

A child is running through a field of tall grass at sunset. The child is seen from behind, wearing a patterned shirt and dark pants. A red kite is flying in the sky above the child. The sky is a warm, golden-orange color, and the grass is silhouetted against the light.

PLAY TO THRIVE

The Key to Recovery and
a Flourishing Future

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Authors' Note

While writing this paper, our esteemed friend Kahontakwas Diane Longboat told us of an Iroquois prophecy that is rooted deeply in the Elders tradition: at the time of great upheaval, the children will be the ones to bring medicine home to the family. In the spirit of this generously shared prophecy, we hope this paper will inspire those dedicated to supporting the growth, learning, and development of children to allow them to bring their gifts forward to help us heal in this time of great upheaval.

Acknowledgements and Introduction

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our review readers who gave generously of their time and insights in sharing both formal and informal feedback on the initial versions of this paper: Michael Fullan, Alexandra Harper, and Pasi Sahlberg. Their thoughtful comments helped us to clarify our thinking and strengthen our message that play is the multilayered solution for struggling societies, children, and the planet.

Introduction

We felt compelled to write this paper in response to what we see as overlapping crises in society and the institutions dedicated to supporting the learning and care of children, from preschool through Grade 12. As authors, we bring different experiences and backgrounds to a shared goal of renewing the prominence of physical and intellectual play in young people's lives as a fundamental aspect of thriving in the 21st century. It is both a treatise on play and call to action. In this time of loss, risk, and opportunity, we believe that betting big on play is our best shot. Play is not new at all. It has been an inherent feature of our human nature since time immemorial. And children excel at it. The trouble is that play has been increasingly pushed down the list of priorities by the growing obsession with productivity and efficiency in contemporary societies and institutions. As a result, kids play less and adults have mostly forgotten how. It is time to restore play and give it a central place in our efforts to recover and build a better future.

We have organized the paper in six sections. The first section brings attention to the current state of global crisis. Humanity and life on the planet are at stake, and the crises we are immersed in present both profound dangers and unique opportunities

to reset priorities and build a fundamentally better future barely imagined at the present time.

Section two—Reigniting our *Why*—points to the importance of defining and enacting our personal and collective *why*, exploring the purposes that might offer the compass to navigate and overcome the crisis. Our core message about the how and why of helping children to learn and thrive through play in this time of great upheaval can be summarized in four simple declarative statements:

- **Let children play to know themselves and the world around them.**
- **Let children play to learn and think for themselves.**
- **Let children play to care for themselves and others.**
- **Let children play to better humanity and the world.**

In section three, we explain how play is a highly effective vehicle to cultivate each of these four purposes, making reference to current evidence on play and its benefits. Section four discusses why and how to effectively connect play and the curriculum. In section five, we bring attention to what might get in the way of the needed play revolution. In particular, we discuss the drive for control that has profoundly shaped the thinking, actions and behaviours of individuals, societies, and institutions, as well as our individual and collective fears associated with the idea of setting children free to play. Finally section six—Play it Forward—proposes five key ideas to initiate, enhance, and spread opportunities to play for and with the children whose lives you touch. **Let there be play so that children become their own and our own future.**

Play is the essence of building a different and richly engaging future.

1. We're in Trouble

We're in the midst of a profound crisis, unfolding at multiple levels. Even before the coronavirus entered the scene as a new existential threat, there were worrying signs that humanity and life on the planet were hurtling towards an anthropogenic abyss. The list of threats includes: natural disasters caused by human activity growing in scale and frequency; thousands of species becoming extinct at an accelerated pace; millions of people displaced from their homelands; democracies crumbling; inequities deepening and growing, overstressing the social fabric; fundamentalism and violence on the rise. When the UN Secretary-General declared a code red for humanity with the most recent IPCC report on climate change in August 2021, it felt like the bad news we all feared was coming. A few weeks later, when Greta Thunberg and her youth activist colleagues wrote that, "We are in a crisis of crises," it was hard to ignore our dire situation any longer. The summer of 2021 was sounding an emergency call to anyone who was listening: do something now to knock us from this destructive path.

Before the pandemic, children and youth in the Canadian province of Ontario, where the three of us live and work, showed worrying signs of increased stress, anxiety, and depression. One in five suffered from some form of mental disorder (Georgiades et al, 2019), with a threefold increase in perceived challenges reported by children and youth themselves. In terms of their healthy movement, only 15% of Canadian children and youth were meeting all three recommendations within the 24-Hour Movement Guidelines covering physical activity, sedentary time including digital screens, and sleep (ParticipACTION, 2018). While it has been tempting to get nostalgic for the state of affairs that existed prior to the pandemic, children were already struggling before it. COVID has made things much worse for many young Canadians, especially for those in historically marginalized groups and communities.

Author and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) has suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic is a portal to the future. Getting through the current crises,

recovering, and making it to a much better world on the other side of the portal will require massive collective effort, commitment, and coordination across multiple sectors. Those of us dedicated to the education and care of children and youth have a crucial role to play. Of the many ways forward in our schools and learning institutions, there is one that is often left out, but which will have a massive impact: let the children play. A society that recognizes and prioritizes children's right to play as an essential human right and the fundamental process of how children learn optimally, and which embraces play as our best bet for the survival of humanity, holds the interests of thriving children and their future at its core.

We say, "Let the children play," for two reasons. First, Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle (2019) have already written a meticulously reasoned and evidenced book with the same title. Canada too is home to an existing and significant body of researchers and practitioners who have been doing the good work of advocating for play for many years. Please read *Let the Children Play* if you have any doubt about the two bold truths laid bare by the authors: that play is the engine of childhood and the foundation of effective education. We expand this argument by adding that play is in fact the essence of building a better and richly engaging future.

Second, based on our own research, practice, and observation, we are compelled by a renewed urgency around centering play in the lives and learning of children and youth. This urgency is pushed by what has been lost to many of them during the pandemic, and pulled by the deepening crises that threaten their and our thriving future. During lockdowns and mobility restrictions, many children and youth experienced significant play deprivation—particularly the loss of social, active, and outdoor play. In a spring 2021 study of over 7,500 mostly Ontario children and youth, 1 in 5 were getting 15 minutes or less of daily outdoor play, which can be described as a form of play poverty (Rae, E., Gillespie, M., Fullan, J., 2021). Learning became less playful or engaging for many students

during online, interrupted or hybrid schooling as layers of rules and restrictions were added to their lives, along with fear of contracting or spreading the coronavirus. Lockdowns may have offered some children and youth the opportunity to rediscover the value and power of play, but the state of play is by many important measures worse off than the already bleak times for play in schools and societies when Sahlberg and Doyle published their book. The world has changed dramatically in the few short intervening years, much of it on a downward trajectory. And the stakes are now much higher with growing and added threats. Now is the time to double down: Let the children play.

