

## CHAPTER 1: PRINCIPLES OF A PEDAGOGY OF PLAY

*What are the core features of a pedagogy of play?*

If we had just a few minutes to explain what a pedagogy of play involves, we would tell you about these principles. They are the core ideas and values that serve as the conceptual foundation for a pedagogy of play. Most of the principles apply both to children and adults, however the last three address adults in particular. The principles are culturally specific—created in and for ISB—though we hope they may have relevance in other settings. To learn about how these principles were developed, see our FAQ Section (Chapter 6).

### 1. Playing with an educational purpose

Playful learning often situates curricular goals, content, and activities, as well as learners' lives and interests, within a larger purpose or inquiry.

### 2. Learners leading their own learning

Taking playful learning seriously means tipping the balance of responsibility for learning toward the learners. Playful learners are intrinsically motivated to reshape the world and to test the limits of their abilities without fear of failure.

### 3. Experiencing choice, wonder, and delight

Learners experience choice, wonder, and delight when they are learning through play and interacting with people, ideas, materials, or spaces. At the same time, what is playful to one may not be experienced as playful by another. Not all learning has to involve play, nor will every moment of play entail significant learning.

### 4. Connecting life inside and outside the classroom

Playful learning frequently invites a transfer of knowledge and experience between the classroom and life outside the classroom.

### 5. Learners reflecting on playful experiences

Learners need to reflect on their learning in order to learn through play. This can happen before, during, or after a learning experience.

### 6. Cultivating a culture of playful learning for adults

In order to create a culture of playful learning for children, there needs to be a culture of playful learning for adults. Playful learning benefits from teachers' capacity and disposition to find the extraordinary in the ordinary (whether materials, physical environment, academic content, etc.).

## **7. Fostering trust and welcoming negotiation**

Trust at all levels (administrators, teachers, children, families) and a willingness to negotiate policies and rules are necessary in order for playful learning to flourish.

## **8. Collectively studying the paradoxes between play and school**

Fostering playful learning entails navigating a set of paradoxes (two true statements that are seemingly contradictory) between the nature of play and the nature of school (e.g., play is timeless, school is time-tabled; play can be chaotic, messy, and loud, schools are places of order; play involves risks, in school, children should be safe; in play, children are in charge, in school, the agenda is generally set by adults). Collaborative and systematic study, supported by documentation, can help educators navigate these paradoxes.

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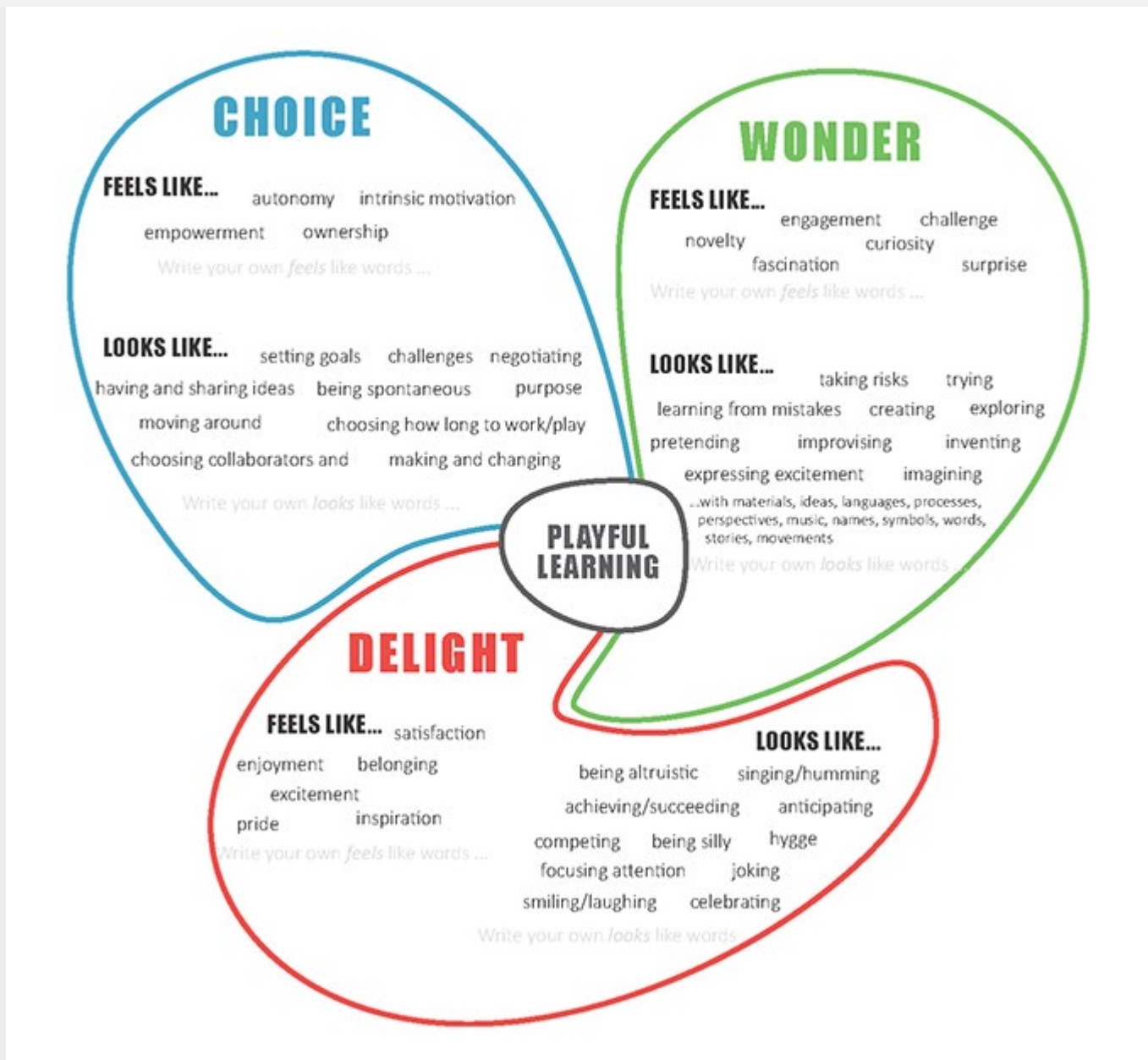
As you read through the Playbook, you will learn more about what the indicators of playful learning (choice, wonder, and delight) look like. You will see how study groups can provide a supportive context for you to negotiate the inevitable paradoxes between the nature of play and the nature of school.

