

**Full –Day Kindergarten
Play-Based Learning:
Promoting a Common Understanding**



Education and Early Childhood Development

April 2016

Available in Alternate Format, Upon Request

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Note:

Unless otherwise indicated, all photos used in this document are courtesy of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

All names of teachers or students in the 'Learning Happens Here' scenarios are not real names of those depicted in the pictures.

Play is....



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Executive Summary

In Budget 2014, government made a commitment for provincial implementation of full-day kindergarten effective 2016. With the transition to full-days of learning, there has been considerable discussion amongst key stakeholders as to what play-based learning within a kindergarten (classroom) environment entails, particularly in terms of classroom practice for meeting curriculum outcomes. As the means to further this dialogue and come to a consensus, in June 2015, a play-based pedagogy working group comprised of key stakeholders met to discuss common understandings for concepts related to the introduction of play-based learning in full-day kindergarten classrooms throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

This document represents the work done and discussions held during these meetings and it provides an in-depth and common understanding of how play-based programming will look and feel in a school-based setting.

This document provides in-depth information about play-based learning such as theoretical concepts and insights into play-based pedagogy. It enhances information about play-based learning that is provided in the Completely Kindergarten (2010) curriculum guide and to provide further insight into how to incorporate play-based learning in kindergarten. The Common Understandings document is intended to continue the conversation on the value of play for all children during the early years. It underscores the important role of play in children's learning and provides clarity on what this means in terms of meeting curriculum outcomes in a school setting, especially full-day kindergarten.

By increasing one's understanding and awareness of play-based learning, parents, teachers, and the community alike will recognize that they all have a role in ensuring that the rights of children to play, learn, and participate are fully respected, articulated, and understood.

PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

Play-based pedagogy describes an approach where the teacher recognizes that children learn best through an active, hands-on, playful environment. In a play-based classroom, the teacher makes decisions about the daily schedule, the environment, the materials, interactions and activities based upon the strengths, needs, interests and input of the students in the classroom.



“Virtually every important concept to be taught – whether it be at primary, intermediate or graduate school level – can be taught through the medium of serious play.”

(Wasserman, 1992, p. 138)

Introduction

In Budget 2014, government made a commitment for provincial implementation of full-day kindergarten effective 2016. With the transition to full-days of learning, there has been considerable discussion amongst key stakeholders as to what play-based learning within a kindergarten (classroom) environment entails, particularly in terms of classroom practice for meeting curriculum outcomes. As the means to further this dialogue and come to a consensus, in June 2015, a representative group of Kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, early intervention/allied health professionals, a professor from the Faculty of Education at Memorial University, a representative of the ECE program at College of the North Atlantic, and government representatives met to discuss common understandings for concepts related to the introduction of play-based learning in full-day kindergarten classrooms throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. The primary objective of this play-based pedagogy working group was to articulate the defining features of play-based pedagogy and to describe a common vision of how it is to be integrated with practice in a full-day kindergarten setting. The questions asked of this play-based pedagogy group included “What is play?”, “What is meant by a play-based pedagogy?” and “What are the defining characteristics of a play-based pedagogical approach?”

This document is a summation of the findings from the play-based pedagogy working group. In addition to these findings, further resources and information on the topic of play-based pedagogy in full-day kindergarten are provided.

This document is not meant to be a comprehensive teaching guide for kindergarten. It is intended to build on the valuable curriculum documents that are already in place for kindergarten teachers in this province. It is to be used as a classroom resource which is meant to help consolidate our common understanding of what is meant by play and play-based learning in a kindergarten setting.

The intent of this document is to define, clarify, and discuss the concepts of play-based pedagogy and play-based learning. For the purposes of this document, the terms ‘play-based pedagogy’ and ‘play-based pedagogical approach’ may be used interchangeably with both referring to the approach adopted by the teacher in a play-based environment. Play-based learning refers to the learning and/or the activities that a student is experiencing in a play-based environment. As well, the words ‘students’ and ‘children’ may be used interchangeably throughout the document, as may ‘teacher’ and ‘adult’.

The document is meant to reflect play and play-based learning for all children. Kindergarten classrooms serve a wide range of children with various needs, backgrounds, abilities, gender, cultures, languages, and interests. Play-based pedagogy is well suited to supporting diversity and inclusive education, as it incorporates the interests, insights and backgrounds of all the children. Classroom environments that

embrace a play-based pedagogy are responsive to the individual strengths and needs of children which lead to a naturally inclusive environment.

In addition, this document provides an overview of seven key ideas to support the transition to play-based learning in full-day kindergarten. These ideas highlight important considerations that, when understood by teachers and others, provide a good starting place for the transition from half days to full days.

Seven Key Ideas to Support the Transition to Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Kindergarten

1. Play-based learning is the main method for implementation of the kindergarten curriculum (as well as primary grades).
2. Teachers understand play-based learning and know how to facilitate play-based learning in a classroom environment.
3. The teacher is integral in the support and extension of play in the classroom. They understand their role in facilitating, extending and documenting the play-based learning that happens in the classroom (and outside).
4. The implementation of play-based learning within a literacy and numeracy-rich classroom environment is the crucial link to achieve solid curriculum implementation.
5. The focus of learning is on the process rather than the product, recognizing that the achievement of outcomes can be measured through observation and assessment in a play-based environment.
6. Documentation is the foundation of on-going assessment and evaluation of the learning processes in the classroom.
7. The design of the classroom environment is central to the success of play-based learning.



Play-based Learning: Newfoundland and Labrador Context

In an inclusive learning environment, the “Completely Kindergarten: Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (2010)”, the “Service Delivery Model for Students with Exceptionalities” (SDM-SE), and play-based learning support healthy child development. Figure 1 provides a conceptualization of this partnership.

At the center of the partnership are play-based curriculum and service delivery. Within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development at the policy and program development level, play-based learning is promoted by the following Divisions: Early Childhood Learning, Program Development, Student Support Services, and Family and Child Development. Early Childhood Learning Division promotes play-based learning from birth in the context of caring and responsive relationships with adults (parent, caregivers, educators and others within a child’s circle of care) to support holistic child development within a provincial framework for early childhood learning. Program Development Division promotes play-based learning in the classroom as a pedagogy, amongst others, to be used by educators to meet curriculum outcomes. Student Support Services Division promotes student learning in safe, caring, and inclusive environments. These settings are responsive to the strengths, needs, and preferences of all students thereby supporting the implementation of play-based learning and other pedagogy. Family and Child Development Division promotes play-based learning within regulated child care and family resource programs to support holistic development of children from birth to age 12 years in safe, caring and inclusive child care settings.

Educators should be aware that these Divisions share common pedagogical practices and of how the varying Divisions interrelate to support student learning. These practices are represented in four shared themes:

- Responsive teaching;
- Documentation and literacy/numeracy rich environment;
- Resources and materials; and
- Classroom environment and set-up.

Examples of common pedagogical practice surround these themes and include:

- Intentional planning for learning opportunities;
- Varied learning opportunities (e.g., whole group, small group, individual and independent learning);
- Observation; and
- Prevention and early intervention.

Other Departments and government agencies that share a mandate for early childhood learning utilize the same pedagogical practices.

Communication, collaboration, partnerships, and transition planning are essential processes to effective pedagogy.

