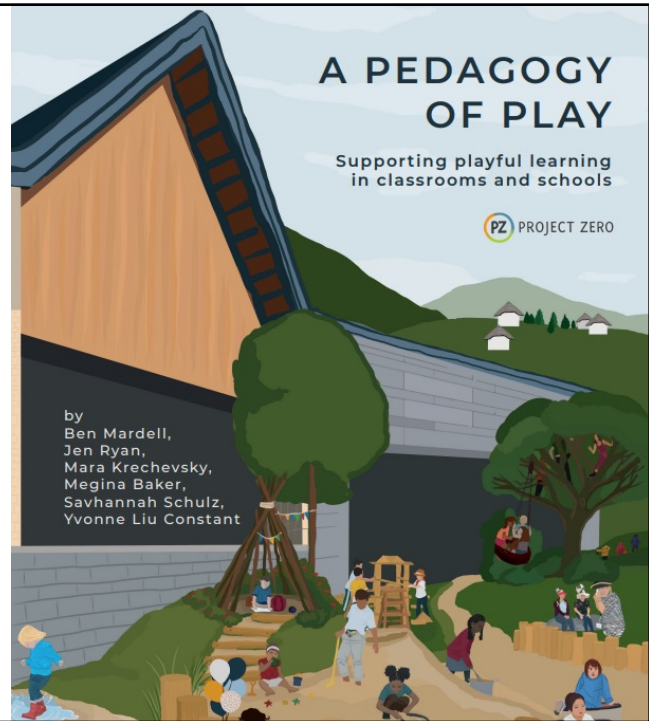


# Creating and Leading a Schoolwide Culture of Playful Learning

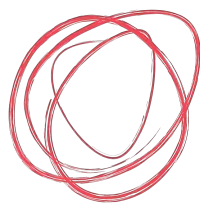
Yvonne Liu-Constant, Ph.D.

Project Zero

Harvard Graduate School of Education



1



pedagogy  
of play



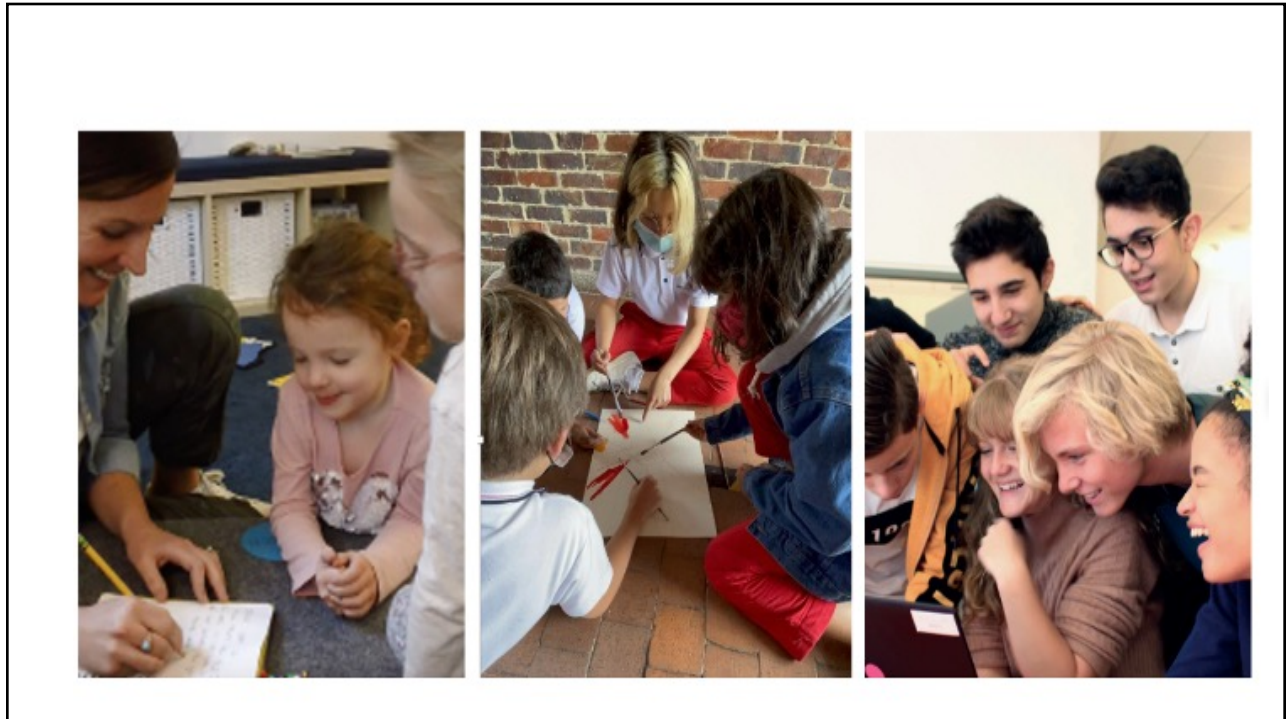
PROJECT ZERO

The **LEGO** Foundation

2



3



4



5

## Participants and Data Sources

Context	Number and Types of Schools	Number of Teachers	Grades Taught	Total Observations by Research Team	Total Teacher Interviews	Total School Leader Interviews	Total Focus Groups and/or Study Groups
Denmark	1 (independent)	40	Preschool – Grade 8	40	80	8	12
South Africa	3 (2 public, 1 independent)	11	Preschool - Grade 7	92	33	8	2
United States	6 (3 public, 1 charter, 2 independent)	22	Kindergarten - Grade 9	88	40	12	1
Colombia	5 (4 public, 1 independent)	17	Preschool - Grade 7	96	48	15	N/A

