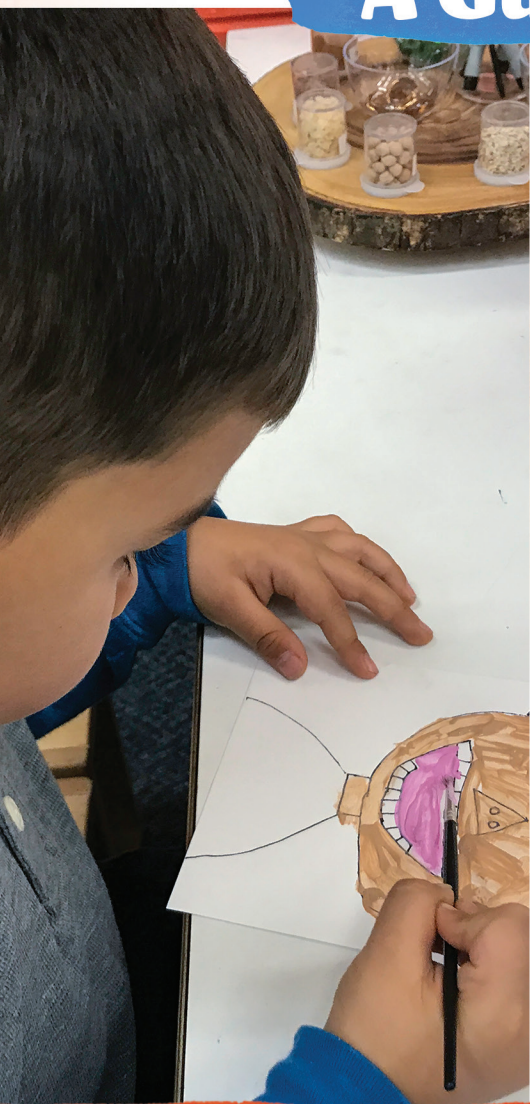


# *The Gift of* **Playful Learning**

**A Guide for Educators**



**Nadia Kenisha Bynoe**

**Angelique Thompson**

**PreK-2**

*The Gift of*  
**Playful**  
**Learning**  
**A Guide for Educators**

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A division of Teacher Created Materials  
5482 Argosy Avenue  
Huntington Beach, CA 92649  
**[www.tcmpub.com/shell-education](http://www.tcmpub.com/shell-education)**  
ISBN 978-1-0876-4907-8  
© 2023 Shell Educational Publishing, Inc.

To Xavier, the greatest gift I've ever been given. I am thankful  
that you share your love and brilliance with me every day.

—AT



To Kyrie, my nephew-son and all the little ones in my family  
who have inspired me to listen, respond, and teach with heart,  
thank you for transforming my pedagogical practice.

—NKB



# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ix
----------------------	----

Introduction: The Invitation.....	1
-----------------------------------	---

Responding to the Invite and Wrapping the Gift .....	2
Accepting the Invite.....	3
Unwrapping the Gift .....	4
How to Unwrap This Gift.....	5

Chapter 1. Exploring the Landscape of Play .....	9
--	---

Play as a Right.....	10
What Is Play? .....	11
Why Is Play Important? .....	13
What Are Play-Based Approaches to Learning?.....	15
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Play .....	20
Uncovering Biases and Assumptions.....	25
Additional Considerations.....	27
Gifts of Learning .....	30

Chapter 2. Creating Spaces That Speak.....	33
--	----

Mapping Memories.....	34
The Environment Is a Teacher .....	35
Elements of the Learning Environment.....	36
Disrupting Spaces That Silence .....	44
Rights to Spaces.....	45
Designing Spaces.....	54
Living within Spaces That Speak .....	62
Shifting Spaces.....	63
Additional Considerations.....	64
Gifts of Learning .....	67

## Chapter 3. Playful Pieces ..... 71

The Theory of Loose Parts .....	72
The Great Debate: Toys versus Loose Parts .....	72
The Power to Manipulate .....	74
Leveraging Loose Parts .....	75
Loose Parts and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy .....	78
The Seven Types of Loose Parts .....	79
The Language of Schema .....	80
Creating Conditions for Play with Loose Parts .....	82
Scaffolding Loose Parts .....	83
Creating Intentional Experiences with Loose Parts .....	83
Comprehensive Loose Parts Programming .....	88
Strategic Actions for Loose Parts .....	89
Engaging with Loose Parts .....	90
Safety in the Learning Environment .....	91
Additional Considerations .....	92
Gifts of Learning .....	95

