

**THE POWER OF PLAY IN A  
GRADE 5 CLASSROOM**

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## Abstract

The project *The Power of Play in a Grade 5 Classroom* examines and offers answers to questions about the appropriate use of play in a Grade 5 class. The researcher has utilized play as a strategy for cognitive and social development with her Grade 5 students for several years and although she intuitively recognized the value of implementing such a learning strategy, she had not formally gathered evidence to support her position. In addition to reviewing literature pertaining to the topic, the research project brings forth supporting evidence from her classroom and curriculum practice which indicates that intermediate students who are provided with play opportunities in the class benefit emotionally, socially and academically. This document consists of personal reflections on action research done over several years.

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## Background to Discovering Play in a Grade 5 Classroom

“Play is almost synonymous with life. It is second only to being nourished, protected and loved. It is a basic ingredient of physical, intellectual, social and emotional growth.” (Montague, as cited in Hannaford, 1995, p. 64).

### Arriving at the Notion of Play in Grade 5

I have utilized play to enhance my Grade 5 program for five years and have come to recognize its value as a support to students in their learning. *The power of play in a Grade 5 classroom* has been written because of my arriving at the belief that play is a powerful learning tool.

My teaching practice has evolved with time and experience, but one of the greatest impacts on my approach has come from teaching primary children, which includes Kindergarten to Grade 3 in British Columbia. At this time it was acceptable for me to have the students play during the school day. In fact, The Primary Program (Ministry of Education, 1990a, 1990b) emphasized the importance of learning through play. The guidelines recommended that students should engage in play activities on a daily basis and so it was a part of the scheduled routine.

When I transferred from Grade 1 to Grade 5 it seemed to me that it was necessary to eliminate play from the daily routine. The fact that none of the other intermediate teachers from Grade 4 to Grade 7 had time to let their students play helped create my initial perceptions about what teaching Grade 5 should look like. It appeared that there was not enough time for such ‘leisure’ activity. There seemed to be so much more curriculum material to cover than in Grade 1.

So I arranged my schedule based on an example from one of my colleagues. I was careful to ensure that I included all areas of the intermediate curriculum in my planning and worked hard to adhere to the structured plan.

I had difficulty with the demands of what felt like an uncompromising schedule. This tight schedule did not seem to suit my style of teaching, and ultimately I did not feel good about what I was doing as a teacher. Things seemed to be so rigid. There was little room for flexibility, and I felt like I was suffocating.

As I moved along in the school year I became aware of the fact that the schedule was not working well. The organization was stifling the enthusiasm and curiosity of my students. They did not have the zest for learning that I was so used to seeing with Grade 1 children.

I knew there had to be more I could do for these students in order to help them learn. They seemed to come alive when we would join up with our kindergarten buddies and spend time playing with them. The tense, focussed stresses of our daily routine were left behind for a more carefree, relaxed and happy time.

I pondered the differences between a primary student and one who was in Grade 5. I recognized that a student in Grade 5 could complete greater amounts of work, was physically bigger and had developed in terms of cognitive maturity. However, I found more significant similarities than differences in terms of how they learned. They were both enthusiastic to gain new knowledge, had a keen sense of curiosity and possessed a playful approach to non-structured time at school.

These realizations intrigued me, and so I started to observe my students during their recess breaks and after school on the playground. From these observations it

occurred to me that despite being in Grade 5 these children were still young, full of curiosity and possessed a great deal of passion for learning. As a result of this discovery, I began to assess my approach to teaching Grade 5 and thought about what I could do differently in order to further benefit the students in my class.

After much careful deliberation I decided to introduce play into my Grade 5 classroom as a part of the learning process. It is from this point that my philosophy about teaching began a process of metamorphosis.

I brought in a collection of different board games such as Checkers, Chess, Backgammon, Scrabble and Trouble. I provided bins of Lego and Jenga blocks and supplied materials such as fabric, beans, tubes, cellophane, buttons and yarn for the kids to use to play and build with. I gathered Math manipulatives such as building blocks, place value rods, pattern blocks, geo-boards, and geometric shapes and made these available to the students.

#### Trusting the Notion of Play in Grade 5

When I was a beginning teacher I felt that I had to do it all. I spent many of my “leisure” hours preparing perfectly laid out little booklets that were so well organized there was no possible reason for failure. I had things so set and planned that no room for deviation was provided, nor was there opportunity to pursue personal paths of interest. In essence I was directing the learning and filling the vessels of the students’ minds whether needed or not.

Over the years I have developed the ability to trust my students and have come to realize that they should be guiding at least part of their own learning (Rogers and Sawyers, 1988). I have developed a great appreciation for the diversity of my students

and recognize that each and every member of my class brings with them different experiences, background knowledge and interests.

I believe these differences need to be recognized, honored and explored. We need to be able to celebrate and capitalize on every student's strengths and develop those areas where weaknesses prevail. I believe play provides an effective means through which a child can work on areas of both strength and weakness.

#### Supporting the Notion of Play in Grade 5

I have worked under the direction of open-minded administrators who have encouraged me to try new innovations in my classroom and who have remained receptive to things new and different. I have been fortunate to have parents who have trusted me with the education of their children and allowed me the opportunity to confidently utilize play as a teaching method. They realize that learning encompasses more than listening to lectures, reading for information and doing work that has little significant value to the students (Glasser, 1993).

The trust and open-minded thinking of the aforementioned people have been the key to keeping me encouraged and willing to incorporate play into the daily routine of my students. I have taken risks in terms of meeting the demands of the curriculum for Grade 5 and have at times felt as though I had not covered all that I should. Despite this fact however, I remain emphatic that the benefits of playing are so great that I am compelled to see that my Grade 5 students continue playing.

## Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this project is to report and reflect on the reasons behind why I believe it is important to use play in the Grade 5 classroom and make it an integral part of the curriculum. This study is based on teacher observations and reflections of events that have occurred during five years of teaching intermediate grades (Jeroski, 1992). I have used my own classroom as a case study to provide evidence and examples of the relevance of play in a Grade 5 class.

Through reflecting on observations I have made in terms of the success experienced by students who have been provided the opportunity to play, I hope to offer readers ideas about how to implement a somewhat different approach to delivering a portion of a grade 5 student's education.

I want to share the knowledge I have gained as a result of conducting research and gathering data about the benefit of play for Grade 5 students. In this way this document provides a resource for teachers and parents to better understand why Grade 5 students should be provided opportunities to play at school. It is entitled *The Power of Play* because through the process of using play as a learning tool with my Grade 5 students I have developed the realization that play is not only useful but powerful as well.

Play is more than an opportunity for students to “blow off steam”. It serves as a vehicle for cognitive and social development and is a very strong, effective means of supporting such learning.

## Definitions and Characteristics of Play

So that the reader and the researcher have the same understanding of the vocabulary used in the context of this document, it is important to define the meanings of the words *free play*, *activity time* and *play*, which will be used throughout the document.

### Definitions of Play

*Free Play* – This is the choice of activities that students in my class may participate in during activity time. Some examples of free play choices include the following: Battle Ship, Kerplunk, Master Mind and Memory, which are all games of strategy and planning, decks of cards to play card games such as Cribbage, Crazy Eights, Concentration, Uno and Thirty-One, checkers, Chess and Chinese Checkers are available for those who like games requiring a plan and ability to out-think an opponent, computer technology, drawing, puzzles, reading, and sewing are options for those who like the opportunity to work at quieter activities, Jenga Blocks, building blocks and pattern blocks, are in ample supply for those who want to build or work at improving Math skills as well there are vocabulary developing games such as Spill and Spell, Scrabble, and Boggle and for the student wishing to explore creative activities there is always the opportunity to explore dance, drama and puppetry.