## **CHAPTER 2: INDICATORS OF PLAYFUL LEARNING**

*What does learning through play look like?*

The relationships between play, playfulness, and learning are complex. For instance, not all play is playful (e.g., a child re-enacting a traumatic event). Not all that might be considered playful resembles what would ordinarily be called play (e.g., a conversation). Although play often supports learning, some kinds of play can also undermine targeted learning.

Based on a review of the research literature, analysis of video from ISB classrooms, observations, interviews and many conversations, we have come to a common understanding of learning through play ([click here for more details of our methodology](#)). Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when learning through play is happening, we have identified three core indicators—choice, wonder, and delight—and believe that when all three are “in play,” playful learning is most likely occurring.



Playful learning includes both subjective and objective dimensions; it is something learners feel and is often accompanied by observable behaviours.

For the playful learner, **choice** includes a sense of empowerment, autonomy, ownership, spontaneity, and intrinsic motivation. Students may experience these feelings individually or as part of a group. Collectively making choices, and the accompanying sense of being part of something bigger than oneself, can enhance feelings of empowerment and ownership. When students are experiencing choice they may be setting goals, developing and sharing ideas, making and changing rules, and negotiating challenges. They are also likely to be choosing collaborators and roles, how long to work or play, and when to move around.

**Wonder** entails the experience of curiosity, novelty, surprise, and challenge, which can engage and fascinate the learner. Look for students improvising or exploring, creating or inventing, pretending or imagining, and taking risks or learning from trial and error. Playing with materials, ideas, perspectives, music, symbols, words, languages, stories, movement, and other modes of expression can evoke a sense of wonder.

Feelings of **delight** include excitement, joy, satisfaction, inspiration, anticipation, pride, and belonging. When students are delighted, they may be focused. You may see them smile, laugh, joke, or perhaps be

silly. They might sing, hum, or dance. A sense of hygge (coziness, solidarity and friendship) may pervade. Delight may also be seen in playful competition, celebration, or engaging in an altruistic act.

For an example of what choice, wonder, and delight look like in action, see our idea in [action \*Indicators and Influences of Playful Learning: The Case of an ISB Staff Meeting\*](#) and [Playing with Money: Playful Learning Meets Curriculum Goals](#).

### CHAPTER 3: INFLUENCES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

You may have read the PoP Principles (Ch. 1) and are thinking about how you can implement these in your classroom teaching. You might have considered what playful learning looks and feels like (Ch. 2). But you also know that promoting a culture of play is bigger than the work you do in planning and teaching a single lesson. **What are the broader influences that shape learning through play in a school?** And what can you do to consider and shape these influences, so that you can promote a culture of learning through play?

To think about how learning through play is positioned within the school system, we have found that it can be helpful to consider four lenses: **community, values, environment, and structures**. We have developed these lenses through an iterative research process, and consider them to be a work-in-progress that will be adapted and changed as they are used by you and other educators (to learn about our research process see Ch. 6: FAQs). Each of the four lenses is described in more detail below. We focus on influences that support learning through play, in order to place emphasis on promoting play in schools. You could use these influences, and the [Playful Learning Influences Tool](#), to discuss the factors that support (or perhaps impede) playful learning with colleagues, students, and family members.

