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Playful Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms

It's Complicated

by Ben Mardell

Early childhood educators with a constructivist orientation have long put play at the center of their pedagogical approaches. As Vygotsky wrote, “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.” There is a growing body of research that supports Vygotsky’s insight, which suggests that by building on children’s strengths, play offers powerful pathways for cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. When children play they are engaged, relaxed and challenged—states of mind highly conducive to learning. Through play, children try out ideas, test theories, experiment with symbol systems, explore social relations, take risks and reimagine the world. (See <https://www.legofoundation.com/en/learn-how/knowledge-base/learning-through-play-a-review-of-the-evidence/>.) While play is sometimes associated with frivolity and silliness, it is good to remember the words of the pediatrician Benjamin Spock: “Children play not because it is easy but because it is hard.” Children play to learn.

Yet there can be confusion about what playful learning involves in early childhood classrooms. A few years ago, I observed center time in an American preschool. Four girls

and a teacher sat around a table with a letter bingo game in the middle. The following conversation unfolded:

Lilly: [Taking a card from the pile]: S. Snake. Eww. I hate snakes.

Emma: Me too. I hate bugs too.

Ilana: Spiders start with S. That’s a bug.

Lilly: Eww. Spiders make me scream!

Teacher: Let’s keep playing friends.

Emma [Taking a card]: I got H for horse. I want a horse for Christmas!

Abby: Duh! We all know this!

Emma: Horses are my favorite animal.

Teacher: Girls please. More playing and less talking.

This novice teacher is in a confusing situation. She wants to create situations where her children learn through play. At the same time, she has specific literacy standards she feels compelled to reach. She is not alone in her confusion over how to incorporate learning through play to meet her learning goals.

Playful learning in schools: it’s complicated. This article begins by sharing why it is complicated: the difficulties defining what is meant by playful learning and the paradoxical nature of play and school. I will present reasons for hope; exemplary early childhood approaches suggest



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Education in the Boston Public Schools.” He is the author of “From Basketball to the Beatles: In Search of Compelling Early Childhood Curriculum” and “Growing Up in Child Care: A Case For Quality Early Education.” When not working, he enjoys playing with his family (hiking, swimming and playing games) and participating in triathlons.

that closely observing children can help navigate the paradoxes between play and school. Next, I will share two models that can support staff of early childhood centers in defining playful learning. The article concludes by noting how adults playing can be preparation for playful teaching.

Why Is Play so Complicated?

The noted play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith wrote, "While we all know what play is, when we try to define it academically, we lapse into silliness." Sutton-Smith's quip highlights the fact that, while we intuitively understand what play is, it can be difficult to define. Does it mean participation in a game? Are you playing when you continue picking up bingo letter cards? Or, does it mean joking around with friends, for example, saying, "Spiders make me scream!"? Complicating matters further is that while play is universal (everyone plays), how one plays (where, when, with whom) is culturally determined. The goal of creating centers and schools where children learn through play can be undermined if the faculty does not have a shared understanding of what is meant by playful learning.

An additional complicating factor, noted by early childhood scholar David Kushner, is the paradoxical relationship between play and school. For example, play involves taking risks. In school, children should be safe. Both of these statements are true. We want children to explore and experiment. We do not want them to get hurt. A paradox. Other paradoxes between play and school include:

- Play is timeless. Players lose themselves in play. School is time tabled.
- Play can be chaotic, messy, and loud. Schools aspire to be places of order.
- In play children are in charge. At school the agenda is generally set by adults.

This last paradox is at the heart of the letter bingo scenario. The teacher has picked an activity to support her students' development of letter recognition. Yet, the girls are intent on taking the activity in their own direction. As expectations for early childhood classrooms have become more school-like, teachers are

increasingly facing this paradox between children's agency and academic-oriented learning goals.

