International Journal of the Whole Child
2019, VOL. 4, NO. 1

Childhood Remembered: Reflections on the Role of Play for Holistic Education in Armenia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the USA, and Wales

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Introduction

Play remains a topic for discussion, debate, and research within the education community. Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2004) provide an historical overview of early childhood; one of their main findings is play is under siege in many educational circles. The authors indicate, through time, there is a move away from play-oriented learning activities to a narrow focus on academics. Outside of the United States, and in many other countries, shifts occurred toward education focusing on academic skills that "deepen the damage and [make] more permanent the 'achievement' gap" between many children (Meier, 2009, p. 12). In opposition to this trend, advocates continue to call for more play-oriented and holistic approaches to learning, arguing the play vs. academics debate with academic support for and against the role of play in early childhood (Miller, 2008). Although this work provides important contributions to the field, prior research often gives little voice to teachers' perceptions about play, especially from varied and diverse cultural backgrounds.

In this article, we argue for a broader view of education in line with Plato's observation (gender not withstanding) that "The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life" (Jowett, 1874, p. 249). The current approach draws on the recommendation that we move beyond the typical developmental research view to use an interpretivist analysis that considers history, culture, and context (Swadener & Kessler, 1991). We begin with a short overview of the potential and traditional developmental and academic benefits of play. Our argument then focuses on a less common consideration of the holistic benefit of play: We explore teachers' cultural reflections about the nature and worth of play through the authors' personal accounts of playful childhood in Armenia, Great Britain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United States of America. Finally, we provide recommendations for the value of play as part of a whole child education.

Developmental and Academic Support for Play

The potential developmental benefits of play are well documented in the literature. Play evidences links to increases in memory, oral language, and school adjustment (Bodrova & Leong, 2005) and the development of children's logico-mathematical knowledge, abstract thinking, and better social skills (Ridgers, Knowles, & Sayers, 2012). Studies indicate that less play is associated with increases in children's obesity, decreases in active learning, and negative effects on emotional development and self-esteem (Stegelin, Fite, & Wisneski, 2015). When children are more active in play, we often see a change for the better with behavior problems (Al-Sahel, 2006). As we consider the work of Vygotsky (1930-1935/1978), there is a long

established connection between a child's play and learning to exercise self-control while developing empathy for others.

More recently, we see ample evidence of researchers examining more developmentally and psychologically oriented play-associated relationships. As one example, research shows the importance of a child's self-regulation to other developmental skills and abilities with children as young as six-months to three-years-old. The motivation for self-regulation can come from the brain signaling the dopamine system while the learning engagement comes from the norepinephrine systems. From studies (e.g., Wang & Aamodt, 2012), we see that play does not increase the stress hormone cortisol: play is associated with responses that promote increased opportunities for learning. With an increased understanding of the nature of the brain and its inherent need for play, we understand how the prefrontal cortex develops with the knowledge needed to function in the world. Children gain perceptual, cognitive, social and emotional practice through playing that leads to discovery and learning (Wang & Aamdodt, 2012). Even with infants and toddlers, improvements in social emotional development generally, and self-regulation in particular, result in indirect and direct effects on language and cognitive development (Sharkins, Leger, & Ernest, 2016). Here, authors found self-regulation to have a mediating effect on cognition through language. Play exhibits a powerful vehicle through which children develop self-regulation. Decreasing play in early childhood can affect self-regulation that in turn affects language, cognition, and other developmental abilities that relate to later school success.

However, as many reconceptualists (Pinar, 1988, p. 3) of early childhood education argue (see the seminal collection of texts in Kessler & Swadener, 1991), the field of early childhood education reaches well beyond developmental confines. Broader analyses of play can move beyond the narrow developmental benefits. As noted by Swadener and Kessler (1991), researchers often choose narrow "parameters of inquiry" (p. 85) that have become almost an exclusive focus on development. The reconceptualists have advocated for a broader set of analyses that include historical, political, and social dimensions of early childhood, interpreted with respect to meaning within context (Swadener & Kessler, 1991). In essence, an educational analysis may encompass developmental and psychological aspects of play, but are never the sum of these aspects of play. Education is a larger concept.

