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# Signalling playfulness: disguising work as play in the early years' classroom

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**ABSTRACT**

Play has been widely investigated from a practice-based perspective; playfulness as an effective pedagogical tool has received less attention. Over an 8-year evaluation of a play-based curriculum, we ascertained that some practitioners found it difficult to captivate and maintain children's interests through the provision of a play-based experience while ensuring that effective learning took place. Drawing on lessons learned, we argue that in order to enhance the quality of the learning experience, playfulness, conceived as a characteristic of the interaction between teacher and child, must be infused across the school day, even within activities focused on traditional curriculum goals. For this paper, we revisit the observational study previously conducted, in particular, an intensive video study of teachers observed to be highly playful, in order to unravel key playful signals useful to frame non-play activities as play, thus disguising the serious pursuit of learning.

## Introduction

Play and play*ness* are related but distinct concepts and both have an important place in the early years classroom. While play has been widely investigated in the early years' educational context, playfulness has received relatively little attention (Pinchover, 2017). Drawing on the findings of a long-running evaluation of play-based versus direct-instruction approaches (McGuinness et al, 2009a), we have been advocating for greater emphasis to be placed on playfulness as a pedagogical tool in an effort, not only to ensure that effective learning takes place, but that children remain interested and engaged in the process, even during activities that are not play. We have articulated our thinking in three earlier papers (Walsh et al., 2011; Walsh, et al., 2019; Sproule et al., 2019). In the first of these papers, we argued that playfulness could be infused into structured classroom activities and that so doing allowed children to preserve the same high levels of engagement that we observed during classroom play. The word infusion was

deliberately chosen to invoke a subtle, blending process. In complement, we argued that structure could be infused into classroom play without loss of child enjoyment or engagement in order to ensure the educational value of play. We called this image *playful structure*. (This image was further developed in a book (Walsh et al., 2017)). In the second paper, we showed how a playful approach was compatible with appropriate levels of practitioner participation in classroom activities, as understood through the lens of the participatory learning theories described by Hedges and Cullen (2012). We argued that such practitioner participation could allow engagement with children's funds of knowledge (Hedges, 2007), accumulated through their lived experience, whilst allowing the practitioner an active teaching role, including furthering specific curriculum goals. In the third paper, we presented playfulness as one of three dimensions of balanced early years practice and contended that practitioners could and should approach all aspects of the teaching and learning experience with a high degree of playfulness, including those activities that address specific curriculum goals such as literacy targets.

In this paper, we extend our earlier work on two fronts: firstly, extrapolating more fully the origins of a playful pedagogy, with a discussion of the key components of playfulness and how they might be recognised. Secondly, delving more deeply into the intensive observation and video studies that were conducted as part of the play-based evaluation, to examine how practitioners can *signal* playfulness, thus disguising non-play activities as play in order to preserve child engagement.

## Background context

The paper is set within the troubled space of the early years of primary schooling, a space in which researchers, educators and practitioners have been struggling for some years, trying to resolve a number of tensions between, for example, formal versus informal approaches to teaching and learning, play versus work, and child-initiation versus teacher-direction (Allee-Herndon et al, 2019, Walsh et al, 2017, Wood 2014). Research has consistently shown that, while most early years teachers in the primary context are enthusiastic about the value of play for children's learning, they are often confused about how they might continue to captivate the interest and engagement of young children through the medium of play while still ensuring that they meet required academic curriculum goals and targets (Nicholson, 2018, Jay & Knaus, 2018 and Walsh et al, 2017). Indeed, some studies suggest that practitioners appear comfortable when promoting the social and emotional aspects of learning through the medium of play, but when it comes to more academic learning they struggle, finding it a much more complex task. Consequently, many teachers resort to more formal and traditional methods (Pyle et al., 2017, Walsh et al, 2017, McInness et al, 2011). Fisher et al (2010) agree, indicating that many practitioners believe that play and academic learning are fundamentally incompatible, where they must either engage in instructional type activities to ensure intellectual gains or allow children to play freely for their holistic development.

