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## **Bridging pedagogical discontinuity: to what extent can play-based learning be sustained beyond children's transition to Year 1?**

**Philip Nicholson**

### **Abstract**

As children make the transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage to Year 1 they must negotiate pedagogical and curriculum discontinuities. Previous research has identified an absence of bridging between these two phases of education resulting in children being exposed to developmentally inappropriate practice. This study explores the feasibility of sustaining play into Year 1 in a small rural Lincolnshire school. Data were collected through interviews with both the Early Years Foundation Stage and the Year 1 teacher. A questionnaire with Year 1 children ( $n = 23$ ) provided supplementary data. Findings suggest that the constraints of the National Curriculum make it difficult to bridge pedagogical discontinuity through play in Year 1 as the bridging process is occurring before children enter Year 1. This project is of particular interest to Early Years Foundation Stage educators as pressure to align competing discourses in their pedagogical space intensifies.

### **Introduction**

Children transferring from a play-based curriculum in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (ages 4-5) to a purely content-based Year 1 (ages 5-6) represents the first significant educational transition of their education (Howe, 2016). The proficiency of children's academic and emotional capabilities can be placed at risk if this transition is inadequately (Bateson, 2013) or abruptly (OECD, 2006) administered. Consequently, more than ever it is becoming increasingly evident that EYFS provision is trying to counterbalance their child-directed pedagogy with the constraints of preparing their pupils for a politically manifested twenty-first century education (Ellis, 2002). The contrasting pedagogical approaches between these two adjacent phases of education results in a shift away from experience and towards content during children's transition to formal education (Howe, 2016; Walsh, Taylor, Sproule & McGuinness, 2008). However, for educators and academics the compromise of early years education and the prerequisites that accompany it are occurring too early in a child's education (Alexander, 2010; Elkind & Whitehurst, 2001; Margetts, 2007).

High-quality early years education has been proven to have a positive impact on a child's future education (Eckhoff, 2013; Sylva, Mulhish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). Therefore, to ameliorate an overly abrupt transition to formal schooling, the extension of a play-based pedagogy into Year 1 is advocated (CPR, 2014). As a comparison, in 2004, Wales extended its provision of early childhood education to age seven to allow children to further experience learning through play and active involvement (Phillips, 2012; Welsh Government, 2016). This is a popular theme throughout Europe as a later school starting age can ensure that children are only exposed to developmentally appropriate practice (Alexander, 2010; Sharp, 2002).

Therefore, an objective of this project is to explore if play can be extended to bridge pedagogical discontinuities between the EYFS and Year 1. By administering questionnaires for Year 1 pupils ( $n = 23$ ) and semi-structured

interviews with the teachers ( $n = 2$ ) either side of the transition, it is anticipated that this project will be able to make inferences into the feasibility of sustaining a play-based curriculum into Year 1 of the National Curriculum. The findings will be analysed for their disposition within the established literature base and recommendations will be based upon this comparison.

## Literature review

### Transition

Succeeding the sixth Summit of European Education Ministers in 1971, the concept of school transition has attracted major interest from academics, educators and policymakers alike (Athola, Poikenen, Kontoniemi, Niemi & Nurmi, 2012; Vrianioti, Einarsdottir & Broström, 2010). The subsequent forty-five years of research into these transitional phases that permeate education have been informed on an international scale. The Pedagogies of Educational Transitions (POET) alliance and the Early Years Transition Programme (EASE) draw upon perspectives from a wealth of international research (Ballam, Perry & Garpelin, 2016; EASE, 2010). Although a prominent method of attaining and measuring successful school transition continues to evade general consensus (Ballam et al., 2016), the literature widely perceives that a child's sense of belonging in a new setting represents an optimal transition to the school environment (Brooker, 2007; Broström, 2002; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006).

Brofenbrenner's (1979) conceptualisation of ecological transitions assists in explaining how a child's development is influenced by a set of interconnected micro, meso, exo and macrosystems. When social contexts are adjusted, for example the transition to a new setting, the reciprocal relationship between a child and their environment is reconstructed as a consequence (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Fisher, 2009). Athola et al. (2012) suppose that prior to Brofenbrenner's theoretic, literature on school transition focused mainly on facilitating change through the micro and meso-systems such as pre-school and school professionals. However, consistent with a neo-liberalist accountability agenda, school transition has become increasingly subject to macrosystems such as the National Curriculum and education policy (Athola et al., 2012).

