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Playful structure: a novel image of early years pedagogy for primary school classrooms

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Playful structure is a new pedagogic image representing a more balanced and integrated perspective on early years pedagogy, aiming to blend apparent dichotomies and contradictions and to sustain and evolve play-based practice beyond Year 1. Playful structure invites teachers and children to initiate and maintain a degree of playfulness in the child’s whole learning experience, even when the learning intentions demand a supportive structure. Thus, playfulness becomes characteristic of the interaction between adult and the child and not just characteristic of child-initiated versus adult-initiated activities, or of play-time versus task-time. The paper is based on intensive observations and interviews with teachers in Northern Ireland who participated in a play-based and informal curriculum. This paper explains how playful structure rests on complementary processes of infusion of structure into play-based activities and infusion of playfulness into more structured activities, illustrated by cameos. ‘Infusion’ suggests the subtle blending process that allows apparent dichotomies and contradictions to be resolved in practice.

Keywords: play-based pedagogy; early years; primary teacher education

Introduction

This paper arises from an eight-year evaluation of an innovative informal, play-based early years curriculum in Northern Ireland, called the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Project (McGuinness et al. 2010; Sproule et al. 2010; Trew et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2010c). Local professionals devised the Enriched Curriculum (EC) because they considered that the pressure for better academic outcomes had produced a curriculum too formal for this age group. The authors were not involved in the initial design or implementation of the EC but were members of an independent research evaluation team.

The EC was introduced as a pilot in Year 1 classes (four- to five-year-olds) and Year 2 classes (five- to six-year-olds) in over 100 primary schools between 2000 and 2002. It continued until the Foundation Stage became statutory in Northern Ireland in 2007\textsuperscript{1}. The research team observed the difficulties that early years EC teachers experienced in achieving a coherent concept of early years pedagogy. Interviews with the teachers revealed that they held a variety of competing mental models of early years pedagogy and child learning that led to confusion and tensions in their

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pedagogy (Sproule et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2010a). In particular, some EC teachers were uncertain as to how the educational value of play could be guaranteed. They struggled to see the connection between play as pedagogy and play as the medium to ensure a high level of interest, confidence and overall well-being for children (Walsh et al. 2010c). Based on these findings, the research team gradually appreciated that teachers needed a repertoire of pedagogical approaches – as well as high levels of expertise about when to use them – if they were to meet the needs and interests of young children, while ensuring progression in their learning. We have subsequently worked with teachers to create a new pedagogic image, called playful structure, that represents a more balanced and integrated perspective of early years pedagogy, aimed at bridging apparent dichotomies and contradictions and allowing the evolution of early years practice beyond Year 1. The purpose of this paper is to explain this new pedagogic image and to illustrate how it can be effectively implemented in early years primary classrooms. Before launching on the specifics of playful structure, we consider the shifts in theoretical perspectives and insights from empirical research evidence that have recently been informing early years pedagogy.

**Changing conceptions of early years pedagogy**

The widening access to pre-school provision in the UK, and the emergence (or re-emergence) of play-based approaches as the recommended pedagogies for early years primary classrooms, means that play-based concepts and associated classroom practices have assumed and will assume even greater importance in future years. Despite its privileged position for children’s learning and the consensus that a formal approach is inappropriate for early years primary classrooms (POST 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002; BERA 2003; Stephen 2006; Dockett at al. 2007), teaching through play – ‘play as pedagogy’ – is not straightforward (Wood 2007; Walsh et al. 2010a). New thinking has emerged concerning the role of play in early childhood education, prompted by shifts in theoretical perspectives away from an overemphasis on a Piagetian ‘ages and stages’ approach, towards a more Vygotskian appreciation of the social and cultural context for young children’s learning and the adult’s role as ‘scaffolder’ and ‘co-constructor’ of children’s knowledge. Insights from recent studies such as EPPE (Sylva et al. 2004), REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) and the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation project – EYECEP (McGuinness et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2010a; Walsh et al. 2010b) have begun to challenge the overly idealised notion that all play activities necessarily have educational value. There is an emerging acceptance that high-quality early years pedagogy is associated with a balance between child- and adult-initiated activities and mixed pedagogies to suit curriculum content and topics. In 2010, two volumes appeared on themes of ‘reconceptualising’ and ‘re-thinking’ play, edited by prominent early years researchers (Broadhead et al. 2010) and Yelland (2010). In her contribution to one of these volumes, Stephen (2010) pointed out that the purpose of reviewing the contribution of play is not to imply a rejection of play but rather:

