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# **A pedagogical meeting place or a problem space? Extending play-based pedagogy in Year One**

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## **A pedagogical meeting place or a problem space? Extending play-based pedagogy in Year One**

School readiness performance measures, such as the Good Level of Development (GLD), are increasingly associated with children's readiness to start formal learning, presenting challenges for supporting the transition to compulsory school. This research focuses on how an English primary school extended play-based pedagogy into Year One for children who did not achieve a GLD. Over a period of six-months, regular observations and interviews with senior leaders and teachers were carried out. The data cautions against an over-reliance on the GLD and identifies a number of challenges associated with extending play-based pedagogy into Year One when it is positioned as an intervention.

Keywords: transition; readiness; Good Level of Development; Year One; play-based pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Compulsory School Education (CSE) are positioned as two different activity systems (Karila and Rantavuori 2014), informed by different visions, cultures and expectations (Huser, Dockett, and Perry 2015) and operating with different priorities and practices (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007). Traditionally, ECEC is holistic in its focus, emphasising play, exploration and interaction whereas compulsory school tends to prioritise the teaching of subject-specific knowledge and academic skills (Woodhead and Moss 2007; Wood and Hedges 2016). As Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) note, the emphasis in early childhood is on the '*act of learning*' while in compulsory school the '*object of learning*' takes precedence. These contrasting pedagogical traditions can mean that the transition from ECEC to CSE is a 'major challenge' (Huf 2013, 63) and a 'culture shock' (Broström 2007, 61) for some children. While a level of discontinuity in the transition to compulsory school is described as inevitable (O'Kane 2016) and even, in some instances, desirable (Walsh et al. 2008), it is important to avoid discontinuity that goes beyond children's ability to negotiate as

this may jeopardise later school success and the development of ‘positive life trajectories’ (Dockett and Perry 2014, 7).

In order to navigate the contrasting pedagogical traditions underpinning ECEC and CSE, it has long been recommended that countries establish a strong and equal partnership between these phases of education (OECD 2006), a type of relationship where ‘neither culture takes over the other’ and both systems work to establish a ‘pedagogical meeting place’ (Moss, 2008, 230). Yet, in the context of England, as well as in a number of other anglophone countries, attempts to closer align ECEC and CSE have promoted a relationship based on ‘readying’ children for formal learning (Moss 2013; OECD 2006). In contrast to the notion of a ‘pedagogical meeting place’, a relationship based on ‘readying’ is hierarchical; the ‘lower educational level, ECEC, must serve the needs of the higher, CSE’ (Moss 2013, 36). This type of relationship has been consistently reinforced by a number of policy technologies aimed at governing and controlling the ECEC sector (Moss 2013; Roberts-Holmes 2019), contributing to the positioning of school readiness as an ‘ultimate goal’ that teachers, children and families should work towards (Wood and Hedges 2016, 393).

An important school readiness technology, and one that holds particular relevance for the present study, is the Good Level of Development (GLD), a single performance measure indicating whether or not children have achieved an ‘expected’ level of learning and development by the end of Reception (STA 2018). Although school readiness is characterised by definitional ambiguity (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012), the GLD indicator is identified as the closest official measure of school readiness (Hood and Mitchell 2017, 91). This creates a binary distinction whereby children are assessed as being ‘ready’ or ‘unready’ for Year One (Kay 2018; Wood 2019). Such a crude dualism is firmly at odds with the notion of a ‘pedagogical meeting place’ (Moss 2008),

positioning the compulsory school system as ‘inflexible’ (Petriwskyj, Thorpe and Taylor 2005, 57) and as one-size-fits-all (Bingham and Whitebread 2012). The GLD, and the empiricist view of readiness it reflects, asserts that children must acquire specific skills and knowledge in order to operate and succeed in compulsory school (Dockett and Perry 2002). This is highly problematic as government statistics (DfE 2019) show that in 2019, 28.2% of children in England did not reach a GLD by the end of their time in Reception with these children being significantly more likely to have a Special Educational Need, be born in the summer months or be eligible for Free School Meals. It is important to caution that reaching a GLD, and therefore being perceived as ‘ready’, is not necessarily a precursor to a successful transition to compulsory school, such is the difference between ECEC and CSE pedagogical traditions. Yet, the significant numbers of children not achieving a GLD, and therefore being deemed as ‘unready’ for Year One, represent a particular ‘problem space’ for Year One teachers and school leaders to negotiate (Kay 2018, 181).

