

Too Many Rules on the Playground: **Working the Paradox between Safety and Freedom**

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One paradox inherent in cultivating a pedagogy of play has to do with rules. Schools are often full of rules – rules that are predominantly made and enforced by well-meaning adults and implemented with children’s safety and well-being in mind. But rules can also interfere with children’s ability to experience choice, wonder, and delight – all indicators of playful learning. In this picture of practice, we step outside on the playground at the International School of Billund (ISB) with one kindergarten class, to see what happens when the teachers ask, “What happens when we have fewer rules on the playground?” This picture of practice also illustrates how ISB study group conversations, grounded in documentation, supported teachers’ ability to navigate the paradoxes between play and school.

Rules include:

- **No going up the slide**
- **Bicycle riding only allowed on the bike track, and in one direction**
- **Trees are not for climbing**
- **Playing with apples that fall from the tree is not allowed**
- **No throwing items over the fence**
- **It is not allowed to dig outside of the sandbox**
- **It is not allowed to play with tree branches**
- **Etc. etc.**

Too Many Rules

It is early September, and Marina Benavente Barbon (lead teacher) and Carolina Ayala (assistant teacher) are on the playground with their class of 14 five-year-old kindergarteners. Many are learning English at school, and several have documented special needs. During the hour-long outdoor play period, Marina and Carolina find themselves saying NO more than yes. Several children want to climb and pick the apples from one of the small trees on the edge of the playground, but Carolina has to stop them, explaining that this is against the rules. Others see friends from the older classes through the fence and want to start a game, throwing a ball across the fence; this time, Marina has to stop the game – throwing things over the fence is not allowed. In fact, there are many rules that circulate verbally among the staff, even if an official written list does not exist. These rules include:

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- Etc. etc.

Frustrated that he can't act on his ideas with the ball play, Toby¹, a child with special needs, runs off, opens the door to the school and disappears inside. Marina sighs as she follows him – this is not the first time that he has run off, and it's rare for him to engage in play that doesn't break one rule or another during outside time. She begins to wonder, is having so many rules on the playground interfering with children's play and learning? Is there any way to try something else?

¹When referring to children, pseudonyms are assigned throughout this paper



A Playful Idea

Later that week, Carolina and Marina attend their first Pedagogy of Play study group meeting of the school year. They are members of the Kindergarten Playful Environments study group, and part of today's meeting is to choose a question, related to play and the learning environment, that can be explored in the coming weeks by gathering and reflecting on documentation. Marina has an idea and pitches it to Carolina. "We keep getting messages about learning through play," Marina explains, "but I keep feeling like I have to stop it. Like when they were counting the apples, and learning math – why should I stop that? I feel like I get told two different things all the time, and I don't think that is fair for the kids." Within a few minutes, they agree on a risky but important question: What happens when we have fewer rules on the playground? The question elicits a mix of gasps and cheers from other members of the study group, who are both intrigued and worried about the implications of asking such a question. Marina reassures them that they will address the question as an empirical experiment, carried out thoughtfully, and will document what happens to share back with the study group next month. Carolina and Marina recognize the risk they are taking with this question, because they will be trying out a major change to the rules that all teachers and children abide by in a shared playground space. But they feel supported enough by the study group to give it a try.

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Planning for the Experiment

Over the next few days, Marina and Carolina make a concrete plan for carrying out their experiment. They decide to explain their plans to the children, and in doing so, talk about what it means to conduct research. This is a powerful message for the kindergarteners, who may not have been aware of their teachers' roles as co-researchers on the Pedagogy of Play project, but now have the opportunity to participate in an authentic experiment. With the children, Marina and Carolina create green "freedom bracelets" and explain that when the children put these bracelets on, they only need to follow two guidelines on the playground:

1. We take care of each other.
2. We take care of the materials on the playground.



Observing and Documenting

The following Monday, and for the rest of the week thereafter, children head out for their morning outdoor playtime with bracelets on their wrists. Each day that week, Marina and Carolina document what happens, filming short video clips of the children's play and writing observations in their notebooks. The children ride their bicycles on a part of the playground not normally allowed; they play ball over the fence with the primary school children; they pick and gather apples from the apple tree. Surprisingly, there are no injuries.

After reviewing the video footage later, Carolina and Marina write the following reflection:

- The children didn't do anything that they normally don't do [when breaking the rules] (ride their bicycles in the blue part of the playground and bridge, dig in the mountain of soil, play with the primary children through the fence)
- The children made their own safety rules
- They needed less grown up supervision
- They felt trusted, they asked us for input and shared their ideas and plans with us feeling safe and confident during the observations
- The children understood perfectly what the bracelet meant (They are asking us when they can wear it again...)

