

It's more like *p / a y i n g*



© Gaby Jongenelen

What a pedagogy of 'play as also-learning' could mean for sustainable art education at primary school Park16hoven in Rotterdam.

Marjolijn Gunst

Graduation Project

Master Education in Arts 2019-2021

Piet Zwart Institute – WdKA

Rotterdam, June 2021

# Content

Foreword	04
Summary	05
Introduction	06
Method	10
 1. PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY	 12
Play	12
Play as also-learning	15
Play and arts education	18
 2. THE RISK OF PLAY	 20
Levels of risk and friction	20
They killed my panda!	23
Reflection	25
 3. PLAY IN PRACTICE	 27
Introduction project	27
Structure of the project as action research	28
Findings and results	30
Spatial environment and materials	30
Imaginative reality	32
Open-ended processes	34
Embodied learning	36
Conclusion	37
 4. PLAY TO GROW AND EMANCIPATE	 38
Safe environment, autonomy and self-regulation	38
Co-creation and the experience of agency	41
Artistic behavior and emancipation	42
Findings and advice	45
 5. NOT (JUST) FOR FUN	 46
Conclusion	47
Statements to take play as a pedagogy seriously	49
 Bibliography	 50
Appendix	53

# Foreword

This research project took place in a very specific period of time during the Corona pandemic. The crisis and unpredictable developments in my practice as an art educator forced me to take a step back, but also invited me to research new possibilities. The questions and ideas that were encouraged by the master's program and conversations with my tutors and peers at the Piet Zwart Institute, became even more urgent to me during the lockdowns. I realize that I've been in a privileged position, being able to use the space that emerged during the crisis by putting my graduation project into practice, and for that, I'm very thankful. Being able to join this master's program, offline as well as online, together with a group of inspiring and devoted classmates made this research process extra meaningful.

Many thanks for the caring support and insightful feedback from my graduation supervisors Thijs Witty and Emiel Copini, you motivated me to keep writing and researching.

That my colleagues of SKVR and the staff of primary school Park16hoven offered me the chance to use my expertise as an art educator to bring this experimental project into practice is something I'm very grateful for. We were able to cooperate and to use diverse thinking to create a temporary solution that has the potential to become a meaningful example for the transformation in education.

Rosanne, my dear colleague, I'm so happy that you were as exited to start this project and devoted your time, ideas, and amazing qualities as a music teacher to this research. I wouldn't have been able to do this without your contribution.

Themba, my colleague, friend, and ultimate inspiration in everything that has to do with theatre and education, thank you for the brainstorming, pep talks, and your engaged ideals that keep me sharp.

To my dear sister Saskia, who was writing her own thesis at the same time but was always there for me when I needed a conversation, confidence, or distraction.

To my parents and friends who always support me.

To Tim, thank you for your patience, your care, and your endless belief that I can make it happen, no matter what.

And lastly, I want to thank all the children who joined the lessons and the project with such joy and imagination. They were the inspiration to start playing and learning again myself.

# Summary

This research project explores what a pedagogy of play could mean for sustainable (art) education at primary schools with as main question: 'How to design and practice art education in which children grow, learn and emancipate themselves through play?'. The process of this research is shaped by a parallel trajectory of a literature study, autoethnographic study, and experiments executed in the context of my practice as a theatre teacher working at a primary school. To understand and define the concept of play in relation to learning I refer to the theories and work of Francis Alÿs, Gert Biesta, Pascal Gielen, Johan Huizinga, Rob Martens, Aziza Mayo and Laura van Dolron. The theoretical framework became the foundation to sharpen my pedagogical ideals and to explore a pedagogy of play in art education.

To describe this pedagogy I use the notion 'play as also-learning' which defines play as an open-ended process inviting children to explore and learn by calling upon their natural behavior and curiosity. On the one hand, I see play as 'also-learning' since I acknowledge that play is not the only way to learn and that not every kind of play is related to processes of learning and growth. Whilst on the other hand, I define play as 'also-learning' because I want to make a plea to approach play as learning and invite educators to explore the possibilities and value of play in education.

The educational project took place at primary school Park16hoven and is executed as action research in collaboration with my colleague, music teacher Rosanne. The project started as a temporary solution to deal with the teacher shortage during the crisis, but became a useful example for a transformation in the practice of arts- and general education. The design of the program emerged day by day using our experiences and findings in combination with the literature study by focusing mainly on what kind of exercises, learning processes and pedagogical approaches contributed to a learning environment in which learning happens through play. In order to do this, we focused on key elements like calling upon the children's imagination, their acquaintance with autonomy and agency, and the development of artistic behavior. We used methods and exercises shaped by dialogic communication, embodied- and Social-Emotional Learning, and collective meaning-making. This thesis doesn't offer an instant method to bring a pedagogy of play into practice in any educational circumstance. Though as a practical outcome it offers guidelines and an insight to invite you to start experimenting and researching yourself.

# Introduction

“But your classes aren’t real classes, right?” Rayaana responded after I told the children that I would write a small report about their progress. I had been teaching theatre at the school for a few years now and we were near the end of their theatre curriculum. I asked the group what they thought a real class meant. “Something where you learn stuff, about history or math or spelling” Rayaana replied. His reaction did not surprise me, but it did touch me. It felt like a very precious moment and I could not resist asking Rayaana and the others very carefully: “So during these classes, you don’t learn anything?” The children thought about it and it was Rayaana who raised his voice again. “We do learn stuff. But it is different you know, it’s more like playing.” The others nodded their head and the room was quiet for a while. Then Romaissa burst out “All right, can we start now?” (Gunst, 2019)

For the last six years, I’ve been working as a theatre teacher and maker in educational contexts. Teaching theatre at primary schools has been an important part of my practice. In the first years of my career, I felt the need to build bridges between my practice and the general curriculum of the primary schools in an attempt to create a more sustainable ground for students and teachers to value the discipline theatre in education. In collaboration with the teachers and children I started using the structures and rules they knew from the classroom management of their group teacher and I tried to connect the content of my lessons to the subjects and learning goals from the general curriculum. The more experienced I became as a teacher the more I wanted to prove that the children moving around, and making a lot of noise while using all sorts of attributes, wasn’t a situation of lost control, but a situation of learning through play.

The conversation with Rayaana and his classmates became fundamental for me to explore and rethink my position as an educator. It stimulated me to understand why I want to educate and what I view as the purpose of education. Rayaana’s notion of ‘learning that is more like playing’ gave me a new framework to question what meaningful education is about. Play became the main concept for me to find an answer or a solution to practice meaningful education. With this research, I wanted to explore how and why play should be practiced as pedagogy and how I and other educators can create space for play in the education system. The urge to create space for play already implies that play in education is currently at risk. While finding play as an answer to my questions it also became part of the problematics of this research in relation to our society’s current educational system.

In my experience, the general education system is shaped by result-focused processes in which measuring results has a central role in the daily practice. Gert Biesta, a Dutch professor and educationalist, describes the context of education as ‘the age of measurement’ and he explains how this context has a great impact on the way our education is constructed and qualified (Biesta, 2012). In this age, measuring the impact and efficiency of education became leading on how education is executed in daily practice. Qualifying education by testing the results and acquiring objective information could be seen as a positive movement since it allows the construction of an education based on facts. Though according to Biesta (2012) this also suggests “that decisions about the direction of education policy and the way education is constructed in practice could be made based on facts only” (p. 24).

The way measuring and testing is executed and used to inform us about the quality of education and children's development suggests that learning is a closed process (Biesta, 2012). This also shows in the 'strong language' that is often used in education explains Biesta (2005, 2009) and he refers with this concept to "language that depicts education as something that is, or has the potential to be, secure and effective — for example, where the aim is to establish a strong and secure connection between educational 'inputs' and educational 'outcomes'" (2009, p. 354). Biesta explains that the connection between teaching and learning can never be perfect since the learning process is about interpreting and making sense of what is taught, which is an open-ended process and therefore can't be measured by fixed results (2009). This might explain why Rayaán didn't connect his experiences in my classes to learning, since he is used to experience learning as an efficient and closed process. This is where the friction appears between my aim to practice play as pedagogy and the current education system, since play is an open-ended process in itself (Martens, 2019) and the education system is shaped as a closed process.

The former director of primary school Park16hoven, Saskia Boerkamp, recognized how her school is also part of this system based on measurement. When I spoke to her last year, she told me she is convinced that the meaning of education has changed over the years due to the digital society, now that most of the basic knowledge is accessible on the internet. Saskia is aware of the shifting function the school will have in future society and how the tasks of educators will drastically change. In her opinion, educators need to guide and coach children to regulate their motivation and curiosity to learn. They should teach them to focus and work on their learning process instead of working towards fixed goals. Still, according to the annual report of the ministry of education, observations show that teachers give feedback mainly on the result (the answer) and less on the way and the process of how this answer was found and the next steps to continue this process (feedforward) (Deursen & Vogelzang, 2020). Saskia acknowledged that it is very difficult for school leaders and teachers to change their approach to the learning processes of children when their general curriculum is not process-focused. This might be the reason why the arts curriculum is experienced as separate and not part of this transformation in education.

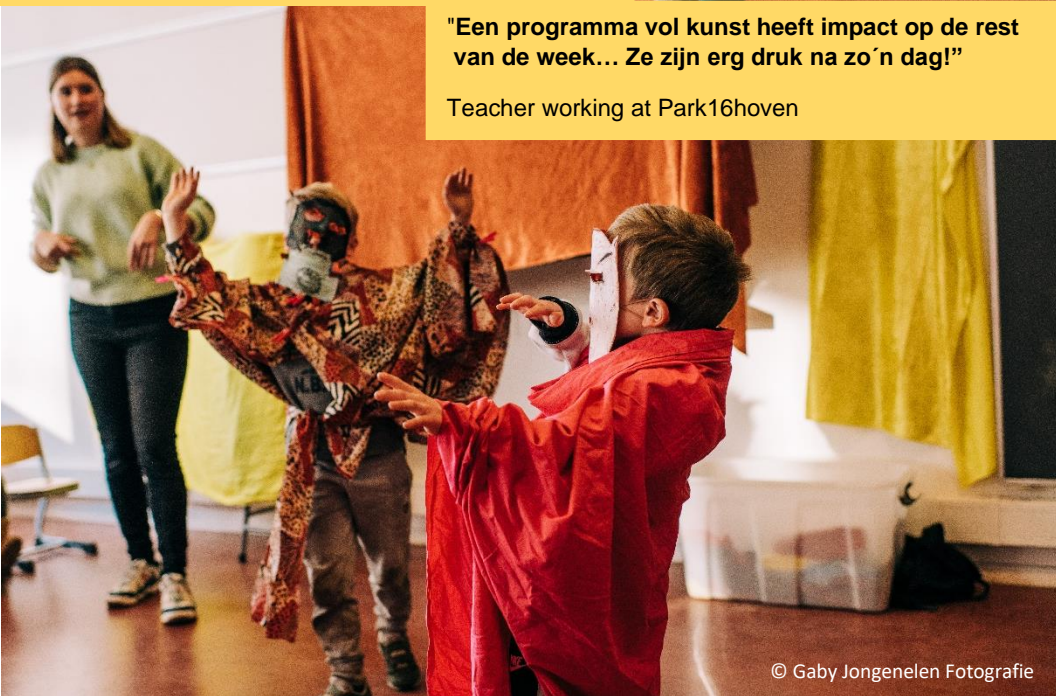
The general curriculum is packed with tests and the children need to be well prepared to achieve the best results, otherwise, this could lead to a learning disadvantage. This became even more urgent because of the Corona pandemic. Still, these insecure times also offered space for art education to take a more prominent role in the general curriculum. In collaboration with the SKVR I created with colleagues a full day of arts program as a solution to the teacher shortage which had increased during the pandemic. At the J.F. Kennedyschool in Dordrecht I was invited to teach theatre to all age groups to support the children their language development but also to work with their Social-Emotional Learning. According to Maarten Bremer (2021), educationalist and member of the executive board of ArtEZ, art education offers children the possibility to express their experiences and explore their position in these insecure times, therefore he argues to acknowledge art education as a fundamental element to restore education during and after the pandemic. Though unfortunately in my experience, the primary school teachers didn't always experience the extra lessons and full-day programs as support to their curriculum. Some of the teachers were apprehensive because the lessons and art programs could have a non-desired effect on the children or they worried they would not have enough time to catch up with the work that had to be done.



**“Theater, bewegend leren, wanneer is er tijd voor het leren van de woordenschatlijsten van de CITO?”**

Teacher working at the J. F. Kennedyschool

© Gaby Jongenelen Fotografie



**"Een programma vol kunst heeft impact op de rest van de week... Ze zijn erg druk na zo'n dag!"**

Teacher working at Park16hoven

© Gaby Jongenelen Fotografie

In our society, we are used to separating work and serious learning from play (Martens, 2019). But what about the learning that happens during my classes? The interactive and social processes the children have to regulate, the new words the children get to know? For example, 'the swamp' the third graders of the J.F. Kennedyschool had to cross by imaginative play. The children asked me "What is a swamp?" and we described together the texture, the smell, and how dangerous it could be to cross it. My intuition tells me that the word endures because of the embodied experience of acting it out. It is exactly this process of exploring and imaginative play that invites children to learn. This open-ended process does indeed ask for a different approach to education and learning. We didn't focus on the perfect execution of an imaginative swamp, but made meaning through an open-ended process. What if the pedagogy behind these processes becomes an example for the transformation that is needed, as explained by Saskia Boerkamp, to reshape the intention and meaning of education for our future society?

The intention of education is often described as "the experience for children and young people to prepare themselves for a life and living as adults in this society" (Mayo, 2015, p. 15). Aziza Mayo, lecturer *Waarde(n) van vrijeschoolonderwijs*, shows in her lecture how this 'experience' is mainly organized with the ideals and motives of life as an adult in the economic domain (Mayo, 2015). She explores visions on education that do not explain the value and meaning of education in terms of its contribution to the economic domain of our society, but education that contributes to a social and sustainable society. Mayo (2015) states that "in a society that focusses on (social) sustainability the meaning of education is less about what students achieve in knowledge, skills and competencies and more about how, as human beings, they start relating to others and the world around them" (p.23). To be able to relate to the world around you I believe it is important that a child doesn't only gain knowledge about this world and the skills that are part of how this world functions, I believe it is also important to experience freedom and agency to emancipate yourself and to be able to position yourself in this world (Hooks, 2008 ; Mayo, 2015). With this view on education, I'm convinced that a pedagogy of play could indeed contribute to a meaningful practice of education. To research how this pedagogy of play could be practiced at a primary school (Park16hoven in Rotterdam) I explored the following question:

#### **How to design and practice art education in which children grow, learn and emancipate themselves through play?**

- Why should (art)educators consider practicing play as a pedagogy in their educational practice at primary schools?
- What complexities of play do (not) contribute to learning processes shaped by play as also-learning?
- Which didactics, methods and pedagogical tools are useful to design a (day) program based on 'play as also-learning'?
- What is needed from educators and children to facilitate a learning- process and environment that contributes to the growth and emancipation of children through 'play as also-learning'?

# Method

With this research, I wanted to answer the question ‘How to design and practice art education in which children grow, learn and emancipate themselves through play?’ The question emerged from a more general problem in a rather specific context, the context of my own practice. As an educator, I’m fully embedded in my practice and therefore this research includes a lot of situated observations and findings. Understanding, exploring, and developing my position and perspective as an educator plays a significant role, therefore this document isn’t a product with an answer, solution, or conclusion that could be applied in any educational setting. It’s not my aim to present documentation that could be interpreted as general truths. It’s rather an invitation to join the process of working with these questions and to offer some possible ideas and tools to bring play as a pedagogy into practice.

