

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE



PLAY BASED LEARNING IN YEAR 1: A practical guide for schools

**“ IF THE CHILDREN CAN ACHIEVE
IN A PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT
JUST AS MUCH AS CHILDREN IN
A HIGHLY DIRECTED ENVIRON-
MENT, THEN WHY ARE WE NOT
DOING PLAY-BASED LEARNING?
THE CHILDREN SEEM HAPPIER
AND MORE INDEPENDENT THAN
CHILDREN IN OUR SCHOOL. IT’S
A NO-BRAINER!”**

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	Page 3
2. The Research Project	Page 4
3. Case studies	Page 14
a.) Alfred Salter	Page 14
b.) Bessemer Grange	Page 16
c.) Dulwich Wood	Page 19
d.) St Francis	Page 21
e.) St John’s and St Clement’s	Page 25
f.) The Belham	Page 27
4. Top tips	Page 31
5. Implications for introducing a play-based approach	Page 47
6. Story of a School	Page 52
7. Appendices and references	Page 59
8. Acknowledgements	Page 62



1. INTRODUCTION

England is unusual in its more formal approach to learning in Year 1. In many other countries, formalised approaches to teaching and learning do not begin until the age of six (White and Sharp, 2007).

Many high performing Scandinavian countries, for example, focus on play-based approaches to learning, distinguishing between ‘free play, such as might happen at breaktime in an English school, structured play-based learning experiences, as might happen in the classroom and beyond, with the careful support of skilled adults’ (Grindheim and Ødegaard, 2013).

This booklet explains the findings of a research project involving nine schools during 2019-20, which explored the impact of introducing or enhancing play-based approaches to learning in Year 1 classrooms. The booklet shares information about the rationale for, design and outcomes of the project. It then offers teachers and school leaders a set of practical ideas and advice for introducing play-based learning into their own Year 1 classrooms.

Sarah Seleznyov

Director, London South
Teaching School Alliance

2. THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A group of 23 practitioners from nine primary schools working with the London South Teaching School Alliance wanted to experiment with a play-based approach to learning, since they felt that early formalisation was detrimental to engagement, motivation and general wellbeing for children. At the beginning of the project, teachers felt that a truncated transition period for Year 1 pupils, and a quick shift to directed activities, left little room for independence:

‘OUR TRANSITION PERIOD WAS TOO SHORT AND IT GRADUALLY FILTERED OUT THE PLAY ASPECT OF THE LEARNING. OUR ACTIVITIES WERE TOO RIGOROUSLY PLANNED AND DID NOT ALLOW THE CHILDREN TO DIRECT THEIR OWN LEARNING.’ (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

Several felt that the formality of Year 1 was particularly detrimental to pupils with special needs, and those from deprived backgrounds. These pupils struggled to stay focused and engaged throughout a full day of formal learning, so started to lose interest and fell behind, remaining working at a level behind their peers through to the end of Key Stage 2:

‘(WE FELT THAT) IF WE FULFILLED MORE OF THE CHILDREN’S NEEDS FROM THOSE DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS FROM A YOUNGER AGE, THEY WOULD HAVE EXPERIENCED MORE OF THE SAME CHILDHOOD THAT THEIR PEERS HAVE EXPERIENCED FROM A YOUNGER AGE.’ (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

Some schools had already begun experimenting with a more play-based approach, but none felt they had got it quite right. This project was an opportunity to experiment, to take risks, and to make a real difference to learning, especially for the most vulnerable pupils.

The project involved teachers undertaking collaborative research projects, working both within school teams and across schools, using a Research Learning Communities model (Brown, 2017) and led by an experienced facilitator of teacher research projects. The project started in September 2019 and ran until it was interrupted by COVID in March 2020, then moving to an online format.

Teachers began by exploring the literature on play-based approaches to Year 1 teaching and learning. Much of the literature corroborated the anecdotal evidence from teachers on the project about an overly quick transition to formal learning at the start of Year 1, which led to a general lack of engagement and enjoyment, but also to special needs children or those from deprived backgrounds being labelled as ‘low ability’ from a very early age (Sanders, 2005).

Of particular interest was the large amount of literature from Wales, where play-based learning until the age of seven was introduced in 2011. Studies of the Welsh approach found that attainment and wellbeing improved (Taylor et al., 2015), but extensive staff training was required to enable high quality play for all, and to avoid a slip back into formal learning (Rhys, Waldron and Taylor, 2015).

Several authors also explored the interaction between play activities, children’s views of learning and adult interactions in children’s play. McInnes (2019), for example, found that when adults intervened in play, they were often too formal and directive, and children therefore did not perceive situations in which adults engaged as playful. One study warned against assuming that a play-based curriculum would solve the issue of underachievement, noting that in Wales, boys and those living in poverty benefitted, but not as much as others, partly attributing this to the unconscious lack of warmth and positivity of interactions with adults during their play (Power et al., 2019).

Once the literature had been explored, participating teachers visited each other’s schools and a number of schools with embedded play-based approaches. All these schools had examples of inspiring practice, but perhaps the most inspiring of these was Hanover Primary in Islington, where a play-based approach is used up until the end of Year 2, and Early Years and Key Stage 1 pupils share a huge creative outdoor space, as well as being able to play within their own classrooms.

Participating teachers noted the increased confidence, happiness and engagement of pupils in these settings, even during more formal learning such as whole class or guided group activities. Teachers noted that all adults interacted with pupils in a high-quality way during play, and that pupils were more likely to want to learn and to work independently:

‘IF THE CHILDREN CAN ACHIEVE IN A PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT JUST AS MUCH AS CHILDREN IN A HIGHLY DIRECTED ENVIRONMENT, THEN WHY ARE WE NOT DOING PLAY-BASED LEARNING? THE CHILDREN SEEM HAPPIER AND MORE INDEPENDENT THAN CHILDREN IN OUR SCHOOL. IT’S A NO-BRAINER!’ (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

Teachers noted that short, high-quality teacher inputs seemed to be more productive than long carpet or table sessions, and that it was sometimes more helpful to assess learning in action, when applied to play:

**‘(WHY NOT) MOVE ALL SHAPE, SPACE AND MEASURE (INTO PLAY) – ENSURING THAT A CONFIDENT TEACHER CAN SUPPORT THE CHILDREN IN THEIR PLAY WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE AND ASSESS THAT THEY HAVE ALL UNDERSTOOD IT.’
(YEAR 1 TEACHER)**

The visits revealed that learning environments with play required careful thought, less furniture and constant observation, to identify barriers to learning through play and quickly address these. Access to outdoor learning and careful thought around outdoor play was also crucial. The work of Anna Ephgrave (2017), as recommended by Hanover Primary, gave teachers a lot of practical advice on making play-based learning a reality in their own classrooms.

At the same time as they were visiting schools, teachers were gathering evidence about their own classroom practice. Some interviewed their own pupils about their experiences of being in Year 1, and found pupils’ favourite subjects tended to be the less formal, more practical and hands-on subjects such as PE, Art and DT.

They felt play was for playtime, and not for learning. Some analysed assessment data from their own schools and identified patterns of underachievement for special needs and disadvantaged pupils which were similar to those in the research literature.

Others carried out observations to measure engagement and wellbeing during learning, using the Leuven Scale (Laevers, 1999; and see Appendices), and found many pupils struggled with the formal sections of learning during the day, and that where there was play-based learning, it was often not set up in a way to challenge and engage them:

**‘THE ENVIRONMENT EITHER NEEDED TO BE MORE CHALLENGING, OR AN ADULT NEEDED TO BE MOVING THEIR LEARNING ON – SHOWING THEM NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS AND THEN LEAVING CHILDREN TO EXPLORE AND CHALLENGE THEMSELVES FURTHER INDEPENDENTLY.’
(YEAR 1 TEACHER)**

Once all teachers had reviewed their own data and visited at least three schools, they gathered to discuss their ideas and to come up with shared research questions. They used a post-it note technique to engineer a good research question:

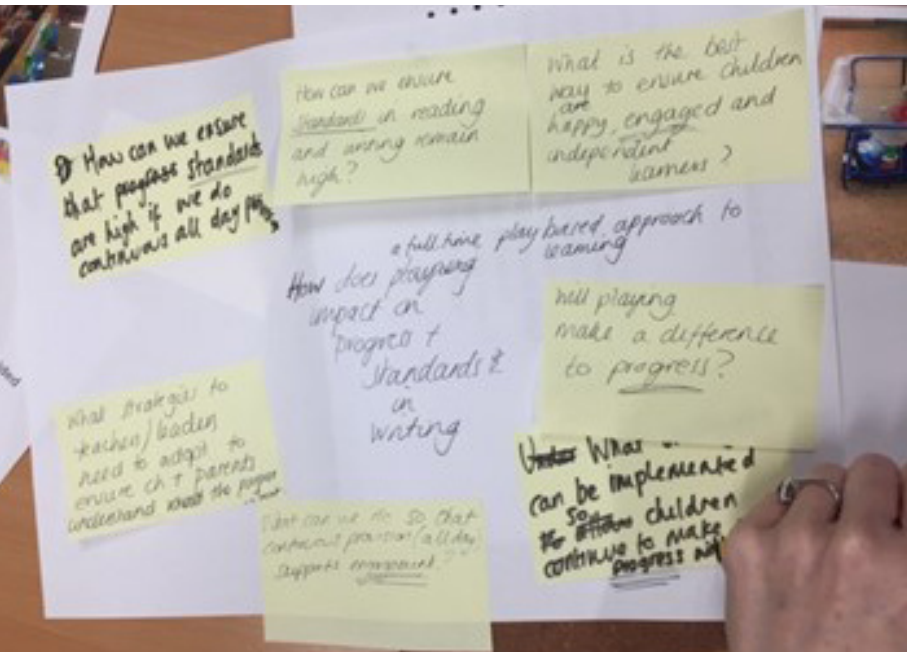
1. Consider your target group of pupils and what you want to achieve.
2. Take three post-its and using the following question starters, quickly write three possible research questions, each one using a different starter.
3. Compare similarities and differences in questions from all teachers and decide what you all agree the final research question should be.

