
PLAY ATTENTION!

STEPHANIE PARSONS

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A Playful Mindset Meets Academic Content

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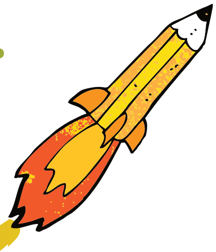


To Maria Nunziata.

Thank you for making PS 130

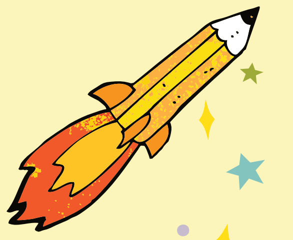
such a magical place and for

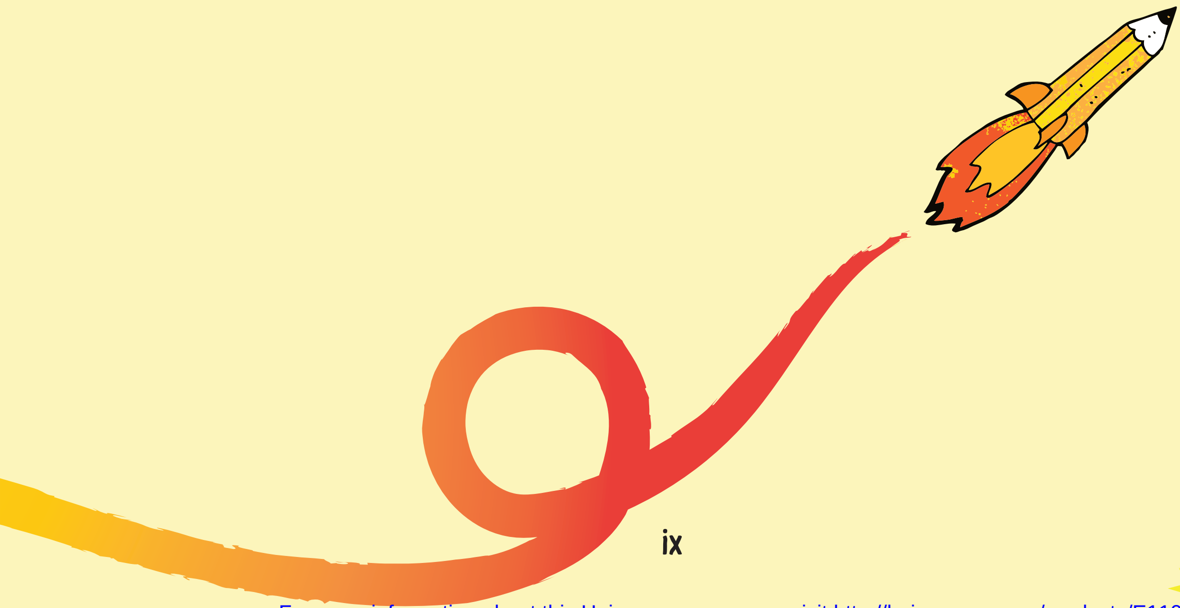
entrusting me with its continued care.

Y gracias también por

su cariño y apoyo.

★ Contents ★





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CHAPTER ONE

WHY PLAY?

The very existence of youth is due in part to the necessity for play; the animal does not play because he is young, he has a period of youth because he must play.

—Karl Groos

Imagine this: You're an upper elementary or middle school teacher, and somehow you find yourself walking in the primary hallway or wing of a school.

You stop to peek into a kindergarten classroom during that magical event known as choice time. You know you're supposed to go copy a very important practice sheet for the state test, or maybe you need to grade that giant stack of literary essays. But from inside the classroom a tiny face catches your eye.

"Are you hungry?" the little boy asks. He's working with a few other impossibly small children in a play kitchen area.

"What do you have?" You ask. A girl comes over and hands you a paper labeled, *menu*. There are some pictures of food labeled with a few letters.

"Today we're serving clams and oatmeal."

"Wow! I'll have some of each," you say. She writes your order on a small pad and asks what you'll have to drink. "Hot chocolate? Or orange juice?"

