

## Shall the twain meet? Prospects for a playfully play-full Scottish education

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## Shall the twain meet? Prospects for a playfully play-full Scottish education.

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### ABSTRACT

This is the opening paper in a *Scottish Educational Review* collection on *Making Space for Play in Scottish Education*. It is acknowledged that, historically, a perception of divergent purpose enabled education both to enlist play and to curb play to achieve desired educational outcomes. However, a new understanding of play has emerged in recent years, catalysed globally by the assertion in the UNCRC that play is a fundamental right of the child, and within the UK, by the response of the play sector to the challenge to articulate the value of play that was set by the Dobson report. Scotland is now a globally significant locus for the promotion of play, with strong national play leadership and, since 2013, a National Play Strategy. This paper asserts that it is timely to consider the extent to which Scottish education could and should embrace playful learning.

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

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### INTRODUCTION

Rudyard Kipling (1892) observation that “never the twain shall meet”, opined in the opening lines of *The Ballad of East and West*, appears to support the train of thought that the world is riven with divisions that cannot be breached. Less widely acknowledged are the lines in the poem that follow through which Kipling’s argues that there is “neither East nor West”. In contemporary Scottish education, unstable and inconsistent binarisms such as Eastern/Western cultures are being challenged (e.g. Dai *et al.*’s (2018) exploration of how a 2+2 articulation programme subverts the divide of domestic/transnational HE, and Mitchell *et al.*’s (2015) analysis of how one physical education intervention challenged the misconception that, in contrast to boys, adolescent girls disengage from physical activity). The premise for this paper, and the collection of which it is part, is that play and education is another binarism that should be challenged. The common understanding of play as activity that is “a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated” (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group 2005) may appear discordant to an understanding of formal education as the process of facilitated learning in which the goal is for the learner to acquire knowledge and skills (and perhaps also values,

and habits). While in the pages that follow, it not argued against the possibility of discrete domains of 'play' or 'education', umbrage is taken at the regressive social construction that has created and perpetuated the deceptively simple, "common-sense" understanding that these are polar opposites. Rather, the purpose is to explore the extent to which Scottish education could and should embrace playful learning.

## **THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF SCOTTISH EDUCATION**

Long since understood as central to Scotland's sense of self (McKendrick and Brown 2018), education has been defined by the Scottish Government (2019: 105) as its "defining mission", in which it is "... determined to improve the life chances of the children and young people of Scotland and change lives for the better". In addition to almost £4 billion being invested annually in education by the Scottish Government (2019: 216), local authorities have also committed to protect local expenditure on education at a time of fiscal stress (local government spending on education has grown by 7.5% or £300m in real terms between 2016/17 and 2019/20, at a time when spend in Scotland on most other local services has contracted – Eiser (2019: 22)). Should education fully embrace an activity that is "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated", this might appear to weaken the case for the scale of public investment that supports the serious business of education in Scotland. Most pertinently, although the purpose of play may be viewed as consistent with the national outcomes that are used to frame national purpose in Scotland (e.g. that people: (i) are creative and their vibrant and diverse cultures are expressed and enjoyed widely; (ii) grow up loved, safe and respected so that they realise their full potential; and (iii) live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe"), play is also out of kilter with the National Indicators that are used to appraise whether these outcomes are being achieved, e.g. the seven measures of educational attainment that are outcome focused on literacy, numeracy and awards at SCQF4 and above (Scottish Government 2019a; 2019b).

## **THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF PLAY**

The Scottish Government values play. In 2013, Scotland's first national play strategy was published (Scottish Government 2013), which asserted the child's right to play, defined play, articulated the value of play, made reference to the need for a positive and supportive environment and workforce, and outlined four domains for play, i.e. home, community, nursery and school. It boldly asserted that all learning environments need free play, acknowledged the importance of school grounds and classrooms, argued that playful learning was necessary in nursery, primary, secondary and special schools and made reference to ways in which the Curriculum for Excellence highlighted how play can enrich learning experiences (Scottish Executive 2007). More recently, the Scottish Government (2018) has provided guidance to early years providers on how to enrich play in outdoor environments. In making the case for play, it is consistent with Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) and acknowledges the positive value of play that has been asserted by the play lobby in the UK (Cole-

Hamilton 2012), in response to the challenge set by the UK Government in the form of the Dobson Report (DCMS 2004).

