

Play: Serious Business

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“Our teachers don’t really care about us. They don’t want us to play with our friends and they cut our lunch time.”

I overheard this comment during a discussion among primary school children. It is evident that the speaker believes that playing and friendships are an important part of the experience of being in school, and it is implied that teachers who care about their charges will cater for this vital socialization process. A similar comment was expressed in an autobiographical research paper that I recently read. The author, a Chinese student in Australia, reported that “my teachers prevented us from going out and playing” and, in reflecting on his experiences as a teacher in China, mentioned that one of his students commented “you take all of our sunshine and blue sky, how can you return it back?” The statement, whether interpreted literally—where play usually occurs outdoors—or metaphorically—where school seems dull and grey—conveys the importance of play to the students.

Interestingly, in the Trinidad and Tobago component of the Multi-Site Teacher Education Research (MUSTER) project, the category of response that was cited most frequently by primary school teachers (78 of the 238 respondents - 33%) when asked “What was the best thing about your primary schooling?” was “Play/carefree life/friendships” (MUSTER country report, 2003). This suggests that many teachers in Trinidad and Tobago do recognise the importance of friendships and play in the formal school setting.

However, it seems that these teachers have had little impact on the culture of schools. A likely explanation is that teachers forget or submerge their childhood experiences when they enter the classroom in their teacher’s hat to focus on the serious business of teaching. As teachers, their actions tend to be guided by the institutional values and societal expectations. This article is meant to serve as a reminder of the importance of play to learning, thinking, and development and to show that the serious business of teaching is not incompatible with the serious business of play.

Play is a natural way for children to learn and we ourselves must learn from their play if we are to fulfil the goals outlined in the White Paper on education (1993-2003). These goals are premised on a school environment that encourages collaboration and interaction among students as they engage the academic disciplines. Yet at present, much of the formal part of the school day is organised around individualism and competition. Perhaps the use of ideas from children’s play can change this structure, as the following examples illustrate.

The first comes from a current popular hobby for youngsters—the Yu-Gi-Oh game. Some youngsters who are very much interested in Yu-Gi-Oh cards mentioned a conversation that occurred between two groups of friends after school hours. One group had stated that the symbol X on the card represented the number 10 (X being the Roman numeral representation of the Arabic 10), but the other group did not agree with this view. They opined that Yu-Gi-Oh cards are based on Egyptian beliefs and that the

Romans had not been influential in Egypt so their symbols would not be included as part of these cards. This discussion and the analysis therein have the potential for hypothesis testing through research. Such a group project, which requires skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (the use of higher-order thinking as outlined in the White Paper), could certainly be used as a springboard for really meaningful learning about ancient history, and about power, acculturation, and interculturalism (all of which are relevant for life in a global village).

Secondly, from children's play, I got an idea for a relatively inexpensive resource for science teaching. As a teacher at the lower secondary science level, I often made a colour wheel by placing a pencil through the center of an appropriately coloured circle and hoped that I could cause it to spin quickly enough for the students to observe white light. Light as a form of energy is also introduced at the primary level. As I observed youngsters playing with spinners, which are now readily available in snack packs, I realised that the coloured circle could easily be attached to one of these spinners to show the combination of the rainbow colours into white light. Furthermore, these spinning devices could be used to introduce primary school students to other science concepts such as force, momentum, and so on. Perhaps students themselves can be given the opportunities to suggest simple resources to assist in science teaching that originate in their play—an illustration of problem-solving.

A question that is currently engaging teachers and teacher educators is: "How can classrooms be transformed into environments that allow students to be actively involved in their learning, and at the same time make learning meaningful and fun?" The above examples illustrate that students' play can serve as a resource to achieve just that. By listening to students' voices and by taking note of their interests, it is possible to design meaningful learning environments. However, this solution is more easily formulated than implemented, given that societal expectations about the "good" teacher and the "good" school, and the traditional school culture (norms, beliefs, and expectations) may in fact militate against these changes. But I have a sense that there are many teachers who are eager to try new strategies and approaches that can impact positively on the learning environment. Is the rest of society ready for these changes? It seems that dialogue among the various stakeholders would be an appropriate start.

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