There are a lot of possibilities available to choose from but the one stipulation I have made is that the game must not deal with guns and violence which is in keeping with our school policy regarding types of toys appropriate for school. If a student brings a game from home I ask that I be consulted; it is made clear that I make the final decision regarding the appropriateness of the activity. I try to ensure that the games are stimulating and appropriate for a Grade 5 student.

*Activity Time* – This is the time provided for free play and is the term used on our class timetable. Activity Time is scheduled for twenty minutes every day of the week, but there are times when the duration may be lengthened because the whole class is so intensely involved in free play.

*Play* - In *Webster's* dictionary there are multiple definitions for the word play. I selected the pertinent definitions that I believe further help clarify its meaning in the context of this paper and include the following: “the conduct, course, or action of a game; recreational activity; especially: the spontaneous activity of children; absence of serious or harmful intent; the stage representation of an action or story; and a dramatic composition; Synonym see FUN” (*Merriam-Webster's new collegiate dictionary*, 1975, p. 881).

### Characteristics of Play

There are many characteristics that help define play. It is known to be a necessary part of every person's development and is credited as an essential aspect of a very young child's advancement. Groos (1976) explored the nature and importance of play in man and advocates that it is the root of human development. He believes that much of what is learned is a direct result of play and that it is a necessary component in educational learning. However, when the concept is considered in a scholarly sense “most educators make a sharp distinction between academic work and play” (Caplan & Caplan, 1973, p. xviii).

Play has been recognized as a significant part of every child's growing up for a very long time. In fact, recognition has been given to play by philosophers who date as far back in time as that of Plato (Caplan & Caplan, 1973) who acknowledged the

importance of play and its impact on the social, emotional and academic development of a child. It was Plato who suggested that from the earliest of years children should participate in organized play because from such opportunities they would learn the lessons of life. These life lessons would in turn help them to grow up to be good, exemplary citizens. Plato believed that play had the potential to benefit every student. It can help them as they travel the journey of life and should therefore be an opportunity provided to every child.

Rousseau and Pestalozzi were both strong advocates for outdoor play being recognized as a part of the learning process. Both of these philosophers believed that contact with nature was essential in developing the senses and that opportunities to explore through play were an integral part of this development (Caplan & Caplan, 1973). They emphasized the concept of learning by involvement and suggested that active engagement and contact with the outdoors provided first hand lessons from which the student could develop their senses and expand interests.

Rousseau believed that “childhood was so important that its stages should take as long as a person needed to fulfil its possibilities” (as cited in Gutek, p. 126). He also emphasized the importance of the decisions made by the players. He capitalized on how very crucial it is to ensure that the student decides on the play because he felt that it was through this process that interests and curiosities could be promoted.

Empowering a 10-year-old with a sense of control can be a very effective way to promote a sense of motivation. Play, as Munroe (1991) suggests, is an attractive option for students because they have the freedom to make choices and decisions on their own and as a result will be more willing to pursue investigations of interest.

Along with empowerment, Munroe indicates that play needs to be fun and exciting. In essence then, it should be an activity that is enjoyable to the students and that arouses their curiosity and maintains their interest.

The significant role of play in learning has been credited and documented for hundreds of years. It is from the viewpoint of educational philosophers such as Plato, Pestalozzi and Rousseau that the foundation of play in the learning process of children was first acknowledged, and that has helped set the foundation for the continued use of play in current educational literature.

Huizinga (Kohn, 1992) suggests that play should be a free activity and not a part of the ordinary academic routine. He goes on to further explain that it should not require seriousness on the part of the players, but at the same time absorb their interest with intensity and commitment. He also believes that there needs to be limitations imposed on the students in terms of the space that can be used and the duration of the play. Expectations are pre-determined according to rules that must be followed by everyone. In the case of a game, unless mutually agreed adaptations are imposed, directions need to be followed so that the outcome of the game is consistent with the rules.

The pressure our society places on children in this day and age is very intense (Elkind, 1981). They are being pushed in many different directions and expected to excel in all that they undertake. This sad reality has the potential to affect learning and ultimately hinder progress when they fall under the pressure of meeting specific outcomes or arriving at correct answers. Because the intention of play is to help one feel positive and happy, it tends to be a time that is relatively free of stress. However, frustrations can arise, but as Munroe (1991) indicates they tend to be short lived because

the child is free to change plans mid-stream. The nature of play provides flexibility and freedom and can be altered at any given time. While play provides the child the freedom to make decisions and set his own rules within the context of a play scenario, the concept changes when interfered with by an adult. To the child it is no longer a free and self-directed activity, but instead a guided process based on the planned agenda of the adult.

Kohlberg (1987) believes that when adults attempt to impose their views or opinions, the nature of the play instantly changes. The child loses what he perceives as a sense of control and is suddenly expected to meet the expectations of the adult. The same can be said for the teachable moment when the opportune chance to expand on a concept arises as a result of play. Once the teacher imposes her views and attempts to use the play to teach, the activity is no longer free play.

When play is used as a learning strategy in a classroom, it becomes difficult to distinguish between what is play and what is work. The fact is, as Groos (1976) suggests, that play and work are very closely related. He points out that when play has a motivational aspect, it encroaches on being work and when work becomes an enjoyable and fun activity, it looks more like play.

Further to distinguishing work from play, Kohlberg (1987) suggests that certain behaviors may or may not define the activity as play but that this is dependent upon how the player feels and the circumstances under which the activity occurs. The practice of using play as a learning tool in a classroom can be beneficial to the student, but the learning must occur on his or her own accord. As Kohlberg emphasizes it is important to provide as much freedom as possible. The learning should come on its own as a result of the play.

In order for play to be successful, not only must the player feel free to make his own decisions about the kind of play he engages in, but he must also feel free to take risks in his explorations. Kohlberg cautions that this needs to occur within a secure environment for, as Caplan and Caplan (1973) point out, through the world of play a child can perform trial-and-error activities without fear of ridicule or failure. Play should provide opportunities for students to share what they already know and further broaden their knowledge and understanding. "The play environment should greatly enrich the child's experiences" (Bengtsson, 1974, p. 58). The result of ensuring a safe environment where a child is comfortable taking risks is a world rich in endless possibilities and potential avenues of exploration. It is the ultimate opportunity to pursue "ongoing personal research" (Caplan & Caplan, 1973, p. 39).

Play also provides the chance to imitate the goings on of the adult world (Bengtsson, 1974). A child can explore the roles of an adult and "try on different hats," so to speak. From such situations comes the opportunity to make discoveries and gain insight into "the real world." Lefrancois (1983) suggests that play is important for every aspect of a child's development. It is this work that provides the foundation for every aspect of his learning. Play is recognized for its value in child centered learning. Exploration and experimentation are two components of play that are valuable teaching tools to use with students. However, as Bengtsson (1974) points out, the fact remains that little emphasis or value has been placed on play and that it is low on the priorities of the educational process.

## Interpreting Play in the Classroom

I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the meaning of play as it appears in my classroom. When beginning to conceptualize this project I brainstormed as many words as I could think of that pertained to the play in my classroom. Many words came to mind and as a result I pieced together the vocabulary to create a description of the playful situations in my Grade 5 classroom. The observations and interpretations I have written about describe how I see play unfold for the students in my class.

To me play means having fun. When my students are laughing and smiling it is obvious that they are happy and feeling good. The joking and laughter that fills the room is infectious. It is hard not to feel uplifted by such an atmosphere. The social development that occurs as a result of situations requiring co-operation of players is remarkable. Many situations arise that require the exercising of communication skills and as small groups of students engage in various activities, ideas are shared and expanded upon.

Some members of the class choose to engage in activities of make believe where acting out and fulfilling creations of the imagination offer endless possibilities. On occasion I have observed students create games that appeared to have marketing potential. I have watched students engaged very ingenious artistic projects, witnessed unique dance interpretations, and been privy to clever story telling.

