"Play is the highest form of research"

Albert Einstein

Learning Through Play in the Middle Years

By Trista Hollweck

On November 20, 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declared play essential for the healthy development for all children under the age of 18 and a specific human right (Article 31, ratified by Canada in 1991). In Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education, (CMEC, 2012) endorsed “a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations.” Yet, despite an abundance of research evidence that demonstrates how play leads to greater social, emotional and academic success, play-based learning is most often relegated to the early years and Kindergarten classrooms. Until now!

In 2022, the Canadian Playful Schools Network (CPSN) was launched to identify, circulate and promote powerful play-based teaching and learning in the middle years (Grades 4 to 8), especially for students traditionally marginalized by systems of schooling. The first of its kind in the world, the network brings together 41 English- and French-language school teams from across seven provinces that are committed to integrating and deepening learning through play for their students.

Funded by the Lego Foundation, CPSN is co-led by Andy Hargreaves and Trista Hollweck and six researchers from University of Ottawa’s Faculty of Education. Our research examines what learning through play means for Canadian educators and how play-based learning can help our most marginalized students. As a bilingual network,
we are interested in the connection between play, language, culture and identity, and whether play enhances engagement, learning and well-being for both students and educators. We draw on what we know about effective professional collaboration and learning networks and we are mapping how CPSN members share, circulate and promote playful learning approaches across their school, province, country and beyond.

**CPSN School Teams**

Each CPSN school team is comprised of three to four educators, with at least one a principal or vice-principal. Teams work together to dream, design and implement a learning-through-play project that builds on previous school initiatives and is relevant for their students, staff and community. All school teams receive $5,000 to help make their project a reality.

As researchers, we know successful networks create opportunities for educators to have the time and space to learn with and from one another, collaborate, share resources and best practices, and offer each other feedback. All CPSN educators receive monthly funding to co-plan as a school team, arrange ‘playdates’ with other network members and attend virtual playjouer professional learning sessions led by national and international play experts.

In playgroup sessions, four to seven school teams come together to support one another and share their learning through play successes and challenges. It is through these collaborative activities that we foster inquiry, reflection, better practice and increased commitment to change across the network (Poortman and Brown, 2018).

CPSN promotes *knowledge circulation*. It is more than mobilizing research knowledge for practice (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2010), but also how practice inspires research and members circulate effective playful strategies across the network. Since there is no definitive definition of learning through play in research literature, we build on the work of partners and collaborators, such as Harvard’s Pedagogy of Play (Project Zero, 2023), Outdoor Play Canada and CCUNESCO. We also see how Canadian educators understand play through their onboarding sessions, monthly reflective reports, site visits, playgroup discussions and CPSN projects.

**CPSN Projects**

CPSN describes play through four interconnected modes: green (nature-based play), screen (digital and computer-based play), machine (robotics and maker-based play) and everything in between, which considers the interplay between language, culture, identity.
Each of the learning-through-play projects are unique and reflect their different contexts (e.g. urban or rural community, Indigenous, French or English language, etc.). While some projects involve the entire school, others are grade and classroom specific. In Ontario, there are five English-language and two French-language CPSN school teams. Their projects include using filmmaking (specifically animation) to tell stories, demonstrate science concepts and help students make connections with each other and community partners; exploring dynamic food-growing opportunities like building a school garden, greenhouse or using tools like Canva and 3D printers to build prototypes of vertical growing towers; and getting outside for nature sessions and learning on the land with Indigenous knowledge keepers.

Today, I spotlight two CPSN school teams from Ontario’s English-language Catholic school boards:

**St. David Catholic Elementary School, Sudbury, Ontario** uses outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach with the objective of enhancing students’ engagement, health and well-being. Inspired by another CPSN school, Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan in Maniwaki, Quebec, the school does “cultural days,” where students can choose to engage from several outdoor, Indigenous-based activities. This winter, students worked on a sledding challenge, where they had to create and build sled prototypes from cardboard and duct tape and then test them in a race.

“Through CPSN’s mentorship and support, the St. David school community recognized that learning on the land is playful learning. Staff engage in outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach to enrich learning, enhance school engagement, and improve student and staff health and wellness. Students and teachers interact and learn in an environment in which the boundaries between classroom and outdoor learning and teacher and student are re-drawn to stimulate enhanced learning and teaching through play. Through a connection with the land, our school has opened the door for deepening connections with Indigenous perspectives, strengthening health and well-being, and increasing knowledge on environmental stewardship and climate change.

“Learning through play is a wonderful example of how a focus on relational teachings can positively shape a school’s culture. When schools increase student engagement through play, they are better able to produce positive outcomes for students. Students who traditionally struggle with pencil and paper tasks often become the leaders when hands-on activities are provided. Play allows students to work collaboratively and experience ‘light bulb’ moments that they want to share. Staff have observed overall improvement in student engagement, attendance and most importantly in ‘fun’ across the curriculum.”

— Christina Raso, Raymond Trudeau and Dawn Wemigwans
St. David Catholic Elementary School

**St. George Elementary and Notre Dame High School** from the Ottawa Catholic School Board are working together to create a bridge of playful learning between their elementary and middle school students. Classes selected two UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6 & 14) under the overarching theme of “water” and a related charitable cause. Using the OCSB Social Entrepreneurship Program (SEP) framework, local business owners mentor students to develop playful ways...
to raise money (e.g., making soap and coasters to be sold through a Shopify website). Additional projects include building a cardboard and coded arcade with a small entrance fee and a student-designed innovation room at St. George where multi-age groupings have the tools and space to work through the design-thinking process and STEAM related activities.

“It’s no surprise the more fun and playful the task, the more absorbed students become. Leveraging technology using Minecraft Education, Microbits and Scratch means working with tools that junior level students see as toys. Collaborating to create videos on We Video or cardboard arcade games are better than playdates. In fact, some students are getting together and working at home to continue these projects. Students frequently request to stay in, noting it’s more fun to work than to go out for recess! As fun and work are interwoven, the team is left asking: Is it possible that deep learning is in fact playful learning? While play-based learning is engaging for students, it’s important to highlight the merits of play-based teaching. It’s invigorating to work in an environment where educators ask, how can we make this more fun? Inevitably, what’s fun for the students is also fun for teachers. We are learning from one another, learning from the community that is ever willing to get involved, and learning from our students. And it sure is fun!”

— Jacqueline Lawlor
St. George Elementary Catholic School

Concluding thoughts

Learning through play is both fun and hard work, and schools are seeing a positive impact on students, staff and the wider school community. Across CPSN, educators report improved student engagement, attendance and social skills, and their CPSN experience is contributing to greater collaboration and enjoyment for themselves. Considering the challenges so many schools are facing, the potential power of play-based learning and teaching is giving us hope. Now is the time to bring educators together to dream, build and implement their own learning through play projects. All children have the right to play. And so do the adults! Let’s work together to bring more learning through play into Canadian schools and spark a global movement.

For Your Reflection:

• Where is learning through play found in our school and what does it look like?
• Is play-based learning accessible and embedded in the middle grades (4 to 8)?
• Who is included in learning through play, and who is excluded?
• How often do our students learn outdoors and in nature?
• What initiatives can we build on to integrate and enrich play-based learning in our school?

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