Towards a South African Pedagogy of Play

A Pedagogy of Play working paper[1]

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What does playful learning look and feel like in South African schools? In this paper we put forward two hypotheses that address this question: a) learning through play in South African schools involves the interrelated experiences of ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment and b) for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is a central part of playful learning. To explain these hypotheses, we introduce the South African "Indicators of Playful Learning", a model of what playful learning looks and feels like in the nation's classrooms. We explain the research methods—including analysis of classroom observations and interviews with learners, teachers, and principals--used in formulating these hypotheses, explore the connections between Ubuntu and playful learning, and share examples of playful learning from South African classrooms to illustrate our hypotheses. We discuss implications of our work, note the preliminary nature of our findings, and suggest next steps for research. Overall, the paper makes the case for a South African pedagogy of play and, by defining the phenomenon of learning through play, begins to explore what such an approach to teaching and learning might involve.

Keywords: learning through play, playful learning, South African education, Ubuntu, pedagogy of play

Emerging from an oppressive colonial educational system and Apartheid, school life in South African schools is described by many learners, teachers, and school leaders as stressful. High-stakes exams, a packed curriculum, large class sizes, and a lack of resources contribute to this stress. Ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity pose further challenges in meeting the needs of learners (Chikovore, Makusha, Muzvidziwa, & Richter, 2012). The result is that many schools rely on a standardized, transmission-style pedagogy that runs counter to a culture that

[1] Pedagogy of Play is a collaboration between the LEGO Foundation and Project Zero, a research organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The project launched in 2015 at the International School of Billund (Denmark) and is expanding to other contexts to explore culturally relevant models of playful learning. For more information, please visit http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play.

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promotes learners' ownership, curiosity and enjoyment. Yet, despite these challenges, South African educators are beginning to incorporate play and playfulness into existing and new curricula in order to make learning more engaging, meaningful, and democratic (e.g., Aronstam & Braund, 2016; Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016).

To further the efforts to bring more learning through play to South African schools and classrooms, the first phase of the Pedagogy of Play South Africa project addressed two questions:

- What does playful learning look and feel like in three South African schools?
- What forces and factors support playful learning in these three schools?[7]

In this working paper we focus on this first question. We make the case for why a pedagogy of play is needed, in education generally and in South African schools specifically. We explain the qualitative research methods—including analysis of classroom observations and interviews with learners, teachers, and principals—used to explore our research questions and share our preliminary findings which include two hypotheses: a) learning through play in South African schools involves the interrelated experiences of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment and b) for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is a central part of playful learning. To explain these hypotheses, we share the "Indicators of Playful Learning," a model of what playful learning can look and feel like in South Africa and explore the connection between playful learning and the philosophy of Ubuntu. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our research and conclude with possible next steps for creating a South African Pedagogy of Play. To help illustrate our findings, three examples of playful learning from the schools in our

[7] While some see subtle but important differences between "learning through play" and "playful learning", in this paper we use the terms interchangeably.

study are provided. The first example comes from the Esikhisini Primary School in Atteridgeville, a working-class township in Pretoria.

Playful learning in a Grade 2 English lesson

Kabezwane Chezi's Grade 2 classroom at the Esikhisini School

There are many signs of playful learning during an English lesson in Kabezwane Chezi's Grade 2 classroom at the Esikhisini Primary School. Learners smile, sing, laugh, and participate actively. They use their imaginations and take risks. They help each other and seem proud of their accomplishments. The atmosphere in the room is one of safety, trust, and belonging. One of the learners even plays a drum throughout the lesson. Kabezwane's learners experience a sense of ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment.

The majority of Kabezwane's 45 eight-year-old learners speak isiZulu at home. Other learners, migrants from neighboring countries, speak a variety of other home languages. Following the national CAPS curriculum[8], Kabezwane's mandate is to help her learners master basic English phonetics skills and expand their vocabulary. She wants to build their confidence

[8] For information about the South African National Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) see: https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/CurriculumAssessmentPolicyStatements(CAPS).aspx.

in using this additional language. To do so, she employs playful learning so that, as she explains, "Learners own the lesson…own the classroom."

The lesson begins with the class singing the song *The More We Get Together the Happier We'll Be*. As his classmates joyfully sing and dance, Dakalo, the boy with the drum, plays along, a big smile on his face.

Dakalo with his drum

After the initial song, Kabezwane walks over to an alphabet poster. First in isiZulu and then in English, she explains that the day's English lesson will focus on the letter C. Throughout the lesson Kabezwane and her learners seamlessly move between the two languages. After using chanting and movement to review the sound C makes and how to write it, Kabezwane arrives at the heart of the lesson: half a dozen vocabulary words that start with C. For each word, Kabezwane has her learners clap out the syllables as Dakalo punctuates them by beating on the drum. To make the word's meaning memorable, Kabezwane then has her learners act out the word.

For *come* she asks all the learners to "come to the front of the room." There are many smiles as the entire group comes forward.

Acting out the word *come*

For *club*, groups of children imagine and enact being part of a soccer, dance, and book club.

soccer club

dance club

book clubs

For *calling*, Kabezwane asks Dakalo to call his friend Linda. He cries out "Linda!" as he beats his drum. With a smile on her face, Linda walks towards Dakalo. "Can you tell me what he is doing?," Kabezwane asks the class. Responding to the children's answers, she affirms, "He is calling!"

Dakalo calling Linda

Kabezwane asks Dakalo to step out of the room and instructs Linda to hide under her desk. She then asks Dakalo to return, and call Linda in order to find her. Reminiscent of a hide-and-go-seek game played at home, Dakalo dashes around the room, beating his drum and calling to his friend. His classmates laugh and smile at this very animated example of calling.

Dakalo (with his drum) running and calling to the hiding Linda

Why does Kabezwane include the drum in the lesson? During the first two months of school, she has observed Dakalo to be reserved and often disengaged with assignments. Discovering that his father plays the drums, and that Dakalo is being taught to play by his dad, Kabezwane procures a drum from the school's supply of instruments in the hopes of changing this dynamic.

The invitation is successful. Moving the lesson to a focus on print, Kabezwane asks her learners to go through their workbooks to find and write down as many words with C as they can. Dakalo, using the drum for a chair, gets right to work. Focused on the assignment, he shares a pencil with the boy next to him, making a list of all the C words he discovers. The drum has brought a dramatic change in Dakalo's school demeanor.

Dakalo searching for C words

The change continues over the course of the year, with Dakalo doing well in school socially and academically.

Why a South African Pedagogy of Play

What is it about play that makes it a powerful approach for learning? Play is a core way children learn, in early childhood and beyond (Zosh et al, 2018). Playful learning promotes physical, cognitive, and social emotional outcomes that are essential for school readiness and academic success (LEGO Learning Institute, 2013; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). Play-oriented early childhood programs lead to long-term academic gains (Marcon, 2002; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Research from primary and middle years classrooms demonstrates powerful links between play and the acquisition of academic skills, including deepening content knowledge in the domains of mathematics, literacy, science, and information and computer technology (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010; Honeyford & Boyd, 2015; Kangas, 2010; Kennewell & Morgan, 2006).