## Towards a playful pedagogy

In an effort to meet this challenge and resolve some of these underpinning dilemmas, a growing body of scholars have been calling for a more intentional and nuanced pedagogical approach that moves beyond the dichotomy of play and direct instruction, where

playing, learning and teaching become more fully synchronised and the role of the playful teacher becomes more explicit in the learning process, for example, Playful Teaching and Learning, (Walsh et al, 2017); Guided Play (Weisberg et al, 2015); Play Worlds (Hakkarainen et al, 2013), Developmental Pedagogy (Pramling-Samulesson & Pramling, 2016) and Development Education, (Van Oers & Duikers, 2013). In this more blended space, particularly when academic skills are being fostered, we strongly argue that the infusion of playfulness becomes the central tenet (Walsh et al, 2011, Sproule et al, 2019), that is, 'the secret sauce' in the teaching and learning experience (see, for example, Mardell in Shafer, 2018, unpaginated) or as Singer (2015,p 33) emphasises, 'a *playful spirit*'. Sicart (2014) explains further, indicating that while play is principally perceived as an activity, playfulness is more of an attitude or modality which affords opportunities to take the attitude without the actuality of play, changing the approach while still respecting the purposes and goals of that particular object or context.

With these ideas in mind, we turn our attention to how playfulness has been conceptualised within the research literature in order to understand more fully the behaviours that underpin it.

## Towards an understanding of playfulness

### Key components

Table 1 shows a comparison of factor analyses of playful behaviours from 1977 onwards. This table is intended as a guide only to aid understanding of the similarities and differences between studies. The column headings are our own interpretation of the factors appearing in the various studies and while they do not imply an exact agreement between the various authors' derived factors; they indicate factors appearing to show good correspondence.

Drawing on the evidence summarised in Table 1, there is complete agreement between studies on a factor indicating characteristics that make people smile and laugh, namely joke telling, silly behaviour, whimsy or other manifestations of humour. Only one study (Glynn & Webster, 1992) sees fun as a separate factor. There is also very good agreement on the remaining factors. Playfulness involves indications of feeling well, namely positive affect, pleasure and cheerfulness. Spontaneity and impulsivity may be interpreted as two sides of the same coin that are important for playfulness. Creativity,

**Table 1.** Comparison of factor analyses of components of playfulness.

| | Positive affect | Whimsy/ humour/ silliness | Spontaneity/ impulsivity | Creativity/ imagination/ Intellectual play | Exuberance/ expressiveness | Positive social/ other-directedness | Fun |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Lieberman* (1977) | X | X | X | | | | |
| Glynn and Webster (1992) | | X | X | X | X | | X |
| *Barnett* 2007 | | X | X | | X | X | |
| Proyer 2012 | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| *Proyer and Jehle* 2013 | X | X | | X | X | X | |
| *Proyer* 2017 | X | X | | X | | X | |

imagination and a ludic approach to cognitive activity are seen as manifestations of playfulness that may be important for learning. Finally, playfulness manifests as exuberant and expressive behaviour involving exaggerated movement (see Guitard et al., 2005, for analysis of the correspondence between studies available at that time).

### Key benefits

Research recognises playfulness as valuable in itself in a variety of contexts. It is known to foster positive affect. It is believed to enable problem resolution, to help in dealing with frustration and anxiety and thus to enhance adaptation (Guitard et al., 2005; Shen et al., 2017). It is widely accepted that it has links to imagination, creativity and innovation, so much so that these are beginning to be explored by industry and business (e.g. Barnett, 2007; Bateson, 2015, Proyer, 2019). Playfulness had also been associated with a number of health benefits in adults in terms of psychological functioning and wellbeing (Proyer, 2012; Proyer & Ruch, 2011; Yue et al., 2016) and stress reduction and coping strategies (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013). Indeed, according to Diener and Chan (2011), playful adults live on average ten years longer than their less playful peers.

