

Incorporating play and playfulness throughout education can boost engagement, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and motivation, helping learners of all ages develop deeper understanding and a lifelong love of learning.

Cultivating Playfulness

A Stance for Inclusive and Engaging Learning



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Across the world, educators are grappling with the same essential challenge: How do we create learning environments where children are deeply engaged, emotionally safe, and excited to learn? Within Scottish primary schools, this question has become especially urgent as teachers navigate increasing curricular expectations, shifting policy landscapes, and the diverse needs of learners. The Playfulness Project, a multi-year collaboration involving nine primary schools in the northeast of Scotland, emerged in response to this challenge with the simple but transformative aim to re-imagine playfulness not as a single activity or early-years entitlement, but as a pedagogical stance that all teachers can adopt.

This article reflects on how this project unfolded, what it has revealed about classroom practice, and how playfulness, when enacted with intention, relational awareness, and professional confidence, has the capacity to shift school cultures and improve children's daily learning experiences.

The Educational Challenge: Beyond Early Years, Beyond Free Play

One of the most persistent challenges facing educators is the misconception that play, or anything resembling play, belongs solely in the early years. Many teachers report feeling confident supporting playful learning in the youngest classes, yet uncertain about how to sustain joyful, meaningful, and active engagement as children progress through primary education. At the same time, there is mounting pressure to increase academic rigor, meet attainment benchmarks, and demonstrate measurable progress.

The result is a tension: teachers want to nurture autonomy, curiosity, and creativity, but fear straying too far from the structures they believe are required for curriculum coverage.

International evidence shows this tension is not unique to Scotland. Educators worldwide describe similar struggles balancing child agency with

adult expectations. A growing number of researchers, such as Zosh and colleagues,¹ who describe playfulness through dimensions like joy, active engagement, iteration, meaningfulness, and social interaction, suggest that the question should not be, “Should we play or should we teach?,” but rather, “How can we teach playfully in ways that strengthen children’s learning and wellbeing?”

It was this question that inspired the nine participating schools to explore what playfulness might look like in practice, across ages, subjects, and learning environments.



Why a New Approach Was Needed

While Scotland’s national guidance encourages play-based approaches, particularly the Realising the Ambition: Being Me² policy, teachers across the cluster reported that translating this guidance into practice was difficult. What exactly counts as playful pedagogy? How much structure is too much? How do teachers support learners while still honoring their choices? How can schools justify giving time and space to playfulness when assessment and accountability structures often prioritize more traditional instruction?

The Playfulness Project was not different from previous initiatives because of new resources or programs. The difference can be found in provision of:

- A shared language for understanding playfulness as a continuum
- A collaborative structure for professional learning
- Permission for teachers to experiment, take risks, and rethink their roles
- Real-world examples of how playfulness supports inclusion, equity, and wellbeing.

Rather than importing an external model, the project supported schools in co-constructing their own understanding of playful pedagogy. This ensured that the emerging practices remained adaptable, sustainable, and contextually relevant.

A New Way of Thinking: Playfulness as a Pedagogical Stance

One of the most significant shifts that occurred across the project was the understanding that playfulness is not an activity; it is a stance. It influences how teachers design learning, engage with children, and respond to their cues. It can happen during literacy, science, social studies, or outdoor learning. It can involve loose parts, digital tools, natural materials, or nothing more than conversation and imagination.

Across the nine schools, teachers began to describe playfulness in remarkably similar ways:

- Joyful — encouraging curiosity and delight
- Meaningful — connecting to children’s lived experiences
- Actively engaging — requiring agency, movement, and exploration
- Iterative — supporting trial, error, and resilience
- Socially interactive — fostering collaboration and empathy.



This shared understanding allowed teachers to rethink the purpose of learning tasks. For example:

- A Primary 3 class exploring measurement used an “invent a creature” playful scenario, giving children autonomy to design, compare, and revise the features of an imaginary animal.
- A Primary 5 classroom adopted “co-constructed challenges,” where pupils helped design weekly investigative prompts linked to science outcomes.
- A multi-stage outdoor learning group created a “loose-parts newsroom,” which encouraged purposeful writing, collaboration, and role-play across literacy genres.

These activities were curriculum-aligned, thoughtfully planned, and rooted in a playful mindset that sparked motivation and deepened engagement.

The Teacher’s Role: From Deliverer to Co-Player, Facilitator, and Observer

Before the project began, many teachers felt they were expected to either “stand back and watch” or “teach from the front.” Through professional learning, classroom enquiry, and peer observation, they discovered a broader range of roles they could adopt.

Teachers experimented with being:

- Observers — noticing children’s strategies, emotions, interests
- Co-players — entering the learning space alongside children to extend ideas
- Facilitators — providing subtle scaffolds, questions, or provocations
- Designers — crafting carefully structured opportunities for playful learning.

One teacher captured this shift beautifully: “I realized I don’t need to choose between letting them play and



meeting the curriculum. My role changes throughout the lesson and that's what makes it powerful."