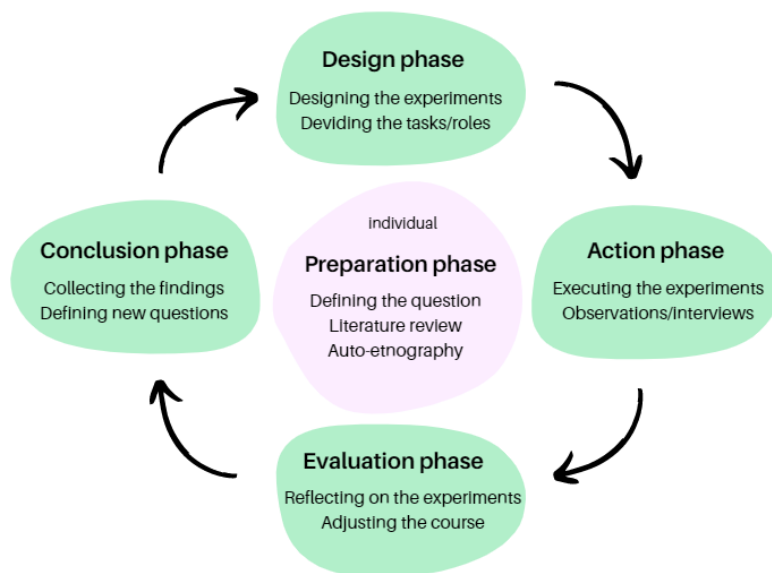
The process of this research is shaped by a parallel trajectory of a literature study and experiments executed in the context of my practice. Some of the described experiments and observations were situated in the period of 2019 till 2020 and are used to create a comparative literature study and an auto-ethnography of my practice. It was my intention to create empirical research with a design-based format, to research different possible methods to bring play as a pedagogy into practice. But because of the transformative nature of my practice (which has been amplified since the COVID19 Pandemic) action research suited the process better, since the projects I intended to use for my research were canceled and new, to be developed, projects emerged.

At the beginning of 2021 my practice started to transform significantly. Because of the COVID19 pandemic and the new lockdown I wasn’t allowed to teach physical theatre classes at primary school Park16hoven where I normally worked two days a week. Instead, I created online video lessons for the children to work with at home. In these lessons I incorporated other disciplines, to keep myself motivated and to try to create a rich and challenging curriculum, even virtually. When the children were welcomed into school again in March, my theatre lessons at Park16hoven could still not start. But the teacher shortage and corona-related protocols made it almost impossible for the school to organize education on a daily basis. The director asked me and my colleague Rosanne, to help out by organizing a full-day program, based on our expertise in art education, for six Thursdays in the third grade. At the same time, I started teaching theatre to all grades at a primary school in Dordrecht to support the children with their ‘learning disadvantages’ in language education. It was interesting to experience how these different situations related to my research of play as pedagogy.

The first phase of this research process was an individual trajectory but when Rosanne and I started working together, to design and practice the full-day arts program at primary school Park16hoven, she got engaged with the research and I invited her as co-researcher to the process. Our sessions, to prepare the program and the conversations and evaluations we had afterward, provided the input for the continuation of the research. Working together with Rosanne as a co-researcher offered me the possibility to include a second voice and perspective in this document. Engaging with the research process together with a co-researcher contributes to the sustainable effects of action research (Van der Zouwen, 2018).

The method we used is based on the following characteristics of action research:

- It's a recursive process. The research starts with the notion of a problem, creating a design to start working with this problem, executing it in practice, and after that evaluate and document the findings. Then this cycle will be repeated with the intention to proceed and improve what is questioned even further (Van der Zouwen, 2018).
- The steps and action taken in the process will be directed by what has emerged in practice (Van der Zouwen, 2018). This means that designing the experiments is in constant dialogue with the context and the process so far.
- The researcher moves constantly between executing experiments, documenting findings, sharing new knowledge, and designing new actions (Van der Zouwen, 2018).



In chapters three and four, I will elaborate on the experimental project at primary school Park16hoven that is designed and executed as action research. I choose to focus on this project specifically to answer the sub-questions: Which didactics, methods and pedagogical tools are useful to design a (day) program based on 'play as also-learning'? and What is needed from educators and children to facilitate a learning- process and environment that contributes to the growth and emancipation of children through 'play as also-learning'?. In chapter one the theoretical framework is presented related to the question: Why should (art)educators consider practicing play as a pedagogy in their educational practice at primary schools? The autoethnographic study can be found in chapter two in which I formulated an answer to the question: What complexities of play do (not) contribute to learning processes shaped by play as also-learning?

# 1 PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY

## Play

Historian Johan Huizinga describes the concept of play as an act with no other goal in itself (Huizinga, 2008 ; Martens, 2019). He argues that play is a function of species that can't only be explained from a biological or logical perception, since play doesn't serve a direct (material) goal. He describes how play is older than culture and how every expression and experience of culture is rooted in play. "One can find play everywhere, present as a quality of acting that distinguishes itself from ordinary life" (Bekker, 2016, p. 24). How can this quality be defined? What is play and what is not? Huizinga (2008) explains that play distinguishes itself from the serious (de ernst) and can be seen as the non-serious (niet-ernst) but that this term is easily misinterpreted since play can be serious and often demands concentration and a sense of gravity during the act of play. Theatre maker Laura Van Dolron (2020) tries to answer the aforementioned question in her monologue on play and art. She figures that maybe breathing, giving birth, being born and dying are the only acts that are free from play. These are the activities essential to life. Next to these activities, there is room for play, but once life is at risk when one simply needs to survive, this room disappears. "You need to feel safe to free yourself, and you need to free yourself to be able to play" (Van Dolron, 2020).

Could we say everything apart from survival is play? And does ordinary life equal survival? This seems to be too simplistic. In my understanding, ordinary life is not only about survival, but ordinary life could maybe be described as life shaped by activities that pretend to be vital to survive (Van Dolron, 2020). Van Dolron shows in her text how work can be seen as non-play since it has the pretentious quality of being vital to surviving. Though in her experience, work can offer a situation that creates room to play (Van Dolron, 2020). Further on in her text she defines play as 'the will to create' and distinguishes forms of play that she, therefore, doesn't acknowledge as real play since these forms (Facebook and videogames) do not offer enough space to create freely.

Experiencing freedom, executing play out of free will, is vital for the act of play according to Huizinga (2008). Still, the act of play also demands some immersion, the quality that for example demands concentration and gravity, but this is not fully controlled by the actor (Martens, 2019). Play is about experiencing **the freedom to lose yourself** into something bigger, the process of play. These moments of losing oneself are defined by time and physical (non) conscious frameworks in which the play exists. The boundaries that separate play from ordinary life, act as an intermezzo. Huizinga (2008) explains that these intermezzos become a repetitive part of life and consequently play is a crucial part of life in general.

Rob Martens, a Dutch educationalist and professor at the Open University, explores the concept of play in relation to education in his book *We moeten spelen*. He argues that play is not only something we can't live without but that it is the reason why we, as Homo sapiens, have been able to develop ourselves. By exploring human nature he connects play to concepts like learning and creativity and he states that play is **'the ultimate learning experience'** (Martens, 2019). Play holds opportunities to develop ourselves, not because its goal is survival, but because the intermezzos of play offer the space to experiment, explore, and practice.

“Play is not real life, but you can apply the lessons learned in real life. It works well when you are able to grasp it, to put yourself in it, and to use your imagination. [...] It is about the process not about the result or the reward outside of play” (Martens, 2019, p. 95). It was the **playful mind** and room to play that held the opportunity for the homo sapiens to create for example a crossbow. Not because it was the goal to invent one but because it emerged during an open-ended process, an **open-ended process of play** (Martens, 2019, p. 117). Play is an activity with no other goal than the act in itself, but one could through play learn skills and achieve experiences that come in handy in life. To play or not to play isn't a question, we are built to play according to our evolution and it's something we do naturally.



Still of the video Children's Game 10 / Papalote, Balkh, Afghanistan 2011. <http://francisalys.com/childrens-game-10-papalote/>

### **Children's Game 10 / Papalote, Balkh, Afghanistan 2011.**

“All you see—what you see—is the body in action with unknown forces, pulling to the left, pulling to the right, up, down, quick, over to the left again, and so on and on. The body is all the more obvious because it is connected like this to the coursing wind by an invisible string. This is not only the body of the boy but the body of the world in a deft mimesis of each other, amounting to what I call “the mastery of non-mastery” which, after all, is the greatest game of all, a guide, a goal, a strategy—all in one—for dealing with man's domination of nature (including human nature)” (Alÿs, 2011).

Artist Francis Alÿs (1999-2017) shows in his work *Children's games* how play occurs in any culture and under any circumstances. It's what children start doing when they experience freedom, safety and space. Alÿs' videos show essential elements of play that I would like to connect to Martens' concept of play as 'the ultimate learning experience'. Alÿs (2011) describes what we see in the video as "a body in action with unknown forces". And in all other video's one can notice interactional behavior, between children or between a child and an object or its environment. **Interactional behavior is a key element** for play to occur. "Play can only occur between. [...] The genesis of play also teaches us that play is only possible by the grace of interactional behavior" (Gielen, 2015, p. 136). How the children interact is defined by the rules of the game, but these rules are also shaped by the interactions (Gielen, 2015).

Alÿs' observations of the boy playing with the kite shows us how we as humans are practicing, experimenting, exploring, and therefore learning throughout play. Playing the game to try to understand, concur and deal with (human) nature. A game we might never fully understand since he calls it **"the mastery, of non-mastery"** (Alÿs, 2011) but at least by playing we try to grasp it and maybe even try to adjust the rules. Play challenges us to engage with an open-ended process and to **improvise**. During play we train skills that help us to deal with different situations in different circumstances. In the game *Wolf and Lamb* we see how the children engage in different roles and have to try out different strategies in order to 'win' the game. In both games, play seems to be a way to learn, to understand, to deal with, to make sense of, and to **give meaning to the world around us**. "It [play] is about discovering who you are and meanwhile learning about everything around us we name as culture, and with that slowly specializing and innovating yourself by committing to certain aspects of this culture" (Martens, 2019 p. 157). I see this as the purpose of education and therefore play indeed seems to be 'the ultimate learning experience'. But how can one create space for this experience in education, to practice it as a pedagogy?



Still of the video Children's Game 11 / Wolf and Lamb, Yamgun Afghanistan 2011.

<http://francisalys.com/childrens-game-11-wolf-and-lamb/>

## Play as also-learning

In the previous paragraph, play is defined as the ultimate learning experience which calls upon children's natural behavior and curiosity when the necessary conditions are met. You need to feel free and safe to be able to play (Van Dolron, 2020) and the process doesn't head for another goal than playing itself (Huizinga, 2008). Through play, you learn about everything around us (let's call it culture) and discover who we are and how we position ourselves (Martens, 2019), it is a process that I connect with the purpose of education. Still, the main conditions for playing are not self-evident in the current education system which focuses predominantly on measurements and results (Biesta, 2012). In this paragraph, I explore how play relates to learning in an educational context and since not every play is defined as 'real play' (Van Dolron, 2020) I elaborate on what kind of play I define as '**real learning experiences**'.

The connection between learning and play isn't a novel concept in the field of education. Many pedagogues, thinkers, and teachers have discussed, designed, and practiced pedagogies and didactics that embrace play as an activity that is connected to a child's growth and learning (Walsh, Mcmillan, & McGuinness, 2017). Some primary schools offer an education based on the ideas of pedagogues like Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, and Célestin Freinet, and in their education autonomy and play are grounded in the pedagogical approach (OCO, 2014). But I have mainly worked as a theatre teacher in primary schools that teach a general curriculum. All the same, they do spice up their education with playful activities and playful learning, mainly in the first and second grades. But there is far less room for play for third grade children (Bijman, 2018). Playful activities make way for 'serious learning'. Serious learning, but not without fun, since **gamification** has become a new reality in the development of didactics.

Gamification is used in education as a didactical approach where the **mechanisms of games** are used (Kapp, 2012) to keep children motivated and engaged with their learning processes (Post, Kester, Admiraal, Lockhorst, & Bulder, 2020). "Gamification allows the instructional designer to select just enough game elements to make the experience engaging, without lowering the bar with respect to the educational value and while remaining cost-effective" (Apostel, Zaharescu, & Alexe, 2013, p. 69). This means that the activities and exercises that are gamified include features of a game, but aren't games in itself. Still, according to Apostel et al. (2013) Kapp argues that education that is gamified only by using features like rewards only provides an extrinsic motivation to play and learn. "In his opinion, features such as the story, the safe environment, the challenge and the sense of mastery are more important to keep the learner engaged and motivated" (p. 68). Some of the ideas behind the gamification of education match with my ideas of practicing a pedagogy of play, for example calling upon children their **intrinsic motivation** to engage with the process, but since the concept is used in different ways I need to (re)define the concept of play as how I would like to use it in relation to learning.

In this research I approach play as an open-ended process, the outcome of play is not known upfront, the process is insecure (Martens, 2019). Huizinga (2008) describes the fundamental concept of play as a free act with no other goal than play itself. This concept of play does therefore differ from didactics which use elements or mechanisms of play and games in relation to learning, like gamification in education (Post et al., 2020), since gamification is a didactic tool that uses the mechanisms of games and play to reach a learning goal, gain knowledge or develop skills. The process of playing (these games) in this setting isn't open-ended and the goal isn't play in itself.

Suggesting that play as pedagogy is only about play itself would be misleading. As an educator, I want to provide an environment in which children are able to grow. I define **growth as the ongoing process** in which children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them through various **knowledge and skills acquiring experiences**. Therefore, one could say that when approaching play as a pedagogy the goal of this process is learning to grow. But instead of focusing on this goal of learning and growing, I want to focus on the process that contributes (or not) to what is learned and developed. **Process-focused learning** instead of result focus learning, the process is more important than the goal of learning. A process which I, according to Dorothy Heathcote (n.d.) founder of *Mantle of the expert* pedagogy, can guide and encourage in my position as an educator but I cannot fully control it, as well as I cannot control the effects of this process.

“As teachers we make nothing tangible. We plant ideas, offer models, create links with seemingly disparate notions, differences and likenesses, patterns and formings, often comprehended through the tasks we perform invent to enable understanding. We have one huge problem. We are rarely there when something we did plant a seed for, is recognized by those we work with. This delta in realization haunts us, and gives rise to the black dog of lack of confidence in ourselves and others, often the people we teach” (Heathcote, n.d.).

Acknowledging the insecure position of an educator in these processes of learning and developing does not mean I don't have an educational position and aim with this pedagogy of play based on open-ended processes. It is my aim to offer an education in which children are able to develop themselves by experiencing these open-ended processes and meanwhile achieve the skills and knowledge to implement this way of learning and exploring, while playing, in other circumstances. I want to create a learning environment in which children are given a **sense of agency**, exploring ways to **emancipate** themselves.

But this aim is not written in stone, since I'm aware that play is not the only way for children to develop themselves (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) and because there are certain situations in which the efficiency of learning something by heart, while knowing the outcome upfront, can be very useful (Martens, 2019). To develop this pedagogy of play indeed as one that aims for emancipation it needs to position itself in relation to the current educational context. Therefore I want to define this approach of play as a pedagogy as one that explains and practices **play as 'also-learning'**. A way of learning and growing that distinguishes itself from the concept of learning that is part of general education but that also offers the space for children to transfer these experiences into their general educational context by experiencing that play is also-learning. In the next paragraph I explore how this pedagogy relates to art education and my practice as a theatre teacher.

“The teacher has to be the author of a play, someone who thinks ahead. Teachers also need to be the main actors in the play, the protagonists. The teacher must forget all the lines he knew before and invent the ones he doesn't remember. Teachers also have to take the role of the prompter, the one who gives the cues to the actors. Teachers need to be set designers who create the environment in which activities take place. At the same time, the teacher needs to be the audience who applauds” (Malaguzzi, 1993).

### Scene 'Also-learning'

Adult: So, we play to maybe learn something?

Child: We play, because we want to play. (starts playing) Look!

Adult: (distracted) Nice! What is the goal, why are you playing?

Child: There is no goal. Look at this!

Adult: Careful!

Child: You should try it!

Adult: Is it safe?

Child: I don't know.

Adult: I don't think... well...all right then. (starts playing)  
This is fun! (after a while) Okay, that's enough.

Child: And did you learn something?

Adult: I'm not sure yet. Though I didn't expect this to happen.

Child: There you go.

Adult: (after a short silence) I get it.  
Upfront you can't be sure what you get out of playing. It's open-ended.  
And because there is no other goal than playing itself I only focus on  
playing. That feels safe, since it is just for fun.  
And I keep doing it as long as I stay motivated. And according to our  
evolution it makes total sense that this is how we learn.  
So, play is a way of learning. Maybe the way of learning.

Child: It is 'also' learning.

Adult: What can I do to start you playing or also-learning?  
What is my role in this situation?  
How can I prepare this open-ended process? I need to take care of the  
activity, right? Otherwise, it will be chaos... (mumbles)  
That is not my line. I forgot my lines (laughs nervously)  
What's the script again? I'm sorry.

Child: Don't worry, we're just playing. Improvise!

