

Lydia's Day in M7:

“There's a lot of freedom”

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“There’s a lot of freedom”: Lydia’s Day in M7

Middle school and playful learning are generally not an easy fit. With increasing curricular demands that are often paired with high stakes testing, it can be hard to make the case or find the time for playful learning in the adolescent classroom. Yet, long after the block areas and dramatic play of early schooling have been left behind, the impulse to play and the learning benefits of doing so continue.

The middle years are a unique time in development. Straddling childhood and adulthood, adolescents face the challenge of establishing their own identity, defining their values and beliefs, and determining a future path. It is also a time of identification with peer groups and increasing independence. As they master more sophisticated skills and wrestle with complex ideas at school, middle schoolers seek both freedom and guidance from adults. During this time, play and playfulness can be successful strategies for middle school teachers to use to support learning.

Just as the development of adolescents looks different from that of young children, so too does their play. What does this playful learning look like in a middle school? What creates the conditions for playful learning to flourish? Pedagogy of Play (PoP) practices can help support educators in exploring these questions. This piece follows one thirteen-year-old student, Lydia¹, through her school day at the International School of Billund (ISB) in Denmark, offering a window into what playful learning can look like in middle school and how Lydia’s teachers have paved the way for its existence. The piece highlights three PoP practices: *learners leading their own learning, fostering trust and welcoming negotiation, and connecting life inside and outside the classroom.*

¹When referring to children, pseudonyms are assigned throughout this paper

These three practices are unified throughout this piece by one central idea: freedom. When Lydia reflects on the playful nature of her learning during her day, the concept of freedom surfaces repeatedly: freedom in the choice of topics she studies, freedom of where and with whom she works, freedom about how she structures both her class and her free time. This freedom that Lydia often equates with her playful learning is not happenstance, but is the result of structures, routines, and a school and class culture, often co-created with the teachers, administrators, and students at ISB.

Over the course of her day, Lydia presents as a kind, hard-working student who engages intently with her work, talks in class when she has something to say, includes others, and floats comfortably amongst groups of her peers. Her English teacher Charlotte describes her as a student with “good ideas and strong friendships with the girls in the class...Lydia is very supportive. She is very patient. She doesn’t tend to judge people very much.” As a result, she quietly emerges as a leader in small group work.

When Lydia moved to Denmark from her home country, the United Kingdom, just under two years ago, she joined a small class at ISB that has only sixteen students. Over the course of the day, the trust amongst the students is clear: the M7 class operates as a close-knit group who, for the most part, accept each other, hold each other accountable for their work, help redirect each other when they are off task, playfully poke fun of each other, and share both moments of excitement and frustration, almost more like a family than a class.

Lydia's Tuesday Schedule

7:30-8:00 Arrival

8:00-8:10 Homeroom

8:10-9:40 Individuals and Societies

9:40-10:00 Break/Snack

10:00-11:30 Yoga Elective

11:30-12:30 Play/Lunch

12:30-13:15 English Language and Literature

12:15-14:00 Danish Language Acquisition

14:00 Dismissal

ISB is an International Baccalaureate school that follows their Middle Years Programme. During the week, Lydia also has classes in Maths, Science, Spanish, Physical Education, Design and Technology, and the Arts (Visual Arts, Music, or Drama, for one trimester each). In addition, she has a 45-minute advisory period once a week. Depending on the day, middle school is dismissed at 14:00, 15:00, or 15:45.

Trusted from the onset: Arrival

It is mid-May, six weeks before the end of the school year. On this particular Tuesday, it is unusually warm and sunny in Billund, and the unexpected weather has added an upbeat tone to the school. Lydia and her friend Clara bike the 15-minute ride to school together, as they do most days, rain or shine. They arrive at school at 7:30, before many of their classmates. They don't need to check in with anyone upon arrival; they and their peers are trusted, as they are at all unstructured parts of their day, to move around the appropriate areas of the school on their own. The bell rings at 7:55 to signal the official start of the school day, and the middle school students make their way to homeroom. This is the only bell the students hear during the day. The rest of the time, they are responsible for keeping track of time and transitioning from one place to the next on their own, with occasional reminders from a teacher.


Learners in the lead: Homeroom

The M7 homeroom could be described with the Danish word *hygge*, often translated as “cozy,” and also meaning “having a good time with friends.” On this particular day, the students have the option to do what they would like in the 10-minute homeroom period, and they run the period without adult interruption: one student sits on the windowsill engrossed in her book, another at a desk reading his book, two other students work on a computer, while the rest of the class sits at group tables and chats amongst themselves. Several students begin a game of Pictionary on the whiteboard, drawing pictures and getting other students to guess what they are. Over time, more students join the game until almost the entire class is playing.

