A Note from the Editors:
Welcome to the second part of our two-part edition of Connections! Like the Fall 16 issue, this Spring 17 publication will focus on what is working in early childhood play-based classrooms across the country. Lynn and I were complaining about the lack of play in our schools and decided we should instead be sharing positive examples of how many places were successfully implementing play-based programs. We set out to use a backward design that instead of focusing on research first, started instead with successful practices.

We are pleased to again introduce you to Dr. Jennifer Berke, Child Care Exchange’s Masters Leader from 2015 as our guest editor. She did a fantastic job of collecting case studies and then aligning the comments with current researchers in our field.

Thank you, Dr. Berke, for your commitment to play and to our publication of Connections! We appreciate your hard work and are extremely delighted to share how play is working!

We would also like to thank, Autumn Richards, Edinboro University Graduate Assistant, for her help with layout and editing for this large issue.

Co-Managing Editors:
Karen Lindeman Ph.D., Edinboro University
Lynn Hartle Ph. D., The Pennsylvania State University at Brandywine

From the Guest Editor, Jennifer Berke, Ph.D.
Once again, I am pleased to be the Guest Editor for the Spring 2017 publication of Connections. This is a continuation of the theme that focuses on play in a variety of settings for young children. Articles were submitted from a family home care provider, administrators of numerous programs, private and public child care settings, a family member, and an outdoor education program. Also, for this issue the net was cast further and includes articles submitted from Scotland and Zimbabwe. All of the information presented reconfirms our belief that regardless of culture and circumstances, children derive great personal meaning and enjoyment in and from play.

I reiterate the purpose of this endeavor. I hope that the content and ideas presented in these articles will stimulate advocacy and foster dialogue around how to best create an action plan that leads to a national position statement on play from NAEYC. I trust that a newly envisioned position statement will, at a bare minimum, acknowledge the essential need for children to play, move policy makers, families, and teachers to a point where they understand and appreciate that play is an indispensable contributor to child development, and help create a dramatic mind shift regarding play’s place in education. As I write this introduction, public education may be at a serious crossroads, so our voices and our commitment to advocacy have never been more important or needed.

One recommendation that I made back in the Fall was for you to take a pen or pencil to mark words or phrases that you found worthy of reflection. I highlighted specific important concepts: time, material, environments/space (physical, social, aesthetic, & temporal), relationships, intentionality, reflection, and joy. Now I can add spirituality, open-ended, intrinsic motivation, parental involvement, provocation, authenticity, and happiness. I am convinced you will find many more phrases and concepts that are personally meaningful to you.

Now it is up to you- the members of the PPP Interest Forum-to decide on your next steps. I hope that your spirits have been lifted and that you found inspiration from these personal stories. For me it was
extremely heartening to see evidence that play continues to be provided and passionately supported by practitioners, administrators, and families. Children across the country and world will benefit from these opportunities in intrinsic and immeasurable ways; it would be my ultimate wish that ALL children had these types of experiences to sustain them in their journey through life.

Sincerely,
Jennifer E. Berke, Ph.D., Guest Editor
Berke and Berkley (B & B) Early Childhood Consultant Group
Exceptional Master Leader, Child Care Exchange (2015)

Disclaimer: The programs described by the authors seem developmentally appropriate and supportive of play, yet the editors cannot endorse them since we have not visited any of the programs in person.

Recess-An Absolute Priority!
Garden Oaks Montessori, PK3-8th Grade
Houston, TX
By Lindsey J. Pollock, Principal

The significance of play in school settings is of undeniable importance. Not only have researchers recognized that recess is crucial in school settings, legislators in Texas have mandated that 30 minutes of daily recess be provided in public elementary schools. As the principal of a PK3 – 8th grade public Montessori campus in the Houston Independent School District, I have made it a priority that our children at all ages have time to play during the school day. Some of this play time is provided 30 minutes before school starts on our school playgrounds where students gather, supervised by adult staff members and parent volunteers. This time is unstructured and provides students with choices such as walking or running the jogging trail, playing soccer in the field or using the playground equipment where we have installed swings, climbing structures and slides. In addition, each classroom has a scheduled 30 minutes of recess during the school day which does not include PE classes.

Pondering the influence that play has in developing innovative thinkers!

During recess, many children play in the natural environment creating games and social dilemma made up from their collective imaginations! One child I spoke to stated “Most of our games are just made up fun from our minds! They’re really the funnest because they (the games) can change when we want them to – we’re not just stuck with the rules.” In fact, one phenomenon we have observed is the children’s persistence in building with whatever they have at hand! For instance, we noticed that after our PE coach left a stack of ‘steppers’ outside (those low platforms used to step on during aerobic exercise) our children creatively engineered them to build a variety of structures and mazes to facilitate their games.

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They Want to Laugh, Dance and Play! By Patrick Mokokoro

Transforming My Classroom: A Personal Story of a Family Child Care Provider Who Advocates for Play by Angela Jones
Additionally, when we had a pile of bricks remaining after a recent patio project, we repeatedly found neatly stacked piles of bricks in various configurations, even though the teachers and assistants on duty did their best to dissuade students from the area for matters of safety. After the excess bricks were moved, we replaced them with outdoor storage containers filled with wooden blocks because we realized the potential that was offered through the provision of building materials. Now, students (both boys and girls) at all ages, work together constructing all kinds of castles, roads, fortresses and other works of their imagination. In the words of one of my kindergarteners, “I love when I build things because I can make stuff from my head.” Children’s ability to manipulate objects into representations of their visual images supports nonverbal expression of ideas and their spatial knowledge and interpretation of the world. This is especially essential for our students who are learning English as a second language and our students with language delays, as they are provided an opportunity to participate in a creative outlet that is not dependent on oral language.

Rules for safety, assurance of movement, and inclusion
At Garden Oaks Montessori recess and PE are two different experiences. Recess is the time each day that children play without the confines of a planned curriculum. However, we did begin to observe some trends that we felt needed to be addressed. We have established rules to alleviate some disagreements that have arisen, such as blocks must be used for building, words must be used to solve problems and only the builder may knock down their creation. When conflicts do arise that are not able to be mitigated following these guidelines, adults are ready to help!

We also noticed that some students almost exclusively preferred sedentary activities such as reading, sitting and talking with friends which concerned us as we worked to instill healthy habits for physical activity. Another phenomenon we observed was that some children either withdrew from the group or were left out of group play/games when there were teams or more aerobic or rough and tumble play such as tag or dodge ball. These activities require highly skilled adult supervision to ensure that children are able to self-monitor their behavior and not harm themselves or others. Additionally, modified equipment and rules such as soft sponge balls for dodge ball, contact only below the waist and a modified ‘out’ where students who go ‘out’ activate another student on the sideline to go in, thus creating a continual stream of participants and reducing the competitive nature of the game. Clarity in rules is established BEFORE the game begins and is monitored by the adults, junior coaches and student participants during recess. My most skilled teachers review class progress regarding recess and student behaviors during community meetings to ensure that the students in class agree that the guidelines are being followed. Some community meetings result in the collective agreement to ban a game for an agreed upon time, or to modify the rules in order to support the successful participation of everyone in the group. In order to support our children, teachers were encouraged to build a sense of community during circle time or community meetings. Some of the strategies utilized helped reinforce ideas such as the importance of trying new things and being an inclusive community. Finally, we implemented a structured play component led by the adult at the beginning of each recess (first 10 minutes) in which the adult modeled physical activity and ensured that all students were engaged in warm-up activities such as toe-touches, twists and jumping jacks.

Rationale for inclusion of recess
Some of my colleagues have argued that with all the pressure to ensure academic excellence, why waste time on recess? I counter with some of today’s realities that often prevent children from engaging in physical activity:

- children who live in apartments and in inner city settings have limited opportunity for green space physical movement and encounters with nature;
- latch key kids go home and lock themselves in for the evening;
- families are worried about children playing outside unsupervised; and
- stranger danger is a realistic fear for many families and the children report that they too are fearful to be outside playing.

For many children school is the primary opportunity to engage in play with same age peers. However, the overarching reason that recess is staunchly defended by me and other faculty is that the children in all grades at Garden Oaks report high satisfaction with the opportunity to play outside during the day. Since we have mandated adherence to daily outdoor play we have seen the impact of recess translated into a measurable drop in bullying and aggressive behavior. Anecdotally, we can track spikes in
referrals and calls to parents about behavioral concerns when we have a string of days where students are not able to have outdoor recess due to inclement weather. (In Houston that phrase translates into heavy rain!)

**Benefits far outweigh the potential pitfalls**

Injuries on the playground are an inevitable outcome of physical activity. Scraped knees and sprains do occur even when children are walking down the sidewalk to the playground, so it is no surprise that children may be injured at recess. We have found that the majority of our accidents happen on playground equipment such as swings, monkey bars and slides, not during cooperative play experiences on the playground! As such, we have made supervision of these areas a top priority and worked to educate our children of the proper use of equipment. For example, the covered slide is made for one person at a time and children need to wait until the bottom is clear before sliding down. Additionally, each classroom has an assigned recess time and location. The locations rotate as we have a variety of outdoor play settings such as the front field, playground and covered pavilion. These spaces and times are assigned in order to limit the number of children using the space and to avoid overcrowding! My nurse also tracks all incidents and the setting in which an injury may have occurred. During our weekly leadership and safety meeting we review this data to ensure that we are taking precautions to address any potential concern. If we see that there is a pattern of concern in a particular location on the campus or in a classroom, we then address that issue whether it is a lack of equipment, supervision or perhaps crowding due to a mix-up in schedule. We also encourage all staff to report any playground concerns immediately to our plant operator and an administrator if any risk factor is detected such as a sharp piece of playground equipment or a need for mulch to be replenished.

Furthermore, in order to avoid unnecessary risk, we provide training that is led by our school nurse and PE teacher and also contract the services of *PlayWorks* which is a non-profit organization that provides training and technical information about activities and skills to promote a safe and inclusive experience. Along with a consultant who gives monthly updates for our staff, *PlayWorks* also has a junior coaches’ component that provides training to students so that they can become leaders and game facilitators on the playground.

Overall, it takes the collective efforts of the students, parents and teachers to support the physical development of our children and the implementation of safe, fun recess at school. We believe the effort is well worth it as we observe children who are able to navigate outdoor play spaces. The nuances of this interactive social setting are developing a greater sense of confidence and increased physical well-being for all the students. One first grader who actively engages in outdoor play reported that recess is “My most favorist part of my day because I get my chance to think with my body and be me.”

Hopefully our goal as educators is to guide all children in their efforts to be their most authentic selves and to provide a variety of playful learning activities that support learners of every modality explore the world around them!

**Response**

By: Dr. Olga Jarrett

The PreK to 8th grade students at Garden Oaks Montessori in Houston, TX are fortunate that recess, 30 minutes before school and 30 minutes during school, is a priority. They are also fortunate that building materials, a natural environment, playground equipment, walking and jogging trails, and a playing field offer a variety of opportunities to experience recess.

School recess provides many benefits. It offers a break in the academic day when children can play outside, be physically active, have free choice, and learn to make up games and play fair. Often recess is the only time in the day when children can explore the outdoors, exercise, make their own decisions, and learn social skills. Sadly, many of the schools that are least likely to have recess serve children of color and children in poverty (Jarrett, 2003; Jarrett, Sutterby, DeMarie, & Stenhouse, 2015). For these children, there may be no time in their school day when they can be active, interact with their classmates, and make their own decisions. Another disturbing trend is that in many of the schools where recess is offered, some children, often the same ones repeatedly, are denied recess as punishment. Often these children are ones who most need to learn social skills or who most need to move during the day.

Furthermore, only a few states mandate recess, allowing the individual schools in most states to eliminate recess for a variety of reasons (including the need to spend more time on test preparation) as determined by the school board, superintendent, principal, or teachers. What
wonderful news that Texas now mandates 30 minutes of daily recess in all public schools in the state!

Noting that sometimes children choose not to be physically active or have difficulty organizing their own games or working out conflicts, Lindsey Pollock, Principal of Garden Oaks Montessori has introduced strategies to maximize the benefits of recess for all children. These strategies, having structured physical activity for the first 10 minutes of recess followed by 20 minutes of free play, making rules with the children to prevent bullying and accidents, rotating classes to different outdoor environments to eliminate overcrowding, and hiring PlayWorks to do some training of teachers and junior coaches, while maintaining free play, are worthy of consideration by other schools.