In addition to the influences described here, there are also numerous teaching practices (Ch. 4) that can support learning through play.

#### COMMUNITY

Interactions among learners, educators, and families can do much to support playful learning. The following elements in a school community can be especially powerful in promoting learning through play:

- **Responsive, democratic relationships.** In responsive and democratic relationships, learners and educators feel listened to and respected; they have a voice and can participate in decision-making that affects their lives and experiences in school. This relates to relationships at all levels – e.g. among learners and teachers, teachers and administrators, educators and families.
- **Playful, creative, caring adults.** Playfulness can be contagious, and when adults set a tone of being playful and creative, while also expressing caring for others in the school community, learners may naturally model these dispositions. Playful adults seek opportunities for the unexpected and experiment with integrating play in new ways. (read more about this in Ch. 5, Teachers as Playful Learners)
- **Similar adult/child learning experiences.** Through professional development, staff meetings, and other adult learning opportunities, teachers and administrators participate in playful learning themselves. This can enable adults to think about playful learning for learners in new ways.
- **Humor/silliness.** Moments of being silly, telling a joke, laughing together... these can strengthen social bonds and make the school environment feel more playful and joyful.
- **Learners with a playful mindset.** Educators cultivate a playful mindset among learners, so that learners experience school with an open mind and anticipate experiencing playfulness.
- **Opportunities for different kinds of interactions.** Within classrooms and during larger-school gatherings, school community members have opportunities to work and play together in different configurations of large and small groups, as well as time to interact in pairs or independently.

#### VALUES

Understandings about play and playfulness are culturally informed. The underlying norms, beliefs, and attitudes held by members of the school community can influence how learning through play takes shape. The following may support playful learning:

- **Trust, respect, shared responsibility for learning.** For playful learning to thrive, all stakeholders in the school (e.g. administrators, teachers, learners, families) need to trust and respect each other and believe that responsibility for learning is shared among all.
- **Common beliefs/values among adults are compatible with playful learning.** These beliefs could include: a belief that learners learn best through play or constructing their own understandings; a belief that learners are capable and can contribute ideas.
- **Respect for and valuing of cultural/linguistic diversity.** For learners and educators to engage in playful learning, they must feel that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are honored and valued in the school community.
- **Support for risk-taking.** Both for learners and for educators, taking risks with ideas, curriculum, or projects can be liberating and provide rich learning opportunities. Of course, not all risk-taking will result in success, but learning from failure can be a powerful experience.
- **Multiple opportunities for collaboration.** School leaders can communicate broad support for collaboration and interaction among educators in a school. This, in turn, can lead to educators fostering these same values in the classroom.
- **Acceptance of and support for a range of emotions.** Learning through play can be joyful, but play can also bring up strong or challenging emotions. In a school that promotes learning through play, all emotions are welcome and supported.

## ENVIRONMENT

A playful learning environment is a safe space that fosters choice, wonder and delight, enabling learners to engage in deeper, more meaningful learning through play. It makes visible connections between learners' lives and curricular studies/school. For more information about playful learning environments, please see our Playful Environments Tool. The following environmental ideas may support learning through play:

- **Learners and teachers have agency over the environment.** They participate in decision-making about the space and their ideas are listened to and acted upon when possible.
- **Access and flexibility.** Learners freely use varied, flexible spaces and furniture, as well as varied and flexible materials, to explore their ideas.
- **A safe and comfortable environment, with elements that are playful.** Playful elements of a learning environment might be architectural features (e.g. an engaging archway or window); furnishings (a mirror placed in an unexpected location; a unique seating area); or materials (loose parts for play and manipulation).
- **Learners and teachers respecting materials and spaces.** Even as learners experience agency, choice, and flexibility in using spaces and materials, they demonstrate respect for the environment by caring for materials, furnishings, and architectural elements.
- **Aesthetic elements (e.g., light, transparency, natural materials) that evoke wonder and delight.** Learners and educators feel inspired by the aesthetic elements of the space; elements of the space elicit a playful and relaxed state of mind.

## STRUCTURES

School structures, such as curricula, timetables, and rules can be designed and implemented to enable learning through play to flourish. The following structures may support playful learning and enable educators to navigate paradoxes between play and school:

- **Flexible curriculum.** Learning through play is enabled when educators have flexibility to adapt and develop curricula based on learners' lives and interests.
- **Teacher autonomy (power) to make decisions.** This doesn't mean that they make decisions in isolation; ideally, teachers collaborate with each other and make decisions based on conversations with colleagues, learners, administrators, and families.