The creative expression of ideas develops from within the mind, and by exercising the imagination students can slip off into activities of pretend play where their creativity and imagination are free to run wild and in some instances make the imaginative become reality (Lefrancois, 1983).

Situations of pretend can provide opportunities to explore scenarios of real life without having to make reference to one's personal circumstances (Elkind & Weiner, 1978). Pretend play can provide the chance to work through problems that may be troubling. No rehearsal is necessary and the ending can be directed or changed at any given time.

The determination and hard work put forth by a student who is challenged to plan and solve a problem can be an exhausting event to witness. I have watched students in play situations determined to overcome an obstacle, calculate and recalculate the best solution to a problem in an attempt to achieve successful results. The guessing and planning that goes into such a thought process requires a great deal of effort on the part of the student. This hard work and dedication is in itself exemplary behavior for a Grade 5 student. The experience from acquiring such knowledge is in itself prime learning.

Manipulating and experimenting can occur through the element of play and often happens when students are attempting to create inventions or explore outcomes of specific events. When students work together, the investigation often goes beyond the initial question and it is not unusual to find one student helping another. Conversations that lead to sharing of experience and knowledge can provide students with opportunities to teach their peers.

Play in my Grade 5 classroom might include a puppet show where an old familiar story is retold. Or, it might be a story telling session that has been newly invented and requires the use of acting skills and role-playing. There might be groups of students engaged in a variety of board games as well as others who are working on a new version of a creative dance with jumps and moves never before attempted.

The process of play can at times lead to quiet reflection. Some students will choose to curl up with a book while others will become involved in independent writing.

The nature of activity time seems to create a sense of relaxation and calmness when expended energy can be replenished (Sponseller, 1974). In some instances the provision of leisure time can provide feelings of relief as the child who leads a hectic lifestyle has the opportunity to prepare for the busy day that lies ahead. To me the true meaning of play shows on the faces of my students and can be heard in their voices. I see and hear it daily.

## Validating the Use of Play in Grade 5

I have observed first hand that play can enhance a student's learning process but because I had never really validated my belief in a formal, comprehensive and cohesive framework my theory seemed ambiguous and inconclusive. The creation of this document has provided me with an opportunity to record my observations and support my belief with literature from those who advocate the use of play for learning.

I believe that play should hold an important role in the educational process of a child as it contributes to all stages of life and areas of development. It not only has the potential to benefit the student, but it can serve the teacher and enhance the curriculum as well. It provides opportunities for independent exploration and can tie in with various aspects of the curriculum.

### Value to the Students

Munroe (1991) and Charles (1974) both emphasize that children learn best by doing. This is when they are interacting and actively involved in their learning. When my students are occupied with their learning during activity time, they tend to become very much engrossed in their projects and spend very little time being idle.

In an article titled *Different approaches to play* it is suggested that the most effective way for a student to express himself is through play and that it is in fact the best process by which to be understood by others (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1980). Activity time in my class provides a good example of an opportunity through which social development can occur. Small groups are productive and allow for greater interaction between players. It becomes necessary for students to cooperate and communicate in order to experience successful play. Social development

can be worked at and problem solving skills become useful in situations of conflict. Students find that they can work out many issues on their own.

Because the groups are small and student-selected, the opportunity to converse back and forth occurs naturally. Students communicate at their own level and express themselves freely. It is a good chance for students to share ideas and work at developing oral conversational skills along with fostering good listening habits (Rogers, 1983).

The practice of utilizing play as a part of the learning process in a Grade 5 class can be a powerful learning and teaching tool. It is beneficial to the student because it provides hands-on learning that captivates and maintains his attention. The choice and variety available through a play session can create tailor made programs that suit the needs of individual students. When a student is given the chance to make decisions about his learning, the result is that he tends to be more motivated and committed to his quest for knowledge (Rogers, 1983). Glasser (1993) makes the point that it is impossible to make people do what does not satisfy their needs and that it is essential students be provided with work that is motivational and worthwhile for them. In my classroom activity time provides a lot of choice. There are many options a student can choose from and for this reason there should never be a student doing what he does not wish to do. Should an activity be assessed as 'boring' or not what was anticipated, the student is free to change his mind. There are always other activities to choose from and it is important that this be honored. The intention of having the class play is to provide them with an opportunity to begin the day in a positive, desirable manner.

As suggested by Caplan and Caplan (1973), children are usually most cooperative when they are engaged in play that satisfies both players, and because social learning is one of the greatest outcomes of play, it needs to be something that is valued.

What I have witnessed in my Grade 5 classroom is increased communication and greater problem solving between students. I frequently observe them attempting to sort out problems in a socially acceptable manner. Working to find solutions or coming to an agreement that everyone can live with is a skill that is practiced almost daily between one group of students or another. Even the student who comes to my class without the skills to work and get along with others makes progress over the course of the year. This student requires extra support and at times one-to-one attention, but once he or she realizes that the opportunity to play is a good experience, less monitoring is required by the teacher.

Having the opportunity to develop communication skills by participating in activities that require players to cooperate with each other not only benefits a student within the classroom, but the knowledge and experience he gains can be exercised on the playground with other members of the school as well. It is important that students be able to communicate their thoughts with one another. Being socially adept and able to communicate is a life skill that anyone can benefit from. I believe that when a student is able to sit down and communicate his thoughts, he is ultimately better able to get along with others.

Elkind (1981) suggests that stress causes wear and tear on the body and that undue stress can be harmful. Learning to manage stress is a key to being a healthy individual (Hannaford, 1995) and is something every human should aspire to develop as a

skill. One learning situation where anxiety tends to be limited is during activity time. It is meant to be a non-stressful opportunity for students where they feel comfortable enough to take risks and become involved in situations they might not otherwise attempt. It is a time that stress can be dealt with in a controlled situation.

Because the nature of play is relaxed and non-evaluated, it provides opportunities for risk-taking and, as Goodman (1986) emphasizes, children learn best in environments that encourage such behavior to occur.

Yet another benefit of play to students is the fact that they feel good about their learning. They possess a positive and enthusiastic attitude and as Bruner (1960) points out, children need a positive, realistic self-esteem in order to develop their individual potential. The way they feel about themselves is related to their ability to learn (Branden, 1994). Activity time provides opportunities for my students to work at situations where they feel confident and successful as learners.

For the unfortunate student who has to cope on a daily basis with the knowledge that his academic ability falls seriously short of that of his peers, activity time provides reason to be positive. Everyone who engages in play becomes an equal and “in creative play, there are no wrong answers; there are only possibilities” (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993, p. xi).

Vygotsky (1978) suggests that social interaction is invaluable. He believes that children learn best through collaboration with others. He makes the point that social, emotional and intellectual developments are all fostered through such situations and that significant development and learning occurs as a result of opportunities to interact socially. During activity time, my students like to join up with other members of the

class. The constant chatter and visiting is something that happens every day. I believe this is so valuable for the students. It is obvious that they enjoy the chance to visit and to be heard. I suspect that for some, the first time they have had a chance to communicate with another person on any given day is during activity time. Several of my students are left to their own accord in the morning. Some are on their own because their parents do not get out of bed with them in the morning and others because their parents have already left the house to go to work. Today, many students arrive at school lonely and void of family support and affections (Newman, 1993).

An important key to experiencing success at school is being able to solve problems in a socially acceptable way. I schedule into the class timetable a weekly session where we focus specifically on problem solving skills and bully proofing. This is one of the components that I am required to teach as outlined in the *Personal planning K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1999). The provision for play gives the students in my class a chance to practice the skills taught to them because they engage in activities that at times require problems to be sorted out. When a small group of students experience a conflict they tend to engage in dialogue that echoes the vocabulary learned in bully proofing sessions because they have all learned the same language. In order for play to be successful, cooperation needs to be an essential ingredient. When the plan is not unfolding as intended, it is necessary to try to solve the problem and find a solution.

