Play for Adults: Play-Based Approaches in Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT

Although play exemplifies one of the highest forms of experiential learning and can foster creativity and innovation in adults, it is less frequently used explicitly in adult training. This short article explores a play-based approach to enhance teachers’ confidence in using play-based pedagogy through a case study on the Continuum of Teacher Training (COTT), Right To Play International’s in-service teacher training programme. The CoTT is a 21-day programme, which is contextualized and delivered in 16 countries. It integrates play-based learning methods into teaching practice while aligning with local curriculum and infusing academic content with social-emotional skills development. The article concludes with preliminary insights on the impact of the model on children’s social-emotional learning and academic achievement and argues for the critical importance of play for adults to support intergenerational relationships and quality play-based approaches.

KEYWORDS: play-based pedagogy; playful learning; adult learning; teacher training; intergenerational relationships

INTRODUCTION

Play “exemplifies one of the highest forms of experiential learning” (Kolb & Kolb 2010: 47), with Singer et al. (2006) proclaiming that play equals learning. It is no surprise that play and playfulness have been subject to much research in the context of young children’s learning (Johnson et al. 2005; Elis 1973; Lieberman 1977). However, experiential learning provides a structure for learners to be playful at any age (not only young children) and creates space for cognitive spontaneity; an attribute Lieberman (1977) suggests is marked by curiosity, inventiveness, imagination and innovation. While many pedagogical approaches described in the literature might be defined as types of playful learning, it is less common that those used with adults are identified as such (Whitton 2018: 1). More generally, research on playfulness for adults is limited, notwithstanding some recent interest (Dobson & McKendrick 2018). This article contributes to this broader endeavor by reflecting on the role of play in the context of teacher training in higher education. The article is organized in the following manner. First, it introduces Right To Play
International's in-service Continuum of Teacher Training programme as a play-based approach to teacher training. Second, the article highlights the role of teacher training on enhancing skills and the social emotional learning of teachers themselves. Third, it introduces the role of communities of practice, and fourth it highlights the importance of intergenerational play between teachers and young people. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the critical value of play in adult education and its implications for both teachers and students' learning and social emotional development.

**CONTINUUM OF TEACHER TRAINING (COTT)**

Founded in 2001, Right To Play International has worked across 40 countries with a mission to protect, educate and empower children using the power of play. The *Continuum of Teacher Training* (COTT) is a professional development programme developed by Right To Play International, which is designed to foster teachers’ creativity and enhance their potential to use play for learning in the classroom (Right To Play 2015). It has been designed for pre-primary and primary school teachers, and includes training resources for teacher supervisors and trainers. Through a series of training sessions and ongoing support, teachers attain new knowledge, and gain skills and experiences. This enables them to teach subject matter through play, and to lead regular sport and play activities for life skills development. Ongoing coaching and mentoring by district government officials and trainers, who themselves are both also trained in coaching and mentoring through play, supports teachers to integrate their learning into their classroom teaching. Monthly meetings of teacher communities of practice are also infused with play to encourage self-reflection and goal setting. The COTT was developed between 2015 and 2017 by Right to Play International, in partnership with education and child development practitioners and academic experts in Toronto, Canada (including the Ontario Institute School of Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto). It was designed to be adaptable to local training needs and contexts through further collaboration with local partners. The COTT has been adapted, contextualized, and administered in Benin, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ghana, Jordan, Lebanon, Liberia, Palestine, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

The COTT package consists of three pillars: a) training, b) coaching and mentoring, and c) teacher communities of practice. Training content, on play-based learning methodology and positive learning environment practices (such as child rights, protection, participation, gender equality and inclusion), is delivered using a play-based approach. Specifically, this means training is facilitated through song, dance, games, small and large group discussions, brainstorming activities, energizers and other play-based activities. The learning activities in the training are varied and target as many learning styles as possible. By using play as a training approach in the training sessions, the intention is for teachers to be more able to sense the value of play in their own learning and thus its value for their own students. The learning approach seeks to create a shift in teachers' understandings and perspectives of what 'good teaching' looks like (away from lecturing and rote memorization), leading to a shift in their teaching behaviour (towards facilitation of games, group work, and critical reflection).
TEACHERS’ PRACTICAL SKILLS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Training through play not only builds teacher capacity to use play-based learning in their teaching practice, but also builds skills in teachers that support their creative autonomy in teaching (Right To Play 2016). This is achieved through training in lesson planning and by intentionally embedding reflective practice.

