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Purposeful Play

A Teacher's Guide to Igniting Deep and Joyful Learning Across the Day

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CONTENTS

Purposeful Play

Play is joy and play is work.

Section 1

All About Play

The Reasons, Research, and Resources

1

PLAY ISN'T A LUXURY. IT'S A NECESSITY.

It is kindergarten in November, and there is a hum in the classroom generated by four- and five-year-olds deeply immersed in imaginary play. Only recently have some of these children moved from contentedly building individual projects side by side to creating imaginary play worlds collaboratively with their peers. Some children are constructing the Empire State Building out of Magna-Tiles (Figure 1.1), while other children have been building and rebuilding a zombie haunted house inspired by a Halloween book. Over in the sand table, an ice cream stand has opened, and in a group of large cardboard boxes, a family theme is emerging, or trying to at least.

An argument brewing between two girls has gathered a small crowd of onlookers.

"I said, 'I am the mommy!'" Julia yells, fists balled, feet stamping.

"But you are always the mommy! I am the mommy now!" Maya retorts.

"I am the mommy all day, and then you can be the mommy a different day!" Julia decides.

"You are always the mommy. It's not fair! I'm not playing anymore," Maya screams.

Their teacher, Lauren, is watching from a distance, observing how these two girls are negotiating this problem, trying to decide if they need a little coaching, when suddenly their fellow student Sara enters the fray.

"Why don't you have two mommies?" she suggests.

The two girls stare at her, until Julia asserts, "You can only have one mommy. And one daddy."

Sara says, "I have two mommies."

Lauren watches as Julia and Maya try to assimilate this information into their existing family schema, wondering what this new knowledge will prompt in their play.

Julia is unbudging. "There is only one mommy. I'm the mommy." She turns abruptly and begins washing dishes. Maya sighs but then picks up the block the students have transformed into a smartphone and begins talking animatedly. Sara drifts back over to the haunted house she is building with several others.

Figure 1.1 Constructing the Empire State Building.

Lauren scribbles furiously on her clipboard. She sees room for these girls to grow in their ability to negotiate and problem solve and opportunities to teach more into the language of emotions. She also sees that there are good questions brewing about important kindergarten concepts, most obviously, "What makes a family?" Lauren decides that it might be time to launch a family inquiry, which is one of the social studies topics for her grade.

Lauren heads over to check in with Julia and Maya to see if the problem has resolved. It has in the way that many of these small conflicts do: with compromise. Maya has contented herself to be the older sister in college, while Julia is the mom. Lauren investigates a little further and finds that Maya has decided it is OK for her to wait to be the mommy until the next day. Julia agrees. Knowing the mercurial nature of five-year-olds, and also teaching into a planning strategy to avoid conflict, Lauren suggests they leave themselves a note at the end of choice time to remind themselves that they plan to swap roles tomorrow.

Later that same day, Lauren returns to the question that arose earlier in the family center. She knows she will need some time to gather materials and think through the steps of the inquiry, but she is eager to leverage the children's natural curiosities into big questions. She gathers the children together and tells the story of

the argument, ending with, "and that got me thinking, maybe we could investigate: What is a family? Do you think we could do some big thinking work about that?"

Over the next few weeks, the children begin a deep study of families. They study pictures of families, read books, interview family members, and develop theories about what makes a family and what roles people in families might have. Lauren is careful to ensure the books she reads aloud and the video clips she selects include diverse elements that are not reflected in her student population. Slowly, an understanding begins to emerge: Families are the people who care for you and love you. As this understanding emerges in conversation, Lauren is also sensitive to its appearance in children's play. How tight are the definitions of roles in play? Does the mommy always take care of the baby while the daddy goes to work? Can there be more than one mommy or daddy? Can there be no mommy or daddy? Then one day, weeks after the study has started, Lauren sees an argument around roles begin in a center that has chosen to play family. It appears that every child wants to be either a mommy or a baby.

Keyanna steps into the center of the conversation and points to the two children who want to be the mom. "You can all be mommies." She then gestures to herself and two other children, "And we can all be babies. It doesn't matter as long as we all love each other." The children agree and go off to build the space for their home (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Problem resolved, the babies are waiting for their mommies to come home from work.