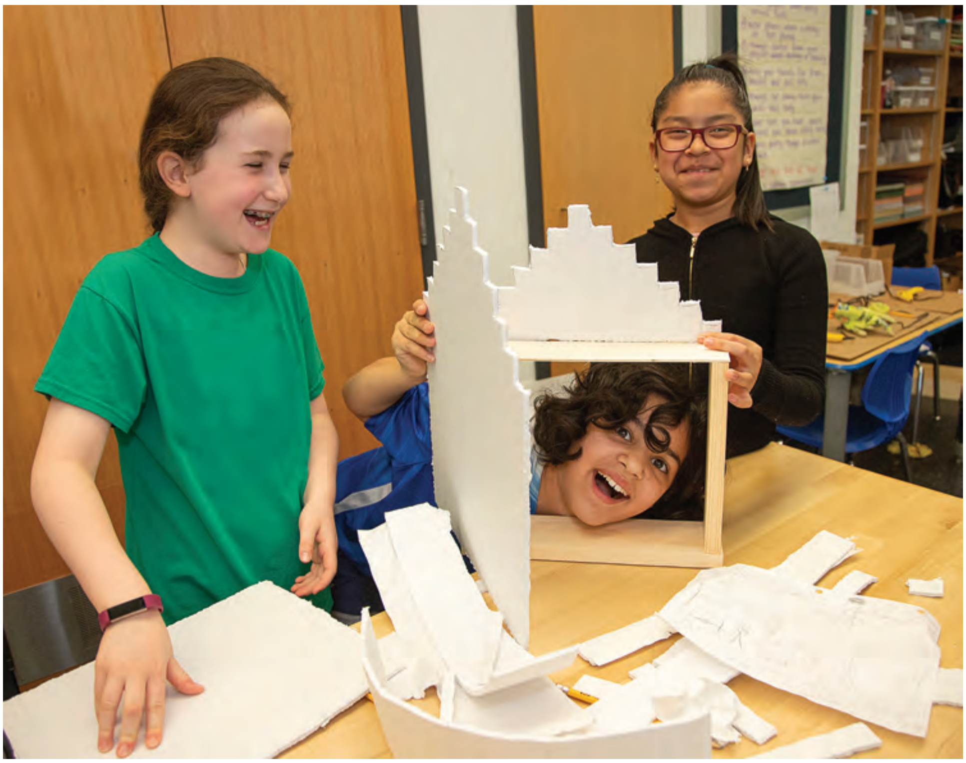
“That’s a tough one. They’re both so good with clams. I guess I’ll go for the hot chocolate, though.”

The kids work as a team to get plates and a cup, serve from the pots on the stove, and pour from a teakettle. They bring your order and you eat it with your hands. The boy gives you a cloth napkin, which you use to wipe the imaginary food from your hands and face.

“That was amazing! I’m going to go write a Yelp review of this place right now!” you say.

The kids look at you quizzically as you return the dishes and make your way back to your very important work.

You just played! Sure, it was fun and cute, but you also did something really important for your brain. You adopted a *playful mindset*. You just created space for possibilities you hadn’t imagined before. Clams and oatmeal on the same menu, a meal consisting of these paired with hot chocolate. Dining with no utensils, but, somehow, a cloth napkin. Fifteen minutes ago this combination of variables didn’t exist in your vision of how things tend to go, but now it does. Congratulations! This microexpansion of your worldview happens every time your vision of what’s possible takes in something new. You were willing to



try something in your imagination that you not only wouldn't have tried, but—and this is the crucial piece—was something that wouldn't even have *occurred* to you to try. "Clams and hot chocolate. Of course!"

Playful experiences like these create pathways in the brain that enable us to consider more readily unusual, inventive, creative, resourceful ways of doing the things we need to do. These are also the pathways needed to solve problems that haven't been solved before and to create things that didn't exist before. These benefits combine and work together to feed a mindset that is flexible, creative, and courageous.

Play Is a Basic Need

As humans, we need to play. I don't mean this like, "I need those shoes" but like, "I need oxygen." Most animals, and certainly all mammals, play. It's not a luxury that humans developed when, as a result of the agricultural revolution some twelve thousand years ago, we stopped needing to spend every waking moment finding food. Play is an evolutionary necessity, and humans were doing it long before the concept of leisure existed. In the late nineteenth century, evolutionary biologist Karl Groos studied the play of young animals (1898) and, later, humans (1901). He observed that young animals played in ways that foreshadowed their eventual survival needs as adults; young predators played at stalking and chasing, young prey played at running away and dodging, young primates played at climbing and swinging. Like all mammals, humans play to develop and maintain the skills we need as adults.

Our survival as humans depends on a complex set of skills, and the variety of human play reflects that complexity. We play with language to learn how it works, and doesn't work, as effective communication with our social groups. In play we learn what our bodies can and can't do. Through play we learn how things work in the world around us—how objects feel and fit together and what they do when they're hit, thrown, banged together, or, in the case of that blue marble I recently found in the toilet, eaten. We create pretend worlds and play within them as practice for navigating the "real" world. As children, we played or pretended our way into almost everything we do as adults. And many adults assert that maintaining a sense of play is vital to their best innovative and creative work. Play helps us grow up happy, healthy, and able to face life's challenges.

Although it's clear that play is integral to human development, somewhere along the way educational policy veered away from educational theory, and *play* became a four-letter word. The decline of free, self-directed play has been as steep outside of school as in school, and I believe we have suffered more than we've gained.