It is this ‘problem space’ which provides the context for this article. Towards the end of the Reception Year, leaders of a two-form entry school were concerned that a considerable number of children, close to 50%, would be moving to Year One without having achieved a GLD. The Head Teacher and senior leaders had the view that for these children a traditional Year One approach and environment would be inappropriate and perhaps even detrimental. Instead, they believed that extending the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum and pedagogical approach into Year One would benefit these children more. They therefore decided to group children based on whether or not they achieved a GLD. Children who did meet a GLD were grouped into a ‘traditional’ Year One class and children who did not meet a GLD were to be grouped in

a 'continuation' Year One class. The Head Teacher and EYFS Lead indicated they would be willing for this new approach to be the basis of research.

### ***Extending the EYFS curriculum and pedagogical approach into Year One***

Extending EYFS curriculum and pedagogical principles into Year One encourages teachers to retain a focus on 'purposeful play' and a balance of 'adult-led and child-initiated activity' (DfE 2017, 9). This approach is popular, receiving support from researchers (Alexander, 2010; Bingham and Whitebread 2012), school leaders (Roberts-Holmes 2012) as well as both Reception (Early Excellence 2017) and Year One teachers (Fisher 2011). Prolonging EYFS curriculum and pedagogy, and in particular play-based pedagogy, is identified internationally as a strategy for 'bridging' the gap between early childhood education and compulsory school (Broström 2005; O'Kane 2016). However, in the context of England, where the school starting age is amongst one of the lowest in the world, it is argued that play-based pedagogy should go beyond the 'boundary spaces' of transition and be firmly embedded within the early years of compulsory school education (Alexander 2010; Bingham and Whitebread 2012; Fisher 2011). Bingham and Whitebread (2012) and Fisher (2010, 2011) argue that Reception (ages 4-5) and Year One-aged (ages 5-6) children are progressing along similar trajectories and that the significant change in curriculum and pedagogy between these year groups is not developmentally justified. Instead, continuing to provide all children with a broad range of experiences in Year One is beneficial (Bingham and Whitebread 2012; Walsh et al. 2006), helping children to build skills and confidence and develop positive learning dispositions (Alexander 2010).

Extending an EYFS approach into compulsory school is supported by Walsh and colleagues (2006) who investigated the implementation of two contrasting approaches to the first year of compulsory school (ages 4-5) in Northern Ireland. They compared a



formal, traditional approach which prioritises early academic achievement in literacy and numeracy with an ‘enriched curriculum’ which places emphasis on play-based pedagogy and child-initiated learning (Walsh et al. 2006). Walsh et al. (2006) implemented the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) to evaluate nine quality indicators such as motivation, concentration, and independence. Although it is important to be sensitive to the problematic nature of notions of ‘quality’ (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007), Walsh et al. (2006) reported that an enriched curriculum scored higher than the traditional curriculum on all nine quality indicators assessed in the QLI, leading them to conclude that the enriched curriculum provided children with a ‘higher-quality learning experience’ (Walsh et al. 2006, 219). These findings indicate that play-based pedagogy has benefits for children’s holistic development. However, implementing such an approach may present some challenges.

When implementing play-based pedagogy in the early years of compulsory school, teachers are tasked with trying to manage the competing demands of ECEC and CSE pedagogical traditions (Alexander 2010; Fisher 2011). In taking this approach, teachers have raised concerns about accountability (Nolan and Paatsch 2017), namely, about how they can ensure educational value through play, especially in relation to literacy and numeracy (Walsh et al. 2010) and how they can achieve specific outcomes when following children’s interests (Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011). Moreover, a lack of resources and inadequate provision (Fisher 2011), lower adult-to-child ratios (Fisher 2011; Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011) and a lack of understanding and respect from colleagues (Nolan and Paatsch 2017) have also been identified as barriers to the extension of EYFS curriculum and pedagogy into compulsory school education.