Playful learning is also a wellspring of creativity, and children who are more playful are often more creative (Bateson & Martin, 2013). Play provides children the opportunity to ask, "what if?", helping them identify problems and imagine solutions. In play they form new connections between people, ideas, materials and the world. In play children create, take risks, and make and change rules. They negotiate and learn to collaborate. With a playful mindset, they

explore and learn from mistakes. Like the Grade 2 learners in Kabezwane's class, they are engaged, relaxed, and challenged—states of mind highly conducive to learning (LEGO Learning Institute, 2013).

Foregrounding learning through play does not mean that we do not take learning seriously or maintain that all learning has to be playful. However, a close look at play reveals numerous emotional, social, and cognitive features that can powerfully support learning in many, if not most, circumstances. Hence the importance of bringing more playful learning into schools.

Yet bringing playful learning into schools is complicated (Kuschner, 2012). Play involves taking risks, while schools aim to be places of safety. Play feels timeless (players lose themselves in play), while school is timetabled. Play can be messy, chaotic and loud, while schools aspire to be places of order. In play children are in charge, while in school the agenda is often set by adults. These paradoxes can derail efforts to have children benefit from learning through play. Thus, the need for a pedagogy of play—an intentional approach to teaching and learning—that supports educators in navigating these paradoxes and leveraging the power of playful learning.

To this end, the Pedagogy of Play project was launched in 2015 as a collaboration between Project Zero, the oldest research organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the International School of Billund (ISB), an independent school in Denmark, and the LEGO Foundation. The project's playful participatory research approach (Baker et al., 2016) has yielded a tentative model for what playful learning involves ("Indicators of Playful Learning") and what factors support playful learning ("Influences on Playful Learning") at ISB (Mardell et al., 2016). Additionally, a set of guiding principles, tools, and illustrative pictures of practice have been developed to support playful learning in early childhood through middle school (See https://www.isbillund.com/en-gb/pedagogy-of-play/about-pop).

Because play is a universal phenomenon, we believe the ideas developed in Denmark have relevance to teaching and learning in other regions of the world. At the same time, play is a cultural construct. Who children play with, how they play, where and when they play, and when it is thought they should stop playing (if ever) are determined by cultural contexts (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013). How children learn through play and what shapes this playful learning are questions that can be answered only by examining everyday learning interactions in classrooms and schools. It is imperative that researchers critically analyze existing research and practice and consider how local factors—cultural values, ethnic and linguistic diversity, school resources, and social issues—inform teachers' and school leaders' understanding and implementation of playful learning approaches (Higgs, 2010, 2012; Roopnarine, Patte, Johnson & Kuschner, 2015).

Through classroom observations and interviews of teachers, learners, and school leaders, the Pedagogy of Play South Africa project aims to describe what playful learning looks and feels like and what factors support playful learning in South Africa. We recognize that our work so far is preliminary. Our hope is to spark dialogue and contribute to the ongoing efforts to make education in South Africa more empowering, engaging, and enjoyable.

Research methods

Three schools in Johannesburg and Pretoria were selected for the project because they included a range of grade levels and disciplines (Grade R through Grade 7)[9], exhibited a healthy and predictable school culture, had strong, supportive school leadership, and, importantly, indicated an interest in incorporating playful learning into their teaching practices. The schools differ in terms of resources and ethnic, linguistic, and economic backgrounds of the learners. While the three schools are typical for their types (e.g., the township school is similar to other

[9] In South Africa, Grade R or Reception, typically for five-year-olds, is the year before Grade 1. Grade R is being included in a growing number of public and private schools.

township schools in terms of learner demographics, learner to teacher ratios, and physical space), they were **not** chosen in an attempt to find representative schools regarding pedagogical practices. Rather, they were selected because existing practices offered the opportunities to observe learning through play in a range of classroom settings.

Esikhisini, "well of water" in isiZulu, is where Kabezwane teaches. It is a government primary school (Grade R through Grade 7) located in a working-class township of Pretoria. A quintile 2 school,[10] 85% of its 610 learners live in informal settlements located 5 kilometers or more from Esikhisini and qualify for free transportation to school. The majority of learners are black South African, with a growing minority from families whom have emigrated from other African countries. The school has cultivated partnerships with local businesses, universities, and cultural institutions to provide a range of extra-curricular activities for learners (from cricket to chorus).

Bryandale is a fee-paying, former model C[11], government primary school (Grade 1 through Grade 7) located in a middle-income neighborhood in suburban Johannesburg. Attached to the school is a fee-paying, private pre-primary school that offers Grade R education along with a creche. The learners—1,000 in the primary and 150 in the pre-primary--are approximately 50% Black, Coloured, and Indian, and 50% White, predominately from English-speaking homes. Both the pre-primary and primary follow the CAPS curriculum and embrace eight core values, one for each grade. Nadine Correia, the teacher in the second example, teaches Grade R at Bryandale where the core value highlighted is love.

[10] Quantiles refer to the wealth of a school and/or surrounding areas. Quantile 1 and 2 schools are the poorest schools in South Africa, often described as "no-fee-paying schools" that receive the majority of their funding from the government. In comparison, Quantile 4 and 5 schools are wealthier schools that often charge fees.

[11] Former model C school refers to a 'whites only' school under the apartheid regime, which, under democratic rule, has become racially inclusive.

Nova Pioneer Ormonde is a fee-paying independent primary (Grade R through Grade 7) and secondary (Grade 8 through Grade 12) school located near the center of Johannesburg. Most learners live 10 km or more from the school, many of whom come from Soweto, a township of Johannesburg. The 800 learners include children who are Black, Coloured, and of Indian descent. The school embraces an inquiry-based pedagogy, in part, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, and is part of a growing network of schools in South Africa and Kenya. The school has six stated culture principles: joy of learning, greater together, always growing, servant leadership, solutions first, and high expectations. Firdous Ismail Karolia, the teacher in the final example, teaches Grade 5 at Nova Pioneer.

With the help of school leaders, eleven Grade R through Grade 7 teachers (3-4 per school) were invited to participate in the research. They were identified based on their use of promising playful practices, openness to reflecting on their teaching, and interest in participating in the project. Participating teachers, all female, range in age from their mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Their ethnic background mirrors the demographics of the schools where they teach: four are Black, four are Indian, and three are white. Of the school leaders interviewed, three are men (one black and two white) and two are women (both white).

Data collection was conducted during the academic year and included:

Observations. Two local researchers (authors Khumalo and Nowack) conducted observations to document evidence of playful learning in each of the classrooms. A total of 92 observations were conducted (6-9 observations per teacher). Initial observations focused on documenting the overall setting (e.g., physical materials and resources) and the flow of learning activities in the classroom (e.g., school day schedule, curricular content). The next phase of observations had two components: 1) a focus on the teachers' pedagogical practice and instructional moves and 2) a focus on individual children's learning experiences (two learners per

classroom). These focus children were selected in conjunction with teachers as "typical learners" (with neither outstanding abilities or learning limitations) who would be willing to talk to the local researchers about their school experiences. While teachers knew of our interest in learning through play, we did not ask them to change their teaching in any way. In fact, we made it clear that we hoped they would do what they normally did during the observations. Of course, we recognize a likely observer effect, and we certainly focused teachers' attentions on playful learning. It is very possible that observed lessons included more learning through play than typical.

