

EDUCATOR ESCAPE ROOMS: PLAY, ASSESSMENT AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Teachers are expected to create learning environments that are rigorous, engaging, and student-centered, yet university-based teacher preparation often relies on lecture-based instruction. To prepare teacher candidates (TCs) to teach in more engaging ways, teacher educators must model the kinds of pedagogies they hope candidates will use. This paper examines how playful pedagogy, grounded in the Center for Reaching and Teaching the Whole Child's (CRTWC) framework for social and emotional learning (SEL) and culturally responsive teaching, can deepen course learning while strengthening teacher candidates' social-emotional competencies and excitement about teaching. In our case study, teacher candidates in a foundations of lesson planning course participated in an immersive escape-room-style formative assessment review. As teams solved clues and puzzles, they experienced productive struggle, collaboration, and shared problem-solving, later analyzing how these practices supported engagement, relationships, and SEL development. Using the CRTWC's framework, we explore how playful pedagogies can foster SEL skills, such as self-awareness, relationship building, and collaborative problem solving, while reinforcing rigorous academic content. We also consider how artificial intelligence tools can support teacher educators in designing high-engagement learning experiences more efficiently.

Keywords: *Teacher preparation, engagement, play, social emotional learning.*

1. Introduction

Nearly every university introduction to education course utilizes Vygotsky's theory that argues that learning is socially constructed and active (1978). Yet, as demands on instructors grow, teacher education courses can default to lecture-based instruction. While direct instruction has value, our university classrooms should also model the student-centered, discourse-rich, and joyful learning environments we hope TCs will create for children. Lortie's work reminds us that teachers often replicate the kinds of teaching they experienced as students or observed as candidates (1975). If we want TCs to design engaging learning experiences for school-aged students, teacher educators must model those practices in their own courses.

Research also suggests that playful learning can create a more positive, low-stress learning environment, supporting engagement, belonging, and knowledge acquisition (Krashen, 1986). Because teaching is learned through observation, rehearsal, and active application, teacher education should include highly engaging pedagogies such as humor, games, role-play, creativity, and collaboration. Playful pedagogies can strengthen SEL, engagement, classroom climate, and belonging while reducing stress (Darwich, DeBay, Forbes, & Mahfouz, 2025). This paper examines how an escape-room-style assessment activity in a university teacher education course reinforced essential course concepts while supporting TCs SEL skills.

2. The pedagogy of play

Play is not a break from serious learning; it is one of the most powerful pathways into it. Playful pedagogies encompass a range of approaches, including simulations, games, role-play, and creative problem-solving, all united by their emphasis on joy, levity, and active participation (Forbes, 2021). Rather than entertaining alternatives to traditional instruction, these approaches promote experimentation, collaboration, critical thinking, and deeper meaning-making (James and Nerantzi, 2019; Zosh et al., 2018).

What matters most is the underlying philosophy: that play is not the opposite of rigorous learning but one of its most natural and effective expressions (Brown, 2009).

This reframing carries particular weight in teacher education. TCs who experience playful pedagogy firsthand, rather than merely reading about it, develop greater confidence, stronger SEL competencies, and a clearer sense of how play can serve as a vehicle for genuine learning (Darwich et al., 2025). When teacher educators model playful approaches, they simultaneously teach content, build community, and demonstrate the kind of joyful, student-centered classroom culture their candidates are being prepared to create.

2.1. Escape rooms: Rooted in the pedagogy of play

While there are multiple forms of play-based learning, the escape room design provides significant opportunities to collaborate, take risks, and reach deeper learning. Research on academic escape rooms points to their promise as high-engagement learning experiences. Louie Montoya, Instructor at the Design School at Stanford University, founded the Deeper Learning Escape Room, as a way to assess one's skills at collaboration, communication, creative problem solving, and critical thinking (2025). His work was inspirational to many teachers, and they created more escape rooms for teachers and high school students as highly-engaging formative assessment and social emotional skill development experiences.

The benefits of educational escape rooms are highly appealing, but the amount of time, effort, and preparation required to create multiple academic puzzles is a barrier to more widespread classroom use. However, now teachers can utilize artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT to help design escape rooms like academic puzzles for their students in minutes.

2.2. Educator escape room: The culmination of a foundations in lesson planning course

Our case study looks at the use of an Educator Escape Room in an introductory lesson planning course taught to TCs as part of their Bachelors Degree in Elementary Education. The course was taught during the Fall of 2025, by an instructor who has taught the class annually for eleven years. The course introduces students to the Effective Teaching Cycle (Plan - Teach - Assess) and explores research on how students learn. For the previous ten years the instructor ended the course with a lecture-based review of the content, covering all six learning objectives in the course. During the Fall of 2025 in an effort to model playful pedagogies for the TCs, the final course review was instead presented as a game-based escape room. Each learning objective was tied to one puzzle in the escape room. TCs worked in small groups of four to demonstrate their knowledge of the learning objective, by completing an academic puzzle-based task. Once the task was completed correctly, the puzzle was solved, giving a hint to where to go to find the next task.

The instructor prompted ChatGPT to create a hands-on assessment for each of the six learning objectives. With a few additional prompts to better align with research shared in the course, the instructor had six activities (e.g., card sorts, lesson plan analysis) to measure understanding of the course content. Last, the instructor prompted ChatGPT to match each activity to one of six escape room props (e.g., invisible ink pens, locked boxes, hollow-core books, etc.) and to design a clue that was visible only when the prompt was answered correctly and completely. One task required TCs to complete a card sort, placing the stages of lesson plan design into the correct order following Wiggins & McTighe's Backwards Design (2005). When in the correct order, **a bold and underlined letter** on each card spelled "*find the book that isn't as it looks.*" This clue led TCs to the bookshelf to find the hollowed out book with the second activity inside. Next, TCs were asked to determine whether a teaching strategy had a high or low effect size- reengaging them with Hattie's meta-analysis of high leverage teaching practices.

Like each of the ten years before, the TCs arrived to the final class session showing signs of exhaustion and burn out. Learning that the review for the final would be in the form of an escape room, the students warmed considerably. In small groups, the TCs worked for an hour to demonstrate their knowledge of the six learning objectives. The shift in the learning environment from true burnout to joyful engagement was remarkable. The classroom culture grew as students began working together and engaging in academic discourse. They persevered through the six difficult tasks, many requiring them to revise their thinking. Equally notable were the relationships that developed between the TCs through their teamwork in moments of productive struggle. The TCs shared that they were inspired to try an escape room academic task in their own student teaching classrooms and learn more about the impact of play on academic and social emotional learning.

2.3. Educator escape rooms and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The CRTWC framework provides a lens for understanding how teachers support students' social, emotional, and cultural development through intentional instructional moves, such as relationship-building, collaboration, productive struggle, and deep engagement. We used the framework to examine how the playful instruction of the escape room gave TCs a lived, embodied experience of these competencies as they built relationships, collaborated across differences, managed uncertainty, negotiated ideas, and persisted through challenge. The escape-room activity allowed candidates to experience whole-child teaching in action and reflect on how they might model similar practices in their own classrooms. Coupling the CRTWC framework with playful pedagogy reframes play as intentional design for both academic learning and whole-child development.

3. Next steps and conclusion

The case study suggests that the Educator Escape Room supported TCs' engagement with course content while also creating opportunities to practice SEL competencies such as collaboration, communication, and productive struggle. These promising insights have shaped our next steps as a collaborative research team. During the 2026–27 school year, we plan to examine how teacher candidates adapt and incorporate playful pedagogies, including escape-room-style activities, into their own emerging teaching practice.

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