## Play and art education

The concept of play as also-learning is shaped by my practice in art education as a theatre teacher. To me there is an inevitable relation between play, creativity and artistic behavior. By exploring and elaborating on these relationalities I want to provide a more tangible understanding of this concept, and clarify why a pedagogy of play as also-learning could provide education that focusses on emancipation. I also want to distinguish this concept from **playful learning and play-based education** that is mostly known in nursery school or early childhood education (Walsh et al., 2017). Mostly, because with the concept of play as also-learning I want to introduce a pedagogy that isn't restricted to these early years of education but can be practiced throughout all age groups of primary school. There are similarities between my approach of play as a pedagogy and play-based education, but they are rooted differently. Play-based education can refer to any kind of play, whilst my concept of play has roots in discipline theatre and therefore focusses on **imaginative play**.

“Dr. E.E.A Vermeer describes imaginative play as the most enriched kind of playing. It brings a vision or a memory, mostly directed by emotions, to life. During this process children are able to enter a self-created world. This imaginary world is different from the real world/everyday life and therefore offers more possibilities than the general world. The meaning a child gives to a thing, a human or an event can be decided by the child itself. The child is able to put its mark on the course of events.” (Groot, 2012 p. 86)

Imaginative play offers the space to give meaning and to reflect on the world experienced by the ones playing. Or as Pascal Gielen, professor culture and sociology, puts it “the fictional space of play is one of the laboratories of our society, the experimental garden of the social in which subjects are shaped also, personalities evolved and roles are distributed” (2015 p. 137). This view on imaginative play connects to the purpose of education when its main focus is to create an environment in which children start relating to others and the world around them (Mayo, 2015). In my theatre curricula, this kind of play is consciously present. It's part of the method behind the exercises, it's the tool for the children to participate and it's part of how I approach, introduce and invite children to engage with the thematic of a lesson. Though before I started this research I never consciously focused on this process of ‘starting to relate to others and the world around’.

Since my theatre practice is based on educational settings, I have never designed curricula that merely focus on the development of acting, creative or artistic skills. Offering a learning environment in which children could work on their so-called **'soft skills'** and self-confidence was just as important. But when my aim is to approach play as 'also-learning' this pedagogy asks for a broader implementation of the discipline and imaginative play. The pedagogy *Mantle of the Expert* is an example of this broader implementation. Here drama is used to open up **imaginative possibilities** and conventions in order to develop deep and rich curriculum studies in classroom learning communities (Edmiston, 2017), education as an **ongoing holistic experience** within a fictional context which approaches curriculum learning in an incorporated way (Aitken, 2013).

“The teachers and children take in roles as experts in an imaginary enterprise... and work together as a responsible team to carry out an important job for a high status (fictional) client. Along the way, they encounter problems, or tensions (either naturally arising, or planned and introduced by the teacher). The element of tension is essential to all drama, and in a Mantle of the Expert experience, tensions add complexity to the commission, keeping it interesting and promoting new tasks for learning. At the same time, through episodes of drama, students are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives on the issues at hand and to reflect deeply on their learning and on the process of learning itself” (Aitken, 2013 p. 37).

In this pedagogical approach, the children are perceived as **co-creators** of the research process. The teacher doesn't invite the children into the fictional context to trick them into thinking that what's going on is real. Instead, the children are fully aware of the fictional context and consciously entering and leaving the fiction as part of the process. They also have the agency to share their ideas, make decisions on how the process proceeds, and “pursue their own directions and interests within the bounds of the commission” (Aitken, 2013. p. 37). This pedagogy is an example of how I would like to define the agency and freedom that comes with play as also-learning. It is **not fully child-led** like the processes in play-based education (Walsh et al., 2017) but offers room for children to position themselves in relation to the teacher and their groupmates and the task they engage with. They also have the freedom to adjust the process if necessary. Approaching children as co-creators is not only a way to create space for agency, it is also a way to appeal to their **inventiveness and artistic behavior**. According to Gielen (2015) it's art education that adds this space for agency in the shape of artistic behavior to play.

“Arts education as a subject at least provides an open space where the game can be played according to different rules for a little while. [...] Whereas other subjects are boarded up with educational plans and goals and competencies, art teachers, in the spirit of the avant-garde have the serious duty to play the artist and thus generate dis measure. They need to break open the boarded-up space again. Why? Because, stimulation and imitation of the measure do not suffice, however, to learn how to live in a constantly changing world. Learning how to play by the rules is not enough” (Gielen, 2015 p. 149).

Experiencing **agency and freedom** in combination with **co-creation and artistic behavior** are the keys to design and practice play as also-learning. It is a pedagogy based on **emancipation**, in order to create an environment in which the children experience agency and responsibility in their own growth. A pedagogy that offers an environment in which children are able to emancipate themselves instead of reducing the space of their growth to the molds preparing them for adult life. But how to bring this pedagogical approach of play as also-learning into practice? So far it seems difficult to find room for play in the general curriculum in primary schools. Martens (2019) describes how playful learning and play-based learning are often set away as a caricature, as pedagogies where knowledge isn't valued at all. He also explains that play in relation to education is a **vulnerable concept** and that play is difficult to approach seriously, because play is an act that shows itself as not serious at all, as a joke. It is my aim to practice and perceive play as a concept that should be taken seriously. To enter this playfield well prepared, I need to explore the **complexities of 'play as also-learning'** and the friction it causes in an educational setting first, to make sure I'm able to present a useful toolbox while starting this open-ended process of experimentation.

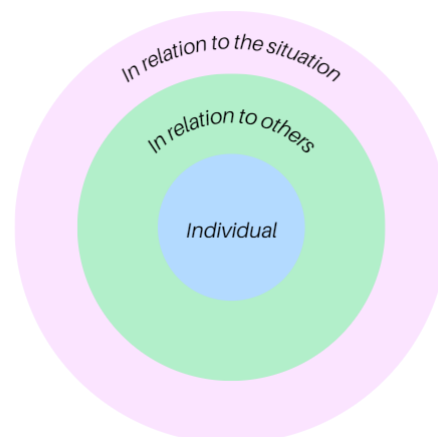
## 2 THE RISK OF PLAY

### Levels of risk and friction

In order to understand what tools and structures are needed to bring play into practice in the context of a primary school we first need to understand why play is such a complex concept in relation to learning and education and on what levels this causes friction. Based on the theoretical framework and observations in my practice I created a figure to visualize to which degree I can work constructively with these complexities and frictions. Underneath I will elaborate on the **different levels of friction** and how they relate to the position of educators and children in an educational setting.

#### Levels of friction

1. Dealing with risk
2. The interactive nature of play
3. The alternative reality of play



#### 1. Dealing with risk

Playing means taking risks. It's an inevitable and natural part of play (Sandseter, 2010). You join a process without knowing the outcome in advance, but you join this process with great commitment. Children need this challenge in play, they need to experience the risky part in order to move forward (Solly, 2015). **Taking risks** in this context is explained by Katryhn Solly as:

“Risk-taking [...] is grounded in the things young children and adults choose to do on a daily basis. It is about doing a little bit more, doing something differently, or exploring somewhere you haven't been before.[...] It is something that is individual but could involve potential hazard or loss if not established within a context appropriate risk-taking in a relatively 'safe' environment” (Solly, 2015 p. 12).



Children of group 3 playing freely outside at primary school Park16hoven.

The last sentence illustrates the friction that could emerge when play is practiced in the educational setting. This level of friction is directly influenced by the educator and the child. The educator is responsible for the **safety of the environment** in which the play is situated, the child needs to experience autonomy to choose how to approach and deal with this risk. The risk of play can be constructive in a process of play as also-learning when this risk lies beyond the child's comfort zones but is still something they trust themselves to be competent in (Solly, 2015).

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky called this '**the zone of proximal development**'. "A child learns in relation to what it already knows, but this should be something new or challenging in order to speak of actual learning" (Blijswijk, 2018). Children are able to move towards this zone by playing since it is open-ended and shaped by acts of improvisation and experiment. While playing, children push the boundaries of their skills and competence and are challenged to gain new ones. According to Vygotsky the social interaction with the educator plays a significant role in the process of learning "Pedagogues can help the other to bridge the gap between what he is able to do by himself on a certain moment and what he, with help, is potentially able to do" (Blijswijk, 2018).

## 2. Play occurs in interaction

"Play can only occur between. It originates from the interactions between animal and animal, between man and man, between animal and man, but also between animal and object, between man and object, et cetera. Even when an individual plays, e.g. spinning a top, he or she is interacting with that top. [...] The genesis of play also teaches us that play is only possible by the grace of interactional behavior" (Gielen, 2015, p. 136).

That play happens in interaction means that one should not only regulate an internal process (for example in dealing with risks) but also needs to regulate the effects of the (social) interaction. When play happens in social interaction, regulating these effects asks for certain social and emotional skills. Skills like recognizing emotions in oneself and the other, dealing with intense emotions, caring for others, being able to make sensible decisions and solving challenging problems. These skills develop during a process of so called **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** and are described as skills which help human beings to shape their identity, life and relationships in an effective and morally responsible manner (Van Overveld, 2019).

Playing in interaction draws upon these skills and at the same time offers a process and environment in which these skills can be further developed. To make this happen the environment that is created to play should not only be safe enough in terms of risk-taking but also in terms of the **social climate**. A child needs to be able to regulate its own internal process in relation to the other which forces the child to position itself in relation to the other's behavior. Children need to be able to express their own emotions and needs and should be able to understand the emotions and needs of others. When the social climate is perceived as safe, children are more likely to express their feelings and to communicate these in a constructive manner.

### 3. Alternative reality

Play is not real life (Huizinga, 2008). Luke Abott explains this concept in his conversation with Tim Taylor, using a simple diagram which shows an inner circle presenting the 'imaginary world' and an outer circle presenting the 'real world'. He shows that the duality of these worlds can't simply be explained by saying that one world is real and the other is not real since the experiences one has in this imaginary world are real. In their conversation, they stress the difference between **pretending and make-believe**. Whereas pretending has a superficial quality to it since it is not to be taken seriously, the act of making believe asks the participant (whether this an actor or an observer) to choose to believe and join the imagination, while still being able to distinguish it from the real world (Abott & Taylor, 2020).

Play is situated in a **physical or mental framework** which I would like to approach as alternative reality and becomes an imaginary world when one chooses to join this framework or as Abott puts it: a 'contract' of the 'construct' (2020). The construct is building this imaginary world by making believe. Martens (2019) points at the importance of this 'alternative reality' in order to make this an ultimate learning experience. This alternative reality offers a situation in which failure is allowed and where the risk in this situation doesn't form a risk in real life. It's a situation from which you can withdraw once it becomes too scary. **Real-life and this alternative reality** co-exist divided by a thin line. If the physical or mental framework, or to say the contract, isn't clear for all participants or when reality enters as a dominator this could cause friction. This friction can become a killjoy for play if it is not handled carefully (Martens, 2019).

## They killed my panda

To explore how these complexities and friction relate to an educational practice I would like to show you what I observed during a guest lesson of two students of WDKA's teacher training. They were invited to design an arts lesson for children (group 5) who normally join my theatre classes as part of their school curriculum. A week earlier the students had observed my class and we discussed what they would like to set-up. It was my intention to give the students full freedom in the design for the lesson but I felt the need, following our conversation, to mark a few boundaries relating to working in schools and this age group. It was not my aim to use this lesson as an example to point out what was missing in the teaching skills of the students, I merely want to use this lesson as a framework to explore and unfold what is needed to create a learning environment in which children play and therefore also-learn.

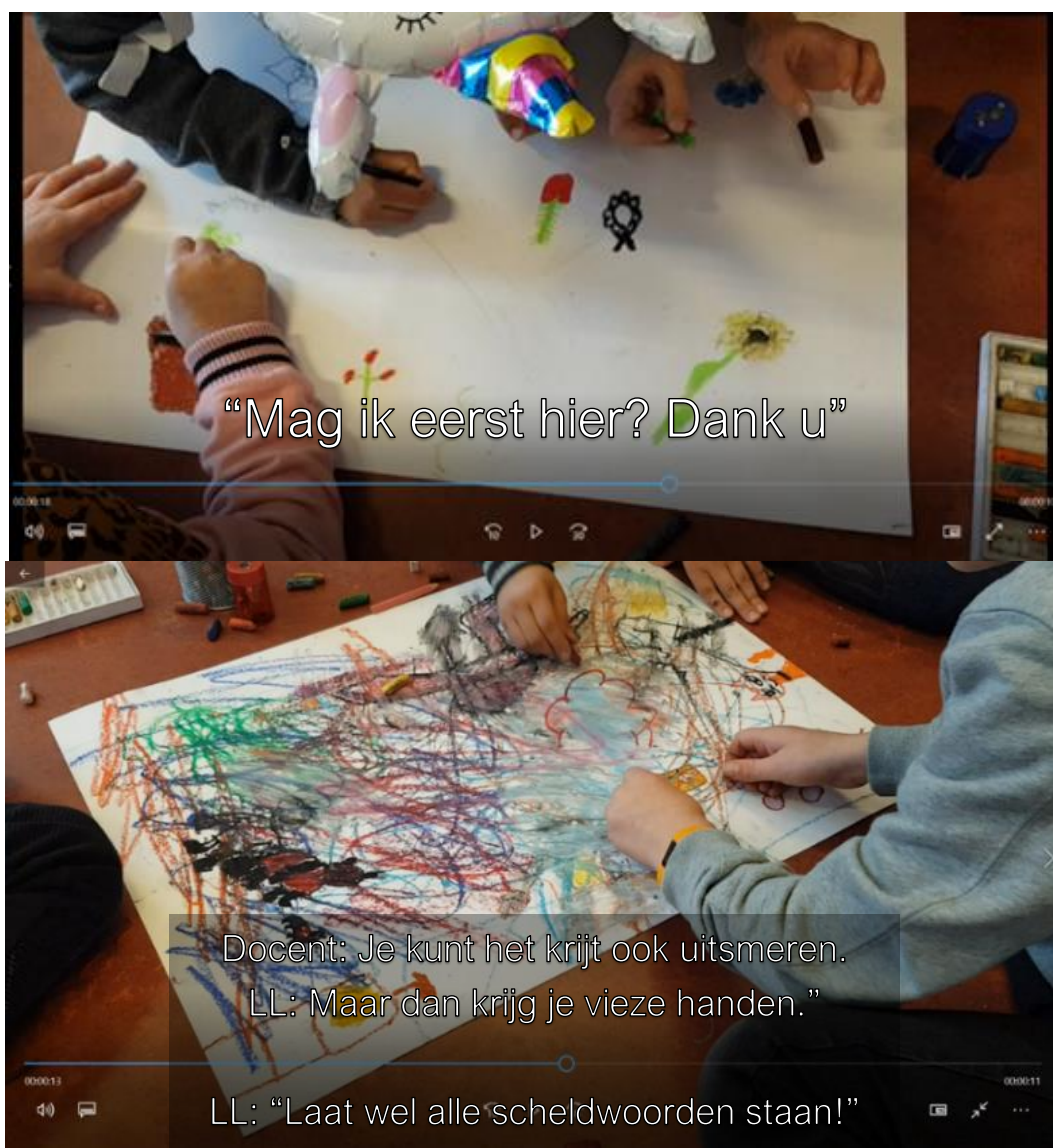
On Monday morning the 16th of November I welcome the students to my classroom. They seem prepared to teach and divide the room into four 'corners' and cover the floor of each corner with a large piece of paper. I can see how the playfield of today's lesson is structured by the drawing materials and their placement in the room. The next hour children won't be playing and acting like they are used to do in my theatre classes, they will be playing by drawing. The children enter the classroom and I settle in the background to make notes. The two students present themselves casually and explain to the group what they are going to do. "In groepjes van drie gaan jullie samen tekenen op een vel papier. Zullen wij groepjes maken of kunnen jullie dit zelf?" The children don't agree on this matter so the students divide the children into groups while assigning them a piece of paper and position in the room.

With energy and enthusiasm, the children start drawing with pencils and oil pastels. Some of them discuss what they are going to draw, others make up a story and start drawing the characters and scenery together. Some groups draw in turns, others individually on their 'own' part of the paper. For ten minutes the children are fully occupied with the exercise. I observe how the children experience intrinsic motivation to engage with this process of communicating and drawing. After ten minutes there is a shift in concentration, a child yells across the room: "Gaan we een halfuur tekenen?". It seems the right moment for the students to give the next instruction. They ask the groups to put down their pastels and elaborate on the drawing of another group. The children act confused, "Oh, Huh?" "Ik wil mijn tekening niet achterlaten", but still, they start drawing on a piece of paper that is already filled with drawings from others. I remind the students of the intention of their exercise and ask them how they could invite the children to challenge themselves. As the children get started the students add to their instruction: "Teken groot en vul het hele papier, je mag zelf weten hoe, je kunt ook over de tekeningen van anderen heen tekenen."