Education: A Breeding, A Bringing Up, A Rearing

The word "Education" is derived from the Latin Educātiō meaning *A Breeding, A Bringing Up, A Rearing*. The object of education has been described as to love beauty (Plato), to create men and women who are capable of doing new things (Piaget), to entertain a thought without accepting it (Aristotle), and what remains after forgetting everything that was learned in school (Einstein). Regardless of how education is defined, it is clear that the intent of education lies far beyond the ability to recall or use academic information in a way that is easily tested in school settings. Although few argue that academics are unimportant as a formal part of education, there has been a worldwide shift to focus on testing and academic ability at the expense of allowing children to

develop more holistic abilities (Meyer et al, 2014). At academic's expense, there has been a dramatic shift in the time engaged in play with data indicating children playing eight hours less every week than their friends did two decades earlier (Elkind, 2008).

Meyer et al. (2014) and several dozen academics from around the world cosigned a letter to the director of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development PISA study. The signatories noted the response to global shifts to testing with concerns that this change "takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development, thereby dangerously narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about" (para. 5). With shifts across the world in how we have made education available to larger communities of children, corresponding questions about the health and wellness of our children continue to surface. Just looking at the United States of America, data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (Benjamin et al, 2018) estimates more than 10.5 million children (5-18) evidence elevated or high blood pressure. Beyond education, we acknowledge the value of play and its relationship to academics as discussed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). For example, in Ginsburg's (2007, p. 182) clinical report for the AAP, the author notes "an increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free child-centered play." However, young children tend to be more active during school days than weekend days, and more active during recess than during physical education classes (Frömel, Stelzer, Groffik, & Ernest, 2008). At the same time that play and recess decline in school settings, there is a corresponding increase in the proportion of overweight and obese children.

Critics of the decline of play also take a more holistic and existential viewpoint, noting how the shift to a more academic and testing culture is questionable to who we are as people. From this stance, play assumes a natural part of childhood for millennia and reducing play is likely to influence far-reaching consequences of which, at present, we possess limited understanding. For example, Spikins, Hitchens, Needham and Rutherford (2014) described the Neanderthal child as resilient and strong to live through tough climates and extreme situations. The authors described how artifacts that children used as toys doubled as elementary tools. If the benefits of play promote a lasting frame of mind not only for learning but for survival, how are we affecting society if we change a fundamental part of who we are? In early childhood education, with every ebb and flow of policy and practice between academics and play (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006), researchers and advocates continue to document the academic and developmental benefits and challenges with play. A broader view of research is needed to provide a more holistic support for play.

Design and Methods

To add to the literature base for and about play, we explored perceptions of early childhood play from teachers that grew up in diverse cultural settings that included Armenia, Great Britain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. We became participant observers as we considered our own perceptions of play using Brown and Vaughan (2009) suggestion that as teachers and

professionals that work with preservice and in-service teachers, we can learn much about ourselves when we look at our own play history. Participants in the study were asked to reflect in narrative form about their own early childhood play experiences and also write about cultural changes in their own countries through time as they consider their own personal development as early childhood teachers and professionals. Participants had at least a master's in early childhood education.

For data analyses and interpretation, we focused on emic or 'insider' knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of play reflections and employed a thematic narrative analysis to determine patterns in results. More specifically, we used intrinsic case studies in an instrumental way to "examine a particular case to provide insight into an issue" and with reference to varied cases "particularity and ordinariness" to help synthesize across cases (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012, p. 5). The narrative data were treated as stories to provide meaning to findings. The narratives were analyzed for initial codes that, when compared across stories, provided varying cultural childhood themes about play.

Results and Discussion

Across the collective cultural backgrounds, three main themes emerged from the codes: (a) deep and long-lasting emotional memories in the early years, (b) a perception of things learned through play that exist and help define who we are today, and (c) cultural connections that bind our personas to our lived experiences.

Emotions of Early School Experiences

Narrative reflections of play clearly evidenced strong and enduring emotions run hand-in-hand with recollections of early childhood. As is somewhat common, first days in school are tough for children and this was recalled by Hana from Saudi Arabia: "Because I was very attached to my mother, I attended kindergarten for [a] few days. I don't have good memories about it. I used to cry a lot and I did not feel comfortable." What was a somewhat surprising revelation were some of the long-term distressing experiences and negative connotations associated with school. For example, Emir from Kuwait said "I did not like school. In fact, I hated school. Both private and public. School was certainly not a place I look at fondly, but I do have a few good memories." Nare from Armenia shared that "I hated my school. First of all, I hated to wake up early morning to go to school. That is at 8 o'clock. When I taught in Dubai, I could feel the frustration of the kids who used to wake up at 5 a.m. to be at school at 7 a.m. (traffic jam)."

