

OCTOBER 2021

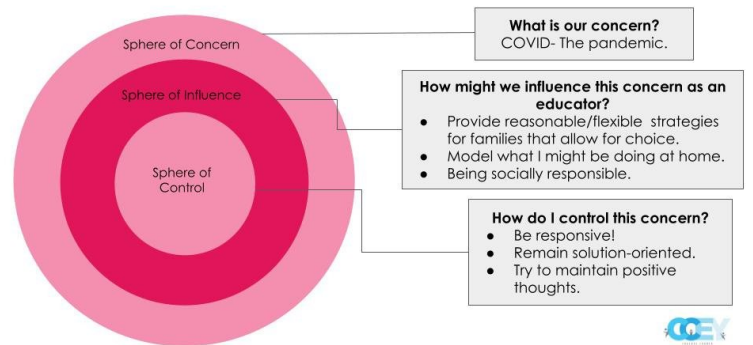
PRIORITIZING PLAY IN A PANDEMIC

N. Kenisha Bynoe & Angelique Thompson



In the wake of the pandemic, we entered a new school year with uncertainty. Our roles as coaches were shifted to respond to the ever changing challenges of the education system. We had received a notice that all coaching staff would be redeployed to teach learners virtually. We were flooded with an array of emotions, feeling overwhelmed, panic and anxiety. As we questioned what this might mean for us, our learners, families and communities, we were reminded of the spheres of control. It had us rethinking how we might be responsive, remain solution-oriented and consider what would work best for our earliest learners.

Spheres of Control



The biggest question that circled in our minds and stood at the forefront of our planning was around how we might prioritize play while teaching and learning with children at home? In conversation, we reaffirmed our belief that play is a vehicle for learning and a right for all children. As we held on to this notion, we considered what the right to play affords our learners within various learning environments (virtual, outdoors and face to face) during the pandemic. One of our mentors Ainsworth Morgan's words resonated loudly in a time of change we were compelled to, "improvise, adapt and adjust."

We were challenged to reimagine a new normal, one that would transform spaces of learning in equitable and accessible ways. As we continue to program for our learners in ways that prioritize play, great lessons were learned from this experience; and we gift them to you as we consider play in a pandemic. "Play is the work of children." (Mraz et al. pg. 12), and when we prioritize play, we observe how it honours well-being, equitable outcomes and success for all learners.



A child plays with a virtual Invitation for Learning and shares her hopes and wishes once the pandemic ends. "This is me, my mommy, my Grandpa and my Auntie Shelby. We are all taking our suitcases on the TTC so we can go on vacation when there is no COVID."

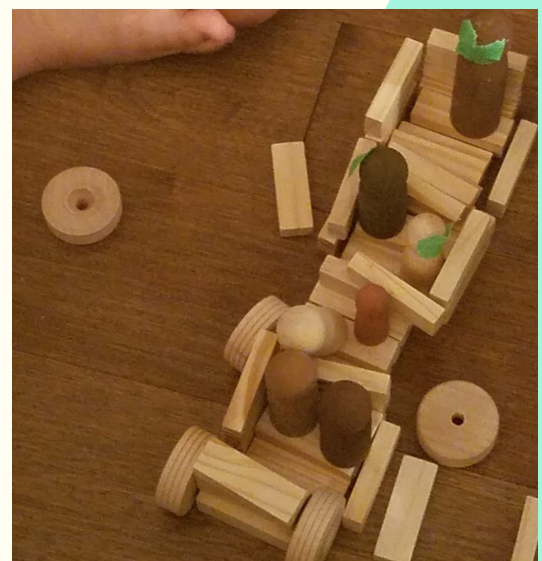


Play is therapeutic.

Through playful interactions with open-ended materials children can access their emotions more freely. The liberatory nature of these pieces allow a child to navigate their stresses in a healthy manner and creates avenues for children to build empathy in a time of crisis. During the pandemic families have undergone immense hardship, stress and loss, having to navigate the unpredictability of this time. As educators, we can leverage play to support our learners. In play, children can self-regulate their emotions and determine strategies to cope with their anxieties. Because play involves choice, children are given a platform to use loose parts to make their thinking visible and voice themselves. Play is a joyful experience where learners are uninhibited.

Consider:

- Offering large blocks of time for play
- Utilizing text that centre the identities of the learners, share messages of empowerment and explore diverse feelings
- Co-constructing your learning spaces in ways that honour choice, flexibility and fluidity



A child in play shares her discomfort around safety during the pandemic and creates a bus to imagine a trip with her family and friends. She shares, "We have to put masks on to keep the people safe!" She uses tape to cover the mouths of the people on her bus.

