

A kindergarten teacher's reflections on supporting playful learning with older students

Marina Benavente Bárbon (contributor), International School of Billund
Mara Krechevsky (author), Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education
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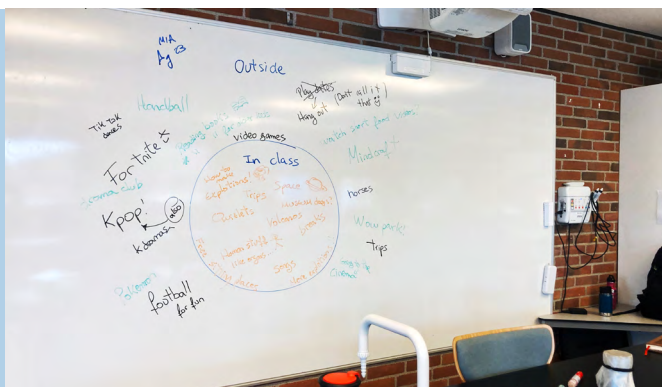


- **What is a human's melting point?**
- **Why don't you think Pluto is a planet anymore?**
- **What element would you want to eat if you want the worst death possible?**

These are some of the questions posted on the Wonder Wall in Marina Benavente Barbón's science classroom. Marina is a middle school Science, Spanish, and homeroom teacher at the International School of Billund (ISB). Before becoming a middle school teacher, Marina had been an early childhood teacher for 14 years. Teaching older students has prompted Marina to reflect on the differences between supporting playful learning with younger and older children. Here are her initial observations.

Supporting playful learning with older students requires more intentionality

It is not obvious how to support playful learning with older students. For one thing, they are more concerned about being right than younger children and often more hesitant to take risks because they do not want to fail. Early teens tend to worry about what other people think of them and fear their performance is a sign of who they are. Marina likens older students to turtles who pull their heads into their shells when they feel like hiding. To counter this tendency, Marina does a variety of things. At the beginning of the year, Marina asks students what they find fun in and out of class and records their answers. Student responses vary widely—for some, it is computer games, for others, it's "girls," playing with Pokemon, or being with friends. (At the same time, some things, like trendy dance moves, go viral immediately.)



Student replies to Marina's question on what they find fun - both in and out of class

Marina also seeks feedback from students, e.g., requesting a “thumbs up” or “down” on what they find playful.

Marina also makes it a point to model her own fallibility and vulnerability. If she makes a spelling or computer error, she makes a joke about it. She shares examples from her own life when things don’t go well (e.g., getting out of the house on time in the morning). Marina’s message is, “I see you. We all feel similar things. We all make mistakes.” Marina looks for direct and indirect opportunities to inject playfulness into learning.

In Spanish, rather than posing preset questions, she asks students to create their own menus and role-play a related dialogue in Spanish.

In Science, Marina asks small groups of students to role-play concepts in chemistry such as solutions, chemical reactions, compounds, and elements, or solids, liquids and gases. The lab coats have the names of famous scientists on the pockets—George Washington Carver, Rachel Carson, and Bill Nye¹, the Science Guy.



The lab coats



Roleplaying the difference between solution and mixture



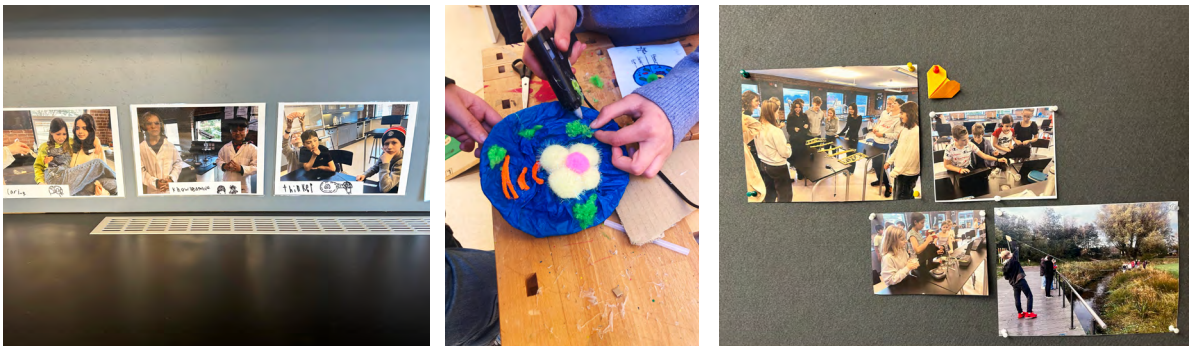
Working in the lab

¹Bill Nye was the host of a popular science education TV show, Bill Nye, the Science Guy.