Yet, as noted above, educational professionals' own use of playfulness in practice is less well developed (Pinchover, 2017). At this juncture, therefore, we now turn our attention to the research study that underpinned the thinking within this paper.

## Research study

### Research context

The evidence at the heart of this paper was gathered as part of The Early Years Enriched Curriculum (EC) Evaluation Project, an eight-year evaluation (2000–2008) of an innovative, play-based curriculum, implemented in Year 1 (4–5 year olds) and Year 2 (5–6 year olds) in Northern Ireland primary schools. Children in Northern Ireland have one of the earliest statutory school starting ages in the world, including children as young as 4y 2 m. Until the introduction of this pilot EC Curriculum, children were exposed to a formal academic curriculum that was assessment-based and content driven (Walsh et al, 2006). The evaluation compared this pilot curriculum with the pre-existing more structured and traditional curriculum in 24 schools throughout Northern Ireland.

### Research design and methodology

There were four main strands to the research design:

- Comparison of the EC children's scholastic progress (principally literacy and numeracy) with the control group of children one year ahead in the same schools, who had experienced the pre-existing curriculum (McGuinness et al., 2014). Approximately 950 children participated.
- A study of the teachers', parents' and principals' reactions to and beliefs about the new curriculum and its effects on children compared with the traditional model as children progressed up the school. This study included one-to-one interviews with the Year 1

and 2 teachers ($n = 119$). Parents' ($n = 1400$) perceptions of the curriculum and of children's progress were also collected, through interviews and surveys. All 24 school principals were interviewed.

- A classroom observation study which covered 110 classrooms – 69 Year 1 (4–5-year-olds) and 41 Year 2 (5–6-year-olds) classes and was conducted in two ways – free flowing naturalistic observations and more structured observations using the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) (Walsh and Gardner 2005; Walsh et al., 2006) to capture the quality of the educational experience, with foci on children's responses, teachers' strategies and the learning environment. Classroom practice was rated against nine quality indicators: motivation, concentration, independence, confidence, well-being, social interaction, respect, multiple skill acquisition and higher-order thinking skills.
- An intensive follow-up classroom and video study which covered eight highly rated classrooms selected for quality on the basis of the scores on the QLI. Two observers spent three consecutive days in each of the eight high-quality settings. 150 h of observations were recorded and 45 h were video-recorded.
- (The full findings are reported in McGuinness et al, 2009a, 2009b; Sproule et al, 2009; Trew et al, 2009).

For this paper, we delve more deeply into the intense classroom observations, and video data as a means of illustrating how playfulness can be infused by skilful teachers into the teaching and learning experience and to examine more closely the associated benefits from doing so.

### Data analysis

The intense observations and video data in the high-quality settings were analysed using an inductive or bottom-up approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), where the themes were generated from and grounded in the data. The videos were analysed separately by each of the two researchers in the first instance and then collaboratively to fine tune the key themes generated. These were then shared with the practising teachers to ensure that they met with their agreement.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from the research and ethics committees from our respective institutions. In line with their guidelines, all participants (teachers, parents and children) were informed in advance of the overarching purpose of the study and had the right to withdraw at any stage. They were assured of confidentiality throughout. Participants were made aware that all data, including the video footage, would be used solely for research purposes.

### Benefits of playfulness in classroom practice

The findings suggested that in the most successful classrooms (according to the QLI), teachers were able to maintain a sense of playfulness throughout the curriculum, even during more structured activities, by being outgoing, active and energetic, preserving a

light-hearted tone and leaving some room for spontaneity in terms of following the needs and interests of the children (Walsh et al., 2011 and Sproule et al., 2019). In these classrooms, the quality of the learning experience scored highly on all nine indicators of the QLI.

## Relationships

We observed how the playful manner adopted by these early years teachers enabled more nurturing relationships to be established and ensured high levels of child confidence and well-being. As Morris (1978) noted, play 'puts dominance relationships temporarily out of action' (p. 268). Vincent-Snow and Tong (2019) agree, stating that 'through playfulness, power imbalances are reduced, stress is positively realised and the environment changed to a state of positive harmony' (p. 12). We observed that children were very relaxed about interacting with the playful practitioners to ask questions, get help with problems and show off their work, suggesting that the playful persona adopted by the teachers, even during the more curriculum-focused tasks, made them more approachable.