Among its many advantages, play provides a constructive alternative to the learning loss narrative. Learning loss—both a misnomer and a red herring—refers to the academic growth and curricular coverage that was not achieved by students during their pandemic education when benchmarked to previous test scores. It is a blunt instrument for capturing what students meaningfully gained or lost during COVID, and threatens a cure that is worse than the disease. One important risk is that the more “learning loss” makes its way into our minds and hearts via the media and publications, the more it might become part of shared beliefs and the historical record for the long term. But the real and present danger is that learning loss could shape how schools

approach recovery and instruction in the near term, at the expense of powerful learning and play—the cost of what it means to be fully human. Recently, Lauren McNamara and Pasi Sahlberg (2020) have eloquently articulated how and why school recess—and the opportunities it affords for play—is more needed than ever in school, and warn about the dangerous temptation to cut it down in order to get children to catch up with learning lost during the pandemic. They have launched the Global Recess Alliance (globalrecessalliance.org) in an effort to defend recess and ensure children's right to play.

While loss and suffering have no doubt occurred in school settings, we see the focus on learning loss or rushing to fill the curricular-coverage gap as wrongheaded and dehumanizing. One of us has described learning loss as “at best an exaggeration and at worst a punitive lie” (Fullan, J., 2021). Play, in contrast, could be a re-entry point for students' love of learning, building competencies together, reigniting relationships and belonging, and fueling healthy movement. Play opens them up to opportunities for ambiguity, creativity and empathy—exactly what is needed for these times. Play as a driving force for recovery honours what children have lost, beyond reading and math scores, as well as what they may have gained in terms of independence, strengths, new discoveries, and knowledge.



2. Reigniting our *Why*

A crisis is a moment when the old system is dead and the new system has not yet been born. In the Chinese language, the term crisis—*weiji*—is composed of two basic concepts. The first concept—*wei*—is 'danger.' As established in the introduction, these are times of existential danger for our democracies, societies, and life on the planet. The second concept in the Chinese word for crisis—*ji*—is 'multiple possibilities.' In times of crisis, there are so many pieces moving that there is a wide range of possible new combinations and outcomes. This is not necessarily a good thing: nothing guarantees that the new system will be better than the one that preceded it. Without deliberate attention to rebuilding humanity and protecting life on the planet, we worry that the default trend, as we cross and go through the portal of the current crisis, will be to stick to what is most familiar, which will in turn lead to further dehumanization and environmental collapse. The stakes could not be higher for humanity, but they are highest for those who have the most to lose or gain: young people.

Returning to the status quo in education might be an option, but it would be a fatal one. Society was already heading toward probable oblivion. Almost instinctively, especially among the very young, there is a growing appetite for change. Parents also fear for their own children's future. We know that many young people, with their natural virtues of tolerance and curiosity, combined with a newly heightened sense of empathy and social purpose (Maximum City, 2021), are hungry for change and eager to lead it. They seem to intuitively grasp its 'now or never' significance.

The crises we are immersed in are forcing many to clarify and reconnect with a sense of purpose, to be more explicit about our *why*. As people dedicated to supporting the development and education of children, we have a unique opportunity — and indeed the responsibility — to be explicit about our *why*. *Why do we educate?* is a crucial question we need to ask and respond to as clearly and explicitly as we can now, as this decade might be the

definitive one in determining the fate of humanity and life on the planet.

With humanity and life on the planet at stake, when we think about the children in our lives, and more broadly children and youth around the globe, we must ask ourselves *what* we want education to support them to learn and be able to do, and *how* schooling can help them grow on this journey. Four major purposes summarize the *why* we believe in (See Rincón-Gallardo, 2021).

We believe in schools, systems, and societies that help children and youth to:

- 1) Know themselves and the world around them;**
- 2) Learn and think for themselves;**
- 3) Take good care of themselves and others;**
- 4) Better humanity and the world.**

We're not asking you to blindly agree with these priorities, but we do urge you to think about and respond to the question of why you educate, lead systems, care for children, conduct research— or whatever your role might be—as clearly and explicitly as you can.

Take a moment to reexamine and reflect on your *why*. *Why do you teach? Why do you treat children? Why do you lead a school or system? And for everyone, Why do you learn?*

There is no silver bullet that hits all of these purposes at once, but play provides a process for supporting all four. As we map out in the next section, play is so powerful for learning and development that it feels deceptively simple as a solution. Is play too good to be true? Let's see what the evidence says.

3. The Power of Play

This section discusses some of the evidence on the power and role of play in children's development and learning, organized by our four priorities. Much of the evidence presented here comes from the younger years, but we have provided examples from the middle and adolescent years later in the paper, and there is a growing body of research and practice that extends these principles to the full age-range of learners. Different ages or stages of learning require different approaches that are developmentally appropriate, for sure, but the core message persists throughout: Let children and youth play.

We have resisted providing a specific definition of play in this paper, and this has been intentional. As counterintuitive as it sounds, we believe that strict definitions of play can get in the way of educators, and those involved in the development and growth of children, embracing it. We rather invite you to come up with your own definitions or descriptions of play, ideally involving young people as co-creators. For now, we invite you to think of play as more of a process with certain agreed-upon characteristics that can include (but are not limited to) self-directedness and intrinsic motivation, creativity and imagination, focus and flow, experimentation and open-endedness (some of these can be found in the five dimensions of play described by Sahlberg and Doyle in *Let the Children Play*). Dr. Angela Pyle's Play Learning Lab at the University of Toronto describes a continuum of play that includes five distinct categories: learning through games, playful learning, collaboratively created play, inquiry play, and free play. The value of this continuum is that it softens the hard distinction between play and learning, merging them into a more useful "broadened definition" (Play Learning Lab, 2021). Remember too that play can be physical or intellectual, structured or unstructured, led by trained adults in a classroom setting or merely distantly observed. Think of play as a very large tent where multiple forms are welcome.

