Investigating your Practice?
Be Prepared for a Shock

Tara Brandes
Chilliwack, British Columbia

Abstract

During an interview with a colleague, I asked her if she cut playtime when fieldtrips or holidays came up during the week. She replied,

“I think that before when I first started teaching I definitely would have cut playtime first; now the more I teach them...
[children] the more valuable I see it is. I see how much they look forward to it because it [playtime] is that time for them to just explore and do what they need or want to do. I would rather now cut calendar than cut playtime. And with all of the reading I have done, it seems that younger teachers are quicker to cut it than the 20 year teacher who sees the value of play.”

How often do we as teachers take the time to reflect on our practice? I spend so much time trying to provide my students with the best learning opportunities, yet I seem to skip over an important part of this equation. Rarely do I take the time to reflect on my practice and determine what is and what simply isn’t working and the reasons for this.

**Conflict—“living contradictions”**

The kindergarten teacher and her students are having a busy and exciting day at school. One of the young boys asks, “When will we have centers?” The teacher responds, “We will have centers later.” However, the day comes and goes without the children getting time for centers.

Two days later, a girl tugs on her teacher’s pants and asks, “Do we get to have centers today?” The teacher smiles at the little girl and tells her they have “to catch up on some work today but maybe tomorrow.”

In this teacher’s classroom play seems always to take a back seat to other components of the kindergarten program. This teacher feels guilty even though she is the one, ultimately, making the decision to limit playtime. I am this teacher.

During an interview with a colleague I asked her how often she provided playtime for her students. She replied, “Um, twice a week for twenty minutes. Way under what we should be giving them.” When I pressed her further as to why this is so she stated, “Because there is too much to cover, curriculum is too huge.”

Even though teachers (such as me) believe play to be an essential part of learning in primary and kindergarten classrooms, providing time for playtime is often difficult. In an action research project that I undertook as part of my masters program of studies, I decided to explore the reasons why I often limited or eliminated play in my classroom.
For this study, I defined play as planned time set aside during school hours in a kindergarten classroom when students engage with various toys and manipulatives designed to assist them to explore their world and apply knowledge gained. Center times are one venue designed to provide children with planned time for learning through play.

I undertook this research with the purpose of gaining insight into why I frequently limited playtime in my classroom. This research helped me to understand the contradiction between my teaching practices and my teaching philosophies. In many ways I will be acknowledging and inquiring into what Jack Whitehead called “living contradictions” (Whitehead, 1993). This article specifically highlights the data that “caught me off guard”—that is, I discovered that my reasons for limiting playtime were ones I never expected to find!

My Way Of Collecting Data

My study included a combination of classroom data collection, interviews with other primary teachers, and self-study strategies. Over a three month period, from September to December, 2005, I monitored and documented my use of play in the classroom. I kept copies of my day plans, I noted the days and times my plans included playtime, and I recorded the number of minutes of each playtime period that occurred and what I was doing during playtime.

In addition to investigating my own teaching practices, I interviewed four primary teachers from three different schools where I have worked in the Chilliwack School District to gain their perspective on
playtime in the primary classroom. Face to face interviews were conducted for approximately forty five minutes at the various schools either during the teachers’ lunch hour or at other times when they were available. I chose to interview these four teachers because I believe they are dedicated and committed teachers. I hoped to gain insight into their perspectives on play and how play is implemented in their respective classrooms.

Finally, I used self-study techniques such as journaling and recalling childhood memories in order to reflect upon my values and beliefs regarding play. I believe play should be provided to children on a regular basis; that play should be a time to explore and learn; that play periods should be at least twenty minutes long so children have an adequate amount of time to explore; and I believe I need to encourage and facilitate children’s play in my classroom. The study methods were used to help me uncover whether I am living these beliefs through my classroom.

![Image of playtime](image)

**REVELATIONS**

**The Shocking Data**

Through documenting the occasions of play in my classroom over eleven weeks, the classroom data that I gathered revealed that I provided my students with play only twenty six of fifty two days. The total minutes of play on average was eleven minutes and fifteen seconds, however, the minutes of play per week ranged from a low of
fifteen minutes to a high of eighty minutes.

I had been expecting a number within this vicinity. But what I wasn’t expecting to find was that I had only missed planned playtime on eight days, and that I did not schedule play on eighteen days! Reasons for missing play included finishing art activities, buddies, writing and math activities, Christmas activities, and so on.