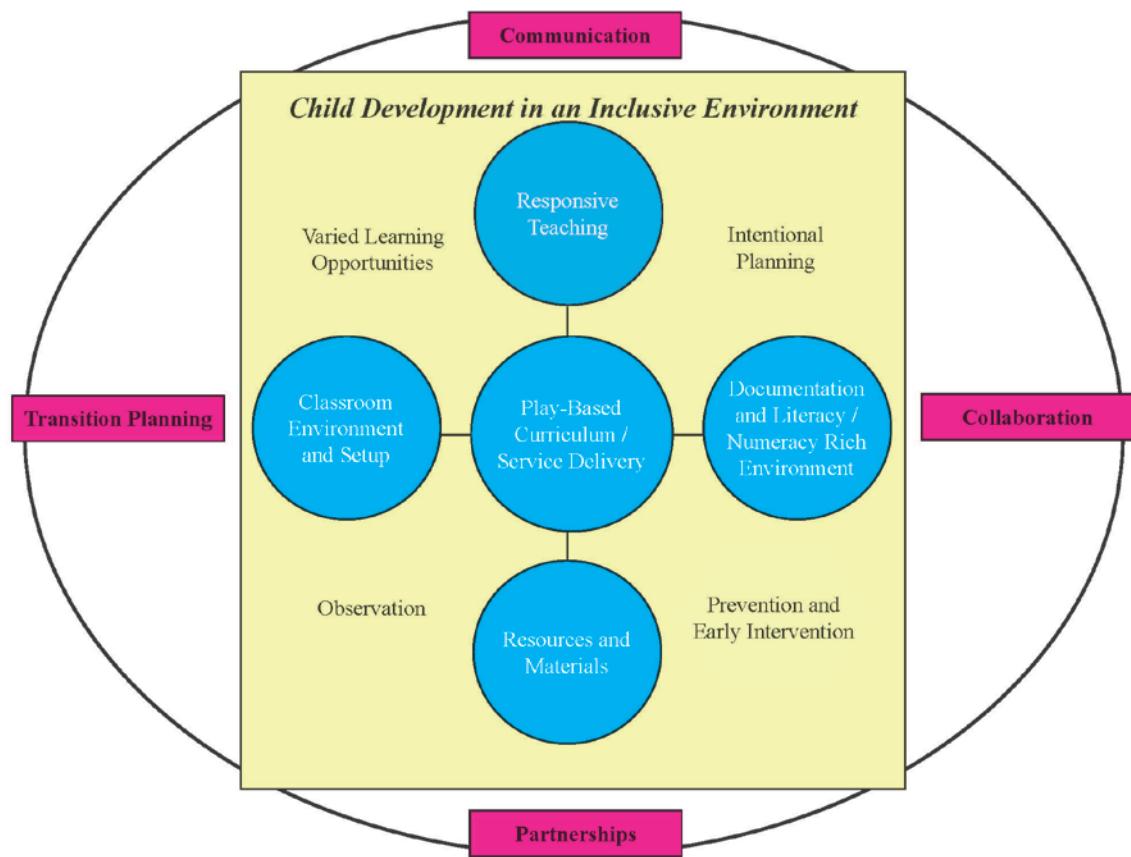


Figure 1: Play-based Learning: Newfoundland and Labrador Context

Principles of Learning in Early Childhood (0-8 Years of Age)

The following principles of learning in early childhood summarized below are derived from the work of philosophers, theorists and researchers of child development. These principles were originally defined in the book Empowering Pedagogy: Play-Based Curriculum for Lifelong Learning, 5th ed. (2013) by Dale Shipley (p.158-160) and are adapted for use in this document.

1. Children learn best through their senses. They require plenty of opportunities for sensory involvement with their environment.
2. Children learn when they can explore and experiment in an environment that allows them freedom to move, to choose among real alternatives, and to pursue activities at their own pace and at their own developmental levels.
3. Children learn by doing – by interacting with concrete objects in the environment (playful learning).
4. Learning is most effective when children are interested in what they are learning and are able to choose and pursue play activities in their own way. When children learn in a context that is meaningful to them and they have discovered for themselves, their learning will generally be remembered.
5. Children learn in an environment where they feel psychologically safe, where they are able to take risks, and make mistakes, and where they receive encouragement and well-timed, guided support in learning.
6. In informal settings, children with exceptionalities may need direct intervention in their playful learning to help them make developmental progress. Wherever possible, materials and equipment should be adapted and modified to support maximum independence. Intervention may vary and include a variety of supports provided through the Service Delivery Model for Students with Exceptionalities and through coordination of services provided with other professionals within children's circle of care outside the school system.
7. Children uncover concepts (concepts that are related to curriculum objectives) when their play is open-ended and exploratory.

8. Early learning experiences are most effective when they take children from simple to more complex levels of knowledge, skill, and understanding; from concrete to abstract concepts; from general to specific.
9. Revisiting knowledge, skills, and concepts in a variety of contexts different from that in which the learning first took place reinforces and transfers the learning from one context to another.
10. Learning is most effective when play experiences build on what children already know and take them one step further (zone of proximal development).
11. Children are deemed to have learned when they are able to transfer learning gained in one setting or context to another setting or context.
12. Activities should begin at the child's developmental level, and significant learning challenges should be sequenced, step by step, in an order and at a pace relevant to the child (scaffolding).



What is Play?

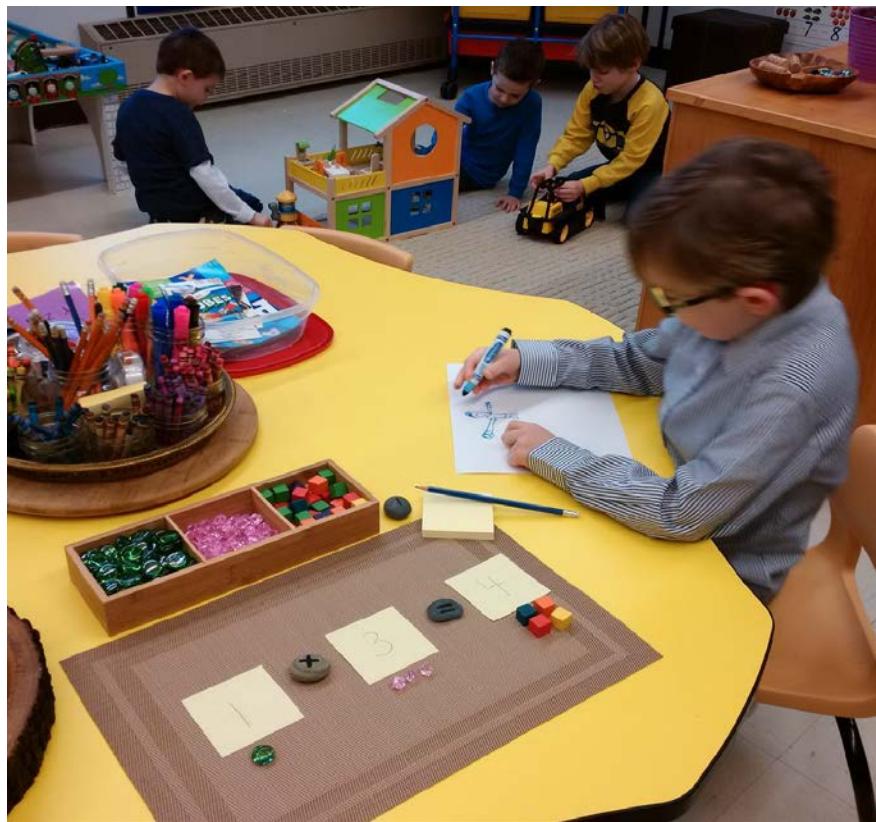
The work of the NL play-based pedagogy working group builds on “Completely Kindergarten – Kindergarten Curriculum Guide” (2010) and “Navigating the Early Years: An Early Childhood Learning Framework” (in press). The following is a compilation of the descriptions, thoughts, opinions, and common understandings put forward by the working group when asked “What is play?”

Play is a vehicle through which learning occurs. It is an intrinsically motivated, voluntary activity that allows the child the opportunity to construct their own knowledge. When children are playing, they are truly engaged in their activity. They are seeking to solve problems and tasks, in a very hands-on way. Play is active, interactive, intentional, open-ended, and concerned with process over product. In play, children learn to be autonomous and confident, persistent and persevering. Children at play learn the value of taking a risk; making mistakes and applying a trial and error approach to learning. They set their own goals and establish their own end-point. Through play, children make connections, make discoveries, and make choices based on their own interests, needs, and strengths. They build, imagine, create, and experiment. They use their whole body to interact with the environment. They become agents of their own learning who seek to make sense of the real world, creating their own working theories about the environment around them.

All children engage in play behavior which is based on their developmental level, their interests and preferences.

Play is a vehicle through which learning occurs. It is an intrinsically motivated, voluntary activity that allows the child the opportunity to construct their own knowledge.

In the following sections, the stages, types and categories of play are described. Theorists describe play in many ways. The types and categories of play may be described differently, depending on the theorist. However, despite differences in the classification of play, there is general agreement that a variety of opportunities for different types and categories of play are necessary for children's overall development and learning.



Stages of Social Play

In the early 1930's, Mildred Parten described stages, or categories of play, related to how children interact with others during their play. These stages can be either viewed as a developmental continuum, moving from minimal involvement to maximum involvement with others, or they can be seen as particular types of play behaviour that children (preschoolers and older) can be involved in, depending on the circumstance. The following are Parten's stages as described in the book "Who Am I in the Lives of Children: An Introduction to Early Childhood Education, 10th edition" by Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, (2016). Each stage has a dominant age indicated; however, children at various ages can exhibit any or all of these particular play behaviours.

Solitary Play (dominant in infancy). During solitary play, children play alone and independently with objects. Other children playing nearby go unnoticed. Although solitary play is dominant in infancy and is more typical in younger children, older children also select and benefit from solitary play.

Learning Happens Here

Alia is exploring how the stickers placed on the window can be used to make different designs. Her curiosity engages her in a solitary moment where she is building skills such as observation, classification, comparison and creativity as she moves and manipulates the stickers on the window.



Parallel Play (typical of toddlers). In parallel play, children play side by side but still are engaged with their own play objects. Little interpersonal interaction occurs, but each may be aware of and pleased by the company of a nearby companion engaged in a similar activity.

Learning Happens Here

Jason explores the texture of goop with two of his classmates. As he explores the properties of this liquid/solid, he uses words such as 'slimy', 'slippery' as he experiences the flow of the goop through his hands. His delight in the experience is infectious as his table-mates start to mimic not only Jason's actions, but the rich vocabulary that he is using while he plays.



