



Course Syllabus

<u>Course:</u>	EDZU 9991	Playful Minds: The Role of Play in Lifelong Learning from Pre-K to Grade 12 Classrooms
<u>Credit Hours:</u>	3.0 credits / 45 hours	
<u>Instructor:</u>	Denise Black	

Course Description

While current educational trends often prioritize rigorous academic achievement over unstructured exploration, we are depriving our students of their right to find their own unique potential. Despite a growing lack of understanding regarding its importance, play remains a vital, transformative tool that fosters executive function and equity across all grade levels. This course is designed to provide educators with a comprehensive understanding of how play serves as a foundational pillar for equitable and engaging learning environments. Throughout five specialized blocks, we will bridge the gap between theory and practice, starting with the neuroscience and cognitive benefits of play. You will explore several types of play, from physical and constructive to dramatic. You will be able to see how these strategies evolve across grade levels to meet the unique needs of students from early childhood through high school. Furthermore, we will delve into the practicalities of designing playful environments. This course will conclude by equipping you with the tools for advocacy and policy change, ensuring you can champion the vital role of play in modern education.

Course Goals

To Know

1. The neuroscience behind play, including its impact on brain development and neuroplasticity.
2. Key executive function skills are bolstered by play, such as self-regulation, working memory, and flexible thinking.
3. The different types of play (e.g., physical, constructive, fantasy, and games with rules) and their specific educational values
4. The distinctions between free play and guided play
5. Current education policies regarding recess, curriculum mandates, and accountability systems

To Understand

1. How play serves as a Zone of Proximal Development based on Vygotsky's theory
2. The evolution of play from early childhood through high school and its continued relevance in adolescent development

3. The relationship between play and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), including empathy and conflict resolution.
4. The importance of play equity and the disparities in access to playful learning environments
5. How inclusive play strategies support neurodiverse learners and cultural responsiveness.

To Be Able To

1. Design flexible classroom environments and select materials that invite exploration and playful learning.
2. Integrate play-based strategies into various subjects, such as STEM through constructive play or literacy through dramatic play.
3. Assess students' progress through play using observational techniques and formative feedback.
4. Implement gamification, simulations, and role-play tailored to specific grade levels from Pre-K to Grade 12
5. Advocate for play-based approaches by communicating their impact to stakeholders and decision-makers.

Course Outline

Block 1: The Science Behind Play and Learning

Understand the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of play across developmental stages

1-1 Introduction

- a. Personal experience with play in education

1-2 Brain Development & Neuroplasticity

- a. How play stimulates brain growth

1-3 Executive Function Skills: Self-regulation, working memory, and flexible thinking**1-4 Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): Empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution**

- a. 5 Keys to SEL success
- b. Athletics and SEL

1-5 Play as a Zone of Proximal Development: Vygotsky's theory in action**1-6 Adolescents & Risk-Taking: teens explore identity and decision-making****Block 2: Types of Play and Their Educational Value**

Explore different forms of play and how they support learning goals.

2-1 Free Play vs. Guided Play

- a. Definitions and classroom applications

2-2 Physical Play

- a. Physical activity and SEL
- b. Physical activity and academic performance

2-3 Constructive Play

- a. Building, creating, and STEM integration

2-4 Fantasy & Dramatic Play

- a. Language development and storytelling

2-5 Games with Rules

- a. Logical reasoning, fairness, and strategy

Block 3: Play Across Grade Levels

Examine how play evolves and remains relevant from Pre-K to Grade 12.

- 3-1 Early Childhood (Pre-K–Grade 2)
 - a. Play as the foundation for literacy and numeracy
- 3-2 Elementary (Grades 3–5)
 - a. Integrating play into project-based learning and inquiry
- 3-3 Middle School (Grades 6–8)
 - a. Role-play, simulations, and collaborative games
- 3-4 High School (Grades 9–12)
 - a. Gamification, debate, and creative expression
- 3-5 Cross-Grade Collaboration.
 - a. Peer mentoring through play-based activities

Block 4: Designing Playful Learning Environments

Strategies to create play-rich classrooms

- 4-1 Classroom Setup
 - a. Flexible spaces that invite exploration
- 4-2 Materials & Resources
 - a. Open-ended tools vs. structured games
- 4-3 Time for Play
 - a. Scheduling and balancing academic rigor
- 4-4 Assessment Through Play
 - a. Observational techniques and formative feedback
- 4-5 Inclusive Play
 - a. Inclusive Play Supporting neurodiverse learners and cultural responsiveness

