Toward More Joyful Learning: Integrating Play Into Frameworks of Middle Grades Teaching
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Toward More Joyful Learning: Integrating Play Into Frameworks of Middle Grades Teaching

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Recent efforts to define qualities of effective teaching practice have done little to capture the role of play, imagination, and creativity in classroom teaching. Drawing on theories of play and data from a two-year case study that included classroom observations, interviews, artifact collection, and surveys, the author examines the ways in which elements of play were present across the practice of eight novice middle grades teachers. Building on examples of play in these classrooms, the author proposes adding the dimension of play to frameworks of middle grades teaching—a dimension that encompasses young adolescents’ engagement in classroom work that involves choice and self-direction, imaginative creations, and a nonstressed state of interest and joy.

KEYWORDS: middle grades teaching, play, beginning teachers, social studies teaching

The predominant emotions of play are interest and joy.
(Gray, 2013, p. 18)

As educational researchers and policymakers have increasingly focused on the importance of high-quality teaching for student learning, there has been a surge in interest for defining the qualities of effective teaching practice. For example, the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to develop reliable teacher observation and feedback systems that can be systematically measured and used to inform teacher professional development and personnel decisions. In order to do this, researchers involved with the project have...
investigated aspects of teaching practice that are most strongly connected to gains in student achievement by collecting data on a range of different measures, such as a variety of classroom observation tools (cf., Kane, McCaffrey, Miller, & Staiger, 2013). These observation tools address an array of important dimensions of classroom teaching, such as the relationships teachers develop in a classroom and the classroom climate they create (e.g., Danielson, 2011; Pianta, 2013), the level of intellectual challenge of students’ activities and assignments (e.g., Grossman, 2009), the quality of questions teachers use to facilitate discussion (e.g., Danielson, 2011), and the ways in which teachers engage students in learning (e.g., Danielson, 2011).

While research points to these dimensions as potentially important for helping to prepare and identify teachers who can facilitate student learning, there are other dimensions of classroom teaching that may also be important that are not captured in these frameworks. As authors from the MET project point out, “There may be some teaching competencies that affect students in ways we are not measuring” (Kane & Staiger, 2012, p. 5), and indeed, “parents care about other outcomes, such as whether their children are developing a positive emotional attachment to school and are engaged in their learning” (Kane & Staiger, 2012, p. 12). We often hear, for example, that the global workplace demands people who are creative problem solvers—or that companies want employees who can “think outside the box” in imaginative ways and take initiative. Companies like Google have fashioned workplaces where employees get to “play” at work (Stewart, 2013). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills—a collaboration among business community leaders, educational organizations, and policymakers—has articulated “learning and innovation skills” as crucial 21st-century student outcomes. These desired student skills include thinking creatively, creating “new and worthwhile ideas,” “demonstrating originality and inventiveness in work,” and working collaboratively to solve problems (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2014).

Yet if creativity, imagination, and play are considered critical student outcomes, where are they featured in existing frameworks for teaching? In fact, in the current age of accountability, play, creativity, and joy are not only absent from prominent frameworks for effective teaching, they are increasingly absent from young people’s classrooms and lives (Brown, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013). With the narrowing of school curricula and increased pressures for testing has come an erosion of joy for both the young people and adults who inhabit classroom spaces.

While this concern resonates across age levels, the critical middle grades hold particular peril, given their pivotal role in steering young adolescents onto future trajectories. For many years, research has painted a bleak portrait of the teaching that occurs in middle grades classrooms: Classwork in the middle grades often requires lower cognitive demand than classwork in the elementary grades and provides fewer decision-making opportunities at a time when young adolescents increasingly desire opportunities for voice
Young adolescents often experience decreased motivation in the middle grades as their classrooms increasingly emphasize performance rather than mastery goals (cf. Urdan & Midgley, 2003). These research findings mirror the media’s and the public’s dim view of the quality of teaching and learning in the middle school years—a view that has led to the characterization of the middle grades as an “educational black hole” (Gootman, 2008) and “the Bermuda triangle of education” (e.g., Herszenhorn, 2004)—and led critics to decry the “mayhem in the middle” (Yecke, 2005).

The mismatches in middle grades classrooms have dire consequences for students and teachers alike. On one hand, there is evidence of a crisis among those who teach in the middle grades: For example, at least in two major cities—New York City and Philadelphia—middle grades teachers leave teaching at higher rates than their counterparts in elementary and high schools (Gootman, 2007; Useem & Neild, 2002). And for students, researchers have documented that increasingly high dropout rates and school disengagement often have their roots in the middle grades, particularly among poor students and students of color (Balfanz, 2009; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). The opportunities for putting young adolescents on positive trajectories for the future through high-quality middle grades teaching, then, have largely not been realized.

In this article I explore some of those dimensions that are missing from existing frameworks for teaching that hold promise for reinvigorating the middle grades with engagement, joy, and learning. I draw on a two-year study of beginning middle grades teaching (Grades 6–8) in which I examined the practice of eight novice teachers working with young adolescents. Initially, I set out to capture the dimensions of variation in their practice in order to characterize the work these eight novice middle grades teachers were doing with young adolescents. For example, there was variation in intellectual rigor across these classrooms, with some teachers providing many opportunities for higher order thinking and others providing very few (cf. Conklin, 2012, 2014). Similarly, the classroom environments varied: Some of these teachers established respectful learning environments and cultivated strong relationships with and among the young adolescents in their classrooms while others did so to a lesser extent (Conklin, 2012). Elements of variation like these are consistent with many of the MET teaching framework elements described previously, such as the level of intellectual challenge of students’ activities and assignments (e.g., Grossman, 2009) and classroom climate (e.g., Danielson, 2011; Pianta, 2013).

Yet beyond these dimensions of instruction that are featured in many existing frameworks, this data set revealed two noteworthy discoveries. First, young adolescents in these eight classrooms were generally content. Second, there was a dimension in many of these middle grades classrooms that did not correlate clearly with any described in the existing frameworks.
for effective teaching: the dimension of play. Thus, in this article, I propose adding the dimension of play to frameworks of middle grades teaching—a dimension that encompasses young adolescents' engagement in creative, imaginative, and joyful pursuits within the context of classroom work.

Because I originally framed this study by a conception of authentic intellectual work (Newmann, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995), I was initially unsure how to categorize the many moments of “fun” that students and teachers alike in this study described and engaged in. Yet the persistent reappearance of these moments across the eight classrooms forced me to attend more carefully to what the teachers were doing—purposefully—and what the students were experiencing—joyfully. Thus, this article represents my own attempts to learn from and better understand the range of ways in which practicing teachers create spaces for learning in their classrooms. In doing so, I have had to rethink my own assumptions about what the elements of high-quality middle grades teaching might encompass.