There were several different themes teachers wanted to explore, for example:

- To what extent does having an adult engaging in play during the afternoons enhance children’s progress?
- How can adaptations to the environment promote independence through play-based learning?
- How does a full time play-based approach to learning impact on progress and standards in writing?
- How can the classroom be organised so that children are more motivated to engage in their own learning?



FIGURE 1



Teachers then decided on the changes they would be making to their own Year 1 practice. Several challenges needed to be tackled before these changes were implemented.

Firstly, teachers agreed that they would like to make sure that senior leaders understood the full implications of moving to a play-based approach. When visiting schools with strong play-based approaches, teachers had noted that there was much less written evidence in books, and that senior leaders were on board with this. They seemed to be looking for different kinds of evidence of learning; for example, how engaged children were in the setting, and how children's work progressed over time.

Several teachers were concerned about the evaluation systems and work production expectations of senior leaders in their schools, and felt they needed to educate senior leaders on how a play-based approach might change what senior leaders might monitor and evaluate. Teachers on the project decided to draw up a set of guidelines for senior leaders, making it clear what changes would need to be put in place if a play-based approach was introduced (Figure 1).

Secondly, many of the teachers on the project had small classrooms and difficulties accessing outdoor spaces. They had to brainstorm creative ideas for tackling this, for example fencing off areas of the playground for short periods; having an adult take small groups out one at a time; or working out systems for sharing outdoor space with Reception classes.

Thirdly, many teachers were anxious about provision extending all children's learning; how to challenge the highest achievers; and how to decide on the optimal amount of guided groupwork whilst maintaining high quality structured play. Key to this would be professional development for all adults in the Year 1 classroom: adults needed to see effective interactions from the most skilful teachers, and to have opportunities to experiment with these new practices themselves. Seeing strong practice modelled with the pupils would overcome adults' anxiety about how to make this work, as well as developing their skillset to make sure the new provision was as effective as it could be:

'THROUGH LOTS OF PLANNING, OBSERVATIONS, MODELLING AND INFORMAL FEEDBACK ADULTS WERE ABLE TO SEE THE VALUE OF PLAY AND CONTINUOUS PROVISION. ADULTS OBSERVED CONTINUOUS PROVISION, ... WERE ABLE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND MAKE COMMENTS AND TAKE THIS BACK TO THEIR CLASS TO TRY DIFFERENT ASPECTS, THEN FEEDBACK.' (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

However, this was much more challenging in classrooms with limited adult support.

Teachers on the project reported anecdotal evidence of positive impact:

'WE HAVE NOTICED AN INCREASE IN CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE, VOCABULARY, LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION; PARTICULARLY WITH SEND CHILDREN.' (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

'IN THE PAST, CHILDREN HAVE DISPLAYED EXHAUSTION AT THE END OF THE DAY, OFTEN WITH BEHAVIOUR SPIKES IN THE AFTERNOON. WE HAVE NOTICED THAT CHILDREN ARE LESS TIRED IN THE AFTERNOON BECAUSE THEY ARE UP AND MOVING AROUND.' (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

'(PUPILS) ARE SELF-SELECTING ACTIVITIES AND CONSEQUENTLY REMAINING ENGAGED THROUGHOUT (THEIR) LEARNING.' (YEAR 1 TEACHER)

Teachers were planning to gather data from pupils, parents and staff to measure the impact of their projects, but this was interrupted by school closures due to the national lockdown. However, plans were put in place across all nine schools to reconsider learning in the Autumn Term of 2020, making the best use of structured play to enhance learning, engage pupils and ensure progress.

A DEFINITION OF PLAY

Teachers and leaders might find Tina Bruce's (2012) definition of play helpful, as they work through this booklet:

- a) Children use first-hand experiences from life.
- b) Children make up rules as they play in order to keep control.
- c) Children symbolically represent as they play, making and adapting play props.
- d) Children choose to play - they cannot be made to play.
- e) Children rehearse their future in their role play.
- f) Children sometimes play alone.
- g) Children pretend when they play.
- h) Children play with adults and other children cooperatively in pairs or groups.
- i) Children have a personal play agenda, which may or may not be shared.
- j) Children are deeply involved and difficult to distract from their deep learning as they wallow in their play and learning.
- k) Children try out their most recently acquired skills and competences, as if celebrating what they know.
- l) Children coordinate ideas and feelings and make sense of relationships with their families, friends and cultures.



CASE STUDY

3. CASE STUDIES

Alfred Salter Primary School

When the Year 1 teachers heard that there were schools with a completely play-based approach and great outcomes for children, they were intrigued to learn more. Their own experiences of teaching Year 1 involved a heavy focus on directed activities, book work and assessments which they felt was a lot for the Year 1 children to manage.

The teachers felt that their 'transition period' from Reception was too short, lasting only until Christmas, and that it gradually filtered out the play aspects of the learning, with activities that were too rigorously planned and did not allow the children to direct their own learning. The visits to other school enabled them to see that other schools were able to successfully combine the objectives of the National Curriculum with a play based approach, and they both felt this would better cater to the needs of the children whilst ensuring that they still met the end of Year 1 goals. The teachers noticed that in schools where play-based learning was embedded:

- children chose to complete activities even though they were given as 'optional';
- independent writing was strong;
- children were noticeably happy and confident;
- communication skills were strong when interacting with peers and adults;
- when asking the children what they were doing they were always able to explain in a clear and articulate manner;
- the wide range of fun, practical activities that could be set up for the children both related to the curriculum and had high learning potential;
- the progress the children were making was at the same level as the children in more formal settings;
- children were independent learners.

The teachers completed questionnaires with their own Year 1 children, asking a range of questions about their opinions of the school day. From these questions, teachers established that:

- children's favourite subjects tended to be PE, art or computing (independent, practical subjects);
- children feel that play happened at playtime but not in lessons;
- children enjoyed having to figure activities out for themselves rather than being told what to do.

Teachers felt it would have been interesting to complete the same questionnaire on children currently in Reception to see how their answers differed.

There is now a plan in place for a full play-based approach for this year's new Year 1 cohort, including free flow, using both indoor and outdoor space. Maths is taught through a fully practical approach with no individual notebooks for children. There is a 20-minute English input and a 20-minute carousel, helping children complete two pieces of writing a week. Learning is otherwise completely independent and play-based, and teachers are excited to see the impact this will have on learning.



CASE STUDY

Bessemer Primary School

The whole discussion of Year 1 implementing continuous provision came from leadership discussions around a dip in academic progress of Year 3 children. This data that there was a group of children from socially disadvantaged households who had met the learning expectations in EYFS and KS1, yet performed significantly lower than their peers in Year 3 and into Year 4. This was not just one cohort of children; this was consistent over three years, which they felt was a lot for the Year 1 children to manage.

Previously, Year 1 had consisted of formal learning all day, apart from Autumn 1 where children were given a 'transition period.' This was purely to help children settle into the daily routine of Year 1 in a gentler way. Something needed to change: the key was to find out what that 'something' was. After many discussions, teachers agreed that if they fulfilled more of the children's needs from those disadvantaged backgrounds from a younger age, they would have experienced more of the same childhood that their peers had experienced from a younger age.

Teachers had already decided to implement a 'free choice' afternoon, as an introduction to play-based learning in Year 1. In the afternoons, children could select topic-related table activities, or access other parts of the classroom including the writing area, a construction, small world and role play area.

This formal morning to 'continuous provision' in the afternoon would require a lot of set-up during lunchtime as it was expected that table activities would be topic related.

Running continuous provision in the afternoon would allow for teachers to 'scoop up' children in the afternoon who hadn't understood or achieved something in the morning. It also allowed for adults to run small interventions (often through play) and focus groups without it impacting on teaching time.

Those Year 1 teachers coming from an Early Years background were already strong believers in learning through play. They believe children need time to play, explore and put their learning into practice: asking questions and finding answers from both adults and their peers.

Through play, children actively learn through their own interests, build concentration skills and find new ways of solving problems. Allowing children to access resources of their choice, independently or with their peers, enhances and encourages critical thinking. Whether they (children and adults) are aware of it or not, children are learning.



Through play, children build communication skills that are fundamental building blocks for a child's development. Being able to form sentences, speak clearly and process speech sounds, understand others, express ideas, turn take and interact appropriately with others are key developmental milestones for all children.

Visiting other schools, speaking to other educators and seeing this learning in practice only reaffirmed Year 1 teachers' belief in a full-time play-based approach.

Teachers agreed that children appeared happier when self-selecting resources and less anxious when it came to more structured learning time. However, there were challenges: senior leaders feared standards of writing might drop if Year 1 moved to a full-time play-based approach, rather than just in the afternoons.

Teachers had to make it work with the minimal resources they had; needed all staff to understand the importance of what they were trying to achieve; what play based learning looks like in a Key Stage One environment; and the importance of their role in this process.

Through lots of planning, observations, modelling and informal feedback, adults were able to see the value of play and continuous provision. Adults observed continuous provision and witnessed targeted questioning to children. They saw specific tasks that were accessible for particular children, and how these children accessed them. This was modelled for adults in a very relaxed and informal manner. They were able to ask questions and make comments and take this back to their class to try different aspects, then feedback.



