

Play as a Model for the Middle Grades

Kristina Chatham

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Capstone Essay

Vanderbilt University

Basis for Project

I used one previous work from the past year, as well as additional research to complete this Capstone essay. I used and extended my work from my Playing to Learn course, EDUC 7500 with Dr. Melissa Gresalfi. That paper focused on how intrinsic motivation may be improved in the classroom through play.

In addition to drawing upon and extending work done in various classes, I did more research on other characteristics of play and how they might be implemented to make learning a more joyful, happy, playful experience for middle grades students.

Abstract: Play in the lives of children of all ages is on the decline. This decline is even more dramatic in the middle grades, as in this context, play is almost non-existent and has been replaced with a rise in negative qualities such as anxiety, stress, and depression. This decline in play is surprising as researchers have continued to tell us of the many benefits of play for development and learning throughout the lifespan. In this paper, I examine the middle grades context and offer play as a model for meeting the needs of the middle grades learner. I then go on to give examples of how play has been incorporated in classrooms in the form of a continuum of play, showing how play might be applied on a classroom environment level, through games, in curriculum, and in the school system as a whole. By applying its characteristics to these areas, middle grades students might experience learning as joyful, happy, intrinsically motivating, and a way of experiencing flow.

Play in the lives of today's children seems to be on the decline (Gray 2011). Children today play eight hours a week less than children two decades ago (Elkind 2007). Even in Kindergarten this decrease is evident, as play in this setting has now been replaced by rigorous content and standardized testing (Miller & Almon 2009). Furthermore, recess, a time in the school day dedicated to play, has been shortened in the elementary years and is almost nonexistent by the middle grades (Pellegrini 2006). For the middle grades, this decline in play seems to be even more dramatic. Conklin even describes the current situation with this age group writing that in the current age of accountability, play is not only absent from the prominent frameworks for effective teaching, but it is increasingly absent from young people's classrooms and lives (2014).

Despite this decline in play, research has shown play to be a valuable part of childhood. In his work, Piaget (1946) viewed play as an activity that occurs all throughout the lifespan, and in the work of Vygotsky (1966), play is viewed as an integral part of development. Furthermore, Gray views play as a promoter of good mental health, seeing the lack of play as a contributor to teen anxiety, depression, narcissism, and even suicide (2011). As Conklin continues to point out, this absence is so detrimental because of the qualities that play brings along with it; without play, our students may lose happiness, joy, flow and motivation (2014). The effects of this loss on students of all ages has caused many to further question the purpose of school (Wolk 2007). In Dewey's *Experience and Education* he even questions, "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?" (1938, p. 49). In this paper, I propose that we look at play as a model for how we do school and in particular, how we teach middle school. I will first introduce and explain a definition of play and its components, and then discuss ways in

which play as a model matches the needs of the middle school student and context. Following this discussion, I will present a range of middle grades classrooms in which elements of play have been promoted through the classroom environment, game play, and curriculum, as well as give recommendations on how these classrooms might be improved using the model of play.

Defining Play

Play itself is hard to define, and though many academics have tried, they cannot seem to come to agreement on a single definition (Callois 2006). Vygotsky comments on this confusion in describing play as a paradox: it is real, but not real and serious, but not serious (Vygotsky 1933, Gray 2011). Many arguments have been had in deciding what play is and what play is not, which may be attributed to the idea that for each of us, play is different; while for one something may be play, for another it might be the farthest thing away from it. For example, Callois (2006) and Huizinga agree that play is free, separate from real life, governed by rules, and “absorbs the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga 1955). Huizinga’s characteristic list differs from Callois’ in adding that play must not result in material gain or profit, which then stands in opposition to ideas that play has the potential to be found in work (Blanchard & Cheska 1985, Rieber 1996).

