

Joyful Learning as Pedagogy and Practice: A Multidimensional Framework for Indian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by rapid societal change and increasing educational demands, there is a growing consensus that academic achievement alone is insufficient to prepare learners for the complexities of the modern world. This paper explores joyful learning as a transformative educational paradigm that integrates emotional well-being, cognitive engagement, and creative expression. Rooted in the disciplines of constructivist pedagogy, neuroscience, and humanistic psychology, joyful learning emphasizes the holistic development of learners by fostering curiosity, autonomy, and meaningful participation. Drawing on Judy Willis's RAD model, the paper illustrates how novelty (Reticular Activating System), emotional safety (Amygdala), and intrinsic motivation (Dopamine) work together to create optimal conditions for deep learning. Joy is not viewed as incidental, but as central to memory retention, critical thinking, and student resilience. The paper also outlines practical strategies for lesson design that spark curiosity, personalize learning, encourage reflection, and transcend subject boundaries. Focusing on the Indian educational context, the study examines innovative programs such as *Nali Kali* (Karnataka), the *Happiness Curriculum* (Delhi), *Jadui Pitara*, *Gunotsav*, *Srujan*, and *Activity-Based Learning (ABL)*. These initiatives exemplify how joyful learning can be scaled and adapted to diverse, multilingual, and under-resourced environments—enhancing both academic outcomes and emotional well-being. Despite promising results, the implementation of joyful learning faces systemic challenges, including limited teacher training, inadequate resources, and assessment frameworks that fail to capture affective growth. The paper argues that joyful learning must move from the margins to the mainstream of education policy and practice. When embedded intentionally and equitably, it has the power to redefine classrooms as spaces of discovery, connection, and transformation.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, education must serve a purpose beyond the pursuit of academic excellence. While foundational knowledge and intellectual rigor remain essential, it is increasingly evident that emotional engagement is a critical driver of meaningful learning. Students learn best not merely when they are taught, but when they feel connected, curious, and inspired. This recognition has led to a growing emphasis on joyful learning—an educational approach that integrates emotional well-being, cognitive stimulation, and creative expression to cultivate both academic and personal growth.

Joyful learning refers to more than just making education enjoyable. It is an intentional pedagogical process that aligns instructional strategies with learners' emotional needs, fostering an environment where students feel motivated, respected, and empowered. Rooted in theories of constructivism, humanistic psychology, and neuroscience, this approach encourages students to explore ideas, take ownership of their learning, and engage in tasks that are both intellectually challenging and emotionally satisfying. Research has shown that when learners experience joy, their brains are more receptive to new information, leading to improved attention, memory retention, and overall cognitive performance (Willis, 2007).

Educators and policy makers are increasingly recognizing that creating such emotionally enriched learning experiences is not a luxury but a necessity. In many educational settings, including those in India, traditional systems often prioritize rote memorization and high-stakes assessments, leaving little room for creativity, autonomy, or emotional expression. This has prompted several innovative initiatives aimed at transforming classrooms into spaces where joy and learning coexist. Programs such as *Nali Kali* in Karnataka, the *Happiness Curriculum* in Delhi, and *Activity-Based Learning* across several states exemplify this shift. These efforts have not only improved student engagement and performance but also contributed to better emotional and social outcomes for learners.

This paper aims to explore the philosophical foundations, pedagogical techniques, and practical implementations of joyful learning, with a particular focus on its relevance in the Indian educational context. Drawing upon insights from psychology, neuroscience, and educational theory, it examines how joy can be intentionally cultivated in learning environments and how doing so enhances both academic achievement and student well-being. Ultimately, this paper argues that joyful learning offers a holistic, student-centered model that can transform classrooms into vibrant spaces for discovery, collaboration, and growth.

Defining Joy and Joyful Learning

Understanding the concept of *joyful learning* begins with unpacking the core meaning of *joy* and its emotional and educational relevance. Joy, while often used interchangeably with happiness, encompasses a deeper, more personal emotional experience that plays a critical role in learning motivation, engagement, and overall well-being.

According to general dictionary definitions, joy is typically described as a state of great pleasure or happiness. However, it is more than a fleeting emotion—it is a deep-seated feeling of contentment and satisfaction that often arises from meaningful experiences. In the context of learning, joy represents an internal state that is expressed externally through enthusiasm, engagement, and curiosity (Wicaksono, 2020). It is important to distinguish between *joy* and *happiness*: while happiness may be transient and reactive, joy in learning often arises from sustained intellectual satisfaction, emotional resonance, and personal growth.

