

Teacher Play: Regaining a Sense of Playfulness in the Classroom

David Martin

Summary: Research into the importance of play for children shows that it is crucial for their development of social skills, physical well-being, creative problem-solving, and so much more. This article acknowledges that if we want to help our students to be creative, playful, and innovative, we need to begin by activating these same characteristics in our own personal and professional lives.

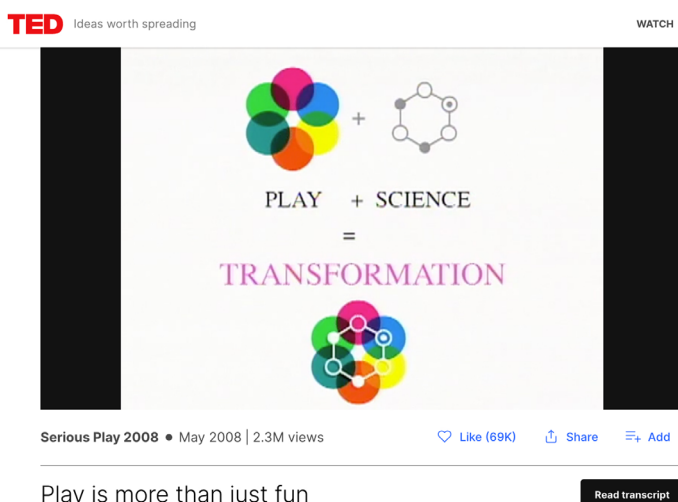
Keywords: teachers, play, social skills, creative problem-solving, innovation

I suspect few teachers would argue that this has not been a challenging time to be a teacher. In many teaching contexts, we are overworked and even more underpaid, or at least undervalued by those who rely on us most. A quick scan of news headlines reminds us that politics has overruled common sense in so many facets of life, which trickles all the way down into how we, as educators, are expected to function in our respective positions. Teachers are expected to be the strength in the classroom in the face of the various adversities, providing a positive example of how to respond to such challenges; yet, some teachers may find themselves with few if any answers to how this should be accomplished. Living in a post-Covid (or maybe not so post-) world is not a situation conducive to having fun and maintaining a sense of playfulness. I would argue, though, that more than ever we need to adopt a playful mindset both in and out of our classrooms before we can expect our students to, and research by Brown and Vaughn (2009),

Gray (2011), and a host of others definitely supports this claim.

As noted, play-deprivation (defined as an inability or inaccessibility for free play) has some serious consequences, according to Gray (2011) and others researching the connections between play deprivation and psychopathy. In fact, he writes that there is a direct correlation between a lack of play and instances of mental disorders among our youth (Gray, 2011). The good news, however, is that integrating play into the fabric of a child's (or adult's) life can prevent future psychological conditions and help them to lead full lives even if their life circumstances are less than ideal (Brown & Vaughn, 2009). The better news is that it is possible in even the worst conditions to build play into our daily routines (Perrin, 2018). In fact, according to Ash Perrin in his TEDx talk titled *The Power of Play*, play is even more imperative than ever, as it can actually "change the direction of somebody's life" (2018, 0:44). He continues saying that the play behaviors people engage in as children help us dream of what we can become.

Before going any further down the rabbit hole of play and why it is important, we need to know what it means when we say the word play. According to both Brown and Vaughn (2009) and Gray (2011), play, or rather "free play" is defined as being self-directed and not driven by extrinsic rewards. In other words, free play is something that individuals dive into without worrying about what someone else will give them and is not defined by anyone outside of the immediate context or our specific interests. It is its own reward, period. This shouldn't, however, be anything new to teachers. It is just something we need to be reminded of now and again, especially during times when we have been isolated and restricted and, in many ways, driven to the brink of mental breakdown over an extended period of time. We need reminders to take time for ourselves so



"Play is more than just fun" by Stuart Brown, TEDxSeriousPlay

that we can give back to others. Play isn't an option, it is a required element for living a productive and happy life (Brown & Vaughn, 2009; Gray, 2011).

