

AN INQUIRY INTO GRADE ONE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES  
AROUND PLAY-BASED LEARNING AND PEDAGOGY  
WITHIN THEIR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to all my grade one students past, present, and future.

You have taught me so much and make me want to be a better teacher.

It is an honour to be a small part of your story.

## Abstract

This research study explores the definitions, value, and implementation of play-based learning practices beyond kindergarten, specifically, in grade one classrooms. By inquiring into two grade one teacher participants' experiences, the teacher researcher (a grade one teacher), also shares her experience with play-based learning. The need for this study is important as there are often significant gaps in how teachers may interpret the broader learner outcomes within the kindergarten curriculum compared to how students are transitioned into a grade one classroom with more specific learning outcomes and curricular expectations (Alberta Education, 2008). The environment and expectations in grade one classrooms can drastically differ and the importance of play may be minimized as a result. Research contends that play throughout children's development is critical because it fosters emotional regulation, creativity, and resilience (Mraz et al., 2016). The literature also suggests that play enhances learning and supports the mental and physical health of children. Specifically, "when children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating, improvising, and expanding their learning" (CMEC, 2012, para. 4). In this paper, the following will be explored: literature on play-based learning and pedagogy, participants' definitions of play, how these grade one teachers strive to co-construct curriculum, barriers and building blocks in pedagogy related to play, and how COVID-19 has played a factor in shaping teachers' ability to implement play-based learning. Lastly, the teacher researcher reflects on her evolving understanding of curriculum in relation to play, shifts in practice, and next steps.

**Keywords:** *play-based learning, curriculum, pedagogy, education, COVID-19, experience, grade one teachers*

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## **Narrative Beginnings**

### **Sliding Back - Coming Alongside My Daughter in Grade One**

“I was excited to start grade one.” Thinking back to my daughter’s words about how she felt when she first started grade one, it conjured up memories of myself as a young learner. Sliding back in time to my grade one experience as a child, I recall feeling trepidation about not wanting to leave my mother. I was anxious about the long bus ride to and from school and also excited about being a ‘big girl’. We had moved in the summer, so I was attending a new school. I remember standing at the end of the driveway with my older brother and sister waiting to catch the bus. My memory is a little vague of grade one. I do recall my sweet, kind teacher was Mrs. King. She often stood in front of the class and wrote lessons on the chalkboard. I remember getting the opportunity to read aloud from an oversized book of Dick and Jane that was on a stand like a bible. I remember the rows of desks and chairs, the tile floor, and the fluorescent lights. The grade one classroom was so vastly different from the kindergarten classroom I knew the year before. I remember how warm the kindergarten classroom was—with its bright green carpet, round welcoming tables where you sat with friends, the dress up centre filled with colourful costumes, and the endless supplies for doing all kinds of crafts. Moving to grade one, I began to learn that school was a place where you sat quietly in your desk, paid attention, and listened to the teacher. Now, many years have passed, thirty to be exact, and I find myself looking through my daughter Gillian’s scrapbook from her time in grade one.

Thinking of my experiences as a little girl, I wonder what my daughter’s memories were of grade one? Was she scared like me? Did she think things would be

similar to kindergarten? Looking through her scrapbook, I see a little girl who loved to draw, colour, and play with her friends. She was confident. She loved learning new things and was very curious about the world around her. Her experience of grade one was different from mine.

### **Who I Wanted to Be as a Teacher - The “Oooh”**

I have always known I would be a teacher. From the time I was in kindergarten, I liked to be in charge and to help out in the classroom. My mom remembers that I was always eager to be the teacher's helper and that I loved to go to school. I remember having the opportunity to teach my grade three classmates all about my hamster. I was even able to give them a test! I loved it.

I completed my education degree at York University in Toronto. I remember one of the first lessons I was evaluated on as a pre-service teacher. It was a colour mixing lesson for a junior kindergarten class. Because it was a half day program, I was able to teach the lesson to the morning class and then repeat it in the afternoon when my University Facilitator/Advisor<sup>1</sup> was there. The activity was mixing food dye in water and the reaction of the students was perfect. When I added the yellow dye to the red water, and it turned orange, all the students ‘ooohed’. It was such a thrill to expose these young children, ages three and four years old, to something new and interesting. Right from the beginning, the excitement in sparking children’s sense of curiosity and imagination motivated me to pursue a career in teaching, especially working with young children in

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<sup>1</sup> The term “University facilitator” is often used to describe the liaison between the university, the pre-service teacher, and the mentor teacher who helps facilitate a student teacher's learning.



early years or early childhood.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to be the kind of teacher that lit that spark in my students and instilled a love of learning and exploring. In my classroom, I imagined reading stories and creating lessons around some of my favourite children's books. I imagined us working collaboratively together to discover new things as I guided them in their learning. I loved teaching in the primary grades where students are enthusiastic about going to school and loved their teacher. I thoroughly enjoyed the creative aspect of teaching in primary school. As an early years teacher, we have the ability to shift our daily schedules around unlike the upper elementary grades that are more tied to a schedule. There is a measure of freedom to explore themes and topics through science, art, mathematics, and literature that I love, or at least that I imagined.

### **Beginnings as a Teacher - The Impact of Experience**

As I lay my experiences of grade one alongside my daughter's, I think back to my earlier memories as a beginning teacher. Looking back to my first few years of teaching, I see how my early experiences have shaped my perception of play. I had been teaching grade two for about five years before I went on maternity leave. As a beginning teacher, I was much more focused on teaching the lesson and perhaps not as focused on teaching the student. Focusing only on the lesson is about paying attention to the time, resources, assessments, and learning outcomes. Focusing on the students allows me to meet them where they are at, to pay attention to their interests, to consider the mood of the class, and shift gears as required. When I focus on my students, they are much more engaged in the

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<sup>2</sup> "Early years" or/and "early childhood" is often defined as "the first five years of a child's life before the age of 6" (Alberta Education, 2011). In describing my experience, I describe teaching early years as working with kindergarten to grade one.

learning because it is more about them. I am more open with my students and I am much more curious about who they are.

