

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Stranmillis University College		
Unit of Assessment: Education		
Title of case study: Changing practice in the early years of primary schooling: Teaching and Learning Playfully.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Glenda Walsh	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Head of Early Years Education	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Sept 1999-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: late 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Yes		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>A 20-year programme of research on play in the early years of primary schooling, by Stranmillis University College and Queen's University, Belfast, has informed a programme of educational reform for all 4-6-year-old children in Northern Ireland (NI) i.e. approximately 650,000 children since 2007 and 720,000 children since 2015 in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). Extending the impacts detailed in 2014, and drawing on new and sophisticated understanding about the synergy between playfulness, teaching and learning, this case study reports on three key impacts: shaping national policy; enhancing teacher knowledge of play as pedagogy through an intense programme of professional development and support; and making a positive change to classroom practice.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>A programme of educational reform in the early years of primary schooling in NI and the RoI arises from a 20-year body of ground-breaking research by Walsh at Stranmillis University College (SUC) and Sproule and McGuinness at Queen's University, Belfast (QUB). The research has been reported in 64 publications since 2000: 1 book, 14 book chapters, 25 research reports, 11 peer-reviewed journal articles, 10 professional journal articles and 4 web-based tools.</p> <p>Enduring concerns about the inappropriateness of a formal curriculum for children as young as 4 years (NI has the youngest statutory school starting age in Europe) led to a substantive strand of research enquiry - a large-scale, quasi-experimental, longitudinal evaluation, funded by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in NI (£850,000) from 2000-2009, of a play-based curriculum for 4-6 year old children, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum (EC) Evaluation Project in 24 schools (with approximately 1000 children, 24 principals, 150 teachers and 1500 parents).</p> <p>Findings revealed a positive picture of this play-based curriculum in terms of children's learning dispositions, social development and emotional well-being (R1). Despite depressed scores on reading and mathematics in Years 1 and 2, by the end of Year 7, the EC children's scores mainly matched those of the children following the traditional curriculum. Yet the research evidence highlighted pedagogical challenges around advancing children's academic learning through play, while still maintaining a high level of children's interest, confidence and well-being (R2).</p>		

The findings and associated recommendations from the EC evaluation were “pivotal” (R3, page 21) in the introduction of a statutory play-based curriculum - the Foundation Stage (FS) for all Year 1 (2007) and Year 2 children (2008) across all NI primary schools. FS teachers were now obliged to change their practice to ensure that children “experience much of their learning through well planned and challenging play” (NI Primary Curriculum, page 9).

However, further evidence revealed that the pedagogical dilemmas experienced by some EC teachers had not been fully resolved with the introduction of the FS curriculum. The findings pointed to the need for more radical thinking about the meaning of play as pedagogy in EY classes. (R3).

For the past 10 years, we have delved deeper into the EC data which has brought to the fore new thinking about the importance of playfulness as a central characteristic of quality teaching and learning in the early years classroom (R4). Additional scrutiny of the data pointed to the need to move beyond the boundaries of play and teaching as separate entities, towards a more expansive and integrated early years pedagogy where playfulness, teaching and learning are more fully fused – an original pedagogical concept which has become known as Playful Teaching and Learning (PTL) (R5).

Further elaborations have informed an innovative early years pedagogical framework, based on three key dimensions: the degree of playfulness, the locus of control and the nature of the learning taking place (R6). Upskilling practitioners on these underpinning principles of PTL has been noted to impact positively on professional knowledge and practice (R7).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The quality of the underpinning research outputs is demonstrably above the REF threshold of two-star quality by virtue of the rigorous peer-review process involved in the publication of the following articles in high-ranking international peer-reviewed journals:

R1 Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C., Trew, K., Rafferty, H and Sheehy, N (2006) “An Appropriate Curriculum for 4-5-year-old Children in Northern Ireland: Comparing Play-based and Formal Approaches.” *Early Years* 26:2, 201- 221.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140600760003>

