

There's something about January:

Using Play to Reduce Student Stress

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How can we help students maintain a positive outlook and playful attitude in the dark days of January?

At the International School of Billund, teachers can choose to undertake an extended project, researching how the Pedagogy of Play (or PoP) can improve students' experiences and learning. As a middle years teacher, I chose to investigate stress and how a school that prioritises play might enable students to deal with increasing pressure. While limited amounts of stress can be helpful—e.g., by motivating learning and focusing energy—stress has a major impact on students' enjoyment of learning. At ISB, stress is an inevitable part of learning as students progress through the years, culminating in online, external examinations. This ultimate focus often necessitates a shift from collaborative learning, in which the playful values of *choice, wonder and delight*¹ are foregrounded, to a more singular, 'traditional' focus, in order to best prepare each student, according to their needs. A suggestion that the centralisation of self might contribute to unmanageable stress had been raised by an M3 parent during my research phase which, in turn, had raised several questions.

I was aware that January proved a very difficult month for fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds (who are referred to as M5s in IB² parlance). Previous years had struggled with social conflict with their peers, attendance issues and feelings of inadequacy in the face of looming assessments. It was an awareness amongst those of us responsible for the wellbeing of M5s, both past and present: there was something about January.

I had also discussed this potential rollercoaster with my homeroom although, on reflection, I questioned whether this was a good idea. Yes, they were prepared for potential feelings of negativity, but had I induced these feelings by preparing them?

As academic pressure rises with the approach of ePortfolios and eAssessments³ in the final months of middle school, how can we help students maintain a positive outlook and playful attitude in the dark days of January?

¹ *Choice, wonder and delight* are the three ISB core indicators of Playful Learning. Read more [on our website!](#)

² IB refers to International Baccalaureate.

³ These are the two forms of M5 assessment in the MYP. EPortfolios are longer term projects, completed in class. EAssessments are external exams.

My biggest question was ‘How could I help nineteen individuals, all of whom possess different backgrounds, experiences and coping mechanisms, make January a positive experience and thereby avoid the difficulties of the previous years?’

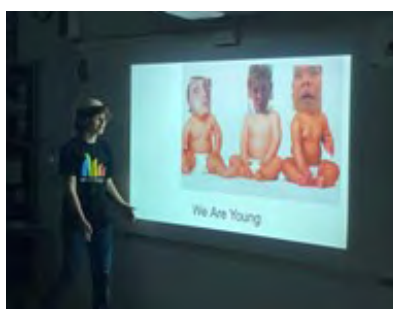
I printed off a calendar for January 2023. Every student (or interested teacher) had to sign up for one day and organise an activity that would get the day off to a positive start.



The first day got off to an inauspicious start.

The second day, the student who was responsible, uncertain of what to do, opted to simply bring in candy. However, the following day, things started to pick up. Lissi opted to teach us a game she had learned in drama class. It took the students approximately 90 seconds to work out how to outsmart the game and they spent the rest of that morning laughing their heads off. From then on, creativity reigned.

Rosie³, a student who had joined us that August, made a collage of the memories she valued in her time with us so far. Then ‘The Boiz’ took charge. ‘The Boiz’ were a group of four close friends: Mark, Jens, Archie and Tom whose greatest wish in life was to defeat the teachers in the traditional ‘M5 vs teachers’ football match on the final day of M5. This was their chance to inspire! We were treated to a series of motivational presentations, frequently - and inexplicably- involving a variety of wigs, exhorting us to become the first homeroom to achieve victory⁴!



³ Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

⁴ Final score 2-1 to the students!



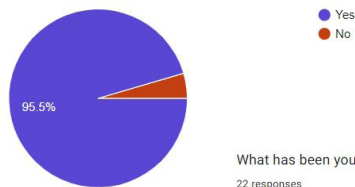
Imogen brought us to a new high on Friday the 13th. Having researched good luck traditions around the world, she brought in a stack of plates for us to smash, and grapes so we could eat as many as we could in the short time permitted.