Across the cluster, teachers consistently reported that when they became more flexible in their roles, children became more confident, collaborative, and creative. Pupils who previously hesitated during whole-class instruction began to shine when given space to explore and iterate. Learners with additional support needs found new entry points into activities that were previously closed to them.

As participants engaged in structured reflection, collaborative planning, and professional dialogue throughout the project, many began to view playfulness as a pedagogical stance applicable across all curricular areas. The teachers found they were able to respond more sensitively to individual pupils' needs while fostering deeper engagement in the learning. As teachers let go of the control and stepped back, the children gained greater autonomy; intentional scaffolding supported learning without diminishing agency.

Evidence of Impact: What the Project Has Revealed So Far

Although the project is ongoing, several encouraging indicators of success have already emerged.

1. Increased pupil engagement and wellbeing

Teachers observed that students were more motivated, more willing to persevere through difficulty, and more able to collaborate meaningfully. Relationships deepened as teachers positioned themselves alongside learners.

2. Greater teacher confidence

As educators explored playful approaches in low-risk, collaborative environments, they reported feeling empowered to make pedagogical decisions and less bound by rigid expectations. The Playfulness Rubric helped them recognize progress in ways that traditional assessment data often obscure.



3. Reduction of behavioral challenges

Across multiple classrooms, teachers noted improved emotional regulation and fewer conflicts when learning involved choice, movement, and meaningful tasks.

4. Stronger school cultures

Schools that adopted whole-school strategies saw improvements in staff wellbeing, cross-stage collaboration, and consistency in their understanding of playful practice.

These outcomes mirror international evidence linking playful learning with higher motivation, stronger peer relationships, and improved academic outcomes.

Real-World Examples: Stories That Inspired Change

One of the most inspiring moments occurred when a Primary 6 pupil who often felt disconnected during literacy sessions became a leader during a playful, creative-writing challenge. Asked to develop a fictional world using cardboard, loose parts, and digital storyboarding tools, he immediately began organizing teammates, constructing narrative pathways, and

offering ideas to others. His teacher reflected, “He didn’t need a prompt or a scaffold; he needed a context that valued his imagination.”

In another school, a group of teachers collaborated on an outdoor numeracy trail designed by pupils themselves. Children created problems, built installations using natural materials, and guided one another through challenges. The activity became so popular that the school adopted it as a weekly cross-stage tradition. These moments illustrate how small shifts in pedagogy can unlock significant changes in engagement, identity, and agency.

Adaptability and Global Relevance

Although the Playfulness Project took place in Scotland, the principles underlying it are highly adaptable to education systems worldwide. Teachers everywhere are seeking approaches that:

- Support inclusion
- Improve wellbeing
- Engage diverse learners
- Strengthen intrinsic motivation
- Meet curriculum outcomes without sacrificing joy.

Playfulness offers a flexible, culturally responsive model that can be shaped to suit different ages, languages, communities, and curriculum. It does not require specialized materials or expensive training; it requires time, curiosity, and a willingness to rethink traditional assumptions about learning.

Building Lasting Impact Through Playful Practice

A core goal of the project was ensuring that playfulness would not become a short-lived initiative. Sustainability was embedded through:

- Professional learning pathways that deepen over time
- Practitioner inquiry cycles that empower teachers as researchers of their own practice
- Whole-school strategies that involve leadership, support staff, and families
- Shared language and common tools, such as the Playfulness Rubric, that allow ongoing reflection
- Cross-school collaboration, ensuring ideas are not isolated to one classroom.

These structures allow playfulness to become a cultural shift rather than a temporary program.





Why Playfulness Matters Now More Than Ever

Globally, schools are experiencing increasing pressure to accelerate progress, narrow attainment gaps, and respond to complex social and emotional needs. Playfulness offers an approach that supports these aims without compromising wellbeing. It encourages:

- Creative problem-solving
- Emotional resilience
- Collaboration and communication
- Intrinsic motivation
- Cultural and linguistic inclusion
- Opportunities for all children to shine.

Most importantly, it affirms children's right to joyful, meaningful learning, a right recognized across international frameworks for childhood development.

Conclusion: A Call to Embrace Playfulness as Professional Practice

The Playfulness Project demonstrates that when teachers are supported to explore and reflect, they can transform not just individual lessons but also entire school cultures. Playfulness, when understood as a stance,

creates classrooms that are inclusive, engaging, emotionally rich, and aligned with the evolving demands of global education.

This innovation is not a program to be adopted, but rather a mindset to be nurtured. It offers teachers around the world a way to reconnect with what brought them into education in the first place: the belief that children learn best when they are curious, joyful, supported, and empowered. A playfulness pedagogical approach contributes practical insights into embedding playfulness in all areas and levels of education. It allows educators to make recommendations for policy and professional learning, and to create school-university partnerships that are aimed at sustaining inclusive and engaging learning environments.

Notes:

¹ Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Solis, S. L. (2017). *Learning through play: A review of the evidence*. LEGO Foundation.

² Scottish Government. (2020). *Realising the ambition: Being me*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/realising-ambition-being-me/>

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