PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION GUIDE

By Lois Brown Easton
Using this guide

This discussion guide is intended to assist Kappan readers who want to use articles in staff meetings or university classroom discussions.

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Making play work for education

By Deena Skolnick Weisberg, Audrey K. Kittredge, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and David Klahr

*Phi Delta Kappan, 96 (8), 8-13*

**OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE**

The authors demonstrate how curriculum related to the Common Core State Standards in preschool programs is compatible with the need for developmentally appropriate pedagogy through guided play.

**KEY POINTS**

- Guided play bridges the artificial division between play and learning.
- Guided play is different from free play during which children select play materials and devise moves without adult intervention.
- Free play enhances children’s social skills, self-regulation, and creativity.
- Without guidance, however, play may not help students acquire other skills or information.
- This chart compares free play, guided play, and direct instruction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Free Play</th>
<th>Guided Play</th>
<th>Direct Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiated by</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Teacher/Child</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed by</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Teacher/Child</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Guided play that is child-initiated but guided by the teacher is co-opted play; the teacher takes over what was initiated by the child.
- The best form of guided play is a blend of teacher initiation (initial structure) that becomes child-directed, so that children have control of the action.
- In guided play — such as a museum exhibit with interactive aspects — teachers prepare the environment, including scaffolding as play occurs.
- Guided play involves initial selection of objects, open-ended questions, and “subtle attentional focusing.”
- Guided play balances freedom and structure and is respectful of children’s choices.
- Studies show that children learn and retain more (sometimes dramatically more) through guided play than they do through direct instruction.
- In guided play, children are likely to be active learners, exploring and retaining ideas better than they would with direct teaching.
- The authors suggest a solution to the problem of focusing attention versus stifling exploration: Teachers can nudge children in a particular direction and then let them choose what to do.
- More research is needed about how guided play varies across ages and content areas.
- Guided play may even work with adults who relish an active, engaging environment, such as gaming.

**DEEPEN YOUR THINKING**

1. What do you remember about play in preschool or kindergarten?
2. What do you know about the current approach to play in today’s preschools and kindergartens?

3. To what extent should content related to the Common Core State Standards be taught in preschool? In what ways should it be taught? What methods should be avoided?

4. What do you know about developmentally appropriate pedagogy, especially as it relates to preschool or kindergarten?

5. What examples come to mind when you think of “free play”? To what extent can teachers rely on free play for learning content?

6. What examples come to mind when you think of teacher-initiated and directed play?

7. What happens when children initiate play but teachers direct what happens during play? What examples come to mind as you think about this situation?

8. What examples come to mind as you think about adult-initiated play that is then child-driven?

9. What can a teacher do to guide play? What should a teacher avoid?

10. Why would children enjoy and learn from guided play (adult-initiated and child-driven)?

11. What if children do not do what the teacher expects during guided play? What should the teacher do?

12. How can teachers balance freedom and structure in play?

EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use this variation of the Say Something Protocol to discuss this article through a quote you select from the set of quotes below.

Say Something Protocol

1. If your group is larger than 5, divide into smaller groups of 3-4. Decide which person will go first, next, etc.

2. Give time for members of the group to read through the quotes and select one. Give additional time for group members to think about what they want to say to relate the article to the selected quote.

3. Begin with the first person; this person should take 2-3 minutes to say something about the article and the selected quote.

4. Each of the next participants, in turn, “receives” what the first person has said by saying something themselves about it; in 1-2 minutes, they may paraphrase, expand, extend, provide examples, define, describe, or add a personal comment related to what the first person has said.

5. After each participant has said something about what the first person said, the first person gets 1-2 minutes to say something more — perhaps a summary or conclusion, perhaps a question for the whole group to contemplate.

6. Repeat steps 3-5 with each person in the group.

7. At the end of the Say Something Protocol, have the group debrief its work and thinking. What went well in the protocol? What was frustrating about the protocol? How could the protocol be improved? To what extent was understanding of the article deepened by the protocol?