I found Ms. Pollock’s article inspiring. In my experience, recess, if it occurs at all, is an afterthought at most schools. At Garden Oaks Montessori, recess is an important time of the day when all children (prek-8th grade) can grow through their play experiences outdoors. Teachers and administrators take recess seriously and work with the children to create a positive atmosphere for play, physical activity, social development, and safety. This thoughtful focus on recess could be a model for schools across the country.

References

A Window into Spiritual Development and Play: An Eye-Witness View of Children’s Imaginary Play
By Deborah Schein, Grandmother

Last year my husband and I did a most amazing thing, we moved from Cleveland, Ohio to Minneapolis, Minnesota. What does this have to do with play? Everything! Minneapolis is where our three young grandchildren live. Because of this we entered a world filled with delightful wonder, imagination, and play; a place where I could extend my own research on spiritual development of young children. This particular story is about baking pretend cookies, a pretend trip to Chicago, and how this all spun into action right before my eyes one cold winter day.

I have heard educators whisper that children today have forgotten to play. I hope this is not true because play is what children do. Play is how children learn. Play is how children get to know themselves, others, and the world. Maybe play has not disappeared. Maybe we have forgotten how to see it. This particular story begins with the Montessori sandpaper letters I purchased for our granddaughter on her fourth birthday – flat blue and pink wooden rectangles with an alphabet letter on each. The gift, was given because I had observed our granddaughter’s strong attraction for tactile material. She is the kind of child, like me, who is prone to touch everything. She was also showing interest in letters; their shapes, sounds, and names. A perfect gift- one would think. But unbeknownst to me because I was still living back in Cleveland at the time the gift was given, my granddaughter visualized the sandpaper letters as cookies. This is where play enters the picture; not just ordinary play but open, imaginary, spiritual play. This type of play integrates all learning domains (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual development) and relies upon children’s innate ability to wonder, to show curiosity, to be creative. Finally, this type of play offers children time and space to be integrative as both mind and brain work individually as well as together, to create these unique spiritual moments for human growth and development.

Setting the Stage for My Observations-- or the Story of Baking Sandpaper Cookies

Talia loved the alphabet letters from the start. She rarely explored the letters themselves (unless guided by an adult). When left on her own the letters became cookies that had to be mixed, baked, and cooled. One winter day, now living in Minneapolis, I was called to care for the two youngest of my grandchildren. As always, I was delighted and looked forward to spending some time together with these two small people. When I walked into the house I discovered Talia now five and her little brother Aryeh, just
two, very busy at play. I was quickly brought into the scene as Talia described to me what they were doing.

Talia, “Grandma, we’re baking cookies. See.” She shows me a large book fitted with some of the sandpaper letters. She turns to give directions to Aryeh.

Talia, “Here Aryeh, these are your cookie trays. This is how you put the cookies on the trays.” Several large books are taken off the bookshelf and Talia carefully shows Aryeh how to cover each book’s surface with the sandpaper letters. Aryeh gets busy doing what his sister has asked him to do. He is very intent in his actions. I can see inner control and deep focus displayed not only on his face, but throughout his body. I remind myself to stand back and leave them to their play. In my eyes, I had walked into a spiritual moment in time and place where these children were in their element; each nurturing their inner disposition; each creating for themselves and for each other I/thou moments defined in a deep relationship with the items they were playing with, as well as strengthening their relationship with one another.

I couldn’t help but wonder what was so magical about the sandpaper letters. What might I be missing? I spent the next 3½ hours observing, taking notes, and capturing photos of Talia and Aryeh as they explored the wonders of imaginary play, each in their own way, each at that own level of development, but still very much together. From an educational perspective, I was reminded of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and the natural flow of social constructivist thinking. But most of all I thought about play as providing place, time, and milieu for spiritual development to occur.

**Talia**

As Talia played, I observed how much she knew about baking cookies. She found a large bowl and a wooden spoon and began to mix pretend ingredients together.

Talia, “Aryeh, here you put in the flour and I’ll put in the butter.” They continued this way until the pretend cookie dough was completed. Then they began to cover all the book cookie sheets with sandpaper letters. At one point Talia turns to me and says, “Grandma, our pretend oven is in the basement but we have lots of other ovens we can use.” Before I could say anything she shows me that the oven of choice for this day was under the couch. She then turned to Aryeh and says, “Here, put your tray in this oven.” Aryeh struggles to cover his book cookie sheets and finds it even more difficult to bend low while keeping the sandpaper letters on top of the books. Talia is completely focused on the story line of baking and Aryeh is completely focused on the movement and following instruction. Together they are producing cookies that now need to bake and then cool. Once Talia decides the cookies are done she asks me to help her find a spatula. I find a spatula in the real kitchen and she is on her way. Slowly and carefully she removes the sandpaper letter cookies from the book cookie sheets and places the cookies out to cool.

She is now ready for another side story as they wait for the cookies to cool. She instructs Aryeh to get a blanket and some pillow so they can make an airplane. Aryeh is captivated by this idea. He has great passion for cars, trucks, and planes. Talia is excited to use this pretend plane to fly to Chicago to see her Aunt Hana. Together the children lay out the blanket and arrange the pillows. Aryeh decides he needs some of his trucks for the plane ride. The two sit side by side on the blanket as they fly to Chicago surrounded by Aryeh’s treasured possessions – his Pelly (a small blanket with an elephant head) and an assortment of trucks, cars, and train pieces. By this time I am hungry. It is way past lunch time. I ask the children if they are ready for lunch. Not yet they say. We still have to land, see Aunt Hana and eat our cookies. All in the order it was meant to be.

Hungry, but greatly privileged to have witnessed these spiritual moments in play, I wait for my grandchildren’s play to come to an end so we might eat lunch together. When we do, they are particularly hungry for their work had been so intense and their play complex, real, and satisfying. As with all good play, their faces and bodies are emitting the light and joy of time well spent.

**Response**

*By: Ann Pelo*

“What’s so magical about sandpaper letters?” Deborah wonders, watching her grandchildren carefully
arrange alphabet tiles on a book-turned-cookie-sheet. To find an answer, she directs her gaze below the unremarkable surface of the children’s play, seeking to understand the magic, the compelling force that binds Talia and Aryeh to this moment of play. What she finds inside their cookie baking game is sovereignty and integrity: “a spiritual moment in time and place where these children were in their element; each nurturing their inner disposition; each creating for themselves and for each other I/thou moments defined in a deep relationship with the items they were playing with, as well as strengthening their relationship with one another.”

The roots of integrity lie in the Latin word for “wholeness, completeness.” Integrity evokes coherence, soundness, a profound alignment of intention and action. I think that’s what Deborah’s getting at when she describes this play as a spiritual moment: it demonstrates completeness, coherence, congruence. Talia is both the author and the protagonist of her story, and Aryeh, while acting within Talia’s storyline, has a wholeness of focus and commitment that is his own. The two children hold a shared purpose, a shared determination to get cookies baked: each contributes her or his particular efforts and gestures towards their shared goal. The apparent focus of the children’s play, baking cookies, is not particularly interesting – not for Deborah, watching, and not for us, reading. But two people acting with sovereignty and integrity – that holds our attention, and our regard. Talia and Aryeh braid together concentration and flow and rhythm, mixing flour and butter, laying out raw cookies on cookie sheets, sliding the trays into the oven and pulling them out when the cookies begin to brown, lifting the cookies off the hot cookie sheets with a spatula and setting them to cool. We recognize the intimacy of concentration and the fluidity of movement from our experiences of giving ourselves over to projects that engage us; we’ve lived this wholeness and completeness of attention and action. We know the integrity of effort when we see it. And, seeing it, we find the magic in the children’s play.

Antonyms for integrity, the dictionary tells us, are hypocrisy, dishonesty, dishonor. These could have become elements of this play. Deborah could have worked to turn her grandchildren’s play into a “learning opportunity” emphasizing literacy or numeracy -- urging some sort of alphabet recitation or suggesting that Talia write down her cookie recipe or proposing a consideration of counting by introducing measuring spoons and cups. She could have requested allegiance to the clock, asking that the children stop playing at a pre-appointed lunch time. With any of these actions, Deborah would have dislocated herself from a commitment to respect children’s play. Instead, though, she stood as a willing witness to the children’s commitments, honoring the integrity of the story that they enacted: cookies baked and cooled and crunched, with a visit to Aunt Hanna along the way. The children were immersed in a complete and self-sustained world, and Deborah let them stay there, gazing into their world looking for the magical – and then telling the story of their play with an intention to illuminate that magic.

We can consider this a spiritual stance for educators, this lived commitment to look below the surface of a seemingly unremarkable game to see the integrity of the children and their play and their relationships. Deborah’s story reminds us of the choice we have to make when we keep company with children: Will we disrupt the coherence and completeness of their play by asking them to tend to what we think has merit – the alphabet, rather than the cookie baking, or the need to stay on schedule? Or will we stand in honorable witness to the children’s play, seeking to see the integrity that gives it coherence and wholeness? The consequences of our choice have implications not only for the children’s experience, but for our own. When we act to honor the integrity of children’s play, we call forward and act from our own integrity.

Building the Foundations for Early Learning through Play-based Programming and Pedagogy at Mothercraft

By Glory Ressler, B.A. Dip. GIT / Director, Education, Data and Community Research

Canadian Mothercraft Society, Toronto, Canada

In the province of Ontario Canada, we are accountable for implementing “How Does Learning Happen?” our pedagogical guideline for the early years. Programs are required to have related program goals and approaches that are supported, monitored and documented. The four foundations that facilitate learning and development in children, and therefore must have related goals, are
Belonging, Engagement, Well-being and Expression. I think of this as putting ‘BE WE’ into practice.

There are also six approaches to achieving these goals as applied to both programming and professional practice. They are: 1. Responsive relationships; 2. Learning through play, exploration and inquiry; 3. Educators as co-learners; 4. Environment as third teacher; 5. Pedagogical documentation; and, 6. Reflective practice and collaborative inquiry. By following these guidelines and continually learning together as we go along, we are on a professional journey that will support quality practice and positive outcomes for young children and, eventually, the larger Toronto community and beyond.

At Mothercraft, we work from a theoretical framework that aligns nicely with the legislated pedagogy. Our vision is that every family has the knowledge and support they need to provide a loving environment in which their child is able to thrive and every professional who works with families is confident in their skills and committed to providing the highest quality services to their communities. The approach across all of our licensed child care, early intervention, family resource and pre-service and in-service education programs is based on attachment, relational learning and development theories. This means that we continually strive to improve quality and understand the importance of reflection, collaborative inquiry and responsive relationships to belonging, engagement, well-being and expression.

In Toronto we also experience one of the most diverse populations found anywhere on the globe and are, therefore, sensitive to the challenges that this can create for the children, families and students we serve. Mothercraft is known for its expertise in anti-bias and inclusion. We focus on providing a strong social and emotional base to give children the confidence and support needed to fully explore and engage in their environments and to interact with others in a positive manner.

Four Play Scenarios:

The following four case studies provide brief examples of how Mothercraft planned for play, responded to the emerging interests and needs of children, and used the six pedagogical approaches outlined above to help build the four foundations for early learning and development (e.g. ‘BE WE’) with a range of children in various program types.

Visiting the Doctor’s Office: The Power of Play-based Expression
~ Maryn Smyth-Commodari, Registered Early Childhood Educator/RECE

As professional early childhood educators working in Mothercraft early years centres, we believe that play allows children to understand and rationalize everyday occurrences in their lives and helps children to reflect and learn through re-enacting events and experiences. By observing their play, we know that educators can deepen their understanding of what may be going on in children’s lives, which allows us to better support them and foster their development. The following scenario occurred during a ‘Transition to School’ program.

A pretend medical kit was laid out on the floor and a circle of children were playing visiting the Doctor’s office. After observing the play taking place for a while, I approached the group stating, “I am sick, can I see a doctor?” One of the children answered, “We still have lots of other patients to see, so you will have to sit and wait your turn.” I agreed and sat down beside the children and waited for my turn. Several check-ups, complete with medicine and needle remedies, were conducted, including mine, and we all expressed our various reactions (e.g. ‘ouch’, etc).

