

# Playful Participatory Research Guide

## An Interactive Workbook

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pedagogy of play

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## PART 1: Overview of PPR

Welcome to the Playful Participatory Research (PPR) Guide! This is an interactive workbook for teachers and school leaders who want to use the PPR process in their schools. In this guide you will find:

- information about the PPR process
- a workbook you can print out and use as you engage in PPR
- and an example of a PPR workbook filled out by a teacher researcher, to give you an idea of how the process might unfold.

Let's start with answers to some questions you might have about the PPR process.

### What is Playful Participatory Research (PPR) and why should I do it?

PPR stands for Playful Participatory Research. It was developed by researchers on the Pedagogy of Play initiative<sup>1</sup> to support educators' playful learning, because to promote playful learning for children and older learners, adults need a way to engage in playful learning too. PPR is a type of "practitioner inquiry" or "teacher research" - research that is done by educators<sup>2</sup>. Can teachers really be researchers? Yes! This kind of research is not about control groups or formal analysis or quantitative methods. This is research that involves you collecting data or documentation about your learning community, making sense of or analyzing what you collect, and applying what you learn to better understand a topic or idea. Your data will be your documentation of your classroom, your school, and your learners — you know them better than anyone else and you make decisions about teaching and learning every day. PPR is a reflective and playful way to explore a puzzle or try out a new idea in your work as an educator. It can help you gain new ideas and think differently about how you support your students' learning. Research about PPR has shown that it can help educators to take risks and explore new possibilities in their teaching, and that exploring questions playfully helps them to incorporate more playful learning into their classrooms and schools.<sup>3</sup> Doing PPR at a school-wide or program-wide level has also been shown to positively impact school culture by providing a stronger sense of community.

### Who can do PPR?

PPR is for anyone who considers themselves an educator and works with learners in any context. School leaders, coaches, therapists, family members, museum educators, etc. can all do PPR. This guide is mainly written with teachers and school leaders in mind, but please think creatively about how you could try PPR in your own role and context. PPR involves sharing ideas with others, so you will need at least 1-2 other colleagues or partners, so that you can support each other as PPR researchers. Of course, your group can be larger, and could include:

- your teaching team
- educators across your school or context
- educators from other schools or contexts
- other students (if you are in a college class learning to teach)
- family members of children in your class

If you don't have a group formed and ready, consider reaching out to a colleague across the hall, or a friend from afar – someone you can connect with regularly throughout the PPR process. PPR works both in-person or via video chat – so you don't need to be in the same location as the other members of your group to have a powerful PPR experience<sup>4</sup>. You can also involve the learners in your classroom and their families as collaborators in doing PPR – we will explain more about that below.

### How much time does PPR take?

Educators are busy! How will you have time for PPR? Well, it doesn't take as much extra time as you might think. A lot of the PPR process is about having a different way of thinking while you are planning, teaching, and assessing your students – things you are already doing. Beyond that, you might want to dedicate about one hour each week to reflect and play with ideas (maybe during a weekly team meeting, or a video chat you schedule with some other educators) and perhaps a longer two-hour session once each month to play with ideas, reflect playfully on your documentation with others, and try out playful provocations. That should be enough! If you are a school leader, you can support PPR by making sure your teachers have time in their schedules specifically for PPR work. And if you are a teacher, you can advocate for this kind of time by talking with your school leadership about how important it is for your teaching practice.

### What is this guide, and how do I use it?

This guide gives you the information you need to get started with your own PPR study. In Part 2, we will explain the PPR process. Part 3 is an interactive workbook that you can play your way through as you do PPR. Part 4 provides an example of a filled-out PPR workbook. And Part 5 includes resources to support your research.

## PART 2: The Playful Participatory Research Cycle

### The Playful Participatory Research Cycle



#### Step 1: Wonder

To do PPR, you need something you are curious about, framed as a good question. Coming up with a good question is HARD. But once you do, you are on your way to an answer. Think about your current role. If you're a teacher, what is puzzling you about your current class? Maybe there's a particular student or group of students who are hard to engage. Maybe an area of your classroom isn't getting used the way you had hoped, or a particular subject or kind of lesson doesn't feel exciting to you or the students. Maybe you're puzzled about addressing issues of equity with your students and want to devote time to thinking more deeply about how to do that well. If you are a school leader, what is puzzling you about supporting teachers? Working with families? Designing and leading professional development for your staff? There is definitely a PPR question for you to explore. In the workbook, you'll find a step-by-step guide for identifying a good question.

#### Step 2: Make a Plan

The next step in doing PPR is to make a plan for how the process might go. The workbook in the second section of this guide will walk you through the planning process, which includes:

- deciding when and with whom you will meet to talk about your PPR on a regular basis (e.g. weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly)
- planning how and when you will explore your PPR question
- thinking about where and when you will share what you learn in the process.

Your plan might not play out exactly as you write it, and that's fine! But thinking through the process at the beginning can be a helpful way to launch your PPR.

### Step 3: Play, Document, Discuss, Repeat

Now comes the fun part. The heart of doing PPR is playfully exploring your question, and you have lots of options about how to do this. There is more than one way to go about this process. Most PPR researchers follow a cycle that looks like this:



But you don't have to do the steps in that order or do all the steps, and there is no one right way to enter the process. How your PPR unfolds depends on the question you are playing with. Let's play out what each of these steps look like, and then you can make the process your own.