Set of quotes

Personally, I’m always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.
— Winston Churchill

The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.
— Robert Maynard Hutchins

What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child.
— George Bernard Shaw

Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?
— Ronald Reagan
The secret of education is respecting the pupil.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The best teacher is not necessarily the one who possesses the most knowledge, but the one who most effectively enables his students to believe in their ability to learn.
— Norman Cousins

Too often, we give children answers to remember rather than problems to solve.
— Roger Lewis

Give a child an inch and he’ll think he’s a ruler.
— Sam Levenson

You can teach a student a lesson for a day, but if you can teach him to learn by creating curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives.
— Clay P. Bedford

It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.
— Albert Einstein

Don’t tell them how to do it, show them how to do it, and don’t say a word. If you tell them, they’ll watch your lips move. If you show them, they’ll want to do it themselves. . . .
— Marie Montessori

To know how to suggest is the great art of teaching. To attain it, we must be able to guess what will interest; we must learn to read the childish soul as we might a piece of music.
— H.F. Amiel

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.
— Chinese Proverb

Children have to be educated, but they have also to be left to educate themselves.
— Abbé Dimnet

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.
— William Arthur Ward

In teaching, it is the method and not the content that is the message . . . the drawing out, not the pumping in.
— Ashley Montague

I hear, and I forget. I see and remember. I do, and I understand.
— Chinese Proverb

It is nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of enquiry.
— Albert Einstein
All rigor and no play is no way to improve learning

By Karen Wohlwend and Kylie Peppler

*Phi Delta Kappan, 96 (8), 22-26*

**OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE**

The authors describe the use of playshops in early childhood education as an example of two premises: Work and play are not mutually exclusive, and they interact and expand learning.

**KEY POINTS**

- Even in the early grades, teacher-led instruction is replacing play based on the assumption that children need rigorous, content-centered work toward standards.
- The authors suggest that educators must consider new technologies for learning that include some aspect of play — counter to the assumption that play and work are opposites — and expand learning to include collaboration, the arts, and play.
- They offer playshops as an example of playful and rigorous learning.

Playshops are built on the Makerspace model that is a community-based (sometimes college/university) real or virtual place “where people gather to share resources and knowledge, work on projects, network, and build” (net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli7095.pdf).

- Playshops, such as Design Playshop with Squishy Circuits, combine literacy, the arts, technology, and the sciences for collaborative play and learning.
- Playshops expand and connect disciplinary learning and incorporate new learning tools through technology.
- The Design Playshop model positively affects:
  - Technology and “minds-on” STEM learning;
  - Inventive learning and pretend play;
  - Design and creative learning (making artifacts and texts);
  - Collaborative learning; and
  - Inviting and sustaining diverse participation.
- The authors maintain that the college- and career-ready goal of the Common Core can be met through “play, design, collaboration, and new technologies.”
- Play is neither frivolous nor extra-curricular; it helps students explore and engage in complexities.

**DEEPEN YOUR THINKING**

1. In your experience, what is the relationship among these three terms: rigor, play, work?
2. What dichotomies or polarities, such as whole language and phonics, have affected educational policy making and practices?
3. How have these dichotomies been resolved? To what extent has the pendulum swung between these dichotomies? Where is the pendulum now?
4. In what sense are the assumptions about rigor, work, play, and frivolity a “zero-sum game”?
5. How has the concept of play in education been treated throughout history? How has it been treated in different cultures? How have a variety of educators — Dewey or Montessori, for example — conceptualized play?

6. What are some possible roles of play today in terms of learning the Common Core standards? What, for example, could be the roles of dramatic play, craft making, invention, pretending, etc. in terms of achieving the standards?

7. What do you know about makerspaces?

8. What do you imagine happens when young children engage in Design Playshop with Squishy Circuits? What content are they learning? How might they be playing?

9. How is collaboration an important part of play?

10. What kinds of technologies lend themselves to children’s play?

11. How can play engage students and help them persist in learning?

12. How does play accommodate individual differences?

**EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

The authors of this article describe what education coach and author Jane A.G. Kise calls “polarity thinking.” In her book *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking in Schools* (Corwin & Learning Forward, 2014), Kise makes the case that educational reform efforts often fail because of either/or thinking. Think of the whole language versus phonics struggle. Or consider new math versus old math. Or standards versus individualization. Homogeneous grouping versus heterogeneous grouping. You can probably think of other concepts that educators and policy makers polarize.

