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Research Article

Integrating playful pedagogies with the curriculum: The perspectives and practices of teachers working across infant, first and second classes, in Ireland

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Abstract: While play is a key feature of the early childhood curriculum, its role in primary education can be more peripheral. In Ireland, a new primary curriculum framework aims to strengthen connections between learning in preschool and school through embedding a playful approach, more dynamically, in the primary context. This paper will share findings from an online mixed methods survey of 293 teachers, working in junior and senior infants and in first and second class. Congruent with research in other countries, findings suggest that while play is associated with a broad range of benefits, and is seen as compatible with learning in school, its potential is not optimised due to a myriad of system, school, teacher, and child features. While the prominence of playful pedagogies in the new primary curriculum framework is welcome, the current findings underscore issues which could impact on the fidelity with which it is implemented. The findings from this study affirm the value of surfacing teachers' perspectives during times of curriculum reform. The perceived enablers and barriers, to adopting playful and innovative pedagogical approaches, can inform the provision of resources and design of supports which will be required to embed play successfully in Irish primary schools. To harness existing best practice and to propel and sustain curriculum innovation, teachers clearly need to be seen as partners rather than mere consumers or receivers of curriculum redevelopment.

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Introduction

In Ireland, the national curriculum framework for the early years, *Aistear*, recognises play as a key context for learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2024). As *Aistear* is a curriculum for children from birth to 6-years, it incorporates those 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds attending the entry junior and senior infant classes in primary school. While conceptually there is synchronicity between *Aistear*, and the primary school curriculum, the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) has struggled in combining playful learning with a compartmentalised, subject-driven curriculum. The primary school curriculum has continued to set out what children learn while *Aistear* has generally been used to support the development of more playful methodologies, in the entry classes (Keane, 2014).

The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (Department of Education [DoE], 2023a) proposes to strengthen connections between learning in preschool and school through embedding playful pedagogies, more comprehensively, in primary education. This presents a unique opportunity to build a curriculum which aligns with the evidence on how children learn in addition to fostering continuity in learning (Ring et al., 2018). In reality, however, integrating play and learning in primary school remains problematic (Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2018; Parker et al., 2022; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). As embedding play in the primary school curriculum is a current policy priority, this study

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investigated the perspectives and practices of teachers working across junior and senior infants (4-, 5- and 6-year-olds) and first and second class (7- and 8-year-olds). While there is some research on the use of playful pedagogical approaches in foundation classes, the research on playful approaches, beyond the entry grades, is sparse. In illustrating how play is currently viewed and utilised in practice, this paper identifies the opportunities and challenges of translating current policy directions into practice and can inform a more authentic implementation of the new curriculum framework. Authentic implementation of the curriculum will increase the fidelity with which the formal curriculum framework is implemented in the real world of the classroom. It can also ensure consistency in implementation within, and across schools, nationally.

A Rationale for Playful Learning

A growing corpus of research affirms the potency of playful pedagogical approaches in the classroom (Mardell et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2018). Playful pedagogical approaches incorporate child-led, teacher-guided, and teacher-led play experiences. Through leveraging the joyful, active, meaningful, iterative, and social characteristics of learning, a playful pedagogical approach can increase children's motivation and active engagement in learning (Zosh et al., 2018). The concept of playful pedagogies is intended to capture the integrated nature of play and learning across a range of child and teacher-led learning experiences in the classroom (Zosh et al., 2018; Parker et al. 2022)

While the idea that children learn better through play, is well established in the early years, primary education is associated more with formal, seat-based, instructional approaches (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Nicholson & Hendry, 2019; Parker et al., 2022; Walsh & Fallon, 2021; Whitebread & Coltman, 2016). Moreover, while early years curricula tend to espouse a holistic and integrated approach which places equal emphasis all aspects of learning, primary curricula have been more concerned with content and academic skills. This has been perpetuated by the global education reform movement or GERM, which in driving the standardisation of education, erodes the status of play in school (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). This practice of introducing academic learning too early has been criticised for its potential to create inequality of educational opportunity, for children, from their first engagement with formal education (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018). Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2016) suggest that in addition to content knowledge, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence are the core skills needed for "21 st-century" wellness and success. Children benefit from opportunities to develop these competences, or 6 C's, across a range of high-quality playful learning experiences. Playful learning can be particularly valuable in boosting the achievement of learners with diverse abilities, closing the gap between low and high achievers (Dowd & Stjerne Thomsen, 2021). Moreover, the evidence suggests that playful approaches have currency beyond the entry grades, benefiting learners of all ages (Mardell et al., 2023; Pino-Pasternak, et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2022). While extending playful learning into the foundation grades is important, pedagogy in subsequent grades must also align with children's learning preferences. As children move through primary school, however, learning tends to become more academically driven and less playful (Conklin, 2014; Devine et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Trawick-Smith, 2015).

Moving towards a Playful Pedagogical Approach in Practice

Research in Ireland and elsewhere attests to the challenge of operationalising a playful integrated pedagogical approach (Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Nicholson & Hendry, 2019; O'Síoráin et al., 2023; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). At a fundamental level, achieving a shared understanding of playful learning is critical to its success in the classroom. As much of the literature on defining play is more focused on child-directed or free-play, its application in curricula with strong socio-cultural underpinnings, can be limiting. Zosh and colleagues (2018) proffer a useful conceptualisation of playful learning, defining it as learning, which is joyful, meaningful, active, iterative, and social. This aligns with the idea that play is not all or nothing and that activities can be approached with varying degrees of playfulness (Gray, 2013). It is also consistent with the view of playful learning as a continuum which incorporates child-directed play, teacher-guided play and learning opportunities which are led by teachers but maintain elements of

playfulness (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009). As child-directed play, guided-play, and playful teacher-led activities can have a differential impact on various aspects of learning, a balanced curriculum is a pressing pedagogical concern (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Marbina et al., 2011). A balanced curriculum ensures that children are afforded opportunities to work towards curriculum learning outcomes through experiences where leadership oscillates between the teacher and children and where learning intentions are often mutually agreed or co-constructed. Unlike a more traditional pedagogical model of curriculum, a balanced curriculum fosters children's agency and their active engagement in their learning.