Play creates equitable outcomes.

The learners in our spaces are unique gifts, offering diverse perspectives, experiences, strengths and needs. What they bring to the learning environment is a present that we as educators unwrap as we treasure their moments of brilliance. Play amplifies their stories, curiosities and theories, interrupting adult-centric views. In educational discourse the pandemic has propelled us to re-envision a counter narrative to traditional teaching and learning approaches. To meet the developmental needs of all learners requires us to honour play in our spaces. Playful learning opportunities like Invitations for Learning and Provocations offer multiple entry points to support diverse needs. It celebrates where learners are and invites them into the learning based on their strengths. Thus, we lean on the expertise of children in play to guide our path towards equity.



As children were learning virtually they began to share plants and flowers that were growing on their balconies, gardens and communities in the Spring. As a response to this emerging interest, the book "Lucy's Umbrella," a story about a girl who looks at the beauty nature and her community has to offer, was read to the learners. It was paired with a virtual Invitation for Learning where children were invited to share where they might find beauty.

Consider:

- Being responsive to the interests, theories and wonders of the learners
- Using loose parts and open-ended materials to honour and support divergent thinking within your space
- Planning differentiated experiences that offer multiple outcomes to meet diverse needs. This can be done through Invitations for Learning, Provocations, STEAM challenges and more.



Book: Count on Me (Also translated in French *Compte sur moi*)
By: Miguel Tanco

This invitation was designed to offer differentiated outcomes for learning through play.

Play empowers the success of all learners.

The act of play invites children to imagine, create and use their critical thinking skills to access learning. When we as educators notice and name the thinking with our learners, we highlight connections to the curriculum and provide multiple pathways for children to show what they know. When we observe and listen with intention we can see how play responds to the interests, theories and wonderings of a child.

We also see how they are attending to academic disciplines in an integrated fashion. Play should be driven by intention inviting our learners to think. In the article, Learning to Cope Through Play, “Children are engaged in learning through play when an activity is (1) experienced as joyful, (2) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, (3) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking (4) involves iterative thinking (e.g., experimentation, hypothesis testing), and (5) involves social interaction (the most powerful resource humans have).” (Solis et al. 2020:11)

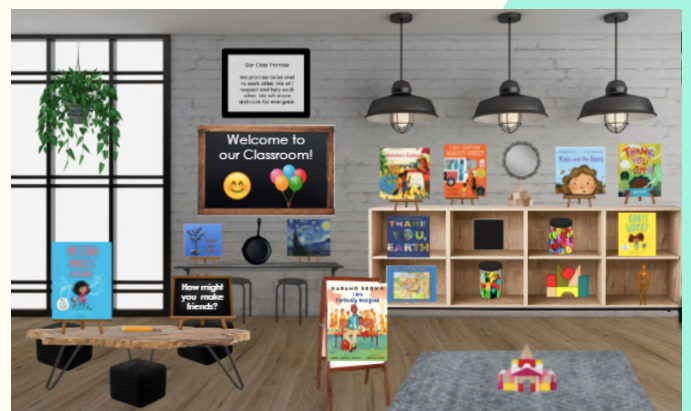
Through offerings of play, we hold a responsibility to ensure that the characteristics of play are upheld in a time of educational challenge.



Consider:

- Intentionally mapping out the connections that live within the curriculum to support learning experiences
- Land-based learning to support programming for all disciplines
- Playful opportunities that move beyond singular disciplines (e.g. a writing centre) to seamlessly offer integrated experiences throughout your space. In the example above the Invitation for Learning using the book “Count on Me” this opportunity welcomes learners to write, design, engage in dramatic play, mathematical thinking and more.

At such a pivotal time in education, play is essential, as it provides children with the means to empower themselves, cope with stressors and support their learning needs. If we prioritize play, we honour the 100 languages that children bring to our learning environments every day. All children have the right to play and uncover joy, imagination, and motivation. We urge you to invite play as a pathway to learning in a pandemic.



Solis et al, (2020). Learning to Cope Through Play: Playful learning as an approach to support children's coping during times of heightened stress and diversity. The Lego Foundation.

Mraz, K., A. Porcelli, C. Tyler. (2016). Purposeful Play: A Teacher's Guide to Igniting Deep and Joyful Learning Across the Day. Heinmann.