Closely Observing Children as a Key to Navigating the Paradoxes

But what if? What if the teacher in the letter bingo observation had kept her learning goals in mind and responded to the girls' interests? What if after Ilana pointed out that a spider is a bug, the teacher asked, "I wonder what letter 'bug' starts with?" Or, what if after Emma declared that horses are her favorite animal, the teacher asked the other girls what their favorite animals were and if they want to write those words? What if the paradoxes between play and school were not seen as an either/or, but as a yes/and?

When thinking about a "yes/and" to play and school, the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia and the teachings of Vivian Paley immediately come to mind.

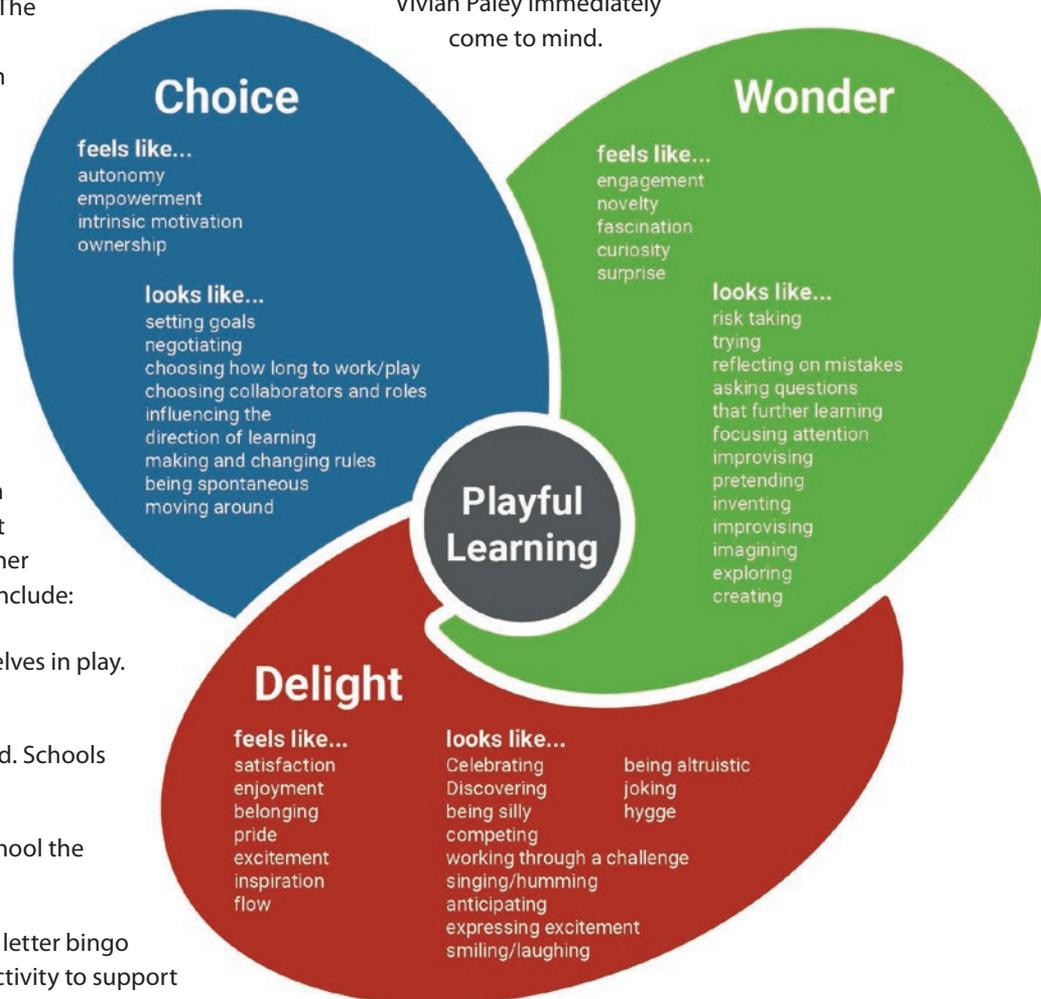


Figure 1: International School of Billund Indicators of Playful Learning

Early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, a small city in northern Italy, is justifiably famous. The schools have shared numerous examples of powerful, playful learning. The founder of the Reggio schools, Loris Malaguzzi, wrote, "Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water." Carlina Rinaldi of Reggio uses the metaphor of a butterfly, seeing play and learning as each of its wings, with flight impossible without both.