Further to Brofenbrenner's (1979) notion of ecological transitions, other theoretical perspectives ubiquitous within educational transition literature such as 'rites of passage' (Van Gennepe, Vizedom & Caffee, 1960), 'horizontal and vertical transition' (Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Peitarinen, Pyhaltho & Soini, 2010) and 'border crossings' (Peters, 2014) further identify the complexities of school transition. For the purpose of this study, however, Dunlop and Fabian (2007) and later Huser, Dockett and Perry's (2015) perceptions of transition as a bridge between pre-school services and the first year of formal schooling is the most applicable theoretical perspective. Applying the bridge theory helps to depict the current situation whereby provision for the EYFS is compromised by pressures from the National Curriculum (Alexander, 2010; Hood, 2013). In this instance,

transition is perceived as a one-way activity (Dockett & Perry, 2014), where bridging between these phases of education (Huser et al., 2015) to alleviate abrupt changes (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006) is absent.

#### Transition from EYFS to Year 1

The international literature base identifies that young children must negotiate an abundance of discontinuities as they progress from the EYFS to their first year in primary school (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Huser et al., 2015; Johansson, 2007; Yeboah, 2002). An extensive range of educators (Kagan & Nueman, 1998; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; McClure, 2002) and policymakers (OECD, 2006; Ofsted, 2004) advocate that these two phases of education should offer a continuous learning experience or, as Huser et al. (2015) contend, a bridged partnership. This perception aligns with Friedrich Fröbel stating as early as 1852 that education should establish an organic link between pre-school and primary education (Vrinioti et al., 2010). However, a study conducted by Ofsted (2006) reported that in comparison to their Danish and Finnish counterparts, English teachers felt caught between Foundation Stage (now EYFS) and Key Stage One expectations. This is a common theme throughout the literature as several studies have elucidated that provision between early childhood education and formal schooling severely lacks fundamental levels of coherence (Barblett, Barrat-Pugh, Kilgallon & Maloney, 2011; OECD, 2006).

#### Pedagogical discontinuity

There is growing recognition within the body of educational transition research that is indicative of embracing educational discontinuities (Kakvoulis, 2003; Page, 2000; Walsh et al., 2008). Dockett and Perry (2012) document that in some instances children pursue discontinuity in order to stimulate new experiences. However, influential research contends that the transition from the EYFS to Year 1 is overly instantaneous (Ofsted, 2004; Sanders et al., 2005). There are systematic differences between these two phases of education with regards to: the physical environment, curriculum content and classroom organisation (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014; Curtis, 1986; Dockett & Perry, 2012; Yeboah, 2002); outcomes and processes (Hood, 2013); and vision, culture and expectations (Huser et al., 2015). Whilst all of these discontinuities impact on children's transitions differently, there is a strong consensus that pedagogical discontinuities are the most pertinent characteristic polarising the EYFS and Year 1 (Fisher, 2009; Fisher, 2011; Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992; Sanders et al., 2005; White & Sharp, 2007).

Pedagogical discontinuity between the EYFS and Year 1 stems from divergent philosophical approaches to educating young children (Fisher, 2009; Howe, 2016; White & Sharp, 2007). When children enter Year 1 they encounter compartmentalised and prescribed programmes of study through means of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013). In contrast, the EYFS implements a 'purposeful' play-based curriculum where teachers must 'respond to each child's emerging needs and interests' (Alexander, 2010; DfE, 2014, p. 9). Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) indicate how preschool environments typically foster the social development of pupils as opposed to the National Curriculum's predilection towards improving children's cognitive and academic capabilities in Year 1. A study conducted by Love et al. (1992) reported that children found the utilitarian shift away from play-based learning towards an academic curriculum in their first year of formal schooling to be the most challenging

aspect of the transition. Additionally, and perhaps more poignantly, a range of studies have ascertained children's perceptions (Dockett & Perry, 2012; White & Sharp, 2007), expectations (Chan, 2012; Vrinioti et al., 2010) and experiences (Fisher, 2009; Walsh et al., 2008; Waterland, 1994) of their transition to Year 1. Ascertaining the perceptions of children aligns with the growing awareness of the recognition of children as social agents (James & James, 2004) whereby their perceptions can assist in the improvement of provision (Howe, 2016).