## Creativity

Equally, the playful interactions observed in these classes helped to generate a low-stakes atmosphere. Just as in play, it was acceptable for the child to make mistakes and just try again until he or she got it right. It was rare for a child to display anxiety in these playful classrooms, even when the tasks in question were more structured and curriculum focused. As Szekely (2015) argues 'Play releases environmental tensions and pent-up emotions that build up in a highly regulated school environment' (p. 13). As a result, children appeared more inclined to take risks, to think outside the box and to try out more challenging experiences without fear of failure, creating opportunities for higher levels of thinking to be sustained.

Pinchover (2017) has shown that aspects of the practitioner's playfulness, as measured by the Adult Playfulness Scale (Glynn & Webster, 1992, 1993), are correlated with child playfulness, as measured by the Test of Playfulness (Bundy, Nelson, Metzger & Bingaman, 2001). She suggested that adult playfulness improved child-practitioner interactions and fostered children's playfulness, suggesting the possibility of richer play and thus in richer learning.

## Engagement

By injecting a rich, playful element into the more structured aspects of the learning experience, the playful practitioner implied that she was inviting the children into her world of play, thus encouraging higher levels of motivation and concentration on the part of the children. Such playful behaviours appeared to foster in children what Nørgård et al. (2017) refer to as a lusory or playful mindset where children seemed to succumb to the playfulness of the experience and in so doing, transcend the rules, goals and boundaries that might be associated with the more task-based experiences. Children in these highly rated playful classrooms were able to treat many non-play

aspects of the curriculum as play and were, therefore, more likely to find them just as engaging as they found play. There is some support for this argument in Howard and McInness (2013), who showed that children had better levels of engagement when they identified an activity as play and also had higher levels of emotional well-being.

These playful practitioners, according to the observation and video evidence, seemed to find it easier to allow serendipitous diversions in their planned programme, when they felt that the children's interest in the new topic was a fruitful opportunity for learning. Such an approach seemed in turn to nurture children's spontaneity and curiosity. It is also important to note that when a habitually playful teacher adopted a more sober or serious mien, children were more likely to attend closely because of the novelty of it. Providing it is not overused, this shift in role seemed to have some advantage in terms of, for example, keeping children safe and promoting important messages.

We now turn our attention to the specific methods used by these teachers to signal playfulness to children in more curriculum-focused task-based experiences.

## Signalling playfulness in practice

Importantly, when we recognise playfulness in action, we do it so quickly that it is likely to be without conscious reference to any of the components of playfulness found in factor analytic studies. This suggests that we are reading signals from the playful person, just as animals do, without being aware that we are doing so. It has long been recognised that many animals have relatively simple signals that inform other individuals and invite them to participate in play, for example, the play bow in dogs (Bekoff, 1974) and the play face in chimps (Chevalier-Skolnikoff, 1974). There is little in the literature to date that speaks to a human equivalent, although a wink or an elbow nudge is well recognised as a signal of playfulness. Morris (1978) noted that human play signals 'include smiling, laughing and fun screaming' (p. 268). He went on to describe the exuberance of the physical movement that accompanies play with gestures being 'capriciously magnified'. As we will elaborate below, playfulness is communicated by more than how people look. We argue that playful practitioners are making use of signals to good effect in the classroom.

Revisiting the observation and video evidence, we found evidence that playfulness in the highly rated teachers' classrooms was signalled in four key ways: use of voice and facial expressions, use of gestures and whole-body behaviours, use of props and popular culture and use of humour and role play.

### Use of voice and facial expressions

The first set of attributes that were observed on the part of these highly rated teachers was a playful way of speaking, comprising a variety of speech characteristics, such as higher than normal pitch with exaggerated intonation (rather like in 'motherese'), changes in volume including whispering, using funny voices either in the context of story reading or during adult/child interactions.