I then initiated an open ended conversation about going to the doctor. This allowed the children to begin discussing their experience of going to the doctor to be immunized before starting school. A common theme that came up was fear of pain when getting a needle and the importance of what the children were playing at, given the transition they were about to make, became strikingly clear.

Opportunities to Play Support Well-being and Engagement among Refugee Children
~ 2015-16 ECE Diploma Students (Vivian, Fernanda, Maricel, Chhaya, Sonia D., Dinda, Hetal, Sadia, Amina, Shammin, Josemine)

In early 2016 we learned that many Syrian Refugee families had arrived in Toronto and their children had very restricted access to opportunities for play. This concerned us as we were studying the importance of play-based learning and development for social and emotional development and for normalizing and integrating experience in our ECE Diploma program at Mothercraft.
One of our course instructors mentioned an opportunity to assist with this so, as a class we discussed this and many of us decided to volunteer.

We researched what the needs of these children might be and what materials would be beneficial to bring. Sensory items were high on the list; shredded paper, paints, homemade play dough. Play dough would be good for motor skills, as would the building blocks and puzzles we decided needed to be added to the list. Blocks and puzzles were also items that would help children in developing their cognition, engaging their creativity and critical thinking, so too would books, puppets and songs. Though the books were in English, we had a small handful of classmates who would be able to translate the stories into Arabic and we talked about how we could always act out the pictures in the books with the children.

On each visit, we made our way to the lobby of the hotel with arms full of materials; a homemade cardboard maze, balls, t-shirts for the children to use as smocks, a tunnel, a homemade ring toss, etc. Children surrounded us within minutes and we started playing with them. We were so excited and enthusiastic and happy to be there! While assigned to program for the 0-4 year olds, older children were welcome to join in our activities and all children were free to move from activity to activity as they pleased. There were both planned and spontaneous activities and we documented cognitive, physical, social, emotional and communication/literacy development.

Some children were initially very reserved or uncertain. Over time, they began to express different ideas and engage more fully in a variety of activities. One school-aged boy initiated an impromptu racetrack, which a student volunteer helped him construct with masking tape on the floor. There was another boy who had initially been observed climbing over tables, hitting other children, and running away from student volunteers when they approached to offer support. Through facial expression and tone, he was given consistent messages regarding appropriate behaviour each day and the space to choose play-based activities. On the last day of programming, we watched as he took turns stacking the cups by colour with another boy, making it as tall as they could reach. They smiled as they built higher and higher. When it eventually fell down, the student volunteers were prepared to step in to support the boy with past challenges self-regulating. However, it was unnecessary! He was seen taking a breath, and then another cup, and he and the other boy began building again. As volunteer students, we felt that we had already made an important difference!

**Everyone is Welcome on the Train: the Impact of Inclusive Play on Belonging**
~ Athena Skliros, Registered Early Childhood Educator/RECE

One day, while visiting one of Mothercraft’s early years drop-in programs, a little girl walked to the snack area and sat herself in one of the empty chairs. She turned herself and the chair around to face the rest of the classroom and said, “I’m in a train!” Rather than redirecting her away from the snack area, I acknowledged her statement by saying, “I like your pretending,” and followed her lead by beginning to sing the *Good Morning Train* song. Soon many of the children began to join in, adding their chairs to the train. As each child joined in, my colleague and I exclaimed “How are you? Choo-Choo!” and pulled on an imaginary horn while we continued to sing the song.

When the children seemed to be losing interest and began leaving their train chairs, we wanted to enrich the co-operative play experience so one educator asked the children if they wanted to continue building trains and tracks.

Upon arriving back at the building area where he had previously been playing, one child found that his structure was different from the way he had left it, and said, “Somebody broke my tracks!” Knowing that this little boy might struggle to regulate his emotions, I responded by acknowledging his feelings and encouraging problem-solving, saying “I’m sorry that happened and it looks like you’re upset. How can we fix it?” The little boy appeared to think for a moment before saying, “Maybe ‘H’ can help.” The little girl, ‘H’, heard this suggestion and responded by saying, “I can help you fix it.” The two children then happily re-built the train tracks together!

Acknowledging each of the children as they joined the train, and the rest of the children in the classroom who hadn’t joined in, helped ensure that every child felt recognized and valued and also modeled cooperation and inclusion. In order to support the development of effective self-regulation and strategies for handling a range of social scenarios, problem solving strategies were encouraged and role-modeled, including the acknowledgement and labeling of feelings.
Playing with Ice and Dirty Water: Expanding Children’s Sense of Belonging, Engagement, and Expression
~ Minodora Grigorescu, MEd, Registered Early Childhood Educator/RECE

The Clean Water Project was first inspired when Amelia, one of the kindergarten children in my classroom, found a chunk of ice in the sand box and said: “Let’s take this ice inside!” Seeing her excitement, other children joined the search for a bucket to carry the ice and then helped to bring the found ‘treasure’ into the classroom, placing it carefully on the discovery table. Later that afternoon, Amelia went back to the table to check on the discovery. However, after peeking into the bucket she exclaimed, “Yew … it is dirty!” This attracted other interested children.

I gave them a few minutes to express their ideas about the melted ice and then quietly told them that there are children in the world that have to boil ‘dirty’ water like this before drinking it. They looked at me in disbelief! I pulled some National Geographic magazines from the shelf, and said “Let’s look at some pictures together… What do we see?” Concepts such as immunization, clean water project, life necessities, working children and life conditions were explored.

To help us learn even more about children around the world, we took a trip to the neighborhood library and welcomed a speaker from Foster Parent Plan. The children learned that in some places sand, rather than snow and ice, is shoveled! They developed different interests and rich, parallel learning took place in our classroom and at home. You can imagine the discussions the children and their parents had!

The kindergarteners started to ask if we could help these children in need, so we brainstormed ideas for fundraising. By the end, over $500 was collected through a lemonade stand set-up at pick-up time, baking pre-ordered cookies every Friday for a month, and creating a short video that we sold.

It was then time to decide how to donate the money collected, so we arranged a visit to Foster Parent Plan. When we arrived, 24 leather chairs were arranged around a huge table; one for each child. They were officially presented with a number of donation options and then it was time to vote. All 24 children put their hands up for the Clean Water Project!

Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, taught us that cognitive development happens in the context of social and cultural development- learning from each other and experiencing feelings of belonging. I treasure these memories and make sure to pass on the learning to my students studying to become Registered Early Childhood Educators.

Conclusion

Play-based learning is highly valued by Mothercraft and we provide many opportunities for intrinsically motivated, open ended play. We believe that, as educators, part of our role is to observe and document children in their play and then to reflect and identify ways to extend and build on the learning and development that is taking place. Planning for play and following the lead of the children ensures that we are taking their interests and preferences into account, co-learning together and striving to make every moment a meaningful learning opportunity.

Response
By: Dr. Paulette Luff, at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK.

My response to the engaging play scenarios from Toronto, presented by the ‘Canadian Mothercraft Society’, is inspired by the name of the organization. The strong principles that guide the work and the examples of playful learning bring to mind the ideas of feminist moral philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) who argued that caring for children is a practice that generates and is informed by ‘maternal thinking’. Maternal thinking has three dimensions: preservation of the child; fostering the growth of the child; and guidance for social acceptance. It is these three linked themes, of protection, nurture and socialization, that are demonstrated and developed through the play-based programme and are explored, briefly, here.

The careful, observant approach of the authors of the play scenarios and their colleagues ensures that children are protected and safeguarded. The children playing out their experiences of ‘Visiting the Doctor’s Office’ are sensitively supported to face their fears about going to the doctor for immunizations. Children from Syrian refugee families are given a place to belong and be. This ‘preservative love’, as Ruddick terms it, is also seen in the ways that children are kept physically and emotionally safe in all the play activities.
It is this same responsive, watchful practice on the part of adults that nurtures all aspects of growth and development. Ruddick terms this ‘active attention’. In all the scenarios, educators notice and build upon the experiences and interests of the children. The construction of the masking-tape racetrack, imaginative play with medical materials and the chair train, and the clean water project are all instigated by children. Then the staff extends the play to co-create opportunities for learning. This is richly illustrated in the ‘Playing with Ice and Dirty Water’ where complex concepts relating to science and geography are explored.

This relational pedagogy extends to support for social and emotional development. Play becomes a vehicle for promoting socially acceptable behaviour and for creating a sense of community. The ‘Doctor’s office’ play is carefully supervised. In ‘Everyone is Welcome on the Train’, the broken train tracks incident is handled in a way that contains and manages the behaviour of the boy who is upset and also involves another child in cooperative actions to rebuild the structure. Similar positive management is seen for the child in the group for refugees whose behaviour gradually transforms from climbing on tables, hitting other children and running away to collaboration with another child in a cup building activity. This fostering of pro-social behaviour is realized on a larger scale where the whole group of kindergarten children participate in fund raising for the ‘Clean Water Project’.

Overall, in reviewing these scenarios, there are resonances with my own research, in England, where practitioners’ understandings of young children were enacted in their work. It is clear that optimal playful learning experiences require the support of ‘maternal thinkers’ who seek to fulfil children’s needs and provide opportunities for growth.

References

First things first:
Why plan and open child care centers when there were options available?

The vast majority of options available were unacceptable. What was available were very custodial, highly unorganized, largely unkempt and unprofessional sites ill-equipped and lacking bright, attractive and interesting environments for children. There was few, if any, qualified staff. There were many babysitters moving groups of children around in small spaces with limited numbers of toys. There was very little, if any, professional leadership, detailed policies and procedures or acknowledged early childhood guidelines. We both worked full time and nursery schools were open for 2.5 hours. Nothing met our needs.

We knew we did not want our children at any of the centers or programs we visited. We knew that there had to be other families who felt the same way. So we planned, designed and framed a childcare program that we wanted our own children to attend. Here they would play and learn with friends under the caring and attentive eye of

Play as the Foundation: Knowledge Guides Practice
EduKids, Inc., Childcare Center
Buffalo, NY
By Kate Dust, M.S. Ed.,
Vice President of Education & Staff Development

Twenty eight years ago my friend and colleague, Nancy Ware, and I were in the same predicament – we needed child care for our young children. My education and expertise is in education and Nancy’s is in business. We knew that we wanted our children to attend all day programming that was warm, inviting, exciting and rich in experiences so that they would be able to obtain academic and language knowledge but also develop skills in creating friendship and attaining thoughtful care of self and others.

Building a high quality early childhood program that is based on play is like taking an umbrella out into the rain. Why? It is an action in response to knowledge. I know it is raining and I will get wet, so I will take an umbrella to keep dry in the rain. I know – so, knowledge guides practice.

First things first:
Why plan and open child care centers when there were options available?
knowledgeable, dedicated adults. So after a year of strategic planning we opened our first center with Nancy as President of EduKids, responsible for all aspects of facility, organizational management and development and I became the Education Director, responsible for staffing, programming, and training. Our center started as a private, for profit program and continues as such today. Our own children began in the first center with a few others attending. Staying true to our mission of personal, intentional care and early education over 28 years has produced 13 high quality, NAEYC accredited successful childcare centers throughout Western New York. Our 14th center will open this year. Daily, there are approximately 1,000 children under our collective roof cared for by a staff of over 300 dedicated professionals. We were right—other families wanted and needed better care and education for their children.

What does play based programming look like?
I know that play is the primary learning path for children. Play is organic. Play supports development of skills in all areas of growth; cognitive, social, emotional and physical. I know that children want and need to play so I will build a program for learning and care based on play environments, experiences and play partners. I know—so, knowledge guides practice.

- A family handbook that organizes information into descriptions of age grouped classrooms. Each classroom has a “look” of the day that includes play and play language in the classroom’s routine or schedule of the day. Play based programming includes information for families that emphasizes the concept that play is an essential learning path for young children. Included is an open invitation for them to be part of play in their child’s classroom experience. The family handbook includes the Mission and Vision of the program; there is information about NAEYC accreditation that guides practices in all classrooms and throughout the centers. Families are welcome partners in all aspects of programming.

