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# Play and Write

## A Guided-Play Writing Workshop in a South African Classroom

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The author examines guided play among students in a South African classroom using a play-and-write workshop constructed by her and her students. She determines that the workshop displays the characteristics of playful learning, lies on the playful learning spectrum, and fits the criteria for guided play. She concludes that, given the benefits of playful learning and guided play in particular, teaching involving construction with the students and allowing student-directed activity can prove valuable and should be put to service where possible beyond kindergarten. She adds that these methods should be employed in conjunction with other educational goals in South Africa and elsewhere in the developing world to help mitigate such problems as underfunding and large class sizes. **Key words:** education in South Africa; guided play; play-and-write workshops; playful learning

### Introduction

**R**ESearch ON GUIDED PLAY—a kind of play directed by students but chosen and arranged by teachers (or constructed with them)—has largely focused on kindergarten and preschool classrooms in North America and Europe, and very little research covers student-directed playful learning in the higher grades, particularly in developing countries like South Africa. This article examines how students in grades five and six in a South African school interacted in a guided-play, play-and-write workshop they constructed with their teacher (me). I aim to provide teachers and researchers a starting point for using guided play in the grades beyond kindergarten. Then I examine a longer-term intervention using a similar structure in another school in South Africa.

In 2021 I had the opportunity to work in a small, bilingual school in a rural area in South Africa where I experimented with using LEGO play as a

story starter for student writing in the senior grades. The LEGO play seemed to increase collaboration, motivation, creativity, and focus. I noticed that the workshop not only appeared to have a positive effect on the quality of writing by the students, but that they also engaged spontaneously in dramatic play with LEGO sets, taking on the roles of different characters in a story as they manipulated LEGO minifigures. This was unexpected given that most of the literature about dramatic play and literacy (Dyson 1999; Peterson et al. 2020; Jensen et al. 2019) dealt with the kindergarten and preschool years. All this prompted me to engage in a study that might help other teachers use guided play in the senior grades and provide researchers with examples of particular kinds of play found in classrooms in the developing world.

Those rare instances in which play beyond kindergarten becomes a subject of study usually involve forms of playful learning lying closer to the adult-directed end of the play spectrum (Zosh et al. 2017). Additionally, although South African teachers increasingly use playful learning, very few studies of such use currently exist (Solis et al. 2019). In my experience, a positive attitude exists toward the use of play in kindergarten (called Grade R in South Africa), but beyond this, teachers become intimidated by the demands of curriculum, and their approaches grow less playful. I see a sharp deliniation occurring between preschool and Grade R, in which play is essential, and grade one, which exchanges play for workbooks and graded readers. However, in my own work and research, I have found a playful approach valuable for learning and believe we need research and advocacy to change the attitudes of parents, teachers, schools, policy makers and nonprofit organizations working in education both in South Africa and in the developing world.

I propose a guided-play approach to literacy learning beyond the foundation phase (grades R through three) in South African schools using my experience with a play-and-write workshop designed by me and my students for a grade five and six class and data gathered from the workshop to answer the following questions: How do children display evidence of enjoyment, curiosity, and ownership (Solis, et al. 2019) in the play-and-write workshop? And how does the teacher display characteristics of the guided-play approach (Zosh et al. 2017) in this workshop? I will begin by reviewing the research on guided play as part of the playful learning continuum, consider the benefits of playful learning, investigate dramatic play and narrative development, and look at playful learning in the higher grades in South Africa. I outline the methods used in my research and describe the intervention in detail. I analyze the research and discuss how my questions can

help create a pedagogy of play for South Africa and other developing countries. I argue that such a class offers the characteristics of enjoyment, curiosity, and ownership (Solis et al. 2019) and of guided play (Zosh et al. 2017), and I reflect on the implications of this for practice. I also outline plans for a longer-term guided play intervention in another South African school.

### Literature Review

#### *Guided Play and the Playful Learning Continuum*

Having only observed teacher-directed play in the grades beyond kindergarten, I wished to understand whether guided play could be used effectively in higher grades. In recent years, research has focused on conceptualizing play as existing on a continuum or spectrum (Zosh et al. 2017; Pyle and Danniels 2017) that includes free play, guided play, games, and direct instruction. Conceptualizing play this way broadens the definition of play-based learning, provides teachers with more clarity about this pedagogical approach, and better explains its relationship to learning. By viewing guided play through such a lens for the purpose of this article, I hope to discover “new avenues of exploration for the field to study the role of learning through play across age and context” (Zosh et al. 2018, 1) and to test whether guided play can, under similar conditions, be used effectively in the higher grades.

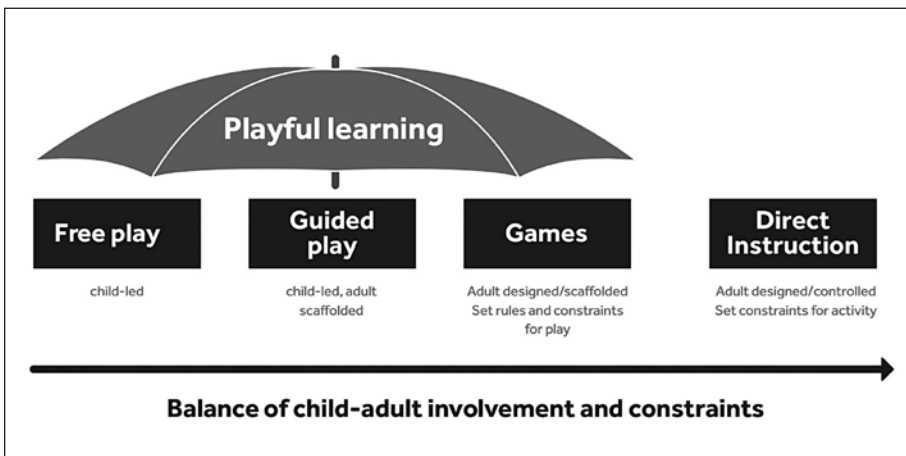


Figure 1. A continuum of playful learning. Reproduced with permission from *Learning through Play: A Review of the Evidence* (Zosh et al. 2017).

