

## PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES IN EARLY PRIMARY

### Introduction

1. This paper provides a brief introduction to what is meant by play-based learning and how it contributes to children's outcomes and facilitates the transition from ELC to primary school. It then summarises what we know about current practice in play-based learning in early primary. Although there are some excellent examples of good practice, it suggests that practice is still too variable. It considers possible strategies for embedding a more consistent understanding of appropriate play-based learning among teachers and invites the Curriculum and Assessment Board to suggest if and how we should be doing more to strengthen this.

### The role of play in supporting children's learning

2. Free-flow play that is not over-directed but involves active support from adults is an essential aspect of early years learning.
3. The National Strategy for Play defines play as "play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development." 'Building the Ambition: National Practice Guidance for Early Learning and Childcare', goes further and makes explicit the connections between play and learning, emphasising that when playing, children try out ideas and come to a better understanding of thoughts and concepts as they play, which supports their wider development. It includes an explanation of why play (particularly free-flow play) and learning are connected and how practitioners can support this. It highlights, for example, how to create the appropriate environment and choices of resources to stimulate children's play that reflects their current interests, and how to support children without over-directing play. It recognises that play can be misinterpreted as "just play" and the intrinsic value of what a child is actually doing, can be missed or ignored and therefore seen as less valued.
4. "Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education 2012-2016" (QUISE) shows that practitioners in ELC are utilising these opportunities and states that children within early ELC now "have better opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills through play and meaningful real life contexts"<sup>1</sup>.
5. The non-prescriptive nature and inherent flexibility of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) allows for the delivery of play-based learning within the current curriculum framework and at any stage of the learner journey. "Building the Curriculum 2: Active Learning in the Early Years" is part of the suite of national guidance on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). It emphasises the importance of learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations. It encourages practitioners in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings *and* the early years of primary school to take full advantage of the opportunities for learning presented by both spontaneous play and planned, purposeful play.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Scotland (2017) Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education 2012-2016 p 5

6. Recent practice in East Dunbartonshire Council (EDC) has demonstrated how attainment has been increased through Play2Learn – a structured, play-based learning approach in early primary. Play2Learn is a systematic strategic approach underpinned by research and practitioner enquiry to improve pedagogy in the early years of primary school. A number of EDC schools are progressing the *Play2Learn* approach into Primary 3. The council's most recent evaluation shows that the 465 children engaged in *Play2Learn* were more likely to achieve early level writing, reading, talking and listening than those who are not involved in this approach, with the differences being statistically significant.
7. The positive effect that play can have on learning has also been demonstrated at St Andrew Primary in East Ayrshire. With support from the University of Strathclyde, staff were trained on how to develop active play-based learning in literacy across the early level. The focus included the development of the learning environment and the use of open-ended play experiences. Play-based learning was shown to support development needs, both academically and their wellbeing, for all learners, including those in SIMD 1 and 2.
8. Whilst there is still work to do to ensure the approach is effective, current data shows that there has been a significant impact on literacy and numeracy skills and children are confidently consolidating their skills and knowledge through application.
9. Children appear calm, settled and engaged in their learning, which has been reflected through the initial use of the Leuven Scale and also through wellbeing baselines and summative assessments.
10. Children are able to independently lead their own learning and are beginning to identify their own next steps by selecting resources to consolidate and transfer their learning into play-based activities and using resources to explore their understanding of key concepts and skills. They have a greater understanding of their world around them and are able to make connections through play. There has also been a reduction in the number of distressed behaviours displayed during the initial transition period from ELC to Primary 1.
11. There is international evidence that highlights the impacts of play based learning in children's development. *Oers and Duikers (2013)* examined language acquisition in the Netherlands. They found that play based learning approaches improved vocabulary acquisition, especially the most vulnerable children.<sup>2</sup> *Fleer (2011)* also proposes that quality play-based programs impact schooling outcomes and can lead to higher outcomes in literacy and numeracy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bert Van Oers & Debbie Duijkers (2013) Teaching in a play-based curriculum: Theory, practice and evidence of developmental education for young children, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45:4, 511-534, DOI: [10.1080/00220272.2011.637182](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2011.637182)

<sup>3</sup> Fleer, M., 2011. 'Conceptual play': Foregrounding imagination and cognition during concept formation in early years education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(3), pp.224-240.

