

“Yes, You Are Allowed To Do That!” One Principal’s Mission to Bring Back Play in School

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by Brett Gustafson

As a principal for the last 13 years, I have come to the realization that the biggest threat to the emotional and academic well-being of our children is me – maybe not me personally but principals. Principals are telling teachers to do away with play in school because, “We need to be more academic.” The problem is that all the data and the research out there proves that statement 100% false. Play in all grades, especially the early grades, is necessary for students’ emotional, behavioral and academic success. I am heartbroken to hear parents in my town tell me “kindergarten is too serious” or “my child was labeled ADHD because he can’t sit in kindergarten.” I am here to tell principals we need to become part of the solution. This account is one more piece of evidence in a growing pile of data that shows children learn best through play.

Four years ago I was hired to turn around a school that was dubbed “The Worst School in the State” by a, then, assistant superintendent. I discovered the principal before me made all kindergarten teachers throw out their sand tables, kitchen centers, and blocks to make the early years more academic. At that time, less than 30% of kindergarten students met the state benchmark for early reading proficiency and there was 350 out of school suspensions in a school of 500 students. Clearly, the get tough, “no excuses” policies were not working.



Many principals of a chronically underperforming school probably would have continued to push for “more academic” lessons in the early grades, because most principals do not come from early childhood settings. They are not aware of the research nor do they have any personal experience working with young children.

They think of kindergarteners as mini-fifth graders who should sit in their seats and get to work. I am fortunate enough to have a wife who is an early childhood expert who hands me articles to read about play in school and proudly boasts she can teach every Common Core State Standard for kindergarten math in the block center. With her guidance, I performed a little experiment with my kindergarten teachers. The teachers and I read articles on the need for play in the classroom and I encouraged them to create multiple opportunities for students to engage in interactive play throughout the day. One teacher, who seemed like she was on a hidden camera show, asked, “Wait, we’re allowed to play in the classroom?” It is heartbreaking that the question needed to be asked, but, in most schools, teachers are told explicitly not to let the kids play or “play is for recess.” I reassured her, “Yes, you are allowed to do that.”

Remarkably, there was one teacher on the grade that wanted nothing to do with this “experiment,” so she became the control group and life in her class stayed much as it had last few years according to district recommendations. Two of my kindergarten teachers embraced the idea of play in the classroom and flourished. Jessica Scire, who had been teaching for five years, seemed a bit depressed with her class prior to the experiment, but then, with a big smile, declared, “This is what I was went to school for. This is why I went into teaching.” She created a play center with a pizza restaurant where each day students created scenes from the restaurant that included wait staff taking orders on paper, delivery drivers, and dinner conversation. Lisette Garcia was the other teacher who later told me of her subversion, “I’ve been doing play even when we weren’t supposed to because I knew



my kids needed it.” Now, with the blessing of the principal, her kitchen center was brought to its glory. She shared, “It builds their vocabulary, especially for my ELL students.” Throughout the year, Scire and Garcia incorporated elements of movement, song, and play in all their subjects and the kids thrived.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there was practically zero office referrals in the two kindergarten classes that incorporated play in their lessons. The students were more engaged and they were allowed to move around the classroom in a manner appropriate for five-year-olds. The control group class, on the other hand, had practically a referral a day and I was forced to send more adults into that class to intervene with students who had so called “problem behaviors.”

What was surprising to some was the incredible academic gains the two play classes made this year. In the class where they created stories in the pizza restaurant, 67% met the state benchmark for kindergarten reading. In the class with a vocabulary-rich kitchen center, 61% met benchmark and that includes a high number of students whose first language is not English. These were the highest reading scores in the school’s history. The teacher who wanted to be “more academic” had just 35% of her students scoring at benchmark.



Next year, we are working on expanding play and movement to all four classes in kindergarten and all four classes in first grade. It is clear to me, as it should be to all principals, that play is a necessary component of learning. This should come as no surprise to early childhood educators but many elementary principals are slow to embrace. I share this account with *Defending The Early Years* not to boast “Look how great I am!” because, had it not been my wife (who worked with Senior DEY Advisor Dr. Diane Levin in college), I might not have been so quick to try this experiment this year. I share this because I know there are many well-intentioned principals out there who don’t have the early childhood background to know how crucial play is for learning. Please share this with them to let them know, “Yes, you are allowed to do that.”

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