

Using Play in Teacher Preparation to Foster Joyful Classroom Practice

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About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation by supporting learning and sharing research and practices among programs, school districts, and policymakers. EdPrepLab supports programs and informs policies that incorporate the science of learning and development to enable deeper learning and equity, working to expand these approaches nationally and internationally.

About This Brief

This brief explores how integrating play as both a mindset and a pedagogical approach can enhance teacher preparation and influence how candidates design learning experiences for their PreK-12 students that are engaging, rigorous, and responsive to students' developmental needs. Grounded in the science of learning and development, the brief draws on examples from the University of Colorado Denver and Lewis & Clark College to illustrate how playful learning environments can reduce stress, strengthen belonging, spark curiosity, and establish the relational conditions that support deep learning.

Introduction

When education loses sight of human flourishing, the consequences are profound. At present, educational institutions, from PreK-12 schools to teacher preparation programs, fall far short of cultivating the conditions necessary for learners and educators to thrive. A nationwide survey of 21,678 high school students revealed that 75% reported negative feelings about school, with roughly 80% feeling stressed and 70% feeling bored most of the time.¹ Teachers experience equally troubling patterns. Research shows that teachers face a high risk of burnout.² Teaching ranks among the most stressful professions in human services, with nearly half of teachers leaving the profession within their first 5 years.³ These statistics reflect deeper cultural and institutional forces that systemically undervalue the approaches most likely to support human flourishing, especially play and playful ways of being.

This raises a central question: *How can education center the cultivation of human flourishing by transforming not only PreK-12 classrooms but also the ways educators are prepared to shape them?*

Recentering Play in Learning and Teaching

One promising answer lies in recentering play as a fundamental dimension of learning and teaching. Play naturally invites joy, wonder, humor, spontaneity, and relaxation. It is an activity rooted in enjoyment and amusement, involving an in-the-moment, interactive, and enthusiastic orientation.⁴ Play supports well-being, resilience, and belonging⁵ while reducing stress and anxiety,⁶ conditions that are necessary for thriving and living well.

In classrooms, play and playful approaches nurture creativity, exploration, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving.⁷ Play offers children and adults the freedom to step outside routine and everyday expectations, disrupting monotony and inviting them to reimagine familiar practices with curiosity. It opens spaces for alternative possibilities and meaningful engagement, as well as facilitating content learning and deeper learning. For PreK-12 students, play fosters agency and perspective-taking. For teachers, it cultivates joy and purpose in their practice. Play does not deny struggles and challenges; it creates room to build strength and embrace the full spectrum of human experiences.⁸

Because play is so important in classrooms, it must also be central in the spaces where teachers develop. This brief highlights the importance of preparing teacher candidates to experience play as both a way of being and a philosophy of education that advances human flourishing. Grounded in the science of learning and development (SoLD), it asserts that aspiring PreK-12 teachers need immersive, experiential opportunities to learn through play. By engaging in playful pedagogies, candidates encounter learning environments that reduce stress, build belonging, and nurture curiosity, which SoLD identifies as essential to development. These experiences enable future educators to internalize the value of play, cultivate social and emotional competencies, and practice coconstructing knowledge with peers and mentors. At the same time, candidates come to recognize that play and academic rigor are not competing forces but complementary pathways to deeper learning. Rethinking teacher preparation in this way positions play as integral to preparing educators who can create classrooms where both academic achievement and human flourishing are possible.

Integrated well, this approach takes many forms. In math, PreK-12 students might design board games that incorporate core concepts, requiring them to understand principles deeply enough to teach others through play. In literacy, storytelling circles can replace traditional book reports, allowing learners to explore character development and themes through creative expression. In science, framing experiments as mysteries to be solved invites the joy of discovery as the route to conceptual understanding. Across subjects, play serves as the vehicle for authentic engagement and deeper learning. Imagine classrooms where play is central rather than an afterthought, where curiosity is cultivated alongside content knowledge, and where wonder is recognized as essential to deep understanding. Such classrooms would become spaces in which students pursue authentic interests and conduct sustained inquiry.

This brief draws on collaborative work between the University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver) and Lewis & Clark College, where faculty have been actively integrating playful pedagogies into teacher preparation programs. At CU Denver, this work is situated within the School of Education and Human Development, part of a large public, urban research university serving a highly diverse student population across the Denver metro area. At Lewis & Clark College, the work is situated within the Graduate School of Education and Counseling, housed within a small, private liberal arts institution in Portland, Oregon.

