Self-regulation, co-regulation, and grounding through the gift of play

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways that play can be utilized with any age group as a natural grounding mechanism that supports nervous system regulation. During a time of heightened uncertainty echoing around the globe, experiences of chaos and increased anxiety are being felt by both children and adults alike. It is in this time of turmoil that play and playfulness are needed more than ever. Using a reflective narrative inquiry, the author examines practical and theoretical perspectives on how and why the provision of ample play time (for children, youth, and adults alike), can support emotional regulation and well-being for everyone in the broader school community. The author brings attention to the ways a sense of grounding is also a prerequisite for any student's readiness to learn. This study is not only timely but increasingly important, offering a fresh look at the ways play can help settle dysregulated nervous systems.

Keywords: *grounding, play, inclusion*

My thoughts and understanding about activities in the classroom that help with regulation have drastically changed over the years. When I first started teaching and I encountered students who were having trouble with regulating themselves, I, like many others, thought it was a classroom management issue, and the goal was to "shut down" these unregulated "negative" behaviours, and to keep things (rapidly) moving. This is what my generation of teachers had been taught after all, with a heavy focus on how to manage our classrooms and the students in them, often through discipline, punishment, and rewards.

Today's teachers have much more access to holistic learning scholarship that challenges traditional, Eurocentric, and colonial teaching methodologies. As an example, Bai et al. in their 2016 article, Classroom as Dojo: Contemplative teaching and learning as martial art, point out how a smooth-running classroom should not be the goal, but rather, the authors explain, a classroom should have room for many different emotions, ways of being, as well as opportunities to be unproductive and disruptive. Bai et al. (2016) go on to describe how, in these types of unproductive and disruptive moments, we best learn what it

means to be fully human. I wish I had heard this emancipating wisdom already thirty years ago.

Over the years, I also learned more about the effects of trauma, and as I witnessed first-hand the need traumatized children have for co-regulation, my understanding of my role as a classroom teacher was further challenged. Co-regulation, as explained by Frivold Kostøl & Mänty (2024) can be described as an interactive process in which an adult supports a child to better manage their emotions and behaviour. For this to be done well, the adult needs to be finely attuned into the child's emotional state. But, as I have discovered, in a busy classroom context with a large group of children, the opportunity to co-regulate can be very difficult to find.

Smoliak et al. (2024), along with Diaz-Diaz (2022) as well as Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021) discuss the different ways many of our school systems continue to be upheld by colonial, neoliberal and Eurocentric values, which emphasize independence, individualism, and a standardized learning environment. With these values, the burden is often placed on each student to learn how to manage and regulate their emotions on their own. Diaz-Diaz (2022) points out how even young children in many parts of the world are taught self-regulation is a desired skill for them to learn. Diaz-Diaz further explains how this type of teaching often falls under Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum, which is currently marketed as something very positive. I agree with Diaz-Diaz that this should cause all of us to take some pause and really think about it carefully. Should self-regulation be the end goal, and should it be something we are asking our children to learn how to do on their own? I find myself increasingly questioning whether this is what is best for my students.

In fact, it is only now, three decades later from when I first began my teaching journey, that I have come to see how problematic and damaging the push for self-regulation can be, and how much anxiety and internal harm it can cause. At the same time, I, like many other educators, have also realized a classroom environment is seldom conducive for opportunities to co-regulate because uninterrupted time with a student one-on-one is so incredibly rare.

It is for these reasons I prefer to look at my classroom community as one filled with students who, for various reasons throughout the day, need grounding. Grounding, as described by Levine (2005), is a way you can access resources of emotional calm within your own body. Grounding brings a feeling of safety to someone; as it reminds them to focus on what is happening around them (an activity or an action), while also providing temporary emotional distance from overwhelming feelings. Through grounding activities, a person can find internal calm.

This need all my students have for grounding is not only a natural part of being human, but it is also something I am responsible for providing for them regularly and through numerous opportunities each day. I have learned I need to make it a priority to slow things down, take time for pauses and rest, and work together to help ground and regulate emotions. These grounding activities benefit everyone. As Esaki et al. (2013) explain, when we create a safe community also grounded in rich relationships and times of play, it will result in emotional regulation for the whole group. Even the students who are already well-grounded to begin with, when their emotional tanks are filled up and overflowing (by giving them opportunities to just be and play), they are able to give themselves and accept those children around them who might be struggling with dysregulation.

Umesh Sharma (2018) talks about how all students benefit from good teaching, and how we

should not provide good things to only some of the students. I have found this to be incredibly wise advice, and I believe grounding activities specifically provide something good for every student.