Associative Play (seen in most preschool-age children). Associative play involves pairs and groups of children playing in the same area and sharing materials. Children tend to interact briefly. While some cooperation and negotiation may be observed, true cooperation and negotiation between children is rare.

Learning Happens Here

Maria and Ava show concentration and determination as they experiment with the paint colours, making very definitive strokes.

Maria notices how Ava makes vertical marks and she incorporates this design into her own painting. Both Maria and Ava are using skills of comparison, colour recognition, focus, concentration and experimentation in their play.



Cooperative Play (characteristic of older preschool and kindergarten/primary-age children). Cooperative play is the most social form of group play. In it, children work together to create sustained play episodes with joint themes. They plan, negotiate, and share responsibility and leadership.

Learning Happens Here

Six children in Ms. Harding's class are exploring the natural objects (shells, pinecones, pebbles) that they have collected and shared. They decide to organize the objects by category and then, once the objects are organized, they discuss where they found each of their natural treasures. After manipulating and exploring their many features, the children begin to form patterns and shapes, all the while discussing the features of their found objects. The children are building their oral language and vocabulary skills, their mathematical understandings of grouping, sorting and classifying by several attributes, their skills of self-regulation through co-regulating emotions and actions, their ability to focus and their ability to share ideas and objects.



Cooperative-competitive play. Building on the work of Parten, Seagoe (1970) identified a type of social play for older children, beginning at about age 7 or 8, that she called cooperative-competitive play (Hennigar, 2013). This play involves activities that are formally patterned toward team victory such as organized sports. According to Hennigar (2013), “Once they are ready for cooperative-competitive play, this can be a very motivating learning experience” (p.132).

Learning Happens Here

While engaged in a boisterous game of pick-up soccer, the children in Ms. Burke’s class are learning about how to play cooperatively and competitively. They are learning to make and abide by certain rules of play as they engage in active, gross motor movement. They practice skills of self-regulation as they learn to give and take; solve conflicts and work together to achieve the common goal of organizing and playing a vigorous game of soccer.



Photo Credit:
www.dailymail.co.uk

Categories of Play (Cognitive Development)

From: “Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum and Development in Early Education, 6th ed.” by Carol Gestwicki.

Jean Piaget’s foundational work relating to the cognitive development of young children provided the field of early childhood education with a description of play categories relating to children’s construction of physical, social and logicomathematical knowledge. These three categories, as described in Gestwicki (2017), are as follows:

Functional Play, also called sensorimotor or practice play, is most common in children in the first two years of life, although it is obvious in later stages as well. With functional play, children repeatedly practice their mental schemas by interacting with objects, people and language.

Learning Happens Here

Ms. Johnson has introduced a new material to the classroom, which is actually a discarded piece of a game that belonged to her own children. Nathan plays with the material in different ways, over and over again as he gains mastery and an understanding of the many ways that this material can be used. He experiments with various functions of the piece, using it as a means to store and hold blocks and various smaller toys, seeing how many objects he can fit in it. Nathan is learning skills of divergent thinking, problem solving, and spatial relations.



Symbolic Play or Representational Play

Symbolic Play or Representational Play appears at about age two and continues into adulthood. Examples of symbolic play in a kindergarten classroom would include constructive play and dramatic play.

1. **Constructive Play.** Children using materials or objects to make other things are engaging in constructive play. Constructive play is a link between functional play and more sophisticated symbolic play. Children create and construct by using concrete materials to form representational objects

Learning Happens Here

Elizabeth works very carefully to construct the outline of a house. She wants it to be 'fancy' so she takes great care in spreading glitter over the glue. She says that once she is finished, she is going to make a family for the house. Elizabeth is not only demonstrating her well-developed fine motor skills, she is using her imagination, creativity, problem solving and planning skills as she creates her 'fancy' house.



2. Dramatic play. Children creating imaginary roles in which they pretend to be someone or something else are engaging in dramatic play. The play often draws on first or second-hand experience in various familiar situations. When two or more children are involved, such play is designated as socio-dramatic play, and the play proceeds based on the interactions between the players acting out the roles and negotiating the pretend themes.

Learning Happens Here

Jacob has been trying on glasses and hats in the dramatic play area. He says, “I look like my dad”, and he places the glasses upside down and laughs. He says that his dad is ‘silly’. Jacob is acting out roles and engaging in pretend scenarios. He is practicing what it feels like to take another person’s point of view and perspective, which helps to reinforce empathy and self-regulation.



Games with rules become part of the play of school-age children and beyond. This play depends on children’s understanding and agreement to use a set of prearranged rules. Logical thinking, social controls and skills are necessary for this stage of becoming ‘serious players’ (Wasserman, 2000, as quoted in Gestwicki, 2017, p. 37). Examples of this type of play in a kindergarten classroom would be playing with math games (e.g., board games, path games or grid games).

Learning Happens Here

Jack and Joey have been playing with a single-path math game for over 20 minutes. They started out just rolling the dice and moving their markers; however, the game has now evolved to include more complex rules such as skipping turns when the player rolls a ‘1’ and deciding that in order to win, the player needs to roll the exact number of spaces. Jack and Joey are using logic, number skills, creativity, and the ability to work together in a cooperative and collaborative way.



The Play Types

Adapted from Bob Hughes, published in full in “A Playworker’s Taxonomy of Play Types” (PLAYLINK, second edition 2002). Available from PlayEducation, 13 Castelhythe, Ely, Cambs CB7 4BU.

According to Bob Hughes, author of “A Playworker’s Taxonomy of Play Types” (2002), there are a number of different play types which provide teachers, early childhood educators, administrators and post-secondary instructors with a common language for describing play. Some of these are:

Symbolic Play – play which allows control, gradual exploration and increased understanding, without the risk of being out of one’s depth. Note: Other definitions of symbolic play include “play where children use one object to represent another object and use make-believe actions and roles to represent familiar or imagined situations” Feeney, et. al (2016).

Learning Happens Here

Simon is a ‘superhero’ who detects the bad guys with his special ‘radar racquet’. He is using a found object to represent his special powers, encouraging not only his imagination, but also his ability to understand that one thing can represent another.



Rough and Tumble Play – close encounter play which is less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength and discovering physical flexibility and the enjoyment of engaging in this type of play.

Learning Happens Here

Rae, Joshua and Patrick are ‘championship wrestlers’. As they wrestle, they are able to negotiate boundaries, co-regulate their emotions, use their muscles, and have fun.



Socio-dramatic Play – the enactment of real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature.

Learning Happens Here

Sophie and Michael have been spending a lot of time in the dramatic play area, playing ‘store’. They take turns being the shopper and the cashier. At the end of each ‘shift’, they count up their cash and divide it equally, so that they can share their profits. Sophie and Michael are not only learning about familiar community roles, they are also working on skills related to numeracy and mathematical thinking, cooperation and turn-taking, verbal communication, perspective-taking and self-regulation.



Photo credit:
teachertomsblog.blogspot.com

Social Play – happens when the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended.

Learning Happens Here

Sam and his friends have been active in the block area for most of the morning. They have been building enclosures that have evolved into ‘cars’. Their play has moved from block building to becoming mechanics who work as a pit crew to get their race car back on track. This group of friends has demonstrated flexibility in their thinking, problem-solving, estimation and prediction skills, negotiation skills and lots of imaginative thinking.



Creative Play – play which allows a new response, the transformation of information, awareness of new connections, and an element of surprise

Learning Happens Here

William has been fascinated with the collection of shells that his classmates have gathered. He is using the paper and pencils to replicate the shapes of the shells. He is overheard to say “This one is kind of a circle; this one is a smaller circle and this one looks like a triangle.” He continues with his drawing, eventually creating patterns matching the ones he sees in the seashells. William is exploring, discovering, focusing, representing, and using problem-solving skills as he determines how to represent three dimensional objects using two dimensional media.



Communication Play – play using words, nuances or gestures; for example, mime, jokes, play acting, singing, debate, and poetry.

Learning Happens Here

Liam and Anna have been practicing “The Bog Down in the Valley-O” for the past couple of weeks. It is a traditional song that Liam’s Pop recently started to teach him. Anna loves to sing and persuaded Liam to let her join him. Liam and Anna have been having fun making up novel verses for the song, much to the delight of their classmates who want to learn the new song too. Liam and Anna are learning phonemic awareness, rhyming, story sequencing and word play as they practice their new song over and over again.



Dramatic Play – play which dramatizes events in which the child is not a direct participant.

Learning Happens Here

Ms. Graham read the book “Owl Babies” by Martin Waddell this morning. The children were delighted by the book and were inspired to create a play about the owls. They gathered props that they felt were appropriate for an owl habitat and designed a script for their two main actors, Adrian and Emily, to follow. The story grew as the day went on, with more and more children adding their ideas to the storyline and the setting. The children are not only retelling events and familiar stories in sequence, they are also playing with text, exploring writing and reading processes, building their vocabulary, using skills of representation, research, imagination, cooperation and written and verbal communication as they make the book come alive in the classroom.



Deep Play (Risky Play) – play which allows the child to encounter risky play experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear.