These types of reactions were still prevalent as we moved into higher grades. For example, Emir from Kuwait recalls:

> When I was in the first grade, I hated to go to school. I feel that the school looked and felt like a jail even though it was not. Can you imagine that in my country, students in the

> classroom were not allowed to speak, move, or do any things without permission from the teacher?

However, some of these perceptions of school changed as reflections shifted to the role of play in education. Contrary to the negative associations that were found when our recollections moved beyond the larger concept of 'school' to thinking about play experiences. Claire from the US shared positive memories:

> The one thing I did like about the private elementary school I went to was the playground. They had some seriously high slides. They would just get hot when the sun was on them, and I had to wear dresses so it would burn all the way down if it was that time of day. The swings were great, too. I loved to play this twist game in the swings we played.

Even with the element of pain associated with the "burn," it was clear that it was worth it for the "FUN!" Aniya from the US also mentioned emotions of pure joy while on the playground:

> I can remember Preschool, being outside and playing with my friends. Learning how to swing, going down the slide, playing on the see-saw, and the playground activity list could go on and on, but ultimately after being given that time it was like our time to be free. No worries, no demands . . . just FUN!

Perhaps the most surprising finding was the recognition of so many people having so many negative associations with early schooling … and yet seeking a career in early childhood education. As Amiya asked, "Children should want to go to school, right? Was there hesitation in your answer? Did you want to go to school?" Similarly, Emir from Kuwait exclaimed, "Children should want to come to the school every day." Rhys from the UK also recalled negative emotional memories from years ago involving a private school and how these changed when moving to a traditional British nursery school:

> I went to a private school where they used the cane and a slipper on your backside when you didn't do what you should. It's tough to have a positive view of school when you know your sisters are playing outside in the evening and you have to do lots of homework because if you don't, you'll get popped with a slipper or cane as a punishment if you don't do your work. I kept nagging my parents to send me to the public school where the kids seemed to be much happier with school. At the private school, it was all about academics. When I moved to the public school, they seemed to value the whole child, keeping children engaged and happy, being supportive socially and emotionally.

The Making of a Wo/Man: Holistic Support for Play

In addition to many of the emotional reactions about schooling, many reflections spoke to a broader value of play beyond the academic realm that corresponds with a whole child education. According to Griffin (1981), holistic education "aims at the integration of elements: self and world; mind and body; knowing and feeling; the personal and societal; the practical and

transcendent" (p. 111). To put it simply, play and holistic experiences help form us into the people we are going to be and are natural ways to develop coping mechanisms. Claire from the US recalled one harrowing experience:

> When I was in Kindergarten, we all went to my teacher's house to have a welcome back to school party where she had a family swing and several of us were pushing some other children in it. We were all laughing and playing, and they wanted to go higher, the swing set was popping out of the ground, we pushed harder and it flipped over. I was the only one left standing there with another child screaming pinned under the swing set; everyone else ran and the other children in the swing had managed to jump out. The adults came out and everyone circled around. I had to tell them what happened. Only to hear, "you should never push people in these kinds of swings." It broke the boy's leg and my heart, I never meant to hurt him. Because of that trying to find someone to play with was very hard when we went to school. They were afraid of me. I would go play by myself. Eventually, I made a friend.

Whether thinking about who is associating blame, considering high emotions when people get hurt, the formation of friendships, there are a myriad of thoughts that come together to help a child understand self in relation to the world. Play invariably involves some pain and unpredictability, and may "dampen their [a child's] emotional weighting in order for that discomfort to be regarded as 'background noise'" (Pellis & Pellis, 2006, p. 265). There are times when children are playing, they get injured. Either, they injure themselves or possibly get injured by a family member or friend or even unintentionally injure someone else. Claire from the USA describes:

> When I was in the 3rd grade, one of my guy neighbors was attending the same school I was, and we decided to carry over one of our adventures during recess catch the others up on our mission after school. They were building a new baseball field at the edge of the playground (present day sports complex) and there were these big, huge, delightfully fun cement tunnels we had started rolling each other in. I had my hand on the outside of one these big guys while we were being rolled by some of our friends during our secret mission. Well, it crashed into another cement tunnel crushing my left hand. I say this only because children are going to have accidents playing. They kept telling my mom that they had told us NOT to go out there. I remember hearing my parents talk about how everyone needed to calm down. With everything we do there are risks and things are going to happen. How we handle things happening as adults is what is important. I learned valuable information from that experience.