Instead of being asked to follow scripted lessons and memorize games, teachers are trained in the ability to continuously adapt or generate their own new, locally relevant games and activities, focused on a curriculum objective. In this way, teachers are able to apply their play-based training to many different subjects and grade levels, and to tailor their lessons to the needs of the classroom. The experiential learning methodology also creates a space, which is conducive to bolstering teachers’ self-confidence, promoting ownership of their teaching, and fostering their capacity to think critically and adapt. All training requires critical reflection – teachers learn analytical and decision-making skills to reflect on their own teaching, seek feedback from students, and constantly improve their learning. In this way, they take control of their own professional development while having the opportunity to play and learn with and from their colleagues and students. Through self-directed and peer-to-peer learning they also continue to innovate and design their own games and activities, and enhance their skills through shared learning.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND LEARNING
Teachers who are learning through, and actively introducing, play and playful approaches can collaboratively build communities of practice to motivate one another, share best practices, and collectively explore solutions to overcome challenges. Communities of practice are recognized as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al. 2002). For example, Right To Play’s COTT package includes play-based CoP facilitation guides for monthly meetings over three years that combine play-based activities and games with accompanying reflection sessions. A critical component of the COTT, the sessions are designed to encourage teachers to collectively explore different issues areas through play and to sustain their learning and reflection. While guides can be useful, it is also critical that CoP’s are playful, organic, flexible, dynamic, and group-led. As such, teachers across international contexts honing in on play-based methodologies explore diverse and creative ways to foster community, which has included social media (e.g. watsapp, Facebook groups, Twitter), local meetups, and visiting and sharing in one another’s classroom spaces. A playful CoP has scope to deepen relationships with content as well as with peers, and self.

PLAY AS A VEHICLE FOR BUILDING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS
Play tends to be recognized as “a valuable tool for social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of younger children [yet] concurrently, it is often discredited for use by adults” (Wright 2018: 239). While there is much literature on intergenerational play between seniors and younger children, there is a dearth of
literature on the use of play for intergenerational learning between teachers and their students. Socio-cultural theory “foregrounds relationship in learning” and highlights the importance of social interactions within a learning process (Tobbell & Donell 2013: 13). Kolb & Kolb (2010) argue that play in learning supports individuals to “gradually [begin] to peel off their game face and freely express” (p.44) themselves, which has the potential to reduce power constructs through creating space for adults and children to take on new playful roles outside of their structured roles of teacher and child, creating space for relationships to form and deepen. Once relationships are formed, play can also foster co-learning opportunities between students and teachers. Play can create space for teachers to enhance their own learning and capacity to engage with and seek feedback from their students. In this process, adults can become more engaged and open to actively listen to their students, respecting their expertise and insights, and taking these into account in classroom decision-making processes. Similarly, through play adults can foster interactive experiential learning opportunities for their students that further enhance their capacity to develop social, emotional, and cognitive competencies, enabling them to thrive in their academic and personal lives (Pyle & Danniels 2017; Weisberg et al. 2013). In Right To Play, where teachers have been trained in COTT, positive learning environments are strengthened, and the academic performance of students is improved (Treeangles Ltd. 2015). Furthermore, it has been observed through Right to Play programmes that teachers’ self-confidence and self-esteem in their role is bolstered.

CONCLUSION

Despite growing recognition that playfulness and play is advantageous for adult education particularly in the grey literature and at a programmatic level, there is limited explicit discussion globally around the use of play in teacher training for teachers working with children from primary to secondary school. The incorporation of play throughout teacher training affords adults the opportunity to revitalize their playful selves and engage in playful opportunities, which enables them to better relate to their students and to more effectively facilitate lessons in their classroom. Playful learning opportunities also have the potential to enhance relationships among colleagues and to facilitate intergenerational learning. This case study has elucidated the importance of integrating play-based education into pre-service and in-service teacher training. We conclude by introducing recommendations to explore in teacher education in Scotland and internationally. We recommend encouraging teachers’ own creativity, promoting collaborative learning, and teacher autonomy; this could be achieved by supporting them to develop confidence and skills to innovate and to devise games and activities to meet their needs. We also posit communities of practice as vital places for teachers to play and reflect, allowing them to experiment with diverse activities, build trust and to not feel uncomfortable if innovations do not work as planned. We assert that greater advocacy is needed to promote the value of play in education from early years up to secondary school (and beyond) and to encourage greater intergenerational play to value play at all levels. Finally, we recommend that training on children’s meaningful participation in play-based workshops is embraced and
teachers play alongside young people, respecting young people’s ideas and undertaking shared decision-making in the classroom.

REFERENCES


A deliberate and effective play-based approach supports young children’s cognitive development. When well designed, such an approach taps into children’s individual interests, draws out their emerging capacities, and responds to their sense of inquiry and exploration of the world around them. In 2009, the DCSG outlined several benefits of the playful learning approach in the Early Years setting, including 1) that playful children use and apply their knowledge, skills and understanding in different ways and in different contexts; and 2) playful practitioners use many different approaches to engaging children in activities that help them to learn and to develop positive dispositions for learning. The variety of play children engage in also increases when adults join in.

2. Establishing the Situation for Role Playing - design the situation to fit the objectives they want to achieve.
3. Establishing Roles and Selecting Participants - sketch out clearly the type of people involved.
4. Presenting the Act - Talk about the objective of the role playing during the presentation and explain the skills and insights the activity hopes to acquire.

Van den Branden defines task-based language learning as an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes. In other words, TBL refers to an approach to teaching and learning which views the completion of meaningful tasks through authentic communication as an effective way to improve language proficiency in the natural, practical, and functional use. Task-based language learning and teaching give students something real to do using the language they Play Matters: Supporting Play Based Learning. Every child learns through play. Here are 5 great tips for parents and teachers, to support play based learning. Andrew Proctor. 34 Reasons Why Play Matters - AAAStateofPlay.com - Infographic. Our society tends to dismiss play for adults. Play is perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood A true teacher is an excited learner. In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn. Play turns out to be so stunningly essential to childhood, it's like love, sunshine, and broccoli all juiced together.