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Playful Primary Classrooms

Exploring Playfulness in Practice across the Primary School

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Dr Glenda Walsh, Dr Andrea Doherty
and Dr Kirsty McCrudden

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the dynamics of playfulness in primary education through a small-scale intervention with teachers and children in Northern Ireland schools. Building on an extensive literature review, baseline survey, and rich qualitative data, including teacher video-stimulated reflective diaries, focus group discussions, and children's playful conversations, the study offers new insights into how playfulness is conceptualised, enacted, and experienced across the primary curriculum.

Key Findings

- **Shared Understanding of Playfulness:** Both teachers and children highlighted autonomy, fun, social connection, and meaningful engagement as core features of playful learning. These insights informed the development of the SPARC framework, which captures five interconnected dimensions essential to playfulness: Spontaneity, Purposefulness, Active engagement, Relational connection, and Curiosity.
- **Enactment of Playfulness:** Playfulness is not confined to discrete play activities but is an integrated approach involving the design of stimulating environments, purposeful hands-on experiences, and rich social interactions. Classrooms where these elements were present demonstrated greater creativity, confidence, and collaboration among students.
- **Benefits and Challenges:** Teachers consistently reported that playful pedagogies enhanced pupil motivation, deeper understanding, and positive dispositions such as resilience and curiosity. At the same time, structural barriers—including curriculum pressures, limited resources, and the need for clear evidence of learning—posed significant challenges. Teachers emphasised the importance of trust, routine, and professional learning in managing these complexities.

Research Approach

The study combined a baseline survey with an immersive intervention involving video-stimulated reflective diaries, focus group discussions, and conversations with children across two Northern Ireland primary schools. This mixed-methods approach ensured rich, context-

sensitive insights into the lived realities of playful teaching and learning across the primary school context.

Implications

This research highlights that playfulness is a valuable and feasible approach to primary education when supported by clear frameworks like SPARC, reflective practice, and school-wide commitment. Embedding playfulness requires attention to teacher professional development, resource allocation, and creating environments that nurture curiosity, agency, and social connection. By embracing these strategies, educators, with the support of policymakers, can create enriching learning experiences that nurture creativity, agency, and social connection, empowering all primary-aged children to thrive.

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INTRODUCTION

Play is widely recognised as a vital cornerstone of childhood learning, development, and well-being. Rooted in foundational theories from Piaget to Vygotsky, play provides children with rich opportunities for meaning-making, exploration, and social interaction. Extensive research highlights that play nurtures cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth, supporting curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and resilience (Whitebread et al., 2012; Ang et al., 2025; Walsh, 2017). Yet, despite its acknowledged benefits, integrating play into formal primary education remains a persistent challenge due to curricular pressures, assessment demands, and entrenched perceptions that separate play from 'real learning' (Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness, 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship advocates for a shift beyond viewing play as merely an activity, towards embracing pedagogical playfulness – a dynamic, relational stance that infuses teaching and learning with curiosity, flexibility, and joy while maintaining academic rigour (Sproule et al., 2021). This approach highlights the importance of thoughtfully designed environments, responsive adult–child interactions, and experiential, sensory-rich learning opportunities that foster playful moods and meaningful engagement (CCEA, 2024; Skovbjerg and Sumartojo, 2023). While much is known about play in early years settings, there remains limited understanding of how playfulness is conceptualised and enacted across the broader primary school curriculum.

The *Playful Primary Classrooms* project addresses this gap by investigating how teachers and children in Northern Ireland primary schools understand and implement playfulness across Key Stages. Drawing on video-stimulated reflective practice, playful conversations, and focus group discussions, this study explores the lived realities of playfulness in primary practice, examining its qualities, enactment, and the benefits and challenges it presents within everyday classroom contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Benefits of Play

Play has long been recognised as a cornerstone of childhood, central to learning, development, and well-being. Across theoretical traditions, from Piagetian constructivism to Vygotskian cultural-historical theory, play is understood as a primary context for meaning-making, exploration, and social participation. Play is widely recognised as a fundamental process through which children learn, develop, and make sense of the world. Educators and researchers internationally emphasise its significance as a foundational mode of learning through which young children acquire knowledge, skills, and dispositions most effectively. Extensive research demonstrates that play supports development across social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical domains (Whitebread et al., 2012; Zosh et al., 2017; Walsh, 2017; Yogman et al., 2018; Severino et al., 2024; Ring & O'Sullivan, 2025).

Recent evidence reinforces this view. Ang et al. (2025), in a large-scale UK study combining a systematic review of international research with qualitative insights from educators, parents, and policymakers, found that play is not a trivial add-on but a central medium for learning and development in childhood. Their *Power of Play* report highlights play as a primary means through which children develop curiosity, imagination, and meaningful social interaction—key foundations for later learning and well-being. When children engage in rich, high-quality play experiences, they demonstrate heightened curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and self-regulation (Zosh et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2019; Paatsch et al., 2024). Play provides opportunities to explore ideas, test hypotheses, and make autonomous decisions, processes that underpin conceptual understanding and metacognitive growth (Zosh et al., 2017). Simultaneously, play nurtures empathy, cooperation, communication, and resilience through shared imaginative and rule-based interactions in which children negotiate roles, manage conflict, and appreciate others' perspectives (Kausar et al., 2024).

Within educational contexts, Doherty and McCullagh (2024) demonstrate that playful, enquiry-based approaches enable children to explore scientific and mathematical concepts within meaningful contexts. Such tasks provide a bridge between abstract ideas and lived experience, illustrating that play can be both joyful and intellectually rigorous. Similarly, Fleer

et al's (2021) *Conceptual PlayWorlds* illustrate how imaginative play creates emotionally charged spaces for children to enter and transform complex concepts. Through shared narratives, children learn via action, emotion, and imagination—modes of engagement that traditional instruction often overlooks. These findings align with contemporary perspectives that position play along a continuum, from free, child-led exploration to guided and structured playful learning (Zosh et al., 2017). Research indicates that children benefit across this spectrum when play is intentional, scaffolded, and responsive to developmental needs. For instance, Skene et al (2022) found that guided play, where adults support but do not dominate, outperforms both direct instruction and unstructured free play in developing early mathematical, spatial, and linguistic understanding. Likewise, Parker and Stjerne-Thomsen (2019), Walsh, McGuinness et al. (2019), and O'Sullivan et al. (2025) demonstrate that high-quality, intentional play supports holistic learning, while Li and Kangas (2024) conceptualise how teachers' active participation across phases of playful learning, from planning to elaboration, can sustain pedagogical rigour and ensure meaningful curricular connections.

Beyond cognitive gains, play is foundational for emotional health and social connection. Medical and developmental research confirms its contribution to executive functioning, early language and numeracy, self-regulation, peer relationships, physical health, and agency (Yogman et al., 2018). Play also enhances well-being and emotional resilience (O'Keefe & McNally, 2025). As Walsh (2024) observes, play offers a psychologically safe space where children can express emotions, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of failure, experiences that build confidence and coping capacity. Complementing this, studies of adventurous or risky play show that children who engage in such experiences often display fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression and demonstrate higher resilience (Dodd & Lester, 2021). The intrinsic motivation and self-direction inherent in play nurture confidence and resilience, contributing to children's overall well-being. As Ang et al. (2025) note, play promotes belonging and happiness, outcomes increasingly significant amid global concerns about children's mental health and diminishing opportunities for free play.

Play also holds moral and rights-based significance. Article 31 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* enshrines the right to play as essential for development, cultural participation, and rest. Walsh (2024), for example, argues that play is not merely a pedagogical tool but a moral imperative within education. Its value lies both in its immediate

joy and in its enduring contribution to holistic growth. Taken together, this extensive body of research underscores that play is not peripheral but integral to children's holistic development. Across its many forms, play facilitates learning that is broad, interconnected, and dynamic, enabling children not only to thrive in the present but also to develop as creative, resilient, and lifelong learners (Zosh et al., 2017; Ang et al., 2025).

The Challenges of Play in the Primary School Context

Despite its recognised benefits, integrating play within the structure of formal schooling remains challenging. Research consistently highlights a 'play gap' as children move from early years into primary education (O'Sullivan et al., 2025). Increased curricular demands, standardised testing and accountability pressures often marginalise play-based approaches. Teachers frequently express positive attitudes towards play but feel constrained by time, assessment frameworks and expectations of academic progress (O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

This transition reflects what Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness (2021) identify as the entrenched *play–work dichotomy*, where play is perceived as the opposite of learning. Such binary thinking leads educators to compartmentalise play into specific times or spaces, "golden time" or "free choice", rather than recognising its pedagogical potential throughout the day. Yet, as Colliver and Fleer (2016) demonstrate, play is not opposed to learning but is itself a sophisticated learning mode through which children construct and apply knowledge.

Walsh (2024) warns that the diminishing role of play in primary settings parallels a wider societal decline in unstructured play, with consequences for creativity and emotional well-being. When learning is overly formalised, children's intrinsic motivation can diminish, leading to disengagement and anxiety. Therefore, embedding play within primary education is not a matter of sentimentality but of educational equity: it ensures that all children can learn in ways aligned with how they naturally think, feel and relate to others (Walsh, 2022 and Dowd and Stjerne -Thomsen, 2021).

From Play to Pedagogical Playfulness

To reconcile the tensions between play and formal learning, recent scholarship advocates a shift from viewing play as an *activity* to embracing *playfulness* as a *pedagogical stance* (Sproule, Walsh & McGuinness, 2021). Pedagogical playfulness involves adopting the affective

and relational qualities of play, curiosity, humour, flexibility, and openness, across all learning contexts. It transforms how teachers plan, interact and think, infusing learning with the same imaginative energy that characterises children's play.

Sproule et al. (2021) argue that this stance allows educators to 'reclaim playfulness' within curriculum-driven environments. Rather than forcing a binary choice between play and instruction, teachers can integrate playful dispositions into everyday pedagogy, through questioning, role-play, storytelling, or creative problem-solving. This approach maintains curricular rigour while preserving the spontaneity and engagement that make play so powerful.

Karoff's (2013) concept of *play moods*, devotion, intensity, tension and euphoria, extends this idea by framing playfulness as an emotional and experiential quality. A playful classroom, in this sense, is one that cultivates emotional absorption and joy, not merely one that includes games. Playfulness becomes an atmosphere, an orientation towards learning characterised by curiosity and connection.

The benefits of pedagogical playfulness are substantial. It supports intrinsic motivation, fosters relational trust, and enhances creativity among both teachers and learners. When teachers model playfulness, they normalise experimentation and resilience, showing that mistakes are part of learning. This aligns with findings from Baker and Ryan (2021), whose *Playful Participatory Research* initiative demonstrated that engaging teachers in playful inquiry strengthened professional confidence and well-being. Teachers reported that learning through play made professional development more meaningful and that it encouraged them to take creative risks in their own classrooms.

Similarly, Jørgensen and Skovbjerg (2024) found that playfulness in teacher education cultivates curiosity, courage and collaborative spirit. They propose *play qualities*, design principles that support dynamic, exploratory learning, such as openness to change and focus on concrete action. By experiencing these qualities firsthand, teachers become better equipped to foster them in children.

In sum, pedagogical playfulness reframes the educator's role: from transmitting knowledge to co-creating learning experiences. It bridges the play-work divide by aligning the *spirit* of play with the *structure* of teaching.

Enacting Playfulness: Environments, Interactions, Experiences

According to the existing evidence base, translating playfulness into practice requires attention to three interrelated domains: the environment, adult-child interactions, and the quality of experiences.

Playful Environments

The physical and emotional environments in which children engage play a foundational role in shaping the quality and nature of their playful experiences. Contemporary research emphasises that creating spaces which balance comfort, flexibility, and sensory richness is essential for fostering playfulness in educational settings. For instance, Fairchild and Mikuska (2024) highlight how children value environments that provide ample space, appropriate materials, and a sense of security, findings that resonate with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA, 2024) guidelines encouraging teachers to design classrooms with warm lighting, natural materials, and soft furnishings to cultivate an atmosphere of comfort and belonging. Importantly, these guidelines challenge educators to reflect on their spatial arrangements, questioning whether the classroom is both cosy and adaptable enough to transform into a play space when required.

The concept of environment as a dynamic, co-constructed space is further elaborated by Skovbjerg and Sumartojo (2023), who theorise 'play moods' and 'atmospheres' as emergent from the interactions between people, materials, and affective states within a given setting. This perspective urges educators to consider the emotional and physical multiplicity of classroom environments, designing spaces that accommodate and fluidly support varying states such as calm focus and playful excitement. Such adaptability not only enriches the play experience but also promotes inclusion by allowing children to navigate and inhabit the environment in ways that suit their individual emotional and engagement needs.

Extending this understanding beyond the classroom, the role of outdoor environments emerges as particularly significant in nurturing playfulness. Morgenthaler et al. (2023), applying Gibson's Theory of Affordances, articulate how specific features of outdoor play spaces, ranging from natural elements to spatial configurations, afford children opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and motor development. These affordances are not passive attributes but active enablers of diverse play behaviours that contribute holistically

to children's growth. Complementing this, Prins et al. (2023) demonstrate the unique cognitive and linguistic benefits of nature-based play environments, revealing that children engage in richer and more complex language use when interacting in natural settings compared to conventional playgrounds. Their findings suggest that outdoor natural environments scaffold not only physical development but also the social and academic dimensions of learning, as children spontaneously incorporate scientific and mathematical concepts into their play-based conversations.

