

# A Principal's View on Play

**Adam Murray**

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Recently, NOW Play investigators conducted a survey, *Investigating Perceptions about Play-Based Learning* asking parents and caregivers to share their perceptions about play. The information gathered from this survey gives school principals insight into parental perceptions of the value of play within the classroom. Paired with the action research conducted by researchers and teachers in kindergarten and grade 1 classrooms, further educational insight can be gleaned about the worthiness of introducing play-based learning into classroom programs. The combined information from parents' positive perception of play within the classroom and the project's participating teachers' experiences of incorporating play-based learning into their students' lessons, supports a context beneficial to the overall intellectual, social, and physical development of primary students.

As a school principal I see three topics that influence a school's decision to offer play within classrooms to support learning outcomes: first, the potential obstacle of traditional views on play and where play activities should take place; second, the potential benefits of play within the classroom to support student development; and third, ways educators can effectively incorporate play within their classrooms.

## **Views on Play and Where Play Should Take Place**

As a school principal, I would be concerned if a child went home and, in response to a parent's

question, "What did you do at school today?" he or she responded with "Nothing, we just played."

I think that schools are typically seen as a place whose role is to ensure that students succeed academically. So parents often ask questions about how their child is achieving, such as wanting to know if their child is at grade level, if their child has any reading difficulties, or why their child may have difficulty paying attention. These questions relate to outcomes that teachers can measure and compare easily to other students. In this paradigm, play is often seen as having no place and schools often work closely with families using a traditional approach to instruction to help their children succeed in literacy and numeracy.

Play has been typically viewed as having a place during school at recess time, or after school weekdays and on the weekends. Play has been seen as important for enjoyment or relaxation, but not always as a method or pedagogy that supports student learning. However, I have noticed the conception of play has changed over the years. After school play is becoming more formalized. For instance, students leave school and go home to eat a quick snack and then they participate in activities that are very structured like hockey, swimming, dance, etc. There is little time in the day for some students to play freely with others. This is evident on the playground when I see many students are increasingly showing difficulties playing with others during the fifteen to thirty minute recess times.

At the school level, educators expect that children will engage in play during times like gym class, recess time, or during kindergarten centre time. There seems to have been assumptions that parents would not support play during core learning times or as a method to support learning. However, the NOW Play survey findings show that many parents support learning and also think that teachers can be active participants in the play. Instead of believing that play distracts from their children's learning, many parents believe their children become stimulated, motivated, and creative, and the potential to learn is enhanced, when they engage in play activities in a classroom setting. The survey data from parents is important to administrators and teachers as it opens the door to using play as a teaching pedagogy to make the curriculum come alive in kindergarten and the primary grades.

### **Benefits of Play in the Classroom**

My own observations and conversations with kindergarten and grade 1 teachers, about the potential benefits of incorporating play into the learning time of students, are encouraging. I foresee many potential benefits to using play-based strategies within classroom learning times. Can we make education and learning within the classroom as enjoyable as play? Think of the rewards if students were more engaged, motivated, and creative. Would we not have better success teaching students important concepts? The survey results indicate that parents believe children receive the benefits of creativity and imagination when they enjoy play activities. Parents connect children's level of motivation and engagement with the enjoyment they have during play. For educators, this suggests that students will potentially be more engaged and motivated during play-based activities and thus could be in a better state to learn, use, and retain challenging learning outcomes.

Another survey finding shows that parents believe the benefits of play include physical development, especially in the area of fine and gross motor control, as play often involves loco-motor activities. They also indicate that play allows their children opportunities to develop social skills, stressing the importance for their children to learn

to share, take turns, and play fairly with others. I would postulate that these behaviours are essential to any rich learning environment.

Another interesting finding from the parent survey data suggests that parents believe their children learn concepts that span all subject areas when they are engaged in play-based activities. The emerging findings from the NOW Play action research on play-based learning in schools suggest that this is an accurate assumption. Students who are engaged in play-based activities will be intellectually and creatively stimulated and will want to engage in problem solving practices to keep their construct-learning going. For instance, some of the project video data showed students playing in a restaurant centre (kindergarten dramatic play) using props and costumes to establish the realism of their play. They also used appropriate oral language to collaborate, continue their play narratives, and practice the appropriate vocabulary to fit the play scenario. When new students arrived at the centre with different community costumes (e.g., police and hairdresser), they were incorporated into the scenario through the active problem solving of the students engaged in the play. The data also showed students writing their 'food orders' and creating signs to enhance the play and label the different services being offered in the centre. The children were leaping from oral to written language.