Also, let's not forget about the teacher: this job is challenging. Taking care of and noticing the needs of 25 children is hard work. When we as teachers participate in grounding activities along with our students, we also have opportunities to find some pause. This can be done by playing, dancing, walking outside, and contemplating along with our students. By taking the time to purely sit and observe, teachers can ground their own emotional state.

Zajonc (2006) writes that for us to bring peace to others, we need to find peace within ourselves, and how else can we provide a peaceful classroom than beginning within our own psyche? We as teachers need grounding amid our busy days as well. In fact, I believe the whole world is needing access to grounding activities now more than ever, as the pressures and anxieties about the state our world is in may cause many of us to be increasingly alarmed. As educators, perhaps we need to begin with our children and the programs we have in our schools. As Bai et al. (2016) also noted, us teachers have inner work to do, and when we are at peace within, we can better resolve our students' anxieties. It is not selfish to want breaks and rest in the midst of our very busy days. On the contrary, they are an essential component to being able to continue doing our job well, and therefore, when we teach our students to rest and to take breaks, it gives us adults opportunities to also step away from our "busy work."

What began my own journey into seeking grounding activities was a year with an intermediate class of students in which behaviour was an on-going challenge. That year, I decided to set aside all academic learning for a season, not realizing this decision was the beginning of a real change in my heart for the priorities I had for my students. I found myself looking at behaviours I would have traditionally considered as "challenging" or "bad" not as problems, but rather as *opportunities* and possibilities for *me* to do better and for *me* to really search for the underlying need that was not being met. By doing this, I slowly began to see my students' behaviour in a completely different way and, interestingly, I started seeing their behaviour as a response to the decisions I was making as a teacher, and as something I actually had the power to change. That year transformed everything for me moving forward. I became increasingly curious to learn more about trauma, regulation, and grounding, and little by little I began to modify my expectations and offerings to my students, increasingly shifting to more play-filled days and also taking these new learnings outside.

Every year I have been blessed to work as a classroom teacher, I have learned something new, but there are some years that stick out for me as ones in which I have taken a giant leap forward. One of these years came a few years ago when I had the privilege to work in a school which had a forest on the school property, a *Nest* as they called it. The *Nest* was an area filled with trees, stumps, rocks, mud, sticks, bushes and so on, ready for the children to play in, while using their imaginations. It was a natural oasis and a place I grew to love. That year, we began our times outside with a ceremony, thanking the forest for allowing us to come and play. The children had full freedom to explore and move their bodies in whichever way was needed. This freedom also allowed me to take a step back and spend time carefully observing my students, so I could get to know them more deeply. Falkenberg (2012) talks about the necessity for all of us to have a noticing component in our teaching practice. This noticing, as he describes, is especially important when

working with children. I have come to realize how incredibly important it is for me to find the time each day to drop everything I am busy doing as a teacher, and to just purely observe. In the past, I, like many others, have easily filled my teaching days with so much "busyness," (often while sitting at my desk, head buried in marking, organizing, and planning). I think we as adults so often forget the most important piece for us as educators, which is to listen and observe our students, as they themselves teach us what their needs are through their behaviour. I have come to believe the mere acts of listening, observing, and noticing are skills we don't spend enough time learning. It is comforting to be gently reminded and affirmed by authors such as Ian Macnaughton (2019) how essential these skills really are and how, through this type of deep noticing and listening, we can build an intersubjective space that allows for deep kinship.

The same year I allowed my students to regularly play freely in the *Nest* (and was then privileged to further observe the wonderful benefits of this decision), I also decided to take the chance of increasing the amount of free play and choice time I allowed for inside my classroom. I will be honest here: the results were so encouraging that by the end of the year, our time of "playing" far exceeded the time we were doing traditional pen and paper, book, or reading "work." I started to notice that all of this extra play time had such positive results in my students' lives that no teacher-led activity could have replaced it. My students were learning how to socialize, how to form good friendships, how to use their executive decision-making skills through role-play and negotiation, how to practice reciprocity with each other, and how to use their imaginations, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Also, importantly, my students seemed far more grounded and emotionally regulated. All of these areas mentioned above are areas of learning and growing that Yogman and colleagues (2018) have shown, through their research, can take place simply through children's play.