I have witnessed students talking through issues and trying to explain from their perspective why the situation is not working. I overheard a student say to another that she did not like her role in the skit they were putting together and that it made her feel

frustrated to be the only one without a speaking part. She shared with the group her ideas about how she felt the story could be changed and from there evolved a productive conversation that ultimately led to revisions in the play and a successful, cooperative group.

While situations requiring the use of problem solving skills arise, they are generally resolved without teacher support. Often the solutions a student devises are very simple and easily implemented. These playful strategies can be utilized productively and effectively.

During activity time students are more apt to take risks and are more adventuresome because the environment is such that they feel comfortable doing so. The pace at which a student works is dependent upon what it is the child wants to achieve. All of these aspects contribute to the self-esteem of the student. The chance to work at independent learning provides opportunities for students to feel good about themselves. Branden (1994) emphasizes that self-esteem is one of the basic needs in all people. He goes on to suggest that the development of one's self-esteem can be bolstered by experiences of successful learning and the ability to master new challenges. Play is an avenue through which children can be a part of such experiences of mastery. It can bolster a student's self-esteem by providing him with the chance to win at games of strategy.

Activity time provides opportunities for students to explore and experiment. Risk taking is encouraged and the non-threatening environment invites even the shyest of my students to tackle situations he or she might not otherwise, under more structured circumstances. For some students play provides an opportunity to sort through the

“morning junk” encountered before leaving home. They might go through various scenarios in their mind, or they might act out various aspects in an attempt to resolve or put closure to the disturbing issues that began their day.

My students are happy and respond enthusiastically to opportunities to play. The safe environment allows for trial and error without judgement. I have consistently observed insecure students grow in their confidence over the year in my classroom.

#### Value to the Teacher

Play as an avenue to support learning in a Grade 5 classroom provides many benefits to the teacher. Deserving of significant recognition is the fact that I have had to deal with fewer behavior problems with potentially challenging students. These students, who have a history of office referrals and classroom social issues, have experienced success and displayed increased positive behavior over the course of the year. Because of the consistent routine, students know what to expect and respond well to the daily independent learning time. They are enthusiastic about playing in Grade 5 and as a result behavior issues are rare. The students tend to be motivated in their learning and there is a reduction in the chance that they become bored. The positive attitudes that abound in the classroom make it a pleasant place to be.

While students are engaged in play situations I have found that I have had to intervene with fewer issues of conflict. It seems that during this time even the students who tend to be outcasts fit in with the rest of the group. During playtime individual strengths become recognized and all students have the opportunity to shine.

One student in particular comes to mind when I refer to a reduction in classroom conflict. This particular boy has serious emotional, social and family issues. He is a

victim of abuse and neglect. He has frequently come to school dirty, smelly and wearing clothes that are very old and worn out; all of these factors make the perfect ingredients for a victim of bullying. For the most part he has very little to do with his classmates, unless he is engaged in a conversation of verbal abuse. On the playground he exists in a solitary world without companionship.

Ironically, it is during activity time however, that this student becomes a hit with his classmates! It seems that he requires the “structure” of play offered in the class in order to have successful experiences and it is very interesting that playground opportunities are unsuccessful for him, but it is likely that this situation is just too “unstructured” for him.

He is extremely gifted in his ability to create figures with plasticine and can draw incredibly detailed pictures of virtually anything. His peers acknowledge the great talent he possesses and he is admired for his gift. This is a time when this student rises above the others and is worthy of the recognition he so desperately needs. Other students request to play with him. His craft is used to create the images for ingenious stories and fantasies of fiction. This is the one time in the day when I am seldom required to come to the rescue of this student.

I think it is because there is time for conversation that there is strong social growth among the students in my class. They seem to naturally engage in conversations with people they might not otherwise spend time talking to as a result of common interests in activities. Problem solving can occur with guidance and students who have had difficulties getting along with others prior to coming to my classroom seem to gain skill in this area. I have observed students become valued in a different manner by their

peers because of social opportunities provided by play. Students gain recognition for their strengths and special talents.

Activity time provides students the opportunity to explore topics that interest them and although it is for a relatively short period of time that they do play, it is nonetheless a period of time that helps set the tone for the day. When playtime leads to projects of inquiry, more often than not students become driven to do further research and work at learning more about the subject of the play. With this kind of interest stirred in even the hard to motivate students, I find that ultimately there is little apathy in them. During activity time there are very few incidents of inappropriate behavior. I continue to be impressed by this fact and further to this, it generally requires little effort on my part to re-direct the one student who is wandering aimlessly and is potentially looking to create havoc in the room.

To further support the point of how necessary it is to keep students motivated, Elkind (1981) suggests that boredom can be detrimental to a student's well being. It is a known fact that students who are bored can "shut down," get into mischief, cause problems for other students and generally make life quite miserable for all those around them.

For the teacher, play can be useful because it has the potential to provide a motivating alternative to teacher-lead instruction. Students can be very good at peer teaching and often they can communicate more clearly with each other. Peer teaching is an effective strategy to use in order to help students understand concepts that they are having difficulty grasping. I have found that when I am unable to properly explain an idea to a student, another student can come along and by using his own words help his

peer to understand. When students are engaged in play, peer teaching seems to happen naturally. They seem to slip into teaching roles without consciously realizing that they have done so. When a group of students work together at an activity, there are times when one player may not understand the directions or be aware of limitations and in this instance, it becomes the job of the others to ensure that all players are clear about the process. It is impossible for me to help all students at the same time and so having students work as peer teachers is a valuable entity in a classroom of 28 children.

It is so much easier to work with students who are positive and want to be at school. The task of educating 28 students with different interests and different learning abilities is not an easy one. The chance to play is something that my students express enthusiasm towards. Many of my students come early and stay late. Keeping students motivated can be an onerous task, but it has been my experience that the provision of activity time keeps the kids inspired and helps them to maintain a positive attitude.

I believe that as a society we do not play enough. I think it is important to experience fun and laughter in life. Incorporating play into the class schedule feels right to me and in so doing, I am demonstrating to my students that what I value is also a part of how I live. I think it is important to model what we believe in.

Activity time provides opportunities for me to step back and observe and I am available to serve as a sounding board when required to do so. It is so valuable to be able to have the time to just stand back and watch my students. I am able to spend time generating anecdotal comments which are so valuable in reporting to parents. The notes I make are an integral part of curriculum assessment as outlined by the British Columbia education ministry and offer evidence of learning at a glance. Much can be gained from

taking the time to study them. While students are engaged in independent learning, I am freed up to spend time observing and documenting progress of class members and have many more opportunities to engage in one-to-one conversations. I am able to stand back and observe my students. I can assess and evaluate from a distance and gain a lot of information during one short session of playtime. Depending on the activities the students elect to participate in, I am sometimes provided with examples of ability to perform in areas of Mathematics such as multiplication and division. Or a student might be playing at an activity that encompasses areas of Language Arts such as reading, writing, and spelling. I might also have the chance to observe the social development of a student who is working with a group of dominant leaders. The students working at the computer might be demonstrating their ability to use technology to gather information or to communicate with students from afar.

In the busyness of a day, it is really difficult to spend time with as many students as I would like to. I often go home at the end of a day to find myself thinking about the students that I overlooked or neglected to converse with. By taking the time to ponder my class, I can be aware of whom I need to focus on when we next meet. I feel that it is valuable to spend time in conversation with children; there is much to be learned if one takes the time to listen. I believe that as a society we do not spend enough time engaged in the art of conversing. We need to take the time to exchange stories and reflect on life.