- Families and children are welcomed into colorful, beautiful and child centered sites. Play is the spoken language from invitation to graduation in each center. Families are offered multiple ideas for play at home with their child and given the resources that guide everything from the leadership directives to the smallest whisper with children during a playful exchange with their teacher. Play is witnessed throughout the center. Play language is heard, building vocabulary as well as setting the tone of caring and friendship building. Teachers and teaching teams routinely and joyfully play with children.

- Children’s environments are center based. Inviting, exploratory and interesting play centers are part of each classroom; these centers include dramatic play, blocks & construction, puzzles & games, science—both indoors and out, learning through literacy, music & movement, creating masterpieces, math magic and individual classroom interest areas. Environments are rich in play language and opportunity. The importance of play is highlighted through center labels and wall hangings e.g.: When your child plays in the block corner she is learning the science principles of weight and matter.

- Toys and materials are selected that are safe, durable, easily manipulated and developmentally appropriate. As children grow and collect skills in all developmental areas, toys and materials are added to support social play stages from onlooker behavior to cooperative play with others. Choices to play alone or with others are respected from infancy to school age. Children play with toys and materials as explorers and engage in playful interactions with adults. Toys as formal learning tools are introduced and discovered through play; blocks become phones in the toddler room and letter puzzles are taken apart to form names in preschool.

How is play based programming supported?
Continuous conversations with families help remind them about the necessity of play in their child’s development. This is done through informal discussion with teachers and teams that include informing families about their child’s growing play interests. Sharing specific anecdotes and examples or ‘tells’ helps the teachers explain their child’s progress in development. For example; a three-year-old child interacts with another child
in the dramatic play center where they make food for their babies and talk about shopping. This play scenario highlights the fact that language, friendship and fantasy play skills are nurtured and supported through positive play experiences in a classroom center equipped with engaging toys and materials.

At the center and in the classroom children’s displays and center projects are just that – the children’s. With open ended art displays such as *Painting like Picasso* and projects that tell the story of study such as *Apple Seeds to Apple Pies*, there is continuous dialogue with families. The identification of skills supported through these playful and engaging experiences becomes evident. Photographs are taken, conversation boards are posted, literacy support is shared and home extensions are provided. Bakers, store keepers and farmers are part of multiple play centers and scenarios in the classroom, allowing children to access opportunities to develop all of their domains. There is always more happening than meets the eye!

Most importantly, staff shares the center’s play philosophy. There is continuous and intentional professional development that focuses on play, play language, play models, social play skill development, cognitive play skills, play as a formal learning tool and play for play’s sake. Play is integrated into formal lesson planning and fostering a *sense of the child* is included in on-going training. Current research and information about play is part of the foundation for training, planning and lesson building.

**How do you know play based programming works?**

You know play based programming works because children are happy when they are with you and they cry when they leave! There is singing in the classroom and marching in the hallway. There is digging in the sandbox and climbing on the climber. Laughter is shared between preschoolers, babies are snuggled into their strollers, there is a game of chase in the playground and the new teacher is having her hair braided by toddlers. There is joy.

Families return to you with their second, third or any child they have in their home! Expecting parents sign up with you at the same time they choose an OB/GYN. You are the referred center at mom’s clubs, the conversation at the neighborhood playground, families go out of their way to talk about how much they and their child loves daycare even though they were sure everyone would hate it. Families cry when they “age out” of your center.

Leadership is invited to share ideas, voice opinions, be part of strategic planning, mentor new professionals and present at business and child centered conferences. Your work is referenced and acknowledged by colleagues.

Kindergarten teachers want your child in their kindergarten classroom! Along with solid academic foundations, your children are known for their social skills and thoughtful character. They are considered well rounded having high scores on screenings and strong interest in school.

Children who need services (e.g., speech & language, physical challenges, behavioral challenges) request to be in your center because they are included in classrooms that offer them opportunities to learn and play under caring and knowledgeable adults with their interest in mind and heart. Therapists report having high success in the program.

Your ‘original’ center children return to work for you as educated and dedicated adults eager to share their ideas and skills with little ones who are in the same classrooms that they were in many years ago! Many are highly skilled professionals having foundations laid through high quality early childhood experiences at your program; they acknowledge this.

**Final thoughts on play based programming**

It’s easier to grab an umbrella to keep dry in the rain. It’s harder to have to continually convince people that children, in fact, learn best through joyful play experiences. Extensive research is available on brain development and the positive influence of play. There are also countless studies on the harm of didactic, stagnant teaching strategies that end up forcing children to give up their right to think for themselves, ask questions and draw
their own conclusions. There is great risk of damage in taking play out of schools. Research-based articles in professional journals as well as qualitative documentation found in programming, refutes the viewpoints of critics and skeptics who dismiss play out of hand. Our centers continue to choose play over a sole focus on academic goals.

**Knowledge Guides Practice**

Children laugh when they are having fun and playing. Children find their voice when someone they love listens to them. Children learn to share after they struggle over a wanted toy even though there are 3 others exactly like it. They learn to count when they are marching, to watch out for others when everyone is splashing in the sprinkler and to wait their turn when playing a game of freeze tag.

Families are strengthened when they play together. They find joy in the success they see in their child the first time she kicks the ball back in a game. There is great meaning gained from playing a game of “I Spy” in the car ride. It is a proud moment to hear a teacher say your son is a great friend on the playground.

We knew 28 years ago what we wanted for our own children. Today we welcome our grandchildren into our centers. What we wanted for our families continues to be our guiding lens, helping us determine what best practice is for ensuring that opportunities continue to exist for all children’s growth, development, and play.

**It is the true testament to Knowledge Guides Practice.**

**Response**

By: Dr. Lisa Fiore; Lesley University, Cambridge, MA

**The important thing about young children is that they are powerful.** (Christakis, 2016, p. xiii).

The statement above is profound in its simplicity. Of course there are many important things about young children, and educators, families, and other keen observers can testify to the ordinary, everyday behaviors and discoveries that confirm this fact. We know that children are brilliant scientists, curious explorers, and compassionate peacemakers- in fact, we are certain of this. We also know that fundamental knowledge and experiences are helpful for children to learn specific concepts and skills that will serve them well in unlimited ways across their lifetimes. This knowledge is supported by scientific findings that shed light on less visible elements of child development, such as brain development. Sometimes there’s a gap between what scientists know to be true and what educators know and do. Unfortunately, the importance of play to healthy child development is not as obvious to the public as the notion of taking an umbrella out into the rain to stay dry might be. The examples that Kate Dust presents in her article provide concrete ways that EduKids, Inc. Childcare Centers attempt to bridge the gap, inviting children and family members into play-based environments that support healthy and successful development for all children.

Fortunately, research findings reinforce the benefits of play-based learning that advocates like Dust have long espoused: positive growth in cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. In an attempt to provide concrete guidelines to educators, policy-makers, and other professionals, researchers at the Yale Child Study Center conducted a complex study that found developmental milestones have remained stable for more than 100 years, “despite ramped-up expectations, including overtly academic work in kindergarten,” (Pappano, 2010, p. 1). Researchers have expanded the dialogue to bridge the gap between science and classroom practice, drafting the “Core Story of Child Development” (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2014). Key findings of this work emphasize the importance of early experiences on brain “architecture,” the power of relationships, interplay between genes and the environment, the long-term negative effects of “toxic stress,” and that fact that brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time. The notion of plasticity strongly suggests the importance of making the “right” investments in early childhood programming. The researchers argue that a focus on policy is the best way to have the greatest impact, and “[p]olicies with smart and necessary funding sustain and scale good programs” to the benefit of more children and families (p. 7). Several years later, this argument continues, as Christakis notes: “With increased public attention to the conditions for healthy child development, and a healthy infusion of new funds to shore up the childcare crisis, we have an opportunity to do things right” (2016, p. xvii). Dust recognizes that the “language” of play is one that can be extended to families – to voters who can influence policy decisions – and incorporated into home environments. In this way, play vocabulary, play experiences, and “the tone of caring” are consistent for children. The results include happier children, happier families, and word of mouth information...
that translates into sustained (and increased!) participation and enrollment as well as early childhood experiences that influence a lifetime of learning for children AND staff members.

We know children benefit from play – time spent engaging in voluntary, unstructured, child-centered and child-initiated activity. Yet recess in public schools is being cut back in attempts to use the time to teach children more math and literacy skills. The reasoning is that such learning will prepare them to compete in a global society – to perform well on standardized tests in the short term and achieve college and career readiness in the long term. We know that choices educators make reflect their values. We also know that children’s misery in school can cause them to lose interest in learning altogether. Dust’s statement, “It is a proud moment to hear a teacher say your son is a great friend on the playground,” speaks to the recognition that relationships, not standardized test scores, matter more. Empathy and compassion are nurtured in play-based environments in which children are the protagonists of their own learning.

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the educational philosophy that guided the development of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is internationally known for his own simple and profound quote: “Nothing without joy.” At the heart of play-based programming for young children is the core belief in the competence and curiosity of children – our youngest citizens. When children and families are invited into a child care environment such as one described by Dust, they experience early childhood education practices that emphasize relationships over mandates, freedom of choice over prescribed activity, and caring over competition. It is an invitation to understand the knowledge that guides practice, through deliberate, intentional choices. It is an invitation to see what the umbrella- in all its possible configurations- can do.

References

Perspectives on Play: One Program -- Two Voices
Grace Neighborhood Nursery School
Minneapolis, MN
By Barb Murphy, MS and Jamie Bonczyk, MA

First Voice: Barb Murphy, Executive Director

“Come Grow With Grace…A Joyful Learning Community!”

This is our school’s motto. We are a half-day preschool program, which serves approximately 110 children, ages 3 – 6 years. As Director of this play-based preschool program, I give approximately 100 tours a year to prospective families. The program does not have an advertising or marketing budget so I always ask, “Where did you hear about us?” The answers vary slightly: “From someone at my older child’s school; from a parent at the park/library/pool/gymnastics class; from someone in my neighborhood; from a friend-of-a-friend.” The reality of the situation is clear to me. We have been satisfying families for 55 years with our approach to early childhood education and their enthusiasm for our school is our best marketing tool and a strong affirmation that we are doing something right.

Of course it is my job to explain to families why their child will thrive at our school in the context of our nurturing, playful community. When I take them on a tour of the classrooms they see children doing the following:
- making choices in environments rich with materials and the provision of interesting and engaging activities;
- pursuing their interests with the support of responsive teachers;
- and connecting and collaborating with peers and learning how to think, ask questions, solve problems and work in groups.

In addition, the families hear the busy

Photo Credit: Omar Gillego
hum of children learning through play expressed with laughter, singing, dialogue and conversation. They see children concentrating, engaged, eager to show and explain what they are doing to the visitors. It is then quite simple for me to explain how our mission is not to “prepare children for kindergarten”, as that would be very disappointing to the children. Rather we are preparing them for life so that they can be fully engaged citizens of the 21st century. It is our hope that they will continue to be thinkers and learners; to have confidence in their ability to ask a question and answer a question; to be curious and have passion for learning; to connect with their peers with confidence; to stand up for themselves when needed, but also to have deep empathy for others; to gain the skills that will allow them to be successful when they move on to other school environments that may have a completely different set of expectations for them. We believe they will be ready.

Our approach is not what every family is looking for. Society has created a false dichotomy between play and learning and many families have bought into the idea that the way for children to succeed in school is to get a boost in academics as soon as possible. Standardized tests scores are used as the primary indicator of a school’s success. Families fear that their child won’t be prepared for the reality of today’s kindergartens. But years of developmental research have supported the notion that play is integral to children’s overall development and to the quality of their lives. For those of us who are familiar with this research, as all early childhood professionals should be, playful learning in supportive, nurturing environments with responsive adults will never be a fad or a fancy. Play is here to stay.

**Second Voice:** Jamie Bonczyk, MA, Grace Neighborhood Nursery School Parent

As an experienced early childhood professional, the endeavor of finding a child development program that aligned with everything I wanted for my daughter was a daunting undertaking, to say the least. After visiting nine early childhood programs and not finding what I sought, I was at a loss. I wanted an environment that was both productive and pleasurable for my daughter. I wanted a program where the children were encouraged to become independent thinkers and their day-to-day learning was prompted by hands-on experience. I wanted a program that was free of “crisscross applesauce,” devoid of policing teachers and full of love and understanding. I wanted a program where my child could experience the diversity of humanity without bias and I wanted a program where she would come home with physical evidence of what she had learned still clinging to her clothes. I wanted her learning to permeate her life so much that she would crave it when absent.

