naeyc

# Learning Through Play in Teacher Education



MELANIE LOEWENSTEIN TONI DENESE STURDIVANT JOSH THOMPSON

It is the first day of classes at Texas A&M University-Commerce, and Professor Ramirez has filled the Early Childhood Curriculum classroom with blocks, balls, pieces of cardboard, and miniature toy cars. As teacher candidates enter the room, they are encouraged to move about and construct play scenarios in response to a variety of prompts:

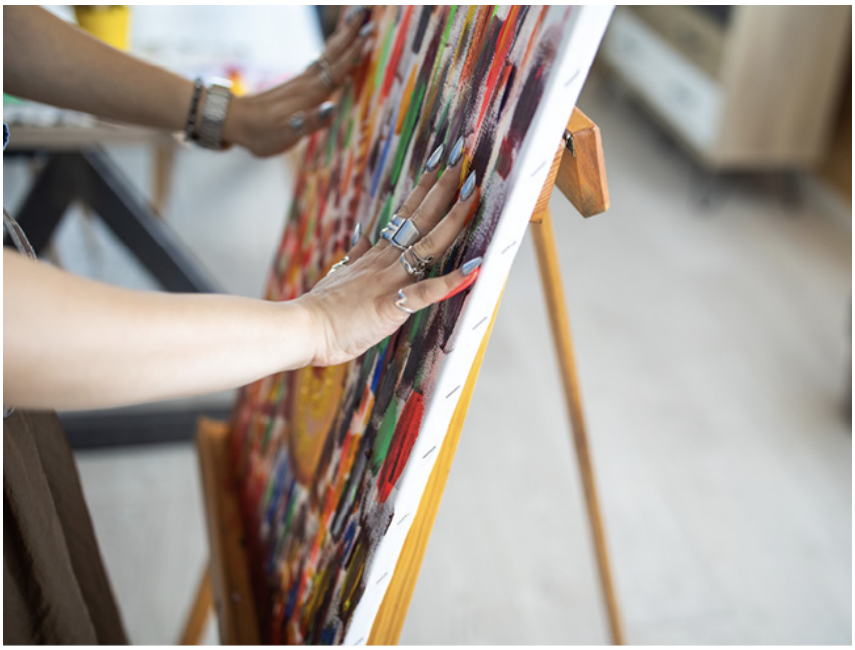
- "Play with the blocks, cylinders, tubes, ramps, balls, and cars. What STEM lessons are you engaged in?"
- "Create a series of ramps and pathways to move an object 10 feet. Include two turns."
- "Elaborate on this story stem, using blocks, ramps, and moving objects: "Once upon a time, there was a magical, mystical, imaginary house . . ."

Some students play with blocks or build robots using Legos. Others apply their understanding of mathematical patterns to create replicas of Aztec Sun Stones. After about 30 minutes of active, engaging, noisy play, Professor Ramirez pauses the

play and asks this purposeful question: “What kinds of learning happened here?”

The ensuing discussion connects students’ experiences to the context of the course. As Professor Ramirez continues to embed playful experiences throughout the semester, students discover that playful learning is an authentic learning experience, especially when contrasted with the high-stakes testing many of them experienced in school. Shifting to a playful learning experience challenges their prior education.

---



Play is essential for all children (NAEYC 2020a), and the learning that occurs through play cuts across developmental domains and content areas (Zosh et al. 2021). Indeed, playful learning—which includes both self-directed and guided activities—can help promote “rich curricular learning that is culturally relevant” (Zosh et al. 2021, 82–83). Yet too often, preservice teachers learn about play in primarily teacher-directed ways, such as through lectures, quizzes, and assignments that stem from scripted materials. These approaches can make it difficult for future educators to construct dispositions that truly frame play as a means to learning. Coupled with the highly structured and controlled curriculum and accountability pressures in many early childhood settings, this incongruence may contribute to the decrease of playful learning experiences for children in today’s classrooms (Project Zero 2016; Pyle & Danniels 2017; McDonald 2018; Diaz-Varela & Wright 2019; Zhulamanova & Raisor 2020; Thompson & Pearce 2022).

Of course, teacher-initiated direction in the early childhood classroom is not anathema to

playful learning. NAEYC (2020a) takes the position of "both/and" thinking: educators understand the complementary roles of teacher-directed and child-directed experiences within early childhood education and debunk the notion that these experiences are paradoxical (10). Pyle and Danniels (2017) align the continuum of children's play (free play, inquiry play, collaboratively designed play, playful learning, learning through games) alongside a sliding scale that measures teachers' involvement in it. The scale moves from "silent and noninterfering observer" to "creator of playful contexts designed to promote the learning of specific academic standards" (281). "The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting," by Jennifer M. Zosh and colleagues in this issue provides additional information on the play continuum.