I am fortunate that while my students are playing, I have the time to spend one on one with them. I am provided with the opportunity to get to know them better by having the chance to talk with them and share conversations that might have little to do with school. Sometimes I am invited to join in a game or listen to someone read a passage

from a book. I am taught new games and am as susceptible to winning and losing as they are. Getting to the same level as my students is important to me.

### Value to the Curriculum

Play has merit in terms of meeting the needs of the curriculum because each and every play activity can be linked with specific sections of the *Integrated Resource Packages* (see Appendix A). These documents serve as the guide to the mandated curriculum in British Columbia and ultimately prescribe what must be covered in a school year. The independent work students can embark on during activity time provides coverage of outcomes that may not otherwise be specifically explored as a result of the busy schedules that unfold each year. During the five years that I have been using play as a learning strategy for Grade 5 students, I have discovered that it fits in with and covers many of the outcomes from the various Integrated Resource Packages.

While Caplan and Caplan (1973) caution that having a set curriculum may mean the teacher is the only one making the decisions regarding the course of study, it is important to realize that activity time can provide room for the student's voice in this decision making process. I will further substantiate this in the chapter on classroom play experiences.

The concept of curriculum has undergone continual investigation, and there are researchers who suggest "that children are the curriculum" (Newman, 1993, p. 5). If this is in fact the case, the way in which activity time is set up in my classroom, students are expected to be in charge of making decisions about their learning at this time. They choose the course of action and the curriculum content that is right for them and in essence become the center of the curriculum.

The play situations my students become engaged in encompass what McCutcheon (1988) describes as the “hidden curriculum.” This is that part of the curriculum experienced by students through the daily unplanned activities that occur within the classroom through the vehicle of play. In other words, these are the learning situations that are not planned for, but from which opportunities arise where students are free to explore areas of interest and ponder that which may not otherwise come up through teacher-lead instruction.

In one morning, for example, there could be students working with pattern blocks who are in turn exploring Math concepts while another group might be working at re-telling a story through dramatization. At the same time two students search the Internet for facts about recent immigration issues, and spread around the classroom there might be a host of students playing some of the various games provided as well as one or two students curled up quietly reading to themselves or each other. This is a lot of “hidden curriculum” being explored all at one time and while I am not deliberately setting out to use play to cover outcomes, it occurs naturally through the processes the students undertake. I like to think of the outcomes that are covered through play as bonuses. I describe them in this way because even though they appear to be extra curricular materials, they are indeed integral pieces of the curriculum. The work my students do during playtime is so varied and so different that there is no possible way I could guide them and plan lessons to cover this same amount of material. Playfully exploring curricular areas can provide memorable learning not to be soon forgotten.

## The Classroom Play Experience

For my Grade 5 students, activity time provides pleasureable experiences. The greatest evidence of this fact can be detected by the smiles on their faces and the happy conversations being exchanged with one another. It is not only from observation that I am able to determine just how content and happy my students are during activity time, but from conversation as well. I have been told on many occasions that “the best part of the day is activity time because it is fun.” When I see a troubled little boy going home from school at the end of the day with a smile on his face because his attention was diverted from his problems for a time, I am again reminded of the power of play.

### Classroom Demographics

The group I taught this past year consisted of 28 students. The class compilation was made up of 11 boys and 17 girls. There was quite a mix of learning abilities. The range consisted of students working at the very least at a Grade 7 or 8 level in Language Arts and Mathematics while there were others who were struggling to put out work that would be comparable to that of a Grade 2 student in these same curricular areas. Nine students were provided with Individual Educational Plans by our Student Services teacher and six members of the class brought with them histories of behavioral issues that had been documented through office referrals. There were five boys who struggled with the unstructured time early on in the year. They required monitoring and at times redirecting, but as the year progressed, so too did they in their ability to be responsible and reliable.

### Setting Up the Play

I have come to utilize play in my current teaching practice as a result of a successful implementation experiment. It was from this experience that I was lead to the decision that my students, despite being in Grade 5, still needed to be playing. With much though and contemplation I gradually introduced greater amounts of time dedicated to play.

In the first year I initially provided short periods of unstructured free time. This often occurred on Friday afternoons when the week was near completion and the students were restless for the weekend to begin. I made sure that I closed my doors for fear of being scrutinized by my colleagues or unexpected visitors to the school. Over time though, I gained confidence in my belief that play was an appropriate and important event for a Grade 5 student. I have learned to trust the natural ability of my students to learn and as a result I no longer feel the need to close my door.

I have slowly increased the frequency and duration of play to the point where I now schedule activity time first thing in the morning for one half hour to forty minutes every day of the week. The learning time, though independent, is rich in experiences and provides appropriate activities for all members of the class. All students have responded well to the opportunity to play and use this independent time responsibly.

In setting the routine with the students I have taken the time to set up guidelines which include behavior, participation and social expectations. Everyone is expected to participate in an activity; “lounging” is not an option. Co-operation is key to ensuring a successful session, and respect toward other members of the class is requisite.

As the school year progressed the entire class became increasingly independent and took activity time seriously. The students have taken the responsibility of choosing wisely the people they play with and the activity they work at. The 9:00 activity time has become such a part of the class routine that it occurs without guidance or direction. I can enter my class on any given day and find everyone working at an activity before the final bell has gone.

### The Operation

The playtime that occurs in my class is intended to provide an opportunity for the students to choose activities that have not been set as a part of our scheduled curriculum study. I have ensured that the classroom is “equipped to enhance an activity-oriented curriculum” (Charles, 1974, p. 28), and the games and activities that are available are meant for small groups of players and in some instances for individuals who choose to work alone.

This is a time that is unique and different from the rest of our day in that it deviates from the “routine” and “structure” of traditional “seat work.” The students are the directors of this learning time and determine where the play will lead them.

The roles of the teacher and the student are different during this time. Sometimes the teacher becomes the learner as a student instructs and explains the rules of a newly invented game. More often than not, in the groups of students someone becomes the instructor and leads the rest of the group in their tasks. The atmosphere in the classroom is relaxed and the teacher and students often trade duties. However, there is a degree of seriousness during playtime because the students recognize it as a valuable, worthwhile opportunity. However, this is where the serious aspect of play ends. The students are

relaxed, happy and content during this time. They make mature decisions about the activities they choose and frequently become so absorbed in the play that it is difficult to pull them away. Periodically a group will set aside the equipment they have been using with the intent to return to their activity the next day.

The class time table is set in such a way that there is some room for flexibility, but the students recognize and appreciate that their playtime comes to an end and we move on to other scheduled lessons. In my classroom the students know that the first 30 minutes of the day are spent playing. They choose the activity they want to work at and, if need be, they modify the rules to suit their needs. In essence they become the directors of the play and ultimately determine how things turn out. The students are free to implement new rules into their game and experiment with them, and if the result is not working as intended, changes can be made accordingly.

It is not uncommon to see 28 students working at 10 or 12 different activities at one time. The workers are steadfast and committed to the outcome of their play. Occasionally a group will decide to move onto something different only to find that time has run short. This is when the group may decide to set their supplies aside for the next day in order to take off from where they have had to end.

Although activity time runs smoothly for the most part, there are times when circumstances can become stressful. Frustrating situations sometimes come about because a plan has not worked out or all members of a group are unable to agree on the rules. In essence then, it is because of differences in opinion that many of the situations of frustration arise. Most conflicts arise because children are egocentric (Rogers & Sawyers,

1988) but when they can learn to resolve conflicts, they are expanding their knowledge of the social world.

Sometimes these situations require the intervention of the teacher, but more often than not, the problem is solved without adult support. Because play does not require that things remain static for the whole time, there is always the opportunity to change the plans or the rules to suit the wishes of the players if consensus can not be agreed upon.