### **Teaching Kindergarten**

During the course of having two children, I worked in a series of part-time teaching positions. When my daughter was 4 years old, she started kindergarten at the same school that I was to teach kindergarten. However, her teacher would not be me, but another teaching colleague. I was excited for my daughter as she was eager to begin school and had loved her preschool experience. I knew her kindergarten teacher well as she became a mentor to me when I embarked on the journey of becoming a kindergarten teacher myself. I recall how welcoming her classroom environment felt. It was bright with centres for painting, building, dramatic play, science, and exploration.

As I taught kindergarten for the first time, I began enjoying the freedom that the curriculum seemed to afford me. I could teach with themes and set up science, math, and dramatic play centres focusing on those themes. Play was a central part of kindergarten and I loved finding new and creative ways to engage students.

In my third year teaching kindergarten, I attended a workshop on play with a colleague. Our district was emphasizing more play-based learning and a focus on Reggio Emilia<sup>3</sup> inspired spaces. During the workshop—we played games, learned songs, and had discussions about the importance of play and what it meant to us. I remember we were going around the circle talking about what play looks like in our classroom, and when it

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<sup>3</sup> Reggio philosophy “is a student-centered and constructivist self-guided curriculum that uses self-directed, experiential learning in relationship-driven environments.” (Wikipedia, 2020)

came to my turn, I became really emotional. I started thinking about my daughter and her transition from kindergarten to grade one the year before. It was a difficult time and transition for me. I shared with the group, feeling like part of my daughter's childhood was over as soon as she entered grade one. I imagined my daughter being expected to sit at a desk for six hours a day and having limited play time. I felt sad as I imagined this. As a mother and teacher, I hoped she would still find joy in her experiences. I wanted to extend her play experience as long as I could.

### **My Transition to Grade One**

When I had the opportunity two years later to move to grade one, I wanted to bring what I had learned and experienced in kindergarten, into the grade one classroom. The need to rethink my approach to grade one became even greater because it also happened that my younger daughter would be moving into this grade at the same time I was becoming a grade one teacher. Unlike my eldest daughter, my second born would be a student in my class. My younger daughter was less outgoing than her sister and would need more time to develop socially and emotionally. Since I was her teacher, it was an opportunity to explore ways of easing the transition between kindergarten and grade one. I am lucky as a parent to have children who are comfortable in the structured environment of school. Even though they are both teacher-pleasers and rule followers, I wanted more for them in their learning experiences.

Looking back at their early years of schooling, my daughters never really struggled with the constraints of what I understood to be a 'traditional' classroom. That is, a learning environment with desks in rows, achievement outcome focused, and a

teacher-centered approach. Nonetheless, I had empathy for those learners who struggled to sit still, focus, and listen for long periods.

Thinking about how I would structure my first grade one classroom, I knew I wanted our classroom space to be different. Right from the beginning, I removed the individual desks so that I could have tables. I tried to build in frequent movement breaks. I started doing morning STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) focused bins so that my students had the opportunity to socialize and explore before the work on what I understood to be the mandated curriculum began. Even with adding in these components, there was no denying that the curriculum in grade one was very different from kindergarten. There are five science units, many outcomes in the math strands, social studies, health and life skills, religion, art, physical education, and most of all language arts. The children also need to learn to read and write while some of them are still struggling with muscle development to print neatly. As a grade one teacher, the flexibility I once enjoyed in kindergarten shifted as the pressure to maintain a certain pace in order to meet the expectations set out by the Program of Studies (Alberta Education, 2008) started to build.

### **Coming to the Research**

It is my fourth year teaching grade one and I still find myself trying to incorporate more play into my teaching. My experience as a parent and former kindergarten teacher has shaped and continues to shape how I approach working with children in grade one. There are many questions and tensions that I still have as a teacher who works to meet the expectations of the mandated curriculum.

Over the years, I have seen and visited many grade one classrooms across the district. In my observation, many of these classrooms have structured their desks in rows with bright fluorescent lights. In contrast, I have kept my students situated together at tables. I also have a classroom with large windows, and I use lamps and strings of lights to create what I feel is a calm, inviting environment. Yet, I wonder if it is okay for me to set up my desks in this way if this is not common practice. As a grade one teacher, I constantly feel the pressure of the expectations of the mandated curriculum. In kindergarten, subjects were woven together without mandates on teachers to spend specific amounts of time per subject. The transition to grade one requires adherence to the government's mandated minutes per subject matter. Therefore, to calculate these minutes, subjects are often broken into blocks of time. Furthermore, each subject has specific learning outcomes that must be taught to the children.

Another challenge I come across as a grade one teacher is parental expectations. Parents wonder about what students should know already and how quickly they should be learning new concepts. Parents often begin the year with questions such as: Should I be concerned that they are starting grade one and cannot read and write yet? How long will it take to learn to read and write? Can we have homework? Should I be putting them in a specialized program? Should I get a tutor? And as one parent commented in response to the collaborative spaces set up in the classroom, "Perhaps, if the children were not sitting at tables, they would not be so chatty."

Trying to meet all the expectations of the mandated curriculum and finding the time and space to develop a different teaching framework have become stumbling blocks. There seems to be little time for the play I imagined in our grade one classroom. Perhaps

the biggest challenge for me in transitioning from teaching kindergarten to grade one is finding the time and energy to rethink my programming and develop a new framework for delivering curricular content.