Child-directed play provides opportunities for children to follow interests, develop creativity and self-regulation, and consolidate skills and concepts which are the focus of teacher-led activities. In teacher-guided play, the activity remains child-directed but is sensitively scaffolded by teachers to support progression in both play and learning. Effective playful teacher-led activities harness the features of playful learning to build learning experiences which are compatible with children's genuine interests (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011). Project style approaches hold much promise in terms of supporting children to work towards core socio-emotional and academic learning goals across a range of playful, relevant and meaningful experiences (Coltman et al., 2015; Katz, 1994; Mardell et al., 2023). When teachers deliberately connect learning across these various curriculum experiences, they foster integrated learning as children pursue interests and develop important dispositions, knowledge and understanding, skills, and values across a range of playful experiences (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011). This type of balanced, integrated curriculum allows us to locate what Sahlberg and Doyle (2019, p. 309) refer to as the "Sweet Spot" of play in school.

The tensions regarding what and how children learn are well established and difficult to ameliorate. Consequently, changes to the curriculum do not necessarily result in radical changes to pedagogy (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Parker et al., 2022; Mardell et al., 2023; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). It is also clear that the relationship between play and learning becomes more complex in the context of formal education with more timeworn pedagogies continuing to dominate in many classrooms. While teachers often value play, they do not always integrate it optimally with teaching and the quality of scaffolding can be highly variable (Fisher, 2021; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018). Moreover, as noted by Kagan (1990, p.183),"all totaled, attitudinal, structural, and functional barriers present a nearly unpenetratable panopoly of obstacles", to infusing play in the classroom.

Present Study

At a time of significant change in the primary education landscape in Ireland, we were interested to surface teachers' perspectives on the role of play in learning and their practices in terms of integrating play with the curriculum. Given the emphasis on playful learning for younger learners, we were particularly interested in the views of teachers working with junior and senior infants and first and second class. As teachers will be tasked with implementing the new curriculum framework, understanding their perspectives and practices can support the sucessful transition to a more playful model of curriculum, at primary level.

Method

An online survey was used to investigate the perspectives and practices of teachers working across junior and senior infants and first and second class in mainstream Irish primary schools. A mixed-methods approach was adopted combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their personal perspectives and reduced the likelihood of artificially created opinions on topics such as beliefs around barriers and enablers of playful learning. Moreover, through adopting this mixed-methods approach responses to some open-ended questions provided further insights into responses to questions with forced-choice responses. Institutional ethical approval was secured for this research which was guided by British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.*

Participants

Email address for all mainstream state-funded primary schools, in the Republic of Ireland, were sourced from the DoE website. At the point of distribution, there were the 3,104 schools on this list. As teachers are allocated based on total school enrolments, there is no public data in relation to the numbers of teachers working in specific classes. School administrators essentially acted as gatekeepers, distributing the information letter and survey link to relevant staff in their schools. A reminder email was sent two weeks after initial distribution and a notice was circulated in the Irish National Teachers Organisation's *All Member E-Newsletter*. At the close of the survey, 293 valid responses were received. Given this non-probability approach to sampling, it is not intended that findings are interpreted as representative of all teachers working in the focal class grades.

Data Collection

The final survey instrument consisted of 27 items- 21 forced-choice and 6 open-ended questions. Questions were designed to collect information on respondent, school, and class demographics; beliefs about the role of play in learning; how play is incorporated in practice; and on factors which enable or hinder a playful pedagogical approach in the classroom. The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics® platform and was available to respondents in English, and in Irish and English, for those working in Irish-medium schools.

Data Analysis

Responses to closed questions were entered into SPSS®. Simple frequencies and proportions were computed for each item and where relevant, non-parametric statistical tests were conducted to explore for group differences. The Text iQ feature on Qualtrics® was used to code responses to open-ended questions and the principles of content analysis guided the analysis of this data (Denscombe, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). An initial inductive approach was adopted to coding responses, to the open-ended questions, in twenty initial pilot surveys. The unit of analysis was each response which was coded multiple times, as relevant, to establish the presence of specific words and concepts. The focus of analysis was on the manifest rather than latent content of the text. In addition to investigating the presence of prticular keywords and categories, counts of the occurance of specific keywords inidicated the frequency with which they occurd in the data (Denscombe, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). This process produced a set of keywords which were then grouped into broader categories creating an a priori framework for analysing final survey responses. This framework was continually reviewed, by the research team, throughout the coding process. Initial categories were modified or elaborated upon i.e., additional keywords, were added, during the analysis. The analysis of data from the forced-choice and open-ended questions revealed significant patterns and prioritiies in the data and allowed for what Cohen and colleagues (2018, p.680) refer to as "speculative inferences" on these respondents perspectives and experiences, to be drawn.

Reliability and Validity

The survey instrument was designed collaboratively by the four members of the research team. The relevant literature and prior survey research (i.e., Walsh & Fallon, 2021) were used to inform the design of the survey instrument. During the pilot phase of the research, an online questionnaire was piloted with twenty teachers with experience working across the focal class grades. Having piloted the questionnaire, the instrument was revised. The presentation and structure were adjusted to make the survey more user-friendly. Questions were added where it became apparent that further information would be needed to answer some questions in adequate depth. To improve the accuracy of results, definitions of key terms such as 'playful pedagogies' were included at the beginning of the survey. The coding framework used to analyse the responses to open-ended questions was reviewed by the research team. Two members of this team were responsible for coding these responses. The Text iQ feature on Qualtrics® allowed both

researchers to code the data simultaenously . During this process, further keywords, occuring in the data were added to the coding framework to enhance reliability.

Limitations

Non-response bias is a limitation in the current study as those who completed the survey may have been more invested in playful pedagogies than those who did not (Denscombe, 2007; Eichhorn, 2021). Non-response bias also occured as not all respondents answered every quesiton in the survey. In addition to non-response stemming from refusal to particiapte, non-response steming from non-contact is a further limitation as not all teachers may have recieved the information and survey link (Denscombe, 2007). Given the non-probability approach to sampling, findings are not interpreted as representative of the perspectives and practices of the entire target population.

Findings

Respondent, School and Class Characteristics

Table 1 provides an overview of respondent demographics. Consistent with national and European data, the majority of respondents were female with lower percentages of respondents in the under 30 and 50 years and over age categories (DoE, 2023b; Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2024). The data in Table 1 reflects the many routes to achieving a recognised Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualification in Ireland. ITE is offered at undergraduate and at post-graduate level with undergraduate degrees consisting of four-year programmes while the PME (Professional Master of Education) is a two-year programme. Qualifications reported as 'other' included teaching degrees from other jurisdictions. 61% (n =178) of respondents had attained additional qualifications in areas including: early childhood education, social science, and inclusive and special education. 39% (n =115) respondents did not note having achieved any additional qualifications. As illustrated in Table 1, most respondents had more than 10 years teaching experience with the majority also reporting that they had been teaching at the current class level for less than 5 years.