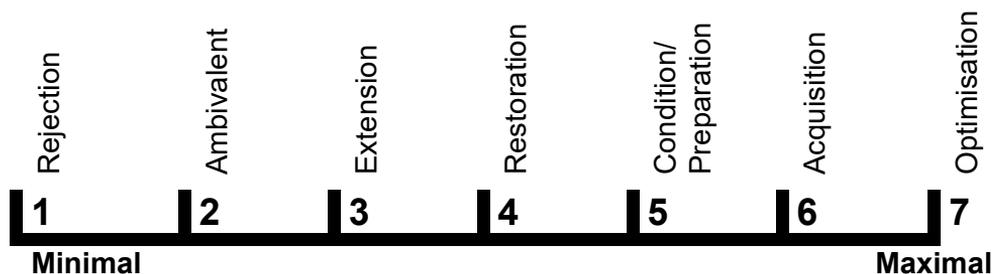
Other national agencies have argued for the infusion of play in Scottish education, e.g. Play Scotland (n.d.) and Inspiring Scotland (Casey and Robertson 2016). Independent thinkers have even argued that our economy is best served by embracing a play (rather than a work) ethic (Kane 2005). On the other hand, it is somewhat premature to eulogise the importance of play for education when there appears to be considerable distance between the purpose of play and the goal of education. Indeed, even within the play sector, there is difference of opinion between those who valorise purpose-focused play and those who are primarily concerned with play as an end in its own right (Battram 2015).

## CONCEIVING OF PLAY FOR SCOTTISH EDUCATION

The tension within the play sector between free play and purposeful play finds expression in the realm of education. Playful learning can take the form of learning through directed play in which the teacher's goal is to use play in order that the learner achieves pre-determined educational outcomes (purpose focused play) or playful learning might be conceived as incidental learning that is acquired through self-determined activities and exploration (free play). The imperative to pre-determine learning outcomes and define syllabi lend favour to purpose focused play in education, although it is important to acknowledge that playful learning should not be restricted to this. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that playful learning is not only relevant to children, as the outcomes from conferences on playful learning in higher education evidence (Langan and Smart 2018).

It is instructive to acknowledge that play can, and does, fulfil many functions in education, ranging from play being castigated as the antithesis of learning, to play being conceived as the highest form of learning. Figure 1 presents this as a continuum, along which there are seven points along which play progresses from antithesis to essence.

**FIGURE 1: CONTINUUM OF CONCEPTUALISING PLAY IN RELATION TO FORMAL LEARNING**



At one extreme, play is conceived as the ultimate barrier to learning (stage 1). Here, play is understood as activity that must be rejected and curtailed in order to facilitate productive learning. Curbing the disruptive influence of play is deemed necessary in order to achieve the serious business of learning. The historic construction of the ordered classroom with didactic learning in which teacher is

knowledge provider and pupil is consumer is one in which playful actions disrupt and undermine the prevailing order.

Rather than show hostility toward play, the “non-response” of ambivalence is equally dismissive of the value of play for learning (stage 2). Here, play and playful activity may be permitted, tolerated or not acknowledged. Play is viewed as not important, but not necessarily a problem or threat to productive learning.

Perceiving that play, *per se*, is activity that is not equivalent to learning does not necessarily suggest that play is without value for learning. Rather, play might be viewed as enabling learning beyond that which is acquired in the classroom (stage 3). Here, learning through play is valued, but is deemed to be of secondary importance to the most important knowledge that is acquired in formal classroom learning. For example, the social skills that are acquired through play are considered to be important, but of lesser importance to the literacy and numeracy skills that are acquired in formal settings.

The restorative value of play is also one in which play is conceived of play as being a realm apart from formal learning, but here is viewed as being of value in enabling it (stage 4). Time-out in the classroom and playtime in the playground are often viewed as opportunities for children to recharge themselves in order to be more ready for learning on their return.