Reducing the discontinuity of pedagogy between sectors has led to a range of educators advocating the need for a more synergetic approach. A unified approach (Bennett, 2013), dual synchronicity (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997) and 'a meeting place' (Moss, 2013, p. 19) are all concepts within the literature which advocate the equal bridging of EYFS and Year 1 provision. However, the current Conservative Government recommends that in order to ease the transition the EYFS should change the emphasis from child-directed to teacher-directed pedagogy (DfE, 2014). Axiomatically, this suggestion offers a worrying insight into the government's attitude towards early childhood education. The shift away from child-directed activity suggests that the current government perceives the EYFS as solely preparing children for their next stage of learning as opposed to delivering an important curriculum in its own right (Howe, 2016). The literature identifies that wider neoliberal trends, such as accountability measures and more rigorously administered assessments, have resulted in the 'downward push' of the National Curriculum which is impacting upon Early Years provision and pedagogy (Alexander, 2010; Love et al., 1992; Hood, 2013). These findings align with the OECD's (2006) Starting Strong project which reported that formal education places an expectancy on Early Years providers to deliver children who are 'ready for learning'. Despite influential theorist Jean Piaget (1951) contending that children aged six and seven are still motivated by making sense of their own world, the literature identifies that many primary education systems persist with a constructivist pedagogy which facilitates the measurement and comparison of children's performance at specific ages (Fisher, 2011; Lansdown, 2005; Margetts, 2007).

#### Extending play beyond the EYFS

There is widespread consensus within the literature that argues against exposing children to formal education prematurely (Alexander, 2010; Elkind & Whitehurst, 2001; Margetts, 2007; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). The Cambridge Primary Review (2014) endorses EYFS provision and proposes that this phase of education should be extended to age six. Not only would this align the school starting age in England with the majority of their European counterparts (Sharp, 2002) but it would also replicate the highly successful international education systems such as Norway, Canada and China (PISA, 2015). Most importantly for this particular study however, increasing the duration of the EYFS would administer the extension of a play-based curriculum.

Play can and has been defined and theorised in a range of ways (Pramling Samuelsson & Fleer, 2008). However, Bruce (2011) simply perceives play as helping to create 'an attitude of mind which is curious, investigative, risk taking and full of adventure' (p. 41). Whitebread's (2012) review of the Importance of Play contends that

contemporary play is a multi-faceted phenomenon with extensive evidence of psychological benefits. The relationship between play and developmental psychology is a predominant concept within the literature. Therefore, the notion that play and learning are inextricably connected has been advocated by an array of influential theorists both past: Dewey (1916); Montessori (Stoll Lillard, 2005); Piaget (1951); and Vygotsky (1978) and present: Broadhead, Howard and Wood, (2010); Whitebread, (2012); Moyles (2015); and Bruce (2011). After over a century of analysis from theorists and scientists (Whitebread, 2012), it was no surprise when Pellis and Pellis (2009) documented that playful activity has been proven to enhance synaptic growth in the frontal cortex of the brain – the neurological component of the brain responsible for higher meta-cognitive functions. The research from Pellis and Pellis (2009) correlates with the contributions put forward by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's theoretical explanation of play's role in enhancing children's symbolic representation and self-regulation has contributed extensively in helping educators comprehend children's developing abilities (Garhart Mooney, 2013; Whitebread, 2012).

Extending play beyond current EYFS provision in England is a concept which is strongly advocated by an extensive range of educators and academics (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; Fisher, 2011; Hood, 2013; Riley & Jones, 2010; Sylva et al., 2004; White & Sharp, 2007; Whitebread, 2012). Martlew, Stephen and Ellis' (2011) study of six primary schools where a play-based curriculum was introduced reported that all teachers responded to the pedagogical change with enthusiasm. However, the small-scale qualitative study revealed teachers had different understandings of the purpose and benefits of active play-based learning. Furthermore, in some aspects of the study, play was found to be peripheral to children's learning experience. This indicates that there are barriers to the inclusion of play as an integral learning tool in Year 1. This research aims to contribute to the established literature by answering the following question. Bridging pedagogical discontinuity: To what extent can play be sustained beyond children's' transition to Year 1? The following chapter will offer an in-depth explanation of the methodology of this study.

