

The Art of Play: Why the Arts are Essential

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I have been reading a fantastic book, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown. In this book, McKeown talks about the importance of making space in our lives to do less, reducing our stress, making room in our lives for what is truly important. Thus, leading to enjoying life more.

Play in the Life of an Essentialist

McKeown devotes an entire chapter to the importance of play in the life of the essentialist. When we are young, play is natural and instinctive. So, it is only as we get older that we are ingrained with the idea that play is unnecessary, trivial, or a luxury. Schools are, in general, guilty of perpetuating this idea. As the pressure to achieve in reading and math mounts, time dedicated to art, music, PE, and even recess is slashed.

Sir Ken Robinson has written extensively about the need for transformation of the current, standardized model of education. Furthermore, he also addresses the role creativity and play will have in this transformation. He says, “The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn’t need to be reformed — it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it. He discusses that to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn, and where they can naturally discover their true passions.” (*The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*).

So how can play help with this transformation, and how do the arts address our need for play?

Play allows us to be who we are.

McKeown says, “When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality” (p. 86). Play, and play through the arts, is key to helping our students discover their individual talents, to discover passion, and to express themselves without standardization. To be clear, while there are learning *standards* in the arts, which are vital to these content areas, the arts are not *standardized*— in fact, the arts celebrate individuality, creativity, and imagination. These principles are necessary in the 21st century classroom.

Play is restorative.

Our students feel the pressure of standardized testing. They feel overscheduled, both in school and out. Additionally, stress and anxiety are on the rise, even amongst our younger students. *Play is an antidote to stress.* The arts are a way to engage our students in learning as they play, explore, create, wonder, and investigate. In San Francisco Unified School District’s publication of Stress Reduction Activities, the arts, play, and physical activity are referenced as effective stress relief.

Play has cognitive benefits.

In McKeown’s book, he writes about Bob Fagan, a researcher who spent fifteen years studying the behavior of grizzly bears. Fagan discovered that bears who played the most tended to live the longest. “In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares these bears for a changing planet.” (p. 86).

Play has a significant impact on our brain’s executive function, stimulating the parts of the brain involved in both careful, logical reasoning *and* carefree, unbound exploration (McKeown, p. 86). Similarly, countless studies tout the impact engaging in the arts has on the brain. The arts engage all the senses both the logical and creative functions of the brain.

How do you advocate for the need for play in your classroom?

Readings

McKeown, G. Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less, 2014. ISBN 978-0804137386.

Robinson, K. The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything, 2009. ISBN 978-0143116738.

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About the Author

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Brianne is a former music educator from Chicago and current graduate class instructor with EdCloset's Learning Studios. She earned her Masters degree in Music Education from VanderCook College of Music and has over a decade of experience in the elementary general music classroom. With her experience in the performing arts, Brianne is dedicated to building connections between the arts and Common Core Standards, 21st century learning skills, inquiry and project-based learning. In addition to her work with EducationCloset, Brianne is a yoga instructor in the Chicagoland area. You can also find Brianne here: <https://artsintersection.wordpress.com/>