Below you will find some vignettes that illustrate examples of efforts to let children play, and settings

or contexts that enable children to take charge of their own play and learning. We have selected examples from different age cohorts around the world that represent a wide range of possibilities: a successful play-centered early childhood model in Anji County in China; a play-based learning classroom in a public high school in Ontario, Canada; and a nationwide strategy for play in Scotland.

Anji Play, Zhejiang, China

In open, unstructured indoor and outdoor spaces with a huge array of diverse materials and environments, young children in Anji County, in the Chinese province of Zhejiang, engage in extended periods of self-directed, uninterrupted and unguided play. Some children build and rebuild a bridge to be able to cross from one large block to another. Others experiment with different forms of yelling. Yet others try over and over again to climb a shaky structure built with large wooden blocks. The adults in these early childhood centres are involved mostly as observers, ready to intervene only when absolutely necessary, but mostly basking in the awe of what these children are able to do, individually and in groups, when left to play and figure things out on their own.

Anji Play is a philosophy and an approach to early childhood education developed by Ms. Cheng Xuequin for Anji County. It is centered on five interconnected principles: love, risk, joy, engagement, and reflection. Its comprehensive approach to early education includes specific indoor and outdoor materials and environments, routines and expectations, teacher practices, and approaches to professional growth and family and community engagement. Started in 2001, Anji play has been now adopted in all 130 public early childhood programs in Anji County, which serve approximately 14,000 children ages 3-6, as well as in public early childhood programs in every province and region in China.

For more information about Anji Play, visit anjisplay.com

Play with Ideas at the Dundas Valley Secondary School in Ontario, Canada

At the beginning of each school year, Pieter Toth designs activities with his students to build relationships and establish a learning community (e.g., speed dating, circle discussions, and others). He works with them to design the physical space where they will work together throughout the year, to review the curriculum expectations, and to design a first project to work on (all the way from topic, tasks, timelines, and demonstration of mastery). Students are encouraged to play to their strengths and to push themselves beyond their comfort zone.

Pieter works with them to connect what happens in the classroom to the real world, in particular with regards to human rights and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Students work individually and in small groups, developing ideas and projects to both learn about the topics they're exploring and to design and test solutions to better the world. One group, for example, organized a "sleep out" that had students on the streets for a day, with no technology, food or water. The generous help they received from strangers in the streets inspired them so much that they later went out on their own to give food and drink to people experiencing homelessness.

Students prepare public presentations of what and how they are learning, in a multiplicity of creative formats ideated by students (e.g., conferences, workshops, songs, videos, podcasts, show and tell presentations etc.). They spend time reflecting, analyzing performance, and giving and receiving feedback. Pieter also works to foster connections with experts and community contacts to provide them network opportunities to learn firsthand how to work with others to make a positive impact in the world.

Play is a central component of Pieter's pedagogy: "I have always learned more through playing with ideas, bouncing around unfinished and unpolished thoughts, and building on them a bit more each time they change direction, like a ping pong ball in a small room [...] Play is also embedded within the



process of daydreaming, another essential element of learning, which builds our cognitive muscles through creativity, curiosity, free-thinking, abstract invention, completely unstructured and unfettered roaming, and even absurdity and silliness. [...] I also believe that we learn most effectively when we are engaged and connected within an authentic learning community. A group of people who authentically feel a caring connection and commitment to working toward shared growth and success" (Pieter Toth, personal communication, November 2021).

And **what do students have to say** about their play-based learning experiences in Pieter's senior class? Here are some selected insights from them:

"Being able to learn and play allows students to enjoy the learning process, which allows for more memorable experiences. These memories then help students remember their learning better for the future. It gives us the desire to learn even more, influencing students to have the drive to increase their experience and develop a deep understanding. It also helps build relationships with group members, making projects more enjoyable overall. These relationships also help students be less afraid to ask questions resulting in the projects being more successful."

– Grade 12 Student

"Having light-hearted, fun activities helped people to learn more because they were not stressed about memorizing, taking notes, and then being tested. It took away the stress of traditional learning and for every activity we all know that if we did make a mistake, it was not the end of the world, we were all there to support each other."

– Grade 11 Student

"Learning is like rowing a boat along a river. If you are moving against the current, it is hard work and you are not having fun and you are missing out on the surroundings all around you. Playing, and being playful, is like moving with the current. It allows you to flow with everyone else and enjoy the experience. You get to open your eyes to your surroundings, see the bigger picture, and expand your perspective, context, and connections to the learning that is happening."

– Grade 10 student

"The classroom environment felt very safe so we were able to talk through many different ideas and have productive discussions in class. We were able to joke around and have fun, while also getting a lot done. Everyone's ideas were accepted and pondered which was extremely important to build confidence for people to share their future ideas [...] By having the time and ability to play with ideas through trial and error, discussions with experts and group discussions, we were able to not only enrich our learning, but also come out with something we were proud of. This freedom of playing with ideas and being encouraged to make mistakes or change things up was extremely beneficial."

- Grade 12 student

For more information about Pieter and his work, visit: ic.gc.ca/eic/site/pmate-ppmee.nsf/eng/wz02286.html



Play Scotland

Launched in 1998, the Play Scotland organization was created with the purpose of making the child's right to play a reality across Scotland. Based on the core belief that play is fundamental to a healthy and happy childhood, Play Scotland's vision is for Scotland to be a playful nation. Its mission is "to enable all children and young people in Scotland to have equal opportunities to participate in diverse and quality play experiences that meet their individual needs."

In partnership with Scotland's Play Council and Strategy Group, Play Scotland has developed Scotland's Play Strategy. In response to the major impact of COVID-19 in the lives of children and their families, this organization has articulated and mobilized around eight core recommendations:

- Refresh the Play Strategy and ensure national and local leadership.
- Renew and develop the national and local commitment to outdoor play.
- Listen to children and young people and act on what they say.
- Ensure the inclusion of all children and young people.
- Ensure cross sectoral and inter professional approaches to play.
- Sustain and support play provision through adequate funding.
- Maintain a focus on playful learning and play in schools.
- Strengthen the play sector nationally and locally.

For more information on Play Scotland, visit: playscotland.org

3.1 Play to Know Themselves and the World Around Them

Our first priority is to help young people to *know themselves and the world around them* since it is a foundational ingredient to so many critical competencies and attributes, including self-awareness, resilience, citizenship, and compassion.

Once their basic needs are met, children are motivated intrinsically by exploration, active involvement in play, and achieving mastery or success in a task. This is what drives them whether they are banging a spoon to make noise, or solving a complex problem to help themselves or others. Such motivation is important for learning and development because it leads to intense engagement in a task, and mastery is associated with pride and satisfaction (Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2019).

The Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development states that, "Play is a central ingredient in learning, allowing children to imitate adult behaviors, practice motor skills, process emotional events, and learn much about their world" (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2021). Play "helps children develop self-identity, who they believe themselves to be, and begin to form relationships through play and peer relations which contribute to their emotional, social and cognitive development" (Raburu, 2015). Play is the fundamental discovery process of children, which includes experiencing failure and success (and therefore learning). Play is how children learn to know themselves and understand the world around them.

For children, "Play and playing is fundamentally about agency, power, and *control* [emphasis added]. In play, children actively explore their own social and physical power, in relationship to the world, and to other children" (Hewes, 2014). We urge you to take special note of the term control here since it is central to our argument for liberating learning through play. Think of instances when you have tried to exert control over students or your own children, and how they reacted. Learning about control, the give and take of it, is foundational to our argument for playful learning. Further: "As

each child participates with other children in the social contexts of play, exploring and testing and making decisions at the edges of their own possibility, they come to understand what it means to be in control, and what it means to be out of control. When left to control their own play, they do explore what it means to exert their own power over others, and they do take chances and physical risks" (Hewes, 2014). The risks that they take are not hazards but calculated risks that can be supported by trained adults who understand the need for some rule defying and risk taking (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

Finally, play is also the *responsibility* of children themselves. Children enjoy a powerful role as the generators, stewards, and primary practitioners of play. It is not enough to talk about a child's right to play; their responsibility to play must also be addressed. The responsibility of play teaches children about their own rights, place and power in the world. Some come to understand that play is important for their own health and well-being, a powerful form of self-awareness to build their resilience.

Let children play to know themselves and the world around them.

3.1.1 The Neuroscience of Play

This brief section gives an overview of what we are learning about how the brain gets changed through play and playful learning. We now know that the brain is our master organ and gets changed by the experiences we have throughout life, a concept known as neuroplasticity. Our genes are *not* our destiny. There is no longer debate about what matters most: nature or nurture; genes or environment. We know that they interact together. In fact, the growing field of epigenetics now describes how the genes are activated or silenced by experiences.

Now, apply this to play. Children and young people who have abundant experiences to play are developing different brains than those who do not. Allow that to sink in for a moment ... **play literally builds brains**. A child who suffers from play deprivation or play poverty, including the

20% of Ontario children and youth who played outdoors for 15 minutes or less per day in the spring of 2021 (Rae, E., Gillespie, M., Fullan, J., 2021), has fewer playful experiences to construct and connect the architecture of their brain.

The Lego Foundation has created a wonderful white paper on neuroscience and learning through play. It concludes that, "Playful learning experiences characterized by joy, meaning, active engagement, iteration, and social interaction can offer multimodal inputs that stimulate interconnected networks involved in learning" (The Lego Foundation, 2017). The sub-field of the relationship between play and the brain is still in its infancy (yes, a poor pun), and is likely to yield many more insights in the near future.

3.2 Play to Think and Learn for Themselves

Play has some distinct advantages when it comes to our second priority of supporting children to think and learn for themselves. When children have consistent opportunities to play, they tend to learn better in school. Periods of play and physical activity allow them to focus and concentrate with improved executive function and, in general, do better academically. In Finland, for example, the nation that has topped the international charts in many fields of learning development, children have 15 minutes of recess for every 45 minutes of class, on top of other daily opportunities for physical activity. Additionally, they do not engage in formal instruction until the age of seven (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). Despite this evidence, many nations have gradually reduced or fully eliminated recess and opportunities for play in schools, under the baseless assumption that more drilling and formal teaching will enhance student achievement. This, combined with the rise of standardized testing and high-stakes accountability of the past couple decades—especially in the English-speaking world—has failed to produce improvements in student achievement. These trends have advanced hand in hand with the rise in student depression, anxiety, and stress. Children are caught in a dismal trajectory where their play and unstructured time are decreasing, physical activity levels have fallen well below recommended guidelines, high-stakes standardized

testing is increasing along with school stress and anxiety, mental health and well-being are declining, engagement in school is weakening with age, and achievement is flat.

But we will fall short if we simply think of play as something we let children do so that they perform better in conventional measures of student achievement. Doing well in school and knowing how to think and learn by yourself are two very different things. Conventional schooling is much better at preparing children to be taught than at preparing them to learn on their own. Learning to be taught is learning to sit quietly, listening—or at least pretending to listen—attentively to the adult in the room, figuring out the teacher's expectations and fulfilling them. Learning to be taught is learning compliance. It places the responsibility of determining what is true, what is meaningful, what is good, and what is beautiful outside of yourself—in the teacher, the principal, the Minister of Education, the parent, or the president. In contrast to learning to be taught, learning to learn and to think for yourself places the responsibility for determining what is good and meaningful squarely on your own shoulders. It is about figuring out, on your own or perhaps with the guidance of a caring adult or peer, what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful. When learning to be taught is the consistent lesson that children and youth are exposed to for most of the time they spend in the classroom—which represents the majority of their waking hours—their ability to learn and think by themselves is severely undermined.



3.3 Play to Care for Themselves and Others

Professor Alison Gopnik (2016) put it perfectly. We cannot make children learn. We can only let them learn. Telling children what to do and how to do it prepares them to repeat what the teacher says and does—that is, it trains them in compliance and passivity. In contrast, letting children explore topics and questions by themselves fosters independent thinking, creativity, and learning. These latter competencies are also fostered when adults approach children with an attitude of openness, wondering, and curiosity (“I wonder what this artifact might do” or “I wonder why this is happening”), as opposed to one of certainty (“This is what this artifact is used for,” “This is why this is happening”) (Gopnik, 2016).

As one of us has argued elsewhere, learning is a practice of freedom (Rincón-Gallardo, 2019). Play is a practice of freedom, too. And in many ways, learning is play. The best available examples of powerful learning—in or out of school, among children or adults—look very much like play. Learning deeply is about making sense of or working on developing mastery of things that matter to us. When we are involved in learning deeply, we determine what, when, how, and with whom to learn. We feel free to try things out multiple times and in multiple ways. We feel safe enough to fail. We reflect on what worked and what didn't, reinforce what is working and adjust what is not. Often we get so absorbed in the object of our attention that we forget about anything else and stop noticing the passing of time—a phenomenon that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls flow. Powerful learning is play.