Studies involving animals have shown that a lack of play in youth leads to deficits in social and emotional regulation (Pellis, Pellis, and Himmler 2014; LaFreniere 2011). The same studies, for obvious ethical reasons, can't be done with human subjects. Except, in a way, they already have, and the results are equally alarming. Peter Gray (2011, 2015) writes extensively about the devastating consequences of the decline and marginalization of play in America over the last fifty-odd years. Without play, Dr. Gray cautions, we don't magically identify another source of all these benefits; we just lose them. In articles, blog posts, TED Talks, and his book, *Free to Learn* (Gray 2015), he has sounded the alarm about the *causative* (not merely correlative) link between less play and more psychopathology in young people. For over half a century, free play for American kids has been squeezed into smaller and smaller time frames. It's not a coincidence that over those same fifty-plus years, diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and behavior disorders have increased at the same rate that time spent playing has fallen. Nor is the fact that many employers struggle to find workers with independent initiative and problem-solving skills unrelated to the decrease in play. It's a bitter irony that in providing more structured activities outside of school, longer school days, and more rigorous curricula, we have raised children who are less prepared for a successful adulthood.

The prohibition of play in schools is misguided, but I have good news for teachers who want it back. Purposeful playful experiences can occur within existing curricular and pedagogical mandates. Play adds value to what we are already doing in our classrooms, and even helps us do it better.

The Benefits of Playful Classroom Experiences

Play benefits people, and society as a whole, in a number of ways, many of which can be achieved through playful classroom experiences. When we tell students what is kind and unkind, safe and unsafe, sound and unsound, reasonable and unreasonable, good and bad, they no longer have any opportunity to learn to make judgments for themselves, socially or academically. In contrast, if we create times when we're not telling students what to do and when to do it, we give the gift of self-regulation. If we establish a culture of process over product, we give the gift of courage. If we shift focus away from assignments and grades and toward problem-solving, we give the gifts of flexibility and creativity. If we let collaboration happen organically and voluntarily, we give the gifts of social regulation and democracy. All of these gifts add up to the biggest gift for us and our students—joy.

Viola Spolin (2000), originator of Theater Games and a formative influence in the development of America's first improvisational theater company, Chicago's Second City, puts it this way: "Outside of play there are few places where children can contribute to the world in which they find themselves. Their world, controlled by adults who tell them what to do and when to do it, offers them little opportunity to act or to accept community responsibility." By creating playful conditions, we "offer students the opportunity for equal freedom, respect, and responsibility within the community of the classroom" (3).

Later in this book, I'll describe some individual playful experiences as well as ways to encourage a playful mindset across the day and year. First I want to take a closer look at the ways play benefits students, as learners and as humans.

All of these benefits are interrelated, overlapping with one another. Being more intrinsically motivated leads to more risk-taking, which leads to increased flexibility, for example, but considering them separately helps us understand what it is about play that makes it so transformational to students' growth.

Self-Regulation

Management is not the most exciting facet of our work as teachers, but without it, well, the classroom can feel like a pretty insecure place for everyone. The skills of self-regulation—impulse control, emotional intelligence, the capacity to act according to social norms (and class rules)—are not skills I used to associate with letting kids play in my classroom. I was so misguided! Vygotsky (1978) figured it out before my mother was even born; play is how children acquire these very competencies.

In their dramatic play, young children often cast themselves as people in familiar situations—parents, doctors, teachers, salespeople, and so on. When playing together in a pretend scenario, children follow the rules that apply to it. A group of kindergartners playing restaurant have an unspoken agreement to do things like sit at a table and look at a menu, take orders and bring food to the table, cook the food, and wash the dishes. Moreover, the diners might even order something they would never eat at home and happily gobble it down in the "restaurant." A player in this scenario is not going to suddenly lie down under the table to find the cause of engine trouble. Vygotsky (1978) called dramatic play a child's way of creating her own zone of proximal development for living:

> This strict subordination to rules is quite impossible in life, but in play it does become possible: thus, play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. (102)

In this way, children practice taking actions that are guided by thought and reason, rather than by impulse.

As children get older, they continue to develop the self-regulation competencies that began in their early play. Self-directed play among groups of children is still guided by rules that the players agree to and requires children to navigate social relationships in increasingly deft ways. Peter Gray (2015) explores this idea in an extended comparison between an informal neighborhood game of stickball and a Little League baseball game. In the stickball game, the players agree on the rules and can modify them if necessary to keep the game going and make sure everyone is having fun. When conflicts arise, the players argue, negotiate, or compromise so they can get back to playing. In the informal game, teamwork is about working together in the moment; players may change teams if circumstances demand it, and the teams may form differently on a different day. All of these qualities of the informal game support an attitude that really does value playing well and having fun over winning.