## Chapter 4. Inviting Learning ..... 97

What Is an Invitation for Learning? .....	98
Preparing the Gift .....	100
What Are the Components of an Invitation for Learning? .....	104
Opportunities for Learning .....	106
How Should We Offer Invitations in Our Learning Spaces? .....	108
Responsive Learning Opportunities .....	110
Identifying De-invitations .....	111
Additional Considerations .....	117
Gifts of Learning .....	120

## Chapter 5. Planning with Purpose ..... 123

The Gift That Keeps on Giving.....	124
Follow Learners' Interests .....	127
Select a Text, a Photo, or an Artifact, and Connect It to the Curriculum .....	128
Develop a Question .....	129
Consider the Materials .....	132
Organize and Market .....	133
Assess and Reflect .....	135
A Call to Action .....	135
Regifting Invitations for Learning.....	139
Additional Considerations.....	144
Gifts of Learning .....	148

## Chapter 6. Playful Assessments ..... 151

What Moments Should We Capture? .....	156
How Can We Capture the Moment? .....	157
What Is Pedagogical Documentation? .....	157
The Process of Pedagogical Documentation .....	158
Biases and Assumptions .....	161
Reducing Bias in Assessments .....	163
Stages of Pedagogical Documentation.....	164
Honoring Student Voices in Documentation .....	166
Sharing a Child's Story .....	167
Self-Documentation.....	169
Responding to, Challenging, and Extending Thinking.....	170
Noticing and Naming the Learning .....	172
Conferencing .....	173
Sharing and Celebrating Learning .....	173
Additional Considerations.....	175
Gifts of Learning .....	178

<b>Chapter 7. Playful Partnerships.</b>	<b>181</b>
Our Views of Families	182
Key Characteristics of Family Partnerships.	183
Family Engagement	185
Building and Sustaining Connections.	187
Opening the Doors to Play	191
Additional Considerations.	197
Gifts of Learning	200
 <b>Afterword.</b>	 <b>203</b>
 <b>Children's Literature</b>	 <b>207</b>
 <b>References</b>	 <b>209</b>
 <b>Index</b>	 <b>213</b>
 <b>Digital Resources</b>	 <b>219</b>

# Acknowledgments

*“One of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.”*

—bell hooks

We are forever grateful to the communities of love, support, and resistance we have been a part of. We cherish how you have made impressions on our hearts, minds, and souls. We are grateful to all the children who have taught us lessons that have transformed our thinking, and to the educators who have opened up their learning spaces so that we might be inspired, learn with them, and be provoked to change.

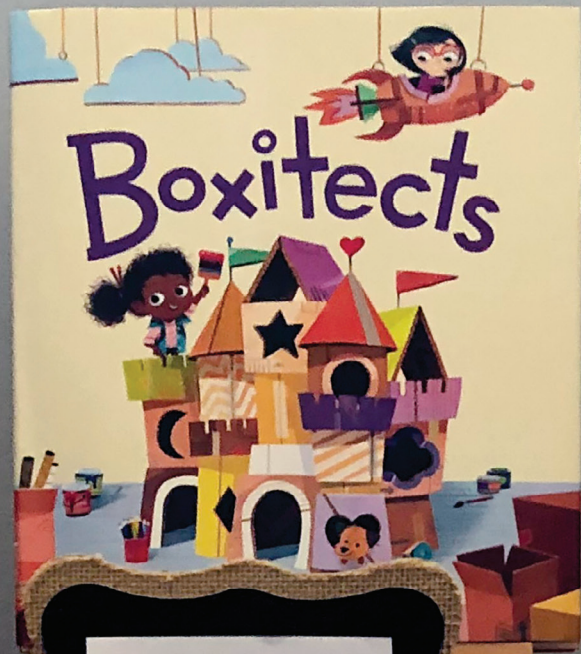
To our families, your gifts of love and courage have taught us about who we are and have instilled a sense of pride for our Bahamian and Vincentian heritages. We are especially thankful for mom (Janet), the “apple crumble” to our movements, who believed in our potential and provided insights and occasional edits along the way. To Garvey, whose patience and support for our work and writing time has been unwavering. You have willingly shared your wife with others and have shown unconditional love. We also extend our gratitude to our siblings whose educational experiences served as a catalyst to our own careers as educators.