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	284	97%
	Male	6	2%
	Other	1	.5%
	Prefer not to say	1	.5%
	Missing	1	
Age	Under 30 years	45	15%
	30-39 years	105	37%
	40-49 years	92	31%
	50 years and over	51	17%
ITE Qualifications	BEd	148	50%
	BEd & Psychology	8	3%
	PGCE	37	13%
	H Dip Education	55	19%
	PME Education	33	11%
	Other	12	4%
Additional Qualifications	Certificate	25	14%
	Diploma	34	19%
	Graduate Certificate	9	5%
	Graduate Diploma	33	18%
	MA	17	10 %
	MEd	35	20%
	Doctorate	1	1%
	Other	24	13%
Teaching Experience	Up to 10 years	87	30%
	More than 10 years	204	70%

	Missing	2	
Number of Years Teaching Current Class	Less than 5 years	182	62%
	Between 6 and 10 years	58	20%
	More than 10 years	53	18%

Geographically, respondents worked across urban (47% n =138) and rural (53% n =154) (missing =1) schools. Reflecting a national trend of reducing class sizes, most respondents (58% n =165) worked in classes with 21 to 30 students, while 4% worked in classes of more than 30 students. Table 2 provides an overview of the class level in which respondents worked. Approximately one-third of primary students in Ireland are taught in a classroom with more than one grade (Quail & Symth, 2014). These classes can involve two consecutive grades (i.e. junior and senior infants in the same classroom) or a multigrade with three or more classes (i.e. junior infants to second class in the same classroom). Children in the entry classes (Junior and Senior Infants) generally range in age from 4 to 6-years and transition to the next class at approximately 7-years. Since the introduction of universal preschool education in 2010, school starting age in Ireland has increased with less 4-year-olds now enrolled in junior infants (DoE, 2024a). In the current sample 39% (n =113) of respondents worked in classes with more than one grade while 61% (n =176) were working in single grade classes. Respondents who selected the Multigrade-other option worked in classrooms catering for: Junior, Seniors and First Class; Junior, Seniors, First and Second Class; First, Second and Third Class; First, Second, Third, and Fourth Class; and Special Classes. 289 respondents answered this question.

Table 2
Class/Classes Respondents were Teaching in

Class	Approx Age	Frequency	Percentage
Junior Infants	5-6 yr olds	68	24%
Senior Infants	6-7 yr olds	56	19 %
Junior and Senior Infants	5-6 yr olds	39	14%
First Class	7 yr olds	30	10 %
Second Class	8 yr olds	22	8%
First and Second Class	7-8 yr olds	18	6%
Multigrade-other	5-12 yr olds	56	19%
Total		289	100%

Beliefs in Relation to the Role of Play in Learning

A number of closed questions explored teacher beliefs about learning through play and formal instruction in school. Four items were adopted from Walsh and Fallon's (2021) survey instrument investigating student teachers' perceptions on play and playful learning experiences: 1) There is too little time for play in primary school, 2) Children learn more through play than formal instruction, 3) Children may not always learn when they play, 4) Teachers can meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful learning approaches. As detailed in Table 3, these closed questions exploring teacher beliefs had response options ranging from 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) unsure, 4) agree, and 5) strongly agree. 250 of 293 respondents answered these belief questions.

Table 3
Teachers Beliefs about Learning through Play and Formal Instruction

Level of Agreement with the Staement 'There is too little time for play in Primary School'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	84 (34%)
Agree	101 (40%)
Unsure	28 (11%)
Disagree	34 (14%)
Strongly disagree	3 (1%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Children Learn more through Play than Formal Instruction'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	55 (22%)
Agree	106 (42%)
Unsure	64 (26%)

Disagree	22 (9%)
Strongly disagree	3 (1%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Children may not always Learn when they are Playing'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	4 (2%)
Agree	70 (28%)
Unsure	41 (16%)
Disagree	100 (40%)
Strongly disagree	35(14%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Teachers can meet the Aims and Objectives of the Curriculum through Playful Learning Approaches'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	89 (35%)
Agree	118 (47%)
Unsure	27 (11%)
Disagree	9 (4%)
Strongly disagree	7 (3%)
Total	250 (100%

Most respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement *there is too little time for play in primary school* (74%, n =185), 15% (n =37) strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 11% (n =28), were unsure. For the purposes of analysis, the data was regrouped into three categories those who strongly disagreed/disagreed with the statement, those who were unsure, and those who strongly agreed/agreed with the statement. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated no statistically significant difference across respondents working in junior and senior infants, first and second classes, and multigrade-other classrooms. Only 10% (n =25) of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that *children learn more through play than formal instruction*, 26% (n =64) were unsure while a majority of 64% (n =161), agreed or strongly agreed. Again, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to the levels of agreement or disagreement, with this statement, across groups.

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement that *children may not always learn when they are playing*, over half of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed (54%, n =135), 30% (n=74) strongly agreed or agreed, while 16% (n =41) were unsure. For the purposes of analysis, the data was regrouped into three categories those who disagreed (strongly disagreed/disagreed), those unsure, and those who agreed (strongly agreed/agreed) with the statement. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) = 7.21, p = .03. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infant classes were significantly more likely to express disagreement with this statement than those in first and second class (p =.02, r = -.2). Results for remaining pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant. Respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that *teachers can meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful learning approaches.* The majority (82%, n =207), strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 11% (n =27) were unsure, with 7% (n =16) strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) = 6.46, p = .04. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infants were significantly more likely to express agreement with this statement than those in first and second class (p = .04, r = .4). Results for the remaining pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant.