The reverse is also true: play *is* learning. Play is more than an engagement tool or merely a catalyst for some higher order learning. *Play is how children learn best.* Play brings them to a state of concentration and focus that makes new neural connections possible. It involves a process of repetition, iteration, failure, and reflection that helps children understand themselves and the world around them (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

Let children play to learn and think for themselves.

In times like these, when empathy seems to be in such short supply and our planet is in crisis, perhaps no other educational priority is as important for young people as *learning to care for themselves and others.*

Play helps children care for their bodies and minds. Play is associated with better health and well-being, while play deprivation can lead to illness, stress, anxiety, and depression. Major pediatric societies across the world recommend play, and have even formalized prescriptions for play. *The Power of Play* report urges that, “Pediatricians should offer a prescription for play to new parents, advising moms and dads to make time for playtime, and suggesting schools do the same” (Yogman et al, 2018).

The reasons for a prescription for play are multiple and include an ever-increasing workload on parents, with little time left over to spend in play with kids. This leads to an alarming increase in sedentary behaviour in kids, which also has significant health risks, including obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes. The other major emphasis is on the loss of play in school with more demand for and focus on academic achievement, often at the expense of social and emotional playful learning, including the loss of recess.

Play is vitally important for children to take care of their own physical and emotional health and capacities. Play helps develop fine and gross motor skills, from holding a toy shovel to balancing on a log. It provides a natural avenue for children to get their daily recommended physical activity.

Play and learning both are a practice of freedom.

3.4 Play to Better Humanity and the World

When it happens outdoors, play has a number of other health and well-being benefits, including improved connections to nature and potential pathways to environmental stewardship. Play can take place on screens too, and this has been an important outlet for many children and youth during the pandemic.

Play is the process through which children learn to socialize with and care for others, make sense of the world around them, form notions of their environments, build culture, participate and take their place in community, often with very little adult supervision or guidance. As we have already noted, adult control too often constricts the development and growth that children can gain through play.

Even the youngest children find ways to cooperate in play-based settings. Professor Roger Hart (2008), an expert on child rights and participation, has described the “high degrees of group participation children can often achieve in their early years in their socio-dramatic play with one another.” He notes that when kids are mixed and not segregated by age and ability as they are in school, there can be more opportunities to build competencies and learn from their peers. Play with older children develops skills in the same way playing a tennis match against a superior opponent can improve your game. Play is strongly linked to our objective of maximizing freedom since it is often the one domain where adult power is at least temporarily suspended (Hart, 2008).

When children play freely, they are not only learning to take care of their own needs and impulses, they are also learning to take care of others' needs and understand competing impulses. Play allows children to develop self-management and take the perspective of the other. For example, if I want to play on the tire swing but someone else is using it, I have to delay my impulses to grab it, take the perspective of the other that they enjoy it too, and keep in mind that my turn will come soon. These are all tremendously important social and emotional skills needed for successful relationships and throughout life.

Let children play to care for themselves and others.

So far, we have emphasized the ways in which play contributes to the learning and well-being of children and youth. But here is a bold idea that further amplifies its importance: **play may be key to the survival of our species.** Compared to any other species, childhood in humans is proportionally very long. It takes a large part of a human's life cycle. Alison Gopnik has suggested that this is a matter of evolutionary design (2016). An extended childhood provides the necessary safety for children and little humans to play, take risks, and mess things up. This creates the environment needed for children to learn to look at the world in new ways, find innovative solutions to old problems, and come up with new problems that the adults haven't even thought about. These are the necessary conditions for ground-breaking ideas, new ways of thinking, and solutions that might be needed in times of drastic changes and great upheaval. Take for example 8 year-old Benjamin Arana-Stirling from Halifax, who during the lockdowns in 2020 developed a fascination with ants and figured out an efficient way to find queen ants (Fenn, 2021). McGill University biology professor Ehab Abouheif, an expert in ants, was so eager to learn about this method that he contacted the boy, with whom he now plans to undertake collaborative work to further understand the world of ants.

The world is changing at a rapid pace, and heading in a worrying direction. Our children and youth are facing and will continue to face problems that are much bigger, more complex and “wicked” than the problems we adults have faced and know how to, or have failed to, solve. In this scenario, if we simply teach our children what we already know, we will fall short. As adults, we are losing our grip on the moral authority to lead the solutions for the world's wicked problems, and it is now time for us to act as allies and guides for children and youth. Our best bet is to create the conditions that maximize the chances that young people will crack the solutions needed for the survival of humanity and the sustainability of life on the planet. And this means letting the children play.

It doesn't take long to realize that young people are eager and ready to better the world. Look to Greta Thunberg and the worldwide movement that she and multiple other young people from around the globe have spurred to demand determined action to address the existential threat of climate change. Look to the Parkland, Florida students who, after experiencing a traumatic mass shooting in their school, launched and have maintained the most widely spread, supported and sustained movement to advance regulations to prevent gun violence in the United States. Look to the young school girls from Chile who in the fall of 2019, in protest for an increase in the fees for public transportation, went into a subway station in the capital city of Santiago, jumped over the turnstiles without paying the fare, and started inviting older people to do the same, saying, "We will take the blows from the police, you go in." This playful and daring expression of freedom inspired a nationwide movement that has led to the creation of a new people-elected Constitutional Assembly that is drafting, as we write, a new constitution for the country that will replace the one currently ruling Chile, created under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Torres, 2021). The power of children and youth to spur change in the world is undeniable.

Examples like these abound in the most recent decade. Some five years ago, two Black teenagers in Georgia, who saw their family being harassed by the police, taught themselves how to create apps, and developed an app for people to rate their encounters with police. When their school garden needed water, a group of teenagers from Uruguay organized themselves to create a water collection system, with the help of drones, electronic kits, and mixed materials to make models and refine their design over time. A group of young children in an Escuela Nueva school in Colombia learned how to make natural soap and beauty products, then arranged to sell them in the nearby cities, using the proceeds to further their business and upgrade their library and school materials. A young child from Kenya created a simple light system to scare away the lions that were eating the livestock in his community. Then there is the Malawian 13-year-old William Kamkwamba, who created a



life-saving solution for his village, suffering from famine, by building windmills that would provide water and electricity. These examples represent the global youthful drive to better humanity and their world through learning, predominantly through experimentation, free flowing ideas, and intense attention—or precisely the kind of flow and deep engagement that comes from playful discovery learning.