To the inspiring mentor who was the first person to bring us together. There would be no “Kenisha and Angelique,” had you not validated the work we were doing, supported our path to coaching, and encouraged us to always ask the questions “Why?” and “How?” Your inspiration has moved us to believe in the possibilities of transformative leadership. We are thankful for the nuggets of brilliance shared as we engaged in critical practitioner research under the guidance of Dr. Nicole West-Burns and inspirational leaders in the Toronto District School Board. With a focus on improving the achievement of Black learners, those research initiatives left an indelible mark on our learning journeys.

We are forever grateful to the two administrators who gave us the space to play with the possibilities at the beginning of our coaching careers, to share our learning and foster collaborative learning communities. To the centrally assigned principals and administrators who supported, provoked, challenged, learned, and led the way with us, we appreciate your insights and commitment to school improvement. We are mindful of an administrator who continues to challenge us to be excellent without excuses, a mantra that we strive to live by day by day. To the coordinators and centrally assigned principals in the Toronto District School Board Early Years Department, both past and present, your commitment to learners in the early years has ignited our passions and grounded our vision for young learners.

Last, but certainly not least, we want to acknowledge our critical friends—thank you for your support and for always sharing your honest and open perspectives whether sipping on bubble teas or enjoying a meal at Scaddabush.

Along our journey, we have been graced by the presence of many who have collectively inspired, provoked, and transformed our vision for learning. We are thankful for the gifts of love, support, wisdom, and encouragement you have all shared that have made *The Gift of Playful Learning* possible.



What might you  
design?



# Introduction

## The Invitation

To those who honor children and view them as competent, capable, and curious;

To those who yearn to see themselves reflected and represented in the pages we turn and the spaces we share;

To those who value playful experiences that engage children;

To those who center themselves as risk takers in teaching and learning;

To those who are inspired to rethink and reimagine their teaching practices in ways that honor all learners;

To those who believe in thinking outside the box;

To those who love and are enchanted by learning—

We invite you on our journey as we unwrap the gift of learning.

Like a gift, the children we are entrusted with daily are precious and unique. And as they invite us to learn more about who they are and what they know through their actions, words, and thoughts, we too have opportunities to gift them with learning that is intentional, differentiated, and responsive to their strengths, needs, and wants.

This professional resource shares our journey with the children we have worked with and invites you to prepare gifts of learning inspired by the interests, curiosities, and lived experiences of the learners you work with. Gifts must be carefully selected and paired with intentional materials to uncover the possibilities of thinking and instruction. We highlight how you can plan and create these gifts through an exchange of learning and teaching that is deeply connected to the curriculum. We then guide you to invite children to unwrap these gifts, which are developed from their ideas, interpretations, and understandings.

Our own journey unfolded when we dared to dream and take risks in our thinking and learning. As we share this experience with you, we hope to inspire you to

- transform your learning environment to become a landscape for play;
- build creative spaces that speak to multiple identities, lived experiences, interests, and wonderings of learners, their families, and the community;
- design playful experiences that lend themselves to deep thinking and critical learning;
- gift children with opportunities that offer differentiated experiences;
- engage children in purposeful learning that is designed with intention to provoke thought, curiosity, and wonder;
- engage in dialogue with partners in learning; and
- respond to observations that draw on children's capabilities.

We hope this resource motivates educators across the world to value play-based approaches as a vehicle for learning and thinking in the early years, which for the purposes of this book refers to children who are three to eight years old. The strategies, experiences, and resources we share support educators in creating spaces that engage, motivate, and sustain the thinking of children. In addition, this resource serves as a tool to support educators in differentiating learning experiences for children with diverse needs. Through instructional methods that honor play, we create pathways that are responsive to learners, building on their strengths, meeting their needs, and nurturing the growth they require to be successful academically.

## Responding to the Invite and Wrapping the Gift

At the beginning of our own journey, we were invited to respond to learners' desires, which led us to believe in the possibilities of play. The children in our spaces pushed us to think in an unconventional manner. To center these learners' needs, we had to reimagine our programming.

As instructional coaches teaching in diverse spaces across the city of Toronto, we witnessed children communicating their needs differently. Some children displayed dissatisfaction within their learning spaces by escaping the classroom or demonstrating apathy, tears, explosive

behaviors, or physical and emotional harm, which became normal conditions that made learning challenging. We realized these behaviors were the children's way of inviting us as educators to respond to what they were communicating about their needs for their learning environment. We were pressed to respond in one of two ways:

- *Accept* their invitation and work intentionally to make shifts in our pedagogical approaches to teaching
- or
- *Decline* their invitation and hold fast to traditional approaches that were limiting children's competencies, allowing the tensions in the classroom to fester and escalate

## Accepting the Invite

---

We decided to accept their invitation and to support the classroom educators in understanding the need and purpose for a shift in their programming. Through our observations and interpretations, we saw a need for more open, honest discussion with educators that would allow them to engage in the self-examination and reflection required to better recognize and address barriers facing their learners and school communities. Educators also began to question how play-based approaches for learning and culturally relevant pedagogy aligned with effective instruction.