The adjective joyful implies a condition or atmosphere filled with or characterized by joy. When applied to educational settings, a joyful environment is not only emotionally positive but also stimulating and motivating, promoting a desire to participate and explore. Thus, joyful learning refers to more than just fun or entertainment—it is a dynamic, affectively rich state where students feel empowered, safe, and excited about their learning experiences.

Scholars have conceptualized joyful learning in various ways, drawing from different disciplinary lenses:

- Wicaksono (2020) defines joyful learning as a process wherein students naturally express their happiness during the act of learning. His definition emphasizes *authenticity* and the visible manifestation of joy—smiles, enthusiasm, willingness to participate—that arise when students are deeply engaged. This joy is not passive; it is an outward reflection of inner satisfaction and intellectual involvement.
- Akmaliah (2013) provides a pedagogical and relational perspective. She describes joyful learning as a state of emotional cohesion between students and educators, where teaching and learning occur without coercion or pressure. Her emphasis is on safe, respectful, and emotionally harmonious classroom dynamics, where joy emerges from mutual understanding and supportive interactions. This kind of emotional bond reduces anxiety, increases trust, and makes the learning experience more memorable and meaningful.
- Udvari-Solner and Kluth (2007) offer a more comprehensive definition, describing joyful learning as a positive intellectual and emotional state that emerges when learners derive pleasure, satisfaction, and meaning from the learning process. Their framework connects emotion with cognition, showing that joy enhances memory, critical thinking, and creativity. They argue that joyful learning is not incidental; it is the outcome of well-designed, inclusive, and engaging pedagogy, especially in diverse and inclusive classrooms.

Together, these definitions converge on the idea that joyful learning is a holistic, multi-dimensional construct. It encompasses emotional safety, intellectual stimulation, autonomy, and meaningful relationships. It requires educators to deliberately design learning environments that balance rigor with play, structure with creativity, and standards with personal relevance.

Joyful learning, therefore, is not merely a teaching strategy or classroom trend—it is a philosophy of education that honors the full humanity of learners. It supports the development of resilient, motivated, and self-aware individuals, making it an essential component of modern education.

Theoretical Perspectives On Joyful Learning

Joyful learning is supported by multiple theoretical foundations. Each perspective contributes a unique lens through which educators and researchers understand the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of learning. The following perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for interpreting joyful learning:

Perspective	Definition & Elaboration
Philosophical	From a philosophical standpoint, joyful learning emphasizes intrinsic motivation, love of learning, and the pursuit of meaning. Thinkers such as John Dewey have long advocated for experiential and interest-driven education, where learners are active participants rather than passive recipients. In this view, education should not suppress emotion but integrate it, recognizing joy as essential to cultivating lifelong learners who find value in knowledge itself, not just in grades or external rewards.
Pedagogical	Pedagogically, joyful learning is associated with constructivist and interactive teaching methods. It involves strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, project-based learning, and experiential instruction. These methods encourage student agency, promote curiosity, and link learning with real-world application, making education more meaningful and engaging. The teacher’s role shifts from a transmitter of information to a facilitator of joyful discovery.
Psychological	From a psychological perspective, joyful learning focuses on the emotional states of learners. It views learning not as a purely cognitive activity but as one deeply connected to affective experiences. Emotions like joy can enhance motivation, attention, and memory. According to positive psychology and neuroscience, pleasurable learning experiences increase dopamine levels, fostering resilience, creativity, and retention. Joy is therefore seen as a catalyst for deeper cognitive processing.
Student-Centered	In a student-centered approach, joyful learning recognizes that each learner is unique, with individual interests, strengths, and learning styles. It emphasizes autonomy, allowing students to make choices in what and how they learn. By personalizing instruction, educators create a sense of ownership and empowerment, leading to greater motivation. Joy arises when students feel their voices are heard and their identities respected.
Holistic Education	Holistic education integrates academic, emotional, social, and ethical development. Joyful learning fits naturally within this model, as it nurtures the whole child. It connects head (cognitive), heart (emotional), and hands (practical) to help learners become balanced, empathetic, and engaged citizens. This perspective acknowledges that learning is not just about results—it is about well-being, connection, and meaning.

Together, these perspectives illustrate that joyful learning is not just a set of techniques, but a comprehensive educational philosophy that aligns the emotional, intellectual, and social needs of students.

Neuroscience & Joyful Learning: The Rad Model

Advancements in neuroscience have offered educators profound insights into how the brain learns best. Dr. Judy Willis, a neurologist and educator, developed the RAD model to explain how the brain’s neurobiological processes can be harnessed to foster joyful and effective learning experiences. The acronym RAD stands for three core components of brain function that are critical in education: the Reticular Activating System, the Amygdala, and Dopamine pathways. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how novelty, emotional safety, and reward are central to sustaining engagement, enhancing memory, and building intrinsic motivation.

