

Play is the Way

Child development, early years
and the future of Scottish
education

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Chapter 12

What would a Scottish kindergarten stage look like?

Sue Palmer and Kate Johnston

THE EARLY LEVEL of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence¹ begins when children are three years old and extends until the end of Primary 1 (P1), when most are aged six. The pedagogical practice recommended for Early Level is child-centred and play-based, which is the norm in nurseries. Unfortunately, when children transfer from nursery to school at age four or five it has usually meant a big change in the ethos of their education (see figure 1 on page 142).

It has therefore been heartening that, over the last few years, many P1 teachers have begun to introduce play-based pedagogy into their primary classrooms, often with support from local authority advisory services, as described in Chapter 6. The move has been accompanied by a groundswell of local and national training courses for P1 teachers (to make up for a sorry lack of attention to early child development in most initial teacher training courses) and some schools have employed nursery-trained staff to work alongside P1 teachers.

The publication of *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*² in 2020 should consolidate this welcome move in the direction of a Scottish 'kindergarten stage'. Indeed, less than a month after *Realising the Ambition* appeared, a 'blue skies thinking' report from Scotland's Futures Forum (*Schooling, Education and*

Kindergarten ethos	School ethos
Adults expected to support children at their individual developmental levels	Adults expected to teach children according to age-related standards
Emphasis on all-round development	Emphasis on literacy and numeracy
Outdoors (and in nature) as far as possible	Mainly indoors, often desk-based
Informal, flexible, child-led curriculum	Timetabled, subject-based curriculum
Children who are interested in reading/writing/numeracy supported at own level	Children expected to attain age-related targets in reading/writing/numeracy
Balance of self-directed play and adult-initiated activities	Activities mainly teacher-directed with little self-directed play

Figure 1: The ethos of education in kindergarten and school

Learning, 2030 and beyond)³ envisioned that, by 2030, we'll have a kindergarten stage from three to eight. Certainly it's now reasonable to expect that, within a few years, the majority of Scottish P1 (and many P2) classes will adopt relationship-centred, play-based practice.

Unfortunately, however, Scotland's early school starting age means children still have to make the physical transition from nursery to school when they are four or five. This is a considerable social and emotional upheaval at that age. There's also the possibility that Scotland's cultural heritage (as described in Chapter 1) will prevent play-based pedagogy becoming fully embedded in P1 classrooms so that the change to developmentally appropriate education will be eroded over time, as is currently happening in England.⁴

Upstart therefore hopes that schools and nurseries soon start devising ways to educate and care for three- to six-year-olds together – on the same site – as a physical acknowledgement that this is a discrete developmental stage. In fact, as Chapter 9 illustrates, there have already been moves in this direction in some outdoor nurseries, and we at Upstart were expecting to see more innovations of this kind during 2020-21.

Sadly, the COVID-19 crisis has put paid to significant innovation for the time being. So, to give an idea of what we hope and expect, here are three likely imaginary scenarios, illustrating the next stage in Scotland's journey to 'a Nordic style kindergarten stage'.

The Lileen Hardy Primary School

This is a huge Victorian building in a major Scottish city, with a yearly intake of two P1 classes and a large nursery on site. Ms McMillan, the deputy head, has a Masters degree in Early Years so her remit is supervision of the nursery and P1 to P3.

Under Ms McMillan's supervision, the nursery and P1 classrooms have been located together in one wing of the school, the Early Level staff have collaborated for several years and P1 at Lileen's is now well-known for its play-based practice. Aided by a dedicated band of parent helpers (who love the new way of doing things), they've transformed a large open space outside their classrooms into a vibrant outdoor area for exploration and play-based learning.

The expansion of funded nursery hours in 2020 means many nursery children are in school for the same hours as P1 so, inspired by *Realising the Ambition*, Lileen's senior management team decided to create an Early Level Village (ELV), consisting of two vertically-grouped cohorts of three- to six-year-olds. Everyone could see the

advantages of mixing the age-groups at this developmental stage, with the younger children learning from their older classmates, and the older children helping the little ones. Once the new intake was settled in, the groupings became more fluid – so that ELV indeed operates like a sort of village – a village that is raising eighty children.

