

A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

Play After a Pandemic

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Introduction

It is a popular and common understanding that play is good and many adults will claim that play is something children should do. Yet why is play not fully integrated into our educational programs in the daily life of schools? Furthermore, why is play often met with the caveat of play can happen when the so-called work is complete? Pasi Sahlberg, a leading education policy analyst, suggested that play is hard to envisage as part of school life because it is misunderstood. People, adults, and teachers truly do not understand the benefits of play. They know the benefits of play exist, but they do not understand these well enough to break away from our traditional thinking and practice (Personal communication, August 13, 2020). Too many adults (parents, educators, politicians) think that school is a place for the ‘work’ of learning. In a recent news conference, Alberta Minister of Education Adriana LaGrange (2020) stated that new curriculum needs to be about creating the next wave of workers.

A shift in mindset where school is a place of play is paramount for the future of our school system. Through and during play, school outcomes are completed along with a range of “non cognitive skills” (Engel, et. al., 2019, p. 119) such as critical thinking, cooperation, empathy, patience, and executive functioning. The Global Recess Alliance (McNamara, et. al., 2020) has an official statement regarding the return to school, “a critical part of returning to school will be healing from collective trauma and focusing on mental and physical health. It is important—for both teachers and students—to ensure that they have the time and space in the school day to connect with others in activities that allow for meaningful and playful engagement”. This paper will look at the future of play in our schools. Using the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiative to encourage futurist

thinking in education for 2050 and specific foresight tools we will be able to imagine education as a place for play.

What Is Play and Why is It Important?

When we think about play, we may think about it as time away from “real work” or time we reward ourselves with when the hard work is over. For our children, play is the work and it is the hard work. Hyvonen (2011), argues that demonstrates the amount of hard work that play is for children when explaining,

(T)he rationale for recommending play lies in its multifaceted educational impact; play educates cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically. Playing renews culture and children’s peer cultures and protects children from worries and destructive thoughts. In addition, play provides reciprocal learning opportunities for children and teachers.

Optimally, play in educational situations not only provides a real medium for learning, but also enables discerning and knowledgeable adults to learn about children and their needs (Hyvonen, 2011, p. 51).

“Do you want to play”? Often a verbal response is never needed or warranted to this question, and the play just begins, often with nonverbal cues of negotiation (Fredriksen, 2012), and with compassion and acceptance (Moore, 2004). Play is a universal language onto itself, in my own teaching experience I have witnessed children who do not have a solid understanding of the same first language but can initiate, understand, and engage in play. There can be many different types of play that we see children, teenagers, and adults engage in during the various stages of their lives. The huge difference between when children engage in play is the critical development that is happening as they play. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) echoed Hyvonen’s description of play in that play develops children in four ways: cognitive development, social

development, emotional development, and physical development (p. 52). From these four areas children specifically develop:

Improvements to attention, coping, memory, perspective-taking, cooperating, negotiating, helping, sharing, solving problems, dealing with trauma, planning skills, decision making skills, motivation to learn, building friendships, school readiness, social skills and attitudes on sharing, turn-taking, self-restraint, working in groups and getting along with others, creativity and divergent thinking, healthy brain development, emotional stability and resiliency, empathy, feelings of well-being, motor skills, early literacy and language development, self-regulation, child-parent attachment, science and math learning, and improvements in executive functioning” (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019, p. 53).

When children play, and when the adults in their lives give them that environment that supports a constructivist mindset of children being capable learners who desire ownership over their learning and meaning making process. Whether the play is structured, unstructured, child led, adult facilitated, indoor play, outdoor play, messy play, imaginative play, it is clear that play is “all about possibilities” (Izumi-Taylor, *et al*, 2010).

Challenges to the Implementation of Play First

Just as play is not easy for our children, neither is the wide implementation of it in our classrooms. Gulliksen (2017), helps confirm this idea in a study where a parent revealed that they did not think they were “as good as they should be” when it came to playing with their children (p. 89). Similarly, in my own experience, I have had parents approach me about the play-based approach in my classroom and question me as to when their child learns. When we moved to emergency home learning in the spring of 2020, teachers were having parents communicate that they did not want play based activities and they were requesting teachers send home worksheets or booklets so their child could practice their reading, writing and numeracy skills. Christakis (2019) attempted to identify why play as an integral part of learning is so hard by proposing that:

one problem is that we struggle to define what good play really looks like. Vague words like “richly engaging,” “authentic,” and “meaningful” don’t shed much light on the difference between productive play (the meandering, exploratory, conversational kind that scientists say is associated with a wealth of positive benefits) and the lesser variety we so often see in early childhood classrooms where kids are moved from one station to another within a fixed time period and with predetermined goals. The uncomfortable reality is that the most rewarding play – for the children engaged in it and for the adults who are tracking their progress – is sometimes hard to pin down (n.p).

Play is not something that comes naturally to adults and often we try to “adultify” children before it is developmentally appropriate. Play is not easy and often highly misunderstood, but when we follow the child’s lead and have an image of the child that presents them as highly capable individuals only then as adults can we understand the work that is happening during play.