#### Playful provocations:

A *playful provocation* is a playful learning experience for you to engage in with your study group or PPR partners. It is a chance to experiment, test out ideas, and play with your question. This is a unique feature of PPR, compared to other approaches to practitioner inquiry or teacher research. You can do playful provocations when you gather with your PPR partners or learning group, either in-person or online. No provocation is too silly or wrong, if it has potential to help you explore your PPR question in a new way. Here are some suggestions for playful provocations you might want to try, and we encourage you to think of your own.

- Use materials. Does your question involve using new learning materials or making changes to the classroom environment? Try using those materials or the new classroom setup yourself with your PPR partners when your learners aren't in the room. Allow yourselves to imagine how the materials/space would feel from the learner's perspective. If it feels appropriate for you, you might role-play being a learner using those materials. Or just explore them yourselves.
- Try out a new learning experience. Are you planning to introduce a new activity, routine, game, or learning experience as part of your PPR? Try playing/doing it first with your PPR partners.
- Role play. Take on roles and act out a situation your learners are experiencing or something you plan to try with them. This can help you empathize with your learners and explore their perspectives.

- Go on a scavenger hunt or “design hunt.” Perhaps you’re exploring a question about how learning spaces are arranged in your school, or how accessible materials are to young learners. Go around and document (draw or take pictures) what you see.
- Take a field trip. Visit another local school, museum, playground, forest, library, etc. to get new ideas related to your question. Go with a PPR partner or two so you can debrief and discuss the experience.
- Read an article or book related to your question.
- Listen to a podcast or watch a video related to your question.

Take a little time after each playful provocation to write down your thoughts, experiences, and new questions. Then debrief and reflect on what you experienced with your PPR partners – try the suggested protocol in the workbook to guide this reflection.

#### Trying something with your learners:

PPR involves taking risks and trying new things in your practice as an educator. It also involves including your learners in the research process. We encourage you to be open about your research with the students in your class, as a gesture of respect for their role in the process.

Here are some ideas for things you might try:

- Plan a new learning experience for your learners. On the PoP website, you will find resources that can help you plan, like the Playful Learning Planner and the PoP Practices.
- Change something about your classroom environment
- Introduce a new material (e.g. clay, wire, natural materials, a new digital tool or app...)
- Try a new daily or weekly routine
- Interview learners about their ideas, then incorporate them into your practice
- Involve learners in a discussion about your question. Tell them you are doing research and want to learn more about *your topic*. Ask them what ideas they have. For example, “Class, I’ve noticed our morning routine isn’t working. What have you noticed about our mornings?” or “What ideas do you have about XXX?” Listen and record learners’ ideas, and then keep them included in the process. Let them know what you try and share some of your documentation back with them so they can participate in reflecting on what you are learning through your PPR process.

#### Documenting:

Teacher-researchers use documentation — video and audio recordings, photographs, samples of children’s work, and transcripts of classroom conversations and interactions — as our most important data source. Gathering this type of information is a regular part of what teacher-researchers do while teaching. We define documentation as:

**the practice of observing, recording, interpreting, and sharing through different media the processes and products of learning in order to deepen learning.<sup>5</sup>**

In Part 3 of this guide, you will find a workbook planner that will help you decide where, when, and how to document to learn more about your question. If you are new to the practice of

documentation, see the “Quick Start Guide to Documentation” to get started (see Part 5: Resources).

Once you’ve gathered some documentation, use a discussion protocol to look intentionally at the documentation and talk about it with your PPR partners or with the learners in your class. There are many possible protocols you could try. We recommend the Looking Playfully at Documentation Protocol (see Part 5: Resources).

Keep the PPR going by continuing to document, look playfully at that documentation, and play with ideas through playful provocations. Engage with these steps in the order that makes sense for you and your question. Just remember to reflect along the way – let’s talk more about how to do that right now.

#### Step 4: Reflect

Reflection is an ongoing aspect of PPR. You will want to reflect throughout the cycles of documentation and play described above. Here are some suggestions for ongoing reflection:

- Use your workbook. The workbook in Part 3 provides a way for you to track your ideas, what you try, and what you learn. It is a way for you to see the progression of your question and what you are learning over the course of your research. Your workbook entries can be poetic, beautiful, messy, artistic, or eclectic... The important thing is that you reflect in the way that works for you.
- Make a routine. Pick a time each week when you set a timer and spend 10-15 minutes writing about what you’re learning about your question. Or make a habit of always thinking about your PPR during your morning commute on Tuesdays, or while you are brushing your teeth at night. Pair this with jotting some quick notes in your workbook after that time.

In addition to ongoing reflection throughout the PPR process, you’ll need to do a bigger-picture reflection session or two when you are ready to wrap up your question and share what you have learned. This might happen after working with your questions for a couple of months, or one term, or a whole year. It depends on you and your question. When you are ready to wrap up and reflect on the whole process, you could:

- Read back through your workbook, highlighting or noting parts that are especially important and show shifts in thinking. Look back at your documentation again. Spend 10-15 minutes writing about what stands out to you, and how it helps you think about your question.
- Write down your hypotheses, or possible answers, to your question. A hypothesis is a best guess – it doesn’t have to be right, or perfect. But when you think about all the things you’ve tried, documented, discussed, and learned about your question, you are going to have some answers. Even if the answers are imperfect, or partial. That’s ok! You can still have a hypothesis.

- Share your hypotheses with your PPR partners and/or the learners in your class. See what they think. Revise your hypotheses if needed after those conversations.
- PPR always leads to new questions. Think about and record what you are now wondering about your topic, or new topics and ideas that you might want to explore next.