I knew I needed to discover ways to improve my teaching practice. Since first teaching kindergarten, I was interested in learning more about play-based learning and what that could actually look like in my classroom. Bridging the gap between kindergarten's play-focused curriculum and grade one's full academic curriculum has become both a passion and challenge. As I come to understand more of the theoretical and practical concept and importance of play-based learning, I still struggle with what this could look like in a classroom that must meet the overwhelming expectations of the curriculum directed by the government. I continue to ponder these questions: How do I support my students' learning in an engaging way? How do I balance the demands of the mandated curriculum with my goal of creating a more play-centered classroom? Where do I begin in making a shift in pedagogy? These questions inspired me to apply to the Master of Education program at Concordia University of Edmonton and pursue this research related to play-based learning.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions/Puzzle**

This research study aims to inquire into grade one teachers' experiences related to play-based learning and pedagogy within their classroom practice. The research has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that followed. The circumstances have shaped the implementation and realities of play-based learning both in person and in remote/online learning environments. The research will explore the understanding, value, and implementation of play-based learning practices beyond

kindergarten. The need for this study is important as there are often significant gaps in how teachers may interpret the broader learner outcomes within the kindergarten curriculum compared to how students are transitioned into a grade one classroom with more specific learning outcomes and curricular expectations (Alberta Education, 2008). The environment and expectations in grade one classrooms can drastically differ and the importance of play may be minimized. As a result, play-based learning pedagogy and practices may be seen by administrators and parents as less important compared to what may be viewed as more academic and rigorous teaching of specific learning outcomes as detailed in the Programs of Studies (Alberta Education, 2008).

According to the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC 2012), play enhances learning and supports the mental and physical health of children. Specifically, “when children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating, improvising, and expanding their learning” (CMEC, 2012, para. 4). The fact that CMEC (2012) highlights the importance of play-based learning practices beyond the kindergarten classroom requires deeper examination and exploration.

By coming alongside two teacher participants who currently teach grade one, I inquire into their experiences of how they interpret the Program of Studies (Alberta Education, 2008) within their individual classrooms. I also become part of the inquiry as I share my experiences as a grade one teacher alongside these participants. This study works to explore how we define, understand, and potentially incorporate play-based learning practices and/or other pedagogical practices to enhance the learning and teaching of children in our grade one classrooms.

Essential research questions as they relate to the classrooms of participating teachers and my own classroom to be explored include: How do grade one teachers define and conceptualize play-based learning and teaching? What approaches and strategies do grade one teachers implement? Is play a valuable and effective pedagogical approach for children in grade one classrooms? How do teachers balance the mandated curriculum but still have a child-centered philosophy?

The findings from this research study aims to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' personal, practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) related to play-based learning and/or other informed pedagogical practices that shape the curriculum within their classrooms. The personal justification for this research is that it may inform my teaching practice and how I might incorporate play-based learning within my grade one classroom. Further benefits include the potential for this research to inform and educate parents', teachers', and policy makers' understanding of play-based learning practices both at home and at school. This research also strives to inform teacher leaders and administrators on how to effectively support teachers to create more play-based learning experiences for their students. The next section shares literature related to conceptualizations of play including definitions, and the relationship of play to learning.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizations of Play**

There are many conceptualizations of play and how it is defined and understood by educational researchers. As Gray (2013) outlines, play should have some element of being voluntary. Another characteristic is that the motivation for play should come from the enjoyment in the doing and not from some external force. According to Gray (2013),



there are rules in play but not a set structure. There should always be room for creativity. Play also involves using imagination and suspending some element of the real world. Lastly, play requires activity as “the mind is wrapped up in the ideas, rules, and actions of the game” (Gray, 2013, p.3).

The International Play Association (IPA) expands on the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) with the *Declaration on the Importance of Play* (2014). The declaration asserts “children have different and varied needs throughout childhood and adolescence; environments should offer endless variety and stimulation to children” (p. 2). The characteristics of play include fun, uncertainty, challenge, and flexibility. The uncertainty and challenge of play is engaging in an activity purely for enjoyment without needing to know the purpose or outcome. Flexibility in play is important because when there is no particular outcome one must be able to adapt to the environment and the other ‘players’. Play offers enjoyment and a desire to continue to play. Part of the IPA’s mandate is to provide professionals and volunteers working with children with research on the importance of play.

Brown (2009) discusses the importance of play at all points of our lives from childhood right into adulthood. As our brains develop the type of play we engage in changes but as humans we participate in types of play our whole lives. Brown’s definition of play is “an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time” (Brown, 2009, p. 60). Moreover, play is what develops creativity and creativity is what drives innovation (Brown, 2009).

Vivian Paley (2009), a teacher and early childhood researcher, in an interview with *The American Journal of Play*, states that “play is the serious and necessary

occupation of children; it's not just the pleasant hobby or a frivolous means of spending non working hours" (p. 122). Paley further contends that "play is absolutely essential for their health and welfare" (p. 123). Through the flexibility of play, children can begin to navigate within a classroom community and this has an impact on their emotional, intellectual, and social development. The negotiation with peers involved in play allows children to test boundaries, advocate for themselves, and learn to cooperate.

The literature also shows evidence that the decline in play has led to children being less self-regulated and can lead to cognitive and social-emotional problems later (Bodrova et al., 2013). Gray (2017) also speaks to the consequences for play deprivation. For instance, it can lead to higher levels of depression and anxiety in peers. Play deprivation may be as simple as a lack of time for free play. Gray's findings show that children are overscheduled in today's world and have less time to just play. The IPA's Declaration also comments on this with research showing that play deprivation can lead to serious consequences for children and potentially echo into future generations (IPA, 2014).