Learning Happens Here

While playing outdoors, the children in Mr. Brady’s class created a slippery sliding path which gave them lots of ‘air’ as they built up speed on their way down. Some children showed trepidation initially but, as they watched their classmates, they built up the courage to try the slippery slide. As these children faced their fears, they were learning safe ways to test their limits, build their confidence, and experience the exhilaration that comes with a feeling of “I did it!”



Photo Credit: M. Noseworthy
Used with permission

Exploratory Play – play to access factual information consisting of manipulative behaviours, such as handling, throwing, banging or chewing objects.

Learning Happens Here

The children in Ms. Hudson's class had been playing outside in the snow this week. On Thursday, Ms. Hudson brought the sensory table outside and filled it with the fresh snow from the night before. She added small shovels, some scoops, moulds, and magnifying glasses. These tools renewed the children's interest in the snow as they examined the various ways that snow could be shaped and manipulated. As the children explored the play, they learned more about the properties of snow; they described their moulded shapes using words such as 'cylinder' and 'cube'; and they were able to verbally express their predictions, questions and ideas.



Fantasy Play – play which rearranges the world in the child's way, a way which is unlikely to occur.

Learning Happens Here

One of the favourite books of the children in Mr. Singh's class is "The Mitten" by Jan Brett. Even though they have heard it dozens of times, they still laugh when the mitten 'explodes'. Mr. Singh created masks for the various characters in the story and the children use these masks to recreate the story, making it more fantastical with each retelling. During their fantasy play, the children are developing their social skills by negotiating roles and developing characters. They are also learning to take the viewpoints of the other players, retell familiar stories and events in sequence, and communicate in meaningful way. They demonstrate an understanding that texts are created for a purpose and an audience.



Imaginative Play – play where the conventional rules, which govern the physical world, do not apply.

Learning Happens Here

Mia, Cassidy and Thomas are intrigued by the underwater scene created by their class. They use their imaginations to create vivid dialogue among the sea creatures, building on each other's thoughts and themes. While they are engaging in imaginative play, Mia, Cassidy and Thomas are expressing themselves verbally, making meaningful connections with each other, developing their creativity and imagination, and communicating their ideas effectively.



Locomotor Play – movement in any or every direction for its own sake.

Learning Happens Here

Noah is enjoying the fresh air and sunshine while he runs with his friend Simon during outdoor play time. He runs back and forth, noticing how his shadow changes shape, depending on how he moves his arms and his cape. Noah is developing his gross motor skills, his physical stamina, and his love for the outdoors as he moves, runs, skips and 'flies' with his superhero buddies.



Mastery Play – is control of the physical and affective ingredients of the environments.

Learning Happens Here

Anneliese has been experimenting with water colour paints for most of the afternoon. She is very careful to blot the water out of her brush as she picks up just the right amount of paint to make the types of marks she wants to make on her paper. As she works with the water colour, Anneliese is developing her fine motor skills as well as her skills in problem-solving, experimenting, and cause and effect.



Object Play – play which uses infinite and interesting sequences of hand-eye manipulations and movements.

Learning Happens Here

Cameron had been making interesting patterns with the small wooden blocks when his teacher suggested that, instead of creating rows of blocks on the floor, he build up from the floor. He makes a small block tower at first, but then tries very carefully to balance a very high tower using blocks of various sizes. As he builds, Cameron is learning about cause and effect, properties of objects, seriation, counting, measurement, and problem solving.



Role Play – play exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic, or interpersonal nature.

Learning Happens Here

Tim, Sophie and a few of their friends, inspired by the dramatic play props, decide to go on a ‘pirate picnic’. As they plan their picnic lunch, they stay in character as pirates, planning a treasure hunt that they will embark on once the picnic is done. As they experiment with different roles, Tim, Sophie and their friends learn to take the perspective of others, learn how to communicate effectively, choose materials to build an imaginary setting, and play roles that correspond to these settings.



“In play, the child renounces his immediate impulse, coordinating every act of his behaviour with the rules of the game.”

Lev Vygotsky (Play and its role in the mental development of the child)

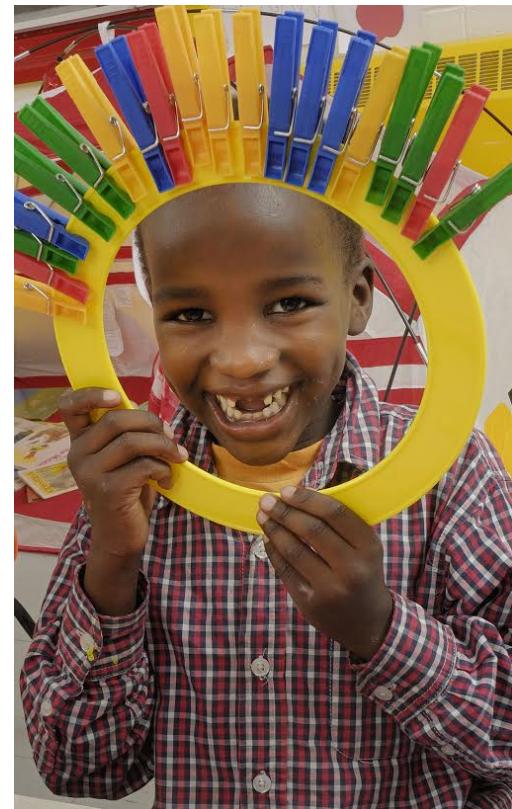
Why is Play Important?

There is an abundance of research indicating that play is essential for healthy physical, social, emotional and mental health. When children play, they are experiencing benefits in all developmental domains. According to Hennigar (2013), the specific benefits include:

- **Intellectual growth:** Play builds on the development of cognitive schema in three important ways:
 1. **Multisensory experiences:** Children use multisensory experiences resulting from their interactions with people and things in their environment to understand the world around them.
 2. **Effective problem solving:** Children who engage in creative play experiences are better at convergent and divergent problem solving.
 3. **Mastering abstract symbolism:** As children pretend play, objects become arbitrary, abstract symbols for real items required for the play. This type of abstract symbolism lays an important foundation for literacy and numeracy which relies on frequent manipulation of abstract symbol systems.



- **Creativity:** Play provides numerous opportunities to strengthen each of the following elements of creativity:
 1. **Personality characteristics:** Creative people have specific personality characteristics that lend themselves to engaging in creative activity. These are mental flexibility, spontaneity, curiosity and persistence. Play provides many daily opportunities to develop these attributes.
 2. **Intellectual processes:** Play provides opportunities for children to approach problems with an open mind and to solve problems using a variety of divergent ways.
 3. **Creative products:** Play helps to stimulate each person's creative talents, allowing them many outlets to bring their ideas to life. These early experiences are necessary for children to grow up to be 'out of the box' thinkers, creating the new products, and practices that society will need and use for the benefit of all.



- **Social Skills:** Play is essential to the development of social skills. During play, children learn about:
 1. **Social roles:** The give and take that occurs during children's play, especially dramatic play, pretend play and social play helps children learn about social roles and the social world around them.
 2. **Decreasing egocentrism:** Play provides many opportunities for children to see things from other's perspectives, thereby decreasing egocentrism. This occurs when children seek to solve conflicts with their peers, when they display empathy with their friends who may be upset, and when they modify or adapt their play in response to the needs of others.
 3. **Underlying rules of social interaction:** Play allows children to learn and practice the principles that underlie all social exchanges such as talking, listening, speaking, taking turns, leading and following.



- **Language and Literacy Development:** Children's oral and written language skills are enhanced through play. Specifically, oral language and literacy is developed through:
 1. **Play with sounds and noises:** Children explore the sounds used to form words and experiment with putting them together in creative and fun ways.
 2. **Play with the linguistic system (Phonological Awareness):** Children are learning to understand how sounds combine to form words and recognize the structure and ordering of words in sentences.
 3. **Spontaneous rhyming and word play:** Through simple rhyming games, children learn about the structure of words and their meanings.
 4. **Play with the conventions of speech:** By using and breaking the rules for conversation, children learn how to communicate effectively.
 5. **Hearing and using new words (Vocabulary Building and Narrative skills):** Playful learning enhances children's vocabulary as compared to more didactic practices such as direct instruction. (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p. xii).

In terms of written language, children's literacy skills¹ are fostered through:

- **Print Awareness and Letter Knowledge:** Playing with letters, sounds and purposeful writing in all areas of the classroom.
- **Print Motivation:** Seeing the purpose of writing and reading as they seek to ask questions and find answers on topics that are of interest to them.



¹ Play-based learning, specifically guided and free play within an inclusive and well equipped classroom, supports literacy development. However, play-based learning is meant to supplement, not replace, other strategies that support reading and writing development in young children.

