Promoting Playful Communities
The Ways Elementary Teachers Play

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The author, using extensive interviews, researches the play of working elementary school teachers to discover how they engage in such activities, both in and out of the classroom, to relax, enhance learning, and connect professionally. She discusses how these experiences offer rich insight for strengthening teacher well-being, training, and professional development.
Key words: teacher professional development; teacher play and playfulness; teacher well-being

Teacher well-being has become a growing interest for researchers scrambling to identify practical ways to improve the overall health and job satisfaction of educators (Brackett et al. 2010). But what is it, exactly, that keeps teachers in a state of well-being long enough and with sufficient stability that they become resistant to burnout? Could part of the problem be that we have forgotten how to play at work? Teachers who infuse playfulness into their teaching have an opportunity to experience joy for themselves. Baker and Ryan (2021) found that when educators embraced play as a strategy for teaching and learning, many experienced feelings of delight and increased energy in their practice. In fact, some have even found that amusement can calm their physical bodies (Wu et al. 2019). Playing can benefit teachers not only personally but also help them become professionally more effective. Research has demonstrated over and again that playing actually enhances learning rather than detracting from it (Brown 2009; Mardell et al. 2019; Zosh et al. 2018).

Through the research I present in this article, I seek to take a deep look into the ways that some teachers play, both in and out of the classroom. I am specifically exploring the research question: What are elementary school teachers' personal experiences with play? The overarching goal of this article is to develop a better understanding of the play of teachers to guide subsequent research and

American Journal of Play, volume 17, number 1
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classroom applications. All individuals should enjoy their work, but in the case of teachers, the stakes are especially high. Students are tremendously influenced by their teachers. Teachers who create opportunities to play at school can lift their own spirits (Scharp et al. 2022) and provide students with opportunities to learn with levity (Ranz-Smith 2007).

Literature Review

Defining Play and Playfulness

Playing is the parent of fun and enjoyment. When we play, we connect to ourselves and others in ways that shape our brains to adopt greater flexibility and creativity (Kellman and Radwan 2022). There is no one way to play, because it is inherently personal (Güneş 2021), culturally influenced (Mao et al. 2022), and difficult to define (Sutton-Smith 2001). Brown (2009) broadly defines play as having several attributes. It is apparently purposeless, voluntary, and inherently attractive. In addition, it provides freedom from time, a diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and desire to continue. Brown further describes the state of play as the opposite of a state of depression.

Distinct from the activity of play itself, playfulness is more of an inclination, a mindset that affects how we engage in the activity (Guitard et al. 2005). According to Shen and colleagues (Shen et al. 2014), playfulness involves a freedom to have fun in the moment. Adopting a playful attitude could shape how an individual interacts with others and their work to take on a lighthearted and joyful quality.

Why Play?

When we play, our spirits rise, and we gain an emotional distance from stressors, which affords a fresh perspective (Brown 2009). In the workplace, play has been found to strengthen psychological safety and innovation (Mukerjee and Metiu 2022) as well as to pave the way for productivity in meetings (West et al. 2016). Personally creating a playful workplace can help adults boost their morale as they invest themselves in their work (Scharp et al. 2022). Teachers can infuse playfulness in their classrooms as they teach, and the highly appealing fun increases student engagement (Sproule et al. 2021). Adults are even likely to feel enhanced well-being when they are playful (Proyer 2014).

Thus teacher play also benefits students. Enjoyment has been categorized

as an academic emotion by some researchers, suggesting that when teachers foster this emotion in the classroom, it becomes pertinent to learning (Jenßen et al. 2021). Teachers play active roles in the intentional incorporation of play inside the classroom, and when play is practiced and scaffolded, it can mature and strengthen learning skills (Bodrova et al. 2013). Foundationally, teachers can work to shape playful cultures in the classroom as they demonstrate ways to play for students (Baker and Ryan 2021).