... to strengthen its place as a medium for learning when that is most appropriate, to ensure that the play opportunities offered to children are playful and engaging to them and to develop a more nuanced and evidence-based rationale for play in the learning
environment that is clear about the benefits and can go beyond an appeal to consensus and historic claims of distinctiveness. (Stephen 2010, 4)

As Stephen suggests, the time is ripe to engage in a critical theoretical and empirical examination of the value of play in an effort to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood pedagogy. The challenge for early childhood practitioners is to strike an appropriate balance between allowing children to express their autonomy and creativity through play, with the attendant social and emotional benefits, and providing enough challenge and structure in the process to ensure genuine progression in their cognitive skills.

Sources of evidence

The playful structure metaphor draws on several sources of empirical evidence:

- interviews (n = 119) with the teachers of the first two cohorts of children participating in the Enriched Curriculum and with those who taught them subsequently (McGuinness et al. 2010);
- structured classroom observations in over 100 Year 1 and Year 2 EC classrooms, using an observation instrument called the Quality Learning Instrument, designed and validated for assessing the quality of children’s learning experience in early years primary classrooms (Walsh and Gardner 2005; Walsh et al. 2006; Walsh et al. 2010c);
- more intensive observations conducted in a sample of eight classrooms that had particularly high ratings on the Quality Learning Instrument. Two observers spent three consecutive days in each high-quality setting; 150 hours of observations were recorded, 45 hours were video-recorded. The purpose of these observations was to identify pedagogic practices that enabled such settings to provide a higher quality learning experience for four- to six-year-olds compared with others. These observations and video-recordings were the source of the classroom cameos described below. (For further elaboration, see Walsh et al. 2010b)

Parental and teacher consent was obtained for the observation and video studies. Teachers were asked to continue with their normal classroom routines during these sessions. All studies were formally approved by the School of Psychology’s Ethics Committee.

The concept of playful structure

The findings from the EC research pointed to the need for a more extensive elaboration of what a play-based curriculum means for the early primary-school years. To this end, we have identified an overarching image, called playful structure, as a means of breaking down dichotomies between informal and formal learning, and between play and work – which the teachers who created the highest quality learning experiences appeared to do. Howard et al. (2002) make a useful distinction between the construct of playfulness and the act of play. They refer to play as an act defined primarily ‘by observable characteristics’ (4). In contrast, they describe playfulness as an ‘internalised quality that develops over time as a result
of experience and interaction’. In their analysis, playfulness is attributed primarily to children. In our characterisation, it can be equally applied to both children and adults. In order to elaborate on the idea of adult playfulness, we drew on the research literature regarding the nature of playfulness as an attribute of adult behaviour. For example, Glynn and Webster (1992, 1993) attempted to characterise adult playfulness by asking college students and childcare workers to provide descriptors to distinguish high and low playfulness in the workplace. They found that playfulness has five dimensions: spontaneity, expressiveness, fun, creativity and being silly. Based on descriptions of playful and non-playful people, Barnett (2007) found four components of playfulness in young adults: gregariousness, lack of inhibition, comedic talent and physical energy. Without entering into the debate about the exact nature of adult playfulness, we note that both studies show how adults can vary widely in the degree to which they are naturally playful and that playfulness has several components. Given the diversity of these components, at least some of them might be open to conscious development through teacher education.