I draw from my study of eight teachers to illustrate how elements of play surfaced in their middle grades classrooms. While I do not claim that the particular instances of play that I noted in their classrooms clearly correlate with student learning, I argue that their presence in these classrooms, along with the theoretical underpinnings of play, suggest that this is a dimension that warrants further investigation, particularly in the context of education for young adolescents. Further, although the elements of play I discuss from the eight classrooms often resonate with other well-established elements of teaching frameworks—such as differentiating instruction and giving students choice—I propose that framing these elements in terms of play highlights the importance of joy in classrooms in ways that other frameworks do not.

Middle Grades Teaching

Considerable evidence has established the middle school years as a critical time for putting young adolescents on successful trajectories for the future. The young adolescent years are characterized by dramatic physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth and change (cf. Jackson & Davis, 2000; Manning, 2002). While not a prescribed sequence of universal changes or stages (cf. Vagle, 2012), these shifts often include young adolescents’ increased desire for independence from adult authority as well as cognitive development that involves young adolescents’ increasing abilities to think abstractly and reflectively and make reasoned moral and ethical choices (Byrnes, 2003; Keating, 2004; Manning, 2002).

Taking these qualities of young adolescence into account, researchers have recommended a range of elements that distinguish high-quality middle grades teaching. Many of these recommendations have been framed in terms of education that is “developmentally responsive” to young adolescents’ characteristics. For example, Scales (1991) argued that young adolescents
have seven central developmental needs: the need for positive social interaction with adults and peers; structure and clear limits; physical activity; creative expression; competence and achievement; meaningful participation in families, school, and communities; and the opportunity for self-definition. Thus, developmentally responsive middle level classrooms foster the healthy development of the whole young adolescent, attending to their intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical developmental needs.

Similarly, Jackson and Davis (2000) articulated a model for high-quality middle grades instruction that highlighted intellectual quality (Newmann et al., 1995), the link between instruction and assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), and attention to students' variability (Tomlinson, 1999). Integrating these three emphases, Jackson and Davis (2000) recommended a vision of middle grades instruction that is consistent with many of the current models of high-quality instruction but places particular emphasis on teachers' personal and academic connections to their students and the opportunities they create for students to have voice in their learning. This vision incorporates elements including challenging classwork; rich learning environments with diverse materials, opinions, and options; connections between classroom work and students' lives; collaborative learning opportunities; and classrooms centered on the students, in which students exercise some control over their learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 83–84).

This last element—students exercising control over their learning—resonates with other visions of middle grades teaching that have emphasized the importance of choice and democratic learning opportunities for young adolescents. Beane (1993) and Brodhagen (1995), for example, have argued that young adolescents should be involved in the planning of their curriculum to provide them with greater ownership over their learning. Curriculum planned in collaboration with young adolescents has the potential to enable young adolescents to identify and explore topics that connect their own personal concerns with broader social concerns, making the curriculum more meaningful to them. In doing so, such a democratic teaching approach in the middle grades can engage young adolescents in relevant problem solving that facilitates the building of critical and reflective thinking skills (Beane, 1993).

Motivation, Flow, and the Middle Grades

These visions of high-quality middle grades teaching are consistent with research on motivation. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), people at all ages have needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When supportive conditions exist for all three needs to be met, self-motivation is enhanced, which involves greater interest, excitement, and confidence, along with improved performance, persistence, creativity, self-esteem, and general well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As Ryan and Deci (2000) explain, intrinsic motivation is "the prototypic manifestation of
the human tendency toward learning and creativity” (p. 69) and the “inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70). Teachers can support students’ need for autonomy and spur intrinsic motivation, for example, by providing choice and opportunities for self-direction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, choice is only motivating to students when it is consistent with students’ needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness: Choices must be related to students’ personal interests, values, and goals; optimally challenging; and given in a warm, empathic, and accepting context (Katz & Assor, 2007).

In keeping with these perspectives, researchers have found that middle school students are more likely to feel interested in and value schoolwork when they have choices that are relevant to their personal interests and goals, the choices are at an appropriate level of challenge, and students feel that they are in a caring and socially supportive environment (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Thus, attending to both the academic and social contexts of school helps contribute to students’ positive perceptions of school, along with their motivation and engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Further, although research has shown that there is generally a shift away from mastery goals toward performance goals with the transition to middle school, when young adolescents perceived an increased emphasis on mastery goals, their motivation increased (Urdan & Midgley, 2003). Similarly, while Anderman (2003) found generally that sixth and seventh graders’ sense of belonging went down from sixth to seventh grades, she did find higher levels of student belonging in classrooms with task orientations (a focus on progress, improvement, and effort rather than performance) and when students saw their academic tasks as interesting, important, and useful.

This research on motivation has considerable overlap with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of optimal experience and its central concept of flow. Drawing on studies using his experience sampling method (ESM) to measure subjective experience, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained that flow is an intrinsically motivated, task-focused state characterized by full concentration, a change in awareness of time, feelings of clarity and control, a merging of action and awareness, and a lack of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Optimal experiences are enjoyable and lead to growth and discovery: The desire to enjoy ourselves pushes people to stretch their skills or discover new ways to use their skills. In flow activities, “the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act” (p. 52) and therefore push people to higher levels of performance. In doing so, such activities “[transform] the self by making it more complex” (p. 74). Flow is more likely when the challenges of an activity and the person’s skills are both high and in balance.

Drawing on flow and motivation theories, Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) compared young adolescents’ quality of experience and motivation in “traditional” public middle schools with Montessori middle schools. The Montessori philosophy is consistent with principles of flow
theory and perspectives on motivation through its emphasis on student self-direction and intrinsic motivation. In the Montessori schools, students could select projects, pursue self-directed projects, and help make decisions about what to study and learn; meanwhile, collaboration was encouraged, and there was daily flexible, unstructured time. Using ESM with both groups of young adolescents, Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi found that Montessori students reported more flow and intrinsic motivation while doing school-work than did students in the traditional middle schools, and overall, the Montessori students had more positive school experiences. Thus, providing conditions that facilitate young adolescents' motivation and flow are related to their greater enjoyment of school, and such experience in turn is related to learning, growth, and discovery.