A Caution About Play

As with any activity, we can take things too far, and playing is not immune to this shadow side. When play devolves to excess or obsession, it becomes no longer play (Eberle 2014). Play requires vulnerability and should be thoughtfully considered before we impose it on others. Ahloy-Dallairea and colleagues (Ahloy-Dallairea et al. 2018) caution that play is evidence, not a cause, of wellness. Yet, when done with intention and tact, integrating play in the classroom can foster a climate of delight in which fear of failure shrinks and creativity thrives (Kang 2020).

The Problem of Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a surge of significant stress for teachers, and many left or are leaving the profession (Marshall et al. 2022). Teacher stress, of course, existed before the pandemic as well, and educators have long reported feeling emotionally exhausted and burned out by their demanding careers (Keller et al. 2014; Weiland 2021; Yin et al. 2016). Research certainly suggests that burnout has significant overlap with depression among school teachers (Schonfeld and Bianchi 2015). Even still, an individual's stress does not occur in a vacuum. Alleviating some of the stressors for teachers not only benefits them, but also can positively affect their students, helping the teachers feel more confident in their ability to succeed in school (Carroll et al. 2021).

There has been an increase in research about teacher well-being, including the daunting issue of teacher burnout (Marshall et al. 2022), but very little research explores the role of playing in a teacher's practice. When considering the act of play in the classroom, most research looks to the students, particularly to young children. Although young people vitally need to play to develop and learn, we also find an emerging interest in incorporating play in the classroom to benefit teachers as well (Leather et al. 2021). The insights afforded by learning about teachers' play are invaluable in the pursuit of teacher resilience and

effectiveness. In this research, I explore how teachers describe their own play behaviors, both in and out of the classroom, to gain insight into this powerful aid to well-being.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

I have approached this research through the lens of interpretivist theory. Such theory involves iterative steps in the research process that seek meaning first from participants' perspectives within their contexts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2020). Interpretivism values the participants and the expert stories they bring to research. From this starting point then, I have built my thematic analysis attempting to link it closely to the data throughout the process. As questions arose during analysis, I turned continuously to the data to align with the participants' accounts. I explored the research question: What are elementary school teachers' personal experiences with play? My interview questions were inspired by Brown's (2009) work on play, specifically focusing on the qualities of play such as fun activities, fond memories, instances for which time seems to stand still, and the reframings of stressful situations.

Methodological Framework

I have employed an essentially qualitative methodology in this study. Qualitative researchers explore how participants make meaning based on their perspectives from particular places in time (Merriam and Grenier 2019). I identified patterns in the data that were valuable or interesting and used these patterns to report the experiences of this sample of elementary teachers.

Data Collection Methods

I conducted in-depth, semistructured, one-on-one interviews for this study. I recorded and transcribed these interviews, including notations of nonverbal gestures. My interview questions offered rich qualitative data for insight into teachers' experiences and perspectives. The interviews lasted between thirty-four and fifty-three minutes, and I conducted them at different coffee shops at a time outside of school hours chosen by the teachers. The interviews began with brief small talk and then involved open-ended questions related to the study's overall research question. Some examples include: What is your happiest teaching

memory? Can you laugh at yourself while teaching?

I was an active listener, using open-ended probes during the interviews such as "tell me more about that" to elicit more in-depth experience from the teachers. I refrained from inserting my own suggestions to the interviewees, instead focusing on eliciting their thoughts and seeking clarification as needed (Creswell 1998).

Ethics

To maintain participant privacy, I kept all interviews confidential and deleted audio recordings after transcribing them. I typed and encrypted the transcriptions and did not include personal identifiers. Finally, I gave participants pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. For greater clarity, I have removed some aspects of transcriptions. Participants signed a consent form indicating that they freely chose to participate in this study.

