

# Seeking a “Happy Medium”: How Does Play Fit into the Curriculum?

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One topic that has recently caught the attention of many educators is play. Over the years play has come to mean a number of things in research literature and although some of these meanings have influenced the lives of many educators and parents of young children, there remains a wide range of ideas about play. To gain further insight into these ideas, the NOWPlay Project carried out focus group interviews with educators, from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, who have professional and/or parental investments in young children’s education.

During the focus group meetings, participants asked each other many questions that showed their concerns about the confusing discourse surrounding play. They asked questions such as:

- “That [activity] is part of play-based, right?”
- “If there is bit-by-bit instruction on how to put something together, are they [students] still playing?”
- “When they [students] go to the gym, even if it’s structured, organized games, are they not learning something?”
- “Should children be free to choose which centers they’re doing or should they be doing sort of the standard?”
- “Should each one [play center] fit within the curriculum category?”

The word *play* holds with it a number of meanings and connotations and as such, it is to no surprise that the participants’ discussions revealed that play currently factors into their lives in various ways and to various extents. Participants’ views ranged from play being “messy” or a “waste of time” to play being seen

as a highly skilled process. Some participants viewed play as “structured” and “teacher directed” and so they infused play with their curriculum activities. Others considered play to be “unstructured” and “child-centered”, and incorporated play with “music and movement” activities. Still others viewed play as “inquiry-based learning” that serves as a catalyst for teaching and learning. Piagetian notions of play also surfaced over the course of the focus group interviews, where participants used terms, such as, “parallel play” and “collaborative play” in their descriptions of play events that occurred in their lives, as in this example:

One of the things I noticed, as well, especially with children around 3 or 4-years-old, is that even though they look like they’re playing with each other, they are both just actually monologuing about the same theme. There is no actual exchange between the two, it’s just the idea of an exchange is there, but there’s actually no exchange happening.

Some participants told stories of play in their homes with their own child(ren), while others told classroom stories. Even across similar play contexts, there seemed to be no consensus drawn about what play is or what play-based learning should entail for young children. What these stories did reveal, however, was that the participants seemed to have strong desires toward finding a consensus of play, particularly in educational settings, and that the motivation for these desires seemed to have grown from their feelings of uncertainty about what types of play constitutes best practices for young children

and how they could enact these types of play within the affordances of their practices.

Despite the fact that play holds with it a number of meanings, many participants told us they were uncomfortable enacting their views of play in their professional practices. One of the main barriers that they identified was the pressure to stick to their curriculum. They often felt troubled when attempting to infuse play into their current practices, as highlighted in the following participant’s statement:

I just didn’t feel comfortable doing it [play activities] because I’m struggling to get the curriculum taught. . . so that’s one reason why I got involved with this [NOWPlay] program because I’d like to find ways to legitimately be able to put play back in my program and still feel like I’m meeting the curriculum needs and be able to justify to my principal and any parents that may have an issue with play.

The conversations also highlighted the pressures that teachers and day care providers sometimes felt from parents and principals to eschew play in their professional practices. Although some participants, who were parents and/or principals, denied this (e.g., “it doesn’t really matter to me the method of delivery. It could be play as long as I see learning occurring when I walk into the classes”), there still seemed to be a strongly-felt pressure to stick to curricula and to place focus on the cognitive aspects of children’s development, rather than on, for example, the emotional or social aspects.

Although many of the participants seemed to want to include play activities in their programs, their concerns about the prevalence of parents and principals “hav[ing] an issue with play” seemed to have an effect on what they actually put to practice. This may explain why some NOWPlay participants expressed a strong need for a “happy medium”. In fact, it appeared that the participants’ professional identities as “good teachers” may even hinge on their ability to reach such a “happy medium”. Their thoughts were echoed in the following statement made by one principal:

... I want to see that the kids are learning a skill or you’re moving them forward. So that’s my take on play-based [activities] and there’s lots of ways to incorporate play into administering curriculum and move kids forward and reach the overall specific expectations. A good teacher finds a way . . .

Overall, there seemed to be a strong consensus that “teachers need to know” how to incorporate play activities in the classroom while meeting specific curricular expectations. Perhaps this was why the participants expressed strongly that arriving at a common understanding of play in educational settings was important. Desires to feel “comfortable” with play was at the heart of the participants’ concerns and reaching a consensus about play would provide educators the means to “legitimately” explain, to anyone who may take issue with play, how play-based activities support the curriculum as well as support children’s learning.

### Author Biography

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