According to Zosh and her colleagues, playful learning (as shown in figure 1), is an umbrella term used to include all types of learning—from free play to games—on the play spectrum (Zosh et al. 2017). A later study (Zosh et al. 2018) also includes the categories of co-opted play and playful instruction in the spectrum between games and direct instruction.

In guided play, the students direct the play chosen or arranged by teachers (or constructed with them). The adults extend the children’s learning by providing scaffolding in the form of questions or guidance, but they do not direct the play. In guided play, a balance exists between structure and choice, and the adults provide play contexts with embedded learning goals. They seek to extend, observe, and build on the children’s ideas and thinking. Guided play becomes evident in the structure and learning goals provided by the teachers and in the students’ directing of the play (Zosh et al. 2019). Dramatic play—by which we mean the adoption of imaginary roles that draw on children’s prior experiences, perspectives, and values (Barrs, Barton, and Booth 2012)—is associated with either guided play (Whitebread and Basilio 2013; Zosh et al. 2018) or free play.

The Play Learning and Narrative Skills (PLaNS) project describes its approach as guided play because it incorporates both child- and adult-led elements. However, although adults may propose the activities, observe the play, ask questions, and provide scaffolding, the scaffolding itself sometimes comes in the form of direct instruction about writing (Whitebread and Basilio 2017).

### *The Benefits of Playful Learning*

My long interest in play has centered on its benefits for academic learning and social and emotional development. Play provides a powerful approach to learning in early childhood and later (Zosh et al. 2018). Studies show that playful learning helps children develop the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills they need to succeed academically (Pyle and Bigelow 2014; Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek 2006; Zosh et al. 2013), helps actively and meaningfully engage learners as they investigate and adopt new concepts with the support of their teachers (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al. 2013), and provides space for creativity to develop. Children who play more are likely to be more creative (Bateson and Martin 2013).

### *Dramatic Play and Narrative Development*

Because I encouraged the children I teach to use play as a means to develop their writing, both dramatic play (Barrs et al. 2012) and narrative development became

of particular interest to me. Dramatic play allows children to support each other as they apply their life experiences to new concepts and develop narratives together (Altidor-Brooks, Malec, and Peterson 2020) and provides a context for them to learn in symbolic ways (Genishi and Dyson 2014). As children interact, they learn how meaning can be communicated and structured in narratives (Vygotsky 1978). Dramatic play can be used to teach writing (Peterson and Senior 2019) because learners take on roles and develop stories in ways similar to those in which they create characters and plots in written narratives (Rowe 2009).

Cultural contexts determine how, where, when, and with whom children play—and when they should stop playing (Mardell 2019). Social constructivists view play as a cultural practice influenced by broader historical, social, and cultural factors (Wood 2013). According to Dyson (1999), dramatic play provides space for children’s cultural and social contexts—their “unofficial worlds” (370)—outside the classroom to enter their school world as they borrow texts from particular people and places and then recontextualize them in their play. This recontextualizing becomes an important feature of narrative development and provides an environment in which children’s cultural and social contexts can intersect with their school experience.

Providing an environment in which children are free to role play and develop a familiar story results in a better organized and more creative story than one produced in a space controlled by adults (Whitebread and Jameson 2010). Additionally, a playful approach to writing helps motivate children who struggle with written composition to become more engaged and to develop the metacognitive abilities needed to master writing (Whitebread and Basilio 2013; Hacker, Keener, and Kircher 2009).

In the PLaNS project, children are provided with LEGO bricks and follow a structured process in stages that culminate in writing a story. This combination of play and writing resembles a multimodal literacy workshop in which children have a range of materials to use to create a story (Kuby, Rucker, and Kirchofer 2015). However, in multimodal workshops, the activities are not necessarily divided into stages, and the final product may not include a written text. In both cases, though, children create stories collaboratively using the materials, and researchers investigate how the interactions influence literacy learning in the classroom.

### *Play in the Higher Grades*

Although relatively little research exists about the role of play in grades beyond

kindergarten, play has received increased focus in recent years. In the past, a barrier to the study and use of play in formal schooling has been the view that play and learning are a dichotomy (Pyle and Danniels 2017) in which play is considered purely child directed and unstructured and limited to preschool (Parker and Thomsen 2019). This dichotomy has been traced to the contradiction between core concepts underpinning school and play such as Piaget's assimilation and accommodation and Vygotsky's spontaneous and scientific concepts (Kushner 2012). Nonetheless, a number of pedagogies—such as active learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, experiential learning, guided-discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and Montessori education—bring these concepts together through their roots in constructivism. And they are widely used beyond kindergarten (Parker and Thomsen 2019).