## The role of play in supporting the transition to primary school

12. We know the importance of effective transitions in supporting progression in children's learning and closing the attainment gap. As the evidence from St Andrew Primary suggests, one way of easing the transition from ELC to primary could be embedding play-based learning in early primary years in a more consistent way.
13. Our practice across the transition from ELC to school is likely to be in the spotlight when the OECD publish their review on alignment and continuity between early childhood and primary school curricula. Scotland features as one of the seven case studies in this review, along with Japan, Luxembourg, New Jersey (US), Norway, New Zealand and Victoria (Australia). The review is being funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland. The date of publication has yet to be finalised but the aim is to publish before the end of the year.
14. The Scottish Government and Education Scotland have seen and commented on an early draft of the Scottish case study. That draft recognised that the early level of CfE spans the transition from ELC to primary ("setting the ground for a smooth transition between early learning and childcare"). However, in terms on professional continuity, the draft also highlighted the difference in the regulation and qualifications of teachers and ELC practitioners and the drop in the number of teachers working in ELC in Scotland. On the subject of play-based learning, the draft report commented:
- "Small-scale research has shown how teachers' understanding of active play-based pedagogy may differ significantly among practitioners<sup>4</sup>, especially when describing their classroom practice e.g. some teachers would describe whole-class teaching as active learning (Martlew et al, 2011; Stephen et al, 2010). According to Martlew (2011) this could be partly rooted in the lack of an explicit definition of active learning, and of a rationale for including it in the curriculum, beyond the call to teachers to implement it."*
15. In October 2016, the Scottish Government published a consultation document, 'Blueprint for 2020', to seek views on the policy choices to be made in delivering the expansion of funded ELC. The consultation included a question on how we could best support children at transition stages throughout their early-learner journey. A common theme in responses was that the ELC workforce and teachers should be supported with appropriate training to equip them with the skills and knowledge they require to guide children through transition stages. Included in the areas for training was an understanding of play-based learning.
16. A repeated view was that training should be relevant and involve a range of approaches such as shadowing and visits to gold standard establishments to observe effective practice. A few respondents suggested that colleges and other training providers review their course content to ensure up-to-date relevance, focusing on the outcomes and competencies around transition. Latest research

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<sup>4</sup> We have asked the authors to clarify whether this is a differences between teachers and ELC practitioners or between teachers.

was identified as potentially informing course content and generating valuable lessons on transitions. Several respondents suggested that best practice on transitions could be usefully shared as part of learning.

### **Current practice in play-based learning in early primary**

17. In an earlier study in 2003, Professor Dunlop undertook research on continuity and progression in learning for children in early educational transition from ELC to primary education experiences of 151 children. Fifty-eight ELC settings and 56 primary school visits were undertaken over 18 month period observing (play-based) learning. While she found evidence that all the teachers in the study theoretically placed a value on play, there were some important differences in how they articulated this. The primary teachers, in common with parental expectations, talked more of structure and, in practice, the play they offered was more routinised, timetabled and frequently teacher directed. By comparison, the teachers working in ELC focused more on interaction, involvement and individual response, with teachers feeling it legitimate to follow children's interests and realising the curriculum through play. For most of the primary school teachers in the study, play was seen as an appropriate way to start the day but the place of play was emphasised as distinct from the curriculum. Just one of the teachers working in primary school used play as a vehicle for her planned learning and made strong relationships between the play opportunities and the more formalised teaching.

18. Professor Dunlop concludes that:

*“Play and playful approaches to learning are vital if children are to be able make successful use of what they already know in the initial stages of their statutory education. A research agenda is generated: one which embraces play, explores its range, is not frightened of its informality, and recognises its power in order to enquire further about most favourable means of learning for children so that they remain motivated and interested in what they are doing, and so that the potential of play as part of learning is revisited for our youngest children. For this to be achieved, the value of play and its nature must be made explicit, and teachers need to be supported in developing their role in relation to play and playful learning. If a continuum of playful learning is sustained, play then is a bridge for supporting the move to school, and an opportunity for continuity and progression in learning.”*

19. Education Scotland's inspection evidence shows that some progress is being made in developing a shared understanding of the importance of delivering learning through play in early years and an increasing focus on play at P1. Evidence from inspection shows an increased amount of professional learning being provided for teachers on play to ensure that they are developing a shared understanding of early years pedagogy.