The researchers looked for these times in the classroom when playful learning seemed to be occurring. They focused on instances in which learning activities and interactions responded to learners' agency, interest, and/or positive affect, aspects identified from the researchers' own experiences in the South African educational system, prior Pedagogy of Play research, and relevant existing literature. During these observations, the researchers engaged in informal conversations with teachers and focus learners about the lessons (e.g., how did the lesson go? what did you like or not like about the lesson? how did the lesson make you feel?). Once a model of playful learning indicators was developed (described in the next section titled "Indicators of playful learning"), the researchers used it as an observational tool to determine its usefulness and appropriateness for representing playful learning interactions.

Teacher interviews. Teachers participated in a series of three semi-structured interviews with the local researchers, aimed at exploring their beliefs, attitudes, and practices related to playful learning. In the first interview teachers were asked about their background, school context, educational goals for learners, and initial thoughts about playful learning and its role in their instructional practice. In the second interview, teachers were asked about the terms and phrases that they use to describe playful learning practices. Interview prompts for this second

interview included open-ended questions and photo- and video-elicited questions in which teachers were asked to react to and reflect on specific moments captured in their classrooms during observations. The third interview asked teachers to respond to a draft of the indicators developed from the earlier interviews and observations and to indicate how well this model reflected their ideas about and experiences of learning through play. Teachers were also asked to suggest additional terms and concepts they would add to the model.

Focus groups. In focus groups, learners from four primary classrooms were asked to draw and reflect on a playful moment (i.e., one in which they felt curious and excited) they had previously experienced in class, as well as imagine their ideal learning moment. Both the drawing task and the group discussion were intended to elicit learners' descriptions of playful learning experiences; what they might look and feel like.

School leader interviews. School administrators participated in two interviews. The first asked them to describe their school context, educational priorities, and beliefs about learning through play. The second asked them to respond to a draft of the indicators of playful learning and how well the model represented playful learning in their school.

Emic, open coding was employed to identify themes related to playful learning that emerged in observation fieldnotes (which included photos and videos), interviews, and focus groups. Two researchers (authors Solis and Mardell) independently read fieldnotes, looked through photos, videos, and artifacts, listened to interviews, and discussed insights and themes that emerged in the data. In collaboration with the local researchers, emergent themes were summarized into categories and developed into a model of indicators of playful learning. Analysis utilized data triangulation as this model was tested and revised based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers, learners, and school leaders. As can be expected, not all observations or interviews yielded similar results. For example, when asked to compare the

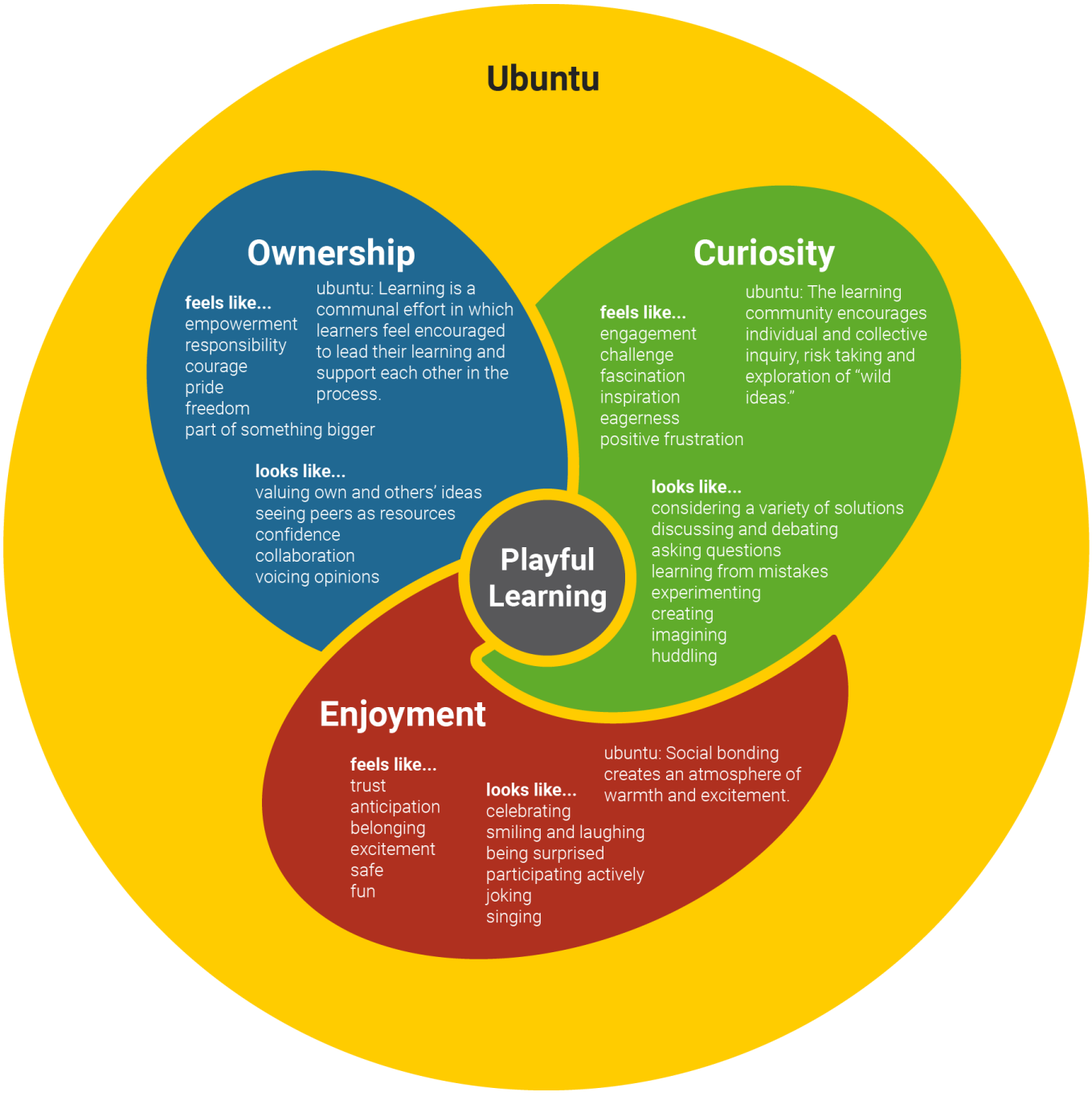
working South African model to a model previously created at the International School of Billund in Denmark, 10 out of 11 teachers preferred the indicators that emerged in South Africa. Reception teacher Asmaa Khan, on the other hand, felt that, "The Danish top headings feel more whimsical. Less formal. Softer. I love these words, ownership, curiosity and enjoyment, and I love these words, choice, wonder and delight, better. They give me a floating sensation." In such cases, we considered both confirming and disconfirming evidence and the consistency of responses to make final conclusions about our findings. In the case of the indicators, we concluded that the South African indicators of ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment (described below) better reflected the language and ideas shared by the educators.

We describe the model that emerged through this iterative process to address the question: What does playful learning look and feel like in three South African schools? The answer takes the form of our two hypotheses: a) learning through play in South African schools involves the interrelated experiences of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment and b) for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is a central part of playful learning.