**Play**

Although it has rarely appeared explicitly in discussions of middle grades teaching, one element of teaching that has many features in common with theories of motivation and flow as well as visions of high-quality middle grades teaching is play. While discussions of play in education have deep roots (cf., Vygotsky, 1978), the recent and dramatic rise in childhood mental health problems (cf. Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013) has spurred a resurgence of articulations of the importance of play across the age spectrum—both in educational and out-of-school contexts. Child development psychologist David Elkind (2007) defined children's play as “[children's] inborn disposition for learning, curiosity, imagination, and fantasy” (p. ix), while psychologist Peter Gray (2013) articulated five defining characteristics of play:

- Play is self-chosen and self-directed; play is activity in which means are valued more than ends; play has structure or rules that are not dictated by physical necessity but emanate from the minds of the players; play is imaginative, nonliteral, mentally removed in some way from "real" or "serious" life; and play involves an active, alert, but nonstressed frame of mind. (p. 140)

According to Gray, “The predominant emotions of play are interest and joy” (p. 18).

These defining qualities of play that Gray (2013) described are fairly consistent with other discussions of play, although other scholars have parsed the dimensions of play somewhat differently. Physician and psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, developed a framework from research that identified seven patterns of play—attunement play, body play and movement, object play, social play, imaginative and pretend play, storytelling-narrative play, and transformative-integrative and creative play—each of which facilitates particular types of growth and exploration (Brown, 2009). The pattern of attunement play, for example, gets at the emotional
tuning that establishes a base for a “state of play” (Brown, 2009) and seems similar to Gray’s (2013) description of a “nonstressed frame of mind.” Bergen and Fromberg (2009) discussed play in middle childhood (ages 8–12) and defined play as an activity that is voluntary, self-organized, and can include envisioning new characters and scenarios, making up games with rules, and building structures or creating artistic works. Common across these definitions of play, then, are the ideas that play involves choice and self-direction, imaginative creations—both physical and mental, and that play is characterized by a nonstressed state of interest and joy. These defining qualities of play, then, are consistent with research on motivation, self-determination theory, and flow theory, although theories of play place particular emphasis on imagination, creativity, and joy.

Play, Learning, and Development

Play, according to these and other theorists, is central to learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) wrote about the role of play in development and theorized that play “creates a zone of proximal development of the child” (p. 102). Like Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) characterization of flow activities leading to growth and discovery, when children engage in imaginary situations, they are creating a new world for themselves, and in doing so, they spur their own learning and development. As Vygotsky (1978) wrote, “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102). Indeed, much early childhood education is based around the fundamental idea that young children learn through play (e.g., Paley, 2004). While Vygotsky focused on the role of play among young, preschool-aged children—and contended that play takes on less significance among school-aged children—other scholars across fields including medicine, psychology, child development, and education have argued that play fosters social and emotional competence, physical skills, imagination, and cognitive development through childhood and adulthood (e.g., Bergen & Fromberg, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013).

Creativity and imagination are central to the notion of play and learning. Cognitive development is enhanced through development of rules for games, creating new forms in construction, creating scripts for sociodramatic play, and through humor such as word play and the use of jokes (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009; Elkind, 2007). When children use imagination and creativity to dramatize roles or scenarios, such as trying on roles and pretending possible careers, they are practicing independence and taking on roles of power (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009). Using their imaginations in these ways enables children to be patient and persevere. Bergen and Fromberg (2009) argued that, “Being able to imagine and role play a particular career, rent and furnish an apartment, and negotiate other aspects of daily living makes those
actions seem less daunting later on” (p. 429). Sociodramatic play involving communication between children with make-believe roles and objects promotes intellectual and social development (cf. Elkind, 2007). Smilansky (as cited in Elkind, 2007) noted the role of make believe in school, explaining that:

problem-solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make-believe: visualizing how the Eskimo live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems and determining what will come next. History, geography and literature are all make believe. All of these are conceptual constructions never directly experienced by the child. (p. 210)

Research suggests, then, that children’s imaginative play contributes to social, intellectual, and language development.

Choice and self-direction are similarly critical elements of play. Play enables children to practice self-directing, self-control, and negotiating with others. Gray (2013), for example, argued for the importance of children having choice and control over their own fates, noting, “In free play, children learn to make their own decisions, solve their own problems, create and abide by rules, and get along with others as equals rather than as obedient or rebellious subordinates” (pp. 17–18).

Further, when children are able to use humor or otherwise engage in a playful state of mind, they are in a better state for learning. Gray (2013) cited research supporting the idea that the creation of a positive or playful mood—such as using humor—enhances creative, insightful reasoning in the face of solving challenging problems. He contended, “Learning, creativity, and problem solving are facilitated by anything that promotes a playful state of mind, and they are inhibited by evaluation, expectation of rewards, or anything else that destroys a playful state of mind” (p. 139).

Play in Educational Contexts

Despite the evidence of the potentially powerful and important outcomes of play, there is widespread agreement that play and joy have been eroded in young people’s lives today, with devastating effects. Brown’s (2009) interest in play, for example, grew out of his study of the absence of play among homicidal young males, while Gray (2013) and Elkind (2007) documented the rise in mental health problems—such as anxiety and depression—among young people that has paralleled the decline in children’s freedom and opportunities to play. Many of these authors have written about the decline in opportunities for children to play outside of school settings, focusing on the importance of unstructured free play time. Some authors, like Gray, advocated for essentially eliminating adults from children’s play—whether in or outside of school—in order to give children fuller autonomy and authority over their own lives.
In the context of teaching, play is typically discussed in the research literature in relation to early childhood and early grades education, social emotional learning (cf. Ottmar, Rimm-Kaufman, Berry, & Larsen, 2013), or more recently, in the context of the use of video games with adolescents (e.g., Gee, 2005; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). In early childhood education, play is typically viewed as an important means of learning among young children (cf. Paley, 2004), yet the principles that guide the use of play in early childhood settings are rarely taken up or discussed in relation to teaching past the elementary years. Social emotional learning has emphasized dimensions of play: The elementary-focused program Responsive Classroom, for example, focuses on establishing a positive tone for learning to start the day; providing meaningful choices, autonomy, and independence; and skills such as creativity and innovation (cf. Ottmar et al., 2013).

In the context of middle childhood play (ages 8–12), Bergen and Fromberg (2009) argued that adults can take on the important role of being facilitators of play through providing space and materials for play, providing choices, and honoring process without judging outcomes. They argued that teachers should “appreciate the multiple ways in which children may represent experiences and display a sense of playfulness” and create assessments that “include observations of children’s play competence, especially as it relates to development of imaginative and creative idea generation” (p. 430).