In a formal Little League game, adults and external forces render players unable to practice these self-regulation skills. In Little League, the rules are the rules. They don't change if someone is just beginning to learn the game or the field is muddy. When conflicts arise, the adults take over. Teams are set, separated, and defined as much by their uniforms as by the rivalries that arise among them. And, of course, the goal is to win. Organized sports can be great for some kids, but they're not a replacement for self-directed play (Gray 2015, 157–63). When adults make the rules and call it "play," we've robbed children of an important developmental need, which is to be in a situation and have to navigate it, figuring out for oneself what makes sense. *This* is how children learn to self-regulate, not by having their behavior always mediated by adult input.

Through playful exploration in the classroom, we can create conditions under which children practice self-regulation. As you'll read about later in this book, one simple and concrete way I have capitalized on this is to invite students to play with fun materials that I eventually hope to use in a more limited academic context. Rather than telling students what they can and can't do, I introduce the materials and ask them what makes sense. As they play, engaging with one another and the materials, children bump up against situations that stimulate their sense of order, fairness, care, and fun. They end up making reasonable rules and adhering to them more faithfully than they would to externally imposed rules.

Intrinsically Motivated Learning

Because an essential feature of play is the perception of choice, play, by definition, is guided by intrinsic interests and motivations. In the 1970s, Richard Ryan and Edward L. Deci, clinical and social scientists, began to develop a theory of human motivation and personality that focused on intrinsic motivation. Since then, social scientists and researchers around the world have taken on the question of how intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation affects the outcomes of human endeavors. The research that has contributed to self-determination theory has shown, in many contexts, that intrinsic motivation leads to enhanced learning, performance, creativity, and social-emotional wellness. By giving students meaningful choice, we build intrinsic motivation into their activities, fostering their natural tendencies to be curious, to seek out challenges, and to develop skills, knowledge, and understanding (Ryan and Deci 2000).

The degree of playfulness children feel in an activity is directly related to the amount of choice they believe themselves to have (King and Howard 2016); the more control over choice we can hand over to students, the more playful (and intrinsically motivated) their actions will be. This applies certainly to experiences labeled explicitly as play, such as when I put Array Play or Fantasy Play on the schedule. A subtler, yet equally powerful stimulus for intrinsic motivation comes from a sense of playfulness that runs through the day and infuses the classroom environment. Students who have choice in how to engage with the curriculum are more intrinsically motivated to do so, taking more ownership of the learning process. What to read and write, which angle of a historical time period to study, how to approach a math or science question, and how to present one's work are some of the choices we can offer to increase engagement.

Of course, the amount of choice we can give our students is limited by several factors related to time, space, materials, and regulations. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition, though! There are many shades of gray—shades of *play*—between total freedom and total control. If we see this vast middle ground as a continuum of choice, teachers can extend many of the benefits of play to students in classrooms by considering the amount and kind of choice we give to children.

How we give choice also matters. Students must perceive that they have meaningful choice, but this is not as easy as it sounds. Actually, it may not even sound that easy. I can hear myself saying, "Are you sure you really want to try *that*?" The second we take away choice, though, or even imply that there are good and bad choices, an activity stops being playful and we may lose the intrinsic motivation and, hence, the learning benefits. So we have to be careful! If we're going to offer choice, we have to accept all (safe) choices. My students have tested me, positive that there was a catch—that I couldn't possibly really mean to let them make the choices I was offering. When I feel myself wanting to limit the amount of choice, I try to remember to be open to amazement, trusting that students will discover something that benefits the whole learning community. I also remind myself that children who perceive their play to be limited by adult rules and instructions show poorer problem-solving skills, less motivation, and lower engagement than other children *performing the same tasks* (McInnes [2009], as cited in King and Howard [2016]).

Cooperation and Collaboration

Viola Spolin (2000) argues that the democratic nature of play supports children in making decisions that benefit a shared purpose:

> Many of the skills learned in playing are social skills. Most games worth playing are highly social and have a problem that needs solving within them—an objective point in which each individual must become involved with others while attempting to reach a goal. (3)

My own observations and personal classroom experience have revealed that the more an activity feels like play, the more cooperative and collaborative it is. We've all seen collaborative learning activities go remarkably well or horribly wrong. When they go well, students work together and get along as equals. They jump into the work, engaging together in authentic and spirited communication. They may argue or negotiate, but their shared purpose helps them find compromise. Their talk seems freer and more filled with the spirit of "What if?" as they plan together how to go about doing what they need to do. They cooperate in dividing the work, enthusiastically supporting one another to benefit the group. When children do normal human things that can get in the way of collaboration—boss other group members around, try to get out of doing something undesirable, feel lost and not know how to ask for help, become competitive, to name a few—the group is able to right itself. And in the end, they have *fun*! When it doesn't go well, it seems like the teacher has to become the project manager and group therapist for everyone. It's exhausting, totally the opposite of fun, and we all end up wondering if the intended learning actually happened.