What happens next reminds me of the schoolyard. "Hij vermoordt mijn panda" screams one, pointing towards his own drawing on the paper that is covered with green and black scratches, the creation of the second group. He reacts by immediately ruining the drawings of others. Pastels move fast along the pieces of paper, colors are mixed and soon all the empty spots are filled with abstract scratches. A new playing field has emerged and the children play by a new rule. The lesson is no longer about creating a drawing, it's about creating layers to hide the existing ones. They enjoy the freedom to do whatever they want and explore the boundaries of this freedom by adding invectives (fak,fak,fak!) and by using the material differently.

The children are instructed to switch again from paper and suddenly the atmosphere changes. "Dit is zo lelijk" en "zij hebben alles verpest" echos through the room. The children look frustrated and start realizing what has happened. Only a few continue drawing, the others clean their hands. When the students ask the children to gather the pastels and clean the floor one girl steps towards me, her eyes are filled with tears and anger, "De jongens hebben al onze tekeningen verpest en nu mogen wij niet eens meer op hun tekening krassen omdat de tijd al op is". I ask why it makes her so angry and she answers: "Het is niet eerlijk, wij willen wraak". Revenge, was this the motivation behind their actions?

She is not the only one struggling with her emotions. Two boys are fighting and start hitting each other. The situation becomes unsafe and I can't stay in the background. I take over from the students and invite the children to explain why they are angry and upset. We try to have a conversation about what has happened but the two boys can't stop accusing each other. I take the two apart and suggest the students to keep the children busy with a game, a simple one, with clear rules, a game they have played before.



## Reflection

What started as a fruitful experiment ended in disappointment for the children. Still, the guest teachers, the students of the WdKA, were happy to see the children using the pastels differently, to see them engaged in a drawing process on a whole other level, a process that is **not restricted by rules of drawing**. At the beginning of the lesson, I was also enthusiastic about how the children were challenged during the exercise. But the initial excitement made way for a strange mixture of pity and guilt, seeing the children struggle with their emotions. The students had set up the conditions for the children to start playing, but the **unpredictable outcome** did not seem to be the risk that contributed to the children's engagement. The situation **caused friction**, on what levels was this (not) constructive and why? At the start of the lesson, the level of risk and challenge in this exercise and (learning) environment seemed to be sufficient for the children to engage with the process of playing or at least drawing with a playful mind. But then....

The instruction of the exercise created the playfield and it was the **intrinsic motivation** that started the play. This motivation starts with experiencing the free will to engage, the free will that is needed to start playing. Even though the arts curriculum is obligatory for the children I would like to state that the children joined this exercise out of free will. Martens (2019) compares the outcome of playful learning with **the self-determination theory** of Ryan and Deci (2000). The first instruction of the students and the playfield they had created invited the children to start drawing as a process of play. The main ingredients to experience intrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness were there (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The children were free to choose what and how to draw, they are familiar with using pencils and crayons and the children did draw together with classmates with whom they already have a connection. The guest teachers challenged the children to experiment with the materials and their classmates, the children were learning in **the zone of proximal development** (Blijswijk, 2018).

The first signs of friction appeared when some of the children asked questions about how long they were supposed to draw and what would happen next. These questions show that the children didn't experience autonomy and agency at this moment of the process to proceed. The questions were not answered by the students and the next instructions were also given without naming the duration or the goal of the exercise. But is this problematic? I can recall examples in which I just give a group an instruction to join a game or exercise without naming a duration or a goal and if I compare it to the children playing freely at the schoolyard, I must admit that they are rarely talking about the rules. In these situations, **the rules and construct of the game** or play are shaped **by interactions** (Gielen, 2015). Compare this to the situation where children started crossing out each other's drawings as an interactive non-discussed rule. In order to be able to start playing one needs to understand the mental and physical structure of the play itself (Martens, 2019 p. 18). Agreeing on such a structure, the alternative reality could be seen as **the code of conduct** to enable engagement.

Compare it with the performance of an improvised scene by two actors. The improvised scene exists in the **physical framework of the stage**, the actors and their audience. When the two actors start playing, they agree upon engaging with the alternative reality for the duration of the scene. It would not enter the actors' minds to accuse each other their characters' horrible behavior once the scene is over. It wasn't real life. All the actors and the audience experience during the scene are real experiences, but we agree upon the fact that all this happens in a

created situation that we do **not perceive as reality** (Zegers, 2008). When this framework or playing field is not clear for everyone it will become difficult to feel free to engage and play, because one will feel the pressure/insecurity of the consequences of your behavior in your real life. As stated before, play needs to be separated from real life, only then one is able to experience the freedom and safety to explore and experiment without knowing the result (Martens, 2019 p. 164).

This made me realize there is a difference in the basic principles of a theatre class and the guest lesson the children joined. In my theatre classes, the children play while constantly addressing that everything we do is not real, we create an alternative reality by using our imagination and expressing this by acting. The boundaries between real-life and alternative reality are consciously present. During the guest lesson, the alternative reality was very present "They killed my panda" though not consciously. This became clear at the end of the exercise where one of the children was upset because there was no time for 'revenge'. The children experienced the situation as unfair. **Unfairness is a killjoy for playing** (Martens, 2019) and so the play stopped. Not consciously but because of the lack of the clear boundaries of the playing field and the alternative reality. We can see how **real-life interfered**. What they had been doing while feeling free and playful during the exercise had a great impact on the social dynamics in the group afterwards. The two realities clashed and caused a great deal of friction.

Could this third level of friction contribute to a deeper and more meaningful process of play as also-learning? In the *Mantle of the Expert* pedagogy, friction (they use the word tension) and problems play a significant role in the process. "Along the way, they encounter problems, or tensions (either naturally arising, or planned and introduced by the teacher). The **element of tension** is essential to all drama, and in a Mantle of the Expert experience tensions add complexity to the commission, keeping it interesting and promoting new tasks for learning. (Aitken, 2013) Although there is a difference in how the tension is dealt with by the children, this part of the fictional context, the alternative reality offers the children the possibility to step out of the alternative reality if necessary. They are able to do this in a very conscious way since they are the **co-creators** of this **fictional context** and aware of the duality between both realities (Abbott & Taylor, 2020). To make this level of friction work in a constructive way, the educators should provide an environment in which the children experience agency to co-create and feel the freedom to step in and out the alternative reality. The structure and rules of this construct need to be consciously present.

This environment also asks for a social climate in which this cooperative combination of playing and learning is possible. The risks, tension and problems that are experienced could contribute to Social-Emotional Learning, but only when the **social climate is safe** enough to reconstruct after conflict situations. From my experience as a theatre teacher, working with the same groups only one hour each week, I know how difficult it is to create such an environment. I encountered this too at the J.F. Kennedy school in Dordrecht where I recently started teaching all age groups. Those children are new to the discipline theatre and experience a lot of friction on level one. They don't feel confident enough to express themselves in front of an audience or feel ashamed because of the image they need to hold up. **Street culture** finds its way into the classroom and for some children **Social-Emotional Learning** isn't self-evident and needs extra guidance. In these lessons play as also-learning can only happen in the clear structure of small exercises. But what if I'm able to work with a group in more sustainable situation, teaching them for a full day? Would I indeed be able to work with these levels of frictions in a more constructive way and could play as also-learning be practiced outside the limited structure of a theatre class? These questions will be explored in the next two chapters.

## 3 PLAY IN PRACTICE

In the previous chapters, I described various conditions and key elements that are necessary to approach play as a pedagogy of also-learning. In this chapter, I focus on the sub-question: Which didactics, methods and pedagogical tools are useful to design a (day) program based on 'play as also-learning'? To find answers to this question, I used a selection of conditions and **key elements** to create a framework for the analysis of my **action-research results** at primary school Park16hoven. This selection contains the use of risk to challenge and engage children during processes of play, the open-ended character of processes of play, the construction of imaginative reality, and play as a social- and embodied act.

### Introduction project

In March 2021 my colleague Rosanne and I were invited to organize a full-day arts program for six weeks at primary school Park16hoven. This school differs from other schools where I have been teaching, because it is situated in one of the wealthier neighborhoods in Rotterdam. Most children speak the Dutch language when they start school and have the opportunity to join extra education, sports, and hobbies besides school. During the lockdowns, the learning deficit was not as high as on other schools, explained director Paul Burghouwt, because the children had the hardware at home to join online learning and their parents were able to provide extra guidance if necessary. Still, Paul argued that the children had missed out some on their **Social-Emotional Learning** and he considered the arts programs to be a possibility to focus more on this aspect of education. The project also functioned as an experiment for the school to test how the arts curriculum could be redesigned in the following years now there was a perspective on a substantial subsidy. At the same time, it was a pilot for the SKVR to test possible solutions in relation to the **structural teacher shortage** in Rotterdam and to explore how art teachers could contribute to general education in a more sustainable way.

Rosanne and I have been working at the school for a few years now and were used to teach music and theatre lessons one hour a week to all age groups. Teaching one group all day for the duration of six Thursdays was something completely different. We organized the days for group three in their own classroom. The group of 29 children, ages 6 and 7, was a safe and harmonious group. The **basic conditions to cooperate** and to join open-ended processes were present. Our task was clear: creating for the children a full-day arts program that fitted in the normal structure of the day. In agreement with the group teacher, we decided to implement two moments for the children to read and we kept the start of the day the same as what they were used to: working independently on their weekly task. But furthermore, we had the freedom to choose the content for these days from our own **expertise in art education**.

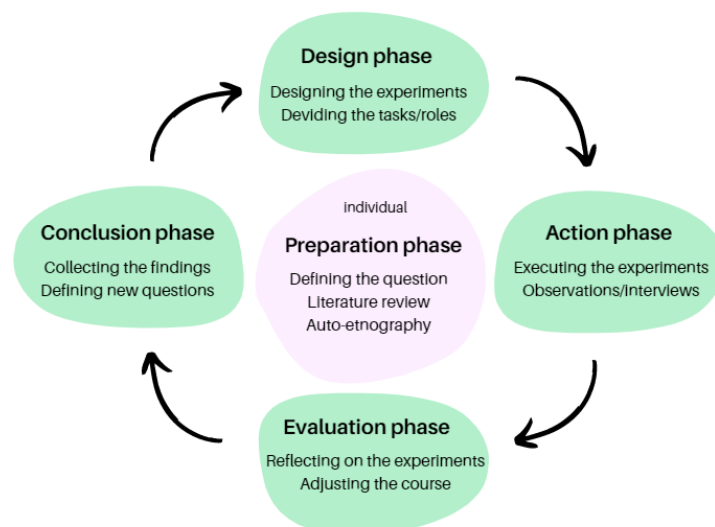
It was our aim to offer the children a learning environment that was different from the general curriculum by using play as also-learning as a pedagogy. Working with **various art disciplines**, we created learning processes with an open-ended approach. We wanted the children to experience an **alternative way of learning**, based on play and imagination. Experiences which hopefully had an impact on their understanding of learning and give them tools to approach other situations with this artistic behavior.

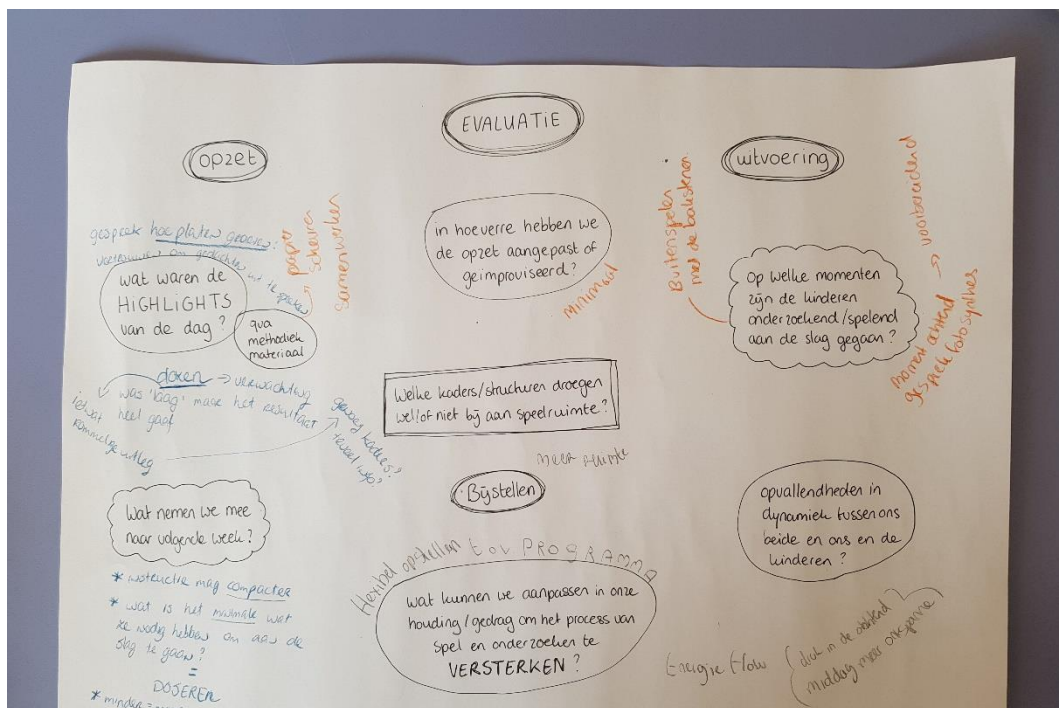
## Structure of the project as action research

In the design phase of preparing the project and the research, Rosanne and I decided to work with different disciplines to challenge the children and ourselves. To create a **cohesive program**, we started working from a **theme**. The first theme we choose was 'the beginning of spring' since it matched the children's perception of that moment. We started the first day together in a circle, welcoming the children in our *Kunstlab* (artlab). We had an open conversation about what the children thought we were going to do in this lab in the upcoming weeks. Transforming the classroom into the imaginative *Kunstlab* helped us to invite the children to this learning environment in which they might experience learning differently.

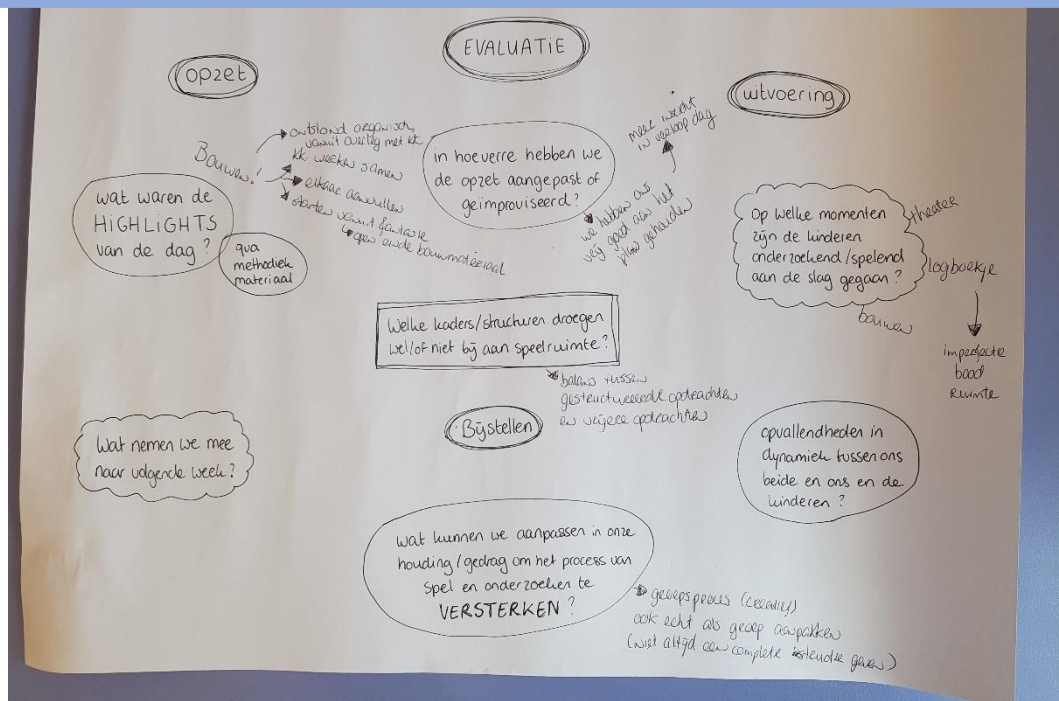
We only prepared the program for the first day and had the intention to take interesting events to the **brainstorm sessions** afterwards to determine the outlines of the next day. A description of the program can be found in the appendix. Throughout the day we documented the project with photos and audio recordings (links to specific files are added to the text). At the end of the school day, Rosanne and I took time to reflect on how the program was executed. We **evaluated** the day in an open discussion led by the question on the form below. We designed the form with the focus on approaching play as pedagogy and tried to find answers to the sub-question: Which didactics, methods and pedagogical tools are useful to design a (day) program based on 'play as also-learning'?