At CU Denver, faculty have been reimagining teacher preparation through playful, inquiry-based learning, with courses across multiple programs—from STEM education to counseling—integrating connection-building activities, collaborative reflection, and embodied learning experiences. Complementary work at Lewis & Clark College examines teacher resilience and social and emotional learning, demonstrating how playful approaches support preservice teachers' professional identity development and well-being. These institutions have documented how structured playful pedagogies create pathways for teacher candidates to develop the social and emotional competencies essential for effective teaching. Building on this foundation, the authors are developing the Flourish Lab, a modular digital platform designed to make playful professional learning accessible to educators across institutions and contexts, extending these principles beyond individual courses to create scalable resources for the field.

Understanding why these experiences are foundational requires drawing on the research base that explains how people learn and develop. SoLD offers a comprehensive framework that synthesizes insights from neuroscience, developmental psychology, and the learning sciences to illuminate the conditions that support optimal learning. It emphasizes that learning is not solely cognitive, but shaped by relationships, culture, emotion, and context. SoLD identifies key conditions for learning: safe and supportive environments; strong developmental relationships; opportunities to build skills across multiple domains; and experiences that are active, engaging, meaningful, and iterative, allowing learners to revisit ideas, refine understanding, and deepen mastery over time.

In a recent report, the Learning Policy Institute translates this research into five design principles for educator preparation: (1) curriculum rooted in deep understanding of learners and development; (2) development of equitable educator mindsets; (3) rich experiential learning opportunities; (4) pedagogical alignment and modeling; and (5) supportive developmental relationships in communities of practice.⁹ When teacher preparation programs embrace play as both content and pedagogy, they create the conditions that SoLD identifies as essential, supporting candidates not only in understanding these principles but also in experiencing and embodying them as they prepare to create flourishing classrooms.

Play as a Philosophy of Learning

Research demonstrates that play is vital to human growth, development, and learning,¹⁰ yet it is often dismissed as a distraction or waste of time. In many educational contexts, learning is treated as serious business, leaving little space for wonder, joy, or exploration.¹¹ As a result, play is routinely marginalized. It is frequently the first element cut amid standardized testing, rigid curricula, and pressure for measurable outcomes,¹² even in elementary schools where it should be central to development.

Play is not the opposite of learning; it is one of the most profound ways humans make meaning.¹³ It invites risk-taking without fear of failure, encourages exploration of multiple perspectives, and nurtures relationships grounded in curiosity rather than control.¹⁴ These dimensions echo findings from SoLD, which emphasize that learning is relational and shaped by environments that affirm safety, belonging, and agency.¹⁵ Play cultivates exactly these conditions: It reduces stress, strengthens relationships, and fuels intrinsic motivation. In a culture that often privileges productivity and outcomes, play shifts attention back to process, presence, and the deeper forces that make learning transformative. Without play, learning can become transactional, something to endure rather than an experience that nurtures growth.

Developing a Playful Mindset

Play also encompasses playfulness, a mindset or disposition that shapes how one engages with the world. A playful person is curious, open, flexible, lighthearted, resilient, and attuned to humor.¹⁶ In this sense, playfulness becomes the lens through which individuals interpret experiences and interact with others. Play can also function as an educational philosophy, a set of beliefs about play's nature and value that guides how teachers design learning. This philosophy rests on the conviction that play is essential to learning, flourishing, connection, and belonging.

Understanding play as both a mindset and a pedagogical philosophy makes it more than a simple activity and much harder to dismiss. It reflects how educators show up, how they relate to students, and how they construct learning environments. This deeper stance can place play at the center of meaningful adult learning. A playful philosophy challenges rigidity, rehumanizes education, and invites cocreation, connection, and growth. When embraced as a guiding lens, play opens new possibilities for deeper learning, fuller presence, and more joyful, authentic engagement for candidates.

When teacher educators adopt a playful stance, they shift from being gatekeepers of knowledge to cocreators of learning experiences, embodying SoLD's call for relational and participatory approaches. A playful mindset might inspire faculty to weave humor into lectures, redesign grading structures, or create collaborative, student-centered assignments and choices that disrupt hierarchies and make room for curiosity and shared meaning-making.

The examples that follow draw from collaborative work between CU Denver and Lewis & Clark College, where the authors have partnered over several years to study playful pedagogies in teacher preparation. This collaboration emerged from shared recognition that traditional programs often marginalize the experiential, relational dimensions of learning that SoLD identifies as essential. The stories presented here, spanning mathematics education, counseling, and courses on child development, illustrate how playful approaches create conditions for candidates to experience the learning environments they must cultivate for their own students.

