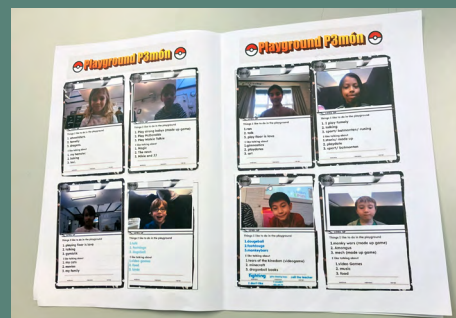


Conflicts in the playground:

# The journey of creating a game to support students' wellbeing during recess

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# It was the first week of school

..and the first parent email about the playground had already kicked in. One of the children in our P3 class was having trouble during recess.

This was not a new scenario. Having been teaching the same class for the past two years, I knew the students had full knowledge of all of the general playground advice- “use your kind words to try and solve the conflict”, “look for a teacher if the person doesn’t listen to you”, but the recess problems were still coming! We knew we needed to dig deeper.

**We needed to learn more about our students’ playground challenges.**

## What makes the playground not so good?

This was one of the questions my co-teacher Gilleon and I asked our class of eight-year-old students<sup>1</sup>. Their answers were interesting, but not necessarily surprising:

- That you have nobody to play
- NO friends
- Playing by myself
- When everyone is against me
- When we say stop but they don’t stop
- I had to go out of 9 games. People told me I was ruining it
- Well, it only happens sometimes but I don’t like it when there’s too many people
- Playing by myself
- When me and my friend fight
- To be alone
- Lonely
- If you are alone, by yourself, walking around
- when I didn’t have someone to play

<sup>1</sup> When referring to children, pseudonyms are assigned throughout this paper.

## It seemed like an easy fix!

If being alone was the main problem, all we had to do was to give the children 5 minutes to find a play partner before their break, right? After a week of trying this strategy, we quickly noticed two challenges:

1. Some children were repeatedly being picked last.
2. Often a group of 4 to 6 children would go out together, but would come back with a person who was upset for not feeling heard, or a person who had been banned from the game.

It was more complex than it initially seemed.



**“Usually my breaks are pretty good. But the hardest is usually trying to find someone to play with. Because, like, there might be someone I want to play with. And then there’s somebody that wants to play with me, and it’s not that person.”**

*Frankie, 8 years old*

# What else could we do?

We started to look at the playground conflicts from a different perspective. We posed the problem to the children:

Jessica: "Imagine our class is made out of 5 children. Pretend they are called Amanda, Mauricio, Gabriel, Dora and Belle. Amanda and Dora are best friends and they always choose each other. Mauricio and Gabriel are besties too. Lucia asked to join Amanda and Dora. But Belle doesn't have anybody".

Children: "Belle can ask to join Mauricio and Gabriel"

Jessica: "What if she wants to play with a girl?"

Children: "She can ask to join Lucia, Dora and Belle"

Jessica: "But what if she doesn't get along with one of them?"

Children: "She can try to get along with them?"

Jessica: "What if she tries, but they don't listen to her ideas? How would Belle feel if Amanda, Dora and Lucia picked each other everyday?"

We decided we wanted to tackle this challenge in a playful way. We wanted to create a game. We didn't know exactly how it would work, but we knew our game goals needed to be:

1. That everybody has somebody to play with
2. That everybody is open minded to play with different people, not only their besties.

# You Gotta Catch them all!

## Making a card trade game

After giving some thought to our goals, we looked at card trading as a game dynamics that could help us solve our problem. We spent a week setting up, making our cards and discussing the rules of the game.

Jessica: "Think about the things you like doing in the playground. You can write these on your card."

Harper: "I like to walk and talk, play restaurant and play Haunted House."

Jessica: "How do you play Haunted House?"

Harper: "Oh, it is a super fun game! I made it up."

Jessica: "You should definitely write it on your card. Then you can teach the person you trade cards with."

We printed a deck of 20 cards per student. At each playground break (we had two per day) each student would have a chance of trading one of their cards with the person they played with.

Tyler: "What if you play in a group of four?"

Jessica: "You trade with one person. That is the person you are committed with. If the group disagrees on something, you and your person decide if you can find a solution and stay, or if the two of you should leave the group and do something else."

Jane: "What if you play in a group of three?"

Though we initially had multiple trio trading cards in a carousel system (A gets B's card, B gets C's and C gets A's), that created challenges, making us realise we needed more rules.

Jane: "But if they do in 3s, if I get Tyler's card, I cannot get his card, because I played in 3s."

Jessica: "You can. You can just play with him again."

Jane: "Yeah, but I gave him my card, so he doesn't need my card, but I need his."

Jessica: I see... I know how we can solve this problem. We can make friendship badges! That way, the next time you need someone's card but they already have yours, they can get a friendship badge instead."

Jane: "Yeah, that will work."

The class was excited and motivated to play! The element of choice was crucial to keep everybody engaged.

Jules: "Can I play with the same person twice?"

Jessica: "You can always play with whomever you want to. It's your break. You trade cards when you play with somebody for the first time. If you want to play with them again you just don't trade for that break. And that is ok. You don't have to trade every break."