Kise shows how seemingly conflicting ideas can be probed to yield new ways of thinking about reform. One of the tools she provides in her 2014 book is a four-square template for thinking (p. 144):

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greater Purpose Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive results of X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative results of over-focus on X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deeper Fear
```

Use the following variation on Kise’s steps related to this template (pp. 144-151) to address the rigor versus play issue that is the basis for this article. First, prepare four separate sheets of chart paper, each one labeled with one of the quadrants above:

- Positive results of rigor
- Positive results of play.
- Negative results of over-focus on rigor
- Negative results of over-focus on play.

Mount these pieces of chart paper around the room. Provide markers near each placement.

1. **See it.** In this step, discuss with your colleagues, what you see when you think of rigor. Also discuss what you see when you think of play. Also address the following permutations of the dichotomy:
   a. Is rigor versus play an ongoing issue? Has the issue gone back and forth between the two polarities?
   b. Are the two “sides” interdependent? Are they like breathing (exhaling and inhaling)?
   c. Do we need both “sides” — rigor and play — eventually?
   d. What has happened in terms of past attempts to reconcile rigor and play?

2. **Map it.** Divide the whole group into four groups that will rotate among the pieces of chart paper. Start groups at one of the
pieces of chart paper and, after 3-5 minutes of brainstorming and writing ideas related to the label on the chart paper, have them rotate to the next piece of chart paper. They should read and discuss what is already written on the new chart paper before adding their own ideas or modifying what’s there. Continue the rotation until all four groups have worked on each of the pieces of chart paper.

3. **Summarize it.** Groups should remain at their last station and summarize the three or four key ideas that are on the piece of chart paper at that station. They should label the new piece of chart paper according to the template (for example, “Positive results of rigor”) and make bullet points of their three or four key ideas.

4. **Place it.** Groups should place their summaries so that they match the four-square template.

5. **Identify deeper fear.** The group should then discuss “What is our deeper fear about rigor? What is our deeper fear about play?” For example, they may decide that their deeper fear about rigor is that some students’ learning needs may not be met. A recorder for the group should capture the group’s deeper fears about both rigor and play.

6. **Identify greater purpose statements.** The group should then consider this question: “Why is it worthwhile for children to experience both rigor and play in schools?” A recorder for the group should capture the group’s greater purpose statements.

7. **Assess current status.** The group should discuss the following questions about the current status of the polarity in their schools or districts:
   a. What is more important — rigor or play — in our school or district now?
   b. What is the trend?
   c. Is the focus “virtuous” or “vicious”? That is, according to Kise, does it get to the “upside of both” or “over focus on one pole to the neglect of the other” (p. 147)?
   d. How would different stakeholders (such as parents of kindergartners) see the polarities?
   e. Was the polarity between rigor and play different five years ago? Ten?
   f. Is it likely to be different in two years? Five?
   g. How might self-correction play a part in the differences?

8. **Learn.** Continue the dialogue by considering the policies, practices, strategies, or beliefs that led to the current situation regarding rigor and play. Also discuss whether over- or under-corrective activities have played a part in the current situation. Finally, discuss how the school or district can achieve the best of both poles (rigor and play).

9. **Leverage.** Finally, the group should discuss two things: action steps and “early warning signs.” The action steps should be based on making sure that both polarities are optimized, using high-leverage (or potent) actions. The “early warning signs” indicate that one of the polarities is being achieved at the loss of the other polarity.

10. **Debrief.** Have participants discuss the entire process, especially the map it step. Have them share insights as well as questions or concerns.
OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE

Board games and other forms of guided play can enhance the development of the Common Core mathematics standards.

KEY POINTS

- The authors report that many kindergarten students have no time for free play because they have to learn an academic curriculum related to the Common Core State Standards.
- However, the kindergarten standards focus on two areas that lend themselves to play: representing, relating, and operating on whole numbers and describing shapes and values.
- In research studies, Head Start children who played a numerical version of Chutes and Ladders improved their knowledge of numbers more than those who played a color version.
- Children who use board games and blocks in guided play take an active role in their learning.
- Guided play helps all students build foundational mathematics skills and is also appropriate for extended learning and interventions.
- The authors describe how preservice teachers can be helped to see that children can learn Common Core mathematics skills through games.
- The authors offer five suggestions for teachers who want to incorporate games into their instruction:
  1. Research already existing playful curriculum materials such as building blocks.
  2. Consider current children’s games as possible tools for mathematics learning.