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# Intentions

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Play supports learning –

**Paradoxes** between play and school add complexity to teaching and learning

---

Playful learning is universal yet shaped by culture –

**Playful Learning Indicators**

---

Supportive school cultures enable playful learning to thrive –

**Five schoolwide playful learning practices**

7

---

# Play supports learning

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## Research from Animals

- Cat
- Cats
- Pigs
- Otters
- Komodo dragons
- Octopuses
- Bears
- Horses
- Dolphins
- Parrots
- Crows
- Kangaroos
- Crocodiles
- Turtles
- Whales
- Badgers
- Wolves...



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## Research from Humans

- During play children...
  - Are engaged, relaxed, and challenged—states of mind conducive to learning
  - Test hypotheses
  - Explore their environment and social relations
- Play offers powerful pathways for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

*\*Illustrations from Ch. 2 of A Pedagogy of Play*

10

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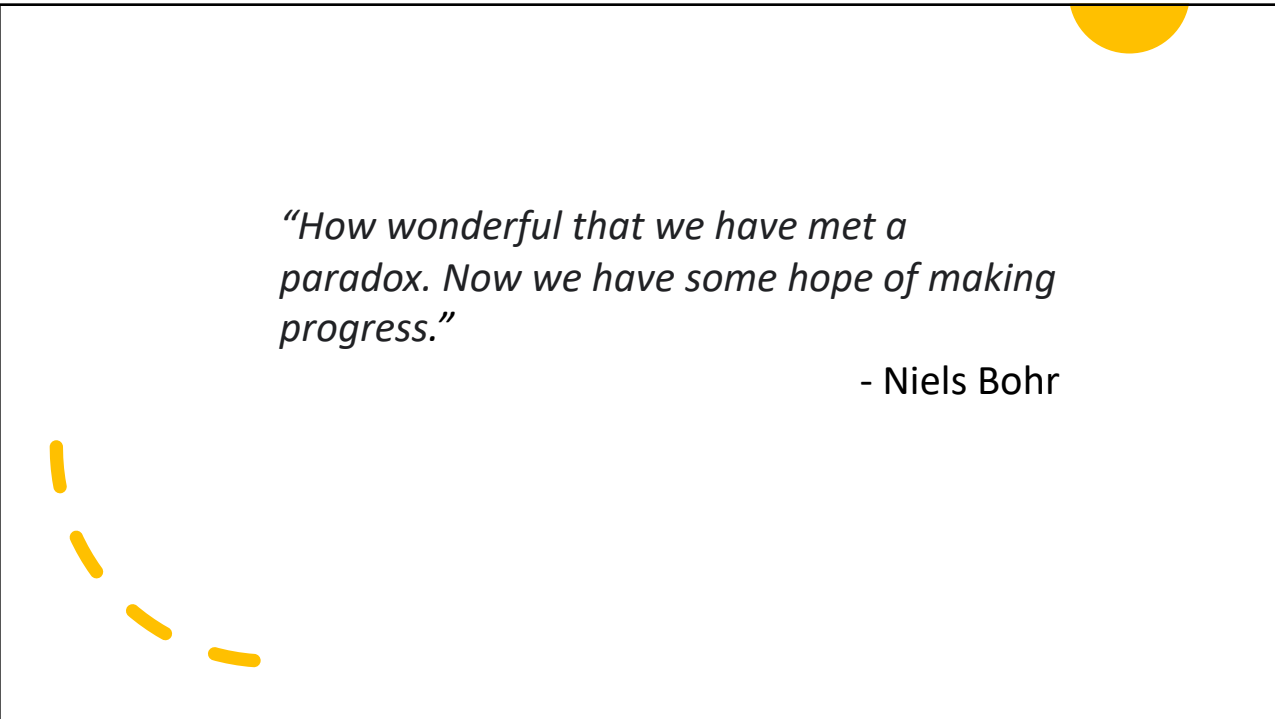
## Paradoxes between play and school add complexity to teaching and learning

11

### Paradoxes between play and school

- In play, children are in charge. At school, the agenda is set by adults.
- Play involves risks. In school, children should be safe.
- Play is timeless. School is time tabled.
- Play can be chaotic, messy, and loud. Schools try to be places of order.