In the past, children had displayed exhaustion at the end of the day, often with behaviour spikes in the afternoon. Since the changes have been implemented, teachers have noticed that children are less tired in the afternoon because they have been up and moving around. They are self-selecting activities, consequently remaining engaged throughout the learning experience, as they are in control of how and when that activity ends, before they become disengaged.

Teachers have noticed an increase in children's confidence, vocabulary, language development, and positive social interaction, particularly with special needs children. Children have made very good progress in reading and phonics, as teachers have been able to run short interventions through play in the afternoons. Children can now show and demonstrate their learning in ways other than written formats, which were quite often frustrating for lower attaining students in the past.

Teachers have seen much less gender stereotypical behaviours in what children access what areas. For example, the girls will play with Lego, cars and construction materials and boys will access the role play, creative and writing areas. Support staff have noted that children appear to be happier compared to previous Year 1 classes and parents say that children are happy coming to school, and keen to talk about their day with their families.

Staff have noticed that children are more willing to have a go at trickier tasks independently, before asking for assistance. Their personal, social and emotional behaviour - including sharing and taking turns - has increased and they are much better at self-selecting resources to enhance their learning experiences.

Staff who were initially reluctant at the thought of continuous provision have now begun to recognise the value of play. They now see it necessary and an important part of child education to aid in the development of building communication and language, self-confidence and awareness and understanding of the world around them. Staff are now showing the initiative: setting up engaging tasks; coming forward with ideas for children that are finding areas of learning difficult; and creating and implementing short interventions during continuous provision in the afternoon.

If schools were to decide to have a formal morning and continuous provision in the afternoon, they would need to start from day one with their provision set up with appropriate furniture (open shelving units with baskets), allowing children to self-access, so that teachers wouldn't have to set up at lunchtimes. This has been a challenge for us this year, and we have slowly found ways to make things work.

THE YEAR 1 TEACHERS HAVE LEARNT THAT THERE IS NOT NECESSARILY A 'PERFECT WAY' OF DOING PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN YEAR 1. JUGGLING THE DEMANDS OF THE CURRICULUM AND THE DESIRE FOR A PLAY-BASED CURRICULUM APPROACH IS INHERENTLY DIFFICULT. TEACHERS FEEL THAT THERE IS A NEED FOR CONTINUOUS PROVISION, BUT THAT IT NEEDS TO BE MADE PRACTICAL AND SUSTAINABLE AND TO WORK FOR TEACHERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL.

CASE STUDY

St Francis Catholic Primary School

Teachers at this school had struggled to manage transition from Reception due to a particularly tricky Year One cohort with a high proportion of SEND, and not providing enough of a play-based curriculum during the Autumn Term. They were keen to develop provision and practice to ensure that they were able to confidently plan and resource a more effective and successful transition period for the next cohort in the academic year 2020-2021.

The school had a fairly rigid and formal style of learning and provision in the Year 1 setting, particularly in the morning. As a direct result of this, teachers found that by the afternoons, the children found it incredibly hard to concentration on the two main teaching sessions and the independent tasks.

The publications that we read as part of the project proved to be invaluable, as a real eye opener to the issues and pedagogies surrounding learning-based play. The research offered ideas for increasing choosing time and facilitating activities that children would view more as playing than as work. After reading the articles, teachers tried to focus more on child led learning, asking the children how they might like to do something or how they might like to record it.



THEY ALSO TRIED TO MORE CREATIVE ABOUT HOW THEY ASKED THE CHILDREN TO RECORD THEIR IDEAS AND LEARNING AND INTRODUCED 'CLASS BOOKS' FOR SOME SUBJECTS, WHERE LEARNING FOR THE CLASS WAS RECORDED, INSTEAD OF THE TRADITIONAL SINGLE WORKBOOK FOR EACH CHILD.

THE RESEARCH ALSO ENCOURAGED THEM TO TRY TO INCORPORATE FREE-FLOW AND MORE CHOOSING TIME INTO THE AFTERNOON CURRICULUM.

Teachers interviewed children from across the ability range in the setting, six from each class. The key message from the children was that they liked the more creative and problem-solving subjects and tasks; however, they loved the morning lesson too. They told their teachers that they liked to play and playing with their friends was one of the most important things that they loved to do, so it seemed vital to begin to incorporate this style of learning and provide these opportunities more frequently, starting with looking at the structure and provision for the afternoon subjects.

However, teachers did feel that the interviews as a means of gathering baseline data proved to be a little flawed, as many children like to tell their teacher the things that they know or think that they will make them happy.

Although the interviewers explained to the children why they were asking them questions and that they wanted them to be honest with us, inevitably this desire to please will have had an impact on the accuracy of the baseline data.

For this reason, teachers also carried out classroom observations using the Leuven Scale. This data showed that children found it hard to stay focused on the independent tasks, especially those that were working below expected age-related levels. They did not seem to have the resilience or the stamina to persist with the task if at first, so they didn't succeed.

One child was asked to go and work at a focused recording task and started to cry. Each time the adult supporting the group looked away he would run off to the carpet to play with the train without completing the task. As observers, we felt this was because the task had too many parts for him: he wasn't able to concentrate for that amount of time. This made teachers realise they needed to plan shorter, more attainable, often more practical tasks for some children.



The Year 1 teachers were keen to research and visit outstanding and good learning-based play settings so that they could magpie ideas and strategies that they felt might be workable in their own school setting. The school visits proved to be invaluable: they were inspiring and showed what is possible through play-based learning. Teachers enjoyed seeing it in action in a range of settings. It was great to be able to visit some schools that were still at the beginnings of their journey as well as those schools where this pedagogy is deeply embedded in the heart of the school.

Teachers at the visit schools were welcoming and more than happy to share their provision planners and to answer any questions that we had. The photographs taken on these visits offered a wealth of resources and tasks to consider offering, including:

- clipboard based tasks for the children, e.g. making a plan for the robot they had created in the Lego for a friend to copy or writing instructions;
- facilitating more outdoor investigative learning for example with sand and water tasks;
- giving the children time to role play and to engage more with small world tasks;
- trying to change the layout of classrooms, evaluating what is in the rooms and whether it needs to be there;

- planning for shorter periods of time and knowing that planning can be more flexible;

- using even more photographic evidence than the school was currently using, to allow the children to concentrate on the learning and not the recording for proof to show others.

Teachers looked at the timetable for the week and started to include more carousel sessions in afternoon sessions as a way of having more focused time with the children, as well as giving the children some time to explore the learning environment more independently. One challenge that we had to overcome was the fact that there is no adult support in the classroom until the afternoon. This meant teachers needed to carefully consider which learning opportunities were offered to the children and when. The children immediately seemed to be calmer in the afternoons and the children working with adults at focussed tasks were more on task.

THE SCHOOL IS LOOKING FORWARD TO IMPLEMENTING THIS NEW APPROACH FULLY AT THE START OF THE NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR AND IS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE IMPACT ON LEARNING AND ENJOYMENT.



CASE STUDY

St John's and St Clement's CE Primary School

Year 1 teachers at St John's and St Clement's Primary School (SJSC) have been trialling continuous provision in their setting since September 2018 and continue to the present day. A lot has evolved in this time. We have tried various teaching pedagogies and play-based techniques such as: open ended challenges and teacher-led challenges; completely free play; honing in on child-led and child-centred activities; a carousel system that rotated children around set activities; and many more. These different approaches to continuous provision were all monitored and reviewed by the wider team to see which system suited the school and cohort best.

Presently, children are able to choose between different areas (a construction area, writing area, maths area and two additional areas which change depending on resources and the topic, They range from outdoor forest-school type activities to arts and crafts opportunities). Children choose their learning, and the teachers and teaching assistants have a guided group each to complete for English, maths and topic work.

Children have been trained in each area to produce meaningful independent work. For instance, in the construction area the children are expected to draw and label a detailed plan of what they are planning to build.

Once they have built their masterpiece, they have been empowered with the habit of evaluating it and assessing how effective it is. It should be noted that there is additional time for the adults to observe children in their free play and environment to support and challenge the pupils in that specific learning outcome. Such time to observe allows children to 'thrive with secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults' (Tanner, 2017, p.13).

YEAR 2 TEACHERS NOTED THE FOLLOWING ADVANTAGES FROM PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN YEAR 1:

- **LOVE OF LEARNING:** CHILDREN WERE MORE ENTHUSIASTIC TOWARDS THEIR LEARNING.
- **RESILIENCE:** CHILDREN DEMONSTRATED RESILIENCE AND WEREN'T APPREHENSIVE ABOUT MAKING MISTAKES.
- **AUTONOMY:** CHILDREN TOOK OWNERSHIP OVER THEIR LEARNING.
- **UNIQUE APPROACHES:** CHILDREN WERE FOUND TO BE MORE IMAGINATIVE AND CREATIVE, ESPECIALLY NOTICEABLE IN THEIR IDEAS FOR STORY WRITING.
- **ON TRACK:** END OF YEAR ASSESSMENTS SHOWED THAT THE YEAR 1 CHILDREN WERE ON TRACK AND HAD SUFFICIENT SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE FOR YEAR 2.

The teachers also noted across the cohort that there were some challenges to still overcome:

- **Sustainability:** Children were not able to work for long periods of time.
- **Handwriting:** Children had noticeably worse handwriting than the year before.
- **Key skills:** Some discreet skills were not as fluent as desired, for example number bonds to 20.
- **Attitudes towards learning:** 'I don't want to learn; I want to play' – certain children didn't identify the play they did in Year 1 as learning.