We then had to tap into our teaching reservoir and draw on the pedagogical approaches and strategies we used in our own classrooms. The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) inspired our foundational beliefs as educators. This foundation led us to offer learning that promoted excellence and success through high-yield strategies. As we navigated our instructional practice, we leveraged children's lived experiences and identities to shape a culture of belonging and contributing. We taught our youngest learners to critically evaluate the world around them.

As coaches, we noticed that children were presenting challenges, which led us to identify a number of gaps hindering the pursuit of learning success. Through our dialogue with each other, we began to share how the experiences we were observing deeply replicated historical legacies that resulted in success for some and marginalization for others. In our very own households, as we grew up, our families held high expectations and encouraged us to strive for excellence and be proud of our Caribbean heritages. However, we bore witness to the duality of education when the pathway to excellence was completely different for us than it was for our siblings. While we were able to successfully navigate the traditional system through acts of memorization, performance, and compliance, the expectations and instructional approaches delivered to our siblings presented great challenges and constrained the ways in which they learned. These tensions in achievement were deeply rooted within intersections of social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, class, religion, and more (Crenshaw 1989).

Our curiosity about these tensions in learning served as a catalyst that steered our course as coaches. We firmly believe that it is our moral obligation as educators to shift the trajectory for learners. While their paths may be different, those paths do not have to be difficult. All children have a right to and deserve to learn in environments that honor culturally responsive practice through playful approaches.

As we accepted this invitation to make intentional shifts, we set out to create a *culture of thinking* and unlearn what was once traditionally assumed. We sought to undo the “worksheet pedagogy” that drove our own learning experiences and instead co-construct thinking and transform our learning environments. These shifts encouraged engagement, increased student voice, provoked thinking, and fostered a culture of higher expectations that supported students’ success. Educators became more intentional in their instructional moves, were invigorated by learners’ responses, and were able to support and address learners’ diverse needs through differentiation. We then began to observe shifts in the behaviors of the children.

As we wrote this book, we faced even greater challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of change, we were compelled to improvise, adapt, and adjust. We were provoked to reimagine a new normal, one that would change spaces of learning in equitable and accessible ways. As we have continued to prioritize play, we have gained great lessons from our experiences that we share with you. In this book, we also consider the transformational approaches required to respond to how this time of uncertainty has affected children. Now more than ever, our systems crave pedagogical pivots that lead to transformation. We challenge you to envision new teaching practices, and we invite you to lean into this discomfort and embrace the lessons offered by the pandemic to shift toward new possibilities.

## Unwrapping the Gift

The goal of this professional resource is to inspire educators with practical strategies for supporting learners with differentiated opportunities. Educators can rethink and reimagine their classroom instruction and programming in ways that offer all learners multiple entry points using culturally relevant and responsive resources, open-ended materials, and play. *The Gift of Playful Learning*