This dynamic play scenario was possible because students were actively collaborating. Teachers can use play to help students bring many important concepts together in a meaningful experience. This particular teacher (from the video data) had involved her students in many community field trips and the play-based learning activities allowed students to draw from previous experiences to enhance the classroom play experience. The level of engagement that I saw in these kindergarten students impressed me.

Play-based learning within the classroom creates opportunities for students to exercise choice in their learning and, if done properly, can give students confidence in their ability to learn. Of course teachers can have a major influence over these two outcomes. They can help a shy child

take on different roles during the play for example, or they can help a student develop or reach a skill during play within their zone of proximal learning. With careful attention to students during play-based learning, teachers can encourage students to take leaps in their own learning therefore helping students develop self-confidence and self-direction.

### **Incorporating Play Effectively in the Classroom**

Play-based activities can create time and places for teachers to effectively scaffold learning objectives for their students. As mentioned earlier the survey results indicate that parents believe children are learning while engaged in play and that parents approve of teachers becoming involved in the play. By joining in the play, teachers can scaffold learning. For instance, during February, in which Valentine's Day plays a prominent theme in many kindergarten classrooms, some NOW Play video research data showed a teacher setting up a play-based learning centre with a post office theme. The students clearly loved this centre, as they used props and assigned roles to peers to deliver and sort mail. Eventually a student asked if he could write a Valentine's card so the teacher suggested that he might visit the 'writing' centre to create one and that she would be working there if he needed any help. The children were completely absorbed in the play, wanting to complete the realism of writing and then delivering a Valentine's Day card, and willingly partaking in the new centre. In this type of scenario, a kindergarten teacher can scaffold important learning for students, such as letter recognition, that can be brought back to the imaginative play of the students. This play-based activity merges 'realism' with 'imagination' that is completely motivating and compelling to children and puts them in a state that is receptive to learning.

Another important benefit to incorporating play-based learning into classroom programming is the ability of a teacher to teach and assess the students' uses of oral language. Unit plans can be paired with play-based centres to activate the use of new vocabulary words. Another project within

the NOW Play research, involved teachers in developing and using a community-responsive oral language tool to monitor and assess the students' uses of appropriate language during play-based learning. Oral language is a critical skill necessary for the literacy development of children, and giving teachers the ability to facilitate and then assess the use of oral language is an important piece of teaching to the whole child. In addition, the tool these teachers are helping to develop could be used by teachers to flag students with areas of need in their oral language development.

As educators, if we relegate play just to recess, after school and weekends we might be missing opportunities to support students' intellectual, social, and physical growth. We should not take for granted that all our students are exposed to rich play that can help them with healthy development. Being an administrator in a northern Canadian community, I know that rural areas can be isolating and can sometimes limit the opportunities for children to play with other children. This puts our students at a disadvantage, as they may not be exposed to the rich problem solving that can occur in an environment where engaging play opportunities are abundant.

With all the potential benefits of incorporating play within classroom learning time, I would support well-planned play-based learning within kindergarten and grade 1 classes. When play is used effectively during class time, students are able to learn in stimulating real-life environments. Essential skills, such as literacy and numeracy, take place everyday in our community in interactive ways, not in artificial ways, such as the sitting behind a desk that occurs in conventional classrooms. Play-based learning creates a real-life environment where students can learn and practice really important skills. This is an effective use of students' time as teachers can monitor and even scaffold learning to support students' growth. In their survey responses, parents suggested that play-based learning could make learning come alive. I believe literacy and numeracy could be developed more effectively in the "realistic" contexts of play-based learning scenarios rather than students learning about these

important topics solely through paper and pencil assignments.

In conclusion, school administrators and teachers have been misguided in our assumptions that parents would not support play in the classrooms. Parents have shown us that they would encourage play in the classroom to make learning fun and engaging for their children. They clearly articulated the benefits of play-based learning that echo the sentiments that many teachers have that play can facilitate motivating environments where learning is performed in rich, dynamic real-world scenarios. Teachers would enhance the curriculum and allow it to come alive if they successfully incorporated play-based learning within their classrooms. In addition play-based learning would allow teachers an opportunity to carefully assess and then scaffold student learning. In closing, I think that in the future parents can expect to hear from their child that they played during class time and they had fun learning!

### **Author Biography**

Adam Murray is a member of the Advisory Committee for the NOWPlay Partnership Project and a principal in the Peace River School Division in Alberta.

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