From this meeting, SJSC Year 1 teachers adapted how they constructed continuous provision for the next academic year.

Changes included:

- **Sustainability:** An expectation that children engage with a given area or resource for a sustained amount of time. For example, in the maths area children were trained to use resources independently to create their own board game. Guided work was also adapted to help children develop a positive work ethic.
- **Handwriting:** This was incorporated in daily phonics teaching, giving explicit teaching of handwriting which also seemed to improve spelling.
- **Linking play and learning:** Teachers worked to emphasise and identify learning by using language such as: 'What learning will you choose today?' 'What could we learn when we go to the creative area?'

- **Celebration:** Always dedicating time to celebrate effort and resilience, as well as outcomes.
- **Key skills:** Incorporating daily mental maths starters for transition times (such as lining up, lunchtimes and whole class maths carpet sessions). This has enabled the children to be more fluent in key skills such as counting in 2s, 5s, 10s as well as their number bonds to 20.
- **Communication:** Year 1 teachers planned half-termly meetings with the Year 2 teachers to show books, discuss learning and ensure the children were on track to meet end of year expectations, as well as being prepared for whole class teaching in Year 2.



CASE STUDY

The Belham Primary School

The school is currently in its second year of embedding a play-based approach into Year 1. Teachers have a clear vision about what this should look like and are pleased with the progress that the children are making, for example the learning in books is of a much higher quality than previous years due to adults completing learning in guided groups and being able to spend quality time supporting next steps and addressing misconceptions.

However, teachers wanted to learn how to ensure that all children were making progress all the time. The areas they thought needed addressing for this were:

- how to set up the classroom to ensure that children are being independently challenged all the time, distinguishing between Reception and Year 1 so that children don't simply engage in low level play unless supported by an adult;
- using adults effectively to support learning;
- finding a way to change the timetable to give more adult time to continuous provision and play.

Teachers carried out observations on six children in each class using the Leuven Scale for twenty minutes each. It had been expected that children would be engaging in low-level play and only for short amounts of time. However, teachers were surprised by the results. For example, in one class:

- five children were engaged at level four out of five (high) for the full time, with small moments of level 3 (moderate) mostly caused by incidents in the classroom such as a child crying or shouting that stopped the child from learning and distracted them;
- One child was level 2 (low) for most of the time and level 3 for a short amount of time, which was expected as he is only just beginning to develop independent learning skills.

The teacher noted that no children were level 5 (extremely high) and felt this was due to a lack of challenge in their play. The children were playing with toys, creating something in a way that they already knew. The environment either needed to be more challenging, or an adult needed to be moving their learning on, showing them new ways of doing things and then leaving children to explore and challenge themselves further independently.



THE SCHOOL DECIDED TO EXPERIMENT WITH TIMETABLING, AND SPECIFICALLY THE AMOUNT OF TIME DEDICATED TO WHOLE CLASS INPUTS AND THE AMOUNT OF TIME USED FOR INDEPENDENT PLAY. TEACHERS REALISED THEY NEEDED SHORTER, HIGH QUALITY INPUTS THAT WERE CAREFULLY PLANNED AND CONCISE. THEY PLANNED THREE MATHS AND TWO ENGLISH INPUTS A WEEK OF TWENTY MINUTES EACH, THREE TOPIC INPUTS OF FIFTEEN MINUTES EACH AND ONE SCIENCE INPUT OF FIFTEEN MINUTES.



The rest of the time was allocated to play-based learning, with guided groups happening throughout the day. The main change was limiting guided groups to ensure an adult has time to engage with play.

Previously, Year 1 had had a similar timetable, but the timings of adult inputs were not specific and often would drag on, limiting the time available for play. We looked carefully at medium term plans to identify objectives that would be covered through play, therefore supporting us in being able to shorten our adult inputs. This was particularly useful in maths where we found we could move all shape, space and measure into play-based learning, ensuring that a confident teacher could support the children in their play with this knowledge and assess that they had all understood it.

Teachers also reviewed the deployment of adults in the environment. They found it very interesting that most adults in the schools visited were not running guided groups, and instead involved in the play at all times. All these adults had received training on how to move learning on within play and many had come from an Early Years background.

This was a challenge in our school as TAs had not been trained in managing play-based learning and did not always understand how to enhance and not interfere. The school introduced a rota, enabling both teachers and TA to run guided groups with the other adult involved in play. This also gave the TAs a chance to observe the teacher interacting through play.

Another challenge we anticipate was evidence – or the lack of it! Our changes would require trust from senior leaders and less evidence in books. Teachers felt fortunate to have full senior leader support for the reduced amount of learning in books. One inspirational idea taken from the school visits was the scrap books or floor books, collating evidence from whole class topics and a wider range of learning. Year 1 teachers are keen to explore this in the next academic year.

Other ideas drawn from observing good practice in other schools included:

- **Planning:** less detail is needed and more teacher trust;
- **Classroom resources:** all resources should be available to the children at all times.
- **Outdoor space:** this space is so important for learning, and tough for this school, as for others on the research project, especially when senior leaders do not see Year 1 as a priority in the playground. Teachers have found ways to be creative with this, for example going to a local garden one afternoon a week, setting up an obstacle course in the corridor and using chalk on the larger shared playground space.

4. TOP TIPS

4a) Consider space and resources to encourage learning through play

Designing the space

Space is key and allows for children to work more flexibly in their play, as well as encouraging more collaborative play. Getting all adults involved in developing the environment ensures a sense of ownership and supports understanding of how the space can best support play based learning. The first step for most of the schools was to clear out lots of furniture, since play-based learning does not need a table and chair for each child.

The Welsh Curriculum recommends 'learning zones':

'CASE STUDY OBSERVATIONS REVEALED THAT THE ACTIVE USE OF NUMEROUS AND VARIOUS LEARNING ZONES LED CHILDREN TO BEING MORE LIKELY TO ENGAGE IN PARTICIPATORY AND EXPLORATORY ACTIVITIES' (RHYS, WALDRON AND TAYLOR, 2015)

Consider where to put each zone in the classroom to create quieter parts of the room, and also zones that may benefit from being nearby: for example small world and construction can often complement.

Consider developing or adapting one or two areas at a time. A gradual approach could enable all adults to closely observe its use and adapt as needed, as well as become confident with the resources and how to join and scaffold play effectively. Some teachers on the project found that by developing the classroom gradually adults could spend time establishing expectations and developing interest amongst the children.

Organising resources to support play

Resources should be organised in a way that encourages children to take more responsibility for their learning by having more control.

1 Accessible and organised

Resources should be accessible. Children can select their own resources without the need to ask an adult, leading to more independence and allowing adult/child interactions to be more meaningful. Using open shelving and baskets that are not too heavy or deep will support this. Resources are easier to access and clear away when organised well – a place for everything. Some Year 1 teachers found that too many resources could be overwhelming and underused. To counter this, they observed how the children accessed resources independently, and for what reasons. They then curated what was available, for example, there was no need to have thirty bead strings.

2 Open-ended resources

Spending time curating current resources and building up a selection that has more than one purpose allows children to be more creative and gives endless possibilities. For example, instead of having purpose-made toys to be used in the small world environment, give the children access to a variety of natural resources such as stones and moss as well as using fabrics and plants to create imaginative places for small world play. Teachers found it helpful to work closely with EYFS staff to think about how the resources would add challenge to that in Reception, as well as choosing which familiar resources could be integrated.

3 Child choice rather than set up

Initially some teachers on the project set up every area with specific resources and activities to engage in. This was found to be time consuming and ineffective as teachers sometimes observed children moving the 'set up' to one side in order to work on their own creations. Teachers also noted that setting up resources limited opportunities for children to make choices and decisions themselves. Schools felt the best approach combined pre-selected resources and chosen resources: allowing children to follow their own interests and ideas using the accessible resources in each area, alongside some adult set up challenges and stimuli to explore.

4 Use the environment in everyday teaching

Using the same areas and resources in group or whole class sessions that can be found in the classroom environment ensures children are knowledgeable, more confident to use them in their play, and allows for greater independence. Putting resources from whole class or group teaching sessions into the areas allows for playful practice. This strategy also helps to prevent the children separating play and learning.

5 Outdoor environment

When visiting schools with strong play-based approaches, Year 1 teachers observed that outdoor play was often more collaborative as there were fewer restrictions in terms of space and noise level. A Rogers and Evans (2007) study found that boys benefited from the more active engagement opportunities outdoor play could provide. Ideally, access to the outdoors would be straight off the classroom enabling children free movement between indoor and outdoor.

However, at many of the schools on this project, this was not possible and children in many schools had to take an indirect route, meaning the use of space had to be timetabled. In order to create an outdoor area, one Year 1 teacher commandeered a part of the playground, sectioning it off with planters. Areas to explore in the outdoors were considered carefully to provide different opportunities than inside, for example a woodwork bench, a small pond, a digging area, and large loose parts construction.



4b) Get quality interactions during play

One area of concern, highlighted in discussion and also in the case studies, was how to ensure the interactions between staff and pupils were purposeful. How was the learning being moved on through adult input during play? For play-based learning to have the most impact the interaction must be enhanced by the adult in a positive way. In other words, we need to ask ourselves 'did this child gain something positive from this interaction that they would not otherwise have had?' (Fisher 2016).

Classroom practice/ how to do it

Extending children's learning within play through observation and interactions may be a new concept to staff in Year 1. However, this is very familiar to staff who work in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Several of the schools within the project have drawn upon this expertise by moving staff from Reception into Year 1 or through support staff spending time observing their colleagues in the Early Years. To embed play-based learning and ensure meaningful interactions between staff and pupils, time for staff to be trained must be given and built upon over time.

