

“More Passionated, More Choice”:

The Evolution of Passion Day



International
School of
Billund

September 2016 saw the introduction of a new ritual at ISB: Passion Day. Differing from the typical school day, during Passion Day children plan and choose activities to participate in. They may spend the day skateboarding, playing chess or reading a book. This picture of practice chronicles how the Passion Day ritual is evolving in the Food Lab (a teaching kitchen in the school) because of middle school teacher Lene Holm Christensen's reflection on choice and her desire to make the day "more passionate." How Passion Days contributes to the school's culture of learning through play is also considered.

A letter to the parents

In early September the ISB families receive a letter from the school's principal, Camilla Uhre Fog. Camilla introduces the upcoming Passion Day and explains:

To all Parents ...

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

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



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



Camilla continues by asking a question parents will likely have:

What will these days actually look like? The short answer is: we don't know, exactly! The long answer is: we imagine that the first Passion Day may involve some of the same activities that children do during a typical After School Club. In initial brainstorming sessions, students have suggested things like gymnastics, arts and crafts, playing on the playground, football, sewing, cooking and playing guitar.

Our hope is that, as students begin to explore and stretch the boundaries of Passion Day, these endeavors will grow, change and come together in new and exciting ways. For example: individual musicians may become a rock band, and individual gymnasts, a performance troupe. Maybe older students who find themselves cooking alongside Kinder-garteners in the Food Lab will discover that they enjoy teaching and will decide to lead a cooking course next time. Maybe others will decide to assemble a student film crew and produce a cooking show.



Preparing Passion Day #1 (September)

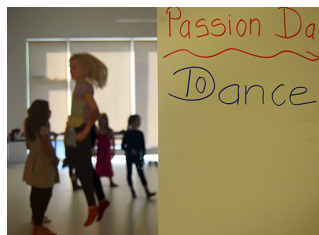
In preparation for the first Passion Day teachers work to establish rules (e.g., take care of each other; computers can be used within established community standards for appropriate content). They iron out logistical details (the play part of the day begins at 10:00 after Whole School Assembly; children bring bag lunches), and clarify their teacher roles (document; support children for whom the open-ended nature of Passion Day might provoke anxiety). Classroom teachers brainstorm possible options with their children and use this information to work within divisions to create a menu of choices for the day. Despite the planning, the prospect of 300 students, ages three through fourteen, roaming around the school provokes some anxiety among the staff. Camilla's reassurance is, "The worst thing that can happen is that the children will have fun."

The ambitions for Passion Day are more than fun. Hopes include:

- Children expanding their planning and organizational skills as well as their sense of autonomy and empowerment
- Teachers learning about their children's interests, strengths and social dynamics that will inform instruction during non-Passion Days

The first Passion Day

The first Passion Day sees a range of play. Children skateboard, construct castles out of cardboard, use Lego and Duplo bricks, dance, play chess, cook, make music, create, build a bridge, play Pokemon Go.





In the music room four girls spend several hours setting goals about creating a song, moving around, sharing ideas about the instruments and negotiating the name for their rock band. Nominations include: The Snails, The Cock-roaches, The Artic Lava. The girls eventually settle on The Galaxy Moon Bears.

The staff reflects on the first Passion Day

The next day ISB teachers spend part of their September staff meeting reflecting on the first Passion Day. The discussion starts by watching a video clip of the four girls in the music room.



After watching the video clip, Tue Rabenhoj, an experienced teacher and accomplished musician who was monitoring the music room, talks about the many teachable moments he passed up including playing instruments, writing music and organizing a band. He muses, “It’s so hard not to teach.”



Tue’s comment along with the video of the girls experiencing so much choice got Lene Holm Christensen, a teacher new to ISB and the profession, thinking about her time in the Food Lab during Passion Day. She reflects that she and her colleagues had limited choice by selecting the recipes and then organizing the children, who acted as assistants. She remarks, “We were control freaks.” She wonders how the next Passion Day might be different.

Passion Day #2 (October)

Plans for the second Passion Day are adjusted based on teachers’ reflections and children’s input. For example, at a student council meeting children advocate for having morning and afternoon choices of activities rather than one choice for the entire day. In the Food Lab, Lene and her colleagues let children set their own goals by choosing which foods to prepare. One group decides to make pizza. The teachers step back and allow the children to organize themselves.



Making pizza

The children respond by embracing the responsibility. The level of engagement is high. Lene notes that her middle school students, “love to act as adults do.” Still, Lene notes that the children are still following a recipe (not super creative) wonders how she can give the children more choice.

Passion Day #3 (December)

Allowing children to make and change rules, set goals and challenges, and choose their collaborators are all ways Lene and her colleagues create opportunities for more student choice during the third Passion Day in the Food Lab. In a challenge resembling a TV cooking show, children are given three savory ingredients and told to create whatever dish they want. Three M6 boys, friends who have a hard time working together in the classroom because they pull each other off topic, decide to work together. As cooks, they are focused and efficient, making an innovative pasta dish that includes sausage and scrambled eggs. Another creation, dubbed “Random Chicken,” is declared “perfect.”



Making Random Chicken

Making and changing rules, in this case culinary rules, continues into the afternoon. The children are given three sweet ingredients and again given license to create their own dishes. The three boys decided to make tiramisu, and think that adding blueberries may improve the product. Tasting proves they are wrong; a finding they say they will keep in mind the next time they bake.

