



Ready or Not to Adopt a Pedagogy of Play for Children Starting School in Scottish Primary Schools-Is this a Major Transition for Teachers?

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

By drawing on empirical data, this article will question how ready Scottish primary teachers are to adopt a pedagogy of play as opposed to more traditional didactic teaching approaches when planning and delivering an early years curriculum for children starting school. Children transitioning to school have traditionally been expected to be 'school ready'; preparing them for a culture where play has yet to be consistently and universally embraced as pedagogy. The author draws on the results of a small-scale qualitative study which explored the multiple realities of ensuring curriculum continuity and progression in children's learning between the early learning and childcare sector and primary school sector in Scotland.

The study demonstrated that realising a play-based curriculum while consistent with pedagogical practice in the two early learning and childcare settings was not yet common practice in the three Primary 1 classes. Furthermore, children experienced two early years curriculum *traditions*: the *nursery curriculum tradition* and the *Primary 1 curriculum tradition*. Each *tradition* is rooted in the different sociocultural norms and structures which exist in the early learning and childcare sector and in the early stages of primary schools in Scotland. Children starting school needed to adjust *how* they learned in readiness for the *Primary 1 curriculum tradition*.

The implications for policy makers and others include empowering teachers to embrace playful pedagogy through cross sectoral collaboration so that children starting school can benefit from a continuous play-based curriculum experience. Future research could explore contested understandings of school readiness that persist, influencing curriculum content and pedagogical approaches nationally and internationally.

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Debates within early childhood education about the concept ‘school readiness’ have focused on social, emotional, and cognitive domains in determining whether the child is ready for school. Over time the ‘readiness’ debate has shifted, as educators acknowledge that the emphasis should be on ensuring the school is ready for the transitioning child (Evans 2013) while others propose an interactionist approach of mutual readiness, arguably a middle ground position between the notion of the ‘ready child’ and the ‘ready school’ (Vernon-Feagans et al. 2008).

This article questions whether primary school teachers are ready to build on the child’s previous holistic experience by embracing play pedagogies as the vehicle for planning and delivering the early years curriculum (Moyles 2015). Almost all children starting school in Scotland will have experienced their early years curriculum through play. Children in Scotland are entitled to up to two and a half years of free early learning and childcare in either a private, voluntary or education authority early learning and childcare setting or a combination of all three (Burns 2018; Scottish Government 2017a). Regardless of the type of early learning and childcare provision the child attended, their learning and development as an individual, as an expert in their lives will have been realised principally through play (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2010; Rogoff 2003). This is achieved through pedagogical methodologies that “capitalise on children’s appetite for learning and practical activities which avoid denting children’s early confidence and enthusiasm” (Stephen, Ellis and Martlew 2010:315). Whether the child starting school continues to experience a pedagogy of play, which Australian researchers Nolan and Paatsch (2018:42) define as “purposeful, co-construction of knowledge with others (peers and teachers) within social and cultural worlds” is debateable and arguably inconsistent across Scotland. However, adopting playful pedagogies has become the focus of recent professional development for many primary school teachers who are increasingly acknowledging the value of alternative pedagogical approaches, including play as the way to build on what children already know and can do as they start school (Grogan and Duncan 2017; Palmer 2020; Peters et al. 2018).

The study, on which this article is based, aimed to explore the barriers and challenges facing practitioners and teachers in planning and implementing the early years curriculum which in Scotland is referred to as *Curriculum for Excellence-Early Level* (Scottish Government 2008). Three research questions were considered. This article has focused primarily on the first question and on how readily play pedagogy has been adopted by early stages teachers in primary schools to support curriculum continuity for children starting school.

Research question 1: *How do practitioners and teachers in two Scottish nursery settings and three associated primary schools ensure curriculum continuity and progression in children’s learning across the Curriculum for Excellence Early Level?*

Curriculum for Excellence is comprised of five levels: early, first, second, third and fourth. The ‘early level’ was devised specifically as a *gift* to ensure that children aged three to six experienced positive continuity in their learning as they transition across two sectors of education: the early learning and childcare (ELC) sector and the primary school sector (Dunlop 2018). A contributory factor in realising a smooth transition for children starting school is the successful implementation of the ‘early level’. According to Brostrom (2002b) features of a smooth transition include children feeling safe and relaxed in new surroundings and sensitive support from their parents. Other features include shared understandings of how children learn, collaboration between practitioners and teachers when planning for progression in children’s learning, and high-quality play pedagogy and curriculum continuity (Burns 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