20. The increased effective use of play in primary schools can be further illustrated by the observations of Inspectors, one of which is detailed below:

“All of the direct teaching and all of the play activities were linked to learning to name, order and match numbers from 0 to 10. This included use of practical numeracy resources; ‘washing lines’ of numbers; dominoes; and singing games. The teacher had clear learning intentions, and her interaction with children during the play activities supported effective learning. Later, there was a more open play session during which the class teacher and classroom assistants interacted with children during play to extend their vocabulary, and observe, check and record learning.”

21. Transitions from early learning and childcare into Primary 1 are mainly positive. However, there should continue to be a focus on ensuring children’s learning is viewed as a continuum and does not have unnecessary stops and starts. There is still a need to develop transition when children are moving into primary school to ensure they continue to build on prior learning through the early level.
22. However the provision of consistently high-quality play experiences for children remains a work in progress. Inspection evidence also highlights a number of key challenges. These include ensuring that play experiences support children in making suitable progress in their learning. Alongside this there is a need further professional learning for staff to develop a shared understanding of what high quality play in primary looks like which engages, motivates and provides sufficient challenge for all children to meet their learning needs.
23. Ultimately, it is for teachers in primary schools to determine when and how to utilise play-based learning. There is a question then as to why primary teachers might be more reluctant to utilise play than their counterparts in the ELC sector, especially as they are both delivering the same set of experiences and outcomes within the early level of CfE. This might be in part attributable to the historical separation of the ELC sector and primary school sector. The introduction of CfE within both sectors has helped to bring about a level of integration but fragmentation still exists in terms of governance, inspection regimes, workforce and general guidance.

### **Developing teachers’ understanding of how play-based learning can support children’s learning**

#### Sharing of highly effective practice in play-based learning

24. Education Scotland will continue to support increased understanding of play-based pedagogy amongst primary teachers through professional dialogue during inspection and other engagements with teachers and practitioners, and through continuing to identify and share examples of highly effective practice.
25. Education Scotland could undertake a national review of play-based learning in the early years of school. This will focus on how play-based learning in primary 1 is supporting children to progress in their learning. This could focus on what makes of effective play-based learning in primary 1, identifying key features and case studies.
26. The St Andrew Primary case study is already featured on the National Improvement Hub ([Playbased learning for early primary to close the attainment](#)

gap) and Education Scotland will shortly be publishing a case-study in the Hub on *Play2Learn*. There are other examples of play-based learning in primary schools that could be added. Garnetbank Primary School, for example, was recently awarded the Nancy Ovens Awards for Play in recognition of the fact that all Primary 1 learning is delivered through play. Education Scotland are also aware of work to develop play across the early level in Falkirk Council.

#### National training on the role of play in supporting children's learning

27. To help enhance practice and create a shared understanding of the role of play in children's learning, the Scottish Government ELC Directorate funds the Masters in Early Years Pedagogy that is delivered by the Universities of Strathclyde and Aberdeen. The course is attended by teachers working in primary school as well as staff working in ELC settings. Feedback from students suggests that the course is making an important contribution to the understanding of play in children's education.
28. One of the actions in the ELC Quality Action Plan that was published in October 2017 was to introduce a professional learning course for school leadership teams on what drives quality in ELC. Pedagogy, and play based learning will be at the core of the course, with a strong interwoven strand on quality relationships, environments and interaction. This should encourage and give confidence to school management teams to further embed play-based learning in early primary school. The course is currently being developed by SCEL and should be available early in 2019.
29. Another of the actions in the ELC Quality Action Plan is to develop an online programme of CLPL for the ELC sector. One of the modules in this programme will be focused on developing an understanding of curriculum rationale. This will help to strengthen understanding of the benefits of play-based learning. While the module will be primarily aimed at the ELC sector, there is no reason why it could not cover the value of play-based learning in the early stage of primary and be made available to teachers too.
30. Within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) play-based learning and pedagogy is embedded in primary programmes. This is a prominent feature of programmes aimed at teaching early and first level pupils where it is explored in depth but is also threaded throughout primary programmes. However, currently there is variety on how each university has embedded play-based learning. There may be more that could be done to explore the extent to which Initial Teacher Training (ITE) prepares students to plan, implement and assess play-based learning, as well as career long professional learning/school improvement strategies which could have further impact on teacher professional development.
31. The University of Aberdeen is keen to develop a new course route that would allow ITE students to continue on campus as full-time students for a 5th year to complete 120 of the 180 credits for the Masters in Early Years Pedagogy (currently offer only as part-time course, once in practice). To complete the degree student would have to undertake the final 60 credits, which is a work-based project, with their own P1-3 class during their Probation year and complete the final part of the course part-