At the secondary education level, research on the use of video games among adolescents has explored how the play that goes on in gaming incorporates good learning principles, including players acting as producers rather than consumers; trying new things and exploring; customizing according to one’s own interests and abilities; having a sense of agency, ownership, and control; and challenging problems that are “pleasantly frustrating” (Gee, 2005)—all elements that resonate with the definitions of play. And indeed, some research on young people’s engagement in video games indicates that playing certain kinds of video games advanced young people’s reasoning and problem-solving skills (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008).

Taken together, all of this research literature suggests that dimensions of play can contribute to important learning goals, but such potential has not been fully realized or explored in many educational contexts—including in the middle grades. Drawing from this literature, then, in this article I focus on the elements of play that surfaced in eight middle grades teachers’ practice. I categorize these elements according to three broad dimensions: imaginative creations—both physical and mental—choice and self-direction, and humor and nonstressed conditions. I highlight illustrative instances of these elements of play across the classrooms in order to explore what their presence in middle grades classrooms might make possible. In many cases, the instances I highlight represent particular qualities of play but lack other important defining qualities. As such, the particular ways in which play
was manifested in these classrooms may not have fully realized the learning and development possibilities of play. However, my goal here is to suggest that the hints of play in these classrooms may point to vital qualities of instruction that are largely missing in today’s middle grades classrooms and in frameworks for middle grades teaching—and warrant inclusion.

Methods

The data from this article come out of a larger longitudinal case study I conducted between 2008 and 2010 to examine the connection between two different teacher preparation pathways (a specialized middle level pathway and social studies–specific secondary pathway) and middle level students’ learning opportunities. As part of this study, I selected eight graduates of two undergraduate teacher education programs housed in the same Southeastern research university—four graduates from each pathway—and studied their teaching practice in their first two years of teaching. The eight teachers I selected met the criteria of having secured jobs teaching middle grades social studies, working in schools with diverse student populations, teaching within a 90-mile driving radius from their university, and having agreed to participate in the study. I gave the middle school program graduates pseudonyms with two syllables (like middle), while the secondary program graduates have pseudonyms with more than two syllables (like secondary). All eight teachers are White and were all in their early to mid-20s during the course of the study. Stephanie, Timothy, and Rebecca (secondary) taught in the same school as Andy and Ella (middle), while Maria (secondary) and Brian (middle) taught in the same school district, with demographically very similar student populations (see Table 1).

Debbie (middle) taught in a school with the least economic diversity but one with higher percentages of students with disabilities and Latino students than the other graduates’ schools. None of these teachers’ classrooms was tracked by student ability levels, resulting in generally heterogeneous groups of students; however, in his second year, I observed a class of Brian’s (middle) that had a high proportion of gifted students, while Debbie taught social studies to rotating groups of students across the school year, one of which had a high proportion of students with disabilities.

In their first two years of teaching, I conducted 14 classroom observations of each teacher, recording detailed notes during each visit to examine the nature of their instruction. My observation notes included a map of the classroom and physical environment (i.e., wall decorations, student work, seating arrangement); the number, gender, and race/ethnicity of students (based on my perception); topics taught; time devoted to each lesson segment; content of teacher instructions or materials; content of teacher-student and student-student verbal exchanges (to the best of my type-recording ability); and an ongoing record of teacher and student actions (i.e., students...
Table 1
Program Graduates and School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Demographics (2008)</th>
<th>Enrollment (N)</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged (%)</th>
<th>Students With Disabilities (%)</th>
<th>English Language Learners (%)</th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>African American (%)</th>
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<th>Latino (%)</th>
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<td>Andy, sixth</td>
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<td>Brian, seventh</td>
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<td>Maria, seventh</td>
<td>1,177</td>
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<td>Longleaf Middle School</td>
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<td>Debbie, seventh</td>
<td>925</td>
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<td>80</td>
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raising hands, laughing, reading, talking to peers; teacher talking with individual student, etc.). Because of school district restrictions, I only conducted six observations of Debbie, all in her first year of teaching. In her second year, in lieu of observations, Debbie sent me copies of the lessons she taught for three consecutive days in the fall and three consecutive days in the spring. Stephanie only took part in Year 1 of the study because she returned to graduate school full-time during Year 2.

I interviewed each teacher three times during each year, twice as part of the classroom observations. These interviews included teachers’ reflections on the lessons I observed and also their discussion of assignments they selected that they believed they had learned the most from, their students had learned the most from, and those they believed were intellectually challenging for their students (10 total assignments for each teacher across two years). For each assignment, the teachers selected and discussed student work samples they believed were “typical” and “exemplary” (in the second year of the study, Debbie’s school district did not permit collection of student work); by asking the teachers to explain why they believed work samples were “typical” and “exemplary,” I aimed to gain greater insight into their goals as teachers and their definitions of high-quality student learning. These observation and interview strategies drew on previous teacher learning studies (Kennedy, Ball, & McDiarmid, 1993) and research on authentic intellectual work in social studies classrooms (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Social Studies Inquiry Research Collaborative, 2011).

Finally, in the spring of each year (April-May), I surveyed the middle school students (those who consented and provided parental permission) in each of the teachers’ classrooms to get their perspective on what they were learning. In the first year, a total of 63 middle school students participated from seven of the eight classrooms; in the second year, 56 students participated from six of the seven classrooms (Debbie’s school district did not permit the student survey in either year of the study). This survey included Likert scale questions about students’ engagement in their social studies class (i.e., “How interesting does your teacher make social studies for you?”) and the degree to which they felt intellectually challenged (i.e., “In this class, how often does your teacher challenge you to think in new ways?”). The student survey also included open-ended questions such as “What does your teacher do in this class that HELPS you learn social studies?,” “What activities have you done in this class that you have learned the most from? (Please give at least 2 specific examples),” and “What else would you like to say about learning social studies in this class?”

Data Analysis

Following observations of the eight teachers, I wrote summaries of each lesson, noting the major activities and the time spent on each (i.e., 15
minutes: individual student work answering apartheid review questions; 11 minutes: teacher-led class review and discussion of review questions; 11 minutes: class viewing of video on South African income gap; 21 minutes: individual student work on Nelson Mandela “bio” poems). I then wrote analytical memos to record patterns, initial hypotheses, and comparisons among the teachers’ practice. All teacher interviews were transcribed, and I read through transcripts, documents, and classroom observation notes. A graduate research assistant assisted me with compiling the middle school student survey data by synthesizing narrative responses.