In this challenging context, the research presented here aimed to investigate the implementation of a new transition arrangement where an EYFS, play-based approach

continued for one group of children whilst their peers move into a traditional Year One class. The research focused on exploring the experiences of the teachers and pupils as the changes were implemented and attempted to understand the factors that inhibited or supported this new way of working. The research was guided by the following questions:

- How does one school facilitate and implement play-based pedagogy for certain children in Year One?
- What factors support or inhibit the implementation of play-based pedagogy in Year One?

### **Materials and Methods**

The study was small scale, focusing on one primary school that was extending play-based pedagogy into Year One for children who did not achieve a Good Level of Development. The school was a two-form entry primary academy based in an area of social and economic disadvantage in a small English city. Whole school data for the academic year 2018-19 showed that pupils in receipt of Free School Meals, a marker commonly used to denote pupils living in poverty, were almost double the national average at 47.6%. The school had experienced a turbulent recent history and was rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted in 2017. At the beginning of the study the new Head Teacher had been in post for less than a year and the school had just been taken over by a new Academy Trust. The school was selected opportunistically when one of the researchers learnt of the school's plan to support children's transition to Year One differently during the 2019/20 academic year.

The two co-researchers employed an exploratory case-study methodology (Basse 1999) as it offered the opportunity to answer 'how' and 'why' questions about the implementation of play-based pedagogy in one Year One class (Yin 2009). The aim was to describe the process and outcomes but also to consider the influential factors on

this experience, mainly from the perspective of the teachers involved. As a way of understanding the complexities associated with extending play-based pedagogy into Year One, Activity system elements (Engeström 2001; Yamagata-Lynch 2010) (Division of Labour, Rules, Tools and Community) helped to inform data collection and initial categories for analysis.

The two co-researchers collected data through four school visits across two school terms: Term 1, October 2019 and November 2019; and Term 2, January 2020 and February 2020. In Terms 1 and 2, qualitative data were gathered through whole day classroom observations in both Year One classes and semi-structured interviews with the Head Teacher, both Year One class teachers, the EYFS Lead and Progress Lead. Classroom observations took the form of chronological, descriptive notes about the teaching activities, interactions and pupil responses which were combined with semi-structured notes under key questions and prompts such as: ‘How are teaching assistants and teachers working with pupils? (1 to 1, small group, alongside in play, whole class)’. The observations offered an opportunity to observe pupil interaction and behaviour in the two classes. They also served as an anchor for and enabled triangulation against staff interviews (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

The purpose of the staff interviews was initially to establish the underlying aims and beliefs about applying play-based pedagogy in Year One using questions such as ‘Why did you decide to introduce this new way of organising Year One?’. They were also used to establish details of organisation and implementation using questions such as ‘Can you briefly explain your new approach to organising Year One this year?’. Perhaps most importantly the different practitioners’ perspectives on the successes and challenges of this approach over the school year were also sought through questions such as ‘Have there been any challenges to this new organisation?’. These interviews were repeated, with

slightly adapted questions, to see how both implementation and perspectives had changed in Term 2. Anonymised data relating to age, gender and attainment of the children in each class was also gathered from the school at the beginning of the study. Ethical processes and considerations were adhered to and ethical approval was obtained in line with the guidelines of the Open University, Bishop Grosseteste University and BERA.

The data were first analysed under the broad categories of the Activity system elements, Division of labour, Community, Tools and Rules. Then the researchers applied an inductive thematic approach to draw out codes under each category (Braun and Clarke 2006). This process was repeated and refined with each piece of data until a set of agreed codes was established between the two researchers and applied across the data. The results are discussed under the key themes that emerged.