Play might also be conceived as providing the necessary foundations for learning (stage 5). It might be conceptualised as such for environments or individuals. Thus, the establishment of a playful learning environment might be viewed as one that is conducive to learning – enthusing and supporting the learner to acquire that knowledge and skillset that is deemed to be the learning outcome. Similarly, play might provide the personal competencies that prepare the individual to prosper in the formal learning environment.

Others might view play as more than a preparatory stage for learning. Thus, play might be viewed as a means through which knowledge and skills can be acquired (stage 6). Here, playful learning is either an alternative or an optimal mode of achieving learning outcomes. Finally, a more ‘radical’ view of play in relation to learning gives greater weight to the competencies that are acquired through self-directed and peer-directed play (stage 7). Here, greater value is placed on the process (learner-led) than the outcomes (the learning that is acquired through play).

This conceptual tool opens up the possibilities of multiple projections of play on learning; what is the reality of play to learning for Scottish education, past, present and future?

## **PLAY FOR YESTERDAY’S EDUCATION: WORKING WITHIN BINARISMS**

It would wrong to suggest that play has had no purpose in traditional education. Paradoxically, the assumption that play differs from education has been used to promote its use within the school day and education system. First, playgroups might be considered the initial stage in a linear track of age-stage learning that culminates in tertiary-level institutions. That this is part of the wider educational system may be contested by some on the grounds that playgroups were traditionally conceived as gatherings of parents (typically mothers) and their very young children who were not yet ready for formal learning. However, it might

reasonably be argued that parents understood that the playgroup was the first stage on a learning journey that would culminate in their child graduating from secondary or tertiary education into the world of work.

Second and third, and less contentious, is the central role of playtime and the playground in the school day and the school environment. Here, the restorative value of play was acknowledged by pupils and teachers, and was viewed as an integral part of the school day. Critically, it is the perception of difference that created a sense of value, enabling pupils to re-charge in preparation for around round of formal learning when the school bell rang to signal a return to class. As is noted elsewhere within this collection (McKendrick 2019), both the time and the space for this mode of child-centred play in school has been undermined in recent years. Furthermore, play value has been implicitly contested in secondary school settings, where these have been known as break times and school grounds (rather than playtime and playgrounds).

Finally, within the classroom, the creative arts and sports have been viewed as a time-space for purposeful play. The annual celebration of the Nativity, the end-of-school-year summer show, and activity within 'gym'/PE/sports day that is non-competitive, are staple features of the school year in which a playful approach to learning is utilised. Although it is recognised that play is an effective means to stimulate creativity (Dobson and McKendrick 2018) and that creative play is widely understood among play professionals as one of the main types of play (Hughes 2006), play has tended to be viewed as a means to an end, rather than that to be valued in its own right.

## **PLAYFUL DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH EDUCATION**

Playgroups, playtime, playgrounds and playful approaches to the creative arts and sports persist in contemporary school education. However, a range of contemporary interventions has extended the reach of play across the school day.

First, and most significantly, play-based learning has extended beyond pre-school and is being adopted by some in the early years of primary school education (Martlew *et al.* 2011). Although there is debate over what constitutes play-based learning (e.g. whether it should include free play or play guided by teachers) (Weisberg and Zosh 2018) and there is variation in the implicit/assumed knowledge about play among those who have not been formally trained in play practice (Fesseha and Pyle 2016; Pui-Wah and Stimpson 2004), the essence of play-based learning is that children learn while at play (Wood 2014). Drawing on experiences beyond Scotland – notably in Scandinavia where children start formal schooling at a later age (Bingham and Whitebread 2018) – as in other countries (Hunter and Walsh 2014), there has been recent growth in the adoption of play-based learning in the early years of many Scottish schools.

Second, and related to this, has been the adoption of nurture groups to support the development of children who need more focused, personalised and intensive support to facilitate their learning (March and Kearney 2017). Although not inherently play-based (Lucase *et al.* 2006), nurture groups have been amenable to utilising play (Stone *et al.* 2017) as a more effective means than traditional class-based learning (McKinney and Hall 2016) to achieve the learning outcomes desired for participating pupils.

