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A Thesis in the Field of *The Power of Play in Education*
for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

Alexandra Naclerio

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Abstract

At its current state, the educational system in America seems doomed with its single-minded, single-method approach to education. Educational systems in many parts of the world are formally instructed with a huge emphasis on teaching to the tests. Despite an understanding of the importance of exploration in the classroom, play is not seen as learning. When teachers aim to include play in their classroom, often children are not playing at all. In relationship to that debate, I argue that play is the essence of any classroom.

The research I have completed has provided me with articles and field experience that supports the necessity for a play-based education and ways in which to foster and advocate for play within the classroom. Play enables us, as educators, to see each child as unique, different, and interesting in their own way. Through supporting children's interests, questions, and ideas, curriculum can be planned. Through providing children with open-ended materials, an environment, and documentation of work, we raise questions and focus closely on their ideas and interests. By allowing children to explore and play, we enable them to communicate in the purest form. This thesis will aim to discuss ways in which play should be seen as essential to every classroom.

Acknowledgments/Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Sheila Hanna who introduced me to the field of Progressive Education. From the beginning of my college education, you provided me with the privilege of accompanying you to the Sarah Lawrence Art of Teaching Saturday Seminars, and have inspired me every day to educate for a democratic society. Thank you for being my teacher, mentor, and most of all friend! You make my life worthwhile.

I would like to thank my mentors at Sarah Lawrence College - Jerusha Beckerman, Patricia Virella, Denisha Jones, Suzy Schwimmer, Lorayne Carbon. To my colleagues and lifelong friends, thank you for your support, advice, and collaboration throughout the past two years.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the people most dear to my heart. To my parents, thank you for believing in me every day. To my brother, Thomas, your guidance and support does not go unnoticed. To my older sister, Maxie, thank you for your advice and support in all aspects of my life and for making me an Aunt. To my younger sister, Eliana, thank you for always being a listening ear and staying up late to talk. I love and appreciate you all the world and more! I would also like to thank myself for staying determined and persevering through these past two years.

Annotated Outline

I. Introduction

- A. Every child deserves the opportunity to play, including children in older grades. Often in classrooms, there is not enough time for play. However, play has the power to emphasize the ways in which children naturally learn and explore the world around them. This play can include fantasy play, talk, outdoor play, block play, art as play, loose parts play, and more.
- B. If teachers are aware of the power of play and how play positively affects children's learning, then they can create classrooms and learning environments that support and value children.
 - 1. There have been several policies that focus on accountability and memorization. One example was the No Child Left Behind Act. This act was designed to reduce the achievement gap between white, middle-class students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, a huge emphasis was placed on rote learning and memorization. Although that policy is no longer in effect, play was ultimately pushed out of the classroom.

II. Play

A. Play

- 1. Some will argue that play is the activity that occurs after school when the important work is complete.
- 2. When we think of play, as Progressive educators, we begin to think about the different types of play that fuel learning and that enable children to make meaning of the world around them. Learning and play are one and the same. Through play, children learn and make sense of the world. Play shouldn't be separated from learning.
- 3. The different types of play
 - a. What types of play are there? Give an example of each and how you have seen it in the school setting.
 - i. Dramatic Play (Play that allows children to express feelings they can't directly express. Dramatic play also enables children to make meaning of an often confusing world).
 - ii. Block Play
 - iii. Art as Play
 - iv. Loose Parts Play
 - v. Outdoor Play
 - vi. Storytelling and Play
 - vii. Play in times of crisis - what does it do for children? Covid having a huge impact on children's pretend play - Why is this idea so important and necessary?

