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Realising the potential of play in Scottish education

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ABSTRACT

This is the closing paper in a *Scottish Educational Review* collection on *Making Space for Play in Scottish Education*. The paper reflects on the key conclusions from the six papers and three notes that comprise the collection. It identifies a baker's dozen of priority actions for those concerned to enrich Scottish education through play, i.e. (i) establishing a shared sense of purpose for play; (ii) crafting a coherent position among those with an interest in promoting play; (iii) acknowledging the role of play in achieving many of the wider goals of school education; (iv) not only promoting the radical potential of play to enhance education, but also thinking critically about it; (v) reflecting on the benefits of playful learning for pupils, wider society and classroom teachers; (vi) sharing exemplars of playful learning and the process through which it is introduced; (vii) reviewing the resources that are available; (viii) specifying minimum play(space) standards; (vix) strengthening the evidence base; (x) reflecting on the significance of the changing nature of play; (xi) engaging practitioners on the value of playful learning beyond the early years; (xii) involving the wider school community in embracing play; and (xiii) supporting teachers and other educational practitioners to utilise playful learning, while being cognisant of the demands and pressures on their time.

KEYWORDS: *Play; education; children; Scotland; Article 31*

INTRODUCTION

The objective of the collection of papers in *Making Space for Play in Scottish Education* was to consider whether Scottish education could and should embrace playful learning. In bringing together a diverse set of insights into the application and potential of play in Scottish education, it will have broadened the awareness of play in education among scholars and practitioners who are less familiar with play; for those who are familiar with 'the play way', it will have provided some reassurance that play is being taken seriously (by some). We conclude with a baker's dozen of next steps that arise from this collection for progressing with play in Scottish education.

PRIORITIES FOR PLAY IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION

First and foremost, there is a need to **establish a shared sense of purpose for play** in Scottish education as a whole, a precursor for which is promoting an understanding of play. The collection opened with a recognition that the common understanding of play among play professionals - a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated – may at first appear to be a direct challenge to education professionals whose primary purpose is to facilitate learning (McKendrick 2019a). In this sense, the prevailing definition of play may be unhelpful for education. Indeed, the strident campaigning for a play-based pedagogy in the early years that was characteristic of Palmer (2019) and McNair *et al.* (2019) may be received as a direct challenge to the professional purpose of some, as the argument advanced is that learning through play (rather than teacher-led learning) is the optimal mode of learning for young children. As the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland (*CfE*) advises, this covers both pre-school and the early years of the primary school. However, the positioning of play-led learning against teacher-led learning in the early years is problematic thereafter for play in education. For proponents of child-led play, what was once a threat (play-based pedagogy in the early years) is seamlessly and effortlessly transformed into an asset (playful learning in the years beyond). Perhaps the answer is not to argue through polemic, but rather to acknowledge that both free play (child led) and purposeful play (adult guided) have value throughout children's lives and that the challenge for education is to utilise these effectively in different ways at different stages in a child's development. Without this shared and sustained understanding of play value in education, play pedagogy will continue to be contested by some in the early years, with many beyond dismissing outright the value of play.

Second, and related to the first point, is the need to consider **who champions play**? Ultimately, play is for the player and as Article 31 of the UNCRC asserts, children have a right to play. However, the issue at hand is who is promoting play to ensure that children's rights to play (and an optimal education) are being realised. Presently, there is a fragile sense of shared purpose: the early years sector promotes play-based pedagogy; the play sector valorises play in all its guises; those shaping education in Scotland acknowledge the value of play, but in the pursuit of other goals (positive outcomes, improved attainment) may also be laying foundations for practice that curtails it; and other interest groups use play to achieve their goals in school (e.g. McKendrick 2019b in relation to school grounds play). In the absence of a shared sense of purpose, the champions of play at times seem to work against, rather than with, each other. Much would be gained from some focused dialogue among stakeholders and interest groups to move beyond narrowly defined self-interest to craft a strategic and coherent approach to the promotion of play for education.