The educational potential of outdoor play is further supported by Kiviranta et al. (2024), who underscore the multifaceted benefits of outdoor learning in early childhood contexts. Their synthesis highlights how outdoor environments promote children's holistic wellbeing, hands-on multimodal learning, and social development. However, they also identify significant challenges, particularly related to educators' competencies in facilitating outdoor learning experiences. This points to an urgent need for professional development that equips teachers to mediate and maximise the pedagogical value of outdoor play spaces effectively.

Together, this body of research affirms that environments conducive to playfulness, whether indoors or outdoors, are characterised by their capacity to provide rich, flexible, and emotionally supportive affordances. Such spaces enable children to experience agency, curiosity, and engagement, fostering a wide spectrum of developmental outcomes. Crucially, these environments require thoughtful, intentional design and ongoing adaptation, guided by educators who understand and respond to the interplay between physical space, emotional tone, and social interaction inherent in playful learning.

Playful Interactions

The role of adults in supporting children's play has undergone a significant conceptual shift, moving from a traditional stance of detached observation towards a more dynamic model of engaged co-playership. Earlier perspectives cautioned against adult involvement for fear of diminishing spontaneity and intrinsic motivation (McInnes et al., 2011, as cited in O'Keeffe and McNally, 2025). However, recent empirical studies provide a more nuanced understanding that recognises the adult as a vital collaborator who enhances, rather than disrupts, play when their participation is reciprocal and respectful of the child's autonomy.

O'Keeffe and McNally (2025) emphasise that children value adults who contribute creatively, offering ideas, humour, and skills, provided these contributions support children's leadership within the activity rather than imposing control. This aligns with the principles of guided play articulated by Weisberg et al. (2013), where adults scaffold learning through subtle, responsive interventions. Such interventions may involve posing open-ended questions, extending narratives, or introducing novel materials, thereby supporting cognitive and social goals without undermining children's agency. This delicate balance between guidance and freedom exemplifies a form of teaching that Walsh et al. (2019) describe as 'teaching but not as we know it' - a pedagogy that moves beyond direct instruction towards facilitation of exploration, creativity, and co-construction of knowledge.

Walsh et al.'s (2019) work underscores that in playful learning contexts, adults function less as transmitters of knowledge and more as mediators of meaning, enablers of dialogue, and fellow participants in discovery. This reconceptualisation challenges entrenched hierarchies in education and calls for professional practices that privilege relationality, responsiveness, and emotional attunement. Such approaches support children's development of executive function, social skills, and intrinsic motivation, contributing to more meaningful and joyful learning experiences.

Professional development is pivotal in fostering this responsive adult role. Baker and Ryan (2021) and Jørgensen and Skovbjerg (2024) both demonstrate that educators who cultivate their own playfulness and comfort with uncertainty are better equipped to engage flexibly with children's play. When teachers experience playfulness themselves, they create classroom cultures where experimentation and joy are valued on par with academic achievement, thereby modelling dispositions that children are likely to emulate.

Collectively, this body of research advances a vision of adult-child interactions as collaborative, dynamic, and context-sensitive, where the adult is a co-player, scaffold, and facilitator of playful learning. This represents a marked departure from traditional didactic models towards a pedagogy that honours children's voices, fosters agency, and embraces the complexity and richness of play as an essential mode of learning.

Playful Experiences

The quality of playful learning experiences hinges on more than just activity selection; it involves the creation of environments and interactions that evoke specific experiential states conducive to learning. Drawing on Karoff (2013) and Skovbjerg and Sumartojo's (2023) conceptualisation of playfulness as an experiential 'mood', these moments are characterised by a felt sense of immersion, tension, delight, or euphoria that intrinsically motivates engagement and exploration. Such affective qualities differentiate mere play from playfulness and are critical to sustaining children's deep cognitive, emotional, and social involvement.

Robust evidence indicates that playful experiences flourish when they are rooted in children's interests and invite active, imaginative participation rather than scripted, adult-directed tasks. Inquiry-based projects that evolve from children's own questions provide a fertile ground for such engagement, enabling learners to exercise autonomy and curiosity while developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Arnott, 2023, Hedges, 2022). Similarly, story-based learning approaches that encourage imaginative co-creation invite children to traverse between real and symbolic worlds, expanding their narrative capacities and social understanding (Doherty and McCullagh, 2017).

Crucially, playful experiences thrive in contexts that allow for spontaneity and flexibility within routines. Rigid scheduling can stifle the natural ebb and flow of play moods, while flexible structures provide space for moments of serendipity and discovery (Wood, 2014). This aligns with the broader pedagogical stance that playfulness is not a strategy to be deployed selectively but rather a pervasive way of being within educational practice, emotionally attuned, collaborative, and creative (Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness, 2021).

Emerging research further underscores the importance of sensory-rich and multimodal experiences. Engagement through multiple senses and modes of expression, as emphasised in the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2017), enables children to communicate and construct meaning in developmentally appropriate ways, particularly for those with diverse learning needs. By incorporating visual, verbal, tactile, and kinaesthetic elements, educators can create layered experiences that resonate with children's varied learning profiles and cultural backgrounds.

Ultimately, these insights affirm that high-quality playful experiences are not incidental or superficial; they are carefully nurtured through attentive pedagogy that prioritises children's agency, emotional engagement, and the co-construction of knowledge. This approach ensures that playfulness serves as a powerful vehicle for holistic development and lifelong learning dispositions.

Children's Conceptualisations of Play

An important development in play research is the recognition that children themselves are capable commentators on their play experiences. Colliver and Fleer (2016) found that children as young as two could articulate what they learned through play, acting as "authorities on their own learning" (p. 1559). This challenges earlier assumptions of children's cognitive naivety and aligns with the broader sociological view of children as competent, agentic social actors (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2024).

O'Keeffe and McNally's (2025) extensive scoping review, drawing on 43 studies and consultations with 49 children aged 5-11, provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of children's own definitions of play. Their findings reveal remarkable consistency: children define play as *fun, free and social*. They emphasise autonomy ("doing whatever you want"), companionship, and the pleasure of self-chosen activity. Play was often associated with movement and outdoor spaces, such as playgrounds and parks, as well as with imaginative engagement: "getting to create stuff" or "making your own imagination" (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2025, p. 11).

Fairchild and Mikuska (2024) deepen this understanding through their study of 17 preschools, identifying "knots" of quality that children value: security, space, material objects, autonomy and relationships. Children's emphasis on emotional security is particularly significant. While adults often idealise play as spontaneous and carefree, children themselves highlight that they must *feel safe* before they can play freely. Emotional safety thus emerges as a prerequisite for creativity and exploration.

Together, these studies demonstrate that children's conceptualisations of play are sophisticated and relational. They value agency, friendship and imaginative engagement, but also recognise that environmental and emotional conditions shape how play feels. For educators, listening to these perspectives is essential: children's understandings provide an

empirical foundation for designing play-based learning that honours their sense of ownership and joy.

Concluding Comments

The literature consistently demonstrates that play is both a right and a powerful mode of learning, nurturing cognition, creativity, social competence, and emotional well-being. Children's own conceptualisations reinforce that the essence of play lies in autonomy, fun, and social connection—qualities that depend on emotionally supportive environments designed for exploration and imaginative engagement (Whitebread et al., 2012; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2024; O'Keeffe and McNally, 2025). Adults play a vital role in cultivating these conditions, acting as responsive co-players and designers of playful atmospheres where freedom and structure are held in creative balance.

Despite the wide-ranging benefits of play, significant tensions remain around its place in primary education. Structural constraints, curriculum pressures, and persistent dichotomies between play and formal learning frequently limit opportunities for playful pedagogies as children move beyond the early years (Sproule et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2025). Emerging research points toward pedagogical playfulness as a way to reconcile these tensions, reframing play not as a discrete activity but as a stance or disposition that can permeate teaching and learning across the curriculum (Baker and Ryan, 2021; Sproule et al., 2021). This perspective highlights the importance of flexible, sensory-rich environments and emotionally attuned interactions that shape the moods and atmospheres essential for playful learning (CCEA, 2024; Skovbjerg and Sumartojo, 2023). Professional development also emerges as critical, both in supporting teachers to enact playful pedagogies and in cultivating their own sense of playfulness (Jørgensen and Skovbjerg, 2024; O'Keeffe and McNally, 2025).

However, while much is known about play in the early years, there remains limited understanding of how playful pedagogy is interpreted, enacted, and experienced across the wider primary school. In particular, the literature highlights a need for research that captures the lived realities of teachers and children in real classroom contexts, exploring how playfulness is understood, how it is implemented, and what enables or constrains its use beyond Foundation Stage settings.

This study responds to that gap**,** investigating the dynamics of playful learning through a small-scale intervention with teachers and children in Northern Ireland primary schools. By foregrounding their perspectives and drawing on teachers' video-stimulated reflective diaries, focus group discussions, and playful conversations with children, the research seeks to capture the essence of playfulness in practice: what playful learning looks like, how it is enacted, and the opportunities and challenges it presents across the primary school.

The following section outlines the study's overarching aim, research questions, and methodology, showing how insights from the literature directly inform the design and focus of the investigation.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Overarching Aim

The Playful Primary Classrooms project aimed to explore how playfulness in teaching and learning was understood, enacted, and experienced across the primary Key Stages in two large Northern Ireland primary schools. Specifically, the project examined how children and teachers conceptualised the qualities of playfulness in both play-based and task-related experiences, how these qualities were enacted within everyday classroom practice, and identified the benefits and challenges associated with implementing playful approaches in primary education.

Research Design and Context

This study was conducted in two large primary schools (originally three but one of the schools dropped out for staffing reasons) in the Greater Belfast area. Initially, all teachers from P1 – P7 across the two primary schools were asked to complete a brief, in-house, baseline survey, developed by the schools, to capture their initial perspectives and practices regarding playfulness in practice beyond just the early years across the entire primary school context.

The intervention then began with a full-day professional learning conference in August 2024, centred on play and playful pedagogy. The event comprised a keynote address and a series of breakout workshops designed for teachers across all Key Stages.

Following the conference, teachers were encouraged to implement increasingly playful approaches in their classrooms throughout the academic year. After a further online training session delivered later in the year to consolidate learning and provide practical examples, the formal research phase commenced, involving ten volunteer teachers across Foundation Stage (FS), Key Stage 1 (KS1), and Key Stage 2 (KS2), across the two primary school settings. The research formed part of a wider year-long professional learning initiative designed to support teachers in adopting more playful pedagogical approaches.

At this point, teachers began using Video-Stimulated Reflective Practice (VSRP) diaries**,** recording video clips of playful learning episodes and reflecting on them through written or

video entries. This reflective process supported teachers in critically examining their evolving playful practices and children's responses.

After a period of a few months engaging in this reflective exercise, teachers then participated in video-stimulated reflective focus groups, enabling rich discussions on their experiences of playful pedagogy in practice.

The combination of professional learning input, guided experimentation, and reflective opportunities provided a supportive context for investigating how teachers and children understood, enacted, and experienced playful learning across the primary school.

Participants

Several teachers across the two schools experimented with more playful approaches in their classrooms; however, ten teachers, four from School 1 and six from School 2, volunteered to engage fully in the research activities. These ten participants represented all primary Key Stages (Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2). Children from each of the schools and across the Key Stages also contributed to the study through child-centred data collection methods that foregrounded their perspectives and experiences of playful learning.

Table 1. Teacher participants for Reflective Practice Diaries

School	Teacher	Class	Key Stage
1	1	P5	KS2
	2	P5	KS2
	3	P3	KS1
	4	Literacy Coordinator	FS, KS1, KS2
2	5	P3	KS1
	6	P5	KS2
	7	P4	KS1
	8	P2	FS

	9	P4/5	KS1/KS2
	10	P6	KS2

Data Collection Methods

Video-Stimulated Reflective Practice Diaries (Teachers)

Teachers recorded short video clips of highly playful episodes during their implementation of playful approaches, capturing moments of both **playfulness in play and playfulness in learning**. They then reflected on these episodes through written or video diary entries. Reflections focused on:

- features that made both the play and the learning playful
- children's responses and engagement
- the learning emerging from the episode
- professional insights and pedagogical reasoning
- challenges in sustaining playfulness

This method facilitated detailed analysis of the relational, spatial, and pedagogical dimensions of playfulness as enacted in authentic classroom practice, encompassing both playful play and playful learning experiences.

Video-Stimulated Reflective Focus Groups (Teachers)

After several months of implementation, teachers participated in three video-stimulated focus group discussions across the two schools:

School 1:

- FG1 (n = 2; Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1)
- FG2 (n = 4; Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2)

School 2:

- FG3 (n = 3; Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2)

Teachers used video excerpts from their own classrooms or from exemplar episodes of playful play and playful learning to stimulate reflection. Discussions explored:

- Characteristics of playful play and playful learning
- Pedagogical strategies that support or constrain playfulness
- Differences in enactment and challenges across age groups
- Practical and cultural factors influencing the embedding of playfulness

These collaborative discussions generated rich, practice-based insights into how playfulness, both in play and learning, was intentionally designed, modelled, and sustained across the primary Key Stages.