### **Relationship Between Play and Learning**

Further research studies support the notion that play is an important, compelling pedagogical practice and that powerful learning happens through play (Gray, 2017; Hassinger-Das et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013). Children who learn through play develop skills that will help them throughout their lives. Another important benefit of play is that it helps to promote language development, critical thinking, problem solving, and social skills (Miller & Almon, 2009). As Hassinger-Das et al., (2017) state "free play and guided play—together known as *playful learning*—are pedagogical tools through

which children can learn in joyful and conceptually rich ways” (p. 3). Students who are allowed to play tend to be more motivated and involved in their learning. Play allows ways for all students to feel successful and can help with regulation and cognitive development (Weisberg et al., 2013). As Gray (2017) states, “children who had more freedom to play and explore exhibited greater creative potential years later, in adolescence” (p. 226).

In this research, I wondered if there were any examples of play-focused environments beyond kindergarten. The research around the positive outcomes between play and learning is increasingly evident. For example, in Finland, school is not mandatory until after age seven, students spend less time in the classroom, and there are no standardized tests until grade six. All the schools are evenly funded by the government and after school care is heavily subsidized. Some of the things Finland is doing allows for more flexibility in pedagogy. As Strauss (2019) contends, “the quality of education shouldn’t be judged by the level of literacy and numeracy test scores alone. Successful education systems are designed to emphasize whole-child development” (para 11). According to the Ministry of Education in Finland “learning in kindergarten should be based on playing, exploration and concrete activities” (Hyvonen, 2011, p. 68). Part of the success of Finland’s education system is that teachers have master’s degrees, the profession is highly respected, and teachers have autonomy to make decisions on the best needs of their students (Hyvonen, 2011). According to Hyvonen’s (2011) study, teacher preparation institutions should enable new teachers to “be competent in designing playful learning processes... integrating play and learning in a way that provides understanding, learning and enjoyment” (p. 80). Walker (2015) discusses the structure of a typical grade

one classroom in Finland which is only half a day and the remainder of the day is spent engaging in free play. The emphasis is less on the academics with more of a focus on the needs of the students in a play-based learning environment. With this research in mind, I wondered how I could bring more play-based learning into my classroom. Were there teachers in Alberta who were managing to find ways to incorporate more play into a grade one classroom? My desire to answer such questions was directly related to my teaching practice and the goal to incorporate more play into my classroom. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state “narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience” (p. 121). In the subsequent section, I describe the methodology and the participants who provided insight by sharing their lived experiences as grade one teachers.

### **Methodology**

I am just beginning to explore narrative inquiry with an understanding that attending to experience is critical. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state that “all of our experiences in situations become a part of us” (p. 8). That includes past, present, and future. Throughout my journey over the last two years, I have enjoyed reflecting on my experiences and how they have shaped my past, present, and future self. Looking back to my experiences from childhood to my experiences as a teacher, and then as a parent, I can see how these beginnings have shaped my understanding.

Narrative inquiry involves both the exploration of stories and “the study of experience” (Clandinin, 2018, p. 19). I was guided by Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional inquiry space which examines our personal and social interactions, the past, present and future, and where we are situated (p. 50). My reflection on childhood,

being a parent, and my teaching experience led me to want to further understand how to effectively incorporate play into my classroom. This study used a semi-structured interview process with participants. In the teaching profession, the stories of our students and our colleagues are extremely important. They help us shape our understanding of our classroom and our experiences as teachers. It is through each others' stories that we can give ourselves permission to try something new or discard something that is not working.

To begin my proposed research, I first sought and received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Concordia University of Edmonton. My goal was to have two participants who were currently teaching grade one or who had previously taught grade one. I recruited my participants through personal contacts who reached out to me via email correspondence. Two teachers who met the outlined criteria agreed to participate. They were from two different school districts which allowed for varied perspectives.

Due to COVID-19 protocols, the participants participated in a semi-structured interview through recorded Google Meetings. The semi-structured interviews allowed for follow-up questions to flow naturally as a conversation to allow for the shared stories of myself and my participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Following the interviews, the conversations were transcribed for analysis. Field texts were composed from the conversations conducted with the participants. The interviews were conducted in the first half of the school year. The transcribed semi-structured interviews were to create the research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Pseudonyms were given to participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. An introduction of the participants is included in the next section.

## Participants

In this research, I will attend closely to the experiences shared by participants as Connelly et al. (1997) notes, “what teachers know and how they express their knowledge is central to student learning” (p. 666). This particular year has seen a major shift as we have had to make significant modifications in light of the global pandemic. As such, these participants have had to make significant shifts in their teaching practice.

Participant one (Melissa) is in her twelfth year of teaching and has been at her current school for eight years—some of those spent on maternity leave. Melissa has mostly taught full-day kindergarten, grade one, and grade two. However, she has also taught the older grades. According to Melissa, she had *bounced around four different schools before she got her permanent teaching certificate* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020). She is currently teaching in-person, a one/two combined grade of 27 students with two students on the autism spectrum.

Participant two (Karen) is in her sixth year of teaching. Karen is a fairly new teacher and was teaching at the same school she did her student teaching at. She had been teaching grade one for five years in an inner-city school. Returning to school after a maternity leave, with COVID-19 concerns, Karen requested to teach remotely. She is currently teaching a combined one/two class, but with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching online.

As I looked closely at the transcribed conversations, three main threads emerged in the participants' stories. Guided by the 3-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I outline these threads of experience and reflect on my experiences in relation. As a researcher and participant myself in this inquiry, I was equally entwined in

these threads with participants. In the next section, I share common threads of experience by highlighting selected field text.

### **Thread 1 - Definitions of Play as a Co-constructed Curriculum**

What does play mean to you?