An interesting situation of conflict arose between two of my students in April. Both boys came to me after our recess break asking for my help in solving a problem. The one boy who was a class bully had been calling the other inappropriate names and then he took his ball. This made the other student so angry that a pushing match ensued.

What I discovered in their explanation was that they were having some ongoing issues that had been escalating for some time and needed to be sorted out. We discussed appropriate measures to solve their problem and in the end I had the two go outside and play together. They were the only students on the entire field, so they had no choice but to communicate and interact between one another. When they came back in the class the issue had been resolved as a result of the co-operative, constructive play they had engaged in. It was from this experience that these two boys developed a mutual respect for one another. They spent much of their spare time playing together and I did not deal with any other issue between them for the rest of the year. The play situation they were made to deal with allowed them to see each other in a way that they had not recognized before.

In this example, the play situation was deliberate on my part. I knew that there would not be peer influences on the two boys if they were sent outside. They would have

to communicate with each other and sort through their differences and it was something unique and a somewhat different approach than either of them had been used to in terms of solving problems. They were made to co-operate rather than compete against each other which, as Kohn (1992) suggests, is a more productive, healthy way to function and be successful in life.

Incorporating play into the daily routine of my Grade 5 program has proven to be an effective strategy both for the students and myself. I have discovered that allowing time for play provides opportunities for students to explore topics of interest independently and as a result of this self-directed learning, additional curriculum outcomes can be covered.

An example of this comes from some students in my class who decided to explore structural components of building stability. Initially, one student decided to utilize place value rods to experiment with various building designs in an attempt to see how high he could build a structure before it crashed to the ground. He spent time gathering information about how to make a structurally sound building and then he put his knowledge into action.

In the process of testing various formulas, two other classmates joined in on the project, but before more building could go on, education of the newcomers was necessary. This activity went on for six days and by day three the trio of up and coming architects would be anxiously waiting for permission to enter the school first thing in the morning. The time and energy these three boys put into this project impressed me in that their learning stretched far beyond what I could have possibly hoped for them to gain. As

a result of the construction project they worked on during activity time, they covered outcomes from various curriculum areas in a single play session.

The work done during activity time is not only productive but engaging as well. On many occasions students have gone back to the same play situation to resume where they left off the day before in order to complete the undertaken task. An example of continued play comes from an intense Chess game that could not be completed during one activity time so it was set off to the side to be completed the next day. What was really interesting about this situation was the fact that one of the players took the time to look through a book of Chess strategies before returning to the game and was able to out-think his opponent. Without direction, he had engaged in reading, problem solving and research skills as a result of his inquiry regarding strategies and determination to out-think his opponent.

I have often observed students returning to the same activity several days in a row. For some it is sheer determination to master what they are working at, for others it is that they are so well entertained by the activity that it sustains their attention for extended periods of time.

I have often seen students instructing one another so that they can both participate in a common activity. What is important in such a situation is that they have the ability to communicate in a socially acceptable manner. The ability to interact is a necessary life skill that becomes an asset in any social situation.

Including play as a part of the daily routine for my Grade 5 students has provided the opportunity to verify its potential to cover a great many learning outcomes. During activity time the students will be involved in a variety of different play situations all

covering different outcomes. For example, if a student chooses to play the word game called Scrabble, he is working on spelling skills, communication skills, reading skills and dictionary skills. In the *English language arts K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1996a) the outcomes for Grade 5 include the following:

- use conventional spelling for most words (p. A-10).

In order to play Scrabble, a person has to create words by using a specific number of letters. The more challenging the word, the higher the points scored. The game is based on one's ability to spell properly. Another outcome is to:

- edit to correct their own and others' use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation using both electronic and manual means (p. A-14).

It is important to recognize when words are not spelled correctly. If the opponent uses letters to create a large word but does not spell it properly, he could gain points that he is not actually entitled to. It is important to be able to recognize words that are not correct and to use a dictionary when necessary to help verify questionably spelled words.

The Language Arts outcomes also require students to:

- demonstrate an awareness of how to use language to develop and maintain friendships and relationships in school and in the community (p. A-18).

Although the game of Scrabble is quite competitive, and the challenge to get the most points is the objective, it is still important that the players be able to get along and co-operate. Players involved in the game need to speak appropriately to each other. A competitive game where someone has to lose can be really frustrating for some ten-year-old children, and for this reason players need to be cognizant of their opponents' feelings.

Another outcome is that students are required to:

- read, listen and view for specific purposes (p. A-2).

In order to play the game properly, it is necessary to read the instructions. It is important that both players understand the rules and the system for scoring which in turn reduces the chance of conflicts arising during the game.

A game of Snakes and Ladders, on the other hand, would encompass cooperation, communication, mathematical problem solving and also some probability and statistics. Outcomes for this activity can be found in at least three different curriculum documents including the Language Arts, Mathematics and Personal Planning packages.

The following Language Arts outcome is covered from the activity of Snakes and Ladders:

- assume a variety of roles when interacting in groups (p. A-20).

To get the game going, someone usually has to assume a leadership role. The others have to be in agreement so things can be organized and play can begin:

- demonstrate an awareness of how to use language to develop and maintain friendships and relationships in school and in the community (p. A-18)

It is healthy to develop positive relationships. The opportunity to spend time in conversation and to have fun with other people can be the direct result of playing a game such as Snakes and Ladders and this is an outcome listed in the Language Arts resource package.

The Language Arts Resource package also requires students to:

- demonstrate a willingness to communicate with others to reach common goals within the classroom (p. A-22).

It is important to be encouraging to others and at the same time to possess the

ability to politely re-direct when rules aren't being followed. Good communication is a life skill that can help make one's life a whole lot easier.

In the Mathematics resource package the following outcome can be achieved from playing a game of Snakes and Ladders:

- predict outcomes, conduct experiments, and communicate the probability of single events (p. 152).

The example of probability comes from every roll of the die providing the chance that the player may land on a snake and end up having to go backwards, but there is also the chance that he may land on a ladder and advance in the game. The outcome of the toss results in the opportunity to contemplate the probability of number results and the chances of promotion and demotion in the game.

The Personal planning resource package has an outcome expecting the student to:

- use appropriate strategies to share and express feelings and emotions (p. A-7).

Through the process of playing a game, there may be times when not everyone will agree with the results. It is when disagreements arise that it is necessary to be able to appropriately communicate one's opinion.

In addition, students are expected to:

- demonstrate an appreciation of the value of friendships (p. A-23).

Engaging in a fun game of chance such as Snakes and Ladders provides students with an opportunity to develop and enrich one's circle of friends. It is from such situations that students are made aware of the value of friendships and can develop an appreciation for the qualities of others. The distance between players with such a board

game is not very great and so they are really “forced” into paying attention to each other; it is through such situations that students really get to know each other.

It is important not only to see that the activities the students work at incorporate many different outcomes, but also to recognize that there are places in the curriculum where playful activities are interwoven in the form of outcomes. In the Fine Arts (Ministry of Education, 1995b) and in the Physical Education Integrated Resource Packages (Ministry of Education, 1995d) the following outcomes are listed as components the students are required to do:

- select and combine locomotor and non-locomotor skills when creating and participating in game activities (p. 114)
- demonstrate body and space awareness when performing game activities (p. 114)
- use critical-thinking and problem solving skills to create competitive and co-operative games (p. 114).

These outcomes are also integrated in the Fine Arts resource packages.

Although play can liven up a program, it does not replace the important role the teacher plays in educating students and it does not mean that students are not taught. It enhances the work they are required to do and adds an element of amusement.