The idea of playful structure invites teachers and children to initiate and maintain a degree of playfulness in the learning experience, even when the learning intentions demand a supportive structure. Thus, playfulness becomes a characteristic of the interaction between the adult and the child and not just a characteristic of child-initiated versus adult-initiated activities, or of being situated in play-time versus task-time. All classroom activity, not only free play, can assume playful characteristics. For example, the tone is light-hearted, the activity becomes self-sustaining because of its inherently enjoyable nature and unexpected turns and directions are allowed, while still allowing adequate structure to support effective learning. It is important to note that such structure is not only the responsibility of the adult. The concept of playful structure recognises that adults must also be prepared, on appropriate occasions, to allow children to have a say in determining how the learning experience might develop, with adults taking the lead from the child. Blending these two concepts – playfulness and structure – and elaborating their pedagogic meaning with classroom illustrations and case studies forms the basis of the remaining part of this paper.

The concept of playful structure not only recognises play as a valuable mode of learning in its own right but also invites playfulness to be infused into every activity. It is one approach whereby teachers can avoid inappropriate pressure on young children and foster the high levels of engagement regarded as a prerequisite for good early years learning (Laevers 1993, 2000). We discuss two aspects of the infusion of playfulness here, infusing playfulness into adult–child interactions and into more structured activities. Each type is illustrated through cameos from high-quality learning classrooms.

**Infusing playfulness into interactions between teacher and child(ren)**

Interactions between adults and children during play-time were very frequently observed to be playful in tone. Teachers in high-quality learning classrooms were able to take a topic from a child and infuse playfulness into it in such a way that it did not seem contrived. In the following simple exchange in Cameo 1, we see this in action. (The names of all participants have been changed):
Cameo 1: Hermione Granger

Peter has drawn the three main characters in the Harry Potter series of books. Miss O’Flynn identifies Ron Weasley in the picture, and then asks Peter to guess how she knew it was Ron. He cannot guess and Miss O’Flynn eventually has to tell him it is because of the red hair. Neither Peter nor Miss O’Flynn can remember what the girl in the Harry Potter trio is called. Miss O’Flynn asks if other children in the vicinity know. Calum’s answer is not understood at first (his diction is poor), but both she and he persevere until he is understood (‘Hermione Granger’). The teacher congratulates him because they ‘won’t have to ask the P7 class now’. She then discusses with another boy that Hermione is an unusual name, and wonders playfully if she might be Jacob Granger’s cousin (a boy in another class). The teacher then asks Peter if he would like to label the characters. He agrees and writes Harry and Ron with very little help. Miss O’Flynn supports him in writing Hermione, breaking it into syllables and pointing out that he knows how to spell some of these (‘her’ and ‘on’). She asks Peter if he would like to talk about the picture in Show and Tell. He nods happily.

In this child-initiated activity, the teacher makes reference to guessing, a joke about someone’s cousin and a shared triumph in not having to consult the Year 7 class to keep the tone playful. Her playful manner helps to make her approachable, so that even a child with a speech difficulty has no hesitation in contributing to the discussion. This cameo illustrates a very important benefit that playful interactions have for children. As in free play, such interactions are a safe place to make mistakes and to try out social skills. They may thus help to lay a foundation for a good relationship with the teacher, important for later academic and behavioural outcomes (Hamre and Pianta 2001). Furthermore, the cameo shows that there is direct educational value in the exchange while engagement remains high. For Peter, there is a positive cognitive outcome related to spelling. In Calum’s case, it is the encouragement to persist in his efforts to communicate and the lesson that such persistence brings success. We also noted that spontaneous playful interactions can provoke episodes of ‘sustained shared thinking’, as recommended for best practice by Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) and frequently reiterated (Siraj-Blatchford 2007, 2009). Moreover, we did not observe any lack of discipline associated with playfulness in interactions nor did children have any difficulty adjusting when the teacher adopted a more serious tone.

