



PLC/Book Study Guide for *The Gift of Playful Learning*

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Dear Reader,

We are delighted that you have chosen to use *The Gift of Playful Learning* to support your programming and planning. This guide is designed as a professional development resource and can be used to facilitate a book study or as a learning experience for a professional learning community (PLC). Facilitator notes are provided for additional support and explanation in planning and facilitating your group's sessions. We recommend that the facilitator read the entire guide and the book before beginning the study. Throughout each session we encourage facilitators to capture moments of the meeting itself and the interactions shared by the participants.



For each session, participants will be asked to read chapters of the book. They may also be asked to bring materials, or create or implement something *prior* to attending a session. Each chapter description includes:

- Facilitator notes
- Items participants need to prepare
- Play Pursuits, which are play-based activities to engage participants
- Gifts of Learning, which are guiding questions to be used to facilitate discussion
- Quotes Worth Playing With, which highlight quotes from each chapter that facilitators may also want to use as sparks for discussion and debate
- Pursuing the Gift, which outlines guiding questions to support the small shifts participants can implement immediately into their practice

Please note that each session's preparation work is noted at the beginning of the session notes. Before you dismiss participants, look ahead to the next session and review and clarify what must be done before the next meeting. Reach agreements if suggested tasks are going to be adjusted or modified.

As you journey through this guide, we encourage you to share documentation of the changes you have made along the way using #thegiftofplayfullearning on various social media platforms. We look forward to learning more about how this resource supports your planning and programming.

Trust in play to show you the way!

— Kenisha and Angelique

INTRODUCTION: The Invitation

CHAPTER 1: Exploring the Landscape of Play

Participant Preparation

- Read the introduction and chapter 1.
- Bring photos, or videos, or samples that connect to a memory in play. (optional)

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms, etc.) and organize them for participants to use.*
- *To ensure meaningful conversation, allow participants enough time to engage with the materials and think through their ideas.*

Play Pursuits

- Invite participants to reflect on their hopes/wishes/goals for this professional learning community. Have them represent their thinking using loose parts.
- Mapping memories: Invite each participant to share the item they brought that connects to a memory in play. After everyone has shared, consider what connections or common themes emerged.
- After discussing how everyone defines play, invite participants to use loose parts to create a collaborative piece and shared definition as a group.

Gifts of Learning

- How do you define play?
- What play experiences were honored or dishonored for you as a child? How has that influenced your view of and pedagogical approach to play?
- Where do you see yourself on the continuum of play-based approaches to teaching? What next steps could you take to move toward the center of the continuum?
- How can you embed culturally relevant pedagogy in your play-based teaching? What are you now considering?

Quotes Worth Playing With

“Now more than ever, our systems crave pedagogical pivots that lead to transformation.” (page 4)

“Play is the greatest equalizer!” (page 10)

“Children are innately drawn to play because it invites a freedom to interact with an inner consciousness in visible form.” (page 11)

“Too often, play is juxtaposed with work and viewed as a reward but not valued as an integral core of classroom instruction.” (page 16)

Pursuing the Gift (page 30)

1. Commit to integrating play as work.

How might you commit to integrating play into your daily routines?

2. Offer choice.

How might you offer choice within your programming through play?

3. Appeal to your learners.

What do you know about your learners? How might you leverage this information for planning?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Respond to the questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift. For our next session, gather documentation (photos, videos, and/or work samples) of your responses. Be prepared to share it during the next session.

CHAPTER 2:

Creating Spaces That Speak

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 2.
- Bring documentation (photos, videos and/or work samples) that responds to questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift from chapter 1.

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms, etc.) for participants to use.*
- *Provide time for participants to review the commitment they have made to play and the photos, videos, and/or work samples they collected.*

Play Pursuits

- Review “100 Languages” on page 33. Invite participants to reflect on the “languages” they used as children to communicate their thinking and to make sense of the world. Have them use loose parts to share their ideas.
- Have participants work collaboratively in groups and use loose parts to design a learning environment that honors the Rights to Spaces (pages 45–54).
- Discuss the questions in the Gifts of Learning. Ask participants to share how they will commit to creating a space that speaks. Invite them to use loose parts to show their thinking.

Gifts of Learning

- Which of the one hundred languages speak loudly in the learning environment?
- Which of the one hundred languages speak softly in the learning environment?
- What shifts might you now consider?
- Scan your entire space and ask yourself what intentions live there. Why is the space arranged or organized in this way? Do the intentions center an adult perspective?