- b. Although we recognize and value the importance of play in the classroom, it is still lacking.
 - 4. Why play doesn't always happen?
 - a. The prescribed curriculum doesn't incorporate play. There is no time for play to occur.
 - b. What happens when there is no play in the classroom? What do classrooms look like instead?
- III. The Power of Play
 - A. What can play teach us, as educators? Through play, children make us aware of their strengths and the ways in which they learn. It is through the authentic experience of play that children are able to participate in the world around them.
 - B. What does play do for a child? How can children be in charge of their play? How and why do children play? Give examples of children playing in the classroom - Purple Circle, ECC
 - C. How to facilitate play for young children?
 - 1. What materials are necessary for children to engage in play?
- IV. My experience of play as a child
 - A. A reflection of outdoor play that I engaged in at home
 - 1. A recollection of my earliest memory of playing in or out of school. Describe the setting/atmosphere, what occurred, who was involved, how you felt, what you thought.
 - B. Describe what you think of when you think of play at school. The idea that play is not what comes to mind. There was not a place for play in my school.
- V. Play-based classrooms/schools
 - A. What should a classroom that values play look like?
 - B. A Reggio Emilia Classroom
 - 1. The Hundred Languages of Children. There is a purpose and meaning in the play that children engage in. What does a Reggio Emilia classroom look like in regards to play? What does it look like when students are fully engaged in play? What are the different kinds of play children engage in?
 - C. ECC
 - 1. What did you learn as an assistant teacher in a 4/5s classroom? What did you gather about children over the course of a year as they engaged in play throughout the day?
 - D. Purple Circle
 - 1. What did you learn through your field experience in both the little kids and big kids classrooms? What did you gather from creating curriculums that were based on the interests and ideas of children in regards to play?
 - E. What does play look like in the different grades of school?
 - 1. Discuss how it is often only valued in early childhood

2. Examples of it in older classrooms/grade levels - Block Program at City & Country, and in public schools too - like Central Park East and Ella Baker.
This type of play is possible for all children.

VI. My future classroom/values

- A. What will your future classroom look like? What will it include? What materials will be necessary to have? What time will be dedicated to play/free choice?
- B. What do you see as of utmost importance in your classroom? What do you value in the classroom?

VII. Advocating for play

- A. What are the ways in which you can advocate for play to parents, educators, colleagues, etc.?
- B. What are ways to support play in your classroom?

Quotes

“In time we discovered that play was indeed work. First there was the business of deciding who to be and who the others must be and what the environment is to look like and when it is time to change the scene. Then there was the even bigger problem of getting others to listen to you and accept your point of view while keeping the integrity of the make-believe, the commitment of the other players, and perhaps the loyalty of a best friend. Oddly enough, the hardest part of the play for us to reproduce or invent were the fantasies themselves.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 2)

“Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind, whether in the service of further storytelling or in formal lessons.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 26)

“Our fantasy characters became our confidants. We would talk and listen to them and tell their stories at will. They did not mask reality; they helped us interpret and explain our feelings about reality.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 29)

“We must continue to find time for play rather than just complain that it is not present. We may do this by recording conversations and making time for play.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 33)

“In dramatic play, language becomes more vivid and spontaneous, enabling young children to connect, with greater fluency and curiosity, the words and phrases they know to new ideas. The process involves not only the flow of words and imagery but of bear” will teach the letter B, a good thing to know, but one must also know who likes to be the father bear and how bears and kittens might get across a poison river.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 73)

“Children are not one-dimensional. Their learning does not occur along a well-defined path. We are constantly reminded through play of the surprises and wonders of childhood.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 72)

“Which comments of ours supported the play and extended the conversation? Which of our interventions dampened the spirit and spoiled the drama? What could we learn about fantasy play that had been unknown to us before?” (Paley, 2004, pp. 74)

“Pretending is the most open-ended of all activities, providing the opportunity to escape the limitations of established rituals. Pretending enables us to ask “What if?” (Paley, 2004, pp. 92)

“The children knew we had tapped into something really powerful, something that school and adults don’t often let us tap feel that right now I’m able to see its truest and deepest value. How amazing that this lesson comes from the age group listened to the least.” (Paley, 2004, pp. 108)

“Pretend” often confuses the adult, but it is the child’s real and serious world, the stage upon which any identity is possible and secret thoughts can be safely revealed.” (Paley, 1990, pp. 7)

“Unstructured play is play that is structured by the kids themselves rather than by adults.” (Gray, 2013, pp. 272)

“Play, as I define it and as many other play theorists tend to define it, is, first and foremost, self-chosen and self-directed. Players choose freely whether or not to play, make and change the rules as they go along, and are always free to quit. Second, play is intrinsically motivated; that is, it is done for its own sake, not for external rewards such as trophies, improved résumés, or praise from parents or other adults. Third, play is guided by mental rules (which provide structure to the activity), but the rules always leave room for creativity. Fourth, play is imaginative; that is, it is seen by the players as in some sense not real, separate from the serious world. And last, play is conducted in an alert, active, but relatively unstressed frame of mind.” (Gray, 2013, pp. 274)