Initially, I had decided to research play in my practice because I felt I was continually missing or skipping over playtime each day. My data indicated I had cancelled play on eight occasions yet I expected this number to be higher. I undertook this study with the belief I was scheduling playtime and then canceling it. To my surprise, it turns out I am not missing planned play periods, but rather I am simply not planning for them as a regular and consistent part of my students’ educational program.

This discovery made me realize the importance of taking the time to examine my practice, even aspects I think I am sure of. My misconception that I was missing planned play periods shows how important it is for teachers to take the time to examine their practice, for things aren’t always as they seem to be. Teachers need to find time to investigate and reflect on their practice so they can make decisions based on real facts versus misguided emotions or assumptions. This revelation made me wonder about what other things in my practice I may be confused or misguided about.
My Part in Classroom Playtime

Going a step further with this data, I discovered that during these twenty-six days when playtime was in progress, I observed the children only during twelve play periods and interacted with my students only a handful of times. Often, while the children were at play, I found I was finishing art activities, checking up on home reading, providing individual help, testing, dealing with behaviour issues, and other issues such as sickness and accidents. It is no wonder my teaching philosophies and practices are not in harmony—I don’t even know what is going on when they are playing!

I believe that since I am not focusing on the potential learning that takes place during playtime—being removed, isolated or otherwise engaged—I am not recognizing its importance. This is problematic for not only should I be observing the children’s play, I need to be facilitating it. Saracho (1991) in his article, “The Role of Play in Curriculum,” highlights the importance of a teacher’s role,

The teacher’s role is critical in the play curriculum. Appropriate arrangement, interpretation, and intervention strategies can encourage and extend the children’s involvement in play, which ultimately promotes their learning. Teachers need to observe children at play, acquire insight about the children’s perceptions of their world, and develop strategies to facilitate children’s learning (101).

Presently, when my students are playing, I am not supporting them and this practice needs to change. Elizabeth Jones writes, “Teachers support play by providing a variety of things to do, observing what unfolds, and staying nearby to help as needed and acknowledge children’s actions and words” (2003, 32).

What Will Parents Think?

Through the journaling component of the research process, I now realize that on some level I worry about what parents think about the use of class time for play. Some parents are very focused on the academic component of the Kindergarten program. Two of the four teachers interviewed believed students’ parents were worried about their child’s academic success and feared their child falling behind. That I worry about what parents think is another startling insight for me because it counters the view I hold as someone who is opinionated and self-determined, and not easily swayed, or so I thought, by other
people’s opinions. It is a surprise to come to understand that I worry about what others think to the point that it affects my classroom practice.

Every parent wants what is best for his or her children. Parents who worry about the use of playtime in the classroom do so because they truly believe the time could be better spent on reading activities, letter recognition, math activities, and so on. Perhaps, the only way to change parents’ opinions is to educate them about the importance of play. Parents need to be aware that playtime is learning time, time that improves math, language arts, and communication skills to name a few.

The importance of play is highlighted in British Columbia provincial primary program document, The Primary Program: Framework for Teaching:

Play engages children’s whole being. It allows learners to project into the realms of possibility while enabling them to develop and refine current understandings as they explore, construct, discuss, plan, manipulate, problem-solve, dramatize, create, and experiment. Through play, children represent their knowledge and further explore their world. Play should be seen as an essential experience that extends, enhances, and enriches a child’s learning (Chapman, Balabanov, Bischoff, Dean, Denyer, Jesten, Johns, & Politano, 1990, 33-34).

Teachers and parents need to be educated to understand that play isn’t something done instead of learning, but rather that play is learning. As a teacher, I need to find ways to help parents understand and appreciate the importance of play in their children’s lives. In addition, parents need to be involved inside the classroom to see firsthand the learning that is taking place.

I have always had an open door policy in my classroom for I truly believe parents are an integral part of their child’s learning. I also believe parents, by being engaged in part of the classroom experience, helps them to understand and appreciate all of the learning that is taking place, and this, of course, includes watching children during center time. Center time is an activity that you have to witness firsthand to truly appreciate all of the learning that is taking place.
Links To My Past

Writing about my own childhood memories was like taking a trip down a beautiful road I had forgotten was even on the map. I recalled a multitude of childhood memories of playing outside of school. When I was a child I used my imagination when playing with Barbies, dolls, dress up, Easy Bake Oven, painting, drawing, and so on. I was continually engaged in these activities by myself, or with my sister, my friends from school, or the neighbourhood kids. I loved dressing up and we all would play for hours and hours acting out our part...I loved it when I was able to wear high heel shoes and attempt to walk around the room with an air of dignity about me.