Indicators of playful learning

We identified three categories of experiences that describe the nature of learners' experiences as they build understanding, knowledge, and skills through playful learning. Together, we call these categories the indicators of playful learning. Because learning through play includes both subjective and objective dimensions, within each category we name psychological states ("feels like") as well as observable behaviors ("looks like"). When all three categories are "in play," represented by the intersection of the petals in the diagram (see Figure 1), playful learning is likely occurring.

Figure 1. Pedagogy of Play South Africa Indicators of Playful Learning



Ownership involves learners feeling empowered to lead their own learning. For the playful learner, ownership includes a sense of freedom, pride, courage, responsibility, and being part of something bigger than themselves. To an observer, learners demonstrating ownership show confidence, voice opinions, value their own and other's ideas, see peers as resources, and collaborate. Ownership is the opposite of disenfranchisement.

As we saw in the first example, there is a sense of ownership among Kabezwane's Grade 2 learners. As they chant together, come forward together, and act out clubs together, there is a sense that they are part of something bigger than just themselves. Dakalo exudes pride as he plays his drum for his classmates.

Ownership, and the sense of freedom it involves, does not mean that a teacher is not involved in an activity. Instructional practices, such as those employed by Kabezwane including providing opportunities for collaboration and encouraging risk taking, help children take ownership of their learning.

Curiosity involves a drive to learn more. Learners feel challenged and engaged and, at times, experience positive frustration (dissatisfaction that leads them to try harder) and are eager to learn. To an observer, curiosity involves discussing and debating, imagining, experimenting and huddling (learners physically close to one another).

In the photographs of Kabezwane's learners, from their singing the initial song, to coming forward to the front of the room, to watching Dakalo call for Linda, one sees engaged learners. There is a sense of eagerness on their faces, as they connect their actions to the understanding of what different words mean. Their imaginations are activated when they pretend to be in their dancing, football, and book clubs.

Enjoyment involves learning that is active and joyful, leading to feelings of anticipation, trust, fun, belonging, and safety. Learners who feel enjoyment may smile, laugh, celebrate, and joke. Alternatively, enjoyment may be expressed through active participation.

Again, recall the photographs of Kabezwane's learners. Enjoyment is clear from their laughter and smiles. As they sing, dance, and act out together, there is excitement, anticipation, and fun. Kabezwane has created a classroom environment where there is a sense of trust and learners feel safe.

While, enjoyment is generally associated with laughter and fun, it can also be manifested as focused attention. This may be especially true in older grades, where, for example, a conversation may not produce laughter, but because of its interest and rapport, may be very enjoyable.

It is unlikely that even in the most playful classroom, all facets of the indicators will be visible and felt all the time. The indicators in each category offer a range of emotions and behaviors learners may exhibit. We believe that by identifying what playful learning may look or feel like, educators will be better equipped to foster it in their classrooms and schools.

In the graphic representation above, each category includes Ubuntu, a South African concept that includes a sense of generosity, harmony, compassion, and interconnectedness. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu (1999) summarizes the Ubuntu philosophy as, "a person is a person through other people." Ubuntu is an important emergent finding in our research that reflects the communal, collaborative, and social aspects of ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment that were central to the ways educators and learners described playful learning. A more detailed description of the relationship between playful learning and Ubuntu is provided further below. In the next example of what playful learning can involve in South Africa, you will

see aspects of the indicators of playful learning, including the role Ubuntu, in a Reception classroom.

Playful learning during a Reception center time

Serin and Ryana are huddling, discussing a drawing of a shark (formerly a crocodile) that Serin has made on her whiteboard. Serin explains how she has drawn the fin. Ryana suggests that she add an eye. Serin does. As their whiteboards are easily erased, and the girls freely share ideas about what to draw with each other, creatures appear, change, and disappear with impressive speed and fluidity.

Serin and Ryana discussing Serin's shark

It is midway through the daily, hour-long center time in Nadine Correia's Reception classroom at the Bryandale Preprimary School. Her 25 five-year-old learners are engaged in a variety of activities around the room: making birthday cards for a friend, building with blocks, and playing a letter matching card game. The activities promote children's emerging literacy and numeracy skills, along with fostering their abilities to collaborate and think creatively. It is clear

that Serin and Ryana value each other's ideas. Together, the girls experiment, imagine, and create. They take risks as they attempt difficult drawings. From the smiles on their faces, they seem to be enjoying themselves. And while they are making individual drawings, their feelings of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment are supported by their being together; from a sense of Ubuntu.

To start the center time, children are assigned to areas. After 15 minutes, they are free to go to where they want. Serin and Ryana are initially assigned to the white board table and have decided to stay. Their assignment: to draw as many objects with the "er" sound that they can think of. Early on, Nadine sits with the girls and two other children (Matthew and Tina). Nadine asks the learners what they are thinking of drawing. Tina calls out "ginger." Nadine asks, "what should I draw?" When flower is suggested she repeats, "flow-er", exaggerating the "er" sound, and begins to draw what looks like a daisy. Matthew declares, "I'm going to draw a fisher" and a figure with a fishing pole appears on his white board.

Nadine, Matthew, Tina and Ryana drawing "er" objects
as Serin ponders what to draw

Serin, whose whiteboard is blank, seems to be pondering what to do. While the other three children draw, she looks deep in thought. Nadine asks what she is thinking of drawing. Serin responds, "croc-**er**-dile." Nadine smiles, appreciating that Serin has found something that,

with her accent, is indeed a “er” word. Serin begins to draw. A creature with massive teeth appears. Serin adds a dorsal fin to her drawing. Her animal has become a shark. The shark is erased. Serin draws a mountain with a girl on top (“a climb**er**”), and Ryana does the same. From the similarities of their drawings—a rectangle shape mountain with a human figure on the top—it is clear that they are inspiring each other.

Drawing the climbers

Erasing her mountain, Serin tells Ryana, “After this I’m going to draw…” She pauses and wipes her board clean. “I’m going to draw…” Again, she pauses for a few seconds, deep in thought.

Serin thinking about what to drawing next

A smile crosses her face and she declares, “a cheetah!” “That’s my favorite animal,” Ryana replies excited, and immediately cleans off her white board. Serin begins her drawing with the bottom of the body—the legs and belly. Looking over at Serin’s white board, Ryana does the same. Dissatisfied with her effort, Ryana erases and starts again. “Drawing a cheetah is hard,” she muses. After several tries, she rotates her board from landscape to portrait orientation and starts sketching a rhino, an animal she has drawn before (note the ears and horn on her whiteboard in the photo below). Serin also expresses how difficult drawing a cheetah is.

Serin, Ryana and Alice

The girls are drawing quietly when Alice joins them at the table. Looking at her drawing, Serin begins to comment:

Serin: This looks like a…

Ryana: A donkey.

Serin (laughing): A donkey.

Alice: A pony.

Ryana (with authority in her voice): A donkey.

Serin (to Alice): I’m trying to draw a…

Ryana: Draw a cheetah.

Serin: I'm just going to make this a donkey.

Ryana: What!?

Serin smiles as she makes her creature's face more equine like.

However, within a minute, the donkey has morphed into a zebra with the addition of the requisite stripes.