In this moment, children are demonstrating powerful learning. They are demonstrating what rigor can look like when it is redefined to mean big thinking in child-friendly ways. They are also, coincidentally, playing. There is an argument in the world that suggests that play can happen only when work is done, yet children show us time and time again that play is the way they work. This book argues that play is an essential pillar of school, and of childhood. This book will take you through research and theory, classroom practice and application, and ways to infuse play throughout the day, whether you are teaching kindergarten or

third grade. Every educator is pushed and pulled to make decisions regarding how to best teach their children; so first, here are a few reasons why you might choose play.

Why Choose Play? Answers to Common Questions About the Role of Play

We Follow the Common Core State Standards. How Does Play Fit with Meeting the Many Standards?

The Common Core State Standards are an endpoint, not a curriculum. Imagine the standards as a destination, like a point on a map. Reaching that destination involves an endless array of choice. Do you walk, or do you drive? Do you take the scenic route or the highway? Do you want to have less traffic but more stop lights, or more traffic and no lights? Likewise, when it comes to the Common Core State Standards, no map dictates how you get there, just that you need to get there.

Play allows multiple opportunities and modes to reach various standards (Figure 1.3). The Common Core State Standards for Speaking and Listening state that children need to follow agreed-upon rules for conversations. Play is rife with opportunities for engaging in discussions with peers, which Maya and Julia do to sort out their disagreement over who can be the mommy. Making the note to remind themselves of who will be the mommy the next day meets the standard for language, which states that children should spell using phonics knowledge. Children at play can often be found re-enacting favorite stories, like those in the haunted house center, which meets the standard for reading fiction, which states that children should be able to retell texts with key details. Informed teachers can see the standards being met in authentic and joyful play and help design engaging instruction that helps children meet the rest. What we need to teach may not always be a choice, but how we teach can be. Play is its own method of instruction.

Figure 1.3 Play or an introduction to STEM principles? It depends on the stance of the teacher.

How Can There Be Time for Play When There Is Such an Emphasis on Academic Rigor?

Well, first we need to define what *academic rigor* actually means. According to Barbara Blackburn, author of *Rigor Is Not a Four-Letter Word*, "Rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels" (2013, 13). We believe that play is one type of environment where children can be rigorous in their learning. You might be thinking, "Huh? Rigorous play? Isn't that an oxymoron?" The truth is when four-, five-, six-, and seven-year-olds play, they are able to achieve things at the farthest edge of their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Think about the child who industriously creates a sign for the airport in blocks saying, "JetBlue" (Figure 1.4) while in writing workshop he only adds labels to his writing when prompted and supported by the teacher. Think about the English language learner in your classroom who surprises you when she carries on a conversation with her peers during choice time or at recess, while during academic times she seems to answer only yes or no questions and only when prompted. Play is a natural learning environment for children, and it is something they have been doing their whole lives before coming to school. Because play is safe and familiar, children feel free to take risks and try on new learning.

Academic rigor also means giving our students the skills necessary to be successful in the twenty-first-century workplace. According to Tony Wagner (2008), an essential skill needed in the twenty-first century is imagination. There is no better place to develop a child's imagination than in play. When children engage in imaginative play, not only do they develop their creativity, they learn to be flexible thinkers, and they develop core social skills, such as negotiation, collaboration, and empathy. If we look back at Maya and Julia's imaginative play scenario, we can see all of this in action. They are developing their flexibility and creativity when they pretend the block is a smartphone, and they are developing the

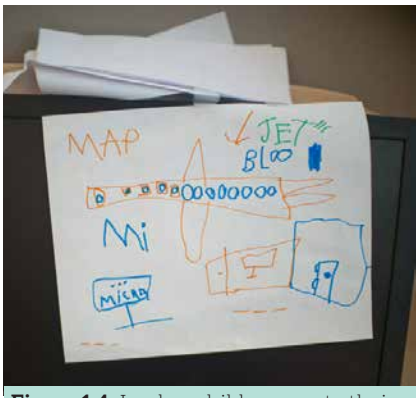

Figure 1.4 In play, children create their own rigor. This child made a sign for the JetBlue terminal at the airport.

skills of negotiation and collaboration when they come to a compromise about who gets to be the mommy. Talk is an inherent and essential aspect of play. We believe that all of the skills children learn during play contribute to and enhance academic rigor in the classroom.