Reticular Activating System (R): Novelty and Attention

The Reticular Activating System (RAS) is a network of neurons located in the brainstem responsible for regulating alertness, attention, and the transition between wakefulness and sleep. In an educational context, the RAS acts as a filtering system that determines which stimuli reach conscious awareness and which are ignored.

Application in Learning Design:

- Novelty is essential for capturing and maintaining students' attention.
- When students encounter new, unexpected, or curious stimuli, the RAS is activated, prompting the brain to pay attention.
- This can be done through:
 - Unusual questions (“What would happen if gravity suddenly stopped?”)
 - Real-world puzzles or mysteries
 - Changing classroom routines or formats to avoid predictability

By incorporating surprise, creativity, and variability into lesson plans, teachers can increase cognitive arousal and engagement, thereby improving focus and memory retention. Joy arises when learners are intrigued and feel mentally stimulated.

Amygdala (A): Emotional Safety and Learning

The amygdala, part of the limbic system, plays a key role in processing emotions, particularly fear and stress. It also acts as a gatekeeper for learning: when a student feels anxious, threatened, or emotionally unsafe, the amygdala activates the "fight or flight" response, which blocks information flow to the prefrontal cortex—the center for reasoning, analysis, and decision-making.

Application in Learning Design:

- A stress-free, emotionally safe environment is essential for learning to occur.
- Teachers can lower the affective filter by:
 - Building trusting, respectful relationships
 - Avoiding public embarrassment or punitive discipline
 - Encouraging mistakes as part of learning
 - Practicing mindfulness, deep breathing, or SEL techniques

A calm amygdala allows greater access to higher-order thinking, creativity, and risk-taking. In joyful learning environments, students feel secure enough to explore, question, and innovate.

Dopamine (D): Reward, Motivation, and Joy

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with the brain's reward system. It is released when individuals experience pleasure, achievement, or novelty. In learning, dopamine acts as a motivational amplifier, reinforcing behaviors that lead to positive emotional experiences.

Application in Learning Design:

- When students are engaged in authentic, relevant, and rewarding tasks, their dopamine levels increase.
- Dopamine release:
 - Enhances memory consolidation
 - Boosts motivation and perseverance
 - Fosters creativity and curiosity

Teachers Can Stimulate Dopamine Production Through:

- Celebrating student progress and small wins
- Providing positive feedback and encouragement
- Incorporating choice and autonomy into assignments
- Embedding play, humor, and excitement into lessons

In essence, dopamine links joy to the learning process, transforming effort and discovery into inherently satisfying experiences.

Implications for Teachers

Understanding and applying the RAD model helps educators become brain-aware designers of learning. By aligning instructional methods with students' neurological needs, teachers can:

- Minimize stress
- Maximize joy and motivation
- Create long-lasting, meaningful learning experiences

In short, joyful learning is biologically supported and pedagogically powerful. It transforms classrooms into safe, stimulating, and emotionally fulfilling environments, making learning both effective and deeply enjoyable.

Designing Joyful Lessons

Creating joyful lessons requires a deliberate design process that aligns with both emotional and cognitive principles. It's not just about entertaining students; it's about intellectually engaging them in ways that evoke curiosity, creativity, and emotional connection. The following six strategies are fundamental to designing lessons that foster joy in learning:

- **Spark Curiosity:**Curiosity is a powerful motivator. When learners are presented with unusual questions, surprising facts, or open-ended problems, their cognitive engagement increases. Intrigue activates the brain's reward system, especially when the content is novel or puzzles students must solve.
- **Personalize Learning:**Each learner is unique, and joyful learning flourishes when content is relevant to students' abilities, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Personalization involves adapting instructional strategies to meet diverse learning needs.
- **Facilitate Connection Building:**Joy increases when learners connect new ideas with previous knowledge, real-life situations, or personal experiences. These connections strengthen understanding and foster a sense of purpose.
- **Bring Novelty:**Children are naturally curious and thrive in environments that encourage creative exploration and innovation. Novelty enhances attention and engagement, especially when students are asked to create something new.
- **Foster Reflection:**Allowing time for self-assessment and reflection helps learners become meta-cognitively aware of their progress. Reflection builds intrinsic motivation and supports emotional growth.
- **Transcend Subject Boundaries:**Real-world learning is rarely confined to a single subject. Joyful learning embraces interdisciplinary approaches that show students the relevance of knowledge across contexts.