Awanti Seth-Rabenhøj is the M7 homeroom teacher and middle school art coordinator. She is originally from India and has been teaching for 10 years, three of them at ISB. She notes that while “[the M7s] do like their Pictionary, and they will find imaginary words that are not in the dictionary,” the students’ repertoire of chosen activities for homeroom is broader than Tuesday’s example.



The M7 Homeroom



One student, Adelaine, *finds space in homeroom to bridge her passions outside of school with topics she is studying in class*. Awanti explains, “[Adelaine] is very, very deeply involved in feminist issues and looking into racism, and these discussions very often happen in class in the ten minutes in the morning...[Adelaine’s] interest has [also] pulled the class into discussing things like this: What is it to be a feminist? Why is child slavery wrong?” Awanti invites these connections during the homeroom period, although does not push them; the *learners are in the lead*.

Homeroom activities continue until 8:12, two minutes after the start of the next period, when one student asks, “Did anyone tell us to go to class?” There is a collective looking around the room. “Oh, yeah,” another student says. There are nods of agreement as everyone rushes to gather their things and heads to the first class.



“There’s a lot of freedom”: Individuals and Societies

Lydia’s first class of the day is Individuals and Societies, a class that combines humanities and the social sciences. The class is taught by Sahana Krishnadas, who came to Denmark from Germany and has been working at ISB for 3 years. In this 90-minute period, Lydia and her classmates are wrapping up a “service in action” summative project that they have been working on in small groups for five weeks. The project is part of a larger unit on sustainability where students chose a topic to research, present their findings, and reflect on their learning. Project topics range from fair trade chocolate to child slavery.

Lydia explains her group’s project, which is about food waste and its local and global implications: “[We have] been focusing a lot on consumption and how we buy things and where they actually come from...We had to find out what we wanted [the project] to be about, get what information we needed, and make an action about it...We were looking at what we wanted to do; we found out that Denmark wastes quite a lot of food, and so we started off by getting some information about it.” As part of their research, Lydia’s group designed and then sent a survey out to all of the middle school students, as well as teachers and parents across the school. Lydia continues, “We realize that people are aware of [food waste], but they don’t really do anything about it because they don’t really feel like it’s affecting them in any way. So, we wanted to really present them with the facts and say, ‘this is actually a thing: this is happening.’” To meet their goals, they chose to make a short film that advertised their findings. At Sahana’s suggestion, the group showed a draft of their film to the class for feedback.

Today, Lydia's group is in the process of incorporating this feedback in order to make the video more engaging, since, as Lydia explains, "when we showed it to people they said it was a bit boring." Lydia's group selects an empty classroom in which to work, sitting down at a table that seats their four group members. Each member uses a school laptop computer, and they spend the period working on parts of the video that include written paragraphs with accompanying explanatory audio to go with images.

The group works in a collegial atmosphere, negotiating roles, coordinating workflow, and deciding how to work. The result is a class period marked by silence with long stretches of individual work on the task at hand, punctured by periodic conferring about what still needs to be done, problem solving technology issues, and asking questions. The group members also pause, take short breaks, joke around, and redirect each other. Lydia is particularly focused. She spends the period putting the group's work into a program called Movie Maker and adding audio to the pictures. She sits at her computer for the first hour, only getting up when one of her groupmates asks for help.



Several instances arise over the course of the period that need navigating. As the group negotiates who will do what, one group member, Oliver, asks a number of questions. Another group member, Evelyn offers him choices, "If you want, you can choose a paragraph to edit or you can help find the pictures." Later Oliver appears worried and raises a concern, "If I'm the only one without audio, it's going to look like I didn't do anything." The group members respond explaining that only one of them, Greta, recorded the audio. Greta tries to reassure him, "Don't worry, we didn't make it look like you didn't do anything."

Later in the lesson, Greta discovers that some of the audio she recorded makes her sound like she has an artificially deep voice. Lydia and Greta decide to watch this part of the movie and discuss what they hear:

Greta: That's good! Wait...the deep voice, does it really matter?

Lydia: Well, it's kind of weird because of the start your voice is really deep and then it changes for no apparent reason.



Greta cracks a joke, “Uh, it’s puberty!” Her groupmates appreciate the humor and have a good laugh. She continues, “I mean, honestly, it just makes it more interesting.” Still laughing, Lydia switches gears and asks Greta how to save the file. Over the course of the period, there is celebrating, too. When Lydia finishes a section she is working on, she pulls out her headphones and looks up, “Done with paragraph seven! Okay!”