### Step 5: Share

Wow! When you've gotten this far, you have some ideas to share! Other educators, learners, and their families will benefit from learning about your research and hearing what you tried, what you learned, and what your new questions are. Whatever format you choose to share your PPR, make sure you include the following components in your presentation:

- Your question
- Your context and role, and who the learners are that you worked with
- A quick explanation about your process – what did you try? How did you document?
- Some examples from your documentation
- Your reflection and hypotheses about your question
- Any new questions you have now or ideas for future PPR

There are many ways to share your research – being creative and playful in how you share your findings is a distinctive feature of PPR. The important thing is that you **DO** share what you learn, and that you are *leading your learning*, *finding joy* out of wondering and sharing with others, and *exploring the unknown*, learning something new in the process of sharing and talking with others about your PPR work. Here are some ideas to get you started. You could share about your PPR in several ways:

- **At your school:**
  - If many teachers across your school do PPR, choose a date near the end of the school year to have a PPR celebration. Dedicate a special day to this, when PPR educators from your school share their work through setting up playful provocations for others, giving playful presentations, or sharing their PPR work through posters and interactive discussion. Invite families, students, and educators from neighboring schools to attend.
  - Ask your school leader for time during your next staff meeting to share what you learned through your PPR. Lead your colleagues in a playful provocation similar to something you tried, and present what you learned in a playful way. Ask some questions you are still wondering to engage them in a conversation or get new perspectives on your research question that you haven't heard yet. In Part 5: Resources, you can see an example of a simple poster format that some educators have used to share their PPR.
- **In a virtual space:**
  - Create a digital gallery (for example, using a Google Site or a resource like Padlet) to share your research with others within or beyond your school community
  - Use your school's website to share your research



- **In writing:**
  - There are several education journals globally that publish teacher research<sup>6</sup>. Even if you've never written an article before, consider writing up what you learned and publishing it for others to read and learn about from afar.
  - If your school or local community has a blog, that's another great way to share about your PPR.

Ready to get started? Print or make a digital copy of the PPR Workbook on the next page and off you go!

## PART 3: The Playful Participatory Research Workbook

Whether you are using this workbook in printed or digital form, we encourage you to write all over it. Make notes, jot your ideas, play in the margins. There is *more than one way* to engage in PPR - make this process your own. Let's get started!

*Print out or type into this workbook to guide your PPR process. Start a new workbook each time you start exploring a new research question.*

### Step 1: Wonder

**Brainstorm about puzzles and topics to explore.** Try one of these ideas:

- Set a timer for 3 minutes, and free-write or think and jot notes about what puzzles come up for you.
- Pair up with a colleague and talk for 3 min about your puzzles, and have your partner repeat back what they heard you share.
- In a group, rapid-fire brainstorm. Each person takes a turn saying the first topic/idea that comes to their mind. Do a few rounds so everyone shares a few ideas. No discussion and no judgements.
- Write your topic ideas here. You might have several at this point.

Topic Idea:

Topic Idea:

Topic Idea:

**Choose your topic.** Out of your brainstorm of ideas above, pick one puzzle you really want to focus on. A good topic will be:

- Something you are REALLY curious about. You don't already know the answer, and you are excited to learn more
- Something you can control and change. E.g., maybe you have a very large class, and your puzzle is about how to engage your students in learning. You don't have control

over the class size (the school or your local government controls that) but you can control how you teach in your classroom. So focus your topic on the part of the puzzle you can control, mess around with, change.

- Something you can test out. Part of PPR is experimenting and taking risks. Choose a question that allows you to test something out, try something new, or adapt something in a new way.
- Not too big, not too small. We will work on this part below.

Write your chosen topic here and reflect on why it feels important to you and your learners:

**Make your topic more specific.** Now it's time to get more specific. Broad topics like "addressing systemic racism" or "increasing student engagement" will be too big to have as a meaningful question. Make those topics more specific, so they are something you can focus in on. For example, "leading conversations about race and racism with my students through read aloud books" or "increasing bilingual student engagement during science lessons." Make sure it's something you have the time/ability to try out.

Write your more specific topic down here:

**Turn your topic into a question.** Here are some question starters you can try, and some examples of questions:

- What happens when....?
- *What happens when I use read aloud books to start conversations about race and gender with my class?*
- How can I...? or How do I...?
- *How can I increase my bilingual students' engagement during science classes?*
- *How can I use what I learn about family cultural practices to strengthen my connections with the children I teach?*
- *How can I use what I learn about the students' social interactions during recess to inform my teaching?*
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ impact/change/affect \_\_\_\_\_?
- How does offering more choice of math activities affect my students' engagement?

**Write your question here!**

Hooray! You have a question. Don't worry – your question can change and evolve as you go through the PPR process. It does NOT have to be perfect. You'll know it's a good one if you feel interested and excited about exploring your question.

## Step 2: Plan

Set yourself up for success! Make a plan for how and when you will do your PPR.

### **Who will you talk to about your PPR?**

Will you be part of a study group with other educators? Will you involve students and families from your class? Your teaching team? A buddy down the hall?

### **When will you make time for PPR?**

Plan a time each week when you can look over your documentation and make some notes, and a time each month when you can meet with your group or buddies to play and reflect with others. (This is a system that has worked well for some PPR researchers – there may be a different approach that works well for you.)

Time to play and document:

Weekly reflection time:

Monthly play time:

### **What do you need to know more about to explore your question?**

Think about some sources you could look at to get more information about your topic. For example:

- Learning more about your students' home lives (through observation, conversation, play)
- Learning more about specific content (through reading a book, article or blog post, watching a video, listening to a podcast, etc.)