Throughout this paper, I will be looking at play through a lens provided by Peter Gray. What I find interesting about his way of looking at play is that instead of quickly dismissing an activity as “play” or “not play”, he is rather viewing play as something to be weighed on a scale or placed on a continuum (2008). Gray attempts to bridge this definition problem by boiling down the many ideas of play into five characteristics; the more of these characteristics an activity consists of, the more playful that activity is (2008). Gray’s first characteristic describes the freedom of play; play is self-chosen and self-directed, and the players are always free to quit. In this sense, play is a very democratic activity. The next characteristic is that in play, means are

valued more than ends. If someone is truly playing, they are more motivated by the process of doing than by receiving the product. Essentially, play is intrinsically motivating. Gray's third characteristic is that play is guided by mental rules, a structure created in the minds of the players. If a person decides to play, they are agreeing that they will practice self-control and follow these rules. In the fourth, play is described as non-literal, imaginative, and separate in "some way" from reality. Though play is situated in the real world and may be about some real world concepts, it is actually fantasy. By saying it is separate in "some way", Gray is leaving room for there to be some degree to which an activity leaves reality; while one person may be playing with a project within the context of their job, another may be battling dragons in a completely different reality, yet both can still be described as playing. The last characteristic is that play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind. I like how with this description, Gray points out that this characteristic occurs in response to play being the four previous qualities. Because play is free, process-oriented, structured by the players, and separate from reality, it is also joyful, happy, and intrinsically motivating, and allows the player to enter a mental state of flow (Gray 2008).

A problem in examining literature on play is that many researchers avoid using the word "play" all together, especially when talking about adolescents and adults. As Gray states, we must "study play without calling it that" (Gray 2015). In reviewing the literature, I found his statement to be very accurate. While many times the term "play" is not used, it is rather substituted with a characteristic of play. Though this reveals a problem in society involving our devaluing of play, I also found it to be useful for educators; by avoiding the term play, we can get away from the complex task of defining and defending it and rather focus on its positive characteristics. We can use these characteristics as indicators of play and use this knowledge in

creating experiences that might bring more joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation to our students. Because Gray's last characteristics of play are dependent on the other four, looking more closely at joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation allows us to better understand play in itself and why it is so important. Looking at each individually allows us to better see how each are connected to one another and to play.

Joy

The task of defining an emotion is as difficult a task as defining play. As emotions are created within a context, one must also have a context in mind when explaining the emotion (Rantala & Määttä 2012). That is why joy within the context of education is often referred to as “the joy of learning” rather than simply “joy. In studying this joy of learning, Rantala & Määttä found that joy comes from experiences of success, an environment of freedom, and agency (2012). It is naturally strived for, active, and does not like to hurry. They also found that for joy to occur, it is crucial that a task's challenge be a reflection of the learner's current ability, an aspect that also leads to the characteristic of flow (Rantala & Määttä 2012, Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Flow

Flow is often referred to as the “optimal experience” or “being in the zone” (Chen 2007). On top of an activity being appropriately challenging, flow also involves deep concentration, a sense of control, and an altered sense of time. Someone who has experienced a state of flow might say they lost track of time or were really in the moment. In studying flow, Csikszentmihalyi has been able to find instances of flow in activities ranging from hobbies to

work; in his research, he has also found flow to be a predictor of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003).

Happiness

In studying happiness, Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter recognize it as both a trait (long term) and a moment (short term); while not every moment may be happy, they found that over time, moments can turn into traits. Traits and moments of happiness most often develop in situations where a person feels free, interacts with others, and experiences flow. They found happiness to be associated with feeling alive and proud (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003).

Intrinsic Motivation

Ryan and Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as “the prototypic manifestation of the human tendency toward learning and creativity”. By this definition, a lack of this motivation would have effects on the learning experience itself, possibly in students’ attitudes towards it, in their interest in it, and in their enjoyment of it. Joy, flow, and happiness are examples of intrinsic motivators that result from play.

Why Play in the Middle Grades?

As previously stated, play has dramatically decreased in the middle grades, and with it, we have also seen decreases in joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003, Gray 2011, Wolk 2008). As these decrease, negative emotions have continued to increase; stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide among middle grades students have reached all-time highs in recent years (Elkind 1986, Gray 2011). School could be playing a big part in this decrease in positives and increase in negatives. In studying the happiness of middle and high school students, Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter found that students were most unhappy in moments

at school or related to school (2003). They experienced peaks in happiness during lunch period, the afternoon, and on weekends when they were not doing homework. Students even reported higher levels of happiness at times where they were doing chores or tasks such as getting dressed or brushing their teeth than at school! (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003). From results such as these, it is clear that we need to rethink how we do school.

