down a hill on his belly!"

We're very serious about education in CES schools. However, in our earnest attempts to engage students in meaningful and thought-provoking work or dialogue, is it possible that we're missing out on the crucial downtime of childhood: play?

Most people who know about children agree that play is essential to their growth and health. Play comes in a variety of forms, and can be defined as self-managed, creative, light-hearted, and spontaneous, involving rule making and breaking. Early childhood researchers have done much to forward the cause of play as a vital part of the development of young children, and have documented benefits of imaginative, social or 'free play.' A 2006 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics said free and unstructured play "is healthy and, in fact, essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient." This is a significant claim, so with these associated benefits of play, why don't we place more emphasis on it in schools? Many preschools explicitly include playtime, or structured dramatic and social play with the goal of improving children's social skills as well as improving their ability to think flexibly. In "Creative Play Makes for Kids in Control," a recent National Public Radio interview, neuroscientists Deborah Leong and Adele Diamond explained that their research shows that imaginative play can also develop important executive function skills, which may also be some of the best predictors of academic success. However, this resurgence of playtime is in direct opposition to many school districts' emphasis on standardized tests scores, since as the fiscal and public pressures to perform well on tests increase, the number of gym, art, music or drama classes tends to decline , as does time for recess.

Not only are kids playing less at school, but they are playing differently at home and in their neighborhoods. With the advent of television and toy commercials in the 1950s, play changed from being activity-based to being more object-based, says Howard Chudacoff in Children at Play: An American History. For young kids, instead of improvising games based on multi-use, neutral toys like blocks or chalk, many children now have toys that make noise, "do something," or that are intended for a single purpose.

Older children, from middle school on, are often shuttled from one organized activity to another, where adults constantly tell them the rules and the structure of their "play." Because of safety concerns, some aren't allowed the freedoms that many of us had in our own neighborhoods growing up, and still others sit inside staring at the television or playing video games for hours. When I asked one high school student what he and his friends did together for "play," he responded with, "Well, we play a lot of Wii, I guess." Kids who leave the house with the old cry of "I'll be back for dinner!"— and families who let them— are on the endangered species list here in the United States. In today's plugged-in climate of iPods, cell phones, video games, and reality television, the amount of time that kids actually play outdoors, or even inside together, has continued to decrease. I grew up in a neighborhood with kids of all ages, and it was quiet enough that

we could play in our yards, in our streets, and generally roam the neighborhood without adult supervision. In the Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, Richard Louv observes that these experiences play a unique role in child development. Spending time in nature, he says, helps restore an inner sense of connectedness with the environment, and research has shown that it may also help reduce symptoms of attention deficit disorders, and mediate stress levels in children.

At the 2007 CES Fall Forum, Deborah Meier and Jane Andrias held a workshop called "Stories of Play." There, teachers, students, and parents each shared memories of how we used to play as younger children. Mine were recollections of Red Rover at the bus stop, kickball in the streets, and a made-up game the kids in my neighborhood called "Mission Impossible." My small group talked about creating "detective agencies," having game night with their families, and exploring nearby forests. The common themes were of independence, creativity and, mostly, a lack of supervision by adults. No one's stories were about organized sports teams or team-building games in schools, we noted. They were all spontaneous, most involved siblings or family members, and all involved creating something from our imaginations. After, Deborah Meier asked us, "So what is the point of sharing these stories? Why have this workshop?" Well, "Why play?" is the real question, I'd argue. Many of us grew up playing, and maybe even recognize its inherent value, but we are not always sure of exactly how we benefited from things such as climbing trees or pretending to be knights, horses, and monsters in our backyards.

Why Play?

What are the actual benefits of playing? Do kids learn skills so necessary from making up elaborate games about dinosaurs, bunnies, and space aliens that we would even consider including play in schools when our schedules are already jam-packed in response to high-stakes testing?

