This school year, let’s find ways to make learning joyful. When I think of joyful learning, I do not think only about the development of lifelong learners ready to ask questions, who actively dive into an inquiry, but I also see children who exhibit curiosity and inquisitiveness and are actively having fun. Making the learning meaningful and joyful includes attending to social-emotional learning needs and capitalizing on student interest, questions, and wonderment.

Focusing on joyfulness doesn’t mean the learning isn’t essential or outside the prescribed curriculum. It’s all about the delivery. Are the students’ interests and prior experiences considered when planning lessons? If we start by only thinking about the curriculum and the assessed elements within the lesson, we often ignore a vital player in the learning—the students.

Student sensemaking realigns the learning from being teacher-directed to student-directed. The student is honored as part of the learning process. Each time we share something new, it’s an opportunity to engage the learners to stimulate their thinking by allowing them to share past experiences. Providing space and time for students to share prior knowledge and experiences builds more robust pathways for the retention of information and for connecting conceptual understandings. We don’t learn in isolation, nor can we solve a problem by only looking at one aspect of the issue. Our students must think like scientists, engineers, and mathematicians throughout the day. They need to be supported in observing patterns, interpreting cause and effect relationships, developing models, and analyzing and interpreting data as they work through a problem. Nothing is more joyful than when a problem is finally solved, results are explained, or the students make cross-curricular connections—these are the authentic lightbulb moments.

Joyfulness doesn’t imply only fun or “soft” science. Joyfulness starts with teachers remembering and honoring that the learning is new for the students and then deliberately drawing on their natural wonder and curiosity. The more students feel excited and empowered by the learning, the farther they will go trying to figure things out or make sense of their world. When teachers plan for student engagement and sensemaking, they have remembered the importance of creating agency for learning. Why should students care, want to find answers, write about findings, or share results—because they are invested in the process. And that truly breeds joy!

So, let’s remember to plan our lessons, follow the curriculum, and cover the content, but don’t forget that essential element in the planning—the students. Create space and time for them to find the joys in learning by figuring things out, debating, assessing data, developing arguments, and solving problems. If you have an example of joyful learning in your classroom, please consider sharing it with us. We’d love to hear about how you’ve incorporated joy into your classroom.

To a joyful school year!

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