PLAY AND PEDAGOGY

Defining the concept of play and what it means to those who work alongside children or who hold responsibility for creating and implementing early childhood policy continues to be a much debated and contested area and is not intended to be explored in this paper (Bruce 2004; Briggs and Hansen 2012; Sahlberg and Doyle 2019; Stirrup et al. 2017). However, the value of play as the pedagogy through which young children learn best, particularly during their first

year in school, is arguably not yet fully understood by all within Scotland with responsibility for planning a child-centred primary school curriculum (Burns 2018; Gooch 2010). Wood (2014:4) wrote that children's choices for free play within a child-centred education are being eroded "within shifting power structures and relationships, involving conflict, negotiation, resistance and subversion". Moreover, Wood (2014) indicated that in England, at the heart of this shift in power was increasing pressure on early childhood educators including teachers, to implement a centrally defined curriculum which placed unrealistic demands on some children to achieve specified curriculum goals. More recently, Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) highlight some of the political pressures facing early childhood educators to reduce the amount of time children spend playing. These pressures include demonstrating children's academic achievement as set out within public education policies. Nationally and internationally, teachers in the early primary stages are potentially torn between realising the advancement of play pedagogy within their classroom and responding to external assumptions that children need to spend more time on cultivating skills and gaining knowledge and understanding needed for the future.

Stephen (2010) suggests that changing pedagogy involves not only changing practice, but also thinking differently about the process of learning and the role of the learner and the teacher, indicating that some teachers have more to learn about the value and importance of play pedagogy in facilitating children's learning. According to Fisher (2013), significant cultural differences exist between the early learning and childcare sector and primary schools creating a barrier to innovative pedagogical approaches at the early stages in primary schools. Children are too often expected to fit into the school culture, the routines, the rules, and the ways of learning that are sometimes at odds with their previous experience (McNair 2016).

The OECD report (2017) notes there have been improvements to children's learning experiences, for example, by providing them with more opportunities for play during the school day, a focus on child-centred pedagogy, and the use of responsive planning which promotes the child's voice in determining the curriculum focus and nature of learning activities. The improvements for children starting school, expressed within the OECD report are welcomed, and while play pedagogy has not yet been embraced everywhere, there are encouraging signs (Burns et al. 2020).

According to Wood (2014) during free play and free choice activities, as opposed to teacher centred activities children should be relatively unrestricted by adult intrusion and direction, thus enabling them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership, and control, and to direct their own learning. Balancing the need to value children's right to choose and their right to play poses a challenge for teachers who are increasingly aware of the tensions which national policy creates through expectations to cover the curriculum goals. Similarly, there has been a push down into the early learning and childcare sector (ELC) in Scotland for assessment and formal monitoring of children's progress against nationally agreed targets (Breathnach et al. 2017; Jarvis 2020). The introduction of baseline assessments for children starting school in Scotland has been met with considerable criticism and some resistance from pressure groups such as the Give them Time campaign and the Upstart movement (Scottish Government 2017b). The pressure then to ensure children achieve these targets becomes ever more of a challenge for primary school teachers and parents who are receptive to play pedagogy which, national guidance in Scotland suggests, is best suited to how young children learn and develop (Education Scotland 2020).

Stewart and Pugh (2007:9) define pedagogy as "the understanding of how children learn and develop, and the practices through which we [educators] can enhance that process". Their definition is rooted in values and beliefs about what educators want for children, and supported by knowledge, theory, and experience. In defining the term *pedagogy*, there remains the challenge of the practitioner's¹ or teacher's style of practice. Moyles (2015: 21) argues opposing pedagogies can be a fundamental barrier to implementing "playful pedagogies" which are considered "creative and innovative for both teaching and learning". Nolan and Paatsch's (2018) qualitative study which included interviews with two Foundation (first year of primary school) teachers and an Early Years coordinator found that the two Foundation teachers, experienced greater tension than the Early Years Coordinator in making changes

¹ In Scotland, the term 'practitioner' refers to the workforce employed within the ELC sector, while the term 'teacher' is predominantly though not exclusively recognised within the primary school sector.

to their teaching approaches, to their learning environments and being held accountable for covering the curriculum goals as set out in policy documentation.

Writing about how young children learn best Smidt, (2002) asserts that children can be taught to do many things in different ways. The concern she argues is to find the best way to promote learning in young children. McCabe (2020: 72) advocates that “play is the best way”, she suggests, “that in recent years the teaching community in Scotland has moved from a position of play-neutrality to one of play enthusiasm”. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) propose a sustainable pedagogy, a pedagogy that does not separate play from learning but draws on the inherent benefits of a playful pedagogy which values children’s contributions and offers them opportunities to take ownership of their learning. Howard and King (2015) claim play offers children a holistic route into experiencing curriculum content. Despite this recognition which many studies and indeed curriculum policy claim about the value of play “as a beginning, as a process, and an outcome”, teachers do not always think about why play is so important for children and too often they get caught up in *what* and *when* children should play when planning curriculum content (Howard and King 2015: 125). Moyles (2015: 21) goes further and suggests there is a need for teachers to utilise more “playful and creative pedagogies in the early years if we are to support children effectively now and into adulthood”.