Researcher Stance

I identify as a white, middle-class, cisgender female. I have taught special education in both elementary and secondary levels for ten years. I recognize that my background and experience shape both my frustrations with the teaching profession as well as my perspectives on practices that enhance the well-being of educators. My own teacher training gave some emphasis to play as a learning tool for elementary-aged students yet made no mention of a teacher's own practice of play or personal enjoyment. I believe we often assume that teachers will simply enjoy their careers because teaching is innately enjoyable. After I first entered the classroom on my own, I did experience the joy of teaching but found it not bereft of stressors. I began a search for sustainable practices that could bolster my own wellness both in and out of the classroom and stumbled upon the idea of play and its potential benefit to the profession. From my vantage point, I find play considerably absent in a teacher's day-to-day practices. I have personally wondered about the benefits of play in my own teaching practices and the potential for play to promote overall well-being and resilience for teachers. My aim is to amplify a few voices of experienced teachers and examine their views concerning the role that play has in their current teaching and in life.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis on the data, employing themes from direct participant

language as well as some broad concepts conveyed in the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), "The analytic process involves immersion in the data, reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning" (332). I noted points of interest as I checked the transcriptions of the interviews. I reread each transcript and coded parts of the data. I then read through all transcripts and compared codes. I categorized the codes into broader themes, then I winnowed the data to three themes and noted the salient data extracts that supported them. I returned to the transcripts to double check that the themes matched the context of each piece of data.

Trustworthiness

Throughout, I practiced reflexivity to strengthen credibility and identify researcher bias. Creswell and Miller (2000) describe reflexivity as a vital step in the research process in which researchers acknowledge perspectives and experiences from their own lives that will influence their interpretations. In every step of the research process, I maintained a journal, noting my observations, reactions, and reflections. Documenting these also helped illuminate the influence of my intentions on the research. I also employed member checks in which I emailed participants transcripts of their interviews and asked them to review for errors or clarifications. Member checks allow participants to corroborate or refute the interpretations made by the researcher. Two of the three participants responded with no recommended changes, and one participant did not respond. I also documented each step in the research with an audit trail to enhance the dependability of the study. I wrote detailed descriptions of the results. These "thick" descriptions are used to boost transferability, so that in other contexts the data might garner insights. (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

Participants

Three friends, three coffee shops, three unique perspectives. Three individuals, chosen by convenience and express criterion (i.e., at least three years of teaching experience and living in the western United States), volunteered to participate in this study after receiving the recruitment letter. This small sample allowed a deep and meaningful exploration of a teacher's experiences with play, noting nuances of the play phenomenon that emerged for these participants in their contexts (Roald et al. 2021). Each of the participants were white women and full-time elementary school teachers, teaching in kindergarten, third, and fifth

grade classrooms. Their teaching experiences ranged from four to twenty-two years. Having a prior connection to these participants allowed me to quickly build rapport, ease into conversation, and share a depth of experience tied to this idea of play. Like them, I knew of weary responses to student trauma and pressure resulting from performance expectations. I discovered that teachers cannot separate aspects of their profession into silos, with one housing the positive experiences and another the negative. They are connected, entwined in the experience of play.

Laurel, a third-grade teacher holding a bachelor's degree, often smiled as she recounted her experiences in the classroom. She had been at her school for three of her four years of teaching experience. She spoke excitedly about the games she creates, implements, and tests with her students. She relished every opportunity for connection with students, even beyond her classroom. She saw playing as something to use intentionally to engage students and maximize learning potential. Her own experience of play felt akin to relaxing. Yet, to access this relaxed state, she felt that conditions needed to be free of expectation. When she could dive into the connection without being constrained by standards, she much enjoyed the experience. Stressors that affected Laurel, however, included a teaching partner with a negative bent and garnering sufficiently high student scores on the end-of-the year state examination.

Poised and prepared, Mary Jo holds a master's degree and has taught for twenty-two years, all spent at her current school where she now teaches fifth grade. During the interview, she had confessed to me that she did not think she played as a teacher, though her perspective offered a window into the flow and excitement she feels when her students engage in a challenge. She used to play in a more carefree way, she said, but now she focuses on finding joy in difficult things. She grew emotional when she talked about a video clip she had seen that parodied stressful teaching experiences but underscored the love of teaching that sustains the profession.