## **Methodology**

A mixed-method approach, which amalgamates both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Denscombe, 2010; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016), was adopted for the purpose of this research. By implementing methods from both interpretivism and positivism research paradigms the research concurs that there are multiple legitimate forms of social enquiry (Greene, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). By choosing a method of triangulation, this project will be able to ascertain a more holistic perception of the research question (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Denscombe, 2010; Thomas, 2009) whereby greater confidence can be placed on the findings if both methods of data collection align (Gillham, 2007).

### Ethics

Prior to any research being carried out a research proposal was designed in accordance with British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (2011) and Bishop Grosseteste University research ethics policy (2014). The proposal gained the approval of both Bishop Grosseteste University and the placement school meaning data collection could commence. A professional working relationship was established with a rural Lincolnshire Church of England school through a placement one month prior to data collection. This placement allowed the investigator to convey to the relevant personnel within the school what the data collection would entail (Wisker, 2008). In accordance with ethical guidelines, the school, staff and pupils would remain anonymous and methods of data collection were administered in the agreement that all respondents had a right to withdraw and a right to not answer (BERA, 2011; BGU, 2014; Wisker, 2008).

### The study

Qualitative data was attained through individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews with EYFS and Year 1 classroom teachers respectively. Prior to the interviews with the teachers, both sets of questions were piloted with trainee teachers. Piloting interviews with a similar cohort to the research sample is a strongly advocated concept (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Oppenheim, 1992) as it can identify aspects of the interview which may need refining (Sharp, 2009). The interviews consisted of a range of open, closed and divergent questions (Sharp, 2009; Wisker, 2008) which were relevant to the research question (Pring, 2000). Open questioning probes the interviewee to respond with more detail and therefore the interviewer can elicit responses leading to further enquiry (Oppenheim, 1992). Closed questions offered a balance to ensure that the interviewer maintained an appropriate balance between interrogation and enquiry (Sharp, 2009). Upon obtaining the teachers' consent the interviews were recorded with an electronic mobile device, transcribed and then destroyed (BGU, 2014).

The interviewer's personal characteristics are just a range of known effects that can reduce the validity and reliability of research (Sharp, 2009). Furthermore, within qualitative interview methods there is a tendency for the interviewer to pursue particular answers which support pre-conceived ideas (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 121). However, despite interviews taking a considerable time to listen to and transcribe (Sharp, 2009), interviewing subjects can provide rich contextual information that can exceed research expectations (Wisker, 2008). Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to negotiate any possible misinterpretations by seeking clarification (Pring, 2000). These advantages combine to make semi-structured interviews appropriate for individual research projects (Sharp, 2009).

In accordance with recognising the impact of consulting children's perspectives (Howe, 2016; Mann, Liley & Kellett, 2014), quantitative data was obtained through questionnaires with Year 1 pupils (n = 23). The questionnaire contained ten structured questions where the responses were pre-determined (Gillham, 2007; Sharp, 2009). In accordance with Sharp's (2009) recommendations regarding using questionnaires with children, the questionnaire was designed to be short, simple and aesthetically attractive by using emojis and pictures. The

language of the questions was adjusted to ensure the questions were appropriate, accessible and minimalised power differentials between the child and researcher (Robinson & Kellett, 2004). Due to the benefits of establishing personal contact (Bell, 2010; Wisker, 2008), the children were asked the questions directly on an individual basis.

As with the interview schedule, it was essential that the questionnaire was trialled on a similar age sample (Bell, 2010; Cohen et al., 2000). Prior to piloting, the questionnaire contained several open questions. This is because respondents can find it 'frustrating' if they are only allowed to choose pre-determined answers (Gillham, 2007). However, when the questionnaire was piloted it became apparent that open questions were not suitable for the age group sample (age 5-6) because they did not elicit responses which were relevant to the research question (Wisker, 2008). Therefore, the questionnaire was edited so that eight of the questions were dichotomous 'yes' or 'no' closed questions and two questions were designed on a conventional five-point Likert-type scale (Cohen et al., 2000; Sharp, 2009). Although intervals between each point-range may not be equal, the inclusion of Likert-type scales allows the research to make inferences into the respondent's strength of attitude towards a particular statement (Bell, 2010).