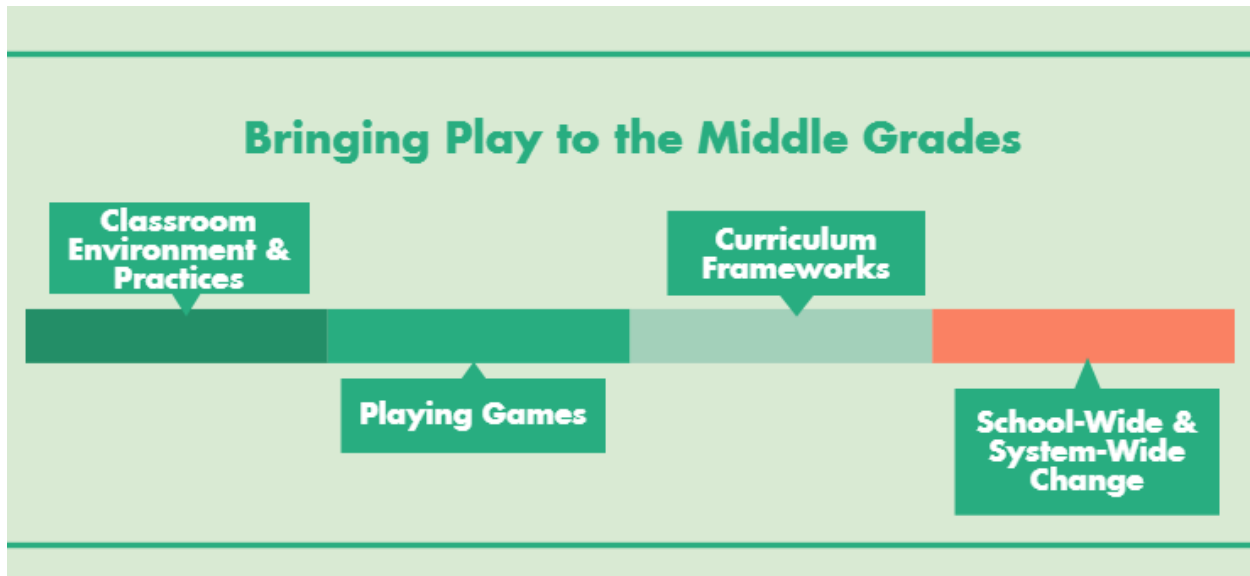
In deciding how to teach middle grades students, we are foremost thinking about teaching to their needs. In the middle grades, students are facing new physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth and changes; they are beginning to think abstractly and reflectively and seek further independence from the authority of adults (Jackson & Davis 2000, Manning 2002). In looking back at Gray's definition of play, it seems to fit well with this idea of meeting the needs of these learners. His first point of play being free fits with the middle grades student's drive for independence. Studies have shown that the more freedom someone has in the workplace, the more play-like their work feels (Gray 2008). If play was added to the middle school, this need for freedom might be met. Gray's second point of means over ends matches another issue that greatly affects middle grades students. In this context, students often experience decreased motivation as their classrooms increasingly emphasize performance rather than mastery goals (Urda & Midgley, 2003; Wang & Eccles 2013). Students in the middle grades are just entering the world of pressure from standardized testing and through this pressure, are shown that the extrinsic product matters more than the process. By allowing middle schoolers to learn through play, enjoyment of the process of learning and intrinsic motivation might be restored (Gray 2008). The mental rules and the idea of separation from reality, Gray's third and fourth characteristics of play, fit well with the changes the middle grades learner is facing. Whether emotional, social, physical, or cognitive, play allows students to safely learn the new rules

brought by these changes, and also allows them to try on different roles and see how they play out (Vygotsky 1978, Gray 2008). Gray's last point, the frame of mind of play, brings us back to the indicators of play such as joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation. These are characteristics that one might also use in describing a "lifelong learner". As educators, myself included, we often cite helping students become "lifelong learners" as our goal in teaching, but with the lack of happiness brought up previously, we have to wonder if the way in which we are currently teaching is actually doing the opposite (Wolk 2008). Are our teaching practices actually contributing to a view of learning as work rather than a happy, joyful, and enriching process? The middle grades is a time where students have been shown to develop habits and ideas that they will carry throughout their life (Conklin 2008). In looking at happiness and flow in particular, Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter found that when students experienced these mental states while doing an activity in middle school, they tended to continue doing that activity and enjoying it throughout high school. Those who did not reach a state of happiness or flow tended to stop caring about the activity or quit it entirely (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003). If we are truly wanting our students to develop a love of learning and to become "lifelong learners", we should be showing them what learning can be like if it is done through play.