*To me, it's student led,  
it doesn't necessarily mean inside the classroom,  
it could be outside as well.  
It's basically wherever the kids' minds take them.*

*Well, why do you think that happens?  
Or, I wonder what would happen if he did this?*

*For me, play-based is all student led,  
it could be through drawings,  
it could be with manipulatives  
and be in the classroom.*

*It could be outside,  
it can be in the river valley,  
it's 100% student led content.*

(Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020)

This was Karen's response to the question, *what does play mean to you?* As Karen shared with me what play-based learning meant to her, I wondered if perhaps this is what

Weisberg et al. (2013) might describe as “invit[ing] active participation and engagement” (p. 108). Weisberg et al. (2013) also discusses how guided play “organically encourages children to focus on the dimensions of relevance to the current learning goal” (p.108).

Karen goes on to share more of what she means by play with an example of how she teaches colour. She describes how they begin with colour mixing at table centres for students to explore and engage their curiosity. She provides them with flashlights and prisms to further explore questions. She encourages her students to take the lead in the colour mixing activity.

*We did a science inquiry, the big question was, how can we make a rainbow inside? It was their question from those original centres. What happens if this happens?*  
(Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020).

Melissa’s response was similar in many ways in how she defined and understood play. She explains more of what play-based learning looks like in her classroom:

*When I think about play-based learning, I think about giving my students an environment where they can interact with each other, problem solve and talk with their peers. There is reading, there is writing...it is a lot of hands-on activities.*

(Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020)

Melissa notes how in play-based learning, *they’re teaching and learning from their peers* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020). As I studied the transcriptions of the conversations with the two participants, I created a list of words that stood out to me as they described what play-based learning looks like in their classroom.



What play-based learning looks like (a list):

*-Literacy centres*

*-Exploring outside*

*-Thinking outside the box (the classroom)*

*-Neighbourhood walks*

*-Inquiry into topics (colour unit)*

*-“I Wonder” - Starting with a big question*

(Transcripts with Melissa and Karen, November 26, 2020; December 16, 2020)

Melissa and Karen talk about how play can take many forms, both inside and outside of a classroom. For instance, in Melissa’s grade one classroom, “thinking outside the box” can mean venturing into the outdoor environment. Speaking more to what play looks like for her, Melissa spoke about an adventure with her class of 23 students last year. They walked to a local store to get donuts and hot chocolate. At first impression, one might wonder how this activity is related to play-based learning. Melissa explained how the neighbourhood walk to the store allowed students to explore their environment, ask questions, and increased student engagement. In this way, Melissa was able to weave in learning outcomes. For example, it allowed students to experience their community, think about how much things cost in the store, read the menu, and talk about respectful behaviour. She found the students to be actively engaged. As Melissa shared this story with me, I could see her eyes light up. She was passionate and excited to share these opportunities where her students’ learning was expanded. Melissa exclaimed, *They loved it. Like they loved it!* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020). Perhaps, this is what the IPA (2004) was referring to as they highlighted that play is engaging when it offers

“opportunities for risk and challenge; stimulation for the senses; chances for social interaction and interesting varied physical and human environment” (p. 2).

Reflecting on these conversations with Karen and Melissa made me think of Vivian Paley’s work and how she “challenges us to consider the importance of the lives of children, our responsibility to them and the need to be attentive” (Murphy, 2015, p. 1). Both participants seem to be focused on the needs of their students and committed to creating an environment that focuses on the learner. Another commonality that Karen and Melissa shared was the idea that students are (or should be) part of co-constructing the curriculum. Brough (2012) also discusses the importance of co-constructed curriculum, noting it as being, “the planning process that begins when the teacher pursues an issue of interest or a teachable moment which has captured children’s curiosity” (p. 348). In this way, the students’ questions and wonderings often lead to the teacher creating lessons of exploration around their interests.

Additionally, both Karen and Melissa were aware of their roles as guides and role models rather than instructors in a play-based learning environment. They talked about how important it is to allow students to take the lead, ask questions, and explore. Melissa explained how she looks at the objectives and then has a conversation with students about what they would like to learn. She also found that following their interests helped them engage with the curriculum, stating, *I noticed that my class this year is really interested in playing math games. So we started talking about what kinds of math games that we like, and we came up with a list* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020).

Both participants discussed the importance of play and how it can help improve their student’s socialization and communication skills. It can impact their everyday life.

It gives teachers the opportunity to discover strengths and interests. Melissa says, *It has a lot to do with just getting to know who your students are too...so they can trust you.*

(Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020). An ideal classroom is a place where students enjoy being, they feel heard and respected, and where learning can happen.

As I think about how these two teacher participants were defining and sharing their understanding of what play meant to them, I also reflected on my understanding of play which has evolved over time and with this research. Aligned with what Melissa and Karen emphasized as being important, I have come to understand that play-based learning can look like many different things. My understanding of play is informed by two definitions that emerged from the research. The first one is free play where the play is open-ended and can take any path. Free play “provides children with the opportunity to escape reality, set new rules and explore new avenues” (Veiga et al., 2016, p. 49). For example, I find with the STEM bins (see figure 1.0) my students will often play with the items differently than I had imagined. I may include certain provocations, but students will often think of their own ways of using the items in the bins. They can use their imaginations, socialize, and interact with each other. The second is guided play which is more inquiry-based and “incorporates adult-scaffolded learning objectives but remains child-directed” (Weisberg et al. 2013, p. 105). With this type of play, there is a purpose usually involving curricular outcomes. An example from my own classroom is using shredded paper, popsicle sticks, and Lego to explore different materials and structures similar to those in *The Three Little Pigs*.



Figure 1: These images are from free play with morning STEM bins

### Thread 2 - Barriers and Building Blocks

Looking across the conversations with the two participants, another theme emerged around some of the challenges they faced. I pull forward some of the phrases they used below.