While some of these examples are occurring within schools, most of them are happening when children are out of school. Yet school is where children and young people are spending most of their waking time. Imagine the abundance and diversity of world-changing possibilities that would open up if even some of the ample time used in schools was devoted to letting and supporting young people to explore, design, test, tinker, and continuously refine solutions to problems that matter to them through playful learning.

Let us also ask the question whether the examples above involve atypical young people who rise to the occasion or are otherwise exceptional. To a certain extent, yes but the evidence more generally shows that these actions are occurring naturally, spontaneously, coming from young people's internal drive. It wasn't adults who organized and propelled them. It was young people who, by intrinsic necessity, became more creative and driven. Imagine if we 'let them play' more naturally, more naturally, and at scale. Neuroscience tells us that there is no lower age limit to ingenuity. Democratize play and you democratize society.

Let children play to better humanity and the world.

4. Play in the Curriculum

Play has been a part of the curriculum in Ontario informally for many years throughout K-12, and more formally in the early years since the advent of full-day kindergarten in 2010. The former unfortunately has not been widely studied, while the latter enjoys the benefit of clear research outcomes. For those struggling to find a place for play in the middle and high school years, we urge you to first think of play skills as the foundation for and extension of academic skills (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019), but more practically to consider the powerful examples in this paper and elsewhere from different age groups around the world of play-based, discovery, and self-motivated learning.

Ontario's full day of learning for four- and five-year-olds was first described in Dr. Charles Pascal's landmark 2009 report *With our best future in mind*. The model—new in Canada at the time—included having a team of an early childhood educator and a certified teacher co-lead each class. Together, they applied a curiosity-driven, play-based pedagogy. Essential to the model is high-quality play, based on and built from children's natural curiosity which provides the foundation for deep learning and expert scaffolding by the educator team.

Since its implementation in 2010, the model has shown significant results when it comes to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Specifically, a recent study of the phasing-in of the program, "showed lasting benefits of full-day kindergarten on children's self-regulation, reading, writing, and number knowledge to the end of Grade 2, including some benefits for vocabulary," along with children who were more likely to meet standards for reading by Grade 3 (Pelletier & Corter, 2019). The study provides more evidence for the benefits of play-based kindergarten and makes abundantly clear that children need play, are engaged during play, and regulate their behavior better during play than during whole class lessons.

Bookending the success of play-based kindergarten in Ontario is the experience of one of the co-authors (Jean Clinton) at McMaster Medical School in Hamilton. Since its formation in 1965,

the school's pedagogical approach has been on a small-group, case-based learning, which is now known as PBL or problem-based learning. In fact, this approach was described as *play-based learning* by founding faculty member Dr. Fraser Mustard as it is self-directed, very rewarding, and intrinsically motivating.

What Ontario and McMaster Medical School recognize is this: play-based learning is good for four- and five-year-olds, and it is good for doctors in training because it is simply one of the most effective ways to learn for people of all ages.

As Professor Evan Ortlieb (2010) describes in "The Pursuit of Play within the Curriculum," some teachers, particularly beyond the early years where play is an established pillar of the curriculum, may fear the abstraction of play, along with the loss of control it activates since play is often open-ended. *What is the educational outcome of play? How can it be measured and assessed for progress and learning?* These are questions any educator might naturally ask themselves. But play is a powerful form of discovery learning, where students explore their own path to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They do not fear getting the wrong answer as they play because they are discovering new knowledge, new processes for learning, and new ways to get along and solve problems (Ortlieb, 2010). And many teachers already use play-based strategies in their classrooms, whether they call them that or not.

"Covering the whole curriculum" is a constant worry for many teachers around the world. Many invest their finite time and energy in covering as many topics as possible at the expense of the actual learning of children. Others worry that devoting too much time to learning a few things in depth will be at the expense of curriculum coverage. As many educators who have created opportunities for in-depth project-based learning in their classrooms and schools have discovered, there is no need to treat deep learning and curriculum coverage as an either-or proposition. Learning is not a zero-sum game, though it often gets treated as such in unit

plans and classroom schedules. One teacher who spent several weeks with her Grade 3 students designing and campaigning for a skating park for their community, presenting their plans to city council—and getting their project approved—said it beautifully: “When students are solving problems that matter to them, they learn the content at 10 times the pace!” (See Fullan, M. & Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, B., 2019). Almost without noticing, the students were learning about scale, proportionality, arithmetic, community organizing, and navigating municipal regulations because they needed and wanted to, not because they had to. It is, as Will Richardson has said elsewhere (Richardson & Dixon, 2017), the difference between using the curriculum just in case (because you might need it some time in the distant future), and using the curriculum just in time (bringing it to the attention of students when they need it to address a burning question or advance the solution of a problem that matters to them).

This kind of transformative learning is equally possible at the high school level. One Ontario teacher, frequently visited by one of the authors, invites his senior students in business studies and global issues at the beginning of the year to look at the curricular expectations, then as a class they explore how they can be covered (see the vignette about Pieter Toth on page 8 for more). They use small groups and project-based learning driven by student interest. For example, they have been focusing on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and recently coordinated a citywide event for many high schools to join in lively

debate, generating excitement about what they as young people could do. This is knowledge building and playful learning at its very best.

If you are an educator, we want to invite you to see and treat the curriculum as a map, not as an itinerary. As an itinerary, the curriculum becomes a predetermined set of sections to visit, at predetermined times, with everyone in the group moving at the same pace, regardless of whether they want to or not. As a map, the curriculum can give you and your students an overview of all the territory—knowledge, skills, competencies—that you can cover, but you can then allow them to decide which sections to travel, how long to spend there, which sections to pass through only cursorily, and where to stay to explore more deeply. If handing over absolute free rein to your students to drive their own learning journeys through the curriculum map sounds too scary, take the time to identify a more limited set of big questions. Some may be grounded in what your students are curious about, others perhaps covering what you consider some of the most important content and ways of thinking. Then invite students to take on one learning project among the options you present to them. You will be amazed at how deeply invested and genuinely engaged most—and hopefully all—of your students will be in the learning. And be prepared to be surprised by all that they already know and know how to do that may have gone unnoticed in the anonymity of conventional schooling, as well as by what and how they learn when they experience the freedom to learn in depth something that matters to them.

If you are an educator, we want to invite you to see and treat the curriculum as a map, not an itinerary.