- **Numeracy Development:** According to the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (CMEC), “Children’s play is representational and provides the foundation for literacy and numeracy” (2014). Play supports numeracy development in many ways by providing children with opportunities to engage in behaviours such as:
 1. Using concrete objects to compare, classify, quantify and sort using several attributes
 2. Constructing relationships among objects
 3. Problem solving, logical and flexible thinking
 4. Patterning, measurement and geometry
 5. Perspective taking



- **Physical Development and Health:** Besides the obvious health benefits of active play, especially active play in an outdoor setting, physical development is supported in the following ways through play:

1. Gross motor development is supported during the primary years through active play and repeated use of the large muscles. Students' movements become more coordinated and they develop a better awareness of body, space, and direction as they climb, swing, run, jump, catch, throw, and engage in vigorous physical activities, both indoors and out.
2. Fine motor development is refined during the primary grades as students cut, glue, lace, button, paint, sculpt, print, draw, build with blocks (large and small), engage in sensory play, put together puzzles and structures, etc.



- **Emotional development:** Play supports the development of self-regulation and emotional development. It helps students with: anxiety, frustration, normal developmental conflicts, traumatic situations, unfamiliar concepts, and overwhelming experiences. As well, play gives students numerous opportunities to feel good about themselves. Because there is no right or wrong way to play, children have successful experiences that positively influence their self-concept (Henniger, 2013, p.134-142). For these reasons, play is therapeutic.



For more information on the many benefits of play, please refer to “Navigating the Early Years: An Early Childhood Learning Framework” (in press). There are examples threaded throughout the Framework that depict how play promotes healthy child development in a variety of settings, including the classroom.

Play for Children with Exceptionalities

All children require ample time, space, and resources to engage in a variety of play activities. With this in mind, educators (and others) need to pay particular attention to the design and layout of the classroom (indoor) and outdoor play space and the delivery of the curriculum.

Universally designed kindergarten curriculum benefits all students. It reflects awareness of the unique nature of each learner and the need to address differences. The specific examples below indicate how the principles of universal design may apply to students with exceptionalities:

- Placement of furniture and equipment (e.g., for children who use a wheelchair, have a mobility disability, and/or for children with sensory impairment);
- Placement of play resources and materials (e.g., for children to easily access, to identify, and locate throughout the room);
- Availability of a variety of developmentally appropriate play resources and materials (e.g., incorporating adaptive or modified equipment for children that are blind or partially sighted, deaf or hard of hearing, and/or have developmental disability); and
- Inclusion of modified materials such as large knob puzzle pieces and pencil grips for children with dexterity disabilities.
- Adapting the rules of a game to allow participation of a child with developmental disability such as having him/her match fewer sets of cards or items in a matching or memory game; and
- Encouraging a child with limited social skills to participate in play by inviting him/her to pass a toy or object to another child or to join an activity in progress rather than expecting him/her to initiate a play interaction.

The individual needs of a student with exceptionalities will be determined through the program planning process as outlined in the *Service Delivery Model for Students with Exceptionalities* (2011). Children with exceptionalities may also receive support from service providers outside of education. Ongoing communication with the family and these service providers is important for initial transition to school and continued coordination of services. This occurs through the ISSP process.



Why Now?

Play-based programming in a kindergarten setting is not a new concept. From the introduction of kindergarten by Friederich Froebel in Germany over 150 years ago, ‘kindergartens’ have incorporated play-based materials and activities in classrooms, recognizing that play is the natural activity of childhood. Yet, over the past few decades kindergarten programming in North America has become less play-based. The research in brain development over the past decade has proven that the early years of a child’s life are essential in terms of brain development and set the stage for learning throughout the school years. However, children’s opportunities to engage in play and play-based learning have diminished. This may be due to a variety of reasons such as: increased screen time (e.g. television, computers, tablets, phones and video-gaming systems many of which are being introduced at earlier and earlier ages); time-crunched parents; and increased levels of participation in adult-organized and adult-initiated extra-curricular events (e.g. music lessons, dance lessons, and organized sports).

Children are experiencing a decrease in opportunities for child-initiated play. As a result, teachers may have young students coming to their classrooms who will not have previous experience in organizing and initiating play episodes without adult assistance. As educator Susan Axelsson says when reflecting on how best to introduce free play into the classroom,

“... but this free play stuff did not come easily for children either... it seems like they are conditioned to seek out an adult to solve their problems... if they have a disagreement, if someone says something they think is not nice, if they fall over... it’s been a process to hand over the power back to the children. Instead of them staring at us when a friend falls, they now go to their friend and comfort them” (Axelsson, 2015).

The introduction of full-day kindergarten in Newfoundland and Labrador gives teachers the opportunity to capitalize on the benefits of play and play-based learning. It provides students with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities, along with the much needed

“Given the evidence, CMEC believes in the intrinsic value and importance of play and its relationship to learning. Educators should intentionally play and create challenging, dynamic, play-based learning opportunities.”

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).

Statement on Play-based Learning.

time to learn through play. Kindergarten teachers will continue to be required to meet curriculum outcomes within their classrooms in a play-based kindergarten program. One of the aims of full-day kindergarten is to ensure that curriculum outcomes are met in a developmentally appropriate and well-provisioned physical, social and educational environment in which the children not only enhance their ability to become competent and capable ‘players’, they are also setting the stage for success as they move through the primary and elementary grades and beyond.

What is Play-Based Pedagogy?

Play-based pedagogy describes an approach where the teacher recognizes that children learn through an active, hands-on, playful environment. In a play-based classroom, the teacher makes decisions about and adjusts the daily schedule, the environment, the materials, interactions and activities based upon the strengths, needs, interests, and input of the students in the classroom, as required, to enhance learning opportunities.



What are the Defining Characteristics of a Play-based Pedagogical Approach?

According to “Navigating the Early Years: An Early Childhood Learning Framework” (in press), play-based learning refers to early childhood learning opportunities that are rich in child-initiated play, especially when it involves the presence of a caring, engaged, and responsive adult. Ongoing planned and spontaneous opportunities for learning through intentional playful interactions are provided by adults in an environment with a variety of developmentally appropriate materials.

“Completely Kindergarten – Kindergarten Curriculum Guide” (2010) describes play and active involvement as being fundamental to a kindergarten program. “Through the process of play, children learn to represent their real and imagined worlds using listening, speaking, reading, writing, role-playing, painting, drawing, building, measuring, estimating and exploring. The kindergarten teacher uses play as an essential learning experience which supports, sustains, facilitates, extends, enhances and enriches the child’s learning. Play promotes the development of the whole child” (p.9).

In addition to the definitions provided in the “Navigating the Early Years: Early Childhood Learning Framework” and the “Completely Kindergarten” curriculum guide, some of the defining characteristics of play-based pedagogical approach, as identified by the play-based pedagogy working group include:

- A child-focused, student-centred approach;
- The classroom environment is seen as a ‘third teacher’, providing an abundance of opportunities for students to explore, imagine, create, and problem-solve through the careful and intentional selection of materials and activities;
- Teachers are co-constructors, co-learners, and co-explorers with students, bringing an attitude of curiosity and openness to the classroom as demonstrated by their questions, interactions and interest in the discoveries in the classroom (indoors and outdoors) throughout the school year;
- Teachers use observation as the place where the learning and planning begins;



- Curriculum outcomes are introduced and met in ways that are purposeful and meaningful to the students, throughout the school year, as the students' play unfolds in both the indoor and outdoor environments;
- Curriculum outcomes are met, in part, as children's interests and questions emerge through play, child-initiated activities, and conversation;
- Teachers have an integral role in the planning, guiding, observing and documenting children's play experiences, seeking out necessary supports, and incorporating/utilizing other essential evidence-based strategies to support individual student learning, as required;
- Teachers following a play-based pedagogical approach are well-versed in the curricular outcomes and are able to present the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the children – 'purposeful learning';
- Teachers and students in a play-based classroom revisit ideas, concepts and lessons, using an integrated curricular approach rather than dividing the curriculum into separate subjects;
- Teachers modify the classroom environment, as needed, to better enable their students to participate in the learning opportunities presented;
- Teachers remain active agents in the indoor and outdoor environments, even during periods of unstructured free-play;
- Play-based classrooms continue to maintain a consistent schedule which allows predictability as well as flexibility; and
- Interactions are respectful among students, classmates and the teacher, with clear expectations, rights and responsibilities being articulated at the beginning of the year and throughout the year.



How Can We Connect Play-based Pedagogy with Current Pedagogies?

A variety of teaching approaches adhere to a philosophy of play-based learning. Classrooms using emergent curriculum, project-based, High Scope®, Creative Curriculum®, and a Reggio-inspired approach are all incorporating play-based learning. Teachers using the K-W-L inquiry-based model of teaching (What do you **Know**? What do you **Want** to know? What have you **Learned**?) or R.A.N. (**R**eading and **A**nalyzing **N**on-**Fiction text) can also be following a play-based practice. Play-based pedagogy is an approach to teaching that provides space, time and opportunity, for students to learn through direct, active, hands-on play with the thoughtful consideration of an attentive adult who guides their learning by expanding and extending on their inquiries and interests. Materials and resources can be added to learning environment, if and as required, to enhance play opportunities for children with exceptionalities. Therefore, any particular pedagogy that adheres to this description is aligned with play-based learning.**



Classrooms where the curriculum is delivered primarily through direct instruction and whole group work would not be consistent with play-based pedagogy. Classrooms where play-time is considered as an activity that happens when the ‘work’ is done would not be considered play-based. Neither would the classroom where ‘play-time’ is orchestrated by the teacher in such a way that children move through their ‘play stations’ in small, teacher-selected groups, transferring from station to station when notified to do so by the ‘ding’ of a timer or at the call of the teacher. Finally, classrooms where there has been little thought put into the provisioning of the environment to sustain play, would not be described as adhering to a play-based pedagogical approach.