Play in the Middle Grades Classroom

Play offers so many benefits for the middle grades learner. The question now is one of how to reap those benefits; how do we help students to experience play, joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation in the middle grades classroom? In deciding how to go about implementing learning through play in the classroom, I think it is again helpful to go back to Gray's idea of play as a continuum (2008). Any classroom can be playful, but some may have elements that

make them more play-like than others. In looking at middle grades classroom case studies, I began thinking of them in this way, placing them on a continuum of play.



Classroom Environment & Practices

The first item on the continuum is all about creating a classroom environment with practices that support play. I placed it here as this is essential for bringing play to any classroom. At this level, the teacher becomes a facilitator of play. They are providing and creating a space in which students can feel free to play and make their own choices. They are establishing a class culture that values the process of learning, whatever that might be for a particular student, over the end result (Bergen & Fromberg 2009). In Conklin's study of play in the middle grades, she observed eight classrooms for instances of play and practices of teachers who have created these environments for their students (2014). Providing opportunities for choice and self-direction was one common theme among classrooms. Teachers allowed students to make a range of decisions from deciding where to sit to deciding what they would like to learn. Along with this choice, one teacher co-constructed the classroom rules with her students, allowing them to decide how their

classroom would run. By giving choice, these teachers showed students that they have agency within their classroom. Another common theme was one of humor and nonsense. Teachers and students often joked with each other and engaged in silly activities, simulations, and word play. Bergen & Fromberg highlight the importance of this activity for the middle grades learner, describing it as a way for the student to “demonstrate their knowledge of the world and gain power through doing so” (2009, Conklin 2014). By bringing choice and humor to the classroom environment, a teacher is opening the door for students to play with ideas and learn with joy.

On top of these classroom environment implications, Conklin also describes common practices shared among teachers who incorporate play. These practices, though not used for every lesson or assignment, bring an element of play to the classroom whenever they are in use. One of these practices involved encouraging students to creatively and imaginatively present their learning. Conklin observed many instances in which teachers assessed a student’s content learning through the creation of products such as magazines, pieces of art, survival kits, and even board games (2014). By giving assignments in this way, the teachers encouraged the characteristic of imagination while again valuing process over product. In all, Conklin found that these playful middle grades classrooms provided many opportunities for students to experience joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation while learning, but emphasizes that there is still much work to be done to bring play to the middle grades classroom (2014).

Playing Games

The next piece of the continuum is all about playing games. It is placed above the environment, as I think it builds on an already established environment of play. It also finds its place below curriculum because many times games may be used as a supplement to curriculum, rather than the main facilitation of learning, though I do recognize that in some cases a game

could be used in this way. While games offer moments of play, they may not situate learning itself as a way of playing; the player may be given the impression that the game is play, but not fully realize that learning, too, can be play. From board games to video games, many games are designed with the learner and play in mind (Quintana et al 2000). Games may provide a space where students experience flow (Chen 2007). As they are often embedded with decision-making and problem solving, they offer opportunities for students to exercise agency and make choices in a safe environment (Chen 2007).

In Squire & Jan's study of the science augmented reality game "Mad City Mystery", they point out that this game accounts for many of these characteristics of play with the goal of the game being to teach science concepts (2007). The game first requires the player to take on a new role or identity and play a character in the game. They must use their imagination to step into this fantasy world in order to play. Within this world, they must also follow the rules. Lending to flow, the game is also organized around challenges and as a result of being challenged, the player develops for themselves goals that act as intrinsic motivators. These challenges and goals are really the heart of the game and are where the science content is embedded. In observing a group of middle school girls playing the game, Squire & Jan found the roles to be an effective mechanism for learning. The girls were excited to step into them and really made these roles their own; they played the game as if it were reality, making decisions as if they were real scientists. By being able to imagine stepping into this role through the game, Squire & Jan hope the girls might later view or position themselves as doers of science (2007).

