



Creating better learning environments – through Systems Design and Magic!

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Over the last four years, I have heard various educationists, school leaders, teachers and policy makers talk - at various Education conferences and in the media - about the enormous challenges in school education.

Over time, I found a few recurring themes:

1. Focus on learning, not teaching.
2. Create the joy of learning – and children will learn for life.

The biggest challenge seems to be around creating better learning environments where children are fully engaged and where children develop a love for learning.

As an engineer, when confronted with a problem, one tends to focus on design - whether it involves making new things or tinkering with existing stuff.

Try something new to make a change.

Mr. Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Are most of our school leaders in a state of temporary insanity? Doing the same thing and expecting different results?

Influencing any environment requires us to take into account the individuals involved and their design principles. And then try some new approach.

And when all other “scientific” approaches fail and the problem is a crucial one, turn to magic!

For solving this seemingly unsolvable problem of creating better learning environments in schools, it is probably time to combine systems design with magic.

Let me explain:

It seems to me that most of the parents, educationists, school leaders and other experts deeply concerned about creating a better learning environment in schools are missing a simple point:

The best use of a system is when you use it for what it was designed for.

And children are designed to learn through play.

Across all species, the young ones learn through play. They learn about their environment, their peers, their seniors, juniors, what hurts, what doesn't, what works, what doesn't.

And so do young humans. From a few months, the human child “plays” – with the mother, siblings, with toys - and learns. Learns about how a smile elicits a positive response, how a cry gets attention, how shapes fit into slots, how pressing a button creates music, how moving the arm with the ball can make it bounce.

Through play, they learn.

Play is often confused with sport.

Play is when you start something because it sounds interesting, try different things, see what works, what doesn't, do it many times learning



something new every time – and have fun in the process.

Sport is one very well-defined form of play. All kids love it – because it involves play.

As our advisor, Dr. George Selleck said:

“Play is a scientific experiment conducted by children”

All parents and school leaders know that children love to play. And given a choice, they will be out playing – instead of learning English or Maths.

So, the “system” of the child is designed to play.

What does the “system” of education want to create? - Better learning environments.

What is the system of education currently designed to do? Deliver a consistent academic experience to all children, measure outcomes and track progress.

Leveraging the design of the current education system, understanding the design of the key constituency – children – and introducing the Magic of Play might give us useful answers.

Magic? What magic?

Kids kick a ball around, run around in the playground, try out new stuff, meet new friends – and you get better team players, kids who understand the value of hard-work, discipline, kids who are more focused, respect the rules, understand boundaries, kids who are fitter – physically and socially.

All of this just by playing! No lectures. No teachers. No classes. Magic!

Over the last 10 years, I have seen the magic mesmerise children, parents, teachers, school leaders and educationists.

So, the best learning environments will be those that incorporate the Magic of Play into the design of the teaching-learning process. Play does not mean sport. But there are lessons from the playground that can be invaluable.

Children can “play” with science. Try out new experiments, see how stuff works, how it reacts when you throw in a new item.

Children can “play” with geography. With history. With maths.

In order to understand how to create better learning environments through play, it is important to understand the “10 Laws of Play”. Laws that I have postulated based on what I have learnt while watching kids play and trying to get 200,000 children to play more over the last 10 years.

Here goes:

Universal foundation of play: You play to have fun.

Fun does not mean children have to be laughing all the time. Fun, as Dr. Selleck articulated beautifully, means:

1. Children are deeply engaged in the activity.
2. Children are connected to the group around them.
3. Children are pushed slightly beyond their limits.

1st Law of Play: You play with whatever you have.

Children are willing to work with constraints. They innovate.

Small classrooms? No problem.

Limited time? No problem.

Shared resources? No problem.

As long as they can continue to play and have fun.

2nd Law of Play: You choose the game. You make the rules.

Children make up rules as they go – in response to the environment. If an angry neighbor is around, you get “out” if your ball hits his window.

Change the game if you need to. Change the rules to include new players, new constraints.

Don’t get stuck with how it was supposed to be done. Try a new approach to teaching.

The goal is not to do it “properly”.

The goal is to play, learn and have fun in the process.

3rd Law of Play: The more you play, the less you get tired.

If real play is happening, children can stay focused for a very, very long time. They do not get tired. They do not get hungry. They do not need to go to the bathroom. They keep playing and learning.

You want kids to be engaged in class? Get them to “play” while they learn.

4th Law of Play: The more fluid the game, the lesser the captain matters.

Fluid games (like football and basketball) do not really need a “captain” or a “leader” while the game is on. The situation creates the leader. Structured games (like cricket) need a formal leader.

The teacher, instead of leading the class, can be the cheerleader of the class. Urging the team in the right direction, anchoring the learning to the school’s context and getting all the children involved in the learning process

5th Law of Play: More scars = More fun = More learning

The scars are proof that they really tried, took a risk and went beyond what was comfortable.

Mistakes are part of the learning process. Let kids “fall”. That’s how they will really learn.

6th Law of Play: The more you play, the more you win.

As the child plays with the subject matter, the probability of the “Aha!” moment increases. And this win is long-lasting and intrinsic.

7th Law of Play: You need just one big win.

One big “Aha!” moment and the concept has been understood for life.

8th Law of Play: Respect the heroes. Don’t copy them.

Children learn from their teachers, their peers and from their “heroes”. But each child has an individuality that needs to be supported. Help children see what the “heroes” do and integrate the best practices into their style.

9th Law of Play: Mastery requires Practice. Lots of it.

Sport is probably the best teacher for this fundamental law – of play and of life.

All children understand that unless they practice, they will not get better. And their friends are getting better because they are practicing – regularly and in large enough amounts.

Get them to play regularly and they will appreciate the value of hard-work and discipline.

10th Law of Play: The game never ends.

The child wants to keep playing. If it is too late, we continue tomorrow. If it is raining, wait for the rain to stop – if they are not allowed to play in the rain!

The game never ends. And the fun, the learning and the joy of play never ends.

If we are able to get our children to experience the joy of play at school, they will seek out play for life. They will seek out friends who also share their passion for play, for exploring new things, for learning.

They will seek out opportunities for fun, for learning and keep learning for life.

There is an oft-heard saying:

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

This should actually be re-worded this way (in the context of learning environments in schools):

Give a child a lesson and you teach him for a day. Teach a child to play and you teach him for a lifetime.

The benefits of play, sport and physical activity in the playground are well known to all educationists.

Fitter children. Physically fitter and socially fitter.

Better discipline.

Better focus.

Better teamwork.

Etc...

While, over the last four years, we have been trying to “extend the classrooms into the playground” - by bringing a structured inclusive approach, assessments, teacher training and monitoring to the sports experience, it seems that the playground also has a lot to offer to the classrooms.

Integrating the 10 Laws of Play into the design of the learning environment will help you create an environment that is aligned with the design of the key constituency – the child.

And while the approach is tough and new, the teacher that succeeds in integrating play into the classroom will have created a magical learning environment where kids want to be, where all kids learn and all kids develop a joy from learning that will last for life.

Enjoy the game!

Saumil is an alumnus from IIT Bombay and IIM Bangalore. He was a part of the Maharashtra Badminton team & the IIT Bombay Football team. As Founder-Director of SportzVillage and Co-Founder & CEO of EduSports, Saumil has personally engaged with over 100,000 children, 50000 parents in the school sports context over the last decade. Recognised as one of 50 leaders changing Indian education by Education World, Saumil has been working with schools, federations, policy makers and sponsors towards creating more quality opportunities for children to experience the magic of sports/physical activity. He can be contacted at saumil@edusports.in