Humans have been developing culture through play since there were humans. We've known that playfulness is good for society (group peace and harmony, efficacy, etc.) for a long time. In his analysis of research on hunter-gatherer groups, Peter Gray (2009) notes that humor and playfulness, in both adults and children, informed their systems of governing, religion, productive work, and education:

> Play and humor lay at the core of hunter-gatherer social structures and mores. Play and humor were not just means of adding fun to their lives. They were means of maintaining the band's existence—means of promoting actively the egalitarian attitude, extensive sharing, and relative peacefulness for which hunter-gatherers are justly famous and upon which they depended for survival. (476–477)

By injecting a spirit of play into the classroom, we expose students to situations that make them internalize the collaborative qualities that they will depend on as adults.

Even in experiences where children are working or playing independently, there is still a collaborative atmosphere, as everyone contributes to the playfulness that infuses the classroom. Eliminating competition helps students wish well for one another. Also, even when playing alone, the choice to collaborate is a powerful one, based on the intrinsic purpose of all the players.

Courage and Risk-Taking

In recent years, many community organizations, independent schools, and camps have put forth the idea that allowing more risk in children's play leads to increased health, self-esteem, judgment, and pleasure. Children develop "risk competence" by trying things that most adults forbid nowadays because they are dangerous ("You'll put an eye out!"). Advocates for more risky play argue that by taking all of the danger out of children's play in the name of protection from injury, we've actually exposed them to more harm (Gray 2015; Almon 2013; Eichsteller and Holthoff 2009). Children learn to assess risk and make decisions about whether or how to, for example, climb a tree, cut a piece of wood, or make a fire, by doing these things—not by being told *not* to do them or by being hovered over the whole time and micromanaged. In fact, forbidding or micromanaging potentially dangerous tasks hinders children's ability to learn to make safe and sound judgments for themselves.

The need for children to learn how to take risks through play is a biological one. Extensive study of play in animals reveals much about the importance of play for humans. Play during youth induces structural changes within the brain, resulting in improved executive functioning and social competency. A key feature of youthful play is that it provides an experience of unpredictability and loss of control that, unlike outside of play, is rewarding and pleasurable (Pellis, Pellis, and Himmler 2014). Facing uncertainty in play helps animals (including us) deal appropriately and effectively with "the unexpected vicissitudes of life." Play teaches us how to take risks and face uncertainty, because life requires it.

The benefits of becoming more confident and competent risk-takers also applies to academic and social learning. We don't learn anything new by staying close to what we already know and understand, nor can we learn in situations that spark fear and anxiety. Senninger's Learning Zone Model ([2000], as cited in Watling [2016] and Eichsteller and Holthoff [2009]) suggests that learning happens when we venture outside of the Comfort Zone, but not so far that we enter the Panic Zone. In the Learning Zone, we face some discomfort and challenge in exploring the unknown, but we do so with a growth mindset. The very

existence of the Learning Zone depends on what Carol Dweck (2016) calls "the power of *yet*," which helps us persevere through difficulty and failure; *I can't do this* yet, *but I will if I keep trying.*

When students don't seem to have a growth mindset for learning academic content, it's as if the Learning Zone has shrunk to nothing, leaving no distance between feeling comfortable and panicking. These students often fear open-ended exploration but thrive in an environment where success depends on getting a certain outcome or answer. On assessments and evaluations, the risk of not being able to perform according to seemingly arbitrary externally imposed criteria leads straight to panic. For students approaching or in adolescence, this is especially true. The added pressure of maintaining an outward appearance makes any kind of failure mortifying. Because playful experiences offer so many points of entry, they facilitate a gradual opening up of students who avoid risk.

Flexibility and Creativity

My brother, Fletcher, is a civil engineer. In his work he hires and oversees people working on a range of projects. He recently complained to me that for the past several years it had been difficult to find people who were actually ready to work on these projects, despite college or graduate educations. He told me of a new hire who had strong technical skills but was unable to make decisions about what to do when. Several times a day she would come to him with questions and problems, needing his approval and direction to continue. She needed to be brave enough to make an independent decision instead of waiting for an assignment. She needed to be flexible enough to face unexpected challenges. She needed to be creative enough to use her skills in new ways. In short, she needed a playful mindset.

Tony Wagner makes the case for rethinking education more fully and persuasively in his book, *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World* (Wagner and Compton 2015). Traditional educational models prepare students to regurgitate and comply, whereas our world is increasingly demanding people who are able to think outside of limits, rather than staying within them. He says, “Increasingly in the twenty-first century, what you know is far less important than what you can do with what you know. The interest in and ability to create new knowledge to solve new problems is the single most important skill that all students must master today” (142).

Multiple studies have demonstrated that play increases creativity. In Kathy Sylva’s classic study ([1977] as cited in Garvey [1990]), children were given two sticks and a clamp and asked to use them to reach a piece of chalk that was out of reach. Some children were allowed to play freely with the sticks and clamp before the task, some were taught explicitly how to clamp the sticks together, and some didn’t see the materials at all before the task. The groups who played and were taught explicitly both performed the task correctly more than the control group. The group who played, however, exhibited more persistence and motivation than the group who was shown how to connect the sticks.