At CU Denver, this playful philosophy is evident in mathematics teacher preparation courses designed to help candidates reimagine what mathematical learning can be. Through ThingStudio, preservice teachers engage in mathematics as play, not as a frivolous activity, but as genuine inquiry grounded in joy, curiosity, and collaborative problem-solving. In Math Playground sessions, candidates explore mathematical concepts through games, puzzles, and open-ended investigations with multiple entry points and no predetermined “correct” path. In one activity, for example, candidates use pattern blocks to investigate geometric relationships, playing with symmetry, tessellation, and transformation before any formal terminology is introduced. This approach emphasizes the curriculum rooted in a deep understanding of how learners make meaning, while modeling the playful stance candidates will need in their own classrooms.

As one candidate reflected, “I never thought math could feel this way—like we were discovering something together rather than just being told what to know. Now I understand that play isn’t about lowering the bar; it’s about opening more doors.”

By experiencing mathematics as a playful, collaborative endeavor, these future teachers develop both the disposition and the practical strategies to create similar environments for their students.

Playful Pedagogies in Teacher Preparation

While teacher preparation programs (TPPs) aim to develop effective educators, they often focus primarily on what teachers should know (content knowledge) and, secondarily, on how teachers should teach (pedagogical methods). What is frequently overlooked is who teachers are becoming, or how their professional identity is formed, which ultimately determines how they will embody their practice and relate to students. SoLD makes clear that learning is not simply the transmission of knowledge; learning is shaped by dynamic interactions among relationships, culture, and context, as well as the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of development. Preparing teachers, therefore, cannot be reduced to coursework in content and pedagogy; it must cultivate the mindsets, habits, and practices that enable educators to create classrooms that promote flourishing.

This identity crisis within TPPs becomes visible in the persistent imbalance between theory and practice, the marginalization of social and emotional learning, and the tendency to treat preservice teachers as passive recipients rather than active participants in their own development. TPPs tend to prioritize theoretical knowledge at the expense of experiential learning, creating what Darwich and colleagues describe as “significant incongruence,”¹⁷ where future teachers engage with abstract pedagogical concepts with few meaningful opportunities to enact or test them. Learning about play in theory alone does little to prepare preservice teachers to implement playful pedagogies. As SoLD emphasizes, candidates need authentic, hands-on experiences that allow them to internalize and value such approaches.

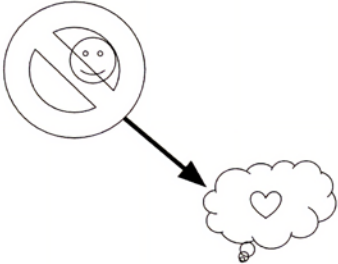

Stories of Play

Story 1: Playful Capstone Reflections

In the secondary mathematics and science capstone course at CU Denver, a culminating reflective activity called “Edustrations” demonstrates how playful pedagogies can create space for meaningful reflection while building community among graduating teacher candidates. Inspired by the game Telestrations, this collaborative activity invites candidates to reflect on their preparation journey through interactive drawing and interpretation.

Using a shared Google Drawing template (see [Figure 1](#)), each candidate begins by illustrating a significant moment or insight from their year of teaching mathematics or science. They then rotate to a peer’s board, add a brief caption describing what they believe the drawing represents, and cover the original image. As the boards continue circulating, candidates alternate between adding drawings and captions, allowing the initial idea to evolve in unexpected—and often humorous—ways, much like a visual version of the classic telephone game.

Figure 1. Edustrations Example

<p>Drawing</p> 	<p>text</p> <p>I don't like it, I love it!!!</p>	<p>drawing</p> 
<p>text</p> <p>I love teaching and this has been an adventure to say the least!</p>	<p>drawing</p>	<p>text</p>

Source: Provided by authors. (2025).

What emerges is both revealing and joyful. [Figure 1](#) illustrates how this process unfolds when candidates finally trace the full progression of their drawing, and laughter fills the room as they discover how “a student’s ‘aha moment’ with fractions” transformed into “a pizza party celebrating Pi Day.” These amusing distortions become entry points for deeper conversation. Candidates reflect on why they selected their initial image, what it reveals about their growth as educators, and how their peers’ interpretations surface varied perspectives or shared experiences. The intention of this activity is to create conditions for safe risk-taking, collaborative meaning-making, and integration of cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning.

Story 2: Playful Connection-Formers

Every story of playful pedagogy begins with the teacher—the human. A teacher preparation course can integrate playfulness by embodying curiosity, humor, and humility, demonstrating that a serious approach to learning can coexist with a playful spirit. Tensions soften when instructors allow themselves to be real and imperfect; modeling humanness gives candidates permission to be human as well. Play in learning is multifaceted: It can connect people, reduce stress, spark interest and motivation, and support content learning.