R2 McGuinness, C., Sproule, L., Bojke, C., Trew, K. and Walsh, G. (2014) “Impact of a play-based curriculum in the first two years of primary school: literacy and numeracy outcomes over seven years”, *British Educational Research Journal*, 40:5, 772-795.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3117>

R3 Hunter, T. and Walsh, G. (2014) “From policy to practice?: the reality of play in primary school classes in Northern Ireland”, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22:1, 19-36.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.830561>

R4 Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C. and Trew, K. (2011) “Playful Structure: A Novel Image of Early Years Pedagogy for Primary School Classrooms.” *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development* 31:2, 107-119.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2011.579070>

R5 Walsh, G., McGuinness, C. and Sproule, L. (2019) “‘It’s teaching ... but not as we know it’: using participatory learning theories to resolve the dilemma of teaching in play-based practice”, *Early Child Development and Care*, 189:7, 1162-1173.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1369977>

R6 Sproule, L., Walsh, G. and McGuinness, C. (2019) “More than ‘just play’: picking out three dimensions of a balanced early years pedagogy”, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27:4, 409-422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2019.1628011>

R7 Walsh, G. and Fallon, J. (2019) “What’s all the Fuss about Play: Expanding Student Teachers’ beliefs and Understandings of Play as pedagogy in Practice”, *Early Years: an International Journal of Research and Development*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2019.1581731>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Shaping Policy

Walsh’s research has been “instrumental” (**S1**) in informing the design and development of the statutory play-based Foundation Stage (FS) curriculum in NI, impacting the playful experiences of almost 650,000 4-6 year olds since 2007. Walsh continues to significantly influence policy: “a familiar face at regular meetings and seminars with key NI EYE policymakers and stakeholders” and provides “regular updates at meetings with DE representatives” (**S1**). The significance of Walsh’s research led to invited presentations at the Chief Inspector’s Report dissemination conferences on 17th and 18th May, 2017 to NI stakeholders and primary principals (n= 250), presentations which the ETI Chief Inspector (2017) described as “invaluable”, “inspiring” and “very worthwhile sharing of best practice” (**S2**).

The impact of Walsh’s research has extended beyond NI, “informing the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) across a range of policy and practice developments in the Republic of Ireland for much of the last decade” (**S3**). Walsh’s presentation to NCCA’s Early Childhood and Primary Team in September 2014 on playful pedagogy informed the new statutory EYs Primary Language Curriculum, impacting over 6000 infant teachers and 180,000 children on an annual basis since 2015. Walsh’s research has informed the design of the [draft Primary Curriculum framework](#). A playful pedagogical approach is recommended across the Key Stages, with the potential to impact all primary teachers (approximately 23000) and in turn all primary pupils (approximately 560,000) on an annual basis (**S3**).

Walsh was appointed by RoI Ministers for her “knowledge and experience in the field” to the influential [Qualifications Advisory Board](#) for the Department of Education and Skills, March 2020, with a focus on upskilling the Early Years workforce across the entire sector(**S4**).

Influencing Professional Development

Underpinned by the EC research on play and playful pedagogies, Walsh designed and implemented a bespoke professional development programme for FS teachers across NI: **31** (6/12 hour) Playful Learning hubs/courses were completed 2013-2019, reaching some **930** teachers.

Having “gained much respect and trust among the teachers” (**S1**), the Education Authority in NI invited Walsh from June 2017 to develop these PL hubs into a series of three day courses as part of the Signature Project (2017-2019) and Collaborating and Sharing in Education project (2019 - 2022). **18** courses have been delivered to date, reaching a further **540** FS teachers (on average 30 teachers per course). The impact on teacher knowledge is significant as almost **1500** FS

teachers have been trained (**S1**), accounting for over half of all NI FS teachers, with further courses scheduled up until 2022.

Such training “has no doubt led to the upskilling of teachers to ensure the theory and recent research is put into practice in a sustainable and enjoyable way with positive outcomes for the children” (**S1**). Such feedback is corroborated by the ETI’s [Shared Education Signature Project Evaluation Report](#) (March 2018: 37), where the Stranmillis Playful Learning course is highlighted as an Example of Good Practice: “Staff now feel empowered to confidently deliver activity-based learning and have the capacity to sustain this improvement” (**S5**).