Importantly, we did observe teachers who found it more difficult to adopt such a playful tone. From these observations, we noted that the absence of playfulness was often associated with lower levels of child engagement and that less playful teachers resorted more often to disciplinary means in an effort to maintain levels of engagement. As well as the natural variation in playfulness of adults, other factors appeared to determine teachers’ attitudes to playfulness. There was evidence in interviews that some teachers equated playfulness with a loss of authority and/or failed to recognise any educational value in a playful exchange.

While informal interactions are not exclusive to a play-based curriculum, they did assume a greater role in EC pedagogy because children spent so much of their time in play and play-like activities. Not anticipating this shift, teacher guidance provided by training staff did not directly address these issues. In Dunkin and Hanna (2001), we found a description of teacher roles during adult–child interactions that are likely to be meaningful for early years teachers. One of these roles, co-player or play-partner, provides a particularly useful image for teachers who find being playful difficult. In promoting the child’s engagement and development of
play skills, the co-player role may be particularly important for children whose play is typical of that of much younger children. Progression in play itself was seldom articulated by teachers as a desirable outcome and this role serves to bring it to their notice. The remaining teacher roles in Dunkin and Hanna (ibid.), which pertain more to the introduction of educational content into activities, are described in the next section.

Infusing playfulness into structured or didactic activities

Recent thinking on early years practice has asserted a strong role for more structured and adult-led activities (Dickinson 2002; Siraj-Blatchford 2004; Wood 2007). At times, however, we observed too sharp a distinction between play-time and more structured activities such as task-time. As expected, there was more evidence of scaffolding and didactic input during task-time but in high-quality classrooms this did not necessitate a marked change in the playful character of the pedagogy. Playful structure emphasises a better approach to adult-led interactions. In the most successful classrooms, teachers were able to maintain a sense of playfulness during more structured activities, by

- being outgoing, energetic and active in their presentation of material;
- preserving a light-hearted tone;
- leaving some room for spontaneity.

Other teachers had difficulties in changing the character of the pedagogy to suit the more structured situation without simultaneously changing their style of interaction. Cameo 2 illustrates how playfulness can be preserved in a strongly structured session. The teacher turns what could have been a didactic and serious literacy lesson into a playful event by using a puppet and game-like language:

Cameo 2: Sentence on a stick

Miss James reads through a previously read story with a group of six children. The reading is interactive. Miss James acts the parts in the story with gusto and invites the children to join in with refrains or makes a mistake or pretends to stop and not know a word and models sounding it out. The children join in with obvious enthusiasm. Then Miss James takes a sentence stick with one of the sentences from the story on it and reads it through carefully twice, touching each word as she reads. She explains that Patch Puppet is going to hide one of the words while they cover their eyes and she will ask each child in turn to guess which word it is. The children are almost out of their seats with excitement. The first three children answer easily. The fourth boy, Oliver, pauses. After giving him time to think, the teacher says, ‘Does he need to phone a friend?’ The children all laugh, including Oliver. ‘Who can help with the beginning sound of the word?’ asks the teacher, and another boy answers. Oliver still cannot guess the word so she allows someone else to do so. The last two children get easier words from the sentence to guess. Finally, she comes back to Oliver and gives him ‘the’ to try. He answers successfully.

Here, it is evident that the lesson had predetermined framing with some very focused and some more general learning intentions. The teacher had planned to infuse playfulness with the puppet before she started but she also infuses playfulness spontaneously. When Oliver cannot answer, the playful reference to the shared culture of the catch-phrase in a television game show helps to deflect any pressure he might be feeling. The teacher makes sure that he ends on a note of success.
These first two cameos show how playfulness can be infused into interactions between teachers (or classroom assistants) and children and into structured activities, while at the same time facilitating learning through high levels of engagement and promoting good relationships between teachers and children.