Initially, I analyzed the classroom lessons, student assignments, and student work samples for their intellectual quality using Newmann et al.’s (1995) published standards and criteria for authentic intellectual work: This meant that after summarizing their contents, I scored each according to the extent to which it involved construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and connected classroom learning to the real world. For example, I determined the extent to which students were using higher order thinking processes (construction of knowledge) in each lesson on a scale of 1 to 5 (for rubrics, see Newmann et al., 1995; for elaboration on this scoring, see Conklin, 2014). However, through this process, I also allowed for other codes to emerge. The analysis I present here comes out of those codes that emerged.

As I examined teachers’ practice and students’ learning opportunities in these eight classrooms, I continually found examples of practice and learning that emphasized different dimensions of what students typically referred to primarily as “fun.” I began to categorize illustrations of creativity, the use of imagination, and the role of humor in these classrooms. These examples did not seem to correspond neatly to any of the criteria in the authentic intellectual work framework, yet because of their repeated appearances in this data set, they seemed important. At first, I regarded comments that both the teachers and students made about having “fun” as trivial activities that were not connected to in-depth, meaningful, conceptual learning. However, I began to see that all of these elements—fun, imagination, games, creativity, choice—could all be considered components of the larger construct of play that I have described previously.

Thus, I draw from examples in these data to illustrate the manifestations of play in these eight classrooms, drawing primarily from classroom observations and student work samples and surveys. Following this discussion, I draw from these examples to theorize how these dimensions of play may warrant further consideration.

A Preface: Listening to Young Adolescents

I begin by drawing on the voices of young adolescents to illustrate these students’ general contentedness in these eight middle grades classrooms—a state that is far from pervasive in classrooms today. Students’ comments in
response to the final survey question, “What else would you like to say about learning in this class?” painted a portrait of students who appeared to generally enjoy life in these middle grades classrooms. For example, students wrote:

- “I really like this class. It is lots of fun and I really wish I did not have to leave next year.” (eighth grader, Ella’s class)
- “It is fun he absolutely does nothing wrong! He helps everyone out! And makes his class fun every day!” (sixth grader, Andy’s class)
- “I have had one of the best school years because of this class. I was happy to learn so much without me knowing that I knew it all.” (seventh grader, Brian’s class)
- “[This class] is interesting and fun. I will remember everything I learned in here.” (sixth grader, Maria’s class)
- “I think he makes it fun and most of the time interesting. I learn cool things by doing his projects and assignments and love what he does.” (seventh grader, Timothy’s class)
- “Learning in this class has been wonderful! My teacher knows how to teach well and fun ways to teach. She has been my favorite teacher. When I get to her class it’s like I can relax and enjoy myself. We joke around and still learn from it.” (eighth grader, Rebecca’s class)
- “This class was very fun and I am glad I had [her] as a teacher.” (eighth grader, Stephanie’s class)

As these comments suggest, a consistent theme from the young adolescents was that what helped them learn was when their teacher “makes learning fun.”

Students’ narrative survey responses provided further insight into the kinds of learning opportunities they believed they learned the most from across the classrooms. Although many of these responses suggested that the young adolescents valued intellectually rich learning opportunities, such as learning focused on issues of justice, learning that gave them opportunities to think and make judgments, and learning that was relevant to their lives, many of the class activities that young adolescents reported as those they had learned the most from were characterized by other qualities. Many students from Rebecca’s eighth-grade class, for example, noted reenactments of battles as powerful learning for them. As one student put it, “Because when we went outside and threw paper balls at each other, it was easier to understand what happened.” In Andy’s sixth-grade class, students reported learning a great deal from his many review games, like one student who noted, “I . . . liked trashcan basketball. Every answer you got right you got to shoot the ball to get more points.” Similarly, students in Maria’s and Brian’s classes commented on learning from Jeopardy review games along with other “hands-on” activities.

What explains young adolescents’ views that these games and “fun” provided important learning opportunities for them? Some readers might dismiss
these student comments as evidence of the popular view that young adolescents are simply not interested in more academic, intellectual tasks. An alternative, more generous reading—and the one I propose—is that young adolescents have very valuable insights into their own needs and views on learning and that what students may be responding to in these teachers’ practice is the teachers’ incorporation of elements of play. Drawing on these young adolescents’ insights and their teachers’ practice, I propose that these elements of play, when thoughtfully integrated into middles grades teaching practice, stand to make important contributions to students’ learning. I now turn to illustrations of play in the eight classrooms.

### Play in Middle Grades Classrooms

#### Imaginative Creations—Physical and Mental

*Conklin*

After completing a unit of study on the ancient Middle East, Debbie provided her seventh-grade students with a set of choices for a culminating project to further their learning from the unit. One choice invited students to research the process of mummification and address the following assignment: “Why did the Ancient Egyptians believe in this [mummification] process? Compose a ‘how-to’ book on this process. Your book must be illustrated and at least 10 pages.” In order to complete this assignment, the students had to conduct their own research on mummification first.

In response to this assignment, one seventh-grade student composed a magazine titled *Mummy Monthly*. The front cover featured a hand-drawn picture of a mummified, cartoonish face wearing braces, with a callout advertising “How to wrap a mummy. Pg. 4.”

Inside the magazine were several pages of narrative explanation in which the student described the reasons Egyptians used mummification and the role of pyramids in ancient Egyptian life. On another page, the student drew pictures illustrating the sequence of “how to mummify a chicken.” An illustration at the bottom of another page was labeled “Random Hieroglyphics” and featured a series of fictional hieroglyphic characters and the accompanying, made-up translation: “My peanut butter sandwich walked up the stairs with his gills.” Next to a page with a carefully drawn comic strip was a magazine-style quiz that asked, “Is your mommy a mummy? . . . does your mom have blue skin? Is she over 200 years old? Is she wrapped in gauze?”

This seventh grader’s work resonates with many of the dimensions of play. On one hand, by providing students with choice and a structure that allowed for considerable freedom, Debbie offered her seventh graders the chance to provide some direction to their own learning as they pursued their own research on mummification and then decided how to represent their learning. But in addition, this student seems to have spurred his own
development by creating a playful representation of his learning through the use of imaginative creations—in doing so, the student was creating new ideas (cf. Brown, 2009). While clearly the student fused the historical with the present and the imaginary in creating a mummified chicken and a mummy wearing braces, these fusions illustrate the student playing with what he had learned and understood. As Bergen and Fromberg (2009) pointed out, middle childhood play may involve nonsense humor—like a peanut butter sandwich walking up the stairs with his gills written in “random hieroglyphics.” Such humor involves cognitive incongruity, which is a way for young people to illustrate their knowledge of the world and gain power through doing so (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009).