Many signs of playful learning could be observed in the groupwork during the period, including students setting goals, deciding how long to work, trying, reflecting on mistakes, celebrating, and smiling and laughing. After the lesson ends, Lydia weighs in on whether she personally experienced playful learning. She first identifies her learning: “Obviously I’ve learned more about where stuff comes from... I’ve learned a lot about Movie Maker in this lesson,” she laughs, “and also teambuilding skills because you have to work with other people and you have to separate work out between us to get it done, trying to get it done faster.” Lydia then describes the lesson as playful “because there’s a lot of freedom. We have to figure everything out ourselves and we get to decide how we want to do it.”

Indeed, Lydia’s group led their own learning throughout the period. Sahana only came into the classroom twice to check in. The students had the freedom to choose where to work and what to get done. The students also had a choice of what to research—both the nature of the subject matter and the students’ ability to select a topic to study allowed for natural connections between school and the outside world. The students were investigating real world situations, conducting research, and taking action, much like they might outside of school if they wanted to effect change in the world. These choices are indicative of a trust that exists not only between teachers and students, but also between the teachers and the administration. All parties trust that the students will be engaged and get the work done. Lydia’s comment equating playfulness with freedom highlights the importance of trust and freedom in fostering playful learning for older students. Because of this trust, the teachers do not micromanage, and the students are allowed to be themselves: middle schoolers, and as such they make jokes, take occasional breaks, reassure each other, and learn in the process.

Break

After Individuals and Societies, the students have a 20-minute break. A snack of carrots and cucumbers prepared by the school canteen is available for those who are hungry, and teachers rotate playground duty. Lydia describes her breaks, “We just sit around and talk.” She pauses and laughs, adding, “and annoy each other.” The students are supposed to be outside during break, though they are free to come and go as they please. Lydia and her friends choose to sit in the warmth of the sun on top of a large wooden block. They laugh and joke with each other. Clara sprawls on Anna’s lap, reading a book in Danish for a lesson she has after school. She reads some to herself, and her friend Edward reads some out loud to her, drawing supportive laughs and jokes from the others. When the break is over, without reminders from any adults, Lydia and her friends head inside with their classmates to their elective classes.



Anna, Clara, Lydia, and Edward hang out during their morning break

“More refreshed...more ready to learn:” Yoga

Next up is yoga, one of many weekly elective classes offered throughout the year, including coding, chess, 3D printer design, and food lab. In yoga, students are physically challenged to push themselves as they are able, and mentally challenged to re-center and ground themselves in the moment. Warmth and focus pervade this 90-minute block.

The students change in the gym, take a yoga mat and block, and set up on a quiet, grassy corner of the school’s field. The birds can be heard in the trees, and a younger physical education class plays on the fields nearby. The yoga class is led by Jess Lawrie, a yoga instructor and one of the physical education teachers at the school. Jess is new to ISB this year. She came from South Africa where, among other things, she practiced yoga and worked for an organization writing curriculum on learning through play.

In addition to learning yoga poses, Jess tries to build a safe, inclusive atmosphere where students are encouraged to go at their own pace. As Jess moves students through the class, she encourages their practice, “You are where you need to be...When we listen to how we feel, to what our body needs, it’s not a weakness, it’s a strength.” For the most part, students follow along with the poses and relaxation techniques that Jess guides them through. Occasionally, students lie down, take a break, modify Jess’ instructions, or do a different stretch. Regardless, students’ faces are focused and attentive throughout the lesson. Jess encourages, “Noticing the breeze on your face, grounded, feel yourself fully in this moment...Exhale, release all that stress, all that tension, anything that doesn’t serve you.”

Lydia and her friends find that the yoga elective aids their learning in the rest of the school day:

Adelaine: Normally it makes you feel more refreshed, but also more ready to learn, even though you are tired.

Lydia: [It] also gives you a time to have a break and kind of forget about everything...normally I would think, ‘I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to do this’... [In yoga], I don’t need to worry about anything.

Evelyn: It also encourages us to think about the things that are bothering us and stressing us, some things that we’re worried about. So, it’s nice; you can kind of acknowledge it, and maybe do something about it.

Yoga seems to offer a needed break from the demands of middle school. When asked if yoga class feels playful, there are a series of resounding “yeahs” from the group. Lydia elaborates, once again citing the idea of freedom to make one’s own choices, “You don’t have to do exactly what [Jess is] doing. If you want to take a step back or do something different, or maybe not go a step further, you can. You can kind of play with the yoga.” Relaxed after playing with the yoga, several of the friends hold hands and slowly walk back to the main building for lunch.