Central to the Reggio approach is documentation, which Project Zero researcher Mara Krechevsky explains as: *the practice of observing, recording, interpreting and sharing through different media the processes and products of learning in order to deepen learning*. Through photos, video, observational notes and more, the teachers in Reggio closely observe children, helping them bring together teaching and children's natural way of learning through play.

Closely observing children is also central to the work of the American kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley. In Paley's numerous books, she describes examples of the deep learning that occurred in her classroom. While Paley does not highlight this in her writings, every afternoon she and her classroom colleagues would gather and look over artifacts of the children's learning (often the stories the children had told that day). These conversations, grounded in documentation, guided important decisions about children and curriculum in Paley's classroom.

An example of a large urban school district—an environment in which young children are increasingly finding themselves—where play and school are "yes/and" is the Boston Public Schools. Kindergartens in Boston schools have long blocks of time where children can explore paint, blocks and dramatic play props. Teachers are supported in documenting children's play in order to guide curricular decisions to both promote play and meet the Common Core State Standards that the district adheres to.

My sharing of the bingo game conversation is a small example of how documentation can help navigate the paradoxes. Reviewing the bingo game transcript provides the opportunity to ask "what if" questions. Reflecting on the conversation can help teachers be more intentional when they encounter similar situations in their classrooms.

A Start to Defining Playful Learning

How can staff of a center or school come to a shared vision of what they mean by learning through play? The work

of my Pedagogy of Play team at Project Zero, a research organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, may be of assistance.

Collaborating with educators in Denmark and South Africa, we have created two models called the "Indicators of Playful Learning," which provide a starting point for deciding what learning through play means in particular communities.

Efforts began in Denmark at the International School of Billund. Informed by literature on play, and based on observations and interviews with teachers and students, we co-created a model of playful learning that involves three categories—choice, wonder and delight (see figure 1). Because playful learning includes both subjective and objective dimensions, the indicators represent psychological states ("feels like") as well as observable behaviors ("looks like"). When all three categories are "in play" we believe playful learning is occurring.

For the playful learner at ISB, choice includes a sense of empowerment, autonomy, ownership and intrinsic motivation. Learners may experience these feelings individually or as part of a group. Collectively making choices, and the accompanying sense of being part of something bigger than oneself, can enhance feelings of empowerment and ownership. To an observer, learners demonstrating choice are influencing the direction of learning, negotiating and making and changing rules. They are also likely to be choosing collaborators and roles, how long to work or play and when to move around.

Wonder entails the experience of curiosity, novelty, surprise and fascination, all of which can engage learners. To an observer, a sense of wonder involves improvising or exploring, creating or inventing, pretending or imagining, and learning from mistakes. It can also involve focused attention or asking questions that further learning. A sense of wonder can be experienced through play with materials, ideas, perspectives, music, symbols, words, languages, stories, movement or other modes of expression.

Feelings of delight include excitement, satisfaction, inspiration, pride, belonging, enjoyment and flow (a feeling of full immersion and energized focus). Delighted learners smile, laugh, joke, and are, at times, silly. They might sing and hum and feel a sense of *hygge*, a Danish term that reflects sharing a cozy time with good friends. Delight may also be observed as playful competition, celebration, excitement, engaging in an altruistic act or working through challenges.

