

Signe's Day in P1:

“If you just start it you’ll feel more brave”

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pedagogy of play



**International
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Meet Signe¹

As part of their Unit of Inquiry on Stories, the P1A students are each creating models. For 25 minutes they construct castles, haunted houses and soccer fields, filling these with characters who are having various adventures. When their teacher Gaby asks the children to share their stories with peers, Sophie organized her tablemates. She suggests that Theis go first. After Theis has completed his explanation, Sofie shares her story. It is then Ananya’s turn. Ananya tells Signe she wants their teacher Kathrin to hear the story. Signe calls Kathrin over, but when Kathrin arrives, Ananya freezes.

Kathrin (to Ananya): You seem a bit nervous.
Ananya: Yeah, I don’t want to tell.
Signe: If you just start it you’ll feel more brave.


With that prompting, Ananya shares her story.

An engaged, confident, and happy six-year-old, Signe has attended ISB since she was three. Signe’s teachers, Gaby and Kathrin, see her as a good friend and classroom leader. Her parents, Birgitte and Carl, report that Signe is eager to go to school. Signe says that she really likes school, explaining that, “I like to play with my friends. I like making books with pictures inside.” She adds, “I want to learn how to read.”

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



Signe, Lasse and Marie making books



Signe was not always this engaged or out going. Birgitte and Carl recall that, “She was very shy at the start. She did not like to talk in class.” Her kindergarten teachers recall that Sofie was a reserved child who was wary of new situations and people. As you will read, little is left of the shy kindergartener. We suspect this transformation to becoming more outgoing—more brave—is, in part, due to her welcoming and playful school experience.

This picture of practice is based on a whole day of observations of Signe on a Tuesday in November, along with shorter observations Monday and Thursday of that week. It provides a record of one first grade child’s experiences of learning through play at ISB, and offers an opportunity to see the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) practices in action, highlighting:

PoP Practice #2:


Play with an educational purpose

PoP Practice #3:

Support learners leading their own learning

PoP Practice #5:

Reflect on playful experiences²



²As a part of the PoP work, we have developed a set of 8 Principles of a Pedagogy of Play. You can find the full set of [Practices here](#). We will refer to these Practices by number throughout this piece.

Welcome to P1A

Along with her twenty classmates, Signe is a member of P1A. The children are six and just turning seven, and come from Denmark, the US, Holland, India, Spain, Mexico and Scotland.



Gaby



Kathrin

Gaby Salas Davila and Kathrin Schaller are the children’s teachers. Kathrin, who trained as a teacher in Denmark, is originally from Germany. She is in her second year at ISB. Gaby comes from Mexico. She has taught kindergarten, first and fifth grades in Mexico and Sweden. In her fourth year at ISB, Gaby has taught Sofie since she was three.

Over the course of a week Signe and her classmates have lessons in English and Danish (for native and non-native speakers), math, music, library, visual arts and unit of inquiry blocks (which integrates social studies, science and language arts). On this particular Tuesday the schedule is:

7:30-8:00	Arrival
8:00-8:10	Welcome meeting
8:10-9:30	Gym
9:30-10:00	Outside break
10:00-11:30	Unit of Inquiry
11:30-12:30	Lunch/outside break
12:30-13:15	Math
13:15-14:00	Passion Hour
14:00	Dismissal

Welcome meeting

Like most days, Signe arrives in the P1A classroom at 7:55, five minutes before the start of the official school day. She says goodbye to her mom and hello to Kathrin and a few classmates. Taking her assigned seat at one of the room's five tables, she begins to draw "for my book," a project she will continue during the afternoon's Passion Hour. Kathrin calls for the children's attention and markers and paper, paper airplanes and books are put away. Signe joins in singing a couple songs. She follows along as Kathrin reviews the calendar and the day's schedule. The children then prepare for the short walk to the gym building. Sofie talks in Danish and English to friends as she gets her gym bag and dons her coat. There is no sense of hurry. After ten minutes Kathrin and her colleague Simone lead the group outside. On the way to the gym Sofie chats happily with Baron.



