While they play, what should I do? Strengthening learning through play and intentional teaching

Sarah Aiono | Longworth Education
Tara McLaughlin | Massey University
Tracy Riley | Massey University

Play lies at the heart of quality early childhood education (ECE) with the benefits to children and their learning and development well documented throughout early years literature (Edwards, 2017; Hedges, 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; White, Ellis, O’Malley, Rockel, Stover & Toso, 2008; Wood, 2010;). Given the power of play to support learning, primary teachers are showing an increased interest in how play can be implemented in junior classrooms (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Bluchter, Aspden & Jackson, 2018; Davis, Davis, 2015; Davis, 2018; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Peters, 2010; Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011). However, primary teachers may feel a tension between notions of child-led play, defined as a “freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour” (National Playing Fields Association, 2000, p. 6) and the more traditional teacher-directed classroom practices. If children are to self-direct their play, what do teachers do and how do they teach? Add to this tension curriculum requirements such as policy, assessment, routines and achievement foci, and primary teachers might find it difficult to blend an authentically play-based approach with current primary teaching practices.

To support teachers to better understand and utilise play pedagogies in the primary sector, the first author examined the use of a professional learning and development (PLD) intervention for her doctoral research. Following a series of workshop-style trainings, teachers received practice-based coaching (Snyder, Hemmeter, & Fox, 2015) to support play-based teaching practices, specifically in relation to the way in which teachers established their learning environment and intentionally taught when children were engaged in play. Consistent with the name of the coaching model, practice-based coaching is an approach to coaching in which specific teaching practices are identified for implementation, observed using an observational tool, and teachers receive on-going support and feedback, including time for reflection and personal goal setting. To this end, the first author in collaboration with doctoral supervisors, identified evidence-based teaching strategies associated with effective teaching through play and created a direct observation measurement tool, referred to as the Play-Based Learning Observation Tool (P-BLOT), (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018). The P-BLOT and supplementary Practice Implementation Checklists (PIC), (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018) were used to support teachers use play in their primary junior classrooms.

This article will address the power of play to support children’s learning and growing awareness of the important role teachers have in both an ECE and primary school play setting and the way in which intentional teaching practices are used to ensure positive outcomes for children. The authors of this article share their journey in creating an observational tool focused on specific play-based teaching practices (that is the P-BLOT), including its structure and its use as a formative tool during the first author’s intervention research project. The use of the Practice Implementation Checklists (PIC) will also be outlined, with access to these checklists provided. Finally, implications for practice will be considered, with examples provided of four key practices identified within the P-BLOT and PIC.

The power of play and the role of the intentional teacher in play

As an approach to supporting children’s learning, play is a powerhouse pedagogy. Yet, play and its meanings, intentions, and purposes as a pedagogy vary widely. Viewed on a continuum, play is described at one end as an
activity that should be freely chosen and intrinsically motivating for children with minimal involvement from adults (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The teacher’s role is focused on providing resources and experiences and to “support, not to disturb” (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p.48). At the opposite end, play is a key medium for learning which play might be a mix of child-led with the teacher engaged at times; as well as teacher-guided, building on children’s interests in playful and flexible ways (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997). The teacher’s involvement in play is seen to support children’s internalisation and exploration of academic, social and emotional concepts while maintaining a child-centredness to the play interaction (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013; Pyle & Bigelow, 2014; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). While there are many play purists who view play, uninterrupted, as inherently valuable in of, and for itself and as a natural activity for learning; there is an increasing recognition that this type of play does not have to be in conflict with other types of play in early education settings in which there is an expectation to ensure children experience a rich and broad curriculum to support learning (Edwards, 2017; McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018; Ryan & Goffin, 2008). Talking about the findings from their research on different play types (open-ended play, modelled play and purposefully-framed play), Edwards (2017) indicated that two principles for using the three play-types were established: 1) all play-types are of equal pedagogical value 2) play-types can be used in multiple combinations to support learning.

To better understand and describe the role of the teacher in play, Epstein (2014) coined the phrase, the intentional teacher, to draw attention to the informed decisions teachers make about the establishment of their learning environments and play supports, and how they interact with, communicate and continually assess their children within play-based activities in order to be responsive to their learning needs. When teachers are intentional within the play-environment, learners are actively engaged and supported to maintain this engagement over time (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2008; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

What does intentional teaching look and sound like in a play setting?

While being an intentional teacher in the context of play-based learning environment sounds like a manageable task, it can be easily misunderstood and poorly enacted to the detriment of children’s learning. In the ECE context, teachers might intentionally or purposefully adopt an approach in which minimal interaction with children engaged in play is the preferred teaching strategy. In the primary school context, teachers, while recognising the need for children to self-direct in their play, might favour the traditional view of learning and the need to ensure academic progress.

