

Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate Practice Handbook

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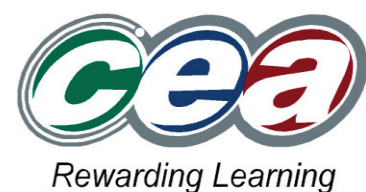
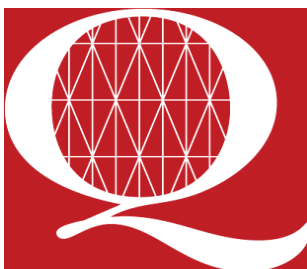
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Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidance Pack

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6. Summary of research of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project: This is a copy of the summary report submitted to CCEA at the conclusion of the Enriched Curriculum project.
7. Research papers:
 - Walsh, G., C. McGuinness, L. Sproule, and K. Trew. 2010. Implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in Northern Ireland primary schools: What lessons have we learned? *Early Years* 30: 53-66.
 - Walsh, G., L. Sproule, C. McGuinness, and K. Trew. 2011. Playful structure: a novel image of early years pedagogy for primary school classrooms. *Early Years* 31: 107-119.
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Statement on Ethics

The research was conducted following the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and each phase of the research was granted ethical approval by the Queen's University School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

The Handbook

1. Introduction

This handbook is intended to provide guidance on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in early years primary school classrooms. It is directed primarily at Foundation Stage teachers, although teachers of other age groups, particularly in Key Stage 1, may find parts of it useful. The Handbook is part of a larger Guidance Pack whose contents are listed on the inside cover at the beginning of the Handbook. The purpose of the guidance is to help teachers become more confident and competent practitioners, working in the context of a play-based and informal curriculum.

The guidance is built around an overarching pedagogical principle called **Playful Structure**, supported by **Six Pillars** of good classroom practice. The six pillars are:

1. Establishing secure relationships
2. Enjoying playful Interactions
3. Creating playful opportunities
4. Providing adequate structure
5. Respecting individual differences
6. Managing progression and transitions

The guidance pack grew from a research project carried out with Northern Ireland teachers over several years, in the context of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Project. This Handbook gives a brief overview of the background to the research project, and the tensions and dilemmas that early years classroom teachers experienced as they shifted their practice in the direction of a more informal, developmentally appropriate and play-based pedagogy.

The Handbook describes how the Playful Structure principle emerged from classroom observations of Northern Ireland teachers and was linked to the new understandings and

re-thinking of early years pedagogy which are currently being discussed and debated in the early years research and practice literature. The main part of the Handbook describes the six pillars in detail and discusses their meaning. This main section underlies and supplements the information found on the six Pillar Cards. Finally, there are some suggestions for how the six Pillar Cards can be used by teachers, schools and/or training staff for professional development.

2. Background

All nations in the UK have moved, or are planning to move, their educational policies in the direction of a more play-based and developmentally-appropriate approach to teaching and learning in the early school years. There is a renewed emphasis on articulating and aligning the expectations for children — and their experiences — in preschools and in early primary school classes.

Northern Ireland is in a unique position because a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum, known as the Enriched Curriculum (EC), was introduced as a pilot in over 100 schools in Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2002 and continued until the Foundation Stage was introduced in 2007. The implementation and outcomes of the Enriched Curriculum were evaluated over eight years, in the following ways:

- teachers, school principals, parents and children gave their views;
- early years classrooms were observed; and
- children's learning was tracked until they left primary school in Year 7.

So there is now a rich source of evidence, *specific* to Northern Ireland schools, to guide teachers, and to help them expand and improve their practice. Northern Ireland teachers are well placed to lead the way in creating a community of expert early years practitioners in play-based pedagogy and curriculum in *primary* schools.