Researching programs on my own didn’t seem to be getting me results and it was then that I utilized another resource. I had been involved in a new mommies group so I reached out to the woman who was the leader. Not only was she a mom of four, she just so happened to be a fellow (former) preschool teacher. I valued her input because she understood the system. I asked her about the program where she sent all four of her children. She began to beam as she described the teachers, then the environment and finally the philosophy. I called Grace Neighborhood Nursery School the next day.

When my family arrived at the tour we were invited into a comfortable room with a couple of couches and toys on the floor for my daughter. The room very much resembled a living room. Instead of ‘selling’ the program to us, the Director, Barb Murphy asked us a series of questions. The question that stands out most in my mind is, “What do you want your daughter to gain from her experience here?” That was easy for me because I knew I wanted her to learn to develop a deeper relationship with herself and to learn to make and hopefully keep a friend.

From day one, Sylvie (my daughter, 3) has loved school at Grace. She is an only child, and this supportive environment has had a significant impact. She has not always known how to navigate play with children outside of our family because of limited opportunities to do so. But at Grace it was like a light switch went on for her. She gained two comrades immediately, Ehren and Bo. Watching the three of them grow and develop has been an amazing experience, each one with their own unique interests and talents, influencing the others because they want to play together and their individual opinions carry perceived value. They have learned to trust each other and to feel safe examining and testing individual boundaries.
while remaining secure in the knowledge that they can depend on each other. This is what I always wanted for her.

Their teacher, Shannon sets up the room so that they are able to explore and ask questions about the materials she has added to the environment. They always notice the additions and have lots to talk about. She knows each one of their personalities, their knowledge level, their current abilities and their skill sets. She truly designs the class around what is going to get each one of them thinking and engaged with the others. She is there to foster their development, not to give them tasks to do. In retrospect this seems obvious; in practice it is more work for the teacher. When considering the teacher, curriculum competency is key, but only if the curriculum is sound. If there is a cookie cutter curriculum approach implemented by teachers who don't care about utilizing best practice, then the children always suffer.

As I reflect on my child’s time at Grace, I often consider the family friends we met through the center. When I asked Ehren’s mom about her family’s experience here she said, “My son has a smile on his face every day I pick him up and he always looks forward to his class, it is the highlight of his week. He loves the play-based learning because it directly involves him in the learning experience. He's got stories for me every day when I pick him up and the stories begin with him telling me what he ‘did’. These type of child led, play based experiences are becoming more rare from what I’ve heard and quite frankly it frightens me. The takeover of standardized testing and rote memorization is something I want to steer clear of with my son's education.” I agree with her sentiment.

For my family, Grace Neighborhood Nursery School has given my daughter the confidence to initiate play. I have witnessed her walk up to children she does not know, introduce herself and invite them to play with her! I have had to become much more of an observer as she now is beginning to design play scenarios that no longer involve me. I watch and listen as she drives her stuffed animals to and from locations on her bus (our hallway filled with blocks, pillows and stuffed animal ‘passengers’). She also has picnics and birthday parties with her ‘buddies.’ My personal favorite is when she takes on the role of teacher. I love to hear her recount her day as she passes on the knowledge of what she has learned at Grace Neighborhood Nursery School.

Response
By: Kristine Mraz and Alison Porcelli, co-authors of Purposeful Play (Heinemann, 2016)

Barb Murphy and Jamie Bonczyk talk about a number of qualities that the Grace Neighborhood Nursery School has to offer, all of which are grounded in research about the way children learn best. Three broad themes stand out from their anecdotes; the importance of getting to know students and their interests, taking an inquiry approach to learning, and developing students’ skills in collaboration and negotiation through play.

Getting to Know Students’ Interests
Jamie Bonczyk, a parent a Grace Neighborhood Nursery School, talks about how one of the things that she loves best is that the teacher truly knows each student and she designs the classroom around their interests.

In their book Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn (2013), John Hattie and Gregory Yates write, “Establishing positive relationships between young students and their teachers has been shown to cascade and so result in lasting benefits involving trust and affection. “ (2014,17) They’ve found that positive relationships with teachers have long-lasting benefits for children. When we bring children’s personalities into the classroom, we send the powerful message that they belong in this space. Hattie and Yates say, “Close and supportive relationships with teachers have the potential to mitigate the risk of negative outcomes for children who may otherwise have difficulty adjusting and succeeding in school.” (2014, p. 18-19). Getting to know our students and their interests gives them a positive and powerful start to their lives in, and out of, school. There is no better place to learn students’ interests than in a play-based environment, such as the one at Grace Neighborhood Nursery School.

An Inquiry Approach
Barb Murphy, the executive director of Grace Neighborhood Nursery School talks about how their hopes are to develop children who will be “thinkers and learners” who will “have confidence in their ability to ask a question and answer a question”; and who will be “curious and have passion for learning.” All of these goals describe an inquiry stance toward learning. According to the National Science Foundation (2000), inquiry “involves a process of exploring the natural or material world, and that leads to asking questions, making discoveries, and
rigorously testing those discoveries in the search for new understanding.” (p. 2). Children are born naturally curious and they use play as a venue to discover answers to their questions. For example, consider a child playing in a puddle. He drops a rock in the puddle and notices that it makes a splash. “Can I do that again?” he wonders. He grabs a pebble nearby and drops that into the puddle, but this time notices that the splash is much smaller. He wonders how he can make a big splash again, so he goes and finds a bigger rock and drops that in the puddle, and aha! He created a big splash again! Through play, this child is learning about cause and effect and the various properties of water.

**Collaboration and Negotiation**

Barb Murphy also describes the value she places on collaboration when she talks about the skills she hopes to develop in her students: “To connect with their peers with confidence; to stand up for themselves when needed” and “to solve problems and work in groups.” In his book, *Free to Learn*, Peter Gray (2013) writes that the best place to teach children social skills is through play. “Play is nature’s way of teaching children how to solve their own problems, control their impulses, modulate their emotions, see from others’ perspectives, negotiate differences, and get along with others as equals. There is no substitute for play as a means of learning these skills.” (p. 175). This is especially true in self-directed free play, the kind of play valued at Grace Neighborhood Nursery School, vs. play that is more controlled and organized by adults. For example, when children chase each other around wildly on the playground, they are the ones deciding the theme of their play scenario, they decide who the chaser will be, and they let each other know when the play is getting too rough. When children engage in this type of collaborative play they are learning important social skills such as the art of compromise and how to maintain boundaries in order to keep everyone happy and playing.

The work of the teachers and the play of the children as described in this article results in learning at its most powerful. With no line drawn between work and play, children are free to engage in spirited investigations while thriving and growing as people. What more could any of us want for children?

**References**


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**The Restaurant Game: The Use of Reflective Thinking to Scaffold Play-based Learning**

Hilltop Children’s Center
Seattle, Washington

By Liddy Wendell, Executive Director
In collaboration with Bria Bloom, Toddler Educator and Sarah Felstiner, Curriculum Director

Children in one of our toddler rooms recently returned to school after their weekend to a surprise! Their teachers had rearranged the classroom environment and now a large shelf sat in the middle of the room. A new type of play immediately emerged in which the shelf became a restaurant counter and children began taking orders, preparing food, and bringing out bowls and cups of food to their customers. Books soon became menus, as children would flip to a page and then read out loud what was on the menu. Throughout the play, teachers observed children exploring their understanding of social roles, practicing early literacy skills, and flexing their critical thinking muscle by creating different representations of their own experiences. As the renowned early childhood expert Nancy Carlsson-Paige states: “play is learning for young kids.”

There is sometimes an impression that play-based learning is centered around a concept of “free play” that begins to look or feel like a free-for-all. Or that it equals minimal work and engagement on the part of the educator. Or that it lacks scaffolding, systems, structure, or intention. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most effective play-based learning is scaffolded in the classroom through intentional choices made by educators based on their observations, analysis, and knowledge of the children in their rooms. The toddler room educators hypothesized that a shift in their classroom environment might invite different play and learning for their children. The success of the decision they made was borne out by the elaborate play that emerged the next day.
Reflective teaching practice, the cycle of provocation, observation, and reflection on children’s play, is a core tenet of our work at Hilltop. Over years of trial and error, we have learned as an organization that our educators are best able to deeply engage in reflective teaching practice when the organization values the process of reflection and has invested in systems and structures to support the educators’ work.

We see reflective organizations as those that:
- Envision an organizational culture drawn from the school’s core values
- Create administrative systems that are driven by these program values rather than by licensing and other external regulations
- Develop management practices that mirror the work they want educators to practice with children

At Hilltop, we often talk about parallel practice, the idea that the values, systems, and philosophical drivers of our work with children ought to be represented in the work we do with families, educators, and each other. Just as educators scaffold children’s play and learning in the classroom, organizations must scaffold educators’ work. In order to support reflective teaching practice in our educators, Hilltop uses a series of organizational systems. These include:
- New teacher orientation (a two-year process)
- Weekly planning time (3-5 hours per week)
- Classroom schedules that allow for extended periods of uninterrupted play
- Reflective protocols for pedagogical documentation, learning stories, developmental assessment, and the development of emergent curriculum
- Weekly team meetings with mentor teacher and program supervisor

As in children’s play, there are multiple layers to these systems. As an example, team meetings are scaffolded by:
- Occurring at naptime to minimize impact on children
- Classroom coverage by substitutes
- Support from a mentor teacher and the program supervisor
- Reflective protocols
- Technology that supports shared agendas and note-taking

Even though many of these systems have been in place for years, we continue to reflect annually on what continues to work well, what might be better, and what is no longer serving us in the way we intended. In the spirit of parallel practice, administrators provoke educators’ work through these systems. We observe and collect feedback on how those systems are functioning throughout the year, and reflect on what might improve those systems for educators to be most successful in their work of creating an effective play-based learning environment for children.
Extending the Restaurant Game

The restaurant game became a focal point in the toddler room’s team meeting that week, as the educators reflected on what might be most important to the children about this play and how to challenge the children to further their exploration of social roles, literacy, and representing their ideas. The next steps they have chosen to learn more about the children’s thinking in this play include:

- Use classroom meeting time to learn more about what children know and think about menus and restaurants and help inform further teacher scaffolding and support of the play
- Set up an invitation for children to draw, write, and create their own menus to continue literacy growth
- Collect photos of diverse types of restaurants and community meals to expand children’s thinking about restaurants and sharing food and engage in anti-bias curriculum
- Visit a local farmer’s market so that children can further observe social roles and explore their connection to a larger community.
- Give the children the opportunity to cook their own food, as another way to re-represent the idea of food that children had been representing and re-representing by pretending to hold it in their hands, drawing on paper, and using other objects as symbols.
- Write a piece of documentation (during planning time) to share with families, asking for their thoughts and reflections about this play and what might be inspiring their children’s interest

Final Thoughts

Through their scaffolded reflective teaching practice, the educators in this classroom concluded that a change to their environment was needed. That intentional change sparked new play from the children that continues to expand their learning. Because of the organizational systems in place, educators were able to deeply engage in their reflective teaching practice and bring their thinking back to the children. Organizational investment in effective systems for educators is essential to ensuring that adults have the scaffolding in place to truly honor, learn from, and support children’s deep play and learning.

Response

By: Professor Emerita Janet Moyles, Anglia Ruskin University UK. Author of: Just Playing?, The Excellence of Play: Thinking About Play and Beginning Teaching; Beginning Learning in Early Years and Primary Education (all published by Open University Press).

This article – and the practice it presents – develops from an idea that changing the resource provision changes both the children’s approach to play and their learning (particularly, in this case, literacy learning). It is also written from the perspective of the importance of reflection on practice and the likelihood that this will result in improved child-centered pedagogies. As Fitzgerald and Kay, state “children need more than our enthusiasm. They need us to think about what we are doing” (2016, p. 10).

The types of play experience in this paper include: imaginative play, role play, socio-dramatic play and representational play.