In seeing play as an essential human activity, we argue that higher education courses must equip future educators to regularly and purposefully balance self-directed and guided play with intentional instruction. Play must be included in adult learning —especially among adults who intend to teach young children. Toward that end, our teacher preparation program at Texas A&M University-Commerce has begun the journey to reignite the existence of play within our schools and early learning programs by incorporating more playful experiences in how we train our teachers.

While play has always been at the heart of our theory, we recently refocused our emphasis toward shifting students' perceptions of play from an abstract idea to a functional reality. In this article, we discuss the need for teacher candidates to experience play, the equitable benefits of playful learning, and strategies that we use to position play within a standards-based curriculum. Through dialogue with our strategic partners in area programs and schools, we continually collect data that measure the effectiveness of this approach, including ways playful learning aligns with our state-mandated teacher evaluation system (T-TESS 2016).

# Using Play as a Transformative Tool

Research into play's benefits for teacher candidates is scarce, as are studies about educators' views of the purpose and practice of play in early learning (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, & Wollscheid 2019). Zhulamanova and Raisor (2020) point out the mismatch between evidence supporting the effectiveness of learning through play and the scant data on play in teacher education. Still, studies are beginning to show play's effectiveness in the higher education classroom. Diaz-Varela and Wright (2019) describe instructional strategies for adult learners that include an emphasis on playful learning and reflection:

"Instead of being asked to follow scripted lessons and memorize games, teachers are trained in the ability to continuously adapt or generate their own new, locally relevant games and activities, focused on a curriculum objective. In this way, teachers are able to apply their play-based training to many different subjects and grade levels, and to tailor their lessons to the needs of the classroom" (134).

> *By strategically immersing future educators in playful experiences, teacher educators can help create teaching dispositions that champion play in the classroom.*

NAEYC's professional standards and competencies call for early childhood educators to understand and use teaching skills that recognize the learning trajectories of young children (NAEYC 2020b). This includes incorporating play as a core teaching practice (10). Thus, future educators must understand the value and educational utility of play before leaving their teacher preparation programs. They need concrete examples of standards-based learning that centers play within their coursework and within their subsequent observation and field placements (Ward 1999). By strategically immersing future educators in playful experiences, teacher educators can help create teaching dispositions that champion play in the classroom.

# Play's Role in Advancing Equity

Helping future teachers develop play-centered teaching dispositions and methods is especially crucial when considering issues of equity. Early learning settings that prioritize play encourage equity in learning because playful activities give children agency (NAYEC 2019) and are built on their strengths, not their perceived weaknesses (VanHoorn et al. 2015; Souto-Manning 2017). Yet opportunities for high-quality, child-centered approaches are not equally distributed among early learning programs and schools that serve families from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Research shows that children who come from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to participate in developmentally appropriate, joyful learning (Adair 2014). "Both/And: Early Childhood Education Needs Both Play and Equity," by Ijumaa Jordan below investigates this idea more thoroughly.

Participating in the context of play reminds future teachers that children are not blank slates waiting to be filled with information. Rather, they are resourceful learners full of prior knowledge and experiences from their homes, communities, and other contexts that can be leveraged in early childhood settings. This prior knowledge, often referred to as *cultural referents* (Ladson-Billings 2009), bridges the gap between home and school. When teacher candidates play in their own learning environments, they better recognize how play connects these referents—or familiar objects, ideas, places, routines, traditions, and interests—to academic skills and concepts. This linkage makes the skills more accessible and therefore increases children's probability of academic success. In addition, providing children with opportunities for rich, engaging play positions them as independent rather than passive thinkers. This sense of agency can help decrease the achievement gap between students of color and White students (Hammond 2015; NAEYC 2019).

# A Rationale for Playful Learning in the College Classroom

Racquel, a preservice teacher in Professor Ramirez's Early Childhood Curriculum class, is pretending to be a pony, flying through the air. Two of her classmates are hungry dragons, extending their claws to reach her. "Look at us, two dragons and a pony, flying through the air over the castle moat," she says. "Who knew learning could be such fun!" The rest of the class laughs as Racquel's small group acts out the story they have created.