3. Sources of Evidence

This guidance draws on several sources of evidence:

- Theory, research and practice about the meaning of ‘developmentally appropriate’ practice and a play-based curriculum, and how it has been discussed and debated in the early years research literature over the past ten years. (A full literature review is in Appendix 1).
- Interviews with the Northern Ireland teachers who taught the first two cohorts of children who participated in the Enriched Curriculum and with teachers who received the Enriched Curriculum children into their classrooms as they progressed up through the school. (Appendix 2: EYECEP Summary End-of-Phase 2 Research Reports).
- Structured classroom observations in over 100 Year 1 and Year 2 Enriched Curriculum classrooms, using an observation instrument called the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI), which was specially designed and validated for observing the quality of children’s learning experience in early years *primary* classrooms. Nine indicators of quality were observed: motivation, concentration, confidence, independence, physical well-being, multiple skill acquisition, higher-order thinking, social interaction and respect (Appendix 2, EYECEP Summary End-of-Phase 2 Research Reports and Appendix 3 which gives specific details of the Quality of Learning Instrument).
- In addition, more intensive observations were conducted in a sample of eight classrooms that had particularly high ratings on the Quality Learning Instrument. A team of two/three observers spent a minimum of three consecutive days in each of these high quality settings; 150 hours of observations were recorded, 45 hours were video recorded. The purpose of these observations was to identify pedagogical practices that enabled some settings to provide a higher quality learning experience for 4-6 years olds compared to others. The observations focused on teaching strategies, the role of the environment in terms of teachers’ interactions, teacher/child interactions, child/child interactions, the types of learning activities on

offer, and the classroom layout. These observations were the main source of evidence for the specific guidance, and the classroom cameos are drawn from the video recordings in these classrooms.

4. What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

The meaning of ‘developmentally appropriate’ practice is contested and the literature review in Appendix 1 explains how it has been debated, reviewed and revised over the past 20 years as new knowledge accumulated about children’s development and learning, and about the role of play in children’s learning. In particular, there has been a notable shift in theoretical perspective about the nature of children’s learning, from an ‘ages and stages’ developmental perspective (usually associated with Piaget) to an increased appreciation of the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing learning with children (usually associated with Vygotsky), and of the importance of social and cultural influences on children’s learning.

An up-to-date position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children in the US (NAEYC, 2009), based on current research, summarises their meaning as follows:

Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are — which means that teachers must get to know them well — and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable.

All teaching practices should be appropriate to children’s age and developmental stage, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.

Developmentally appropriate practice does not mean making things easier for children. Rather, it means ensuring that goals and experiences are suitable to their learning and development *and* challenging enough to promote their progress and interest.

Best practice is based on knowledge — not assumptions — of how children learn and develop. The research base yields major principles in human development and learning. Those principles, along with evidence about curriculum and teaching effectiveness, form a solid basis for decision making in early care and education.

(NAEYC, 2009)

The position statement goes on to point out that, in order to improve learning and teaching,

“a teacher’s moment-to-moment actions and interactions with children are the most powerful determinant of learning outcomes and development. Curriculum is very important, but what the teacher does is paramount.” (NAEYC, 2009, Key Messages)

That is why the focus for this Handbook is on adult-child interactions, irrespective of whether they are child-led or adult-initiated.

5. Learning and Teaching through Play

Play engages every aspect of the child’s experience — the physical activities of the child, the mind and imagination, as well as the emotions. It can involve working with others or working alone. Either way, it invites children to manage their own activities and show some degree of self-regulation. For these reasons (and many others), play holds a unique position as a means of learning for young children.

Despite its privileged position for children’s learning, teaching through play — ‘play as pedagogy’ — is not straightforward and the literature review reveals a re-appraisal of the meaning of play in primary early years classrooms (see Appendix 1 for more details). For example, teachers are often uncertain about their role in children’s play and whether they should intervene at all, and if so — when, how, and how much. In addition, the concept of free play has been critiqued, with some research suggesting that, if children are simply left to themselves, the dynamics of their play can reproduce inequalities that are endemic in adult culture, such as gendered roles or dominance hierarchies.

One of the most important findings from the classroom observations was that teachers in the Enriched Curriculum classes distributed their time differently compared to teachers in more traditional classes. More time was spent on child-initiated activities. Importantly, there was also a good balance between teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities and time was well distributed across play, practical activities and written work. Nevertheless, some teachers struggled to find out what was the ‘best balance’ for their particular children.

Elizabeth Wood, who has researched and written extensively on the relationships between teaching, learning and play, has argued that it is necessary to develop:

“a pedagogy of play that respects the ideological tradition, and provides a theoretically rigorous underpinning for creating unity between playing, learning and teaching.” (Wood, 2004, p 31)

The ideas in this handbook go some way towards achieving this unity.