Entering a process with a playful mindset means seeing what didn’t work as a new challenge and not a failure. Embracing these challenges opens the door for creative problem-solving—thinking “out of the box.” The ability or ease of taking risks allows the mind to wander further away from the boundaries of what’s known—the comfort zone. Armed with the question of “What if?” and unencumbered by the notion that it has to work a certain way, the aim shifts from correctness to discovery.

Abstract Reasoning

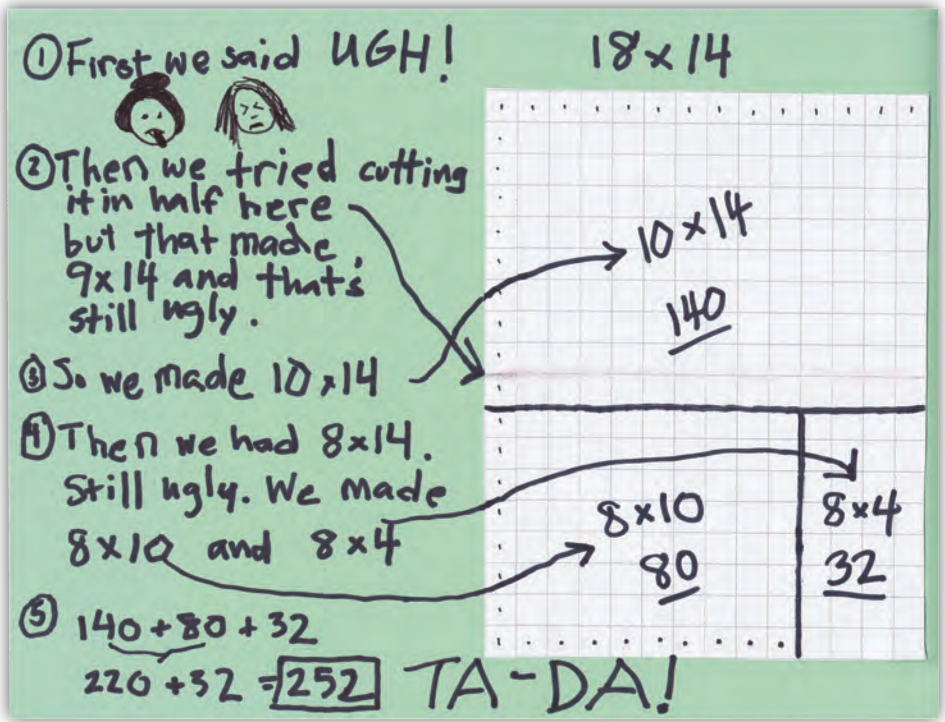
We used to think of the developmental shift from concrete to abstract thought as a linear progression, similar to physical growth; once you reach four feet, you don’t go back to three feet eleven inches. Surprise! It’s a lot more complicated and nuanced than that. We now know that our capacity for abstract thought is related to experiences we've had and our state of mind. As we gain more experiences, we are increasingly able to use imagination to make things that were once abstract become concrete.

Consider the equation 2 + 2 = 4. For most kindergartners, this is a very abstract concept. These symbols are just squiggles. The act of counting out two pebbles from a pile of pebbles and sliding them away, then counting out two more pebbles and sliding them over to the first two, and then counting the four separated pebbles, is much more concrete. As adults, our years of life have given us the experience required to *imagine* situations that would give concrete meaning to 2 + 2 = 4.

Experiences give us more material to draw on when we're trying to make sense of something unknown or unfamiliar. However, imagination is also required to make the cognitive jump from a known thing to an abstract thing (Gray 2008; Bergen 2009). Barricade, a flame retardant gel used to protect homes and other structures from fires, is a perfect illustration. John Bartlett, founder of Barricade International, was not the first firefighter to notice that used diapers at charred scenes were slimy and gooey, and—critically—unburnt. His imaginative mind *was* the only one to make the leap from this concrete experience to the abstract idea of spraying the soaked diaper gel over a whole house and creating a flameproof barrier. Years of lab experiments later, hundreds of homes have been saved by the stuff (Lewis 2000). If imagination is a muscle, play is the exercise that makes it stronger and more flexible. I might argue that all the people we see as innovative geniuses are not any different from the rest of us except in one regard: they're more playful.

The "accidental" learning that happens in play comes from a willingness to entertain, even embrace, scenarios one's rational mind has never seen before. In school, children may not imagine such a scenario merely because it's not part of the assignment. My own son has frequently sighed with annoyance at my efforts to engage with his learning: "I just have to do what's on the rubric." Playful exploration gives students room to make the discoveries they're ready and motivated to make, independent of the required lessons or your planned teaching. They may solidify concepts they learned about in the past and had not fully attained, or they may begin to develop new conceptual understandings of things beyond the scope of the curriculum.