It is important to note, however, that there is a place for adult direction and instruction in a play-based classroom. According to Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva “effective classroom environments involve a mix of both play-based activities as well as direct instruction alongside the kind of interactions which guide but

do not dominate children's thinking" (2004). The findings of their research have been summarized by Wood (2007), as follows:

- Effective pedagogues model appropriate language, values and practice, encourage socio-dramatic play, praise, encourage, ask questions, and interact verbally with children.
- Effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and the provision of instructional learning and play environments and routines.
- The most effective settings provide both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities.
- Excellent settings tend to achieve an equal balance between adult-led and child-initiated interactions, play and activities.
- Teachers stimulate children's activity and talk through 'sustained shared thinking' (Wood, 2007).

Sustained shared thinking occurs in adult-and child-initiated activities (including play) when adults and children engage in meaningful discussions that involve co-constructing meaning and understanding.

(Wood, 2007, p.313)



Moving along a continuum from a traditional teaching to a more play-based pedagogical approach requires change in attitude and practice. This will be a gradual change for some teachers as they learn which of their traditional routines and activities align with play-based pedagogy and which ones need to be revised or rethought. As teachers become more comfortable with their role during the play process – at times an observer, at times a facilitator, and at times a play-partner – they will recognize that curricular outcomes are being met in an integrated and complementary way. As children make natural connections to outcomes in their play-based learning, the time teachers spend on traditional adult-directed activities may slowly decrease. Teachers will recognize, as well, that they have a variety of tools and strategies at their disposal, including those related to direct instruction, guided learning, differentiated instruction, and skill-building activities. These strategies can be incorporated into classrooms which adhere to pedagogy of play, as teachers find the balance between teacher-initiated/ adult-led activities, guided play-based learning, and child-initiated play activities.



What is the Role of the Teacher in a Play-based Classroom?

According to the “Completely Kindergarten” (2010) document, “The kindergarten teacher is a facilitator of children’s play, expanding learning, extending activities and designing the environment to support children’s development - acknowledging children’s independence to choose what to play and how to play will support children as they try to make sense of their world. While the element of choice is critical to the kindergarten child’s development, a teacher can monitor the child’s progress and achievement during play. The teacher must recognize when it is best to intervene with appropriate suggestions to scaffold learning experiences and respond to teachable moments” (p.9).

As a result of examining contemporary theoretical trends related to play-based learning, Wood (2007) describes the role of teachers in a play-based classroom as one that includes:

- Planning and resourcing challenging learning environments;
- Supporting children’s learning through planned play activity;
- Extending and supporting children’s spontaneous play;
- Extending and developing children’s language and communication in play;
- Assessing children’s learning through play;
- Ensuring continuity and progression;
- Combining adult-directed and child-initiated activities;
- Emphasizing well-planned, purposeful play (indoors and outdoors);

COMPLETELY KINDERGARTEN

The role of the kindergarten teacher is unique and the effects that the teacher has on the life of a kindergarten child and his/her family cannot be underestimated. It is during this first year of formal schooling that children begin to see themselves as successful and active participants in the school community.

Kindergarten teachers who create caring, respectful and nurturing environments where children and their families are valued play an integral role in supporting children to reach their full potential.

Completely Kindergarten – Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (2010), p.12

- Planning for continuity between play and work;
- Allowing time for children to become engrossed, and work in depth; and
- Engagement between children and adults.

The role of the teacher is integral to supporting children’s learning and development. Teachers provide support (i.e., scaffold) to extend the duration and complexity of children’s play as well as encourage children to incorporate language, literacy, and numeracy within their play. When teachers consider individual children’s abilities, interests and preferences, they create an environment that is engaging for all. Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds in their book “*The Play’s the Thing*” (2011, p.32-96) describe teachers’ roles in play as being:

- Stage Manager – it is up to the teacher to provide enough space, enough materials, and enough time, by arranging the environment so the play can happen.
- Mediator – in modeling and explaining problem-solving skills which children can later use on their own is one of the important and effective roles of the teacher during play.
- Player – teachers move in and out of children’s play to model and mediate. They act as helper, customer, visitor, and so on in order to sustain play while responding to children’s ideas.
- Scribe – the teacher is a collector and organizer of the data that he/she notices while observing the children at play. In addition to observing and documenting the children’s play for purposes of planning and assessment, the teacher can also act as a scribe for the children, using representations, both written and pictorial, to communicate with the children.
- Assessor and Communicator – ongoing observations focusing on children’s abilities – what they can do instead of what they cannot do. Records used for observation and assessment include teacher’s representations – photographs, drawings and written words of children’s play, language and constructions as well as samples of children’s work – paintings, drawings and writings.

- Planner – planning is an emergent process in which play has priority, resulting in an emergent curriculum – one in which both adults and children exercise initiative and make decisions, and, at the same time, meeting outcomes through play-based learning.



The Play Continuum in a Kindergarten Classroom

In the 2009 report, “Crisis in the Kindergarten”, Miller and Almon wrote that “In a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean “anything goes.” It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergarteners need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused on experiential learning guided by teachers” (p.12).



Adapted from: Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2009). Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school. Retrieved from Alliance for Childhood:

http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf

So, with this in mind, the teacher should strive to create a classroom environment that primarily falls under the two central methods described in the continuum depicted above. This means that the classroom provides choices for children throughout the day to learn and explore with a variety of open-ended materials; construction materials; self-correcting materials (e.g., puzzles, shape sorters); sensory materials; and creative materials both indoors and outdoors. The children play in the company of an attentive teacher who has intentionally designed the environment to provoke children's exploration. The teacher observes the children's play, becomes a co-player when necessary to expand or extend children's play; the teacher asks questions and makes comments on the process of play, when appropriate, and documents the learning as it is happening. In addition to the child exploration, occasionally the teacher will provide teacher-led activities (small group or whole group) that are meaningful and relevant to the

topics and interests at hand. Finding the balance between the teacher-led and child-initiated explorations is key to the play-based learning approach.

Play-based Pedagogy in a Multi-Grade Classroom

A teacher in any play-based classroom environment, including a multi-grade classroom, will follow the same principles and practices that are described within this document. In fact, play-based pedagogy, with its emphasis on open-ended materials and design, inquiry-based approach, and reduced emphasis on whole group and direct instruction is ideally suited for the multi-grade classroom. Teachers in a multi-grade environment can see first-hand the many opportunities for scaffolding learning among classmates as the children work together on child-initiated projects and activities, with the more experienced students (or ‘more knowledgeable other’ as described by Vygotsky) providing a model and direction, either directly or indirectly, for the younger, less experienced children.

Although curricular outcomes may vary by grade level, there are commonalities across the primary and elementary grades. These common elements – literacy, numeracy, science and exploration, and social skills – can be supported and enhanced by the many cross-curricular opportunities that are presented in classroom projects and play-based learning activities.



Play-based Pedagogy in a French Immersion Classroom

French Immersion teachers in a play-based environment can sometimes struggle with finding a balance between providing direct instruction to second language learners and providing plenty of time for child-initiated, open-ended play experiences. The French language should be modelled by the teacher through songs, rhymes, short chants and repetitive play activities in whole group situations and then supported and guided in the learning areas. The class is brought together frequently, for periods of short duration, to share learning and practice key words and structures. The teacher's role is to reinforce the language in the learning areas, while engaging in the play and dialogue with individual or small groups of students.

“I recognized that when the demonstration of skill – such as using new French vocabulary – was experienced in an authentic situation and in context with my students’ interests, they were far more able to remember and use the vocabulary in authentic ways.”

Fortier, 2014



It is key to remember, however, that children in a French Immersion program are active learners and ‘active creators of knowledge’ (Fortier, 2014) as much as children in the English Kindergarten stream. Paula Fortier, in her 2014 article entitled “The Ups and Downs of a French Immersion Kindergarten Teacher: My Journey Toward an Inquiry-Based Approach to Teaching” (Fortier, 2014), describes the transformation of her teaching practice from a traditional, curriculum-driven approach to one that was more play-based and constructivist through a description of a learning journey with her kindergarten students on the subject of reptiles which arose after the death of a much-loved classroom pet. “I recognized that when the demonstration of skill – such as using new French vocabulary – was experienced in an authentic situation and in context with my students’ interests, they were far more able

to remember and use the vocabulary in authentic ways. My focus was more on the process of learning and the ongoing learning that was happening rather than simply the end result. Yet our end result was wonderful! We ended up presenting a learning expo on reptiles to our families and school community and we covered many of the curricular outcomes along the way. This experience was driven by students, yet I could have easily missed the opportunity” (p.136).