6. Tensions and Dilemmas for Teachers

The findings from the different strands of research with the Northern Ireland teachers identified several tensions and dilemmas which they experienced as they embraced the principles and practices of a developmentally appropriate and play-based curriculum. The issues centred on:

- the role of the adult in a more play-based curriculum;
- drawing distinctions between ‘free play, ‘structured play’ and ‘formal work’;
- how best to distribute teacher’s time; and
- how to manage transitions between the informal and the formal as the children progressed over the course of a school year, and moved up through the first two years of primary school (now called the Foundation Stage) and on to Key Stage 1.

From the interviews with teachers, we found that they held different ideas and interpretations about what constituted developmentally appropriate practice, and these viewpoints affected how they structured learning activities and how they interacted with the children. For example, a dominant viewpoint held by the teachers could be classified as ‘maturationist’ which stresses that progress in learning in the early years is largely due to physical maturation in the brain and that they should be responsive to where children are. At first sight, this seems like a very good developmentally appropriate principle, yet an over-reliance on it can lead a teacher to adopt a passive role and thus not intervene in an appropriate way to provide challenge and move the children’s learning on — which is another good developmentally appropriate principle.

Thus the teachers experienced tensions between different and often conflicting goals —

- between adhering to a readiness or maturationist model of child development and thus ‘holding back’ vs. a more co-constructionist and scaffolding model and thus ‘intervening’ ; this tension was particularly acute for making decisions about when to move the children on to more formal approaches to teaching reading;
- between providing cognitive challenge in the effort to advance the children’s learning vs. presenting unachievable goals and thus engendering feelings of failure; and
- between the amounts of time spent on child-directed activities vs. adult-directed activities.

Teachers with more ‘balanced’ interpretations of developmentally appropriate practice appeared to recognise and deal with the tension between allowing children sufficient time to mature, and the necessity to maintain forward momentum in their learning. They were able to find the balance between providing sufficient challenge for children and allowing them time to understand fully new concepts and to practice new skills. They appeared to strike the right balance between child-led and teacher-initiated activities.

From the intensive study of the high quality settings, we tried to gain a coherent picture of how these tensions were successfully or not-so-successfully resolved.

7. Playful Structure — a new overarching principle

The findings from the research point to the need for a more extensive elaboration of what a play-based pedagogy means for the early years in primary school. To this end we have identified an overarching principle, called **Playful Structure**, as a means of breaking down dichotomies between informal and formal learning, and between play and work — which the teachers who created the highest quality learning experiences for children appeared to do. The idea of Playful Structure invites teachers to initiate and maintain a degree of ‘playfulness’ into the child’s learning experience, while at the same time maintaining adequate structure to ensure that effective learning takes place. Thus, the idea of play becomes a characteristic of the *interaction* between the adult and the child and not just a characteristic of child-initiated vs. adult-initiated activities. By this we mean that the

interaction assumes playful characteristics — for example, the tone is lighthearted, the activity become self-sustaining because both partners are enjoying it, and unexpected turns and directions are allowed. Blending these two concepts — playfulness and structure — and elaborating on what they mean in early years primary classroom, forms the basis for this guidance.

8. Playful Structure - Six Pillars of Practice

In order to illustrate the meaning of Playful Structure, Six Pillars for Practice, have been identified. We have chosen the word ‘pillar’ because of its literal meaning as ‘providing support to a superstructure’ of some kind, but also because it conveys ideas of ‘sturdiness’ and ‘reliability’. Also, physical structures such as buildings are usually supported by more than one pillar and they depend on all the pillars remaining intact and providing adequate support. If not, the physical structure will crumble or at least become distorted or lopsided. Similarly, the relationship between the principle of Playful Structure and the Six Pillars of Practice — although each pillar is described separately, they are interconnected and each one is important if the principle of Playful Structure is to be realised in classroom practice.

The pillars are organised as three sets of two pairs. This has been done in order to emphasise the overlapping nature of their subject matter, which is a direct consequence of the interconnected nature of children's learning. The three pairs are:

Pillar 1 Establishing secure relationships

Pillar 2 Enjoying playful interactions

These first two pillars focus particularly on relationships, and on the nature, quality and style of the social and pedagogical interactions between the adults and children in the classroom.

Pillar 3 Creating playful opportunities

Pillar 4 Providing appropriate structure

The second pair of pillars refers primarily to learning resources, to the opportunities for learning in the environment, to learning intentions, and to the organisation and pacing of learning.