A zebra

The drawing, erasing, imagining and laughing continue to the end of the center time. While there is no longer a focus on "er" objects, Nadine has signaled that the girls are free to draw whatever they would like, the playful interactions are contributing to the girls' creative and collaborative skills and dispositions. Asked about the experience, Ryana explains that, "I was happy to draw with my friend."

Again and again in our observations, we witnessed the social nature of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment. In Kabezwane's class, Dakalo's ownership of the lesson—his pride in playing the drum—emerges from the supportive reactions of his classmates. Serin and Ryana's curiosity—their imagination, experimenting and creating—seem closely related to their being

together. And enjoyment; Ryana explains the activity was fun because she was "with my friend." These observations, along with comments from teachers and learners, led us to the South African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu's role in playful learning in South Africa

While on one level, the experience of playful learning is individual—a person feels ownership, curiosity and enjoyment—in our observations and interviews the social dimension of playful learning was a consistent theme. Consider Serin and Ryana's interactions. They shared ideas of what and how to draw and even finished each other's sentences. The centrality of being part of a community in learners' experiences led us to our second hypothesis: that for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is an important part of playful learning. In this section, we provide a brief review of Ubuntu as it relates to South African polity and education. Although a thorough review of the relevant debates surrounding Ubuntu is beyond the scope of the present working paper, we discuss Ubuntu in relation to education in South African schools. We then discuss the relationship between playful learning and Ubuntu and the meaning educators at the three schools in our project ascribe to Ubuntu.

Ubuntu in South African society and education

Ubuntu is a complex philosophy with a long history of usage in African writing and rhetoric (Gade, 2011)[12] that is widely regarded as impacting the political, social, economic, educational institutions of South African society (Eze, 2010; Keevy, 2009; Mokgoro, 1998). Ubuntu is not easily-definable and debates exist as to its relation to nation building (Marx, 2002), human rights discourse (Thomas, 2008), and its role in education (Letseka, 2012; Waghid, 2014).

[12] According to Gade (2011), in its historical development in written discourse, Ubuntu has been defined and characterized in different ways. Before the 1950s, it was referred to as a human quality. After 1950, it was referred to as African humanism, a philosophy, ethic, or worldview. And between 1993-1995 the Nguni proverb "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," which translates as "a person is a person through other persons" was used to describe ubuntu.

Given its potential impact on all aspects of South African society, the legal, philosophical, and practical implications of Ubuntu are powerful and, at times, also contested (e.g., Keevy, 2009; Kubow & Min, 2016; Letseka, 2017). Yet scholars have also focused on its importance to notions of personhood, humanity, humanness, and morality in African philosophy (Mokgoro, 1998). Mtibi's (1971) definition—*I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am*—is one of several that denote social interdependence, community, and a sense of compassion, respect, concern for others, and even conformity (Letseka, 2012; Mokgoro, 1998). The Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* often translated as "a person is a person through other persons" captures the interconnectedness invoked by Ubuntu. At its core, Ubuntu is about human dignity (Mokgoro, 1998).

As South Africa has emerged from Apartheid, and has become a multicultural democracy, Ubuntu is seen by many as a worldview that can be used to help build a nation where citizens share values regarding democracy and human rights (Mandela, 2012; Thomas, 2008; Tutu, 1999). It is not surprising then that Ubuntu is promoted as a guiding philosophy in South African education by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. Scholars, theorizing about possible futures for South African education, argue that Ubuntu should serve as a core idea for the education system as it contributes to building a democratic, inclusive, and moral society. For example, in his article "Towards a different understanding of African education: reconstituting the place of Ubuntu," Waghid (2014) writes about Ubuntu's role in guiding relationships between both individuals within a community as well as between multiple communities. He illustrates this by naming the two paths of Ubuntu within education: the fulfillment of individual responsibility, and the upholding of community ideals and values. This is also the position of both Letseka (2012) and Msila (2007); that the inclusion of Ubuntu in educational structures can be important in building a more democratically-minded society. As Letseka (2013) writes,

"educating for ubuntu/botho should entail equipping young people with the kinds of attributes and dispositions that enable them to live lives that are anchored in communal understandings of personhood and humaneness" (p. 338). Waghid (2014) further names the importance of recognizing "otherness" in school and using inclusive and tolerant language in education. Ubuntu is seen to have a place in steering curriculum as well as the assessment of learning.

Policymakers, making recommendations for teachers and administrators, have also identified Ubuntu as an important philosophy. The South African Department of Education's *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* names Ubuntu as one of the fundamental values of South African education. The concept of Ubuntu is defined in this manifesto as human dignity. It identifies an aspect of Ubuntu as being the ability to accept and appreciate human difference (South African Department of Education, 2001). Educators are urged to create school and classroom cultures of open dialogue and respect. Respectful communications between teachers, families, and learners are seen as essential.

Ubuntu and its implications for education and the greater South African society continue to be researched and theorized. Debates about its interpretations and integration into South African social institutions are ongoing and will surely continue to evolve. All the while, citizens—educators, learners, parents—reflect on how it may inform their daily lives and interactions. In our conversations with educators, learners, and school leaders as well as in our observations of classroom experiences, we saw Ubuntu guiding and supporting playful learning, which we discuss next.

Ubuntu and playful learning

Entering the Esikhisini Primary School, one is greeted by a sign that reads, in bold, capital letters: UBUNTU. Teachers, learners, and administrators in our study described Ubuntu as central to the mission of education. They explained Ubuntu as including a sense of generosity,

harmony, and interconnectedness, as they made connections between their existing educational experiences and playful learning. They also described Ubuntu as the love, diversity, humanity, and a sense of family that emerges in playful learning.

When describing Ubuntu, Grade 6 teacher Nikki Davis, explains that it is the feeling of "being dependent on each other," "everyone is contributing," and "you value others' opinions as part of the group." For her, playful learning is a communal effort where everyone, teachers and learners, is responsible for the learning that is taking place. Ubuntu is in evidence when, as Grade 5 learner Siphesihle explains about exams, "I want all my classmates to pass, so I have to help them." When asked about the emerging indicators of playful learning model, all teachers and school heads in our research reacted positively to including Ubuntu.

As an important South African philosophy, Ubuntu seems to help educators in making the link between their current practices and what is understood as playful learning. When we describe Ubuntu under **ownership**, as "Learning is a communal effort in which learners feel encouraged to lead their learning and support each other in the process," we are capturing the feeling of ownership that a learner experiences when she knows that she belongs to the educational community in her classroom and her school. She can depend on others to support her learning and she also has the agency to contribute and lead the direction of learning.

Similarly, when we describe **curiosity** as immersed in a context of Ubuntu as, "the learning community encourages individual and collective inquiry, risk taking, and exploration of 'wild ideas,'" we are describing the engagement and fascination that arise when the community is invested in pushing learners' thinking. It refers to the atmosphere created by playful learning that fosters learners' explorations and where, as Grade R teacher Nadine Correia explains, learners feel the freedom to "extend knowledge."

Finally, Ubuntu is manifested through **enjoyment** when "social bonding creates an atmosphere of warmth and excitement." As described by Grade R teacher Sibongile Mnisi, Ubuntu means that learners and teachers recognize the humanity in others and "treat others like they would like to be treated." That is, Ubuntu is present in playful learning when the social bonds allow learners to feel safe, accepted, and excited in their classrooms and schools.