Playful Conversations with Children

Playful conversations were conducted with children across both schools and all primary Key Stages using a Mosaic approach, which facilitated multimodal expression through activities such as playful ball games, drawing, plasticine modelling, and puppet-assisted discussions. These sessions were designed to explore children's understandings of different approaches to teaching and learning, explicitly addressing both playful approaches and more formal approaches.

Children were encouraged to discuss and reflect on what they perceived as playful and engaging versus more structured and formal learning experiences. The methods enabled children to communicate their views verbally, visually, and kinaesthetically, thereby providing rich, child-centred data on their perspectives regarding diverse pedagogical approaches.

Table 2. Number of child participants and associated Key Stage

School	Conversation	Key Stage	Number of Children
1	Playful Conversation (PC) 1	Foundation Stage	7
	PC2	Key Stage 1	5
	PC3	Key Stage 2	6
2	PC4	Foundation Stage	9
	PC5	Key Stage 1	6
	PC6	Key Stage 2	6

Data Analysis

All data were analysed thematically, using playfulness as the central conceptual lens. An inductive analytical approach examined:

- how teachers and children conceptualised playfulness in both play and learning
- how playful approaches across teaching and learning were enacted across classroom contexts
- the benefits, tensions, and challenges perceived by participants

The integration of diary reflections, focus group discussions, and child-centred multimodal data produced a rich, multidimensional understanding of playful pedagogy as a relational, affective, and spatial phenomenon shaped by the realities of primary classroom practice.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to British Educational Research Association (2024) and EECERA (Bertram et al., 2024) ethical guidelines. Parental consent and child assent were secured prior to participation. Teachers and children were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal without penalty. Video recordings included only children with explicit parental consent and were stored securely with access limited to the research team and participating teachers. Video data were deleted following analysis, and identifiable information was redacted in reporting. Throughout data collection, researchers monitored children's comfort and engagement to ensure ethical standards in participatory activities.

THE BASELINE SURVEY FINDINGS

The initial baseline survey invited teachers from two primary schools to share their views on playfulness in teaching and learning and to reflect on how playfulness currently features in their practice across the curriculum. The survey also explored teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of embedding playful approaches in the classroom. Furthermore, respondents were asked to consider what supports, resources, or professional learning might assist them in strengthening and expanding high-quality playful learning opportunities for children. Teachers representing all Key Stages, i.e., Foundation Stage (FS), Key Stage 1 (KS1), and Key Stage 2 (KS2), participated in the survey.

Defining 'Playfulness in Teaching and Learning'

Teachers described playfulness in several interconnected ways. They highlighted that it involves play-based, games-based, or activity-based approaches where children are highly engaged and motivated. Playfulness was characterised as active, hands-on, and interactive, often taking place in areas such as sand and water trays or outdoor settings. Teachers emphasised the enjoyment and fun accompanying playful experiences, recognising their value in supporting holistic child development, including fostering creativity, curiosity, problem-solving, and social skills. The child's role was consistently highlighted as central - learning is most effective when children are active participants in playful experiences. The adult's role, meanwhile, was seen as structuring, facilitating, and guiding these experiences, weaving curricular aims into play to provide clear purpose and appropriate challenge. Notably, one teacher admitted uncertainty around what 'playfulness in teaching and learning' precisely meant, indicating variability in familiarity with the concept.

On average, 71% of teachers believed that playfulness should be incorporated across all stages of primary education. All areas of the curriculum were considered suitable for playful approaches, with 100% identifying the 'World Around Us' curriculum area as particularly well-suited. Religious Education was noted as the least appropriate subject for playfulness.

Current Practice

Teachers reported varying degrees of implementation of playfulness in their classrooms. Many encouraged learner autonomy, experimentation, and risk-taking. The majority

consistently welcomed and accepted all emotions generated through play, fostered a culture of collaborative learning, promoted creative thinking, and facilitated purposeful conversations aimed at developing knowledge and understanding. The tables below summarise responses from each school.

School 1 (N=12):

Question	Never	Sometimes	Always
Do you empower learners to lead their own learning?	16.7%	41.7%	41.7%
Do you promote experimentation?	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%
Do you promote risk-taking?	0%	75%	25%
Do you welcome and accept all emotions generated through play?	8.3%	33.3%	58.3%
Do you build a culture of collaborative learning?	0%	33.3%	66.7%
Do you encourage creative thinking?	0%	50%	50%
Do you facilitate purposeful conversations (teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil) to build knowledge and understanding?	0%	50%	50%

School 2 (N=31):

Question	Never	Sometimes	Always
Do you empower learners to lead their own learning?	0%	80.6%	19.4%
Do you promote experimentation?	0%	58.1%	41.9%
Do you promote risk-taking?	0%	38.7%	61.3%
Do you welcome and accept all emotions generated through play?	0%	38.7%	61.3%
Do you build a culture of collaborative learning?	0%	51.6%	48.4%
Do you encourage creative thinking?	0%	35.5%	64.5%

Do you facilitate purposeful conversations (teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil) to build knowledge and understanding?	0%	45.2%	54.8%

Benefits of Playfulness in Teaching and Learning

Teachers identified several key benefits of embedding playfulness in the classroom:

- Increased active learning through hands-on, practical experiences.
- Enhanced engagement and motivation among learners, with greater enjoyment reported by both pupils and teachers.
- More authentic and meaningful learning for all participants.
- Empowerment of children to lead their own learning, encouraging challenge and risk-taking.
- Inclusive environments that cater to diverse learners.
- Promotion of holistic learning, integrating multiple areas of development and curriculum.
- Development of positive relationships through meaningful conversations and collaboration.
- Creation of a more relaxed, less anxious learning atmosphere with reduced reliance on formal recording, emphasizing shared learning experiences.

Supports Needed to Enhance Playfulness

Teachers also noted supports required to expand and improve playful teaching and learning:

- Professional training to boost confidence, shift perceptions, trial new ideas, and facilitate sharing of good practice, including potential parental training.
- Funding to acquire appropriate resources and guidance on quality materials.
- Designated play spaces tailored to different age groups.
- Allocated time for planning and preparation to ensure quality playful provision, with playfulness explicitly included in planning documentation.
- Reduced emphasis on written evidence in favour of meaningful learning experiences.

- A shared whole-school vision and culture around playful learning, supported through staff meetings and collaborative discussions, alongside progression maps to ensure continuity across stages.

Concluding Summary

The baseline survey provided an initial snapshot of teachers' perspectives and practices relating to playfulness in teaching and learning across two primary schools. It highlighted a generally positive attitude toward integrating playfulness throughout the curriculum, with a recognition of its benefits for engagement, creativity, and holistic development. However, it also revealed variability in how consistently playful approaches were enacted, and pointed to perceived challenges around resources, time, and professional development needs.

Importantly, participation in the survey did not encompass all teachers, and responses reflected a range of confidence levels and familiarity with playfulness in teaching and learning. Rather than serving as a formal baseline for measuring change over time, these findings offered valuable contextual insight into the existing landscape of playfulness within the schools.

Building on this foundation, the subsequent intervention was designed not as a straightforward training or confidence-building programme but as an immersive professional learning journey. It aimed to deepen teachers' understanding of playfulness in teaching and learning, support the enactment of playful pedagogies across Key Stages, and explore the lived experiences of teachers and children engaging in playfulness in practice. Through reflective practices and collaborative inquiry, the project sought to capture the nuanced ways playfulness manifests in everyday classroom life and the opportunities and challenges it presents.

The following section presents findings from the intervention phase, exploring how children and teachers conceptualised playfulness in both play and task-related activities, how playfulness was enacted across the primary school context, and the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing playful approaches in practice.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVENTION STUDY

This section of the report, presents findings from the intervention phase of the study. Building on the contextual insights gained from the baseline survey, it, firstly, examines how children and teachers conceptualised playfulness in both play and more task-related activities. The section then explores how teachers enacted playfulness across the primary school context, before concluding by identifying the perceived benefits and challenges associated with implementing playful approaches in primary practice.

Children's and Teachers' Conceptualisation of Playfulness in Educational Practice across the Primary School context.

The *Playful Primary Classrooms* project set out to explore how playfulness is understood, enacted, and experienced across primary Key Stages in Northern Ireland. The following findings consider insights from both teachers and children across the primary Key Stages in terms of what playfulness in play and task -related experiences means to them.

Teachers' Insights into the Qualities of Playfulness

Teachers participating in the Playful Primary Classrooms project offered rich and nuanced insights into the qualities that make both play and task-related experiences genuinely playful. Their reflections highlight playfulness as a fluid and multifaceted pedagogical orientation; one that emerges through the interplay of children's autonomy, meaningful purpose, active physical and cognitive engagement, social interaction, and curiosity. These perspectives illustrate how playfulness is understood and enacted across the primary years, and how it reshapes both classroom practice and teacher–child relationships.

Agency, Autonomy and Spontaneity

A dominant theme in teachers' accounts (drawing on both the focus group data and the data gleaned from the video reflective diaries) was the importance of children's agency, autonomy, and spontaneity. Teachers frequently described playfulness as arising when children have space to initiate ideas, make decisions, and adapt activities in the moment. This included spontaneous changes to the flow of play, unexpected directions taken by the children, and improvised responses that teachers learned to value rather than contain. Allowing room for spontaneity required teachers to step back and resist the urge to pre-determine outcomes.

One teacher reflected:

> *"It's about enjoying the play with the children and seeing what they come up with, not always directing or questioning, but letting them take the lead." (Teacher 8, FG1)*

Similarly, another emphasised the shift in classroom dynamics that playfulness introduces:

> *"It's following the lead of the children… they're the ones facilitating the learning." (Teacher 3, FG3)*

Teachers acknowledged that supporting spontaneous, child-led activity could initially feel unpredictable or chaotic. However, this unpredictability gradually became understood as productive, giving rise to what some teachers described as "*constructive chaos."*

As one teacher put it:

> *"When you first try to introduce [playfulness]… it can seem chaotic. But the more you do it, the more it becomes constructive chaos, and the children learn their boundaries while still having fun." (Teacher 2, FG3)*

Purposeful Engagement

Alongside autonomy, teachers highlighted purposeful engagement as crucial to supporting playfulness in both play and learning contexts. They stressed that playful experiences should feel meaningful, connected to real-life contexts, children's interests, or curriculum goals, rather than being playful for its own sake.

> *"It's not just free play for play's sake; it's making sure the play is purposeful and linked to real learning." (Teacher 3, RD)*

Another teacher emphasised how purpose deepens engagement:

> *"It's much more meaningful when they can relate it to their own experiences… they naturally talk more about it when it relates to their own life." (Teacher 9, FG2)*

Physical and Cognitive Engagement

Teachers also identified active engagement - physically and mentally - as a defining quality of playfulness. Physical movement, hands-on exploration, and sensory-rich materials were frequently described as energising and enjoyable for children. Yet teachers also drew attention to the way such activities simultaneously activated children's thinking, encouraging problem-solving, questioning, and imaginative reasoning.

Some teachers emphasised the potential of the outdoors for physical playfulness:

> *"Children loved being outdoors, getting involved in practical activities, and continuing conversations well beyond the session." (Teacher 2, RD)*

> *"The outdoor ones - I've been really enjoying those this year. You just feel more playful when you're out there. And I think when I'm enjoying it more, they do too." (Teacher 8, FG1)*

Teachers emphasised that the *"work"* of playful engagement involves both bodily and cognitive challenge, the kind that feels exciting and motivating rather than burdensome. This blend of physical activity and mental stretch helped sustain children's interest and deepened their learning, as summed up in the following citation:

> *"They just like, they don't even see it as, like, their engagement. It was the same with the capacity, when we took it outdoors and did all the water trays, and they experimented. And even with the more able you were challenging them with different questions and stuff. But they didn't realise*

that they were being challenged, you know? And they still keep saying, 'When can we get the water trays again?'" (Teacher 2, FG3)

Relational Practice

The social nature of playfulness also featured prominently in teachers' reflections. They described playfulness as inherently relational, involving collaboration, shared problem-solving, negotiation of roles, and the building of peer relationships. In such moments, teachers often positioned themselves as facilitators, stepping back to allow children to co-construct ideas together.

"I stood back while they led everything—they were negotiating and playing out roles together." (Teacher 3, RD)

Another teacher noted the generative nature of shared engagement:

"During play, they really bounce ideas off each other… one child's idea sparks another's, and the play just grows." (Teacher 8, FG1)

"It gives them a chance to relax, enjoy time with friends, and develop other skills holistically." (Teacher 8, FG1)

"It was just amazing to see what they come up with and the language they come up with and the roles that they assumed as well… it could just be whatever they want to be and that was brilliant." (Teacher 8, FG1)

Curiosity and Motivation

Teachers further noted the importance of curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Children were described as highly eager, imaginative, and inquisitive when immersed in playful activity, whether during free play or structured learning. Curiosity was seen as a core mechanism by which playfulness invites exploration and fuels deeper engagement as detailed below:

"My class gets really excited and curious when it's play time - they're motivated in a way that's different from sitting at tables." (Teacher 8, FG1)

"The sense of curiosity begins to build… the balance of imagination and fun, but also reality, ensures the children are onboard throughout the lesson." (Teacher 10, RD)

Another teacher highlighted the role of creativity and challenge:

"Learning [in the traditional sense] can be boring… playfulness is about challenge, making it purposeful for them and being creative." (Teacher 3, FG3)

Inclusive Potential

Teachers also reflected on the inclusive potential of playful approaches. Playfulness helped remove barriers for children with additional learning needs while offering rich challenge for more advanced learners.