How to model play in Year 1

In the case studies, it was noted that some children can 'flit' from activity to activity, not spending enough time engaging with any one resource. It is important that play is modelled. In order to do this, staff must be given the time to play alongside the children in child-led activities. To allow this to happen, sessions of play without written observation should be scheduled to allow for the relationships to develop and children to learn how to play in their new environment. Using this strategy promotes excellent relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils feel understood and valued. They are comfortable in sharing their thinking with adults and this then leads to opportunities to extend their learning.

Adults should receive training and support to understand how best to interact in children's play. This training may include:

- Allocating time for less experienced staff to observe others in EYFS & Year 1.
- Discussing with staff the importance of physically working at the same level as the child.
- Allowing time for staff to play and different children to be invited in.
- Exploring how different areas can be used for play.
- Deciding when to intervene and when to 'wait and wonder' to gain a better picture of what a child can do independently.

There is a fine balance to strike - adults need to facilitate challenge without jeopardising the children's imagination or fun. In one of the project schools, adults found giving sufficient time for observations was vital: watching the children first, and resisting the temptation to immediately intervene with questions and suggestions. If a child has already played in an area before, it is an appropriate moment for an adult to give direction and target key skills. For example, in the construction adults could ask which 3D shape is best to build with and why? Teachers need to be facilitators and ensure they are not taking away from the independence or autonomy of children's play.

Equally there will be areas of the classroom that the children are less familiar with and unsure as to how to play in them, or where they become stuck in the same play behaviours e.g. always creating the same narrative using the role play resources. Here adults should enter the play to suggest other narratives or uses of the small world toys. This is most effective when the children see the adult playing in this way and are able to initially copy before building on that play behaviour.

Extending children's own ideas and use of language

The best way to extend children's ideas is to be in the play with them. From this position you can truly develop their thinking and language. Staff could:

- **Begin playing on their own, describing what they are doing. This often entices children to that area or activity.**
- **Wait to be invited into the children's play and introduce new vocabulary.**
- **'Drop in' by introducing a new word e.g. 'I can see you've made a wonderful feast.'**

Through getting into the play, the child and adult are able to co-construct the learning together. The child learns a skill or piece of knowledge, and the adult constructs a better picture of the child's interests and next steps. In order to do this, it is vital that staff are able to 'tune in' (Fisher, 2016) to the child, a process that benefits from increased time getting to know the children through play in the early days of Year 1.

One of the most important tools when extending children's own ideas is language. This is two-fold: to promote the acquisition of language by the child, and also to build relationships in order to be invited into their play. The adult needs to show interest in what the child is doing and therefore take care not to be distracted. How we use our bodies and voices also needs to be considered.

There are many sentence stems that staff may use in order to move the learning on. Some of these include:

1. **Commenting – 'I can see that you're...'**
2. **Thinking aloud – 'I think I'll try...'**
3. **Wondering 'I wonder what would happen if...'**
4. **Reminding – 'I remember when we...'**

All of the above support the children in making links between different areas of learning yet avoid the interaction becoming too adult-led. It is also important that staff also know when it is most appropriate to not speak and allow the child's thinking to be uninterrupted. Staff should take care to not ask too many questions or that their voice is heard so often that it lacks impact when learning alongside children. Equally spending too much time waiting to be invited into the play or observing from a distance is also ineffective. All the above must be included in training for staff on how best to interact during play.



4c) Build play around children's interests

Teachers in project schools observed how the children in their classes responded to the types of resources and set up of the environment. They noticed that if the children were interested in the context of the play, for example superheroes, they would be more focused, interact more with their peers and be more likely to produce better outcomes. When the play was around an adult-led subject, that did not capture the children's interest, it was more difficult to engage the children in deeper thinking in their play and they demonstrated less imaginative outcomes. In these situations, the children would then ask the adults if they could do 'work' with them.

TEACHERS NEEDED TO CONSIDER HOW BEST TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN PROVIDING PLAY OPPORTUNITIES THAT FOLLOW THE CHILDREN'S INTERESTS AND INTRODUCING NEW IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES. OBSERVATION OF WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE CLASSROOM PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN ACHIEVING AN EFFECTIVE BALANCE.

Observation time needs to be built into the day. Without getting involved in the children's play, staff should spend some time watching what the children are doing. What are they using? How are they interacting with the environment and others? What learning are they practicing and applying? What new ideas are they exploring? Using qualitative data gathering tools such as the Leuven Scale (see appendices) can help to monitor how different children are engaging in play in different areas.

Observation played a role in supporting reluctant writers to begin to include writing as part of their play at one project school. The children who would not typically engage in writing activities were observed. Where they played and what types of play were monitored.

The team then worked to develop writing opportunities in the areas of the environment the children preferred and modelled how these could enhance their play, for example making sign posted maps on big paper for the cars to race through, writing labels for the construction models they wanted to save, etc.



4d) Balance free play and structured playful tasks

It is often tricky to strike the correct balance between free play and structured teaching tasks in a play-based learning environment. Teachers on the project experimented with various approaches to striking the right balance:

1. Worksheets

Worksheets are often formulated with closed questions and do not best stretch children's reasoning or problem-solving skills so should be used sparingly. Worksheets which are not modelled by an adult often remain unused as they are uninviting for Year 1 children, but interestingly, Year 1 teachers on the research project found that modelled worksheets were extremely popular with children who wanted to demonstrate their achievements. They also proved more accessible to children whose home environments were not as organised or learning-focused since they offered children structure and direction. However, teachers should be mindful that restrictive worksheets go against learning being 'active or experiential', and this can reduce opportunities for children to be 'self-motivating and directing' (Stephen, 2006, p.15).

2. Open-ended resources

Teachers on the project found that rotating resources on a weekly sometimes bi-weekly basis was exhausting and that children often did not choose to access the topic-specific resources.

Some teachers therefore decided to place open-ended resources in each area. Open-ended resources echo Fisher's (2010) suggestion that Year 1 and Year 2 children learn best when learning is natural and spontaneous, encouraging creativity, offering open-ended possibilities, and allowing children to be inquisitive. Some schools focused on designing open-ended resources and introduced them gradually to one classroom area at a time, observing children's reactions. The focus was on designing rich environments which would offer children 'new experiences, choice and variety, independence and fun.' (Fisher, 2010, pp28-32).

For example, one school created a set of open-ended resources for the writing area. There were exciting pens, writing tools, wanted posters, leaflets, letters, envelopes and mini sugar-paper books. Ways of using all these open-ended resources would be modelled by the teacher, enabling the children to access and use them independently. For children who faced writer's block or struggled to come up with imaginative ideas, teachers used a familiar book from English carpet sessions to model writing opportunities using the resources.

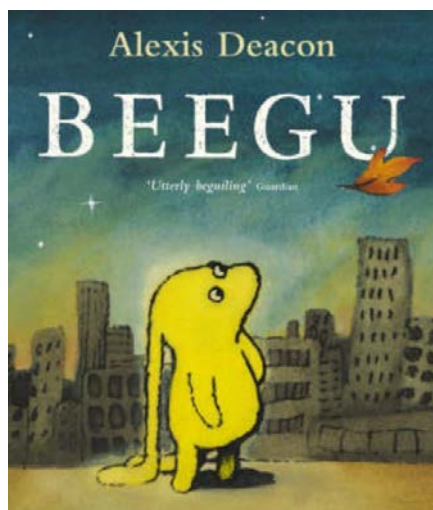
For example, when reading *Beegu* by Alexis Deacon:

- **A wanted poster searching for Beegu's spaceship and her family.**
- **Welcome letters to make Beegu feel at ease in her new setting.**
- **Fact-file style leaflets about Beegu (what she likes to do, what she likes to eat etc.)**
- **A story sequel to *Beegu*. What happens to her when she returns home?**

Teachers found that this kind of modelling enabled children to respond positively and productively to the open-ended writing materials and to produce successful, independent pieces of writing. This was particularly true of the once reluctant writers who benefited from the autonomy and creativity offered by the open-ended resources. Teachers reported that children felt ownership over their writing and were prouder of it.

3. Structured tasks

Teachers on the project found there is still a place for structured tasks in a play-based curriculum. Structured tasks can provide comprehensive assessments on certain knowledge-focused topics, such as number bonds to 20 or phonics skills. These tasks also enable teachers to provide meaningful interventions for children who may have gaps in their learning and skills.



THESE TASKS ALSO ENABLE TEACHERS TO PROVIDE MEANINGFUL INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN WHO MAY HAVE GAPS IN THEIR LEARNING AND SKILLS. STRUCTURED TASKS CAN PROVIDE CALM WORKING ATMOSPHERES FOR CHILDREN WHO STRUGGLE WITH A PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT, AS THERE IS CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS.

IDEALLY, STRUCTURED TASKS ARE DESIGNED TO PROMOTE PROBLEM SOLVING AND INDEPENDENCE, AND TEACHERS ON THE PROJECT FOUND THAT THIS COULD BE ACHIEVED BY FOCUSING ON THE USE OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS, BY CONSIDERING HOW BEST TO MAKE STRUCTURED TASKS PLAYFUL, OR BY OFFERING CHILDREN CHOICES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE TASK.

4e) Carefully balancing carpet work, guided work and play-linking structured teaching

Context

The majority of teachers in play-based Year 1 classrooms visited as part of the project continued to have daily whole class maths, English and phonics carpet sessions, as well as occasional topic carpet sessions as and some whole-class lessons in subjects like P.E., music and art.