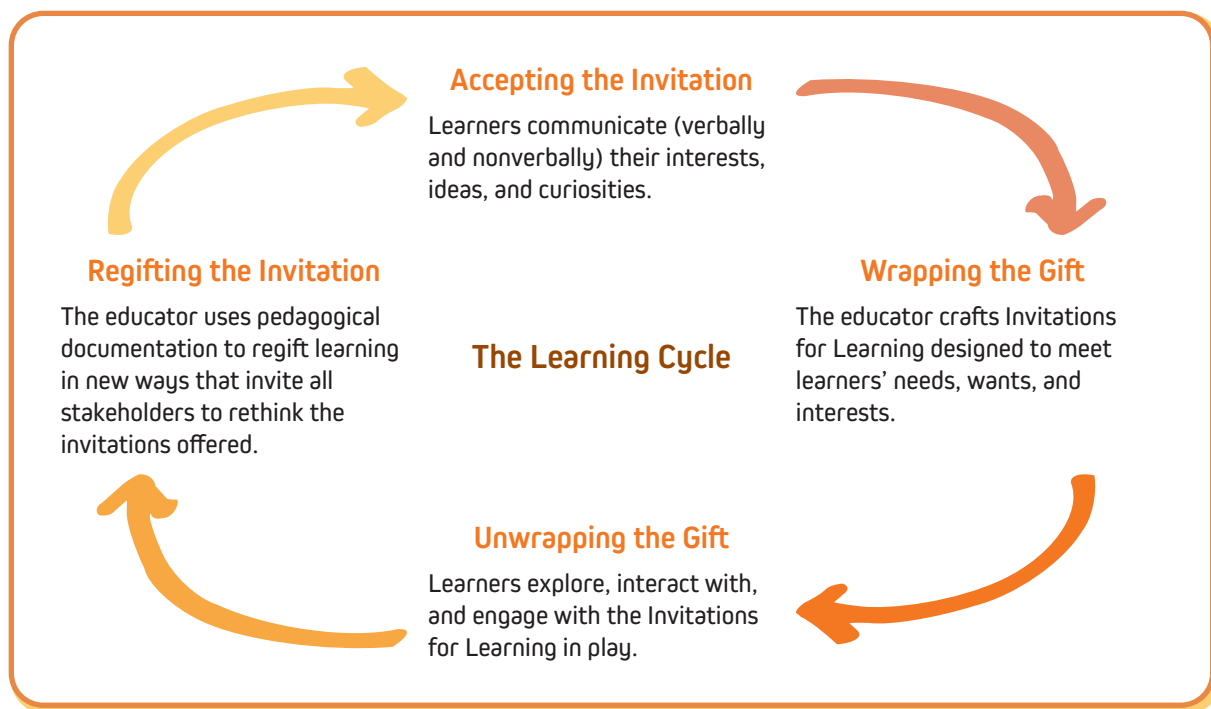
- offers practical steps and considerations at the end of every chapter to guide educators along their journey;
- embeds examples and experiences that share personal journeys, educator reflections, and photographs; and
- offers a variety of planning templates and graphic organizers to support educators as they journey in this new learning.

This resource is for educators who want to foster a love of learning through intentional play offerings that consider all aspects of the curriculum and yield academic success. Throughout our work, we endeavor to appeal to diverse learners through play-based approaches that are integrated with culturally relevant and responsive teaching. This equitable approach, which we explore in the book, engages learners in playful opportunities and encourages them to think deeply and critically. While this book offers a comprehensive guide specifically for educators working in prekindergarten to second grade, it supports learning beyond these years as well. This book can also benefit system leaders and administrators who are working to transform school cultures and create sustainable structures for learning.

# How to Unwrap This Gift

The sequence of this text follows a cyclical process that sees teaching and learning as iterative and moving in a nonlinear fashion (see figure 0.1).

Figure 0.1. The Learning Cycle



The chapters reflect the four aspects of the process of learning:

1. **Accepting the Invitation:** In the first portion of this text, we explore concepts that uncover how you can accept the invitations communicated by learners. Chapters 1 and 2 delve into the importance of play and the learning environment in connection to children's interests, ideas, and curiosities.
2. **Wrapping the Gift:** Chapters 3 and 4 outline how you should carefully consider what learners have communicated as you design opportunities to meet their interests, wants, and needs. We closely examine the purpose of open-ended materials and how to offer these materials within learning opportunities.
3. **Unwrapping the Gift:** In chapter 5, we offer guidelines for planning and strategies for unwrapping the gift of learning so that children can explore and engage with playful opportunities.
4. **Regifting the Invitation:** Finally, chapters 6 and 7 prepare you to use pedagogical documentation to regift learning in new ways that invite children and families to identify goals and next steps to rethink learning opportunities and programming.

## Chapter 1: Exploring the Landscape of Play

This chapter uncovers the importance of play in creating joyful and purposeful experiences for diverse learners and shows how aligning play-based experiences with the curriculum offers rich learning for children and educators. We frame a continuum for play that moves from unintentional opportunities to purposeful learning experiences. The chapter provides an understanding of how play offers equitable entry points for learning and presents examples of how culture and identities have shifted the landscape of play.

## Chapter 2: Creating Spaces That Speak

This chapter explores the power of the environment as a third teacher and how the elements of time, space, materials, and relationships can create equitable access points for learning. In this section, you are invited to consider how your personal biases and assumptions inform what is offered in your learning space. We uncover how classrooms speak and transfer the values that educators honor most. This chapter offers strategies for inviting children to share who they are and for creating opportunities where joy and learning can intersect through play.