Over the past few years, what has come as a bit of a surprise to me is the realization that the more time I allow my students to play, the easier it has been to ask my students to engage in "work time." Not only have my students been getting their academic work done, but they seem to be able to concentrate on their work better and complete their tasks more efficiently. I have often found my students are grasping new concepts faster than expected and are completing their individual assignments with ease. Also, what I have found to be most rewarding of all, is that I haven't been hearing nearly as much grumbling. In fact, today, if I hear my students grumbling about the "work" they are being asked to do, my first response is to think through the day thus far, and to ponder whether I have given them enough time to play. In the past, I know this would not have been where my thoughts would have gone.

Most often, nowadays, when I tell my students it is time to do some "work," there tends to be minimal to no complaints. The rhythm of our day has become so grounded in relationships, mental rest, and playful grounding breaks, that the capacity to do everything academic I have planned has been incredibly high. This makes sense to me and is explained further by research conducted by Yogman and colleagues (2018) in which the authors revealed that especially in times of childhood adversity and stress, play helps calm a child's body and helps to control their aggression and impulsivity. With so much play time, negative emotions have become minimal, and my students, I find, are also getting along better. Levine (2005) in his ground-breaking work talks about the ways play can be therapeutic. Could play perhaps be key to transforming our schools into places of healing where students learn how to sit with and accept their emotions?

The year I decided to increasingly add more play time for my students, I was teaching a split class[1] in upper primary. About half of my students were grade two students, and the other half were in grade three. Over the years, I have found split grades can be a blessing in disguise, as students' abilities and needs don't always fit the model of age-based groupings. This observation has further been confirmed in the work done by Parfitt and colleagues (2025) in which the authors conclude multi-grade teaching is beneficial for all students as concepts are re-enforced, re-taught, and learning is more spiral in nature rather than being purely linear. Juggling a split grade is sometimes considered tricky; however, this year, even with all the added play time, my students and I still managed to cover all the curriculum requirements set out by the province which had been assigned to me in my portion of the job share,[2] and I feel like we did it with ease. I think this is very important to note, as educators often feel intense pressure to cover all the curriculum, and we are worried, if not downright scared, of doing anything seen as a "time-waster" because we so often feel there is not enough time. I believe more discussion about this is needed, as in my experience, bringing in and increasing these "time-wasting" activities in the form of play is really what allowed my students to get through our curriculum in a way that was not stressful for me as the teacher nor for the students themselves.

So, what were some of the grounding play activities we did? First of all, I quickly realized how much benefit there was to start the day with tactile sensory bins. These bins contained activities such as kinetic sand, modeling clay, beading, drawing, snap cubes and so on. I have noticed as we move up in grades, many teachers tend to cut out all access to toys and play-things. It is amazing to witness, however, how much joy these very "childish toys" can bring to kids (and the kids within us) of all ages. From our morning bins, my students and I transitioned into a fit break (which was rhythmic and interactive).

We then had our *Morning Meeting* consisting of a slowed-down check-in on how everyone was feeling about school, as well as a review on what the day's agenda was going to be. Only after all these rituals did we begin our first lesson. The format for my lessons tended to be the same. Opening activity, group lesson, and discussion, which was then followed by individual work the students had the option to do on their own or together with others. Once students were done with their individual assignments, they then had the choice to either draw, read, or play card or board games. Often the play time was as long as the work time had been (or even much longer). As students transitioned into their play time, I then gathered those students who were still stuck, and went over the lesson again, helping these students to complete more of their assignments. Once we had reviewed the lesson, I also encouraged these students to go and play. If a student seemed dysregulated, I dismissed them immediately from the lesson review, knowing that learning was not going to take place anyway, and extra playtime could potentially allow for this student to be in a better place for our next block of teacher-directed learning.

[1] In British Columbia, Canada, the government mandates for class organization to be completed in the most effective way. There are several reasons why students end up in "split classes". Some of the reasons are for the school board to save on educational costs, for individual schools to balance the needs of students, or for schools to provide more placement options. For all of these reasons numerous split classes (ones that have students from two different grades being taught by one teacher) exist in British Columbian schools. View the website from the Vancouver School Board, to learn more: https://www.vsb.bc.ca/page/5046/combined-split-classes

[2] In British Columbia public school teachers are contractually allowed to enter into what is called a "job share". Two teachers share one classroom of students. Each district within BC has slightly different rules around job sharing. As an example, please see the Abbotsford District's job sharing rules: https://www.abbotsfordteachers.ca/job-sharejob-exchange.html