The following comments sum up the inclusive nature of playfulness in practice:

"It gets all the children, no matter what their ability, involved." (Teacher 6, FG2)

"It removes barriers, totally… it allows them to challenge themselves." (Teacher 4, RD)

Teachers also noted that more playful approaches to teaching and learning also facilitated formative assessment through observation rather than formal marking. Observation-based assessment within playful contexts enabled teachers to capture learning in more authentic and holistic ways as detailed below:

"You can assess in so many different ways that you don't need to do marking, with photographs." (Teacher 2, RD)

Children's Insights on Playfulness

Playfulness as Fun, Joy and Emotional Wellbeing

Across all ages, children strongly associate playfulness with happiness, laughter and positive feelings. Play is described as joyful, exciting and emotionally uplifting, in contrast to work which is often experienced as dull or heavy.

"Play is much more fun." (PC4)

"Playing makes you happy, good, joyful." (PC5)

"Love to play, it's so much fun." (PC1)

"Playing, like, makes work less hard." (PC6)

Laughter is a defining feature of playfulness, particularly for younger children:

"Playful work is laughter work." (PC4)

"Being playful is where you laugh and have fun." (PC4)

In contrast, work is often framed emotionally as boring or oppressive:

"Work is so boring." (PC4)

"Work is enslavement… you feel a lot of weight there." (PC2)

"Sometimes school feels like being in prison." (PC2)

Choice, Freedom and Independence

A powerful theme is that playfulness is about choice, choosing what to do, how to do it, and with whom. Children repeatedly contrast the freedom of play with the lack of autonomy in work.

"That makes it play when you get to play with what you want." (PC1)

"I like it when you are not told what to do, you get to make up your own mind and do it in your own way." (PC2)

"It's like having a bit more choice in what you have to do and how you do it." (PC2)

Home is often seen as more playful because of greater independence:

"At home you can play as much as you like." (PC5)

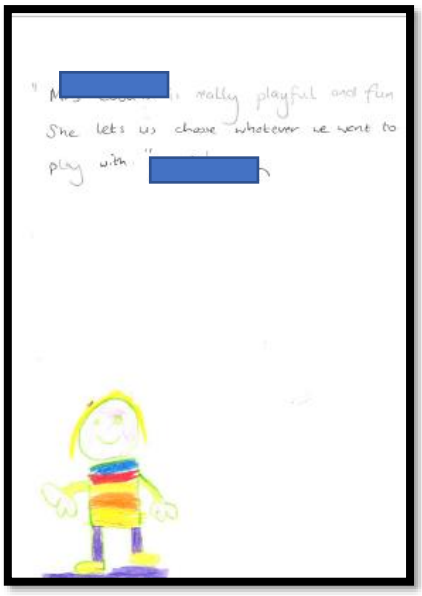
"There's a bit more choice at home so it's more playful." (PC5)

"Play at home feels more comfortable… it seems more relaxed." (PC6)

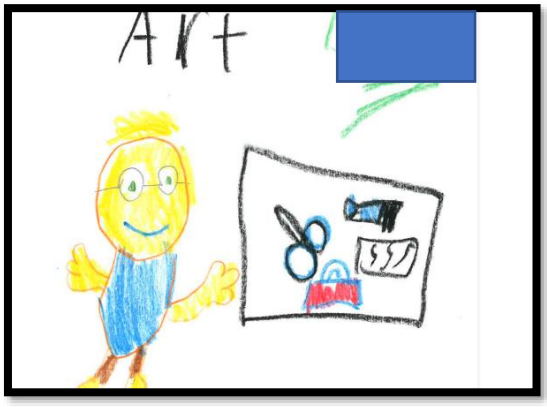
Where school play is overly controlled, playfulness is diminished:

"There can be lots of rules when the teacher plays with you and that takes the fun out of it." (PC2)

The children's drawings reinforce these ideas, illustrating how playfulness is experienced by children as agentic, self-directed, and grounded in freedom and choice:



"……She let's us choose what we want to play with" (FS boy)



"I like to play art at school. I like making paper aeroplanes…. I like having the choice to make what I want" (KS1 boy)



"I like playing with my friends because we play games we enjoy doing" (KS1, girl)

Relationships and Playing with Friends

Playfulness is deeply relational. For most children, playing with friends is central to what makes play meaningful and enjoyable.

"Love playing with my friends." (PC4)

"Playing is meeting new friends." (PC1)

"Having fun and playing with your friends." (PC2)

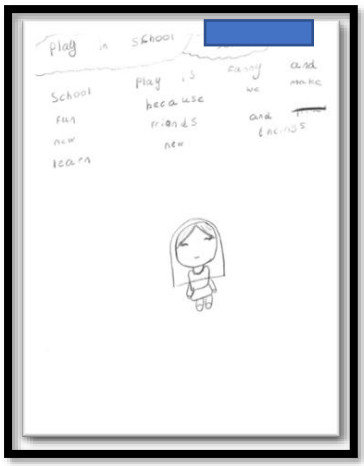
"It's active and it's a lot of fun with your friends." (PC6)

Friends make both play and learning more enjoyable:

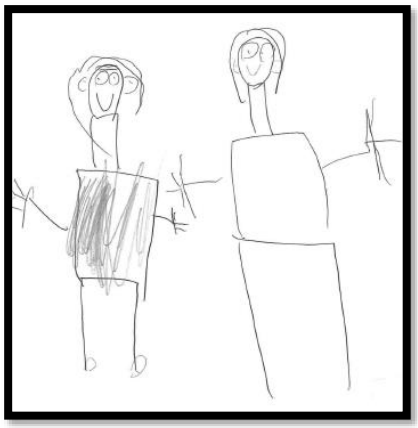
"You get to play with your friends and nice resources." (PC2)

"I really like comprehension especially if it is set up like a game and you have to beat your friends." (PC3)

The following children's drawings help to support the relational ideas expressed above.



"School play is funny and fun because we make new friends and learn new things" (KS2 girl)



"Playing with my friends makes play so much fun" (FS girl)



"I love playing with my friend. It [is] fun, so fun to playing" (KS1 girl)

However, children also recognise when relationships break down, play can stop feeling playful:

"When your friends get angry… that's when it gets boring and you can get upset." (PC6)

"You get fed up in play when people cheat." (PC3)

Some older children also highlight the value of solitary play:

"Sometimes you just like to play on your own." (PC6)

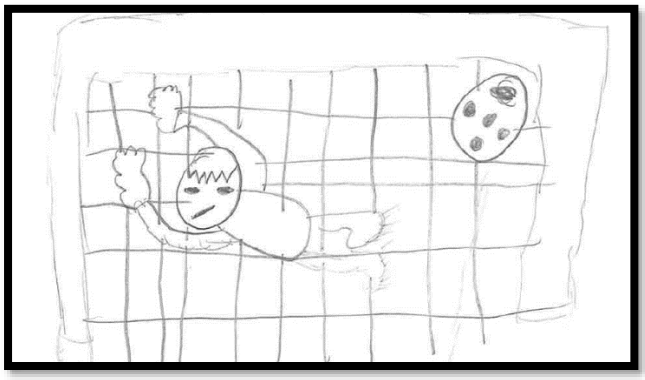
Physical Activity and Embodied Play

Playfulness is strongly linked to movement, physical challenge and using the body. This is especially prominent from KS1 onwards.

"Playing is gymnastics, boxing, jiu jitsu, swimming, dancing." (PC5)

"Running is playful." (PC2)

"I like the physical side of play, where you have to run, jump and climb." (PC6)



[Playful play is] "when I am playing all kinds of sport" (KS2 boy)



[I love] "the climbing frame – it's SO much fun" (FS girl)

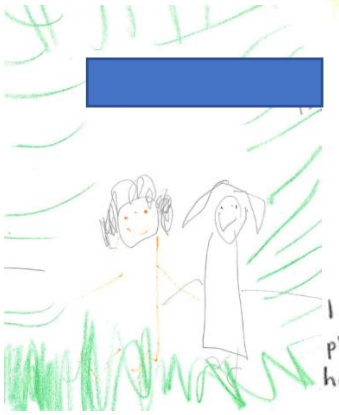
Outdoor play is consistently described as exciting and freeing:

"Going outside is fun." (PC1)

"Play outside is good fun, like playing games and stuff." (PC2)



"I like to play on the swing outside. I like to play on the trim trail" (FS boy)



"I like playing outdoors with my friends" (FS girl)



"I like playing hurling outdoors" (FS Boy)

Children also value physical risk, experimentation and inventiveness:

"Breaking sticks is my favourite thing… it's like playing horses, you get piggy backs." (PC2)

"If you have no toys to play with, you come up with your own ideas – that's even better." (PC2)





"[My favourite game] is breaking sticks and acting like horses …" (KS1 boy)

[Being playful} "allows me to use my imagination" (KS1 girl)

Playfulness: Fun, Challenge and Thinking Hard

Children across all stages clearly articulate that play and learning are not opposites. Playful work is described as engaging, challenging and mentally stimulating.

"Playful work can be fun too because it makes your brain really think." (PC5)

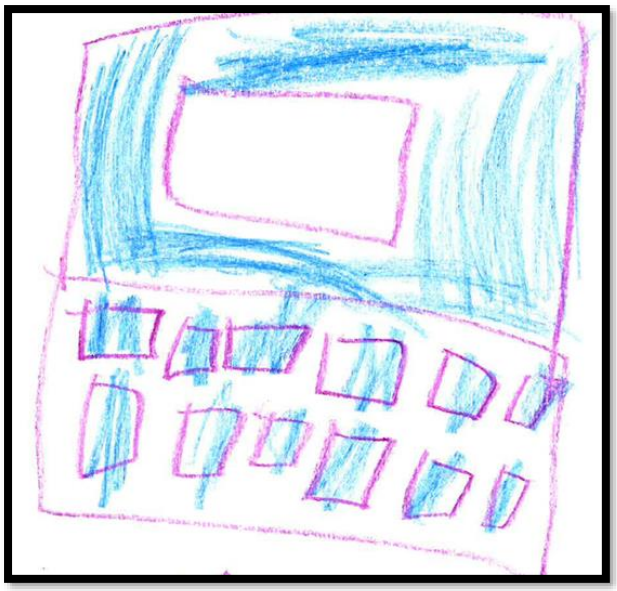
"You learn much more when you are playing." (PC6)

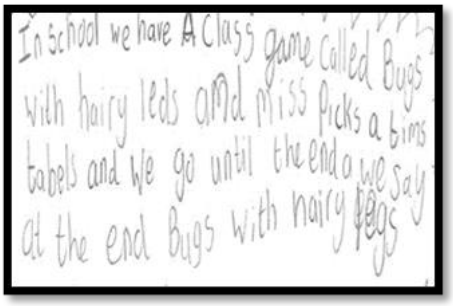
"In play, you are still learning but in a fun way." (PC3)

"Playful play is where you're playing really hard and having really good fun." (PC3)

"Once we played a game where there's all these questions that pop up in your mind, and you have to move around the tables - it's exciting and fun, like a challenge that makes your brain work really hard." (PC5)

"Playful play can be hard work but it's much more enjoyable." (PC3)





"Playing with my chrome book makes my brain go into super power" (KS1 boy)

Playful play is when "we play games and there is plenty of competition in them" (KS2 girl).

Playfulness is closely tied to problem-solving, curiosity and finding things out:

"Being outside, finding out new things like in science." (PC4)

"Sometimes we do fun work like science where you use your brain to find things out." (PC2)

"Using your brain to find things out, that's really interesting." (PC2)

Examples of playfulness in more task-related experiences include games, competition and practical activities:

"Once we played a game called scoot… it was like a team game – that was real fun learning." (PC2)

"I like maths games… your score keeps going up and that makes you feel good inside." (PC3)

"Sometimes we make jam sandwiches in literacy… that was exciting." (PC2)

"It was like being a real explorer! I got to find sticks and stones outside, make arrowheads from clay, and test if they worked. I could try things my way and figure out how to make them better – it felt like a real adventure." (PC6)

Meaningful Play vs Boring or Repetitive Experiences

Children are clear that not all play is playful. Play loses meaning when it is repetitive, overly simple or lacks challenge:

"Sometimes the play we do is too babyish – there's no challenge." (PC2)

"Play can be boring too when you play the same game over and over." (PC3)

Similarly, work becomes unplayful when it is passive, sedentary and repetitive:

"You're just writing and sitting all day." (PC6)

"Doing sheets of just numeracy – that's so boring." (PC3)

Children consistently call for active, practical, meaningful and creative approaches:

"Make homework more fun – not just writing and writing." (PC3)

"Playful work is not doing boring stuff… it's active learning." (PC6)

"I love it when we play baking – my mum does baking at home so I like doing real things like her." (PC3)

"When we're playing football and keeping track of the goals and penalties, I'm doing lots of mental maths, but it makes it more exciting and feels real!" (PC2)

The Role of Adults and Playful Teaching

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping whether experiences feel playful. Children associate playfulness with warmth, humour and flexibility.