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory and its subsequent iterations are frequently used to support studies which explore the topic of life transitions. Transition is described as, “the adjustment to new contexts outside the family, whereby the child experiences ecological changes in their position, relations, and identity” (Education Scotland 2020: 89). According to Fabian and Dunlop (2007: 3) an “educational transition is defined as the process of change of environment and set of relationships that children make from one setting or phase of education to another over time”. Children in the author’s study not only transition between two culturally different sectors of education, but they also navigate changes in curriculum design, pedagogy, and identity as learners through the inevitable changes to their routines and exposure to a new set of rules (Burns 2018; Pianta et al. 1999). Hayes’ study (2003) found that children starting school are expected to adjust socially, emotionally, and cognitively to a new environment. Other transitions studies have found that friendships are lost or weakened, and new ones are created, and the skills and knowledge children bring with them to school are too often undervalued, not recognised or even ignored (Ackesjö 2014, 2013; Fabian 2002; Jindal-Snape and Miller 2010; Peters 2010; Rogoff 2003). Ackesjö (2014: 6) contends that “children both shape the transition and are shaped by the transition” and so the transition process becomes an ecological and sociocultural process, where children learn to “reconstruct themselves”, and their identity as members within a new community (Ackesjö 2014: 7).

Transitions studies have provided an extensive narrative on the social, cultural, structural, and pedagogical differences which exist between the early learning and childcare sector and primary school sector (Broström 2016; 2002a; 2002b; Peters 2002). These differences contribute to the challenges facing practitioners and teachers in ensuring children experience a “smooth transition” (Neuman 2000: 8) and open up possibilities for practitioners and teachers to share practice, thereby creating opportunities to work together across the sectors.

In a review of transitions literature, Peters (2010) highlights some of the characteristics which determine how well children transition to school. These include the nature of the social context the child enters, its compatibility with the characteristics of the developing person, for example, adjusting to the sharp socio-cultural differences which can exist between a child-centred environment and one that favours adult direction and didactic teaching. In the former, more flexible daily routines, activities and resources sit comfortably alongside play pedagogy, while in the latter; an adult-directed environment where learning is “packed with compulsory tasks” may present challenges for some children (Carr et al. 2009: 220).

The literature presented provides a rationale for questioning how ready Scottish primary teachers are to adopt a pedagogy of play as opposed to more traditional including didactic teaching approaches when planning and delivering an early years curriculum for children starting school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The author combined elements of the Bronfenbrenner's (2006) bioecological theory and Bourdieu's (1985) sociocultural theory, to create a theoretical framework on which to base the analysis of the research data and discussion of the research findings. An important feature of the framework was the focus on relationships and interactions, to explore how these concepts develop between the child and others and to what extent the transitioning child is empowered to influence the pedagogic culture that exists within the spaces they occupy.

Globally, studies suggest there is a strong correlation between the influence of the social and cultural environment on the transitioning child, their ability to exercise agency over their learning and the existence of a child-centred curriculum delivered through responsive pedagogy, and a successful transition to school (Biesta and Tedder 2006; Blaisdell 2016; Dunlop 2021; Einarsdottir 2003; McNair 2016).

Recognising the importance of the social environment, the role of children's agency at times of transition and the way the 'early level' of Curriculum for Excellence was socially constructed to support children's learning, components of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) and Bourdieu's (1985) sociocultural theory were therefore combined. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stressed the vital role of interactions and strong relationships between participants, viewing the child as active and contributing to these interactions in a meaningful and respectful way. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) places a particular focus on the process of transition. Bronfenbrenner cited in Hayes et al. asserts that the process has the potential to overcome barriers that the context may create for the child in transition (2017). In addition, Bronfenbrenner considered the role that those in and beyond the child's immediate environment play in influencing and shaping their development over time. It was this aspect of his bioecological model that particularly influenced my theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

While Bronfenbrenner's model offers a framework within which to link bioecological theory to early education curriculum and practice, from an environmental and pedagogical perspective, a major criticism of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the absence of the child's voice (Griebel and Niesel 2003), Griebel and Niesel assert that Bronfenbrenner's theory does not take account of how children transfer social capital, an important consideration for children starting school. Bourdieu's (1985) sociocultural theory is relevant then within the sphere of education. His interpretation of social and cultural capital and his concept of 'field' deepened the author's understanding of how children navigate and adjust to changes in social and cultural norms and networks which exist in and between the nursery settings and the primary schools. Interested then in what and how children learn, their relationships with practitioners and teachers; but also, on why children's agency and social capital alters during the process of transitioning to school, Bourdieu's work offered a way of understanding what it is like to be a child in transition, and their experience of the 'early level' of Curriculum for Excellence.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was informed by an interpretivist paradigm as it allows the researcher to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants in their unique context or culture (Miles and Huberman 1994; Miles et al. 2014). The purpose of the study was to explore the multiple realities of ensuring curriculum continuity and progression in children's learning from nursery to school. Qualitative data collection methods allowed the perspectives of parents, practitioners, and teachers to be gathered via semi-structured interviews and through naturalistic observations of children's learning in their nursery and school settings. Understanding the barriers and challenges, the realities facing practitioners and teachers in planning for and ensuring curriculum continuity across the 'early level' for children transitioning from nursery to P1 (the first year of primary school in Scotland) provided the justification for adopting the 'boundedness' of case study methods (Merriam 2009).

