HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Play pedagogy in primary 1

Summary of inspection findings

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Introduction

Purpose and scope

This report summarises inspection findings regarding how effectively play pedagogy is being implemented within primary one (P1) classes across Scotland. It presents national inspection evidence, identifies emerging strengths in practice and highlights areas where further improvement is required.

His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) routinely gather evidence and report on the extent to which there is an awareness of Realising the Ambition: Being Me (2020) and its application in P1 as part of early level curriculum. This report is based on inspection findings from 196 primary schools in the academic year 2024-25 and 76 primary schools in 2025-26.

Background and policy context

Play is an important feature of Scottish education policy and curriculum guidance. Curriculum for Excellence and Realising the Ambition: Being Me (2020) promote play across early level and support continuity and progression from early learning and childcare (ELC) into P1. Through active, meaningful play, children develop language, thinking, creativity, self-regulation, relationships and social skills.

Four essential points

Strategic leadership, professional learning and transitions are central to improving consistency

Strong leadership is needed to set expectations, use national practice guidance effectively, evaluate the impact of play pedagogy and support staff development. More consistent professional learning and stronger transitions from ELC to P1 are also needed to ensure that play-based learning builds effectively on children's prior experiences.

Successful play pedagogy is characterised by purposeful learning environments, high-quality resources and skilled adult interactions

The strongest schools provide flexible, stimulating indoor and outdoor spaces with open-ended resources that support exploration, investigation and creativity. However, in some schools, environments, resources and skilled adult interactions do not yet provide enough challenge, appropriate progression or personalisation.

Children are most engaged when play pedagogy is embedded but achieving the right balance of learning experiences remains a challenge

Many children show high levels of engagement, independence and curiosity when play pedagogy is embedded in practice. However, children need a better balance between child-initiated, adult-initiated and adult-directed learning.

Assessment of progress and attainment is an important area for improvement

In the most effective schools, assessment, including observation, is used well to assess progress, identify next steps and inform responsive planning. However, assessment practice does not yet consistently provide the depth of analysis needed to support appropriate progression in learning.

Summary of findings

Inspection evidence does not identify any individual local authority where play pedagogy is consistently strong across all primary schools. Instead, the strongest practice is commonly associated with approaches within individual schools, particularly where there is:

- effective leadership that sets clear expectations for high-quality play pedagogy
- sustained, high-quality professional learning that builds staff confidence, knowledge and skill
- meaningful and sustained engagement with national practice guidance
- effective collaboration between staff in associated ELC settings and P1 staff to support continuity and progression across early level

These factors have a significant influence on the quality and consistency of play pedagogy within schools and lead to positive outcomes for children.

Quality of environment and space

Many schools have taken positive steps to develop the learning environment in P1 classrooms and shared spaces. Improving the learning environment is often a first step for schools as they take forward play pedagogy in P1.

In schools where this is well developed, indoor and outdoor spaces support exploration, investigation and sustained play well. Practice is most effective where children can move freely between well-planned indoor and outdoor learning spaces that provide flexible and stimulating play environments.

In the strongest examples, teachers organise classrooms into purposeful play spaces and use open-ended resources, provocations and invitations to extend learning. They respond well to children's interests, stages of development and ideas when planning spaces and selecting resources. Teachers encourage children to choose, use and review resources. This strengthens children's participation, independence and ownership of their learning. Teachers design environments that provide appropriate challenge and differentiation for children. These environments link clearly to intended learning through well-considered provocations and a clear curriculum rationale.

In a few schools, shared spaces, such as playrooms, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas and open areas, are used effectively to support collaborative and inquiry-based learning.

Although some schools demonstrate positive practice, inspection evidence continues to identify areas for improvement in the quality of P1 play environments, spaces and resources. In these schools, learning environments do not provide sufficient challenge or progression for children. Teachers are still developing confidence in designing and resourcing effective play provision that meets children's needs.

Overall, stronger leadership, closer engagement with national practice guidance and more effective collaboration with ELC colleagues are needed to improve the quality and consistency of learning environments and spaces.