Learning from Passion Day: Teachers

Returning to the regular schedule after Passion Day, Lene finds that, ‘I see my class differently. During Passion Day all the students shine.’ EAL teacher Bridget Mawtus concurs, explaining, “I see other sides of children who struggle in my subjects.”

New ways of seeing children lead to new pedagogical moves. Lene emphasizes more choice in her plans. Using her Passion Day observations, she also recalibrates grouping decisions. Previously, she avoided having the “Random Chicken” team work together, fearing they would distract each other. Seeing their Food Lab success, she allows them to collaborate in preparation for the class’s “Danish Restaurant.” Preparing a Danish inspired dish, they riff off a traditional apple porridge and use jordbær (strawberries) to create a dish for classmates. While, from a teacher’s point of view, their work style is a bit “chaotic” they meet the deadline and produce a tasty dish.



P1 teacher Grace Cunningham, who is generally not with her children during Passion Day, learns of their adventures during a reflection meeting where she asks them to share what they did and what they learned. From these stories Grace discovers that, “My kids are very hands-on learners—they like having materials to work with in formulating their ideas.” She uses this information, enhancing her lessons with more materials.

Preparing jordbær porridge

Middle School English teacher Carmela Vina learns from hanging out with a group of skateboarders. She is impressed by how the boys take on the role of teachers and, “Confidently explain the processes to each other (and me) in order to try more complex tricks and encourage each other.” As the group skates along a trail (a route the boys choose) they discover an area where there is a maths puzzle. Stopping to explore, the boys translate the Danish numbers into English. They also explain to Carmela the background of the art installations found on the trail. Carmela finds that, “Placing myself in the active role of student (where I literally didn’t know how to guide them with skateboarding) really changed the dynamics of the Passion Day expectations for me and for them.” Having her students become her teachers helps Carmela move away from the transmission approach of instruction that characterized her previous school.

Changes in practice also occur as colleagues, who are normally not together, learn from each other. DAL (Danish as an Additional Language) teacher Sanne Brink Rasmussen learns a new way of organizing small groups from her colleagues Nis Fredslund Christiansen and Idah Khan in an iMovie activity. Rather than forming groups and having each group decide the theme of their movie, Nis and Idah suggest to the children they brainstorm topics and form groups based on interest. Sanne sees that children working on topics that interest them lead to more productive groups and is impressed by the movies the children create independently. She adapts this way of organizing small groups in her classes.

Intangible, but perhaps most important, relationships are thickened. Bridget explains that Passion Day, “Helps in building my relationships with kids. It gives us something else to talk about.” Lene adds that this is, “Special time where I get to relate to children in a different way. They feel safer with me. And they see me in a different way—not just a language teacher—but someone who loves cooking.”

Learning from Passion Day: Children

The thickening of relationships also occurs among students, who get to know each other in different ways, sharing skills and expertise as well as enjoyment of their passions. In the Food Lab Maya (M6) explains she is going to teach her friend Catherine to make smoothies. M7 student Sara notes she enjoys being in the Food Lab because, “Here it’s independent but you can always call on a teacher for help.” Asked if she takes anything back to non-Passion days she replies, “Teamwork.”

Of course, navigating one’s passion in relationship to peers is not always easy. Becca (P5) recalls how her experience creating a band in the music room during the first Passion Day was, “Really fun, but we didn’t really think of doing it again...We were all quite stressed out and quite tired.” She continues that, “[We only] really got started when we learned how to deal with how to work together.” Becca made a different choice for the second Passion Day, returning to the music room for the third. She explains that she likes Passion Days, “Because it kind of teaches me what I like, and who to do it with.”

Some children report that Passion Days influence how they feel about ISB and school. Hedi (M6), who is cutting out fabric for a clothing project, explains that, “It’s a really nice feeling when you do what you like. It’s really fun, but you’re still in school. And if you have questions or doubts about anything you can ask.” Her friend Cecilie adds, “It makes school much more

great because you have a positive look on your education...if you're excited about something you do your work better." This sentiment is shared by Ayda (P3). Making turtle buns in the Food Lab with her friend Luna, she explains:

It's the best day ever. I really like this school because at my old school we did not have these ideas. Like this many things to do. In the Food Lab I can learn a lot of things. And I learned that I can also try everything. I can find my passion. I like everything about this school.

To be continued

Passion Days at ISB will continue to evolve. Naturally, questions about pedagogy remain. Teachers wonder about how involved they should be in children's activities. Some are concerned that some children gravitate to the same activity Passion Day after Passion Day. The question of whether children need to be exposed to more possibilities, "So they can find their real passion" is raised. Some children report finding it difficult to get "in" to the more popular activities. Teachers also hear from parents who, while supportive, have questions about what qualifies an activity as "good enough" for Passion Day, and wonder about post-Passion Day opportunities for reflection.

Most significantly, as the children's planning and organizational skills—as well as sense of autonomy and empowerment—expand, they themselves will stretch the boundaries of Passion Day. The children are beginning to see possibilities. During a recent Food Lab elective a student showed Lene her chocolate creation and excitedly explained her vision to make something even more complicated. A light bulb seemed to go off when Lene told the student that she could try out her idea during the next Passion Day. Who knows what treats will be created that in the Food Lab when Lene's ambition to make the day even "more passionate" is realized.