

Time to be Obsessed by Play, not by Technology: the Zechariah Impact

Ban cell phones from school at all ages. Use technology with regard to the SAMR model:

1. Substitution
2. Augmentation
3. Modification
4. Redefinition

Not to be simplistic, but the technology 'issue' is now largely dealt with. The school's influence outside school is zero (except for trying to get parents to use technology in a more restrained way) but inside the school, technology is not an issue.

It is time to switch from obsessing about technology to obsessing about play.

This is not a new thing for CSM. In scheduling theory and practice, we have routinely called for playtime to be a priority in creating new schedules. But now we are becoming obsessive about play. Immediately, we want to say that the issue is not a post COVID issue, it is not a climate crisis issue, it is not a generalized safety issue since 2001, it is an historical issue that has been exacerbated in the 21st century to a new degree.

In this article, we connect play to the issue of anxiety. We know today that children are highly anxious. This crisis of anxiety has been long in the making and is correlated with the loss of playtime. From CSM's interventions through schedule design, we know that we can deeply impact the way in which children live including their mental states. This gives us confidence to speak about play. We will never, ever, deal with root causes of our children's mental health until we include play in the conversation. Anxiety (and states that go along with it) is a mental health issue. Play can do something about that. It has significant impact. It is the Zechariah Impact (chapter 8):

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her."

This is what the LORD says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."

When Jesus comes in glory and we no longer need the sun to light our paths, the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there. We call our Christian schools to exhibit the

Zechariah Impact in our 'not yet' wait for the 2nd coming. When we commit to play, we commit to our children's well-being and, as an important by-product, their academic achievement. It is bold indeed to say that play is a significant way to improve mental health and boost academic achievement.

Anxiety is an historical phenomenon. This is not anxiety inspired by a unique circumstance (state anxiety). This is embedded anxiety that accompanies the child through the day (trait anxiety). Jean Twenge in a study of children's anxiety 1952-1993 had this to say:

- Anxiety scores have risen about a standard deviation from the 1950s to the 1990s (college students)
- economic conditions do not correlate significantly with anxiety levels (college students)
- increases in anxiety for children were large as well as linear (9-17 year olds)
- by the 1980s normal children were scoring higher than 1950s child psychiatric patients on self-reported anxiety (9-17 year olds)
- it appears that lower social connectedness and higher threat led to higher anxiety (both groups)
- economic conditions do not explain the rise in anxiety (both groups)
- anxiety tends to predispose people to depression ... usually anxiety precedes the onset of drinking or substance abuse ... anxious people have a higher mortality... anxiety has been linked to higher occurrences of asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, inflammatory bowel disease, and coronary heart disease

Peter Gray in *Free to Learn* (2013) shows these trends continuing. The American Freshman Survey (2016) showed every indicator of mental health reaching new highs: rating emotional health below average, feeling overwhelmed, expecting to seek counseling, feeling depressed. It's interesting that when CSM interviews children face to face as we do routinely, they tend to ask for less homework. But when we ask them separately how much time they actually spend on homework, the amount has decreased significantly from a decade or more ago. Schools are no longer (by and large) piling it on and yet children still feel the pressure. It's a generalized pressure – it's trait anxiety. It's been increasing for a long time. And play has been decreasing.

A 2001 study by Hofferth and Sandberg identified a 25% loss of playtime from 1981 to 1997. This has continued into our current century. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2015) found that preschools were reducing playtime to increase a focus on academic achievement – we're talking about four and three year olds! But CSM finds the same as it travels from school to school. Preschools seem to think that they have to justify their existence with reference to academic progress – and don't include play in their scope and sequence of 'academic' despite its proven benefits in all areas of a child's development. As a result of No Child Left Behind, 40% of school districts reduced or eliminated recess and that's probably an undercount. Our own schools struggle to find time for recess, given the supposed advantage of spending every possible minute in a classroom. The 2020 Survey by Plan in England reported that less than 10% of children surveyed regularly play in natural spaces. And as CSM looks at site development plans at our schools, rarely is much more than lip service given to the need for 'natural spaces' for the school's children to roam in. Instead, schools pride themselves on the latest new "playground" composed of metal, synthetic flooring materials, vinyl, and plastic.

Recommendation

We can do something about it. Increase access to unstructured time for every child K-12 to at least 60 minutes a day plus 30 minutes for lunch.

Send children out to play in mixed age groups. K-12 is ideal.

Ensure this time is truly the child's – free to self-organize.

Supervise with teachers, not paraprofessionals, parents or others. This is a key learning time and teachers must be there to see and support – and sometimes teach how to play.

Include play conversation in all future planning for renovation, construction, space purchase.

Outcomes

Expected outcomes will be visible:

- happier children
- fewer behavioral issues
- greater focus in class
- lessening anxiety
- better emotional regulation
- the Zechariah Impact

Postlude

We do not claim that this 'fixes' all problems. That would obviously be vast overreach. But play is a simple, no cost, significant part of the solution that Christian schools must embrace. There are psychotherapies, medications, lifestyle shifts that are ways to manage anxiety. Schools have little or no access to these resources that parents must seek out. Schools do have play space.

CSM Mission: For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students

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