As if play as a policy issue did not have enough challenges and obstacles to overcome, the COVID-19 global pandemic has set forth a new set of hurdles for the acceptance of play. Many parents feel like children “missed out” on months of learning during school closures/ emergency online learning from home platforms, so there is a call to get children back to school and learning and once again play is coming under fire as a thing that should occur as the reward for fulfilling serious learning expectations. Sahlberg and Doyle (2020) suggested that, “this should not be viewed as a setback to learning. The reality is that learning never stops. Children have kept learning at home”. And they are recommending, “schools adopt a 90-day ‘golden age of play’ our transitional period where traditional academic education should be balanced as much as possible with learning through play, physical and creative outlets and mental health counseling to provide support for children who will need it” (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2020). Parents are right when they say there has been a loss for children, but it is not a loss of learning. It is a loss of socialization, a loss of connection, a loss of imagination, and loss of understanding their

world and where they fit into this new normal. In the study, *Teaching in a Pandemic: Lessons learned from Alberta* (2020), conducted by Dr. Phil McRae in conjunction with the Alberta Teachers Association, a teacher responded that online learning has presented, “a loss of social interaction and imaginative play”. These are the things we need to ensure students regain when they return to us. It will need to look different to ensure safety procedures and protocols are being respected but play is not gone, it is needed more than ever. As futurists, we need to forecast how we are going to play during a pandemic.

UNESCO 2050

UNESCO has outline nine foundational ideas for public action in respect to education in a post COVID world. However, despite these recommendations being put forward in a post- COVID world, my futures proposal for education in 2050 is not contingent on a global pandemic. This proposal is instead focused on promising exemplary practice where education systems reimagine schools as a place of play. As educators, we are always putting the core subjects first and we are using play as the tool to learn. Early childhood educators are always thinking about how to meet the learner expectations through play and attempting to make concepts more captivating by playing. What if we shifted our thinking from how we can embed play in learning, to how can we embed learning into play? What if we changed our mindset to having play as the priority and the learning as something that happens while play occurs. As educators, we could ‘do school’ in a way that protects and honours a child’s right to play.

When I interviewed Pasi Sahlberg, I inquired about the countries in which play has been the most successful or welcomed by the educators and stakeholders he has worked with. He shared that the countries where play is most successful is in places where they are fully committed to their international declarations that include the UNICEF Convention on the Rights

of a Child (Personal communication, 2020). One of these many Rights of a Child include, “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (UNICEF, 1989). If our schools and systems of education could be reimagined to be places that upheld the rights of a child and put play first and foremost, we could ensure that a whole child is being developed. Using forecasting and strategic foresight tools we can begin to imagine what the future of education and play could look like in 2050.

Foresight Tools and the Futures of Play in School

The first foresight tool used to explore the future of play in our schools is *The Thing from the Future* as envisaged in the Design Lab work of Candy (2018). The paper’s proposed *Thing from the Future* would be an approach to educational programming where we embed learning and school are now a occasions and places of play. To explore this paradigm shift as a *Thing from the Future*, we will look at the core elements of: Arc, Terrain, Object and Mood as a means to develop this imagined future and its the possible implementation would look like in the lived experience of school.

ARC - The trajectory of the play as core to learning and the school.

Growth: play and the growth of play as the objective of school or approach to education.

Collapse: traditional approach to play in school, and embedding play into learning.

Discipline: Reconsidering that play is something that happens after the hard work is complete.

Transformation: Play as the ‘hard work’ for children.

TERRAIN (thematic context or location where this object could be found in the future)

We would find this paradigm shift in Early Childhood Education settings that want play to be the center of all that they do for children and students.