The use of the word “play” often faces opposition from school leaders and policy makers, so promoting learning through play in the formal school system becomes complex and requires teacher studies (Mardell, Solis, and Bray 2019) such as this one. Still, a number of ministries of education around the world have included play in their national policies, and three research models help define learning through play beyond kindergarten (Mardell, Solis, and Bray 2019). I have already described the first, the play spectrum, which considers the teacher's role in directing the play. The second, five characteristics of learning through play, defines playful learning as learning that is meaningful, actively engaging, joyful, iterative, and socially interactive (Zosh et al. 2017). And the third, the indicators of playful learning (Mardell et al. 2016), is based on research at schools to create culturally specific models to guide teachers in planning playful learning in their classrooms. In these three models, researchers need to consider local factors such as cultural values, language, and resources in implementing playful learning (Mardell, Solis, and Bray 2019). Hence, I consider all three in this study, looking in particular at the indicators of playful learning developed in South Africa and how they are used as a framework for understanding children's interactions.

### *Playful Learning in South African Schools*

Because my study took place in a South African school, I was interested in previous research about play and playful learning there. A comparative study of guided play in Canadian and South African kindergarten and Grade R classrooms reported that guided play took place less frequently in the South African

classrooms, most likely because of the larger class sizes (Jensen et al. 2019). However, South African teachers were more likely than Canadian teachers to extend than initiate children’s play, possibly because play in North America has historically been understood as a child-directed activity and educators are often reluctant to structure the play or involve themselves (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017) whereas in South Africa, different ideas of play coexist (Jensen et al. 2019).

As I mentioned, a different South African project investigating playful learning mostly in the higher grades of primary school identified curiosity,

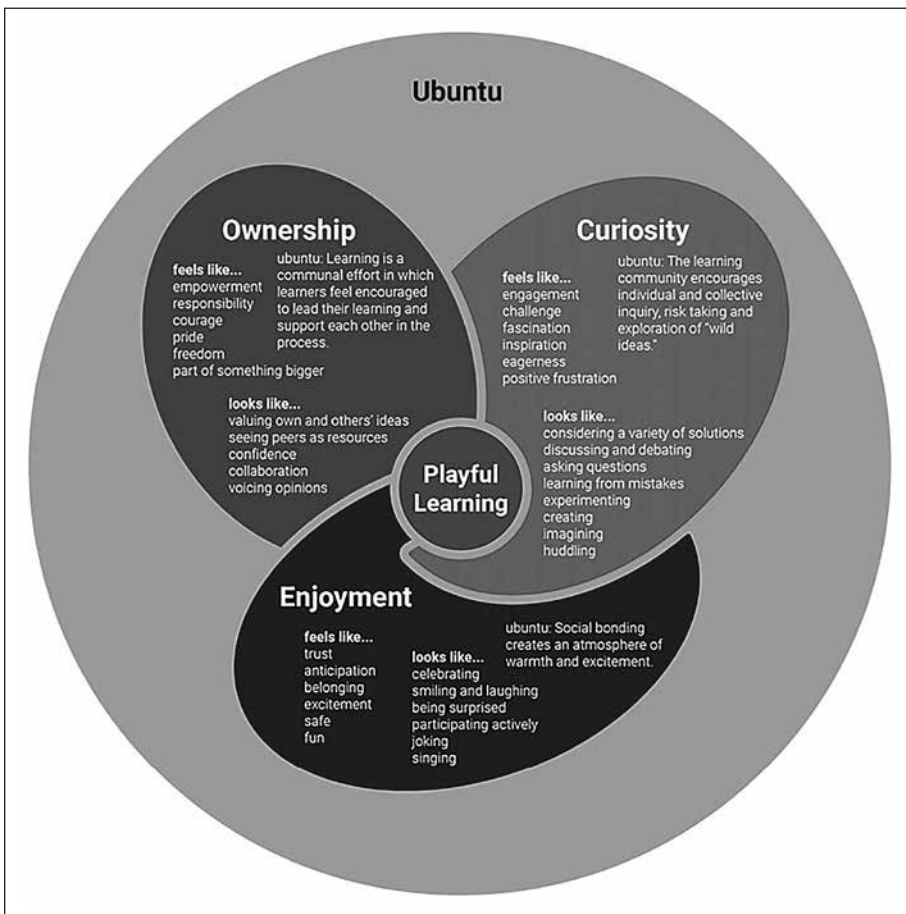


Figure 2. Indicators of playful learning: three South African schools. Reproduced with permission from *Indicators of Playful Learning: Three South African Schools* (2019). Developed by Pedagogy of Play at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

enjoyment, and ownership as indicators of playful learning, using “feels like” and “looks like” to describe each (as shown in figure 2). The South African concept of “ubuntu,” which refers to the interconnectedness of people, was considered central to this definition, and additional descriptors were integrated with the original three indicators of playful learning (Solis et al. 2019).