  3. Extend math talk and math thinking into other content, such as language arts through reading and discussing the numbers in a book.
  4. Encourage students to work together to figure out the mathematics of an activity (such as dividing art supplies).
  5. Share with parents how they can talk about mathematics while playing games at home or engaging in other home activities.

DEEPEN YOUR THINKING

1. What games did you play as a child that have some connection to mathematics (numbers, counting, shapes, and spaces)?
2. To what extent do you think that games make learning more memorable? To what extent do you think games help students transfer and apply mathematics skills?
3. What do preservice teachers need to learn about games to help children learn the foundations of mathematics?
4. How do children cooperate and collaborate? How do they help each other learn?
5. What kind of game would you develop to help young children learn mathematical concepts?
6. How can games be differentiated for use in a diverse classroom?
7. How can mathematics be integrated into language arts? Science or social studies? Art, drama, music?

8. How can parents be encouraged to play with mathematics with their children? What everyday activities can you think of that would help parents and their children use the language and concepts of mathematics?

**EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

With colleagues, brainstorm a list of children's games. Include card games such as "Go Fish," board games such as "Chutes and Ladders" or "Candyland" and active games such as hopscotch, four square, or building with blocks.

Then, consider the following kindergarten Common Core standards. Which of these standards could be learned, practiced, and/or applied through the games? Consider how the teacher would guide the learning towards the standard by asking questions or setting up a scenario.

**Overview of kindergarten mathematics standards**

**Counting and cardinality**
- Know number names and the count sequence.
- Count to tell the number of objects.
- Compare numbers.

**Operations and algebraic thinking**
- Understand addition as putting together and adding to, and understand subtraction as taking apart and taking from.

**Number and operations in base ten**
- Work with numbers 11-19 to gain foundations for place value.

**Measurement and data**
- Describe and compare measurable attributes.
- Classify objects and count the number of objects in categories.

**Geometry**
- Identify and describe shapes.
- Analyze, compare, create, and compose shapes.

Finally, work together to design a new game (though it may borrow elements of current games) to learn one of the standards. Here are some general instructions for creating a game (adapted from How to Make Your Own Board Game, www.wikihow.com/Category:Board-Games).

1. Write down the general idea, theme, or purpose of your game. For example, "Monopoly" has the theme of getting the most properties and wealth and bankrupting opponents.

2. Write down the mechanics of your game. How do players interact? What do they do to accomplish the general idea, purpose, or theme? How will they win? Does everyone win?

3. Think about the players. How many do you want? What do they already know? What are they supposed to learn? How are they going to learn what they’re supposed to learn? How competitive or cooperative should the game be? What will be most exciting about your game?

4. How long do you want the game to last? How will players learn the game? How complex is the game? How much of the game is based on luck? How much on skill/knowledge?

5. Write out the basic rules, and make a sketch of what the game looks like as it’s being played. What are the conditions for playing? How does play progress from one move to the next? How does the game work?
6. Make pieces from index cards; use poker chips or coins as player avatars or counters. Make playing cards (or use regular playing cards).

7. If your game is a board game, sketch out the path players follow from start to finish, the playing field, positions on which to land (and what happens when they land on those positions). Also consider using an old board game as a base.

8. Play the game yourself to see if it works. Play as if you were each of the players you have in mind. Write down what works/doesn’t work. Try to foil your game plan. Make changes as needed.

9. Test your idea with a group. Write down what works/doesn’t work. Notice what happens to each of the players. Watch without making comments. Make changes.

10. Try with kindergartners. Refine. Create the final product with rules and all pieces (cards, tokens, counters, board). Decorate with appropriate artwork. Publish (perhaps using a 3D printer). Collect royalties!
OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE
Common Core standards do not prohibit playful learning; in fact, early childhood educators can help children progress toward proficiency in standards through play-based strategies while helping them develop socially and emotionally.

KEY POINTS

- Play helps students “build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills” and begin to learn reading, writing, and mathematics concepts.
- Fearing repercussions from failing to meet certain mandated standards, educators have changed instruction as early as kindergarten so that it’s more teacher-centric (didactic) and less playful and covers more material with textbooks and workbooks.
- Parents provide part of the pressure for covering more basic skills earlier, as do teachers in later grades, especially in subject areas that are tested on standards.
- Before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), about 68% of kindergartners participated in child-selected activities; after NCLB, only 44% of kindergartners participated in child-selected activities.
- The author offers several reasons for these changes:
  1. Mandates and regulations governing teacher practices (think pacing guides, worksheets, textbooks, tests).
  2. Vertical alignment of standards, which puts pressure on kindergarten teachers to accelerate expectations in literacy and numeracy.