Joyful Learning In The Indian Context

India has increasingly embraced joyful learning as a national priority in its efforts to make education more inclusive, engaging, and emotionally enriching. In response to the limitations of rote memorization and exam-centric teaching, both central and state governments have introduced innovative programs aimed at transforming traditional classrooms into environments that nurture curiosity, creativity, and emotional well-being.

Below is a comprehensive overview of key initiatives that reflect India's evolving educational philosophy:

Nali Kali (Karnataka)

A flagship joyful learning program, *Nali Kali* ("Joyful Learning" in Kannada) reimagines multi-grade classrooms through:

- Storytelling, music, and games
- Child-paced learning via activity cards
- A fear-free environment encouraging self-directed progression

This model has empowered first-generation learners, especially girls, by making classrooms more welcoming and culturally relevant.

Happiness Curriculum (Delhi)

Introduced in over 1,000 Delhi government schools for students from Nursery to Grade 8, this curriculum focuses on:

- Daily mindfulness practices and self-reflection
- Lessons on empathy, gratitude, and interpersonal relationships
- Cultivation of emotional intelligence alongside academic learning

The curriculum has shown promising effects in improving emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and classroom behavior.

JaduiPitara (NCF Foundational Stage)

Part of the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (2022), *JaduiPitara* or "Magic Box" is a play-based learning toolkit for children aged 3–8:

- Includes toys, storybooks, games, and manipulatives
- Offered in 13 Indian languages to ensure cultural and linguistic inclusivity
- Encourages exploration, creativity, and joyful learning at the foundational level

Digantar (Rajasthan)

Operating in rural Rajasthan, Digantar promotes context-driven, learner-centered education through:

- Activity-based pedagogy
- Emphasis on conceptual understanding and critical thinking
- Facilitator-based teaching rather than authoritative instruction

Digantar has been particularly effective in empowering marginalized communities and democratizing access to meaningful education.

Activity-Based Learning (ABL)

Widely implemented in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and other states, ABL is based on:

- Experiential learning and peer interaction
- Visual and self-paced learning aids
- Reduced textbook dependence and increased hands-on engagement

It has improved student retention, comprehension, and autonomy, especially in rural and multi-grade contexts.

Gunotsav (Gujarat, Assam)

Originally launched in Gujarat and later adopted in Assam, *Gunotsav* focuses on educational quality improvement through:

- Joyful, child-friendly learning materials
- Continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms
- Emphasis on reducing fear and increasing student participation

The initiative has significantly improved foundational learning outcomes in government schools.

Balvatika (SamagraShiksha)

Introduced as part of India's early childhood education reform:

- Pre-primary classes integrated into government schools
- Focus on toy-based, play-centric learning
- Culturally relevant and localized materials

Balvatika supports children's holistic development and lays the groundwork for joyful foundational learning.

Khelo India – School-Based Physical Education

This initiative embeds sports and movement-based learning into regular curricula:

- Promotes joy through active play
- Enhances teamwork, focus, and emotional resilience
- Combats sedentary learning by incorporating physical activity

UNESCO's Happy Schools Framework (India Adaptation)

Adopted in collaboration with select Indian institutions:

- Emphasizes emotional climate, teacher-student relationships, and well-being
- Includes visual and performing arts, life skills, and self-expression
- Evaluates student happiness alongside academic performance

This approach promotes emotional balance, community, and creative exploration.

Srujan (Maharashtra)

Developed by MSCERT, Srujan promotes creative and experiential learning through:

- Open-ended activities in language, science, and social studies
- Integration of local culture and craft
- Project-based tasks that foster critical thinking and innovation

State Curriculum Framework Pilots (Post-NCF 2022)

Several states, including Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, and Telangana, are implementing pilot programs aligned with the new NCF:

- Emphasize interdisciplinary, joyful, and multilingual learning
- Encourage nature-based experiences, arts integration, and theme-based projects
- Use play, storytelling, and music to enhance student engagement

India’s joyful learning movement demonstrates that emotional well-being and academic excellence are not mutually exclusive—they are interdependent pillars of quality education.

Policy Context: NEP 2020 AND NCF 2023

The implementation of joyful learning in Indian classrooms is firmly aligned with recent national education policy frameworks that advocate for holistic, inclusive, and engaging pedagogy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a paradigm shift in Indian education by emphasizing learning that is not only competency-driven but also emotionally enriching and experiential in nature. The policy explicitly calls for “*fun-filled, discovery-based, and learner-centered education*” at all stages, particularly in foundational and preparatory years (Ministry of Education, 2020). This reflects a broader recognition that emotional well-being, creativity, and student autonomy are integral to meaningful learning. Building on the vision of NEP 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 and the broader NCF 2023 further institutionalize joyful learning as a core pedagogical principle. The NCF-FS prioritizes play-based, activity-oriented, and culturally responsive learning environments for children aged 3 to 8. The NCF 2023 extends this philosophy across all school levels, emphasizing learner agency, interdisciplinary integration, and the use of local materials, stories, and languages to make learning more relevant and joyful.

