

Playful learning in Finnish classrooms

words and photos **Piia Martikainen** and **Susanna Hietaharju**



Piia Martikainen

Piia: My motivation for using games and gamification in the classroom is to make learning engaging to those who might not otherwise be interested in learning. Today's students are already familiar with gaming environments, and therefore, it's natural to use them when it's suitable. Through games, students learn problem-solving, critical thinking, communication skills, and also some technology skills, which are all skills they need in the future.

The goals for learning topics and lessons come from a Finnish national curriculum, but I can decide what kind of methods I use in the classroom based on what I believe best support learning goals. I use gamification at least once a month.

For example, I use games like Kahoot as formative assessment. After I have taught something, I create a quiz to see what my students have learned. The results of the quiz help me to see if the students need more practice.

I also use word explanation games in my Geography class. Students in small groups take turns explaining the concept of a word, without saying the word, and try to guess what the actual word is. This way, they can help teach each other, practice difficult words, and collaborate.

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I also frequently use Minecraft in the classroom because students can use it to build together all kind of projects. The limit is only your imagination. Minecraft is very popular among students, and they love it, so I think it has many uses in the classroom as well. Students can learn to communicate, collaborate, develop logical thinking skills, and problem-solve together through Minecraft.



We studied ancient Greece through Minecraft. For about ten class periods, students in groups of four searched, read, and took notes about a specific topic related to Greece (e.g., labyrinths, wars, art, and theater). Then, they create a three-dimensional world with characters, structures, and environmental features that represent their topic. I am always amazed to see how game-based environments can inspire students and that they learn things that truly matter through creating a virtual and visual recreation of their topic.





**Susanna
Hietaharju**

Susanna: As a teacher, I have been working with the youngest school children (grades 1-2) in the past seven years. It is very important for me as their teacher to give them enough space, time and possibilities for playful learning experiences. I see learning by playing as an effective way to make learning more fun, accessible, and motivating for our school children.

The young children who are between the ages of six and nine, deeply enjoy taking part in playful learning experiences. Playing is the most natural way to learn for them! They are usually very eager, motivated and excited about all kinds of playful activities, learning experiences, and situations that occur during lessons. I think that every teacher should seize the opportunity to bring joy to the children; not just because we think it is a good pedagogical tool.

Learning by playing can help students to feel joyful and enthusiastic and also enable students to learn deep concepts across all subjects. For example, when our young students at Torkinmäki school are learning about numbers from 1 to 10 and the basic mathematical operations, they learn this through play, not just by solving problems in their math books. In our classroom, we have a little grocery store that is open daily (our students are always excited about this because they get to do their own grocery). As a teacher, I play the role as the cashier, and while we're all having fun together, I can also naturally gather information about their knowledge, evaluate their learning process, and provide them feedback.

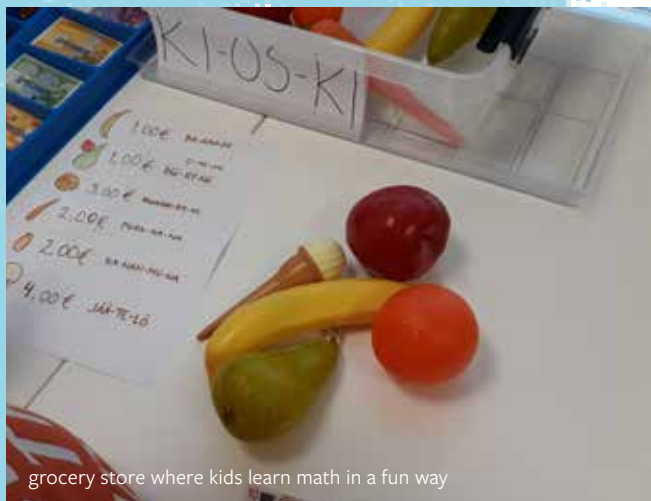
We also extend our students' playing space outside the classroom. We have a big lobby with a mini play kitchen,



the lobby area outside the classroom

cozy little tables and chairs, and shelves full of different kind of toys as well as card, and board games right outside the classrooms of the younger students. Every class uses this lobby area for weekly lessons, and children are very excited about having enough time to play there.

Finally, I regularly use drama exercises in the classroom. Depending on the nature of the exercise, it is nice to use different spaces of our new school building to do it; we can choose our homeroom, the lobby, the gym, the music classroom, or the schoolyard outside. I believe that it's essential to create a safe atmosphere where children feel like they can trust each other to encourage every child to take part in a playful drama activity. As the teacher, I provide the structure and script of a drama, and the children can add their interpretation and practice their communicative and social skills through the process.



grocery store where kids learn math in a fun way

At our school, teachers work together as a team; we do all of the pedagogical discussions and planning together in teams or in pairs. My colleague and I gather together weekly and then plan our following learning experiences thoughtfully. When it comes to using playful learning as a method, it is very creative and rewarding to discuss the ideas and thoughts together before they become real in the classrooms. It is our task as teachers to know the curriculum and give our young students opportunities to play and challenge them to learn by playing.