## Chapter 3: Playful Pieces

This chapter focuses on the theory of loose parts and how these playful pieces provoke learners to foster a *culture of thinking*. We uncover the importance of open-ended materials and the value they maintain in creating sustainable engagement, as these playful pieces invite learners to share stories that are deeply connected to their identities. This chapter provides strategies for scaffolding the use of loose parts in relation to text and for fostering learning opportunities in meaningful ways. You will learn about schematic play and how to intentionally connect loose parts to schemas (repetitive behaviors in play) to unpack biases and assumptions. We also make connections to the importance of open-ended materials as we reference Bloom's taxonomy. The chapter considers how to implement conditions for learning that allow for safe and intentional use of loose parts.

## Chapter 4: Inviting Learning

In this chapter, we identify the elements of an Invitation for Learning. We define the difference between an activity, a provocation, and an Invitation for Learning. We give examples of Invitations for Learning and how they deepen connections to the curriculum and play. We consider how documentation can support and strengthen play-based experiences and redirect learning in purposeful ways. The chapter also shares misconceptions around Invitations for Learning and offers strategies for revitalizing offerings for play to reinvoke and engage learners.

## Chapter 5: Planning with Purpose

Our journey in learning continues as we explore key considerations for planning Invitations for Learning. You will gain a deeper understanding of how to plan Invitations for Learning that are reflective and responsive to children in an integrated and differentiated manner. We provide concrete examples, graphic organizers, and reflection questions to guide you in the planning process. We explore the worksheet continuum and revisit Bloom's taxonomy as it connects to planning Invitations for Learning, while considering how these invitations move children to think, analyze, create, and transfer skills.

## Chapter 6: Playful Assessments

This chapter looks at protocols for pedagogical documentation and effective ways to record, collect, and analyze learning. We explore how documentation informs next steps in teaching practice through data gathered from playful classroom experiences. We also explore how to leverage documentation to consolidate learning and make connections to the curriculum. We reflect on how biases and assumptions inform our assessment practices and how to respond to, challenge, and extend thinking.

## Chapter 7: Playful Partnerships

This last chapter explores the importance of partnerships and focuses on the power of engaging families as collaborators in learning. We consider meaningful ways to engage families in play opportunities that honor their lived experiences and capitalize on children's thinking. In this chapter, we uncover strategies for fostering partnerships that fuel play-based experiences. You will gain perspective on various forms of family engagement. We also offer practical ideas for inviting family members to serve as co-educators by noticing and naming learning to inform teaching practice.

As you navigate the chapters, key features within the text are included to support and inspire you in deepening your understanding of the material. Scenarios based on real classroom situations illustrate the implementation of key ideas in the text. “Playful Notes” share tips and strategies we have found helpful in our own practice. In addition, we have crafted questions to elicit deep reflection and discussion as you journey through the chapters. We have also included clarifying definitions and quotes that link to learning. And to help further recap ideas and connect them to practice, we include the following features in an **Additional Considerations** section:

- **Missed Invitations:** Here we present misconceptions or missed opportunities along the learning journey. We address how to move through these missed invitations to be more responsive.
- **Unraveling the Knots:** In our own practice, we have encountered tensions, challenges, or wonderings about the learning we have acquired and how it moves from theory to practice in seamless ways. This section unravels the knots that educators often contend with on the path to new discoveries.
- **Pursuing the Gift:** In this section, we offer practical steps for you to implement in your own practice that align with the gifts of learning. These can be considered next steps for your own learning journey.

We close each chapter with **Gifts of Learning**. Here we revisit key ideas and concepts explored within the chapter. We review learning goals and consolidate the ideas that have been presented.

Join us as we unwrap the gift of learning.



The background of the page is a photograph of a classroom. In the upper left, there are wooden shelves holding books. One book is titled 'jeanette winter'. To the right, a sign on the wall asks 'Where is the magic in your world?'. The title 'Chapter 1' is written in orange. The main title 'Exploring the Landscape of Play' is in a large, dark, handwritten-style font. A text box with a paragraph of text is in the center. At the bottom left, there are colorful wooden blocks (pink, green, blue) on a grey carpet. A green vertical bar is on the right edge.

## Chapter 1

# Exploring the Landscape of Play

It is mid-morning, and the school day is in full swing. We enter a space with a community of children who are confidently engaged in the intentional learning opportunities offered to them. As we stand at the entrance of this learning environment, a feeling of enchantment washes over us, and we are immediately invited into their world of play. As our eyes dance around, we see Invitations for Learning intricately placed within the classroom. Learners are captivated by a space that speaks to their interests, curiosities, identities, and intrigue—a space that validates their right to play.