The pedagogy involves: scaffolding, observation, analysis of activities, and reflection.

Developmental perspectives involve children in: making choices, experimenting, interpersonal skills, functioning symbolically, independence, motivation, negotiation, language/vocabulary extension, cooperation, and a level of creativity.

The practitioners, in portraying their practice and pedagogy, show an understanding of these elements both directly and in their theories of their role in children’s learning. They emphasize that free-play need not be a free-for-all but, with resource provision left open-ended, children can take the initiative and develop play that fits with their current interests and understanding. Moyles (2010) stresses that there are really different types of playful pedagogies, which she calls ‘pure play’, ‘playful learning’ and ‘playful teaching’ – the episode represented in this paper shows a combination of playful teaching (provision of the expected resource) which eventually is taken over by the children and becomes ‘pure’ (or deep) play.

The practice represented in this paper is also a very good example of how changing the environment promotes both different kinds of play and enhanced learning in young children. Broadhead (2004) gives her own example – the ‘whatever you want it to be place’ – in which she and her research practitioners showed clearly that, given their
own lead and provided with open-ended materials, children will envision their immediate world in the way that represents their lives and experiences and play from a sound basis of what they already know (Fisher, 2008) to extend their learning.

To further enhance play, opportunities also can be given to the children, like the staff, to reflect on ‘new’ play experiences. Whilst the teachers clearly have protocols in place to develop their own reflective powers, it was not evident that a similar procedure existed for the children (at least it did not appear on the diagram provided, nor was it discussed in the article). However, it is now known to be vital that the children have opportunity and motive to consider their own experiences and what they have learned from them, supporting the development of their theories of mind and metacognition (Whitebread, 2010).

Reflective practice, as these practitioners show, is at the heart of high quality, effective early years pedagogy (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008). Having a protocol and building in time for reflection in the way that these practitioners and this setting has done is vital to the process (but please note that reflection needs to extend to the children as well). Additionally, Moyles (2010) has shown that reflection needs to be at least at three levels which are not necessarily manifest in this particular description of the practitioners’ experiences: of-the-moment, retrospective and prospective reflection. One might also add introspective reflection (perhaps better called reflection-on-reflection) to this list. Each type of reflection requires different skills, knowledge and understanding from practitioners. In the case of the first, tacit, intuitive knowledge and understanding; in the second looking back at what occurred; and in the third looking forward to where we now want to be or to go.

Reflecting on critical incidents in early years education is often about questioning things that we take for granted – reflective practitioners are likely to be those who can see the world from the child’s perspective and, perhaps more importantly, can see themselves as learners and players too!

References

An Introduction to the Auchlone Nature Kindergarten
Perthshire, Scotland

By Claire Warden, founder Mindstretchers Consulting and Jenny McAllister

Auchlone Nature Kindergarten is set amongst the rolling hills of Perthshire Scotland offering a rich play based environment, a place of high play affordance and self-directed play. This Nature Kindergarten offers the best of all worlds to allow children the opportunity to build great childhood memories within a secure natural space inside, a gently challenging outdoor investigative garden which supports young children to develop emotional confidence and skills, and then the wild wood where they can feel the freedom of a fully natural environment. Play moves across all three of the spaces to provide a sense of freedom and childhood empowerment. Children from the age of 2 years to 5 years old spend the majority of the
eight-hour day outdoors in all weathers, either in the very naturalistic garden or in the woodlands where they build dens and bird hides using tools such as saws and loppers, make fires to cook their own snacks, climb trees and generally explore the wonders that the woodlands have to offer. Nature provides a range of purposeful contexts that the children can really become involved in. The planting and harvesting of vegetables, the creation of habitat piles to increase biodiversity in the area and the use of natural streams to explore the properties of water all give children tangible ways of working with and in nature to increase their connection to it. Children are able to explore nature in depth in nature time so some investigations might take a year or more.

The methodology of our Nature Kindergarten is concise: nature creates the context and the curriculum comes from it in a more natural way than over-planned, activity-driven days. There are many moments of epistemic, self-motivated play that are extended by adult interaction which documents children’s voices utilizing a Floorbooks* (Warden 1996) method. These serve as evidence of the deep learning that is achieved for children to reflect upon but also to meet the licensing requirements of the government. We operate in a naturalistic space and work with children in a way that is consultative, where risk taking is encouraged and there is a consistency of access that creates an authentic experience for children. Many children are not “allowed” the freedom to explore, test themselves in play and to feel in control of ‘being out of control.’ When play behaviors are restricted, the drive from humans is to find another way to achieve play goals. Warden (2010) explains that in the nature kindergarten we have a variety of natural slopes; some of them steep in order to increase the challenge in the play space. It is important that children feel the sensation of being in control of being out of control as they rapidly descend these gradients. To put too many restrictions on this actually takes away the learning moment for the emotional intelligence of the child.

Over time, an increase in indoor living and second hand learning through screens, has minimized the strength of our connections to the real world. How can we learn about the smell, gravitas and scale of a tree if we only see it in two dimensions? Feeling the wing beat of a bee or dancing in the dappled shade of an oak tree as the branches move in response allows us to feel connected to something. Nature pedagogy is more than a scheme or a series of activities; it is the art of teaching and learning with nature inside, outside and beyond. The underlying belief by the adults in the place of joy, empowerment, challenge, freedom, engagement, curiosity and love run throughout our multiple spaces so that the indoor space is more natural and the outdoor space is designed to be full of engaging opportunities and works in an integral way with the inside space; the children are able to extend their boundaries by engaging with nature on nature’s terms in a wilder form.

In Scotland, there is an expectation that learning is play based/experiential until the age of 7 years old. All areas of learning are offered through a wide range of holistic experiences, both active and calm which makes the most of what the outdoors has to offer. Our outdoor provision is organized so that children are stimulated and able to follow their own interests and needs through play based activity giving them independence, self-organization, participation and empowerment. The adult role is crucial in achieving this effectively. Observation and consultation enable us to explore the possible lines of development (P.L.O.D.S), which push learning forward. These objectives are then mapped back against a curriculum, to show accountability and demonstrate breadth and balance in learning. Documentation takes the form of Talking Thinking Floorbooks* which celebrate the process of learning, while allowing adults to be aware of core skills that arrive quite naturally through children’s play.

*FLOORBOOKS
Claire Warden developed Talking and Thinking Floorbooks over 25 years ago with an aim to match children’s needs, interests, and desires with the curriculum. The name “Talking and Thinking Floorboards” reflects their purpose which is to encourage thinking skills through talking and listening together in a group. This insures that children are consulted and thus have involvement in progressing their own learning. Children need to develop higher order thinking skills in order to develop the capacity to challenge their thinking throughout their lives. The floorboard method helps children track their learning pathway and enables teachers to evaluate children’s progress as well as the teaching process.

It is essential for children to learn about being in control of being out of control. Nature can provide that opportunity.
Case study. The Puddle.

On the rainiest day of the year, two 4 year old boys decided to explore some puddles. This is their story...

In a part of our garden, there are a whole series of puddles left over from various digging experiments of the past. Two boys were drawn to this area, and they were off to ‘test the puddles’. To begin with, the boys were a little cautious, so they carried out mini-risk/wellie (rubber rain boots), depth assessments. They would enter slowly from the side and move across the puddle to chat. We started to talk about how wide and deep the puddles were:

“ It’s okay, none of these go over your wellies (rubber rain boots).”

Adult: “How do we know how deep it is?”
“We could check it with a stick!”

Then, one of the boys got a very short stick, and it went in up to his hand.

“This stick’s too small, I need a bigger one.”

“Wow! That’s pretty deep–nearly half the stick.”
“ I know, I’m ‘gonna’ test it with me. Yep, it’s not over my wellies–it’s not that deep.”

“What about the middle?”

“What is the middle?”

Once they were sure that the puddle was not too deep, they would jump in. The boys then moved around the puddles, exploring depths and testing with sticks and other items. One of the boys then noticed that some of the things were floating in the water and started to discuss this with his friend.

“Look! Our measuring stick floats, and those leaves.”

“But that one is sinking.”

“It’s ‘cause you splashed it with water and it got heavy.”

“Let’s try a new leaf, be careful putting it in.”

“Let’s try a stone.”

“Agh! That just sunk.”

“Watch this big one.”

“Wow, big splash! Where did it go?”

The boys then fished around using their measuring stick and eventually, somehow found it, and dragged it to the side.

“There it is, let’s try again.”

“What about this? This will float.”

They then tried a wood ‘cookie’ that was the same size as the stone, but made of wood. The boys then moved out of the woodland cover into the garden, and discovered two things about the next puddle. “Look, I can see me! And there are bubbles. Where are the bubbles from?”

The boys moved to see their reflection move and kept on staring at the bubbles.

“The rain is splashing and it turns into a bubble, look, and now it’s gone!”

“It only lasts a minute–why is that?”

“It’s not washing up liquid, it’s just natural in there.”

The boys then checked to see if the other puddles had bubbles and discovered it was only the ones in the garden, not under the trees. They thought it could be due to the size and so measured a few puddles.

“No, these are the same as over there.”

Adult: “Is there anything above us here in the garden compared to over there in the wood?”

“There is just sky here, there are trees there.”

Adult: “So do you think that makes a difference to how the rain drop falls in the puddle?”

“I don’t know ... ”

The boys went off to explore more about puddles and what they could put in them.
The next day we reflected upon what we had learned about puddles in the camp journal and talked more about these strange bubbles. We decided to watch the puddles on a different day, when it wasn’t raining quite so hard, to see what happened and if the bubbles were there.

Analysis of learning
The boys explored many aspects of puddles; their shape, size and depth (mathematics), reflections, floating/sinking and bubble formation (science). They spent a considerable period of time exploring these aspects and talking with each other regarding their theories and ideas. Finding the bubbles was the only thing that confused the boys and, on that day, we didn’t push the discussion; this would be a subject to explore further on other rainy days.

“Imagine a world where the lines were harsh and unyielding, the textures were consistent and variation is unheard of. Does it inspire you? Now imagine a place where the carpet changes every day, the ceiling is a myriad of different colours, light, shadow and movement. The feelings and movement completely surround you, sometimes breezy, sometimes cold, others warm. Unexpected wonders fly by, sometimes full of colour and sometimes full of noise and movement. If we really want children to thrive we need to let their connection to nature nurture them.”
(Nurture Through Nature, Claire Warden, 2007)

Possible Lines of Development (P.L.O.D)
1) Explore puddles on different days to see if bubbles form, where bubbles form the most, and formulate a theory as to why they form. Children may wish to create their own puddles, and try to make their own bubbles by dropping water, objects, stirring to see the link between air, gravity and water.
2) Watch puddles over a day or several days to explore how they change, linked to weather conditions and perhaps other factors. This could be done physically with chalk, flour or string, for marking boundaries, or photographically.

Conclusion
Nobody can deny the importance of play in childhood. Every week I receive links to blogs, research papers and TED talks on the benefits of play. The evidence is strong and irrefutable and with international and local organizations like the International Play Association promoting a child’s right to play, it is not only the right thing to do but an essential part of childhood. Play is the means through which children find stimulation, well-being and happiness, and is the means through which they grow physically, intellectually and emotionally.

Research in play and learning in naturalistic spaces is wide ranging, providing a solid foundation for the Nature Kindergarten approach. When adults provide the opportunity, children will physically demonstrate preference, and enjoy playing in natural environments and/or with natural elements. One of the strengths of nature is in its open-ended resources and limitless experiences that it offers to children. The diversity of nature provides the children with a palette of colour, shape, pattern and texture that is impossible to replicate even when we try. The closed, overdesigned, usually plastic resources that are available offer few play affordances for children and therefore limit the possibilities. It is the complexity of the natural world which feeds the playfulness in children and adults, as it provokes, invites, challenges and provides feedback to the decisions children make. Play is the most important thing for children to do outside and the most relevant way of offering learning outdoors. The outdoor environment is very well suited to meeting children’s needs for all types of play, building upon first hand experiences. Because of the freedom the outdoors offers to move on a large scale, to be active, noisy and messy and to use all their senses with their whole body, the young children engage in the way they most need to explore, make sense of life and express their feelings and ideas.