"Playful teachers don't have a grumpy face… they have a smile." (PC5)

"Playful teachers are sporty, constantly smiling, really funny and fair." (PC3)

"[redacted] is so fun." (PC1)

Adults who introduce imagination, drama and games enhance playfulness:

"Our teacher makes up a story and we have to act it out." (PC2)

"The teacher adds in games and that makes it more fun." (PC3)



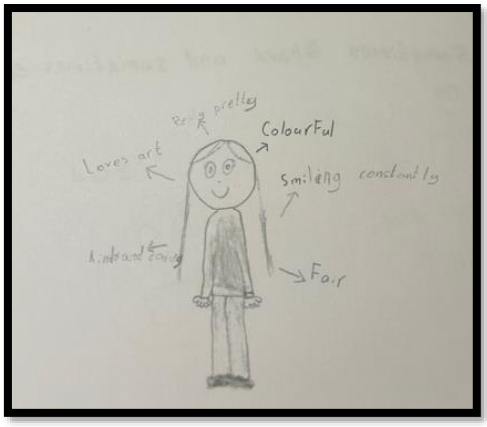
"This playful teacher was dressed up as a clown. Clowns are silly and playful" (FS girl)



"… is playful because he is funny and he teaches football and Gaelic and he brings loads of things with him and we can od drawings and all sorts of different things" (FS girl).



"My teacher is playful as she always has a smile" (KS1 girl)



"…loves art, being pretty, colourful, smiling constantly, fair and kind and caring" (KS2 girl)

Concluding Summary: Towards the SPARC Framework

Synthesising insights from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and children's voices revealed a coherent and shared understanding of what makes learning feel playful across both play-based and task-related contexts. While teachers and children expressed these ideas in different ways, they consistently pointed to a common set of conditions that supported engagement, motivation, and meaning.

Through iterative coding, comparison, and collaborative refinement, these shared features were distilled into five interconnected dimensions, forming the SPARC framework. Importantly, SPARC did not emerge as a predefined model imposed on the data; rather, it was constructed inductively from participants' lived experiences and practices.

S - Spontaneous

Playfulness was characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the unexpected. Children valued being able to make choices, adapt activities, and invent new possibilities. Teachers described stepping back, allowing children's ideas to lead, and trusting in the learning that emerged through spontaneity. This dimension captures agency, creativity, and in-the-moment decision-making as central to any playful experience.

In practice, this might involve:

- Offering choices in how play and learning tasks are approached
- Allowing children to adapt or extend their experiences, whether in play or more focused learning tasks, in accordance with their interests.

P - Purposeful

Both children and teachers emphasised that playfulness was most powerful when learning felt meaningful. Purposeful playfulness involved linking activities to real-life contexts, children's interests, or curriculum intentions. Rather than diluting learning, purpose gave playful experiences depth, coherence and relevance.

In practice, this might involve:

- Embedding curriculum goals within playful contexts
- Linking playful experiences to children's own funds of knowledge
- Ensuring play has depth, not just novelty

A -Active

Playfulness involved high levels of physical and cognitive engagement. Movement, hands-on exploration, problem-solving and imaginative thinking were all described as energising and motivating. Active learning extended beyond physical activity to include mental challenge, creativity and sustained thinking.

In practice, this might involve:

- Using playful spaces both indoors and out
- Affording playful opportunities (both during play and task-related activities) that require thinking, doing and talking
- Reducing long periods of passive sitting

R- Relational

Playfulness was deeply social. Children emphasised playing and learning with friends, while teachers highlighted collaboration, shared meaning-making, and a trusting classroom climate. Positive relationships, between peers and with adults, enabled risk-taking, experimentation and emotional safety.

In practice, this might involve:

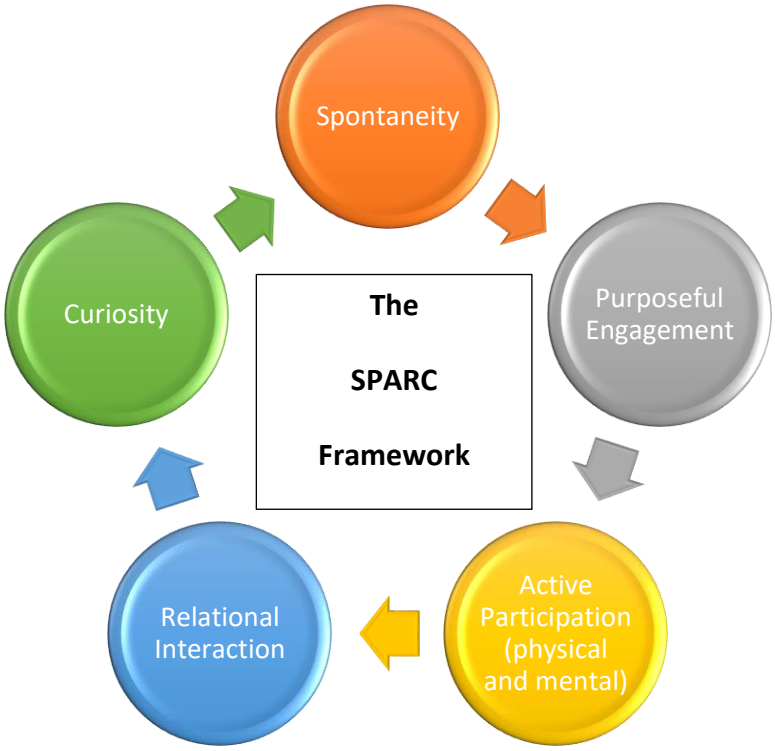
- Creating playful opportunities for shared decision-making
- Building trusting and respectful classroom relationships

C- Curious

Curiosity sat at the heart of the playful experience. Children's desire to explore, find out, test ideas and imagine possibilities fuelled engagement and sustained attention. Curiosity linked directly with all other dimensions, acting as the driving force that animated playful learning.

In practice, this might involve:

- Using open-ended questions and challenges
- Allowing time for investigation and exploration
- Valuing children's questions and ideas



Together, the SPARC framework offers a practice-facing definition of playfulness that extends beyond activity type or age phase. It positions playfulness as a quality of experience, shaped by how learning is structured, facilitated and felt. By foregrounding spontaneity, purpose, activity, relationships and curiosity, SPARC provides a shared language for educators seeking to embed playfulness meaningfully across the primary curriculum, both within play and task-related experiences, without diminishing challenge, rigour or intentionality.

The Enactment of Playfulness in Classroom Practice

Teachers across Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2 described playfulness as a dynamic and intentional practice, which emerges through the interplay of environment, experiences, and social interactions. These three elements together bring to life the qualities of playfulness captured in the SPARC framework: Spontaneity, Purposefulness, Active physical and mental engagement, Relational connection, and Curiosity, wonder, and awe.

Drawing on teachers' video diaries and classroom excerpts, this section illustrates how SPARC becomes a reality in primary classrooms regardless of phase. The examples below highlight how purposeful environments set the stage for playful learning, how meaningful experiences engage children's minds and bodies, and how social interactions foster collaboration and inclusion. These cameos illustrate the richness and diversity of playful practice across primary school settings, demonstrating how playfulness can be authentically embedded within everyday primary teaching.

The Learning Environment as a Foundation for Playfulness

Teachers emphasised that playful learning requires carefully designed environments that invite exploration, creativity, and social engagement. As one Key Stage 2 teacher put it, "you can't wing it" (Teacher 3, FG3), highlighting that playfulness grows from intentional planning.

Loose Parts Play – Train and Transport (Foundation Stage, P2)

During an outdoor learning session focused on transport, a small group of Primary 2 children quickly took the initiative to build a 'train' using loose parts such as wooden planks, crates, and scrap materials. Without detailed adult instructions, the children collaborated spontaneously, stacking and arranging the materials to form the body and carriages of their train. Their play became highly imaginative: children assigned themselves roles such as train driver, passenger, and ticket collector. One girl found a small metal object, using it creatively as a ticket punch to 'stamp' each passenger's ticket. The teacher's brief prompt at the start: "What might you need to travel somewhere?", was enough to launch a rich play scenario. The physical environment was open and flexible, encouraging active movement, collaboration, and creativity. The children's conversation was lively and full of role-play language,

demonstrating how the space and materials invited curiosity, social interaction, and joyful exploration.

World War II Suitcases Play Corner (KS1, P4)

In a corridor outside the main classroom, a themed play corner was set up to support the World Around Us curriculum. This area featured vintage-style suitcases filled with replica props such as wartime hats, scarves, and old-fashioned games. Children were invited to dress as evacuees and enact scenarios related to World War II, such as packing their belongings and saying goodbye to family. The immersive nature of the play corner made history tangible and immediate. Groups rotated through the space, developing their own stories and re-enacting emotional situations like separation and fear, but also moments of friendship and play. This carefully prepared environment encouraged children to physically and emotionally step into different roles, fostering empathy alongside imaginative play. The variety and authenticity of props stimulated curiosity and wonder, keeping the play fresh and engaging throughout the term.

Dr Doc's Mystery Science Box (KS2)

A Key Stage 2 classroom transformed for a sustainability project included the "Dr Doc's Mystery Science Box," a thematic learning area filled with diverse natural materials and scientific tools. Children were invited to explore these resources freely, investigating concepts related to ecology and sustainability through hands-on activities. The environment balanced structure and openness: clear project goals were supported by flexible, tactile materials that invited experimentation. Pupils physically manipulated objects, made hypotheses, and recorded observations, demonstrating active mental and physical engagement. The thematic setup sparked curiosity and wonder, as children uncovered unexpected properties and connections in the materials. This environment also encouraged social interaction and peer learning as children shared ideas and tested theories together.

Playful Experiences: Engagement, Exploration, and Ownership

Teachers described playful experiences as immersive and intrinsically motivating, where children take ownership and connect deeply with learning.

Building Activity – Grandad Was a Builder (Foundation Stage, P2)

In a quiet corner of the classroom, a Primary 2 boy immersed himself in an open-ended building task using foam bricks and other construction materials. The child carefully stacked the bricks in an orderly, overlapping pattern reminiscent of his family connection with real bricklaying. As he worked, he talked to his peers about what he was doing, sharing techniques and ideas. Later, the teacher learned that the boy's grandfather was a builder, which added personal significance and pride to the task. This meaningful connection appeared to support his sustained focus and positive behaviour, contrasting with his usual restlessness during more traditional lessons. The hands-on, purposeful activity engaged the boy both physically and mentally, fostering problem-solving and creative thinking. His peers interacted with him in a collaborative way, asking questions and offering support. The teacher observed how this playful experience revealed strengths and skills that might remain hidden in conventional classroom settings.

Battery-Powered Buses Project (KS2)

During a cross-curricular project on sustainability and science, Key Stage 2 pupils worked in groups to design, build and test battery-powered model buses. They selected materials, assembled circuits, and refined their designs through trial and error. Children carefully chose materials, designed bus bodies, and wired motors, balancing creativity with scientific principles. The activity was hands-on and mentally challenging, requiring concentration, planning, and adjustment as groups encountered technical issues. This purposeful and playful task combined scientific inquiry with creative experimentation. Children showed pride and autonomy, working collaboratively and staying mentally engaged, demonstrating how playful learning fosters perseverance and curiosity. Teachers noted the pride and autonomy children demonstrated, highlighting how playful, purposeful experiences support deeper engagement and mastery.

Butterfly Life Cycle Observation and Craft (KS1, P3)

Following a visit to Colin Glen, a Primary 3 class became fascinated by butterflies. The teacher introduced live caterpillars into the classroom for ongoing observation. Children watched the caterpillars eat, pupate, and eventually emerge as butterflies. This real-life experience generated sustained curiosity and wonder, encouraging children to ask questions and make predictions. To deepen understanding, the teacher designed a playful craft activity: children

used marshmallows to represent eggs, gummy worms for caterpillars, and paper and sweets for butterflies. They assembled these into life cycle posters, explaining each stage as they worked. The combination of sensory observation, hands-on crafting, and social sharing helped children make connections between scientific facts and their own experiences. The joyful enthusiasm around the project illustrated how playful experiences nurture curiosity, wonder, and active learning.

Interaction Dynamics that Foster Playfulness

Social interaction was highlighted by teachers as central to playfulness, nurturing collaboration, communication, leadership, and inclusion.

Inclusion in Train Play (Foundation Stage, P2)

In the loose parts train play scenario, a typically quiet boy who rarely joined group activities was gently drawn into the play by a peer. The girl paused her role as ticket collector to speak directly with him, inviting him to take a part in the game. This simple, spontaneous interaction opened up a meaningful social connection. The boy gradually became more vocal and confident, contributing ideas and collaborating with others. The teacher noted how this moment exemplified relational playfulness: peer support and subtle adult facilitation combined to encourage inclusion, agency, and social engagement. This balance between stepping back and stepping in helped maintain the authenticity of the play while ensuring all children could participate fully.

Mini Teachers in Sustainability Project (KS2, P6)

Within the sustainability project, some Key Stage 2 pupils naturally took on leadership roles, explaining ideas, managing group tasks, and supporting classmates. These ‘mini teachers’ acted as peer mentors, demonstrating the relational aspect of playfulness where children learn from and with each other. This dynamic fostered confidence and social skills, encouraging collaborative problem-solving and communication. Teachers observed how this social interaction made learning feel shared and supported, enriching the overall playful experience.