I realize how much the students are learning when I walk around the class and observe my students teaching one another new concepts or perhaps discussing the rules to play a specific game. “No child wants to be shown in great detail how a thing should be done – he wants to find out for himself” (Bengtsson, 1974, p. 111).

There is a lot of learning during activity time and I know that I could not possibly cover all of the material that the students investigate in one half hour by themselves if I were to use a teacher-lead style of instruction. The independent time to investigate provides students with individual leaning opportunities that could not unfold under the structure of a more traditional teaching practice.

## Insights

There are many different ways to view the play that occurs in my Grade 5 classroom. Everyone who participates has a different view of the success and entertainment value. Those who observe either up close or from a distance will perceive the play to be different things. What is important is that its value is reflected upon.

### Teacher Perceptions

I know that my students are enthusiastic about being in the class because many arrive early to get extra playtime. The school is not open until 8:30 a.m. for students, but as soon as they are allowed in, many go directly to the classroom and take out an activity to work at. I am always amazed to see so many students arrive at school so early in the morning. I even have students who live across the street from the school arrive early so that they can play. To me this is a very strong indicator that play is inviting and worthwhile.

As this past year progressed, students from another intermediate class began to stop by my classroom in the morning to play with the toys and games. Although some of them were friends with students from my class, many did not have any affiliation, but were attracted by the opportunity to play. Allowing these students to come to the class to play helped reduce playground issues.

In particular there were four boys who had a history of social conflicts with some of the boys from my class. It was through the vehicle of play that these boys grew in their ability to tolerate and accept each other's differences. They worked at cooperating and developing proper communication skills in order to get along. In part, their effort was due to the fact that they knew that if they could not get along, they were not welcome in the

class and also because the play situations provided opportunity for social development. The growth made by this particular “group of boys,” as they became known by my students, was remarkable.

I am frequently reminded of the success play has had in helping my class work at getting along together. I deal with very few behavioral issues during playtime. When I take time to reflect on this reality, I am reinforced by the fact that my Grade 5 students are truly benefiting from the opportunity to play. They are engaged in a learning process that guides them through social development and improved communication skills.

The playful atmosphere is intended to help students feel relaxed and free from intimidation and embarrassment. As a result of this environment, students tend to be more willing to take risks. I feel pleased with the fact that many of my students are willing to take risks. It is the shy, reserved members of the class who really stand out in terms of the gains they have made through the avenue of play.

There was a student in my class who was just learning to read and felt very self-conscious about the fact that she was so far behind the academic ability of her peers. Activity time became a period in her life when it was safe to work on this skill with the help of some competent peers. Role playing and retelling stories through puppetry provided her with a safety net and over time, her confidence grew to the point where she elected to read a story to the entire class. This was a remarkable milestone. I believe this student gained a positive outlook about her ‘inability’ to read and turned things around through encouragement and support from other students in the class. This success story could not be shared had this student not gained the confidence and ability to feel good about herself.

This same student became so confident about her reading and speaking ability that she decided to try out for a lead role in our spring school production. When she was assigned to a major part in the play her parents phoned me in disbelief. They were concerned that their daughter would not be able to handle the pressure and would panic when she stood on the stage in front of 400 people. Having watched this little girl grow in her self-confidence over the past five months I felt confident enough to be able to reassure them that she would be just fine. To volunteer to go on stage was a major hurdle for this student. I believe she is an example of a student who through a positive self concept and optimistic outlook is striving to reach her potential ability as a result of the play opportunities provided during class time.

I saw such a variety of interests in the group of 28 students and they all had their own individual strengths and special abilities. I believe that play has the potential to guide each of these students in the direction they need to travel and to open doors of exploration and inquiry for each and every student.

Bengtsson (1974) points out that students do not want to be shown how to do things, but that instead they possess the desire to experiment and try things out for themselves; they learn much through their natural curiosities. This has certainly been true of the students in my class. A case in point is a group of students who I observed working on an electrical circuit. They were curious about how the electricity traveled from one port to another and in the process lit a light bulb. They worked on answering this question for several play sessions and then began to experiment with various conductors and insulators as they began on new curiosity quests.

I believe that these students learned more from the experiments they performed than I could have taught them in one month's worth of teacher-taught Science lessons. Not only did they perform many hands-on experiments, they also began reading to seek answers to their questions and in turn discovered more than what could have ever been imparted to them through organized lessons. They were very focussed with the work they did and put a lot of energy into their learning. I watched these students and was able to observe more than basic learning. They were engaged in meaningful conversations, significant learning occurred and motivation was high. To me this is what counts in the big picture of my students' education and in their future learning.

This investigative form of play between several Grade 5 students resulted in a great deal of learning, however the perception by many people would be that they were simply playing. For a lot of people, this is difficult to accept, particularly because the children are ten years old. Generally speaking, society has come to expect that as the age of the learner increases, the classroom setting should be more structured and the work more pencil and paper oriented. Keeping this in mind then, when a Grade 5 student is playing, the activity is often deemed to be nothing more than simple entertainment.

I know that this is just not so. I have felt particularly frustrated when a colleague has walked by my classroom and asked me what was going on. "Looks like these kids are having a lot of fun! Didn't have time to plan this week-end?" It has been moments like this when I have felt compelled to justify the activities occurring in my classroom and sensed the need to explain what I knew to be the reality of the situation. It has been in situations like this that I have gone into great detail trying to make it clear that my

students were engaged in more than what was being perceived. My students were in fact involved in extensive learning.

I find it terribly frustrating when people are unable to see beyond their first impressions, particularly when I know that they are skeptical about what is going on in my classroom. I have come to realize, as Wasserman (1990) suggests, that no matter what form the play is, learning is occurring and when we watch children involved in play, we will see a great deal of intellectual growth no matter what age the child is. The key for teachers and adults is to be able to stand back and observe learning and play in action and to accept the fact that the intellectual growth of a student can happen just as successfully through playful situations as compared to those more traditional settings.

### Student Perceptions

On occasion, I have asked my students how they felt about playing in Grade 5. The feedback is always encouraging. I am yet to receive negative feedback regarding their impression about play. I overheard some students talking about activity time and was encouraged to hear them say: “Our class is sure lucky to be able to play.” “Yeah, it’s a lot of fun and I learn stuff too.”

When I stop to think about the Grade 5 students who have had an opportunity to experience learning through play I am reminded of the degree to which it is actually appreciated by them. Many students have offered their opinion about playing in a Grade 5 class, and as a result I have received much positive feedback from them. Here are just a few examples of students’ voices:

“I think that playing is good for us because it helps us to relax.”

“Playing in Grade 5 is not bad because you can learn things for your future. It is also time to have fun and make friends.”

“I think playing in Grade 5 is a good idea because it sets us for life and gives us time for our brains to wake up.”

“I have learned to become more patient.”

“Playing makes the day a lot more interesting and more fun.”

“Play wakes us up so we are warmed up and ready to go on in school.”

“Play opens our minds and gets us ready for challenging things in the day.”

“Play helps your thinking skills.”

“Play can help plan for the future.”

### Parent Perceptions

At first I felt uncertain as to how the parents felt about their children playing in Grade 5. I did not receive direct feedback one way or the other and presumed that either they were not aware or that they were not concerned.

At the same time however, I was always worried that they would respond negatively to such a concept because in general, society tends to perceive play as something luxurious (Kohlberg, 1987). It was my fear that the implementation of play in my classroom would be seen in the same light.

Contrary to my belief, it seems parents are pleased that their children are provided with the chance to play in Grade 5. One parent told me that her child was so busy with hockey practices and games that he didn't have much time to play for the sake of playing. This parent went on to tell me that she was pleased that I valued playtime. She thought it

was important for kids to get time to play but that many people's lives today are too hectic to fit it in.