In her discussion of this assignment and the accompanying student’s work, Debbie explained:

They learned all of this on their own so I think that’s why they learned the most because it was totally them . . . this [student] got really creative. . . . He included hieroglyphics and he tied in that knowledge and then he just got comical with it: how to mummify a chicken and then called it King Nugget. I thought it was hilarious! [He] put a comic strip in it and . . . quizzes: is your mommy a mummy? . . . this is a kid who we can hardly get to pick up a pencil. So that was exciting, very exciting.

This student’s chance to play through his learning appeared to engage him in ways that other schoolwork had not and enabled him to experiment and exercise creativity.

Many of Debbie’s assignments for her seventh graders offered students similar opportunities to engage their imaginations and create new possible worlds. During a unit on the Holocaust, students read Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, a young adult book set during the Holocaust, and had to “analyze the book from any character’s point of view other than the narrator” and rewrite it, changing “at least 7 main events in the story.” Such an assignment, while giving students the potential to deviate from historical fact, enabled students to try on new roles and imagine new possibilities and worlds, activities that facilitate and nurture students’ capacities for patience and persistence (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009).

These opportunities for creative and imaginative play in Debbie’s class were similar to assignments across several of the other middle grades classrooms in which young adolescents had the chance to create artistic works with elements of play. In Andy’s class, for example, sixth graders researched different climates and created “survival kits” of items that would be useful in those climates. Maria’s class included many similar kinds of assignments, such as creating colorful group projects that Maria termed “Slices of Australia,” in which her sixth graders assembled information about Australia’s government, economy, culture, and physical features into globe-like mobiles that Maria
Taking on Roles

Another aspect of imaginative play is pretend play and the taking on of roles. In many of the middle grades classes, students noted how much they learned from lessons that involved taking on particular roles, such as through lessons related to money management and practical economics—a part of the state curriculum that each grade typically included at the end of the year. One of Timothy’s students said, for example, that a summer vacation project focused on practical economics was “very interesting and similar to the real world” while a similar project in Rebecca’s class elicited an eighth grader’s comment that, “I learned from this because I saw how much real life [costs].” Meanwhile, in Brian’s class, a student explained that a “create a country project” was a powerful learning experience “because it was hard to come up with everything for a perfect country,” while another noted, “I’ve learned how creating a country is actually not that easy, and government systems are more detailed than I thought.” In Stephanie’s class, eighth graders engaged in a mock trial to determine whether Captain Thomas Preston was guilty of murder in the Boston Massacre. Finally, Timothy engaged his students in a simulation of apartheid, relegating the majority of students to one very small section of the classroom and allowing the remaining few to roam freely so that his students might get a small sense of the overcrowded, highly restricted conditions for Black South Africans and the freedom of White South Africans.

Through these and other classroom activities, the middle grades teachers invited their students to try on a range of different kinds of roles—both historical and those that they might engage in in the future. To be sure, dramatizing roles such as those in the apartheid simulation is not without controversy given the potential harm that might come from having students reenact damaging stereotypes and societal structures (cf. Drake, 2008). At the same time, students’ serious consideration of such roles might also spur their imaginations and understanding of other possible lives and worlds. Many of these opportunities for students to take on particular roles appeared to provide these young adolescents with the chance to imagine possible careers and try on future adult and leadership roles that enabled them to practice independence and take on roles of power that may equip them with productive skills for the future (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009).
Many of the classrooms also provided young adolescents with opportunities to learn physically by engaging their bodies in somewhat creative ways. As noted earlier, in their end-of-year surveys, several of Rebecca’s eighth graders noted that they learned the most from reenactments of battles that Rebecca engaged them in, bringing them outside to the school parking lot and throwing paper balls at one another to simulate particular battles from the Civil War. As one student quoted earlier explained, “Because when we went outside and threw paper balls at each other, it was easier to understand [what happened].” In Debbie’s class, in one lesson her seventh graders went outside and used sidewalk chalk to draw a map of countries in the Middle East, after which she engaged them in a game of “physical” geography, directing them to “go to the Gaza Strip” and “move to Afghanistan.” Meanwhile, many of Andy’s review games for upcoming unit assessments involved his sixth graders in physical activity, catching and throwing balls around the classroom or throwing balled up paper into a trashcan for “trashcan basketball.”

Although each of these examples of physical involvement in the classroom entailed teachers providing the majority of the rules governing students’ movement—rather than students defining these rules—these lessons have hints of the “body play” that is an important type of play. As Brown (2009) explained, movement is “a way of knowing, and we actually, through movement and play, think in motion.” Movement—as those who advocate for kinesthetic learning know—engages the brain and facilitates learning, providing the roots for innovation, flexibility, adaptability, and resilience (Brown, 2009). Thus, by creating opportunities for young adolescents to engage physically with their learning, the teachers in these classrooms opened up new ways for students to grow and develop.

Choice and Self-Direction

For some of the teachers, cultivating a sense of ownership among students was central to their teaching. In Ella’s classroom, in the first week of school, she provided students the opportunity to create the classroom rules, explaining, “I definitely want them to feel like this is our room. I never say it’s mine. It’s ours.” Accordingly, a poster attached to a back wall showcased students’ rules for themselves: “Classroom rules: Believe in yourself; Be kind to others. Don’t be a bully!; Put effort into everything you do; Be truthful and honest to your teacher and classmates.” At the bottom of the poster were the signatures of all of her sixth-grade students. By having students generate their classroom guidelines democratically, Ella felt “it would really set the tone for them at the beginning of the year that your opinion matters. And you know your voice will affect what happens in here.” While the teacher played a large in role in facilitating these negotiations, in a sense, the students were creating
their own rules for the game of classroom life—an approach that has elements of the choice and self-direction that are central to play.