The school also has access to a ‘forest school area’, a short minibus drive away. All Lileen Hardy staff receive basic training in outdoor education, appropriate to the age-range they teach (which in the case of Early Level is forest kindergarten training). ELV has been allocated a two-hour slot ‘in the woods’ every day so the ‘elves’ (as the children are now inevitably known) have plenty of access to nature, as well as free-flow access to their on-site outdoor area.

This year there are also two support assistants (for children with additional needs) in the Early Level at Lileen’s, as well as at least one ELC student and several parent-helpers around. So every child in Ms McMillan’s ELV has a named key worker and a great many other caring adults keeping an eye on their progress.

Parents and children are all delighted with the new arrangement. The P1 teachers are thrilled to be released from curriculum constraints so they can develop their observational skills and support the children in creating their own educational challenges. They also have time to engage with children in ‘sustained shared thinking’⁵ and to use learning journals, developmental observation charts and floor books for record-keeping and assessment. According to a PhD student who is monitoring ‘The Lileen Hardy Experiment’ for her PhD, the ‘elves’ progress so far is extremely gratifying.

Children's Garden Nursery

Children's Garden is a local authority nursery in a large post-industrial town which is officially designated an 'area of disadvantage'. The nursery has access to some local woodland space and, over the last few years, many of its practitioners have gained forest kindergarten qualifications. The children love spending time 'in the woods' and local parents and the community have supported the nursery's outdoor activities, building a storage shed, a yurt, a fire-pit and even a compost toilet. Enthusiasm among staff, parents and children for these woodland activities has been even keener since the COVID crisis.

The local authority is highly supportive of play-based learning at Early Level so, when Mrs Frederick, head teacher of Children's Garden, suggested expanding her nursery upwards into P1, they were sympathetic. However, they gently pointed out that she didn't have enough space and they couldn't afford to build an extension. Mrs Frederick then told them of a project in several Edinburgh nurseries, where children spend half the day outdoors in a 'forest nursery' environment and half indoors in a traditional nursery setting. Not only is it good for the children to spend half their time outdoors, it also means that each nursery building can cater for twice as many bodies.

The local authority was immediately interested, especially as they knew that the next year's P1 class in the main primary schools fed by Children's Garden was worryingly oversubscribed. They therefore brokered an arrangement for the school to swap one of its teachers for one of Children's Garden's early years practitioners, meaning that Children's Garden could now accept P1 children, while the primary school had an early years practitioner (EYP) to help develop play-based practice in P1.

Aided by excellent online mentoring from Edinburgh, Children's Garden created Scotland's first state-funded outdoor kindergarten for

children (Woodland Weans Kindergarten), much to the delight of local parents who soon saw the positive impact on children under seven of learning and playing out- doors in nature, rather than traditional schooling. Indeed, the entire local community, inspired by Children's Garden's pioneering spirit, has rallied to support them with fundraising activities. The first of these equipped every child with warm, waterproof outdoor gear. The second opened up new horizons by turning an empty retail unit close by the nursery into a 'design studio' (Mrs Frederick calls it the 'Malaguzzi-style atelier') for an on-site artist who works with the children and parents for a percentage of the year.

This enthusiastic community support of the Woodland Weans Kindergarten has generated a great deal of publicity – not just in Scotland but worldwide. And the town's reputation as community-led trailblazers has already attracted a couple of new businesses to the area.

Taigh na Cloinne Village School

Taigh na Cloinne Village School is a rural school with three full- time teachers, including the head, Mr Geddes, who is very keen on education for sustainability and has always made full use of the school grounds and surrounding countryside in implement- ing *Curriculum for Excellence*.

The school also houses a nursery class run by Ms Owen, a senior early years practitioner, who has alerted Mr Geddes to the importance of play in developing the self-regulation skills, creativity and intrinsic motivation to learn that will benefit child- ren throughout their education. She has also pointed out that self-directed play lays the foundations for skills they'll need in future employment, as foreseen by the World Economic Forum.