References
Response
By: Angela Hanscom, founder of TimberNook

This article discusses many important issues, but for me there are three main points that stand out as significant positions to consider. The first one is that nature offers a range of different contexts which are constantly changing. For instance, one day there may be a marsh in a specific location but overnight it may turn to ice. Environmental changes, as well as uneven terrain, hills, and other landscape variations, all challenge the body and senses as children navigate these regions. The more sensory stimuli the children are exposed to, the more synapses are fired – leading to further development, refinement, and organization of the senses. Children need to organize senses through ample outdoor play opportunities in order to cope with their emotions and new situations, navigate their surroundings safely, and develop new life skills.

Playing outdoors also provides more space and opportunities for children to move their bodies freely. Natural playscapes are ideal environments that inspire unrestricted movement opportunities such as going upside down, spinning in circles, climbing, and jumping off of objects. These movement experiences are often discouraged in indoor settings due to lack of space and fear of injury. However, when children get to move through space as nature intended, they often move their body in many contrasting ways.

By moving in different planes, the fluid found in the inner ear complex moves back and forth, stimulating the little hair cells. If done on a regular basis, children will develop a strong vestibular (balance) sense. This sense helps children to pay attention in school, remain calm and alert, and even supports all six eye muscles to function properly for tasks like reading and writing. Without enough movement experiences on a daily basis, the fluid in the inner ear can thicken and lead to problems with the middle ear complex. This can create problems with emotional regulation, spatial awareness, and attention. If teachers want children to pay attention and learn, they must let them move throughout the day. When children are made to sit, their brains become inactive. They actually fidget in order to remain alert, activating their vestibular system which cues the brain to pay attention (Hanscom, 2016, p. 66). So admonishing children to stop moving and fidgeting is actually requiring them to shut down their brain activity. “It’s not that these young students are trying to be disruptive or are not interested in learning— on the contrary. They are in fact straining all their resources in order to listen and learn. The classic sign that children are not getting enough movement throughout the day is when they start wiggling, rocking and twisting their bodies about” (Hanscom, 2016, p. 66).

The second point Claire mentions that is noteworthy was the phrase, “being in control of being out of control.” This notion of letting children learn how to regulate feelings during moments of lost control is worth incorporating into a purposeful and desired outcome. Children are designed by nature to regulate their emotions such as fear and anger by playing in risky, emotion-inducing ways (Gray, 2013) and this skill is best acquired through first-hand experience. Movement plays a big role in helping children do this. In fact, occupational therapists will actually place children in various positions on swings to stimulate the hair cells in the middle ear complex to move in different directions. This helps develop the vestibular sense, which in turns helps children regulate their emotions naturally. They should be able to regulate fear, anger, and frustration without needing outside aids like special breathing exercises or coping skills. Their bodies, if healthy and strong, should be able to do this naturally.

Finally, Claire talks about play as being the most important experience children engage in outdoors and an essential way of learning. Whenever you ask adults about their fondest memories growing up, you often get stories of their adventures outside. Rarely do I hear adults recollect memories of playing or reading indoors. Playing outdoors typically leads to creating elaborate play schemes and hours of imaginative play – chosen by the children themselves. When children play outdoors, multiple senses are engaged (Hanscom, 2016). They feel fully “alive.” Stimulating the senses makes important connections in the brain and supports memory recall – which will help children remember these play experiences later in life.

Most children are not as fortunate as those who attend Claire Warden’s program. So, what can teachers do in more “traditional” classrooms that might enable children to move? Provide classroom environments that bring in natural elements such as creating sensory gardens – even indoors- and by opening windows to let in fresh air that may carry scents from outdoor stimuli. Offer
movement activities and allow for child-chosen movement in the classroom that could include these ideas: no assigned seats; permitting children to move to a variety of spaces as they accomplish different tasks; and periodic breaks from the daily routine that are individually mediated. Make loose parts such as wooden planks, baskets, and transparent curtains available during choice time and recess.

All of these ideas help encourage use of the whole body. However, we must always strive for what is best for the children. If you do have an outdoor space, use it often. When we start to recognize that children can learn through outdoor play because they challenge their bodies in ways that enhance a multitude of learning modalities, this will change the way we educate the children of the future. For it is outdoors, where children can truly move and play in ways that challenge the mind, body, and spirit at a whole new level.

References

A Glimpse into A Little Patch of Earth Preschool (ALPoE)
Santa Clarita, CA
By Jeanne McNiff-Hendzlik, MS.

The Arrival
In the play yard, Gabe comes riding up to the patio on a balance bike shouting out my name, ready to greet me and then wraps my leg for a hug and good morning. Most mornings start this way. I squeeze him back and say “I am glad to see you here today.” It is important that the children feel welcomed and personally recognized as an intricate member of our community. Emmie runs up to me, showing off her fabric cape she has tied around her neck - likely one of the tablecloths from the cafe set up in the playhouse. She is excited to show me a treasure she has found in the dirt this morning. “It’s a calcite” she exclaims, remembering the name from a rock and mineral book from last week that one of our teachers set out as a provocation with a natural science collection. A boy runs up to show her his pocket full of smooth sea glass that he has brought from home. Learning about things of their own interests has deep meaning to them and they gather the knowledge each day to carry on new journeys here. There are a few children here already. Some are enjoying a snack from their lunch boxes at a child-sized picnic table, sharing amusement over the private languages exchanged between friends. A boy laughs as he comes down the slide going underneath the bridge his friend has made with his body. One of the girls runs from the patio to the side yard with two water bottles in hand. She ducks down into an empty plastic wading pool that is flipped upside down on top of another, creating a clam shell. She is delivering one of the water bottles to her playmate. “I found yours,” and she offers it with a smile. They both cozy up inside and through the crack I can see them wrapping their baby dolls in blankets, swaddling them in their arms while having a few sips of water together. In the distance there are some children swinging on the swings, a Dad offering pushes and playful banter. A Mom bends down on her knees and squeezes into a goodbye hug with her young one at the sand area-a place large enough to park two cars in that is surrounded by a trail of river rocks to climb on with a cement moat that has a push button water drip that can trickle water down if the children so desire. It takes collaboration in this space for it to work; one friend to push the button and another with a bucket ready for catching water at the bottom. As Mom walks away the child calls out with a wave, “bye – Mommy.” With a shovel in her hand and her brother standing by her she beams with a confidence She has come many days with a smile and something to share with me when dropping off brother but today is special; her first day here and she has found a place of comfort to start the day - a sandy and puddle filled haven for digging and ‘cake’ making. Trusting children to find joy of their own choosing makes transitions smoother and greatly supports self-help skills.
The Welcome

The yard fills with children and their families, some saying goodbyes and some lingering in the yard, and then the guitar music echoes from the patio. A loving and talented teacher sits on the bench singing “We’ve Been Waiting for You to Come to this Place…” and many join into the singing. Next to the teacher a boy strums his own play guitar. We gather together under a large oak tree. Families and children are ready to welcome the day sitting upon cushion covered bleachers beneath the oak. I, along with another teacher, greet each child by name, including a number of the brothers and sisters, some small enough that they are wrapped up in slings or sitting in laps with their Mamas or Papas. Many days one of us shares a tale of just words - no book or pictures … Roly Poly Rice Ball, Abiyoyo, The Belly Button Snatcher (a few favorites). Today we have decided to dance and sing together … “A Tootie Ta, A Tootie Ta, A Tootie Ta Ta.” We all thank the VIP (Very Important Person) who has brought the snack of corn, watermelon, grapes, and broccoli for the community today with a “hip hip hooray!” Then we make our transition into the day, saying goodbye to our Moms, Dads, Grandmas, Grandpas, Brothers, and Sisters while singing once again, “All I really need is a song in my heart, food in my belly and love in my family.” Then we run off to play! Families are just as much a part of our school community as the children and teachers are. Welcoming the day together in gathering honors one another as a part of this family and models for the children many practices we hope they carry with them for life - community, love, nourishment, joy, thankfulness, tradition, imagination, music, collaboration, and companionship.

The Flow of Play and Learning

As an outdoor classroom, we all begin our day outdoors. Often a few travel up to the chicken coop side by side with a teacher, singing “Where are my chickens and my eggs? Where are my chickens and my eggs? …” and marveling at the gift the chickens have left us. They run down to the kitchen to wash and label the eggs with names for those that are taking them home for the day. Many of the children write their own or tell the teacher what letters to mark. A name is important to a child. We believe that it is how children come to know something; if it has meaningful context to them and they learn it in a way that is integrated in their daily experiences and childhood moments they will carry it with them for a lifetime. Bev Bos’ maxim, “If it hasn’t been in the hand and the body, then it can’t be in the brain” rings true for us here at A Little Patch of Earth Preschool (ALPoE).

Soon there are children in the sand, the mud pit, at the swings, and in the playhouse. A pod of three is at a table lacing wooden wheels on string and snapping in dowels into the round holes. I am sitting at the playdough table with fresh homemade white soft dough and a collection of cookie cutters, rollers, and nature pieces including rocks and pinecones. A new girl has found comfort sitting in my lap. She cuddles quietly while one child offers her a dinosaur cut out. She takes it and in a few minutes, I see her mimicking my actions of making a ball. I feel that by my being part of the play provides an avenue of comfort which allows her to ease into the group. Now she smiles and creates with them. I simply stay close for support. Giving children time to explore the materials allows them to arrive at multiple discoveries on their own terms. The dough evolves into a sensory rich exploration as several children appear with a delivery of green water to add to the trays the dough is placed upon. What joy! What discovery of texture. Randy exclaims, “Monster hands!” and giggles as she holds her gooey hands up. All the while, five or six children zoom by chasing each other. One barks like a dog and hollers “You can’t get me!” A few seem to be involved in their own game of a pool noodle sword fight. While some schools may discourage rough and tumble play, we understand that it is more important for us to be a part of the conversation with the children about this type of play then have them keep it undercover. Exploring the many scary things they see and hear in the real world and media through play is how children learn to understand and cope with tender topics.

Meanwhile, two girls are painting at a table, stirring together colors with sponge brushes on a large paper covering the whole surface. “Oh pretty” one says. “I made purple, blue and red and blue and red and stir!” the other child responds. We know children are constructors of their own knowledge and learning happens through their own discoveries that are often supported by intentional teacher facilitation. The morning carries on with many adventures and explorations. By 10 o’clock the door has opened to the family room, another place of play and learning and the children freely choose to come and go. Whenever the children are hungry they choose to snack from their lunchbox or enjoy as many bowls as their belly needs of the community snack brought by the VIP. Some
are carrying their snacks in bowls to eat at a table indoors while others consume it outdoors at the picnic tables; we trust the children to know the skills of their own bodies so pouring, scooping, carrying is left to them. Creating a warm environment that supports choice, acknowledges the children’s capabilities, and extends a feel of home is critical.

All the while play continues… Inside a boy watches the turtles swimming in the tank, he traces his finger back and forth following the trail of the swimming friend he is enamored by. Another girl is hiding behind a curtain under a wooden cubby below the windows reading a book to a stuffed toy, creating her own story using the pictures. The dollhouse has 3 girls negotiating space; I stand close but hear them figuring out how to solve the dilemma. Sometimes it is our job to just stay close; resolving challenges on their own empowers them and gives them life-long skills of negotiation and problem solving. On the carpet a teacher sits helping two boys discuss their feelings about not wanting to share the square magna-tiles they are using for building. There are many triangles but not enough squares to build “a very, very big garage.” “What do you want him to know?” I hear the teacher’s voice chime from a distance. Knowing their voices are being heard and that they are a part of the problem solving process allows their tears and worries to settle. The work of navigating play and building bonds with others is hard but rewarding. Sometimes it just takes a trusted adult to help mediate compromise on terms that are designed by the children.