Third, behaviour management strategies that have been introduced in educational settings, such as golden time and circle time (Watt and Higgins 1999) use play to achieve their goals. Many of the end of the week rewards for good behaviour during the school week are play-based (Howe 2016), while circle time invokes a playful approach to opening discussion of sensitive topics and to learn the principles and mechanics of respectful debate (Pursi *et al.* 2018).

Interest groups promoting the possibility and value of play-based learning, and generating resources and direction on how to achieve it, are a fourth significant development in the extension of play in Scottish education. Foremost among those promoting play from outwith education is *Play Scotland*, which has published a play types toolkit to support “bringing more play into the school day” (Scott-McKie and Casey 2018). Similarly, *Inspiring Scotland* has supported work to promote a loose parts toolkit (Casey and Robertson 2016) and, together with Grounds for Learning, explored the prospects for adolescent play in secondary schools (Robinson 2014). *Learning Through Landscapes* has produced a range of documents to support targeted play including learning maths outdoors in the early years (Richardson, n.d.) and woodland play in school grounds (Learning Through Landscapes n.d.).

The utilisation of play in contemporary Scottish schools extends beyond traditional uses and extensions based on the realisation that desired outcomes of traditional schooling can be achieved, or achieved more effectively, through play. Education is also responsive to emergent opportunities within wider society; notably, the growing importance of gaming in the creative industries (Schlesinger *et al.* 2015). For example, Hainey *et al.* (2013) undertook a large scale gaming survey of almost 900 HE students from Scotland and the Netherlands that explored their gaming habits and perspectives on the use of games in education, finding that the majority favoured their incorporation as an educational mechanism in HE.

Finally, play features among the many ways in which Pupil Equity Fund monies have been deployed by Head Teachers to respond to the challenges within their school of ‘closing the attainment gap’ between pupils from the most and least deprived backgrounds (Allison 2018). As befits a scheme tightly focused on educational attainment, the formal evaluation of the broader Attainment Challenge of which it is part focuses on processes and outcomes, rather than activities (Scottish Government 2019). However, as Allison (2018) reports, play features prominently as the means to that end in many schools, particularly in the early stages of school education.

It is important to reflect critically on the infusion of play in Scotland’s schools and not to assume that play *per se* is always a positive development. For example, Plowman and Stephen (2005) raised concerns that the emphasis on ‘free play’ in early years settings in Scotland was not conducive to young children making effective use of computers. They argued that an overarching commitment to free play led to a lack of peer support and ineffective adult intervention. Similarly, beyond Scotland, some concern has been expressed by parents that children want more than play in early years settings (O’Gorman and Ailwood 2012). More broadly, Stirrup *et al.* (2017) have observed that the way in which play pedagogy is being practised leads to contented children, but ones whose horizons are limited in a system that lacks a progressive imperative that disrupts existing social hierarchies. It is important to better understand play, its goals and the limits of its utility; without a common understanding of play, there is a risk that different

practitioners will achieve varying outcomes on the basis of varying practice (McInnes *et al.* 2011).

## **PLAY FOR TOMORROW'S EDUCATION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS COLLECTION**

The seeds may already have been planted for what lies ahead for play in Scottish education. Will there be further extension of a play-based curriculum (in more schools, or among older groups of children)? Will the tentacles of playful learning reach out beyond its core in the creative arts to embed itself more firmly in other curricular areas? Will the online platforms and Regional Improvement Collaboratives that now exist to share promising and evidenced good practice among teachers lead to an expansion and extension of playful learning? Will the evidence base emerge to strengthen the case for play-based learning? Will the demands of the creative industries generate an external pressure to infuse school education with more playfully creative approaches to learning in order to better equip children to optimise their contribution to the service-based economy of the future? There is much to ponder in relation to play and school education for the years ahead.

