



Friday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>

Playing is learning.

You know that already, but you might wonder, How do we, professional preschool teachers, operationalize this well-researched fact? What is the difference between “just playing” (which, to be clear, does have its own myriad developmental benefits!) and playful learning in a classroom setting? (*I’d suggest grabbing a snack and settling in, it is not a simple answer!*)

There is a lot of theory behind it (my Masters and Doctorate are both in early childhood curriculum and teaching) but in practice it comes down to three distilled points: **Spark, push, recede**. Darci and I meet with each of our teaching teams once a week to support their pedagogical work and coach them through this process.

*“I wanna dance!”* That’s the **spark**.

I’m in Arazim, our full day 3s + 4s class, watching during free play (all of our classrooms have at least one hour of free play every day). The teachers have built the base of the classroom – a pervasive sense of love, joy, and trust – allowing the children to freely explore and express themselves. Without that base, there is no spark, there is only quiet timidity.

*“OK friends, let’s build the stage for the dance show!”* Here’s the **push**.

Andy, one of the co-educators in the room, grabbed hold of the spark (utilizing the children’s intrinsic motivation) and pushed the children into a scenario she knew was rich with learning potential. Flailing our limbs around like Elaine sure is fun but this is where the teacher comes in and adds some direction. Andy motioned to the open floor in the block area as a suggestion for where to build the stage. With the children highly motivated, because the spark was theirs not the teachers, they flew into action.

And now the teacher **recedes**.

Rather than showing them how to build the stage, she stays close but quiet. The children grab as many unit blocks as they can from the shelf, blanketing the floor. Slowly and over many trials, the stage takes shape. This is what I refer to as the “cognitive gap” – the children are navigating their way towards a goal, learning as they go. The key piece here is to not carry the child over the gap by building the stage for them; the learning is not in the dancing (though the joy certainly is, which is a crucial ingredient in the whole process!), it is in building the stage.

Our play materials are selected for their learning potential. As each student places blocks down, they notice that any angles between the blocks will leave gaps in the stage. The children begin to jam the blocks against each other, forming parallel lines. They realize that every quad block (each unit block has a name – a “quad” is four lengths of the “unit”, which is the basic rectangular block) can be matched by four unit blocks end-to-end; again through trial and error, they realize they can turn the unit blocks perpendicular to the quad and then fit eight of them along the quad (the unit block is half as wide as it is long – four lengths equals a quad block just as do eight widths). Pushed into the cognitive gap by their teacher, in which they have intrinsic motivation to build a stage but aren’t immediately sure how to use the available materials to do so, the students have now carried themselves through a geometry and math lesson. They play Baby Shark and dance their hearts out, carrying with them a bit more knowledge as they stomp on the blocks.

*"I wanna do Frozen next!"*

Spark-push-recede is an iterative process, an ever-evolving river of learning. Right away, here comes the next **spark**. With one dance completed, the children begin clamoring about what song to do next. So, another **push** by the teacher: *"Friends, let's write each song we want to do!"* Writing at this age can be drawing, scribbling, letter-like marks, or inventive spelling. The students grab their crayons (eagerly so, again because the spark is theirs) and begin the work of creating cards for each dance song. The teacher **recedes**, staying close but quiet – careful not to close the cognitive gap by writing the cards herself or overly fretting about the accuracy of the marks and letters. The learning is in the active hands of the children, not the teacher providing the solution. The cards slowly emerge, some scribbly and some looking more like letters. The students use the cards to create a set list instead of arguing each time about what song is next. As they break out into their *Frozen* dance, they do so again with a bit more knowledge – this time not about geometry but about the power of literacy.

There's not much "teaching" taking place here, in the old-school sense of giving out information or providing instruction. The teacher is more a curator of play, ensuring that children find themselves in educationally-rich play scenarios. Eleanor Duckworth, longtime professor of education at Harvard Graduate School [writes about early childhood development](#), *"The right question at the right time can move children to peaks in their thinking."* As teachers we look for the right spark, then we ask the right question, and then we move out of the way while the children engage in the heavy lifting of learning. We await eagerly for the process to begin again, always excited about where our learning journey will take us.

Shabbat shalom,

Noah