At CU Denver, instructors engage candidates in a “connection-former” activity, which is sometimes unrelated to the day’s content. One example is a lively round of Ultimate Rock-Paper-Scissors. Students break into pairs and play a best-of-five match. Winners then seek other winners for the next round, while candidates who lose become the winners’ cheerleaders, following and rooting for them as the game progresses. If their chosen winner is defeated, they switch allegiance and join the new winner’s cheering section. The pattern continues until only two finalists remain, at which point the entire class has become their cheering squad. As the final match unfolds, the room erupts with joy, support, and laughter. Candidates return to their seats smiling, talking, energized, and ready to learn.

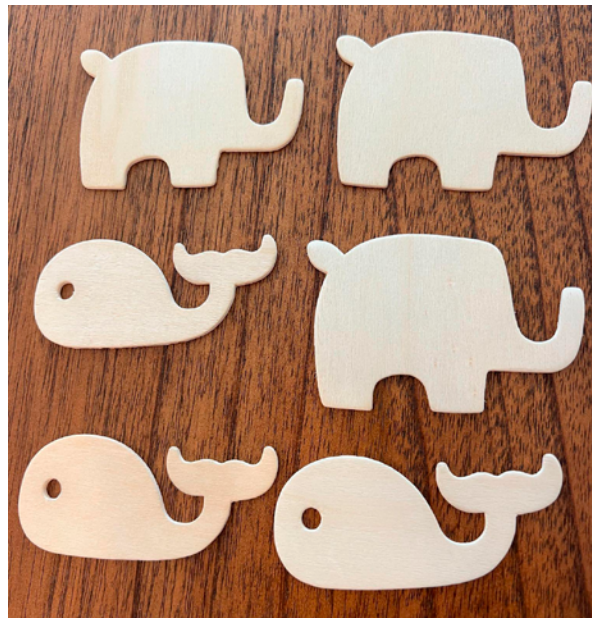
The most effective playful pedagogy classrooms do not stop at connection-formers; play is infused into the learning experience. While play is not used 100% of the time, it often offers a more engaging way to process an experience or spark a dynamic group discussion. For example, to debrief stressful 30-minute role plays, candidates write their own reflection questions on slips of paper. These are questions they want to discuss but may feel hesitant to ask aloud. In small groups, with the cards face down on the table, each person takes a turn using a “slappy hand” toy to grab a random card, then reads and responds to the question. The playful design introduces a novel, unexpected element that engages both body and mind. Slapping cards with a toy encourages movement, reduces tension, and replaces self-consciousness with anticipation and laughter. Because the questions are candidate-generated, they feel ownership of the process and take greater pride in the discussion. The activity shifts power from instructor-led evaluation to learner-generated meaning, and the randomness of the card selection brings surprise, positive emotion, and ease to an often anxiety-provoking debrief.

Story 3: Playful Encounters

In Child Development in Lewis & Clark College's Elementary Master of Arts in Teaching program, instructors use the Mystery Shape Challenge to build relationships, get candidates moving, and model creative approaches to forming student groups. Each candidate receives a sealed envelope containing a small, flat wooden shape (e.g., a bird, whale, anchor, crab). (See [Figure 2](#).) Once they receive their envelope, candidates may not speak or peek inside. Each shape has three or four matches somewhere in the room. When everyone is ready, candidates explore their shape by touch only and are invited to find classmates who appear to have the same shape—without using words.

What follows is typically funny, inventive, and unpredictable. Candidates begin experimenting with ways to communicate: Some mime with their bodies to suggest possible shapes, others trace outlines in the air, and many rely on animated gestures and facial expressions. In every class, at least one student enthusiastically pulls a peer across the room to connect them with someone they believe is a match. Laughter and improvisation fill the space as candidates negotiate meaning in silence. Once they believe they have found their group, candidates guess the shape. They then open their envelopes and reflect on the experience.

Figure 2. Mystery Shapes



Source: Provided by authors. (2025).

In these reflections, candidates often describe what it felt like to communicate without words, the strategies they used to identify their matches, their appreciation for classmates who helped them find their group, and the emotions that emerged if it took them longer to connect. These insights serve as springboards for social and emotional learning (SEL).

Play and the Conditions for Flourishing

SEL is often siloed and neglected in schools despite extensive research showing that supportive relationships, belonging, and emotional competence form the foundation of effective teaching. It is difficult to imagine teachers cultivating wonder and flourishing in their PreK-12 learners without experiencing these states themselves during preparation. Lectures and readings alone rarely provide the embodied practice this requires. Playful pedagogies offer candidates low-stakes, socially rich opportunities to practice SEL skills while experiencing the humor, levity, and joy they are meant to bring into their work with children.