**Play Occurs in a Variety of Studios**

In addition to moving freely through the yard space and family room, the children often request or are invited to join studios. These are intimate places of rich explorations and creativity where the children interact in groups of 4 to 8. The garden is a place where they plant, harvest, turn compost, find bugs, set ladybugs free, and engage in project work. Inspired by curiosity and the magic of hope, the children had planted some recycled seeds and now an apple tree and corn stalks are growing, each deserving a daily inspection. If you ask them what a seed needs to grow they will say soil, sun, water, and a song (which many truly follow through with). Today there are many children plucking blackberries from the bushes, some for the baskets and some for their mouth. In the “Language of Foods” studio another group is found chopping fresh salad ingredients picked from the garden with Montessori choppers. Each child has his/her own work space to support autonomy and fine motor work. Once two girls laughed as their faces turned red from succulent bites of beets that they ate like apples! These two loved the juicy, sweet and messy taste of them while others thought they tasted like dirt. Risk taking is not just about balance beams and rough and tumble play, but also about testing out new ideas and materials and developing your own perspectives about them. After the salad is prepared some of the scraps go to the compost in the garden but many are hand delivered by the children for a snack to the 100 pound tortoise that is a part of our school family. Helping children learn their ecological connection to the earth is crucial for their own social and emotional development and supports the development of future naturalists.

The construction studio is where children tinker with loose parts and work with tools. Today they are working outside of the studio. Some are sitting on the ground with a teacher trying to chip open a rock with a real child sized hammer. The curiosity of what will be discovered inside makes it easy to wait for a turn. Others are engaging in the creation of a box city. I hear laughter from a nearby box as it flips and tumbles behind me. “Get into the boat” I hear from the inside of one box. A small group is also in the art studio where the children explore a multitude of art materials, color mixing, paints, sensory materials, light and shadow play, collage materials, and clay (just to name a few). In the field you can spot a small studio group engaging in movement and dance, trying out animal yoga poses and sharing their happy and tender feelings with their playmates while engaging in a practice of filling an imaginary bowl with thoughts made with their own hands. They toss the moments that do not serve them away into the air and pour the happy ones into their hearts for saving. One of the girls is rolling herself into her mat; she calls it her cocoon and teaches all of her yoga friends a pose she made up called the butterfly. “My heart is happy when my
Mama makes a nest at home with me for cuddling,” Bryant shares. The children find great joy in creating their own plans and having the support of teachers as facilitators as they carry out their very own ideas in the studios.

The Winding Down of the Day
The day carries on with these and many other learning narratives until we gather for lunch and story and bid farewell until the next day. Some families scoop up their children after lunch while others stay and are picked up after rest, more play, and projects such as bread making. Each day the children self-direct their journeys of play and discovery and deeply extend their ideas through a curriculum that emerges from them. At ALPoE we believe children learn through play and by bringing their own ideas to life. We strive to make our space an extension of home, one that is nurturing and respectful. The combination of play, intentional provocations, child-led project work, and nature in the outdoor classroom and studios allows for the children to learn and grow in the way that is most developmentally appropriate and aligned with best researched based early childhood practices. We trust in each journey of play bringing meaning and purpose to a child’s day. The prompt “What’s your idea?” is only the beginning of the each wonderful process of growth, exploration, and development. We stand by our belief that play is the way to learn because we know our true focus is the beginning of the each wond...
They Want to Laugh, Dance and Play!
Nhaka Foundation, Zimbabwe
By Patrick Mokokoro

The Nhaka Foundation is a Zimbabwe-based non-governmental organization which has developed and implemented a series of interventions designed to bridge the gap between the government’s capabilities and policies mandating the requirement for early childhood development (ECD) programming in primary schools and its ability to fully realize the implementation of such programs.

Nhaka Foundation has created among its programs one which seeks to promote children’s play. As a part of the classroom and outdoor playground renovations program, Nhaka works with the families and members of the community to plan, build, expand or repair the playgrounds and equipment using readily available and safe materials. Once restored to a like-new condition, the Centers are officially incorporated into the primary school system and sustained by the community through elected Pre-School Management Committees. This contractual requirement thus ensures that the children will continue to have clean and safe spaces in which to work and play.

Learning through play
Nhaka Foundation holds community appreciative inquiry meetings that help shape its programming. When parents and guardians are asked, “What are the things that kids want to do?” the team almost always gets the same answer, irrespective of the community they are visiting. Children want to “laugh, dance and play.” Play is the means through which children learn and develop socially, physically, cognitively and emotionally. During play, be it solitary play or in a group, children learn a variety of skills including the development of positive attitudes and the ability to draw relationships between objects and concepts. When children play, they learn to form ideas about their environment and expand language abilities through social interactions with their own age groups. In turn, they develop values and qualities that help them to establish relationships with family members and people outside their family.

Mrs. Madzinga, head teacher of one of the schools that fall under the Nhaka program areas, recognizes that many parents have different beliefs about the relationship between play activities and learning. While parents view learning from the lens of structured play activities, as a teacher she encourages the parents to identify non-structured activities as having not more value—because when children are allowed to be themselves they get in touch with their inner beings. All types of play contribute to healthy physical growth and the overall development of a child.

While the Zimbabwean ECD syllabus is based on sound, proven early childhood pedagogy and practice principles, its proper implementation is subject to a number of things such as availability of resources including ECD trained teachers, classroom blocks, and outdoor and indoor play equipment. Despite the shortage of these resources, a challenge faced by most rural schools in Zimbabwe, teachers such as Mrs. Madzinga have learned to improvise in her class. For example, she encourages her pupils to engage in play activities such as the local entertainment called “mahumbwe” (role playing), a game where kids can pretend to be anyone. When her pupils are role playing about what happens in a hospital one child can be a nurse, another a doctor and yet another,
a patient. This type of play promotes creative imagination in children. Social dramatic play can develop the child’s creativeness and language skills simultaneously.

**Role of parents in play**

Through its parenting program the Nhaka Foundation promotes the involvement of guardians and caregivers in the lives of young children, something not too common in these areas. Parental involvement is not just limited to the role the caregivers have at home, but also relates to activities that happen at the early childhood development centres. Parents are encouraged to supply empty food cartons for play activities, as well as any old equipment that can be used by the kids in various play activities. A child-centered approach to early childhood development recognizes that children’s rights and needs are the primary focus for development and parents have to be involved every step of the way.

**Final Thoughts**

Play is an integral part of learning for young children. Albert Einstein once said, ‘play is the highest form of research.’ Early childhood development programs should provide as much growing space as possible for children; a space that allows them to just be themselves as they laugh, dance and play!

**Transforming My Classroom: A Personal Story of a Family Child Care Provider Who Advocates for Play**

Paideia Preparatory Academy
Memphis, Tennessee
By Angela Jones

In various educational settings, classroom experiences, and scholarly experiences, play is one word with many meanings and various purposes. As a family child care provider I define play as fun and social, with physical interactions free from over-bearing structure, initiated by the child and facilitated by the teacher. My personal definition of play helps to shape how I support play in my program.

Unfortunately, today many stakeholders question if play has a place in the curriculum often due to the misconception that a ‘school ready’ curriculum requires a highly structured and teacher-directed environment. Until I became an early childhood provider and doctoral student in Early Childhood Education, I questioned the validity of play-based learning in a school readiness driven culture. Through practice and scholarly research, my role as a practitioner has been guided by theorists such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Froebel, and Elkind, who validate play as part of the education itinerary. Whether past or present, the common belief shared by these theorists and practitioners is that play is necessary for the healthy development of young children. Classrooms that suffer from play deficits are socially, cognitively and emotionally toxic to the shaping of early learners. Needless to say, because of my exposure to these types of influences, I became interested in creating a learning environment where the foundation of my curriculum focused on play. Paideia Preparatory Academy is a privately-owned family day home that is tailored to children between the ages of two to four-years-old. Having a multi-age integrated learning environment requires a stimulating environment that meets the various interests and differing abilities of all early learners.

**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: Fall 2017**

**Watch and Listen to the Children: Play Informs Research, Theory, and Practice**

Sandra Waite-Stupiansky, Guest Editor
Professor Emerita, Edinboro University, PA

*This issue of PPP Connections will explore the notion that children’s play has informed most of the influential theorists of the twentieth century such as Piaget, Erikson, and Vygotsky.*

Authors are asked to submit a reflective piece (no longer than 1500 words) to stupiansky@earthlink.net
Through my educational learning journey, I gradually acquired the knowledge and confidence to transform my program. As Director and teacher, I support the role of play through classroom routines, classroom design, teacher-peer relationships, predictability and developmentally appropriate toys and activities for my students.

Specifically, the following measures create a positive play-based curriculum that is supported by a play-inviting atmosphere.

**Classroom routines:** Paideia’s classroom routine allows my early learners to understand what is expected of them and to take ownership of their learning. Further, the predictable routine promotes a sense of community as the children engage in collaborative play scenarios throughout the day.

**Classroom design:** Classroom quality is important and our classrooms are conducive to play. The classroom and home layout is inviting for children and supports play in the curriculum. The layout of the childcare space is essential in supporting a play-dominated culture. The classroom design illustrates predictability. Centers are clearly defined and high quality materials are labeled, student-manageable and reachable.

**Teacher-Peer relationships:** The relationships that I have with my students are important and they become magnified when I am engaged with my students during their child directed play. Through my teacher peer relationships, I am able to help my students expand vocabulary in meaningful contexts and strengthen their social skills.

**Predictability:** Preparation and planning supports an effective play-based learning environment. It’s important for our classroom relationships; peer-to-peer and teacher to peer, to be met with expectations of positive expectations.

**DAP activities and materials:** To initiate play that is open-ended, child-directed and learning centered, the materials and classroom centers should be appropriately stocked with materials and activities that are planned according to student’s interests and age groups. I strongly believe that play is universal and intentional planning for its inclusion in the early childhood sector is essential. In the natural realm, play is the means through which childhood development materializes and children blossom. For that reason, the Paideia curriculum continues to cultivate the role of play in the learning paradigm because it’s the most effective way for young children to learn. For example, our play-based environment is child-directed, the length of play occupies majority of the classroom schedule, and the learning centers are interchangeable based on learning themes and the interests of Paideia students.

Transitional into play dominated programs is a process. Therefore, it was very important for me to educate my families about the benefits of play in the curriculum. Many families may question a play dominated program out of fear that children are not learning. Consequently, they express concern about their child’s academic development, not fully understanding that academic development is highly influenced by play-directed curriculums. Play-based preschool and family child care environments are equally accountable for school readiness, if not more than classrooms and settings that are academic-focused and less play focused.

Establishing a curriculum that deliberately integrates play and learning requires professional development, planning and accountability on behalf of the teacher. As I gained more expertise, I felt empowered to create a program where play is magnified and never compromised. With child-directed play, I facilitate and not dictate the learning journey. It is essential for me to play and engage with my students so that I can effectively provide scaffolding. I also maintain learning centers that are developmentally appropriate and that spark interest in sustaining play engagement. As an early childhood professional, I am intentional in my preparation of classroom design and planning. I consider play to be a valuable teaching tool! In fact, play is the only cookie cutter strategy that reaches every child with any learning style. Although as teachers we know that play is universal among children, it is the teachers’ beliefs and values that determine if and how play enters and remains a permanent fixture in the curriculum. Professional development, workshops, and continuing education classes are all instrumental strategies that have contributed to how I transitioned my classroom into a play-based haven. School-ready children are in high demand and the educational system continues to place undue emphasis on standardized testing. I’m not sure if the play-based approach will ever be met with complete support due to a host of factors, one of which relates to a nagging uncertainty that play actually results in
learning. However, as early childhood professionals, we can help fellow professionals and other advocates gain a greater appreciation for play-rich school settings through networking, co-teaching, further research and collaborative relationships between early childhood professionals and primary school professionals.

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**Learn more about the schools and classrooms featured in this issue:**

Garden Oaks Montessori, PK3-8th Grade  
Houston, TX  
[www.houstonisd.org/gardenoaks](http://www.houstonisd.org/gardenoaks)

Paideia Preparatory Academy – Family Childcare  
Memphis, Tennessee  
[www.ppacademy.org](http://www.ppacademy.org)

Canadian Mothercraft Society  
Toronto, Canada  
[www.mothercraft.ca](http://www.mothercraft.ca)

EduKids, Inc., Childcare Center  
Buffalo, NY  
[www.edukidsinc.com](http://www.edukidsinc.com)

Hilltop Children’s Center  
Seattle, Washington  
[www.hilltopcc.com](http://www.hilltopcc.com)

Nhaka Foundation, Zimbabwe  
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Grace Neighborhood Nursery School  
Minneapolis, MN  
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