The South African indicators, created in collaboration with educators in four schools in the Johannesburg/Pretoria area, have some similarities and differences with the ISB model (see figure 2). The three main categories—ownership, curiosity and enjoyment—map on to ISB’s choice, wonder and delight. An important difference is that underlying the categories in the South Africa model is the philosophy of

ubuntu. Ubuntu includes a sense of generosity, harmony, compassion and interconnectedness. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu summarizes ubuntu as, “a person is a person through other people.” Ubuntu is highlighted in the model because, though ownership, curiosity and enjoyment are experienced by individuals, they are often manifested through a sense of togetherness in the South African educational context.

As our Pedagogy of Play team has shared these models in conversations and in workshops, we have found them to be a good starting point for staff conversations about what playful learning involves. What playful learning involves in your school will be determined by your, your colleagues’ and your community’s values and circumstances. For more information on these models see: <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play>.

Play as Preparation for Playful Teaching

Good early childhood education, through which children develop a full range of skills, agency and interest in learning, is complicated. It requires teachers who are engaged, creative and joyful. How can we help teachers be in this playful mindset?

At Bryandale Preprimary School outside Johannesburg, South Africa, teachers arrive early every Friday. They take turns picking a game or an activity to play with their colleagues. Principal Gillian Leach explains, “As learning through play is a primary strategy for children, we want our staff to play as well.”

The staff’s Friday play concludes with a debrief. Teachers’ reflections have led to the realizations that in games where a player picks the next person for the next turn, “it feels bad to be left out,” and that in games with a lot of movement, physical contact is inevitable. As Gillian explains, “We were always moaning at the kids for bumping into each other. Now there is more understanding towards the children when they collide.”

Gillian does not know in advance how the teachers’ play will unfold or what conclusions they will make from their Friday mornings together. She, her staff, and the children at Bryandale, are engaging in the complexities of playful learning.

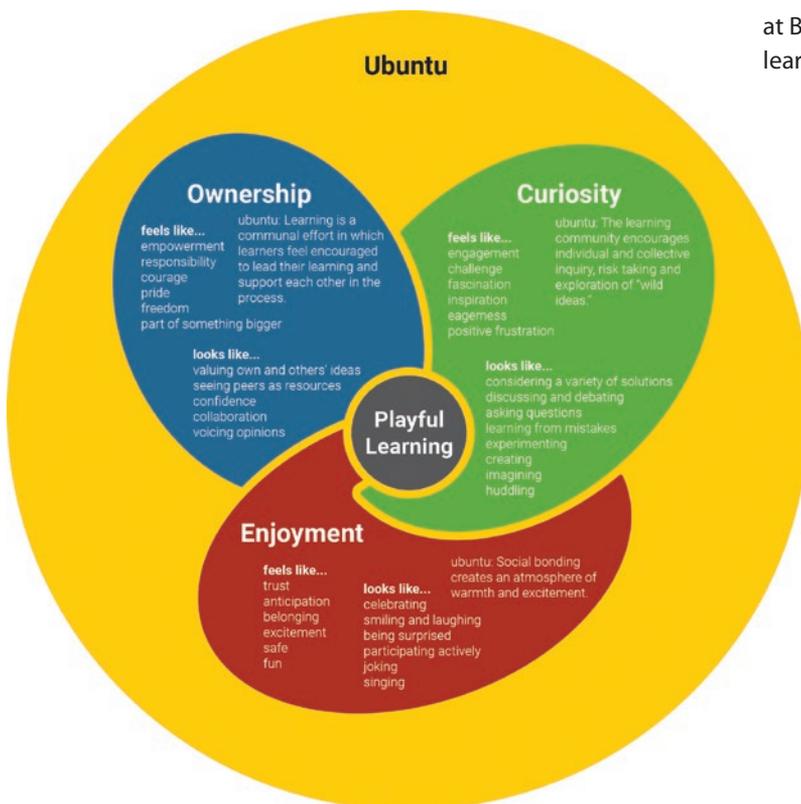


Figure 2. South African Indicators of Playful Learning