Many also led regular guided sessions with small groups of pupils. Guided groups can address issues or questions for particular groups of children, giving a smaller, more intimate setting for children to listen and learn. However, several schools reported that having set guided groups had created a rigid system and reduced child engagement: children felt they did not have a choice and resented seeing their other friends 'playing'.

How can Year 1 teachers maintain a suitable balance of carpet work, guided work and independent play?

1. Short and snappy

Both guided groups and whole-class carpet sessions need to be of high quality and kept short. The learning needs to be clear. Some teachers on the research project found that fifteen minutes was sufficient time for carpet sessions: time to both teach a skill and to engage the children. Interestingly, teachers in one school found that maths carpet sessions were not as effective as the guided work, which would often recap what was taught on the carpet in a more targeted way.

Teachers in this school decided to focus on the development of mental maths skills for whole-class sessions.

2. Building in choice

Some teachers created tracking systems of all the guided work needing to be completed, created as a register. They provided energetic carpet sessions to introduce the guided work asked children to choose when they wanted to complete the task. This worked well as the new learning was fresh in the children's minds and they could see their friends wanting to do the task. If children did not initially choose to do a guided task with an adult, they knew they had to complete it within the week. This system enabled teachers to respond flexibly to the needs of children.

3. Adults need variety too

In a continuous provision setting it is vital for adults to have opportunities to become immersed in children's play. This enables the adults to observe children's communication, problem solving and other independent skills. Within the timetable, all adults should have time to join in play across the curriculum, and not to be wholly timetabled to lead guided work. Often in free play, children demonstrate enhanced skills which would not be visible in guided or whole class work.

4f) Assessing and monitoring progress and learning

Children enter Year 1 with high levels of independence. They know how to play and what interests them. If we are to improve our pedagogy through the use of play-based learning, the current assessment practises in traditional Year 1 classrooms must also be altered. Again, there is a wide range of practices around record keeping in EYFS settings to draw from when considering how to assess and monitor in Year 1. Through completing the project across several schools and being given the opportunity to visit best-practice schools, a range of assessment processes were tried and tested:

- **Using exercise books for group work:** Schools have found it most useful to record once or twice weekly English and Maths adult led tasks in exercise books. These are completed in small groups along with a teacher or teaching assistant. This is a very effective way to show progress and ties into ensuring quality over quantity.
- **Time for observation:** Often whilst group work is being completed by one adult, the other adult can be used to observe and interact with the children during play. This works well for monitoring of independent tasks and allows the teacher or teaching assistant time to move learning on through language and modelling of play.
- **The use of focus children:** In some settings a few children each week are the focus of assessment by all adults within the setting. This can be recorded using large A3 assessment sheets, post-it notes or an online platform.
- **Lollipop sticks or check lists for independent activities:** When a child has completed one of the independent tasks for that week, they receive a lollipop stick or mark on a class chart. This works well for schools who want pupils to complete independent English, maths, humanities and creative challenges each week.
- **Use of tablets for children:** Both adults and children can photograph independent work and submit it to online platforms such as Tapestry, Class Dojo or Seesaw.



INDEPENDENCE AND MOTIVATION

The greatest advantage of assessing play-based learning in the ways described above is the independence afforded to the children. They are free to organise their play and learning whether that be through completing an independent challenge or choosing who they learn alongside. The schools on the project found that giving choices engendered higher levels of engagement and when children got more choices, there tended to be less reluctance to take part in what the children perceive as 'traditional learning' in groups with their teachers.

BETTER QUALITY GROUP WORK

Traditionally, children move from a play-based approach in the EYFS to a formal classroom setting very quickly. Often the standard of work can dip as they become used to completing book work every day in most lessons. Through using small adult led groups whilst other children engage in independent play-based learning, teachers found that children were better supported to discuss ideas, develop their communication skills and record higher quality work either individually or as a group.

GETTING A ROUNDED PICTURE OF THE CHILD

Ultimately, assessing children through observation, independent work and small group work allows us to gain a rounded picture of that child. It becomes easier to follow children's interests and plan the next steps. We are able to see clearly their talents and areas for improvement as well as placing a heavier focus on their communication, social and physical skills.

ACCOUNTABILITY

One concern when moving to play based learning is that senior leadership teams will lay the same book monitoring expectations on Year 1 teams as they do the rest of the school. A Year 1 team in one school avoided this issue by scheduling a meeting with SLT to compare children's books from the previous year. It was immediately clear that whilst the quantity of written work had reduced, the quality of the work was of a much higher standard. The progress was clear, and children were responding to the immediate feedback given to them by an adult in a small group setting. When this was combined with evidence from independent learning, such as letters written in the messaging centre or photographs of Tudor houses built in the junk modelling area, a much fuller picture of each child's effort, attainment and interests was built.

WORKLOAD

When beginning to use play based learning in Year 1 it is easy to fall into the trap of either planning too many activities for the children to complete, or planning activities that are not open-ended enough so that they are all completed on the first day of the week. One school tackled this through introducing the independent tasks gradually, no more than two each day, to allow for new challenges throughout the week.

FOCUS CHILDREN

The use of focus children requires careful planning and consideration. All adults need to clearly understand their role and be trained in how to interact and assess in the moment. It is important to remember that there are always those weeks where less play-based learning is able to happen e.g. the end of term and themed weeks. Ensure that there is enough play-based learning time to capture a rounded picture of the child in that week.

4g) Transition to Year 2

Often educational transitions are marked by 'intense and accelerated developmental demands' (Fabian and Dunlop, 2005, p.229). Without a well thought out transition process, children can become disaffected, disorientated and inhibited (Fisher, 1996), resulting in behavioural problems which impact on commitment, motivation and relationships (Kienig, 2002).

Currently most primary schools encourage play in reception and adopt 'formal' learning from Year 1 upwards. In settings where a play-based approach is encouraged, playful learning often continues into Year 1 and even Year 2, meaning transition is not so much of an issue. However, many teachers in the research project faced the question of how to prepare children for the more formal learning which they would meet in Year 2.

How can Year 1 children working within a play-based curriculum best be prepared for transition to Year 2?

1 Plan the transition term carefully

The second half of the summer term of first half of the Autumn Term are ideal times to implement a careful transition into Year 2. Teachers can explain to children that teaching in Year 2 is different and dedicate time to exploring how the classrooms are different, how play is different and to highlighting the benefits of whole class teaching. The half term can focus on increasing the number of whole class carpet sessions and guided activities, ensuring these are immersive, active and playful. Schools on the project found that the Year 1/2 children respond well at this stage in the year, as they are more mature.

2 Use learning language to describe play

Children moving into a more formal classroom will often say: 'I don't want to learn; I want to play'. They have not identified the play they experienced in Year 1 as learning. Teachers can overcome this by labelling play as learning in the Year classroom. For example:

- 'What learning will you choose today?'
- 'What could we learn when we go to the creative area?'
- 'We had so much fun learning today!'

Many Year 2 pupils interviewed as part of this research project identified play as happening only at play time. Year 2 teachers might also consider renaming 'playtime' and talking about playful learning experiences in the classroom using the language of play-based learning.

3 Communication is key

Organise meetings with Year 2 teachers both before transition, to jointly agree strategy, and after transition, to feedback on the cohort's reactions to a more formal learning experience. Create a jointly agreed plan of action, which will ensure continuity of experience across Year 1 and into Year 2. Visiting each other's classrooms to see learning in action can help this, as can teacher swaps.



5. IMPLICATIONS

WHAT OUTCOMES SHOULD WE EXPECT?

The outcomes of the project for children have been very positive. If you are introducing a play-based learning approach, these are the sorts of outcomes you might expect, based on the experiences of teachers taking part in this research project:

Independence

Many schools reported that the children had become more independent in not only their learning but also in their social skills. Teachers were spending less time supporting children with behaviour or fixing disagreements between children. Children were able to choose how and where they wanted to learn and took great pride in completing independent challenges. Some children began to take responsibility for recording and filing their learning on either digital platforms or in folders within the classroom.

Quality of work, engagement & motivation

Having additional time to interact individually and in small groups with the children had an impact on children's vocabulary and confidence.

Inputs and interactions have been able to be tailored to small groups and individual children.

In schools where small group work for English and maths were used alongside a majority of time allocated to independent play, teachers reported a much higher quality of work compared to previous years. This can perhaps be attributed to children completing less written work but being more willing to do so. Children were also given ample opportunity to independently practise skills during their play, leading to very clear progress in exercise books. Through completing written work in groups of six with an adult, feedback was immediate and more tailored to the children's needs, also promoting good progress.

Disadvantaged pupils

Implementing a play-based curriculum allowed those who needed the most support to complete written work in a small group and with greater support from an adult. They also had the time to work on their next steps both independently and together with an adult in their play.

Children who heard less language in their home settings were exposed to a greater number of social interactions with peers and adults. This led to better relationships within classes and with staff.

Behaviour and happiness

Teachers found that the children seemed happier and more willing to engage with learning than in previous years. They were more willing to complete adult-led writing and number work. Children were also reported to be less tired by the end of the day and happier when discussing their day with parents. Both appear to have contributed to better overall behaviour with fewer instances of learning being disrupted. Over time, schools who used the Leuven Scale (see appendices) to assess wellbeing saw the levels in 'focus children' improve as they learnt how best to access the environment in response to adult scaffolding.

HELP SENIOR LEADERS UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS OF MOVING TO A PLAY-BASED LEARNING APPROACH

Throughout the project there were concerns about how to convince senior leaders to support this different approach.

Teachers felt it was important for the outcomes outlined above to be used to prompt a discussion with leaders in schools about play-based learning. It was clear that children were happier when allowed greater control over how they learn.

