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Studios of Joy: Teachers Reimagining the Pedagogical Possibilities of their Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract: Recent research suggests emotion, specifically designing for joy, supports teachers in learning how to co-create justice-oriented, dignity-affirming educational environments. Using four principles from the pedagogies of joy framework, this paper explores a group of novice teachers who engaged in a professional development model (Studio Days) to co-design for social justice. Through this lens, we saw how one studio focused on positioning culture, families, and communities as rightfully belonging inspired another teacher to host another studio on recognizing that power, historicities, and futures matter. This second studio then inspired a fellow teacher to try out a lesson on disability justice in her kindergarten class. These findings help the field to better understand how social justice and joy are helpful to design for in parallel, and how these pedagogies can lead to expansive pathways for different teachers to learn how to enact justice oriented, dignity-affirming curriculum in their classrooms.

Motivation

Emotions are often ignored in educational contexts (Boler, 1999), and especially teacher learning settings where there is more of an emphasis on pedagogical and content knowledge, classroom management, and assessment. Among the many emotions that teachers experience, it is especially important to attend to joy because of its potential to support learning environments to be dignity affirming (i.e. welcoming whole people and their diversity of backgrounds, expertise, and cultural knowledge; Espinoza et al., 2020; Scipio et al., 2025)). In this paper, we build off Scipio et al. (2025)'s pedagogies of joy framework to explore the complexity of joy as it diffuses through a community of teachers into their classrooms with their students. This paper asks how are pedagogies of joy enacted within teaching learning (specifically, a studio model), and how does joy spread in expansive directions into teachers' classrooms?

Theoretical framework

In this paper we argue that supporting joy is an act of social justice in teacher education. In their review on social justice in teacher education, Hossenini et al. (2025) commented on how teachers often struggle with "navigating the risk of reproducing inequity;…coping with vulnerability; and struggling to practice social justice education within the current system." (p. 16). More recent research has suggested that focusing on joy can be a solution to addressing these feelings of risk, fear, vulnerability, discomfort, and uncertainty involved in trying to enact social justice-oriented curriculum. The pedagogies of joy (POY) framework offers four lenses for both designing for and following joy. *Attending to affective entanglements* means paying attention to opportunities for learners to experience laughter, witness, connection, belonging, and other feelings that shape the learning activity. *Switching roles* means intentionally disrupting traditional power dynamics and encouraging learners to step into leadership positions they may often be denied. *Cultivating third space* (Gutiérrez, 2008) means co-creating hybridity between learners, teachers, and researchers so that multiple cultural repertoires are welcomed and honored in the learning environment. *(Co)dreaming to enact* means to follow the learners' lead in imagining new and expansive possibilities and future trajectories of the collective learning activity. The next section will describe how analysis was conducted through these four lenses across multiple professional learning events to show how both teachers and students engaged in joyful learning.

Methods

In [PROJECT NAME], we provided professional development (PD) for teachers in the form of 1:1 coaching sessions, monthly Zoom meetings to host critical friends' groups of each other's practice, quarterly convenings, and individual lesson observations with follow up feedback. This paper focuses on Studios, which was a new addition in the 24-25 school year of the project. Our studios were an all-day job-embedded PD hosted in one of our teachers' elementary classroom. Similar to Lesson Study (Lewis et al., 2006), Studios supported improvement of teaching through cycles, with the goal being to improve a particular lesson with the support of researchers and teacher colleagues. Host teachers and researchers met before the Studio Day to co-design lessons. On the day of

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the Studios, teachers and researchers co-taught two portions of a lesson to the same group of children, debriefed between the lessons, then adapted pedagogical approaches tailored to that particular group of children. We focus on one "chain" of PD events that features three teachers: Susy (4th/5th grade, studio host), Dhara (2nd, studio host), Helena (K, classroom observation).

The data analyzed for this paper included: Swivl recordings of the PD events, researcher field notes, exit tickets from the events, and Zoom recordings of exit interviews with the teachers. Videos and transcripts were content logged (Derry et al., 2010) then compiled into an excel sheet for deductive coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) based on the four principles of pedagogies of joy and the justice-oriented commitments of our project. This coding process revealed the prevalence of joy in the process of teachers learning to co-design justice-oriented curriculum, as described in the next section.

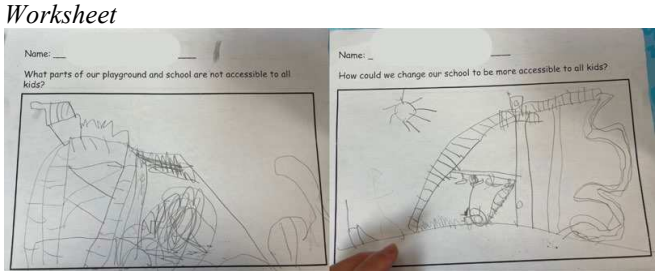
Findings

Across one "chain" of events (Susy's studio, a convening, Dhara's studio, and a classroom observation in Helena's classroom), we noticed an overall pattern that joyful social justice was a collective rather than an individual endeavor. By analyzing professional learning sessions through the four POY lenses, this section provides examples of how each lens as a design principle was enacted and how teachers learned to co-design dignity affirming learning environments. We argue that POY lenses allowed for teachers to specifically learn how to incorporate social justice into their teaching, which our literature review showed can be quite difficult to implement. These three teachers focused on two justice-oriented commitments that our project introduced: positioning culture, families, & communities as rightfully belonging (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020), and recognizing that power, historicity, & futures matter (Agarwal & Sengupta-Irving, 2019).

By studying how our teachers enact justice and joy, this section aims to show how teachers help researchers co-theorize a more coherent and expansive definition of social justice-oriented teaching. First, Susy hosted a studio where she incorporated family stories into a lesson on stars, the moon, and seasons (POY: cultivating third space). This idea was the shared out at a convening, and Dhara then incorporated family stories into a unit on structures and materials. During her lesson, she also added a wonder walk to consider not only how the students' favorite structures are build and cared for, but also how the school is breaking down and needs attention (POY: attending to affective entanglement). Helena, who attended Dhara's studio, incorporated the wonder walk idea when teaching her kindergarteners about disability justice: She asked them to take notes on how their school's playground is accessible (or not) for friends with disabilities, and to design a more accessible playground (See Figure 1; POY: switching roles + co-dreaming to enact). These four data points tell a story of how pedagogies of joy (POY) guided the teachers toward learning how to support dignity-affirming learning environments. These four moments analyzed through the POY lenses show how collaboratively designing justice-oriented science curriculum can be a joyful, dignity affirming process for both teachers and students. Together these teachers felt empowered and encouraged to design for joyful social justice through a collaborative and expansive process. Without POY and the PASTEL social justice commitments, the teachers reported that they may have had many "missed opportunities" to support dignity-affirming learning (Community Meeting, 2026).

Figure 1

Examples of Helena's Students' Playground Observations (Left) and Design (Right) Worksheet



Significance

The teachers highlighted in this paper represents just one example of a pathway for joyful teacher-student learning through research-practice partnerships. This concrete example contributes to the literature on teacher learning specifically by showing how teachers can learn to co-design justice-oriented, dignity affirming science lessons in elementary contexts. This paper also contributes to research on emotion in the learning sciences by showing how pedagogies of joy can be seen and designed for at both the teacher and student level. In future work, we hope to see pedagogies of joy and the studio model taken up in even more expansive, and dignity affirming directions.

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