

Indicators of Playful Learning: Six United States Schools



Based on observations and interviews with 22 teachers and 7 school leaders at six Boston-area schools, we have identified three categories that describe the nature of students' experiences as they build understanding, knowledge, and skills through playful learning. Because playful learning includes both subjective and objective dimensions, the indicators represent psychological states ("feels like") as well as observable behaviors ("looks like"). When all three categories are "in play" –represented by the intersection of the petals of the diagram – playful learning is likely occurring. The sub-indicators, or markers, under each category offer a range of emotions and behaviors that students may exhibit. It is unlikely that all the markers will be visible or apparent in every playful learning experience. However, we believe that by identifying what playful learning may look or feel like, educators will be better equipped to foster and identify it in their classrooms and schools.

Playful learning at these schools is **empowering**. Students experience a sense of freedom and choice; they feel respected and heard; and they have choices about their learning. Teachers explain that empowering learning experiences happen within boundaries and structure. Clear routines and schedules provide students with the opportunity to make developmentally appropriate choices where they can demonstrate independence and leadership, direct their own learning, and co-create rules and norms. Empowerment allows students the courage to take risks. It looks like students actively participating, moving around, sharing ideas, collaborating, and asking for help from each other.

Meaningful learning feels interesting to students and is connected to their family, friends, interests (in and out of school), and issues of importance in the wider world. Meaning is found individually (e.g., a student who loves spreadsheets) and collectively (e.g., an entire class passionate about figuring out a pattern being revealed in a daily calendar). Meaningful learning looks like students who are curious, engaged, creating, experimenting, and leaning in (literally and figuratively) to learning experiences. Meaning is found when students strategize about how to solve problems (rather than just looking for the right answer) and can be found in a long arc of inquiry where students iterate and revise ideas and products in a process of inquiry.

Playful learning involves experiences that are **joyful**, where learners are having fun and enjoying themselves, often with friends. Challenge can add to the joy, leading to what Mitch Resnick, a researcher at MIT, and others call "hard fun." In fact, in the absence of joy, activities can become boring. In *The Sociology of Fun*, Ben Fincham notes that fun requires a feeling of safety and trust. Students enjoying learning are often smiling and laughing. But joy can also be surprising and, for some, involve competition. At times, there can be a bit of silliness. Joking and celebrating are part of joyful classroom. There is often a buzz of activity.

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