

### Pushing Play in Primary: Findings from Three Case Study Classes.

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Short research paper.

*Key words: play, early primary, changing pedagogy.*

Authors' note: *This paper presents a very brief overview of a larger data set.*

#### **Introduction**

This work is informed by Scotland's growing initiative to extend play across early primary, fuelled, in part, by The Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 Project, and nationwide continuing professional development delivered by Grogan. In terms of conflict of interest, it is important to note that some of the student researchers had attended Grogan's training before embarking on this project.

This paper explores the practicalities of implementing play-based pedagogy in early primary. Using a practitioner enquiry paradigm, data were collected during M.Ed. research projects in three primary schools and presented via case study methodology. A multi-method approach was adopted, including interviews with practitioners, observations and pedagogically-designed consultation with children. The paper presents four findings: 1. Play in primary was heterogenous and context specific; 2. Teachers had considerable sway over the place of play in the classroom; 3. Children appeared engaged when they were leading their learning and playing, making the need for more play-based opportunities fundamental. 4. Lack of confidence, training, resourcing and the need to 'cover' the curriculum were apparent barriers to play pedagogy in Primary.

#### **Aim**

This paper explores play in early Primary classes in Scotland. The work seeks to bridge the perpetual gap between the nursery and primary traditions, offering more fluid transitions throughout the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Early Level, which spans nursery into Primary 1 (Burns, 2019).

### **Relationship to previous research: the place of play in Primary**

Play is fundamental and beneficial, not least, for:

- children's social and academic skills (Sandberg, A. and Heden, R. 2011);
- children's self-regulation, through exploratory dramatic and make-believe play or child-led play experiences (Bodrova et al. 2013; Arnott 2013);
- creative thinking (Goodliff et al 2017);
- problem solving (Grogan and Duncan 2018);
- imagination (Vygotsky 1930/2004); and
- consolidating learning and application of skills to real-world situations (Piaget, J. 1951; Bruce, T. 1991.).

Linking play, learning and teaching requires an awareness of the many forms of play and the role of the adults in a play scenario (Fisher, 2013). It also requires an understanding that, as a medium for learning, play requires appropriate scaffolding and opportunities for uninterrupted play to facilitate new challenges. This cannot happen devoid of context and learning environments - physical, social and cultural environments are key. Hence, we need Primary classrooms that offer 'potentiating' spaces for play (Claxton, 2007).

In Primary, however, play is less established. To inform this debate at Primary school level, this paper offers practical and critically reflective examples of key considerations that must be explored in order to support children with play pedagogies.

### **Theoretical frame**

As this paper amalgamates findings from different studies the theoretical frames are idiosyncratic to the study. Nevertheless, for this paper, the data is presented as a critically reflective narrative (Dean, 2017) to consider the successes and challenges of play within each context.

### **Methodology and Methods**

The projects employed a practitioner enquiry approach (Hall and Wall, 2019) where researchers assumed a dual role as class teacher and researcher. Data are presented as case studies (Yin, 2013), to amalgamate the three data sets. All studies adopted multi-method approach (see Table 1).

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Title of the project	Primary Level	Sample Size	Consent process	Methods	Data collected
Context 1 (Milligan)  Teachers' Perspectives of the Value of Play in Primary Schools	P1 - P3	3 teachers from 3 different primary stages  Primary 1 – 1 teacher and 25 children.  Primary 2 – 1 teacher and 19 children.  Primary 3 – 1 teacher and 28 children.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written consent from teachers.</li> <li>Consent to observe children in class - information session with the children within the participants classes to explain that I would be observing their teacher and I asked them to give their consent to me being there by moving their name onto a happy or a sad face.</li> </ol>	<p>Semi-structured teacher interviews.</p> <p>3 observations of each teacher across different curricular areas.</p>	<p>3 interviews.</p> <p>3 observations per teacher participant each lasting approximately 50 minutes.</p>
Context 2 (Lamb)  An Investigation into Children and Teachers' Perceptions of Playful Pedagogy in Primary School	P1	<p>8 (4 girls and 4 boys) children from a class of 25.</p> <p>260 teacher survey responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All pupils were informed as to the nature of the project prior to consenting. Children did not need to take part and consent was optional.</li> <li>If the selected children wished to take part then they would move their name onto a green thumb up. If they did not wish to take part their name would go onto a red thumb down. Their name could move at anytime during any day or lesson.</li> <li>If children consented to taking part in the interview phase of research, they placed a lanyard on to show they are consenting to being recorded.</li> <li>Although parents had no direct role in the data collection, they were required to consent to their child taking part. The parents were invited to an open afternoon to become familiar with the research.</li> <li>Consent was given electronically by those who wished to take part in the teacher survey by ticking a box to say they consent.</li> </ul>	<p>Data Collection</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children's views using colour coded panel (a technique used as part of classroom pedagogy).</li> <li>Semi structured children's interviews in groups.</li> <li>Children's observations (using a time sampling checklist)</li> <li>Electronic teacher survey</li> </ol>	<p>Panel vote by children - after each lesson (total 15)</p> <p>Interviews – 4 groups of 2 interviewed.</p> <p>Observation - minimum 5 per child (minimum 40 in total)</p> <p>Teacher survey – 17 questions asked, 260 responses gained</p>
Context 3 (Connor) "To what extent is it possible to teach science through play based pedagogy in Primary 1?"	P1	<p>20 children (out of a class of 25)</p> <p>15 (out of 20) teachers across the school ranging from P1-P7</p>	<p>An informal info session for parents and children, children then could choose to join with some or all with a consent smiley face badge. They were able to leave whenever they wanted, and leaving the activity indicated dissent.</p> <p>Non-return of surveys indicated dissent.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narrative Observations</li> <li>Teacher Survey</li> <li>Mosaic Approach method for data collection including floor book, photos, and multi methods such as drawings, science work, mark making and results from science experiments.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 teacher surveys distributed- 15 returned.</li> <li>2 observations per child. 10 used in final analysis.</li> <li>Photos- 45</li> <li>Floorbook documenting work including photos, drawing, findings- all children's work.</li> </ul>