I would like to take a paragraph to drive this point home with lessons from four (out of hundreds) TEDx talks on the importance of play to emphasize why play is important for us to engage in and model for students. Lois Holzman (2014) notes that play is crucial due to its power to help individuals establish a sense of personal identity, "defin[ing] who we become." This idea is mirrored in a talk by Tony Wagner (2012), who makes three major points. He discusses the importance of play in the development of those who innovate, saying:

- that innovation goes beyond discipline and is focused on problem-solving,
- that the teachers whose students become innovators generally fall outside the norms for their context, and
- that these teachers understand the balance of "encouraging play, passion, and purpose" both for themselves and for the students.

Another TEDx talk by Mallory Nezam (2017) points out the importance of play for a child's "cognitive and social well-being" and that the purpose of play "is that there really is no point." Nezam's statement about the purpose of play is important because the social and political landscape that drives U.S. educational policy is so focused on the extrinsic rewards that it sets the tone for a life of disappointment and frustration. Ash Perrin (2018) reinforces the connection between play and identity and warns of the dangers of identity confusion, saying that because play is essential for helping children dream of what they could be, if they are deprived of play, it has potential to set them up for a dismal future indeed. Another point made by Perrin (2018) is that play can be as simple as coming together and using whatever is available to make music or art; it doesn't have to be complicated, as the point is to divert attention in a positive direction rather than focusing on the trauma teachers and students may be facing.

As noted earlier, the research surrounding the importance of play is not just an issue relevant to children. Stuart Brown was so passionate about the need for play and research surrounding it that he created a whole institute dedicated to learning more (for more, see the [National Institute for Play](#) website). Researchers at the institute take on important topics, such as the connection between neurological responses tied to the experience of "having fun" (Spinka, Newberry, & Bekoff, 2001), the value of role playing in child development (Bergen, 2002), connections between play and emotions (Burgdorf, 2006), and more. Further, Brown (2009) discusses the connection between the risk of violent behavior mitigation when traumatized youth engaged in play activities, as well as the value of commonly restricted play types such as "rough-and-tumble play" that is actually important in developing social problem-solving skills as well as helping to address

"dominance and competitiveness issues" (2009, p.89). He notes that kids tend to get in trouble at school too quickly when rough-and-tumble play breaks out due to school officials' fears of potential injury, some of which are warranted. There is so much that researchers are still trying to learn, but we do know that play is important, and newer research with adults is learning (Shaefer, 2003; Tink et al., 2017; Sala et al., 2019) that it's not just important for children. Adults need it for many of the same reasons children do (e.g. social skills development, problem solving, emotional/mental well-being, physical health (Brown, 2008; Gray, 2011)), and going without it can have dire consequences.

To say that teachers need play is probably an understatement, but there are four questions that need to drive inquiry about how to integrate play into class planning.

Question 1: If play defines our identity, why might it be essential for us to embody a playful spirit, modeling it for our students? After all, as difficult as it is to maintain joy in these challenging times, our students depend upon us to set the mood in our classrooms.

Question 2: If play is the parent to innovation (Wagner, 2012), why might it be a good idea for us to demonstrate innovative thinking through our own play?

One type of play that has demonstrated impacts for both children and adults, especially in relation to identity and innovation, is that of performative play or role playing (Bergen, 2002). In a study conducted by Enz and Christie (1993), they found that the most effective roles for activating oral language and literacy with preschool-aged children were those that involved teacher play and were non-directorial but more participatory. This is similar to what Wagner (2012) points out that students learn best with teachers who model the innovation process and foster a pattern of play.

Question 3: If we want to take kids' attention off material things and/or external rewards for their efforts, how much more important is it that they see normal things as tools for play?