Lisa, a kindergarten teacher with a master's degree has been teaching for twenty years, ten of them spent at her current school. She shared her struggles of the past few years during the COVID-19 pandemic. The related trauma associated with her students and an angry confrontation with a parent weighed heavily on her. She clung to her community both in school and outside it, leaning on her support system. As a kindergarten teacher, she considered play a powerful tool to assess academic, social, and problem-solving skills. She has learned to relax and, as she says, "keep on truckin'."

Findings

To describe how these teachers play, I identified three themes from the data: play is an opportunity to relax; play enhances learning; and play has a reciprocal relationship with connection. From this perspective, play acts as a scaffold for teaching and learning, enhancing outcomes with joy and engagement. Each teacher held a positive view of play, both for herself and her students, though the specific activities she felt playful were unique to her personality, context, and experience.

Play is an Opportunity to Relax

These teachers recognized that the more they can relax, the more they can tap into the joy of play. Laurel discussed a fun rhythm she has implemented. She has the class finish its lessons early, and she and the students play together at the end of the day on Fridays. "For the last like forty-five minutes of the day on Fridays . . . I give them an expectation like, oh, you have to have your vocab cards done. . . . [when] they meet those qualifications then we go [play]." Laurel creates these spaces for her class to play by facilitating science experiments or giving her students time to draw. This time gives Laurel and her students something to look forward to each week.

Relaxing into play also allows teachers to care for themselves and their students. But teaching brings with it many pressures. Acknowledging these pressures proves vital to processing them, and effective emotional regulation has been linked to the ability to play (Yin et al. 2018). "I think there are some of us that feel so weighed down by obligations and expectations that we feel like it's not fun anymore," said Mary Jo. These pressures can squash the capacity to play. "Here's your new [state test] scores and you're like, ugh, okay, now we don't have time for any of that," noted Laurel.

Over time, such stressors take an emotional toll on educators. Lisa recalled the stress of students struggling with tumultuous situations in her classroom: "I was thinking back to last school year because . . . I had to have the district support team in my classroom every single day for a month and a half and it was really tough, and I was like not eating well, I wasn't sleeping well. I was drinking more than I should have drank. I was gaining weight and . . . you could see it happening, and I knew I wasn't in a healthy place."

These teachers have adapted to their environments and roles to develop helpful coping skills to aid them in the hard times (Sandmeier et al. 2022). Often

these skills involved a shift of mindset and claiming what was in their purview to control and to depressurize. As Lisa said: "Now I'm like, no, it's going to be okay if we stop. And I am not going to let a curriculum demand or drive what we're doing in here. I'm going to be the one driving it . . . and we'll do the best we can. But I know they'll learn a million times more if I don't put all that pressure on them to keep on going, and we just slow down."

Mary Jo describes her early years teaching as less pressured and more relaxed. She spoke of shifting her mindset to seek out the fun even if she was not emotionally ready to do so. Laurel noted that gaining nonprobationary status at her school has helped her worry less and be creative in helping students get what they need. Indeed, play is more accessible when individuals feel psychologically safe (Kellman and Radwan 2022).

These educators capitalized on their humanity and used it as an opportunity to teach students that making mistakes is okay. Mary Jo shared, "Good thing I make mistakes. Wouldn't it be terrible if you got taught by a robot that was perfect all the time?" Lisa added, "I want them to see me like, it's okay to mess up (laughing). . . . I hope I'm like their prime example." Over time, this levity around mistakes has given the teachers a perspective of the bigger picture. As Lisa noted, "The longer you teach, the more you're like, listen, it's gonna be okay. . . . One day at a time, everyone's gonna move forward." Mary Jo intentionally uses humor to turn around a bad day: "Start cracking jokes. Find something funny. . . . Life's too short to be too grumpy too much." When teachers playfully model humor in the classroom, students enjoy the learning and engage in it more (Bieg et al. 2022).