**Table 1 Multimethod approach**

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was sought from institutional ethics committees and the studies followed the Scottish Educational Research Association Ethical Guidance (SERA, 2005). Consent was sought from educational institutions, staff and parents. Children's assent was conditional, based on their willingness to participate and researchers provided opportunities for children to voluntarily withdraw at any time (see table 1 for details).

### **Main Findings and Discussion**

Across the studies, four findings became clear:

1. Play in Primary was heterogenous and context specific;
2. Teachers had considerable sway over play in the classroom;
3. Children appeared engaged when they were leading their learning and playing, making play-based opportunities fundamental;
4. Lack of confidence, training, resourcing and the need to 'cover' the curriculum were apparent barriers to play pedagogy in Primary.

Play was different across the case study contexts. This is not problematic; indeed it could mean that teachers are responsive to individual children within their class. Data, however, showed that play was less driven by children's needs and more driven by teachers' definitions of play as multifaceted, guided by their beliefs and experiences about education. Individual teachers could define play in many ways, from something that is 'pleasurable' or 'unique' or something that supported 'growth' in some way, either cognitively, socially or emotionally.

A definition of play which varied from moment to moment still fosters diverse experiences for children. This encourages child-led experience as Case Study 3 suggested that a child's natural play and learning cycle link to skills for life-long learning and work. This helps challenge or support children's curiosity and own investigations. The uniqueness of each child's play experience, therefore, has the potential to benefit children, not just in the moment but throughout their learning journey.

Child-led experiences were valued by the child participants as data showed that children perceive themselves to be playing when they are leading their own learning but learning when they are working with their teacher. Furthermore, the data showed children engaged most enthusiastically in activities that were child-led, open ended and provided a level of challenge, where the purpose was flexible but clear. Thus, in free choice time children engaged most with activities they perceived as play.

Similar findings were clear in case study 3 where the use of open-ended resources were shown to support child-led experiences. For example, the main conclusions from this case stated that:

*“that science can be taught through a play based approach in Primary one, as long as certain factors are implemented; starting from the child and child led learning, the learning environment/science area is set up with the children and open to change” (Connor, 2019)*

Overall, children need time for ‘free play’ – play that is freely chosen and self-motivated (Government, 2013; Scottish Government, 2013). It is through such free play – as opposed to narratives around structured or guided play (see Moyles, 2015 for consideration of these debates) – that the child’s perspective is obtained and understood. The data from these studies supports this where possible.

Yet, many Primary teachers, however, remain unsure of how to organise a play-based curriculum (Moyles, Georgeson and Payler, 2011). Staff need training about how to develop play to ensure a level of challenge and reflection for all children (Bruce, 2018). This was evident in the data, as Case Study 1 suggested that resourcing, budgeting and staffing were found to be barriers of play-based learning. In particular, lack of confidence meant that some teachers reverted back to adult-guided teaching approaches in order to ‘teach’ the curriculum.

### **Implications for research, policy and practice**

- Teachers require more opportunities to develop knowledge and confidence with play-based pedagogies, particularly in relation to supporting free play; a focus on provocations may be helpful here (Education Scotland, 2020).
- Freedom within the curriculum, classroom management, support networks, growth development and friendship building were found to be facilitators of play-based learning. Therefore, re-examining the structure imposed in some school context would help progress opportunities for play.
- Open ended resources, or ‘intelligent resourcing’ (Arnott and Grogan, in press) can support child-led learning, even with more specific topics like Science, as shown in Case Study 3.

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