In this way, Ella, along with many of the other teachers, gave their students greater autonomy and authority over their lives in the classroom (Gray, 2013). For most culminating assignments after a series of lessons, Debbie offered her students a range of options for showcasing their understanding of the content. For example, in addition to the option of creating a “how-to” book on mummification described previously, Debbie’s seventh graders had additional options, including to (1) research Hammurabi’s code in greater depth, compare these laws to their own town’s laws, and develop their own set of laws or; (2) research the holidays and religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and create a book describing the traditions for holidays for each of the religions as well as any recipes that might be associated with the holiday; or (3) make a 3-D model of the main physical geographical features of the Middle East. In some cases, Debbie even included a note in her assignments that students could propose additional options if they had another idea. Similarly, in Brian’s class, students had the chance to complete three of nine “tic-tac-toe” options to showcase their learning about Southern and Eastern Asia, including assignments such as creating an “entrepreneur brochure,” making a memorial model for Gandhi, writing a children’s book on religions, and writing a report from the perspective of a wildlife worker. In Maria’s sixth-grade class, a series of lessons focused on Christianity, Judaism, and Islam culminated with a “diner menu” activity in which students completed activities of their choice—an “appetizer,” “entree,” and “side dishes”—to summarize their learning about the three religions. The “side dishes,” for example, asked students to select two options from a list of choices including drawing a picture of a person representing one of the major religions, drawing two objects that relate to the religion in the picture, or with a partner, creating and performing a short skit that shows the difference between two religions. By providing students these arrays of choices for representing their learning through creative and/or imaginative means, the teachers presumably fostered greater interest and joy by allowing students opportunities for choice and self-direction as well as some freedom to play with their learning.

The idea of self-direction also surfaced in students’ survey responses. Many of the students noted how much they valued opportunities to conduct their own research and actively engage in learning for themselves. For example, one of Maria’s students explained of a map labeling activity, “I learned from this activity because I had to look it up myself; she didn’t just give us a map to color,” while another student reflected on a European country research project, noting, “I learned about different cultures and traditions from many different countries. We also learned how to do deep research.” In Rebecca’s class, students created board games to review content they had learned; as one student explained, “We had to do research and write questions and the answers to them and it was fun to learn that way.” To
be sure, all of these opportunities for choice and self-direction occurred in the context of considerable constraint—required, graded assignments in compulsory classes—certainly not the pure “free play” that Gray (2013) advocated. But these student comments are indicators that opportunities like these stood out to them among other learning opportunities.

Humor and Nonstressed Conditions

On one September day of his second year of teaching, Andy taught a series of lessons on the European Union and European geography. When his sixth graders came into his classroom, they began work on their daily “retro” warm-up, which asked students to respond to three review questions and one trivia question about music, sports, or culture from a decade of the past such as “Which of the following people was NOT a member of the Rat Pack? A) Sammy Davis B) Frank Sinatra C) Jerry Lewis D) Dean Martin” as part of “1960s week.” On another day, Andy auctioned off a Starburst candy to show students the concept of supply and demand while other lessons engaged students in playing “Social studies duels”—a game he invented to help students review their learning. His sixth graders were also highly entertained by many of his simulations, such as when he emerged from the hallway disguised in an all-black ensemble—hat, faux beard, trenchcoat, and glasses—speaking with a Russian accent, to begin a simulation on Communism.

Each of these rituals of Andy’s classroom exemplified his use of humor and playfulness to set the stage for learning among his sixth graders. As Gray (2013) noted, “Learning, creativity, and problem solving are facilitated by anything that promotes a playful state of mind” (p. 139)—with the use of humor and providing candy being examples of ways to create a positive or playful mood. The sixth graders in Andy’s class were enthusiastic participants in the vast majority of Andy’s learning activities—it was generally a classroom that I found to be filled with joy and interest, an observation that was supported by students’ universal comments on what a “fun” learning environment Andy created. This learning environment was consistent, too, with Andy’s vision of good social studies teaching: he explained, “I think good social studies teachers enable the students to become passionate about learning about the subject.” His vision was motivated in part by his constant thinking about “What’s going to be enjoyable for an 11- and 12-year-old,” something he tried to accommodate by varying his instruction, tapping into students’ creativity, and making learning fun since, as he noted, “if they’re enjoying it, they’re learning more.” Andy worked hard to create the positive and playful mood that he believed—and Gray (2013) supported—would facilitate further learning.

Do Playful Classrooms Generate More Learning?

Across the eight classrooms in this study, then, are many examples of teachers providing assignments that capitalize on students’ creativity and
imagination, instruction that involves physical play and movement, opportunities for students to have choice and self-direction, and the use of humor and joy to set the stage for learning. Looking at these results in relation to theories of play suggests that many of these aspects of teachers’ instruction were consistent with features of what scholars call play—which lead to a range of desirable outcomes, such as social and emotional competence and the development of physical skills, imagination, and cognitive development (e.g., Bergen & Fromberg, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013). Do the elements of play that appeared in these young adolescents’ classrooms, then, foster these desirable outcomes? While I did not study this particular connection—and as I suggest in the following, this seems like important work to do—the research literature points to some possible answers.

To be sure, some of what I’ve described from these classrooms is probably not wholly “play” as others have described it—that is, many of the examples I have discussed include some but not all of the critical dimensions of play. For example, given many authors’ definition that “for an activity to count as play, it must be voluntary and self-organized” (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009, p.427), the fact that much of the classroom activity I have described here was assigned to students (and in the context of compulsory education, no less) automatically seems to demote it from official “play” status. Similarly, in many of the assignments these teachers provided that allowed for creative expression, such as Maria’s “Slices of Australia” project, the assignments were prescribed to an extent that limited students’ ability to fully explore and create. It is reasonable to think, then, that if these classroom activities did not incorporate all of the dimensions of play, the possible learning outcomes of play might not be fully realized.

In the same way, perhaps those assignments and instruction that included more of the critical elements of play might have been more successful in accomplishing the developmental possibilities of play, such as Debbie’s mummy assignment in which at least one seventh grader not only had a choice in how to represent his learning but also an apparent sense of self-direction in creating his Mummy Monthly magazine, an opportunity to engage his creativity and imagination, and the chance to use humor to create what appeared to be a product characterized by joy. Thus, perhaps the more each of these classroom examples included critical dimensions of play, the more they fostered the social, emotional, physical, imaginative, and cognitive growth that play can produce.

At the same time, the presence of any of the qualities of play in the classrooms might have contributed to important student outcomes. Simply having the opportunity to use their imagination, stand up and throw a ball, take part in creating classroom rules, construct a visually interesting product, or just laugh might have contributed to the young adolescents’ comments that their classrooms were happy places to be—places that perhaps students
were more excited about returning to each day and perhaps enabled them to
learn more and develop new competencies.