- How might you shift or amend your intentions to honor all protagonists in the community?
- How might the learning environment embody learners' Rights to Spaces?
- How might you center thinking and learning?

Quotes Worth Playing With

"The privileges and power afforded through the design of a space send explicit and implicit messages to learners and their families about what is prioritized and what is not." (page 44)

"Our educational experiences can condition us to replicate legacies of the past, challenge the status quo, or overcome the void of experience we might have been afforded ourselves." (page 44)

"If we design a space that presents learning in subject-specific ways, we deliver messages that do not make connections through a multidisciplinary approach." (page 54)

Pursuing the Gift (page 67)

1. Declutter your space.

What might you remove or shift to declutter your space?

2. Get organized.

In what ways might you organize your space to highlight learning?

3. Map out where playful opportunities can be offered.

Consider mapping out the possibilities for play in your learning environment. What might the plan look like?

4. Scan for accessibility and student input.

How might you gather the ideas and interests of learners when designing your learning space?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Respond to the questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift to make shifts in an area(s) of your space. For our next session, gather documentation (e.g., photos or videos) that reflects the shifts that you made. Consider capturing photos or videos taken both before changes are made and after to highlight the transformation.

CHAPTER 3:

Playful Pieces

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 3.
- Bring documentation (e.g., photos or videos) of an area(s) that reflects the shifts that you made.

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them. If you decide to engage participants in a loose parts hunt, ensure the existing space offers loose parts. It is not necessary to scatter or hide any items.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts for participants to use. Ensure that there are seven types of loose parts (ribbon and fabric, ceramic and glass, packaging, metal, wood reuse, nature-based, and plastic).*
- *As you engage in conversations around loose parts, we caution you about the use of food as playful pieces. Inviting learners to playfully interact with food sends subconscious messages that food can be played with. It is important to reflect and consider the inequities and injustices that exist around access to food in our world. For additional reading on this topic, consider “Food Is Not for Play” by Jean Hannon in *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* edited by Ann Pelo (*Rethinking Schools*, 2008, 137–138).*

Play Pursuits

- Invite participants to share their documentation of the shifts they made. Have a “gallery move” and invite participants to use sticky notes to share a Glow (one way the transformation glowed) and Grow (a possible next step).
- Go on a loose parts hunt! Invite participants to scan the space and collect as many loose parts as they can within a designated time, e.g., one or two minutes. Sort what is gathered into the seven types. Select one or two items from each group and brainstorm possibilities for what the item might become in play (e.g., a cylinder might become a tube of lipstick, a beverage can, and so on).
- Offer a display or tinker tray containing seven types of loose parts. Invite participants to explore the playful pieces and consider how they might be inspired to use them to share an idea, a message, or a story.

Gifts of Learning

- What playful pieces can you offer that connect to learners' interests, experiences, and identities?
- How can the loose parts schemas support you in better understanding learners?
- How can you affirm learners' cultural identities through loose parts play?
- What whole-group and small-group scaffolding opportunities can you implement to support the conditions for learning?

Quotes Worth Playing With

“Loose parts are relevant to every child. They cross the boundaries of gender, age, race, ability, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, language and more. They provide equitable opportunities for learners to express themselves, their experiences, and who they are.” (page 72)

“With all the benefits that manipulation has to offer, we question why it is not centered beyond the realm of mathematics.” (page 75)

“When learners are offered fixed materials in the learning environment, we often see power dynamics that reflect the societal injustices of the larger world.” (page 76)

Pursuing the Gift (page 94)

1. Start a collection of loose parts.

What loose parts might you gather at home, in school, or outdoors?

2. “Rock what you got.”

Consider how you might use the materials gathered to facilitate learning.

3. Get organized.

How might you present the loose parts to highlight learning?

4. Invite learners to explore.

How will you use guided learning experiences with loose parts to invite more intention and learning?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Respond to the questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift. For our next session, be prepared to share about guided learning experiences you offered connected to using playful pieces.

CHAPTER 4:

Gifting Learning

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 4.
- Be prepared to share about guided learning experiences you offered connected to using playful pieces.

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms) for participants to use.*
- *To engage participants in conversations, use photos from the Digital Resources, images of de-invitations from the book, or your own images of activities.*
- *You may wish to place the de-invitations in plastic sleeves and provide dry erase markers; participants can circle the misconceptions within the de-invitations.*

Play Pursuits

- Use photos from “Sample Invitations for Learning” and “How to Offer Invitations for Learning” found in the Digital Resources for chapter 4. Display the photos and have participants engage in a gallery move. Ask them to consider what learners might say, do, or represent. Invite participants to use sticky notes to record their ideas and thinking.
- Invite participants to observe examples of activities and consider what they might change or shift to allow for more open-ended learning experiences. Display a variety of loose parts to inspire participants to imagine which materials may pair well with the experience.
- Play a game of I Spy. Share images of de-invitations (pages 112–115), and invite participants to identify the misconceptions reflected by the materials offered.