Scaled and dichotomous questions fail to elicit the complexities surrounding their context (Cohen et al, 2000; Sharp, 2009). However, an advantage of using a questionnaire consisting of pre-determined answers is the simplicity in which the responses can be coded (Cohen et al., 2000; Wisker, 2008). Additionally, conducting face-to-face questionnaires can ensure that the answers given are genuine (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, when used in a method of triangulation, questionnaires can support the findings of other methods making them a suitable method of data collection for this small-scale study.

### **Presentation and analysis of findings**

Axial coding of the data collated from two semi-structured interviews and analysis of the questionnaire revealed three consistent themes: the discontinued learning experience; issues surrounding play-based pedagogy; and, the downward push of the National Curriculum.

#### **The discontinued learning experience**

Naturally, interviews with both teachers explored the transition from the EYFS to Year 1. When discussing differences between EYFS and Year 1 provision the teachers responded with:

EYFS: 'its obviously the curriculums... the jump is massive. We've got play-based learning which is fantastic and that's taken away (in Year 1)'.

Year 1: 'the curriculum content is huge that they have to cover. The curriculum makes that (transition) difficult. It's a huge jump. They (the children) need familiarity to feel confident and safe'.



These sentiments provided by both teachers unequivocally correlate with the literature (Fisher, 2009; Fisher, 2011; Love et al., 1992) in asserting that pedagogical discontinuities polarise EYFS and Year 1 provision. In accordance with Curtis (1986) and Yeboah (2002) the teachers also identified curriculum content as an aspect of the transition where children experienced a lack of continuity. Sanders et al. (2005) reported that both curriculum content and pedagogy influence a child's learning experience. Curriculum content's capacity to influence pedagogy results in these two concepts being inextricably linked (Carr et al., 2005; Fisher, 2009).

Additionally, both teachers' responses support the findings from research conducted by Ofsted (2004) and Sanders et al. (2005) which established that children's transition to Year 1 was overly abrupt. For the EYFS teacher especially, the transition to Year 1 has become more disjointed since the reform of the National Curriculum in 2013. When asked if these two phases of education complement or contradict each other, the EYFS teacher responded:

EYFS: 'I would have said before (the reformed national curriculum) complement because it was a gentle slope into Year 1 but not now. There are so many objectives to get through'.

This perspective supports the research which indicates that Year 1 provision fails to offer children from the EYFS a continuous learning experience (Barblett et al., 2011; OECD, 2006). In some instances, the transition to the National Curriculum, which situates knowledge at its core (Brundrett, 2015), results in some children being exposed to developmentally inappropriate practice. This further highlights a lack of bridging between EYFS and Year 1 provision in order to avoid an abrupt transition (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Huser et al., 2015). Additionally, the teachers' perspective corresponds with the belief that school transitions are becoming increasingly affected by macrosystems such as nationalised curricula (Athola et al., 2012).

Responses from the questionnaire revealed that 87% (n = 20) of Year 1 pupils found the transition to Year 1 a significant change. This statistic supports the findings from White and Sharp's (2007) study whereby Year 1 children consistently identified considerable differences to their learning environment after their transition from the EYFS. Despite these differences, most children make the transition to formal schooling successfully (Margetts, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Sharp, 2006; White & Sharp, 2007). The data from the questionnaire accurately represented this perspective as 91.3% (n = 21) of pupils stated that they have enjoyed moving into Year 1. It has been documented that for young children, the move to Year 1 is met with enthusiasm as it encompasses the perception of becoming more 'grown up' (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Walsh et al., 2008) and the opportunity to learn new things (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006).

