

Time to get serious about play

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You may have seen this before: a motivational poster, either on a classroom wall, cubicle divider or online, with the pithy epigram: “Play is the highest form of research.”

Reactions to this oft-cited quotation span a wide range. At one extreme, there is the view that a sense of playful wonder and joy is inseparable from the process of discovery and learning.

Historically, though, Singapore has taken the opposite perspective. Ever so pragmatic, our research initiatives are driven largely by a practical problem-solving mindset. Our education enterprise is defined by a functionalist logic: to produce young adults ready to contribute to society in material and economic terms.

In recent years, though, the

Ministry of Education has tried to reframe the vision of education that mitigates the severe logic of instrumentalism. We see this in slogans such as 1997’s “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, 2004’s “Teach Less, Learn More”, and 2018’s “Active Imagination, Collective Inquisitiveness, and Rich Interconnections”, just to name a few.

This past May, Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung cautioned that the education system in its current form could “reduce the joy of learning” among our students.

Mr Ong is absolutely right. Confronting an uncertain and exciting future requires a sense of wonder about the world. The fixation on examination results risks killing off what Plato and Aristotle referred to as *thaumazein*: the wonder at that which is as it is.

In fact, in the latest sitting of Parliament, during the debate on the motion “Education for our Future”, Nominated Member of

Parliament Kok Heng Leun spoke about the joy of getting lost in the process of learning: “Curiosity is about getting lost, but allowing oneself to do so without fear... (The) fun part of creation is when you are still trying to find your way around, when you are experimenting and discovering the world in the process.”

And what better way to do that than in play?

It is timely, therefore, to revisit the ideas of the American philosopher and education reformist, John Dewey. In his 1916 *Democracy And Education*, Dewey argued that when children indulge their natural impulse to play, “going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier”. Indeed, he believed that teachers should not merely resort to games and play as diversions to alleviate the tedium of the regular school day. Instead, he argued that when play is integrated into the school programme, the student is

engaged in a holistic manner that not only makes learning gain better traction, but also enhances the student’s mental well-being.

But Dewey’s advocacy of the use of play in teaching isn’t just a pedagogical innovation. Rather, play prepares students for the world beyond the school gates.

Play – whether free play or structured, rules-bound games – reproduces (albeit crudely) the realities of adult life, giving children opportunities to test out moves and ideas in an interactive playing field populated by friends, opponents and authority figures, and more importantly to get instant and direct feedback from them.

Furthermore, play is important in preventing the mere accumulation of what Alfred North Whitehead called “inert ideas”. According to Whitehead, another education philosopher, to present an idea to a student in isolation, devoid of experiential context, is to make an idea inert. He says: “Dead knowledge is the danger... Now what is wanted is activity in the presence of knowledge... knowledge applied to experience.”

In other words, it is through play that useful knowledge emerges,

often serendipitously through little experiments in the everyday lived experience. Education must be appreciated as a complex process, where the desired education outcomes – creativity, applied knowledge, entrepreneurial dare, moral courage, and so forth – emerge not just as a result of policy diktat, but more likely are the incidental by-products of play and daydreams, both in and out of schools.

In order that there is time to play, Mr Ong rightly says that the education system must be “loosened up”. Indeed, there is nothing more we could be doing to increase the intrinsic joy of learning. But there are many things we should stop doing in order to not reduce the joy of learning.

In this, Mr Ong is in good company. In 1967, Dr Goh Keng Swee lamented the overemphasis on academic results in the education system: “(The) general complaint is that the young have to spend so much time studying that they have very little time to do anything else such as playing games. An education that lays too much stress on the academic as against the physical and moral side

of life is unbalanced and lopsided.”

Play begins in wonder, and playing develops a wondering temperament. A playful, even irreverent, tinkering, trial-and-error mindset is the key to navigating this complex age, where the small failures incurred are the lessons that the game of life dispenses en route to discovering the bigger payoff. Indeed, it is noteworthy and apt that the Singapore Government’s experiments with fintech and autonomous vehicles are played out in “regulatory sandboxes”.

The call to free the imagination and to unfetter play should not be seen as motherhood statements or indulgences; they are the indispensable means by which to survive and even thrive in disruption. It is through play where we start to delight in the world around us and to be sensitive to its myriad opportunities without preconceived notions.

There is no better time than now to get serious about play.

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