Walsh has also worked closely with CCEA over 20 years, developing a [repository](#) of high quality professional development [resources](#) (password protected) and informing the [Mixed-Age Play at Parkhall](#) project (**S6**) underpinned by research on play and playful pedagogies to support delivery of the FS Curriculum which practising teachers deem “as extremely valuable learning and teaching tools” (**S1**).

In RoI, “Given Dr Walsh’s expertise and research activity in relation to teaching and learning through play” Walsh was invited by NCCA to present to, and work with the national group of tutors, 2015-2018, as part of the Aistear Tutor Initiative (ATI) reaching over 20,000 teachers (**S3**). She has also been responsible for developing a series of professional development [resources](#) (2015-2016) for NCCA’s online Primary Language Teacher Toolkit, accessible to all RoI primary teachers (**S3, S7**).

Walsh’s edited book ([Playful Teaching and Learning](#)) with McMillan and McGuinness (**S8**) is a “key resource for all early years practitioners” (**S1**) and “has informed policy advice developed by NCCA for the Department of Education” (**S3**). It has been well-received by teacher educators and practitioners across RoI and the UK (see [reviews](#)). The initial chapter of PTL was translated into Danish for [Leg I Skolen](#) and led to Walsh contributing (by invitation) a chapter for a Norwegian [anthology on Play in Primary classrooms](#) (**S9**).

Impact on Practice

“The impact of Glenda’s research activity on practice cannot be underestimated” where “learning through play in the NI FS has evolved greatly over the years” (**S1**). Such thinking has been corroborated by the latest [Chief Inspector’s Report](#) (2018): “there are (now) more opportunities for open-ended research, investigation and child-led enquiry through activity-based learning” in FS classrooms (**S10**). The influence of Walsh’s research on practice remains significant throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Walsh developed a [repository of playful learning resources](#) for teacher and parental use during lockdown, reaching 33,000 unique visitors 08/04/20- 30/06/20. Walsh’s research has created positive change that has had “a lasting impact on the views and attitudes of key stakeholders to create playful approaches to teaching and learning in practice... for the benefit of our children” (**S1**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1 – Testimonial from a former inspector at the Education and Training Inspectorate (1998-2018)

S2 – Letter of thanks from the Chief Inspector of Schools in Northern Ireland – 30th May 2017

- S3** – Testimonial from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in the Republic of Ireland – Director of Curriculum and Assessment and the Deputy Chief Executive (now Chief Executive)
- S4** – Letter of Invitation to the Qualifications Advisory Board, Principal, Early Years Education Policy Unit, the Department of Education and Skills ROI
- S5** – The Shared Education Signature Project Evaluation Report, October 2018, page 36-37 <https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/shared-education-signature-project-evaluation-report.pdf>
- S6** – Testimonial from the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, September 2020
- S7** – Primary Language Curriculum: Support Materials for Teachers, NCCA, December 2015: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/3ac44a69-57f9-49ea-80db-ebec76831111/PLC-Support-Materials_All-Strands-Final.pdf (pages 9-17)
- S8** – Walsh, G., McMillan, D and McGuinness, C, (2017) Playful Teaching and Learning. London: Sage, [Playful Teaching and Learning | SAGE Publications Ltd](#), the initial chapter of which was translated into Danish for the edition, <https://u-p.dk/vare/leg-i-skolen/>
- S9** – Chapter in Norwegian Anthology on Play in Primary Schools, Towards Playful Teaching and Learning – Walsh, G. (2019) Towards Playful Teaching and Learning in Practice, In Andreassen-Becher, A., Bjørnstad, E & Dehnæs-Hogsnes (Red) *Lek I Begynneropplæringen*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pages 127-142
- S10** – The Chief Inspector’s Report – 2016-2018 - [cir-2016-2018_1.pdf \(etini.gov.uk\)](#) page 65