Trading, 2022

Analytical thinking and motivation Active learning and learning strategies Creativity, originality and initiative Technology design and programming Critical thinking and analysis
Complex problem-solving
Leadership and social influence Emotional intelligence Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation Systems analysis and evaluation

Figure 2: World Economic Forum: The Future of Jobs Report⁶

Not surprisingly, therefore, Taigh na Cloinne Village School has embraced *Realising the Ambition* with open arms. Ms Owen is now head of Early Level and – ably supported by the former ‘infant teacher’ – provides play-based education and care for children up to the end of P2. (The ‘middle class’ consists of P3 to P5 and Mr Geddes teaches P6/7).

All the classes make use of the wonderful outdoor environment and opportunities for involvement with the community. The Early Level children spend at least half their time learning outdoors and have forged strong links with local ‘grannies’ and ‘grandpas’, who last year helped them plan and plant a kitchen garden (including polytunnel), so they can grow, prepare and eat healthy food all year round.

The school has even had two articles in the *Times Educational Supplement*: one by Mr Geddes on the use of the outdoor environment to stimulate children’s interest in STEM subjects, sustainability and critical thinking (which mentions the Early Level healthy food project); and one by Ms Owen (‘Getting the Four Capacities Right from The Start’) on how the under-sevens of Taigh na Cloinne Village School are now involved in planning for their own learning, the development of the school environment and ways of engaging with the community.

Barriers to implementing a kindergarten stage

Back in real life, it isn't such plain sailing, of course. Some schools and settings will be put off experimenting with Early Level reorganisation because of logistical and regulatory issues, such as adult:child ratios and staff qualifications. The growing professionalism of early years practitioners (including their understanding of child development and play-based learning) is not yet recognised by many members of the educational establishment. But Scotland's ambitions for the Early Level will not be realised until we have achieved a genuinely 'blended workforce', where the qualifications of early years professionals are valued as highly as those of primary teachers. We hope Chapter 11 of this book will be helpful in this respect.

There may also be problems regarding inspection. Since nurseries are currently inspected by the Care Inspectorate and schools by Education Scotland, there would probably have to be some degree of regulatory reform. However, special provision is already made for the inspection of kindergarten classes in Montessori and Steiner schools so it shouldn't be too difficult to extend this to 'straight-through Early Level' classes in other nurseries and schools.

Another likely barrier to success is the continued existence of the P1 SNSA (Scottish National Standardised Assessments in literacy and numeracy) and its related (highly unrealistic) benchmarks. As long as national and local government officials insist on assessing the literacy and numeracy skills of four- and five-year-olds, many P1 teachers will feel obliged to teach in the old-fashioned way. We need national recognition that age-related educational 'standards' are not developmentally appropriate during early childhood (i.e. before the age of eight).

Perhaps, if enough politicians read Part Three of this book, they will soon abandon literacy and numeracy testing at P1 and introduce the EDI (the highly regarded Early Development Instrument, used with

this age group in Canada and Australia). In the meantime, to maintain the integrity of play-based pedagogy, we hope P1 teachers and their managers will simply act as if the P1 SNSA doesn't exist (except for the miserable couple of days on which it has to be administered). We also urge head teachers to support parents who wish to opt their children out of the P1 SNSA.

There will, of course, be further barriers to implementing an effective kindergarten stage, particular to individual schools and settings. For instance, many Scottish primary schools have difficulty providing all-day access to outdoor areas and natural environments. Solving these specific difficulties will require open-mindedness, curiosity, creative thinking and willingness to collaborate on behalf of schools' senior management and local authority personnel. If this is forthcoming, we reckon most problems can be solved through consultation between early years educators, parents and community activists – people who know the buildings, neighbourhood and children concerned. As Children's Garden Nursery and Taigh na Cloinne Village School suggest, the development of Early Level outdoor facilities can be an excellent focus for community engagement.

Advantages of implementing a kindergarten stage

There are so many advantages to the innovations we're suggesting that it's difficult to list them all. So let's just take for granted the arguments throughout this book in favour of adopting *Realising the Ambition* practice guidance for all under- sevens, as a way of helping all children fulfil their educational potential, while improving their health and well-being – and thus, in the long term, the social and economic well-being of the nation as a whole.