Pillar 5 Respecting individual differences

Pillar 6 Managing progression and transitions

The final pair of pillars refers to adaptation and change — as the pedagogy adapts to the uniqueness of each child and changes as children grow and become more competent.

Pillar 1 Establishing Secure Relationships

Establishing secure relationships is foundational for advancing developmentally appropriate practice and for transforming the principle of Playful Structure into classroom practice. Children should enjoy good relationships with teaching staff if they are to acquire a positive emotional disposition for learning (see, e.g., Margetts, 2007). Optimum learning is most likely to occur when secure relationships are established. Most Year 1 classrooms are already warm and welcoming places; the challenge is to ensure that every child is secure in his or her relationships with the teacher and that children are secure with one another.

Children arrive in early years classrooms with their own unique history of family relationships and attachments. Some children may not initially respond positively to teachers and other children. It can be testing to maintain a positive approach with children who persist with disruptive behaviour and/or who are withdrawn or surly. Such children are likely to require a special level of warmth and understanding within a context of positive discipline. In some circumstances, teachers may find it necessary to seek the help of the special needs co-ordinator if they are not making progress with a particular child.

Equally, some children may interact well with adults but may not interact in a friendly and co-operative way with other children. Such children may expect or demand a disproportionate amount of the teacher's time. It may take a while before they realise that they have to share the teachers' time and attention with other children. It may help to be explicit about what the child should be doing and consistently praise the child's efforts when he/she behaves more appropriately. Some children also need to be encouraged to interact with their peers. Paired activities where the pair partner is varied from one session to

another will help to get them talking to their peers. It is not too soon to bring in conflict resolution protocols¹ in order to help children deal with arguments independently. Circle time activities can also be a good occasion for introducing positive behaviour towards peers. For example, turn to the person next to you and say something nice about them.

Finally, it is essential that the secure relationships of early years classrooms are not quickly eroded — and pupils alienated — as children grow older and become more aware of the institutionalised aspects of the teacher's role. One way that this can be achieved is by drawing peer relationships into the learning process, so that children are educated by peers as well as by teachers. This has advantages for both children in a learning relationship; the learning of the more advanced child can be clarified and secured by having to explain it to someone else. Another helpful approach might be to encourage teachers to ask children genuine questions and actively co-discover information that the teachers themselves do not know, so that children can see themselves as junior partners in an interactive learning process, rather than simply as passive receptacles for the teacher's knowledge.

Pillar 2 Enjoying *Playful Interactions*

At times in early years classrooms, there is too sharp a distinction drawn between 'play-time' and 'task-time'. This can lead to big differences in the roles adopted by the teacher and in the interactions between the teacher and the children in the two different contexts. The principle of Playful Structure, however, invites all interactions with and between children to be as playful and enjoyable as possible for all parties. This does not mean that all the time is allocated to play, but rather that all interactions should share some important characteristics of play;

- being intrinsically motivating, engaging and enjoyable;
 - being light-hearted in tone in the sense of being free from stress for both parties;
- and

¹ For example, if someone is doing something you don't like, first tell them you don't like it in a clear voice. If that doesn't work, get a friend to help you make it clear and only if all else fails, enlist the help of an adult.

- leaving some room for spontaneity.

Keeping the idea of playful interactions in mind can help teachers to refine their role in different kinds of activities. During the research-based classroom observations, we saw that some teachers were uncertain about their role during play. In interviews, some teachers also expressed great concerns about it. On the other hand, there were other teachers who showed great skill and flexibility in their role. This flexibility finds an echo in research in New Zealand early years classrooms, which has identified many different roles that can be adopted by teachers as they interact with children (Dunkin & Hanna, 2001). It may be of benefit here to consider the roles that can be adopted by the teacher. These are as follows:

- Co-player/play partner — this entails behaving like the child's peer in the sense of demonstrating appropriate play for a child of that age. This is particularly important for children whose play is at the level of much younger children when they start school. Note that children of school age often keep up a running commentary on their activities when engaging in pretend play, often taking the parts of other 'characters' such as dolls. This should be encouraged.
- Co-learner/co-explorer — here, the teacher is modelling the role he or she would wish to see the child taking. It could include looking for resources or information, asking for help and struggling with a problem.
- Facilitator — this means taking a step further back than when acting as co-learner. Here, the teacher only steps in when help is needed and gives the minimum help the child needs in order to make progress. In other words, the teacher is scaffolding the child's learning and encouraging independent learning.
- Listener/decoder — sometimes this means just listening and giving full attention to a child. But it can also mean acting as a sounding board for the child's ideas, reflecting their thinking back to them and sometimes restating the child's utterances so that they make more sense.
- Co-planner — here, the teacher and the child interact to further develop the activity. The teacher can make suggestions when the child cannot generate an idea alone and can comment favourably on good ideas.