Figure 1.5 These second graders discuss the play they plan to perform during snack.

But What About My Students Who Need Extra Support? Wouldn't Their Time Be Better Spent Engaged in Small-Group Instruction?

Small-group work is a powerful instructional method and an important intervention for students who need additional support. However, small-group instruction should not replace play. All students, particularly those with different learning needs, should spend time playing as well as engaging in small-group instruction (Figure 1.5). Jennifer Serravallo's book, *Teaching Reading in Small Groups* (2010), is a wonderful resource for how to differentiate and make the most of your small-group instruction.

Play gives access to content and higher levels of thinking for a variety of learners. For example, Maya had difficulty composing narratives during writing time but, as seen in the scenario above, could readily engage in pretend play with elaborate story lines. Why is that? When children have access to a rich play environment (Figure 1.6), they are given an opportunity to learn and express their thinking through multiple sign systems. Sign systems are different ways of communicating. Art, music, drama, and language are all

Figure 1.6 In the foreground a child paints, while in the background a group plays ninja training camp.

considered sign systems (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996). When children engage in choice time—one type of play environment—they are given opportunities to build with blocks, paint on an easel, and dramatize stories.

Not all learners use language as their primary mode of learning and expression; some benefit from movement and physicality while learning, whereas others express themselves best through drawing or painting. Think of the movie, *Akeelah and the Bee*, where the main character of the film, Akeelah, finally was able to learn her spelling words when she simultaneously jumped rope and spelled out loud. Ultimately, choice time is a way of tapping into our students' strengths to give them access to learning at higher levels. Isn't that the quintessential form of differentiation?

How Much Time in the Day Do Children Really Need to Play? Can't Children Just Play When They Are Finished with Their Work?

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky was a proponent of the idea that children learn best when we build on their strengths, but accomplishing this can sometimes feel a bit frustrating. As we struggle mightily to develop kids' stamina to ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes of reading and writing, we watch these same children deeply engaged in play during recess and choice time for long, extended periods. So while we firmly believe in building on children's strengths, it can be frustrating when we find ourselves limiting the time we give kids to do what we know they do best: play.

Figure 1.7 A teacher supports a child at work.

Perhaps, we need to look at play from a different perspective; if the feeling of active movement toward a goal is what we call work, then play *is* the work of children (Figure 1.7). In fact, it is the work and the art of childhood: the essence of learning, discovery, and creating. In play, learners are developing ideas, taking on and assigning roles,

collaborating, crafting the environment and deciding when to change it, developing and negotiating rules, and being active listeners. If play is the work of children, then to build on kids' strengths, we need to ask, "How can we infuse an abundance of play and the principles of play across the curriculum?"

When children are dramatizing a favorite book, they are engaged in high-level comprehension skills including inference, interpretation, and synthesis. Think about the abstract thinking that happened when Julia and Maya transformed a block into a smartphone, or the metaphorical thinking of five-year-olds when they line up hollow blocks to replicate the restroom in the Empire State Building. Or the empathetic stance first graders are taking when they decide that the troll in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" is mean because his mom sends him to school with messy hair, and they build a barber shop so the troll can get his hair cut. The thinking that occurs in play fits a definition of work (active engagement toward achieving a goal) and often provides impetus to continue working long after the official "play" time is done.

Figure 1.8 Ample time to play means ample time to build literacy skills: a kindergarten sign for the "Pink Berry."

Figure 1.9 Ample time to play also means ample time to build math skills: A first grader counts out change at the "grocery store."

Isn't Play Just "Fun"?

In *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (2005), Vivian Gussin Paley tells us that the first time she heard the idea that play is the work of children was in 1949 when she was taking an undergraduate course at Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans. Her instructor, Rena Wilson, told her students, "You are watching the only age group in school that is always busy making up its own work assignments.

Figure 1.10 The building of this structure required planning, collaboration, trial and error, and flexibility—not to mention the beginnings of understandings about engineering.

Figure 1.11 These girls are not just playing store, they are building literacy skills (speaking, listening, and writing), math skills (paying and receiving change), learning social studies concepts, (needs and wants), and abstract thinking (a block as a sandwich). Play does it all!