Block 5. Advocacy, Policy, and Practice for Play in Education

Enable educators to promote play in curriculum and policy

- 5-1 Historical Shifts in Educational Philosophy
 - a. From play-rich to test-driven models
- 5-2 Play Equity
 - a. Disparities in access to playful learning
- 5-3 Challenges in Play Based Learning
 - a. Decline - causes and consequences
- 5-4 Play in Education Policy
 - a. Recess, curriculum mandates, and accountability systems
- 5-5 Building a Case for Play
 - a. Communicating impact to stakeholders and decision-makers

Graduate Credit:

Global Perspectives

- a. How other countries integrate play into education

Methods of Instruction

Teachers enrolled in this course will be asked to rethink the role of play as an opportunity to serve their students better. Through reflective practice and using primary and secondary sources we discover how students can grow cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically when learning environments make space for unstructured activities. They will complete assignments that assess the understanding of educational theories and brain development. They will analyze the different mandates schools have in the United States and other countries for outdoor play. They will communicate and share successful strategies, tips, and stories for implementing discovery-based lessons. They will complete assignments assessing their understanding of the socioeconomic disparities and closing the gap. They will complete analysis of the several types of play for their own classroom. They will watch videos to gain a better understanding of how to maximize the benefits of play-based learning and minimize drawbacks. They will be able to advocate for play-based approaches to their peers, administrators, and the community. Also, apply strategies learned from this course to use observational techniques for assessment methods.

Students will connect with each other throughout the course within forums and various other types of online feedback options built into each class.

Methods of Assessment

To earn an A for graduate credit, a student must complete all assigned readings, assignments, and discussion forums. The student must complete a five-day unit of study using the strategies from this course to develop interesting at home assignments. *To earn a B for graduate credit*, a student must complete all assigned readings, assignments, and discussion forums. The student must complete a three-day unit of study using the strategies from this course to develop interesting at home assignments.

Instructors are online each day of the course and correspond with students through the course itself, feedback on assignments, and e-mail.

Time Validation

Assignment	Time (in hours)
Playful Minds: The Role of Play in Lifelong Learning from Pre- K to Grade 12 Classrooms	
Block 1 The Science Behind Play and Learning	
Watch introduction video - share personal experience with play in education- Introduce yourself	1.00
Read research articles and watch video- about neuroplasticity - analyze the research found	2.00
Read article and watch video -Executive Function Skills - write comments on connection	2.00

to play across age levels	
Identify 5 key Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills from the research article and video -needed for success	2.00
Vygotsky's theory - article /video - Zone of Proximal Development Zone of Proximal Development -give examples	2.00
Adolescents & Risk-Taking- read study -identify essential skills learned through risk taking	1.00
Block 2: Types of Play and Their Educational Value	
Watch video -Free Play vs. Guided Play - compare / contrast educational benefits for both	2.00
Watch physical play videos - analyze benefits for cognitive development and SEL - comment on examples	2.00
Read research on constructive play - analyze different forms and their benefits	2.00
Watch short intro video on fantasy/dramatic play - Read research by Dr Trawick - Smith- discuss myths	2.00
Watch videos on game-based learning - ideas for your classroom - share thoughts	1.00
Block 3: Play Across Grade Levels	
Watch video-read articles on Pre-K–Grade 2 play in education - choose one example and how you could implement/discuss reading readiness	2.00
Watch short video- read articles- Grades 3–5 - examples of project-based learning (PBL) – discuss how your curriculum would benefit	2.00
Examine the diagrams-read article - Grades 6–8 - share and discuss different strategies	2.00
Watch video and read - Grades 9–12 - analyze how to develop engaging classrooms discussions	2.00
Motivational Quotes for Play in Education share/ reasons why	1.00
Block 4: Designing Playful Learning Environments	
Watch videos on classroom layouts - what would your perfect set-up be?	2.00
Read and research how to obtain materials & resources in your district - share information	1.00
Watch videos - examine different schedules - the importance of planning - create your own schedule	2.00
Watch videos on assessment through play - analyze different formats	2.00
Watch inspiring videos on inclusive play - list key components for inclusive play-based classrooms	2.00
Block 5: Advocacy, Policy, and Practice for Play in Education	
Read article on historical shifts in Educational Philosophy - state how the shifts affect the way you teach	2.00
Read the author's experience with play equity - analyze her experience	1.00
Read the policy review on the challenges of PBL -choose a discussion question or misconception to comment on	2.00

Read policy mandates from different states - compare your district to current mandates	2.00
Watch video on The Importance of Play - Make a list of advantages to bring PBL to your school community	1.00
Graduate Credit: Watch videos and read article - compare different countries perspectives on PBL	
Total Time	45.00