The possibilities of these positive outcomes, however, also highlight
some potential tensions among desirable classroom outcomes. In the case
of the mummy magazine, it is possible that while the student cultivated inno-
vation through his play with mummified chickens and magazine-style
mummy quizzes, this student’s historical understanding did not develop as
fully as it might have. Similarly, when the students in Andy’s classroom
engaged in his review game of “Social studies duels” or retro warm-ups
with 1960s trivia, there was joy and interest in their learning—though this
learning may not have fostered an understanding of the interpretive nature
of historical evidence. Further, Debbie’s assignment to have students rewrite
parts of a book focused on the Holocaust or Timothy’s simulation of apart-
heid may well have surfaced complex tensions about race, religion, and
genocide. Providing students with opportunities to play may lead to unpre-
dictable outcomes.

These tensions suggest that teachers need to be deliberate about balanc-
ing desired outcomes, such as historical understanding or authentic intellec-
tual work, with elements of play. In some cases, play may support these other
goals, though in other cases, they might come in conflict, and teachers would
need to make explicit choices about which goals are being prioritized and for
what reasons. At the same time, surfacing complex tensions like those about
race, religion, or genocide provide opportunities for students and teachers
alike to include ethical deliberation as part of their classroom work, to con-
sider the potential consequences of play that could, for example, reinscribe
marginalization or oppression. Just as the early childhood educator Vivian
Paley engaged her young students in consideration of the ethics of whether
children should be allowed to exclude others in their play (Paley, 1993), mid-
dle grades educators could invite young adolescents into similar kinds of con-
vversations about the moral dimensions of their play. In other words, highlight-
ing some of the potential tensions of incorporating play in middle grades
classrooms is not a call for teachers to avoid such tensions but rather to rec-
ognize, anticipate, and engage such tensions with care and thought.

Toward More Playful Middle Grades Classrooms

The data from this study suggest that the students in these eight class-
rooms experienced enough joy and interest from the kinds of classroom
activities I have discussed here that the teachers’ practices warrant further
consideration. The elements of play featured across the classrooms appear
connected to students’ desire to be in these classrooms—a fact that is note-
worthy, given the evidence of increasing dropout rates that often have their
roots in the middle grades (Balfanz, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2006). It seems
worth considering, then, how elements of play might be integrated
intentionally with other frameworks for teaching that emphasize other important learning outcomes. What, for example, might a classroom look like if it included the elements of the PLATO framework (Grossman, 2009)—a framework designed for middle and high school English language arts—along with the elements of play? Teachers would focus on elements such as clearly identifying objectives, engaging students in activities with high intellectual challenge, providing models and explicit strategy instruction, and connecting new material to students' personal and cultural experiences (Grossman, 2009)—but they would also focus on giving students opportunities to choose and self-direct aspects of their learning, develop imaginative and creative processes and products, and engage in humorous and playful activity. All of these elements might not be present in every lesson, and in some cases, it might not be appropriate to incorporate particular elements together. The element of humor, for example, might be problematic in the context of presenting controversial content. Or, providing models might not be appropriate if a goal is to allow students to generate creative products. However, by purposefully highlighting play in the classroom, teachers might do more to successfully advance the outcomes of joy and interest in learning, along with social, emotional, physical, imaginative, and cognitive growth.

Some readers might observe that many of the elements of play I have highlighted here are simply examples of well-established, existing features or conceptions of instruction, such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999). The idea of giving students choice and ownership in their learning has deep educational roots in democratic education, while many of the ideas I have discussed here might also be described in terms of teachers finding multiple ways to facilitate student engagement or cater to students' multiple intelligences or modes of learning. However, I propose that the concept of play provides a different and important way to frame these ideas—a lens that provides a sense of purpose rooted in the convergent aims of joyful learning along with social, emotional, physical, creative, and intellectual growth.

Thus, I suggest that this set of data points to the possibilities of playful middle grades classrooms as well as the need to explore systematically the relationship between the elements of play in classroom instruction and desirable student outcomes. What exactly does a teacher like Andy accomplish through his lively review games and humorous disguises? How might we capture the effects of the nonstressful conditions he establishes in the classroom? And how might he capitalize on these strategies further to facilitate young adolescents' interest in learning alongside their engagement in complex problem solving? What do Debbie's creative assignments make possible for students? Does students' ability to choose their product and engage their imagination limit their learning in other ways—or does it enhance other aspects of their learning? In what ways do the elements of play in her instruction open up or close down different kinds of growth among her students?
We would need to study the balance of aspects of playfulness that lead to learning and desirable student outcomes.

Research on play in the middle grades, then, might examine the particular practices teachers use to create conditions for classroom play, the subjective experiences of both teachers and students when play is infused into classrooms, the process involved for young adolescents engaged in play, and the range of outcomes of play in middle grades classrooms. While designing such research would likely necessitate a creative, playful approach in itself, the related bodies of research on motivation, flow, and play point to some possible ways to explore play in middle grades classrooms. For example, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) experience sampling method offers one way to measure students’ quality of experience in middle grades classrooms that incorporate play, just as measures of interest and engagement from motivation research (cf. Wang & Eccles, 2013) could illuminate young adolescents’ experience with classroom play. Similarly, researchers might explore young adolescents’ “imaginative and creative idea generation” (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009, p. 430) as outcomes in classrooms that deliberately incorporate play. Researchers might also use theories of play to detail the relative presence or absence of features of play across middle grades classrooms, such as the extent to which classrooms incorporate imaginative creations, choice and self-direction, and humor or nonstressed conditions.

Given the convergence of increased mental health problems among young people (Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013), ongoing mismatches in middle grades education (e.g., Balfanz, 2009; Eccles et al., 1993; Urdan & Midgley, 2003), and a recognized desire in American society for educational outcomes such as creativity, self-direction, interest, and joy (Kane & Staiger, 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2014), finding out how play can be infused in classrooms beyond the early years seems a worthwhile—if not urgent—pursuit. Further, given that young adolescence is often a time characterized by young people’s desire for more independence and greater ownership in their learning, the need for physical activity and creative expression, the need for competence and achievement, and increasing abilities to think abstractly and reflectively (Byrnes, 2003; Keating, 2004; Manning, 2002; Scales, 1991), the infusion of play in middle grades classrooms seems like a perfect fit. Through physical and playful activity; experimenting with new, adult roles; trying out their power and self-directing their learning; making choices; and engaging their imaginations, play could address many of young adolescents’ intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical developmental needs. As such, adding play to frameworks for middle grades teaching might assist in the critical work of putting young adolescents on positive, playful trajectories for their futures. The teachers in this study may be pointing to an aspect of middle grades education we should not ignore.
Notes

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1In some cases, I have changed students' spelling or punctuation to clarify what I believe was their intended meaning.

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