Many childhood development theorists, including Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and D.W. Winnicott, have written extensively about play as an integral part of the world of children, in which they learn to reconcile their inner world with outer reality, work to attain mastery over their environment, and learn social rules or norms. Newer research in the field of neuroscience has also argued that imaginative play in early childhood may help to develop the critical cognitive skill of executive function, specifically what we call, "self-regulation." Young children are relatively unable to control their impulses, but their behavior is in part controlled by external forces—a "no" from a parent, a reward, or a punishment. As we grow older, our sense of self-control shifts to being largely managed by internal impulses—part of the system of regulating our own behavior. We learn to inhibit inappropriate impulses, to shift from one task or environment to another, to manage our time, and to initiate activities by ourselves. These are all crucial pieces of executive functioning, a construct used to describe a set of cognitive abilities that helps to manage our behavior, a so-called "control center" of the frontal lobe. Deborah Leong and Adele Diamond, neuroscientists researching the development of executive functions in children, spent time evaluating "Tools of the Mind," a program for preschools designed around Vygotsky's theories of play. They found that participants in this curriculum scored higher on tests of executive functioning, after they had spent one year working explicitly to improve skills involving memory and organization. Leong and Diamond explain that these self-regulation behaviors develop during play as kids make up rules, engage in self-talk, and learn to direct and inhibit their own behavior during games. Some researchers argue that these executive functions are also the critical malfunctioning systems in disorders of attention. Dr. Russell Barkley, a prominent researcher in the field of attention disorders, believes that self-control is actually the primary deficit in kids with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and that problems with attention are a secondary characteristic of the disorder.

Most of today's video games are the antithesis of executive function "developers," requiring kids to respond to visual and auditory stimuli that encourage immediate reactions instead of critical thinking. There is no time to stop, process information, or consider the implications or relevance to our own lives. The intrusion of technology isn't only a problem at home. At the beginning of advisory, and classes, I have to quickly remind one or two kids, "Please stow all electronic devices in your backpacks for the duration of the ride." Even with a daily reminder, they still seem surprised at this, "My iPod isn't turned on," one says. "I can still hear you."

When play involves physical activity, as much of it does, there may be other benefits. In his newest book, Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Education and the Brain, Dr. John Ratey explains the positive effects of exercise on our brain, describing research that correlates increased physical activity with decreasing levels of stress and depression, and increased ability to concentrate or focus for longer periods of time. When asked about exercise, one junior at my school declared, "If I don't get at least an hour of

physical activity a day, I'd be completely grumpy! It lets me relieve stress and not worry. I guess other kids like to read or draw, but for me, that's how I deal with it." This year, Parker is installing a major building addition. As a result of the construction, our outdoor space has been severely limited, and the loss of even a few minutes of outdoor break time has had noticeable effects on the students. Judy Gibson, a middle school science teacher, said, "I hadn't realized until this year how important our ten minute breaks were to the kids. Last year, we would go outside for some fresh air and movement, even in the winter! This year, they can only use the hallway for break and occasionally we play basketball in the gym. I have really felt the pent up energy; there is more restlessness in the classroom and our kids have a harder time maintaining focus for extended periods.

So what happens if kids get to middle or high school having had little to no playtime? What are the repercussions? Psychologist Harry Harlow, famous for his experiments using monkeys to learn about attachment and isolation behaviors, replaced real monkey mothers with homemade cloth-surrogates to test what factors were needed for "normal development." Interested in the role of play in socialization of young monkeys, Harlow took away their natural playtime, keeping them in social isolation for up to six months. When he reunited these monkeys with their normally raised peers, they exhibited aggressive social behavior like biting and hitting, as well as autistic-like qualities of rocking and avoidance. However, with the addition of a half an hour of playtime, Harlow found that the socially awkward monkeys could be re-socialized to be comparable to their peers. So, that leads me to wonder, "Is it possible that our kids are like these monkeys?" As they miss these experiences in their childhood, will they become less flexible, less able to agree upon and make rules with their peers, and more aggressive? I do have kids in class who seem like they missed out on these important social experiences. Most of us learn over time that even though we'd like to win, we still wait for the "Ready, Set, Go," before we leave the start line. We understand that to play with others means to compromise, to inhibit our basic impulses, and to adjust our level of competition accordingly.