Harrison et al. (2017) described three different approaches taken by prominent case study researchers. They suggest case studies are governed by each researcher's philosophical position.

Within an interpretivist paradigm, a pragmatic constructivist position was assumed: this led to the particular research questions, the exploratory nature of the study, the design and data gathering methods and the analysis employed in this study. The original intention was to have a single exploratory case study with one case, where the “unit of analysis” (Grünbaum 2007:88) was to be the group of thirteen children, their parents and the practitioners and teachers. However, after generating the data, and from early analysis of those data it was apparent that two ‘early level’ traditions existed across the two sectors of education: the nursery ‘early level’ and the P1 ‘early level’ therefore two cases were created.

LOCATION AND PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in two local authority areas located in central Scotland: Riverside Council and Valleyfield Council (pseudonyms). Data gathering activities were conducted in two nursery settings; Bluebell Nursery Class and Mistletoe Nursery Class, two associated primary schools; Bluebell Primary School and Mistletoe Primary School, and a third out of catchment area primary school; Buttercup Primary School because one parent chose to place their child out with their catchment school (a right open to all parents in Scotland, depending on availability). To follow the child’s curriculum transition journey, it was considered important to include Buttercup Primary School in the study.

SAMPLING PROCESS

Purposeful sampling (Bryman 2012) was used to select the location and participants and to reflect the exploratory nature of the study. Riverside Council and Valleyfield Council had expressed an interest in the study and were therefore purposely selected. They broadly represented local authorities in urban areas across Scotland in terms of size, the structure of their nursery and primary schools and the curriculum taught.

Of the forty pre-school children enrolled across the two nursery settings, thirteen families responded to the invitation to participate in the study. All thirteen children whose parents agreed for them to take part were included in the study. All the names used in the study are pseudonyms. At the time of the data collection, the children were aged between 4 and 5½ years old and were in receipt of their annual entitlement of up to 600 hours free education and childcare (Scottish Government 2017a). They were all in what is referred to in Scotland as their ‘pre-school year’ (the year immediately preceding primary school start).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

All of the practitioners and primary 1 teachers in the two nursery settings and three primary schools were invited to take part. A total of ten practitioners from the two nursery settings and four teachers from the three associated primary schools, volunteered and gave their consent. The research was conducted in line with rigorous ethical procedures (Economic and Social Research Council 2015) and permissions were obtained and approved by the author’s university ethics committee. Thirteen parents gave consent for themselves and their child. The issue of informed consent or assent was particularly relevant as the research methods included observing the children in their playrooms and classrooms. Informed assent was sought from the children before each observation period. This was important because from a child’s view, consent may be provisional (Flewitt 2005), and children have a right to express their choices on an ongoing basis.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Observation

Observation was undertaken in this study as it offers an immediate connection with the activities which are the focus of the research (Moyle 2002). Observation data of children were collected over two visits to each of the nursery settings in May/June and in one visit to their primary school in September/October. Each nursery observation period was the equivalent of a morning session, typically three hours ten minutes. In the primary classrooms, observations lasted for roughly the same amount of time, though children were not observed in the playground. By observing the episodes of learning in real time, it was possible to make field notes of what children and adults were saying and doing, and to note how children responded to the behaviours of their peers and the pedagogical approaches employed by adults (Corsaro 2011; Farrell 2005).

Semi-structured interviews

The practitioners, teachers and parents involved in the study took part in semi-structured interviews which lasted on average around 20–30 minutes. Cohen et al. (2011) conclude that interviews are useful as they allow the interviewer to dig beneath the surface of initial responses, to explore meanings and to seek to understand by asking additional questions. The parents who took part in the study were invited to say where and when they wished to be interviewed. A telephone interview was offered, and the majority of the parents' interviews were conducted in this way to suit parents' personal circumstances. The interviews with practitioners and teachers took place within the working day and in a quiet area within each setting. Permissions were given for the interviews to be audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the analysis of data should begin very early on in a qualitative study. They argue every researcher will come to the 'fieldwork with some orienting ideas' of what they hope to find (17). Boeije (2010) draws attention to the benefits of an inductive approach to the analysis of data, where for example, the researcher exploring a social phenomenon can surface patterns and themes which are embedded in the data, and which can be interpreted to meaningfully reflect the social reality of the problem being studied.