## **Results**

### ***The development of a shared pedagogy***

Themes from the interview data highlighted that there were tensions between the vision for the project and the specific details of putting it into practice. At the beginning of the study, a common rationale and shared vision for the continuation class was clear across the staff. They believed that continuing play-based pedagogy in Year One had the potential to support the pupils who did not attain a GLD:

... in terms of their grounding and what they learn in EYFS, the progress they make, is phenomenal and there's always been an argument that actually National Curriculum should replicate what they do in EYFS ... because it is meeting those children's [who did not reach a GLD] needs. (Head Teacher)

However, although the senior leaders and teachers seemed in agreement about the need for a different approach to learning for children not meeting the GLD, their own concepts of play-based pedagogy and how this could be applied were quite different. The Head Teacher and Progress Lead emphasised ‘closing the gap’ in attainment by the end of Year One as preparation for later learning and assessment and so conceptualised this change in activity as an ‘intervention’ to raise standards:

If you don’t reach GLD then you wouldn’t normally meet your Year One expected so actually if we can get a percentage of those children to expected then for me that’s a huge success or actually get them close to what the expectation is because I think they’ll close the gap later on in school. (Head Teacher)

Whilst the EYFS Lead focused on the skills that the pupils in the continuation class still needed to develop:

... this cohort coming out, they didn’t need that focus and that routine of sitting at a desk, they still needed to work on their dexterity to help them write, they still needed the language skills that you get with small world and role play. (EYFS Lead)

She saw the ‘continuation’ class as a way of helping children to continue to ‘develop the Prime areas and make that smoother transition when they are ready’.

The ‘continuation’ class were taught by an EYFS teaching staff who moved ‘up’ into Year One for the first few weeks. However, the teacher was unable to continue with the role due to a scheduled leave of absence and was replaced by an NQT who had no experience of EYFS teaching. This change in personnel highlighted that the staff had not

established a clear idea of pedagogy for the class and had relied on the individual EYFS teacher to combine Year One objectives with play-based pedagogy.

A further unintended consequence of dividing the classes into continuation and traditional was that the Year One teachers found it harder to plan together and tended to work with limited dialogue and exchange of documents:

I think because of the staff mixing about and maybe clashes with staff, they were on PPA and they weren't really talking so the two classes became very separate and actually that is not what it is about, we want them to be collaborative. (EYFS Lead)

Alongside the challenges of collaboration, there were other issues caused by a limited understanding of the wider factors needed for effective play-based pedagogy. There was no plan for re-distribution of resources or re-design of the classroom environment to allow for learning through play. Although the Head Teacher indicated that there was increased adult support in the classroom, through observation and discussion with the teachers it became clear that one Teaching Assistant was designated to one specific child and the other shared her time between a number of different classes. The impoverished resources, in comparison to the resources observed in the Reception classrooms, and the lack of teacher expertise in EYFS pedagogy prevented children from accessing play-based provision, whether independently or with adult support.

In retrospect, all the staff agreed that finding a pedagogy that could meet the needs of this 'continuation' class was complex, requiring EYFS and Year One expertise:

I think really ... it has to be really carefully thought out with staffing, you kind of need EYFS teachers ... you really need to hand select your staff to make sure that they fully understand everything that goes behind

the early years curriculum, but equally how to push it to Year One.  
(EYFS Lead)

After experiencing this process, there was strong agreement from all staff interviewed that they needed to allow more time to plan how to move from vision to implementation, allowing a shared pedagogy to emerge:

... me articulating my vision is one thing but again realising that the minute detail needed to be planned which we'd probably overlooked various things because we thought we had the expert in the classroom  
(Head Teacher)

The Head, EYFS Lead and class teachers suggested that in future a shared pedagogy could be more effectively developed by allocating more time for collaboration and discussion between Year One and EYFS staff. They also acknowledged that sharing the EYFS environment had the potential to support this way of working.

### ***Starting with the pupils***

A key barrier to the success of the school's new approach to Year One teaching was their choice of pupil grouping. It was clear that staff had internalised the concept of reaching a 'Good Level of Development', based on the policy of EYFS national assessment, as the significant marker of children's 'readiness' for a formal curriculum. In this school, the cohort's drop in percentage of children meeting the national expectations for reaching GLD was therefore the driving force behind their decision to split the classes:

... from the data last year we realised that there was around 50% of the cohort who weren't actually ready for that more formal routine of the Year One classroom. So, the plan for it was that half of the cohort would go into a more Early Years approach ... And then in the other Year One class it will be more structured, more formal. They were the children that had that solid two ('expected' GLD measure) and the exceeding statements and they were ready for that more sort of formalised learning approach. (EYFS Lead)

The grouping of children using the overall GLD measure provided equal class numbers and ultimately led to a system of streaming. Consequently, the continuation class contained only pupils who had not reached a GLD, many of whom were the youngest and most disadvantaged in the year group. Data showed that the average age of pupils in the continuation class was 5 years 6 months compared with 5 years 9 months in the traditional class. There were also higher numbers of pupils with English as an additional language, Special Educational Needs or in receipt of pupil premium funding, which is awarded to schools to support children from low socio-economic backgrounds, children who are Looked-After and children of service personnel (Table 1).