- **Negotiable/co-constructed norms and rules.** Some rules are necessary in schools, but too many rules or rules that are overly rigid can limit opportunities through play. Ongoing dialogue and the opportunity to co-construct and negotiate rules can open doors for learning through play.
- **Clear timetable, with some built-in flexibility.** Timetabling is complicated, especially in larger schools. But when teachers have some flexibility, for example when they are able to extend a learning experience because the learners are especially engaged, this can enable playful learning.
- **Time for socializing, collaborating, having meaningful discussions built into schedule.** These times could include staff social hours, a dinner before an evening meeting, or a chance for a coffee during a morning break between lessons.
- **Low teacher/child ratios.** This enables educators to get to know learners in a deep and meaningful way, so that their interests and passions can be brought into the curriculum.
- **Traditions that support learning through play.** For example, a whole-school "[Passion Day](#)" when regular timetables are suspended and learners and educators pursue playful interests together.
- **New staff hires who support the learning through play approach.** When administrators hire new teachers, they include information about learning through play as part of the mission of the school, and seek applicants who appreciate this approach.
- **Whole school gatherings.** For example, whole school assemblies, where particular classrooms share their learning through play experiences with the school.
- **Varied assessment strategies.** To assess learning through play, varied approaches are needed. Educators use documentation, rubrics, and observational assessments to gather rich information about learners' playful learning and share these assessments back with the learners, colleagues, and, sometimes families to deepen understandings.

## CHAPTER 4: POP PRACTICES

What practices bring learning through play to life?

So far in the Playbook you may have read about the principles that guide a pedagogy of play, what learning through play looks and feels like, and broader influences that support playful learning. This chapter describes practices that you can use to bring learning through play to life in the classroom and school.

### PRACTICES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Numerous practices can support learning through play in your classroom. Some are "big," in the sense that they last a long time or are repeated over days and weeks. Some are "small" in that they may only happen once or take less than a minute to unfold. Because of the nature of play and learning, there is no one set of practices that will lead to effective learning through play; what will work in your classroom will be unique to you and the learners you teach. On the other hand, there are practices that you can draw upon directly, adapt, and/or be inspired by. Based on inquiry into our classroom practices, we have developed the following list of strategies that support learning through play.



## Teaching strategies that support learning through play (foster choice, wonder, delight)

- allowing playful learning to happen over time, within cycle of inquiry
- shared purpose/clear goal meaningful to learners
- fail forward: mistakes, innovation, and invention are encouraged and learned from
- hands-on
- open-ended
- differentiated: all learners get what they need
- \_\_\_\_\_
- freedom to talk, be active (safely)
- multiple ways to represent ideas/learning
- opportunities for child and adult learners to construct meaning and test ideas
- ample time
- teachers model playing/playfulness
- work/play groups are flexible
- peer-to-peer teaching
- opportunities for feedback

We have also developed specific tools, activities, and ideas, and have organized these practices around:

- Tools for planning and assessing
- Snapshots from the classroom that include ideas about the classroom environment, games and role play, making, student-led activities, and reflecting

### **TOOLS FOR PLANNING AND ASSESSING**

Whether thinking big (e.g., an IB unit of inquiry) or small (e.g., a movement break), here are four tools to support your planning:

1. [The Playful Learning Possibility Planner](#), based on the indicators of playful learning, is designed to help you consider how to create conditions for more choice, wonder, and delight within a learning experience.
2. [The Playful Learning Idea Generator](#), developed by the 2016-17 Play and Academics Study Group and based on the PoP principles, suggests five different ways you can support academic content learning through play.
3. [The Playful Environments Tool](#) can be helpful in thinking about how your classroom environment can support playful learning. This tool can be used for initial set up as well as adjustments during the year.
4. [The Playful Learning Assessment Tool](#) helps assess if learning through play is occurring, based on the influences of playful learning (choice, wonder, and delight).

### **SNAPSHOTS FROM THE CLASSROOM**

At ISB, a central part of the curriculum is the International Baccalaureate (IB) units of inquiry. For an illustration of how playful learning unfolds in one of these units, see the idea in action [Playing with Money: Playful Learning Meets Curriculum Goals](#).

Classroom practices also include daily lessons, activities, and the setup of the classroom environment. Illustrations of these practices are found on the Padlet to the right. The Padlet contains “snapshots” of teachers inquiring into their teaching practice in the form of “mini-posters” created for a celebration of learning for the 2016-17 PoP study groups. These snapshots capture teachers’ questions about teaching, some classroom documentation, and a brief reflection on what they learned about learning through play through this inquiry process. We share them here to provide inspiration as you experiment with incorporating more playful learning in your teaching.

On the Padlet, the mini-posters are organized into five topics:

- Learning environments

- Games and role play
- Making
- Student-led activities
- Reflecting on learning

On the padlet you will also find codes that let you search the mini-posters by: study group; content area (art, language, math and IB unit of inquiry), grade level, and connection to the [Playful Learning Idea Generator](#) tool.