After the first day, we experienced it did not feel fruitful to make a full outline of the next day, since we wanted to give ourselves time to let the ideas ferment. After the weekend we had a call and added new ideas to the first draft of the next day. This gave us the possibility to go back to meaningful moments from the previous day, recall some questions and remarks of the children and implement new inspiration to the earlier ideas. It also helped me to check if we were still on track on answering the sub-question, if we were **sticking to the purpose** of the project and if we had to adjust the **direction of the research**. To give meaning to our findings during our evaluations I used the levels of friction and complexities of play to understand at what moments in our research we were able practice play as also-learning.





Evaluation forms filled in after day 2 and 5.



## Findings and results

### Spatial environment and material

Peter Kraftl's argument for the study of **spatialities of education** (2015 p. 119) made me conscious about the impact of children's interactions with the material and environment on their experience of education. Rosanne and I wanted to experiment using materials and spatial environment to help the children to engage in a process of play as also-learning. In Chapter two I spoke about the element of risk in play that helps children to engage in the process. There are pedagogies in which this element is a direct part of the material and the environment in which the education takes place, for example in the Forest School pedagogy (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). We recognized how **risky material** was a booster for play during the children's free playtime outside.

The children were playing with bricks and wood boards they found at their playfield, organically they started to build a 'house' together. The **imaginative and explorative play** emerged out of the found materials. It was interesting to see how the children managed the complexities of their social interactions, making decisions on what to build and who was going to play which role. They took risks while playing with the **heavy and rough materials** and we were in doubt if we had to intervene at some moments. Especially, when the children started removing the bricks from the pavement. When I asked the children if they thought it was wise to do so they answered boldly: *"Nee, maar we doen alleen nog deze rij"*. It shows their sense of **autonomy** in engaging with the play (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). [Link to audio recording](#)

Inspired by the free play we designed the program for the fifth day: building their designed space station with a small group in the classroom. We invited the children to use the tables, chairs, rags of fabric, and wooden boards. We talked about how the children could use the materials to make sure nobody would get harmed and nothing would be damaged. When we started with the activity the play emerged immediately. Some groups started working from a narrative, others created a clear design first or just started stacking chairs upon tables. They were cooperating, discussing, laughing, playing, storytelling, and taking risks all at the same time. Working with the material was enough for them to stay engaged with the creative process. Rosanne noted: "This was probably because of the **open-ended quality of the material**." But also, the imaginative reality we created played an important role. This made it possible to use familiar objects as their chairs and tables in an alternative way. In this situation, I would state that the choice to **use these materials and the spatial environment in a risky way** invited the children to engage in the process and offered them the possibility to approach this material in the same way as they did during their free play outside. [Link to audio recording](#).

In other situations, the material we chose to work with didn't have a clear risky element in itself, but did contribute to a process of play as also-learning. This happened on the second day, when we asked the children at the end of their free playtime outside to **collect (natural) material**. The children collected all sorts of material that appealed to them. Later on, they had to figure out how they could use it to create a tiny world in a cardboard box for an imaginative insect. First, it felt a bit deceptive that I didn't inform the children about what they were supposed to use it for, but Rosanne noted during our evaluation: "It changed the way of searching, they were more free and open to search, this would have been different if we had already instructed them about what the task was going to be."



**Children playing with bricks and wood during their free playtime outside.**



**Children building space station in their classroom.**

While creating the tiny worlds the material challenged the children on different levels. They had to figure out what constructions could be made with the combination of cardboard and paper and natural material. Vanessa Van 't Hoogt and Imka Buurke describe in their research *Curious Hands* how the characteristics of materials and objects draw out or detain certain actions (affordances) and the use of materials with **affordances unknown** to the participants changed their **process of meaning-making** during the act of making something (Van 't Hoogt & Buurke, 2020). I was made aware of this effect when the children started using their imagination to work with the material. Dandelions became suns or honeycombs to suit the world of their insect and they got curious about what the material actually was and created their own definitions. "Het is van de buitenkant van een boom - Nee het is een giftige paddenstoel, als je hem langer dan 5 tellen aanraakt is het gevaarlijk". On the third day, we observed how the children started collecting material by themselves, without our instruction during their free playtime outside, to create something new.

In some situations, during drawing or writing exercises, it was helpful that the children already had an understanding of how they could use certain materials, such as scissors and paper. This gave them the freedom to work **independently** and to start the process while feeling competent. According to the self-determination theory, this contributes to the children's level of engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In these situations, the materials were just **tools to start** the process of play as also-learning but did not directly contribute to the **levels of risk** and the **challenges** the children experienced during the process. Still when we invited the children to work with material and space in a way that was new to them in the classroom situation, this became part of the process. In these situations, the children had to explore, improvise and experiment to figure out how to work with the material and space. Therefore working with the material became part of the (imaginative) play as also-learning.

### Imaginative reality

Constructing an imaginative reality was an important tool to set the framework for a process of play as also-learning. Sometimes we prepared the day with this tool in mind, inspired by aspects of the *Mantle of the Expert* pedagogy (Aitken, 2013). In other situations, constructing the imaginative reality emerged spontaneously out of the process. We used the tool mostly in the shape of a conversation with the group. Language played a significant role to give words to what was imagined and to build further on each other's ideas. Rosanne and I used **dialogic communication** strategies (Van der Veen, 2016) like:

- We ask open questions.
- We give children the space to come up with their own ideas from their own perception.
- We perceive each other as competent and try to take in each other's perspective.
- We make meaning by building further on each other's ideas.

To make sure the children were able to listen to each other we experimented with using structures and rules. We tried to work with a talking stick to make visible which child had the agency to talk during the conversation and we also set the rule that the children would react to what was said, before introducing a new topic. The children were very competent in expressing themselves in words and listening to each other, but we also recognized that it asked a lot from their **concentration and energy**. It was also difficult to keep every child engaged and give them the chance to react.

The complexities of working with the imaginative reality became clear in the transfer to a process of physical play. Surprisingly enough we experienced this during a **theatre exercises**, when the children were invited to act as the different inhabitants of their self-invented planets. We held a group conversation, while seated in a big circle, and to create enough space for the theatre exercise the children moved their tables aside. The **unsettled feeling** caused by this chaotic moment worked further in the unrest we experienced when the children started moving and acting together in the circle. The children were familiar with the exercise, but now it was difficult for them to participate. The threshold to step into their imagination seemed higher. The tight space and crowded situation gave too much room to be busy with other interactions. Only at the end of the exercise when all the children sat down in the circle and two of them showed a short interaction, between two fantasy inhabitants of the planet, the children seemed fully engaged. Using the 'empty' space as a stage and **experiencing the imaginative reality as an audience** did the trick. This made me realize that next to constructing the imaginative reality we need to take the actual reality of time and space into consideration. Together with the group, we need to understand how we are going to use the space and what rules we need, to help each other to engage with that process of physical play, since those rules are not as self-evident as during a theatre class. [Link to audio recording.](#)



The children posing as their self-invented space creatures on their self-invented planets.

## Open-ended processes

One of the significant elements of a process of play as also-learning is that it is, similar to creative processes, **open-ended and iterative** (Lutke & Potters, 2018; Martens, 2019). Most of the exercises we designed for the days had indeed an open-ended approach and held a lot of space for the children's autonomy and expression of their ideas and imagination. Most of them were **creative processes** where we invited the children to play, build, make music, draw and write while working with their own imagination and input of ideas from classmates. What distinguished those from the **general creative exercises** was that we approached it as a research and artistic process. We called upon the children's ownership and responsibility from the start by inviting them to help making decisions on the method and steps we were going to take.

We experienced how **the process flourished** when we improvised the instruction by using the children's input to develop our strategies. "Daring to start the group process together with the group, starting the creative process already before the activity" (Marjolijn). This happened before we started building the space station in the classroom, the activity I talked about in the first paragraph of this chapter. Rosanne and I didn't prepare how we would instruct the children and decided to present the drawings of space stations they made the week before and to ask them how we could build these stations in the classroom. The children reacted enthusiastically: "We kunnen de tafels op elkaar zetten en de stoelen gebruiken." When we asked them about strategies to work with the material they suggested "We moeten samen tillen en voorzichtig zijn" and "Ik maak dan de computers en dan doet iemand anders iets anders." The introduction and **instructions became part of the learning process** and offered space for the children to experience freedom, agency, and the value of their own perspective. [Link to audio recording.](#) In order to bring a pedagogy of play as also-learning into practice, one could argue that it is needed to approach every part of the learning processes as open-ended at all times. In relation to the complexities of play and the levels of friction, I argue for a more nuanced implementation of open-ended processes.

Rosanne and I came to the conclusion that it was helpful to vary with exercises that didn't have an open-ended approach. To fluctuate in how much we ask from the children's creative expression and self-regulation we also implemented creative processes that were **less open-ended**. Rehearsing a song Rosanne wrote about the growth process of plants is an example of this diversion. She discussed with the children what concepts like roots, carbon dioxide, and chloroplast meant throughout sensorial experiences. The children examined chloroplast, using plastic bags with peas and saw how roots, like straws, are able to transport water. While singing the song the children invented movements to express these concepts. The freedom to play while rehearsing the song was limited since it had a clear goal and outcome. [Link to song.](#)

We observed how it helped the children to manage their concentration and energy level during the day when some of the exercises had a clear goal and semi-instructed outcome. The open-ended processes asked a lot from their **self-regulation** in relation to dealing with risks and the effect of social interactions. By including some tasks in the program from their general curriculum the children were able to rely on knowledge and skills they recognized from other learning processes. Nevertheless, I still view these processes as play as also-learning and in the next paragraph I'll explain why.



Children examine the chloroplasts of plants through a sensorial experience.

Children's documentation while exploring the question: How do plants get nutrition?



## Embodied learning

According to Martens (2019) singing and dancing are **embodied acts** that can already be seen as play. Of course, singing a song about the growth of plants differs from learning about these concepts by listening to instructions or reading about them. This is the case because the embodied act calls upon a **different process of meaning-making**, where the bodily responses and personal experiences of each child play a significant role. The value of embodied learning is explained by Ross, C. Anderson (2018) in relation to engaged meaning-making during learning processes. Although his research speaks about youngsters expressing scientific concepts, through tableaux vivant, it has a lot of similarities with how the children in our group expressed quite complex biological concepts in movements while singing a song.

“By enacting a metaphorical milieu for evaporation—the hot sun, a grape shriveling into a raisin, and the upward motion of vapors rising—the multisensory experience shapes meaning, sustained deeply through somatic markers...Made manifest in learning, this idea is powerful if we consider the difference between the learner enacting the felt meaning of evaporation compared to reading the definition within a symbolic language, only. In the language-only form, without strong somatic markers to aid the discrimination then or in the future, the possible qualities emergent in the meaning-making process may remain limited.”  
(Anderson, 2018 p. 77)

Embodied exercises are weaved throughout our program. Initially because we felt intuitively that it would make the program more meaningful for the children “You want an embodied process, a process in motion and not using language only. It is fun when their research and explorations become tangible” (Rosanne). Now looking into the theory of Anderson (2018) this assumption connects to his explanation of how embodied learning contributes to children’s meaning-making. He considers the need for meaning as **the fourth fundamental need** for children to engage with their learning process alongside the other three needs: the need for belonging, need for competence and need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2002). “I propose that the need for meaning should be considered primary and supported by everyday creativity in the learning process alongside those other key needs” (Anderson, 2018 p. 77).

Anderson (2018) explains how the creative and embodied process is **a process of growth** through which the children’s ideas mature through experience. Still he also takes into consideration that this is a personal process that depends on the conditions of the learning environment. With his research, he states that it is exactly the active, social, and embodied meaning-making that offers full engagement in learning. I would like to add to his findings that the **theatrical act of representation** and expression, that calls upon children their imagination, offers the possibility to approach the process of meaning-making with explorative and artistic behavior. The interactive and embodied nature of these processes, that call upon a child’s imagination and full-body engagement connect to what happens during processes of play (Martens, 2019). Therefore it proved itself a useful tool to bring play as also-learning into practice.

## Conclusion

The research will be continued in the same educational setting since the school board asked us to proceed with the program for the upcoming weeks. It still functions as a temporary solution for the teacher shortage, but we also consider it as a first step in the direction for more sustainable implementation in the general curriculum. The first six days of the project gave us the possibility to experiment with exercises, tools, and methods to bring a pedagogy of play as also-learning into practice. During our action research, we found the first answers to the question: Which didactics/methods and pedagogical tools are useful to design a (day) program of play as also-learning?

What stood out for us as educators was that we took the liberty to design the program by making **use of multiple arts disciplines**. Approaching subjects and themes through **explorative and creative processes** invited us to step out of the comfort zone of our own disciplines and to create overlaps with subjects like science and biology. For us, this was an inevitable part of working from processes of play as also-learning, since play is not restricted by the diversion of disciplines and researching and learning with a playful mind (Martens, 2019) also invites educators and children to combine different strategies and activities to experiment and to find or create answers.

We experienced how we and the children were able to flourish during the open-ended processes. Though we also concluded that it was important to vary with processes with a clearer goal or semi-instructed outcome, to make the program manageable for the children in relation to their Social-Emotional Learning and self-regulation. Inviting the children to work with **material and the spatial environment** in a way that was new to them contributed to bringing processes of play as also-learning in motion. We experienced how **constructing an imaginative reality** helped the children to express their own ideas, perception, and imagination. In some situations, this construction was indeed a booster for the children to experience full bodily engagement with their learning processes, but this was not always successful. The transfer between the linguistic construction and the step to engage with the imaginative reality by embodied play wasn't self-evident and needed extra guidance. During these processes, the levels of friction and the complexities of play in an educational setting did not always contribute to a process of growth. We experienced the value of the **embodied acts** in relation to the children's **engagement in meaning-making**. To continue this research, it will be important to zoom in to what is needed to create an environment in which these processes indeed become one of growth.

During our evaluations we often returned to the question: Did we really provide an environment in which the children experienced agency and freedom to play? As described in chapter 1 freedom and agency are key elements to engage with a process of play as also-learning and to experience it as a process of growth and emancipation. It was difficult to answer these questions with grounded arguments after such a short time span. Still, our reflections did inform us on what preconditions were missing or when we were not able to fulfill the purpose of the project. Those findings are the first steps in order to understand what is needed from us as educators and the children to bring a pedagogy of play as also-learning into practice by focusing on the pedagogical approach. In the next chapter, the findings so far and the continued process will be used to answer the question: What is needed from educators and children to facilitate a learning- process and environment that contributes to the growth and emancipation of children through 'play as also-learning'?

## 4 PLAY TO GROW AND EMANCIPATE

In the first two chapters, I mentioned key elements and preconditions that are necessary to provide a learning environment in which play as also-learning could be practiced. These elements include the safe learning environment, co-creation and the experience of agency, freedom, and autonomy, and the development of artistic behavior to emancipate. In this chapter, I will take another close look at these elements, to evaluate how they appeared in the experimental project and to what extent they contributed to the practice of play as also-learning. This shapes the framework to find an answer to the question: What is needed from educators and children to facilitate a learning- process and environment that contributes to the growth and emancipation of children through 'play as also-learning'? I defined growth as the ongoing process in which children learn about themselves, others, and the world through various experiences in which they acquire knowledge and skills (Hooks, 2008 ; Mayo, 2015). In order to speak of emancipation, the children need to be able to apply autonomously in their life what is learned in other situations.

### Safe environment, autonomy and self-regulation

Rosanne and I were lucky to start the project in a group that had already created a safe group climate with their teacher. In general, the children respected each other, and most times conflicts were easily solved. Still, even in this safe environment the processes of play could cause friction on an individual level, for the children or ourselves, and on a group level. This had an impact on the flow and dynamics of the day. After each day Rosanne and I evaluated what was needed from us as educators to provide a safe environment to make the processes flourish. Along with the project, we got a better understanding of what was needed from us in our position. Moreover, we experienced how the children got better at dealing with the program and finding their position in relation to this kind of education.