These indicators also provide evidence of children’s unofficial worlds entering the classroom as students engage in dramatic play, providing a context for them to learn in symbolic ways (Genishi and Dyson 2014) and for play used in narrative development and writing when learners take on roles and develop stories. Because cultural contexts determine how, where, when, and with whom

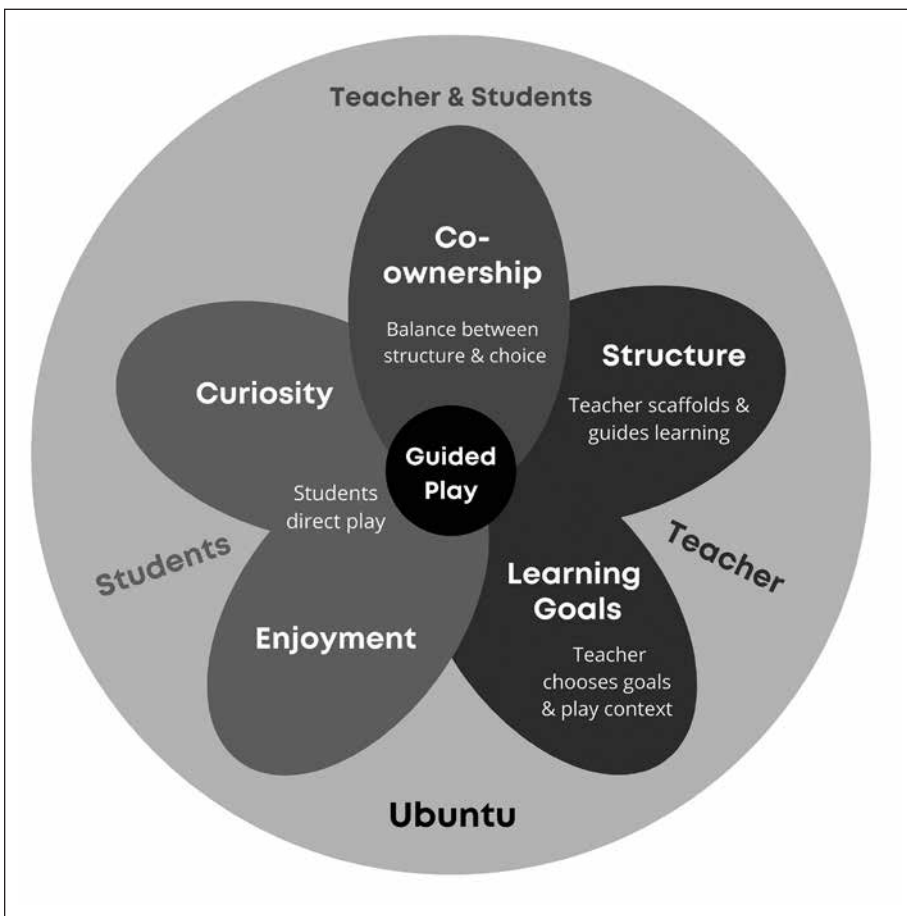


Figure 3. Proposed indicators of guided play in South African schools.



children play, and when they should stop playing (Mardell, Solis, and Bray 2019), it is important to understand dramatic play in South Africa when children's unofficial worlds enter school and students borrow and recontextualize texts (Dyson 1999).

### *Guided Play in South African Schools*

In figure 3, the two models central to this study—the play spectrum and the indicators of playful learning in three South African schools—show what guided play might look like in a South African school and what indicators might be used to determine when guided play occurs. The indicators in ovals on the left are evidence of enjoyment, curiosity, and coownership. They are the indicators of playful learning.

To hone this model further to identify guided play specifically, we offered the teacher indicators in ovals on the right. These—learning goals, structure, and coownership—indicate a teacher who is facilitating guided play rather than free play or games (Zosh et al. 2018). Because the teacher and students share ownership in guided play, we call this indicator “coownership” and show it centered between the student ovals and the teacher ovals to highlight the balance between the structure provided by a teacher and the choice experienced by students. The model still includes ubuntu to indicate the interconnection between students and teacher in the guided-play experience (Solis et al. 2019).

## **Research Methods**

### *Participants and Context*

The study takes place in a combined grade five and grade six class in an independent South African school located in what was during apartheid called a homeland. As a result of the unequal allocation of resources under apartheid, such areas are less developed and usually have limited access to quality health care and education. The school I study in this article is located at the site of a government hospital and a number of nonprofit organizations (NPO), and it draws students both from the professional hospital and NPO staff and from the local community. Families pay fees on a sliding scale according to their means, and the school raises funds to cover the shortfall from the lower fee-paying students. The school provides bilingual isiXhosa and English instruction in all classes. From kindergarten (or Grade R) to grade four, each class

has a mother tongue English-speaking teacher and a mother tongue isiXhosa-speaking teaching assistant. The grade five and grade six class is the smallest in the school and only has one English-speaking teacher and ten students whose ages range from eleven to thirteen. Three of the students are mother tongue English speakers from families of professional staff, and the other seven students are mother tongue isiXhosa speakers from a mix of local and nonlocal families.

My own connection with this school and community—and specifically with playful learning in this community—began in 2013 when I worked with two nonprofit organizations based here. Both organizations received donations from the LEGO Foundation and, prompted by this fact, I offered an after-school play club and provided weekly training in learning through play to play group facilitators in partnership with one of the nonprofits. For the other organization, I introduced playful approaches to learning with LEGO sets in its primary and high school programs and provided training to staff in playful literacy learning. The independent school opened shortly before I left in 2016.

After five years of working nationally and internationally in the field of playful learning, I returned to the South African community for a short stint, and I have been teaching the grade five and grade six class in the school one day a week. In this study, I play the role of both teacher and researcher, facilitate the focus group after the workshop, and then analyze my own behavior as teacher of the workshop. Because of the potential for bias, I also discussed my findings with colleagues at the school and with faculty and fellow students at the University of Toronto.