Over and above the actual tone of voice used, the observations revealed that these teachers often made use of exaggerated facial expressions to heighten playful excitement or engagement. Practitioners would use the wide eyes, raised eyebrows and an open mouth that denote surprise to suggest that a child had achieved something special. During story

time, they would use the facial expressions that denote anger and fear to enhance understanding of the storyline. We also observed.

- A teacher placing the top teeth over the bottom lip to signal chagrin, especially when she wanted the children to believe they had made a mistake that the children could then identify;
- A teacher making an exaggerated disgust face with protruding tongue (accompanied by noises of disgust); and
- Winking or rolling of eyes to signal shared understanding or humour.

All these expressions appeared to hold the children's attention in a positive way. Cameo 1 serves to illustrate this more fully.

### Cameo 1: story adventures

On summer days, Miss P and her Year 2 class always enjoy story adventures outside, with a focus on developing the children's language and listening skills. A favourite spot is under a tree, on a secluded patch of grass. The children and Miss P tiptoe from their class, conscious that their story will take place in this special corner. Upon arrival, the children settle down expectantly and Miss P begins. She tells the story in a lively, expressive, and fun-filled way. Different voices are used for the various characters, one loud and rasping and one soft and timid, and children join in the refrains with glee. To further the children's understanding of the storyline, they are asked to show a facial expression for a character, answer questions or make predictions about various parts of the story. Some work on punctuation follows. Yet, the children remain equally enthusiastic for this part of the lesson. When the lesson is over the children tiptoe back to their classroom.

### Use of gestures and whole-body movements

Teachers used exaggerated gestures to signal playfulness and enhance understanding. We observed various teachers placing a finger to the lips to convey atmosphere or ask for quiet, slapping a palm on each cheek to indicate exaggerated dismay, extravagantly shrugging the shoulders to suggest helplessness and need of assistance from the children, beckoning children into a huddle (sometimes with the whole arm) and placing a palm over the mouth with indrawn breath to indicate surprise. Special efforts by particular children might lead to applause and/or exchanging high fives or fist bumps with the children. Other gestures included rubbing the palms together to indicate relish and punching the air in triumph. To encourage and highlight thinking, exaggerated pointing to the head or temples was in evidence and one teacher would mime putting on a thinking cap on the head and tying it tightly.

Playful teachers displayed physical energy and used exuberant movements in their behaviour. For example, they might mime the movements of people or animals in a story, for example, by tiptoeing and hunching over. They performed the actions accompanying rhymes with enthusiasm rather than by rote. They were not above acting silly occasionally, as a kind of treat for the children. For example, one teacher did her 'happy dance' when someone had made a special effort. The children regularly asked her to do it. The observations also indicated how these teachers also tended to physically get down to the child's level, often observed sitting on the floor alongside the children.

The following cameo illustrates how one teacher effectively made use of gestures and whole-body movement in the outdoors when telling the story: Farmer Joe and the Music Show by Tony Mitton and Guy Parker-Rees.

### Cameo 2: Farmer Joe and his animal band

In Year 1, Mrs C and the children perform a music story together in an effort to develop the children's concentration skills and to foster the ability to follow instructions effectively. To familiarise the children with the content of the story, the teacher first reads it straight through. They reflect on the different aspects of the story and with supportive suggestions from Mrs C agree on suitable actions to illuminate the different characters. She and the children pluck a guitar and dance for Farmer Joe; they flap their wings and cluck for the hens. For Frisky Fox, they decide to gesture holding a fiddle and plucking the strings. For the pigs, they hop from foot to foot and for the rabbits, they use pushing and pulling gestures to imitate the playing of the concertina. For the bear, they decide to stand up straight with their legs apart, heads up and proud, with one arm raised and the other lowered, to illustrate playing the double-base. After deciding which groups of children will act out certain characters, they head outdoors, led by the teacher as Farmer Joe, dancing and skipping from side to side, strumming her guitar with her band following her excitedly.