*Melissa:*

*I start by looking at what I want to accomplish and sometimes it doesn't happen the way I want.*

*With assessments, it's still something I need to work on.*

*Karen:*

*There's a new math programme and a new literacy programme that they've introduced to us this year. And it's all stuff that we have to use. We just need to get this content out...and that's not how I like to teach at all.*

(Transcripts with Melissa and Karen, November 26, 2020; December 16, 2020)

As these participants share, there can be many barriers to building a classroom program around play. Karen and Melissa discussed constraints around the volume and

expectations of the mandated curriculum, students not performing at grade level, the pressure to do things similar to grade level teaching partners and finding ways to accurately assess the students with a lack of available resources.

Both participants expressed a willingness to try new things and make play-based learning work the best they could, however, they spoke more of how it was a challenge to make their ideal classroom a reality. Karen and Melissa seemed to have an ideal scenario in mind of a play-based classroom, but the realities of the classroom dynamics required some adjustments and rethinking. As Karen says, *In a perfect world, I would love to incorporate play-based learning all day long and intertwine all the subjects* (Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020). Further to this, Karen found that during her first couple of years teaching grade one, she often went along with what her grade level partner was doing. But as Karen gained more experience, she wanted to do things differently from her colleagues. The past few years prior to moving to remote/online teaching, she had an Educational Assistant with 15 years experience that she *could bounce ideas off of*. Karen spoke more of the complexities in teaching students when some of them are coming into grade one and lacking basic fundamental skills.

I share part of a conversation with Karen who talks about the challenges she feels in trying to implement play-based learning with all the demands of the mandated curriculum.

*... I think that's one thing that I've kind of struggled with, these kids are coming to me where they don't know how to spell their name. They don't know the letters of the alphabet. I can't jump into grade one content until I have those basics down.*

*So I feel like every year it's been a building block.* (Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020).

These were barriers that Karen cited as posing a challenge to incorporating play-based learning in her classroom. She knew what the ideal play-based classroom could look like through her participation in an initiative called the Discovery program. The school division/district had received funding for a school to set up and fully immerse themselves in play-based learning. Other grade one teachers around the district were able to visit the classrooms, and meet to talk about different strategies and how to integrate play. Teachers were also invited to develop reporting and assessment strategies to support it. But without the same support and resources (e.g., support from a learning coach, small class sizes, and an Educational Assistant), Karen found it was not feasible for her.

Frustrated, she reflects on her past experience:

*How can I do this with inner city kids who don't know their alphabet, who have poor attendance? I have up to 29 kids in a class with one EA, 90% are ELL, and four extreme behaviours where I'm cradling one of them while I teach all day.* (Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020)

Now, she says that she has learned to incorporate play into specific subject areas and adapt activities for a variety of learners in her school.

Melissa, much like Karen, also spoke of tensions in implementing play-based learning. When she started twelve years ago, as a beginning teacher, she was not very confident to try new things. However, over the years, she has learned a lot from colleagues. Further building her capacity, Melissa has had the opportunity to work with other teachers who previously taught in the Early Education program; these colleagues

provided mentorship in play-based learning approaches and pedagogy. Although Melissa has these experiences, she still feels like she has room to develop as a teacher. She is still developing ways to assess accurately in a play-based environment as well. *I try to gather lots of different kinds of evidence, to show me what the student can do. I would love to just have the time to take all these pictures and videos, but reality is...* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020).

Even though pictures and videos are a great way to show what students know, Melissa acknowledges how it is a time-consuming process. Moreover, she finds there are challenges in communicating to parents the learning that is happening in her classroom. Currently, teaching in-person with COVID-19 protocols in place, Melissa feels like she is implementing 50% play-based learning and 50% using a more traditional approach and exploring ways to add more play into the classroom. Melissa shares, *There are some times where we got to sit and we have to focus on learning something, we have to do this the traditional way, but I'd like to do more play-based if I can* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020).

Both participants have found that they learned a lot from colleagues and had strong examples of play-based learning around them. Karen's school in particular has embraced various strategies to help meet the needs of the complex student population. They have begun the Loose Parts<sup>4</sup> play program for recess. They have push bikes for students to ride in the hallways. They have quiet corners set up around the school. The

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<sup>4</sup> Loose parts play is child-directed play using recycled household items that transform into the most magical playthings. Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and built in multiple ways. (Ever Active Schools, 2018)

whole school has a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere. A lot of the classrooms have lamps and alternate lighting. Melissa also discussed how her school had a lot of great examples of colleagues who were finding ways to incorporate play-based learning. *I feel like I've learned a lot from colleagues that I've worked with....I've watched them...just talking to them about how to try different things.* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020).

As I think about the stories that Karen and Melissa shared with me around their tensions, I wonder how I can make more shifts to my practice. I have found in my experience around play-based learning— the more I can see successful examples and models, the more I can take risks in my classroom. I am learning that what play looks like in kindergarten is not necessarily what it is supposed to (or can) look like in grade one. Play-based learning can, and should, look different as students develop more skills in communication and focus as they progress through the grades. Karen and Melissa's approach to curriculum and examples of play has shown me that there are many ways to interpret the Program of Studies (Alberta Education, 2008). Perhaps I need to embrace the flexibility of the curriculum and re-examine my imagined barriers in order to create more opportunities and building blocks.