Physical Activity as Play

One of the ways that I suggest we can include more playtime in middle and high schools is by re-envisioning traditional gym class. At Parker, all seventh through tenth graders have "Wellness" classes four days a week, three of which are designated for an hour of physical activity. In our classes, we offer a mix of the conventional, with games like floor hockey and soccer, along with activities like rock climbing, walks, problem-solving activities, and large group tag games. This three hours a week of physical activity is significantly more time than students get in many other larger public schools, but it almost never seems enough for some kids. Just recently, I listened to my students discuss how having daily Wellness classes affects their school day:

> Kevin, 14 years old: "I can't sit still for too long. I need to run. At my old school, we had [physical activity] once a week for a half hour and I was always hyper and the teachers were always mad at me. They didn't care that I needed to move! I love going outside for classes…it's really hard to be stuck in a classroom."
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> Greg, 13 years old: "I use Wellness class to get rid of stress. I play it off, and I use it to have something to look forward to and keep myself motivated and going through the day."
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> Katie, 14 years old: "It helps me focus better because if I have a lot of energy it's hard to focus or it gives me new energy to pay attention. It's something to look forward to, if I am bored at school, I think about what we will do in Wellness."
>
> Adam, 12 years old: "It's basically all I love about school."

Their spirited discussions revolved around needing a physical break in their day, a respite from sitting in a classroom, helping them focus their energy, and allowing them social "down-time" when they are able to talk and play with friends.

But are they engaging in real play? I am supervising and structuring it after all, and as Leong and Diamond explain, too much of kids' play time is overly programmed for them, not allowing them the time to learn to monitor themselves, and build those critical cognitive skills. However, the social aspects of our physical activity classes can replicate some features of traditional play. They still need to negotiate rules, even in

frequently played games, and since most of the games are interactive, they are constantly developing the way they act towards one another. I watch them, like an anthropologist observing this strange and complex social dance that they do in adolescence. In fleeting moments in class, if I'm paying attention, I start to learn a bit more about their personalities—the split second decisions they make about who to pass to, what to say to encourage others, whether or not to be mad and argue a call, and how or if to address dishonesty when they see it. I see the kid who lies about being "out" during dodgeball, and the ones that volunteer to be goalie when no one else wants to. It seems to me that the kids who are experienced at making "neighborhood rules," negotiating minutia such as "how close can you be to throw at the goal?" or "how many steps can you take with the ball?" have a distinct social advantage. Most of us who grew up playing on our own learned how to deal with kids who didn't play by the rules, who played too rough, or took the game way too seriously, without an adult intervening. I try to teach these skills in classes of 25 students, but still wonder, "Can we teach kids to play?" Or can I just make room for it, and do my best to give feedback at critical moments?

Our Wellness team has worked to include games that ask kids to create strategy, to think, to be creative and spontaneous. In a game called "Manhunt," students use a large open field bordered by woods and small outbuildings first to hide and evade the tagger, and then to join the manhunt and find and tag the final remaining students. Kids have all sorts of strategies: many just enjoy the hiding, covering themselves with leaves, concealing themselves under bushes, or trying to stand innocuously behind trees. Others might pretend to be "it,' jumping out and chasing people around in an attempt to keep the taggers away from them. I usually play this with the kids, and have enjoyed many afternoons in these trees, peering out from behind branches in search of my prey, then springing out like a lion chasing the gazelles. Sounds fun, doesn't it? Kids laugh, I laugh, we're all out of breath. Isn't this play?

This variation on hide-and-go-seek, along with other games like Capture the Flag, Four Square, and various tag and ball games can all include elements that we used to define play earlier: lighthearted, improvised, and imaginative. Just listen to this litany of rules negotiated in a game of Four Square outside on the pavement! *My turn. Okay, old-school, double taps, no penguins, no cherry bombs, no outs on first serve, body language and play nice*. A new student makes her way into the four square, where you get to change the rules and announces: *Alright. Single taps. You have to say the name of a country when you hit the ball, no spikes, firewall, no chicken feet*. Whew!

In many schools, physical activity happens in a variety of settings—classrooms, advisories, recess, and afterschool programs. Here are a few suggestions for ways to make it more like play.