### Use of props and digital devices

The playful practitioners also made use of playful props. In several classrooms, we observed teachers using puppets as playful props in a variety of scenarios, whether it be Patch the Puppet hiding words from a sentence on a stick or Coco the Counting Clown making numerous mistakes in his counting with a regular retort from the children, chorused in unison: 'Silly, Coco, you need to count like this'. In other examples of prop use, one teacher used a 'magic wand' to split sets in a mathematical activity on number bonds. Another used a pointer with a large pointing hand on the end of it to indicate the place in a Big Book she was reading with the children. Any item that caught the children's imagination could become a playful prop. Epistles were used as playful hooks, for example, a letter from the elves as to how they can help Santa fix Christmas, or from a Princess from the rhyme: London Bridge is Falling Down, enlisting the children's help to come up with ideas as to a re-build. Cameo 3, Spider Sid, illustrates the teachers' use of playful props more fully:

### Cameo 3: number activities with Spider Sid

In Mrs J's class the year 2 children adored all manner of counting activities with Spider Sid who lived in a box at the back of the store. Hearing a distinctive rap somewhere in the room, the children knew that Sid wanted to come and play at counting! They were eager to join in the fun with enthusiasm. Mrs J would fetch Sid (who was a rubber spider on the end of a length of fine plastic piping and who could jump when the holder at the end of the piping was squeezed). At times Sid acted as a pendulum to keep the children counting in unison. Sid would also whisper various numbers and counting challenges into Mrs J's ear and she would inform the children of the next challenge. The counting would be forwards, backwards in 2's 5's 10's or start at a variety of numbers within 20, 50 or 100. The children were always keen to show Sid how well they could count. After each successful challenge Sid carried out a congratulatory bounce on their desks (assisted by Mrs J). There was much laughter, fun and learning taking place, encouraging even the most reluctant child and at the same time reinforcing number ordering and recognition in a wide variety of ways.

Digital devices were also put to effective use to engage the children's interest in many curriculum-focused tasks. In some cases, video messages were used by the teachers to bring aspects of the learning to life, for example, when a class was learning about 'people who help us'. A doctor, (a parent really), sent the children a video message, equipped with scrubs and stethoscope, bringing the children on a tour around a hospital ward, explaining her daily routine. On other occasions, children were observed using digital cameras or iPads to take photographs of items in the outdoors that were thick or thin, tall or short, heavy or light, while some children were observed using recordable ICT sound buttons, adopting the roles of the characters in 'the Frog Prince', a story they had been studying during their literacy lessons and then recording themselves with the sound buttons. Other resources used to retell the story included a flipbook on the interactive whiteboard, hand puppets & puppet theatre and story sequencing cards.

## Use of humour and role play

Lastly, the playful practitioners also made good use of humour in the classroom. Smiles and laughter were ubiquitous in these playful classrooms. Using nonsense words in the classroom was a demonstrably effective strategy on the part of the teacher, to encourage children to laugh and relax. Answering her own question with a reply the children would recognise as ridiculous was another. Making a deliberate, silly mistake would sometimes result in fits of giggles from the children. Some of the jokes would be incomprehensible to the outsider and thus carried the suggestion of an in-group, promoting a feeling of togetherness, such as the *Hermione Granger* (the character in the Harry Potter books) cameo in Walsh et al. (2011), when the teacher wonders whether a boy called Granger in another class could be related to Hermione. Other humour referenced their shared local culture.