Table 1. Pupil characteristics and number of children in each Year One class

Pupil Characteristic	Continuation Class	Traditional Class
English as additional language	5	3
Special Education Need	11	1
Pupil Premium	14	2



Interview and observation data showed that there were serious issues with behaviour in the continuation class. Children were unable to engage safely with the limited play activities on offer:

You saw the glitter tray... they had that in phonics last week... I had an activity on each table and they all had a go on each activity in their set groups. I modelled it but as soon as my back was turned they were throwing it at each other. (Continuation class teacher)

The school staff attributed this 'spike' in behaviour problems as a symptom of the social needs of the class and the fact that streaming had removed older or more socially developed 'role models':

behaviour has been a huge challenge because there's all those complex needs in one room, managing that is proving to be really challenging and the skillset the teacher needs is to be extremely high (Head Teacher)

Time spent observing the two classes corroborated the differences between behaviour in the two classes. Children from the continuation class frequently displayed off task and inappropriate behaviour such as walking around the class when asked to be seated, leaving the class unnecessarily and having to be retrieved, throwing small items across the room. Despite the teacher's attempts to make whole class activities short and interactive many of the class struggled to maintain attention and were unable to follow questions or instructions. There were frequent emotional outbursts and problems with managing self-care such as looking after belongings or dressing independently. However, other factors may also have contributed to the pupils' problems with playing harmoniously as the play-based opportunities on offer in the 'continuation' Year One

class were very limited and offered little freedom for pupils to adequately explore and follow their own areas of interest.

Another problem as a result of streaming the classes based on GLD was that the parallel Year One class were expected to adopt a very formal approach from the first week of term. This meant that the usual period of transition was no longer in place for them. The class teachers and EYFS Lead were particularly critical of this approach:

I don't think that was done particularly well if I'm honest. I think it was kind of almost thought that these children were ready and therefore we will start. (Traditional class teacher)

The Head Teacher and Progress Lead believed that because children in the traditional Year One class had met a GLD they were ready for a formal curriculum and would no longer benefit from play.

Yet observations of the traditional Year One class during the first half of the Autumn term identified that there were incidents of emotional outbursts or obviously disruptive behaviour. The class also struggled with sustaining concentration in whole class sessions and when asked to work independently on English and Maths tasks they were often unsure of what to do:

Good focus from the majority of the class for about 5 minutes. Then some children start to lose focus/concentration. Teacher has to refocus them. She needs to do this frequently. 'Able' group not on task, not fully sure how to use the number line to find the missing number in the number sentence. Also struggling to record legibly.  
(Observation notes, October 2019)

The staff concluded that the social development of the pupils should have been taken into consideration when forming the class groups. Using the GLD had provided an unsophisticated measure of progress which did not allow them to fully consider the complexity of children's needs. The EYFS Lead and Year One teacher working with the continuation class were particularly convinced that continuing play-based pedagogy with classes containing a mixture of ages, attainment and social development would have been more successful.

### *Meeting expectations*

A key theme arising from the data was the influence of both external and internal expectations of school progress in Year One. The need to meet Year One expectations and 'narrow the gap' in the year group as the pupils progressed through the school was a primary driver to 'streaming' the two classes based on GLD. In the continuation class the tension between the purported belief in the value of play-based pedagogy and pressure to reach these targets was ever-present:

having lots of complex needs in one classroom is an extra challenge certainly and we need to deliver certain interventions as well ... but they also need to make sure that they're meeting the objectives that they need to meet in the Maths and the English. (Head Teacher)

It meant that even when play-based pedagogy was attempted for the continuation class there were still regimented daily timetabled sessions for 'Read Write Inc.' (school phonics scheme), Maths and English.