- Commentator — this role involves being somewhat more directive but always with a positive spin as in “That’s a good idea but it would be even better if...”

All of these roles can contribute to episodes of ‘*sustained shared thinking*’. Siraj-Blatchford’s (2009) work on “sustained shared thinking” points to the importance of giving children an extended period of attention during which teacher and child work together to plan a project, solve a problem or explore a concept.

During more structured sessions (for example, task-time), we sometimes observed a big change in the teacher’s demeanour, with the atmosphere becoming more serious, some loss of warmth between teacher and child, and occasional signs of stress in children. The key to the teacher’s role in more structured work is to *keep it as playful as possible*. The tone of the interactions should be light and pleasurable for both parties. If the teacher is enjoying the interaction the child is also more likely to do so.

Some teachers have correctly taken on board the message that early years classrooms should be playful but they do not always distinguish between being child-led and child-centred. To be child-led is to follow where the child’s interests and enthusiasms lead. To be child-centred is to have the individual’s interests at heart. The best approach is to be always child-centred but not necessarily always child-led. Sometimes, this can mean redirecting and/or expanding the child’s interest in an alternative direction, rather than allowing him/her to spend the whole of play time on a very specific interest (e.g., the computer). At other times, the child’s natural inclination should drive the interaction; it depends on the goals of the activity.

In conclusion, it is very important that these playful interactions are *balanced* in terms of the following:

- Some should be child-led, others adult-directed. Generally, task time is more adult directed and play is more child-directed but there are no hard and fast boundaries. Furthermore, teachers should get involved even in child-directed activities. Classroom play should not always be completely free, for example, but should give children plenty of options and allow them to take the lead. Conversely, adult-directed activities can be made more playful and engaging for children, and one way

of doing this is to give children a role in influencing how they develop.

- There should be a reasonable distribution in the amount of time spent by the teacher in taking the various roles described above.
- Some sessions should be tightly framed, with very focussed learning intentions, and others should be more open. Usually, the second of these predominates during play but not necessarily so.

All this is challenging for the teacher to orchestrate in a busy classroom. Furthermore, it cannot be learned in a mechanical way. It is appropriate to recognise that experience will play a big part in this aspect of professional development.

Pillar 3 Creating Playful Opportunities

Creating playful opportunities is about more than making play resources and play activities available. Creating playful opportunities is about planning for and/or taking advantage of play-like opportunities (in the sense of having the playful characteristics described in the previous section) during structured activities as well as play. For example, in our 'Sentence on a Stick' cameo on the Creating Playful Opportunities pillar card, the teacher has turned what could have been a dry literacy lesson into a playful lesson by using a puppet and game-like language.

Resources can cause problems too. Firstly, having too many resources available at one time can be a problem, encouraging butterfly behaviour in children who find it difficult to settle to an activity. Secondly, some resources, such as computers or the house corner, attract gendered behaviour leading to the desirability of gently encouraging children to move around. With regard to new resources coming into the classroom, it is important to choose the right resources and often, these need not be expensive. Bodrova and Leong (2001), who have pioneered an early years programme based on Vygotskian principles, called 'Tools of the Mind', suggest that modern children have become over-used to complex, prescriptive toys, to the extent that they find it difficult to engage in imaginative role-playing unless they have the "right" toy. The Tools of the Mind program draws on Vygotskian ideas and thus

considers complex socio-dramatic play *with minimal props* to be crucial at this stage of a child's development. There is stress on acting out structured, real-world activities (which children often learn about through visits, visitors or direct teacher instruction). Therefore the classroom environment and materials should be flexible and open-ended, with materials able to play versatile roles and children able to draw connections easily between different areas in the classroom, and move materials from one area to another. The teacher can provide some structure and help the children to construct the remainder of the script by judicious questioning and suggestions for, and modelling of, possible roles.