It looks and sounds like play, yet we properly call this play the work of children. Why? That is what you are here to find out." Ms. Wilson asked her undergraduate students to pretend that they were children who were playing and to consider what they were trying to accomplish and what obstacles they met. She wanted her college students to recall what it was like to be a child.

Paley shares what she and her classmates discovered in the course of creating, collaborating on, negotiating, and determining rules for fantasy play, that play is a complex activity that is, indeed, hard work (Figures 1.10 and 1.11). And they also realized that play is the work that coalesces all other enterprise in the classroom. It is serious business; just think about Julia and Maya at play and the words of John Dewey come to mind, "No one has ever watched a child intent in his play without being made aware of the complete merging of playfulness and seriousness" (Cuffaro, 1995, 85).

In Stuart Brown's seminal book, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (2010), he argues that play has an essential role in fueling our happiness and intelligence throughout our lives and that it is as essential to our health as sleep and food. Great thinkers and philosophers including Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Einstein have put forth their thinking that play is not a frivolity but essential for the development of the mind and human spirit. Play connects us to the world and to each other and offers unlimited possibilities. So come. Let's play!

Peek into the Classroom: Using Student Interest to Drive Instruction

Third-grade teacher Christine has gathered her mathematicians on the rug in front of the Smartboard. She has cued the clip from the *Empire Strikes Back* where Luke, after a lot of hemming and hawing and fear, finally raises his X-wing from the swamp under Yoda's watchful guidance. She knows many of her students have seen and love this movie. She also knows that her students have been daunted by some of their tricky new math work, so she is taking this opportunity to infuse some playful reflection.

She starts off by saying, "Friends, we are going to watch a clip from *The Empire Strikes Back* a few times. The first time we are just going to watch and enjoy it, and the second time we are really going to try to figure out what is going on with Luke and if that can help us at all in our lives." As she starts the clip, there is a murmur of excitement and then rapt attention for the duration of the three minutes. When it ends, Christine has the children turn and talk, with no specific prompt or question beyond, "What do you think?"

Notice How . . .

* The intention is set up clearly in the beginning.
* The teacher first lets the children respond organically to the clip.
* The clip is short enough to show multiple times.
* The teacher is using her knowledge of both her children's interests and academic needs.

As Christine is about to start the clip for the second time, she gives a "listen for" prompt, saying, "Friends, listen for Luke's self-talk in the clip and what that says about him right in this moment. If you want to jot down or draw a few thoughts, you can. Otherwise, just hold them in your mind till I hit pause again."

Notice How . . .

* The teacher is using some of the growth mindset work from play in this setting.
* There is character work that mirrors work done in reading.
* There are multiple modes of response based on children's preference: drawing, jotting, thinking.

Christine hits pause after Luke's repeated cries of "I can't. It's too big" and gives the children a chance to respond. Most have identified that this attitude is certainly negative. Ryan gestures to the class chart of "brain helpers and brain hurters" and says, "That's the kind of attitude that makes you give up and stop growing."

Christine gathers the class back and then directs them again. "Now listen for how Yoda coaches Luke to a different kind of thinking." Christine starts the clip again, hitting pause right after Yoda chastises Luke saying, "So certain are you." She asks the children to turn and talk again, analyzing Yoda's speech and its impact on Luke.

Notice How . . .

* The teacher treats the clip as worthwhile as any other academic material.
* The thinking skills and talking skills are academic in nature, though the content is from pop culture.
* The children rely on the work they have done through play as a touchstone for thinking about Luke's experience.

The children share out, noticing that Yoda gave some tips about the Force, and even some concrete examples of what to do to manage the Force.

Christine then angles the conversation in the direction she has been heading the whole time, asking, "What do you think the Force is in our world?"

This question has children stumped, some thinking its the air around them, others shrugging.

Christine tries rephrasing and clarifying, asking, "The Force seems to be something that helps you do things, lots of different things, lift ships out of the water, but also influence people and your own body. Is there anything in us we've talked about like that?"

Maya has a moment of inspiration and shouts out, "Your brain!"