Signe (green coat) on her way to the gym

"Rolling was hard. That was good so I could try my best": Gym

Once in the gym building, Signe and other girls go into their locker room, emerging a few minutes later wearing workout clothes. Kathrin gathers the class for some warm up exercises and then explains the main activity: five stations with different equipment the children will explore in small groups. Kathrin's learning goals for the children during these stations are three-fold:

- Develop skills in using a variety of equipment (the teachers have noticed that a surprising number of children are unfamiliar with such equipment)
- Enhance abilities in sharing space with peers
- Become comfortable with moving through stations in small groups (a structure used throughout the primary grades in a variety of settings)



The Hula Hoop station

Signe, Tim, Andreas and Emma’s first station is the hula hoops. Signe immediately begins twirling a hoop on her arm and wrist. She tells Tim, “This is easy”, and she is right. Signe twirls the hoop for nearly a minute as Tim looks on with admiration. After the arm twirling, Signe tries around her waist, which proves more difficult. Then, after watching Emma toss her hoop across the floor, Signe gives this a try. Five minutes on, Kathrin plays some music and the foursome quickly rotates to the next station: basketball.



The basket ball station

At the basketball station Signe finds a net that is about her height. Holding the ball over her head, she easily drops it into the hoop. Looking for more challenge, she tries underhand shots. Seeing Tim bouncing the ball on the floor to launch it towards the basket, she gives this method a try.

Climbing ropes are next. The station has four ropes suspended from the ceiling with a knot at the end. Along with the others in her group, Signe pulls her rope back, takes a running start, and tries to jump on to use the knot as a seat. She is unsuccessful and awkwardly hangs on. After several more failed attempts, Signe asks Kathrin for help. Kathrin lifts Signe up onto the knot and gives her a push. Smiling broadly, she swings back and forth, exchanging high fives with Thomas as they pass each other.



The ropes



Large, bouncy balls (around a meter in diameter) are next. Signe and Andreas play catch, laughing as they throw a ball to each other with gusto. Occasionally, and to their delight, they chase an errant throw.



The large, bouncy balls

A three by one meter mat is the group's last station. Signe lines up on one end, poised to do a cartwheel. Speaking in Danish, she tells Andreas and Theis, who are rolling on the mat, to be careful. They merrily ignore her. Her attempt to organize a one-way traffic flow unsuccessful, Sofie eventually joins the fray. While occasionally bumping into each other, there are smiles on everyone's faces.



The mat

The children then have a few minutes where they can choose where to play. Signe continues on the mat. She changes back into her street clothes, and after a snack, heads back to the P1A classroom.

Signe enjoys her time in the gym, in part, because of the challenge. As she explains, “[It is] really exciting because there are so many fun things...It is hard to get on the ropes, but it's really fun. Rolling was hard. That was good so I could try my best.” Along with being fun, playful learning can inspire persistence.

PoP Practices #2 and #3

Playing with an educational purpose and Learners leading their own learning are on display during Sofie's time in the gym. Sofie was playing at the five stations—with the equipment, her body, her friends and the rotation routine. That, as Kathrin explains, is the purpose. Within a structure her teachers provide, Sofie was leading her own learning, deciding how to use the equipment, engage with peers and setting her own challenges.

Outside break

Despite a constant drizzle, the P1As head outside for fifteen minutes. Signe walks around the yard with Amber, pausing to talk to Emma and Martin, and climb on a large tire.

“I really like it because I like stories”: Unit of Inquiry

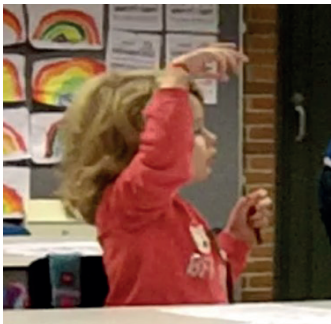
Coming in from their outside break, the first graders find their seats around five tables. Gaby asks the children if they remember the name of the new unit of inquiry which was launched the previous day. Signe, along with half her classmates, call out “Stories.”

Units of inquiry, which last for six weeks, are the heart of the Primary Years Program (PYP). Units have an overarching theme and learning goals that are anchored in the PYP’s learning objectives (e.g., principled, creative, risk taking, etc.). For the Stories Unit, the learning goals are to gain a better understanding of:

- Types of stories
- How stories express feelings and themes
- That we respond to stories in different ways



Gaby facilitating the “types of stories” conversation



Signe participating in the “types of stories” conversation

Gaby writes “types of stories” on the white board and asks children to share, “What kind of stories do you know.” When called on, however, the children name specific stories: Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, and Calvin and Hobbes. Signe suggests Snow White. When called on Marie asks, “Can I say it in Danish.”Gaby replies, “of course” and asks for Kathrin’s help in spelling Maria’s contribution: the Danish way of ending a story: *Snip Snap Snude*.