Other groups follow. After much laughter, the class reflects together on how they felt creating a make-believe story. They discuss how a playful activity like this one can help children expand vocabulary and begin to develop an understanding of character, plot, and narrative. The experience enables these future teachers to identify with how children might feel and learn as they playfully create and act out stories.

---

When future educators engage in play, they re-experience its social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits (Nell, Drew, & Bush 2013). They are reminded of what play looks like, sounds like, and feels like. They gain greater insight into the cognitive complexities that young children acquire as they immerse themselves in play. This insight then becomes the impetus for teacher candidates to broaden and transform their ideas and beliefs of how children learn and grow in the classroom.

A greater awareness of how children experience play also helps preservice teachers become more sensitive to the types of learning and teaching that can occur during specific play events. This, in turn, equips them to observe and support young children more thoughtfully and effectively (Elkind 2007) and to learn how to build a classroom environment that will foster children's growth and learning. In our teacher preparation classes, for instance, students' prior experiences in creating lesson plans were appropriately informed by standards and assessments—the elements of "what learners

know" and "how will teachers know that they know this." While these elements of intentional planning persist, our students now also recognize that not all learning is teacher-directed. Sometimes—many times—an observant teacher may document elements of the curriculum standards that children have demonstrated learning through play.

# Positioning Play in a Standards-Driven Curriculum

Early childhood educators may not always have a choice in what they can teach because the curriculum is prescribed. However, they still may be able to select *how* they will execute various learning experiences (Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler 2016) and how they will engage children in active learning. Effective teachers know how to strategically embed play within the existing curriculum. They can combine their knowledge of curriculum standards and instructional practices with their understanding of the developmental domains of the whole child to create playful learning experiences (Stanković-Ramirez & Thompson 2018). As such, it falls to teacher educators to ensure that their preservice teachers understand play and learning, the relationship of the two to each other, and the teacher's role in facilitating play (Zhulamanova & Raisor 2020).

In our dual roles as early childhood instructors and student-teacher liaisons or supervisors, we have numerous opportunities to foster future educators' integration of play into their planning and teaching. While we want them to finish their coursework with a deeper understanding and appreciation of play, we also recognize the importance of scaffolding as they do so. The sections below explain how we guide future educators along the play continuum in planning and implementing play-centered learning experiences.

## "Both/And": Playful Beginnings Within Direct Instruction

In a course on play and creativity, preservice teachers are asked to create a hands-on math or science activity for a pre-kindergarten field placement. They spend 30 minutes playing

with math and science materials like Cuisenaire Rods alongside a scripted worksheet with explicit instruction. Then they use hair beads and yarn to create patterns and use droppers filled with vinegar and baking soda to illustrate chemical reactions. Students revise their lesson plans based on comparing the teacher-directed, scripted lessons with the hands-on experiences they had in class. Their plans now include more focus on children's activities rather than teacher directions.

---

One strategy for building on children's prior knowledge and experiences is to plan and scaffold playful experiences at the beginning of lessons, activities, and broader units or projects. Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues have written about scaffolding in its different forms, including the benefits of letting children play with manipulatives to further their learning. "The key is that children are not just actively engaged in a situation but are given the appropriate tools that, when actively explored, allow them to acquire a new concept or understanding" (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2015).


When prospective teachers are given opportunities to design and share these playful beginnings within a college course, they are able to experience them both as an educator planning for children and as a learner discovering how a new concept connects with their prior knowledge. They learn ways to build on and bridge the knowledge children bring from home with what they must learn in school. "Today, we are going to learn about magnets" becomes "Tell me what you noticed about these objects. What did you discover, and what wonderings do you still have?"

These playful beginnings make new learning more accessible for all learners. Not only do they give children the opportunity to organically develop their own questions (Elkind

2007), they also encourage children's motivation to learn. At the same time, future educators learn to use more teacher-directed methods to help children fully understand and "name" the new learning they discover through play and to examine and expand it in more academic ways (Pinkham, Kaefer, & Neuman 2012).