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*"How wonderful that we have met a  
paradox. Now we have some hope of making  
progress."*

- Niels Bohr

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**Playful learning is universal  
yet shaped by culture**

14



## Playful learning is both universal and shaped by culture

All humans can learn through play, yet...

- how to learn playfully
- where and when it takes place
- who participates
- how it is valued

...are shaped by the culture of the learning community as well as the broader sociocultural context.

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### Pedagogy of Play – Playful Learning Indicators



The International School of Billund in Denmark



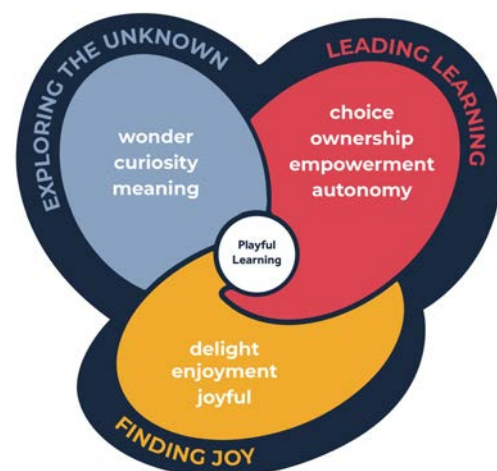
Three schools in Johannesburg, South Africa