After recess, the students and I headed to the forest. This was followed by a time of contemplation in which my students would write and draw about our outdoor learning time. This activity was also strategic, as it was meant to help my students notice things in their bodies; what they had seen, heard, felt, and touched while outside (another grounding activity). After that was done, we began our second lesson of the day, once again following the same routine as the morning (some interactive teaching with the whole group, followed by some individual activities, again, that the students could choose to complete with their classmates). This was, once again, followed by free time, which was a time of games, reading, or drawing. Occasionally, students would ask to pull out one of the morning tactile sensory bins, and the answer was always: yes, go ahead. I figured if they were looking for more tactile activities, there probably was a need for more grounding through sensory feedback. I want to also note not every student was necessarily able to sit through my lessons. There were times where some students needed time alone or more time with sensory feedback. The class quickly got used to the fact that it was okay for students to be engaged in different things that allowed for them to meet their sensory and grounding needs. Because everyone was given ample opportunity to play, the students were very used to seeing others playing while it was their work time, without it becoming a problem.

After lunch, it was time for reading, in which the students searched for their most favourite nook to curl up into while reading their favourite books. I found it fascinating how much my students seemed to look for small comfortable spaces, building forts and nests, and curling under desks and tables (something that could be explored further). After our reading time, we gathered for our final two lessons of the afternoon, and if the students were restless, sometimes the last activity would be replaced with center time. These lessons also followed the same format as the earlier ones. In the afternoon, I often noticed my students were tired (they had worked and played hard all day) and so the option was always there for them to lie down for some of our final stories. I always welcomed the chance to lie down, as children, just like us adults, do not always have enough opportunity to rest. As Byung-Chul Han reminds us, "we live in a world that is very poor in interruption; the '*betweens' and 'between-times'* are lacking" (Han, 2015, p. 22). The moments when all expectations cease, and we are allowed to just be. So, why not allow for rest when someone is brave enough to ask?

Depending on how much time was left in the day, we would then end the day with either more play time, whole group game time, or a story. Our closing circle was the final activity of the day at which we would talk about our experiences through a sharing circle.

Something I really want to emphasize with everything I chose to do that year, and how I planned my day (and continue to do so), was the importance of making the activities I chose as accessible as possible. Finding ways for everyone to participate is incredibly important to me as an educator. Play, in contrast to pre-prescribed worksheets, activities, or assignments, is accessible to all. It allows for connection that isn't also prescribed by ability (Babik & Gardner, 2021). Whatever the diverse needs are, through free play, and especially through times where centers (toys like blocks, Lego, animal figurines, etc.) are taken out for all kids to share and all children can participate in one way or another. Whether they need an adult to play alongside them because they are still learning how play "works"; whether they need time to play alone or whether they need help getting started. When we structure our day to include generous amounts of free play time, we build a program in which all students can find entry points and a way to

connect with others. I find this especially important when we think of all our students with diverse needs. Play does not discriminate, require a pre-determined set of abilities, nor determine what the outcome should be, and the grounding that can happen through play throughout the day is often most needed specifically by the students with the most complex needs. When play is allowed to take place in many different forms, everyone can find a way to participate.

I will admit I think back in sadness on how purely "academic" and skill-based so much of my teaching used to be. I believe through my current values, however, the way I will set up any learning environment moving forward will be very different. I have come to understand that for something to be considered "rigorously academic" it not only can, but *must* also include plenty of time for play, for grounding, for co-regulation, for pause, for rest, for contemplation, for communication, and, importantly, it must include time for reciprocal relationality. "Rigorously academic" does not need to only be books, theories, "knowledge," and paper. In fact, I believe it is through these types of rich interactive activities described in this study that the best kind of learning follows. Not only for children, but for us adults too. There is so much more to be discovered about relationality and how a complete shift in focus on what it means to be whole, relational people, for both children and adults alike, could do for how we operate in all our spaces in this world.

Nilholm (2020) talks about the need for inclusion to begin with us changing the way we have always done things before. To create a "counter-disturbance" of "relationality, wholeness, and mutual flourishing," in the way we educate our children as Fettes & Blenkinsop (2023, p. 48) talk about. It is not always easy to step away from the familiar, the safe, and the system we feel we have under our control so that our classrooms run "smoothly." For our schools to become places where there is safety and refuge for each one of our students, we need to start critically examining our practice and how accessible our day is for a diverse group of learners, including those whose behaviours we cannot seem to "manage."