Importantly, these frameworks embed joy not as a supplementary feature but as a structural element of curriculum design. Joyful learning is viewed as a driver of curiosity, social-emotional development, and intrinsic motivation—qualities essential for lifelong learning. By integrating arts, movement, games, and reflective practices into everyday instruction, NEP 2020 and NCF 2023 position joyful learning as both a right and a necessity in the evolving Indian educational ecosystem.

Together, these policy documents provide a strong normative and operational foundation for scaling joyful learning across diverse contexts, ensuring that pedagogical innovation is supported by systemic coherence, equity, and sustainability.

Impact of Joyful Learning

Joyful learning has been shown to yield significant positive outcomes across various dimensions of education. The benefits are both academic and emotional:

Benefit	Supporting Evidence and Explanation
Academic Achievement	Studies like Wahyuni&Naim (2019) indicate improved test scores and conceptual clarity when humor and joy are embedded into instruction. Students not only perform better but also retain information longer.
Engagement and Retention	Programs like Nali Kali have significantly reduced dropout rates, especially in rural schools. When students enjoy learning, they are more likely to attend and participate actively.
Emotional Well-being	The Delhi Happiness Curriculum has shown positive outcomes in self-regulation, empathy, and resilience, which are vital for both academic success and personal growth.
Long-Term Learning	Joy increases dopamine levels, which enhances long-term memory and intrinsic motivation. Students exposed to joyful learning are more likely to become lifelong learners with a positive attitude toward education.

Challenges In Implementation

Despite its numerous benefits, joyful learning faces several challenges in practice, especially in traditional or under-resourced educational systems:

Teacher Preparedness

Implementing joyful learning demands a shift in teacher mindset and pedagogy:

- Many teachers are trained in didactic, exam-driven approaches.
- They may lack skills in facilitation, creativity, or inclusive teaching.
- Ongoing professional development is required to equip educators with tools for interactive, personalized, and emotionally responsive teaching.

Resource Limitations

Joyful learning often requires learning materials, manipulatives, and flexible spaces, which are not always available:

- Underfunded schools struggle to provide the infrastructure needed for experiential or play-based learning.
- Limited access to teaching aids, technology, or culturally relevant materials can hinder implementation, especially in rural or marginalized areas.

Assessment Systems

Current assessment frameworks are heavily focused on standardized testing and rote recall:

- They fail to measure creativity, collaboration, emotional growth, or student engagement.
- There is a need for alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, formative feedback, self-assessments, and project-based evaluations that align with the goals of joyful learning.

CONCLUSION

Joyful learning is not an educational luxury—it is an essential foundation for cultivating learners who are not only academically competent but also emotionally resilient, socially aware, and intrinsically motivated. In an era where rote learning and high-stakes testing often dominate classroom practices, joyful learning offers a transformative alternative that places students' emotional well-being and active engagement at the heart of the educational process.

By intentionally integrating emotional resonance with cognitive rigor, joyful learning promotes deeper understanding, long-term retention, and a sustained love for knowledge. It fosters environments where students feel safe to express themselves, take intellectual risks, and engage meaningfully with content that is both relevant and inspiring.

Through strategies such as personalized learning, play-based exploration, interdisciplinary connections, and reflective thinking, joyful learning aligns educational practice with the natural ways children explore and make sense of the world.

Moreover, the evidence from neuroscience and psychology affirms that joyful learning is neurologically optimal—it enhances attention, motivation, and creativity through the stimulation of positive emotional states.

Programs implemented across India, such as *Nali Kali*, the *Happiness Curriculum*, and *Jadui Pitara*, demonstrate the practical viability and social impact of this approach, particularly in under-resourced and diverse learning contexts.

However, the full realization of joyful learning requires systemic support. Investments in teacher training, curriculum reform, infrastructure development, and assessment redesign are critical to embedding joy as a core pedagogical value rather than a peripheral supplement. Policymakers and educators must work collaboratively to create conditions where joyful learning is not the exception but the norm.

In essence, joyful learning holds the potential to redefine the purpose and practice of education. It empowers students to see learning not as a burden but as a journey of discovery, meaning, and fulfillment.

When classrooms become spaces of joy, curiosity, and connection, education transcends the transmission of facts and becomes a catalyst for personal transformation and societal progress.

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