Adelaine, Anna, Clara, Lydia, and Evelyn walk to lunch

Play/Lunch

Students have an hour for “Play/Lunch” as it says on the official school schedule. Lunch is served in the school canteen, and students help themselves from a buffet before choosing to sit wherever they would like. As the lunchtime conversation turns to the food, Lydia shares her knowledge of food waste, which she researched as part of her Individuals and Societies project, “It actually wasn’t that much compared with how big the school is... The majority of [waste] comes in the younger years.” Indeed, Lydia and her friends do not leave much food waste on their plates.

After lunch the students again head outside. The sun is higher in the sky and the air warmer than it was in the morning; Lydia and a slightly different mix of students choose to sit on a table shaded by a wooden awning. They laugh, joke, and hang out. Clara and Edward are still reading the Danish book. Students come and go from the group, while others roam around the playground. Some M6 students have taken off their shoes and gathered a bucket, fishing in the small, human-made pond for frogs, while another group of M6 students are making up a game with a ball. As the lunch and play hour come to a close, there is a moment reminiscent of homeroom: “We should go,” one student comments. The others look up, “Oh yeah,” another says, and they head to class.

“Something we can really relate to”: English

English meets three times a week and is taught by Charlotte Blæhr. Charlotte is in her first year teaching at ISB, having recently moved to Denmark from the United Kingdom where she was an English teacher for 17 years. At the start of today’s 45-minute period, Charlotte sets the expectations for a group summative assessment about bias in the film of the musical *Chicago*. She shows a slide with the assessment objectives and talks them through with the students.

Objective Strand	Analysing: identify and explain the effects of the creator's choices on an audience	Using Language: use appropriate and varied vocabulary, sentence structures and forms of expression
What does this mean?	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Can you explain how the choices the director has made affects the audience's opinions?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Can you explain what the bias is and how it is created?</div>	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Can you use Film terminology?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Are the examples you are picking out relevant and correct?</div>
What I did		
Reflections		

English objective strand slide

The summative assessment is for a unit called “Fame and the Media.” Over the course of the 12-week unit, the class has been looking at the way the media influences how we think and the opinions we hold. Lydia explains more about what the class is working on: “The whole musical [Chicago] is centered around bias and how that has affected these two characters called Roxie and Velma, [who are] in prison because they shoot people, and how the media publicizes this and how they become famous from it. But also, how you can be innocent but still convicted as guilty. And you can also be guilty but be [seen]...as innocent... So now, we’re looking at the songs, and thinking, ‘So what’s the bias here? And what techniques are used to show the bias?’”

Lydia works in a self-selected group with two of her peers, Oliver and Lea. The only criteria Charlotte gave the class when they chose their groups was that they could not work with the same people they worked with in the preceding group project. In previous class sessions, Lydia’s group chose the song “Nowadays,” sung by Roxie and Velma at the conclusion of the movie. Lydia explains that they then “had to analyze the song and pick out all the details we could and figure out: Why did they use that technique? What’s that for? And then we would look at the words and lyrics, and think...[what] could [that] mean?... We did one together as a whole class, and we [looked at], what does the color white symbolize?...Innocence. Even though the person was convicted guilty, they were innocent.”



Oliver, Lea, and Lydia discuss the bias present in the song they chose

In this particular lesson, Lydia and her groupmates wrestle with the complex task of articulating the filmmaker’s biases and providing evidence to support their claims. Charlotte steps back and allows the time and space for the group to develop these skills. Charlotte explains how, “what they decide the bias is matters less than how they explain how it is conveyed...Can they understand the way that media makers make decisions that affect their opinions and perceptions of the world?”

Oliver starts off the group discussion about bias with a question:

Oliver: All of the songs have a context...What context is there here?

Lydia: It's kind of like them talking. I guess it's kind of like how, I don't know how to describe it...

Lea: I kind of get what you mean.

The group of three continues their discussion for some time, trying to articulate the bias they see in the movie. The group decides to watch and listen to the song again to see if they get more ideas. Afterwards their discussion becomes a bit more specific:

Lea: I'm not really sure, but when they [Roxie and Velma] shout at the background, it just reminded me that they [are]... kind of telling people that they should just live the life and they shouldn't waste time...

Lydia: I think it kind of relates to the fact about how they joke about what they did.

Lea: Even when they joke about it, it's still kind of the reason that they're [in prison].

Lydia: It's really good point... I guess [they] aren't telling people to do it, but don't regret it exactly...kind of saying that, you did it, you accepted it, now let's go find the next adventure... throughout the whole movie, Roxie didn't necessarily feel sorry for what she was doing, she just wanted to get out [of prison].

