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Play Is Part of the Learning Process, Too

By Colette Daiute

School is back in session, and children are supposed to get serious. They have had time to **play** during the summer, and now it is time for them to work. While such reasoning is familiar to most of us, this dichotomy between **play** and work is one of the greatest myths of education--a dangerous myth that often leads to leaving children out of the educational agenda and ignoring the quality of their life in school. Testing, longer school days, and parental choice all resonate with the theme of increasing the work children do in school, yet **play** is a powerful learning process. Clearly, there is work children have to do in school, and some structure is necessary when many people are sharing resources, but given the freedom to work on challenging tasks in the company of their peers, children devise purposeful and ingenious lessons for themselves in the context of their classroom **play**.

Young children do some of their most important learning through **play**. "peek a boo" helps them learn that the world exists independently of themselves and is often predictable. "Pat-a-cake," a cooperative game, enhances physical and social development. And children make one of the most dramatic of human accomplishments--learning language--by **playing** with sounds and meanings from the time they are born. After kindergarten, though, children are abruptly expected to think and to express themselves like little adults, even as they continue to make discoveries and develop their talents by **playing**. I have seen, in my research, how **play** supports children's literacy development--even up through the 5th grade, when **play** is all but banned from the classroom.

The transcript of a brief conversation between Andy and Russ, two 3rd graders in an urban school, shows how children do difficult work like figuring out the spelling system of English--when they have the freedom to explore academic material on their own terms. When asked to write a report for the class newspaper on events in the Renaissance, Andy and Russ engaged in an effective spelling exercise as they **played** with the sounds of Christopher Columbus's name:

Andy: Yea, I spelled it right! I think.

Russ: N, no.

Andy: Oh (raspberry sounds), oops, I forgot one L. I didn't look at that. Forgot the L.

Russ: Challenged Christopher Columbus and his crew.

Andy: This was a great challenge for.

Russ: Chrissy.

Andy: Chrissy? (Laughter). This is a great challenge for Chris.

Russ: For Mr. Columbus (Laughter)

Andy: It's shorter! (Laughter).

Russ: Put Mr. Columbus.

Andy: Mr. Columbus.

Russ: Columlumbus.

Andy: Colum, Columbumps (Laughter).

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Russ: Colum.

Andy: Colummus? Colum, Clom, Come, Columbus?

Russ: Lumberjack (Laughter)

Andy: Colombos, Columbus. Columbus ...

Russ: Colummmmbababababbbb. Ohhew. B U S. I think that's how you spell it ... Andy: Col-um-bus. Ya, you're right.

Russ: Christopher Columbus. Collumm.

Andy: Ya, where ... Columbus, Columbus. The Spaniard Christopher Columbus discovered America. Now do you know how to spell the last three letters of Christopher Columbus? Oh, I already asked you. Forget it.

Russ: Actually, he rediscovered America.

Andy: No, US.

Russ: And he even made friends with some Indians.

While this **play** may seem capricious, it is actually rule- governed. Breaking down the sounds of unfamiliar words, as Andy and Russ did, helps children with the task of writing about challenging material. After rejecting the temptation to shorten Columbus's name to make it easier to spell, Andy and Russ **played** with the name--"Columulumbus," "Columbumps," "Colummus" which involved analyzing the sounds of the word, testing a variety of sounds, and eventually coming up with the right spelling. Although these same students might groan when given a spelling test by the teacher, they have challenged themselves to explore the rules of spelling and to use these rules as they composed a complex piece of writing--the way that expert authors do. In fact, rather than goofing off when allowed to work together, Andy and Russ, like other children, **played** around material they had not yet mastered, seizing an opportunity to advance their skills.

While **play** may seem silly, it is children's way of making sense of the world. Just as younger children take some control over their lives by **playing** doctor or Mommy and Daddy, older children can take control of intellectual material by **playing** with it in relation to personally meaningful themes. When children **play**, they may appear to stray from the topic, but what they are doing is exploring the topic in relation to their own knowledge, needs, and talents. Since new knowledge is learned only when it relates to prior knowledge, **playing** is a sound way to create bases for new learning.