Amiya from the US wrote about this idea as they note "Pain felt is real, but because children are playing, they will devalue the pain because they were 'just messing around' as compared to a situation when they were injured and it was not associated during a play experience." Here we see how when children are engaged in play, we treat pain through a different lens, in a way 'toughening us up' to keep doing what we were doing and work through the pain. It is, as Wang and Aamodt (2012) noted, that through the developmental system of play, children are able to engage in social interactions combined with their physical environment to negotiate risk taking,

distinguish between safe and dangerous and test boundaries storing for later use in life. Therefore, and as Nare from Armenia shared, "decreasing these play opportunities, decreases the chances for preparedness." Emir echoed these thoughts as "learning through play can promote children to grow in many respects."

Another set of reflections noted the role of free play in offering, what Hurwitz (2002-2003) considers, children having control over the course of their own learning and this control helps promote the intangibles of motivation and desire leading to mastery and creativity. Again, Claire from the USA describes:

> My favorite "girly things" to do were shows for our families, and I loved taking blankets and making "fashion" out of them. I'd make my friends stand on stools while I would tailor these outfits made out of blankets over their clothes. They were simply baby blankets tied, looped, or swayed in different ways covering the essential body parts that needed covering. It would then culminate with a runway show with them walking while I would talk about what a beautiful model they were describing the fashion. The shows we did for our families would be quite the production. We would practice dances, cheers, and gymnastics, come up with costumes, props, have snacks (the first time we forgot drinks, the second time we forgot food), read books, do magic tricks, charge admission ($.10), create a theatre space in the backyard with seating on both sides of the fence, and pick special music. This event could sometimes last 10 minutes or an hour.

As Claire went on to note, "Talk about learning through play. Even though the landscape changed and the perimeter was limited there was still opportunity for me to continue to learn within my own interest." This free play experience was full of creativity, innovation, business and service full of future skill sets and opportunities for allowing a young child to explore their interests not preset, prescribed curriculum. Research suggests these types of opportunities in learning, flourish with diverse forms of play (Cheng & Johnson, 2010) and becomes a springboard for problem solving, critical, and divergent thinking skills (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). In the context of play, children that are afforded choice tend to be more motivated and engaged (King & Howard, 2014). Russ and Kaugars (2001) recognized in their work that a child's affect while playing related to a child's divergence in thinking. When a child has a positive play mood they are more likely to create original responses to situations.

Another set of reflections can be described as children using play as a mechanism to develop important concepts of the mind and body, the knowing and feeling, the self and the world, as essential parts of being human. Hoffman and Russ (2016) remind us of the life skills that are associated with play that include organization and imagination. Also, children learn to manage their own risk (Ridgers, Knowles, & Sayers, 2012) and play helps children understand others' points of view and build self-confidence (Smilansky & Shefaya, 1990; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Other life-skills include those noted by Ginsberg (2007): Children forge connections, learn how to share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts and engage in existential thoughts of our relationship to the larger world. These ideas were consistent with several of our participants' thoughts about play growing us. As Claire from the US shared:

> Some of the best memories of my childhood were at home when I could go outside and play. The days were unending in our neighborhood. We started sometime after breakfast and didn't end until we heard the whistle of one of the moms which was on into dusk as the bats would be starting to eat the mosquitoes, and our imaginations were incorporating them into whatever Star Wars, mad scientists, cowboy saga, or game we were playing. We even thought we could chirp to the bats and get them to come eat out of our hands. Ah, to be a child.

The example is clearly one that develops deep and lasting memories that are created when children are free to play. Play becomes time-space for "everyday momentary forms of hopefulness" (Kraftl, 2008, p. 88). Here, as Kraftl explains, there is a joy and pleasure of playing--of doing things for the sake of them, rather than performing obligations for adults--that enable children to maintain an openness to the world. Children can create and take on the environment, work through toxic stressors taking actions that help to reduce the emotional pressures, and thereby enable children to cultivate resilience through play.