A further connection between Ubuntu and play are the parallels between how theorists of the two concepts explain their importance. Paley (1999, 2004) has written extensively about how play helps create caring communities, allowing children to get to know each other, share ideas and feelings, and act with kindness. One can hear echoes of Paley's sense of community in Sindane's (1994) writing: "Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to enrich our own" (p. 8-9). This is not far from the play sociologist Henricks (2006), who maintains that, "Play is not a flight from the world; it is inquiry into the challenges and responsibilities of social living." Through play learners develop a sense of Ubuntu. And through Ubuntu play can involve a sense of inclusivity and belongingness.

In our final example, from Firdous Ismail Karolia's Grade 5 class at Nova Pioneer Ormonde, we find learners encounters of differences enriching their own learning, central to Sindane's understanding of Ubuntu. The example provides a further sense of what practices South African teachers employ to foster playful learning in their classroom. And as it is sometimes assumed that learning through play is only relevant in early childhood, the example is also an opportunity to consider what playful learning feels and looks like with older learners.

Playful learning in Grade 5

What can learning through play look like with older learners, when the curricular demands on teachers and learners expand and content often become more serious? There are

extensive curricular demands on Firdous and her 31 Grade 5 learners at Nova Pioneer Ormonde, where the rigorous Cambridge Curriculum is followed.[13] Yet in their year-long study of writing genres, playful learning—exhibited through experiences of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment—are clearly in evidence.

Firdous with some of her learners

Consider a two-part lesson on informational texts in which Firdous' class debate the nature of facts and create fictional species about which they create informational texts. Previously, to consider features of the genre, Firdous has provided her learners with informational texts including: *How to Build an Airplane* and *All About Bears*. To relaunch the conversation, Firdous asks them to share their current definitions of informational texts. She does not provide them an official definition, but rather supports the group in co-constructing a definition.

[13] For information on the Cambridge Curriculum see: http://www.cambridgeinternational.org/about-us/.

An interesting argument arises when Abdullah illustrates his definition with the example of Spiderman. According to Abdullah, it is a fact that Spiderman can spin webs from his wrists. He argues that, “Even though Spiderman is not real, it is still a fact that he fights crimes.”

Abdullah sharing his opinion about Spiderman

Mbali disagrees. She maintains that this is not a fact because Spiderman is fictional, and fiction does not give “correct information.” Lots of hands pop up and a spirited debate ensues.

The start of the Spiderman debate

Firdous lets the conversation unfold for a few minutes and then asks the group, “Do all facts have to be true to life?” Refocused, the conversation continues.

During a break later in the day, learners go to the dictionary to look up "fact." Bringing the definitions back to the whole class, new questions are debated over the next few days, including:

- If a fact is "something that actually exists", is fear a fact?
- If the definition of fact is "things known to be true", what about religious beliefs that are "known to be true" for some, but not others?

It is noteworthy that rather than being divisive, the Spiderman debate brings the learners together to find out more. They own this conversation. They are curious to learn more. Earlier in the year, at the start of a conversation where they were asked to share their opinions about a painting, several learners expressed reservations, worried that classmates would disagree and even ridicule them. Firdous had reminded them about their class norms, which include: it is good to disagree respectfully. Several months later, the classroom culture and community gives learners the courage to share their opinions freely.

For Firdous, the Spiderman debate is wonderful serendipity. She has planned an activity in which learners will devise informational texts based on "facts" about a fictional species of their own devising. Along with providing a segue into the assignment, she normalizes the reality that learning involves moments of confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity. She tells her learners, "I'm loving what is coming out of this conversation. A lot of you seem a little confused. Some of you are now unsure. You were sure and now you are unsure. And I'm going to make it a little more complicated." Some learners groan good naturedly.

Firdous explains the assignment: to create a species and write an informational text about it. She tells her learners to imagine that, "You are the scientist; it's your discovery. You can draw or write the facts first. It's okay to think of real-life plants and animals to get inspiration. It's okay to look at one another's work because this enables you to share ideas and to give each other feedback. However, make the creature your own."

Tadiswa has a question: “Ma’am may I please use the globe? I want to see where my animal will be from.” Firdous agrees and Tadiswa fetches the globe from the bookshelf.

Tadiswa considering the globe

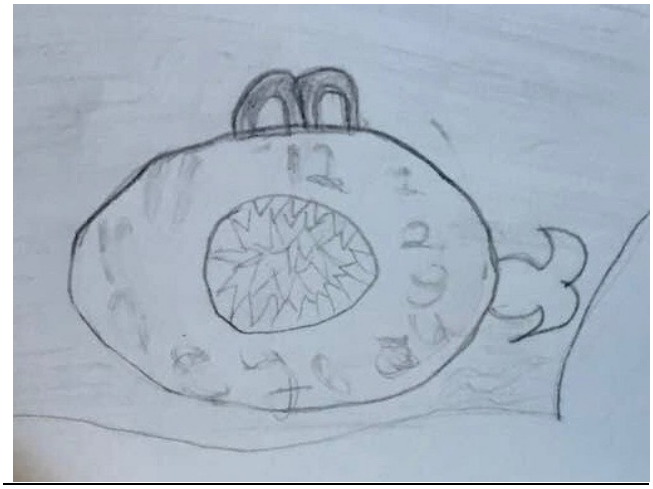
She takes the orb to her table and studies it. She spins it around slowly, looking at it intently. Tadiswa explains what she is thinking:

> *I don’t want it to come from South Africa. I want to go somewhere where nobody has ever been to. Or somewhere that is very rare. Something new, like having an ice cream flavor for the first time…I just want to find something that is really exciting…It will stand out. It will be a little different. It will have that little touch.*

Thinking and then starting to write

After five minutes Tadiswa starts to write. Abdullah asks her to share the globe with him so he can find a home for his animal. She gladly hands it over. A good idea is shared rather than guarded as proprietary. As she writes, Tadiswa’s ideas advance. She decides her creature will be a sea animal but will also spend time on land.

After 20 minutes it is lunch time. Writing continues the next day in a 45-minute workshop period. Tadiswa builds on her previous day's work. She writes, shares what she has written with Abdullah for feedback, and writes some more. In the end, she names her animal the Tic Toc. Note the numbers proceeding clockwise around the creature's body.



The Tic Toc

Tadiswa's informational text about her animal describes its anatomical features, its range, diet and habits. It lives on and in the waters around Kermadec Island (New Zealand). Abdullah, who imagined he was a zoologist who, on discovering his creature, called in colleagues to help him study it, places his creature, "in the depths of the Pacific Ocean." They explain that the isolated locations are, in part, to protect their creatures from human interference. Tadiswa empathetically explains, "you need to consider your creatures needs. You would not want your creature to feel afraid."