We saw quiet children interacting with others, "runners" staying in the playground without the need of jumping fences and escaping, Toby finally enjoying being outside, shy girls becoming risk takers and trying new things (Annika, Nubia, Susanna). Happier children, less incidents and no material or trees damaged in the whole week.

Marina and Carolina post these reflections, along with the videos, on the study group's Padlet (digital learning space) in preparation for the group's upcoming meeting.

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Two weeks later, the Kindergarten Playful Environments study group gathers and watches an excerpt from the playground videos together. The discussion that follows, guided by a protocol used to focus looking at documentation, is lively, exciting, and challenging. Here is a slice of that conversation:

Tove (K2 teacher):

I see children having a lot of fun and there are no rules, they are actually being creative, like playing with the ball with primary...that we haven't seen before. So I think they are being creative and trying new things. And I think the children are growing with this, their self-esteem, as they have more responsibility and can grow with this. The bracelets give them freedom. And I wonder if we have too many rules, because rules are made to be broken. We could rethink our rules, because less rules is better. I think it's cool what you are doing.

Irene (K2 teacher):

The only thing I'm concerned about is the way it's made over there. They have those huge metal poles, and if they bang their heads on the poles when they are riding the bikes there they can get a severe concussion. And I don't think that's safe.

Megina (PZ facilitator):

I saw children being safe even though they were doing things that are not normally allowed. It does make me think that they are capable of making wise choices if trusted and adults are there. They did have two rules: that the children needed to stay safe and keep materials safe. I wonder if those are enough, if the teachers and the children know that they are negotiating limits as they go.

Britta (K1 assistant teacher):

It would really be nice if we could play more fully, if there wasn't so many rules.



Farah (K2 assistant teacher):

I'm thinking the same, but we could try adding classes by classes and see how it goes. I think it's a good idea. If it works... and when we are doing the documentation, maybe we could have K2A join in. We could come out and join you.

June (K3 assistant teacher):

I was just wondering if it's ok without asking permission from Bent [school caretaker]. If there are some specific rules. To me it seems – breaking rules that have been set by someone who is in charge of the playground without even asking, is disrespectful.

Britta:

I think that by the 1st of November, we have 21 little ones. And I think it's a lot of kids to look after if there are no rules out there for the older ones. So I think it would be very difficult. I don't know – just a thought.

Tove:

I can see the problem June is pointing out. If something really bad happens, and a child falls hurting his head, and it's something we allowed... I'm just thinking about insurance in that case. Then we are responsible.

Megina:

I hear you want more freedom and joy but also genuine concern for children's safety and materials. I wonder about having rules that teachers know but don't have to be so visible to the children. It takes trust among the teachers to be helping each other to observe carefully. So if you see something that looks unsafe, you talk to each other and the children. Bent could articulate reasons for this, this, and this, that you have in your head and could negotiate as needed with the children.

Carolina (K3 assistant teacher):

I think this is really controversial and I appreciate your comments. I'm surprised that you like it. I understand the safety reasons... but I also saw the big kids being careful and kind with the small ones. So I think this is something we could help them more, and help the small ones to trust the big ones and to play with them.

Marina (K3 teacher):

For me it's called play – ground. It's for playing. I think we need some rules, but too many rules makes it difficult for them and difficult for us.

So maybe next time, when we make the rules, they could come to us, and talk to us, and ask us what rules do we think are necessary. And maybe they could observe how the kids play. So I think in that way, maybe we could do it together so we don't have to keep saying no, no, no.

This is a very real and rather challenging conversation. Teachers in the study group voice both support and concern for the experiment with fewer rules, and have good reasons on both sides of the debate. No solution is reached today, but the structures of the study group (grounding the conversation in documentation, using a protocol to facilitate a focused discussion) seem to enable an open and thoughtful conversation about the paradox of needing rules, but not overly limiting children's play.



Sharing Documentation with the Children

After the study group meeting, Marina and Carolina talk again. Encouraged by the open and engaging conversation in the study group, they decide to push their research further by bringing the documentation back to the children in their class. As Carolina explains, "The children did not have access to their bracelets for a month. We decided to show them the video and on another occasion the green bracelets. Both times we asked the children what they remembered about the experience and how they felt."

After viewing the video and seeing the bracelets again, Marina leads a whole-group discussion with the class:

Marina:

Who remembers how you use this (holding up one of the green bracelets)?