Despite the knowledge that wisdom lies in lightheartedness, teachers often feel they need permission to play through the day (Baker and Ryan 2021). As Laurel noted, "[I am] like a people pleaser. . . . I can tell that that carries into my work. . . . I want my principal to think that I'm like perfect at like all these things." She went on to share her teaching experience in emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding a positive aspect from that period. She said, "I also feel like it gave you almost a leeway to play a little more. Because you're just like, hey, the expectations are not here." Lisa also shared how she was learning to weather stressors: "If everyone needs a little break, because I can just tell things are out of whack. I give myself permission to do something that I know they love. We're just going to do some puzzles for a while to kind of reorient ourselves."

For these teachers, intentionally lightening the mood or workload allowed

them to feel more playful. Sometimes this seems as if the teachers were making space to notice the positive things happening around them. As Lisa said, "Their smiles can be cool. And just watching them play at recess, too, watching them be children, just like loving climbing and running and chasing each other and just that pure joy that they have." And Laurel spoke of a social and emotional learning time in which she can "connect with kids without the pressure. I love it. There's a lot of teachers who are like, oh it's so much work but it's just like OK, if you just enjoy it. Like I get to be a kid during that time. You know what I mean? So it's like one of those things where I literally get to go play tag, like, I don't have to go to the gym today because I am at like nine thousand steps by 9:00 a.m. (laughing)."

Mary Jo shared that she intentionally seeks delight: "The world does not exist for your entertainment. You're gonna have to find the joy in things."

Play Enhances Learning

Each teacher agreed that play benefits the learning process. They felt more successful in their roles as teachers, noticing that playing could usher students into a state of mind primed for learning. The teachers also valued how playing during the school day supports well-being for themselves and their students. Additionally, incorporating play in the classroom simply felt fun and rewarding, even when playing meant more prep work or was underappreciated by the school community.

Laurel, Lisa, and Mary Jo recognized that playing helped them be more effective teachers. Laurel harnessed play as a way to prepare the class for learning: "I would say that it helps build community in our classroom so kids can trust you more, which then I believe, decreases negative behaviors . . . then you can teach more." Classroom learning in and of itself can also be a way to play (Andrée and Lager-Nyqvist 2013; Jenßen et al. 2021), and flow comes from getting lost in a challenge. Mary Jo was passionate about reframing school as enjoyment for her students: "I'm teaching them to find joy in things that might not normally be considered joyful, like work. Work can be super gratifying and fun."

Harnessing playfulness as a learning tool can be an effective way to draw students into the lesson (Sproule et al. 2021). When students enter into a space of thoughtful creativity, a positive communal experience can result. In Lisa's room, she says: "If they're doing reading time and they're all really enjoying it, I'll just let them go a few more minutes because they're all engaged and enjoying something." Mary Jo also relished deep learning in which time stands still.

Indeed, playing can happen when people are so swept away in an activity they lose touch with time (Brown 2009). For Mary Jo, this can happen when she has been coaching her students in writing, a subject she loves, "Then I can look up and be like, Oh, wow, it's time to get ready for lunch guys. So yeah, I get that really good synergy going."

Each teacher understood what the research supports—play is important for an individual's holistic well-being (Güneş 2021). Playing affords growth to those skills foundational for learning, including self-efficacy and self-awareness for children as well as adults (Perone and Göncü 2014). Playing can also provide a mental break for teachers and their students. Lisa incorporated her yoga to model emotional awareness and wellness for her students. It is important for teachers to instill these soft skills in their students, but it often proves difficult to know whether students are growing in these areas. To address this problem, Lisa implemented a practice she called "purposeful play" in her class—a time when students could engage in enriching activities and she could informally assess their verbal, social, and problem-solving skills: "I wouldn't say like oh, yay, I'm gonna sit down and do puzzles now as a teacher. I'm not, like, woohoo, this is so much fun for me (laughing). . . . But it is a lovely time because I don't have to plan it. I can just sit down, and I know they love it so so much, and it's easy, and also what I can gain from it is incredibly powerful."