Infusing appropriate structure into play

We want to acknowledge that the notion of structure in play is not new. For example, Manning and Sharp (1977) describe a project which outlines an imaginative array of contexts and materials for teachers to stimulate children’s play and they emphasise the teacher’s role. Reflecting on our observations, we concluded that infusing appropriate structure into play was a highly skilled task. It required ongoing, expert observation and assessment, implying a thorough knowledge of the fine grain of developmental pathways, and an ability to plan on the hoof. It was not surprising that many teachers found it difficult. Indeed, we saw that a small number of teachers found it almost impossible to understand their role and to resolve the tension between giving structure and direction to the child’s activity while maintaining a playful tone. For example, boys playing with dinosaurs attacking each other were somewhat abruptly interrupted and asked to name each dinosaur in turn. This teacher’s body language and tone also suggested to observers that she was not happy with the direction of the play, and the children also noticed this. Such teachers sometimes reported finding it challenging to ‘get down to the child’s level’, feeling that it would undermine their authority. Furthermore, these teachers often seemed reluctant to relinquish any control of the proceedings to the children: they had trouble resolving the tension between providing appropriate structure and allowing children sufficient autonomy. Finally, the main form of scaffolding they tended to employ was questioning. In contrast, more playful teachers were adept at directing the action without seeming to do so. For example, a teacher asked one child, ‘Are you ready to paint a picture for me yet?’. The word ‘yet’ subtly implied that the boy had already made the decision to paint a picture but he remained perfectly free to decline the activity. This more adept group also demonstrated a wider repertoire of pedagogic skills. Their skills reflect Dunkin and Hanna’s (2001) delineation of some of the roles a teacher can take during interactions; listener/decoder, facilitator, co-planner, co-learner and commentator. These roles can provide meaningful images of scaffolding techniques for teachers who find it difficult to infuse structure into play.

The following cameos illustrate how teachers infused structure and extra educational value into two activities that took place during play-time and a role-play activity. While not being free play, these activities were freely chosen and characterised by the self-motivation and high levels of engagement of the children that are typical of free play.

Opportunistic infusion of structure

In this instance, the activity was not pre-planned and was entirely child-initiated. The teacher simply took advantage in an opportunistic way of infusing additional structure into the play activity:
Cameo 3: Exploring large numbers

Teachers often spoke of children choosing to undertake literacy or numeracy activities during playtime. During playtime in a Year 2 class, Gemma took a whiteboard and wrote the numbers one to 10 and then, on a new line, began to continue. Getting stuck at 13, she asked the teacher for help. The teacher drew her attention to the parallels between the teens and the unit numbers, encouraging her to write 14 below 4 and so on, and asking her to predict what would come next. Gemma continued up to 19 and then asked for help again. The teacher introduced 20 at the end of the line, drawing the analogy with 10. Gemma spent the whole session on this activity, gradually constructing the 100 number square, sometimes making mistakes but highly engaged and pleased to be dealing with ‘big’ numbers. Other children looked on from time to time and showed excitement at tackling big numbers. At the conclusion of the session, Gemma asked the teacher to write 1000 and then 1,000,000. Many of the children crowded round to see.

It may well be that Gemma did not understand fully what she was doing but her horizons were broadened through the teacher’s intervention and she had perceived the first glimmerings of a pattern in the number square. Given that the child was not viewed as one of her ‘high-flyers’, the teacher was surprised at her persistence and enthusiasm. Despite her surprise, she adapted quickly to Gemma’s request for help, did not give too much input at once and was relaxed about how far the child would go. The teacher commented that this session would never have happened in the previous content-driven curriculum, partly because large numbers were not demanded and partly because children had less autonomy.