Curriculum Frameworks

The next piece of play on the continuum focuses on curriculum and frameworks that are designed for "play". They are placed higher on continuum because these curriculums present

learning in a way that consistently is playful and matches the characteristics of joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation. Three examples of these curriculums include those designed for Montessori Middle Schools, Reggio Emilia Middle Schools, and Project-Based Learning. What I find particularly interesting about these three is that, though each are often referred to as examples of “playing to learn”, the designers are careful to not use the word “play” to describe their curriculum. Maria Montessori, the creator of the Montessori system even refused to call what students were doing play and rather referred to it as work (Lilliard 2014). In reviewing each of these frameworks, it is important to remember that the curriculum on its own cannot be playful; for play to occur the player, or learner, must decide that they will play and abide by the rules of the play. Without having the foundation of a playful environment and classroom practices, these curriculums and methods might not be successful.

In their case study on Montessori middle schools, Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi observed five Montessori classrooms and compared the learning in these classrooms to that of regular school classrooms. In observing, they particularly focused in on student motivation and experiences of flow. Of the Montessori classrooms studied, all were found to be task focused; students were able to select their own projects and make decisions on how to go about them. Students and teachers together negotiate the curriculum, giving the approach play-like characteristics such as self-chosen, and self-directed (Gray 2011, Lillard 2013). Students in the Montessori schools also had daily opportunities for collaboration and their schedules allowed for unstructured, flexible time to play with ideas and concepts. By including these in instruction, the Montessori approach brings in the social quality Csikszentmihalyi attributes to happiness and the freedom associated with play (Gray 2011, Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005, Lillard 2013). On top of this, the Montessori philosophy is closely aligned with experiencing flow, as it highly

values deep concentration and places the student's experience above all other aspects of learning (Lillard 2013). In this student experience, students' interests are constantly at the forefront. They are challenged to pursue those interests at a level that keeps them in a state of flow. Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) found that most students in a Montessori setting reported experiencing flow more during academic activities than during other times. When you compare this to the regular school classrooms and Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter's study on happiness, it is easy to see that the Montessori method is more effectively helping students find joy, flow, and happiness in learning. Along with this, the Montessori students also experienced higher levels of intrinsic motivation at school, leaving them with a more positive school experience.

In Hesterman's (2011) study on a Reggio Emilia middle school, she found that the philosophies of Reggio Emilia that are typically used with early childhood students fit nicely with middle school students because they meet many of the needs these students possess at this unique point in their lives. Teachers in this setting have high standards for how learning should be presented to students, making sure it always attends to student interests, is hands-on, stimulating, and engages their curiosity. When interviewed, students described feeling safe, happy, and creative in this setting; they felt it was different from any other school setting because the teachers do not stand in front of you, but rather beside or behind you as you explore and learn. Hesterman (2011) also found many qualities of instruction in the Reggio Emilia approach that have been shown to lead to increases in joy, happiness, motivation, and flow. One of these qualities, like in Montessori, is the negotiation of curriculum between the teacher and the students. Students in this setting are able to be a part of choosing what they learn and can even choose the medium through which they express their learning with Reggio Emilia's "100 Languages" approach. Through this approach, they can choose to express themselves creatively

through drawing, writing, acting, sculpting, music, and many other mediums. I find this to align with Gray's (2011) definition of play in that it is a self-chosen and self-directed behavior. In addition, the Reggio Emilia middle school's fluid lesson structures allow teachers to bring required content into experiences where students are already curious, interested, and motivated. One teacher described this experience saying, "In a nutshell, we plan experiences and around those experiences we leave plenty of space to go in different directions...we have discussions about options...we have some ideas where that might go...it involves constant feedback" (Hesterman 2011). By putting student's interests at the forefront, teachers are able to keep motivation, joy, happiness, and flow high during learning.

Though Project-Based learning is not viewed as play in the sense that Montessori and Reggio Emilia are often described, an effective PBL experience shares many characteristics with play. A PBL takes the projects described by the teachers in Conklin's study to a new level of inquiry and challenge (2014). Instead of learning first and then applying this knowledge to a project for assessment, students actually learn the content through completing the project (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Student voice and choice are integral to the success of a PBL, and their inclusion is similar to Gray's ideas of learning being free and self-chosen; in most PBLs, students play a part in deciding what exactly they will study and must make decisions and choose how to take action within the project. Within these decisions, students have goals and are challenged at the appropriate level so that if they are engaged in the project, they might reach a state of flow. PBLs themselves can be scaffolded according to the individual learners needs, allowing everyone to receive the right amount of assistance and challenge to get to this state. Another characteristic shared by PBLs and play is the valuing of means over ends. Like play, PBL is more about the process of the learning than the product. Though this product is still

important, it more naturally assesses the learning involved and values the experience over the result. On top of matching these characteristics, looking at a PBL through the lens of play allows us to think more about how real-world tasks can be made to be more play-like. In a PBL, students are tackling real life problems that might better resemble a job than school; though this activity may be much less separated from reality than other forms of play, it does give learners the opportunity to see how play, work, and learning might intertwine to be a joyful, happy, motivating experience, an idea that might transfer to their later work and learning experiences.