Other wonderful mornings followed: Danni made a Kahoot about what we knew about each other, Inge brought in a quiz of ABBA songs in different languages, Louis made us a galette des rois for Epiphany and Peter condensed the movie 'Killer Bean' into 15 minutes, finally concluding a long, playful argument about whether we were ever going to watch it in class.

To me, it was a wonderful month. The students were relatively calm, there had been no major fractures in social relationships and January had passed in a flash. But what did the students think? Had it reduced their stress? Would they recommend repeating the project with other classes? I sent out a survey... The response was positive! Comments included:

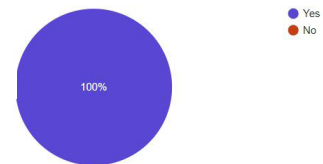
Overall, have you had a positive experience of this January project?

22 responses



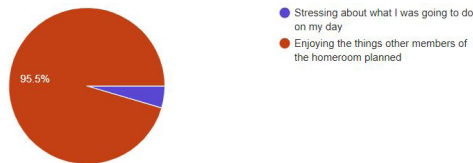
Would you recommend repeating this project with next year's M5 to help them cope with stress?

22 responses



What has been your STRONGEST experience of this project?

22 responses



I think that this is a wonderful way to get the class connected with each other. It builds community and comfort within a class. It also helps people get more comfortable with presenting in general and makes January seem less sad. I also think it gives the class motivation and excitement to come in, in the morning.



Everyone gets stressed and showing we care about them can also help them.



It makes you not feel like you are at school, it provides you with 15 minutes to have fun with your friends and class teachers. You also cannot think about other subjects during that time.

Only one student claimed it had not been a positive experience. I believed this response required reflection. If an activity designed to relieve stress had, instead, increased it, this was important feedback. Was she simply more honest than others, or could there be another explanation?

Students were also asked whether they spent more time worrying about what they would do or enjoying what others had done for them. This student was the only one to say she had spent more time thinking about herself, speaking to the potential link between stress and self-focus raised in my initial research.

January complete, it was time to reflect on what this experience taught me.

Firstly, the strongest activities were the ones where a student spoke directly to the class and included humour and an acknowledgement of the shared past. This group knowledge, enhanced by the deeper level of understanding necessary to create humour, speaks to what I call the 'group mind'. One of the primary challenges of learning through play is that what constitutes play is different for everyone. The energy and cheering of a team game is bracing for some but draining for others. One element of the January Project that proved particularly heartening was the participation of every member of the class. Whilst play is different for everyone, the act of supporting their peers led to a loss of self and a shared responsibility to signal gratitude to those who organised the day's activity. Participation was a way to show care and appreciation, reducing stress for the organiser as well as the participant.

Food was a common means of trying to bring that class together but was not enough by itself.

For example, buying candy showed little time and thought had gone into planning, resulting in a proportionate lack of investment. This was markedly different when the food provided an addendum to a story. One of the benefits of being in an international school is the vast number of cultural practices and differences contained within a single classroom. A chance to learn about Epiphany traditions in France or traditional Czech baking meant that the students felt included in each other's lives and responded with heart and sensitivity.



Louis is cutting the galette des rois he brought to school

My final takeaway concerned the time invested by the students. On a basic level, the students responded strongly to an activity that clearly took time to create. Reinforcing their shared history gave them a conscious appreciation of the relationships they had invested in for years. However, the acknowledgement of a shared future, such as the aforementioned football match, proved equally as emotive. I believed that this was due to the underlying knowledge that the students' time together was, unavoidably, drawing to a close. This exacerbated the feelings of individuality as their paths would diverge and the homeroom, who had been together for up to ten years, would cease to exist. Focusing on things to come that they looked forward to, both during this January and in the remaining weeks of M5, helped to situate them in the now, allowing them to enjoy the sense of belonging and support, rather than casting themselves into the future and potential loneliness they imagined.

Questions for further consideration:

- **How can a shift from a focus on individuals help to reduce stress?**
- **How can teachers help younger students use play to manage stress?**
- **What ideas for engaging students in using play to relieve stress do you have for your own context?**
- **What are your own thoughts about the relationship between the self and others when experiencing stress?**