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Challenging the definition of “play”

January 22, 2016 in **Classroom culture**, **Primary Years Programme**


The expression “learning through play” seems so common in early years education, and yet the verb’s definition found through a quick online search states that “to play” is to “engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.”

In this post, we look at the theme of learning through play by looking at the work of the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) Development team as they support the PYP community to develop in this area. We also share feedback from Catherine Erpen, Assistant Elementary Principal and PYP and Early Years Coordinator at GEMS World Academy in Abu Dhabi – Catherine attended a session by Cécile Doyen on this theme at the IB regional conference in The Hague, Netherlands.



Cécile Doyen

play

/pleɪ/ 

verb

1. engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.

"the children were playing by a pool"

synonyms: amuse oneself, entertain oneself, enjoy oneself, have fun, have a good time, **relax**, **rest**, be at leisure, occupy oneself, divert oneself, play games, **frolic**, **frisk**, **gambol**, **romp**, **cavort**, **caper**; [More](#)

As the Acting Head of the PYP, Cécile Doyen opened her 2015 conference workshop sessions with the definition of play (pictured above). In response, session participant Catherine Erpen told us, “I felt as uncomfortable as Cécile with this universally-accepted definition. Like many educators with experience in early childhood education, this is not what one wants to hear.”

Clearly, Cécile and Catherine are not alone. 81 of approximately 200 of Cécile’s participants feel that play as learning is essential, 35 said they wanted more research, and 49 want more professional development for both themselves as educators and also for parents. And in 2014, The LEGO Foundation in Denmark, brought together innovators, opinion shapers, and educational specialists to consider the question: “How will we convince the world to redefine play and reimagine learning?” The group examined the latest research on brain development and play, and discussed how play can contribute to better lives, foster stronger communities and transform the learning experience.

“How will we convince the world to redefine play and re-imagine learning?”

At the time of the LEGO event, the review of the PYP was in the early stages. Cécile found that what she was hearing at the LEGO event seemed to match the feedback that her PYP team were getting from schools. PYP schools were highlighting a demand for increased guidance on play and asking for a clear explanation of the relationship between play and learning in the PYP. “We know that play is a cornerstone of creativity and imagination—characteristics we seek to develop in students as citizens of the world, today and tomorrow” explained Cécile.



As part of an emerging compelling body of evidence, data in a 2012 study by Suggate showed that children who formally learn to read later catch up with children who formally learn to read earlier.

Cécile invited the regional conference audience to considerations on the idea that the children who were given the time to develop learning skills through play and learned to read through formal ways of teaching later, at age 7 instead of age 5, were not only likely to have the same reading skills at the age of 11 but with better reading comprehension (see image below), because they were given more time to build meaning by creating connections through their engagement in open and playful inquiries.

So, what can we do to help teachers support their students' learning through play?

At the IB Annual Regional Conference in October 2015 in The Hague, and at the Teacher Skills Forum in Jordan in December 2015, Cécile delivered workshop sessions that focused on teaching strategies to plan for and evaluate learning through play. She highlighted three processes crucial for learning which teachers can focus on when evaluating, monitoring and documenting learning when children play, plus a set of three lenses through which teachers can look in order to design learning experiences and environments that promote play as inquiry-based learning.