## Other ideas

### Step 3: Play, Document, Discuss, Repeat

Use this section of the workbook as many times as you need to plan each cycle of playing, documenting, discussing, and repeating. Remember, there is more than one way to go about this process. You don't have to do the steps in the order provided, nor do you have to do all the steps. There is no one right way to enter the process. How your PPR unfolds depends on the question you are playing with.

#### Get Ready

##### What will you try?

You could: read, watch, do a playful provocation with your PPR group, teach something, try a new routine or material, etc. Consider if you plan to try something with your PPR group/colleagues or with the learners in your class.

##### How will you document what you try?

When will you document? (e.g. during morning meeting? At literacy block? Outside?)

What documentation strategy will you use? (photos, video, audio recording, writing notes)

**How and when will you reflect on your documentation? Who will you reflect with?**  
(try the “Looking Playfully at Documentation” protocol in the Resources Section)

**How will you involve your learners in the process?**

### **Play and Document**

**What did you document?**

Make note of what you documented (photos, videos, notes...) and where you are keeping them (in a binder, notebook, on your computer, etc).

### **Discuss and Decide on Next Steps**

**What did you learn from looking at your documentation?**

**What do you want to try next to explore your question further?**

#### Step 4: Reflect

Read back through this workbook and look through your documentation again. Highlight or make note of parts that are especially important and show shifts in thinking.

Spend 10-15 minutes writing about what stands out to you from reviewing your workbook and documentation, and how it helps you think about your question.

Write down your hypotheses, or possible answers, to your question. A hypothesis is a best guess – it doesn't have to be right, or perfect. But when you think about all the things you've tried, documented, discussed, and learned about your question, you are going to have some answers. Even if the answers are imperfect, or partial. That's ok! You can still have a hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 2:

Share your hypotheses with you PPR partners and/or the learners in your class. See what they think. Revise your hypotheses if needed after those conversations.

Congratulate yourself! You've finished exploring this PPR question! PPR always leads to new questions. Think about and record what you are now wondering about your topic, or new topics and ideas that you might want to explore next.

#### Step 5: Share

**With whom will you share?**

Your teaching team? Your school? Families? Other educators?

**What format will you use to share your research?**

Make a poster? Do a presentation or reenactment? Write a blog post or an article?



**When will you share what you learned with others?**

At a staff meeting? At a whole-school celebration? In a written journal or blog that you work on this summer?

## PART 4: A PPR Example

This example is adapted from a real PPR process that was conducted by a classroom teacher of five-and-six-year-old children. This teacher was part of a study group of 5 teachers at one school who supported each other in their PPR work during their common planning time.

### Step 1: Wonder

**Brainstorm about puzzles and topics to explore.** Try one of these ideas:

- Set a timer for 3 minutes, and free-write or think and jot notes about what puzzles come up for you.
- Pair up with a colleague and talk for 3 min about your puzzles, and have your partner repeat back what they heard you share.
- In a group, rapid-fire brainstorm. Each person takes a turn saying the first topic/idea that comes to their mind. Do a few rounds so everyone shares a few ideas. No discussion and no judgements.
- Write your topic ideas here. You might have several at this point.

Topic Idea: **using playful assessment for early literacy**

Topic Idea: **changing the classroom environment to support playful learning**

Topic Idea: **using play to explore gender stereotypes**

**Choose your topic.** Out of your brainstorm of ideas above, pick one puzzle you really want to focus on. A good topic will be:

- Something you are REALLY curious about. You don't already know the answer, and you are excited to learn more
- Something you can control and change. E.g., maybe you have a very large class, and your puzzle is about how to engage your students in learning. You don't have control over the class size (the school or your local government controls that) but you can control how you teach in your classroom. So focus your topic on the part of the puzzle you can control, mess around with, change.
- Something you can test out. Part of PPR is experimenting and taking risks. Choose a question that allows you to test something out, try something new, or adapt something in a new way.
- Not too big, not too small. We will work on this part below.

Write your chosen topic here and reflect on why it feels important to you and your learners:

**Challenging gender stereotypes through play – I think I can work with this question because children naturally bring up stereotypes through their play and**

conversation. I've been noticing that the children are saying things like "only boys can..." or "girls are..." and sometimes dividing themselves during play, so all the boys play together and exclude the girls. I'd like to focus on addressing that through play.

**Make your topic more specific.** Now it's time to get more specific. Broad topics like "addressing systemic racism" or "increasing student engagement" will be too big to have as a meaningful question. Make those topics more specific, so they are something you can focus in on. For example, "leading conversations about race and racism with my students through read aloud books" or "increasing bilingual student engagement during science lessons." Make sure it's something you have the time/ability to try out.

Write your more specific topic down here:

I want to learn about how I can challenge gender stereotypes when they come up during play, specifically during free play and choice time in my classroom and on the playground.

**Turn your topic into a question.** Here are some question starters you can try, and some examples of questions:

- What happens when....?
- *What happens when I use read aloud books to start conversations about race and gender with my class?*
- How can I...? or How do I...?
- *How can I increase my bilingual students' engagement during science classes?*
- *How can I use what I learn about family cultural practices to strengthen my connections with the children I teach?*
- *How can I use what I learn about the students' social interactions during recess to inform my teaching?*
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ impact/change/affect \_\_\_\_\_?
- How does offering more choice of math activities affect my students' engagement?

**Write your question here!**

How can I challenge children's gender stereotypes during free play and choice time?