Third, although there is a need for careful consideration of how play is promoted in education, at the same time, there is a need to acknowledge the many helpful ways that play is being used to achieve the **wider goals for school education**. The central role of autonomy in the Capabilities-based play pedagogy proposed by Scott-McKie and Campbell (2019), the valorisation of child-led play by McNair *et al*. and the ease with which older pupils embraced the autonomy of the student composed schedule in the work of Krechevsky *et al*. (2019) are consistent with the

drive to promote children's active participation in the life of the school, as promoted through pupil councils and Rights Respecting Schools. Without a commitment to play and playful interaction, the capacity of children to make meaningful contributions to matters which shape their school experience is much curtailed. In a similar fashion Johnstone *et al.* make the case for promoting active play in schools in order to contribute toward national physical activity targets. At the other end of the spectrum, Guilbaud (2019) portrays a very different set of educational goals in an education that is framed by Steiner values.

Fourth, the **radical potential for play to enhance children's education** should be celebrated and promoted. Scott-McKie and Campbell's (2019) argument that the Capability Approach might serve as a useful theoretical underpinning to understand the role of play in Scottish primary schools is less radical than first appears. Rather than argue for a re-focusing of purpose, they argue that the Capability Approach provides a strong – and perhaps a stronger – basis for achieving the existing educational goals, i.e. they assert that a play-pedagogy is best placed to achieve the four higher order *CfE* competencies. Here, the radical challenge of play is the means to the end, rather than the end in itself. Similarly, Krechevsky *et al*. (2019) demonstrate how a student composed schedule leads to more effective pupil engagement on return to the standard timetable. Johnstone *et al.* (2019) view the promotion of active play in schools as a means to achieve a pre-desired end – in this case to contribute toward national physical activity targets; once more, the utilisation of play is consistent with wider educational goals, rather than challenging to them. On the other hand, this view of a 'purposeful play' is one that concerns McNair *et al.* (2019). Rather than generate citizens with the progressive competencies of the *CfE*, their concern is that purposeful play might instead be no more than "effective preparation for an adulthood in which the citizenry is compliant to the demands of authority". Their call is to optimise the value that accrues when the child is afforded opportunity to determine the shape of their own play. Similarly, the learning orientation of Guilbaud (2019) in her home learning environment, is one that is informed by Steiner principles and that seems distant to the outcomes focus of educational attainment. The radical potential of play is one that should excite stakeholders; however, without an understanding of the shared purpose of play and its contribution to the wider goals of a school education, there is a risk that confusion and divergent purpose is promoted through radical play.

Fifth, the aforementioned points make clear that the **question of who would benefit from play pedagogy** is far from academic; it is reasonable to assume that if play enriches education, then wider society also gains as a result of children benefitting from a more useful education. However, the question of primary purpose is critically important. Most of the papers in this collection, understandably, have been concerned to argue that a play infused education benefits children, which in turn leads to a more effective education system. Extending this, Krechevsky *et al*. (2019) report that the benefits of a more playful approach to designing the school day were reported to be of as much benefit to teachers as pupils in that the student designed curriculum highlighted the possibilities of working in new ways that enriched their practice and afforded them opportunity to spend more focused time with pupils, beyond that which was possible in traditional classroom settings.

Sixth, although this collection has demonstrated that playful learning has the potential to enrich the learning experience of educators and a wide range of pupils, there is a need to **share experience of successful case studies and** share experiences of introducing playful learning. In particular, there is a need to demonstrate the value of play in the upper years of primary school and for specific subject areas in secondary school. There is an emerging culture in Scottish education of sharing good practice; Regional Improvement Collaboratives, CPD and the National Improvement Hub already exist, providing portals and mechanisms for disseminating ideas and exemplars. Although the primary focus of this professional learning is less on the means utilised than the ends reached, there is an opportunity for a more explicit focus on the contribution of playful learning to enhance learning in Scottish education.

Seventh, there is also a need to **review the resources that are available** to support play and playful learning. Both Johnstone *et al.* (2019) and McKendrick (2019b) challenge us to enrich the resources that are available in school grounds. Although not focused on the school environment, the work of Schlesinger *et al.* is also of relevance. First, they make productive use of the tools of the traditional classroom in the wider community; they use chalk and chalkboards to capture the significant play memories of the wider community, inadvertently making connections between school and the community of which it is part. Importantly, they also argue that school grounds should utilise these simple resources to enrich school ground play. The value in utilising everyday and incidental resources to maximise play value is also evident in Guilbaud (2019). Perhaps the immediate priority would be to identify the low/no cost resources that are known to enrich the learning potential of schools, and to consider how the use of existing resources might be optimised.