During a child's transition, the pedagogical and curriculum discontinuities can have a profound impact upon children's enjoyment of learning (Sharp, 2006). This perspective is enforced by the statistics shown in Figure 1, which compares children's enjoyment levels between the EYFS and Year 1. Whilst all children enjoyed their time in the EYFS, the majority of children (87 % n = 20), stated that they 'really enjoyed' it. This correlates with

research conducted by Garrick et al. (2010) which suggested that children’s needs and interests in the EYFS are mostly catered for. Conversely, Figure 1 also depicts that children’s attitudes towards Year 1 were less congruent. Given the importance of play throughout the sensitive period (age 0-7) (Brown, 2013; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Goldstein, 2012) it could be suggested that a reduction in opportunities to play impacts upon children’s enjoyment of Year 1.

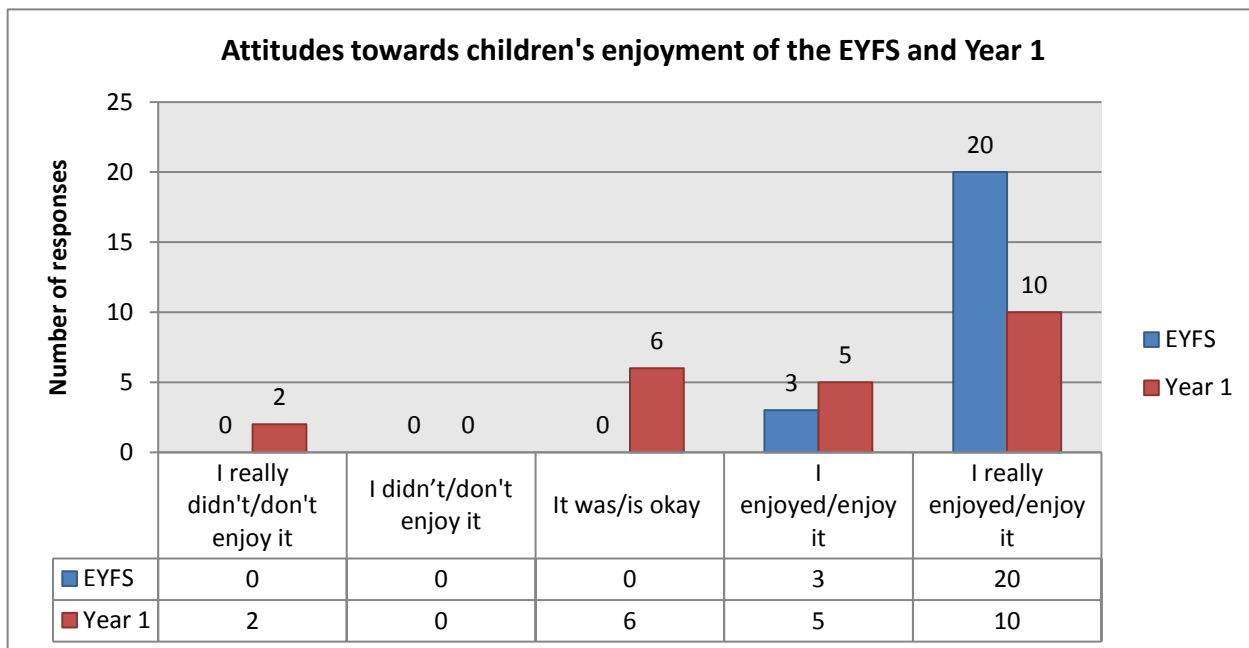


Figure 1: Attitudes towards children’s enjoyment of EYFS and Year 1

**Play-based pedagogy**

A key aspect of the study was to ascertain teacher and pupil perceptions towards play. Responses from the questionnaire divulged that 95.7% (n = 22) of children enjoyed play in the EYFS. Further to this, 87% (n = 20) of children wish they could have more opportunities to play in Year 1. These statistics align with studies conducted by White and Sharp (2007), Sanders et al. (2005) and Walsh et al. (2008) who all reported that upon their transition, Year 1 pupils regretted the curtailment of play-based activities.

Antithetical to a range of studies which revealed differences in practitioners’ understanding of play (Martlew et al., 2011; McInness, Howard, Miles & Crowley, 2011; TACTYC, 2011), the interviews elicited that attitudes towards the value of play were unanimous between both teachers. Unsurprisingly therefore, when questioned about the extension of play-based learning both teachers shared similar perspectives:

EYFS: ‘No, absolutely not (play should not be confined to the EYFS)... it should go through to at least the end of Year 1 if not Year 2’.