Hooray! You have a question. Don't worry – your question can change and evolve as you go through the PPR process. It does NOT have to be perfect. You'll know it's a good one if you feel interested and excited about exploring your question.

## Step 2: Plan

Set yourself up for success! Make a plan for how and when you will do your PPR.

### **Who will you talk to about your PPR?**

Will you be part of a study group with other educators? Will you involve students and families from your class? Your teaching team? A buddy down the hall?

I'm part of a study group with 4 other early childhood teachers. I'll talk to them about my PPR, and I'd also like to tell my class that this is something I'm interested in and see what they think. I'll tell families this is something we are focusing on when I write our monthly newsletter, and maybe there is a way I could have conversations with families about what they are noticing at home.

### **When will you make time for PPR?**

Plan a time each week when you can look over your documentation and make some notes, and a time each month when you can meet with your group or buddies to play and reflect with others. (This is a system that has worked well for some PPR researchers – there may be a different approach that works well for you.)

#### Time to play and document:

I'll document during morning free play on Mondays and Wednesdays, at recess on Thursdays, and during Choice Time on Friday afternoons.

I'll have time to explore my question (read articles, watch a video, etc) during my study group worksessions – we have 45 minutes every week when we gather to work on PPR.

#### Weekly reflection time:

During my 45 min gatherings with my PPR group – we will look at each other's documentation during this time and plan next steps.

#### Monthly play time:

We have a longer study group meeting once a month for 2 hours. That will be a good time to do some playful provocations: test out different prompts, materials, and questions that I might ask the children in my class. This is also when we can look at documentation in more depth.

### **What do you need to know more about to explore your question?**

Think about some sources you could look at to get more information about your topic. For example:

- Learning more about your students' home lives (through observation, conversation, play)

I need to learn about the family structures of the children in my class and understand how families think about gender roles.

- Learning more about specific content (through reading a book, article or blog post, watching a video, listening to a podcast, etc.)
  - I'd like to read articles about talking with children about gender stereotypes and gender identities
  - I'd also like to make sure I know all the right words to use when talking about gender – maybe I need a resource about terms to use to describe different gender identities?
  - I'd like to find articles about any research done on gender stereotyping and toys/games– how color, material, fabric, design, even marketing influences who plays with them and how they play

#### Other ideas

I've heard there are some good videos about anti-bias education and that might include thinking about gender stereotypes. Like this video:

<https://www.antibiasleadersece.com/the-film-reflecting-on-anti-bias-education-in-action/> – maybe that's something I'll watch and talk about with my PPR group as a playful provocation.

### Step 3: Play, Document, Discuss, Repeat

Use this section of the workbook as many times as you need to plan each cycle of playing, documenting, and reflecting. Remember, there is more than one way to go about this process. You don't have to do the steps in the order provided, nor do you have to do all the steps. There is no one right way to enter the process. How your PPR unfolds depends on the question you are playing with.

#### November

##### Get Ready

##### What will you try?

You could: read, watch, do a playful provocation with your PPR group, teach something, try a new routine or material, etc. Consider if you plan to try something with your PPR group/colleagues or with the learners in your class.

We don't have any materials in our classroom right now that encourage challenging gender stereotypes. I'd like to introduce some materials that show images of a wider range of gender identities, and maybe some families that have two moms, or

two dads. I know we have some puzzles and books that I can borrow from the school library that could do this.

I think I'll try putting these out during morning free play time and document the conversations that come up as children play with the materials and look at the books

**How will you document what you try?**

When will you document? (e.g. during morning meeting? At literacy block? Outside?)

During morning free play time

What documentation strategy will you use? (photos, video, audio recording, writing notes)

Photos, written notes, audio recordings. Possibly video

**How and when will you reflect on your documentation? Who will you reflect with?**

(try the "Looking Playfully at Documentation" protocol in the Resources Section)

I'll bring my documentation to next week's check in with my PPR group

**How will you involve your learners in the process?**

At circle time later in the week, I'll tell the class that I've been listening to how they talk about gender, and I think I'll show my notes or video to the children and ask them what they hear in the conversation.

**Play and Document**

**What did you document?**

Make note of what you documented (photos, videos, notes...) and where you are keeping them (in a binder, notebook, on your computer, etc).

I have a notebook in my classroom where I'm writing down all my notes that I take by hand, and I also have a folder on my computer where I keep photos, videos, and audio files when I document.

Here's one conversation I recorded while a group of children were working on a puzzle with a picture of a family – looks like 2 mothers and 2 children having a picnic.

*A group of children were doing this puzzle...when R overheard them saying, "Yes, this is the one with the two girl Mummys". R came straight over and said "No, that's a boy and a girl...two girls can't be married". T then said, "Yes they can". R left....very disturbed by this notion, I recorded his conversation with the boys..."it*

*can only happen when they are little, right...?!..." [that two girls can only pretend to be married when they are little]*

### **Discuss and Decide on Next Steps**

#### **What did you learn from looking at your documentation?**

When my PPR group looked at my documentation, we did a See-Think-Wonder thinking routine. Here are some of our notes:

##### **See:**

R saying "It can only happen when they are little, right?"

Children talking about gender roles during play.

Children disagreeing with each other.

##### **Think:**

I think some children, like R, might believe that same-gender people can only get married or be a couple together if it is pretend.

I think the puzzle sparked children's thinking. I think having materials like this in the classroom did engage them in talking about this topic, and helped you start to learn about what their underlying beliefs are about gender roles.

##### **Wonder:**

Are any children exploring gender variations beyond the binary (girls/boys)? Have they ever encountered a story about a boy who identifies as a girl, or vice versa, for example? Just curious.