This knowledge will shape teachers' approaches to interventions and enriching activities that meet students' social and emotional needs so that they can grow more effectively. Although school can and should be a place of joy, high academic expectations get placed on students that can sometimes be a hindrance to well-being. Lisa shared, "Sometimes just the weight of curriculum can just be so much on a kid, on us." Laurel saw play as a way to advocate for her students: "There's definitely some more rigorous teachers where it's like, oh, you have not finished your work, so you are not playing. And I feel like play is a good reset . . . [E]veryone needs breaks."

The teachers found it invigorating to share the joy of learning with their students. When they saw students making connections with the learning and having fun at it, their own enthusiasm grew. Play behavior can support adults in being part of something bigger than themselves and thus contributing to the culture of their communities (Lobman and Rich 2022). Mary Jo talked about finding her play in the classroom content and in students' responses. She shared, "When we're learning something that's really interesting, like we're learning about atoms and molecules right now, and that is fun . . . because the kids are

like, wow, that's so cool." Laurel noted how intentionally incorporating games to make lessons fun can be hard work, "It's a little more planning but also at the same time like after you've planned and things go well, it's so rewarding too." She has found that playful activities increase student engagement and motivate students to stay on task (Sproule et al. 2021; Zosh et al. 2018).

These focused learning spaces are something teachers strive for, and it is incredibly frustrating when they are impeded or interrupted. Mary Jo discussed her frustration with paperwork, student behavior, and classroom disruptions, "all the stuff that distracts from actual learning." For these teachers, maintaining a state of playful learning became a goal worth working toward, even if it was met with opposition. In some contexts, it became countercultural for a teacher to recognize the need for students to play. The school community does not always agree that the value play offers is worth the effort it takes to infuse it into learning. Mary Jo spoke of an activity she was excited to try, "I told my team, 'feel free to do it if you want to,' and one of them goes, 'No way Jose,' and I'm like, 'that's okay, that's your prerogative.'"

Ranz-Smith (2007) conducted a study with first grade teachers and found what seems to be a disconnect between theory and practice when it comes to valuing and promoting play in the classroom. It may be the case that, though elementary school teachers are often taught that play is helpful for student learning, teachers often do not hear the message that playing is important for them, too. When I began this study, I focused solely on how teachers personally play. During the interviews, I realized how difficult it was for the teachers to distinguish their personal play from their students' play. When I met with Lisa, for example, she shared pictures of her students playing, pictures she considered beautiful. Although this was certainly a marker of the presence of play in her classroom, her pictures did not include her or a representation of her personal play. She clearly garnered enjoyment and pride watching her students play and learn, evidence that she places a high value on play for students.

Play Has a Reciprocal Relationship with Connection

Communal engagement in play offers opportunity to share positive emotional experiences that have the power to connect individuals in meaningful ways (Lobman and Rich 2022; Baker and Ryan 2021). As they continue to play out of this shared experience, they deepen these connections with one another. Birthed from a shared struggle or simply from an invitation to whimsy, adults can find pathways to vulnerability and joy that highlight common experiences and cre-

ate opportunities for meaningful connections (Mukerjee and Metiu 2022). For teachers, opening up about stresses could create common space for solidarity, and the play they engage in offers the dual benefits of levity and wellness, fostering communities of creativity and joy in which individuals do not have to feel alone.

The more these teachers played, the more connected they felt to others. Reciprocally, the more they connected to others, the more they found themselves playing. Lisa reflected on times when she is having fun in the classroom. She shared, "When we're laughing, you know which it can be at any time during the day when sometimes spontaneous things happen or a book is funny that we read, and the children laugh and smile." Times of play can occur sporadically, and when the whole class becomes involved, the connection can feel palpable.

Each of these teachers placed a high commodity on connection, centering it at the heart of their reasons for choosing this profession. Laurel recalled that her motivation to become a teacher stemmed from her own fifth grade teacher taking the time to support her: "I was really struggling in math. And . . . she took time to, one-on-one, [help] me understand fractions . . . and we actually still get coffee every once a while together today. . . . [S]he took time for me. And then I was like, hey, I want to do that for students too." Lisa shared, "It's probably more about the relationships, you know, with their families . . . that are more powerful to me then about content that I'm teaching or all of that." Play can connect us with each other, even in potentially challenging situations (Lobman and Rich 2022). The more we are able to connect, the more we are able to play together. Mary Jo spoke of her students, "They have those inside jokes . . . like their little secret. Things that are funny in our class." Laurel spoke of the importance of connection for her students—both to each other and a trusted adult.