Playful pedagogies create a learning context in which SEL can be enacted rather than just discussed. Playfulness can reduce fear and hierarchy, while playful, collaborative tasks invite help-seeking, perspective-taking, communication, and regulation under low-stakes conditions. This also addresses a persistent critique of SEL as separate from academics: Play can be used to teach content while simultaneously developing social and emotional competencies.

Thus, TPPs should not rely on pedagogical models that position candidates as passive consumers of information rather than active coconstructors of their learning. Lecture-heavy instruction stands at odds with the dynamic, relational, and problem-solving nature of teaching. It stifles the creativity and adaptability essential to teaching, leaving little room for playful or experiential learning. As a result, candidates may enter the field without having experienced the interaction, collaboration, and agency that SoLD identifies as central to learning and that they must be ready to cultivate in their own classrooms.

Without such experiences, new teachers often leave programs with theoretical knowledge but without embodied practice in integrating playful, socially rich, and emotionally attuned approaches to teaching. They may understand the value of play conceptually yet lack the confidence to implement it in their classrooms. This gap can leave teachers feeling ineffective and overwhelmed, especially when attempting to create the positive classroom climates that support human flourishing.

When aspiring teachers engage in playful, experiential learning, they gain personal knowledge of what curiosity, joy, and wonder feel like when part of the learning process. These experiences deepen their understanding of how learning integrates cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions while helping them develop resilience, creativity, and

cultural responsiveness. By modeling the conditions SoLD identifies as foundational, playful pedagogies allow candidates to learn effective practices and embody them in ways that are transferable to their own classrooms.

Reconceptualizing teacher preparation in this way requires more than changing instructional methods: It calls for a fundamental rethinking of what it means to prepare teachers for the complex, relational work of education.

A Call for Integration

The challenge in education is not choosing between play and academic rigor but integrating them to create learning experiences that honor achievement and human flourishing. The perceived tension between play and academic success stems from a false dichotomy that casts them as mutually exclusive. In fact, research consistently shows that playful learning environments enhance, rather than diminish, academic outcomes.¹⁸ When PreK-12 students learn through play, they demonstrate deeper understanding, greater retention, and increased motivation to engage with challenging material. Play and rigor are not competing priorities but complementary pathways toward meaningful learning.

Reflecting on the difference between compliance and engagement helps clarify the role of play in rigorous learning environments. Traditional schooling often rewards compliance by emphasizing following directions, completing benchmarks, and reproducing information. Playful approaches, in contrast, invite active participation and intellectual curiosity, positioning students as contributors to their own learning. This does not lower academic expectations; instead, it reshapes how students reach them by creating space for exploration and creativity. When PreK-12 students grapple with ideas, make connections, and apply knowledge in new ways, rigor is strengthened rather than lost. Teacher candidates who experimented with integrating play informally reported heightened student engagement and more authentic learning experiences, noting increased enthusiasm and a developing sense of inquiry among their students.

Integrating play and rigor cultivates academic skill as well as social-emotional growth. PreK-12 students develop creativity, empathy, and resilience, while teachers rediscover the joy and purpose that animate their work. This integration is not only possible, it is necessary. When education embraces play and learning as complementary forces, schools become places where learning is not simply endured but experienced as a joyful, transformative process.

Conclusion

Reimagining teacher preparation through the lens of play offers a powerful way to prepare educators to create learning environments where all students thrive. When candidates experience playful, relational, and curiosity-driven learning, they encounter the very conditions that support engagement, deep understanding, and human well-being. These experiences help them see teaching not simply as the delivery of content but as the creation of spaces where learners feel safe, seen, and inspired to explore.

Playful pedagogies also strengthen candidates' professional identities, offering opportunities to navigate uncertainty, collaborate meaningfully, and reflect on their growth. Through these experiences, future teachers learn to approach their work with flexibility, empathy, and creativity, capabilities that align with SoLD research and are essential for meeting the diverse needs of PreK-12 students. Play becomes a way of practicing the relational, adaptive, and emotionally attuned dimensions of teaching that traditional coursework alone cannot cultivate.

By centering play in teacher preparation, programs prepare educators who are grounded, resilient, and able to design classrooms where academic rigor and human flourishing coexist. Embracing play is not an enhancement to preparation. It is a transformative approach that strengthens teaching, restores joy to learning, and helps ensure that every student encounters a classroom where they can grow, imagine, and thrive.

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