I learned that putting out this puzzle was a great way to spark conversation and uncover some of the children's thinking. I also learned that some children in my class (like R) seem to have rigid ideas about gender roles but are also wondering aloud about more flexible ideas around gender.

#### **What do you want to try next to explore your question further?**

Now I have a few ideas about what to try next:

I'd like to find more books that talk about gender and get the children talking about different genders and gender roles.

I'm also thinking about setting up a learning experience that explicitly opens a conversation about gender with the children. Here's an idea:

I realized that sometimes I use language and prompts that are gender-specific, so I'm going to try being intentional about using more gender-neutral words and activities. During choice time next week, with our winter theme, I had planned to set up a station for children to make snowmen. What if instead, I set it up as a *snowpeople* activity?

## December

### Get Ready

#### What will you try?

You could: read, watch, do a playful provocation with your PPR group, teach something, try a new routine or material, etc. Consider if you plan to try something with your PPR group/colleagues or with the learners in your class.

During choice time next week, I'll set up a *snowpeople* activity. I'll ask children about the gender of the snowpeople they are making, and want to model that snowpeople can be girls, boys, etc. I'm curious about what they will say and create.

#### How will you document what you try?

When will you document? (e.g. during morning meeting? At literacy block? Outside?)

During our morning choice time next Tuesday

What documentation strategy will you use? (photos, video, audio recording, writing notes)

I will take photos of the children's creations, and record their conversations with each other, listening for if/how they talk about what they're making. If possible I'll ask them to describe what they have made, taking notes or recording what they say.

#### How and when will you reflect on your documentation? Who will you reflect with?

(try the "Looking Playfully at Documentation" protocol in the Resources Section)

I'll bring this documentation to my next weekly reflection time with my colleagues. I'll put up all of the snowpeople (or photos of their snowpeople) and do a gallery walk with my PPR group, asking what they see or notice about the children's creations. I'll also share any bits of conversation I record relevant to gender.

#### How will you involve your learners in the process?

I'll remind the children that I'm curious about how they talk about gender. I'll do a gallery walk with the children, just like I plan to do with my colleagues. I'll put up



their pictures, play some of the recordings of their conversations, and ask them what they see and notice about their work (and how they describe it). I might look at the snowmen creations that were made last year as part of this unit and see if there are any differences. I could show those to the children as well and ask what differences, if any, they see.

#### **Play and Document**

##### **What did you document?**

Make note of what you documented (photos, videos, notes...) and where you are keeping them (in a binder, notebook, on your computer, etc).

I have decided to organize my binder and my computer PPR folders by month, so I can keep track of what I've learned over this period and if my question changes at all.

During the snowpeople activity I ended up taking photos of all their creations and having a short interview with each child, where I asked them to describe what they made. I put the photos in my digital folder, and my interview notes in my binder, making sure to include which photo belongs to the interview notes.

The children were decorating as they wished – a boy or girl snow person. I heard R say "Girls like girls more, boys like boys more" while M disagreed, saying "everyone likes everyone."

#### **Discuss and Decide on Next Steps**

##### **What did you learn from looking at your documentation?**

During the PPR conversation this week, we listened to some of the recordings I made of the children talking as they made their snowpeople.

I realized that it was REALLY important that I set this activity up differently and that I asked the children what gender they were choosing for their snowpeople, and why. I had never thought before that by doing this activity and inviting the children to make snowMEN I was missing a whole opportunity to explore their understandings about gender roles!

##### **What do you want to try next to explore your question further?**

I've noticed that only the girls are playing with the large doll's house in our classroom. What if I focused on this play next as a space to open up conversation

and expand their play related to gender? I think I'll document what's happening now – the girls playing with the doll's house but no boys – and have a conversation with the class to see what they notice. I'll audio record that conversation so I can share it back with my PPR group. Or maybe we could repaint the doll's house together. Have a clean slate, and then engage the whole class, all genders, in making furniture and props for the house using recycled materials. I wonder if having more ownership over the play materials would engage the boys in playing with the doll's house?

**Note:** The inquiry cycle continues for a few more rounds of playing, documenting, and reflecting... There was a playful provocation where the teachers in the PPR group tried out using the doll's house together, testing out materials that might work for making furniture. You get to imagine how the rest of this example played out!

#### Step 4: Reflect

Read back through this workbook and look through your documentation again. Highlight or make note of parts that are especially important and show shifts in thinking.

Here are some things I highlighted:

**Nov documentation:** From the documentation of children working on the puzzle, this moment stands out:

*R came straight over and said "No, that's a boy and a girl...two girls can't be married". T then said, "Yes they can".*

**Nov reflection:** I realized that sometimes I use language and prompts that are gender-specific

**Nov planning ahead:** I'll remind the children that I'm curious about how they talk about gender.

**Dec reflection:** I realized that it was REALLY important that I set this activity up differently and that I asked the children what gender they were choosing for their snowpeople, and why. I had never thought before that by doing this activity and inviting the children to make snowMEN I was missing a whole opportunity to explore their understandings about gender roles!

Spend 10-15 minutes writing about what stands out to you from reviewing your workbook and documentation, and how it helps you think about your question.

I am struck by both what a big role I have as a teacher, and also how important it can be sometimes to step back. In the example with the puzzle, T stepped up and challenged R's stereotype. And that happened without me intervening at all – I was just listening (but I did bring that puzzle in...so setting up the environment really matters). That seems important.