5. What is in the Way?

Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) warn that there is a global war against play. This seems like hyperbole at first blush, but a closer look reveals a troubling trend against play in the lives of children and adolescents. They also point out that the standardization of everything in children's lives—from school to afterschool to every waking moment—stands in the way of time and freedom to play. This control of children's lives is a serious threat to their learning and thriving.

At a deeper, even more troubling level, control has been a fundamental impulse driving our ways to think about and practice parenting and schooling. Richard Elmore (2019) has suggested that most of what schools do is driven by fear of children going out of control. Control, however, precludes connection, trust, learning, well-being and, ultimately, gets in the way of realizing *any* of our four priorities. Play, on the other hand, requires freedom. It is a *practice* of freedom.

Play is freedom to explore, to be whimsical, to be unsystematic, to engage in activities for their own sake, to “waste” time. When enabling play, teachers may give up one kind of control but gain a deeper understanding of how students learn and solve problems on their own. Paradoxically, the more we try to control students, the more we stifle their learning and their creativity. The more we control them, the more we disable them from taking control of their own learning. There can be a higher incidence of accidents in highly regulated playgrounds where children are closely watched and supervised than in construction sites that are open for the children to play unsupervised (Bregman, 2019; Brussoni et al, 2015). Abstinence-only programs of sex education have systematically failed to have any significant influence on adolescent abstinence, sexual behaviours, or other sexual health outcomes; in contrast, comprehensive programs that trust and support young people with making their own informed decisions around their sexual lives have favorable effects on sexual activity, use of protection, frequency of unprotected sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy (Chin et al, 2012).

We get it. We have children. We often catch ourselves trying to control them for fear of them getting hurt or being too wild. The problem is that it is impossible to control children into freedom. Children learn freedom by practicing freedom. And falling, making mistakes, testing limits, even hurting themselves, are an inevitable part of learning freedom.

We are living in times when the need for freedom for children has perhaps never been higher, while the adult desire to control them has never been stronger. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the imposition of multiple rules and restrictions that limit contact between people. While some of these rules are reasonable steps to ensure everyone's safety (such as the use of masks, limiting time indoors, ensuring indoor spaces are well ventilated), our impulse to control the bodies and behaviours of young people is often more constraining than necessary. Some students in Toronto, for example, are being asked not to talk with each other over their lunchtime to prevent the spread of the virus (See Neufeld, 2021). Many others have had their outdoor play time limited because of cohorting or closed facilities. More control might help us channel our fears for the safety of our children and youth but it will stifle their learning, their creativity, their resilience and, more broadly, their freedom. And all of these are crucial competencies that they urgently need to face and better a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

The late Sir Ken Robinson, speaking on the virtues of freedom and the vices of control, described four factors that are constricting children's outdoor play: parental anxiety around ill-founded fears of crime and danger; the decline in quality, safe places to play in our cities and towns; the reduction in school-based play such as recess; and too much time with technology at the expense of active play (summarized in Gill, 2016). We would expand on these points to add that teacher control, car-oriented urban planning, and lack of quality schoolyards are additional constricting factors. A recent audit of Ontario schoolyards found that

nearly three quarters of them had less than half the optimal score, and some lacked key play facilities entirely (Gallagher-Mackay, Corso & Shubat, 2021). With Canada already one of the world's most urbanized nations and developing countries urbanizing rapidly, there is no question that the solutions for reviving play need to be designed and built into our cities and towns, with a significant reduction in car dependency for people and planet. Researcher Tim Gill has spoken and written extensively on this topic, noting in his recent book *Urban Playground* that, "Traffic has emerged as a mortal threat to children who wish to get around their neighbourhoods, and a justified fear for parents who want to allow them to do this" (Gill, 2021). This traffic threat is omnipresent in children's lives but most severe in low- and middle-income countries (Gill).

You may encounter resistance from parents who are skeptical of the merits of play, or who are concerned about academic progress. *Why should my child spend time playing when they are behind in math?* The short answer is that play will make them better learners, full stop. Play skills are the foundation for and complement to the academic skills that these parents value so much. The long answer (which we don't recommend as a starting point!) is to share some of the evidence and examples from this paper and elsewhere that point to play and playful learning as the joyful process for saving children and the world. Play engages and builds the skills we need in the 21st century. Play is good training for life (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

The biggest casualties in the war against play are often historically marginalized and underserved groups, or students who have trouble concentrating, especially when sitting for long periods of time. Some teachers and school administrators enact a perverse punishment on these students by taking away recess when they do not meet behavioural or academic expectations. As Sahlberg and Doyle (2019, p. 189) point out, "the logic of this practice is completely backward," since it deprives play of children who need it most, and goes against the best medical advice. All children benefit from play but some will benefit more or differently than others.



All children have a right to play; denying it is a tool of oppression that violates that right.

We have seen how the coronavirus has reinforced systemic inequities by spreading at a higher rate among low-income and racialized populations, particularly in large urban centres like Toronto. The children of these groups—frontline and shift workers, new immigrants, apartment dwellers—are also getting hit harder by the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including more severe reductions in physical activity, time outdoors and play (Maximum City, 2021; Rae, E., Gillespie, M., Fullan, J., 2021). Privileged children may have more access to space, higher quality local environments, programs and specialized schools that are grounded in play-based activities and discovery learning. So while the need and desire for play are universal among children and youth, the opportunities are not. Centring play more deliberately in all young people's lives in the coming decade can act as a countervailing force to inequity. *Play for all* will not take down oppressive or rigged systems on its own, but it is a very good start in two critical ways: it balances the play and movement deficits that underserved groups are suffering under in the immediate term; in the long term, it builds the skills, social-emotional capacities, and agency needed for dismantling inequitable systems.

Let the children play is a simple idea and, in many ways, easily actionable since all that children need to play is safe space, time, and supportive adults. It is pretty much about letting children be children. Letting children play is respecting their basic human rights. Play is innate to children and, whenever they can, they engage in it readily for long periods of time. It is vital to their happiness.