Brene Brown, in one of her books, talks about the ways we sometimes get stuck with "life paralysis" (Brown, 2010 p. 76). She goes on to explain how sometimes we wait for something to be perfect before we are willing to put it out there. This thought resonates with me deeply. I think I have spent a lot of my life, also as a teacher, worried that how I do things might be seen as "not perfect." I was always worried that anyone walking past my classroom would see something was not running smoothly (as in, not "controlled" by me). In the beginning of my career, this fear of being observed as a teacher who might not be able to "manage her classroom" would keep me working at a frantic pace, giving one assignment after another to my students so that they would look orderly, busy, and productive. I wanted to "impress" those walking by my room as the teacher who was able to have my students be quiet and diligent and certainly not disruptive to anyone else (of course, this was almost impossible to do). As I matured as a teacher, I found I was increasingly learning how to let things go. If you walk past my room today, you will see and hear my students spending an awful lot of time making noise, laughing, playing and allowing their day to be filled with things they naturally do well and that help ground them into a healthier emotional state. My days are not perfect, and there can be lots going on, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I want to recognize that the amount of play and let-your-guard-down time I have slowly built into my program may exceed what some teachers are comfortable with. At the same time, I would like

to encourage all educators to consider making room for play in their practice, as I can testify it has only been by doing this I have been able to notice things about my students I otherwise would not have noticed. After all, noticing and paying attention, as I have mentioned earlier, is an increasingly important fundamental skill for all of us as educators. I have learned that by paying attention and noticing my students' needs, I am then better able to care for them, to meet them where they are at, to understand the relationship dynamics in the classroom, and also, importantly, to help those on the outside to find ways to connect with others. Research done by Roberts (2024) also shows when we meet a child's need for emotional connection and safety, then, and only then, are they better able to engage in learning. We cannot underestimate how important it is for us to create ways to make time so we can notice and spend time with our students in unhurried ways, to coach them on how to navigate friendships, and to just be available to them so we can take an interest in their lives.

I have personally witnessed how opening the day up to generous time for this much relationship-building, play, and grounding has allowed my students to form deeper and more meaningful friendships with each other as well. I firmly believe this type of free-play-grounding and relationship-building time is needed now more than ever before, in all our classrooms, regardless of our students' age. In fact, for us to fight against the all-consuming pressures of this age, we have to start thinking about our children's time in our schools as a sanctuary worth protecting.

There are creative ways to provide pause and rest from all the pressures of this world at any grade level, and to allow even older students (and why not the adults in the building as well) to engage with truly meaningful and playful grounding opportunities. You must take some risks, use your imagination, and make relationship-building a priority for everyone.

In closing, I am reminded of a children's story called *Franklin and the Computer*, written by Sharon Jennings. The book was published in 2003 and, perhaps, we could call it a little prophetic. In the story, Franklin the turtle becomes enamoured by his friend Beaver's new computer, and especially, a game Beaver introduces him to, called *Dam Builders*. Franklin can't stop thinking about this game and shows up at Beaver's house at all hours to play on the computer. Soon, his obsession with *Dam Builders* and making it past the *Swamp Monster* takes over his life, and he starts neglecting his friends and the plans he has made with them. His friends become increasingly annoyed as Franklin only wants to play on the computer, and he doesn't show up to play with them even when he said he would.

Some days later, Franklin finally decides to skip going to Beaver's house to play *Dam Builders* and instead calls on his best friend Bear. As Franklin stands at the door, asking for Bear to come outside to play, Bear's Mom tells Franklin that Bear isn't at home and has gone to Beaver's house instead to play some dam-building game. Franklin storms off, angry and hurt, feeling left out and betrayed after all his friends have been complaining that he was the one spending too much time on the computer.

A little while later, he hears sounds of his friends playing and laughing in the pond. He calls out to them and finds out they are playing *Dam Builders* in real life together while splashing in the water. They invite Franklin to come join them, and so he does. Franklin comes to realize how much more fun playing the real *Dam Builders* game with his real-life-friends can be, and he quickly forgets all about the video game.

In 2003, our children's use of electronic devices for entertainment was still in its baby days. As all

of us know, things have exploded since then, and most children, teens, and adults alike now tend to use their devices as a numbing mechanism, a fake sense of grounding if you will. In a recent article published by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2024), new research shows that children between the ages of 8 and 18, in the United States, spend an average of 7.5 hours on screens a day. We can assume children in Canada, and many other parts of the world, are not doing any better. Surely, the time has come for our school systems to also change the way we look at our day.

Might it be time for all of us, whatever our role in making decisions for our children is, to add some firm commitments that time be carved out for some real-life play-filled grounding time of *Dam Builders* to be a part of our plans and our mandated curriculum? And could it be, in doing so, we might be teaching the next generation to take the time to focus on what really matters: our relationships to one another?

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