



CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Teachers, Instilling Life-Long Learning May Be As Simple As Child's Play

BY [KENDRA LUEKEN](#)

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For decades, teachers have engaged their youngest students in play-based learning activities to expand their minds. Many of us remember playing with blocks in kindergarten or building dioramas in elementary school because it's engaging, hands-on learning that sticks.

For over a decade, it seemed that the element of play vanished entirely from the classroom; the blocks, art tables and toys replaced by direct instruction, rote learning and skill-and-drill education policies. I started my teaching career during that time and saw too many classrooms which, for all of their supposed rigor, lacked the most authentic motivation for learning: curiosity and joy.

Now as the lower school director (K1- 2) at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School, I'm thrilled to see that play-based learning is enjoying a renaissance of its own. About five years ago, we shifted toward a play-based curriculum, and now it seems more and more districts are waking up to decades of research showing that kids – from preschool through elementary school – learn best through play.

A Long Overdue Realization

Play has positive impacts on [academic outcomes](#), including language, literacy and math. From a [social-emotional](#) standpoint, play has been shown to positively impact social competencies and stress levels, as well as working memory, attention and impulse control.

The education pendulum's swing back toward the play-based world is overdue and likely spurred by what happened to children during pandemic lockdowns. In the wake of those difficult experiences for children, adults in their schools are realizing that social-emotional learning is a top priority. Play-based learning is the best way to address children's needs—both academic and social.

Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum May Be Easier Than You Think

Implementing a play-based curriculum is a collective effort, one that requires strong school leadership, supportive principals and teachers who are joyful about learning. It also requires buy-in from parents who are worried about their kids falling behind. That parent buy-in can be achieved more easily than some school staff might expect.

Once parents understand the learning that occurs during play, they are supportive and enthusiastic. When they visit their children's classrooms, they don't want to see their worksheets as much as they want to see them engaged in experiences that are exploratory and multisensory. They're impressed by the projects and the questions being asked. Kids are proudest to share those types of elements from their classroom community.

We co-created our play-based curriculum through a lot of professional development, partner schools, and team meetings with leadership. This included bringing back the sensory tables, easels, blocks and other hands-on tools that inspire play. Building on that, we looked for fun traditions for our school community to look forward to – like [Global Play Day](#), a designated day where kids around the world have one full day of unstructured play, without interruption from adults, and annual [Character Day](#), where kids get excited about their love of reading by dressing up as their favorite storybook character, having visitors read to rooms and older age students read with buddy rooms.

Beyond special days, the daily goal is to create exploratory experiences tailored to each grade level with a specific learning goal in mind. The kids build their knowledge around a particular theme, then work collaboratively and in small groups toward a culminating project.

For example, a first-grade theme this year is “building strong communities” with a culminating project around “increasing book access.” First-graders spent their first trimester developing ideas about strong communities and what book access looks like across the world. They then zoomed in on how they can support the goal of increasing book access for local communities or the school. One group is working on gathering books to donate to a neighborhood organization that distributes them, another group is creating a little free library. Such playful ways of looking at different problems in the real world gives the students a sense of agency and purpose within their own environment.

Exploring Standards in Different Ways

Some might ask, what of the statewide grade level standards? How does play fit in there? Worry over test scores has made too many schools afraid to forego skill-and-drill practice. But we've found that students can explore standards in many different ways. Playful instruction, centered around a standards-based learning goal crafted by the adults, allows students to explore the material in greater depth.

For instance, starting in pre-k, kids are expected to learn letters. Through play-based instruction, our lessons don't just involve looking at the letter “A,” but skywriting it with their fingers and singing a song where they say the letter name and sound over and over again. The kids also take turns at a sensory bin filled with rice, where they use a ladle to scoop out “A” magnets and letter tiles, and words that start with A. These simple, adult-planned, playful tweaks allow for the authentic application that sticks with little learners.

Human learning is such a multidimensional, interwoven process. This begins in the early years. When little learners are working on grade-standard letter sounds, they're doing it in the context of their collaborative classroom community, which means they have to tap into social-emotional learning standards. Their neighbor who also wants a turn with the letters ladle has to use those social skills to ask for that turn and work together to share. In addition, they are honing their gross and fine motor skills which are early standards for the pre-k and kindergarten.

Little learners do not develop in a straight line, they learn in a web, constantly puzzling the pieces together and applying them to their reality through playful practice.

Our teachers strive to present students with choices and plan for their unique needs and learning styles. In some classes, kids are offered a choice to play at a writing center or a Play-Doh center. You would think they'd all choose the Play-Doh, but many kids choose to write, because that's the way their brains work.

Traditional instruction doesn't allow for choices and makes engagement difficult to measure. Play-based instruction honors kids' voices, individuality and interests. It also allows students to engage and apply their learning more deeply. When their brains are making connections between learning standards and practical applications, and when they're allowed to ask questions and choose what makes most sense for them, they are applying their learning to a variety of contexts. Their brains are developing those pathways to problem solve, think critically and work collaboratively – something traditional instruction cannot achieve on its own.

We remember our favorite activity or project from school. We remember that class and teacher that was magical and loving, fun and exciting. The real life Ms. Frizzles. We remember field trips. Those core memories translate to core learning that lasts.

In our play-based environment, we've seen shifts in kids' behavior and ability to work with one another. Even with so many social-emotional gaps from the pandemic, our teachers say they see more kids sharing and taking turns during integrative center time. They are using prosocial language, talking about their learning and most importantly, having fun. They are allowed to showcase their learning style and skill set and practice independent skills. They are empowered to function in a collaborative setting that mimics the collaborative settings they'll be a part of in school and work places for years to come.

At the end of the day, play-based curriculums may be more complicated to implement and take a lot of effort, leadership and creativity to do well - but it's worth it (and it's fun.) Of course it's possible to find moments within traditional instruction to be playful and fun, but play-based instruction - with its elements of exploration and multi-sensory tasks - leads to a lifelong love of learning. And that's what it's all about.

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