Thematic analysis can be applied credibly across a range of theoretical approaches "what is important is that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognise them as decisions" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 8). An exploration of the various data analysis tools was conducted, and the author concluded that "thematic analysis" was the most suitable method for exploring and interpreting how practitioners and teachers plan and deliver the 'early level' of Curriculum for Excellence. Braun and Clarke (2006) insist there is a distinction between other data analysis methods and that despite views to the contrary, thematic analysis is not a tool, but a method in its own right. Using thematic analysis allows the researcher to break up or segment the data from several sources into pieces that can be sifted and searched for meaning and patterns before being reassembled into a series of codes, categories, and themes (Boeije 2010).

Connections were made during the analysis process with the research questions and the underpinning theoretical framework. With the focus in this article on teachers' *readiness* to embrace play as pedagogy, the findings as they relate to 'planning and delivering the early level' through play are presented in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis process has revealed three key themes which were deduced from the data. In this article the focus is the first theme.

Theme 1 *Planning and delivering the 'early level' of Curriculum for Excellence*

Theme 2 *Supporting children's transition across the 'early level'*

Theme 3 *Moving between two traditions-implications for how children learn, their agency and social capital.*

The analysis showed how the pedagogical approaches used by the ten nursery practitioners and four early stages teachers to plan and deliver the 'early level' curriculum varied and therefore influenced how well curriculum continuity and progression in children's learning was achieved through play.

THE EMERGENCE OF TWO 'EARLY LEVEL TRADITIONS'

When asked about how they plan the 'early level' for children, it emerged that practitioners' planning of the 'early level' in the nursery settings was more responsive to the needs of the child and reflected a team approach. Conversely planning the 'early level' in P1 was mostly undertaken by the individual teacher "working alone" (Karila and Rantavuori 2014:382) or

sometimes with a stage partner. The following excerpts show the variance in approaches to curriculum planning and pedagogy used by practitioners in Bluebell Nursery Class and Mistletoe Nursery Class

We have planning meetings, and the staff bring together children's interests and we discuss how we are going to take that planning forward. We select the learning outcomes from Curriculum for Excellence that is going to suit the interests that the children have and which ones we feel we would be able to cover, and staff can add outcomes at any point. (Hannah-practitioner interview, Bluebell Nursery Class)

Hannah reinforced the practice of sharing information with members of the practitioner team, she emphasised the need to discuss how the child's learning will be taken forward. She describes how a child-centred approach to planning the curriculum activities needed to build on the child's previous experience, to deepen their learning, or to learn new skills (Moyles 2010). In Hannah's comments, the child's needs were placed alongside the expectation that the 'early level' experiences and outcomes guide rather than lead the planning process.

In the following extract, Megan from Mistletoe Nursery Class referred to how her team used their knowledge of the children as individuals to plan curriculum content in the long, medium, and short term. Their collaborative approach to curriculum planning also included opportunities to capture children's views and opinions as part of the process. This extract provides an illustration of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) construction of development as an interactive process between the child and others.

We have planning sheets; we will ask them initially what they would like to learn if they are going to do a certain type of activity what would they learn from doing that. It is about getting the children to have a bit more in depth thought. If they are learning to cycle a bike then at the end, you ask them 'did you learn to cycle' and now the children are aware of doing this, they are really good at doing this [evaluating] now. When doing the activity with them when you go to assess them on the back of the form with the observation sheet 'did they achieve it' and show how successful they have been using photographic evidence. You would then bring that sheet to the team meeting and have a chat about what worked well. (Megan-practitioner interview, Mistletoe Nursery Class)

When planning the 'early level' curriculum, nursery practitioners employed a collaborative approach, their plans were largely informed by the child's motivations and interests as the stimulus for their discussions and to guide the content of the 'early level' activities on offer to children. Children were regularly included in these discussions, their ideas for curriculum content influenced practitioners' plans.

In comparison, in the following extracts from Bluebell Primary School and Mistletoe Primary School the 'early level' planning approaches, used by P1 teachers occurred either in isolation or with a stage partner. The children had limited involvement in planning what they would be learning.

Within my class it is up to me what I want to do with the curriculum. I know that in nursery they have been following the early level planner and they [practitioners] then send that information over to us then we have a meeting with the nursery teacher about what they need work on and if there any issues and discuss what has been covered but basically making sure the early level curriculum is covered. (Laura-teacher interview, Bluebell Primary School)

Laura described how she made the decisions about curriculum content, suggesting a predominantly autonomous system. It appears that the information received from nursery practitioners did not drive her thinking or help to shape her plans. She highlights the need to identify what the child can do, but a stronger message emerges, that is the emphasis on 'covering' and 'achieving' the early level. There is a sense that meeting externally imposed goals and targets creates a tension for her. The reference to meeting with practitioners implied that planning occurred across sectors, suggesting some collaboration.