Year 1: ‘Definitely, we’d like to do more through play. Your EYFS needs to be brought into Key Stage One.’

These viewpoints are consistent with those of Copple and Bredekamp (2008), Fisher (2011), Hood (2013), Riley and Jones (2010), Sylva et al. (2004), White and Sharp (2007), Roberts-Holmes (2012) and Whitebread (2012) in promoting the extension of play beyond the EYFS. It has been suggested that extending EYFS provision to age six would assist in properly preparing children for formal learning (Alexander, 2010). Despite unanimity in attitudes towards play and its extension beyond EYFS provision, further questioning postulated divergent responses. The EYFS teacher focused mainly on the benefits of play as opposed to the Year 1 teacher's emphasis on the barriers of including play within the curriculum:

EYFS: 'It's learning at their pace. It's learning without them knowing. It's good for social skills. They get to choose and it gives them confidence. It's a lovely curriculum'.

Year 1: 'The amount that we have to cover... you've just got to sit down and go boom boom boom and get them doing it (formal work)'.

Evidently, the EYFS teacher's response aligns with the Department for Education and Skills (2008) in stating that 'play underpins all development and learning for young children' (p. 7). For Year 1 however, play assumes an entirely different role. The interview elicited that the Year 1 teacher uses play as an incentive to get 'through with the curriculum'. Hayes (2012) advocates incentivising play as a strategy to engage children to participate in more formalised learning. However, this should only be implemented when children become more familiar with more structured learning environments (Hayes, 2012). Arising from this pedagogical strategy are two fundamental limitations which have the potential to undermine the value of play. Firstly, relegating play to the periphery of young children's learning experience in favour of dictated criteria is unheeding of the profuse benefits of play (David, 1990). Secondly, the inclusivity of this strategy must be questioned. Rewarding children with play will only suffice to allow children who complete their work to procure its benefits. Conversely, this means that children who process their new academically focused curriculum at a slower pace are placed at a disadvantage. Additionally, research conducted by Howard (2002) contended that in settings where play was used as a reward, a dichotomy developed between pupils' perceptions of play and work. The emergence of a play-work dichotomy has severe implications as children begin to perceive play as recreation and work as learning (Howard, 2002). This perception carries weight as the questionnaire identified that only 43.5% (n = 10) of Year 1 pupils believe that they are learning when they are playing. Any attempts to curricularise play are far removed from the anthropologist's perception whereby play is a vehicle for learning in its own right (Edwards & Knight, 2000; Strandell, 2000). Therefore, Yardley (1984) suggests incentivising play to satisfy adult goals should be strongly opposed.

Incentivising the role of play in a teacher-directed classroom is a precarious strategy. However, the Year 1 teacher expressed how she was torn between delivering a 'very prescriptive' National Curriculum and wanting 'to do more through play'. The data obtained from the questionnaire revealed that 82.6% (n = 19) of children preferred choosing their own activity as opposed to participating in activities dictated by their teacher. It was clear that the Year 1 teacher understood the benefits of child-directed practice. The Year 1 teacher stated, 'If

they could do it through their interests and play I think their learning would accelerate'. However, further discussion again revealed that the constraints of the National Curriculum prevented the Year 1 teacher implementing a child-initiated pedagogy:

Year 1: I like them to think that they have free choice but there is a difference because you just have to cover it (National Curriculum)'.

It could be perceived that the Year 1 teacher is vacillating between a child-directed pedagogy, of which she is a strong advocate, and the teacher-directed pedagogy which she is obliged to cover. The conflicting educational objectives between the EYFS and Year 1 can mean teachers' professional expertise and judgement are suppressed by the pressure placed on schools to deliver prescribed educational outcomes (Athola et al., 2012; Howard, 2002; Moyles, 2001).

#### Downward push of the National Curriculum

Recent years have seen increasing political pressure being applied on the EYFS to ensure that children entering Year 1 are ready for learning (DfE, 2014; Neaum, 2016; Whitebread, 2012). This has seen the purpose of early childhood education recontextualised resulting in pedagogical 'sites of struggle' for Early Years practitioners (Broadhead et al., 2010; Moyles, 2015; Soler & Miller, 2003). When asked if the teachers feel the impact of the downward push of the National Curriculum the teachers' responses concurred with the literature:

EYFS: 'Absolutely... Academically they are not ready. Socially they are not ready. They are not ready to be pinned down. They (government) don't realise that their little brains aren't developed for all of this hard work'.