Six schools in Boston, MA



Five schools in Bogota, Colombia



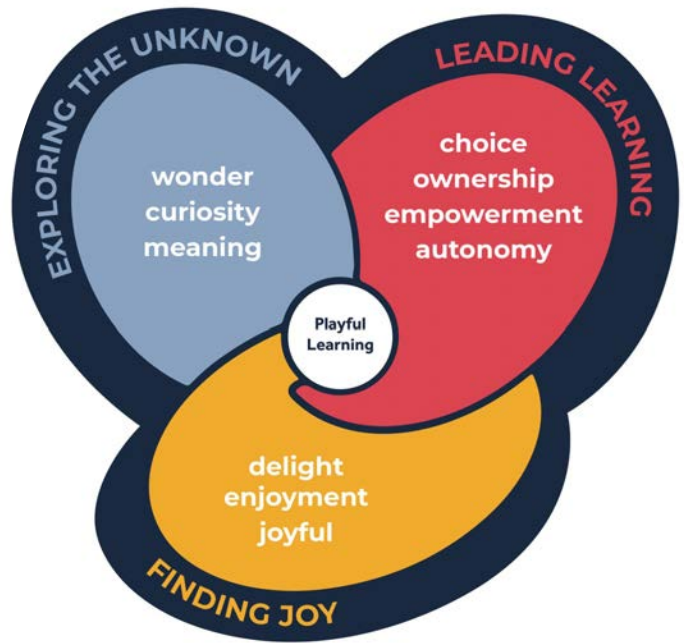
Cross-cultural Indicators

16



Share in the chat  
where you see  
**teachers..**

- lead their own learning
- explore the unknown
- find joy in the process



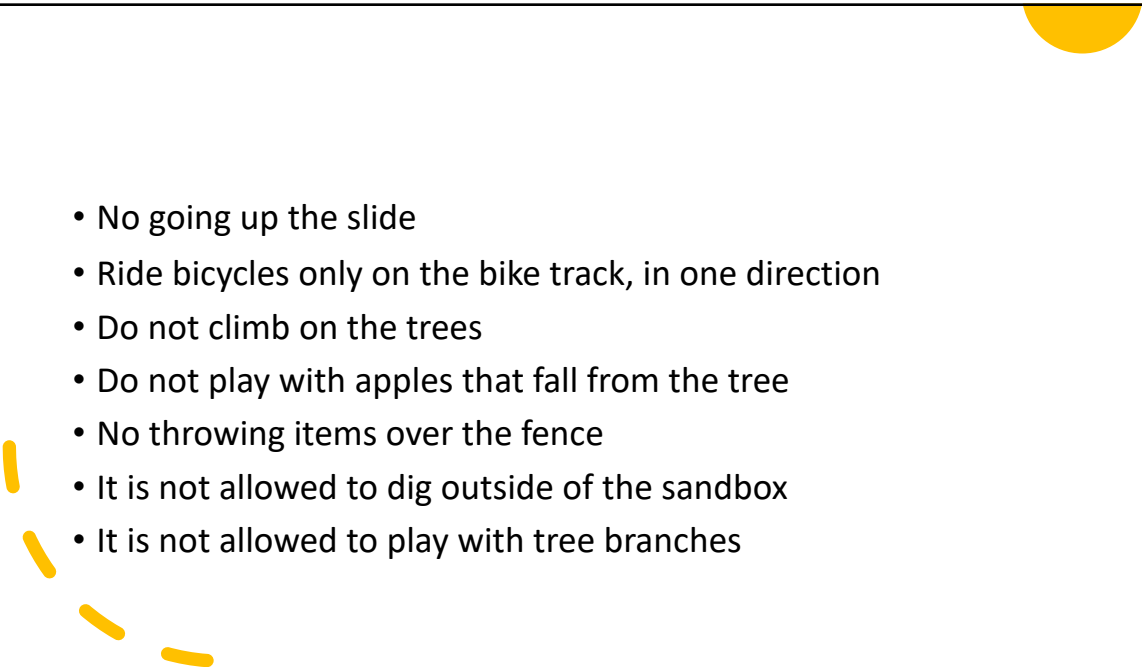
17



## Too Many Rules on the Playground

Kindergarten  
International School of Billund,  
Denmark

18

- 
- No going up the slide
  - Ride bicycles only on the bike track, in one direction
  - Do not climb on the trees
  - Do not play with apples that fall from the tree
  - No throwing items over the fence
  - It is not allowed to dig outside of the sandbox
  - It is not allowed to play with tree branches

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“We keep getting messages about learning through play, but I kept feeling like I have to stop it.”

*Marina, K3 teacher*

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Carolina and Marina agree to focus on a risky but important question: **What happens when we have fewer rules on the playground?**

Their experiment: **What if we have just two rules?**

1. We take care of each other.
2. We take care of the materials on the playground.

21

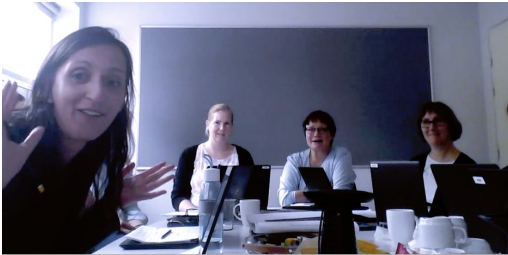
## Observing and Documenting

- The children didn't do anything out of the ordinary, even though they *could*
- The children created their own safety rules
- They needed less grown-up supervision
- The children felt trusted, they shared their ideas and plans with teachers, and they asked us for input



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## Teacher Study Group



*Carolina reflects with the study group*

- “The bracelets give them freedom,” explains Tove (K2 teacher). “And I wonder if we have too many rules because rules are made to be broken. We could rethink our rules, because fewer rules are better. ”
- Are two rules enough? Adding additional classes one by one to try the experiment, and documenting as they go.
- Is it ok to try the experiment without asking permission from the school caretaker?

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Sharing  
Documentation  
with the  
Children

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Marina: Who remembers how you use this (holding up one of the green bracelets)?

Viva: When we have the bracelets, then we can do anything and ride everywhere, bike on the blue part. And then you and Carolina are going to go around with a camera.

Lucy: You said we had to be nice to each other.

Marina: Yes – that was one rule. Actually there were just two rules. Do you remember the other one?

Christof: Take care of our things.

Anja: And we have to take care of the little ones.

Marina: Yes – those were our two rules. So do you think the K2s could learn to use bracelets?

Christof: Yes!

Divani: I can teach them!

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## Going Public to School Leadership

- “There are just two rules, and they are so simple.”
- What would happen if the children *started* the year with only two rules?
- Rule-making could be seen instead as a dance in which teachers and children negotiate limits in an ongoing, iterative way
- The school caretaker should be part of the process

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## Teacher Reflection

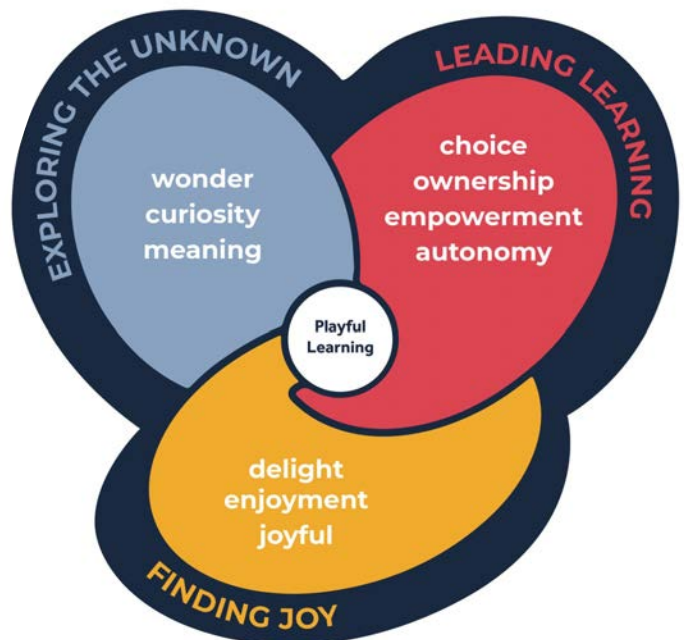
“This was so early in the year, but I learned that the children could handle the responsibility. That impressed me, because I wasn’t sure, given their maturity, given their ability to balance their feelings.”

“My mindset changed as I realized that I could push for different possibilities. It was like an opening of a door.”