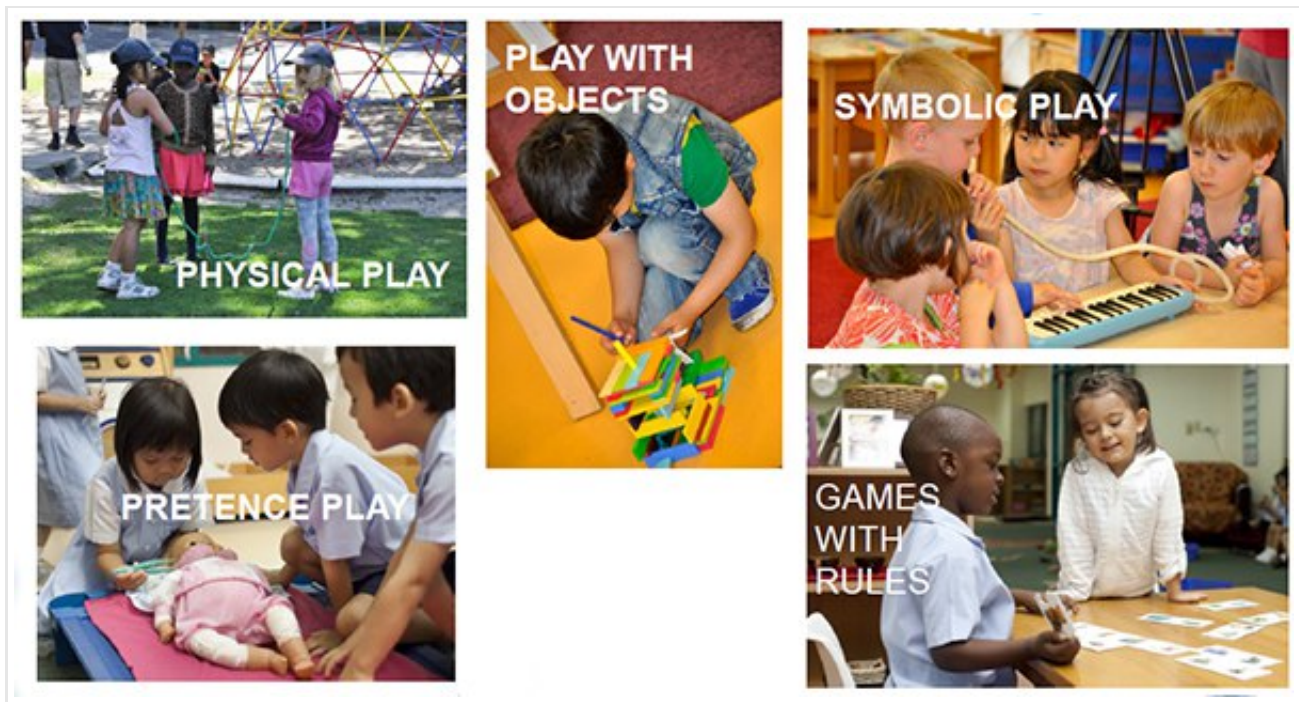
Catherine Erpen recalls: “As we considered the research, we reviewed three crucial processes to document/monitor the learning that happens when children play: **self-regulation, language and social skills**. We then thought about types of play as organized according to **developmental stages, relationships and learning environments**.”

For example, a playful approach to language learning can offer powerful support for the development of literacy skills through:

- Language-rich play environments
- Narration in play situations
- Cognitive-linguistic skills development (phonological awareness, symbolic representation, etc.)
- Sequencing of steps to problem-solve (plan for play, etc.)

Adapted from: Christie & Roskos (2006), Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2003), Konishi et al. (2014)





By looking at photos of children playing, the workshop participants had an opportunity to evaluate both what types of play and what learning processes were taking place. They also had time to think about how the different ways that play is directed/initiated could have an impact on the learning experience/outcome. See table* below.

	Child-directed	Adult-directed
Child-initiated	Free play	Co-opted play
Adult-initiated	Guided play	Direct instruction

Catherine shared her session experience with colleagues when she returned to her school in Abu Dhabi. She said: “It prompted some really rich discussion about the types of opportunities teachers were providing and the ways in which we could enhance student learning by ensuring a greater range of play experiences that promoted growth in all key areas in the context of the units of inquiry. It was interesting to reflect upon how the various types of play were evidenced in our classrooms and the extent to which each of the quadrants [see table above] was represented. We have only just begun to think more deeply about this, but I am confident that through thoughtfully reflecting and sharing with each other we will develop strategies for enhancing play experiences and ensuring that student learning is maximized.”

What next?

Tell us what you are doing – As organizations like The Lego Foundation and educators around the world continue to challenge the official definition of “play”, we welcome any feedback from the IB

community and beyond about their work and experience as they develop their childhood learning through play.

Use the handout and other resources – Here are the slides and handouts from Cécile's session at the Teacher Skills Forum in Jordan in December 2015.

- Flick through the [conference slides](#)
- Use the [teacher hand-out](#)
- Read [these posts](#) on the *SharingPYP* blog

Attend a workshop or webinar – Find IB workshops on play-based learning for PYP educators around the world [here](#) plus an overview of what to expect [here](#) in the *2016 IB Workshops and Resources Catalogue*.

And finally,

Learning through play isn't just for children. Here's a parting thought from Catherine: "I have been thinking about "play" from my own personal perspective, reflecting on what kinds of "play experiences" promote the same kind of growth in us as adults both personally and professionally. I believe that our personal representations of 'play' can look very different according to our interests. I am an avid snowboarder. While I have had to develop my skills as an individual in order to develop my muscles and develop control of my board, for me, snowboarding involves connecting with others, it is a social activity. I have learned the language associated with the sport and have developed my cognitive abilities in learning to pay greater attention to my surroundings and reflect on the ways in which I strategize to improve my performance. I believe that the skills I have developed are reflective of those associated with play."