Some members of staff interviewed also described ‘pushing’ the traditional Year One class to build on their GLD and translate that into exceeding the nationally expected levels by the end of Year One:

So if we are saying they got GLD and they are expected then we should be pushing them to continue to be making that good level of progress.  
(Progress Lead)

The history of the school contributed further pressure, as all staff were aware that the school had been judged inadequate by Ofsted and that national curriculum outcomes and testing were a key measure in future judgements:

There has to be a new way. I mean teaching and learning were judged inadequate. We have to do something drastically different to make it better. (Head Teacher)

In the second term of visits to the school this pressure and accountability were made visible in a new system of teaching being introduced from Year One to Year Six. This very prescriptive system of ‘Pace’ was imposed on the school by the Academy Trust, with the intention of raising teaching standards, but it was not well suited to the children in Year One, particularly the continuation class:

... we’ve got a new pacing system and its basically ...5 minutes to do a starter, 10 minutes to do something that they’ve previously done. Then its 5 minutes for a reasoning question. Then you’ve got your 8-minute input and then 20-minute activities. I have found this a little bit tricky because with my children that aren’t quite independent, yet we’re

following the same curriculum pace as everyone else, but my children aren't quite there. (Continuation class teacher).

This academisation of pedagogy was not in line with the original goal of the continuation class but led to a top down impact from SLT to class teachers:

I know exactly within progress what I need to look at and we will feed back to SLT. But then, the trust will come in and say 'right, I want to know what you have been doing'. So, they hold us to account, but then obviously we need to hold teachers to account in whatever we are monitoring. (Progress Lead)

In February 2020, after six months of working with the streamed Year One classes, the school leaders and class teachers decided that this new approach had not been successful. Play-based pedagogy had not been embedded in the continuation class and the pupils' experiences of play were reduced to choosing from some puzzles, games and drawing activities on a Friday afternoon and participating in more practical, adult supervised activities as part of National Curriculum subjects such as Art, Science and Design Technology.

A decision was made to create two new groups of pupils for Maths and English sessions every morning, returning to the continuation and traditional classes for afternoons. The grouping of pupils was organised by the class teachers who were asked to consider academic and social needs as well as the relationships within each group. The Head Teacher could see how things could be improved in future by grouping pupils in Year One based on more detailed consideration of specific academic and social needs. However, he was unsure if they would try the approach with the next cohort:

Will we do the same next year? The answer is I don't know yet. I still 100 percent believe that play-based is the way forward but then I also realise that maybe when we're splitting those children it's probably not as easy as to say, 'Good level of development' and 'Not Good level of Development'. It's looking at the specific strands of why they're not getting GLD. (Head Teacher)

## **Discussion**

The case study presented here investigated how and why a two-form entry school redesigned their approach to teaching and learning in one of their Year One classes when close to 50% of the cohort had not achieved a Good Level of Development by the end of their time in Reception. Findings from this study appeared to confirm that the teachers and senior leaders internalised the GLD measure as a legitimate indicator of children's readiness to start formal learning, as suggested by Kay (2018) and Wood (2019). This view led the school to group children who achieved a GLD into a traditional Year One class and children who were still working towards a GLD in an EYFS continuation class, an arrangement that epitomises the binary nature of the GLD (Kay 2018). This could be considered as taking an empiricist view of what it means to be school ready, implying that if children have not attained a normative check-list of requisite academic and developmental criteria then they are not 'ready' and instead require an alternative approach to the one offered in compulsory school education (Dockett and Perry 2002; Meisels 1999).