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Share in the chat  
where you see  
**teachers..**

- lead their own learning
- explore the unknown
- find joy in the process



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---

## Supportive school cultures enable playful learning to thrive

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### Playful Learning Classroom Practices

**Empower learners to lead their own learning**

**Build a culture of collaborative learning**

**Promote experimentation and risk-taking**

**Encourage imaginative thinking**

**Welcome all emotions generated through play**

*For more, see Ch. 4 in *A Pedagogy of Play**

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## Playful Learning Schoolwide Practices

**Build shared understandings about playful learning**

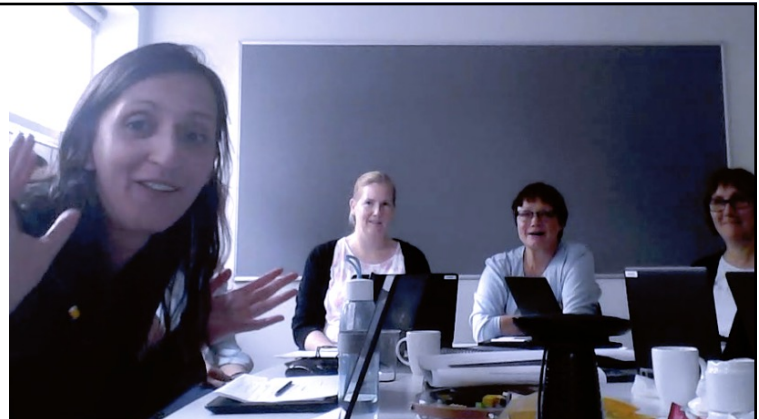
**Leverage school structures to support playful learning**

**Provide playful professional learning opportunities**

**Foster playful community connections**

**Lead playfully**

31



School Mission of the International School of Billund (ISB)

“By placing PLAY at the heart of education, ISB stimulates every child’s natural desire to LEARN.”

32

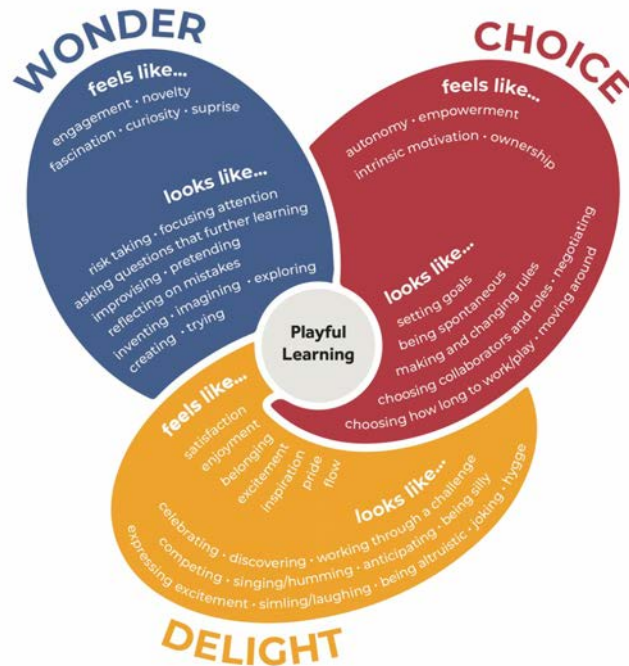
## Playful learning in the International School of Billund in Demark

### Markers

- Looks like (observed)?
- Feels like (subjective)?

### Indicators

- wonder
- choice
- delight



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## Massachusetts DESE



Curiosity		Empowerment		Enjoyment		Connection	
Looks like	Feels like	Looks like	Feels like	Looks like	Feels like	Looks like	Feels like
reflecting	creating	expressing ideas	having choice	laughing	excitement	making real-life connections	belonging
exploring	discovering	making choices	bravery	smiling	culturally sustaining	sharing background knowledge	being present
asking questions	making meaning	taking risks	independence	storytelling	peaceful	sharing materials	support
universal accessibility	wonder	solving problems	autonomy	encouragement	accomplishment	caring & kindness	respect
touching materials	challenge/productive struggle	moving around	confidence	enthusiasm	fun	helping each other	safety
imagining		engagement	pride	calm atmosphere	feeling alive	collaboration	trust
using multiple senses		child-led	investment	buzz of activity		teamwork	friendship

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## Playful Learning Schoolwide Practices