Midway through the naming of stories Riya asks Gaby, “Can we make our own books? Gaby’s affirmative response leads Marie to ask:

Marie: What if people can’t write?

Emma: You can use some writing.

Dharai: Or teachers can help.

Sille: Or pictures.

Emma: I can write a little.

Nanna: I can write a lot.

Amber: Or use scribble scrabble if you don’t know the words.

Ananya: That’s my idea.

Signe follows the conversation closely as one of her main ambitions is to make a book.

After each child who wants has named a story, Gaby gently returns to the idea of types of stories. Going through the list, she asks children if the story they named is “one you can read or watch?” She circles stories to read in black and stories to watch in black.

Theis calls out that Mickey Mouse, the story Nanna named, can be watched in different languages. Others mention that their stories appear in multiple languages. This leads Gaby to add a third story type: stories in different languages. These are circled in blue. Going through the story list again, the children feel most of their stories are in multiple languages. In fact, Signe notes that almost all the stories have all three colored circles. Marie, though, is sure the ending *Snip Snap Snude* is only in Danish.

PoP Practice #1

Gaby has planned this lesson with choice, wonder and delight into play in mind. The conversation is premised on children having and sharing ideas and she welcomes spontaneous tangents (e.g., “can we make books”), both elements of choice. With this conversation, the class has begun construction of a story classification system (creating is related to wonder).

The engaged feel of the conversation is, in part, related to children sharing beloved stories and, in part, because of the interest in languages, not surprising among such a multilingual group. For Sofie, the result is enjoyable. As she explains, “ I really like it because I like stories. She adds, “I want to learn how to read.”

Lunch

Lunch is next. Sitting next to Lasse and Sebastian, Signe eats her school made lunch in the canteen. She eats and talks for 25 minutes. Finished, she checks in with Gaby and then leaves the canteen, walking with Lasse and Marie back to the classroom.

Outside break

The sun has come out, and Sofie and her classmates have 30 minutes to be outside. With different friends, Signe runs, plays in the sand, and with a pile of leaves. There is much laughter and conversation.



Outside break

“It felt really good when Kathrin helped me”: Math

The P1A class is in the midst of a stand-alone math unit about numbers. As part of the unit, Kathrin is working with small groups on a lesson that focuses on combining and partitioning the number ten. She also wants to have the children use numbers for a purpose.

In the early afternoon it is Signe’s turn to participate in the lesson. Coming in from outside, she goes off with Kathrin, Evaline, Sebastian, Benji and Marie to the Creator Space (the rest of the children stay with Gaby in the classroom). At the threshold of the room Kathrin whispers to the children, “When we step in here it’s not the usual Creator Space, It’s the math Creator Space. Signe asks “Just for P1A?” Kathrin responds affirmatively and the children cheer.

Kathrin explains, “When we go in I want you find three numbers and I want you to think about which is the biggest and which is the smallest and which is in the middle.”

Entering the room, Signe immediately begins looking around. She notices a large clock and calls out, “There’s a twelve.” She then counts three computer monitors. Sebastian complains, “I can’t see any.” Signe responds, “I found two” and leads him over to the clock.

Kathrin gathers the children around a table and asks them to share the biggest number they found. Signe tells her 12, pointing to the clock. Benji claims 36. Everyone is a bit skeptical, until he shows them identical gray boxes containing materials. “Are you sure there are 36?”, Signe questions. Benji pops up from his seat and counts them for the group. There are indeed 36 boxes.

PoP Practice #2

Like gym, the play during this math lesson was with a purpose. The playful activities are linked to Kathrin’s learning goals for the children. The result is a lesson Sofie feels was, “Really interesting. First I did not know what to do, and I’m so interested in the highest and lowest. I am really curious. Making a rainbow and being with my friends was fun...I felt really good when Kathrin helped me.”

Kathrin helps the children stand in a line from the smallest to biggest number found. Signe is in the middle. Benji is at one end. The children giggle as they line up in order. An activity about combining numbers to make ten is next. After watching Kathrin demonstrate, Signe makes a one through nine number line. The assignment is then to “make a rainbow by connecting two numbers that add up to ten.” As children connect pairs with pencils, Kathrin notices Signe has drawn arc between 3 to 8 and gently corrects her. Different colored paints are used to turn the arced lines into a “rainbow.” Signe is a study in concentration as she paints, choosing the colors to make what she and Evaline agree are “so beautiful rainbows.”