To investigate teachers' perspectives on the role of play in learning, respondents also answered an open-ended question which asked *what areas of learning do you think play is important for?* 235 of 293 respondents answered this question in the survey. There was consensus that play is important for many areas of learning, particularly for holisitic and integrated learning i.e. "*Where do I start! Independence, problem solving, oral language, writing, SESE, art, drama, Gaeilge (Irish), music - I can't think of any area that it doesn't help*!". References to social competence and communication, language and literacy were also

dominant in the data. Respondents reported benefits across the curriculum subject areas of: SESE (social environmental and scientific education); Mathematics; Arts Education; PE (physical education); SPHE (social personal and health education), and language (English and Irish). There were frequent references to the role of play in supporting children developing mathematical skills and concepts. The value of play for children's emotional wellbeing, cognitive skills, physical skills, imagination and creativity, and self-regulation also featured in the data. The overall frequency of reference to these areas of learning are reported in Table 4.

Table 4
Areas of Learning Play is Considered Important for

Area	Elements	Frequency	Data Extract
Social Competence	Relationships; friendships; empathy; sharing; collaboration; cooperation social skills; teamwork; conflict resolution; interpersonal skills; leadership; play skills; role play skills.	101	"Everything. Especially social skills"
Communication, Language and Literacy	Communication skills; speaking and listening skills; oral language; vocabulary; language fluency; conversation skills; writing; EAL; topic specific language.	99	"Oral language skills, vocabulary development"
Curriculum Content	Science; maths; drama; visual art; physical education; SPHE (social personal and Health education); SESE (social environmental and scientific education); Gaeilge; English; music.	50	"All areas - literacy, numeracy, SESE, SPHE, PE, Visual arts, Music, Drama"
Mathematical Skills & Concepts	Number; pattern; shape; spatial awareness; concrete and abstract mathematical concepts.	35	"Exploring number, shape and patterns"
Emotional Wellbeing	Personality; confidence; self-esteem; self-awareness, empathy; wellbeing; self-help skills; levels of enjoyment; emotional literacy.	35	"Developing their own independence and confidence"
Cognitive Skills	Neurodevelopment; curiosity; problem-solving; abstract concepts; investigating; exploring.	25	"Cognitive development, problem-solving, sustained shared thinking with others"
Physical, Fine and Gross Motor Skills	Physical development; physical skills; gross motor skills; fine motor skills.	18	"Fine and gross motor skills"
Imagination and Creativity	Imagination; imaginative play skills; being inventive.	18	"Developing imagination and creativity"
Self-regulation	Independent learning; adaptability; focus; concentration; perseverance; patience; delayed gratification; planning; adaptability; following rules.	9	"Independent learning"

Playful Learning in Practice

A number of questions were designed to elicit information around how respondents currently utilise play in practice. As indicated in Table 5, respondents were asked how often children experience child-directed play, how long these periods of child directed play are, how often they engage in child-directed play to guide play and learning, and the extent to which they use child-directed play as a context for assessment.

Table 5
How Respondents Utilise Play in Practice

Opportunities for Child-directed Play	
Frequency of child-directed play period	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Less than once weekly	16 (6%)
Once weekly	35 (13%)
On certain days	60 (23%)
Everyday	153 (58%
Total	264 (10%
Duration of Child-directed Play Periods	
Duration of child-directed play period	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Half an hour or less	86 (33%)
Less than an hour	122 (46%)

One hour	48 (18%)
More than an hour	8 (3%)
Total	264 (100%)
Teacher Engagement in Play	
Frequency of Teaching Joining in Play	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Never	12 (5%)
Hardly Ever	31 (12%)
Sometimes	106 (40%)
Regularly	90 (34%)
Always	24 (9%)
Total	263 (100%)
The Extent to which Child-directed Play is used as Context for Assessment	
Child-directed Play used as Context for Assessment	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Never	20 (8%)
Hardly Ever	45 (17%)
Sometimes	105 (40%)
Regularly	80 (30%)
Always	14 (5%)
Total	264 (100%)

There was variation in terms of how often respondents reported providing opportunities for child-directed play in their classrooms. Overall, 42% of respondents (n =111) reported that they do not provide daily opportunities for child-directed play while 58% (n =153) reported that they provide daily opportunities for play. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported providing daily play opportunities and does who did not provide for play, daily. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) =49.05, p = <001. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infants (p = <.001, r = .4), and in multigrade-other classes (p =. <001, r = -.3), reported providing more opportunities for child-directed play than teachers working in first and second class.

Respondents were also asked to indicate how long a typical period of child-directed play lasts in their classroom. Only 21% (n =56) of respondents reported providing play periods lasting for an hour or more with 79% (n =208), providing play periods of less than one hour. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported providing play periods of an hour or more and those providing play periods of less than an hour. There was no statistically significant difference across groups with regard to the duration of play periods. Most teachers in junior and senior infants, first and second class, and multigrade-other classes reported providing less than an hour of child-directed play each day.

Respondents were asked how regularly, as teachers, they join in child-directed play to guide play and learning. 263 out of 293 respondents answered this question. Only 43% (n =114) reported regularly or always joining in child-directed play to guide play and learning. Again, for the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported regularly (regularly, always) joining in play and those who did not regularly join in play (sometimes, hardly ever, never). When this data was analysed for group differences, results of a Kruskal-Wallis test indicated significant differences across groups H (2) =12.27, p = .002. Follow up pairwise comparisons with adjusted p values indicated that teachers in junior and senior infants were significantly more likely to report regularly joining in play than those teachers in first and second class (p = .001, r = .2).

When asked how often they use child-directed play as a context to assess children's learning, only 36% (n =94) of respondents reported regularly or always using child-directed play as a context for assessment with the remainder only using play sometimes, hardly ever, or never, as a context to assess learning. 264 of 293 respondents answered this question. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported that they regularly/always used child-directed play a context for assessment and those who reported using child-directed play as a context for assessment sometimes/hardly ever/never. When the data was analysed for group differences, results of a Kruskal-

Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences across groups H (2) =11.71, p = .003. Pairwise comparisons indicated that teachers in junior and senior infants (p = .005, r = .2), and those in mutli-grade other classes (p = .009, r = -.2), were more likely to report using child-directed play as a context for assessment than those in first and second class.

When asked when children in their classes get to engage in child-directed play outside, the majority (56% n =148) reported that children get to engage in child-directed play outside during break time, 3% (n =9) reported that his happens during class time, while 41% (n =107) provided opportunities for children to play at break time and during class time. There was no statistically significant difference across groups with regards to the opportunities provided for children to play outside across classes. 264 out of 293 respondents answered this question.