The struggles of teaching add up and can feel immense at times. Lisa, teaching in a school where she encountered much student trauma, believed it her mission to be present and to support students and their families. She recounted that while she does her best to meet challenges, the weight of this mission is heavy. She spoke of trying to find hope in her situation, but still questioned how much longer she could keep teaching like this. Mary Jo grew emotional, holding back tears, as she recalled some of her frustrations, but said she really loves teaching and "wouldn't change a thing." Laurel spoke of a teaching partner with whom she plans her lessons. The partner's habit of talking negatively frustrates Laurel and, in her mind, wastes half the planning time they could have used more productively. Lisa spoke of a particular instance

one morning when she opened her classroom door to a parent screaming at her about concerns with a student. Both Lisa and Laurel felt the stress of maintaining the same pace as their teaching partners, often thinking they are not keeping up and reevaluating why it sometimes takes them longer to move through their content.

These teachers discussed how helpful a good support system could be (Brackett et al. 2010). Lisa shared, "I want to just stay at the school where I have all those people and all the relationships, and I know the families, and it's just home." She also appreciated her administration, "I don't have a principal that's . . . micromanaging and making sure we're on time being here and there. I feel bad for some people that have that kind of principal." Laurel also felt the trust between principal and teacher to be important and allowed her to feel free to support her students creatively, such as taking them for walks when they needed a break. A support system can also be found in playing with co-workers. Lisa shared that her co-workers like to play practical jokes on each other and goof around concerning the school announcements. She began laughing when recalling the ways the staff teases their principal, "They place [little toy] cats all over the school where we know [he's] going to be . . . and he'll turn around and there'll be this cat there staring at him and it's just so funny. So funny." Playing together builds camaraderie, fostering feelings of safety among teachers in a community (Mukerjee and Metiu 2022).

The lasting impact of teaching centers on connection for these educators. As Lisa said, "I think sometimes the things that are so awesome are when you see students later on in life, not necessarily when you were their teacher." Having positive connections with students can support a teacher's overall well-being and help them resist burnout (Taxer et al. 2019). Mary Jo recalled one of her best teaching memories when a prior student came to say hello: "And I looked up, and I looked at his fatigues, and it said his last name, and I'm like, '[Derrick]?' And he goes, 'Yes, ma'am.' And I was like, 'You grew up! You joined the Marines!' He's like, 'Yes, ma'am.' I said, 'That was probably the best thing you ever did.' He said, 'They shaped me right up, ma'am.' I mean, like he was so even keel and . . . I was like, this one is not going to make it. But yeah, that was a hugely gratifying moment."

Laurel summed it up nicely when she shared, "I don't know how much they're gonna remember about fractions, but they're gonna remember you or how you made them feel."

Discussion

Play benefits the practice of teaching. It allows teachers to connect, offers them a chance to relax, and invigorates their learning. However, some stressors in a teacher's life cannot be alleviated by play, such as lack of administrative support, low pay, and negative student behavior. In light of these, it is easy to think of play as optional and frivolous. Can we really afford to allocate professional development time to playing when there are so many other instructional topics to cover? Although teacher play is not a complete solution for stress and burnout, it can serve as a whimsical and powerful coping skill that helps us through tension, fear, and pain. This does not erase all our challenges, but it can remind teachers of an essential aspect of their humanity and of the possibility that joy can a tool to navigate struggle.