In many learning environments, educators are shifting their teaching practices to provide programming that is inclusive of diverse learners, addressing ever-changing dynamics to nurture a myriad of interests, curiosities, and needs. Through play, learners' capabilities and competencies are actualized, and manifestations of learning become apparent.

Play is the greatest equalizer! Children play around the world, regardless of their lived experiences and social identities. Play transcends time and generations. As educators, we must appeal to the power of play. Play is fundamentally “an expression of freedom” (Gray 2008, para. 14)—a freedom void of stress and driven by a person's own intentions and desires.

*What if play was honored as a right?*

## Play as a Right

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes 54 articles upholding a universal standard that all children, at all times, without exception, need to thrive. While the UN Convention outlines a variety of basic human rights and freedoms entitled to children, it also values and honors the importance of play. If we consider play to be a right in our school communities, learning environments, and districts, we must consider what the right to play affords our learners within an institutional setting. We therefore propose these principles of the right to play (adapted from “Children's Rights to Read,” published in 2018 by the International Literacy Association):

1. All children have the right to play and uncover *joy*, *imagination*, and *motivation*.
2. All children have the right to *choose* where and with whom they play.
3. All children have the right to *share* what they have learned from their global or local perspectives.
4. All children have the right to *access* open-ended materials that they can manipulate to enhance play.
5. All children have the right to play in a way that *mirrors* their lived experiences and identities, provides *windows* into the lives of others, and opens *doors* into their world.
6. All children have the right to play for extended periods of *time* that go uninterrupted.
7. All children have the right to play in a way that values different *expressions* for learning.
8. All children have the right to be *supported* in accessing play, based on their developmental needs.

When we promise such freedoms to our children, we liberate them from a *culture of doing* to a *culture of thinking*. When our spaces offer limited choices and rote or procedural tasks, they are focused on a culture of doing. However, when our spaces offer differentiated experiences that allow for multiple entry points in learning, they promote a culture of thinking. We invite possibilities without restriction, and we honor the voice of the child who yearns to discover the world through their own perspectives.

## What Is Play?

There are many definitions of play. For us, “play is a vehicle for learning and rests at the core of innovation and creativity” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016b, 18). Play encompasses joyful moments that are ignited through interactions, activity, or acts. Play elevates an experience by tickling the senses to appease a person’s creativity, expressions, and inquisition. As identified by Friedrich Froebel, play represents the inner act of a child’s thinking through outward expressions that require the manipulation of objects or the child’s body (Nell et al. 2013). A child’s learning potential is immeasurable when the child engages in play. Whether children are playing cooperatively, independently, or parallel with others, they demonstrate their understanding of the world in a variety of ways. Through play, children comprehend the world using their senses (Reimer et al. 2016).

Providing an opportunity for play means giving children the autonomy to express pleasure, demonstrate motivation, and create meaning through engagement. Children are innately drawn to play because it invites a freedom to interact with an inner consciousness in visible form. Visible manifestations of play are not just static physical creations; they also include outward expressions of movement and sound. Through play, we have an opportunity to tap into the infinite ways in which children symbolically express themselves. Children have an insatiable curiosity and desire to explore the world; with play as the vehicle, they are driven to take risks, reimagine possibilities, and share their own ideas. Play brings a flexibility of thought that gives children autonomy over their own learning and invites opportunities for exploration and expression.

The autonomy we refer to is the ability to make a decision—that is, the flexibility to choose whether to interact with others or simply play in solitude. Children must have agency over the materials they select for play, as the ability to “play is [an] intensely personal” (Mraz et al. 2016, 12) experience. How a child plays is equally as important as what is done during play. As children engage in acts of play, their play may shift in multiple contexts; a child may express a desire to play alone, cooperatively with another child, or side by side in a parallel way (White 2012).

## Types of Play

When we hear the word *play*, specific imagery comes to mind that connects us to our own lived experiences and identities. While interpretations of play differ, it is important to highlight that play comes in a variety of forms. Bob Hughes (2002) has identified 16 types of play (see figure 1.1). When we observe play, we notice the types of play that unfold for each child; through the information we gather, we come to understand that play embodies specific characteristics. We also recognize the fluid and overlapping nature of the play types, and we see the value in creating environments that foster rich play opportunities.