## **Intervention**

In this article, I present the findings of a research study in which learners in the class I have described engaged in a guided play, play-and-write workshop. Prior to the workshop, I construct the experience with the learners by explaining the goal of the workshop (i.e., to produce a written story in English) and outlining the constraints (i.e., the total time period available and the source of materials). I then asked the learners which materials from their classroom they wanted to use, how they wanted to be grouped, and how they thought the time should be divided. The students decided that they wanted to use LEGO sets, wooden blocks, paper, and pencils and that they

wanted a half hour each for building, talking, and writing. They requested that groups be chosen randomly by drawing names and that group members be allowed to choose whether they would submit a story collaboratively or each would write an individual submission. I also discussed the meaning of the word “story” with the students, and they understood that their composition might take the form of a play, a fictional or nonfictional narrative, or a poem. The workshop construction took place in English and—although the workshop occurred during English class and the compositions were submitted in English—the children were allowed to use any language in their play and narrative development.

I set up for the workshop by moving the desks to the edges of the classroom and placing the LEGO sets and blocks on the mat in the middle of the floor. Learners were divided into groups of two or three by drawing names placed in a hat. However, some of the learners then switched groups afterwards. During the workshop, I extended the learning by circulating and asking questions as the students built, talked, and wrote. I did not direct the students except to remind them when each half hour had passed and to request that they pack up the large box of LEGO pieces (not their LEGO models) and move to their desks after one hour so that I was able to hear their conversations better.

I obtained written permission for the study from parents and guardians and informed the children that their participation was not compulsory and that they would not be penalized in any way if they decided not to take part. The children were aware that they were being recorded, so it is possible that their play was disrupted by the recording and that they may have changed the way they interacted with one another accordingly. The names of the students I present in this study are pseudonyms.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

I collected data for the study during the workshop by video recording conversations between the learners and between the learners and myself. This recording lasted a total of thirty-eight minutes and focused on students’ answers to questions I posed or on meaningful interactions between the students. In addition, I held a focus group with all ten students after the workshop and recorded sixteen minutes of questions and responses. I had both recordings transcribed into five pages of workshop conversations and three pages of interview responses. The students’ written assignments and written notes made after the workshop also provided data for the study.

I analyzed the transcriptions and the recordings in terms of the characteristics of playful learning in South African classrooms as shown in figure 2 for evidence of learners' enjoyment, curiosity, and ownership through deductive analysis of the "looks like" descriptors (i.e., descriptors that are externally observable) in the case of the workshop conversations. In the case of the focus group responses, the "feels like" descriptors (i.e., subjective experiences as described by the students themselves) I analyzed alongside the "looks like" descriptors. I color coded and counted the students' focus group responses that contained the same words (or synonyms for such words) as the "feels like" descriptors in figure 2 (e.g., excitement or fun for the "enjoyment" indicator) and the students' recorded conversations during the workshop where I noted the "looks like" descriptors (e.g., laughing or joking for the "enjoyment" indicator). I tabulated the results, shown in figure 4. The number of descriptors that occurred for each indicator informed my analysis of it. I counted the descriptors in each conversation I recorded between the learners in the workshop to determine which interactions offered the most evidence of playful learning and how many conversations offered evidence of each indicator.

I analyzed my behavior as the teacher according to the characteristics of guided play as part of the play continuum (Zosh et al. 2017). I used this to identify the questions for my analysis, and hence it focused on the play context we chose and why we chose it, how I provided scaffolding, how I embedded the learning goals, and the degree to which I or the students directed the play itself. I analyzed the choice of play context using the questions I had used in the preworkshop discussion. The degree to which I or the learners directed the play was informed by how many directive statements I used during the workshop and the recorded answers from the focus group discussion in which the students mentioned either free choice or constraints. I analyzed how I provided scaffolding by reviewing the questions I had used in the workshop and classifying them according to the type of answers the students gave or I expected (i.e., were they open-ended or yes-or-no questions?).

I created figure 4 to provide a synthesis of these two areas of analysis, bringing together the indicators of playful learning in South African schools and the features of guided play, as distinct from both free play and teacher-directed play on the playful learning spectrum.

Indicator	“Looks like” descriptors	“Feels like” descriptors	No. times occurring in workshop	No. times mentioned in focus group
Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing own and others’ ideas</li> <li>• Seeing peers as resources</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Voicing opinions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Courage</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Freedom</li> <li>• Part of something bigger</li> </ul>	11	17
Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering a variety of solutions</li> <li>• Discussing and debating</li> <li>• Asking questions</li> <li>• Learning from mistakes</li> <li>• Experimenting</li> <li>• Creating</li> <li>• Imagining</li> <li>• Huddling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Challenge</li> <li>• Fascination</li> <li>• Inspiration</li> <li>• Eagerness</li> <li>• Positive frustration</li> </ul>	18	12
Enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrating</li> <li>• Smiling and laughing</li> <li>• Being surprised</li> <li>• Participating actively</li> <li>• Joking</li> <li>• Singing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Anticipation</li> <li>• Belonging</li> <li>• Excitement</li> <li>• Safe</li> <li>• Fun</li> </ul>	9	8

Figure 4. Indicators of playful learning in workshop and focus group.

## Findings

### *Children's Curiosity, Ownership, and Enjoyment*

Bonginkosi: I'm interested in tragedy.

Teacher: Why are you interested in tragedy?

Ayabonga: Because it's fun.

*Both boys talk excitedly at the same time, and their words are indistinguishable.*

Ayabonga (manipulates LEGO as he speaks): The guy's going to end, then I'm going to land. Then wooooo! Poof! That's the quality movie.