## SCHOOL-WIDE RITUALS

Trusting and democratic relationships form the bedrock of a school culture where learning through play flourishes. School-wide rituals build that culture by allowing us to share ideas, interests, and passions, sing together, celebrate, and collectively solve problems. At ISB, these rituals include:

### Passion Day

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). 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. What is your role during Passion Day? First and foremost, it is to observe--to learn about children's interests and relationships, enjoy and appreciate children's play, occasionally challenge children's thinking, share your passions, and make sure children are safe. Before each Passion Day, you can help prepare children by talking about their interests and how they might be explored at school. After each Passion Day, you can help children reflect on their experiences what they have learned. The idea in action [More Passionate, More Choice: The Evolution of Passion Day](#) provides an illustration of the playful learning that can take place during Passion Day, what you can learn about your students during these experiences, and your role in supporting their learning.

### Whole School Assemblies

Whole School Assemblies (WSA) are times when the ISB community comes together to sing, dance, and celebrate learning. The assemblies take place roughly once a month. These gatherings often begin with music and go on to include student performances of various kinds. They provide opportunities for students to practice public speaking and to see what's going on in different grades levels. Your role is to support your students' participation along with singing, dancing, and celebrating yourself. During WSAs there are celebrations of the month's birthdays (defined by a slapstick trumpet routine), recognition of new staff and visitors (who are asked to introduce themselves by dancing along to the ISB band), and a closing song during which the classes leave one by one.

### Staff meetings

Staff meetings are also a time to learn what is happening in other parts of the school and occasionally celebrate together. The idea in action [Indicators and Influences of Playful Learning: The Case of an ISB Staff Meeting](#) describes an ISB staff meeting, and how the meeting contribute to our culture of playful learning for adults.

### ISB celebrations and events

As a school located in Denmark with community members from around the world, there are a lot of celebrations. We are also a creative bunch and have invented some celebrations (and elaborated on others). Here is a partial list of celebrations and events that take place at ISB. Ask a colleague if you want to learn more about a particular celebration. And if you have a tradition to share, talk to a member of the Leadership Team to see if your celebration can be added to the list.



| WHAT                        | WHEN                         | WHY   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Classroom Show & Tell       | End of each unit             | A chance for you and your students to show parents what you've been working on  |
| New Parent Cafe             | 3-4 times a year             | A chance for families new to ISB to meet each other and members of the Administration   |
| Parents' University         | 3-5 times a year             | A workshop or talk open to all parents, often on a topic connected to IB or learning through play   |
| ISB Get Together            | First week of school         | A casual, welcome back event  |
| Sports Day                  | Friday before autumn holiday | A day of running- celebrated throughout Denmark   |
| Halloween                   | 31 October                   | Usually a potluck and day of dressing up  |
| Holiday Craft Day           | November                     | "Klippedag" is a Danish tradition when families decorate the school for the holidays  |
| Staff Christmas Party       | December                     | A very important tradition!   |
| Fastelavn                   | February (Carnival)          | Students dress up and "hit the cat out of the barrel" (similar to a piñata)   |
| April Fools                 | 1 April                      | Despite communications from admin, there won't be a school uniform. Also, there is no such thing as a <a href="#">methane collecting device</a> in the basement (two past April Fool's Day jokes) |
| P5 Exhibition               | April                        | A celebration of P5's self-led unit of inquiry and preparation for MYP  |
| PoP Study Group Celebration | May                          | See Chapter 5 of the Playbook to learn more about PoP study groups  |
| Family Picnic & Art Show    | Last week of school          | Student performances and art exhibits followed by a whole school potluck  |

## POP TOOLBOX

The [PoP toolbox](#) is a collection of tools and protocols that ISB teachers use in their work with Project Zero. If you try them out, we would love to hear your feedback! Please contact Jen Ryan at [jen\\_ryan@harvard.edu](mailto:jen_ryan@harvard.edu)

## CHAPTER 5: TEACHERS AS PLAYFUL LEARNERS

Throughout the previous chapters, we have painted a picture of what playful learning and teaching looks like at ISB—the indicators (Ch. 2) of playful learning, the influences (Ch. 3) that shape playful learning experiences, and examples of practice (Ch. 4) throughout the school. Much of the focus has been on describing how to set up the conditions where playful learning thrives, whether by sharing snapshots of practices or how classrooms can be designed with and for students. This chapter turns our attention to the adult playful learning environment at ISB.

You may have read the previous section discussing the principles (Ch. 1) of a pedagogy of play. Principle #6 notes that to create a culture of playful learning for students, we need to create a culture of playful learning for adults. Principle #8 alerts us to the tension or paradoxes that can exist between the goals of play and of school, and suggests that a way of addressing the paradoxes is to study them.

So how do we build on these two principles? One way is to set up opportunities for teachers at ISB to experience choice, wonder, and delight with colleagues: playful staff meetings, adult social events like bowling and spouse dinners, cooking in the food lab together, spontaneously fun department meetings, baby showers, and encouraging adult laughter and joking in the halls.