Market Day Maths (KS2, P5)

In a lively maths lesson, children transformed the classroom into a bustling marketplace. Pupils took turns being shopkeepers and customers, using play money and price labels to practice calculating change. The role-play scenario created an authentic social context where negotiation and communication were key. Children eagerly engaged in spontaneous conversations, helping each other with calculations and discussing prices. The teacher described how this relational interaction made maths real and fun, boosting motivation and social competence. The playful exchanges also provided natural assessment opportunities as the teacher listened in and supported learning without interrupting the flow.

Concluding Summary: The Enactment of Playfulness in Primary Practice

These classroom snapshots show that playfulness is not a single activity but an integrated approach involving carefully arranged environments, purposeful, hands-on experiences, and rich social interactions. Together, they bring the SPARC framework's elements: Spontaneity, Purposefulness, Active engagement, Relational connection, and Curiosity/Wonder to life in primary classrooms.

By designing spaces that invite exploration, offering meaningful, engaging activities, and fostering supportive peer interaction, teachers can create learning cultures where playfulness thrives across all key stages. The cameos here offer practical inspiration for how playful learning can be embedded effectively, nurturing creativity, confidence, and collaboration for all children.

Benefits of Playfulness in Primary Education: Focus Group Insights

Enhanced Engagement and Understanding

Teachers across the focus group discussions consistently observed that infusing playfulness into primary educational practice led to heightened engagement and deeper understanding among pupils. Many noted that when lessons are made fun and interactive, all children become active participants, even those who might otherwise be disengaged or lack confidence. Teachers from School 1 remarked that in playful activities every pupil is "fully engaged", including those who usually "would sit back and they go, 'I'm no good at ... I struggle with writing down my work.' They're fully engaged, and you can see much more from them as well" (Teacher 9, FG2).

By shifting away from the traditional lesson and book format, teachers found they could maintain academic rigour while capturing pupils' interest. As one teacher explained, "changing up the normal classroom environment", moving beyond pupils "sitting down at a desk... doing something from a textbook", means "you can still learn the same thing, but in a more fun and enjoyable way". Often, pupils become so absorbed that "they don't even realise that what you're doing is ... a lesson, because all they're thinking is, 'this was so fun'" (Teacher 7, FG2). This highlights a key benefit: playfulness masks the "work" of learning, increasing time on task and enthusiasm for even challenging subjects.

Playful pedagogy was also credited with improving conceptual understanding and retention of academic content. Teachers gave concrete examples of how pupils grasped difficult concepts more thoroughly through hands-on playful experiences than via worksheets or rote methods. In one focus group, a teacher contrasted her class's understanding of symmetry before and after adopting a playful approach. "Last year it was very worksheet based... and I could see from my own assessments that the children didn't understand... where the line of symmetry was," she admitted. "But by doing it in a playful and practical way this year, they were walking along the line of symmetry... showing me with their hands the symmetrical pictures that they made... and they were really, really able to show me where those lines... were. So, I can see hugely the benefit of doing that" (Teacher 1, FG1). This testimony

illustrates how playful learning can translate abstract concepts into tangible experiences, leading to demonstrably better learning outcomes.

Two teachers described similar playful lessons on liquid capacity where pupils pretended to be “juice makers” concocting smoothies, and the other making witches’ potions. Simple props like safety goggles immediately “got them engaged straight away” (Teacher 10, FG2) and brought the scenario to life. Crucially, Teacher 9 noted that during the playful lesson, unexpected learning emerged: when pupils were given freedom to experiment, some went beyond the original task, (e.g., identifying precise ingredients and materials) without prompt. “All of a sudden, some were coming up saying... ‘that’s 483 millilitres’... I thought, actually, I’m getting loads out of this. So, I’m just going to run with it,” (Teacher 9, FG2) she said, allowing the activity to evolve in response to pupil enthusiasm. Her takeaway was that a playful approach not only covered the required content but yielded richer learning than a tightly scripted lesson: “You get unexpected learning from it that you mightn’t have thought you were going to... things came out of that that you just wouldn’t have got from the written exercise” (Teacher 9, FG2). In this case, teachers viewed playfulness as academically beneficial, enhancing comprehension, creative problem-solving, and the overall quality of learning.

Importantly, greater engagement through play was linked to improved classroom behaviour and focus. Several teachers observed that when children are immersed in playful tasks, they are less prone to distraction or misbehaviour. One teacher initially worried that introducing play might invite chaos, especially with pupils not accustomed to such freedom. Indeed, “when you first try to introduce (playful learning) ... it can seem chaotic to start with,” she noted, but “the more you do it... it’s not chaos. It can be constructive chaos”, a productive buzz of activity rather than disorder. With clear expectations and practice, pupils learned “their boundaries... what’s accepted and what’s not” in a playful setting (Teacher 2, FG3). Another teacher agreed that “you have to be careful... rein it in a wee bit. Yes, we are playing and having fun, but...” it must be appropriately managed (Teacher 1, FG3). Once routines were established, however, the high engagement level of play-based lessons became an asset for classroom management.

One focus group discussed how keeping pupils busy with playful activities meant “there was no opportunity for... negative behaviour, because they were so busy and they knew exactly

what was expected, and they were so engaged and enjoying it so much that they didn't have (time to misbehave)" (FG3). In other words, engagement driven by playfulness can create a virtuous cycle: students are deeply involved in learning tasks and thus less likely to act out, which in turn allows the lesson to proceed smoothly and reinforces positive academic focus.

Dispositional and Relational Outcomes

Beyond academic gains, teachers highlighted numerous dispositional and relational benefits of playful learning, from increased motivation and creativity to better collaboration and confidence. Many teachers felt that playful pedagogy nurtures positive learner dispositions such as curiosity, creativity, and resilience. For example, one teacher described cultivating a classroom culture where "it's okay to make mistakes", emphasising that playfulness creates a "safe space where... we're all human, we all make mistakes, and that's how we learn... through trial and error" (Teacher 5, FG1).

By lowering the stakes of being wrong, play encourages pupils to take risks and try new ideas without fear, which can build resilience and a growth mindset. Another teacher similarly noted that a playful approach helps pupils relax and open up, boosting their confidence to participate. She gave an example of quiet children finding their voice: "in class, some of the children... would not have been very forthcoming, but in (the play context) it could just be whatever they wanted to be... I love that" (Teacher 8, FG1). This teacher observed previously shy pupils embracing roles during play (such as ticket seller, train driver in a make-believe scenario) and contributing ideas more freely than in regular lessons. Such anecdotes suggest that play can draw out students' personalities and talents, giving those who are reserved in formal settings a chance to shine and feel valued in the group. The motivation generated by playful learning was also repeatedly mentioned: pupils find the activities enjoyable and thus are eager to engage (FG1). One teacher described children "itching to get started" on playful tasks and showing excitement to share their creations (Teacher 7, FG2). This heightened intrinsic motivation not only makes the classroom atmosphere lively but also can translate into greater perseverance and effort in learning.

Teachers also reported that playful learning often yields creative and cross-curricular outcomes that go beyond the original academic objectives, reflecting higher-order thinking. One teacher's account of a playful board game project exemplifies this. She set out to have

pupils review numeracy content by designing board games, but found that the task unlocked a wealth of creative and interdisciplinary skills: “It started as a numeracy lesson, but... the amount of creativity that came into it... they were using techniques from literacy, and at the end I got each group to present their board game. They were using their public speaking skills. So, it goes beyond even what you think... it started as numeracy and it just went even further than that” (Teacher 7, FG2).

Notably, the pupils became so absorbed in designing rules, themes, and narratives for their games that “they completely forgot that the focus was numeracy” (Teacher 7, FG2), yet they were still practising those maths skills incidentally while also developing communication, design, and teamwork abilities. This example illustrates how playfulness can foster creativity and holistic learning. Pupils approached a maths review in an inventive way, demonstrating originality and enthusiasm. In general, teachers valued that play allows children to explore ideas freely, often leading to imaginative outcomes (e.g. elaborate pretend scenarios or student-created materials) that standard lessons would not produce. Such creative experiences can strengthen students’ love of learning and ability to think outside the box.

The social and relational benefits of playful learning were another prominent theme. Teachers observed improvements in pupils’ collaboration, communication, and peer relationships when play was integrated into the classroom. One focus group noted that their pupils “needed a lot of movement, a lot of opportunities to talk, and a lot of opportunities to share,” and that playful activities provided exactly that, “teaching them how to work together” (FG3) in the process.

Rather than sitting silently in rows, students in a playful classroom frequently work in pairs or groups, discuss strategies, negotiate roles, and help each other, all of which build important teamwork and communication skills. For example, a teacher described a themed play area (“World War Two” props and costumes) where pupils collaboratively engage in imaginative play, taking turns and building on each other’s ideas. She noted it has been “really good” for her Primary class, especially as they rotate roles and activities over time so that “they all get a go doing something” (Teacher 7, FG2), learning to cooperate and share responsibilities.

Several teachers explicitly connected these experiences to real-world skills. One remarked that while collaborative group work can sometimes be challenging (not all children initially love working in teams), “it teaches them so many skills too... they learn to work

collaboratively, and that's real life" (Teacher 2, FG3). From this perspective, the playful classroom becomes a microcosm of society where pupils practise social skills like negotiation, leadership, listening, and empathy in a safe setting. These relational outcomes are valuable in their own right, contributing to pupils' personal development. Furthermore, improved peer interaction often led to a more positive classroom climate. Teachers found that as children played and learned together, they became more supportive and confident.

One teacher in FG1, mentioned that during play, she often joined in or chatted alongside pupils, rather than instructing from the front. This shift in teacher role can humanise the teacher-student relationship. "Doing it with them and chatting to them is a big thing, instead of... chatting at them," she explained, noting that playful pedagogy tends to "open up" a more conversational, trusting dynamic between teachers and pupils (Teacher 8, FG1). In sum, teachers reported that playful learning not only boosts academic engagement but also cultivates a classroom environment where children feel free to express themselves, collaborate with classmates, and develop confidence, outcomes that are dispositional (increased motivation, creativity, resilience) and relational (better teamwork, communication, and rapport) in nature.

Challenges to Implementing Playful Learning: Focus Group Insights

Structural and Planning Challenges

Despite their enthusiasm for playfulness, teachers candidly discussed multiple challenges in implementing playful learning, particularly related to classroom structure, curriculum demands, and lesson planning. A common concern was the initial difficulty of managing a playful classroom without it descending into actual chaos. Introducing more open-ended, active learning requires teachers to adjust their classroom management strategies.

One teacher noted that when a class is new to playful methods, "it can seem chaotic to start with" (Teacher 2, FG3), as pupils may test limits or misunderstand the freedom. Another added that educators "have to be prepared to... lose control" (Teacher 10, FG2) to some extent, meaning they must accept a higher noise level and more pupil movement than in a traditional class. This loss of the teacher's tight control can be uncomfortable for some. "You

need to be playful... you have to be prepared to lose, like, lose control," one teacher emphasised, acknowledging that "you have to" (Teacher 10, FG2) find a balance even if some teachers find it harder to relinquish old norms.

In the focus groups, participants reflected that adopting playful pedagogy "takes courage" (Teacher 9, FG2) on the part of the teacher (especially in upper primary years) to break from the traditional expectation that a quiet, orderly classroom with written work is the only evidence of learning. "I think it takes courage... to step away from having to have written evidence," one experienced teacher admitted, "after so many years" (Teacher 9, FG2) of being used to books and worksheets. She reiterated, "it takes a bit of courage to say this is a good way to do this," (Teacher 9, FG2) knowing that this approach might be questioned by others who equate learning solely with formal outputs. Thus, a significant structural challenge is overcoming the ingrained mindset (in schools, and even among parents or colleagues) that a playful classroom is "just play" and not serious learning. Teachers felt a need to justify and demonstrate the value of playful learning to sceptics.

Another structural challenge lies in aligning playful methods with certain curriculum requirements and content areas. Teachers pointed out that not everything is easily taught through play; some skills or topics, especially in upper grades, still seem to require direct instruction or written practice. For instance, a teacher struggled with making literacy mechanics playful: "What I find difficult is... areas like grammar or spelling, where they need to apply (rules). ...I was thinking, how can I make the possessive apostrophe fun without writing it down?... That would be a challenge." She concluded that some traditional exercises (e.g. grammar drills or exam practice papers) felt unavoidable: "that's the sort of (thing) you have to do" (Teacher 10, FG2) in a conventional way.

This sentiment was echoed in discussions about standardised testing and rigid curricula. One teacher noted "unfortunately, we are still assessing the children the same way... (they're) still doing" (Teacher 3, FG3) standardised reading and maths tests each year. Such external assessments and syllabus pressures can limit the scope for play, as teachers must prepare pupils for formal tests using more structured methods. The focus groups suggested that exam preparation and coverage of mandatory content often compete with playful innovation. For example, a teacher in Primary 3 worried that her recent shift towards "task-based" playful learning, while beneficial in many ways, might also be "closed" in scope and not allow children

to take learning in their own direction. She found herself uncertain “if that’s the right way to go about it... or not,” (Teacher 1, FG1) reflecting a tension between child-led play and meeting curriculum targets.