Balance of child-initiated, adult-initiated and adult-directed experiences

Across schools, achieving an appropriate balance of child-initiated, adult-initiated and adult-directed learning remains a challenge. Teachers can find it difficult to plan learning that provides the right amount of teacher and child-led learning. In schools where teachers plan well, they take account of children's interests, motivations and stages of development. Teachers in these schools use national practice guidance effectively to strengthen their understanding of the role of the adult. They organise learning environments purposefully to promote independence, choice and meaningful play. They use observations and children's views well to inform planning and adapt learning experiences responsively.

Overall, teachers need to plan more consistently the balance between direct teaching and meaningful child-initiated learning. Adult-initiated experiences are often low-level and do not extend and deepen children's learning and skill development. They need to better reflect the needs of children and support progression. . Play experiences need to be progressive, relevant, motivating and responsive to children's interests and developmental needs. Children need increased opportunities to lead their own learning and to use open-ended resources that support curiosity, inquiry and deeper thinking. Over-reliance on adult-initiated activities limits children's choice, creativity and independence within play spaces.

Senior leaders need to support teachers with clear advice and guidance on the role of the adult, progression in learning through play and developmentally appropriate practice. Teachers need access to regular, high-quality professional learning to support this work.

Children learning through real-life contexts

Teachers recognise the opportunities that play pedagogy provides to plan meaningful experiences that allow children to apply their learning in real-life contexts. There are some positive signs that outdoor learning, links to the local community and imaginative play are supporting teachers to plan learning using real-life contexts.

In the best examples, teachers provide effective play experiences that help children apply their skills in purposeful situations, such as writing factual texts linked to forest experiences or using role play to develop everyday life skills. This leads to children demonstrating high levels of motivation, confidence and independence as well as being able to explain how play helps them develop transferable skills across learning.

However, this is not yet consistent practice across all schools. Most children would benefit from more frequent access to varied, real-life contexts for learning. Overall, children need more regular opportunities to develop and apply their literacy, numeracy and creative skills during play.

Assessment

Nationally, high-quality assessment of children's progress, including through observation during play, is an area where staff in schools need further support and advice.

In the most effective examples, observation is embedded and co-ordinated across teams. This supports staff to track and evidence children's progress over time and informs future learning that builds effectively on children's interests, needs and prior experiences. Staff use skilful questioning, sensitive commentary and well-timed interventions to help children to extend and explain their thinking. They interact purposefully during both direct teaching and independent play, providing effective scaffolding that helps children make appropriate progress.

However, teachers do not always have clear evidence of the progress that children make through play. Teachers require additional support and guidance to support them to gather reliable and robust information on children's progress across the curriculum. They need to use this information to make accurate judgements and plan children's future learning.

Schools need support to balance developmentally appropriate play pedagogy with expectations around progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy. Teachers need clearer guidance on assessing and evidencing children's progress at early level so that play pedagogy is valued as a meaningful route to learning and progression. Assessment approaches should better reflect how young children demonstrate their learning through play. This includes stronger use of observation, interaction and responsive planning to support progression.

Leadership

Overall, stronger strategic leadership is needed to build a shared understanding of play pedagogy and secure consistently high-quality approaches for all children. Senior leaders should set clear expectations, establish supportive

policies and evaluate regularly the impact of play pedagogy on children's learning, wellbeing and progress. They need to support the implementation and continuous improvement of play pedagogy through existing school improvement planning approaches.

In the best examples, staff demonstrate strong collaborative approaches to developing play pedagogy. In these schools, teachers, support staff and senior leaders work together effectively to design play-based learning, share practice and respond to children's interests. Senior leaders in these schools strengthen partnership-working beyond the school, including with staff in ELC settings and local authorities. This supports a shared understanding of play pedagogy and improves the quality and consistency of children's play experiences across early level.

In the most effective practice, senior leaders prioritise professional learning and collaborative working within and beyond their schools. They ensure that staff have dedicated time to reflect on practice, develop their skills and work collegiately. Strong leadership underpins this work. Senior leaders demonstrate commitment through high-quality resourcing, effective deployment of staff, training and opportunities for collegiate working. They develop play strategies, policies and guidance that establish clear expectations and support a more consistent, high-quality approach to play-based learning.