Building a culture of collaborative learning is key to supporting playful learning with older students

Learning becomes more individualized as children get older. In the early primary years, children have morning meeting or circle time every day. They engage in activities in small groups around the class. In many classes, children are asked to share what they did with the rest of the class. There is more time and space to connect subject matter. Family members come in once a month to observe the learning process. In Middle School, however, learning becomes more private. Marina finds herself saying “we” less often with older students. Students typically show what they know in individual products such as exams or papers. Family members meet with students and teachers in conferences that focus on individual work. Grades become more important, and students become more competitive.

Yet playful learning is enhanced when learners have the opportunity to learn from and with others, exchanging ideas and perspectives. Marina asks her students to make presentations to the class, participate in group work, and draw on each other’s strengths in interdisciplinary units. In science, Marina puts photos of students learning through play on the walls to help build the identity of the group.



In Spanish, every student’s language and home country are represented on a classroom map. Marina facilitates a “circle time” on the floor when problems arise in her homeroom so students can talk them through. Rules for lunchtime like, “no one can be alone at a table” support a culture of collaboration and group identity outside the classroom. Students, too, want to create personal relationships with teachers. Marina’s students ask her questions like, “What do you do on the weekend? Do you have kids? How old are you? Do you like MacDonal’s?”

In many middle school classrooms, attention to the esthetic and sensory features of a learning environment wanes

Most middle school classrooms are not known for being “cozy.” They do not contain materials of different sizes, shapes, and textures. At ISB, for the past two years, middle school teachers have set aside one week each year for a student-directed inquiry project called *Wonder Week*. During this week, students decide where to work. They are allowed to bring in items from home. Some students create enclosed structures with pillows, blankets, stuffed animals (teddy bears!), scarves, and strands of Christmas lights. They bring in slippers and pajamas. Students study lying down, on the floor, upside-down, and everything in-between. Inviting students to design their own study spaces may be one way to make overly monochrome classroom environments more engaging.

Before

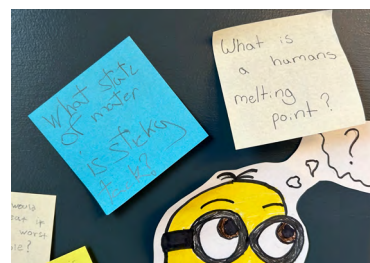
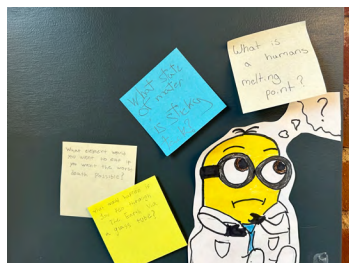
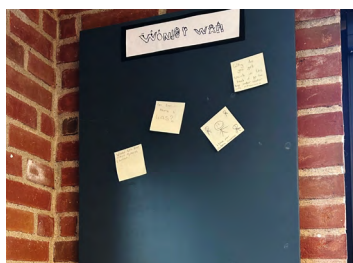


After



Older students could benefit from more opportunities to use their imagination

As children make the move from Primary to Middle School, the opportunity to use their imagination often declines. Younger children generally have more time to delve into a topic than their older peers, who move from one subject to the next on a fixed timetable. Facts become more important, especially in subjects like Science. There are fewer occasions for classroom and subject matter teachers to tell stories. Marina has found she needs to be more purposeful about encouraging imaginative thinking and posing questions that invite curiosity. Marina has a Wonder Wall in her science classroom where students post questions for which there is no immediate answer (see the questions at the beginning of this essay).



Throughout the year, Marina and the students revisit the questions on the wall to see what they may have learned about them. Students also find ways to use their imagination with the tools at their disposal—creating a competition to stop their stopwatches at exactly “1000,” or flipping cups on a counter so they land right-side up. Richard Schechner’s (1988) observation seems relevant here: “It’s wrong to think of play as the interruption of ordinary life. Consider instead playing as the underlying, always there, continuum of experience ... Ordinary life is netted out of playing but play continually squeezes through even the smallest holes ...” Marina’s students use play to refresh themselves for the hard work of learning.

No matter what age you teach, it is essential to get to know the children in front of you

All students want to be seen and heard. Marina eats with her homeroom students daily. (All ISB homeroom teachers sit with their classes at lunch for a minimum of 20 minutes.) Marina creates routines for the class to get to know them even better—on Mondays, students talk about the weekend; on Tuesdays, they choose songs as background music; on Wednesdays, they play games. During lessons, Marina tries to be flexible and take the time to address concerns and fears as they come up. When students know teachers care about their well-being, they are more likely to be open about their struggles with learning and to ask for help. Regardless of what age you teach, listening to students is key to supporting playful learning.

Reflection Questions

- **What strikes you or surprises you about this essay? How does it extend your thinking about the role of play in learning? What questions does it raise?**
- **What do you think are the differences between supporting learning through play with younger and older children?**
- **Where do you see opportunities to introduce more playful learning in your own setting? Choose one small thing to try in your own context.**