Integrating Play across Curricular Areas

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they incorporated play across teacher-led lessons in the seven subject areas of the primary school curriculum (Gaeilge (Irish), English, mathematics, social, environmental, and scientific education (SESE), arts (Music, drama, and visual arts), physical education (PE), and sSocial, personal and health education (SPHE). Religious education (RE), which is the responsibility of the school patron, in the Irish context (O'Connell et al., 2023), was also included in the question. As outlined in Table 6, for each subject area, response options ranging from 1) never 2) hardly ever 3) sometimes 4) regularly, to 5) always, were provided.

Table 6

The Extent to which Teachers Incorporate Play during Teacher-led Lessons across Curriculum Subjects

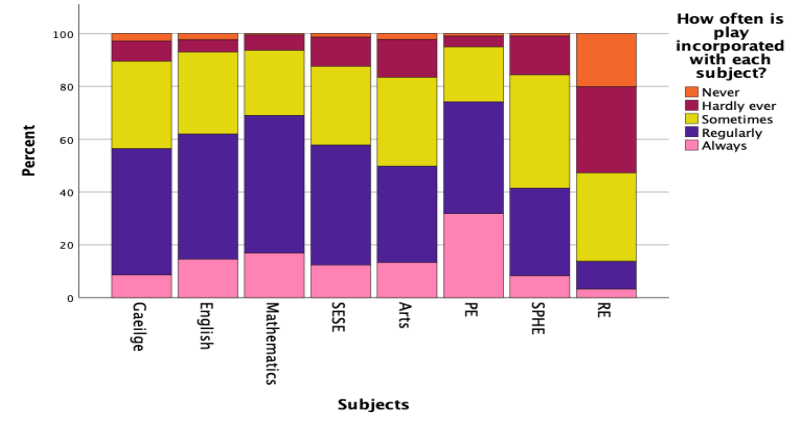
Subject	Never	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Regularly	Always	Missing
	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	
Gaeilge	6 (3%)	17 (8%)	73 (33%)	105 (48%)	19 (9%)	73
English	5 (2%)	10 (5%)	66 (31%)	101 (47%)	31 (15%)	80
Mathematics	1 (1%)	13 (6%)	54 (25%)	114 (52%)	37 (17%)	74
SESE	3 (1%)	24 (11%)	65 (30%)	99 (45%)	27 (12%)	75
SPHE	2 (1%)	32 (15%)	93 (42%)	72 (33%)	18 (8%)	76
Arts	5 (2%)	31 (14%)	73 (34%)	79 (36%)	29 (13%)	76
PE	2 (1%)	9 (4%)	45 (21%)	92 (42%)	69 (32%)	76
RE	44 (20%)	71 (35%)	73 (36%)	23 (11%)	7 (3%)	75

*values have been rounded and may not sum to exactly 100%

Figure 1. further illustrates these trends in relation to how often play is incorporated with teacher-led learning activities across the various subjects of the primary school curriculum. Play was incorporated, to some extent, in teacher-led lessons in all curriculum areas.

Figure 1

The Extent to which Teachers Incorporate Play during Teacher-led Lessons across Curriculum Subjects



For the purposes of analysis, this data was regrouped into two categories- those who regularly/always reported incorporating play with the subject, and those who reported sometimes/hardly ever/never incorporating play with the subject. The results of a Friedman's ANOVA indicated that there were differences across subject areas, $\chi^2(7) = 305.19$, $p = .001$. Follow up pairwise comparisons found that teachers reported that they were less likely to incorporate play into RE than all other subject areas (Gaeilge ($p = .001$, r =.-5), English ($p = .001$, r =.-5), Maths ($p = .001$, r = -.5), SESE ($p = .001$, r = -.5), Arts ($p = .001$, r =.-4), PE ($p = .001$, r = -.5), and SPHE ($p = .001$, r = -.4). No statistically significant results were found for the remaining pairwise comparisons.

Enablers and Barriers to Playful Learning

Two open ended questions explored perceptions of the factors which enabled and hindered playful learning. Respondents articulated a myriad of factors which impinged on their capacity to implement a playful approach in practice. Analysis of the data suggests that barriers and enablers can be interpreted as occurring at the level of the education system, school, teacher, and child. Notable enablers and barriers occurring in the data are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Barriers and Enablers of a Playful Approach: System, School, Teacher and Child Features

Education System Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Administration load • Accountability • Student-teacher ratios • Lack of support staff • Overloaded curriculum • Underfunding • Priority given to traditional pedagogical approaches • Expectations around documenting and assessing learning	• *Aistear* (The early childhood curriculum framework) • A more open curriculum • Less emphasis on academic skills • Tools to support planning a playful integrated curriculum. • Tools for assessing learning through play • Government approved and funded continuing professional learning programmes • Teacher agency • Communities of practice
School	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Lack of space, resources, and storage • Teachers responsible for sourcing resources themselves • Lack of time to plan for play • Expectations of management • Parents, colleagues, and management having a lack of awareness around the role of play in learning • Priority given to traditional pedagogical approaches	• A whole school approach to play • Adequate space, resources and storage • Sharing resources across classes • Time for planning for play • Being assigned to same class yearly • Additional support staff • Team teaching • Inclusion of children's voices • Support from management • Peer mentoring • Teacher agency • Supporting parental knowledge and understanding of playful learning • Positive feedback from parents
Teacher Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Poor classroom management skills • Lack of knowledge and skills to implement a playful approach • Reliance on traditional pedagogical approaches • Lack of experience • Lack of confidence	• Teacher experience • Teacher knowledge and understanding • Teacher playfulness • Teacher confidence and motivation • Teacher creativity • Engagement in continuing professional learning
Child Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Younger children • Children assessed with additional needs • Children presenting with self-regulation challenges	• Older children • Well-developed play skills • Playing in mixed ability groups

• Children who do not have well developed play skills	• Children learning through peer modelling • Appropriate class rules and boundaries • Self-regulatory competence • Additional adults to support children's engagement in child-led play and learning