As described in the previous chapter, Rosanne and I concluded that it was important to create a **balance** in how much we asked from the children's **autonomy and self-expression**. Otherwise, we would ask too much of their self-regulation. This was tangible in the feedback we received from the teacher about Klaas who was quite nervous during the first Thursdays, she explained "Hij is er eentje van doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg". Because the Thursdays had quite an impact on the children's energy and their behavior, "Op donderdag mogen we druk doen, dus dan vergeten we dat we de rest van de week weer rustig moeten zijn", Klaas was challenged in **self-regulation**. Though after the first period we observed how Klaas got more comfortable every day and was able to express his own thoughts and ideas. The zappy behavior of his classmates didn't hold him back anymore. There were more children who struggled with self-regulation. Charlie needed a lot of extra attention and for him cooperating with his classmates wasn't self-evident. Though with extra guidance and receptivity from us, he was eventually able to flourish during some of the exercises. Especially the theme 'space' made him happy and it invited him to share his knowledge with the rest of the group.

As educators, we needed to be extra alert on the signals of well-being during these processes, because we asked a lot from the children's **Social-Emotional Learning**. Although this is not new to us, Rosanne and I experienced it was difficult on a different level, because we designed the days with a lot of **collective teaching**. When we asked the children for written feedback in their Kunstlab logbooks some of them wrote "Ik vind het niet zo leuk dat ik nooit aan de beurt kom". We realized that the learning environment shaped by group processes also had the effect that some children disappeared to the background. As music and theatre teachers we are so used to work with collective teaching that we created the outline of the days from this experience. But we concluded that in order for the children to experience collective meaning-making, it was important to create space for them to join the **process in smaller groups** to avoid exclusion.

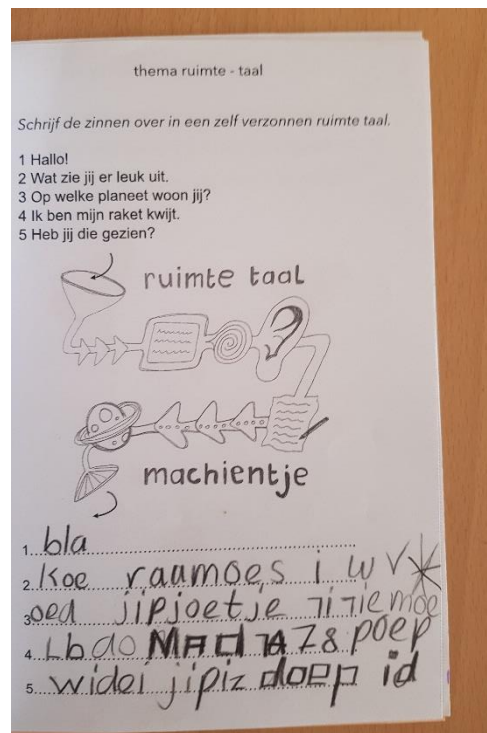
This worked well during the explorative conversation based on **dialogic communication** with half of the group and brainstorm exercises in which the children explored a topic or question independently in small groups. During these processes, Rosanne and I had the role of **facilitator** and helped the children creating the right conditions to be able to cooperate by creating the space for children to hear each other and to **negotiate**. After a few days Rosanne and I managed to create a better balance between the collective teaching, the exercises joined in smaller groups and the individual processes. The children enjoyed working on their 'own' **Kunstlab logbooks** a lot since the assignments were very clear and manageable and they experienced a lot of freedom and autonomy when making them. They didn't need an extensive instruction but could start the process independently. The assignments lied in their 'zone of proximal development' (Blijswijk, 2018) and when they needed help the children asked their classmates or us to give a hand.



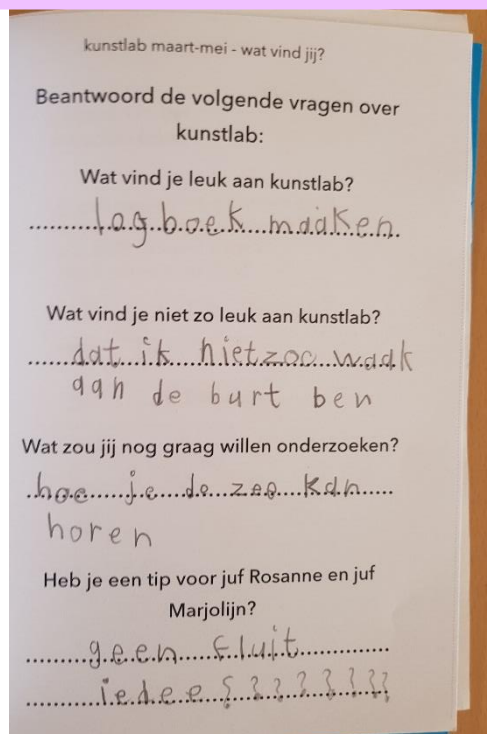
Children brainstorming in small groups.



Mali working on her logbook.



### Children's Kunstlab logbooks



Still, these individual processes were not always a success. On the eighth day we started with the theme 'the human body' and explored concepts like the skeleton, the muscular system, joints and tendons, during discussions and music and theatre exercises. The children were very engaged and enthusiastically shared their own knowledge and ideas about the subjects. But when we started the process of making 'a skeleton hand' this energy changed. It was my intention to provide a process in which the children would use their own knowledge about the subjects, their skills in math's and their understanding of physics, by simple steps in a making exercise. But when the children had to work **independently** some steps in the process were too difficult for them to deal with. It was not possible for the children to make knots, to lace and to attach the small parts by themselves, simply because they had not trained these skills before. This assignment was way out of their 'zone of proximal development' (Blijswijk, 2018) and caused a lot of friction and frustration. This didn't make the process worthless, but the children were challenged a bit too much in their **self-regulation**. Therefore, as educators we need to implement exercises that offer tools to deal with the creative processes, so the children are able to develop the necessary skills and they are able to develop their self-confidence and feeling of being competent.

### Co-creation and the experience of agency

Carla Rinaldi, a formal pedagogue in the Reggio Emilia pre-school system, explains how theories in psychology and sociology tend to describe "the identification of the child as a weak subject, a person with needs rather than rights." She states we need to "rethink our image of the child (as) a child who possesses his or her own directions and the desire for knowledge and for life. A competent child!" (Rinaldi, 2013, pp. 15-16) During our experiment, it was our aim to approach the children as **researchers and co-creators**, but to what extent were they indeed able to take this position? The exercise described in the previous paragraph shows that not every situation contributes to the children's experience of being competent.

It was our intention to take the input of the children as the starting point for the design of the days. In practice this was difficult. Mainly because the program was quite packed and there wasn't enough time to discuss with the children what they wanted to research next and how. On the third day, we implemented a brainstorm to collect ideas for a new theme and questions, the questions the children suggested were too specific to work with all at once but we realized after the eight-day that we used most of them as inspiration for the exercises spread throughout the project.



Documentation by the children during a brainstorm about the specific question: Where does ink come from?

Discussing the **rules and conditions** that were necessary to engage with the exercises was also key to create a **safe environment**. To call upon the children their agency and autonomy, we tried to include their voices as equal in these discussions. Sometimes we asked for their opinion ‘What do you think we need?’ or we set an extreme example of conflicts by improvising a scene and asked them to help us to solve the situation. Still we also made use of the structures and rules the children knew from the general days, simply because it was too time-consuming to question every rule and condition that was at stake. When you want to include the children’s voices and perspectives it could be helpful to instruct the children by questioning them about what strategies and conditions are needed. Therefore, it is important to invest time in this part of the process and plan, for example, 15 minutes extra for each activity by approaching the **instruction as part of the process** of play as also-learning.

We did not measure exactly to what extend the children experienced agency during the project. But because of our observations and conversation with the children, we were able to recognize how they got more comfortable with the program since they presented themselves more **self-confident and competent** to us throughout the project. The children’s reactions to our instructions are examples which show indeed that they experienced agency: “Geef de stift maar aan mij, ik teken het wel even op het bord” (Mir) and “ik vind dit leuker dan veilig leren lezen, want hier mag je zelf bepalen hoe je het doet” (Klaas). They also showed a sense of autonomy during the exercises which I associate with freedom to play and artistic behavior.

### Artistic behavior and emancipation

During the free playtime, I asked a small group of children if they experienced what we did on Thursdays more like playing or more like learning, the conversation was similar to the one I had with Rayaan.

Transcription conversation [Link to audio recording.](#)

Marjolijn:	Vinden jullie wat we doen op donderdag meer spelen of leren?
Allemaal:	Spelen!
Marjolijn:	En waarom vinden jullie dan dat het meer als spelen is?
Beyza:	Omdat we gaan knutselen, buitenspelen...!
Boaz:	Drama, uh... geen idee.
Anoek:	Muziek, van alles en nog wat!
Marjolijn:	Van alles en nog wat... Wat vinden jullie dan eigenlijk echt leren?
Boaz:	Uh, ja weet je wat ik echt leren vind...
Beyza:	Echt schrijven, rekenen!
Boaz:	Ja, lezen.
anderen:	Ja.
Marjolijn:	Oké, en leren we dan helemaal niks op donderdag.
Boaz:	Duo-lezen alleen.
Liva:	Muziek en Drama en ook die boekjes maken.
Liam:	We hebben over de ruimte geleerd, hoe het eruit ziet.
Anoek:	We leren gewoon veel leuker, op een veel leukere manier.
Liva:	En we hebben ook over de natuur geleerd!

The children experienced the Thursdays indeed more like playing, and Rosanne and I concluded that this had to do with the activities and exercises that had a playful character and that invited the children to engage from intrinsic motivation, but also offers the space to play around with what is asked from them. After a few days, some children started to take in this space more easily by **adjusting the exercises to their own interests and challenges**. For example, during the exercise in which they had to translate Dutch sentences to their own invented space-language: “Mag ik ook mijn eigen letters en tekens maken?” (Mir). Rosanne explained: “Sometimes it’s not so bad to be ignorant of which way to go. Just presenting the materials and the basic idea can be enough to give the children room to follow their own directions.” According to Bell Hooks (2008), professor, social activist, and author of many essays about education, providing this space for students is exactly what contributes to meaningful education.

“As educators, one of the best things that we can do for our students is to not force them into holding theories and solid concepts but rather to actually encourage the process, the inquiry involved, and the times of not knowing—with all of the uncertainties that go along with that. This is really what supports going deep. This is openness” (Hooks, 2008, p. 44).

The **openness that supports going deep** (Hooks, 2008) is what we experienced when we explored the work of artist Theo Jansen (2020), *Strandbeesten*, in relation to archeological finds. The children were able to connect art with science by expressing their own knowledge and imaginative ideas. They started talking about Pompei and the eruption of the Vesuvius volcano. The children showed each other pictures of preserved fossils and tried to explain to each other how the fossils remained in such good condition. We had not foreseen which direction the process and conversation would go. [Link to audio recording.](#)

Still some children took this (open) space to choose to not engage at all and they expressed this in quite recalcitrant behavior which sometimes had a negative impact on the engagement of others in the group. Sezer told us, for example, that he wanted to be at home gaming, rather than being here, since this was not really like school. **The playful character of the day** did not appeal to him like his videogames, it confused him since he felt he wasn’t learning anything. In response to his experience, we figured it is important not only to engage the children in the process of play as also-learning by means of the content but also in the shape of guiding them through the process and telling them why we offer this as an education.

Paulo Freire, who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy, wrote about the importance of a critical approach in education. He states that “Only an education facilitating the passage from naïve to critical transitivity, increasing men’s ability to perceive the challenges of their time, could prepare the people to resist the emotional power of transition” (Freire, 2013, p. 29). But he also argues that educators “must do everything to ensure an atmosphere in the classroom where teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts, but also ones that generate happiness” (Freire cited by Hooks 2008 p.43).

Happiness or joy is one of the elements that drives intrinsic motivation and is inevitably connected to play (Martens, 2019). One of the **traps** of working from a pedagogy of play is that educators and children approach the learning processes **only from a position of joy**, which could be seen as a more **naïve position**. We concluded it could be helpful to be more **transparent** about why we choose certain methods and exercises for the children, to evaluate with them what competencies they think they acquired during a particular process and to show that this process is not just situated play but is also a process of learning and growth.

This is equally important concerning the intention of the pedagogy of play is the emancipation to enable children to implement in other situations in life what is learned, and on a smaller scale to children's development in the general curriculum.

The Thursdays invited the children to call upon **other competencies** than they were used to in the general curriculum. They were asked to think critically, to question the rules that were at stake, and to approach the subject with artistic behavior. At this point it would be too early to conclude that a pedagogy of play as also-learning does contribute to **children's emancipation**. We can only see the potential impact of such a program on how the children grow and emancipate by how they developed artistic behavior. Therefore further research should be done to observe and understand what the long-term effects and transformation could be in relation to their general education.

The content of the program overlapped with some of the subjects the children worked on in their general curriculum, for example 'the human body' which was part of the group teacher's reading lessons. Still, with this project, we didn't collaborate with the group teacher to create **a cohesive connection** between our program and the general curriculum. Since the school board is enthusiastic about the program, and wants to explore the possibilities of implementation of interdisciplinary art education, it would be interesting to research what connection between the curriculums could be made.



Children brainstorming about a specific part of the human body in a small group.

## Findings and advice

The project gave us the opportunity to research our position while building on a **more sustainable relationship** with the children and implementation of art education, shaped by a pedagogy of play. After the first nine days, we reflected on the first understandings of what is needed from educators and children to facilitate a learning- process, and environment that contributes to children's growth and emancipation through play as also-learning. Below you find the **basic principles**, as shaped by the experiences during the nine days of this research, and the intentions we have for the continuation of the research and the project.

### Co-construction of the learning environment

Educators need to provide a safe environment in which children feel seen and heard and experience the space and freedom to express themselves. They do this by shaping **clear structures** during the day, while taking the children's suggestions and perspective into consideration. Rules and conditions are discussed in order to create an environment in which everybody has agency. Still, some structures of general classroom management can be implemented, as long as the educators are transparent about the choices they make about setting these rules and conditions, so the children experience the agency to question and alter those if necessary. Educators should approach the children as **competent** and take the children's directions and desires for learning seriously. This is further promoted by using a variation of collective teaching and smaller group processes in which the children are able to work **independently and self-driven**.

### Balanced autonomy

During the open-ended processes of play as also-learning, children are called upon their **self-expression and autonomy**. Dealing with the friction that could emerge during these processes, asks a lot from their Social-Emotional Learning and **self-regulation**. To make sure they don't cross boundaries and exceed their energy level, educators should **balance the open-ended processes** with clearer and goal-oriented exercises. When a balance is created there is enough space for the children to develop their self-regulation and the competencies that are necessary to join the processes of play as also-learning. Day by day the transformation can be made to a more process-focused and play-oriented experience of education.

### Manifesting play as also-learning

Joy is of course one of the key elements that invite children to play and also-learn. It is the booster for intrinsic motivation (Martens, 2019) and helps children to engage with the activity, the process, and each other. But **if joy is the only goal, one could lose the potential** of play as also-learning to contribute to emancipation. To prevent this one sided approach, educators should guide the children in evaluating these processes and experiences to give the children tools to apply what they have learned in other situations in life or, on a smaller scale, in the general curriculum. Then the process of play as also-learning becomes a process in which the children develop artistic behavior and are invited to position themselves in relation to others and the world around them.

## 5 NOT (JUST) FOR FUN

Education should take play seriously.

If education is practiced to prepare children for life as adults in a socially sustainable society, educators should take play seriously.

In our society, we tend to build walls between play and serious acts like learning and working. These serious acts have the pretentious quality of being vital for life to survive (Van Dolron, 2020).

This division makes no sense.

Play is a serious act. Play is vital for life.

It offers human beings the ultimate learning experience (Martens, 2019)

in which they can explore, grow and emancipate themselves.

Play is also learning. It is a serious act that asks for a playful mind.

We need this playful mind in education to transform our practice.

If we acknowledge that play is what children naturally start doing when given the space and safety, to explore, learn and grow, why isn't it used as the pedagogy behind general education?

How is it possible that education is predominantly shaped by result-focused processes and measurements? Processes that do not appeal to a child's intrinsic way of learning.

If we approach children as competent and already part of our society (Rinaldi, 2013) we need to take their intrinsic way of learning seriously.

Education needs to create space for play as also learning.

Not because play is the only way to learn.

But because play provides the open-ended processes in which imagination can flourish.

Imagination offers the possibility to adjust representation, it offers the chance to question the rules at stake and it offers the space to take in other perspectives.

Open-ended processes shaped by play and imagination invite children to express themselves and to explore their position in relation to others and their world.

Educators need to reclaim the playfield.

We need to open the dialogue to indeed critically reflect on the current educational system.

To ask ourselves the question of what meaningful education is really about.