Play-based Pedagogy as a Tool for Inclusive Education and Diversity

Kindergarten classrooms serve a wide range of children with various needs, backgrounds, abilities, gender, cultures, languages, and interests. Play-based pedagogy is well suited to supporting diversity and inclusive education, as it incorporates the interests, insights and backgrounds of all the children.

Classroom environments that embrace a play-based pedagogy are responsive to the individual strengths and needs of children which lead to a naturally inclusive environment. Teachers who promote inclusive education find the balance between direct instruction and child-led activities, recognizing that play is at the core of their pedagogical approach. “Play offers multiple opportunities for children to come together as learners, in a stimulating and inclusive setting. In their play and interactions, children learn about and practice their roles and responsibilities as members of a learning community. When educators offer appropriate support to children’s play, they establish an environment that nurtures holistic learning” (Ministry of Saskatchewan, 2010, p.5).

Teachers meet children where they are and will use their skills in observation and assessment to inform their teaching and play-based learning activities. For example, teachers may have some children who are already reading in kindergarten and others who are engaged primarily in pre-literacy behaviours. Teachers who employ a play-based pedagogical approach in their classrooms will have the opportunity to be responsive to all of their students in ways that are more meaningful and effective. Within a play-based learning environment, teachers are also able to modify the environment and resources routinely to promote optimal learning experiences for all students based on individual development, interests, and preferences—i.e., their strengths and needs.

Communication, collaboration, partnerships, and transition planning are essential processes to effective pedagogy and essential for inclusive education. Each is briefly defined below:

- Communication - is the imparting or exchanging of information for the purpose of achieving a common understanding or work towards a common goal. Communication may be verbal, written or through a medium such as a video.

- Collaboration - occurs when two or more people are working together to create or achieve the same purpose or common goal.
- Partnership - is an agreement between two or more individuals or groups where each contributes by providing resources – e.g., time, intellect, funding – to a common goal for mutual benefit.
- Transition planning - involves the changes that children encounter from one setting to another. As children develop they move or transition, from one learning environment or setting to a new one – this happens many times in childhood and throughout life. Many times, transitioning involves a process of change that requires children to adapt their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to meet new expectations. While transition is important for all children, transition for children with exceptionalities requires extra care and planning.



Play-based Pedagogy and Reading Instruction

“Play represents a huge opportunity to create a foundation for the future literacy lives of our children” (Burke, 2011, p.4). Children enter the kindergarten year with varying levels of comfort, interest and familiarity with language and literacy skills. During this first year of formal schooling, teachers will provide opportunities for children to experience oral and written language in ways that are functional and meaningful to them. Play-based learning environments can support children’s emerging literacy development through conversation, imagination, and dramatic play as well as supporting and encouraging writing and reading throughout the day and in all areas of the classroom. Play-based learning environments also provide developmentally appropriate experiences and opportunities for children to develop as proficient readers and writers, supplemented with ongoing playful learning opportunities for generalization as children acquire these skills. As Kontovourki and Siegel state in their 2009 article, Examining Play Within a Mandated Literacy Curriculum, “...if teachers take play seriously, that is, as a way to learn more about children and their literacies, they may come to treat it as a valuable resource for child and teacher learning” (p.37). Adopting a play-based pedagogical approach, however, does not mean the exclusion of direct instruction, especially as it pertains to the introduction of prerequisite skills necessary for reading and writing. Skilled teachers will use all the tools available to them during these early years of schooling to help build a solid foundation of literacy, including many strategies that promote skill development in the key areas of early literacy as described the National Early Literacy Panel (2002) and Konza (2014) – print motivation, vocabulary, print awareness, narrative skills, letter knowledge and phonological awareness. Knowing how and when to incorporate direct instruction in a play-based classroom takes a certain level of skill and confidence on behalf of the kindergarten teacher. The teacher must have a solid understanding of the research on early reading development and what pedagogies are found to most effectively support specific dimensions of reading development. Thus, the teacher can balance play pedagogy with other forms of instruction, to reflect an evidence-based approach.



Finding the balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated activities in a play-based classroom calls for teachers to “know each child well and to differentiate their teaching methods to meet individual needs” (Miller and Almon, 2009, p.53).

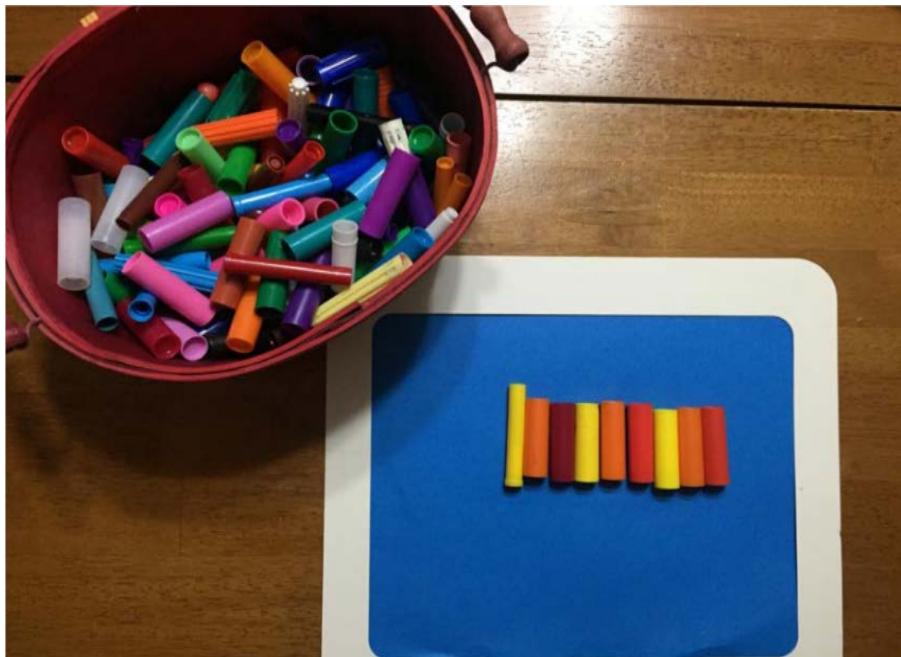
Play-based Pedagogy and Numeracy

“...young children do not only memorize...and they do not only employ mechanical skills. They do not operate only on a ‘concrete’ level. Instead, we can say fairly that young children are splendid little mathematicians. They deal spontaneously and sometimes joyfully with mathematical ideas. This is what real mathematicians do” (Ginsburg, 2008, p.55).



Children use various numeracy strategies during the early years. These strategies – classification, seriation, patterning, measurement, geometry, and number concept – can be supported and strengthened in a play-based program throughout the school day and in all areas of the classroom. For example, children who put objects that have similar characteristics into groups are demonstrating competence in the area of classification. “Although this cognitive skill may seem simple to us as adults, children require considerable practice and time to understand classification. Classification skills are fundamental to many mathematical concepts such as understanding higher mathematical skills such as organizing sets or understanding groupings of ‘tens’ and ‘ones’” (Hennigar, 2013, p.389). Examples of activities that encourage classification in a play-based kindergarten classroom include exploring classroom collections, building in the block area, and sorting children into groups according to a certain attribute, e.g., ‘those who like dogs the best, those who like cats the best.’

Classroom collections, math games, nature walks, block play, stringing beads, pattern blocks, music (e.g. songs, skipping and clapping games), all provide children with the opportunity to engage in numeracy and mathematics in ways that are meaningful to them. When children have the opportunity to engage in materials and activities that provide hands-on, concrete mathematical experiences, they begin to construct an understanding of number concepts, including skills in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, that will provide a solid foundation for their future learning in this area. When they are presented with 'real-world' problems that involve mathematical thinking, e.g., "How can I make my block tower sturdy?" or "How can we all have an equal number of playing cards?" they are developing the essential skills of discovery, logical thinking, interpretation and problem solving that will deepen their understanding of numeracy and mathematics. These play-based activities will help to give children a perspective and a language that will support their ability to think abstractly, allowing them to transfer this thinking to other situations, all of which supports the development of numeracy during the early school years.



What Common Practices Should Be Seen in a Play-based Classroom?

The following list of common practices was developed by the NL play-based pedagogy working group during their discussions on what common practices would be followed in play-based Kindergarten classrooms throughout the province:

- Teachers have a thorough understanding of all kindergarten outcomes, child development, and the play-based approach to children's learning;
- Teachers practice documentation and reflective practice;
- Teachers plan using an emergent approach, incorporating and collaborating with children's ideas, activities and interests. Students are involved in the planning process – the teacher and students become co-constructors of knowledge and partners in the learning process;
- Curriculum topics and objectives are introduced and explored using an integrated curriculum model of delivery rather than a subject-specific approach;
- Students are provided with extended periods of time for exploration and play;
- Teachers make use of the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, to provoke, extend, and enhance learning;
- Literacy and numeracy are integrated into every area of the learning and the environment;
- Teachers use observation and conversation as the basis for their documentation of learning in the classroom;
- Teachers stimulate children's activity and talk through 'sustained shared thinking';



- There is a mix of both teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities throughout the week; and
- There is a mix of large group, small group activities as well as individual learning and child-initiated activities.
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If the children and youth of a nation are afforded the opportunity to develop their capacities to the fullest, if they are given the knowledge to understand the world and the wisdom to change it, then the prospects for the future are bright –
Bronfenbrenner

What is the Role of the Physical Environment in a Play-based Classroom?