“Play and exploration are the natural ways by which children have always educated themselves.” (Gray, 2013, pp. 278)

“Play will be to the 21st century what work was to the industrial age—our dominant way of knowing, doing, and creating value.” (Kane, 2012)

“The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.” (Dewey, 1916, pp. 60)

“What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children’s own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.” (Malaguzzi, 2012, pp. 44)

“Once a kindergarten hums with play, all forms of learning take place spontaneously and deeply.” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 58)

“On the ferry ride back to Manhattan, I reflected on how four simple ingredients—junk, tools, physical space, and playworkers—could create such a powerful learning environment, where children appeared to develop their “Four Cs” (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity) for hours on end.” (Walker, 2016)

“Play is a highly beneficial and deeply natural way in which kids learn... Play has deeply important roles in the development of intellectual skills, in social skills, in developing empathy, in stretching our imaginations and exploring our creativity.” (Robinson, 2016)

“Even when the play includes elements a parent might find troubling, it’s often a sign a child is working through the intensity of living through something difficult, like a global pandemic.” (Underwood, 2020)

“The arts make it possible for all children, regardless of their difference, to participate fully in the process of education.” (Gallas, 1991, pp. 50)

Process Paper

As I entered the program in September of 2019, I knew what I was passionate about and I knew that the teaching and learning inquiry I was embarking on would be the foundation of my master's thesis. I was introduced to the field of Progressive education at Westchester Community College. I began my fieldwork at the Sarah Lawrence College Early Childhood Center. My second fieldwork placement was at Purple Circle Early Childhood Program located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Through my work at WCC, the SLC Early Childhood Center, Purple Circle, and SLC, I saw enacted what I believe in for children's education. After reading through my previous papers and classwork, I decided to take a look at the essay I wrote when I was applying for entrance into the Art of Teaching Program. I took a look at my values and beliefs and knew that the topic I was focusing on was the most important to my heart. In 2019, I wrote that, "School must be a place where all children can be who they are, given the space and opportunity to imagine. I strive to let their imaginations run wild. As a teacher, I will listen closely to the thoughts and questions of all of my students. Each child is unique and interesting in their own way. I want to give children the opportunity to explore with all mediums; with open-ended materials. Open-ended materials encourage children to bring their ideas and questions forward within a play experience. Through play, the children's thinking can be valued, reassuring them that everyone's ideas and questions are important, and that through shared questions and ideas in a classroom, everyone learns. By supporting children's interests, questions and ideas, curriculum is planned." I was most passionate about play being at the center of any classroom. It is through play that the rest of my values can be seen and enacted. Once I discovered that play would be the topic of my master's thesis, I relied on support from a colleague who had written passionately about play in the past. I found that a majority of the texts and scholars we had read from had some connection to play and learning. I began reading articles, excerpts from books, blogs, and watching videos of play in the classroom. This was the beginning of my thesis forming and I was thrilled.

I spent a lot of time dwelling on the fact that I couldn't complete an annotated outline. It wasn't coming together as I had expected. I would start work on it and quickly put it away because I didn't think it was "right." I then was put in a breakout room on Zoom with a colleague who suggested I take a look at her PowerPoint slides and draft a PowerPoint and then focus on filling out an outline. I took her advice and was able to jump-start from there. I titled each slide which became the main ideas of my outline. I finally saw what I was passionate about coming through and I was excited. I was able to put together all the pieces I had gathered from articles, books, and videos and felt confident in what I was arguing for. Then, I thought about presenting my thesis to a larger audience and immediately felt nervous and overwhelmed. I have never been fond of speaking in front of large audiences and knew that it would be my weak spot. However, when we were asked to sign up for a presentation date, I knew I wanted to be the first presenter in the cohort. Although I am always nervous about presenting, there is something within me that feels more confident and secure in going first. If I wanted to feel more at ease and comfortable, I knew I needed to have everything I wanted to say written down in front of me. I took the advice of a colleague to print out my slides and write down the points that I wanted to speak to on each slide. With enough mediation the morning of my presentation, I knew I would be able to present and would remain confident that it would be exceptional.

As I enter into the field of public education after six years of deep inquiry, play will most certainly be part of every classroom I enter. I will be forever thankful for the opportunity I had to study at Sarah Lawrence College in the Art of Teaching Program. I carry with me a deep value for all children to be seen and heard in every classroom through play.

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