To claim the space to explore how this meaningful education can be practiced.

To create a playfield and use our imagination to think beyond the set-up structures.

To play together as a team by building further from each other's expertise.

If you are in the position to create or claim space for this playfield, I advise you to do so.  
Directors, invite art educators to explore possible cross-overs  
between the arts and general curriculum.  
Teachers, experiment with how you could enrich the curriculum by play as also-learning.  
Art educators, collaborate to approach general education from an artistic perspective.  
Claim the playfield of your practice by working as a team.

If we are able to move beyond the limits of separated education  
and to start thinking not from measurements or results  
but from the approach of children's learning in which they are so competent already,  
I foresee that education becomes indeed an ultimate learning experience.  
In which children experience the space to explore, grow and emancipate.  
In which they learn through cognitive as well as embodied and social-emotional experiences.  
In which play is acknowledged as also learning.

This research is about experiments to bring pedagogical ideals into practice.  
What I did here was testing and exploring what imaginative play could mean for education.  
In the context of a transformed arts curriculum situated in a crisis.  
I took the space to redesign an arts program with a pedagogy of play.  
I did not focus on how a regular curriculum could be transformed through a pedagogy of  
play. This research doesn't include intensive collaborations with group teachers.  
It doesn't focus on what this pedagogy could mean for their position in general education.  
This research doesn't conclude with methods that can be easily copy-pasted in any practice.  
The findings of the experiments are directions and landmarks to explore your own playfield.  
This document is an invitation to start an action research yourself.  
In a way that challenges you to approach education with a playful mind.  
To play and also-learn.

## Conclusion

This research shows how **divergent thinking** offered a solution that was initially just meant to be temporary, but proved to have the potential to make a **sustainable transformation** in the approach of education. This process of transformation had roots in years before at primary school Park16hoven, and there were already plans to redesign the curriculum with a more interdisciplinary approach. Though the school board experienced that it took a lot of time and effort to understand the (logistic) complexities of such a transformation, the crisis opened up space to think **beyond the complexities** and to go for experimental solutions. It created a playfield in which it was possible to approach **education with a playful mind**. The conditions of the situation, there were no expectations on measured results in the children's development, offered a different perspective on what education could alternatively look like. The experiment made ideas for a possible transformation to education, shaped by interdisciplinary open-ended processes, tangible. It became easier to visualize what future education could look like and we as art educators were able to explore the possibilities of our practice and our position to contribute to this transformation. Now it's up to us and the team to continue the process in this playfield and to start to take this approach seriously. Future education needs it.

Emiel Heijnen and Melissa Bremmer (2019) state it in the following explanation: “Society is becoming so complex, that there is a growing societal need for professionals who can solve ‘wicked’ problems, who look beyond the limits of their discipline and exceed in interdisciplinary skills like creativity, critical thinking and cooperation” (p. 7). They envision how **art science practices** could boost curriculum innovation from the content and the transformations in the practice of the different subjects. With this research, I add the **pedagogical approach of play and artistic practices** as a booster to bring this innovation in motion. For why do we shape education from separated subjects and closed processes when children show us, from the moment they are born, that they are able to direct their own learning, driven by intrinsic motivation and play in processes that aren’t exclusively focusing on one element of their development to prepare them for life? (Ploeger, 2018 ; Rinaldi, 2013).

If this approach scares you because it might be too complex, too idealistic, or not realistic, or because it seems to neglect important subjects like learning how to spell and speak, how to do maths or how to understand physics and nature, I invite you to think again of children **playing freely outside** and to consider the play that happened there as a process of also-learning, that moves beyond the limits of separated knowledge and skills. Why do we not **implement embodied experiences** and Social-Emotional Learning in cognitive processes when children are naturally used to combine all these different approaches to gain knowledge and challenge their competencies whilst playing freely? Why do we not build on their brilliant ‘learning through playing’?

It is not possible to copy-paste the free play processes that happen outdoors into the classroom situation, simply because the classroom situation is a different environment, with different conditions and a different framework. But this research is an attempt to work around **the limitations of the classroom situation**, and the current education system that differs so much from the environment in which children naturally play. By claiming the space that emerged out of crisis this research became **a pragmatic contribution** to an idealistic and innovative approach to education. It explores how a pedagogy of play could build on a child’s natural way of learning by emphasizing the role and position of (art)educators in such processes. Free play happens under the not too present, yet guiding view of educators, where the learning environment in the classroom situation is constructed by the present role and position of the educator. The role and position of the educator are significant in order to make play work as a pedagogy. We need to invest in creating a safe learning environment with the children. An environment in which children are able to regulate themselves, deal with risks, and develop their self-confidence. An environment in which we offer children time and space to develop artistic behavior and where we take their comments into consideration by emphasizing that play is not the only way of learning, but that it is indeed also-learning.

Creating such a learning environment and **interdisciplinary program** isn’t self-evident and this research doesn’t offer a method that can simply be implemented in any circumstances. Using play as pedagogy in general education is complex and causes friction because it is situated in a system and society that predominantly separates play from serious acts like learning and working (Martens, 2019 ; Van Dolron 2020). This research doesn’t offer a toolkit to deal with those frictions, still the findings in this document offer **directions and landmarks** to start exploring how to do this yourself. It shows that education needs to take play seriously and it’s an invitation to start transforming your own practice with an open, brave, and playful mind. To start **playing as an ultimate learning experience** in the company of the experts on this matter, children.

## Statements to take play as a pedagogy seriously

1. Play is the natural way of learning for human beings, it is the reason that homo sapiens were able to evolve. It is what children start doing when given the space, safety, and freedom.
2. Play as also-learning does not neglect the role of the educator and the importance of the school as a learning environment. On the contrary, it asks for guidance, care, and attention, qualities that belong to educators.
3. Play as an open-ended process gives space to imagination and takes the perception of children seriously. Imagination offers the possibility to adjust representation, it is a process of growth as well as innovation.
4. Play as also-learning connects different learning processes with each other: the cognitive, the embodied as well as Social-Emotional Learning. Therefore, the achieved knowledge and competencies are useful in different circumstances. Exactly how we learn throughout life.
5. Play offers a pedagogy that approaches children as competent and already part of society. It offers space for children to act freely and autonomously without neglecting others and their needs. In play children develop who they are and explore their potential.
6. Play is not (just) for fun. It's vital for life.  
We need to take the experts, children, seriously to be able to survive.

# Bibliography

- Abott, L. & Taylor, L. (2020) The Inside/Outside fiction. Podcast available from: <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/podcast/the-inside-outside-fiction/>
- Aitken, V. (2013) Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach to teaching and learning: A brief introduction. In: Whyte, B. Aitken, V. & Fraser, D. *Connecting Curriculum, Linking Learning*. New Zealand, NZCER Press, pp. 34-56. Available from: [\(PDF\) Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach to teaching and learning: A brief introduction. \(researchgate.net\)](#)
- Alÿs, F. (1999-2017) Children's Games <http://francisalys.com/category/childrens-games/>
- Alÿs F. (2011) *Children's Game 10 / Papalote, Balkh, Afghanistan 2011*. Available from: <http://francisalys.com/childrens-game-10-papalote/>
- Alÿs F. (2011) *Children's Game 11 / Wolf and Lamb, Yamgun Afghanistan 2011*. Available from: <http://francisalys.com/childrens-game-11-wolf-and-lamb/>
- Anderson, R. C. (2018) *Creative Engagement: Embodied Metaphor, the Affective Brain, and Meaningful Learning*. International Mind, Brain, and Education Society and Wiley Periodicals. 12 (2), 72-81.
- Apostel, S. Zaharescu, L. Alexe, I. (2013) *Gamification of learning and educational games*. In: *The 9th International Scientific Conference eLearning and software for Education. April 25-26 2013, Bucharest*, pp. 67-72. Available from: <https://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=582395d5-481e-4244-a356-1adf3f0821be%40pdv-sessmgr02>
- Bekker, R. (2016) Homo Ludens, haalt van alles omhoog. *Magazin van Hetkind, SPeEL-ruimte*. 5, 24-26.
- Biesta, G. (2005) Against learning. Reclaiming a language for education in an age of learning. *Nordisk Pedagogik*. 24, 70-82. Available from: <https://orbi.lu.uni.lu/bitstream/10993/7178/1/NP-1-2005-Biesta.pdf>
- Biesta, G. (2009) On the weakness of education. *Philosophy of education*, University of Stirling. P. 354-362 Available from: <https://orbi.lu.uni.lu/bitstream/10993/7817/1/112%20PUB%20PES%202010%20Weakness.pdf>
- Biesta, G. (2012) *Goed onderwijs en de cultuur van het meten – Ethiek, politiek en democratie*. Den Haag, Boom Lemma Uitgevers. Available from: [https://www.bua.nl/media/6/9789059318137\\_inkijkexemplaar.pdf](https://www.bua.nl/media/6/9789059318137_inkijkexemplaar.pdf)
- Bijman, J. (2018) 'Juf ik wil terug naar groep 1-2, daar konden we nog spelen'. Available from: <http://www.skowf.nl/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Minor-4-spelend-leren-Joyce-Bijman.pdf>
- Blijswijk, R. (2018) *Lev Vygotsky en de zone van naaste ontwikkeling: 'Door samen te werken en in gesprek te zijn, zijn mensen in staat tot dingen te komen die nieuw zijn'*. Platform Hetkind, Nivoz. Available from: <https://nivoz.nl/nl/lev-vygotsky-en-de-zone-van-naaste-ontwikkeling-door-samen-te-werken-en-in-gesprek-te-zijn-zijn-mensen-in-staat-tot-dingen-te-komen-die-nieuw-zijn>
- Bremer, M. (2021) *Waardeer wat jongeren wél leerden in de online-only tijd*. NRC. Available from: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/02/05/waardeer-wat-jongeren-wel-leerden-in-de-online-only-tijd-a4030715>
- Coates, J, K. Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2019) Learning while playing: Children's Forest School Experiences in the UK. *British educational Research Journal*. 45 (1), 21-40. Available from: <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3491>
- Deursen, E. Vogelzang, M. (2020) *De staat van het onderwijs*. Inspectie van het Onderwijs, Nederland. Available from: <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/onderwerpen/staat-van-het-onderwijs/archief>
- Edmiston, B. (2017) *The 'Mantle of the Expert' approach to education*. USA, Ohio state University. Available from: <https://sites.ehe.osu.edu/bedmiston/files/2011/11/The-MoE-Approach-to-Education.pdf>
- Freire, P. (2013) *Education for critical consciousness*. Londen, New York, Bloomsbury Academic.

Gielen, P. (2015) Lessons in disproportion, the role of play in arts education and the role of art in education. In: Van Heusden, B. & Gielen, P. (eds) *Arts education beyond art, teaching art in times of change*. Amsterdam, Valiz, pp. 133-152.

Groot, R. (2012) De homo sapiens als homo ludens. In: Bakel, H. Groot, R. & Van der ploeg (eds.) *Van klein tot groot, de ontwikkeling van het jonge kind*. Antwerpen – Apeldoorn, Garant, pp. 81-99. Available from: [https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=yyUc2R4mJ-gC&oi=fnd&pg=PA69&dq=van+klein+tot+groot&ots=VvUiv95riX&sig=3GA4\\_y18W4jwVKJ6IWlufcn-vnE#v=onepage&q=van%20klein%20tot%20groot&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=yyUc2R4mJ-gC&oi=fnd&pg=PA69&dq=van+klein+tot+groot&ots=VvUiv95riX&sig=3GA4_y18W4jwVKJ6IWlufcn-vnE#v=onepage&q=van%20klein%20tot%20groot&f=false)

Gunst, M (2019) Research document. Rotterdam, Piet Zwart Institute.

Heathcote, D. (n.d.) *Creativity paper, The Mantel of the Expert*. London, Borough of Redbridge. Available from: <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DH-creativity-Paper-compl..pdf>

Heijnen, E. Bremmer, M. (2019) ArtsSciences als aanjager van curriculum vernieuwing. *Cultuur+Educatie*. 18 (51), 6-16. Available from: [https://www.ahk.nl/media/ahk/docs/lectoraat/CE51\\_ArtsSciences\\_als\\_aanjager\\_van\\_curriculumvernieuwing.pdf](https://www.ahk.nl/media/ahk/docs/lectoraat/CE51_ArtsSciences_als_aanjager_van_curriculumvernieuwing.pdf)

Hooks, B. (2008) *Teaching Community*. New York, Routledge.

Huizinga, J. (2008) *Homo Ludens, Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*. Amsterdam, Erven J. Huizinga c/o Amsterdam University Press. Available from: <https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=L9B6ewwgjXsC&oi=fnd&pg=PA26&dq=homo+ludens+johan+huizinga&ots=KlPynLbZm6&sig=EnrDVZtn4w8GzFynCPkbaHhHawli#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Jansen, T. (2020) *Strandbeest*. Available from: <https://www.strandbeest.com/>

Kapp, K.M. (2012) *The gamification of learning and instruction : game-based methods and strategies for training and education*. San Francisco, Pfeiffer. Available from: <https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=M2Rb9ZtFxccC&oi=fnd&pg=PR12&dq=kapp+gamification&ots=JyJd247F4J&sig=sIVPsaG7IOhFL5ZX9p7icv9h4#v=onepage&q=kapp%20gamification&f=false>

Kraftl, P. (2015) *Geographies of alternative education, diverse learning spaces for children and young people*. Great Britain, University of Bristol, Policy Press.

Lutke, S. & Potters, O. (2018) *Leren van Kunst, ruimte voor en door creativiteit*. Bussum, Uitgeverij Coutinho.

Martens, R. (2019) *We moeten spelen, wat onderwijs aan een verkenning van onze natuur heeft*. Driebergen, Nivoz.

Malaguzzi, L. (1993) *Your image of the child: Where teaching begins. Translated comments from a seminar in Italy*. Available from: <http://feelgood-designs.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/malaguzzi-ccie-1994.pdf>

Mayo, A. (2015) *Lectorale rede, autonomie en verbondenheid, waarde(n)vol onderwijs voor nu en voor de toekomst*. Hogeschool Leiden. Available from: <https://www.hsleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/hsl/lectoraten/waarden-van-vrijeschoolonderwijs/publicaties/autonomie-in-verbondenheid---lectorale-rede-azizia-mayo-waarden-van-vrijeschool-onderwijs.pdf>

OCO (2014, September 8th) Welke concepten voor vernieuwend onderwijs zijn er? <https://www.onderwijsconsument.nl/welke-concepten-voor-vernieuwend-onderwijs-zijn-er/>

Ploeger, A. (2018) *De evolutie van een kind, hoe elke ontwikkelingsfase een functie heeft*. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Nieuwezijds.