But also, I'm realizing that if I had done the snowMEN activity as I did last year, there's no way we would have had such a rich conversation about gender. So I am thinking that teacher language and the way we talk about gender (or not) makes a big difference in the classroom.

Write down your hypotheses, or possible answers, to your question. A hypothesis is a best guess – it doesn't have to be right, or perfect. But when you think about all the things you've tried, documented, discussed, and learned about your question, you are going to have some answers. Even if the answers are imperfect, or partial. That's ok! You can still have a hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1:

Children often speak up to counteract stereotypes when they come up in conversation and play. If teachers step back and listen first, rather than responding right away, the children often have richer conversations.

Hypothesis 2:

Sometimes, gender stereotypes persist in play if teachers don't intervene to offer a counter-example or model more flexible thinking. Teachers need to be careful about the language they use, the kinds of materials (books, toys, images) we present in my classroom, and be sure that children are exposed to a wide variety of ways to think about gender and gender roles.

Share your hypotheses with you PPR partners and/or the learners in your class. See what they think. Revise your hypotheses if needed after those conversations.

We all agreed that sometimes we're too quick to jump in whenever we hear the kids talking in gender stereotyping ways. Like 'only boys do this' or when they're talking about jobs or duties, saying one is more for girls or one is more for boys. If we wait before jumping into the conversations, the children often challenge these gender ideas themselves!

What we hadn't realized until looking at this documentation is how much the toys or prompts we offer, and language we use, can influence how children play and the gendered language that comes up through their play. This also made me think about the connections to home life and what I learned when I asked about the children's family structures. So maybe an additional hypothesis is that the gendered language children hear – from peers, teachers, and parents – and the toys they have available to them influences how they think and talk about gender.

Congratulate yourself! You've finished exploring this PPR question! PPR always leads to new questions. Think about and record what you are now wondering about your topic, or new topics and ideas that you might want to explore next.

- There is definitely more to explore about gender roles/stereotypes. I wonder if the children could be involved in the research on toys and gender...doing an inventory of the toys they have at home and sharing with each other?
- Or I might explore another topic completely! Playful classroom management – I'm trying to do more to make my daily routines, transitions, and classroom management strategies more playful. I'd like to learn more about how others are doing this, and try out some new strategies in my classroom.

## Step 5: Share

### **With whom will you share?**

Your teaching team? Your school? Families? Other educators?

Our school has a school-wide celebration to share our teacher research with each other in May. I'll share with my school then, and we will also be inviting some other teachers to join us from other schools in the area.

### **What format will you use to share your research?**

Make a poster? Do a presentation or reenactment? Write a blog post or an article?

I'll make a poster to share at the school-wide celebration.

And maybe I'd like to write or co-write a blog post about this to share with other teachers! Our school has a blog – maybe I'll write something to contribute.

**When will you share what you learned with others?**

At a staff meeting? At a whole-school celebration? In a written journal or blog that you work on this summer?

Whole school celebration on May 15<sup>th</sup>

Possibly writing a blog post over the summer

## PART 5: Resources

### A: Quick Start Guide to Documentation: Learning to Document, Documenting to Learn

#### When and what do I document?<sup>1</sup>

- When I notice students learning through play in a way that surprise, inspires, or excites me
- When my absence from the learning experience will not adversely affect the learning
- When I notice a pattern in behavior, confusion, or ideas that I want others to notice
- When I am, or an individual or group of students is, struggling or has a question and wants to understand someone or something more completely•When I want to tell or help a child to tell a story of learning
- When an “Aha!” moment seems to be happening for an individual or group•When we are working on a specific skill, strategy, or routine and need evidence to assess progress
- When I know someone will ask, “What are they learning from doing this?”
- When I anticipate changes in thinking, understanding, or behaving over time
- When I find myself feeling like things are or are not “going well” and I need evidence to support my perception
- When I sense a quality of engagement or disengagement that is striking
- When groups (small or large, successful or unsuccessful) are working together without teacher facilitation
- When I notice purposeful and connected discourse of almost any kind
- When language or memory is a weakness for one or more students
- When I hear voices that are seldom heard or notice struggling students feeling successful
- When I want to make individual thinking visible and accessible to the group—e.g., to share an idea that will move individual or group thinking forward, demonstrate multiple perspectives (or disagreement) about a single topic, or challenge misconceptions

#### How do I document?

- Keep baskets with “documentation note” papers and pens handy around the classroom (see example). When you see something interesting, jot it down on a note and put it back in the basket. When you have prep time, gather the notes and look through them, to inform future teaching, add to students’ portfolios, or share with students, parents, or colleagues.
- Take a photograph and write down what students are saying/doing in that moment.
- Invite one or two students to hold a camera or video camera and capture a learning experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Based primarily on “Amanda Van Vleck’s Occasions for Documentation” in Krechevsky, M., Mardell, B., Rivard, M., & Wilson, D. G. (2013). Visible learners: Promoting Reggio-inspired approaches in all schools. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Record a conversation. You can use your phone or audio recorder OR write down what students are saying—either on a chart paper so they can see you writing the ideas, in your notebook, or on post-its.
- Take a short video (1-3 minutes) of a moment during a learning experience. OR, set up a video camera on a tripod to record an experience you're especially excited about, and later cut out a short clip of video to share. (If possible, jot down the time(s) you'd like to return to.)
- Exit ticket/tweet: Ask students to jot down one insight and one puzzle (or something they learned from another student) before they leave class.
- When posting student work, add a few sentences about what you learned about your students' learning.
- Use speech bubbles. Copy or laminate speech bubble pages for each of your students with a photograph of the student and an empty bubble. Write interesting or provocative comments you hear learners say into the bubbles and post.

