

# “More Play Will Save Our Schools,” A New Book Claims

*Danger—and surprising wisdom—in Finland’s informal fun*

**Let The Children Play:  
How More Play Will Save Our  
Schools and Help Children Thrive**  
by Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle

Oxford University Press, 2019,  
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As reviewed by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

**THE EDUCATION SOLAR SYSTEM** is endlessly distorted by the extraordinary presence within it of two separate suns with gravitational fields that tug the policy planets in different directions.

Around one sun revolve the satellites of utility, instrumentality, and achievement. On their surfaces, education must be purposeful and structured so that societies can cohere and prosper. Left in a state of nature, children would grow up ignorant and wild. Adults—and schools—exist to form, instruct, discipline, acculturate, and socialize them.

Orbiting the other sun we find the heavenly bodies of romanticism, naturalism, and liberation. There, education frees the individual to become a unique being. Left to explore her own nature and unconstrained by external forces, the child will unfold like a flower. The job of adults is to keep her from serious harm and provide options for exploration, not to expect, demand, or discipline.

If those were separate solar systems, we might hear only music from the spheres. In reality, however, the education planets are being pulled in both directions.

The American K–12 world spent recent decades with its orbit mostly shaped by the gravity of the utility star. Thus we focused on boosting achievement, prepping more kids for college and career, strengthening school effectiveness—and holding elements of the



education system to account for their results, gauged mainly by test scores, graduation and matriculation rates, and other formal markers of success.

Today, however, education in the United States is swinging rapidly toward the liberation star. Tests are being scrapped or their results diminished. “School climate” is getting weighed more heavily, achievement less. “Social and emotional learning” vies with knowledge, and “21st century skills” loom larger than the three R’s. “Personalization” and “collaboration” are crowding out all forms of standardization.

Enter Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle with a plump, readable, earnest tome that celebrates children’s play. (The book’s subtitle: “How more play will save our schools and help children thrive.”)

The book opens with a heartfelt foreword by British arts educator Sir Ken Robinson, perhaps best known for his 2014 TED talk about how modern schools kill children’s creativity. The top jacket blurb comes from Howard Gardner, famously the inventor of “multiple intelligences,” including the

“bodily-kinesthetic” and “naturalistic.”

The authors clearly bask in the rays of the naturalism sun—and it’s no secret that most of my own tan comes from the instrumental one. So it will surprise no one that I find much of their message misguided, even harmful. Perhaps more surprising is that some of it is spot-on.

Sahlberg, many will remember, is a Finn (no relation) who for years functioned as the foremost booster of Finland’s vaunted approach to education, which was (for a time) validated by robust PISA scores and drew many to Helsinki to see how a gentle, teacher-centric system with little formal accountability could yield such good results.

Co-author Doyle (a sometime television producer and an author of worthy books on history and other subjects) spent several years in Finland, put his young son into school there, and was charmed by the experience, during which he came to know Sahlberg and clearly imbibed much Finnish education Kool-aid (or stronger quaff).

Of late, some of the bloom has gone off Finland’s education rose—PISA scores have slid since 2009—and both authors have left town, with Sahlberg now living in Australia and Doyle back in New York. Yet that Nordic land’s laid-back approach to schooling and child development reigns over these pages. “Unlike in many other countries,” they write, “Finnish parents favor a full, enjoyable period of childhood rather than an earlier start of formal learning. Childhood is, they say, the time when children discover the world within them while learning how to be with other children.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau could not have better evoked educational naturalism.

Doyle was particularly taken with his son's experience in a system where formal schooling does not normally start until age 7 and "play was commonly understood to be both the whole point of childhood and the bedrock foundation of effective childhood education." Sahlberg was, of course, one of the architects of that system.

But they've spotlighted some bona fide issues and they support these observations with research from sources as varied as the National Academies of Science and the Centers for Disease Control. Young children do indeed need to play—perhaps we all do—in order to develop healthfully, socially, even intellectually. Recent decades' focus on scores and rates has caused many schools to limit recess and extend instructional time. Sometimes gym and extracurriculars also get squeezed. And it's true that hyper parents often pressure their kids to buckle down and study, cramping their ability to play, dream, make believe, and goof off. The authors are correct to fault this mindset—even as they have fun labeling the policy overkill "GERM" for "Global Education Reform Movement."

They're also right—the Academy of Pediatrics concurs—to skewer our obsession with technology and our letting kids substitute "screen time" for healthy outdoor activity as well as such old-fashioned indoor pleasures as reading books and playing board games, all of which yield valuable learning experiences of their own.

And they're on target when they condemn today's helicopter parents and overblown worries about safety and competition for blocking youngsters from experiences that carry the teeniest risk or might yield winners and losers. Thus we crack down on "free-range parenting," eliminate team competitions and dodgeball, and don't let our children climb trees, explore a riverbank, or take themselves to the park. Those experiences, too, are part of becoming educated, as important in their different ways as long division or the causes of the Civil War.

Nor is this just "An American Tragedy." That's Chapter 7. Chapter 8 is "The Global War on Play." Kids, say the authors, are increasingly being denied their childhood in much of the world.

So there's wisdom and documentation to be found in these 440 pages. Find time for recess in school. Tell parents to cool their overprotective jets. Limit screen time. Absolutely. But the authors' central policy message for primary and secondary education, particularly as it's certain to be interpreted and implemented in

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today's gravitational field, portends damage to children and society at least as severe as the practices the authors rightly deplore.

It's crystallized in this prediction: "Someday soon, the parents, teachers, and children of the world will rise up and join together to build a new generation of schools for all children, schools built not on stress and fear but on play, joy, learning, and love." Once that utopian revolution is complete, kids will enjoy a "school experience rich in discovery and experimentation, encouragement, conversation, intellectual challenge, free play and guided play, playful teaching and learning, and respect of children's voices and individual learning differences."

Sound familiar? It should, as it's a formula straight out of Rousseau, Dewey, and a million other "progressive" educators. As with all such nostrums, there's nothing in it that you wouldn't want for your own child. But wait. We're living in a time when academic achievement

is flat at the end of high school; when scads of young people emerge unready for either college or career success; when American employers must look overseas for skilled personnel; and when results-based accountability for kids, teachers, and schools alike hangs in the balance and "soft skills" are in the ascendancy. We also have ample evidence that while "playful teaching and learning" does little harm to middle-class kids with support and structure in the rest of their lives, for children from troubled circumstances, it's a recipe for failure. Many such youngsters already have plenty of "play" of various sorts in their lives, even a corrupted sort of "natural state," but precious little formal learning—and few of the other benefits (such as character formation, self-discipline, and citizenship) that also flow from purposeful adult direction.

Are we—bizarrely and cruelly—to exacerbate the achievement, economic, and mobility gaps that already plague us as a nation, while turning a blind eye to the academic mediocrity that already afflicts even those on the upside of those gaps, all in the name of modeling America on a charming small country in northern Europe? The authors cite persuasive evidence that kids need to play, but not that we should diminish the quest for stronger skills and knowledge or try to organize U.S. schools the way they do in Vuohtomaki, the rural village where Sahlberg grew up. Appealing as that model is in its way, it doesn't transplant at scale to the Bronx, nor would it pave a path out of poverty for children who live there (or in Memphis, Houston, or other American cities.)

I think I'll stick with GERM—and keep doing what I can to infect others. It may be too late to block America's migration from one education sun to the other, but it's a dreadful mistake to accelerate it.

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