A more long-term return on an investment in play lies in its role in how humans create culture. In play we explore ideas and emotions beyond our quotidian experiences. In a rational world, where so much depends on what



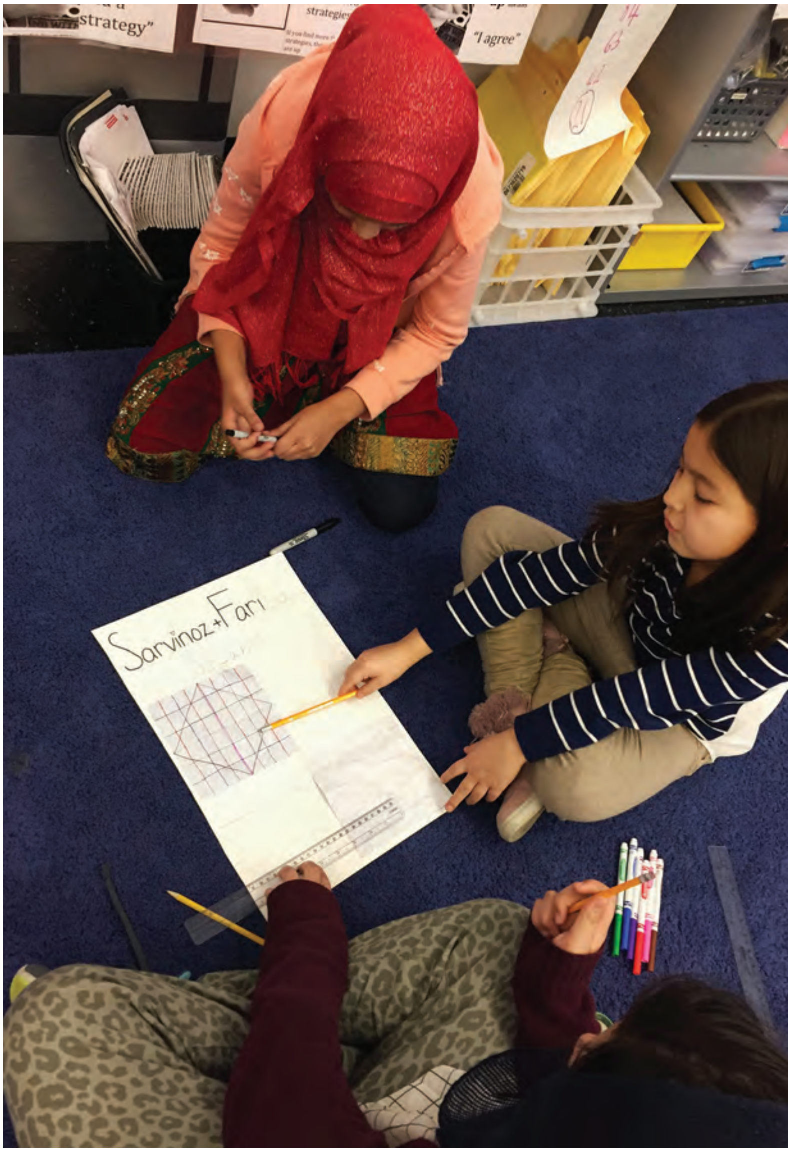
is known and understood, play is the way we safely and fearlessly wrap our minds around the unknown and overwhelming. Why am I me? Why are we here? What happens when we die? A defining feature of human existence is the mind's back-and-forth between rational, pragmatic, concrete living and the search for purpose and meaning that defies rational explanation. Thomas Henricks (2016) argues that play "centers on a tension between different ways of relating to the world" (309). As we have seen, the rules of play are agreed upon and self-imposed by the players. Juxtaposing the rationality that comes from the rules of play with its exuberance, irreverence, and impulsivity, we "explore the widest implications of personal and public existence" (321). This tension between rationality and imagination, by the way, is the very definition of the Learning Zone. We're close enough to the known to feel safe as we imagine what may lie in the vast unknown. Although we're concerned about what our students are learning now, with us, we're also preparing this generation for the time when they are the ones setting the course for the future. Play is how we help them develop a good compass.

Resilience

Brian Sutton-Smith is said to have told a group of fellow play researchers, "We study play because life is crap. Life is crap, and it's full of pain and suffering, and the only thing that makes it worth living—the only thing that makes it possible to get up in the morning and go on living—is play" (De Koven 2016). After chuckling at the tongue-in-cheek manner with which Sutton-Smith described his very serious study, I found myself coming back to this quote. My first connection was personal; I have obsessively sought out humor and playfulness as an antidote to a darkness that has been part of my identity for as long as I remember and which I attribute to years of early childhood trauma. I am certain that my playful mindset has tempered the frightening gravity that trauma survivors know so well and enabled me to have an identity that included something other than "trauma survivor."