Figure 1.1. Types of Play

<p><b>Imaginative Play</b></p> <p>Children use their imaginations to act out experiences that would not apply in the real world. <i>Example:</i> Pretending it is snowing inside.</p>	<p><b>Mastery Play</b></p> <p>Children try to control their physical environments through play. <i>Example:</i> Digging tunnels in sand.</p>
<p><b>Creative Play</b></p> <p>Children explore and use their own ideas and theories to create something. <i>Example:</i> Using materials to create a musical composition.</p>	<p><b>Exploratory Play</b></p> <p>Children explore objects that are in their spaces and use their senses to process and make sense of new information. <i>Example:</i> Dragging hands over materials, then smelling them.</p>
<p><b>Fantasy Play</b></p> <p>Children allow their creativity and imagination to be free as they conjure ideas and concepts. <i>Example:</i> Pretending to be an astronaut.</p>	<p><b>Socio-dramatic Play</b></p> <p>Children act out real-life experiences that are based on their prior knowledge. <i>Example:</i> Pretending to shop at the mall.</p>
<p><b>Communication Play</b></p> <p>Children play through ideas, songs, rhymes, poetry, and words. <i>Example:</i> Telling jokes.</p>	<p><b>Locomotor Play</b></p> <p>Children engage in a world of movement. <i>Example:</i> Playing freeze tag.</p>
<p><b>Rough-and-Tumble Play</b></p> <p>Children are in physical contact with objects or with other children. <i>Example:</i> Rolling down a hill.</p>	<p><b>Dramatic Play</b></p> <p>Children dramatize and act out roles that are assigned or invented. <i>Example:</i> Playing a dentist who is caring for a patient.</p>
<p><b>Symbolic Play</b></p> <p>Children transform objects, actions, and ideas into new representations. <i>Example:</i> Using a stick as a wand.</p>	<p><b>Recapitulative Play</b></p> <p>Children explore history, ancestry, rituals, and stories connected to culture and identity. <i>Example:</i> Using sand to reenact a prayer ritual.</p>
<p><b>Role Play</b></p> <p>Children take on a role that moves beyond domestic or personal roles associated with other types of dramatic play. <i>Example:</i> Pretending to use a phone.</p>	<p><b>Social Play</b></p> <p>Children engage in social or interactive play that follows expectations and rules. <i>Example:</i> Playing “Red Light, Green Light.”</p>
<p><b>Deep Play</b></p> <p>Children take risks that are connected to their mood. <i>Example:</i> Overcoming the fear of climbing a tall tree or jumping to another surface.</p>	<p><b>Object Play</b></p> <p>Children play with an object that involves hand-eye coordination. <i>Example:</i> Using a paintbrush to paint.</p>

Source: Adapted from Encourage Play (n.d.); play type information from Hughes (2002).

## Characteristics of Play

Everywhere around the world, at any given time, children exhibit characteristics of play that offer learning to us as observers. Through playful expressions, children reveal their skills within the developmental domains. Play serves as the optimal context for learning. Gray (2008) and White (2012) share several characteristics that define play:

1. Play can be joyful and liberating.
2. Play is self-directed and offers children choice.
3. The process within play is more valued than the product.
4. Several mental processes guide play.
5. Play is imaginative and non-literal.
6. Play is emotionally, physically, and mentally engaging.

## Why Is Play Important?

Play is a powerful educational tool that provides multiple entry points for learners to access curriculum content. Through play, young children develop foundational skills that support social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth. Early childhood development depends on integrated approaches to learning that support all subject areas. Math, science, literacy, and the arts are interconnected—and what better way to merge these disciplines than through play?

Neurologically, as children engage in play, the brain creates pathways that support the development of many skills. These pathways create a foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.

Children have very flexible brains. Scientists describe this as “brain plasticity.” The nature of children’s brain structure allows them to actually see more, hear more, and experience feelings more intensely than adults. They take in large amounts of sensory information, and they investigate and act on sensory input; they form brain pathways for all their future learning and capabilities. (Curtis and Jaboneta 2019, 16)

Research shows us that play is beneficial for childhood development. If we are to offer play-based approaches to teaching, we must first know why it is so important. We believe play is the best avenue for learning because it supports development in holistic ways. Figure 1.2 shows the multiple ways in which play can support children.

Our approach to play contradicts widespread misconceptions that children need to gain specific skills at earlier ages; instead, play lays the foundation for children to be able to engage in skills when it is appropriate for them to do so.