Another way is to provide a space for exploring and discussing playful learning. Adult study groups at ISB are central to the pedagogy of play approach. They are designed around elements of choice, wonder, and delight, and function as micro-learning environments that parallel the student playful learning experience. Study groups are organized around teacher interest and inquiry. If you join a study group, you will meet monthly to discuss ideas, reflect on practice, and consider strategies for implementing playful pedagogy. Examples of student work and documentation from the classroom help ground the discussions. Study groups are safe spaces where you can tinker with material, play with ideas, try new things, have fun with your own learning, and learn from each other. In study group, you will work together, support each other, listen and disagree respectfully, build personal and professional relationships, laugh, and —often—indulge in coffee and chocolate.

At ISB, learning and teaching is a journey full of choice, wonder, delight, and sometimes messiness. As kindergarten teacher Marina notes,

**“If you are not ready to play, you probably shouldn’t work here. We are all a little crazy.”**

Want to learn more about what happens in study group? The pictures of practice A Kindergarten Creator Space: Building a Space for 3- to 7-year-old Makers and Too Many Rules on the Playground: Working the Paradox between Safety and Freedom illustrate what it can look like when a study group tackles a particular question or issue.

### 2016-2017 POP STUDY GROUPS

#### Playful Learning in the After School Club

The philosophy of ISB carries through to the After School Club, where play and playfulness remain at the heart of learning and teaching. In After School, free play and structured activities provide opportunities for children to build friendships across ages and develop their social, emotional, and independent choice-making skills. In this study group, we explore questions such as: *What is After School’s place in playful learning environment at ISB? How can the After School Club support and promote learning through play?*

- [After School Club Padlet](#)

## **Play and Academics**

School is a place where adults have goals for children's intellectual, moral, social, and emotional learning. This study group considers learning through play's role in academics, asking: *What does academic learning through play look like? How can play and playfulness be part of children's acquisition of skills and content knowledge across disciplines such as math, science, writing, etc.? What can teachers do to support such learning, and how can play be used to activate children's curiosity and motivate them?*

- [Play and Academics Padlet](#)

## **Kindergarten Playful Classroom Environments**

This group explores the question, "How can classroom environments for young children support and promote learning through play?" We have learned that when children have agency and ownership over the classroom environment and materials, they engage in more developed play and deeper learning. As a study group, we explore ways to transform spaces into spaces conducive to playful learning (such as the Kindergarten Creator Space, a maker space for young children) and document how children explore, create, and play in these spaces. And in collaboration with the Primary Classroom Environments study group, we are designing a tool for educators to support thinking about how the environment can foster learning through play.

- [Kindergarten Environments Padlet](#)

## **Primary Playful Classroom Environments**

Like the kindergarten group, the primary playful environments study group considers how classroom environments support and promote learning through play in the primary grades, learning that when children have agency and ownership over the classroom environment and materials, they engage in more developed play and deeper learning. As mentioned in the description above, both playful classroom environments groups are working together to design a tool for educators to support thinking about how the environment can foster learning through play. Teachers in our study group also explore what makes spaces in school conducive to playful learning by engaging the children in designing and adapting areas of the classrooms, using materials in novel or new ways, experimenting with the arrangement of classroom furniture and its relationship to a room's architecture, and reflecting on their own experiences in the environment.

- [Primary Environments Padlet](#)

## **Playful Language Learning**

The Playful Language Learning group documents language learning activities involving children from kindergarten through middle school in a range of settings: in classrooms, the library, After School Club, and during English, Danish and Spanish lessons. We explore how play and playfulness may support learners to acquire new language skills or practice language skills previously learned.

- [Language Learning Padlet](#)

## **2015-2016 POP STUDY GROUPS**

### **Classroom Environments and Learning through Play**

Teachers shape the experiences of their students every day, in part by making decisions about the design of the learning environment. The physical space (e.g., furniture, materials/tools, access to ideas), cultural

space (e.g., norms, expectations, mindsets, values), and climate (ethos, mood) of the classroom can support (or undermine) learning through play. This study group explores questions such as: *How can environmental factors be conducive to and enhance learning through play? How can my students be co-creators of an environment that supports learning through play?*

### **Learning through Play in the Creator Space**

The Creator Space is located at the physical center of ISB. This study group considers how to make it part of the pedagogical center of the school—a space where playful, experiential learning takes place and emanates from. We draw on Project Zero’s recent work on maker-centered education (see [www.agencybydesign.org](http://www.agencybydesign.org)) and the expertise and practices of a research group from Tufts University also collaborating with ISB. This study group addresses questions such as: *What is the relationship between learning through play and exploring, tinkering, and hacking? How can the work that happens in the Creator Space be connected to the teaching and learning that occurs in other parts of the school?*