#### What do I do next?

- Reflect on your own or with colleagues
  - Look back at the documentation to determine students' interests, strengths, understandings, or misunderstandings in order to inform your next teaching steps
  - Post something to your study group's Padlet and ask for See-Think-Wonder comments.
  - Start a routine of sharing a short video clip or other type of student work with your colleagues at the start of your planning meetings
  - Post a piece of documentation in the staff room with a note asking colleagues to respond to a particular question on a post-it
- Share documentation back with learners
  - Share back a provocative or insightful comment, question, or exchange from one or more learners
  - Post photographs of learning moments or artifacts on a wall with a caption or question.
  - Revisit with students and write down what they say
  - Share a few moments of video, a couple of quotes, or a photo from a previous lesson as a reminder of important learning moments before you begin the current lesson
- Share more widely
  - Ask your students which part of their learning they most want to share with the school community and in what format
  - Make one aspect of the learning process visible when putting on performances, exhibitions
  - Post documentation outside of the classroom for the school community to see

## B: Looking Playfully at Documentation Protocol

(25 min protocol)

- **Listening:** The presenting teacher names their question and gives context about the documentation they are sharing (2 min)
- **Looking:** Look carefully at the documentation for a few minutes (2-3 min)
- **Clarifying:** Presenter answers short, fact-based questions from the group (2 min)
- **Noticing and Wondering:** a round of “I notice” (just saying what you see/hear in the documentation without judgement), and then “I wonder” statements. The presenter listens and is silent (4 min)
- **Pretending:** Take on roles, act out a scenario from the documentation (2-3 min)
- **Noticing/Wondering again:** Did the playing help you notice anything new? (2 min)
- **Inspiring:** Repeat the presenter’s question. What could the presenter try as next steps in their teaching? Or share ideas of what to document next. (5 min)
- **Closing:** The presenter has the last word to share their take-aways/questions. (2 min)



## C: PPR Poster Example

### Annalisa's Question:

How do children in the ECLL navigate gender in their play in the Dramatic Play Area?

**School:** Early Childhood Learning Lab, Boston University

**Children:** Ages 2 years 9 months to 5 years

**Dramatic Play Area (DPA):** Through the course of my observations, the DPA has been set up as a house. There are materials for the kitchen, including pretend food and meal preparation utensils, fabrics and accessories available for costumes and disguises, baby dolls and items for baby care, stuffed animals and items for pet care, and materials having to do with traveling, such as maps, subway passes, suitcases, and a steering wheel. Play in this space is child-directed and teacher-supported.



**Teacher:** EW is bringing her baby and her dog.

**KL:** And her father!

**EW:** Nope.

**Teacher:** EW, is your father coming on this trip?

**KL:** I'm, I'm, I'm your father!

**EW:** No, you're not my father, you're my husband.

**KL:** No I want to be your father...Okay I'll be your cousin, but I still want to be a boy.

**EW:** No, my *husband*.

**KL:** Oh.. but I'm still a daddy, right?

**Teacher:** Oh, you can still be a father, but you can be a father and a husband at the same time.

**EW:** You're a father to me and my baby.

### Reflection:

Throughout my observations at the ECLL, I saw children participating in many different play activities and scenarios in the Dramatic Play Area. Very few times did children actually verbally declare their gender role in their play, as is stated above.

However, when they did, they often did not adhere to strict social gender rules (evidenced by KL's wearing of the red dress above, despite insistence that he pretend to be a boy). In my observations, I more frequently observed children who identify as male taking on more stereotypically feminine activities in their play (cooking, cleaning, caretaking), than the opposite (children who identify as female taking on stereotypically masculine activities). I learned that this group of children does not necessarily express their awareness of gender or their desire to take on gendered roles in the DPA, most frequently engaging in play scenarios without explicitly acknowledging or expressing a gender role. I wonder how this might be affected with the provision of more stereotypically male play props and opportunities? Would there be a more obvious crossing of the binary gender lines with the addition of more stereotyped materials?

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<sup>1</sup> Pedagogy of Play is a research initiative funded by the LEGO Foundation and based at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. For more information, please see <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play>

<sup>2</sup> To read more about practitioner inquiry, see Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research in the next generation*. Teachers College Press. To learn about teacher research, try Perry, G., Henderson, B., & Meier, D. R. (Eds.). (2012). *Our Inquiry, Our Practice: Undertaking, Supporting, and Learning from Early Childhood Teacher Research(ers)*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. For more information about Playful Participatory Research, please see *Inquiry is Play* (Baker & Salas Davila, 2018) <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2018/inquiry-is-play-playful-participatory-research>.

<sup>3</sup> See Baker, Megina & Jennifer Ryan. (2021) Playful provocations and playful mindsets: Teacher learning and identity shifts through playful participatory research. *International Journal of Play*, DOI: 10.1080/21594937.2021.1878770.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of an inquiry group that did this work entirely online, see Baker et al. Leading Through Inquiry (Voices of Practitioners) in *Young Children* vol 76 no. 3. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/fall2021/leading-through-inquiry-voices>

<sup>5</sup> Krechevsky, Mara, Ben Mardell, Melissa Rivard, and Daniel G. Wilson. *Visible Learners: Promoting Reggio-Inspired Approaches in All Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> If you want to write up your PPR study and publish it, there are several journals that publish exclusively teacher research, including Voices of Practitioners <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/vop> (focus on teacher research in early childhood education) and Educational Action Research: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/reac20>.