How did Tadiswa feel about this lesson? Her answer highlights her feelings of enjoyment, curiosity and ownership:

> *It was fun that we get to do this. Well, everything is fun about it because like we get to invent something that is different. We get to create. It's just like really exciting. They are ours.*

And of learning, Tadiswa explains:

> *I learned from different pieces of our subjects. For example, science. We learned about habitats. How different animals can adapt to a specific habitat for them. It brought in my geography because I wanted to find a good place for my animal to survive…It brought in my writing skills because it taught me of different ways of writing.*

She concludes:

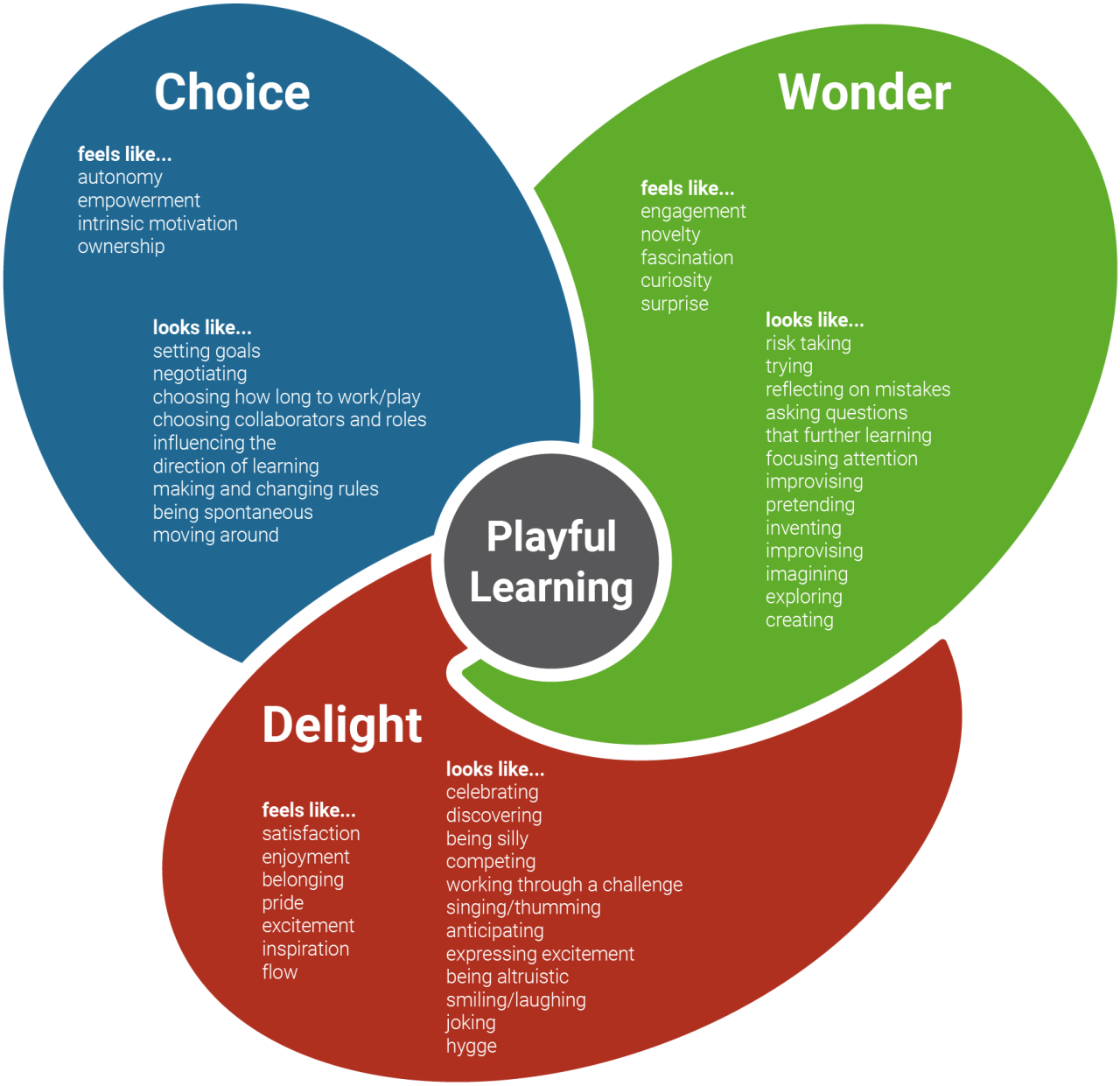
> *When I first started I didn't know about informational texts…And we also had many debates about what a fact is.*

In the lesson Firdous has created, Tadiswa and her classmates are encountering complexity. They are pursuing questions that do not have simple or single answers and experience the courage and confidence to voice their opinions. They are inventing their world and feel encouraged to take risks and explore their wild ideas. They are learning about informational texts and participating actively in the learning process. In other words, they are experiencing ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment. And they are doing all this together, exuding a feeling of Ubuntu. Well past their early childhood years, Tadiswa and her classmates have encountered high curricular demands and learned about them through play.

Discussion: Implications for theory and practice

We see implications for both theory and practice from this research. Theoretically, the emerging South African indicators of playful learning, along with the model created at the International School of Billund in Denmark (see Figure 2) support our efforts to build a broader understanding of learning through play in schools.

Figure 2: International School of Billund Indicators of Playful Learning



Theorizing about learning through play involves engaging in the tension between the universal and culturally specific nature of human behavior and development. It is noteworthy that from the ethnographic, situated analysis of this project, playful learning in South Africa, as in Denmark, can be described as occurring at the intersection of the three interrelated categories. These categories—ownership, curiosity and enjoyment—have parallels with the International School of Billund's (ISB) categories of choice, wonder, and delight. For example, ownership and choice both involve feelings of empowerment for learners. Equally noteworthy are the differences between the two models. Although some of the indicators for each category overlap, there are other indicators of what playful learning looks like and feels like that are unique to the context. For example, huddling appears as an indicator of curiosity in South Africa but does not appear in the ISB model. Furthermore, in the South African version, Ubuntu plays a major role in characterizing the social nature of playful learning.

Interviews with the 11 teachers involved in this study, where we shared the model created in Denmark, affirm the cultural dimension of playful learning in schools. While appreciative of the ISB version, 10 out of 11 teachers preferred the model developed in South Africa. Grade 2 teacher Nuhaa Ismail was supportive of the local model because, "These words make it unique for South Africa." Grade 2-3 teacher Pravashnee Mongrove noted, "Delight is the same thing, but I associate more with enjoyment." Kirstin Daniels, who teaches Grade 5 maths observed, "Ownership and empowerment are such South African ideals." Overall, Reception teacher Sibongile Mnisi captures the feelings of her colleagues when she explained, "I like our words better."

As we look beyond our study to other models describing play, the observation that learning through play has universal aspects is further affirmed by similarities between the emerging South African model and the LEGO Foundation's *Five Characteristics of Learning*

*through Play (*http://www.legofoundation.com/da-dk/who-we-are/learning-through-play/play-characteristics). The *Five Characteristics* were created through an extensive review of the literature on play in humans and other species and interviews with experts from around the world to describe the universal aspects of learning through play. The model holds that learning though play is a) joyful, b) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking, c) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, d) involves iterative thinking (experimentation, hypothesis testing, etc.), and e) involves social interaction. The belonging, trust, fun, and excitement noted in the South African indicators maps on closely to the *Five Characteristics* category of joyful. Eagerness, creating, asking questions, and being challenged in the curiosity petal of the model aligns with active, engaged, minds-on thinking. Learning through mistakes and considering a variety of solutions (also in curiosity) maps on to the iterative nature of learning through play. The empowerment, pride, and responsibility involved in the ownership petal connect with the meaningful nature of learning through play found in the *Five Characteristics*. While the model in our study refers to playful learning specifically in schools and was co-constructed with educators through observations and interviews, and the *Five Characteristics* is a meta-model that can be used to understand play across all settings and cultures, the connections between the two are instructive.