### **A Playful Approach to Language Learning**

As an international school, ISB aims to promote children’s fluency in a number of languages. This study group explores how play can be a central part of ISB’s approach to language learning. Questions to explore might include: *What practices do Vivian Paley’s Storytelling/Story Acting inspire at ISB? What can we learn from and how might we incorporate the Opal School’s Story Workshop? Where can learning through play best be a part of language instruction at ISB?*

### **Play and Academics**

School is a place where adults have goals for children’s learning—moral, social, emotional, and academic. This study group considers learning through play’s role in academics. Questions to consider include: *How can play and playfulness be part of children’s acquisition of skills and content knowledge? What is unique to particular ages about learning through play? What is the relationship between learning through play and IB units? How can the two complement each other?*

### **Playful Mindsets**

Because children at play are engaged, relaxed, and challenged, playfulness is a mindset that supports learning. This study group explores the various components of a playful mindset and considers how teachers can promote a playful mindset among their students. Issues of engagement and motivation will be considered, including questions such as: *What are the elements or characteristics of a playful mindset? Is a playful mindset observable? What would it mean for a teacher to have a playful mindset? How can we engage children who seem reluctant to play in learning through play?*

## **CHAPTER 6: FAQs**

In this section, we answer questions you may have about ISB’s approach to learning through play. These answers were developed in collaboration with ISB faculty and staff.

### **Where do the ideas in the Playbook come from?**

The Pedagogy of Play project is a research initiative that uses a research approach we call Playful Participatory Research. This is a methodology in which university-based researchers and school-based practitioners construct knowledge together in playful ways. We draw upon varied and numerous data sources that help us build a deep understanding about learning through play, including:

- interviews with teachers
- video and audio recordings of classroom interactions
- documentation from teacher meetings
- student work samples
- notes from school-based observations
- notes from PZ team meetings and Replays (short anecdotes about play and playfulness)

This is a lot of data, so we analyze it collaboratively and iteratively. Some data analysis happens at Project Zero – for example when we make sense of interview transcripts or review classroom observation field notes. But you will be involved in much of the analysis, during Study Groups and whole-school workshops. We also occasionally engage in shared analysis sessions with educators beyond ISB, and with learning through play experts.

The PoP principles, the indicators of playful learning, and the influences of learning through play in school were all developed using this playful participatory research process.

To learn more about our research methodology, please see our white paper Playful Participatory Research.

### **Do the kids have to be playing all the time?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. All of the above

Our answer is no. Not all learning needs to be playful and not all play leads to meaningful learning. And we believe play and playfulness have a central place in school. Play and playfulness give children the freedom to explore and follow their interests. Rather than telling students what to do and giving them the knowledge, we give them space to figure things out, with the freedom to make and learn from mistakes. Sometimes it is a small thing you can do to make learning more playful, like letting the kids sit where they want to during an assignment. When learning is playful, it's more motivating. But playing all the time is not fun, and the kids don't have to be playing all the time.

### **Is there a place for learning that isn't light and fun, and is instead challenging-- like a math concept that is really hard?**

Playful learning is different from entertainment. It certainly should involve challenge and it doesn't have to be fun all the time. When you really care about something you will push yourself and work hard. Kids choose to do that in their play all the time. There are rewards that come from pushing yourself and seeing what you can do, and we want our students to have this feeling of real accomplishment. Playful learning and seriousness can exist together in a school setting.

### **Why is learning through play so important?**

Play is a central way through which children learn about the world. We've actually written a paper on this topic – please take a look!

### **There are a lot of LEGO bricks at school! Do you use them all the time?**

There are many materials and tools that support learning through play: clay, books, technology, objects found in the forest, and the children's imagination. We use what supports playful learning - what makes sense. Build to Express, Six Bricks, First LEGO League, and simply letting children use bricks to build with and explore are great for encouraging different kinds of playful learning. As a school in the LEGO Group's

backyard, we are fortunate to have access to many of these tools. So yes, there are a lot of LEGO bricks, and they are a wonderful resource.

### **How do we talk to the parents about PoP?**

It depends on the parent and what they are asking. In general, you'll find that ISB parents support the idea of learning through play—it is, after all, the philosophy of the school! However, sometimes parents have the idea that play isn't connected to academic learning; that it's just play. So we talk about what children learn through play: coming up with solutions to problems; practicing and consolidating skills and information; developing motor skills; cultivating number sense and an understanding of patterns and shapes, building their concentration; and learning about social interactions and collaboration.

Sometimes parents understand that children learn through play, but are worried about their child reaching specific learning goals and mastering specific skills. So we talk about how at ISB children play with a purpose and that we do have learning goals in our teaching. Sometimes we have to help parents see the connection between their child's play and playfulness and their learning. And sometimes we have to let them see how their child adjusts and begins to really enjoy school.

You can also refer parents to information about play and learning (e.g., the [Towards a Pedagogy of Play](#) paper).