Playful teachers also were observed dressing up and assuming a role in order to engage children more fully. The following cameo, adapted from Walsh (2017), helps to illustrate how one of the playful teachers took on the role of Mr Wonka from Charlie in the Chocolate Factory to good effect:

### Cameo 4: the presence of Mr Wonka

This morning, a Year 2 class has been advised that a special visitor would be coming into their classroom to help them develop their scientific enquiry skills. Unknown to the children the visitor is the famous Mr. Wonka himself! After lunch, the teacher enters the classroom dressed as Willy Wonka and thanks the children for all their superb recent work on the theme of chocolate. Mr. Wonka explains that he has a major problem. Unfortunately, his design team have gone down with the 'flu and he has no one to design his new chocolate bars. He has chosen this class to take up the challenge. The children are ecstatic. They offer suggestions and possibilities. Mr. Wonka produces chef hats, aprons and tablecloths, and soon the children set to task. He encourages them to draw plans for their chocolate bar and they discuss shape, size and features of their favourite chocolate bars. Next, Mr Wonka displays an array of different materials and asks the children to observe them closely and to choose wisely to design an original and enticing wrapper. Jessica comes up with the idea of making her bar smell of chocolate and, after discussing several suggestions about how this might be mastered with her class peers and Mr Wonka, suggests painting the bar with melted chocolate. Mr Wonka then puts on his health and safety hat to ensure that

some chocolate is melted safely for the children in the microwave. The smell of chocolate filled the air and Mr Wonka and the children compare the differences between the chocolate before and after it is melted. After intense labour, the children come to the 'workshop' floor to observe each child's chocolate bars and consider which models are the best prototypes. Upon their return to becoming Year 2 children, the noise levels rise.

## Concluding comments

This study has pointed the way towards a possible alternative to the lingering tensions that exist in early years pedagogy, particularly with regard to curriculum-focused tasks, by showcasing the power of playfulness as a pedagogical tool, thus ensuring more engaged young learners in the process. While there has been a growing trend within the research literatures to foster more expansive, integrated and balanced notions of playful teaching and learning in practice, this paper is particularly significant in terms of providing an empirically informed breakdown of what these playful signals look like in practice and in describing the more nurturing relationships that blossom as a result. In turn, these playful signals encourage more creative responses on the part of the children involved, while also enabling higher levels of engagement throughout.

We argue that the findings from this paper are particularly relevant in the current policy climate where, in many countries across the globe, there appears to be a movement towards adopting an 'earlier is better' educational approach to ensure that children master the academic concepts of literacy and numeracy at a younger age, resulting in an 'international squeeze on play' (Parker & Thomsen, 2019, p. 9). This paper goes some way to showcase the power of playfulness in practice, enabling young children to be engaged in experiences that are more structured in style and more curriculum focused, enabling the acquisition of more academic concepts to be developed but in a fun-like manner. As Pyle et al., (2017) indicate, there is 'a need to move away from a binary stance regarding play and toward an integration of perspectives and practices, with different types of play perceived as complementary rather than incompatible.' (p 311).

In addition, while we appreciate the limitations of our dataset, we would argue they provide significant insights into the behavioural repertoire needed by an early year practitioner to become playful in educational practice and could be particularly beneficial for professional development courses. While donning a playful persona may have come naturally to the eight teachers in question in this intensive follow-on study, it is not guaranteed that all teachers would find the shift in style from traditional teacher to playful practitioner an easy task. Indeed, some may find it particularly challenging and, for this reason, an urgent upskilling of teachers in Northern Ireland and beyond, both at initial and continuing professional development levels, is required. Pinchover's (2017) research, unfortunately, highlights that too often play and playfulness are not given the academic and practical scrutiny required in teacher education programmes to the detriment of our early years' workforce. The time is ripe therefore for policymakers and teacher educators to act upon these findings and foster a more playful, practitioner workforce who inspire more playful children and in turn more engaged learners in our classrooms.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Liz Sproule* is an Honorary Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast. She specialises in early years pedagogy. Liz was previously Project Co-ordinator for the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project in Queen's, a major study of a play-based early years curriculum conducted in Northern Ireland over eight years.

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*Carol McGuinness* is Professor Emerita at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests are in the application of cognitive and developmental psychology to classroom learning, specifically, how teachers can promote the development of children's thinking skills. She led the longitudinal evaluation of the play-based curriculum in the early years of primary school in Northern Ireland, the Enriched Curriculum.

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