"The Power of Play" by Mallory Nezam, TEDxGateway Arch

Little children don't need expensive toys to play (a stick will serve nicely as a digging tool, a gun, or a bow and arrow), and neither should we. Interestingly, when asked to come up with a list of even 25 things to do with a broken rubber band, it is challenging, at first, for even adult learners. However, when given the chance to brainstorm with others and a prop (an actual broken rubber band for each person) the process takes off and students' creativity takes over.

Question 4: If in times of crisis, as Perrin (2018) notes, we need play more than ever, why are we not playing more? The short answer is that we are human and fall prey to many of the same barriers as anyone else, but play is just such an integral part of who we are and who we become.

Since there aren't a lot of articles that go beyond providing a rationale for adult play, I wanted to end this article with something a bit less theoretical and more practical. Various sites on the internet list some variations on 11 categories of play types that children engage in that can easily be applied to [the adult experience as well](#). The key is to find something we enjoy and do it, for no reason other than to just do it. Not everyone sees the same activities as equally amusing, so it is crucial that we do a bit of introspection and maybe experiment with new types of play periodically, if for no other reason than to experience the variety of ways our students play. More importantly, we need to take time out of the daily grind to engage in play whether that be on the weekend with our family (or self) or along with the students as a part of classroom activities.

REFERENCE

- Bergen, D. (2002). The role of pretend play in children's cognitive development. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 4(1), n1.
- Brown, S. (2008) Play is more than just fun, TEDxSeriousPlay2008, https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_play_is_more_than_just_fun/transcript?language=en
- Brown, S. & Vaughn, C. (2009). *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Penguin Group.
- Burgdorf, J., & Panksepp, J. (2006). The neurobiology of positive emotions. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 30(2), 173–187.
- Enz, B., & Christie, J. F. (1993). Teacher Play Interaction Styles and Their Impact on Children's Oral Language and Literacy Play.
- Gray, P. (2011). The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Play*, 3(4), 443–463.
- Holzman, L. (2014). Play helps us grow at any age, TEDxNavesink, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4sdVEoQ9Lk>.
- Nezam, M. (2017). The power of play, TEDxGatewayArch, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n34lJfcF1Yg&t=308s>.
- Perrin, A. (2018). The power of play, TEDxJacksonville, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNAtVKLxjnA&t=573s>.
- Sala, Jopp, D., Gobet, F., Ogawa, M., Ishioka, Y., Masui, Y., Inagaki, H., Nakagawa, T., Yasumoto, S., Ishizaki, T., Arai, Y., Ikebe, K., Kamide, K., & Gondo, Y. (2019). The impact of leisure activities on older adults' cognitive function, physical function, and mental health. *PloS One*, 14(11), e0225006–e0225006. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225006>
- Schaefer, C.E. (2003). *Play Therapy with Adults*. Wiley.
- Spinka, M., Newberry, R. C., & Bekoff, M. (2001). Mammalian play: training for the unexpected. *The Quarterly review of biology*, 76(2), 141–168.
- Tink, L. N., Kingsley, B. C., Spencer-Cavaliere, N., Halpenny, E., Rintoul, M. A., & Pratley, A. (2020). 'Pushing the outdoor play agenda': exploring how practitioners conceptualise and operationalise nature play in a Canadian context. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 12(3), 303-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1457071>
- Wagner, T. (2012). Play, passion, purpose, TEDxNYED, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvDjh4l-VHo>.
-



DAVID MARTIN is a teaching associate professor at Washington State University and has been teaching in various contexts since 1997. After tutoring for 2 years, he began the road of classroom teaching, along the way teaching first year composition, various levels of ESL, K-12 Language Arts, back to ESL, and for the past five years teaching composition courses again. Current research focuses on the uses of play research, folklore, and other theme-based approaches in the composition classroom. His favorite forms of play include travel, photography, woodworking, and watching way too many YouTube videos on how to build furniture and other structures. You can contact him at drmartin@wsu.edu.