Discussion

Findings from the present survey, coupled with those from previous research in Ireland and elsewhere, illustrate the problematic passage of playful pedagogy, from the periphery, in primary school. The present findings concur with those from previous research which suggest that the value teachers attach to play is continuing to increase (Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Teachers' acknowledgement of the contribution of play to holistic and integrated learning chimes with the proposed shift, in the new Primary Curriculum Framework, from a compartmentalised subject-driven curriculum to a more flexible, meaningful and integrated programme of learning (Ring et al., 2018; DoE, 2023a). In the current study, play was seen as most impactful for social competence, communication, language and literacy. This aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the redeveloped curriculum which underscore learning as a socially shared process, and communication, language and literacy as a bedrock of learning success. While the majority of teachers believed that there is too little time for play in school, that children learn more through play than formal instruction, notable too are the dissenting and uncertain voices. Teachers working in junior and senior infants were more likely, than those working in first and second class, to believe that they could meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful approaches. Furthermore, those teachers working in first and second class were less likely to express disagreement with the statement that 'children may not always learn when they are playing'. Since the publication of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, in 2009, teachers working in junior and senior infants may have more experience utilising playful pedagogical approaches which are often less well embedded beyond the early primary grades (Fisher, 2021; Devine et al., 2023). This may influence first and second class teachers' beliefs around the role of play in the curriculum. Disagreement and uncertainty may also be explained by personal beliefs which are inconsistent with playful learning; a lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of play in learning; or less than optimal prior experience of integrating play in practice (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Irish National Teachers Organisation [INTO], 2023).

Teachers in first and second class groupings were less likely than their colleagues (in junior and senior infants and in multigrade-other classess) to provide daily opportunities for play, to join in play, or to use child-directed play as a context for assessment. This reflects a fairly established pattern whereby play becomes more peripheral as children move up through the more senior classes, often used more as an incentive or reward rather than as a primary pedagogy (Conklin, 2014; Devine et al., 2023; Fisher, 2021; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). It could be hypothesised that in circumstanes where children in more senior classes are taught in the same classroom as infants, they continue to benefit from the play provision for their younger classmates. Through adopting a differentiated and integrated approach, teachers in multigrade classrooms can work towards the curriculum objectives of both infant and subsequent grades. Moreover, incorporating play in multigrade contexts can encourage the type of mixed-age group learning which benefits both younger and older children (Gray, 2013; Leogue-Moran, 2014). While ideally, children benefit from an hour, or more, to plan and develop complex collaborative play, the majority of teachers report that they are not providing an hour or more for periods of child-directed play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Trawick-Smith, 2015; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). This supports the contention that a reliance on teacher-led instruction, to achieve curriculum aims and objectives, can have the net effect of reducing the amount of time for child-directed play, in school (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009). Despite its affordances, the outdoors tends to be underutilised in school and the current findings suggest that for many children, play outdoors is confined to break times (Mardell et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the benefits of the outdoor environment and while opportunities to play and learn outside are increasing, further expansion is both desirable and achievable (Mannion et al., 2015; O'Donnell, 2022). Sahlberg and Doyle's (2019, p. 82), for example, recommend that

school-aged children experience "at least an hour free outdoor play every day, and give them up to 20% of their indoor time for intellectual free-play and self-directed "passion projects" of their own" (Sahlberg & Doyle 2019, p. 82).

Pedagogical competence is crucial to the success of an integrated playful approach which successfully melds child-directed, teacher-guided, and playful teacher-led experiences (Parker et al., 2022). Given that teacher-guided play has been found to be particularly beneficial for areas of literacy and mathematics learning (Goble & Pianta 2017; Nesbitt et al., 2023; Weisberg et al., 2015), it is notable that more than half of teachers did not regularly become involved in play with the intention of guiding play and learning. Guided play is often seen as a panacea for the play and learning conundrum in so far as it offers a middle ground between child-directed play and more teacher-directed instruction (Fisher et al., 2011; Miller & Almon 2009; Nesbitt et al., 2023). If guided-play occupies a bridge between play and instruction, it seems important that teachers, across grades, would inhabit this space more consummately. Given the emphasis on the '*Aistear* hour of play' in the entry grades (O'Síoráin et al., 2023), it is notable that teachers reported that they incorporated play, to some degree, in teacher-led lessons across the various curriculum subject areas of the curriculum. As articulated elsewhere, full integration of play with the curriculum requires an approach which moves beyond providing for play alongside the curriculum (O'Síoráin et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2011). We will report, in a separate paper, on the various strategies that teachers reported using to make teaching and learning, across the curriculum, more playful.

In addition to skilful pedagogical interactions, playful learning also necessitates a differential approach to assessment (Miller & Almon 2009; Mardell et al., 2023). In the present sample, child-directed play was not regularly used as a context for assessment. In Ireland and internationally, efforts to promote a more playful curriculum are often at odds with the emphasis on standardised testing. In the Irish context, for example, norm-referenced standardised tests of mathematics and reading ability are administrated in 2nd, 4th and 6th class (O'Leary et al., 2019). Standardised testing is noted as impacting negatively on both students and teachers, who can be pressurised to learn and teach to the test (Jay & Knaus 2018; Miller & Almon, 2009; O'Leary et al., 2019). To imbue play more effectually in teaching and learning, concordance is required in relation to the outcomes of education and how these outcomes can be assessed for formative as well as summative purposes (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Parker et al., 2022). The development of assessment tools which authentically capture holistic learning, without compromising on rigour, will be imperative to developing a more sustainable playful approach (Parker et al., 2022).

The enablers and barriers to facilitating a playful pedaogical approach, articulated in this study, clearly resonate with those identified in earlier research (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Howard, 2010; Hunter & Walsh 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023). Teachers undoubtedly require system level support to operate a playful approach in the classroom. Similar to other countries, the curriculum itself was perceived as an obstacle with teachers feeling pressure to cover the content of what is perceived as an overloaded programme (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Jay & Knaus 2018). High pupil-teacher ratios, large class sizes, and lack of classroom support personnel were commonly articulated barriers. Consistent with other studies, teachers reported often not having a budget to develop places and resources which entice play, in their schools and classrooms (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Howard, 2010; INTO, 2023; Mardell et al., 2023).

Fisher (2021) emphasises the importance of policy giving a clear mandate in terms of the role of play in the curriculum. In reality, however, teachers often receive little support in developing a more playful approach. The current findings corroborate the importance of support for teachers to develop the assessment, planning, and facilitation skills required to make integrated playful learning a success (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Marbina et al., 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Walsh et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2022). Given that play, historically, has existed on the fringes of the school curriculum, it has also been somewhat dispensable in the continuing professional learning space. Respondents to this survey reported a strong desire for funded systemwide continuing professional learning opportunities. It is acknowledged that an emphasis on performativity can undermine the position of play in the curriculum and teachers in the current study

reiterated a desire for greater flexibility, agency, and professional trust (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Parker et al., 2022). While a playful approach obliges teachers to relinquish more control to children, it also necessitates a system and schools which can more flexibility accommodate teacher autonomy.