Year 1: 'Yeah I do think so because they have got to achieve so much up there (higher year groups) as well. It does start to feed in ... and sometimes (I am) going but they are so young, they are so young'.

Furthermore, these comments support the notion that the downward push of the National Curriculum is impacting upon the education of young children (Alexander, 2010; Hood, 2013). When asked if the pressure applied by the downward push affected her own practice, the EYFS teacher stated 'Yes. In the summer term especially. I am frantically trying prepare them for what's coming'. These sentiments correlate with the growing expectancy of Early Years providers to deliver children to Year 1 who are ready for learning (OECD, 2006, DfE, 2014).

The perception of early years teachers as preparing children for formal learning (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012; Howe, 2016) has marginalised play (Soler & Miller, 2003) and caused pedagogical tension within EYFS classrooms (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Additionally, in line with previous research (DfE, 2015; Fisher, 2011), the EYFS teacher affirmed that upon their transition to Year 1 'some (pupils) are still working on their early learning goals that they haven't achieved yet'. The early learning goals are a set of learning domains which outline the level of progress that young children are expected to attain prior to moving into Year 1 (DfE, 2014, p. 10). Despite some Early Years practitioners strongly resisting the downward push of the National Curriculum

(Dockett and Perry, 2012), the increasing pressure on the EYFS to formalise their practice further accentuates the lack of bridging between the EYFS and Year 1 (Huser et al., 2015; Miller, Soler, Foote & Smith, 2002; Pugh, 2010). Therefore, the data suggests that in accordance with Dockett and Perry (2014) the transition to Year 1 is a one-way activity. This puts practitioners in a precarious position as premature exposure to formal learning is damaging to children's academic, social and emotional development (Margetts, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

This study has contributed to the comprehensive literature base that is concerned with children's learning experiences upon their transition from the EYFS to Year 1. Overall findings from this study suggest that there are difficulties in bridging pedagogical discontinuity through sustaining play in Year 1. Furthermore, there is evidence which indicates that the stage at which pedagogical discontinuity is addressed is increasingly impacting EYFS provision in light of intensifying National Curriculum pressure. It should be acknowledged that the findings from this study are taken from a small sample size and therefore should not be generalised (Cohen et al., 2000). Moreover, it is likely that teachers' and pupils' perceptions of the transition to Year 1 are likely to change as the academic year goes on. Although it was beyond the remit of this study, the findings would be enhanced through observations of before, during and after the transition as in some cases what teachers say is not commensurate with their practice (Bennett et al., 1997).

The widely documented pedagogical discontinuity that pupils experience upon their transition from the EYFS to Year 1 can be identified within the findings of the study. The data appears to support other studies that there is an absence of practitioners bridging between these two phases of education. This perspective is supported by the evidence which elicits that the EYFS feel obliged to adapt their practice to implement more formalised learning to avoid children experiencing an abrupt transition. These findings align with the concerning perception of the EYFS as solely a preparation for formal learning (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012; Howe, 2016).

It was evident throughout this study that both teachers and pupils recognised the value of play and would welcome more opportunities to extend play into Year 1. However, the extension of play beyond the EYFS appears to contradict the National Curriculum's prescribed programmes of study. Consequentially, the role of play in the Year 1 classroom, although highly valued, was largely consigned to a recreational status. This study therefore, further highlights the impact that curriculum content can have on pedagogy (Carr et al., 2005; Fisher, 2009). It could be argued however, that teachers' experience and confidence in moving away from National Curriculum guidelines has the potential to influence teachers' perceptions of facilitating play in Year 1.

Further research into the extent in which play can be sustained beyond the EYFS should seek to ascertain the perspectives of a wider range of teachers and pupils. Particular emphasis should be placed on researching the

relationship between a reduction in play and children's enjoyment of learning. Further to this, it would be beneficial to expand on the dearth of research into the implications of incentivising play.

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