Another point emphasised by Bodrova and Leong (2001) is the benefit of literacy play: children should be encouraged to play with books and writing materials and incorporate them into other areas of their play. Physical materials such as sand and water can also be very helpful in teaching basic mathematic skills in capacity and in developing early concepts of map-making.

Pillar 4 Providing Appropriate Structure

Appropriate structure is planned to help children make sense of what they are doing and so to foster learning at their own pace, eventually enabling the child to develop a clear understanding of how learning takes place. This kind of structure can exist at two levels, at the level of matching the stage of learning and the pace of learning to the child or group², and at the level of organisation and sequencing of the activity. In the Providing Appropriate Structure pillar card, the 'Top hat buns' cameo shows both kinds of structure. The teacher has a clear idea in advance of how the session is likely to proceed for this group. With a more able group, she might increase the pace and provide less physical help in making the buns. In a play session, such as 'The Road Project', one of the cameos on the Managing Progression and Transitions pillar card, the planning is more focussed on providing the necessary materials and space and intervening at the right time to provide a new challenge to move the children's learning on.

² Technically, being in the *zone of proximal development*.

Clear learning intentions and the ability to communicate these to the children in a way that is meaningful for them are central to the process of providing appropriate structure. During more structured activities such as task time or circle time, the learning intentions will tend to be more focussed than during play. For example, in the 'Top hat buns' cameo, the teacher could say that making the buns is the object of the exercise. She could also say that she wants the children to make two each, one for themselves and one for another person. She clearly has further learning intentions in mind, namely, to practice counting in twos in a meaningful situation and to introduce the concept of melting and solidifying and their relation to heat. Should she communicate all that beforehand? Probably not — it is too much for most first-year children to remember. So it will be necessary to decide on the principal learning intentions in an activity. In an ongoing play-based activity, such as the Road Project, in the Managing Progression and Transitions card, it is more appropriate to reveal the learning intentions at intervals as the project unfolds.

Appropriate structure is also about giving clear instructions and pacing these to the child's ability. Teachers may find that more able children are easily able to grasp the structure. On the other hand, for the less able children, it is easy to underestimate the need for repetition of the goals and instructions at regular intervals, and not to give too much information at a time. Several Enriched Curriculum teachers remarked on the improved "attention skills" of their less able children when they gave instructions broken down into smaller pieces. In reality, some of the children probably had memory problems rather than attention problems; research has shown that this is a common misdiagnosis (Gathercole, 2008).

One of the main aims of making play more structured is to improve children's organisational and self-regulatory skills. This too is a key feature of the Tools of the Mind project (Bodrova & Leong, 2001). One way in which self-regulatory skills can be improved is through the development of "play plans," in which children break down an imminent play session into constituent parts, which are then illustrated and written about (using the "scaffolded writing" technique). Structure can also be developed by encouraging children to reflect on what they have been doing during play, and by giving them several options in play rather than a completely free rein. Equally, it is important not to spend too much time in planning and reviewing, as children will want to 'get on' with their play activities.

Pillar 5 Respecting *Individual Differences*

One of the core elements of developmentally appropriate practice is the insight that different children mature in some areas earlier than others, and so curriculum content for an individual child should depend on what they have already mastered, rather than simply on their age (NAEYC, 2009). Children should be praised for effort rather than attainment, and respect and understanding should be shown for those children who take longer than others to complete a task. Different children have different preferences to learning through a particular medium³, so a wide range of materials and activities should be available for children to choose from during play sessions. Most teachers know that structured teaching should also make use of different modes of instruction (e.g. visual / auditory / kinaesthetic) to get a single point across. At the same time, there is a danger that learning styles can be over-emphasised; children should be encouraged to develop those modes of engaging the world that don't come as naturally to them.

Teachers tended to mention ability differences and the differences between boys and girls quite often in talking to the research team. Other sources of difference were mentioned much less frequently and may not be so easy for teachers to bear in mind. Children can differ in terms of

- ability,
- relative age (young or old in their class)
- gender,
- oral language skills,
- attention and memory skills,
- temperament,
- attitudes to and approaches to learning, and
- home culture.