**Learning experiences with  
unknown outcomes  
(for learners and teachers)  
are invitations to discovery.**

*The what if school p.24*

# Level up

The children quickly noticed that their card had a “basic” badge on the top left corner. Their Pokémon knowledge (much more advanced than their teachers’) led them to wonder if they would be able to level up. Based on their initiative, we decided to incorporate it in the game. We agreed that when a person had collected 10 cards, they would evolve to level 1. After collecting all the 20 cards they would evolve to level 2. Mathematically speaking, if a child in our class traded cards for every break, they would be leveling up after five days and would complete the game after 10. Gilleon and I were curious to see how long they would take to level up to each phase.

Sunny: “The game is fun. A lot of people are focused on evolving. The only problem is that if people are only missing one card to evolve, and then the person that you need their card is already playing with somebody else. Then it is frustrating. Because, come on, I am only missing their card and that is the last break of the day.”

Jessica: “So people can’t always find someone that they haven’t played with before, right?”

Sunny: “Yeah.”

Jessica: “But that is ok, isn’t it? We need to remember why we created the game. Is everybody finding someone to play with?”

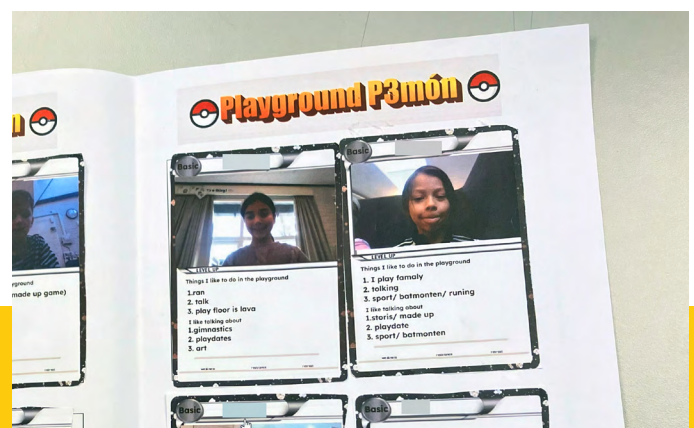
Sunny: “Yeah”

Jessica: “And are people open minded to play with people they haven’t played before?”

Sunny: “Yeah”

Jessica: “So we are being successful!”

Sunny: “I guess so.”





Indeed, Sunny was one of the first children to evolve to level 1. She and two other classmates collected their 10 cards within the first 6 days of playing. It took Tyler, the first student evolving to level 2, a month to collect all 20 cards. We started playing P3món in March and kept on playing until the end of the school year in June. There were lots of adjustments and making up rules as we went, to keep the game running with a group of 20 children, each playing at their own pace.

## ***“I like the fact that the cards bring people together”***

*Student feedback at the end of the journey*

As part of our game development, the students’ feedback was crucial to make adjustments and make sure we were taking steps in the right direction. Towards the end of the process, we collected the students’ feedback again and their answers were heartwarming.

Bob: “I think it is really fun.”

Kim: “Yeah, I agree. It is really fun and I think it is working for making new friends.”

Jessica: “Which people did you guys played with that you haven’t played before, or that you haven’t played THAT much with before?”

Bob: “Jules and Harper. And... Micah and Jaden.”

Kim: “Harper.”

Bob: “Yeah Harper, Tyler, Nessa.”

Kim: “I probably have never played with Adrian before.”

Jessica: “Oh, nice.”

Kim: “I don’t normally play with these people (pointing at some cards he had collected).”





Jessica: "Is there someone that you had never played with before, that surprised you by how fun they are, and that you would totally play with them again?"

Kim: "Adrian and Harper."

Bob: "I think Harper."

Jessica: "And what did you guys play with Harper?"

Kim: "Haunted House!!"

We also had some worried feedback

Ellis: I think P3món, people are playing together because they want their cards, not because they want to play together.

Jessica: But are they being nice to each other?

Ellis: A little bit.

Jessica: Well, they can always chose if the play was worth a trade, can't they?



# Final thoughts

When we started this journey, we had no idea where it would take us. Figuring it all out with the children has been incredibly fun and taken us to some plot twists. The coolest and most surprising thing about playing P3món - a card trading game that helps children expand their social circle and willingly select different play partners- was to observe each child following their own pace in taking initiative or accepting play invitations from classmates that were not in their closest friendship circle. The more we played, the more demand was for the cards of the shy and reserved children, and every day that went by when they didn't play with anyone, their card became more valuable.

Now instead of the other kids giving up on them, they received more and more invitations to play. Going from being left out to being requested and valued was a mindset shift- not only for our little ones but for everybody involved in the process.

At the end of the P3mon Card project everyone had somebody to play with, and they were all open-minded to play with different people, not only their besties.

## Considerations

At the end of this journey, we can't help to think about what happens when the game is over. We found the cards to be useful as an intervention to shake the group dynamics and played P3mon until the very last week of school, but after the game is over, we wonder:

- How can we continuously support these emerging connections, fostering bonds that last?

### Discussion Prompts:

- What other strategies teachers may come up with to support students' social challenges in the playground?
- What are the differences and similarities in playground conflict for different age groups?
- How one may involve parents in supporting the children's social development?

### References:

International School of Billund, The *what if* School.

Available at <https://isbillund.com/academics/pop/practices/>