When implementing a play-based approach, the way Year 1 is viewed, monitored and managed must change. The year group can no longer be subject to the same requirements as many Year 5 and 6 classes in terms of planning formats, quantity of work produced and timetabling.

Because play-based learning involves a significant rethink of classroom space, Year 1 teachers who were asked by their schools to continue formal learning in the morning, and then switch to play-based for the afternoon, found this to be a significant workload problem. The classroom needed to be completely re-organised for the different learning approach, and the challenges this presented would often lead to lower-quality play in the afternoon sessions. Schools on the project would therefore advise senior leaders to go for an 'all or nothing' approach.

Teachers on the project produced some guidance for Senior Leadership Teams on how this shift might best be achieved and the role of leaders in supporting the change.

YEAR 1: PLAY BASED CURRICULUM ADVICE FOR SLT



DO

Trust in the power of play and social interaction

Expect a higher quality of work in books

Spend time interacting and playing with children

Recognise spaces and resources to facilitate child-initiated learning

Staff Year 1 classes appropriately to allow for CPD

Invest time in training staff

Facilitate visits to other Year 1 continuous learning

Allow staff to follow the interests of children through their own play



DON'T

Walk in and out without interacting with the children

Expect a high quantity of work in books

Ask to see evidence of each learning objective being met

Insist on school wide planning proformas being used in Year 1

Use formal assessment methods to gather data

Restrict outdoor play

Expect tidy and quiet classrooms during play

Create a rigid timetable for adults which leaves little time for interaction with children during play



OUTCOMES

Children become more independent in their learning

Higher levels of engagement and enjoyment

Improved language and social skills

Improved wellbeing

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN PLAY IN EYFS AND YEAR 1

Year 1 children should experience a different kind of 'play' to Reception children. Whilst it's essential to embed the key knowledge and skills outlined in the National Curriculum, it is equally important to give time for children to have free play where communication and resilience are developed without the restrictions of a structured activity or teacher-led play. Play can mean many things and teachers tried to focus on encouraging play that "is whatever a child does in order to satisfy their desire to learn". (Ephgrave, 2017, p.2).

Moving to a play-based approach in Year 1 should not be seen as an extension of the EYFS. Rather it is extending some of the best and most inclusive practise in the Foundation Stage and applying it as method to achieve objectives set out in the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum.

There will be lots that Year 1 staff will be able to learn from colleagues in the EYFS and some schools have begun to group these years into phase teams to support the extension of child-led learning into Year 1. Through doing so, staff are able to work together to distinguish what play should look like in different year groups. e.g. how does the use of sand play change from the beginning of Nursery or Reception into Year 1. Some schools produced documents with their teams (small extract below) to support staff in recognising age-related expectations and in giving next steps to move learning on.

Sand Play		
Nursery	Reception	Year 1
Pouring Mixing Hiding objects Use of sand toys Role play Emergent writing Motor skills – larger tools	Narrated role play Mark making using found objects Use of phonics and number knowledge in the sand Refining motor skills tools	Extended narratives using small world Use of sand as a stimulus for message writing Completing investigations, comparisons, observations Increased hand-eye coordination

Free play gives children the freedom to interact and engage with the environment. It gives them time to try new things and have a safe space to 'fail'. The curriculum does not reflect the importance of resilience in children. Children need to be armed with confidence and an ability to bounce back when they cannot achieve something the first time. However, free play is tricky for children who are 'flitters'. They can fail to engage meaningfully in play without adult support or task structure. They can avoid spending sufficient time in one area, thereby failing to take the time to develop specific skills in any depth.

To avoid 'flitting', adults need to have effective tracking systems in place and carry out effective observations. Some teachers managed this by having focus children to observe each day. Others set high expectations for free play by training children to put work they were proud of into folders and by dedicating time each day to celebrating this work.

TRAIN ADULTS TO INTERACT EFFECTIVELY WITH PLAY

Children's engagement in play, and the ensuing learning, can be greatly affected by adult interaction. When an adult joins in play, children can become more interested, have more meaningful conversations about their thinking and produce a higher standard of outcomes.

Adults should be facilitators and ensure they are not taking away from the independence or autonomy of children's play. Too much scaffolding and over didactic input from adults can lead to a worse outcome as it is not only restrictive but disempowering. McInnes (2019) found when adults joined play they were too formal and directive. Power et al (2019) found that for some boys play was not beneficial. This was partly attributed to lack of warmth and positivity of interactions with the adults.

Invest in the training of adults to ensure they understand the pedagogies of play-based learning. With a better understanding of the 'why', adults will more likely to have more effective interactions.

TIME SHOULD ALSO BE SPENT MODELLING AND SUPPORTING ADULTS IN THE PRACTICAL STRATEGIES THEY CAN BE USING TO BEST INTERACT IN CHILDREN'S PLAY. AT ONE PROJECT SCHOOL, TIME WAS GIVEN TO ALLOW ADULTS TO WORK IN PAIRS OBSERVING PLAY TOGETHER AND OBSERVING EACH OTHER TO THEN DISCUSS IDEAS AND IMPACT OF ADULT INPUT. THIS ALLOWED FOR STAFF TO BE MORE REFLECTIVE AND FEEL SUPPORTED IN THEIR ROLES.

6. STORY OF A SCHOOL

One of the most impressive schools teachers visited in terms of play-based learning in Year 1 was Hanover Primary in Islington, which has been working for several years now to embed and refine the approach. In this section, Polly Shields, Deputy Head at the school, gives an honest account of their journey, and the school's successes and challenges.

A JOURNEY TOWARDS PLAY-BASED LEARNING: HANOVER PRIMARY'S EXPERIENCE

Over the last four years, Hanover Primary School in North London has been on a journey to develop a more play-based and developmentally-appropriate provision for children aged 3-7 (our 'Lower School'). We began with reinvigorating our Nursery and two Reception classes, ensuring that we built our provision on a solid understanding of the Early Years Characteristics of Effective Learning, and a renewed focus on the Early Years Prime Areas: Communication and Language, Physical Development, and Personal and Social Development. Without these foundations, we knew that all other learning was compromised.

But as our Early Years provision improved and the children's confidence and independence grew, our Year 1 provision was thrown into relief. Here were children, some only a few weeks older than those in Reception, for whom our offer, and their experience, was very different. Although we had a short transition period where we gradually weaned the children off the free-flow play they'd enjoyed in Reception, it felt wrong.

Our talented teachers felt limited by a traditional timetable of whole-class, subject-specific lessons, with assemblies, playtimes and lunch-breaks splitting up the day. The majority of the children were struggling to pay attention and focus, with the younger ones, those with SEND, and those from less advantaged backgrounds, particularly distracted, listless and - ultimately - challenging to manage. Teachers were exhausted and demoralised. Parents told us their children, who had loved Reception, weren't keen on school any more; morning tummy-aches were common. Most children were not thriving in our Y1 provision. We needed to act.

WHAT DID WE CHANGE?

ENVIRONMENT - INSIDE AND OUT

In Early Years parlance, the learning environment is the 'third teacher' (after parents and educators). We had to get rid of a lot of furniture (cupboards with closing doors), chairs and tables (far fewer were now needed) and years worth of inappropriate resources to achieve this. Although new open shelf units were a big investment, these allowed us to create classroom zones (creative 'making' areas, construction with large blocks, small world play, maths areas, writing zones, role play, water trays, and inviting book areas) in which the children could learn independently.

But the biggest change was that we made proper use of our large, shared outside area, which all Lower School classes can access directly. Previously, this had been a narrow strip of tarmac onto which children poured for their 20-minute morning and afternoon playtimes. This area became an outside classroom, zoned similarly but with different activities - climbing apparatus, a huge sandpit, growing zones, a mud kitchen, large-scale painting, water play alongside a water butt, a woodwork area, musical instruments... anything that would be too noisy, messy or active to be contained within a classroom, but which we knew would support children's learning.

CURRICULUM

We knew from experience that KS2-style lessons did not work in Year 1 - but we felt constrained by the need to cover the content-heavy Year 1 curriculum. We decided to approach it differently. We separated out those objectives we felt could only be covered through direct teaching (e.g. phonics, handwriting, 'missing number problems' in maths, or naming the continents and oceans) and those which we felt could better be covered through children's direct experience (e.g. seasonal changes, or the properties of materials in science; weather patterns, or making maps in geography).

We built in short daily whole class 'maths meetings' where previously-taught skills, like counting in 5s, reciting days of the week and problem solving with them, or telling the time) could be practised through short songs, games and familiar activities. Our environments provided the context in which children could practise the new skills we taught them in their own way, at their own pace, either on their own or with their friends.

We continue to experiment with setting 'challenge tasks' for children to complete through the week independently, alongside their directed group work with a teacher, trying (and sometimes succeeding) in making sure these don't seem tokenistic or irrelevant to the children.

TIMETABLING

Once we had an outdoor area which could be accessed through most of the day, we could get rid of set playtimes. Year 1 children no longer came to assembly. The extra learning time this provided meant that our direct, whole-class teaching could be limited to the very beginning and end of each session (for phonics, shared reading, singing and stories, and the maths meetings) while two clear hours in the morning (9.30-11.30) and just over an hour in the afternoon (1.45-3.00) could be used for freeflow play. During those sessions, the teachers or the teaching assistants were timetabled either to take small groups for focused work (for example writing, or practising written calculation), or to play alongside the children, inside and out, observing carefully and joining in only where they thought they could make a positive difference (Fisher, 2016).

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN YEAR 1?