Gifts of Learning

- What Invitations for Learning might you offer that honor children’s interests, identities, and learning needs?

- How might you prioritize a variety of learning opportunities in your environment?
- How might you ensure that the components of an Invitation for Learning are honored?

Quotes Worth Playing With

“As children engage with an Invitation for Learning, they might reveal their divergent thinking or demonstrate a transference of skills. This informs the instructional moves that the educator needs to make next.” (page 100)

“Creating beautiful arrangements that captivate learners and spark curiosities goes beyond the realm of ‘pretty pedagogy.’ When a focus on beauty outshines and overrides the intention, we devalue the optimal learning that can be achieved through play, resulting in a de-invitation.” (page 111)

“For children to pursue the gifts we offer, we must plan and design thoughtful experiences that allow learners to respond to, challenge, and extend learning.” (page 117)

Pursuing the Gift (page 119)

1. Start simply.

What small shifts might be made to allow for more open-ended experiences? For example, offering provocations or pairing loose parts with a question and text.

2. Shake things up!

What might you add, change, or extend to your centers or activities that already exist to create an Invitation for Learning?

3. Focus on the familiar.

How might you leverage a familiar text or a book you intend to use to create an Invitation for Learning?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Respond to the questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift to create more open-ended experiences for learning. For our next session, be prepared to share documentation highlighting the shifts and changes that you made.

CHAPTER 5:

Planning with Purpose

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 5.
- Bring a text (picture book or other text) you intend to offer in your program. (optional)

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Use photos of Invitations for Learning.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms) for participants to use.*
- *Provide time for participants to celebrate and share the changes they have made.*

Play Pursuits

- Divide participants into two groups. Offer one group figure 5.1, “A Worksheet about *Red: A Crayon’s Story*” (page 124). Offer the other group figure 5.2, “An Invitation for Learning Connected to *Red: A Crayon’s Story*” (page 125). Invite participants to get into the role of a learner to dramatize what learners might say or do when offered each learning opportunity. As props for the groups, you may wish to offer multiple copies of figure 5.1 and loose parts similar to the ones shown in figure 5.2.
- Provide photos of invitations for learning and have participants share how new materials can be layered in over time to change the experience. For example, opening up to a page in the book, changing the question, offering different materials, or offering different surfaces and tools for documentation.
- Have participants share the texts they brought. Invite them to consider how the texts might be used to offer Invitations for Learning. Use figure 5.9, “Planning Invitations for Learning” (page 136), to support thinking. You may wish to display a variety of loose parts to inspire participants to imagine which materials may pair well with the text.

Gifts of Learning

- How might children's interests, news, and learning goals guide your planning pursuits?
- What observations have you gathered to inform your planning?
- How might you use the Considerations for an Invitation for Learning (page 137) to inform your planning?

Quotes Worth Playing With

"As we prepare to offer gifts to learners, our planning and intention should focus on the recipients of the gifts. Children in our spaces possess a diverse range of strengths, interests, and needs. Our offerings must appeal to learners in engaging and sustainable ways." (page 124)

"The worksheet (figure 5.1) isolates skills and limits learners' potential to express themselves in multiple ways." (page 125)

"We need to establish an environment that supports a *culture of thinking*, where learners problem-solve their way to new ideas, instead of a culture of doing, where learners passively create products." (page 125)

Pursuing the Gift (page 147)

1. Make a plan.

How might you use the guidelines in chapter 5 to support your creation of an Invitation for Learning?

2. Let learners lead.

What do you know about your learners? What have your documentation and observations revealed about their interests?

3. Collaborate!

Who might you co-plan an Invitation for Learning with? How might you support each other?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Respond to the questions outlined in Pursuing the Gift to plan and, if possible, offer one or more Invitations for Learning. For our next session, be prepared to share the plan you created and/or documentation of one or more Invitations for Learning that you offered.

CHAPTER 6:

Playful Assessment

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 6.
- Bring a plan for an Invitation for Learning and/or documentation of one or more Invitations for Learning that you offered.