**Build shared understandings about playful learning**

**Leverage school structures to support playful learning**

**Provide playful professional learning opportunities**

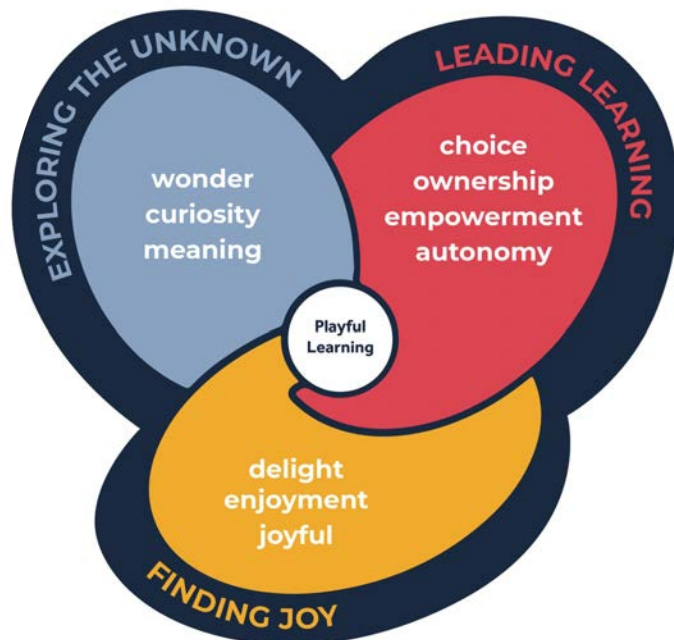
**Foster playful community connections**

**Lead playfully**

35

How can our **school structures** help learners..

- lead their own learning,
- explore the unknown, and
- find joy in the process?



36

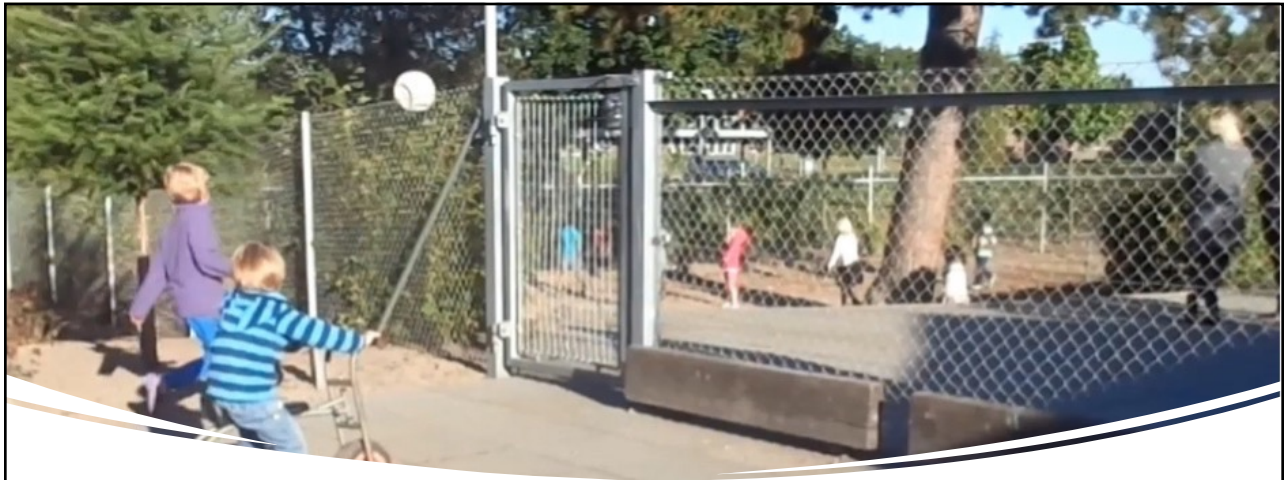


## Schedule

- **Facilitating a Student-composed Schedule** – middle school at ISB
- Eliot School in Boston Public School: **EPIC block (Eliot. Play. Innovate. Create)**
  - K to 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Menu of cross-discipline topics that last for weeks



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## Environment and Materials

- ISB: Changing rules of outdoor environment
- Hannah School at Beverly MA – teaching children how to be independent with classroom materials

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## Examples of How We Integrate Studios with the Curriculum

3<sup>rd</sup> grade  
in Beverly  
MA



### End of Module Playful Studios



Why and how do people explore the sea?

#### Writing Studio

Make a poster about why or how people explore the sea. Use text features such as pictures, captions, diagrams etc.

*Bonus: SeeSaw your poster or make a video recording yourself reading your poster and the information you included.*

#### Building Studio:

Use materials to build a model of a tool used to explore the sea. Add a Fact Card to explain your tool and how it is used.

*Bonus: SeeSaw your model and Fact Card explaining the tool you built and how you built it.*

#### Technology:

Use Google Slides or Book Creator to write and illustrate about how or why people explore the sea.

*Bonus: Share your slideshow or book with a friend. Record yourself reading your work.*

#### Music/Poetry Studio:

Write a poem or song about why the ocean is important. Include facts and reasons in your lyrics.

*Bonus: Add music to your song/poem when you have finished writing.*

#### Art Studio:

Make a picture or painting showing why we explore the sea or how we explore the sea. Make sure to include a caption explaining your artwork.

*Bonus: Share these with others! SeeSaw your work and explain it.*

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“In short, the debate must no longer be about learning *versus* play. Rather, curricula should stress learning *via* play.”

-Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2011)

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## Playful Learning Schoolwide Practices

**Build shared understandings about playful learning**

**Leverage school structures to support playful learning**

**Provide playful professional learning opportunities**

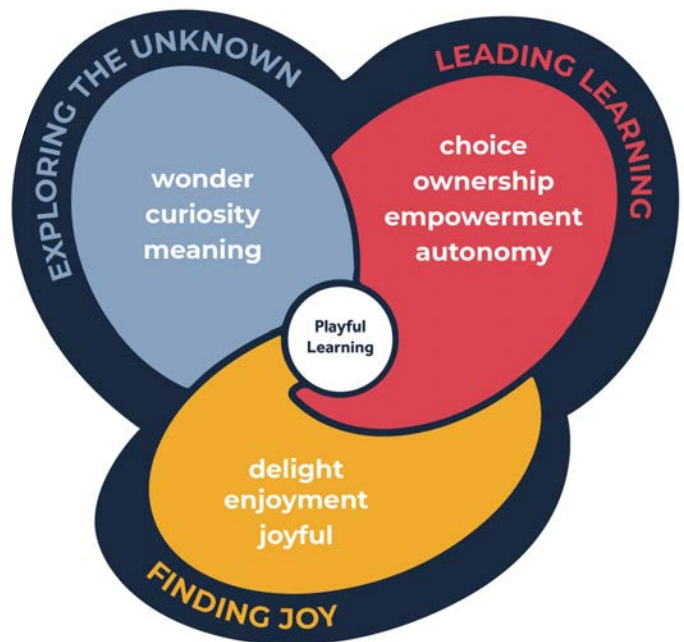
**Foster playful community connections**

**Lead playfully**

42

How can **teachers** in my school..

- lead their own learning,
- explore the unknown, and
- find joy in the process?



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## Playful meetings and professional development

Playful Learning Summer Institute in MA, June 2023



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## Educator Research Guides

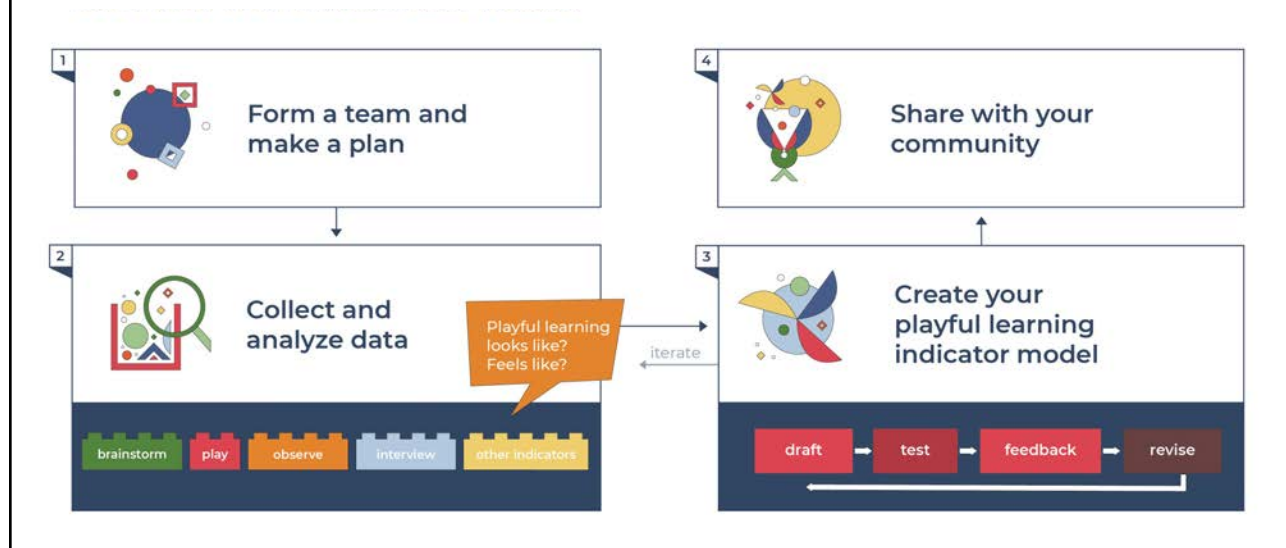
1. Creating Playful Learning Indicators for Your School (PLIG)
2. Playful Participatory Research Guide (PPR)

See Appendices in *A Pedagogy of Play* book

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## Creating Playful Learning Indicators for Your School (PLIG)



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## Playful Learning Schoolwide Practices

**Build shared understandings about playful learning**

**Leverage school structures to support playful learning**

**Provide playful professional learning opportunities**

**Foster playful community connections**

**Lead playfully**

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To all Parents ...

The goal of Passion Day is to give students the opportunity to spend time at school pursuing their own interests with the support of enthusiastic teachers and inspiring resources.

You might think of it as the ISB equivalent of Google's "20% Time," a concept that gives engineers a portion of their work day to explore their own projects and interests (the results of which include Gmail and Google Translate).