Evidently, the motive for continuing to deliver play-based pedagogy in Year One for half of the year group was strongly influenced by the GLD indicator, affirming the influence of school readiness performance measures on grouping practices (Roberts-Holmes 2019). This was, however, in stark contrast to other studies reporting the

extension of play-based pedagogy which are often identified as being motivated by the need to provide children with a broader range of experiences in the first years of compulsory school (Fisher 2011; Stephen, Ellis, and Martlew 2010; Walsh et al., 2006). For example, the teachers in Fisher's research expressed a desire to move away from a formal and prescribed pedagogy in Year One and Two in order to provide all children with more developmentally appropriate opportunities and achieve 'a greater balance between adult-led and child-initiated learning' (2011, 33). Central to the support for extending this approach is that all children up until the age of seven can benefit from a continued focus on learning through play, exploration and interaction (Alexander 2010; Bingham and Whitebread 2012). However, in this instance, the school, and in particular the Senior Leadership Team, saw the extension of an EYFS approach into Year One as an intervention, intended to 'close the gap', with the only exception being the EYFS Lead who held the view that every child is unique and would benefit from continued opportunities to learn through play. The rationale for grouping children into an EYFS continuation class was therefore dictated by the GLD and seen as a strategy for improving children's readiness to start formal learning as opposed to a genuine desire for pedagogical change in Year One. This was confirmed when the children who had achieved a GLD were subject to an overly formal approach right from the start of Year One.

As the rationale for prolonging play-based pedagogy in Year One was policy rather than practitioner initiated, attempts to develop and create a shared pedagogy and vision for the continuation class were lacking. It was assumed that the children placed in the continuation class would benefit from a replication of their experiences in Reception, including continuation of play-based pedagogy and opportunities to 'develop the Prime areas'. However, the over-reliance on one teacher to facilitate this meant that when she

left, the school struggled to articulate their vision for the continuation class from which the new teacher could assimilate, contribute towards and co-construct. Previous research indicates that teachers interpret early years pedagogy in a number of different ways (Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011; McInnes et al. 2011) and the failure to establish and articulate a shared understanding (Moss 2013) for the continuation class meant that the new teacher reverted towards a more traditional Year One approach, in line with her training and experience. This goes against the recommendations of Jay and Knaus (2018) who identified that the establishment of a genuine learning community, encompassing teacher mentorship, the introduction of collaborative year group teams and regular team meetings where teachers can share ideas, resources and planning, was integral to supporting the introduction of play-based pedagogy in a compulsory school context in Western Australia. In addition, factors that have been identified in previous research, such as a lack of support and understanding from colleagues (Nolan and Paatsch 2018), less adult support (Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011) and inadequate resourcing including limited access to outdoor provision (Fisher 2011), all impeded the extent to which play-based pedagogy could be effectively implemented in the Year One continuation class.

The application of the GLD as the principle mechanism used to inform this school's organisation of Year One meant that vitally important factors relating to each child were overlooked. Each year, government statistics affirm that certain children, particularly those born in the summer months, those with a Special Educational Need, and those eligible for Free school Meals, are on average less likely than their more advantaged peers to attain a GLD (DfE 2019). This pattern of attainment prompted Kay (2018, 47) to argue that the GLD is in itself 'an act of marginalisation' that fails to take into account the 'developmental complexities and variations of young children'. In failing to look beyond the GLD, the approach taken by the school resulted in a situation whereby



disadvantaged children were overwhelmingly and disproportionately grouped in the continuation class. The adherence to and reliance on the GLD ultimately led to inappropriate grouping, which Roberts-Holmes suggests is increasingly prominent in Reception and Year One contexts due to increasing pressure on teachers and school leaders to ‘maximise the production of required attainment data’ (2019, 8). This was particularly evident as teachers discussed this way of organising Year One as an approach that would benefit the children in both classes. It would enable children in the continuation class to ‘catch up’ and ‘close the gap’ and it would allow the children in the traditional Year One class to ‘push on’ with the added expectation of ‘converting’ their GLD into an ‘expected’ level of attainment at the end of Year One.

Although the GLD provided an equal split, which seemed attractive, as this school was two-form entry, the implementation of this approach was highly problematic for both classes. The behaviour of children in the Year One continuation class presented huge challenges for the staff. Issues with pupil behaviour, while exacerbated by the lack of resources provided for play and child-initiated learning, were mostly attributed to the grouping together of children with highly complex social and developmental needs. Whereas in the traditional Year One class, the presumption of children’s readiness for formal learning led to an overly structured approach from the very start of the year, meaning that there was little attempt to build on children’s experiences in Reception, as is recommended by Dunlop and Fabian (2007) and Sanders et al. (2005). This lack of ‘bridging’ (Huser, Dockett, and Perry, 2016) meant that children in the traditional Year One class experienced discontinuity that seemed to go beyond their ability to negotiate. The expectation placed on these children to concentrate for sustained periods of time, during mostly adult-led learning activities, represented a significant departure from their

Reception experiences and led to incidents of emotional outbursts and disruptive behaviour.