Ayabonga: People these days like bad guys to win because they want to see what the bad guys do.

Teacher: Who are "the people these days who like bad guys to win"?

Thabo: He is one of them.

Ayabonga: I love action-packed movies.

A number of the recorded conversations, such as this one involving Ayabonga and Bonginkosi talking excitedly about their story and their enjoyment of action-packed movies, offered evidence of two or three of the South African playful learning characteristics of ownership, curiosity, and collaboration (Solis et al. 2019). In this conversation, the children show confidence in voicing opinions, giving evidence of ownership. Their conversation also clearly evidences enjoyment (through their excited speech and their description of their chosen genre as fun) and curiosity (through their imagining and experimenting with the LEGOs).

One of the "looks like" descriptors of enjoyment—active participation—was present in all of the recorded conversations. Other descriptors such as smiling and laughing, being surprised, or joking, occurred in nine conversations. Enjoyment was mentioned by the students in eight interview responses, primarily using two of the "feels like" descriptors, fun and excitement.

Babalwa (pointing to LEGO garden): The garden is not only beautiful but magical. It's where they make their riches.

Akhona: We're gonna have two climaxes. The first one is going to be about the garden. The second one is going to be explaining how Alicia got married to the prince.

Akhona (pointing to LEGO bricks): Here in the castle, we've got like a door, and here is like a beautiful decoration, and we've got a kitchen and a sitting room. It's not ready yet. And we have one bedroom, a shared bedroom 'cause we didn't have enough space.

Esihle (pointing to page): And I'm also writing the story and planning it.

Teacher: How are you planning it? How did your building help you with this story?

Esihle: We are copying the building, like making it into a story so that it can make sense.

As the learners developed their narratives further, many of their conversations evidenced strong ownership. Such evidence in the “looks like” descriptors of ownership—valuing their own and others’ ideas, seeing peers as resources, confidence, collaboration, voicing opinions—also occurred in eleven recorded conversations from the workshop and in thirteen interview responses. In addition, the “feels like” descriptors of empowerment—freedom and leading learning—came up in four interview responses.

Teacher: What's this inside the building here?

Thabo: We call it “The Burning Maze,” and that is the title.

Sarah: Because there's lots of fire in places you're not supposed to go, so you have to get through the maze. It's a lot harder than it looks, and if you don't get through you can either go here (pointing to place in brick maze) and get burnt.

Thabo: Or like you can go to the end (pointing to end of the maze), and the crocodile will eat you.

Sarah: Yes. And here is . . . if you touch it, you get shocked very hard, so like you'll faint.

Thabo: If you touch the brick that has fire on top, you will be burnt, but it won't burn you like to death. It will just make you feel pain.

Teacher: Where did you come up with the idea for this?

Thabo: Because, like at first, we were building, we didn't know what we were building so like we were just putting walls and we were like, “Why is it like a maze?” And we were like, “Why don't we call it ‘The Burning Maze?’”

The imagination and creativity displayed by Sarah and Thabo in this conversation proved typical for the indicators of creativity evident throughout the class. The “looks like” descriptors of curiosity occurred in eighteen recorded conversations. Of these, sixteen primarily denoted two of the descriptors—imagining and creating—and seven denoted discussing, debating, asking questions, considering a variety of solutions, and experimenting. Nine interview responses mentioned the “looks like” descriptors of curiosity and three additional responses evidenced the “feels like” descriptors of challenge or positive frustration.

In addition to evidencing playful learning, two recorded conversations and

one focus group response seem to suggest the occurrence of dramatic play. During one conversation in the workshop, Akhona referred to the LEGO minifigures as actors, and a blurring of lines between reality and story occurred when Thabo, Bonginkosi, and Ayabonga argued about a LEGO structure they called a “bank,” which seemed to have been stolen. It is unclear whether the bank had been stolen by one of the characters in the story or one of the students. These interactions, did not involve the teacher, except for scaffolding questions. During the focus group interview, Ayabonga—a member of the group that wrote its story in the form of a play—said, “We had to push ourselves into the character of the play. We had to push the people. Like we had to act the people.”

### *Teacher's Role in Guided Play*

I analyzed my behavior as teacher in the study according to the characteristics of guided play in the play continuum, characteristics replicated in the proposed model, indicators of guided play in a South African school (see figure 3) I developed for this study. I initiated the workshop itself and set goals to address the needs of the learners such as practice in collaborative writing, play writing, group work, and creativity. Knowing that the students were interested in LEGO sets, I made sure they were available as choice of a play material. I created a balance between structure and choice by constructing the workshop with the students, setting the end goals and time limits but letting them choose how to structure the time, the materials they used, and which groups they joined.

As the quotations from recorded conversations show, I extended the students' learning by asking open-ended questions. They directed their own activities during the workshop, deciding what to build, how to interact with their group members, what form their story would take, and how their narrative would be developed and written. I was present at all times and interacted with the students. In the transcribed recordings, I asked a total of twenty-nine questions about the LEGO builds, the stories, and the ideas behind the stories. I recorded only one statement and one instruction—about how the students were responding to my question rather than to the direction of play in the workshop. For the first hour of the workshop, I did not direct the actions of the students but simply reminded them of the time constraints at the end of each half hour. After one hour, I directed them to pack away the box of LEGO bricks (not their models) and move to their desks to lessen the noise caused by the rattle of the LEGO pieces.