We have scheduled six Passion Days during the 2016/17 academic year. The first will take place on Thursday 8 September.

## Create playful rituals and celebrations

- International School of Billund, Denmark - Passion Day

<https://isbillund.com/academics/pedagogy-of-play/passion-day/>

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*More Passionate, More Choice*

<https://isbillund.com/academics/pedagogy-of-play/>

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## Engage playfully with families

Home-based  
family  
engagement

School-  
based family  
engagement

- Setting a playful environment at home
- Facilitating play to extend learning
- Sharing playful learning examples from home with teachers
- Meeting with teachers to discuss culture of playful learning
- Parent Universities about the theme of playful learning at schools
- Sharing experiences and best practices parent-to-parent
- Playful Participatory Research with families and teachers

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## Find opportunities for school-community partnerships

Thabiti Brown, Head of School at Codman Academy, Boston MA

Steve Maapea, principal of Esikhisini School in Johannesburg, South Africa

Judith Guevara Uribe, principal of the Jose Asuncion Silva School in Bogota, Colombia

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Playful Learning Schoolwide Practices

**Build shared understandings about playful learning**

**Leverage school structures to support playful learning**

**Provide playful professional learning opportunities**

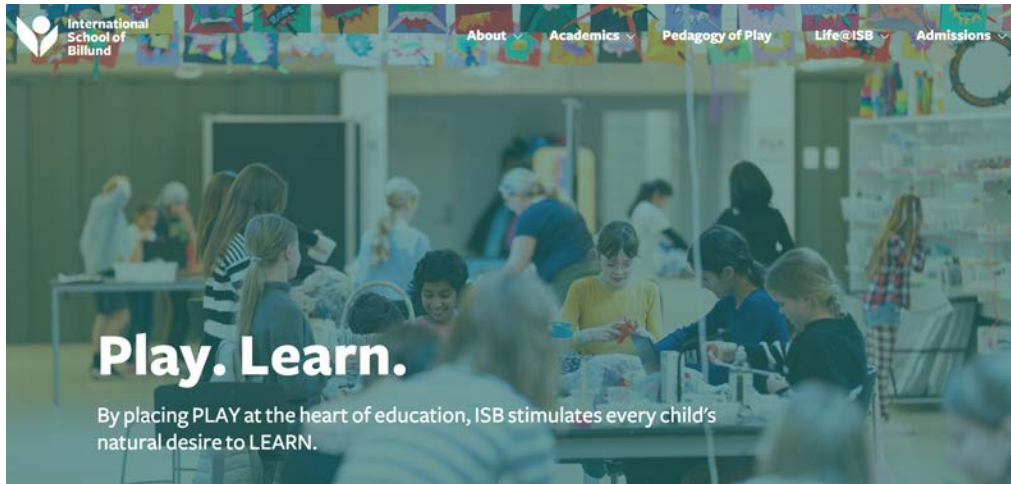
**Foster playful community connections**

**Lead playfully**

53

## Lead playfully

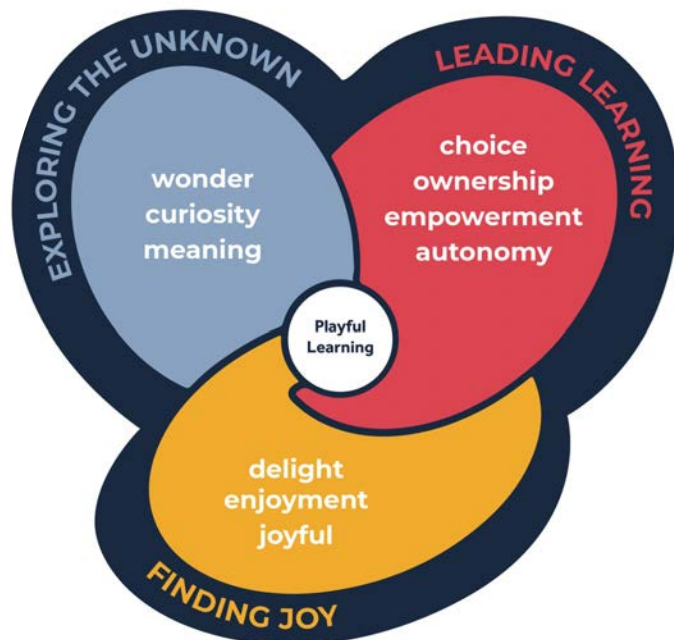
- **Get feedback** – from teachers, students, and families
- **Make playful learning visible** – displays, newsletters, [website](#)
- **Model playfulness** – take risks and experiment



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## How can you as school leaders..

- lead your own learning,
- explore the unknown, and
- find joy in the process?



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## Pedagogy of Play

Cultivating school cultures that value and support learning through play

IN: COGNITION, THINKING & UNDERSTANDING

OVERVIEW KEY IDEAS FOR EDUCATORS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS



<https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play>