References:

- Suggate, S. P., Schaughency, E. A., Reese, E. (2012). Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.
- Table credit: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~deenas/papers/weisberg-et-al-kappan-2015.pdf>
- legofoundation.com

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Matthew Freeman · 6 months ago

I had forgotten how outdated and dismissive the dictionary definition of play is compared to what we mean by play in education. I love that first diagram that compares ages of starting to read and the later implications at age 11 for reading comprehension. The cost of removing play for structured, teacher directed activities is not just reading comprehension though. Creativity, sense of well-being, personally connecting with numbers, social skills, gross and fine motor skills, empathy, self-regulation and of course oral language ability all suffer from a premature squashing of play to make time for teacher directed activities. I am searching for other studies that can empirically show the impact of play removal from school on these areas of human development. Sir Ken Robinson's famous example about creativity diminishing after Kindergarten comes to mind. Does anyone know of any studies in this area? Thank you for this article! I am a PYP Kindergarten teacher that would like to connect with others who are advocating for play-based education.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Kate Taverner Mod → Matthew Freeman · 6 months ago

Hi Matthew, thanks for your comment. I've asked my PYP colleagues for other studies in this area and will get back to you. To connect with other PYP educators, you might want to join the regular #PYPchat run by PYP educators (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/py...> and subscribe to our SharingPYP blog (<https://blogs.ibo.org/sharingp...> for weekly PYP-focused posts. You might also want to join the PYP educators group on LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/group...> Hope this helps!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Matthew Freeman → Kate Taverner · 5 months ago

Thanks Kate. I will check out what you suggested. Since I last posted I have been researching more in to these areas. I am presenting on early literacy and play based learning at a conference soon, in Korea ,where I am teaching. I will share my slides here when I am finished in case they can benefit others.

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Kate Taverner Mod → Matthew Freeman · 5 months ago

Fantastic, thanks Matthew.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Marianne · 5 months ago

I'd like to thanks Cecile for posting this presentation. Highly relevant and timely.

I have long had a problem with the use of the word play in early years education contexts due to this limited definition of the word which seems to sustain and exacerbate the notion that young children are not doing much more than having fun.

The correlation between play and literacy is thought provoking and is something i would, personally, love to hear more about, particularly when related to emergent language and multilingualism.

I would also suggest that , as educators we have a responsibility to analyze the concept of play further both theoretically and at a practical level in the classroom and with our staff in the way that Cecile is proposing here.

I am EY coordinator in an Ib school in Italy but have also twenty years experience from Reggio Emilia. the Reggio experience is just one possible approach to EY education but I do find it interesting that the word play is not much called upon directly in the Reggio experience.

[see more](#)

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Matthew Freeman → Marianne · 5 months ago

Thank you, Marianne, for your post. It made me question the use of the word "play" in learning. Perhaps it is counter productive to try to use it. I also have a background heavily influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach. When I was teaching Grade 2 in my first PYP school I wanted to have a "play" time in the classroom where child were free to explore, build, create and pretend with my provocations and my joining in as an occasional guide and co-player. I called it "Making" time to avoid the non-serious stigma of the word play, but it was identical to what I used to do with my Kindergarten students in Canada.

Marianne, are you using Learning Stories for documenting children's learning? I have had success with them but still need to develop better routines for their use. At my last school in China we created a 5 week cycle where we would have focus groups of 5 children each week and post learning stories about them. This was necessary to manage the work load of 20 students and one adult. Every second cycle we would have conferences with the children and their parents. This replaced our old report card and conferencing routine. On the school wide conference days we had prep time to make up for our loss of prep time in the 5 week cycles that was replaced by on-going conferencing. We used a platform called Educa for sharing the learning stories. Currently I use Story Park. They are quite similar.

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marianne → Matthew Freeman · 4 months ago

one more thing regarding learning stories... which is purely personal. From

one more thing regarding learning stories... which is purely personal. From the evidence i have seen their seems to be a tendency to narrate the child's experience (hence the name learning stories) which is very different from making visible their learning PROCESS at a cognitive level. But it would be good to see better examples.

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marianne → Matthew Freeman · 4 months ago

Hello Matthew, I apologise for taking to long to get back to you . I only manage to look in at the weekends and must have just missed your post. Luckily someone else pointed it out to me.

So.. I think that problematic notions of play are sustained by the fact that school days are organised in ways that divide the 'work' from the 'play' and teachers in this age group then feel the need to create 'free play' time. One of the first things that we need to do in order to give value to children's playful learning is look seriously and reflect on the organisation and flow of the day we impose on the children.

As for pedagogical documentation. to be honest no I 'm not using predefined tools such as learning stories. I can see the positive in them , particularly for educators who are exploring the documentation process for the first time, but I prefer to create documentations told according to the learning situation and context in question. I use certain tools that I have learned to use over the years in Reggio Emilia which emphasise the socio-constructivist aspect of group learning which I feel the learning stories approach does not consider so fully.

However documentation strategies definitely change according to context and the international setting calls for careful consideration of how to document. Our youngest children who may have three emergent verbal languages but may not yet be producing much in any deserve careful and sensitive handling in terms of documentation if we are to make visible their learning. This is the challenge i am working on in my own context now.

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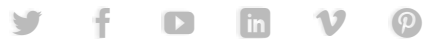
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