Support from management, colleagues, and parents were also identified as critical to supporting the transition to a more playful approach (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2022). The reality, of course, means that the undervaluing of playful learning and the emphasis on academic learning by school leaders, colleagues (particularly those working in more senior grades), and parents, presents a persistent barrier to teachers wishing to travel a more playful path (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Jay & Knaus, 2018; O'Sullivan & Ring 2018). A whole school approach which leads and nurtures a community of playful practice are decisive to the success of a more playful mode of teaching and learning.

Teachers also acknowledged the role of their own personal characteristics. While there was a belief that the curriculum aims and objectives could be met through a playful approach, similar to previous research, there were also reports of feeling under-equipped to achieve this, in practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Given the dominance of more formal instructional models which rely on textbooks and workbooks, teachers can lack the motivation, knowledge, skills and experience to execute a more playful approach in practice (Hunter & Walsh 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018; Martlew et al., 2011: INTO, 2023). Some teachers referred to the importance of teacher playfulness and a willingness to become a co-player. This aligns with Walsh and colleagues (2011), who suggest that playfulness is best interpreted and operationalised as a characteristic of all teacher-child interactions in the classroom, not just those occurring during activities traditionally characterised as play. While counter-intuitive, perhaps, child characteristics were also identified as a potential barrier to playful learning. Comparable with earlier research, respondents articulated concerns around implementing a playful curriculum with children who have just transitioned to primary school, have diverse needs, poor self-regulatory competence, or less well-developed play skills (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Howard, 2010; Jay & Knaus, 2018). This vision of the child as needy seems at odds with Sorin's (2005) image of the agentic child, co-constructing the curriculum, in a democratic classroom. The concerns are, however, consistent with the contention that many children now enter primary school with lower than expected self-regulatory and play competence (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Stagnitti et al., 2023). This is certainly troubling given the relationship between play and self-regulation, and between early measures of self-regulation and longer-term learning success (McClelland et al., 2013). If children with high levels of need are entering primary school classrooms where teachers feel under-supported, to establish a playful pedagogical approach, this may serve to further perpetuate the gap between low and high achievers (Dowd & Stjerne Thomsen, 2021).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Play is increasingly promoted as medium which can be leveraged to promote the development of the whole child. While it has generally been accepted that play can support wellbeing and the socio-emotional aspects of development, more recent research also illustrates the potential of playful pedagogical approaches for working towards more academic learning goals (Pino-Pasternak et al., 2014; Pyle et al. 2017; Parker et al. 2022; Pyle et al., 2024). This evidence base is important to progressing playful pedagogies and avoiding the 'play ethos' or tendency to overstate the functional role of play in development (Smith, 2010; Lillard et al., 2013). Moreover, many of the theoretical perspectives which guide our curriculum in Ireland, and internationally, align well with playful pedagogical approaches. Taken together, the research on effective learning in school underscores the importance of a curriculum which is underpinned by emotional connections with others, content which is meaningful and harnesses learner interests, opportunities for learner agency and active participation, multiple means of expression and representation, and opportunities for collaborative learning (Ring et al., 2018).

Despite the evidence for playful pedagogies, in many countries the global education reform movement (GERM) has become a "GERM that kills play" (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019, p.95). Moreover, a recent policy call released to mark the inaugural United Nations International Day of Play, in 2024, identified the undervaluing and trivializing of play as a key barrier to upholding children's right to play

(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). This has led to many children across the globe, being in school but struggling to achieve their potential in contexts where pedagogical approaches fail to harness the benefits of play and playful approaches in the curriculum. Globally, post-pandemic, where a crisis in children's school attendance has been identified (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023; Addis, 2024; DoE, 2024b), play and playful approaches can play a role in making instruction and school experiences engaging, motivating, relevant and enjoyable. Universal playful early childhood programmes, and the integration of playful pedagogies in schools, are identified as powerful accelerators of children's play and learning (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). In a review of perspectives and evidence in relation to 'school readiness', Whitebread and Bingham (2012, p.7) concluded that "what we need to consider is not how to make children ready for school, but how to make schools ready for children". In Ireland we now have an opportunity to ensure that our schools are ready for children through providing continuity in how they learn, and opportunities to connect old and new ways of learning. Moreover, through continuing to embed playful pedagogies in early childhood education and expanding the approach up through the school grades, play has the potential to drive more equitable education systems and to close the achievement gap between higher and lower achieving learners (Parker & Stjern Thomsen, 2019). All learners thrive when teachers adopt a pedagogical approach which supports them emotionally, preserves their agency, responds to their unique learning needs and interests, and encourages collaborative learning with others. Such an approach enables children to find the joy in learning and motivates them to achieve their potential (Zosh et al., 2018).

While we know that systems, schools, and teachers, can be resistant to change (Mardell et al., 2023), this paper affirms that play is increasingly valued for its contribution to wellbeing and holistic learning. This is significant as prior research suggests that implementing playful pedagogies is challenging in contexts where teachers find it difficult to justify a role for play in learning (Pyle et al., 2017). Paradoxically, the present findings indicate that children do not always expereince daily extended periods of child-directed play and not all teachers are purposefully guiding play to progress play and learning. As illustrated across a number of earlier studies, there can often be a gap between teacher beliefs and practices (Pyle et al, 2017). Of course, practice cannot be isolated from the myriad of contexual factors which shape it. This paper illuminates the many challenges teachers face when adopting a playful approach and the factors they believe support them integrating play effectively in practice.

Similar to earlier research in Ireland (Gray & Ryan, 2016), and elsewhere (Pyle et al., 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), respondents identified curriculum demands as a barrier to a playful approach. Being cautiously optimistic the curriculum should prove less of a barrier, in Ireland, going forward. The Irish early years and primary curriculum frameworks now provide a clear mandate for the utilisation of playful pedagogical approaches. Significantly, the DoE Inspectorate in its inspection and evaluation work in schools is clearly promoting the alignment of play and playful learning with the achievement of learning outcomes (DoE, 2024b). An increased focus on learner and teacher agency, and curriclum integration and flexibility, now create more favourbale conditions for play. The key competencies identified in the Primary Curriculum Framework also reflect a more holisitc view of development and include a broad range of important dispositions, attitudes and values, in addition to knowledge and skills. The Primary Curriculum Framework provides "clarity and certainty on the appropriateness and centrality of play and playful approaches in primary and special schools, where they are key elements of learning and teaching" (DoE, 2023a, p. 25). This will be significant given that many teachers in the present study, particularly those working in first and second class, were not entirely convinced that they could meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful approaches. The incompatibility of playful pedagogies with the curriculum has previously been identfied as a barrier to implementing playful pedagogies in Ireland (INTO, 2023) and in other countries (Pyle et al., 2017).