Facilitator Notes

- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms, etc.) for participants to use.*
- *Create a provocation to support one of the Play Pursuits.*
- *Gather images that capture moments of play to support one of the Play Pursuits.*

Play Pursuits

- Offer loose parts or a provocation to participants. Have participants get into pairs; one person will play with the materials and the other will assume the role of documenter. Give participants about five minutes to engage in play and documentation. If time allows, have partners swap roles. Discuss the observations, interpretations and implications, and reflections that emerged from the documentation.
- Invite participants to review figure 6.1, “Examples of Moments Captured in Documentation” (page 156), and ask the participants to use loose parts and other materials to reimagine a moment through dramatization. For example, a moment of achievement might be building a structure and running up to another participant, sharing, “I built my apartment taller than I did yesterday! Come look at it!”
- Offer documentation of moments in play and invite participants to notice and name the learning. Next reveal the story behind the image and encourage conversation and reflection around the risk of biases and assumptions when interpreting the work of children. Then invite participants to consider how they might respond to children’s work and challenge and extend children’s thinking.

Gifts of Learning

- How might the playful learning opportunities offered in your space yield multiple outcomes for learning that can be documented?
- How might various sources of documentation reveal learning and support your process for planning?
- How might you honor the process of pedagogical documentation in your practice?

Quotes Worth Playing With

“Positioning ourselves as co-learners provides us with entry points for observation, as well as opportunities to reflect on the moment we have captured and to gain insights from learners about the thinking that has been made visible.” (page 156–157)

“Some children may be susceptible to the educator’s interpretations and may validate or confirm the educator’s thoughts and ideas to please the educator. When we probe for understanding and question too much, children’s thoughts become conflated with our own, and we move further away from the real meaning of the moment.” (page 162)

“When our documentation neglects to capture the observations themselves, we might miss important information and impose interpretations that are actually misrepresentations of the story being captured. From whose perspective is the story being told?” (page 159)

Pursuing the Gift (page 177)

1. Start with what you know.

What tools might you use and offer to collect documentation?

2. Create a plan.

Who will you document? When will you dedicate time to document moments of learning?

3. Make time to review and reflect.

When might you review the documentation that you have gathered, and with whom?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Document a moment of play. Record your interpretations, implications, and reflections. Or, establish a plan for capturing the learning and share the tools, routines, and strategies you will use. For our next session, be prepared to share your documentation or your plan.

CHAPTER 7:

Playful Partnerships AND

THE Afterword

Participant Preparation

- Read chapter 7 and the afterword.
- Bring your documentation of a moment in play or your plans for documentation.

Facilitator Notes

- *Consider sharing documentation that captures the journey of learning from the first meeting to this one (e.g., creating a collage, scrapbook, or slideshow of the learning).*
- *Determine which of the Play Pursuits you will offer. Consider offering at least one of them.*
- *Gather a variety of loose parts (e.g., gems, buttons, popsicle sticks, shells, paper clips, ribbon, pom-poms, etc.) for participants to use.*
- *Provide an opportunity for participants to share their documentation of a moment in play or their plans for documentation.*

Play Pursuits

- Ask participants, “What are your views of families and caregivers?” Have them use loose parts to represent their thinking.
- Have participants work as a team to create an elevator pitch for an activity or event that will engage families and caregivers in play.
- Invite participants to reflect on their learning journey and consider how they will commit to playful partnerships. Offer participants loose parts to share their thinking and invite them to create a collaborative piece.

Gifts of Learning

- How might you honor and respect the competencies of the families in your learning environment?
- What strategies can you utilize to foster playful partnerships?
- How can you engage in meaningful dialogue with colleagues, administrators, and system leaders to make the shifts needed in your school community?

Quotes Worth Playing With

“Our beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives toward families influence our programs and practices.” (page 182)

“Leveraging partnerships is vitally important for supporting children’s growth in learning. Learning should not happen without the contribution and collaboration of protagonists who together create a common language that merges shared goals, visions, and aspirations.” (page 183)

“Many misconceptions emerge when educators offer play-based programming and families interpret it as ‘just play.’ We must become advocates for this pedagogical approach and highlight, notice, and name how play benefits learning and promotes learners’ success.” (page 191)

Pursuing the Gift (page 199)

1. Seek insight and learning.

How might you gather insights about families that will support programming?

2. Play, learn, and grow in partnership.

How might you invite families to engage in play to make connections to curriculum and programming?

3. Plan a playful opportunity that invites family participation.

How might you plan a playful opportunity that engages families in play?

Putting Playful Learning into Practice

Plan and commit to playful learning opportunities that invite families, children, and educators to partner in play to uncover learning. Consider what commitments you might make to ensure play is honored in your learning environment, the community, and beyond.