In figure 3, I show the two proposed teacher indicators—learning goals



and structure—were present. Ownership by both the students and the teacher also became evident in the balance of structure and choice. I provided such structure by setting up the classroom, keeping time, and asking scaffolding questions. This was balanced by the freedom and choice apparent as the students directed their own play and made choices about what to build and write and how to function as a group. Three of the students also mentioned freedom and choice in the postworkshop focus group. One student, Daniel, highlighted the importance of this freedom to his creative process when he said, “It felt, like, really good because we could just do what we wanted, build what we wanted to build, and make a story out of it. You didn’t have to make the same story. You could just take the idea and then change it to what we want. We don’t have the same thing, and we don’t have to do exactly the thing we’ve built. Because then we can put some more imagination in. Because if you don’t have a piece, you can just pretend it’s there in the story.”

## Discussion

The prevalence of the descriptors of enjoyment, curiosity, and ownership in the student’s conversations and interview responses indicate that this workshop fits the description of playful learning in South African schools described by Solis et al. (2019). However, there are also significant differences between this workshop and the three classes described in the study by Solis and her colleagues. In two of their examples, which take place in a grade two class and a grade five class, the teacher directs the learning and offers few opportunities for learners to make choices. The third example includes a high degree of choice and opportunities for the learners to direct the activity but takes place in a Grade R class. Additionally, no means exist to compare the frequency or quantity of the indicators of playful learning in the two studies. Hence, it seems that we need a way to integrate their contextualized understanding of playful learning in South Africa with the different points along the playful learning continuum and to investigate whether particular points on the continuum are more appropriate for different grade levels. My indicators of guided play in a South African school is a proposed first step toward doing so. Once tested in other schools, it could provide a framework for more easily identifying guided play in South African schools and hence allow us to investigate this approach at different grade levels. I also found it difficult to ascertain whether a higher degree of choice yielded

more creative or better narrative development as has been shown in previous studies in Europe (Whitebread and Jameson 2010).

The overall standard of the written work produced from the play-and-write workshop was not significantly higher than other stories the students had written, although the students themselves noted that they took longer to produce their final stories. However, the workshop did give them a context to develop social and emotional skills such as collaboration and group work, which they rarely use in writing classes. Learners also engaged in some dramatic play, which is often considered important in children's narrative development (Altidor-Brooks, Malec, and Peterson 2020) but is seldom studied beyond kindergarten. Additionally, students' engagement and motivation were high, which has been considered important for the development of the metacognitive abilities needed to master writing (Whitebread and Basilio 2013; Hacker, Keener, and Kircher 2009). Hence, a number of the descriptors of playful learning in the context of a writing workshop could indicate that some kinds of narrative development are taking place. For example, "valuing others' ideas," "seeing peers as resources," "collaboration," and "discussing and debating" all give evidence of collaborative narrative development. Other descriptors such as "engagement," "eagerness," "participating actively," and "belonging" might be thought to give evidence of engagement and motivation (Solis et al. 2019).

My students borrowed from a diverse range of texts and people as they composed their stories. They borrowed from the ideas of their peers, both in their own groups and in the groups playing around them, and they borrowed from movie and book texts. In one case, a group borrowed one character's name from a book written over seventy years ago in the UK, a second character's name from a popular, decade-old Disney movie, and the setting from a fairy tale. Another group talked about tragedy and adventure, which they said they wanted to include because these were in the movies they liked best.

In both instances, learners borrowed genres and actions and recontextualized these in their own stories. This recontextualization is another key feature of narrative development and shows that as the children's unofficial worlds were given space to enter the classroom through guided play, they enjoyed a richer context in which to develop narratives and write creatively than they would have through direct instruction. Nonetheless, my fellow students in Canada seemed to find differences between this cultural context and the contexts in which they worked. The age of the children in my class was higher than the age of children in Canada who would be likely to play with LEGO sets. And the media from

which my students borrowed characters and themes (e.g., Disney princess movies) was likely to appeal to children of a younger age in Canada.

The degree to which the students in the workshop were able to direct their learning caused some tension for me as the teacher because I did not know whether directing the students to move on to the next stage of the workshop would dilute the experience of guided play. Time management proved a challenge for the learners, and perhaps we could have focused more on the writing if I had shifted the balance of structure and choice slightly to align more closely with the PLaNS lesson structure. However, this, in turn, may have had an effect on the quantity of playful learning indicators displayed by the students. As noted by Solis and her colleagues (Solis et al. 2019), “Play feels timeless (players lose themselves in play), while school is timetabled. . . . In play children are in charge, while in school the agenda is often set by adults. These paradoxes can derail efforts to have children benefit from learning through play” (8). These paradoxes, then, are important to keep in mind as teachers weigh the benefits and costs of bringing play into their classrooms. Figure 3 provides the proposed framework for teachers and researchers to balance between structure in choice, to maintain structure without undermining student autonomy, and to provide choice without negating the learning goals and structure.