## Using Play to Solidify Learning

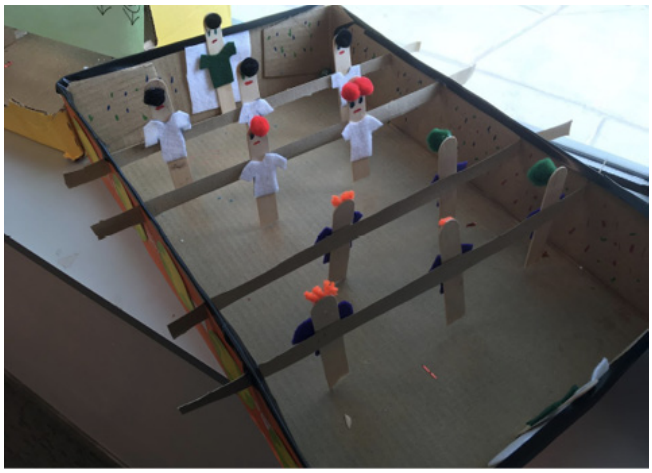
Alex, a preservice teacher, is observing a class at a Head Start center. The children have spent the morning building with magnetic tiles. As the teacher calls the children to the circle rug for story time, 4-year-old Taylor continues to play. Alex watches as the teacher encourages Taylor to keep investigating. Rather than insist that he join the rest of the class, the teacher gives Taylor time to finish his playful repetition, telling Alex, "This is how to help learning 'stick.' "

While play provides opportunities for children to discover, develop, and deepen their learning, it also can help them retain concepts (Sprenger 2005). Mraz, Porcelli, and Tyler (2016) propose that "play taps into many of our brains' ways of remembering things: It is visual, it is physical, it is fun, and it is repetitive" (126).

> *When candidates see a concerted, programmatic effort to include play across the teacher preparation curriculum, they begin to recognize the value and importance of play.*

Teacher candidates in our program are encouraged to take advantage of the inherent nature of play to make new learning "stick" (Schwartz 2008) by embedding active and engaging activities—such as music, movement, art, and games—within both the guided and independent parts of their lessons. These experiences make repetition more playful and spur children to slowly, steadily increase their levels of mastery. Planning in this way also moves teachers away from the persistent use of worksheets and other rote activities. Instead, it challenges them to create opportunities that respect children as thinkers, problem solvers, creators, and active learners (Ransom & Manning 2013).

## Harnessing the Power of Child-Directed Play



While our teacher preparation program equips future early childhood educators to strategically incorporate both teacher-guided play and direct instruction throughout their lessons, we also encourage them to create dedicated times for children to engage in spontaneous, self-directed play. Spontaneous play positions the child as the initiator and leader of their own learning. It also creates wonder and delight as children explore, gather information, test hypotheses, and make meaning (NAEYC 2020).

As with children, some of the most impactful learning opportunities in our higher education classrooms have occurred when students give themselves permission to play and to follow the flow of their own curiosities and creativity. These future teachers re-experience what it means to learn and engage outside of the boundaries of judgment, grades, and someone else's criteria for success. The reality of their experiences empowers them and motivates them to think about ways to recreate these opportunities in their own future classrooms. As they design and integrate both teacher-directed and spontaneous play experiences within traditional lessons and learning experiences, our preservice teachers are given another lens in which to construct developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

# Effects of Playful Instruction on Preservice Teachers

By enacting playful learning within our courses, students in our preparation program have planned more engaging learning experiences for children and have rediscovered their own joyful learning. As one of our students wrote in a course evaluation, embedded play prompted them to rethink all of their college classes.

Our students have made employment decisions based on programs' or schools' cultures

related to play. They also have recreated classroom experiences within their own settings after graduating. For example, one of our professors noticed that two former students implemented playful learning because of what they learned in their coursework. “One student teacher prepared a lesson for second graders on phonological awareness by adapting a game we used in our preservice language acquisition course the year before,” he recalled. “On my way to watch her lesson, I stopped by to see a former student now in her first year of teaching. There in her classroom was the cardboard puppet stage she had made for our storytelling lesson in that same language acquisition course.”

These observations of current and former students’ playful lessons provide evidence of their acceptance and implementation of this teaching approach. We had seen ample evidence of conceptual knowledge about playful learning for a long time. By embedding play into coursework, our teacher candidates are now applying that knowledge to their practices.

Programs that intentionally adopt a model of playful preparation communicate the true value of play to future teachers, administrators, and policymakers. When candidates see a concerted, programmatic effort to include play across the teacher preparation curriculum, they begin to recognize the value and importance of play. But only when they see play in action in partner schools will they believe and understand how play builds a child from the inside out. These programs mirror what we hope to see in our early childhood classrooms.

---



# References

Adair, J.K. 2014. “Agency and Expanding Capabilities in Early Grade Classrooms: What

It Could Mean for Young Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 84 (2): 217–278.