With that summary, Lydia redirects the group's workflow out of conversation and towards the written assignment, "I feel like the more we work on this, the clearer the bias is going to get, but I'm going to just try and write something."



Lea, Amelia, and Lydia listen to last instructions from Charlotte before they head to their final class of the day

As they did in Individuals and Societies, groups in English led their own learning for almost the entire period, having chosen where to work and how to tackle the learning objectives laid out for them. Lydia, for her part, describes her experience in Charlotte's class as playful, citing a strong connection between the work and her life outside of school as the reason, "We didn't necessarily have [a lot of] choice, but I don't think that makes it any less playful because the lessons are really engaging and fun and the subject that we are working with is something we can really relate to because it's bias and news and media and stuff and that's...all around us. I think it's nice to notice how much the media affects us. So just because we're not choosing everything about it, it's still a really fun topic." She elaborates that "it's not just more writing; it's a lot of discussions... Something about the way [Charlotte] teaches you, she allows room for new ideas and things, and...you just learn so much."

"There is not one right answer": Danish

Lydia's last period of the day is Danish Language Acquisition, a class that meets three times a week. It is led by Elsebeth Thomsen, a native Dane who has been teaching at ISB for one year and at Danish boarding and public schools for another 21 years combined. Elsebeth explains how she thinks about playful learning in her classroom, "To me, the word playful...it's a lot of things. Sometimes it is more like running around and doing things actively...and other times it's more like creating funny things up here (points to head)...it's about using your imagination... because there is not one right answer."



Lydia responds in Danish to Elsebeth's questions about the picture on the board

The afternoon's 45-minute lesson begins with a warm-up activity where Elsebeth shows pictures of different vacation scenes on the board. The class first generates vocabulary related to each picture and then orally puts together sentences to describe what is happening as if they were in the scene. Lydia raises her hand frequently to participate. When Elsebeth puts up a picture of an empty hammock on a beautiful sandy beach, she playfully asks the class in Danish, "Hvorfor sidder du ikke i hængekøjen?" Why aren't you sitting in the hammock? The class is silent for a moment, and then Lydia responds with a joke, "Fordi jeg tager et Instagram foto." Because I'm taking an Instagram photo. Elsebeth and the other students respond with laughter.

The second half of the class period is spent in pretense, with the students working individually on a 2-week long assignment, imagining a 5-day trip to the local area for fictional characters and then preparing an oral presentation about what happened during the trip.



Lydia works on the trip assignment

This assignment was directly relevant to students' lives; Elsebeth reports that some students even remarked that they got ideas about what they might do with their families on the weekend. When asked if today's Danish class was playful, Lydia responded, "Yeah, because I kind of got to decide what I was doing and decide where to take things." Elsebeth understands the importance of the freedom involved in leading one's own learning in middle school. In the lesson she planned, there was not one right answer. Instead, there was room for the students to think creatively and for themselves as they worked on their Danish language skills.

A culture of freedom

The ISB middle school day ends much the way that it began, with students moving freely about the school. Some students, like Clara, stay on for lessons or activities, while others chat casually with teachers or their peers; some head home. It is still warm and sunny, and the Danish May sun is still high in the sky as Lydia heads to the back of the school to retrieve her bike. She reports that when she gets home, she plans to “relax a little.” Some days Lydia has homework to do, while other days, like today, she does not. At home too, the M7 students are trusted by their teachers to lead their own learning, often with the freedom to decide when to complete assignments.

This culture of freedom, upon which Lydia’s playful learning is built, extends beyond the walls of the school. Awanti, Lydia’s homeroom teacher, describes how many of the students in the small M7 class live near each other and are afforded the independence to get to each other’s homes on their own by foot, bike, or bus. Lydia herself says that she often leaves school with a group of peers. At ISB, and in Denmark, it is not just freedom in the ability to move around or to follow one’s interests that is valued, but a larger freedom to think for oneself and create one’s own identity, an ideal match for middle school. As Jess the physical education teacher emphasized in her yoga class, a freedom to be where “you need to be.” Awanti explains how in her experience, in Denmark “there isn’t that much pressure of what you should look like and what you should be. There is no pressure to conform. And I think that takes the pressure off of the kids quite a lot.”



Lydia bikes home at the end of the school day

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Pedagogy of Play is a research collaboration between the LEGO Foundation and Project Zero, a research organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The project launched in 2015 at International School of Billund, Denmark, and expanded to research sites in South Africa, the United States, and Colombia.

In each site, educators and researchers work together to explore culturally relevant models of playful learning.

To learn more about PoP at ISB, please visit <https://isbillund.com/pop>

To learn more about PoP and Project Zero, please visit www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play

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