There are shouts of agreement, and Christine asks the children to tell their neighbors some examples of how using your brain can be like using the Force. Children volunteer ideas like focusing to get something done, practicing handstands again and again until you can do it, and visualizing before you do something. More concrete examples abound, too—your brain can make your arm lift things up, for example.

Christine now suggests a playful way to approach problems. "Maybe," she says, "when we come to hard things, it might be fun to support each other by reminding each other that we can use the Force. We can become Yodas to each other." Christine tries out Yoda-speak: "Solve hard math problems, can we." The class laughs along with Christine, and a few children try out the Yoda-speak.

"Use a pen, you can."

"Carry the ones, you can."

"Read hard books, you will."

Christine transitions the conversation one more time toward math saying, "Listen, we have some challenging work we are doing in math, but no more challenging than what Luke had to face. Let's think of some Yoda-speak we can use to help our math partners use the Force when it gets hard."

Notice How . . .

* The teacher coached children to transfer the big ideas; it did not happen magically or effortlessly.
* The children are all engaged by talking with each other, and multiple entry points to the conversation can occur.
* The teacher has transitioned into math instruction (naming strategies) but in a playful engaging way.

Next we outline a basic process for bringing the mindset of play to more academic work by adapting the tools you create to be more reflective of children's passions. For more about creating tools, we invite you to look further at the books *Smarter Charts* and *Smarter Charts for Math, Science, and Social Studies* (2014) by Kristi Mraz and Marjorie Martinelli.

A Tool by Any Other Name: A Field Guide to Tools

We define a tool as anything that supports a child to work and think with more independence. Before we begin to think about how to make tools more playful, we first need to identify what they might be.

- **Prop:** An item, like a pointer, that triggers a certain action or thought for a child.
- **Chart:** A support made for a whole class to use, usually hangs in the classroom (Figure 8.4).
- **Minichart:** A smaller version of a class-made chart, or an adapted version of a class-made chart for an individual child (Figure 8.5).
- **Splash Card:** Named by math consultant Ryan Dunn, a splash card is a reminder of new learning given to an individual child, often on a sticky note or index card (Figure 8.6).
- **Photo:** Captures a child in a moment of work or play that the child should replicate (i.e., a picture of a child making a tall block tower reminds him he can also work hard to make long books).

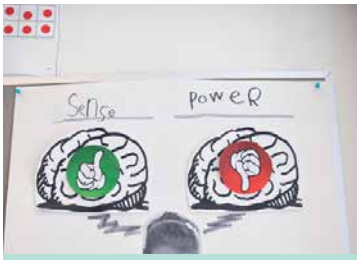

Figure 8.4 A chart made with students.

Figure 8.5 During a conference, this reader is deciding which minichart will make him the most powerful reader he can be.

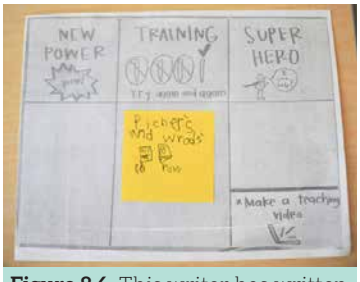

Figure 8.6 This writer has written the goal he wants to work on for a few weeks on a sticky note.

APPENDIX B

RECOMMENDED TIME FRAMES FOR CHOICE TIME

Workshop and Recess by Grade Level

Choice Time Workshop

Grade Level	Length of Time	Number of Days per Week
Pre-Kindergarten	45–60 minutes	5
Kindergarten	45 minutes	5
First grade	45 minutes	3–5
Second grade	45 minutes	2–3
Third through fifth grades	45 minutes	1–2

We recommend a forty-five-minute time slot for choice time in order for children to engage in collaborative projects with depth; hence, choice time workshop is typically fewer days a week as children move up through the grades.

Extra Recess

Grade Level	Length of Time	Number of Days per Week
Pre-Kindergarten	30-45 minutes	5
Kindergarten	30 minutes	5
First grade	20–30 minutes	3–5
Second grade	20 minutes	3–5
Third through fifth grades	20 minutes	2–3

We recommend short bursts of extra physical activity multiple times a week in order to give children a brain break from academic tasks. Depending on a teacher's schedule, in the lower grades the thirty-minute time slot is sometimes broken into two fifteen-minute periods for extra recess daily.