### **How do you get ideas of how to teach playfully?**

We learn from each other. For example, a P5 teacher started a routine called "bubble catchers." It's a playful name for a place where kids can write down the ideas they are having about the PYP unit or math or life. It's a bit like a diary. When other teachers heard about it they thought, "Oh, I'd like to do something with bubble catchers with my kids!" Later, during some cross-disciplinary planning, other teachers even started saying, "We should have bubble catchers for the teachers."

### **How do you know if you are learning through play?**

We assess. Are the children learning? Are they experiencing choice? Do they wonder? Are they asking questions? Do they seem delighted and engaged? Our assessments involve observing and also asking the children to reflect on their learning. You can see examples of this in the [Pictures of Practice](#).

### **I've noticed you use the terms "learning through play" and "playful learning." Is there a difference?**

We use these terms interchangeably. For a longer discussion of why, please see our paper: [Toward a Pedagogy of Play](#).

### **Are there challenges to teaching playfully at an international school?**

Sure. We have kids of many different nationalities and different school experiences. While people from around the world play, in some cultures school is not a place to play. Sometimes we see a child just sitting there because at their old school they weren't used to learning through play. Part of our work is helping children adjust to our school culture.

### **With everything else going on at ISB, how is there time for learning through play?**

Learning through play isn't something that takes additional time; it is something that is part of what is happening at ISB all the time. That said, we know planning for learning through play takes time. Planning time, especially with your colleagues, should involve considerations of how more play and playfulness can be part of learning experiences. And speaking of time, here is a joke about the relative nature of time: A snail was mugged by two turtles. When the police asked him what happened, he said 'I don't know, it all happened so fast.'

### **What is the relationship between PoP and IB?**



PoP is a set of ideas intended to support learning through play in schools, working in tandem with the school curriculum. At ISB, of course, this means PoP and the International Baccalaureate Programme (IB) working together. There are many natural connections between PoP and IB, and the two can easily coexist. If we could pick one word for both PoP and IB, we would say 'inquiry.' PoP and IB do not just suggest a way of working, they hope to cultivate a mindset, a way of viewing and approaching the world – a mindset in which teachers become more open, view the child as capable, and offer learners opportunities to activate their sense of agency. In both PoP and IB, students explore and take the lead. When you have an IB mindset, you will begin noticing parts of curriculum in your daily work: "I really see this learner profile here! I can really work with this key concept related to it." With a PoP mindset, you might notice something playful in the classroom and think, "This is so PoP!" and pause to document the learning in that moment, writing down a note or taking a photo or short video. The IB requires documentation, and PoP-style documentation works well here. In documenting, PoP helps you reflect on your practice and makes you more aware of those moments in IB when you want to take a step back and let the students take initiative (see some [Documentation Tools](#) here). Thinking about student motivated playful learning reinforces what you should be doing with the IB curriculum. Although it can take a while to become comfortable with both PoP and IB, there is a sweet spot where PoP and IB overlap, and instead of thinking, "Now I'm going to think play; now I'm going to think IB," both exist simultaneously.

Within playful inquiry in an IB unit, there are times when some learning is more playful than others, and this is okay. Playful doesn't have to be big and fancy, or song and dance in the classroom all the time. Sometimes our previous conceptions of what play looks like can get in the way of understanding when playful learning is happening. We might think that something is not playful, but it might be playful inside a student's mind even if it doesn't present that way externally. So when planning and teaching for playful inquiry with PoP and IB, it's important to ask children what they find playful. It can sometimes be a challenge in IB getting the children's interests to align with the curriculum that adults have chosen, especially when it comes to making the learning of core skills like reading and writing more playful. The goals of PoP and IB can work together so that the playful inquiry gets students motivated and engaged and makes school meaningful.

### **Are there unanswered questions about learning through play?**

Of course! We haven't figured it all out. For example, we puzzle about using the term "free play." Some of us don't like the term "free play" because we don't want to diminish the value of child-led play (from the adult perspective, "it's just free play"). Nor do we want to say to the kids that they aren't playing when they are exploring different topics in class. We need a common language for teachers and children so when we say "go play" it means children are given ownership to discover lots of things through their play without saying "now put on the free play mask."

### **Do you have a metaphor and/or model that captures the ideas in this Playbook?**

As a matter of fact, we do. Envision a playing field—a playground, sports field, or park. As children inhabit the playing field, there is a possibility, but not a guarantee, that they will experience playfulness. We can think of a classroom or school as a playing field where the potential for learning through play exists, but is not a given. In a pedagogy of play, we strive to create the conditions for this learning through play to flourish. However, in order to understand if and why playful learning is happening, we first need to be clear about what playful learning looks and feels like; then we can recognize what practices bring learning to life, and finally understand what supports or creates the conditions for the playful learning to take place. We are working on a graphic representation of how playful learning, teaching practices and supportive influences interact in our metaphorical playing field. The idea in action [Indicators and Influences of Playful Learning: The Case of an ISB Staff Meeting](#) illustrates our playing field metaphor in action.