As you walk into our play-based Year 1 class you might see:

- A group of children playing with a spinner and numicon, adding pieces to fill a base board.
- Another child silently intent on putting pegs into a peg-board, and experimenting with different patterns.
- Someone copying digits using a newly-taught formation onto a large whiteboard on the back of a bookshelf.
- A group of five children working with a teacher on a writing task at a table.
- Three children building a city with a train-track, building blocks and small-world figures, and excitedly telling each other the story of what is happening.
- A pair of children playing 'teachers' and showing each other the phonics flashcards.
- Outside, through the open doors, children have discovered bugs on one of the bushes and are trying to identify them using a book suggested by the TA on duty.
- Others are turning somersaults on the climbing frame bars; yet more have invented a game with a ball and a bat and are tallying up the score on a clipboard.

- In the sandpit, a large subterranean world of tunnels has been built with children carrying water in buckets to see if they can make underground rivers.
- A couple of children are relaxing on a bean bag in a sunny spot with some books.
- A group are engaged in one of the set 'challenge tasks' and are surveying the class to find out how many brothers and sisters the whole class has.

What you will not see:

Bored children tipping back their chairs around five tables set for six children each, asking if it's home time, and turning the carefully collected cubes for counting that the teacher has set out into guns.

MINDSET

The biggest change of all was probably helping staff rethink what we mean by 'teaching and learning'. Young children are primed from birth to learn - they are 'learning machines', and they delight in the new skills they acquire which they will practise independently until they master them. (Just think about a one-year old learning to walk!) Those teachers and teaching assistants trained or experienced in child development and Early Years pedagogy know this, but without this background it's easy to believe that a teacher's job is to plan and be in control of all children's learning in the classroom. And that, conversely, teachers who are not aware of everything that the child is learning throughout every day are not doing a good job.

We had to encourage teachers to see that when given choices, children will often choose to have a go at new skills and will be learning. We see lots of independent writing; for example, children will choose to write in a way that was rare before. A less confident child might spend an hour writing with his friend writing all the numbers from 1-50 on a large whiteboard, correcting each other until they are both happy with the result. We had to accept that we would often never know exactly what it was a child had learnt - but that the fact that they were absorbed in a self-chosen task for an extended period of time meant that deep level learning was taking place.

We also had to get to underneath both the concepts of play and learning, so as to understand that play is not only a primal need for children (as it is for all young mammals) but that it can also be the mechanism through which children's learning is consolidated, experimented with, and extended. Children thrive when given the opportunity to play and suffer when play is denied - so play-based learning supports their wellbeing and social skills too.

As a senior leadership team, we needed to accept that book looks and learning walks in our lower school were going to be different; fewer pieces of set work are in the books, and evidence of learning is now gathered in a wider range of ways, including annotated photographs, independent work 'scrapbooks' and video footage.

When we visit classrooms, we don't expect to see the teacher at the front, teaching the whole class, but we do expect to see high levels of focus and engagement from the children choosing their own independent tasks lots of pro-social behaviour and co-operation; and clearly understood systems and agreed boundaries in place (for example: if you play with something, it's your job to put it away when you're finished).

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Schools can only make these changes if they have the support of senior leaders, and leaders need to understand Early Years pedagogy, to allow enough time for mistakes to be made and learnt from, and to keep an open mind. Things can be messier in play-based learning; the classroom may seem chaotic to the untrained eye, with children all engaged in different tasks, most of them not planned by an adult. There are staffing implications, not least in ensuring there are enough staff to run inside and outside learning, but also it is vital that staff understand why, not just what they are doing. You need to really know the children well, but the good news is that working this way helps you know them much better than before.



Building in challenge to the provision, and moving children's learning on through your interactions, is much more difficult than moving on to the next worksheet or book. Maintaining and developing the learning environment is never-ending. Some parents are sceptical about the approach when friends' children in other schools are doing 'proper learning' (formal lessons at tables, for example). We still worry about SATs and writing outcomes (and scrappy books when we are moderated)!

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Children's well-being has rocketed. We very rarely have to manage behaviour in our lower school. Children learn how to self-regulate by moving between different tasks or zones and matching their behaviour to their context. Their levels of focus and engagement (as measured by the Leuven Scales) are higher, and they can stay on a task for much longer. Children are keen to come to work in a small group and will focus happily on their task because they know they can play afterwards. The work they produce when taught this way is of much higher quality than when they are one in a class of 30 doing a task together.

They are more active and seem physically fitter. It is early days to compare assessment outcomes, but there certainly hasn't been a dip, and in 2019 our maths outcomes were significantly higher than in 2018. But most of all, as one Year 1 teacher told us, having moved from the old system to the new, 'it just seems kinder'. There are no more morning tummy aches. Teachers enjoy their jobs.

Overall, we feel that we are working with children's natural proclivities, rather than going 'against the grain', and having to 'break children in' to formal learning at an age when, in most other countries, children are expected to be learning through their play when at school. Working this way feels right.

Polly Shields

Deputy Head, Hanover Primary,
Islington



7. APPENDICES

THE LEUVEN SCALE

Developed by Ferre Laevers (1999), the Leuven Scales help you to understand how focused and comfortable children are. Laevers believed that high levels of well-being and involvement were prerequisites for learning. Both well-being and involvement are scored from one to five, with five being the highest level and one the lowest. Leuven Scale assessments can be used to observe children who are concerning, in terms of learning progress or, as on this project, to measure wellbeing and involvement before and after a significant change to practice, like the move from formal to play-based learning in Year 1.

THE LEUVEN SCALE FOR INVOLVEMENT

Level	Involvement	Signal
1	Extremely low	Activity is simple, repetitive and passive. The child seems absent and displays no energy. They may stare into space or look around to see what others are doing.
2	Low	Frequently interrupted activity. The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around.
3	Moderate	Mainly continuous activity. The child is busy with the activity but at a fairly routine level and there are few signs of real involvement. They make some progress with what they are doing but don't show much energy and concentration and can be easily distracted.
4	High	Continuous activity with intense moments. The child's activity has intense moments and at all times they seem involved. They are not easily distracted.
5	Extremely high	The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period.

THE LEUVEN SCALE FOR WELL-BEING

Level	Well-being	Signal
1	Extremely low	The child clearly shows signs of discomfort such as crying or screaming. They may look dejected, sad, frightened or angry. The child does not respond to the environment, avoids contact and is withdrawn. The child may behave aggressively, hurting him/herself or others.
2	Low	The posture, facial expression and actions indicate that the child does not feel at ease. However, the signals are less explicit than under level 1 or the sense of discomfort is not expressed the whole time.
3	Moderate	The child has a neutral posture. Facial expression and posture show little or no emotion. There are no signs indicating sadness or pleasure, comfort or discomfort.
4	High	The child shows obvious signs of satisfaction (as listed under level 5). However, these signals are not constantly present with the same intensity.
5	Extremely high	The child looks happy and cheerful, smiles, cries out with pleasure. They may be lively and full of energy. Actions can be spontaneous and expressive. The child may talk to him/herself, play with sounds, hum, sing. The child appears relaxed and does not show any signs of stress or tension. He /she is open and accessible to the environment. The child expresses self-confidence and self-assurance.

7. REFERENCES

Brown, C. (2017). Research learning communities: How the RLC approach enables teachers to use research to improve their practice and the benefits for students that occur as a result. *Research for All*, 1(2), pp.387-405.

Bruce, T. (2012). *Learning through play, for babies, toddlers and young children*. Hachette UK.

Bryce-Clegg, A. (2017) *Effective Transition in Year One*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ephgrave, A. (2017). *Year One in Action: A Month-by-month Guide to Taking Early Years Pedagogy Into KS1*. Taylor & Francis.

Fabian, H. & Dunlop, A.W. (2005). 'The Importance of play in transitions'. In J. R. Moyles (Ed) *The Excellence of Play*. Second Edition. Buckingham: Open University/McGrawHall.

Fisher, J. (2016) *Interacting or Interfering. Improving Interactions in the Early Years*. Open University Press.

Fisher, J. (2020). *Moving on to Key Stage 1: Improving Transition into Primary School*, 2e. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Fisher, J. (1996). *Starting from the Child*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Grindheim, L. and Ødegaard, E. (2013). What is the state of play?. *International journal of Play*, 2(1), pp.4-6.

Kienig, A. (2002). 'The importance of social adjustment for future success.' In H. Fabian & A. W. Dunlop (Eds) *Transitions in the early years: debating continuity and progression for children in early education*. (pp.23-37). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Laevers, F. (1999). The project Experiential Education. Well-being and involvement make the difference. *Early Education*, nr. 27, Discussion paper.

McInnes, K. (2019) Playful learning in the early years – through the eyes of children, *Education 3-13*, 47(7), 796-805, DOI:

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to Alli Crank and Nat Nakkas from St John's and St Clements CE Primary, Ally Sprakes from The Belham Primary, Kate Finbow from St Francis Catholic Primary and Polly Shields from Hanover Primary who co-authored this booklet.

With thanks to Alfred Salter, Bessemer, Dulwich Wood, Judith Kerr, Keyworth, St Francis Catholic, St John's and St Clement's CE, and The Belham Primaries in Southwark, and School 21 in Newham, who participated so enthusiastically in the project.

Thanks also to the following schools who inspired us with their commitment to play-based learning in Year 1 and their wonderful teachers and pupils:

- Crawford Primary, Southwark
- Drayton Park Primary, Islington
- Hanover Primary, Islington
- Pickhurst Infant School, Bromley
- Woodgrange Infant School, Newham



CONTACT US

London South Teaching School Alliance
Charles Dickens Primary School
Toulmin Street, London, SE1 1AF
Tel: 020 7407 1769