The findings from the Enriched Curriculum research showed that the first four of these significantly influenced the children's scores on standardised tests of reading and

³ Although differences in aptitude, commonly known as *learning styles*, is highly contested in peer-reviewed research.

mathematics. After the first year, teachers showed less awareness of the effect of the relative age of the child compared to others in the class, which influences outcomes right through primary school, even after taking ability into account. Work on oral language skills was a strong focus of the Enriched Curriculum in schools in high-deprivation areas, but researchers felt that there was some loss of focus after Year 2, even though children's verbal skills were still clearly behind expectations for their age group. Also, the teachers' ratings of the children showed that their attentional skills in the early years were important for future school success, even more important than 'good' behaviour⁴. Furthermore, although children with extreme attention problems and hyperactivity are easily identified, a lower level of attention problems may be misidentified as a behaviour problem. Poor short-term memory skills have been shown to be very important for learning and for disposition to learn (Gathercole, 2008). In the local research, we found that some low ability children in Key Stage 2 had difficulty in remembering more than two letters at a time when a word was being spelt out for them. This level of short-term memory skill would clearly have a negative effect on learning in all domains. A developmentally appropriate curriculum does not mean that basic memory skills should be ignored. The learning of rhymes and songs can be an enjoyable way to foster their development as can play activities such as Kim's game.

Pillar 6 Managing *Progression and Transition*

According to many writers on early years practice (e.g., Broström, 2007), the move from an informal to a formal context, that is part of the child's natural progress into Key Stage 1 and beyond, should be more of a continuum — for example, by gradually introducing more formal elements to play such that it eventually becomes activity-based learning. Children thus become gradually able to meet the changing demands of the curriculum. During this process, children's motivation and engagement is likely to be best preserved when playful interactions and a playful component to activities remain an important part of the education experience, particularly to support creativity and thinking skills.

⁴ Children were rated by teachers on both attention skills and behaviour.

Progression and transitions are both about moving children on and helping them to meet new cognitive and social challenges. Progression through the school year should be made as smooth as possible and should reflect the children's growing competence and engagement with learning. If the changes associated with moving up a class are anticipated and prepared for, then research has shown that children will tend to look forward to the change as a positive event associated with the pleasure of growing up and gaining independence.

Children should also be encouraged to reflect verbally (and perhaps also through pictures, role-playing, etc.) on the educational transitions they are going through, and on the differences between their past, present and future learning environments. Einarsdóttir's (2007) work on children's voices provides some suggestions for this preparation: children seem particularly preoccupied with changes in peer relationships and social norms as they progress through educational age grades, so it might be worth teachers talking explicitly about these two types of change.

Planning for progression implies a number of things:

- having a clear idea of the developmental pathways in different domains, because the teacher should know in what direction the child's understanding may be expected to develop next;
- using this knowledge to plan pedagogical sequences that provide for children moving forward in their learning;
- providing each child with a suitable level of difficulty within that sequence, one that will not cause persistent failure but will provide sufficient challenge, because although nothing succeeds like success, even able children who never experience difficulty in the early years may find it harder to cope later when they do⁵;

⁵ Teachers reported that a content-driven curriculum may not have been doing the brightest children any favours, as they felt in retrospect that had tended to relax with this group once the curriculum for that year was covered. Thus a content-driven curriculum can limit the challenge to the brightest children.

- using appropriate challenge to ensure that children learn to persist in the face of difficulty in the expectation of eventual success; and
- making learning as engaging for the child as possible in the early years of primary school to prevent them from ‘switching off’ at an early age.

Concluding comments on the pillars

When you read through the descriptions of each pillar, and examine each pillar card and the associated cameos, you should gradually come to appreciate, as you work with the cards, how the concept of Playful Structure emerges and is interrelated across the pillars.

When we first interviewed the Enriched Curriculum teachers, some of them expressed concerns that shifting their practice in developmentally appropriate ways might lead to the absence of structure — both in pedagogy and in the curriculum. In the highest quality Enriched Curriculum classrooms, this was not the case. In this Handbook we have expanded on the meaning of Playful Structure across Six Pillars of Practice and drawn cameo illustrations from real classrooms. The classroom cameos show how play, playfulness, and structure can be blended to create a learning environment that is both appropriate for young children and creates positive dispositions to sustain their learning in school and beyond.

9. How to Use the Pillar Cards

The cards are intended for use as a professional development tool by individual teachers, groups of teachers and/or schools, as well as by training teams such as curriculum advisory staff. They were developed using real teacher experience in the Northern Ireland context, as well as drawing on the wider peer-reviewed early years research and practice literature. As such, the guidance is properly evidence-based. Nevertheless, it is not intended to be prescriptive and teachers are invited to use their professional judgement when applying it to their own context.