“That looks so great”: Passion Hour

There is a little less than an hour left in the school day. Signe is sitting on the rug with her classmates as Gaby explains that it is Passion Hour. Nanna exclaims, “I love Passion Hour.” Smiling, Gaby explains that children can continue with their projects and interests.

Passion Hour is a new structure in the P1A classroom. In response to a Danish law, all ISB primary grades have set aside two hours a week for children to do homework. Since grade one at ISB generally does not have homework, at the start of the school year the time was unstructured. Wanting to provide a context for children to pursue projects of their own choosing, Gaby has created Passion Hour. How to deepen the learning occurring during this time block is the question Gaby is investigating in her PoP study group.



Gaby introducing Passion Hour

Not surprisingly, Signe has decided to make a book. After binding some pages together with Gaby’s help, she sits at her table with Lasse and Marie who are also making a book.

Signe writes her name on the book’s cover and tells Lasse, “My book is called Signe’s Book.” Reading the cover Lasse responds, “If you want Signe’s you should put an s at the end.” Signe eagerly takes this advice. Signe turns the page and starts drawing. She occasionally looks over at Lasse and Marie, who are trying to sound out words in their book. Signe asks her table mates to, “Look at my rainbow.” They offer words of appreciation. Signe tells Lasse, “that looks so great” referring to his book.



Book making

Around the room others are making books, creating patterns with Hama beads, making winter themed decorations and constructing paper airplanes. Heads are looking down; children are focused on their projects.



Heads down/focus during Passion Hour

A 13:45 Gaby explains there will be more time to work on projects during future Passion Hours. Over the next two months, children have 18 sessions to pursue their projects, culminating in a “Creativity Celebration” (the children picked the name) where families were invited to view the projects. The date was selected by the children, who wanted a lot of time to do their work.

During this period, Gaby introduced the idea of drafts and feedback to the children as a tool to improve their ideas. After she learned, in a conversation about improving ideas, that children felt the best way was to “ask a teacher for help” she shared the video Austin’s Butterfly³ to illustrate children can learn from each other.

PoP Practices #3 #5 #7 & #8


Here again, we see PoP practices in operation. Most obvious is learners leading their own learning, PoP Practice #3.

PoP Practice #5, reflecting on playful experiences, was encouraged in the conversation at the end of each Passion Hour where children started giving and receiving feedback about their project.

PoP Practice #8, fostering trust and welcoming negotiation, appears when the children selected the day for the Creativity Celebration.

The collective study of the paradoxes between play and school (PoP Practice #7) took place in Gaby’s study group as she discussed with colleagues how to provide the structure that would help children learn through their play.

³A video created by EL educator Ron Burger. See <https://eleducation.org/resources/austins-butterfly>



At 2 PM Vivaldi's Four Seasons plays over the intercom (the first time the intercom has been used since the start of the school day). While many of her classmates stay for after school club, Signe says goodbye to her friends as she is picked up by her aunt.

A coda. Signe continues to work on her book during the bi-weekly passion hours in December, January and February. Gaby structures the time so children get feedback from teachers and peers. For example, she suggests Sofie look at different books and think about how they communicate to their intended audience. Over the months Sofie adds rainbows, stars, hearts, flowers, houses, designs, friends' names, and page numbers to her book. Her devotion to the project is impressive and, as she explains when the book is completed, "It was hard to do. It took such a long time. I drew so many things." She proudly shares her book at a Passion Hour celebration for families. Asked what she learned through this process, Sofie replies, "I learned about numbers."

"I learned about numbers": Learning in many different ways through play

"I learned about numbers" is perhaps an unexpected answer to the question about what one learned from creating a book. Signe's remark points to two important aspects of learning through play. The first is that through play children learn in many different ways. In creating her book Signe learned how to see a long-term project through to its completion, practiced fine motor skills, learned about incorporating feedback into a project, and thought about how to communicate to a specific audience. And, by adding 1 through 29 to the pages of her book, she learned about using numbers in a meaningful way.

One should not dismiss this unexpected result as unintentional. Indeed, one of the intentions of bringing playful learning into school is that children will learn and discover in ways adults cannot specifically plan for.

Visitors to ISB often remark on how nice it would be to be a student at the school. Throughout Signe's day the first PoP Practice — creating opportunities for playful learning — is in evidence. During the day it is clear Signe feels important elements of choice, wonder and delight.

Sofie's transformation from a shy three-year-old to a confident six-year-old can, in part, be attributed to maturation. A supportive family certainly has played a role. And knowing how she spends her time in school, one cannot help but suspect that ISB has also played a role in helping Signe feel more brave.