Eighth, although none of the papers explicitly recommend **specification of minimum school standards for play,** this would be a logical extension of any review of resources for play in schools. The Scottish School Grounds Survey (McKendrick 2019b) offers a starting point for considering what should be expected of the outdoor environment. Specification of a minimum offer might be conceived as a matter of social justice to ensure that all children in Scottish schools are afforded the potential to enrich their education through play. Although provision alone does not determine opportunity and a cultural shift is required to ensure that potential is realised, it is important that the play potential is given due prominence in the Scottish Government's assessment of the suitability of the school's external social spaces and external facilities. At present, the contribution of play potential to this evaluation is unclear.

Ninth, there remains a need to **strengthen the evidence base** in order to demonstrate with positive impact of play-pedagogy with confidence and conviction. Perhaps the strongest case for the need to strengthen the evidence base comes from Johnstone *et al.* (2019) who, despite evidencing that active play provides more moderate to vigorous activity for children than active commuting, PE sessions and break-time play, conclude that "The evidence base for active play interventions needs to be strengthened if it is to provide a compelling narrative on the potential it may have on improving children's MVPA and FMS". More pertinently, the evidence base is paltry for the hypothesised impact of play on educational outcomes. Even where there is a substantial evidence base, there is

scope for it to be strengthened to support the case for play (Palmer 2019). Of course, as McNair *et al*. (2019) caution, there is a need to appreciate that evidence comes in many forms and the skilled observer has much to contribute to enhancing understanding and optimising play practice.

Tenth, there is a need to acknowledge that the nature of play is changing and has changed through time. Schlesinger *et al.'s* (2019) project captures the most pertinent play memories among two communities in Philadelphia. Although the method does not allow them to assert with certainty that the **nature of play has changed through time**, this is the reasonable and informed conclusion that they draw from their results. Interestingly, they conclude that the playground and playtime might be a time-space that is amenable to promote these low/no cost opportunities for play that were so highly valued. Whether the objective is to understand how play has changed in order to better utilise contemporary play in education, or whether the objective is to recover what has been lost through education, it is clear that schools should be cognisant of the wider impact of changing play on children's lives.

Eleventh, although arguing that play pedagogy is pertinent to the upper reaches of primary school, Scott-McKie and Campbell (2019) assert this case on principle, rather than evidenced practice. The question of **play and age stage** is unresolved, or at least there remains a need to state the case for playful learning beyond the early years. Establishing the theoretical base for a play pedagogy is a useful contribution to make, but for naysayers to be convinced, this needs to be strengthened with reference to exemplars of how play will enrich the education of older children. Similarly, although there is nothing overt in the work of McNair *et al.* (2019) that cautions against its value for older children, their focus on the early years offers little direction to those practitioners working with older children who might be interested in embracing more playful learning. Krechevsky *et al.*'s (2019) successful experimentation with the school timetable suggests that there are clearly ways in which playful learning can enhance the education experience of older pupils.

Twelfth, in many instances, the desired outcome (e.g. increased physical activity levels of Johnstone *et al.* 2019), is best achieved when parents and the **wider community** are involved. As with the case for the evidence base, McNair *et al.* (2019) once more provide a cautionary note. Supporting play is a skill and there is a need to appreciate that well-intended intervention might be counter-productive to the ends to which play is being put in education. On the other hand, the everyday experience of play could be used to bind together the interests of school and parents; the work of Schlesinger *et al*. (2019) demonstrates how play can motivate and engage. Play may be a mechanism through which to engage parents and the wider community in the education of their children; however, it should not be assumed that all fully appreciate or understand the contribution that play can make to children's learning.

Finally, and ultimately, the prospects for play in Scottish education will be determined partly by the strength of the evidence base that demonstrates the enhanced positive value of play, but also the **inclination of educational practitioners** to embrace it. There is evidence from the research reported in this paper of the former might determining the latter (Krechevsky *et al*. 2019). On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that this intervention was based in an

educational establishment that was already attuned to the value of play. As the observations of McNair *et al.* (2019) highlight with regard to young children at play, Guilbaud (2019) with regard to her mothering, and Johnstone *et al*. (2019) observe with regards to active play, this places yet another demand to extend the professional competency of educational practitioners and, in the case of active play, may necessitate an additional (unwelcome) demand on time within an already crowded timetable. To end on an optimistic note, as Diaz-Varela and Wright (2019) observe, embracing a play-based pedagogy is not only of interest in Scotland; it is an approach to enriching practitioner practice that is being embraced internationally.

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