The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that the basic human nature of play goes against the grain of how we have come to think about, practice, and institutionalize things as omnipresent as formal schooling and parenting. It is practically taken for granted that our role as educators and parents is to tell young people what to do. Yet what the science of learning and child development makes clear is that it is much better to let them learn to make their own decisions, and help them take control of their learning and lives. Loris Malaguzzi, an educational psychologist and influential leader for the Reggio Emilia approach to education, invites us to examine our view of the child. Do we see children as empty vessels, requiring our adult knowhow to “fill them up” with the required knowledge and skills to turn out the way we want them to be successful? Or do we see the child as competent, inquisitive, capable of co-creating that learning? This view greatly influences how much we need to control the environment OR create the ecosystem for all children to thrive. Ecosystems are not control free. In fact, dynamic systems have many less-than-obvious forms of influence that guide and otherwise influence behavior. Let the children play, feature their work, and we can all learn better.

There are many simple things we can incorporate into our personal and collective routines to let the children play. But if we are to take letting children play seriously, we will also need to reimagine how to restructure the work and culture of schools so that they nurture play rather than constrain it. We need to design households, schools, school systems, and public spaces that place the learning and well-being of children at their center, and are organized in ways that enable rather than preclude or compartmentalize play. We need to replace the grammar of schooling with the language of learning and play.

You may be wondering how we can possibly get this to work. There is no need to have it all sorted out and planned. Indeed, it is impossible to know exactly what to do, when and how. And this is where, once again, children come in. We need to include young people as co-creators of the new environments and relationships where learning and

play thrive. You will be surprised at how thoughtful and creative children and youth are when asked, in a safe and caring environment, about how they feel about school and home, about what they like and dislike, about what the school or home of their dreams would look like, about how play and learning can be supported in their everyday lives in school, at home, and beyond. We are asking you to invite children in as co-creators of a new vocabulary for the language of learning and play.

Where to start?

We recognize that starting something new and uncertain can be the most difficult part. We urge you to start small and spend some time getting used to the feelings of ambiguity and open-endedness that come with play. These are uncomfortable but productive feelings (Stein Greenberg, 2021). Not knowing where an activity is headed is okay, and open-endedness is itself a purpose in the right context. For simple starter ideas on play and playful learning, try working with some of the prompts below. Remember that a central goal of whatever you do to get the ball rolling is that kids see themselves as part of it in a natural way.

We are asking you to invite children in as co-creators of a new vocabulary for the language of learning and play.

Starter Ideas

1) Think about your fondest memory with play.

- *What was happening? What were you doing?*
- *What made it so memorable?*
- *What can you take from that experience that you would like to make possible for the young people whose lives you touch?*
- *What are the one or two best ideas that you can think of to bring play to life in your work and the lives of young people?*
- *What can you start, stop, or change to bring these ideas to life?*

OR

2) Think back to your earliest childhood memory of play.

- *Where were you? Who were you with?*
- *What words might you use to describe your experience?*
- *Did you find yourself losing track of time? Could you just be yourself in the play?*
- *In what ways was your play adventurous and risky?*
- *What relationships were you building in your play?*
- *What can you take from that experience that you can bring into your role with children and youth? It can be a feeling, a simple activity, a goal...*

AND

3) Ask young people!

- *Repeat either 1) or 2) to start a conversation with children and youth about the kind of play and activities they enjoy, and why.*
- *What can you take from the discussion and put into practice in incremental but meaningful ways?*
- *Determine a worthwhile common purpose, then figure out ways to incorporate play in pursuing it.*

Look at one or more of the vignettes in Section

3: The Power of Play on pages 7-9. Think about your role in supporting the growth and development of young people.

- *What do you currently do that is similar in nature or approach to the example(s) in the vignette(s).*
- *What are the two or three best ideas that you can take from this/these vignette(s)?*
- *What can you start or change to bring these ideas to life?*



6. Play it Forward

Play is our best bet as a short-term strategy for recovery. It is also our best long-term investment for our survival as a species. Letting children play is a simple solution that might be very hard to bring into our everyday lives. This is so because it goes against the grain of the institutions charged with the care and education of our children, which fundamentally operate through the drive of control. Letting children play requires both cultural and structural change. On the cultural side, it requires that adults, individually and collectively, deal with and soothe our fears of children getting out of control, or getting seriously hurt. On the structural side, it requires looking at and fundamentally changing the norms, structures, designs, policies, procedures, and practices that get in the way. At the most basic level, we need to create and protect space and time for both structured and unstructured play. More ambitiously, it requires that we undergo a fundamental reset of the core institutions that provide care and education for our children, so that we place children's learning and well-being at the heart of their work, and identify and change what's getting in the way.

As simple as it sounds, letting the children play will take hard work on the part of adults and the institutions we have created. And yet, the cost of not doing it is too high. Nothing less than the happiness and healthy development of our children, and our survival as a species, are at stake. The new power of play is a lot like the old power of play with one critical difference: it is needed now—not a year or ten years from now—more than ever.

And so what? What do we do next?

We play it forward. Or, in the words shared by Kahontakwas Diane Longboat, we let children bring their gift of play forward in this time of great upheaval.

As a concluding call to action, and knowing that the best ideas will come from practitioners and children themselves taking responsibility for their play, we are asking you to do five simple things:

1) Reflect on the kinds of activities you do or oversee with children and youth that incorporate

some kind of play, whether it be intellectual or physical play, structured or unstructured play, in a classroom, schoolyard, playground, or natural setting. You may be surprised by how many of these activities already incorporate characteristics of play, such as experimentation, collaboration, creativity, and open-endedness. Remember that adolescent play may look different from play with younger ones, and may include less kinetic movement but but a stronger social component and more novelty through self-directed and experiential discovery.

2) Spend some time thinking seriously about how to incorporate more play, and play characteristics, in the young people's lives you touch for all of the reasons articulated in this paper. Again, this play can be intellectual or physical, structured or unstructured, and take place anywhere safe. Note that not every play-based activity or learning experience needs a product or outcome. If possible, engage children in the co-creation of new and more play-based learning and play for play's sake. Incorporate periods of child-initiated free play and resist the urge to think of these as breaks from learning (they are not). Admit that you don't have all the answers and celebrate that new knowledge awaits.

3) Share your ideas. What are you doing that might benefit others? What are some examples of playful learning or an activity that never fails to excite? What is a simple starter idea for those who are new to play and struggling with where to start? How can you spread these practices within your learning organization or community?

4) Organize to change what gets in the way. Once you get going, you will likely experience friction between young people playing and the conventional rules and routines of schooling and parenting. Identify what is getting in the way and organize with others to figure out how to reduce or at least mitigate the constraining effect of existing rules and routines on children and young people's freedom to play.

5) Ask the kids. Whatever you do, make sure that kids see themselves as part of the ideas in a natural way. Their future depends on it.

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