I had another parent tell me that she was impressed with how well the children in my class played together. She was curious to know why the group had pulled together so well. Apparently there were several social issues between this group of kids in the previous years. As we discussed possible reasons for the noticeable change in their ability to get along and cooperate, she touched on the fact that "probably the classroom play time had made a difference."

I had a parent compliment me for helping to instill confidence in my students. Specifically, she was impressed by their ability to perform in front of large groups. She recognized the fact that for most students, this was a big risk and credited some of their courage to the fact that they were provided time to experiment with such activities during playtime.

Six parents and a retired teacher accompanied our class as helpers on a camping trip and over the course of the three days, all commented about how brave and non-threatening the students appeared to be and they were impressed at how well everyone played together.

One parent who has spent many hours in her daughter's classes over the years told me that she could not "get over the increased confidence" of one student in particular. She was astounded by the fact that this girl took the risk to perform a dance in front of her peers and was emphatic that there was no possible way this would have happened in prior years.

It was not only the parents who were cognizant of this young girl's risk taking, but when she completed her dance, the entire class stood up and cheered and clapped loudly. Many students expressed disbelief at what they had witnessed.

## Critical Considerations

It is important to realize that, as with anything new, utilizing play in a Grade 5 classroom will require patience and persistence. The approach and attitude of all players will impact the outcome of such an endeavor. In the following section I will point out some elements and conditions that I had to pay attention to, in order to ensure successful implementation of play in Grade 5.

### Teaching Style

While I advocate the use of play as a valuable teaching and learning tool for Grade 5, because it is something that has worked well for me, I am reminded that all teachers have their own beliefs about learning and approaches that work best for them. I believe that adaptations can be made to allow any teacher to use play. However, one must make the decision to work within one's own methodology and tolerance levels in order to make play available to the students. The person who decides to utilize play must be willing to accept that there will be increased noise in the room and although it is productive, it may not always seem to be so on the surface. For some, the commotion of such hubbub might be difficult to cope with and so they might choose games and activities of a quieter nature.

Therefore, vital to the implementation of successful play is the ability to look beyond the surface. Upon closer examination, what might look like chaos, is in fact organized, thoughtful learning appearing in a different manner.

Just as students are encouraged to take risks with play, so is the teacher who attempts to use this strategy. How this time is perceived by others, the amount of learning the students will ultimately do, and the success of such an endeavor could create a state

of vulnerability. It is important that one knows in one's own mind the intentions and the purpose behind the process of education and that one is aware of personal limitations.

### Difficulties

For some students activity time can be difficult to cope with. The unstructured, "loose" opportunity to play can be too much to handle. This is when it becomes necessary for the teacher to direct or specify options in order to avoid potential misbehavior.

Activity time for some students might not be perceived as a fun and rewarding experience because cooperating and getting along with others requires hard work on their part. For the student who experiences such difficulties, successful play in the classroom may take time to occur. There are times when a group of students can not get along and require separating. This is a tough decision to have to make because the concept of play changes completely under such circumstances.

It is important to realize that for some, limitations and boundaries must be imposed in order to ensure a productive activity time. Not everyone will thrive immediately and unconditionally under such an environment, but with carefully thought out guidelines and proper support, eventually even the most scattered student will benefit.

### Commitment to Implementation

It is unfortunate that people who question the value of play have difficulty seeing beyond the face value. It can be disconcerting to be under the scrutiny of others and when something different such as implementing play in a Grade 5 class causes others to question its worth, it is easier to conform to the status quo than to prove one's belief.

When a child engages in play, his mind is at work. At first sight it might appear that a child is having far too much fun and that there is no possible way that he is learning

(Kohlberg, 1987). This is when determination and commitment on the part of the teacher are vital.

There have been situations when it has felt to me like activity time was nothing more than extra lounging time. This is when I have had to step back and observe the events going on in my classroom to discover that while perhaps a very few students have required “re-routing,” the majority have continued to be completely engrossed in play.

Because of the fact that society generally views work and play as separate entities (Caplan & Caplan, 1973), it can be challenging to implement play as a learning strategy in a Grade 5 class. Sadly, “few educators, even today, readily consider play as the art of learning” (Caplan & Caplan, 1973 p. 111) and so, when implementing such a strategy, it can be an isolating endeavor. It is when I begin to falter in my conviction to utilize play in my Grade 5 classroom that I find myself having to stand back, trust my judgement, acknowledge all of the important curricular learning that occurs and be determined to carry on with the play

## Summary and Implications of my Work

I embarked on this project to celebrate and reflect on my own professional development and teaching success and to advocate my belief that intermediate teachers need to be including play as a classroom teaching component.

I am convinced that play is a crucial part of learning and that it encompasses many different aspects of the learning process. If we can provide varied opportunities to help a child learn, why then should we not include play as a part of the learning process for a Grade 5 student? I believe that teachers need to pay attention to how very important it is to include play in the learning of their students regardless of whether they are teaching primary or intermediate age children. The links to the curriculum can be made and it is an important part of learning that is being disregarded as students move into the intermediate grades.

The result of the teacher research and implementation work I have done on play over the past few years has changed me as a teacher forever. I don't think I could ever eliminate play from my planning now that I have observed the benefits in my Grade 5 classes.

Although the curriculum drives much of what I am supposed to do with my students, I recognize that as we rush children through life we need to ensure they are growing up to be healthy human beings. While I value the importance of a mandated curriculum guideline, I also recognize a need for some flexibility that allows for individual differences to shine through. There are many ways to deliver a curriculum, and I have discovered what I believe to be a different but not unique avenue to guide students through some of their learning and in turn enhance the way in which material is covered.

Currently I am the only teacher providing intermediate grade students the opportunity to learn through play at the school where I work. I feel like I travel down a different path than most of my fellow intermediate colleagues, but I am confident about the fact that my students benefit from the time they are provided to play on a daily basis. I feel confident about the process I have implemented and know that my efforts are benefiting students. I have observed the living proof of successful players in my classroom. The compilation of this document has provided me an opportunity to share research undertaken in my classroom and my enthusiasm for play in Grade 5 along with my philosophy about its importance as a learning strategy.

“To put play, perhaps the most important of our educational processes, low on the list of priorities is a tremendous waste of potential” (Bengtsson, 1974, p. 111). Play should hold a significant role in the educational process of Grade 5 students and I am committed to ensuring that in my classroom we continue to play.

From the beginning of my teaching career to the present day, my philosophy has evolved and changed. The greatest revelation has been primarily in the way I think about my students and their position as learners. It is my opinion that first and foremost children need to feel good about themselves as people and as learners. If a child has personal issues consuming his brain, it is unreasonable to expect that he is going to have the ability to be actively involved in academic study work. If a child is feeling happy and can acknowledge her worth, she will be more likely to succeed.

As a result of this project it is my hope that other intermediate teachers will come to recognize the value of play and become interested in attempting the use of play as a learning tool within their classrooms.

While I am aware of the fact that in British Columbia we are fortunate to have the progressive Integrated Resource Packages, it is my opinion that they are merely a small step in the right direction in terms of acknowledging and implementing play as a learning tool. Ultimately, I would like to see play recognized as a valuable approach to teaching intermediate age children. I would like to see it receive greater recognition and commendation as an accepted method for teaching various aspects of the curriculum to learners of any age.

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## Appendix A

## Integrated Resource Packages Applicable to Implementing Play in a Grade 5 Classroom

- *Applied skills K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1995a)
- *Fine arts K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1995b)
- *Mathematics K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1995c)
- *Science K to 7 integrated resource package*, (Ministry of Education, 1995d)
- *English language arts K to 7 integrated resource package* (Ministry of Education, 1996)
- *Social studies K to 7 integrated resource package*, (Ministry of Education, 1998)
- *Personal planning K to 7 integrated resource package*, (Ministry of Education, 1999)