This highlights a planning challenge: teachers must carefully design playful activities that still hit required learning objectives, and sometimes they are unsure how far to let children’s explorations go. Indeed, one teacher commented that ensuring purposeful play is key, “not just playing for the sake of it”, and that finding this balance “can sometimes be a challenge” (Teacher 3, FG3) when planning lessons. Teachers felt they had to constantly consider: “How can we make this playful but still meet the learning intent?”, essentially double planning to satisfy both engagement and curriculum outcomes.

Resource and Time Barriers

The focus groups also shed light on practical resource and time constraints that hinder the implementation of playful learning. One major issue is the limited availability of additional adult support and materials in the classroom. Playful, hands-on activities often involve running simultaneous centres or group tasks, which can be difficult for a single teacher to supervise.

A teacher from School 1 noted, “I don’t have a classroom assistant... A lot of activities... (have) different groups happening at the same time, and it’s hard when there isn’t another adult to make sure that everybody stays on task” (Teacher 7, FG2). She explained that when pupils are working independently in multiple small groups, “sometimes they go off... they finished (one role),” and without help she cannot attend to all groups promptly. “It would be easier if there was another body in the room to help... and keep an eye on that,” she concluded (Teacher 7, FG2). This highlights a staffing constraint, as many classrooms, especially in later primary, do not have full-time teaching assistants. Without support, the teacher must either limit the complexity of playful tasks or continually rotate around the room, which can be stressful and less effective. In another group, teachers mentioned they were fortunate to have classroom assistants who, once briefed on the approach, actively participated in facilitating play. Not everyone has that luxury, and some schools might have no extra personnel or have assistants assigned to specific special-needs duties only. Thus, lacking adequate adult supervision is a practical barrier to certain kinds of playful learning (outdoor

explorations, elaborate role plays, or concurrent activity stations) due to safety and management concerns.

Similarly, teachers identified insufficient resources and space as obstacles. Playful learning often requires manipulatives, games, or environmental enhancements (like costumes, construction materials, or digital tools) that are not always readily available in every school or classroom. One teacher described a challenge during her "smoothie shop" capacity lesson: ideally each student would have measurement tools and ingredients to experiment with, "but sometimes... resources... can be lacking. It would be ideal if you had all different test tubes and everything for everyone... sometimes (there's) just not enough. So, it (was) restricted slightly" (Teacher 10, FG2).

She managed by having pupils work in groups and take turns but noted the activity could have been even more effective if better resourced. This scenario is common, as teachers often improvise with limited materials, which can constrain the scale or inclusivity of a playful task. Another example came from a teacher who set up a themed play area for her class; she highlighted how they rotate themes each term (e.g. a "World War II" corner with vintage props) and how valuable it is to have that dedicated space (Teacher 7, FG2). However, not all classrooms or schools have spare space for a play corner or the budget to stock it with relevant materials each term. In some cases, teachers invest personal time and money to create resources (printing game boards, collecting loose parts, etc.), which is admirable but not always sustainable. The focus group discussions suggested that unequal resource distribution, whether it be physical materials or appropriate spaces (like outdoor areas or large rooms for movement), can result in variability in how well playful learning can be implemented across different settings.

Time emerged as another critical barrier, both in terms of planning time for teachers and time within the school schedule for playful activities. Teachers emphasised that designing and organising playful lessons can be time-consuming. "It's a different type of teaching... you need to be organised with it," one teacher explained. "You can't wing it. You can't have an off day... you need to be ready for the children, because they deserve that" (Teacher 3, FG3). This quotation underlines that successful playful learning requires careful thought and preparation, as one must gather materials, set up the environment, anticipate how pupils might engage, and be prepared to guide or intervene appropriately. For already busy

teachers, especially those working alone, this extra planning load is a genuine challenge. Some focus group participants described how they tackled this by collaborative planning: for instance, a team of four teachers would meet to brainstorm playful lesson ideas together, effectively sharing the workload of creativity (FG2). They started small, aiming for two playful lessons per week and sometimes only managing one, gradually building a repertoire of tried and tested activities (FG2). Over time, they compiled these ideas into planning documents for future use, thereby easing the burden in subsequent years. This strategy of teamwork and gradual implementation acknowledges the reality of limited planning time. It suggests that without such support or experience, an individual teacher might struggle to routinely design playful lessons for every topic.

Time within the school day is also a factor, as pressure to cover the syllabus can squeeze out longer play sessions. One teacher mentioned that in a hectic week they "might have only had one" playful lesson instead of the goal of two (Teacher 6, FG2). Additionally, transitions into playful activities can require extra minutes to set expectations or clean up afterwards, which tight timetables do not always accommodate. Thus, time management is a constant consideration: teachers must balance the time invested in playful learning with other teaching responsibilities and fixed schedule components.

Finally, the focus on time and resources connects to a broader systemic challenge: the educational system's current structure may not fully support playful pedagogy. As noted, standard assessments and packed curricula demand a significant portion of time, and resources are often allocated toward core academic necessities rather than play materials. Until systemic changes occur (e.g., recognising play as a vital part of learning in policy and providing matching resources), teachers are left to find creative ways around these barriers. For instance, one teacher pointed out that even though assessment methods haven't changed ("we're still doing [the tests]"), the playful approach in her class was yielding better results on those tests anyway, "which has definitely (been) a positive impact" (Teacher 3, FG3). This is a heartening insight, as it suggests that even under current constraints, playfulness can boost outcomes, but it doesn't remove the extra effort teachers must expend to implement it. In conclusion, the teachers in these focus groups identified tangible resource shortages and time constraints as key barriers to implementing playful learning. While they have developed coping strategies (like sharing ideas, starting small, or repurposing materials), these

challenges underscore that sustaining a playful classroom requires not just individual teacher passion but also sufficient support in terms of staff, materials, and time allocation.

Reflective Diary Insights on Playful Pedagogy

The teacher reflective diaries strongly corroborate the focus-group findings that playful pedagogy heightens pupil engagement and deepens understanding of academic content. Teachers consistently observed that children were highly motivated and engrossed when learning through hands-on, playful experiences.

In a Primary 3 lesson on contractions, for example, one teacher noted that "the children definitely achieved the learning intention" through an interactive task-board activity and now understand how to make and use contractions in their writing. She attributed this success to play-based learning, emphasising that making the lesson fun ensured all pupils, regardless of ability, could grasp a concept that is "quite tricky" for that age group. This diary evidence reinforces the focus-group reports of improved understanding: playful methods enabled even challenging content to be learnt effectively, with the teacher confidently stating the learning goal "has been achieved". Incidentally, the diary reflections deepen this finding by illustrating why engagement was so high (as this teacher put it), "play is a child's area of expertise. It's where they learn best", underlining that pupils naturally invest more attention and effort when learning is enjoyable (Teacher 3, RD).

Across various subjects, the diaries describe similarly enhanced engagement leading to meaningful understanding. In one Numeracy lesson, the "excitement in the room was palpable" as pupils designed their own maths board games, buzzing with ideas and eager to start. This enthusiastic participation went hand in hand with deep learning: children applied year-long maths skills (fractions, time, multiplication, shape) to create games, showing that they could transfer and use knowledge creatively. The teacher noted that the playful project "brought together everything we've been working on in numeracy" in a joyful, meaningful and deeply memorable way, reminding pupils that maths isn't just about textbook problems but about using skills "in a creative, collaborative and exciting way" (Teacher 7, RD).

Such diary accounts support the focus group's claims about greater understanding: children not only met curriculum objectives but did so with better retention and comprehension, as the learning felt authentic and memorable. Another diary recounts a measurement lesson where using a smoothie-making context made abstract concepts tangible. Pupils found capacity measurement "relevant, fun, and memorable" when designing smoothie recipes, and they became notably more confident in reading scales and converting units by applying these skills in a real-world task. The teacher observed that this playful, context-based approach naturally led to high engagement and practical understanding of millilitres and litres, evidence again that enjoyment and immersion drive academic learning (Teacher 10, RD).

Importantly, the diaries also reveal that playful pedagogy can enable inclusive understanding. Teachers reported that active, game-like tasks allowed all children to succeed and feel a sense of achievement, not just the high attainers. In the contractions lesson, the teacher pointed out that using interactive activities instead of worksheets "ensured that all children felt the sense of achievement" in learning the concept (Teacher 3, RD). In the board game project, every child had a chance to contribute according to their strengths, one diary noted it "gave every child a chance to shine," drawing out different abilities (creative design, storytelling, maths skills) that traditional lessons might not tap (Teacher 7, RD). Even pupils who were "normally quite anxious" about numeracy took the lead during the game presentations, demonstrating newfound understanding and ownership of the material (Teacher 7, RD). These vignettes from the diaries deepen the focus-group finding by illustrating how playful learning not only boosts general engagement but also ensures deeper and broader understanding across the class, including pupils who might otherwise disengage. Teachers themselves, through reflection, came to appreciate that playful methods integrate multiple areas of learning. One teacher was surprised by "how much cross-curricular learning went into" a simple Lego pyramid activity, children were simultaneously learning geometry, engineering, history, and language skills through play without even realising it (Teacher 1, RD). Such reflections indicate that playful pedagogy can unlock rich learning experiences, confirming and expanding upon the benefits identified in focus-group discussions.

Dispositional and Relational Outcomes (Diary Reflections)

The reflective diaries strongly support the focus-group findings that playful pedagogy fosters positive dispositional and relational outcomes for pupils. Teachers repeatedly observed improvements in children's attitudes, social skills and emotional development when using playful learning. For instance, many diary entries highlight growth in pupil confidence and willingness to take initiative. In the maths board game project, pupils had to present their games to the class, an activity that significantly built their confidence in public speaking and pride in their work. The teacher wrote that the lesson "gave them a chance to practise public speaking, build their confidence and take ownership of their work", noting with pride how even normally timid pupils "came alive" and took the lead (Teacher 7, RD).

The reflective diary accounts emphasise that it wasn't just the typically high-achieving or outgoing children who stood out; the playful task "drew out strengths in so many different areas" (Teacher 7, RD), allowing children with various dispositions to excel and feel proud. This echoes the focus-group reports of increased pupil self-esteem and agency, while adding concrete examples: one anxious child became a group's spokesperson, and creative pupils who struggle in formal maths could showcase their ideas through game design. Such outcomes suggest that playful pedagogy not only teaches content but also nurtures confident, resilient learners, a point made tangible by the teachers' first-hand narratives. Collaboration and improved relationships among pupils were also common themes in the diaries, reinforcing the focus-group's observations of enhanced social skills. Playful activities often required teamwork, and teachers saw notable progress in how pupils interacted. In one case, a teacher reflected that some table groups who had "struggled with teamwork earlier in the year now worked confidently and respectfully together" during a playful group task, a dramatic improvement attributed to the collaborative nature of the activity (Teacher 7, RD).

Another diary describing a creative construction task (building forms of transport from blocks) illustrates how play encouraged children to "band together" organically. The pupils self-organised roles (driver, ticket conductor, etc.) and "all played really nicely together," drawing on their imaginations and even experiences outside school to enrich the group narrative. The teacher was struck by how this open-ended, play-based challenge taught them to work

cooperatively: “they really enjoyed it, and I think they learned how to work together” (Teacher 8, RD).

These instances support the idea from focus groups that playful learning bolsters peer relationships and class cohesion. The diaries deepen that finding by showing play in action: pupils naturally communicating, negotiating roles, and helping each other within engaging tasks. One teacher observed children “saying, ‘What about doing this instead of that?’… helping each other out” while building Lego structures, evidence of organic peer coaching and problem-solving (Teacher 1, RD). Another noted that a fun practical context like smoothie-making “encouraged group work, collaboration, and discussion, with each pupil contributing” to the shared goal. These reflections illustrate how playful pedagogy creates a social learning environment where pupils feel included and valued. Indeed, something as simple as wearing safety goggles as part of the smoothie experiment made each child feel “included, important, and engaged”, a small touch that strengthened their sense of belonging and excitement Teacher 10, RD).

In addition to social development, the diaries indicate that playful pedagogy cultivates positive learner dispositions like creativity, curiosity and resilience. Teachers recounted numerous instances of pupils thinking imaginatively and persisting through challenges during play. In the Lego pyramid activity, pupils had to experiment with designs and cope with failure as structures collapsed. The teacher noted seeing children get frustrated and then calm themselves and adapt their approach, or peers stepping in with suggestions, in short, pupils practising self-regulation and problem-solving in a real context (Teacher 1, RD).

The focus group had identified increased creativity and problem-solving skills as outcomes of playful learning; the diaries affirm this with concrete classroom evidence. One reflection called the board game lesson a “rich discussion and peer feedback” session, where pupils’ curiosity led them to ask each other questions about their game rules unprompted. Another diary described how giving pupils open-ended tasks and space to explore led to “ideas and imagination” highlighting how play draws out inventive thinking. Teachers themselves appeared pleasantly surprised at the pupils’ creative capacities, a teacher wrote that the lesson “made me stop and feel incredibly proud watching them,” as it revealed how far the children had come in creativity, teamwork and confidence (Teacher 7, RD). This sense of pride suggests that the relational impact extends to teacher–pupil relationships as well: through

playful pedagogy, teachers saw their pupils in a new light and felt a stronger connection as facilitators of joyful learning. Overall, the reflective diaries strongly support the focus-group's conclusions that playful pedagogy yields valuable dispositional and social gains, while also deepening those conclusions by providing vivid, personal illustrations of children collaborating, gaining confidence and expressing their creativity in the primary classroom.