The data also showed that the content of teachers' 'early level' curriculum plans were influenced by both formative and summative assessments and meeting externally determined attainment targets.

When asked about her role in delivering the 'early level' Laura justified the use of whole class teaching rather than play as a means of helping her to get to know the children and to assess their learning abilities, their strengths and weaknesses, reinforcing the culture of gathering evidence of the child's 'readiness' to progress to the next target.

At the beginning, we do whole class activities and then not long after you can see the differences of who can be challenged, and which ones need support. (Laura-teacher interview, Bluebell Primary School)

Similarly, Holly from Mistletoe Primary School described how she relied on assessment to guide her pedagogy, as a way of organising the children.

We use the numeracy baseline and we use that to gauge whether they are at the level they were at when they finished nursery. We use it for grouping our children and that helps us with knowing which children need more support than others and who needs continually challenged. (Holly, teacher interview, Mistletoe Primary School)

Overall, play-based pedagogy provided the conduit for almost all of children's planned learning within the 'nursery early level' tradition. Conversely, in the 'P1 early level' tradition, children's learning was planned as subject specific activity, in an environment where coverage of curriculum programmes shaped the type of pedagogy that took place. Parents accepted that starting school would bring change for their child and for them. Indeed, over time they noticed their children had fewer opportunities to exercise agency over their learning, though by pulling together their individual and collective resources, children's social capital was strengthened as they adjusted, coped with, and grew in confidence in a culturally different microsystem.

Consistent with bioecological theory, parents anticipated the environment, and the curriculum would look and feel different when their child started school, that there would be fewer opportunities in the classroom for play.

He struggled in the beginning with the curriculum and the timetable so to speak, because it was more of a timetable, whereas in nursery it was more of a small group and they had that one on one and its only for a short time and they then go on to do their own thing. However, in school it is a timetable of learning and then a little bit of play and then group activities. (Libby-parent, Buttercup Primary School)

A shift in pedagogical approaches was noted by Jan. She noticed a change to the social order of life, suggesting the role of the nursery is now about preparing her son for school:

It [learning] is more structured now that they have gone into their pre-school and so they have tailored it for them to be ready for when they go into P1. (Jan-parent, Mistletoe Nursery Class)

Parents perceived the classroom as a place where lessons were timetabled with a more formal system where their child would be taught new skills, or reinforce skills already gained, within a particular curricular area such as literacy and numeracy:

It is more structured in the school, she [Belle] is telling us that she has maths at a certain time and she has her golden time and PE. The days are more structured and what she is doing. The teaching style has definitely contributed to this and that she has to listen to the teacher. (Lydia-parent, Mistletoe Primary School)

A POLARISED APPROACH TO REALISING PLAY AS PEDAGOGY

Analysis of observation data found that pedagogical approaches used by the nursery practitioners and P1 teachers to deliver the 'early level' were polarised. This raises some questions about the culture, the norms and variable curriculum planning practices employed by practitioners in the nursery settings and by the teachers in the P1 classrooms, reinforcing the existence of two

‘early level’ traditions. The thirteen children starting school needed to adjust *how* they learned by drawing on their social capital to navigate their way from the nursery *curriculum tradition* to the P1 *curriculum tradition* where teachers relied less on play as pedagogy and more on teacher-initiated and teacher-directed activities. The results showed that greater emphasis was placed on achieving nationally agreed attainment targets by the primary school teachers than the promotion of a play-based curriculum. Such a contested situation requires the child to act differently in each tradition, to bring about socially and culturally a change in their identities from being a *nursery child* to being a *school child*.

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) brings into focus the differences in the activities, roles and relationships experienced by the children previously positioned as expert learners in the nursery ‘early level’ tradition compared with their position in the P1 ‘early level’ tradition. As a result of their transition to school, not only did the child’s ecological environment change, but there were also changes in terms of status.

The following data extracts from Mistletoe Nursery Class, Bluebell Nursery Class, Bluebell Primary School and Buttercup Primary School demonstrate some variances in the pedagogical approaches employed by practitioners and teachers in each *tradition*.

Lily is playing with John in the construction area, Belle is playing on a wheeled bus, exclaiming she is the leader. Lewis and Walter are walking on plastic pots-they do this skilfully balancing and using the rope handles to move about up and down the set of stairs. Jill offers a bit of support pointing out they need to take care and asking what might happen if they lose balance.Jill sets the scene for finding the big bad wolf. She retells the story of the three little pigs and children become the characters. John joins in the acting out of the story of the three little pigs which Jill leads using a range of props and children being the main characters. (Jill-team leader and Lily, John, Belle, Lewis, and Walter-Mistletoe Nursery Class-Fieldwork notes).