Our findings support the idea that while learning through play is universal, the way that it is integrated into schools is culturally specific. Further research in settings culturally and economically different in and beyond South Africa and Denmark will provide the data needed to discern patterns and confirm or disconfirm the findings from this initial work. Ultimately, we hope to create a meta-model of learning through play in schools and formulate an effective, culturally-informed, and participatory research method to created indicators of playful learning

for specific contexts. Together, the model and method will support educators around the world in articulating what learning through play involves in their schools.

Our research findings also highlight practices that can support playful learning in South African classrooms. Such practices are illustrated by the three vignettes we shared throughout the paper. Grade 2 teacher Kabezwane Chezi plans activities that engage her learners in using all their senses and has them respond to content with physical actions.

The soccer club in Kabazwane's class

Nadine Correia's Reception learners can work individually and in small groups (as well as in the whole group), learn with a variety of materials and engage in challenges (such as drawing different animals).

The challenge of drawing a shark in Nadine's class

Firdous Ismail has her Grade 5 learners respond to open ended questions and scenarios and engage in discussions and debates.

The Spiderman debate in Firdous's class

These practices activated learners' feelings of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment.

Drawing on observations from all 11 classrooms, and in collaboration with the teachers, we are developing a planning and reflection tool to support teachers' efforts to connect learning objectives with practices that promote learning through play (see Appendix A). The tool, which will undergo further field testing, also invites teachers "to be playful" and use their own ideas to promote feelings of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment. The tool makes concrete connections between theory (the indicator model) and classroom practices.

At the start of this paper, we noted the need for a culturally relevant understanding of learning through play. The tool, the indicators model which links play with the important philosophy of Ubuntu, along with examples of what playful learning looks and feels like, all advance efforts to create a South African Pedagogy of Play.

Towards a South African Pedagogy of Play

In order to support learning through play, educators need to be clear about the phenomenon they aim to promote. This is the reason this paper began with the question: what does playful learning look and feel like in South African schools? We enumerated two hypotheses to answer this question: a) learning through play in South African schools involves the interrelated phenomenon of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment and b) for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is a central part of playful learning.

Naming these as hypotheses underscores that our work describing the indicators of playful learning is provisional. South Africa is a diverse country geographically and culturally, and we make no claims that the three schools in this study are representative of the entire nation. However, as these hypotheses represent the voices and experiences of the South African teachers and learners we have observed and interviewed, we hope that our findings about what playful learning looks and feels like lays the groundwork for a South African Pedagogy of Play. We recommend three next steps in this endeavor:

Further research on the nature of learning through play in South Africa. Just as a ISB version of the indicators of playful learning could not be simply imported to Johannesburg, a model created in urban settings in Gauteng Province cannot be a priori extrapolated to rural South African schools or the Eastern Cape. While it may be that the playful learning is very similar throughout the country, this is an empirical question. Additional research about what playful learning looks and feels like across diverse South African schools will help answer this question.

Create tools and materials for teachers interested in playful learning. Building on an understanding of what playful learning involves, we worked with the eleven teachers in this study to create a planning and reflection tool to bring more playful learning into the CAPS and other curricula used around the country (see Appendix A). We are currently field testing this tool. And, as discussed above, we have identified some promising playful practices used by these teachers. Additional tools, pictures of practice, and digital media that support teachers in implementing these practices; for example, we envision a tool that helps facilitate open-ended questions that invite the playful learning and discussion that Firdous uses with her Grade 5 learners. Overall, further work is required here to articulate a coherent pedagogy of play for South African teachers across grade levels and content areas.

Support for school leaders in creating school cultures where learning through play thrives. It is noteworthy, and given the educational research not surprising, that when asked what helps them teach in a playful way, all 11 teachers named their school leaders. As guardians of their school learning culture, leaders play a critical role in promoting learning through play. Consequently, efforts to assist them is essential to this work. The indicators can support school leaders' classroom observations and guidance for teachers reflecting on playful learning. The planning tool can be used by principals in creating staff meetings where teachers experience learning through play in service of promoting school cultures where playful learning thrives.

For both teachers and school leaders, understanding the forces that support learning through play (our second research question) will be valuable. A subsequent working paper will share findings about these forces—the values, community, environment, structures, and practices—that in the three schools in our study promoted learning through play. Our hope is that awareness of these forces will help educators in other schools build cultures where learning through play thrives.

As South Africa faces the demands of the 21st Century and the challenges of building social structures that are just and democratic, educators must equip learners with the knowledge and skills to be engaged, empowered citizens (Enslin & Horsthemke, 2011; Letseka, 2012). It is exciting to see Dakalo, Linda, Serin, Ryana, Tadiswa, Abdullah and their classmates being prepared for these challenges. Our aspiration is that, building on the work of their teachers, a South African Pedagogy of Play can lead to all learners in the country receiving this kind of education.

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Appendix A: Learning Through Play Planning and Reflection Tool

Pedagogy of Play: South Africa

PLAN FOR LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Think about how you can incorporate more learning through play into your lesson. Check the boxes that address your objectives and use the blank spaces next to them to describe how you might do this in the lesson. We invite you to be playful and write in your own ideas in the space provided at the bottom of each indicator.

OWNERSHIP *Encourage a collective feeling of **empowerment**, **freedom**, **responsibility**, and **pride**. Prompt learners to **voice their opinions**, **collaborate**, **value their own and others' ideas**, and **see peers as resources**.* **Learners can…**	
☐ Work individually, in pairs, or groups	
☐ Share their learning in different ways	
☐ Choose from a variety of learning activities	
☐ Ask their peers for help or offer help to others	
☐ Display their work around the classroom	
Add your own ideas and practices to encourage ownership.	

CURIOSITY *Encourage a collective feeling of **engagement**, **challenge**, **inspiration**, and **positive frustration**. Support learners in **imagining**, **experimenting**, **creating**, **asking questions**, and **learning from mistakes**.* **Learners can…**	
☐ Engage in discussions and debates	
☐ Respond to open-ended questions and scenarios	
☐ Explore outside of the classroom	
☐ Build with a variety of objects and materials	
☐ Access different sources of information	
Add your own ideas and practices to encourage curiosity.	

ENJOYMENT *Encourage a collective feeling of **excitement**, **anticipation**, **belonging**, and **safety**. Create opportunities for learners to **participate actively**, **celebrate**, **smile and laugh**, **joke**, **sing**, and **be surprised**.* **Learners can…**	
☐ Engage in activities with all their senses	
☐ Respond to class content with physical actions	
☐ Explore content through puzzles, scavenger hunts, or riddles	
☐ Engage in challenges and friendly competition	
☐ Incorporate traditional and indigenous games, songs, and dances	
Add your own ideas and practices to encourage enjoyment.	

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