“We pretend to be in a rocket ship and we are going to another planet and we run around and we....we make a list of what we need to bring first, though.”

(Child, age 5, as quoted in Burke, 2011)

The classroom environment, both indoors and outdoors, is where the teacher sets the stage for play-based learning. When designing the environment, the teacher must consider what values are to be communicated through the classroom design. The classroom sets the tone and the expectations for what the children will be doing and seeing and how they will be behaving during the school day. If the tone is one where exploration, (safe) risk and social interactions are welcomed and encouraged, then that is what will happen. Children’s play will flourish and teachers and children will view themselves as active co-constructors of knowledge.

If the tone is one where it becomes obvious that the teacher leads and the children follow, then that is what will happen. Children will soon learn that this space is not one where their questions and explorations are valued. They will learn to stop, wait, and ask the teacher when they need help. They will learn that they are dependent, not independent; that they need to be ‘taught’; that they are not competent and capable learners. The tone will be set for them for that school year and, perhaps, years to come.

The physical environment has been called “The Third Teacher”. This concept comes from the Reggio Emilia preschools in Northern Italy, founded by Loris Malaguzzi after World War II. It means that children learn as much from their environment as they do from teachers and their peers. It speaks to the importance of the care and attention that must be paid when designing an environment that intentionally supports learning through play. It is about the materials, the design, and the use of the physical space and also the design of the school day.

All of us learn best in active, hands-on environments, regardless of our age. This is especially true for children – they need to be in environments, both indoors and outdoors, where they can explore freely, using all of their senses – smell, taste, touch, hearing and seeing. Using their senses is how children construct their own knowledge and make sense of the world around them. Richard Louv, author of the ground-breaking book, “Last Child in the

Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" (2005), states that "Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of the senses."

Particular attention ought to be given to link "nature" into the learning experience. This can be done by bringing natural elements such as pebbles, leaves, twigs, beach treasures, pine cones, etc. into the classroom for use as either provocation items or "loose parts" to stimulate children's interest, encourage creative expression, and/or to provide natural links to curriculum outcomes (e.g., counting, sorting and classifying).

With outdoor play, children have opportunities to play differently. They expend their energy through gross motor activities such as running, jumping or skipping; they learn about, incorporate and generalize curriculum outcomes to a natural setting (e.g., learning about living things from a book vs. experiences in real life); and they have further opportunities to engage in the different types and categories of play. Just as with playing indoors, children benefit from creating their own play experiences outdoors in free, unstructured play that develops imagination, problem solving, collaboration, and creativity. The outdoor environment is rich with play possibilities.

Children require many opportunities to enhance and extend their learning outdoors. While play happens naturally when children are outside, teachers can also extend and plan for other play experiences outdoors. By incorporating materials such as sand or water, as well as allowing opportunity and space for creative expression, story-time and dramatic play in the school yard, the learning environment is expanded. Activities such as scavenger hunts, nature walks or interactive games like "I Spy" are wonderful extensions of outdoor play. Curriculum outcomes can be realized in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments.

Incorporating outdoor play into the regular school day encourages respect for the natural environment and supports the social, emotional and physical well-being and development of all children. Aboriginal children, for example, are taught the importance of using the natural environment as a place for learning and their relationship with nature is an accepted part of their culture. The natural environment has been used since time immemorial as a teaching tool for Aboriginal children, resulting in a strong sense of connection to the land. Beginning at a very young age, all children will benefit from learning that the natural environment is important, must be respected, and preserved for future use. By promoting access to outdoor play opportunities, the teacher is reaffirming the value of outside play, supporting diversity and inclusion, promoting health, and enhancing curriculum connections to everyday experiences.

What Does Assessment Look Like in a Play-based Environment?

The “Completely Curriculum Guide” (2010) outlines the assessment tools and techniques to be used in a play-based Kindergarten environment. These are, as follows:

- Documenting observations in the classroom:
 - Daily observations may be planned and spontaneous to ensure that all learning experiences that may emerge from a particular activity are included.
 - Documentation means keeping a record of what is observed while students are engaged in a learning experience while playing and exploring. Documentation can include the following:
 - Samples of students’ artwork, writing and drawing;
 - Photographs; and/or
 - Video/audio tapes.
 - All documentation should include a title, photos or sketches of children’s work, children’s illustrations of the experience and a written interpretation of the learning from the teacher’s perspective. Including the children’s interpretation of the learning as well, is a way to further engage both children and families in the classroom learning.



- Anecdotal notes or short narrative descriptions of observations in the classroom - these notes can be written ‘in the moment’ using jot notes or ‘sticky notes’ and then transferred to a more permanent place (notebook, binder, computer) at a later time.
- Photographs, videotapes and audio recordings - can be very useful when assessing children’s learning. These, combined with anecdotal records and other forms of documentation, can provide a very rich and meaningful way of assessing children’s progress and achievement.



- Self-assessment/student reflection – student reflections can include audio, video or printed records and work samples. Self-reflection allows students the opportunity to set individual goals for themselves by reflecting on their own work.
- Checklists – are an efficient and effective tool for assessment when they assess specific curriculum outcomes pertaining to a topic. They are not a replacement for anecdotal records.
- Work samples and portfolios – portfolios containing children’s work samples show a progression of growth in a child’s development over time. They allow teachers and families to focus on what a child can do rather than what he/she is not doing.



- Conferencing – periods of time assigned for planned conversations with individual children or small groups are valuable in providing insight on children’s thinking processes and provide valuable information about a child’s learning.
 - Documentation can be interpreted with and for children and families through the use of documentation displays of individual children’s work or the work of several children. Documentation can be displayed in various ways including:
 - Display boards;
 - Bulletin board/Wall displays;
 - Photo albums;
 - Portfolios;
 - Scrap books;
 - Websites (secure, password protected);
 - Emails; and/or,
 - Newsletters.



Conclusion

The introduction of full-day kindergarten in schools throughout Newfoundland and Labrador brings with it an exciting opportunity to highlight the importance of play-based learning during the early years. Teachers have always recognized the important role of play in children's lives. Now they will be able to utilize best practices in play-based pedagogy to support and enhance their learning environments.

Children will have the opportunity to grow and develop in responsive, inclusive classrooms that are uniquely designed for them, allowing them to interact in holistic and authentic environments that will place them in the centre of their own learning. Teachers will be able to recognize the discoveries being made by children as they construct their own knowledge in their own ways. Curriculum objectives will be met in an integrated program, allowing for depth as well as breadth as children make meaning from the world around them.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) is committed to supporting teachers along their journey to implement best practices in play-based learning. Through discussion and ongoing professional development, the Department of EECD staff, school district personnel, administrators, teachers, and others within the education system as well as external service providers (e.g., early childhood educators, early intervention staff, allied health professionals), parents/caregivers and other family members work together to provide young learners with the best environments they can have during the all-important early years.



Further information on a variety of topics presented within this document can be found at the professional learning site for teachers at <https://www.cdli.ca/sdm>.

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Inclusive Education Resources

For further information on transition planning in K-12, see Transition guidelines at:

http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/transition_guidelines.docx.

Supporting documents for these guidelines include the following:

- The plan –
http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/transition_plan_students_exceptionalities.docx
- Further explanation –
http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/info_accompany_transition_guidelines_plan.doc
- Additional resources –
http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/resources_support_really_final.docx

Further information on inclusive education in Newfoundland and Labrador can be found at:

<http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/inclusion.html>

The Service Delivery Model for Students with Exceptionalities (K-12) supports a philosophy of inclusive education and provides examples of the processes defined above. Information on this model can be found at: <https://www.cdli.ca/resources/sdm/DocumentSection/SDM.pdf>; the forms associated with this document are available at <https://www.cdli.ca/resources/sdm/DocumentSection/SDMappendixC.pdf>.

For information about transitioning children with exceptionalities from regulated child care into K-12, see <http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/publications/childcare/index.html>.

Additional Resources

Additional Book Resources:

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National Early Literacy Panel Report (Full Report):

https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pages/pubs_details.aspx?pubs_id=5750

National Early Literacy Panel Report (Executive Summary):

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508381.pdf> or

<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/documents/NELPSummary.pdf>

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Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (Teacher’s Guide)

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Additional Online Resources:

Child Care Services Documents <http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/publications/childcare/index.html>

Images of Learning Project <http://imageoflearningproject.com/>

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Transform Ed: Transforming our Learning Environment into a Space of Possibilities

<http://myclassroomtransformation.blogspot.ca/>

Learning Starts with Play.

that's the
Power
of Play!



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