I can remember taking all of my Barbies and having a pool party using my dad’s bar sink as the pool and a lamp for them to get a tan (something that none of them achieved by the way!) While journaling, I recalled using my beloved Easy Bake Oven where I first realized my love for baking. I sometimes played with my Easy Bake Oven when I was upset. To this day, I like to bake when I am under stress or pressure; it is a way for me to have a small amount of time for myself and take my mind off my worries.

Pretending to be a baker or hairdresser gave me the opportunity to try new things, and use my knowledge in a context where it was safe to
make mistakes; at the same time I gained self-esteem and motor skills. It was amazing to understand better what play provided for me in my childhood. I came to realize that play wasn’t just something that I had the right to do as a child, but something that I needed to do.

Reflecting on my readings on action research and through reflective journal writing, I became aware how my own childhood experiences influence my classroom practice. Whenever I am strapped for time, play is the first thing to be pushed aside. I now realize I do this partly because I feel that children can play at home, yet they might not be able to learn their academics there. The problem with this thinking is twofold—first, it conveys the message that play is not a vital component of the primary program and that there is no learning taking place; and second, it assumes that children are provided with these play opportunities at home. It was this latter revelation that I was not expecting.

Children today do not play in the same way. Bodrova and Leong claim, “Nowadays young children spend less time at home playing with their peers and more time playing alone, graduating from educational toys to video and computer games” (2003, 10). One teacher I interviewed discussed the effect this kind of engagement has on children. She stated that because of video games and computers “a lot of children don’t have the skills to play.”

I now understand that not all children necessarily have opportunities for dramatic or other kinds of play at home. One reason may be the time restraints that families now experience in situations with both parents working outside the home. This is an area that requires further research. It is concerning that a growing number of young children are entering school without the adequate social and emotional skills that can be gained through play.

Children should be given play time for the learning experiences it creates, but also because all children deserve to play for it is an important part of who they are. Weininger writes, “Play is not aimless or purposeless or undirected. It is the child’s attempt to achieve, to feel comfortable, and hence to be able to innovate and change his world” (1979, 5).

**Insights**

I previously believed the “living contradiction” between my teaching philosophies and my practices regarding play was the sole result of increased academic expectations of parents and administration. And while this continues to be part of the insight I gained, I was not
expecting to uncover other reasons that resulted in my limiting play in my kindergarten classroom.

I undertook this self-study because of the conflict I sensed between my philosophies and practices regarding play. I was fully aware that there was a problem and I knew the reason for it. Or so I thought. But I was unaware that there were multiple reasons for this problem in my practice. I was unaware of the influences of my personal experiences, such as the role of play in my own childhood and how my mistaken assumptions of the play experiences of today’s children affected the amount of play in my classroom. Nor had I been aware of my lack of engagement with the children during playtime, nor my concern that some parents would not see the value of playtime during school hours. As educators, we sometimes tend to blame problems in our practice on things we feel are beyond our control—in this case, academic expectations of the curriculum. However, if we want to truly better our practice for our students and ourselves we need to take the time to look beyond our initial tendencies.

When teachers start action research, it is common to have preconceived notions or reasons already in mind, yet one needs to be ready for whatever findings or insights may come. One needs to accept the data that unfolds and be prepared for surprises.

I am currently on maternity leave but when I am back in my classroom I plan on making changes to my practice when it comes to play:

- I will designate some of the work that currently takes my time during playtime to parent volunteers.

- I will find ways to invite parents into the classroom to observe their children at play, and help educate parents about the connection between learning and play.

- I will spread assessment and testing throughout the day as much as possible.

- I will become involved in the children’s playtime and become a more engaged facilitator.

Play is an important part of a child’s learning and I need to make the necessary changes to my practice so this type of learning is more readily available to my students. It is critical I start to observe and facilitate my students’ play in order to be able to see and promote their learning.
For over thirty minutes the Kindergarten students have been busy exploring and investigating with various toys, centers, and manipulatives during classroom playtime. The teacher has been carefully observing the learning that is taking place throughout the room, and has joined in when appropriate to promote and develop further learning. When playtime is over the children happily go about cleaning up. A smile creeps uncontrollably up the teacher’s face as she thinks of how the children are so engrossed in and excited about this learning. Soon, this teacher will be me.

References


About the Author

Tara Brandes has been teaching with the Chilliwack School District for five years. In 2006, she became a mommy to a beautiful baby girl named Emerson as well as completing her Masters of Education. She will return to teaching her kindergarten students in 2007.