Bubikova-Moan, J., H.N. Hjetland, & S. Wollscheid. 2019. "ECE Teachers' Views on Play-Based Learning: A Systematic Review." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 27 (6): 776–800.

Diaz-Varela, A., & L.H.V. Wright. 2019. "Play for Adults: Play-Based Approaches in Teacher Training." *Scottish Educational Review* 51 (2): 132–136.

Elkind, D. 2007. *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Hammond, Z. 2015. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., J. Zosh, R. Golinkoff, J. Gray, M. Robb, & J. Kaufman. 2015. "Putting Education in 'Educational' Apps: Lessons from the Science of Learning." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (16): 3–34. 10.1177/1529100615569721.

Jordan, I. 2021. "Both/And: Early Childhood Education Needs Both Play and Equity." In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, 4th ed., ed. NAEYC, 103. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Ladson-Billings, G. 2009. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

McDonald, P. 2018. "Observing, Planning, Guiding: How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards Through Play." *Young Children* 73 (1): 31–35.

Mraz, K., A. Porcelli, & C. Tyler. 2016. *Purposeful Play: A Teacher's Guide to Igniting Deep and Joyful Learning Across the Day*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2020a.

"Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/dap-statement_0.pdf.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2020b. "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/standards_and_competencies_ps.pdf.

Nell, M.L., W.F. Drew, & D. Bush. 2013. *From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers' Play to Children's Learning*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Pinkham, A.M., T. Kaefer, & S.B. Neuman. 2012. *Knowledge Development in Early Childhood: Sources of Learning and Classroom Implications*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Project Zero. 2016. "Toward a Pedagogy of Play." Accessed January 22, 2022. http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play.

Pyle, A., & E. Danniels. 2017. "A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play." *Early Education and Development* 28 (3): 274–289.

Ransom, M., & M. Manning. 2013. "Teaching Strategies: Worksheets, Worksheets, Worksheets." *Childhood Education* 89 (3): 188–190.

Schwartz, S. 2008. *A Quick Guide to Making Your Teaching Stick, K–8*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Souto-Manning, M. 2017. "Is Play a Privilege or a Right? And What's Our Responsibility? On the Role of Play for Equity in Early Childhood Education." *Early Child Development and Care* 187: 5–6, 785–787.

Sprenger, M. 2005. *How to Teach so Students Remember*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Stanković-Ramirez, Z., & J. Thompson. 2018. "Rethinking Developmental Domains to Improve Classroom Observations." *Texas Child Care Quarterly* 42 (2): 20–27.

T-TESS. 2016. *Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System*. Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency.

Thompson, J., & N. Pearce. 2022. "A Toolbox for Engaging Children in Play and Creativity for Learning Across the Domains." *Dimensions of Early Childhood* 50 (1) (forthcoming).

VanHoorn, J., P. Nourot, B. Scales, & K. Alward. 2015. *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*. New York, NY: Pearson.

Ward, A. 1999. "The 'Matching Principle': Designing for Process in Professional Education." *Social Work Education* 18 (2): 161–169.

Zhulamanova, I., & J. Raisor. 2020. "Early Childhood Preservice Teachers' Perceptions on Children's Play." *International Online Journal of Primary Education* 9 (2): 128–143.

Zosh, J.M., C. Gaudreau, R.M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek. 2021. "The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting." *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, 4th ed., ed. NAEYC, 81–105. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

**Audience:** *Teacher*
**Age:** *Early Primary*, *Kindergarten*, *Preschool*
**Topics:** *Other Topics*, *Play*, *Professional Development*, *YC*

---

**MELANIE LOEWENSTEIN**

Melanie Loewenstein, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood/reading education at Texas A&M University-Commerce in Commerce, Texas. Dr. Loewenstein creates authentic learning spaces for preservice teachers learning to engage and educate young children. melanie.loewenstein@tamuc.edu

---

**TONI DENESE STURDIVANT**

Toni Denese Sturdivant, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Dr. Sturdivant's research focuses on racial identity development, play, and young children. toni.sturdivant@tamuc.edu

---

**JOSH THOMPSON**

Josh Thompson, PhD, is professor of early childhood education at Texas A&M University-Commerce. He is a trainer for the Dallas Montessori Teacher Education Program and writes about play, teacher education, observation, developmentally appropriate practice, waves and cycles of early childhood development, Critical Race Theory, Black fathers, and Montessori education for all. josh.thompson@tamuc.edu