- Let kids make some of the rules, but provide structure so they can improvise. Suggest, and then help enforce that all voices be heard.
- Don't keep score.
- Play games that encourage strategy making and creativity. Laugh. Have fun!
- Be open to changing the game. Some of the most interesting games I've played have happened when a student has suggested, "What if we tried this?"
- Set the example. Play as a faculty—not just competitive games, but those that require imagination and strategy. Take risks.
- Physical activity can definitely be one place for teenagers to engage in playtime, but only when it is structured in such a way that the competition is not central to the enjoyment of the game, and kids are able to play together naturally in ways they invent.

What Can We Do?

Most of the research advocating for increased playtime is directed towards preschool and elementary school students, but we need to recognize that this need doesn't end in the upper grades. Teens are in desperate need of creative play, and although they may participate in numerous activities, the attitude towards what they are doing together is what makes the biggest difference. We can't treat them like smaller adults; the transition between childhood and adulthood means that they waver back and forth from feeling independent and wanting to break away, and then needing to be able to relax, be silly and act like kids. Teenagers need breaks from the seriousness of school. We need to give them the room for this though, and trust that they will use it well.

A few years ago, I attended a Project Adventure workshop, at which my two colleagues and I prepared for the school year by learning and playing warm-up tag games and team-building events. After being a part of a "Wolfpack," a tag game where when we were hit by the ball we joined the "pack" and had to howl loudly, I found myself thinking that my 14 year olds might not go for this. "Would they really howl?" I questioned, and what would happen if they didn't? In our reflections at the end of the workshop, my goal for the year became to trust that my classes could have fun, relax, and howl like wolves when given the space. Trust, along with my own willingness to be silly and make a fool of myself, were the important components for success here. I have to constantly try to remind myself to allow students to help make the rules, to make changes, to be funny, and have fun, but this requires that I give up part of my well-earned classroom control, and trust that it will be okay. Sometimes it doesn't work, but sometimes it does, and even moments of this can make a big difference in classroom culture. Between classes, I lock the gym closet door, and put away my equipment. I've learned that this is the easiest way to keep the one or two kids for which the balls are totally irresistible from throwing them at each other and making class a bit harder to start. However, I recently walked in and a small group of eighth grade boys were flinging around a pinnie that had been left on the ground. They had devised a whole game around this small piece of cloth, kind of a cross between tag, keep-away and dodgeball. Watching this, I know that kids will always find ways to play, and that some will continue to seek it out while we re-learn how to provide space for it.

How can we encourage and stimulate imaginative play in students past their prime playing years? What else can we do to reverse the effects of too much screen time? One of the ways we can help change this trend is to model it ourselves. I appreciate our middle school division faculty meetings because we play together! We've made it a priority to share games and short activities in order give us each more of an advisory toolbox. One of our more productive meetings consisted of sitting under a parachute "mushroom," throwing neon-colored foam balls at each other, laughing wildly. However, recently I heard one of my colleagues ask, "Why is it that we ask our students to always take risks, but we are so hesitant ourselves?" She was referring to the fact that many of our female teachers were less than enthusiastic about playing in the Faculty Women vs. Varsity Girls Basketball game, where we usually get thoroughly crushed by the high school girls. We don't only need to make the time for play, but we also need to be open to it in our classrooms, our homes, our daily lives. Play happens when we allow ourselves to change things, to invent something new, to relax. Play was the start of who we are today, and it allows us the freedom to be anything we can imagine. Lenore Terr broadly defines play as "any activity aimed at having fun,' in her book Beyond Love and Work: Why Adults Need to Play, and she argues that play is also a necessary part of our adult lives. Play "gives us pleasure, a sense of accomplishment, of belonging…it is an opportunity for learning," Terr writes.

Let's all break out the rainbow parachute, hide under piles of leaves, and howl like wolves more often.

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The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, a CES Small Schools Project Mentor School, is a public charter school open by lottery admissions to all residents of Massachusetts in grades seven through twelve. One of the state's first charter schools, Parker was started in 1995 by area parents and teachers.

For more on Project Adventure's adventure-based experiential curriculum and programs, visit www.pa.org.

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This resource last updated: July 22, 2008

Database Information:

Source: *Horace* Summer 2008, Vol. 24 No. 2
Publication Year: 2008
Publisher: CES National
School Level: All
Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent
Issue: 24.2