The POWER of PLAY

A focus on engagement and innovation can bring joy—and excitement about learning—back into the classroom.

Andy Hargreaves, Gladys Ayson, and Sajani Karunaweera

The 2024 animated movie *Inside Out 2* has entertained countless families with its insights into young people's emotional lives. The movie depicts the struggle in a pubescent girl's brain as she careens into and through the turmoil of adolescence. Joy, who once figured large in childhood, now battles to maintain control in the face of new emotions like Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and Ennui (all characters in the movie). In a moment of resigned acceptance, as chaos reigns around her, Joy articulates what many adolescents and their parents feel: "Maybe this is what happens when you grow up. You feel less joy."

Even before COVID-19, joy had been harder to find in many schools. But the pandemic was the ultimate killjoy, literally. Teenagers were among those who suffered most. Cut off from in-person relationships with friends and trapped at home with stressed-out parents and siblings, adolescents found it hard to figure out who they were, where they belonged, and the direction they were going in life.

But COVID-19 isn't the only culprit. School systems have become killjoys, too. Endless test preparation, curriculum mandates that reduce student choice, dreary trudges through standardized content, and a toxic tide of technology encouraging distraction long preceded the pandemic (Hargreaves, 2021; Luoma & Kauranen, 2024).

Schools have responded to these concerns with smartphone bans, social-emotional initiatives in self-regulation, and efforts (albeit faltering) to scale back standardized testing. There's nothing wrong with these solutions, but they're not enough. They don't *create* joy.

How to Jump-Start Joy

Luckily, all is not lost. As our work with 41 schools in Canada reveals, schools can bring joy back again. In 2022, the LEGO Foundation awarded our University of Ottawa team of seven faculty members and multiple graduate students approximately $2 million to create a network of schools across seven Canadian provinces. These schools

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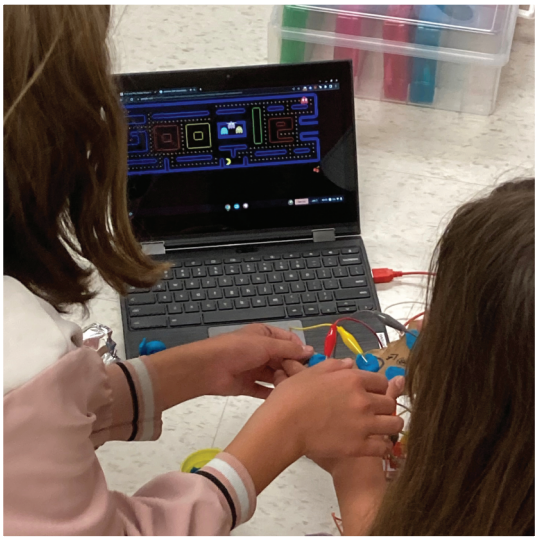



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Students in the Canadian Playful Schools Network experiment with a variety of hands-on learning projects, including (top left) coding their own Pac-Man game; (top right) creating playful handprints on a teacher's door to beautify the school; and (bottom) growing healthy food indoors during the Ontario winter.

would jump-start play-based innovations to support groups of middle years students who were vulnerable in terms of achievement and mental health post-pandemic. These included students transitioning into high school, students with special needs, LGBTQ students, First Nations (Indigenous) students, students in poverty, and new Canadians with immigrant or refugee status. This network—the Canadian Playful Schools Network, codirected by Andy Hargreaves (one of the authors) and Trista Hollweck—built on the research team's previous work to use play-based innovation to improve student engagement and well-being (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022; Shirley & Hargreaves 2021).

School teams were invited to submit proposals that focused on learning experiences in one or more of the following areas: *green* (outdoor or indoor nature-based initiatives, gardening, Indigenous learning on the land); *screen* (digital

play, coding, editing, Minecraft); *machine* (maker-oriented teaching and learning, design thinking, and construction with different materials); and *everything in between* (inclusion, identity, emotional development, and language-based learning).

Many of the teams we eventually selected for the network—41 in total—often integrated multiple areas of focus into their student learning experiences. For example, a green play project, in which students developed a nature path on the school grounds, also included QR codes—displayed on various parts of the path—that identified surrounding plants and described their link to the Indigenous heritage of the land. Likewise, machine play expanded beyond the use of technological tools, with some projects involving beading, sewing moccasins, and making things out of wood or cardboard.

In 2022 and 2023, we (the authors) undertook daylong visits to 11 of the 29 English language schools in the network to observe and interview team members and school administrators on their play-based projects. We asked about any obstacles they may have faced in implementing such an approach in their school. We also asked them to describe the project's effect on student achievement and well-being. Here's what we found.

The Joy of Play

There's more to play and joy than mere fun or transient happiness. A review of 124 articles on playful learning concluded that "playful experiences lead to deeper learning when they are *joyful*, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive" (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). The late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) argued that "the joy we get from living" happens when we're in *flow*, the feeling of being so engaged with something interesting and challenging that we lose track of everything else around us. Joy contains moments of fun, but it also includes deeper experiences of relationship, accomplishment, and fulfillment.

In our transcriptions of interviews with administrators and school team members, we searched for keywords associated with engagement and innovation, as well as for mentions of *joy* and words containing *joy*, like enjoyment and joyful. We found that *joy* is not a routine part of educators' vocabulary. When teachers referred to students *enjoying* things, it was often just the equivalent to saying students liked or had access to those things. But as we reflected on how educators talked about their students' experiences of engagement and their own innovations as teachers, we realized these were the areas where the school teams nurtured joy.

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Joy, like happiness, comes about as a byproduct of focusing on something else. There's more than one way to achieve joyfulness. Here, we explore two of those intersecting currents: engagement (and its benefits for students) and innovation (and its benefits for teachers, especially in terms of their own engagement).