Pre-planned infusion of structure

In contrast to the previous cameo, the next cameo shows how the teacher had pre-planned structure for a play activity. However, there is also evidence of structure being ‘drip-fed’ into the activity, as the teacher judges the children’s readiness to respond:

Cameo 4: The roadway project

Having previously discussed roads and constructing a roadway, the teacher asks who wants to paint roadways on large pieces of cardboard. Several children volunteer and go to fetch equipment. The teacher makes sure they can all make a start and leaves them to it. Another group are making the houses to go with the roadway, supported by the classroom assistant. The teacher returns to the first group and suggests that they could do another road crossing the first one. One roadway keeps getting wider and wider as Anna, who obviously thinks she has to fill the whole area, continues painting. Anna is very quiet but the others keep up almost continuous chatter about what they are doing. The teacher notices Anna’s efforts. She says (with helpful gestures), ‘That’s a very nice wide road Anna, not a narrow road. Is it wide enough now, do you think?’ Anna nods and stops. The teacher asks what is going to be at the side of the road. ‘Grass’ decrees one boy and the others agree. They get green paint and begin filling in the rest of the space. Anna gets her brush stuck with another brush in the entrance to the pot. As she pulls, the widest parts of the paintbrushes jam the entrance harder. A boy sees her difficulty and tries to pull them out. It doesn’t work and he sits back to consider the problem. Then he realises he must push them both fully in to get one out. Anna watches intently. After some time, the teacher goes and gets a copy of the Highway Code and shows them some of the contents. ‘What else might your road need?’ she asks. ‘Do you remember that we talked about things you might see on the road?’ White lines and
signs are two suggestions. The teacher says that they can continue the project tomorrow.

From a purely child-led perspective, the teacher might be judged as being too directive in getting the project started and moving it on. In the context of playful structure, the teacher’s intervention can be viewed differently. For example, the children chose to take part in the activity and had space to be creative, work at problem-solving independently and cooperate. When the teacher intervenes the second time, she has clearly planned in advance how to move the project on once the children are ready and has envisaged the roadway contributing to a major project continuing over several play sessions and using the houses being constructed by other groups of children. If she had reminded them about the Highway Code at the beginning of the session, they might have been overwhelmed or unable to retain it. Instead, she injects the information they need at judicious intervals. On a later visit, the project was displayed in the school’s entrance foyer, suggesting that the children had had opportunity for sustained thinking on the topic and indicating to the children how much their activity was valued.

Infusing structure into role play

In general, we observed relatively little structure and support given to children’s role play, even in the best-rated classrooms. While a low level of structure and support was sufficient for some children, who had no difficulty sustaining role play on their own, other children, particularly in highly disadvantaged areas, made very limited efforts at doing so. Bodrova and Leong (2001), who have pioneered an early years programme called ‘Tools of the Mind’, suggest that modern children have become over-used to complex, prescriptive toys, so that they find it difficult to engage in imaginative role-playing unless they have the ‘right’ toy. The Tools of the Mind programme draws on Vygotskian ideas and thus considers complex socio-dramatic play with minimal props to be crucial at this stage of development. In contrast to what we usually observed, Bodrova and Leong stress acting out structured, real-world activities with strong preparation but minimal props. In the final cameo, a combination of special equipment (masks) is combined with highly imaginative use of the shrubbery (jungle) and the hut (camp):

Cameo 5: Jungle drama

The classroom assistant is supporting a small group for a drama session. They have previously read a story about animals in the jungle. Five of the children choose to don masks of jungle animals and hide in the jungle (a small shrubbery in the playground), each enthusiastically practising their part. One child opts to play a hunter. The children decide that he should go to the far end of the shrubbery and shout that he is hurt and needs help. The ‘heroine’ must rescue him, avoiding the fierce animals and finding a route through the jungle while supporting him as he leans on his ‘spear’ and hops on his uninjured leg. The animals ‘stalk’ him on tiptoe and enjoy making a lot of scary noise. The heroine supports the hunter back to camp (a wooden hut beside the playground). The classroom assistant provides prompts if the action seems to be failing but she does not direct the action.
With the ongoing support available here, the children were able to sustain the action better because the classroom assistant became a co-player whenever the children’s imagination flagged.