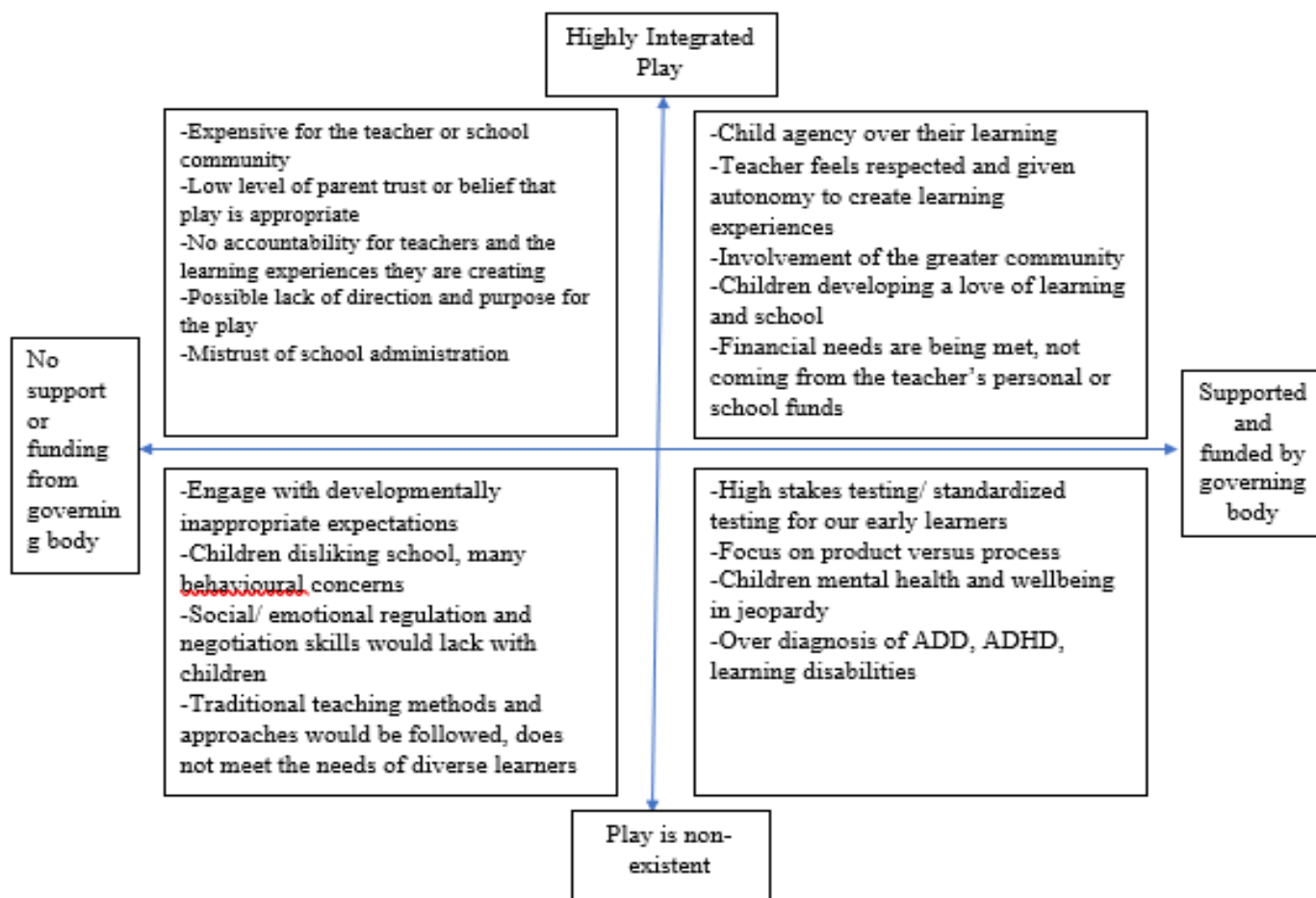
OBJECT (the revealing of how the future is different from today)

The approach to a school wide mission that centers play as the goal, and the learning happens while play is occurring.

MOOD (how it may feel when we experience the play as integral to learning ad school)

I think it would be difficult to implement this *Thing from the Future* into an existing education setting, but if you could build this approach from scratch and have a group of educators and parents who support the idea it could be a very positive mood. The mood of the children would be positive and enthusiastic. In creating this *Thing from the Future* there are definitely many considerations to make and there are places around the world that have systems similar this proposal. In Izumi- Taylor et. al. (2010), Swedish teachers reported a high level of respect for play in their classrooms. They were reported in saying that it was critical to allow children unstructured play and the educators were to build learning concepts into this play. This very much follows the Thing From the Future as shifting a paradigm to focus more on what the children want to know, what skills do they want to learn, and by giving them play educators could decipher how to encourage children through their interests and areas of play they enjoy.

A second foresight tool of use here is scenarios. As educators, we know that a huge obstacle in moving forward with futurist thinking is support and funding; whether this support be from the governing body of education, a school district, a principal, or a fellow educator. To further explore the future of play, a scenario developed looked at what could potentially happen if schools had highly integrated play in their classrooms and the schools were supported and funded in having this and also considered the results if there was nonexistent play and no support from the governing body.



By looking at the various outcomes of this schematic, the most ideal scenario would be to have an approach that involves high levels of integrated play and support and funding from the governing body. In completing these two foresight tools to consider a paradigm shift in thinking about play, it is clear that in some areas in the world this is already happening. For the rest, we are left with this “wicked problem” (Zhao, et. al., 2019) where most people would agree that play is good and it should be what our children are partaking in, yet we are not willing to allow government funds to be used to support this in the way it needs to be done to have the most benefits for our students.

Reflections and Conclusion

The debates over where and how we play in school has very much been at a standstill from my own experience in the classroom and now supporting teachers in a leadership role in Alberta. We are so close to forming meaningful classroom experiences that move play to the center of the classroom and school life. With the constructivist view of education seemingly being under attack from our current provincial government and an encouragement of “foundational learning” is on the rise it is critical that we advocate for and reimagine play for our current climate. Using the two foresight tools through the previous analysis it is clear that this shift in paradigm is not easy and it does take a community of people to truly understand the benefits of play from a physical, emotional, social and cognitive place of development. As Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) suggest, “someday soon, the parents, teachers and children of the world will rise up and join together to build a new generation of schools for all children, schools built not on stress and fear but on play, joy, learning and love. We have everything we need to make the change” (p. 317-318). We truly have everything we need to make the shift, to encourage the changes and to move educators, parents and children into a seeing play as integral to school as Thing from the Future that might arrive much faster than we anticipated.

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