Challenges to Implementing Playful Learning (Diary Insights)

The diaries echo the focus-group discussions of various challenges in implementing playful pedagogy, while also offering insight into how teachers navigated these difficulties. A recurring challenge mentioned is practical constraints, such as time, resources, and classroom management, which can complicate playful activities. Teachers in the focus group had noted that play-based lessons often require more time and careful planning, and the diaries confirm this. One teacher frankly acknowledged that a complex creative task "can't be rushed", it took longer than a traditional lesson, and she had to "step back and just allow the process to unfold" (Teacher 7, RD). Time management became crucial; another diary reports that during a hands-on capacity lesson, "pupils needed sufficient time to measure accurately without feeling rushed," especially when working in groups (Teacher 10, RD). This aligns with the focus-group's caution that balancing the curriculum timetable with open-ended play is tricky. However, the diaries also show that when time was invested, the payoff was "more than worth it" in terms of learning outcomes. Teachers learnt to adjust their expectations, one reflected that she simply had to relinquish a bit of control over pacing, trusting that deep learning was happening even if the activity ran long (Teacher 7, RD). In this way, the diaries deepen the understanding of the time challenge: rather than simply identifying it as an obstacle, they document how teachers coped by prioritising pupil experience over rigid schedules.

Managing resources and classroom dynamics is another challenge highlighted both in focus groups and diaries. Playful pedagogy often involves materials and movement, which can create organisational difficulties. In the reflective diaries, teachers noted that ensuring fair access to resources and handling the inevitable mess or noise requires proactive measures. For example, during the smoothie-making lesson, the teacher had to organise clear ground rules to manage spills and see that all pupils got a turn with equipment (Teacher 10, RD). Likewise, a teacher using Lego blocks found that limited materials led to "a few arguments

over certain things, like people wanting certain colours or there not being enough Lego for everyone" (Teacher 1, RD). This directly supports the focus-group identification of resource constraints as a challenge to playful learning. The diary entries also show teachers' responses to these issues, in the Lego activity, for instance, the teacher reflected that next time she "would probably get more Lego boxes" to avoid competition over pieces (Teacher 1, RD).

In general, the diaries illustrate that effective preparation (having sufficient materials, setting rules) is key to surmounting logistical challenges in playful tasks, a point likely raised in focus group advice as well. Notably, one teacher reported that in her structured learning stations approach, challenges were minimal because roles were well defined: misconceptions could be addressed at a teacher-led station and a teaching assistant helped facilitate another station. This example suggests that certain models of play (like task boards or rotating stations) can mitigate management difficulties, an insight that adds nuance to the focus-group's discussion of challenges by indicating potential solutions (Teacher 2, RD).

Perhaps the most salient challenge evident in the diaries is the teacher's own role adjustment, knowing when and how to intervene in playful learning. This was less explicitly mentioned in focus-group summaries of challenges, which tended to focus on external factors, but the diaries "complicate" the picture by revealing the internal challenges teachers faced. One teacher candidly wrote about her dilemma in a free-play construction activity: "I tried not to intervene… and I regret intervening" on one occasion, as stepping in too soon disrupted the children's role-play scenario. She reflected that the pupils might have stayed fully immersed in their imaginative narrative had she not interrupted, even though her intention was to guide a pupil. This highlights a delicate challenge unique to playful pedagogy: teachers must restrain the instinct to direct, and instead act as observers and facilitators, which can be uncomfortable for those used to tight control (Teacher 8, RD).

The focus groups might not have captured this personal challenge in depth, but the diary entries show the same teacher actively learning "the best time to intervene" and to keep in mind the pupils' learning goals without unnecessarily halting their momentum (Teacher 8, RD). Another teacher's diary similarly noted that she had to give pupils "space to lead their own learning," fighting the urge to over-structure, since interference or rushing could undermine the benefits of the playful task. These reflections complicate the understanding of implementation challenges by adding the dimension of teacher adaptability and trust in the

process. It underscores that professional development is required for teachers to become comfortable with the organised chaos of playful classrooms (Teacher 7, RD).

Despite these challenges, the tone of the reflective diaries is one of problem-solving and adjustment rather than defeat. Challenges are followed by "action taken" or next steps in nearly every entry. For example, when some pupils struggled to read measuring scales, the teacher responded with extra modelling and visual support (Teacher 10, RD). When pupils bickered, teachers considered how to improve grouping or resources next time (Teacher 2, RD). Teachers also highlighted that many potential issues (misconceptions, unequal participation) could be addressed through careful lesson design or on-the-spot facilitation. One diary explicitly states that "nothing that I can think of" became a serious problem because the playful task was structured to allow the teacher to work with all pupils and handle needs as they arose (Teacher 3, RD). This proactive and reflective stance complements the focus-group perspective by showing that while challenges to playful pedagogy are real, they are surmountable with reflective practice and pedagogical creativity. In sum, the diaries validate the focus group's enumeration of challenges, time pressure, resource management, classroom control, while also enriching the conversation by describing how teachers noticed, learnt from, and in many cases overcame these hurdles in practice.

Concluding Summary: Teachers' Perspectives on the Benefits and Challenges of Playfulness in Primary Teaching and Learning

Across both the focus groups and reflective diaries, teachers consistently articulated that infusing playfulness into primary teaching and learning brings substantial benefits for children's engagement, understanding, dispositions, and relationships. At the same time, they highlighted a set of practical, structural, and pedagogical challenges that shape how playfulness can be enacted in everyday classroom practice.

From teachers' perspectives, one of the most significant benefits of playfulness is its impact on pupil engagement and depth of learning. Teachers repeatedly observed that when learning experiences were playful, hands-on, and meaningful, children became more motivated, sustained their focus for longer, and engaged more deeply with challenging content. Playfulness helped to "mask" the work of learning, allowing pupils to immerse themselves in activities without the anxiety often associated with traditional, worksheet-based tasks. Both focus group discussions and diary entries provided compelling examples of improved

conceptual understanding, particularly where abstract ideas were made tangible through physical movement, role-play, or real-life contexts. Teachers noted that learning achieved through playful experiences was often more memorable, transferable, and inclusive, enabling a wider range of learners to succeed.

Beyond academic outcomes, teachers emphasised the dispositional and relational value of playfulness in the classroom. Playful approaches were seen to foster curiosity, creativity, confidence, and resilience, particularly by creating emotionally safe spaces where mistakes were viewed as part of learning rather than failure. Teachers described how playfulness supported quieter or less confident pupils to participate more fully, take on leadership roles, and express their ideas. Socially, playful learning strengthened collaboration, communication, and peer relationships, helping children to practise teamwork, negotiation, and empathy in authentic ways. Importantly, teachers also reflected on how playfulness altered teacher–pupil relationships, shifting interactions from "talking at" children to learning alongside them, which contributed to more trusting, open classroom cultures.

However, teachers were equally candid about the challenges of embedding playfulness in primary education. A recurring concern was the tension between playful pedagogy and existing structural expectations within schools, including curriculum coverage, assessment demands, and the perceived need for written evidence of learning. Many teachers described the courage required to move away from traditional models of teaching and to tolerate higher levels of noise, movement, and uncertainty. Managing what teachers described as "constructive chaos" required clear routines, strong relationships, and confidence in the value of playfulness as a legitimate pedagogical approach.

Time and resources were also significant barriers. Teachers highlighted the additional planning time required to design purposeful playful experiences and the difficulty of facilitating complex activities without sufficient adult support or materials. Limited space, staffing constraints, and uneven access to resources often shaped what was possible in practice. These challenges were particularly evident in larger classes or where teachers worked without classroom assistants. Nonetheless, teachers also shared strategies for managing these barriers, including collaborative planning, starting small, reusing and adapting resources, and gradually building confidence through experience.

The reflective diaries added further depth by revealing the internal challenges teachers faced, particularly around knowing when to intervene and when to step back in play. Teachers reflected on learning to trust the process of playfulness, resisting the urge to over-direct, and becoming more comfortable with uncertainty. These reflections suggest that developing playful pedagogy is as much about teacher identity and professional learning as it is about activities or resources.

Overall, teachers' accounts present playfulness in teaching and learning as highly beneficial but not without complexity. Playfulness was not viewed as an "add-on" or a reward, but as a powerful way of enriching learning experiences, supporting inclusion, and nurturing positive learner dispositions across all primary stages. At the same time, teachers' perspectives highlight the need for supportive school cultures, professional learning, time, and resources to sustain playful practice meaningfully. These insights underline that embedding playfulness is an ongoing, reflective process, that requires both individual teacher commitment and whole-school support to become embedded in everyday classroom life.

CONCLUDING INSIGHTS: REFRAMING PLAYFULNESS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

This study set out to explore how playfulness in teaching and learning is conceptualised, enacted, and experienced across the primary school, drawing on the perspectives of both teachers and children. By bringing together insights from the literature, a baseline survey, and an in-depth, reflective intervention, the findings offer a nuanced understanding of playfulness as a pedagogical quality rather than a bounded activity or age-specific approach. Three overarching insights emerge from the study.

1. Playfulness as a Shared, Lived Experience Across Teachers and Children

A key insight from the study is the strong alignment between teachers' and children's conceptualisations of playfulness. While expressed through different language and experiences, both groups consistently described playfulness as something that is *felt* rather than simply *done*. For children, playfulness was associated with choice, enjoyment, curiosity, movement, and being with others. For teachers, it was linked to engagement, motivation, creativity, and meaningful learning. Together, these perspectives challenge narrow or activity-based definitions of play and reinforce the idea that playfulness is a quality of experience shaped by agency, relationships, and emotional safety.

Importantly, children's voices played a central role in shaping this understanding. Their insights highlighted that playfulness is diminished when learning feels overly controlled, passive, or disconnected from their interests, and strengthened when they are trusted to explore, imagine, and collaborate. These shared conceptualisations provided the foundation for the development of the SPARC framework, ensuring that it was grounded not only in professional discourse but also in children's lived classroom experiences.

This finding responds directly to gaps identified in the literature, which often privilege adult interpretations of playfulness or confine children's perspectives to early years contexts. By foregrounding children's voices alongside teachers', the study demonstrates that playfulness remains meaningful and valued by learners across all primary stages.

2. SPARC as a Practice-Based Framework for Playfulness

The SPARC framework represents a central contribution of this study. Emerging inductively from the combined insights of teachers and children, SPARC reframes playfulness through five interconnected dimensions: **Spontaneous, Purposeful, Active, Relational, and Curious**. Rather than positioning playfulness as an alternative to curriculum-driven learning, SPARC conceptualises it as a pedagogical stance that can permeate both play-based and task-related experiences.

Crucially, SPARC moves beyond age-phase assumptions. The findings show that playfulness can be enacted meaningfully in Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2 classrooms when learning experiences are designed to allow flexibility, agency, collaboration, and inquiry. Teachers' video-stimulated reflections and classroom cameos illustrated how SPARC came to life through everyday practice, not as scripted activities, but through responsive teaching, thoughtful environments, and rich interactions.

By offering a shared language for playfulness, SPARC supports teachers in articulating what they are doing and why it matters. This is particularly important in contexts where playfulness may be questioned or marginalised. Rather than diluting rigour, the framework demonstrates how purpose, challenge, and curriculum intent can coexist with spontaneity, curiosity, and enjoyment. In this way, SPARC acts as both an analytic lens and a practical guide, bridging theory, research, and classroom practice.

3. Enacting Playfulness Requires Pedagogical Courage and Supportive Conditions

The study also highlights that while the benefits of playfulness are substantial, embedding it across primary education is neither simple nor straightforward. Teachers consistently described playfulness as highly beneficial for engagement, understanding, inclusion, and learner dispositions. At the same time, they were candid about the challenges they faced, including curriculum pressures, assessment demands, time constraints, limited resources, and the need to manage what was often described as "constructive chaos".

A significant insight is that enacting playfulness requires pedagogical courage. Teachers spoke of the discomfort involved in stepping away from traditional expectations of quiet classrooms,

written evidence, and tight control. Reflective diaries revealed internal tensions around when to intervene, when to step back, and how to trust the learning process. These challenges were not framed as failures but as part of an ongoing professional learning journey.

The findings suggest that playfulness is most sustainable when supported by enabling conditions: collaborative planning, shared vision, professional learning opportunities, flexible environments, and a school culture that values learning as well as outcomes. Playfulness, therefore, cannot rest solely on individual teacher enthusiasm. It requires systemic support if it is to become embedded rather than episodic.

Final Reflections

Taken together, the findings of this study reposition playfulness as a legitimate, powerful, and necessary dimension of primary teaching and learning. By centring both teachers' and children's perspectives, the study challenges enduring binaries between play and learning and demonstrates how playfulness can be meaningfully enacted across the primary years. The SPARC framework offers a coherent, practice-facing way of understanding and supporting this work, while the insights into benefits and challenges highlight the importance of reflective practice and supportive school cultures.

Ultimately, this study suggests that playfulness is not something to be "added in" when time allows, nor confined to particular ages or activities. Instead, it is a way of shaping learning experiences so that they are engaging, relational, purposeful, and alive with curiosity. When conditions allow, playfulness has the potential to enrich not only what children learn, but how they experience learning and how teachers experience teaching across the primary school.

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