time. This would be another route to increasing the number of teachers with a specialism in play-based pedagogy.

#### Raising the profile of play-based learning through a national event for teachers

32. A national event might encourage teachers and school leaders not only to share good practice and evidence of the impact of play-based learning, but also to discuss barriers to the use of play-based learning and develop strategies to address these.

#### Enhancing cross-professional working among teachers and ELC practitioners

33. The number of teachers working in ELC has been steadily declining in recent years. Driven to a large extent by the introduction of the other graduate-level qualifications for the ELC lead practitioners. This is a trend that is unlikely to be reversed. The initial result is that teachers with experience of early years pedagogy are being drawn back into schools, where they may have the opportunity apply their understanding of the value of play-based learning to shape practice there. However, in time, with fewer teachers gaining this experience via an assignment to ELC, this opportunity to spread learning into primary school will diminish.
34. Inspectors have seen some good examples of ELC practitioners and P1 teachers working across the early level to ensure shared understanding of early years pedagogy. There is also anecdotal evidence that some schools are using their Pupil Equity Funding to employ early years practitioners to work alongside teachers in the early years of primary school, to promote a more consistent approach to pedagogy across the early level. Perhaps more could be done to encourage this and to share these examples and how they are affecting practice and outcomes in early primary.

#### Shared inspection framework

35. Currently "*How Good is our Early Learning and Childcare?*" the self-evaluation and improvement framework for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), frequently references play-based pedagogies. It contains a quality indicator on the curriculum (2.2) which describes good practice in pedagogy and play. ELC settings are encouraged to consider the extent to which:
- the curriculum is based firmly on play and active learning;
  - in their practice, staff demonstrate a deep understanding of the critical role of play in promoting children's development and learning;
  - children are provided with rich, relevant experiences to enhance their play and practise skills, explore the world around them and develop knowledge and understanding in their own way and in their own time and;
  - well-timed and skilled interventions effectively promote children's creativity, extend their thinking, widen their skills and consolidate their learning in play.
36. Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate are developing a new shared framework which will be used for both self-evaluation and inspection. It will be important that play-based learning has a high prominence within this new framework.

37. Once launched there will be a need to ensure that practitioners working with children across the early level make use of both the new shared framework alongside other frameworks such as *How Good Is Our School?* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) to support continuous improvement in children's learning in both early learning and childcare and schools.

Practice guidance on play-based learning in early primary

38. The ELC practice guidance mentioned above (Building the Ambition) is due to be refreshed in early 2019. This could be an opportunity to extend the focus to early primary school and to raise the profile of the resource with teachers. Education Scotland plans to produce a bespoke self-evaluation toolkit to support practitioners to improve play-based learning across the early level and beyond. This could include an illustration of 'very good' practice; additional 'features of highly-effective practice' and 'challenge questions' which can be used alongside the quality improvement frameworks and provide a national steer for primary schools and local authorities. This would helpfully build upon and extend, the updated and refreshed ELC practice guidance which is due to be published in early 2019.

**Conclusion**

39. There is evidence that play-based learning contributes to children's outcomes and can play a role in facilitating the transition from ELC to primary school. There is already some good practice, but not delivered consistently across the country.
40. The Curriculum and Assessment Board is invited to consider:
- if more should be done to promote the use of appropriate play-based learning in early primary school; and
  - if so, what strategies should be further considered.