In addition, by emphasising the GLD as the normative benchmark against which children would be judged, children in Year One were subject to being labelled as being either ‘ahead’ or ‘behind’ (Kay 2018) or as having or lacking competence (Ang 2014). The labelling of young children against what is considered ‘normal’, carries with it a strong risk of reduced or increased expectations and the subsequent grouping of children based on ability (Roberts-Holmes 2019), as evidenced by the school’s expectations for and organisation of children in Year One. These factors have strong implications for inclusive practice. For example, Graue (2006, 53-54) argues that ‘An inclusive school assumes that all children have a place in pedagogy, that thresholds have limited value in planning instruction or placement of students’. However, the grouping of children based on the GLD represents a move towards what Bradbury (2018, 7) refers to as ‘data-driven teacher subjectivities’, where children’s ‘data double’, in this case their GLD score, becomes more visible than that of the individual it is intended to represent.

Although the intention in the continuation class was to extend an EYFS pedagogical approach, the expectation for children to meet National Curriculum objectives, particularly in Maths and English, and work towards the Phonics Screening Test at the end of Year One meant that this vision was never fully embraced. In accordance with other research (Martlew Stephen, and Ellis 2011; Nolan and Paatsch 2018; Walsh et al. 2010), the teachers in this study displayed concerns about how Year One attainment targets could be met through a pedagogy which gives children opportunities to direct their own learning. This meant that English, Maths and Phonics were taught at set times using a predominantly adult-directed approach, with child-led learning restricted to more ‘practical’ National Curriculum subjects in the afternoon. In

alignment with Fisher, it was clear that the teachers in this study held the view that certain elements of the Year One curriculum, particularly those related to statutory assessment, required 'systematic adult input' (2011, 39). The fulfilment of play-based pedagogy in Year One proved difficult as it represents a collision of two very distinct pedagogical traditions, namely, between '*the act*' and '*the object*' of learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson 2008). Play-based pedagogy, with its emphasis on process, can contain elements of spontaneity (Fung & Cheng 2012) and unpredictability (Wood 2007), yet such ambiguities are seldom tolerated in the outcome-driven practices of compulsory school education. Ultimately, the vision of play-based pedagogy in Year One was abandoned, succumbing to the 'gravitational pull' of compulsory school education and its powerful and established pedagogical tradition (Moss 2008, 225).

This was epitomised by the decision to move towards a pedagogy based on 'pace' for all children in Years One to Six. This top down, one-size-fits-all approach, imposed on the school by the Academy Trust with the intention of driving standards, oversaw a shift to a highly prescriptive pedagogy based on imparting knowledge. This method, which represents a significant departure from the original aim of extending EYFS pedagogical principles into Year One, is easier for children to demonstrate and for teachers to measure, both of which are indicative of a neoliberal education model that fosters performativity (Ball 2003) and values the measurement of educational outcomes (Biesta 2009).

The extension of play-based pedagogy in Year One (ages 5-6) and beyond is widely supported as it continues to provide all children, regardless of ability, with a broad range of experiences throughout important years of development. However, given the established pedagogical tradition of compulsory school, extending a pedagogy based on play and children's interests, if it is to be successful, necessitates a long-term perspective,

requiring constant reflection, ongoing professional learning as well as support and understanding from the wider school community (Fisher 2011; Jay and Knaus 2018). Yet, in the present case study, this pedagogical change was interventionist, positioned as a way of helping a group of children who did not reach a Good Level of Development to ‘close the gap’. This seemed to impact the extent to which a vision for the continuation class was developed, shared and supported by the wider school community. The data presented also draw attention to the highly problematic nature of the GLD as in this case it led to inappropriate grouping practices that failed to take into account children’s social and emotional development as well as their cognitive capabilities.

### **Disclosure statement**

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