***Ministerial Roundtable - ‘Effective embedding of Realising the Ambition at the Early Level of Curriculum for Excellence’***

**Thursday 19th June 2025 - 14.30 to 16.00 - Scottish Parliament**

**Presentation 1 - ‘Benefits of the Scottish approach to play-based learning in the ‘early level’**

* Sian Neil, Education Scotland
* Janie McManus and Patricia Watson, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE)

Rationale for learning through play at the early level:

* Essential for early learning, **development** and **well-being**.
* Benefits to skills development and creativity.
* Play can mitigate some of the impacts of poverty.

This input was very positive and Sian Neil confirmed this positivity and posed the question ‘why do we change the focus at P.1?’, a play based approach should be retained for **developmental reasons**. We are aware that many of the play developments in P.1 and Early Level are being reported positively therefore **why stop or not introduce?**

Play versus Play Pedagogy

Play is an activity which is chosen and directed by the child and undertaken for enjoyment and its own sake rather than a means to an end.

Child centred play pedagogy - a cyclical process of 👍

* Observation and assessment
* Responsive (in the moment) and intentional adult-initiated planning, and
* Facilitation of learning through high-quality interactions, experiences and spaces

**It is crucial that there is a shared understanding of this - all courses and professionals MUST possess this shared understanding.**

Inspection insights: play based learning at early level:

* What’s working well?
* System enablers
* Challenges

A major strength is that indications are that many/most early years are using national guidance, i.e. Realising the Ambition, leading to strengths that play has been, and presently is, being developed, this over a period of years. There is evidence that staff progress has been made regarding well-timed and effective observations.

Challenges:

* Ensuring we can ‘move children’s play on’
* That teachers/early years staff have confidence to allow children to ‘take the lead’
* Resourcing difficulties
* Financial investment, specifically training
* Barriers to Nursery-P.1 transition

**Presentation 2 - ‘Play Scotland’s perspectives on how play-based learning supports children’s development’**

* Marguerite Hunter-Blair, Play Scotland

Marguerite shared that research evidenced that only half of school children play actively at school break times. Research also confirmed that there is less conflict in the playground when play is in-built.

Play pedagogy supports the delivery of RtA through:

* **Secure Relationships** - co-play, emotionally attuned adults, and consistency
* **Learner Agency** - enabling choice, curiosity, and self-directed learning
* **Responsive Environments** - designed around children’s identity and interests
* **Wellbeing and Nurture** - building emotional security, confidence and resilience

***‘These are not aspirations - they are lived, relational pedagogies seen every day in schools across Scotland’*** (Falkirk teacher)

Note - these are all Upstart aspirations and now observed in many schools across Scotland.

Marguerite updated the group on **Play Scotland Play Pedagogy Award**, via this initiative Play Scotland has observed how schools can embed these principles meaningfully across the whole school. **Play is a driver for equality and wellbeing relationship based experience.**

Marguerite then spoke about play pedagogy as a driver of equity and wellbeing, using quotes of experiences from staff as follows **‘children who used to withdraw or dysregulate now lead their own learning’** (Glasgow teacher) and **‘We’re seeing children take risks in learning because they feel safe enough to fail’** (Falkirk teacher).

Marguerite presented two slides entitled ‘play pedagogy practice in action’ and ‘local solutions, national impact’, two brilliant and excellent slides evidencing positive progress and practice. This included local and national evidence: **‘children are calmer, more independent, more curious’** (Falkirk teacher) and **‘our classroom is a safe space where children can be themselves and take ownership of their day’**

**What gets in the way of Realising the Ambition?**

* Lack of confidence - ‘I didn’t know what play looked like in P.5’ (Glasgow teacher)
* System pressure - traditional assessment models and documentation demands
* Limited resources - time, staffing, funding constraints
* Inconsistent access - cost remains a barrier in some settings

***A CALL TO ACTION: MAKE THE AMBITION REAL:***

***NOT JUST A POLICY VISION - TO MAKE IT WORK WE MUST:***

* ***Invest in the people and practice that enable relational pedagogy***
* ***Support school-level change through time, tools and trust***
* ***Recognise the power of play not just for early-level but throughout the whole school***
* ***Expand access to structured whole-school approaches***

**‘After 25 years I’ve never felt more in tune with my learners’** (Glasgow teacher)

**‘If there was no play, school would be boring and we wouldn’t even learn properly’** (P.4 pupil, Shetland)

**A PERFECT MESSAGE TO ALL ATTENDEES AT THE ROUNDTABLE EVENT**

**Presentation 3: Local authority experiences of embedding play-based curriculum in the early level**

Lisa McCabe, Falkirk Council

Lisa’s presentation was outstanding and the most vocal and powerful message and plea of the session - **completely aligned with Upstart’s ambitions:**

* Address the barriers presented by Early Level (Nursery-P.1) and the elimination of P.1 assessments
* The development of strong systemic leadership
* Entitlement for training
* As stated previously **a shared and agreed understanding of play**
* Long term training and upskilling
* Lisa’s experience is of **parents/carers/families being increasingly supportive and agreeable of a play based approach**
* Remove the conflict and confusion that exists between **RtA** and **CfE** - this conflict **undermines practice**

**Roundtable discussion**

On behalf of Upstart, I contributed comprehensively to the debate, as follows:

* I presented John’s question - **‘Is there a willingness to examine real issues impeding Early Childhood Education across Scotland? With no universal kindergarten in Scotland, and only limited time in P.1 to teach, isn’t there a risk that expecting a more play-based approach will be in direct competition with the goal of preparing children to perform well in the very non play-based SNSA testing. *Do you have any plan(s) to address this potential “internal competition” for resources in P.1?’***
* I cited value for money and direction of resources - **£7 258 928.66** invested in SNSA over the last three years - **£23 837 581.40** invested in the seven years since SNSA introduced - **£1.7 billion invested in an effort to ‘close the attainment gap’** (likely the majority of which is Pupil Equity Funding)
* Curriculum for Excellence - inordinate amount of experiences and outcomes - benchmarks - states flexibility but negated by SNSA and submission of Early Level attainment date - **contradictions and confusions - *how can this be developmental?***

Other roundtable discussion significant points:

* Janie McManus stated that the training of teachers and NQT’s appropriately and with high quality is essential.
* Education Scotland is looking at some practices and research of kindergarten and will afford some consideration.
* Janie McManus shared there has been some discussion with regard to raising the formal start of schooling to the P.2 age/stage level.
* **Terminology and understanding is VITALLY important - it’s either PLAY or not - it’s NOT PLAY-BASED - we should all be referring to a shared terminology and understanding of PLAY PEDAGOGY.**

**Conclusively, this was a really positive, productive and effective roundtable event where all attendees presented as supportive and endorsing Upstart’s aspirations.**

Willie French

Chair - Upstart Scotland

June 2025