School-wide & System-wide Change

With this last piece of the continuum, play as a model for the middle school context and curriculum is extended beyond the classroom to include the system of school and society's influence on it. Through this system, society's influence, and the curriculum and standards that result from the two together, our current middle schools implicitly are teaching students that learning is a boring, unpleasant, but necessary experience, and in doing so, are teaching student to hate learning (Engel 2015, Wolk 2007). As a whole, the education world needs to experience a change in mindset, a change in how we view and treat learning, if we are to again strive towards a goal of educating for lifelong learning. We need to reexamine what we believe is truly the purpose of school: are we looking to create workers or human beings? Do we want to educate the whole child or just give them the pieces they need to get a job?

If we are truly looking to educate the whole human being, a major change is needed in how we currently assess student learning. By placing so much value on grades and test scores, our system as a whole is communicating that we value a product over a learning experience. By putting so much pressure on students to do well on these assessments, we are continuously placing them in a mindset that learning is something to "get through"; we are saying that once

the test is passed, that learning is no longer of value. In doing so, we are also portraying failure in an extremely inaccurate manner; our views on testing tell students that failure is bad, an idea that discourages learners from taking risks and truly learning from an experience. In using play as a model for improving learning for middle grades students, we need to take steps to make assessment a more positive experience (Wolk 2008). We need to move from formal, traditional methods of testing to informal and formative types of assessment that more closely match play. By watching a student engage in learning through play, we might see firsthand what they have mastered. By measuring learning on an individual basis through narrative and self-assessments, performances, presentation, and portfolios, we might see the student as a human being rather than a number (Wolk 2008). By taking away this pressure and refocusing on our goal of educating lifelong learners, we might reach a place where the learner might truly experience joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation in their work, and as a result, do their best at it.

Implications and Further Considerations

While the affordances of modeling middle school after play are many, there are a few constraints and arguments against educating in this way, many of which go back to disagreements in what play is. The view I have on play gives a very loose characterization of it, as Gray's definition creates large buckets into which many other characteristics of play might fall, giving opportunity for multiple interpretations of what is play. One of these disagreements spurs from a strict view on the characteristic of freedom; some believe that by facilitating or placing learning intentionally into play, the activity no longer is play (Rantala & Määttä 2012). Along with this, some question whether a pedagogy of play is necessary, and see it as well as a hindrance to true "free" play (Day 2012). Furthermore, Conklin warns that letting students play

may lead to unpredictable outcomes; if a teacher is to implement playing to learn, they must be comfortable with these responses and learn to navigate the conflict they might bring (2014).

To better understand these disagreements and work to resolve them, much more research on fields relating to play and the middle grades needs to be done. Research on play in the middle grades itself is scarce, as most sources tend to focus on development in early childhood through play. As we as a society learn to value play and see it as integral throughout the lifespan, this research might be made possible. As Rantala and Määttä point out, research is also lacking on the emotions associated with play, and the research that has been done tends to focus on the negative emotions like anxiety and depression (2012). Coming to a better understanding of emotions like joy and happiness might help us to find more satisfaction in learning and in our lives, helping us to be more intrinsically motivated and experience more moments of flow. If we want to improve the quality of life for our students and for our world, we must be willing to take some focus off of solving the negative and pay more attention to how we might improve the positive.

Conclusions

In researching ways to better meet the needs of middle grades students, I have found play to be a very appropriate and effective model to follow. By using the characteristics of play as a guide, teachers and curriculum designers might make learning experiences more learner-centered. By making learning more self-chosen, valuing means over ends, promoting mental rules and self-control, and more frequently allowing students to venture into imaginative worlds, we might also help students experience joy, happiness, flow, and intrinsic motivation in learning. By reexamining our purposes of school and assessment, we might make these also more closely

match characteristics of play, allowing us to educate the whole learner and more effectively promote lifelong learning.

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