Viva:

When we have the bracelets, then we can do anything and ride everywhere, bike on the blue part. And then you and Carolina are going to go around with a camera.

Lucy:

You said we had to be nice to each other.

Marina: Yes – that was one rule. Actually there were just two rules. Do you remember the other one?

Christof:

Take care of our things.

Anja:

And we have to take care of the little ones.

Marina:

Yes – those were our two rules. So do you think the K2s could learn to use bracelets?

Christof:

Yes!

Divani:

I can teach them!

All of the children remember the bracelets and the agreements they had, and several recall that they could “bike on the blue part” of the playground, an area normally off-limits to bicycles. The children also use the word “fun” repeatedly to talk about the experience. When asked if they thought younger children could learn to have fewer rules, several children offer to teach the younger ones about the new rules. Anja suggests, “Actually I can teach all the girls and Christof can teach all the boys.”

This is a powerful conversation, in which revisiting documentation allows children to share their perspectives about play and rules on the playground. But Marina and Carolina aren’t quite sure what to do next; they hope that maybe other teaching teams will be interested in trying their experiment with fewer rules, but also feel that they need support from the school leadership in order to push this idea further.

Going Public to School Leadership

Wondering how to support the K3 teachers to share their ideas with the school leadership team, Megina has an idea. In just two weeks, the PoPART (Pedagogy of Play Advisory Research Team) will be holding their monthly meeting, a time when PZ researchers, school leaders at ISB, and outside advisors from the LEGO Foundation and other local schools spend time looking at documentation from study groups. Megina asks Marina if it would be ok to share the K3 documentation and a transcript of the study group discussion during the PoPART meeting, and Marina agrees this would be a good way to get some feedback on their ideas. She is nervous about how the leadership team will react to the experiment, but again, is willing to take a risk and share this piece of work beyond the study group.

When the PoPART group meets, view the video documentation and read through a transcript of the study group discussion. The responses are overwhelmingly positive. Camilla, Head of School, notices that, "Some of their documentation and the findings have been quite similar to what we found in Passion Day- the trust and the freedom, but also not demanding too much, which is a huge part of this. We're not requiring the students to do anything- they're in their own flow." Sue, Head of Academics at the school, appreciates that, "There are just two rules, and they are so simple." Sidsel, the school's communications manager, wonders what would happen if the children started the year with only two rules. Everyone in the room agrees that the experiment seems very successful. Too many rules, they acknowledge, can make children feel stressed, limit creativity, and get in the way of learning. Instead, rule-making and limit-setting could be seen as a dance in which teachers and children negotiate boundaries in an ongoing, iterative way.

The whole PoPART group is open to continuing the experiment, and wants to be sure that the Kindergarten Playful Environments group hears that message. Megina summarizes key points from the meeting and shares that back with the study group. Marina and Carolina are thrilled to hear that they have support from the leadership team.

Continuing the Conversation

In study group meetings over the next few months, conversations about negotiating rules versus freedom continue to surface. Although the group never reaches a full consensus, the conversations continue to be rich, respectful, and productive. And although no permanent or official changes are made to the playground rules, when Marina reflects back on the experience, she still feels that it had an impact on the children, enabling them to feel more powerful and capable in their outdoor play. Furthermore, Marina learned something about the children in her class as well. “This was so early in the year, but I learned that the children could handle the responsibility – all of them could. That impressed me, because I wasn’t sure, given their maturity, given their ability to balance their feelings. And I think it was good that it was the whole class – all or nothing.”

Using Documentation to Navigate a Paradox

In the context of teacher study groups, Carolina and Marina seized an opportunity to ask a meaningful question with potentially big implications for children’s learning through play: What happens when we have fewer rules on the playground? Throughout this story, the paradox of rules and freedom was negotiated on multiple planes – in the classroom, in teacher learning communities, and in conversation with school leadership. Through conversation and experimentation, the K3 children and teachers were able to take a risk and try something new. Throughout the experience, the tool of documentation and the process of looking closely at children’s play within the study group supported risk-taking, meaning-making, and playful learning for both the children and adults involved.

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This picture of practice is a product of the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project, a participatory research collaboration between the International School of Billund and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. PoP is carried out with support and collaborative input from the LEGO Foundation, and seeks to investigate the relationship between play and learning in a school context.

To learn more about ISB, please visit <https://isbillund.com/academics/pedagogy-of-play/>

To learn more about PoP and Project Zero, please visit www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/pedagogy-of-play

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