But there are also obvious benefits for children, parents and teachers/EYPs in abandoning the highly disruptive physical transition from nursery to school the year children turn five. There is no good argument for this highly significant (and sometimes traumatic)

‘transition’ at such a formative stage in children’s development – transition in the year they turn six or seven (as in most countries of the world) makes much more sense. If all Scottish schools/settings could find ways to introduce a ‘straight-through Early Level’ there would be no need for a *Give Them Time* campaign, nor for the wasteful expenditure of time and money when local authorities battle to send children to school against their parents’ wishes (see Chapter 8).

As illustrated in the examples above, establishing a ‘straight-through Early Level’ immediately raises local awareness of the importance of early childhood education and care. A national change to this system would provide a platform for explaining the significance of child development to the entire Scottish public and thus help destroy the damaging misconceptions about play identified by Suzanne Zeedyk in Chapter 1. That would sit very comfortably alongside our present government’s commitment to ‘Getting It Right for Every Child’ and making Scotland ‘the best place in the world to grow up’.

A ‘straight-through Early Level’ would also benefit everyone working in early childhood education and care because – as a ring-fenced stage in our education system, covering three to four years of children’s lives – it would raise the status of early childhood education and care. It would also create what the authors of Chapter 11 call a ‘blended workforce’, thus shining a light on the particular skills of early years practitioners, which would hopefully lead to increased remuneration for this seriously underpaid section of the workforce. The longer time frame also offers improved opportunities for career progression. And it should guarantee that anyone working with the under-sevens (including primary-trained teachers) would receive training in child development, play-based pedagogy and outdoor education and care.

From a long-term educational perspective, there’s another big advantage to a ‘straight-through Early Level’. When children spend three to four years in the same setting – with no disruptive transition

at age four or five – there is time for observation, identification of problems and the provision of early therapeutic support. Chapter 9 describes how Finnish EY practitioners identify many additional support needs during the kindergarten stage. Then, working with parents and specialist therapists, they offer targeted support as early as possible, so that developmental problems are ameliorated or (sometimes) even solved before children start school. Indeed, for many the simple ‘Gift of Time’⁷ would mean that additional support needs never develop.

Back to the future

Many of the advantages of what Upstart calls ‘a Nordic-style kindergarten stage’ relate to the biological needs of children during this extremely formative stage of their lives. As pointed out in Chapter 2, the centrality of outdoor play and learning to a kindergarten ethos contributes to children’s all-round development and long-term physical and mental health. Outdoor play has been the birth-right of children throughout the millennia and research by evolutionary biologists⁸ shows how greatly it has contributed to the survival of our species. For the long-term well-being of children and society, the decline of outdoor play must be reversed and, as the American Academy of Paediatrics explains, the best place to reverse it is during early childhood.⁹

The mixed-age ‘vertical grouping’ adopted in all three of our kindergarten scenarios is another advantage from the perspective of evolutionary biology. Since time immemorial, young children’s emotional and social development has been advanced, not only by their interactions with caring adults, but through play (especially outdoor play) with other children.

Three-year-olds have always learned by watching older friends and siblings, and six- and seven-year-olds have always grown in confidence and competence by helping and taking responsibility for

the little ones. As Sarah Latta illustrated in Chapter 7, adults are often unaware of this eternal truth but children, given half a chance, will remind them.

And, finally, it takes a village to raise a child. As all our scenarios show, a kindergarten stage is the 21st century version of the proverbial child-rearing village. Nowadays, professionals care for children while parents are at work but every community still feels its inevitable responsibility to the next generation. In our experience, parents, grandparents and other adults in the local area are usually eager to help improve facilities for this age-group, and give local young children 'a good childhood'. The establishment of a kindergarten stage provides the perfect focus for community involvement and regeneration.

Realising the Ambition: Being Me has provided Scotland with a magnificent opportunity to inform, educate and enthuse the nation on behalf of the next generation. We hope and pray Scotland will take it.