  3. Schools and districts spending more money on standards-related textbooks, workbooks, and tests than on play materials.
  4. Parents pressuring schools to be teacher-directed and focused on basic skills.
- These pressures are especially hard on teachers whose students come to school unprepared to read, write, and compute.
- The authors provided some recommendations for educators who want to prepare students for the Common Core while also adhering to best practices for early childhood education:
  1. Use practices recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
  2. Incorporate social and emotional learning with standards through play, flexible timing, and rate of learning.
  3. Stop rewarding teachers based on standardized test scores to decrease pressure throughout the system to accelerate learning related to standards.

DEEPEN YOUR THINKING

1. Recall your own experiences in kindergarten or 1st grade. What do you most remember?
2. What percent of your day in kindergarten or 1st grade was spent playing? Was the play child-directed or directed by an adult?
3. Would you characterize your early childhood learning experiences as playful learning?
4. Consider today’s kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms. Would you characterize what happens in them most of the time as playful learning?

5. What do you know about changes in early childhood education as a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)?

6. Do you think teachers today feel intimidated by the Common Core State Standards? Why or why not?

7. What kinds of pedagogy does the Common Core favor? How coherent are these teaching strategies with the principles of early childhood education?

8. What do you think about the criticism that the Common Core leads to accelerating and narrowing the focus of the K-12 curriculum?

9. What textbooks, workbooks/worksheets, and tests are used in the kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms you know?

10. What pressures do today’s kindergarten and 1st-grade teachers feel they have in terms of teaching to the Common Core?

11. What are the sources of the pressure? To what extent are they perceptions or reality?

**EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

With colleagues, consider the following Common Core standards. For each standard, imagine an appropriate playful learning activity — related to the standard — for children in kindergarten. Think of games children play — guided or not by teachers. Think of art and drama activities children could do. Think of multisensory experiences children can have (such water or sand tables).

Use the following chart to guide your thinking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A standard for kindergartners</th>
<th>Identify a playful instructional activity that helps students achieve the outcome.</th>
<th>How does the activity also build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading — K4:</strong> Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing — K5:</strong> With guidance and support from adults, respond to questions and suggestions from peers and add details to strengthen writing as needed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics — KCC7:</strong> Compare two numbers between 1 and 10 presented as written numerals.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics — KMD1:</strong> Describe measurable attributes of objects, such as length or weight. Describe several measurable attributes of a single object.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Select other standards, as appropriate.*
Applications

This Professional Development Guide was created with the characteristics of adult learners in mind (Tallerico, 2005):

• Active engagement  
• Integration of experience  
• Choice and self-direction  
• Relevance to current challenges  
• Learning style variation

As you think about sharing this article with other adults, how could you fulfill the adult learning needs above?

This Professional Development Guide was created so that readers could apply what they have learned to work in classrooms (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001):

• Identifying similarities and differences  
• Reinforcing effort and providing recognition  
• Nonlinguistic representations  
• Setting objectives and providing feedback  
• Cues, questions, and advance organizers  
• Summarizing and note-taking  
• Homework and practice  
• Cooperative learning  
• Generating and testing hypotheses

As you think about sharing this article with classroom teachers, how could you use these strategies with them?

References


About the Author

Lois Brown Easton is a consultant, coach, and author with a particular interest in learning designs — for adults and for students. She retired as director of professional development at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo. From 1992 to 1994, she was director of Re:Learning Systems at the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Re:Learning was a partnership between the Coalition of Essential Schools and ECS. Before that, she served in the Arizona Department of Education in a variety of positions: English/language arts coordinator, director of curriculum and instruction, and director of curriculum and assessment planning.

A middle school English teacher for 15 years, Easton earned her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. Easton has been a frequent presenter at conferences and a contributor to educational journals.

She was editor and contributor to Powerful Designs for Professional Learning (NSDC, 2004 & 2008). Her other books include:

• The Other Side of Curriculum: Lessons From Learners (Heinemann, 2002);  
• Engaging the Disengaged: How Schools Can Help Struggling Students Succeed (Corwin, 2008);  
• Protocols for Professional Learning (ASCD, 2009); and  
• Professional Learning Communities by Design: Putting the Learning Back Into PLCs (Learning Forward and Corwin, 2011).

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