These last three cameos show the infusion of structure into a variety of playful activities to meet both general and specific educational goals with minimal effect on the benefits of free play.

Concluding remarks

The primary goal of the image of playful structure is to enhance the value of play and playfulness in early years primary classrooms. Where, previously, play was positioned as a counterpoint to work, the image of playful structure means that playfulness now permeates activities across the day, as the term infusion implies. Where, previously, play was associated primarily with child-led activities, and work with adult direction, playfulness is envisaged as a characteristic of the interaction between children and adults across a range of classroom activities.

Playful structure, as conceptualised here, is underpinned by complementary processes – infusion of structure into play and infusion of playfulness into activities that are tightly structured (e.g. task-time). These ideas can be usefully illustrated by written guidance, including cameos and vignettes, and can best be explained in training through the use of video. Such recordings assisted the research team in understanding how the tones of voice, body language, spontaneity and general ethos in the classroom created a pedagogy that could be summarised as playful structure. The cameos selected for this paper were intended to convey similar messages.

To ensure the full educational potential of play demands some degree of structure. On the one hand, the view that is advanced in this paper is that structure does not necessarily mean formality. What it does mean is that teachers need to know developmental pathways in a variety of domains (not just reading and mathematics) so that they can scaffold children’s learning in developmentally appropriate ways. Moreover, playful structure does not undermine the importance of free play, nor does it negate the role of the child in having a say in his or her own learning; rather it enhances and extends the opportunities for the positive characteristics of play to feature across primary classroom activities.

A word of caution may be needed about the extent of infusion of structure into play. Training material should make clear that there will still be great variation in the degree of structure between different playful activities, depending on the support required and whether the activity is intended to provide very focused or more generalised learning outcomes.

On the other hand, structure need not be an impediment to playfulness. We have found the idea of playfulness as an attribute of teacher behaviour very useful as a way of conceptualising classroom interactions between adults and children. While it may be more difficult to move classroom practice in this direction for those teachers whose temperament is not naturally playful, we consider that at least some aspects of playfulness are open to teacher education – if they are sufficiently well articulated and educationally valued. Furthermore, aspects of playfulness may be usefully developed into more sophisticated forms that help to maintain good attitudes to learning as children grow older. For example, playfulness can contribute to creativity in art and storytelling, and it is characteristic of good mathematicians that they have a playful attitude to numbers. Thus playful structure not only encapsulates
Several strands of research point to the need for a more integrated early years pedagogy that honours the interests and autonomy of young children while also accommodating new thinking about the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing children’s learning. In her paper advocating new directions in play, Wood (2007) recommends a greater degree of ‘synchronicity between playing, learning and teaching’ (319), where the practitioner assumes a more explicit role in young children’s play. We suggest that the image of playful structure is a novel way of bridging previously held divisions between formal and informal, work and play, child-initiated and adult-led activities in early years classrooms.

The current move across the UK to a more play-based pedagogy in the early years constitutes a major transformation of early years practice during the first years of compulsory schooling. Our experience of working and researching with teachers in Northern Ireland, as they engaged with the new play-based pedagogy, has confirmed the need for more nuanced understandings of the meaning of play for early years primary classrooms. Existing teacher education, as well as in-service professional development, will need to fully embrace these more nuanced understandings if play-based early years pedagogies are to fulfil their promises.

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Note
1. In the current Northern Ireland school curriculum, the primary years are divided into three stages; Foundation Stage, the first two years, ages 4–6 years; Key Stage 1, the next two years, ages 6–8 years; Key Stage 2, the remaining three years, ages 8–11 years. Northern Ireland has the youngest statutory primary school starting age in Europe, from 4 years 2 months onwards. Class sizes for Years 1 and 2 average 20, typically with one teacher and one classroom assistant. See http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/ for more information.

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