Allowing children to use their own knowledge as a springboard for learning is also a way to build the curriculum on diverse strengths. Education may be failing in our country because too little attention has been given to making sure that lessons make sense to the diverse population of children in our schools. So finding ways to support children's **play** around their schoolwork is worth more effort than reforms that repeat past failed attempts at telling children what is supposed to make sense.

Play is also an effective learning strategy because it allows children to take risks--which is essential when studying challenging material. Trying out a new word or using unfamiliar concepts is easier for children to do with a friend in jest than with a teacher who evaluates them and expects to see them at their most competent. In formal lessons, only the most confident children take such risks, but in the safe context of **play**, even low-achieving students take on intellectual challenges, examining and using academic materials as they would their toys, and they improve their performance in this process. Allowing **play** in the classroom means supporting children's ownership of intellectual material, and such ownership is the right of all children.

Finally, the laughter in Andy and Russ's lesson is also one of the reasons why it leads to growth. Laughter provides social and emotional support to intellectual development, providing links between the mastery of skills

and the ability to use skills during the course of life. The positive feelings evoked during **play** give children courage to propose and test hypotheses, like the probing ideas Andy and Russ began to explore about Columbus: Was he really the one who discovered America? What about the people who were there before him? By having the chance to say what they think rather than only what they are supposed to think, children advance their critical-thinking skills.

Through **play**, children spontaneously design activities that involve them in taking responsibility over their own learning. It is difficult to think of a more sound educational goal. Yet, reforms continue to propose options that put the power elsewhere--with parents, in tests, in school restructuring--not even with the teacher. Clearly, the job of becoming literate, knowledgeable, and critical does not end with exploring the logic of the English spelling system or social issues, but the kind of analysis, sense-making, and hypothesis-testing children do when they **play** in school sets a firm basis for their intellectual development.

Yet, even when **play** is properly understood as an effective learning process, several misconceptions keep it out of the classroom. One concern about **play** is whether it creates chaos. On the contrary, **play** flourishes in classrooms where teachers provide structure and guidance. For example, the teacher creates a meaningful task like writing a class newspaper, asking children to work together and to use facts and concepts they have been studying. The collaborative process and the common goal provide the structure. And far from being chaotic, children's **play** in school is remarkably on-task.

Another concern raised recently is that when teachers allow children to **play** in school, they may be depriving students of the benefits of instruction. While this could happen, **play** and formal instruction work best when they work together. Teachers can offer precise guidelines on spelling, vocabulary, facts, and the rules of classroom discourse. But these rules are likely to be more useful to children if they can appropriate them in their own ways. If children write reports with a classmate, for example, they can practice using school rules in their own language, lingering over aspects that interest or challenge them. In this way, children have a hand in designing the curriculum as they adapt it and introduce new elements. Creating classrooms in which children own the goals, contents, and strategies through spontaneous processes like **play** means providing all children with points of access and control.

There is great concern that schools in the United States are lax in comparison with those in other countries whose children score higher on achievement tests. Since a major cause of the problem is reported to be that our schools do not require children to work as hard or suffer as rigorous exams as children in other countries, allowing children to **play** in school might be last on the list of reforms. Yet, far from being antithetical to work, **play** is children's way of working. Children use **play** to challenge themselves, design their own lessons, and test themselves. When children in other countries do better, we should explore the culturally relevant ways of making schoolwork meaningful in those countries. **Play** may provide a rationale for learning that we have not otherwise conveyed to our students.

The schools and classrooms where **playful** learning occurs are structured with children in mind. They are schools where children are respected as special and unique and where institutional and pedagogical structures invite children to express themselves and to participate in planning--albeit in subtle ways. For young children, **play** is learning. **Play** means making sense, taking control, creating mastery. When we listen to children's **play** in the classroom, what we hear are their designs for education. Given a

meaningful task, children as young as 8 use **play** as a way to stay on topic-not veer from it's challenge themselves--not avoid their work--and make discoveries that are more profound than silly. Yes, learning should be fun, and finding ways to bring learning alive to children in classrooms should be on the educational agenda.

Colette Daiute is an associate professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

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