Overall, school leaders need to ensure that national practice guidance informs school policy, planning and professional dialogue. This should support staff to develop a more consistent understanding of effective play pedagogy and their role in observing, interacting with and extending children's learning.

In addition, more robust self-evaluation is required to better understand the impact of play-based approaches on children's learning, progress and outcomes. This should include systematic reflection on practice and evidence of children's progress over time.

Transitions

Positive practice in play pedagogy is generally evident where strong links are established between staff in ELC settings and teachers in P1. Meaningful engagement with national practice guidance, alongside effective collaboration

between ELC and P1 staff, strengthens transitions and supports continuity in children's learning across early level.

In the most effective examples, staff share pastoral and curricular assessment information, observations, and knowledge of children's interests and learning needs. Staff plan a range of transition opportunities throughout the school year, including regular opportunities for children to access the P1 learning environment. This supports more effective planning for play-based learning and helps children settle confidently, engage positively and build on familiar nursery approaches. Where play pedagogy is developing well in P1, children benefit from nurturing, well-designed environments that enable them to build on prior learning through play, routines and strong relationships.

However, improvements are needed to ensure that all schools provide consistent, high-quality transitions from ELC settings into P1. In many schools, approaches to play-based learning in P1 remain at an early stage and do not yet build effectively on ELC practice. As a result, children do not always experience continuity and progression in their learning.

Senior leaders and P1 staff should make more effective use of tracking information from nursery to inform planning, learning and assessment. This should help ensure that children's prior experiences, interests and progress are reflected more clearly in P1 provision.

Senior leaders should also provide regular opportunities for staff in schools and ELC settings to share practice, engage in high-quality professional dialogue and plan jointly. The use of national practice guidance should support this work and strengthen continuity across early level.

Engagement with national practice guidance

Although more schools are engaging with national practice guidance, this engagement remains inconsistent and is not yet sufficiently sustained. Staff across most schools need regular, purposeful opportunities to use national practice guidance to deepen their understanding of effective play pedagogy. This should include a clearer focus on the adult's role in observing, interacting with and extending children's learning through play.

Where play pedagogy is working well, staff use national practice guidance effectively to strengthen their understanding and expectations for learning

through play. Where this is embedded well, guidance informs planning, professional dialogue and reflection on practice. In these schools, staff plan interactions, provocations and play-based experiences carefully.

In the strongest examples, senior leaders ensure that all staff are familiar with the national practice guidance and use it to inform school policy, improvement planning and approaches to professional learning. Alongside strong partnerships with ELC settings, this promotes greater consistency across classes and stages and supports more coherent play-based learning across early level.

Professional learning

Professional learning to support high-quality play pedagogy is not yet consistent in its reach or impact. In many schools, staff need further opportunities to build confidence and develop a clearer shared understanding of high-quality play pedagogy. Professional learning should support staff to apply this understanding in practice. This should include opportunities to observe provision in other schools.

Where professional learning is well planned, it is helping staff develop a stronger understanding of high-quality play pedagogy. Teachers use this learning to improve aspects of play-based learning and strengthen children's experiences. Where engagement is strongest, there is a whole-team approach, with all staff participating in relevant professional learning activities, including well-considered local authority training, professional reading, school-based sessions, support from external agencies and visits to other establishments.

In the strongest examples, staff apply their professional learning to improve interactions and plan play-based experiences that are developmentally appropriate, purposeful and engaging. As a result, children access higher-quality play and benefit from more effective use of space, resources and provocations.

Senior leaders need to ensure that professional learning is targeted, relevant and ongoing. In a few schools, professional learning has not yet led to sustained changes in practice. Senior leaders should also strengthen how they evaluate the impact of professional learning to ensure that it leads to measurable improvements in children's experiences and outcomes.

Nationally, a more consistent approach is needed to ensure that all children experience high-quality play pedagogy in P1. National and local authority

partners should support schools and teachers to develop greater clarity about effective play pedagogy.