In the above extract, the children were able to follow their own interests, to exercise agency while receiving appropriate interventions from Jill as she extended through well-judged questioning, the learning of Lewis and Walter who were having a go at balancing on the plant pots. Jill was responsive to their spontaneous interests and their wellbeing needs. Fisher (2013) writes that this type of learning is ‘child-initiated’. There was no attempt by Jill to influence their play, just a timely wellbeing reminder.

Jill then set up an opportunity for some role play around a traditional tale-the three little pigs, an ‘adult-initiated’ learning activity. However, there was no expectation that Lewis and Walter would leave their balancing activity to join her. Children in the area who did respond, did so because they wanted to, while Lily, Belle and John persevered with their chosen play activity. Broström (2016) asserts that play and learning are different, others argue they happen simultaneously, that both result in children acquiring new skills and knowledge as well as developing psychologically (Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008). An important characteristic of an ecological environment is that “learning through social interaction and communication” (Broström 2016:32) occurs in meaningful contexts for the child.

Almost all of the learning activities observed in the two nursery settings emerged spontaneously during free play or were planned by practitioners in response to children’s specific interests, needs and wishes. The value of learning through play, was also recognised by parents:

I think for me a big priority in nursery is the play side of things, being happy and developing socially and they are learning through play. I think when they start school, they get a lot more involved with that [the curriculum]. (Arlene-parent, Bluebell Nursery Class)

During the summer term before the children started school, a change in the way children learned was commented on by Jan (parent) highlighting the “many and multi-layered levels of influence on development associated with the different contexts in which children learn and develop” Hayes et al. 2017:105. In Jan’s view the structured learning activities in nursery were linked to preparing John for school:

It [learning] is more structured now that they have gone into their pre-school and so they have tailored it for them to be ready for when they go into P1. (Jan-parent, Mistletoe Nursery Class)

Parents perceived that nursery offered more time to play and that their child engaged regularly in long periods of free play. As Fisher (2013: 18) reminds us “play allows children to gain mastery over and to be in control of their emerging skills and competences. Through play, children can make things happen-they can become another person, they can influence a story or a situation”.

Observations in the two nursery settings provided numerous examples of children exercising agency over their learning, and almost all of the time, children exercised choice over, ‘what, how, where and when’ they took part in learning activities. Although as the next extract illustrates, this practice was not consistent, and highlights how Eddie draws on his social capital to manage the situation.

Children were engaged in free play then they had group time. Eddie and Cara are in the sunshine room for group time. Children were invited to talk about their holidays. The practitioner, Lucy had a copy of a passport and a picture of a suitcase. Children offered stories about where they had been on holiday. There was some discussion about what they took with them in their suitcases and how they travelled to their destination. Lucy gave each child a piece of paper which resembled the shape of an open suitcase. The children had to fold their suitcase in half and then were issued with pens and asked to write the word, ‘suitcase’ on another bit of paper. Eddie states he does not know how to write all the letters. He ... filled the entire space with the letters he was copying. Lucy asks them to cut out their word and then stick it to the outside of the paper suitcase. Eddie is not fully focussed on the task, ...Eddie is much more interested in talking to Lucy. He gets up and gives her a cuddle, pats her shoulder... tries to leave the group but is reminded he still has his name to write on his suitcase. ... Eddie walks away from the table. (Fieldwork notes, Bluebell Nursery Class)

In the two nursery settings, pre-planned adult-directed learning activities like the one outlined above were infrequent. More often, child-initiated play or practitioner support for child-initiated activities were observed. Sometimes, children actively sought support from practitioners, who then exercised their professional judgement in determining the level and extent of interaction required to support the child/children.

Overall, the pedagogical approaches used by the P1 teachers resulted in children experiencing more structured lessons and fewer opportunities for play or having autonomy over where and how to complete the activities set for them. In the next extract parents recognise contextual and cultural differences.

Parents talked about learning in P1 as a place where lessons were planned and the child listened to the teacher, with fewer opportunities for children to move about freely:

He struggled in the beginning with the curriculum and the timetable so to speak, because it was more of a timetable, whereas in nursery it was more of a small group, and they had that one on one and it's only for a short time and they then go on to do their own thing. However, in school it is a timetable of learning and then a little bit of play and then group activities. (Libby-parent, Buttercup Primary School)

In comparing the ‘nursery early level’ tradition, with the ‘P1 early level’ tradition, parents recognised starting school would present their child with challenges that did not reflect their previous experience. Parents also expected change to occur in terms of regular communication, active engagement and influence over their child’s learning experiences in school.

In the following extract, Roddie was sitting on the carpet with his peers for a whole class sequencing activity, timetabled as a literacy lesson.