Solis and her colleagues (Solis et al. 2019) include the South African concept of ubuntu—summarized by the phrase “a person is a person through other persons” (Tutu 1999)—in their playful learning model and provide three sentences that integrate this concept with each of the three indicators (see figure 3). Although these were not included in my analysis, anecdotal observations from the workshop indicate that all three sentences integrating ubuntu are in keeping with the characteristics I observed in the play-and-write workshop. With respect to ownership, learning appeared to be a “communal effort in which learners feel encouraged to lead their learning and support each other” (26) through the collaborative process learners used to develop their stories and directed their activities. The recordings also included numerous examples of curiosity integrated with ubuntu through “inquiry, risk taking, and exploration of ‘wild ideas’” (26), the best example being a conversation in which learners debated whether their stories could include swearing. Some teachers might consider this conversation the opposite of ubuntu. Indeed, they might think it the point at which they should step in and direct the learning. In this workshop, however, it became an example of learners using discussion to lead each other towards a respectful, shared agreement. Lastly, with regard to enjoyment and ubuntu, an

“atmosphere of warmth and excitement” (27) through social bonding certainly seemed present for most of the workshop, and although there were instances of disagreement that lacked warmth, these were negotiated by the learners to create an overall atmosphere in keeping with the quote.

Studies show that guided play provides a context for children to develop the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills they need to succeed academically (Pyle and Bigelow 2014; Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek 2006; Zosh et al. 2013), provides a meaningful way for them to become actively engaged while scaffolding is provided by the teacher (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al. 2013), and provides space for creativity to develop (Bateson and Martin 2013). The use of guided play in a class such as this offers the potential for holistic skill development and creativity in writing in ways that may not be possible through teacher-led instruction. Hence, a model such as the one shown in figure 3—which shows clearly when guided play takes place—offers a tool teachers can use to enhance creativity, narrative development, and social and emotional skill development through a play-and-write workshop such as mine.

However, figure 3 does not show guided play as part of a continuum or spectrum that includes other forms of playful learning. By nature, a continuum includes areas of overlap in which guided play starts to become free play or games. Additionally, a continuum provides an expanded definition of play that prevents the historical dichotomy between free play and direct instruction. Hence, although this model may provide guidance useful to a teacher, it must be understood in the context of a broader discussion about playful learning.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

As already noted, the quantity of indicators displayed by the students shows that my workshop fits well within the framework of playful learning in a South African context (Solis et al. 2019). My behavior as the teacher also fits the criteria of guided play because the workshop was initiated by me, but it was led by the students based on the scaffolding I provided by asking questions (Zosh et al. 2018). The five indicators of guided play in South African schools are consequently in evidence as these indicators are drawn directly from my two models.

The implications for practice by teachers and researchers are that guided play, although rarely used at this grade level, is possible in a class of this size. In short, a workshop such as this provides ample opportunities for playful learn-

ing. Given the benefits of playful learning and guided play in particular, teaching that allows for construction with the students and student-directed activity proves valuable and should be explored where possible in the grades beyond kindergarten. However, in South Africa, teachers do not usually receive training in playful learning unless they are Grade R or preschool teachers. Thus, we need more in-service and preservice training to equip teachers to bring more playful and open-ended approaches into their teaching.

As other studies have indicated that guided play may occur less frequently in South African classrooms because of the large class sizes (average thirty students), extra facilitators or teaching assistants may be needed to make this approach feasible. These are just two of the paradoxes noted by Solis and her colleagues (Solis et al. 2019) that might challenge efforts to increase children's access to playful learning in South Africa. This study adds further weight to the argument that we need a pedagogy of play to support educators in negotiating these paradoxes to leverage the potential of learning through play in South African schools and in similar contexts elsewhere in the developing world.

To address the challenges of teacher training, class size, and scope of the study, I planned a follow-up intervention using playful learning (including free play, guided play, and games) as a regular feature of teaching. This intervention was to occur at a low-fee private school, one of a group of schools at which I began working in 2021. This group of schools uses a blended learning model that incorporates videos and e-learning on computers in class, with tutors and teaching providing one-on-one assistance as required. My role was to design a bridging program for students who had passed grade seven (the final year of primary school) but who needed intervention in literacy and numeracy before they could transition to high school. The bridging year makes up a full year program, and it is one of the first of its kind in South Africa. It was important that I find—in addition to the blended learning model—innovative ways for students to develop creativity, collaboration, problem solving, and communication skills in an environment fostering a love of reading and writing. To this end, we allocated two hours a week for play with LEGO sets and board games. For the first term (January to March, 2022), this was offered as a free play activity, and the students responded extremely positively to the LEGO sets. Once we had established that LEGO sets were viable as play material for this group, we planned a series of workshops in the same format as the play-and-write workshop presented in this article.

In this follow-up intervention, we included teacher training so that teachers

could become familiar with some of the theory behind the use of playful learning, and we provided them a sample format for guided play writing workshops. We ran the first training session in January 2022 and, in addition to the training content I have identified in this article, we also trained teachers in the use of games for literacy, numeracy, and life skills learning. The first phase of the follow-up intervention will take place in a class of twenty bridging-year students, a larger group than in the initial study. Once the feasibility of the LEGO play and the indicators of guided play has been established for a class of this size, the next step will be to test the approach in larger classes of twenty-five to thirty students at the same school.

Hence, through this study and ongoing research into the use of guided play in the higher grades in South African schools, a clearer pedagogy of play can be tested and developed, using the combined teacher and student indicators proposed in figure 3, to serve as a guide to teachers for including and structuring guided play in the higher grades in similar contexts. Showing them the key elements for which they will be responsible—embedding learning goals, choosing the play context, and scaffolding the play and learning—and of the indicators they can expect to see in the students' interactions offers them a usable guide for learning through play. In addition to what this research offers to teaching practices, it provides a clear model that researchers in South Africa and similar contexts might use to identify different kinds of play and understand how these take place in the developing world.

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