The Joy of Student Engagement

Student engagement typically dips at the end of the elementary years, especially among high-achieving students from low-income families (ASCD, 2016; Hodges, 2018). When engagement drops, achievement does, too. Reengaging students and filling them with joy in these crucial middle years is vital for equity.

Teachers can engage students by maintaining eye contact and being entertaining, but the biggest payoffs for engagement are intrinsic (Harlow, 1950; Pink, 2009)—just making the learning more interesting. Many of our network schools took this approach by having their teams develop a common project for students to work on that was either classroom-based, grade-based, or schoolwide. Students created a sensory room for younger students with learning disabilities, built a mural out of ceramics and metal to represent the history of the community, grew food and distributed it to elderly residents, and connected the curriculum to Indigenous cultures.

One middle school focused on developing a

storyline inspired by the province's culture and literature. The project involved little costumed Ozobots that students coded to move across a set they created. This set comprised model buildings, wharves, a lighthouse, and trees constructed with 3D printers; a bridge over which the Ozobots would pass; and a painted backdrop and scenery. Students then planned to film what they had created using green screen technology.

This was a perfect project for students who had attendance problems or who struggled with text-based learning. One student who usually attended school only twice a week made sure to show up on project days. Like many other students who have difficulties with reading or math, this student thrived when engaged in hands-on learning.

The Ozobot project and those like it give students more ways to be successful. As the vice principal of the middle school noted, students got "really excited," had fewer behavior problems, and got a chance to "shine in a different light." Excitement, engagement, shining, and love—these are elements of joy for students and teachers alike.

The Joy of Teacher Innovation

Another way to experience joy is to master something new. Innovation matters not just in occasional projects, but as part of the whole life of the school. If we want learning to be engaging, teachers must be able to design innovations that inspire them, too.

In the school that was innovating with Ozobots, much of the energy came from the teacher librarian. Noticing that many of the teachers were critical of technology—among other things, they deemed technology responsible for the decline in outdoor play—the librarian wanted to show teachers how they could engage students with technology in purposeful ways. She got up to speed in robotics, 3D printing, and makerspace learning. She surprised herself with all the learning she accomplished and became truly confident and impassioned about her teaching.

Projects like these can even reengage teachers who have become worn down by poor working conditions. One teacher in the school that was innovating with Ozobots, who was frustrated with class size and skeptical about the impact of such projects, had a change of heart when the mother of a struggling student told the school about "what a fabulous day" her child had and how "excited and engaged" he was with the learning.

One of the school principals in another Canadian Playful Schools Network project was deeply influenced by the late Canadian curriculum theorist Kieran Egan (2010), who argued that students should pursue one topic in-depth weekly, perhaps over their entire school career. Although Egan assigned topics, this principal gave students choice. Students selected an activity among Friday electives that included:

- performing magic tricks;
- building a fort in the adjacent woods;
- learning to knit with the help of grandmothers from the community;
- imprinting designs on teachers' doors that reflected the teacher's character; or
- advancing their skills in Minecraft.

Student engagement and teacher engagement are not islands in a stream. They're cross-cutting currents in the stream itself. As one principal stated, "If the teacher has the passion, the students will have the passion."

Join the Joyride

To pick up on a song title from the 1990s chart-topping band Roxette, how can we all "join the joyride"? Here are some suggestions for teachers based on what we learned from our network.

1 ***Create protected time for innovation.***

Even offering just half a day a week for innovative activities can enthuse and engage students and teachers alike. When Singapore decided to reform its educational system by linking learning to creative and dynamic economic development over 20 years ago, it designated protected space in the curriculum for teachers to innovate and experiment with student learning (Ng, 2017). Make time. Make space.

2 *Encourage self-determined teaching.*

We have many examples in our project of what Wehmeyer and Zhao (2020) call *self-determined learning*, like in schools that introduced Google's Genius Hour for students to design and make their own products. But teachers, too, need to be able to design their teaching around their own passions and interests sometimes. This creates excitement in their teaching.

3 *Combine high-tech with high touch.*

The answer to too much "bad" digital technology is not *no* technology. It's a better, more prudent use of it. The 41 schools we worked with didn't begin with screen-based initiatives to drive engagement and innovation; they turned to green, machine, and other options instead. They used clay, wood, and cardboard, as well as screens, to engage their students and enhance their well-being. Think about the learning before you consider the contribution of the tech, not vice versa.

4 *Get outside.*

Hold a math class outdoors. Use experiential learning to build things both inside and outside. Find ways to connect students to this Earth. And don't use bad weather as an excuse. As Scandinavians say, there's no such thing as bad weather; there's only bad clothing.

5 *Learn something new every year.*

Don't just think about how your students will meet a standard, but, instead, about how they will learn things that will last forever. Teachers also need to be continually learning something new. Andy Hargreaves (the lead author of this article) has recently learned how to drive a snowmobile through the Arctic wilderness and paddleboard with his grandson. What new skills will you learn as a teacher this year?

Playful Learning, Deeper Engagement

More *engagement*, not just more fun, leads to greater joy. And more time spent on *innovating*—on widening choices in learning and teaching—leads to more engagement and greater joy, too. Young people's interest in school often starts to dry up in their pre-teens and early teens. It's time to turn the tap back on for them. Instead of perpetrating a few people's *joy of power* to enforce unwanted educational assessments and restrictions, let's instead unleash the *power of joy* in learning and teaching.

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Andy Hargreaves is research professor at Boston College and visiting professor at the University of Ottawa in Canada. **Gladys Ayson** is a doctoral student in experimental psychology and **Sajani Karunaweera** is a doctoral student in education, both at the University of Ottawa.