Laura is leading a recap session before turning to another traditional tale. The focus of the discussion is about the characters in the Little Red Riding Hood story. The children are asked who their favourite character is. Responses are taken from the

children who are then issued with a sheet of paper that has four of the characters from the story. They must choose their favourite character, cut it out then stick the picture onto a larger sheet of paper then colour the picture. They have to order/sequence the characters according to how much they like them. Once they are finished, they are reminded by Laura where to put their work and that the next task is to take out their whiteboard and pen and have a go at writing their name. (Laura-teacher and Roddie and Hildur- Fieldwork notes, Bluebell Primary School).

In line with a bioecological framework, where educators require a deep understanding of the child in context, the findings above show that pedagogy in the nursery 'early level' tradition was rooted in a socially responsive culture, where the child's spontaneous interest and motivations that unfolded in their daily lives were capitalised upon by responsive planning. However, over time the child experienced more episodes of direct teaching. Lessons in the P1 'early level' tradition were more often associated with the delivery of pre-determined experiences and outcomes. Play pedagogy was limited during the children's learning experiences in P1 because the learning culture was influenced by the rules and systems of the school day. The results show that the 'early level' traditions were influenced by institutional structures, cultures, and pedagogical practices peculiar to each microsystem. The practitioners and teachers demonstrated these influences in the methods they used for planning activities, in their relationships and their interactions with children and parents and in their preferred teaching styles.

CONCLUSIONS

While the content of the 'early level' of Curriculum for Excellence in both the nursery tradition and the P1 tradition are generally well understood, the study found the 'how' to deliver the curriculum was understood differently, resulting in discontinuity in pedagogical practices. Similarly, in planning the curriculum children starting school experienced discontinuity in their learning experiences. By connecting the two 'early level' traditions, it should be possible to open up a third space that allows for negotiation and collaboration. The creation of a third space would allow practitioners and teachers "to make meaning and hybridity, that is the production of new forms of cultural dialogue between the participants in each tradition, to connect the contested planning and pedagogical approaches which are evident in the 'early level' traditions" (Burns 2018:215).

In its report on the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence the OECD (2015:11) called for strengthened engagement and boldness from schools, teachers, and others in realising the full implementation of a 'dynamic, highly equitable curriculum'. Practitioners in Scotland's early learning and childcare sector and teachers in the early stages of primary schools need to find a meeting place to consider the structural and systemic differences located within their pedagogical practices if they are to be 'ready' to 'bridge the curriculum gap' and build on children's previous learning experiences.

Taking action to bridge these structural and systemic differences may hold relevance for educators and policy makers in other national and international jurisdictions beyond Scotland's shores; as a means of promoting cross-sectoral dialogue, especially during the planning stages of transition programmes (Moss 2013). Margetts (2002:115) describes how effective transition programmes "should include strategies that attempt to retain the benefits of pre-school programmes". Regarding the study reported here, embracing the pedagogical inconsistencies between the sectors and planning for continuity of practice could be a unifying next step.

Education authorities across Scotland are actively promoting play pedagogy in early stages classes in primary schools (Education Scotland 2013; 2020), with many practitioners and teachers attending cross-sectoral professional learning events which aim to "build strong and equal partnerships between ECEC settings and schools...through collaborative learning environments" (OECD 2017:205). According to the OECD, the creation of collaborative professional learning partnerships provides a platform for an exchange of ideas and practices across sectors. Increased collaboration could help resolve "the unequal relationships between ECEC staff and primary school teachers" (OECD 2017: 205) and look for ways to co-create play and learning spaces that are ready for the child starting school.

Policy makers and practitioners and teachers now need to recognise the existence of two ‘early level’ traditions. These traditions are rooted in the sociocultural norms and pedagogical practices of each sector of education creating a tension for the planning and delivery of the early years curriculum experience through play. By empowering teachers to embrace playful pedagogy in primary schools through cross sectoral collaboration, children starting school are more likely to benefit from a flexible, socially constructed, continuous ‘early level’ curriculum experience.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged, insofar as the findings of small-scale case study work are not usually generalisable, however there is valuable learning to be had. It is recommended that one of the ways to address the inconsistencies in implementing the Curriculum for Excellence-early level as intended is to bridge or connect pedagogical approaches (Barr and Borkett 2015).

This article has shown that while there may well be a shifting of minds nationally, and a readiness to adopt play as pedagogy, these approaches are not transferring consistently across the two ‘early level’ traditions. In reality, the pedagogical practice found in the nursery ‘early level’ tradition conflicted with the teaching approaches employed in the P1 ‘early level’ tradition. One pedagogical tradition child-centred, the other a predominantly didactic teaching approach to learning where play was too often reserved for break times.

A fact recognised by Hamish who protested not long after starting school that “there is no dirt [mud] to play with in school” (Burns 2018). Clearly, there is still headroom for early stages teachers to readily adopt play as pedagogy. It is suggested then that future research could explore contested understandings of play pedagogy and the early years curriculum.

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