The Structure of the Cards

Each card contains four main chunks of information. The main chunk of information is the box containing the key points for best practice. Some of these key points are then illustrated in a selection of two cameos drawn from classroom observations in highly rated classrooms. The key points and the cameos are both accompanied by commentary intended to amplify a point, provide examples, draw attention to links across pillars or provide food for thought.

Another box on the card provides Indicators for Success drawn from the Quality of Learning Instrument which was used to evaluate the quality of learning in the Enriched Curriculum classrooms (See Appendix 2 and 3 for a full description). We have selected three of the nine QLI indicators that are judged to be the *most* salient for each pillar. To each of these, we attach a statement of the behaviours that should be observed in a classroom where the key points on the card are being successfully implemented. However, an important caveat: each of the nine QLI indicators could be considered to be relevant to some extent for every pillar. Thus, at a later stage, the poster on QLI contained in the pack can be used in conjunction with the cards to provoke further reflection.

Finally, there is a section on each card intended to facilitate further consideration and reflection of the issues raised by the pillar.

For Individual Teachers

- Read through the handbook and the pillar cards in order to get a broad picture of their meaning and how they relate to one another. However, the pack contains a lot of information and you will not be able to take it all in from this overview.
- The simplest way to use the cards is to choose one of the pillars as a starting point, perhaps the one that strikes you as having the most to offer in your own practice. Read the key points through and choose one, or at most two, to be the initial focus

of your endeavour. One or both of the accompanying cameos may illustrate the points you have chosen.

- When you feel you have fully grasped what it means for your practice, try to make it a focal point of your day and to record any changes you notice as a result. You might even decide to keep a diary. If you do not fully understand the information on the card, remember that there may be further explanation in the handbook in the section that describes each pillar. Or, you are likely to gain a deeper understanding as you work at it.
- Over the course of a set period of time, work your way through the card. At the end of that time, assess your class for the behaviours described in the QLI indicators of success, being careful to note whether any children are not demonstrating the desired behaviours even though the bulk of the class do so. As a final activity, think about the idea/s for reflection on the card. If this kind of practice is very new to you, you may find that you can work on one card for as long as a term and continue to get value out of it but whenever you are satisfied, you can move on to the next one.
- A more structured and highly beneficial way to use the cards is to record yourself on video. It is not necessary to video the whole day in order to get benefit. Perhaps you find one part of the day more difficult than the others. If so, that would be the part to choose. Then, at your leisure, you can review it several times and even view parts in slow motion. You do NOT need to share the video with colleagues in order to get benefit from it. You can view it alone and check the adult-child and the child-child interactions against the cards, against your own learning intentions, against QLI indicators of success and so on. The great advantage of watching a video recording is that we can see the body language and hear the tone of voice we are using. Often, we find that things come over differently from what we intended. Young children, who do not always understand the words fully, will pay particular attention to body language and tone of voice for clues as to the meaning.

Working with Colleagues

- It is intended that the cards will help to provoke useful discussion amongst teachers. In the research, we found that cluster groups were greatly valued by teachers as an opportunity to air their concerns and experiment with ideas within a supportive atmosphere. You may not have had the opportunity to do this. If a group is not possible in your school, try to persuade at least one colleague to work with you.
- There are several ways you can do this. You can observe one another or one another's videos. If you cannot manage to observe one another, or to use the video, then discussion can still be very useful. Some people find discussion easier in a dyad than within a larger group (just like some children). Do not hesitate to criticise what is written on the cards in a constructive way. Arguing in support of one's point of view is an excellent vehicle for learning.
- If you have a larger group, you may decide to work through the cards systematically, comparing notes at the end of each period.

Formal Professional Training

- The principle of Playful Structure, the Six Pillars of Practice, and the cameos can form the basis for a series of professional development days for early years teachers (and even with nursery practitioners).
- It would be useful to examine the pre-existing beliefs and ideas that the teachers have about developmentally appropriate practice as a starting point for the session.
- Sessions can be organised around each pillar. It is advisable to have the sessions distributed across the school year to allow teachers to try out and experiment with their practice in ways outlined above.
- A bigger group can also examine ideas of progression and transitions and the differences between the pillars as children grow in competence and move up through Foundation and into Key Stage 1.

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