### **Thread 3 - Play-Based Learning in a COVID-19 Landscape**

*If I were to do play-based learning online, it wouldn't be true play-based learning, because there would always be a parent intervening.* (Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020)

This year, neither one of my participants are teaching in the way they would typically have taught. Karen talks about the tension and worries of having parents



potentially questioning her teaching practice. She constantly finds it a challenge to get all her young learners engaged in learning remotely, making play-based learning nearly impossible. Teaching a combined grade one/two class online, Karen states,

*I miss my class and having time with [the children] in the classroom. There is no time to just sit and have conversations with kids... for the most part, it's like, there's the content. Do you need help? No. Okay see you again in an hour.*

(Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020)

More to this, Karen shares how there is no opportunity to pivot when teaching online if, and when, something is not working. By necessity, her teaching has become more content-driven without the flexibility she normally would have in the classroom to implement play-based learning. As much as she would like to find ways to incorporate more play into her online teaching, it is a challenge because some students do not even have access to a box of crayons let alone dice or playdough or building blocks. As Karen says, *That's been the biggest struggle with teaching online is the lack of manipulatives...so much of grade one is hands-on learning* (Transcript with Karen, December 16, 2020).

Melissa, too, teaching in-person, shares her concerns from the beginning of the year, *They can't sit all day. I was having a really hard time at the beginning of the year because I just felt like I wasn't supposed to let them interact.* Now, Melissa has started taking students on weekly neighbourhood walks, and finds it helps with their emotional and mental health *to get out and just do things and learn in different ways.* (Transcript with Melissa, November 26, 2020). With government cuts impacting her school, Melissa is teaching a combined grade of 27 students in grades one and two. With COVID-19

protocols of physical distancing and not sharing supplies, she has had to get even more creative in finding ways to continue the play-based learning she had enjoyed in the past.

As I listen closely to how Karen and Melissa are navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 guidelines, I see the similarities in my classroom. For example, I can no longer have my carpet and rocking chair in the reading corner that has been dismantled. My students are spread out and at two to a table. Every activity that we do requires an extra thought of how students are interacting and how many students will be touching the material. I have found it has taken longer to connect with my students because we are not able to gather on the carpet to share stories. They took longer to settle into routines because they were out of school for six months. A positive is that I find my students to be very eager to be in the classroom. They are happy to come to school because it is the one place where they are able to interact with peers. Our grade one team also implemented an additional recess in the morning for our students. They get an extra fifteen minutes outside almost every day to help combat the extra time they seem to be spending in their chairs. While some of the ways I would have incorporated play-based learning look different this year, we are still finding ways to play under the restrictions of the protocols.

What the COVID-19 protocols and restrictions have illuminated for me is the relational aspect of play. What this year has also shown is that classrooms are important places. The students are getting a lot out of just being face-to-face and interacting with each other. They really need that time together. They need to be present with each other. There is something powerful in those interactions where they can negotiate with each other and decide on the rules or the way to build something. So much of what makes a classroom successful are the connections students make with their peers and their teacher.

It is much more difficult to develop those connects in an online learning environment. Students should not be learning in isolation. I think perhaps parents are seeing the important and complex work that is happening in classrooms more than ever after having to be the teachers in their own homes. As Murphy (2015) so powerfully points out while reflecting on Paley's work, there is a "need to attend to children's lives in ways that support the communities we seek to build in our classrooms" (p. 4).

## Moving Forward

### Personal Shifts - As a Teacher

As I came alongside these two teacher participants and reflect on my understanding of play, what comes to mind is "Magic Dough." At the beginning of the year, I create Magic Dough with the children (see figure 2.0). First, we add food colouring to the middle of the homemade dough so my students cannot see what colour they are getting. Then, we say a magic spell over the dough, and they begin to mix it. I like to think it is the "magic spell" of a play-based classroom. The curriculum that is being co-composed is much like the dough that is pliable, shaped, and re-shaped into endless possibilities. What brings colour to the dough, (the curriculum) is play.



Figure 2.0

As I started to think about my past experiences and reflect on the conversations with Melissa and Karen, I see with a new lens. Thinking about my tensions and puzzles around implementing play-based learning in a grade one classroom setting, the pull of the mandated curriculum has been at the forefront of my programming. From the literature, curriculum studies in my master's program, and research conversations with participants—I recognize that the concept of “curriculum” is so much more than just the mandated curriculum or as Aoki (1993) would say, “the curriculum-as-planned.” My experience as a parent continues to guide my understanding because as Connelly et al. (1997) contend, “nothing is clearly separated” (p. 673). It is both my experiences as a parent and teacher that shape who I am in the classroom. I have come to a new understanding of the term “curriculum” which goes beyond what I would have taken as a mandated, written, and rather static document prescribed by the government. I have become much more reflective of my experiences as a student, a parent, a teacher, and a teacher leader.

Prior to engaging in this research, my supervisor asked me to define what curriculum meant. I wrote, *All the lesson plans we create are based around specific outcomes. It is our responsibility as teachers to be delivering the provincially mandated curriculum. There is some flexibility in how that curriculum is delivered.*” (Excerpt from Dialogue Journal, September 6, 2020).

Through engaging in this research and over my course of studies, I have learned that curriculum can be defined in many different ways. When I look back at my earlier definition, I see how narrow my understanding of curriculum was. Now, I realize the notion of curriculum encompasses much more than attending to the mandated curriculum.

Houle (2010) describes the mandated curriculum as being “written by professionals and passed on to school boards and teachers to be enacted through learning activities” (p. 31). Furthermore, Houle acknowledges that student learning is so much more complicated than this mandated curriculum which is the “dominant notion of what people think of as the curriculum in school” (p. 3). We, as teachers, are curriculum makers. As a curriculum maker, it is also the teachers’ stories, experiences, and their “personal, practical knowledge” that shape the curriculum and interaction with students (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 392). As a grade one teacher, who understands the play-centered approach in kindergarten, it is up to me to create a learning environment that best reflects my students. According to Snyder et al., “curriculum materials may be...mandated, but teachers and students inevitably adapt them to their needs and context” (as cited in Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016 p. 299). My understanding of a play-based pedagogy has evolved. I now have a much better understanding of the curriculum as a guide but not a prescription of how to teach. Therefore, I have also learned through this research related to play, how important it is to pay attention to the sparks of interests that the students express and to give them more opportunities and space to explore. In my classroom, I realize that I have not been co-constructing curriculum with my students. Thinking of the stories told by Melissa and Karen of how they implemented play-based learning with their students, I recognize the need to use the mandated curriculum to shape a play-based pedagogy in my classroom. I have been relying on specifics rather than the bigger picture which can be centered around play-based learning. This makes me realize that I can weave multiple curricular outcomes through a topic or a project.