Hurwitz (2002-2003) explained the value in an activity where a child can enjoy the moment: Play can help children regulate stress responses and emotional systems by rerouting impulse-driven or under-receptive reactions to unfamiliarity. They are better able to 'roll with the punches' (Siviy, 1998) at a neural level negotiating their way through situations that present themselves during play. With our participants, play was felt to be particularly valuable for learning when negotiating social rules. For example, Nare from Armenia reminisced "My grandfather had sacks of wheats in the basement. I thought it would be even more pleasant to use wheats to throw on each other. The feeling of doing something novel and forbidden added more fun to our play.*"* This was also shared by Rhys from the UK:

> My earliest recollection of school was standing in the corner! Three minutes earlier, my friend Neils and I were busy stomping on the Lego's, smashing the constructions, having a whale of a time as we played 'destruction.' Apparently, my teacher had other ideas about how Lego's should be treated.

As Berinstein and Magalhaes (2009) found when studying play in Tanzania, many cultures value a more eclectic view of education noting the roles of traditions, culture and standards of living and finding play associated with creativity, healing, and oneness. Engaging in play in these cultures will help a child internalize rules and customs particular to their way of life in a natural and meaningful way.

Cultural Connections to Our Past

A third theme from the narratives was related to helping us link our cultural nuances from past to present. As play is as old as any culture, using play is a natural and logical mechanism to help connect who we are to our ancestors. As French (1977) explains, there has been a shared cultural definition of play that dates at least as far back as ancient Egypt. Archeologists have found wall art depicting children playing with dolls, balls, and what looks like jumping rope. Although some

of these activities might be culturally specific, many transcend cultures. In the following, we see Hana from Saudi Arabia sharing an example of many activities that could be found around the world:

> Before going to school, I remember that I loved to play with my mom's makeup and my favorite thing to do was playing with dolls. Despite the fact that I was living with six brothers, I did not like to play their kind of play such as soccer or basketball. I had a small kitchen and that was the best part for me. When I was in the elementary school, I started to join my brothers in their play. In our house, we had a big courtyard that my brother used to play soccer, basketball, volleyball and such. I played with them sometimes if their friends were not there, but if their friends were there, I watch them while they playing because they usually play real rough and tough games. Because our house was the 'boys' house', usually all my cousins (the boys) gather in our house. It was like their club.

Conversely, there was also a perception of culturally-specific nuances that help to define a culture. We see this reflected in Nare's conversation with her mother when living under the old soviet system:

> My mom was a teacher during USSR and recently I asked my mom about punishments at school in old times. She told me that even then punishment by law was forbidden, but no student knew about their rights. So, teachers abused the fact that children have no clue about the 'hidden rules' and used their power on them. Culture makes a difference. Kids have no say in my culture, they should obey the adults (as in your culture I assume). Hence, even if kids knew about the law they would not have a say in anything.

Play helps children learn social structure with other people in their homes, school, and community (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). As Hana noted about their own play growing up in Saudi Arabia: "The relationship with my relatives has a lot to do in my childhood playing. We lived at the same neighborhood, very close to each other's, so we played together most of the days." Another reflection from Hana explained

> During the weekdays, I go with my mother most the days to visit my grandma, and sometimes we play Domino together, my grandma was a very good Domino player. Another thing we used to do with my relatives was camping in the desert. We spend all the time playing cards, Domino, traditional games, play with the sand, climbing mountain, tag, hide and seek and so on. We play all the time.

Hana continued to mention:

> I love games so much. I play with my kids and my nephews and nieces board games, cards, and even the traditional games; I think they love me so much because of that. I also like to play games (board games such as sequences, cards, traditional games) with my grown-up cousins and my sisters-in-law. Writing about play makes me realize something strange. I realize that the older I've gotten, the more I love and value play.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We all come from different backgrounds having experienced play in different forms, and as Brown and Vaughan (2009) suggest, there is much to learn from an exploration of your own play history. Our reflections on play at home, at school, and now as adults has helped us better understand where we are as we 'play' the role of educator. As teachers, interpreting our past experiences and how we feel about play today can help inform how we nurture our children's development. The work of Piaget informs us that children learn and develop when interacting with their environment (Piaget, 1962) and Johan Huizinga has helped us understand the role of play as a necessary component in the development of culture and society (Huizinga, 1944). Children need more time playing, and they need opportunities to guide their play (Hurwitz, 2002-2003). Reflecting on our own experiences of being a child and valuing teacher research as a way of knowing (Rust, 2009), the choice to have children engage in play is more than the sum of academic gains. Also, from an access to education perspective, research shows that children's social skills matter. Gilliam (2005) found preschoolers to be three times as likely to be expelled than children in kindergarten through 12th grade and their behavior was the primary reason for being expelled. The opportunity to play brings a greater opportunity for self-expression and opportunities to work through social interactions and understand and regulate emotional feelings.

As proponents of a more holistic view of education, it is important advocates remain mindful of the views of parents that we might collaborate with one another. Prior research indicates that in their urgency to have their children read and write, parents can marginalize or fail to appreciate the learning benefits of play (Garcia-Coll & Meyer, 1995). However, McCloskey (2011) notes that although parents often emphasize the fundamentals associated with reading, writing, arithmetic, there is an implicit recognition of the value of economics, arts, language, and other areas of learning so that "each student becomes academically, socially, and emotionally well-rounded" (p. 81). In our research, we found connections across cultures that coincide with emotional wellness and more holistic supports for child development. On the surface, parents are often concerned with academics, but not at the expense of the value of play for learning about navigating social circles. Also, there was a recognition that play helped us remember who we were in the past as people of today: remembering how we enjoyed ourselves while accepting some of the injuries that almost always go in hand with play is important as well as remembering how we interacted with others during play, at the child, parent, grandparent level. As Witten, Kearns, Carroll, Asiasiga, and Tava'e (2013) note, a decline of outdoor play has seen corresponding declines with the development of intergenerational relationships. It might be that conversations with parents about the function of play to help bridge generations might be a fruitful approach for play advocates.

As children, and as we navigate who we are as we mature to adolescence and adulthood, we can draw on the work of Gray (2016). His work shows that children in less academically-oriented schools also discover their interests and passions, develop specialized skills in those realms, and often go on to successful careers that make use of those skills. Gray noted that this curiosity and playfulness blooms in an environment rich in self-educational opportunities, children learn to read, write, and perform numerical calculations without deliberate training, in their own ways

and in their own time. Furthermore, Gray provided evidence from 37 case histories of literacy that did not receive formal reading instruction and 61 responses to an informal qualitative analysis on SAT preparation for math. Results indicated that when children are regularly exposed to literate and numerate environments, they learn these skills without coerced instruction. The skills that are acquired developmentally during play set the scene for social interactions in a child's life as they become mindful of the emotions, motivations, desires, and actions of others. Children learn to modify their own actions and reactions in response to these encounters. Play then becomes a "willful belief in acting out one's own capacity for the future" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 198).

Recommendations from this work include working with principals and other administrators so that teachers can implement scheduling to safeguard flexibility throughout the day for play. Rather than advocating for having to fit play into an academic day, teachers can advocate for working our academics into our play: altering our language we use as teachers can be helpful here. As many reflections indicate, initial emotions to a first day/week of school are lasting memories that can shape our perceptions of school. If teachers use a play-based approach to introduce young children into a classroom that mirrors home life or a community play-based mothers' morning day out, some children may be less likely to develop the strong negative emotions that some people have toward schooling. As professional educators, we can better publicize the importance of play in the community, sharing moments of excitement and learning success that will be observed for others to benefit. Play is an integral part of our lived experience whether it is indoors or outdoors, structured or not, we play leaving us to hone in on the power of diversity and the importance of accountability. The challenge is how to capitalize on both in a demanding era. Educators can meet this challenge by making the development of the whole child their top priority (Nelson, 2009). Miller (2008) reminds us "The child is not merely a future citizen or employee in training, but an intricate and delicate web of vital forces and environmental influences" (p. 5). Said another way, a child is a child, and as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1989) noted, play is a right of every child. It is important that as adults we remember the value of play as central to working through emotions, being aware of the developing who we are as women and men, and forging cultural connections to our past. Early childhood is a formative period of development and play is not just an integral mechanism for learning academics but the sine qua non of more holistic learning and development.

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