*Making Space for Play in Scottish Education* aims to bring focus to these issues and to open debate on the role of play in Scottish education. It comprises six full papers and three reflective notes. Although focused on the Scottish context, it also draws from international experience (Diaz-Varela and Wright; Schlesinger *et al.*; and Krechevsky *et al.*). Similarly, although the focus is on play in schools, the significance of playful learning in the wider school community is also considered (Guilbaud; Schlesinger *et al.*). The papers comprise theoretical musings (Scott-McKie and Campbell), empirical case studies (Johnstone *et al.*; Krechevsky *et al.*; McKendrick; McNair *et al.*; Schlesinger *et al.*), descriptive case studies (Diaz-Varela and Wright), advocacy (Palmer) and biographical reflection (Guilbaud). Consideration is given to the role of adults (Diaz-Varela and Wright), interaction between adults and children (Guilbaud; McNair *et al.*), learning spaces (McKendrick; Schlesinger *et al.*) and children's experiences/outcomes (Johnstone *et al.*; Krechevsky *et al.*; Palmer). A range of age stages is covered, with specific focus on pre-school (Guilbaud; McNair), the interface between pre-school and primary school (Palmer), the primary school (Johnstone *et al.*; Scott-McKie and Campbell), the secondary school (Krechevsky *et al.*) as well as comparative perspectives (McKendrick; Schlesinger *et al.*).

The collection opens with a reflection of how Martha Nussbaum's (2011) version of the Capability Approach can provide a theoretical case for playful approaches in all stages of education within Scottish primary schools; Scott-McKie and Campbell (2019) focus on the capability of play and three others with which it is closely linked, arguing that this is consistent with the wider objectives of the *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004). Their objective is to present a theoretical case for playful approaches to learning in Scottish primary schools. Moving away from theory, Johnstone *et al.* (2019) shift the focus to practical matters. Their concern is to consider whether 'active play' in and around the school day can contribute toward reducing the deficit in moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity among children in Scotland and improving their fundamental

movement skills. School grounds, Johnstone *et al.*'s domain for active play, is also the central focus in the paper that follows, as McKendrick (2019a) reflects on Scotland's use of school grounds to support play, active and otherwise. The Scottish School Grounds Survey of 2003/4 is used as a starting point to reflect on what is traditionally understood to be the most important time and space for play during the school day. The focus then switches back into the classroom as McNair *et al.* (2019) reflect on their observations of children at play in early years settings (nursery and primary schools). Their concern is to appraise adult power and to reflect on what adults interpret from their observations of children at play. Adults' role in shaping the educational environment is also of interest to Krechevsky *et al.* (2019). Their work in Denmark was a playful experimentation that disrupted the timetabled nature of the school day by challenging middle-school pupils to design their own schedule for two weeks of the school year. This was conceived as an exposition of one of the principles of the pedagogy of play that was proposed by the university research team who were supporting the teacher-researchers based in the school. Broadening horizons to reflect on what could be learned in Scotland from afar is also characteristic of the work of Schlesinger *et al.* (2019) in Philadelphia, USA. Here, we also shift beyond the school to consider a playful intervention to engage the wider community using the traditional tools of the classroom – chalk and a chalkboard. The relevance to Scottish education is in the lessons to be learned on community engagement and the benefits that might accrue in schools by embracing low-cost play that is highly valued among the wider community. Speaking from beyond is also the approach taken in the first of the three research notes. Sylwyn Guilbard (2019) reflects on her mothering, drawing on lessons learned from informal learning passed through her own family history and the principles of a Steiner education. It demonstrates the complexity of play and the child-centred focus of a learning environment when a skilled play professional is practising their craft. Sue Palmer (2019), the driving force behind Upstart Scotland, makes an impassioned case for the further extension in schools of a play-based curriculum, providing a broader argument that furthers the case made in earlier by McNair *et al.* (2019). In a similar manner, Diaz-Varela and Wright (2019) offer a solution to McNair *et al.*'s concerns over inadvertent but unhelpful educator interventions in play, as they describe their transnational work in training next generation teachers playfully in the art of playful learning. The collection draws to a close with reflections what has been learned in the collection, presented in terms of priorities for realising the potential of play in Scottish education (McKendrick, 2019b).

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