The transition to a more playful curriculum is supported when student teachers have opportunities to develop a playful pedagogical approach, during their initial teacher education programme (ITE) (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2018; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). Consistent with recent curriculum developments, Céim, the standards for initial teacher education, in Ireland, recognise early childhood education as a core

component of primary ITE (The Teaching Council, 2020). In the present study, continuing professional learning (CPL), similar to previous research (Pyle et al., 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; INTO, 2023), emerged as key enabler of playful pedagogies. Research in the early years affirms CPL as a determinant of high-quality provision (Whitebread et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the roll-out of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework in 2009, was not accompanied by a targeted national programme of CPL to support its implementation in practice (Walsh & Fallon, 2021). CPL which focuses on implementation of the curriculum, includes experiential and classroom-based learning, and opportunities for sharing and reflecting, is particularly impactful on programme quality (Slot et al., 2015; Whitebread et al., 2015). In the Irish context, the government funded the Leadership for INClusion (LINC) in the Early Years Programme (which is designed to equip early childhood teachers to take on the role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO), may provide a valuable blueprint for a national model of CPL for playful pedagogy (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023). The roll-out of a national programme of CPL would cultivate consistency across teachers and schools and potentially provide more equitable learning experiences for children. The success of such a programme would, of course, be reliant on adequate investment in programme development, delivery, and evaluation. It would also require buy-in from teachers to effect any real change on the ground. Prioritising a government funded model of CPL also has the potential to ameliorate many of the additional barriers highlighted in the current paper. CPL, for example, can build teacher confidence in adopting a playful approach and support them to develop the competencies needed to effectively plan for, facilitate, and assess learning through play. The prevalence of multi-grade classes in the Irish context, while not unique, also presents as a challenge and CPL would afford teachers the opportunity to tackle the issue of differentiation within a playful multigrade context (INTO, 2023). Any CPL offering would have added value if opportunities for teachers to share professional knowledge and best practice were built in. Furthermore, opportunities for teachers across preschool and early primary contexts, to come together and share practice would further support continuity for children as they transition between settings. Congruent with earlier work in this area (Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023), teachers articulated a strong desire for professional communities of practice, and opportunities for team-teaching and peer mentoring.

Echoing the perspectives from earlier research (Pyle et al., 2017; Jay & Knaus, 2018), support from school leaders was also highlighted as a key enabler of a playful pedagogical approach. School leadership has a pivotal role in embedding curriculum innovation in the real world of the classroom (Biddulph & Gibrid, 2024). Consequently, including school leaders in any roll-out of CPL seems imperative to ensuring a whole school approach to playful learning. Support from parents is viewed as similarly enabling and like other countries, in Ireland parents can often champion traditional academic instruction over playful learning (Ring et al., 2016; Pyle et al., 2017; Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023). While playful parenting programmes can support parental knowledge and understanding of prevalent pedagogical approaches, they can also encourage playful home learning activities which connect with learning in school (O'Sullivan et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2022). Policy efforts to embed play meaningfully in primary school will clearly need to engage parents and target the provision of effective and accessible playful parenting programmes.

Ireland is not unique in experiencing somewhat of a mismatch in terms of expectations around implementing pedagogical innovation and the allocation of sufficient resources to enable this in practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Jay & Knaus, 2018). To ameliorate some of the challenges identified around the lack of space and resources, a dedicated funding stream will need to be created for schools nationally. This may need to include investment in building or retrofitting of school environments to make them more conducive to playful learning indoors and outdoors. Most recent figures from OECD's (2024) Education at a Glance report indicates that Ireland's spend of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education (from primary to tertiary level) is 2.9% which falls below the OECD average of 4.9%. Ongoing investment will be important to maintaining reductions in class size which can support more active and playful ways of teaching and learning. The average class size in Ireland in 2023/24 is reported at 22.5, remaining above the OECD (2024) average of 21. In 2023/24, 9.2 % (less than 1 in 10) of students remain enrolled in classes of 30-34 students. The student teacher ratio in 2023/24, at 12.8 students to every teacher, is the lowest reported across the 2003-2024 period (DoE, 2024a). While smaller class sizes and lower student-teacher ratios can

help address some of the concerns articulated by teachers, how human resources can be deployed to allow more staff to support teaching and learning, through play, requires consideration at both system and school level. Acknowledging that across education systems, educators variously struggle with securing optimal resources, CPL has a pivotal role in supporting the adult and the child to become co-creators of indoor and outdoor spaces that excite, invite, and absorb learners within the existing availability of resources.

Conclusion

In Ireland we now have much welcome synchronicity between the early childhood and primary curriculum frameworks and are working towards extending this synchronicity to the junior and senior cycle in post-primary contexts (DoE, 2023a; DoE 2024b; NCCA, 2024). To embed this curricular continuity in practical terms, the time is ripe for an implementation plan which makes provision for an accessible and effective model of CPL, directs attention to creating appropriate indoor and outdoor environments for play and playful learning, and considers the impact of lower student-teacher ratios in supporting a differentiated and integrated approach to enable each child to achieve their potential. While in many countries the formal curriculum can be at odds with a playful pedagogical approach, the current paper adds to the existing literature through surfacing the perspectives and practices of teachers in a context where the formal curriculum provides a clear mandate for playful approaches. Moreover, through incorporating the views of teachers working beyond the early primary grades, it contributes to research on the implementation of playful pedagogies as children transition from the early to middle school grades. This paper highlights the importance of surfacing teachers' needs and concerns. Teachers are, after all, the linchpin between the formal curriculum and the curriculum which children experience daily in our schools. While teachers value a playful approach, supporting them during this time of curriculum redevelopment is critical to ensuring that the curriculum honours their professional competence as well as children's preferred ways of being and learning.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

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