Illuminating some of the wisdom and insights about play that teachers already know and employ in practice provides a clearer reason to promote such play for our educators. Play invigorates learning (Zosh et al. 2018), promotes creativity (Kellman and Radwan 2022), and supports the well-being of students and teachers (Carroll et al. 2021). Skilbeck (2017) argues that teachers should be prompted to "relax and be playful" (9). Our three teachers make the case that play has a powerful impact on well-being. Teaching without a sense of playfulness can lead to disastrous outcomes, to classroom cultures devoid of joy, and to students who buckle under the hard weight of performance pressures as teachers continue to abandon the profession. Exploring how teachers play is like looking through a keyhole into an alternate view of school. The possibilities are bright, where teachers model delight and inspire learning for their students.

Teachers who are relaxed, connected, and invigorated in the learning process can promote communities of playfulness. As they embrace a teaching style that embodies play, they will contribute authentically and vulnerably to strengthening relationships with colleagues. These three teachers demonstrate how some playful communities can be sustained. First, Lisa modeled relaxing when she spoke of "slowing down" to reset the energy in the room. Once she and her students were relaxed, they were able to playfully approach the learning. Then, by reframing "work" as "fun," Mary Jo ushered students to learn through play. Finally, Laurel recognized that her connections to her students as well as their connections to her were meaningful and would likely have a more lasting impact than the content she was teaching. Who would not want a school culture

in which relaxed and happy teachers invest creatively in their students and foster genuine connection within the whole school community? As a parent, that is certainly the type of school I want for my children. Even more, that is the kind of experience I crave as a teacher.

As I continue to review this data, I imagine the questions that will arise. What would it look like to offer more time to play in the classroom? What types of support would be effective in promoting a culture of play? What if more administrators trusted their teachers with this type of permission? How would that affect learning for our students? Much wisdom and insight concerning aspects of teacher well-being and sustainability can be gleaned from teachers who are currently practicing. Keller and colleagues (Keller et al. 2014) suggest that the more enjoyment teachers feel, the less likely they will experience burnout. Learning more about teacher play will enable institutions to do a better job of training future educators to be well-rounded, holistic individuals who create environments that engage students and free them to learn. In addition, retaining quality teachers adds great value to the education of our students. Insights from this study should promote play as a practice in professional development for teaching staff. Fostering a culture of play in schools could lighten the stress and allow room for joy that inspires students and teachers to want to come to school each day. Bolstering teachers with practices that could improve the quality of their life and work will inevitably have a trickle-down effect on the lives of students (Carroll et al. 2021).

I am deeply grateful for the teachers who vulnerably shared their hearts concerning play with me. Going into this research, I expected to uncover many practices that teachers do for fun. What I found, though, was much deeper. Teachers invest their lives in their schools. The undertaking can be painful at times and needs strong support along the way. These teachers recognized that play can act as one of these supports, infusing daily practices with grace so that they can function with health over the long-term.

I hope my research sparks a conversation about teacher play and its place in the classroom and school community. As researchers and administrators better grasp the power of playful practices in school, more effective training and support can develop for teachers who wish to embrace ludic practices in their craft. Playful education can help teachers access joy even in times of stress while simultaneously supporting their effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

To paint a clearer picture of teacher play in practice, future research could expand the exploration of teacher play to incorporate observation, multiple interviews, and peer reports of perceived play. This study focused on perspectives from three participants, a small number that limits the data. Also, having a single coder for analysis limits the findings. Because a goal of this study is to promote play and playfulness in schools, I think it vital to continue to highlight teachers' play experiences in many different places and including many different personalities. The more we see and understand play at work, the more we can emulate it in our own contexts.

Considerations

After studying the play of some teachers, I find myself wondering about the importance of personal agency in play. Do teachers feel they have the ability to play in various settings? Future research could also garner accounts of administrators on the subject and add valuable insight into the structures that promote or inhibit play in schools. There are many teachers who have chosen to continue in the profession despite the challenges. We need communities and cultures to support and encourage teacher play in the classroom to shape schools into training grounds for greater well-being for all. Empowering teachers with the freedom to be playful could shape the classroom into a place where students can play as they learn.

Lisa shares a vision for teachers to create a playful class culture when she says: "Helping everyone have that awareness that we don't have to live in this [stress] . . . I can stop and maybe try to get myself feeling better before I start moving on again. So I try to do some of that with [my students]."

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