Perhaps the reason I've decided to keep this quote here despite my attention to word count is that I'm reminded of play in the face of pain and suffering in more dramatic contexts. During a deadly and destructive war that has been the backdrop of their entire lives, Syrian children play. In fact, children's play during times of war has inspired much academic study by adults who must (reasonably) wonder, "How can fun be had in a time like this?" In his book, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, George Eisen ([1990], as cited in Gray [2008]) describes in detail the ways that children interred in Nazi ghettos and concentration camps played. As Peter Gray (2008) explains, "They played not because they were oblivious to the horrors around them. Nor did they play as a means to deny those horrors or divert their attention from them. Rather, they played in ways that helped them to understand, confront, and, to the degree possible, deal effectively with those horrors." In every school I've visited or worked with, I've heard stories of children facing some sort of trauma, but it's because of the difficulties faced by *every* child entering or in adolescence that I argue for more play.

Growing up is hard. The brain and body undergo dramatic changes. The powerful need to belong and the equally powerful need to forge an individual identity pull *hard* in opposite directions. David Elkind (1967, 1985) termed two key features of this period of development "imaginary audience" and "personal fable." Briefly, tweens and teens perceive their words and actions to be not only seen but actively watched and evaluated by those around them. The idea of having a constant audience requires one to engage in a constant performance, creating the character one thinks one should be. One trip on a New York City subway at 3:00 p.m. on a weekday will show you exactly what I mean. At the same time, children are ensconced in *personal fable*, the idea that "nothing that is happening to me has ever happened to anyone before and is of epic proportions and will have lasting meaning for the rest of my life, and nobody else is even capable of understanding it, especially adults." My cringe-worthy journals from middle and high school back this up. Navigating these conditions is part of the necessary transition from childhood to adulthood and, like every new thing that we take on, is a bit clumsy in the beginning. The tension is between self-expression and identity on the one hand and life's uncertainty and ambiguity on the other.



Confusion about identity is a normal part of being this age, and rather than be diminished by it, children can be supported within it. They need to be able to try on words and behaviors that push the envelope or explore the boundaries of what is OK and what is not and to do so in a safe space. Playing one's way into different identities is a way of understanding oneself and one's capacity to be who they want to be (rather than some predetermined or externally imposed identity).

Joy

And, of course, in play, we experience joy. After several years in school, many older children seem to believe that play is the opposite of work and that what happens in school is supposed to be work. Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) says that the opposite of play is not work; it's depression. The point of play is not the outcome, but the play itself. In work—indeed, in most of life—we are not ensured of our prospects, so our commitment is tempered by the real possibilities and consequences of failure. In play, without these stakes, we're able to follow our

instincts with "exultant commitment," knowing that whatever happens will be the correct outcome, in contrast to feeling the pressure to arrive at a predetermined outcome. The destinations we *do* arrive at in play lead to "adaptive potentiation," meaning that we gain skills and understandings in play that we then use in our nonplay lives (Sutton-Smith 2001).

Joy is an important *outcome* of play and not just a by-product. The effects of joy on the body, such as dopamine and serotonin release and increased circulation, lead to improved physical and emotional health. Frequent episodes of joy lead to a greater overall sense of well-being or happiness. As a natural antianxiety treatment, joy removes barriers to learning. Experiencing joy with others creates bonds that can withstand the social challenges of being a tween. I think we can all agree that more joy in school is a good thing. In the rest of this book, I hope both to give you some practical, doable ways to play in your classroom and to empower you to invent more.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAY	
PLAY IS:	
Pleasurable	I know—duh. Play is fun, joyful, and exciting and sometimes involves a sense of humor. Play might also include frustrations, challenges, and fears. Our ability to face these and work through them brings pleasure.
Voluntary	An activity feels more like play if the players perceive that they have choices—whether to play, how the play might go, what to play with, and so on. Perhaps most important is that a player has the choice to quit playing or not to play in the first place.
Active	Playing is *doing*. Whether it's physical or mental, alone or collaborative, with ideas or with tangible things, playing is an active, yet relaxed state. People at play are alert, engaged, and, crucially, unstressed.
Adventurous and Risky	Taking risks is a key component of a growth mindset, as is trying again when something doesn't work out. Play provides a safety net for students to explore the unknown or try new things.
Process Oriented	People at play are concerned primarily with the process of their play, rather than with a preconceived outcome. Motivated from within by their own desire to explore or make things, children shape their explorations as they go (Shipley 2013).
Symbolic and Meaningful	When children imagine and pretend, it's as if they're casting themselves in roles they've never experienced and exploring what those roles might be like. Play helps children visualize abstract concepts, such as fractions or a time when there was no electricity. Perhaps most importantly, imaginary play is children's way to safely explore their current and possible future identities.