Post, L. Kester, L. Admiraal, W. Lockhorst, D. Bulder, E. (2020) *Overzichtsstudie Gamification in Digitale Oefenprogramma's, Eindrapportage*. Nationaal Regie orgaan onderwijsonderzoek. Universiteit Utrecht, ICLON, Universiteit Leiden, Oberon Onderzoek en Advies. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wilfried\\_Admiraal/publication/338570607\\_Gamification\\_in\\_Digitale\\_Oefenprogramma's\\_Overzichtstudie\\_Eindrapportage/links/5e1d5aa44585159aa4ce8d10/Gamification-in-Digitale-Oefenprogrammas-Overzichtstudie-Eindrapportage.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wilfried_Admiraal/publication/338570607_Gamification_in_Digitale_Oefenprogramma's_Overzichtstudie_Eindrapportage/links/5e1d5aa44585159aa4ce8d10/Gamification-in-Digitale-Oefenprogrammas-Overzichtstudie-Eindrapportage.pdf)

- Rinaldi, C. (2013) *Re-imagining childhood, the inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia*. Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012–2013. Government of South Australia. Available from: <https://cpb-ap-southeast-2-juc1ugur1qwqqo4.stackpathdns.com/blogs.holyfamily.catholic.edu.au/dist/d/449/files/2018/01/carlarinaldi-adelaide-thinker-in-residence-1hyo9b3.pdf>
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000) Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychologist*. 55 (1), 68-78. Available from: [https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000\\_RyanDeci\\_SDT.pdf](https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf)
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2009) *Conceptualizing progression in the pedagogy of play and sustained shared thinking in early childhood education: a Vygotskian perspective*. University of Wollongong. Available from: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2223&context=sspapers>
- Solly, K. (2015) *Risk, Challenge and Adventures in the Early years, a practical guide to exploring and extending learning outdoors*. New York, Routledge. Available from: [https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=nUi2BQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=risk+challenge+and+safety+play+quality&ots=FxUXcTYd3l&sig=HqWgx4I9JE1nONhjQz\\_D4U7scDg&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=risk%20challenge%20and%20safety%20play%20quality&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=nUi2BQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=risk+challenge+and+safety+play+quality&ots=FxUXcTYd3l&sig=HqWgx4I9JE1nONhjQz_D4U7scDg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=risk%20challenge%20and%20safety%20play%20quality&f=false)
- Sandseter, E. B. H. (2010) *Scaryfunny, A Qualitative Study of Risky Play Among Preschool Children*. Trondheim, NTNU. Available from: [https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmloi/bitstream/handle/11250/270413/322544\\_FULLTEXT02.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmloi/bitstream/handle/11250/270413/322544_FULLTEXT02.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Van der Veen, Ch. (2016) *Dialogische gesprekken met jonge kinderen, Interview met Courtney Cazden en Sarah Michaels*. HJK. November 2016, 23-25. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309121853\\_Dialogische\\_gesprekken\\_met\\_jonge\\_kinderen\\_Interview\\_met\\_Courtney\\_Cazden\\_en\\_Sarah\\_Michaels](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309121853_Dialogische_gesprekken_met_jonge_kinderen_Interview_met_Courtney_Cazden_en_Sarah_Michaels)
- Van der Zouwen, T. (2018) *Actieonderzoek doen, een routewijzer voor studenten en professionals*. Amsterdam, Boom uitgevers. Available from: [https://www.boomhogeronderwijs.nl/media/18/tonnie\\_van\\_der\\_zouwen\\_-\\_actieonderzoek\\_doen\\_9789024415533.pdf](https://www.boomhogeronderwijs.nl/media/18/tonnie_van_der_zouwen_-_actieonderzoek_doen_9789024415533.pdf)
- Van Dolron, L. (2020) *Over kunst en spel*. deBuren, Brussel. Podcast + text Available from: <https://deburen.eu/magazine/2884/herbeleef-laura-van-dolron-over-kunst-en-spel>
- Van 't Hoogt, V. Buurke, I. (2020) Curious Hands: maken en leren maken. *Cultuur+Educatie*. 19 (54), 46-63. Available from: [https://research.hanze.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/34785369/cultuur\\_plus\\_educatie\\_54.pdf](https://research.hanze.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/34785369/cultuur_plus_educatie_54.pdf)
- Van Overveld, K. (2019) Sociaal-emotioneel leren op school, leer leerlingen levensvaardigheden. *Whole Child 2019. studiedag Kansrijk Onderwijs*. 12-15. Available from: <https://www.keesvanoverveld.nl/files/leer-leerlingen-levensvaardigheden.pdf>
- Walsh, G. Mcmillan, D. McGuinness, C. (eds) (2017) *Playful learning and teaching*. London, SAGE. Available from: <https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=m703DgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=playful+learning+at+primary+schools&ots=c6r-fUq7q6&sig=ROCbnUNkznsnVaQSLVDG2RXIzOo#v=onepage&q=playful%20learning%20at%20primary%20schools&f=false>
- Zegers, M. (2008) *Theatermaken, pragmatische theorieën*. Amsterdam, International theatre and film books.

# Appendix

This appendix contains the outline of the first nine days of the project with links to audio recordings of specific exercises and moments during the days. An overview of the audio files can be found [here](#). The conversations Rosanne and I had to evaluate each day are also recorded and can be found [here](#).

## First Thursday 25-03-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Transforming the classroom metaphorical into our Kunstlab. Introducing the question 'How do we, animals and nature around us know spring has arrived?'
9:15-10:00	Drawing exercise. What makes you think of spring? The children draw their ideas. The drawings are the input for the conversation held afterward.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading 'Vier seizoenen uit een dag'
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-12:00	Working with music. Creating an orchestra of spring. Inspired by Vivaldi and Stravinsky. In groups, the children create a sound using their body as an instrument. Composing all the sounds while researching the role of a conductor.
12:00-12:15	Reading independently.
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-13:15	Exploring seeds (through theatre). Showing a small bottle with seeds, what do you think is in there? How does a seed grow? Finding answers by transforming ourselves into small seeds. Showing the process of a growing plant by physical movement in a duo.
13:15-13:45	Seeding plants. How can we find out what grows out of the seeds? Can we use recycled materials to create a mini garden in the classroom? Together we decide on methods and strategies to start gardening. We make use of cardboard, toilet roll, glass jars, and juice cartons.
13:45-14:00	Cleaning the classroom. Shelter the seeds.
14:00-14:15	Closure. Group conversation: How did the children experience the first day?
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week.

### Program second Thursday 01-04-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday. Introducing what we are going to do and research today.
9:15-10:00	Collective research on how plants grow. Interactive and sensorial exploration of concepts like photosynthesis. Through collective conversation and examination. <a href="#">Audio recording - Conversation about how plants grow</a> Through music and embodied exercises, rehearsing a song about photosynthesis.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside. (On this day the children discovered the bricks) Inviting the children to collect natural material. <a href="#">Audio recording - Playing outside with bricks</a>
11:15-12:00	Working with theatre. What would it be like to observe nature from close by? As close as an insect. Telling and playing the story of 'Erik of het insectenboek'. Playing the narrative by constructing an imaginative reality.
12:00-12:15	Reading independently.
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-14:00	Instruction of the process to create a 'tiny insect world' in a duo. Presenting the material. Invitation to use their collected natural material. Discussing strategies to be able to cooperate in their duo.
13:00-13:45	Working in a duo on their insect worlds.
13:45-14:00	Cleaning up the classroom. Tasks in small groups: creating a garland of their spring drawings. reading in small groups about Vivaldi. evaluating the day while creating the poster. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation with a small group of children</a>
14:00-14:15	Closure. Group conversation: How did the children experience today?
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation day 2</a>

### Program third Thursday 08-04-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday. Introducing what we are going to do and research today. Using the method of 'The mantle of the expert' to invite the children to position themselves as researchers.
9:15-10:00	Brainstorm and creative exercise in small groups. Finding and creating answers to questions that relate to nature and spring. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- How do plants get nutrition?</li><li>- Why are bees important for flowers?</li><li>- Why are trees and plants important for humans?</li><li>- How do we know spring arrived?</li></ul> Presenting these answers in a theatrical act. <i>(The last part didn't work out because of lack of time and difficult instruction).</i>
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside. <i>(The children started collecting material by themselves).</i>
11:15-12:00	Working with music. Rehearsing the song about photosynthesis. Using various simple instruments and cooperate as an orchestra.
12:00-12:15	Reading independently.
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-13:00	Instruction of the process to create an insect with different materials. Exercise and instruction are given by Gül, a teaching assistant in training. With coaching from us.
13:00-13:45	Working in a duo on their insect worlds.
13:45-14:00	Cleaning up the classroom. Presenting some of the insect worlds to the group. Evaluating with the children, the process of cooperating in a duo.
14:00-14:15	Closure. Evaluation with a small group of children while drawing the Kunstlab poster. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation with a small group of children</a>  Conversation on what questions or subjects the children would like to explore next.
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation day 3</a>



Program forth Thursday 15-04-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday. Introducing what we are going to do and research today.
9:15-10:00	Recording the song about Photosynthesis. <a href="#">Link to the recorded song</a> Discussing together with the children how they want to present the song.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-12:00	Creative process. Finishing the last detail on the tiny insect worlds. Presenting their work to classmates. <a href="#">Audio Recording - Presentation and reflection of the insect worlds</a>
12:00-12:15	Reading independently.
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-13:00	Introducing the new theme 'space'. Using google earth to zoom in and out to create the overlap to the next theme. What do we see here? What do the children already know about the galaxy?
13:00-13:45	Drawing exercise in groups. In groups, the children create a blueprint for their own space station. If they were astronauts, what do they need to research the galaxy? Discussing strategies to cooperate by putting a wrong example by an acted scene.
13:45-14:00	Cleaning up the classroom. Small tasks in groups. Evaluation about the day.
14:00-14:15	Closure. Watching a part of the episode with André Kuipers from Het klokhuis.
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation day 4</a>

Program fifth Thursday 22-04-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday. Introducing what we are going to do and research today. Continuing our research of theme space/galaxy. Creating a clean space to be able to work with drama exercises
9:15-10:00	Co-construction imaginative reality (theatre). Discussing fantasy planets and their landscapes. <a href="#">Audio recording - collective conversation</a> Collectively acting out how we move around in these landscapes.  Brainstorm about imaginative creatures that live on these planets. Creating small scènes of creatures meeting each other for the first time. The children experiment with how they play these creatures. And how they communicate with self-invented and non-verbal language.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-12:15	Exercise Kunstlab logbook. The children work autonomously on their logbooks. They create the cover and binding and work on the exercises on sheets.
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-13:00	Reading independently.
13:00-14:00	Creative process building the space stations. Introducing the process by asking the question how we can turn the blueprints into space stations built in the classroom. Presenting the material. Discussing strategies of cooperating.  Presenting the space stations to each other through a theatrical act. <a href="#">Audio recording - Presenting the space stations</a>
14:00-14:10	Cleaning up the classroom.
14:10-14:15	Closure.
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation day 5</a>

#### Program sixth Thursday 29-04-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday. Introducing what we are going to do and research today. Extra attention to the basic conditions and agreements we need to create a safe learning environment.
9:15-10:00	Introduction with fantasy language. (in the circle) Theatre exercise - Echoput with fantasy language.  Introduction using music as a language. (in the circle) Children playing in pairs on the keyboard. Storyteller translates, by improvising a story by what is heard. Variation: adding certain emotions to their play. <a href="#">Audio recording - Playing the keyboard to tell a story</a>
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside. <a href="#">Audio recording - The conversation about play and learning.</a>
11:15-12:15	Exercise Kunstlab logbook. The children work autonomously on their logbooks. - Exercise to create their own space creature. - Exercise to answer questions to evaluate Kunstlab. <a href="#">Audio recording - Discussing children's Kunstlab logbooks</a>
12:15-12:45	Break.
12:45-13:00	Reading independently.
13:00-13:10	Creating an imaginative reality. Constructing the different fantasy planets we are going to explore. Using dialogic communication to define them.
13:10-14:00	Creative process making masks. Showing different examples of masks. What are masks used for? We are going to use it to transform ourselves into fantasy creatures. Discussing strategies of using the paper and crayon. How to measure the position of the eyes, nose, and mouth? How to cut those out?
14:00-14:10	Cleaning up the classroom.
14:10-14:15	Closure. Conversation about the follow-up after the maybreak.
14:30-16:00	Evaluation + planning next week. <a href="#">Audio recording - Evaluation day 6</a>



Program seventh Thursday 20-05-2021

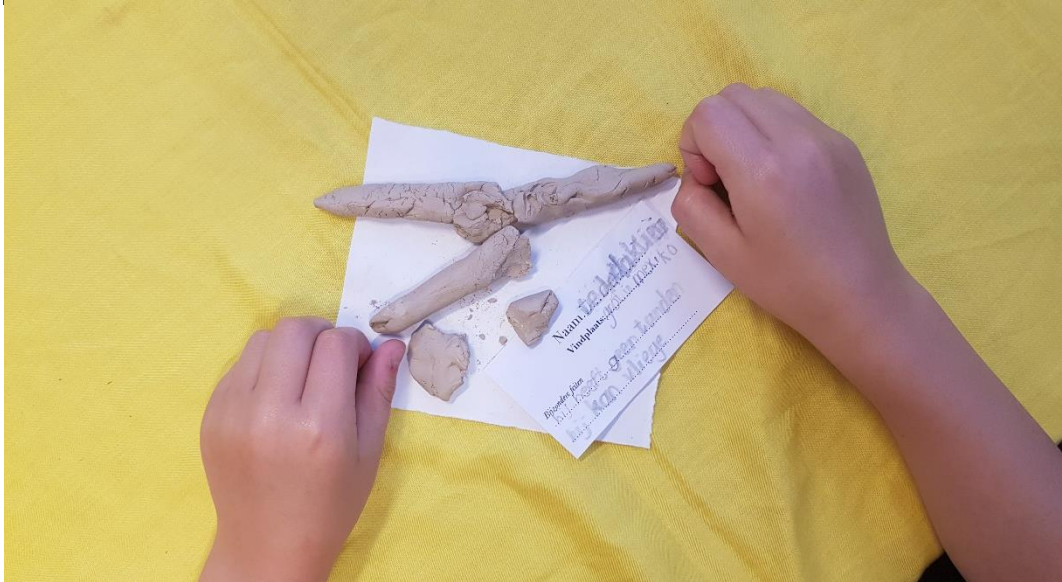
8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Warming up, changing chairs. Also to make sure all the children sit somewhere they feel at ease. Introducing what we are going to do and research today.
9:15-10:00	Creative process - finishing the masks. Introduction with clear steps. - Finish the design of the masks. - Bind with help the rubber bands. - Create extra elements for the decoration of the planet. - Create a group portrait of the inhabitants of the planet.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-12:15	Exercise Kunstlab logbook. The children work autonomously on their logbooks. - Exercise to write down lines in a self-invented space language. - Exercise to measure the distance between tables as if they were planets.
12:15-12:45	Break
12:45-13:00	Reading independently.
13:00-13:10	Energizer - Astronaut warming-up.
13:10-13:45	Explorative conversations - dialogic communication. Introducing the questions (suggested by the children) we are going to research. Introducing the use of a talking stick and discussing strategies to listen to each other.  Conversation in two groups at different locations. - Where does ink come from? - How was the earth made?
13:45-14:00	Presenting answers. Each group presents the documentation and found answers or new questions.
14:10-14:15	Closure. Cleaning the classroom. Watching a small episode of Het Klokhuis about astronauts.

Program eight Thursday 27-05-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Introducing the new theme for the upcoming week 'The human body'.
9:15-10:00	Explorative brainstorm session. Discussing strategies how to brainstorm together in a small group. Every group working around an image of a specific part of the human body. After 10 minutes there is a shift and each group works further on another sheet. Building further on each other's ideas.  A conversation about the found answers and ideas. Focusing on concepts of the skeleton and muscles.
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-11:30	Explorative collective conversation about autonomy. Together with the children, we discuss concepts like: The skeleton, Muscles, Tendons, Joints. What is their function?
11:30-11:45	Theatre exercise - exploring how we move How would we move if we don't have joints? How would we move if our muscles and joints are old? How would we move if our bodies were robotlike? How would we move if our muscles would bodies were super stretchy. How would we move if we didn't have a skeleton?
11:45-12:15	Music exercise - Skeleton dance Working as an orchestra with boomwhackers. Creating a choreography of skeletons.
12:15- 12:45	Break
12:45-13:00	Reading independently.
13:00-14:00	Creative process - Skeleton hand Introduction, showing the skeleton hand. Discussing the steps. How to start making?
14:00-14:15	Cleaning the classroom + Closure. Evaluation about the day <i>The process of the skeleton hand was very difficult for the children, so it was important to also admit to the children that I miscalculated this.</i>

Program ninth Thursday 03-06-2021

8:35-9:00	Welcoming the children. Start working independently on their weekly tasks.
9:00-9:15	Starting the day in a circle. Singing a welcome song together. Recapping what we did last Thursday.
9:15-10:00	Inspirational and explorative conversation. Presenting 'Stranbeesten' from artist Theo Janssen. Discussing with the children how they think it is made. How the sculptures can move and what fossils on his website are.  Rosanne taking over by telling about scientists who also discover fossils. Talking about and showing examples of archaeological finds. ( <i>The children were very engaged and started talking about Pompei</i> ). <a href="#">Audio recording - Conversation Strandbeesten and fossils</a>
10:00-10:15	Reading exercise in their duo.
10:15-10:30	Break + reading.
10:30-11:15	Free playtime outside.
11:15-11:45	Music exercise - Rehearsing and recording the skeleton dance. Multiple times so everyone has played with a boom boom whacker.
11:45-11:15	Working on the logbooks. - Exercise about the concepts of human anatomy. - Adding pictures of the insect's houses and the portraits with their masks.
12:15-12:45	Break
12:45-13:00	Reading independently.
13:00-14:00	Creative process - Finishing the Skeleton hand A conversation about the strategies to work with the different materials. <i>Some children presented how they managed to make it work to the others. They helped each other and figured out new ways to create movement in the hands.</i>  <i>We were learning a lot from them as well!</i>
14:00-14:15	Cleaning the classroom + Closure.



It's more like *p / a y i n g*  
Graduation project by Marjolijn Gunst  
Master Education in Arts 2019-2021  
Piet Zwart Institute – WdKA  
Rotterdam, June 2021