Another curriculum that I must pay closer attention to is my relationship with students and their lives. According to Aoki (1993), attending to the lived curriculum involves creating a community of learning where each student feels valued, safe, heard, and loved. Play allows me to have conversations with students where pieces of their lives are shared and enacted through in impromptu, and often unstructured, play with others. This does not mean that I am not attending to the mandated curriculum, rather, I am attending to the children's lives and seeing that as a starting point for inquiry in my play-based classroom. As Vivian Paley (2007) says in *On Listening to What the Children Say*, "The act of teaching became a daily search for the child's point of view—and it provided an open-ended script from which to observe, interpret and integrate the living drama of the classroom" (p. 154).

My tension as a teacher involves thinking about how much curriculum I have to "cover" in a day by way of subject learning outcomes. However, as I reflect on Melissa and Karen's stories and mine, I see how important it is to attend to the lived experiences of the children and to nurture a sense of play. These research conversations with other grade one teachers has allowed me to recognize that they also have some of the same tensions but are finding ways to define for themselves what curriculum means (or can mean), and move forward with a play-based approach they imagine.

When I think back to when I was a pre-service teacher over 15 years ago, I recall learning to develop lesson plans for the first time. I remember being instructed to start with the goal in mind and the mandated, provincial curriculum outcomes. Now, as a practicing teacher, I still find myself seeing "small" in the way Greene (1995) spoke of. As a curriculum maker, I see "small" when I pay attention only to the mandated

curriculum and measurable outcomes rather than lives. It is necessary to think outside of the mandated curriculum. This research has provided a major shift for me as I now see a bigger curricular picture.

Tyler (2004) speaks about the importance of teachers having “an intuitive sense of what is good teaching, what materials are significant, what topics are worth dealing with, and how to present materials and develop topics effectively with students” (p. 52). As my teaching practice has evolved over the years, the starting point has changed. The research and conversations with participants have shown me how the benefits of a play-based approach are far beyond “covering” specific learning outcomes and objectives. I have a better understanding now that the curriculum for my grade one students is not just the mandated outcomes but the learning we are creating together in our community which values play. When paying attention to the children, their stories, and experiences as they engage in play-based learning, we can create valuable experiences and learning.

### **Practical Implications and Next Steps**

In his examination of Vivian Paley’s work, Murphy (2015) beautifully sums up her philosophy of attending to children. As teachers, we need to think of “learning from and with children, inquiring into our teaching, learning about diversity, shaping a curriculum that is attentive to the lives of children, the importance of the social life of the classroom...and the place of play” (p. 4). In reviewing the literature, dialoguing with colleagues and professors, and engaging in this research alongside two other grade one teachers, my understanding of curriculum and its connection to play-based learning has evolved. There is no ‘right way’ to do play-based learning. Looking back, I realize that my tensions have been centered around justifying my approach to parents, administrators,

and colleagues. Through this research, I can see these tensions are based mostly on not knowing where to start and how to articulate the importance of play. Prior to engaging in this research, I used to worry that a parent, administrator, or colleague would question or challenge my approach as I tried to implement play-based learning in my grade one classroom. And when questioned, I was not sure how to articulate and share the benefits or pedagogy behind the importance of play. I now have the knowledge and the tools to expand my teaching practice so I can more effectively integrate and enhance teaching and learning in a play-based learning environment with my grade one classroom.

I am also learning that, as a teacher, I need to be willing to take the risk of trying something different even when it causes me tension. Learning will continue to happen for my students in the exploration of playful curricula in all its forms. This research has encouraged me to develop trust in myself and my abilities. My next steps include being the lead teacher in developing the *Loose Parts Play Initiative* at our school which will provide students the opportunity for more free play. A few of the benefits from this initiative will be to allow students to use their imaginations, develop their social skills, and increase their gross motor and fine motor skills. Another school initiative I will continue to work on is *Global School Play Day* which is an event that promotes the importance of unstructured play in schools. The idea is to spend one entire day playing. I am looking into developing a community of educators that have a shared vision of child-centered learning around play in my school division to help share ideas, assessments, and resources. It is important to have a community of like-minded individuals to encourage each other, develop good pedagogy, and allow for multiple perspectives.



My ultimate goal is to further develop both aspects of play into an inquiry-based unit where we start out with an open-ended play/inquiry and begin to develop wonders and curiosity as we delve deeper into the content. Free play allows the students to decide the direction they want the play to go. Guided play allows them to explore and to think creatively, but it has ties to the learning outcomes.

Eisner (1967) sums up what keeps me in the classroom, noting, “what is most educationally valuable is the development of curiosity, inventiveness, and insight that is capable of being described only in metaphoric or poetic terms” (p. 89). I want to be the teacher that meets my students where they are at. I want to push them to do their best. I want to create critical thinkers and good citizens. I also want their experiences in grade one to set them up with a love of learning and success as they move through the grades. When I see the enthusiasm of children in a grade one classroom and those “magic dough” moments, this brings immense joy to this, at times, very difficult job.

A play-based learning environment is a classroom that explores new ideas, shares experiences through hands-on learning, and values the lived curriculum of all its learners. It is the curriculum in the immeasurable, improvisational moments of play that are often the most valuable.

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