Initially as an itinerant teacher, and later as a PLD provider, the first author observed the enthusiasm for play practices growing in the primary school sector as a re-shuffling of the daily timetable with more time for children to play and have fun with less time sitting engaged in teacher-directed tasks. However, as children engaged in more free play teachers often remained at their teaching tables, continuing to engage in small-group instructional work, rather than adopting intentional approaches to teaching through play. Many principals and senior managers often conveyed concerns regarding the lack of academic progress of their children who just seemingly played all day. Teachers were unsure as to the relevance of planning processes and the extent to which or how they should engage children when playing. It appeared that while leadership and teachers embraced the potential benefits of children’s play, they had little knowledge or confidence in how play can be used with pedagogical intent. As a result of these experiences, the first author was keen to explore what teachers believed and did when children were engaged in play in the classroom, and what type of support would impact their practice to align with effective teaching through play practices. Teachers, centres and schools need support to ensure the effective use of play as a pedagogical tool and to be confident in its use by ensuring teaching through play practices are applied as intended.
To address the challenges in primary play-based practice, the authors sought to identify and articulate effective play-based teaching practices and design a system to observe for these practices in action. Direct observation with the use of developed measures have been highlighted as a cornerstone in supporting effective teaching practices (Hill & Grossman, 2013; Joe, Tocci, Holztman, & Williams, 2013). Observational methods have an advantage over self-reported approaches, as data collection is done in real-time, rather than relying on teacher reporting (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Martin, Daley, Hutchings, Jones, Eames & Whitaker, 2010).

A review of the literature identified that current observational tools available were not focused on teaching practices associated with play in the primary setting, nor did they reflect a New Zealand classroom-based context. There was a need for both a clear set of evidence-based teaching through play strategies and a method for observing these strategies. Thus, following an extensive review of the literature, a list of effective teaching practices were identified and organised into a measurement tool, titled the Play-Based Learning Observation Tool (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018). This teacher observation tool was designed to observe the extent to which teachers implement effective teaching through play practices within their primary-school classroom environment. While the P-BLOT was used both summatively and formatively for the purpose of the doctoral research study, its intended and future use is formative, supporting teacher PLD and effective use of play pedagogies.

The P-BLOT comprises of 31 items identifying key teacher behaviours and recommended practice in the play-based primary classroom. Items are defined in terms of the learning environment and teacher behaviour, with remaining items falling into the general section of overall teacher practices. These key practices of the three primary sections include intentional decisions related to:

- The learning environment: For example, the physical space; resourcing the play and management of these resources; scheduling of play (timetabling) and supporting successful transitions.
- Teacher behaviour: For example, providing play invitations; the use of exploration and imagination in play; intentional curriculum integration including literacy and numeracy; teaching and supporting social-emotional skill development; problem solving, resiliency and risk-taking; and behaviour management.
- Overall teacher practices: For example, noise and mess management; balancing the timetable to ensure both adult and child-guided learning experiences; planning and promoting learning experiences through play; and assessing, documenting and communicating the learning observed.

A fourth area identifies practices contrary to effective play-based approaches and requireremediation to ensure success. Using a likert-scale in combination with practice descriptions and key definitions, the tool provides the user with the means to identify the extent to which specific teaching practices are occurring in the classroom.

Supporting the use of the P-BLOT are the supplementary PIC (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018), a teacher-friendly list of the practices identified in the P-BLOT measurement tool itself. ¹ These checklists provide teachers with an opportunity to identify areas of strength and need in their teaching practices, through self-evaluation or with the support of a PLD provider. The checklists have been used in the first author’s doctoral research and wider role as a PLD provider and teachers consistently report finding the checklists useful. Many teachers have indicated that they don’t know what they don’t know with regards to their role within children’s play. The checklists provide a way for teachers to identify observable and measurable teaching practices aligned with empirical and theoretical evidence; critically reflect on the presence or absence of these practices in their setting and document the frequency in which these practices occur and set actionable goals for their practice.

¹ The PIC have been made publicly available for teachers at https://eyrl.nz/play-based-learning-pic/
While the P-BLOT was designed to support primary teachers with play-based practices, the items of the tool, in conjunction with the PIC, are equally relevant for early childhood teachers keen to ensure intentional teaching practices are integrated within their play-based learning environments. Although, the P-BLOT and checklists make specific reference to New Zealand Curriculum, the domains of Te Whāriki are equally relevant and interchangeable with NZC related items of the tool. ECE teachers might draw upon the available checklists to identify areas of strength in their play practices, and areas in which they want to increase their use of evidence-based intentional teaching practices within their play environments.

Examining select teaching practices

The empirical and theoretical underpinnings of the P-BLOT tool, and subsequent checklists reflect the key play-based practices intentional teachers adopt when facilitating play-based learning. Describing the practices above in significant detail is beyond the scope of this article. However, for illustration purposes, four key practices identified as commonly chosen goals by the teachers who experienced the PLD intervention have been selected and expanded on below. These practices reflect the varying decisions intentional teachers face when considering their responses to children engaged in play, the way in which opportunities for play are supported and how they observe and document the learning occurring as a result.

Scheduling a balance of adult-guided and child-guided learning experiences (Overall teacher practice section)

This key practice reflects the way in which teachers maintain a child-centred learning environment while incorporating intentional teaching methods. Rather than enabling play to be child-controlled, with the role of the teacher remaining passive, or adult-controlled, with the child being passive in the learning process, intentional teachers adopt a combination of child-guided and adult-guided experiences (Epstein, 2014). That is, adults interact intentionally with children during child-guided play and children have significant and active roles during adult-guided experiences. Inherent within this approach is the need for flexibility in order to respond to teachable moments that inevitably arise in the play setting.

A significant challenge to teachers in the primary sector is the required focus on explicit literacy and numeracy instruction. Many teachers find it difficult to conceptualise how to balance child-guided learning experiences alongside the need for explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy. In adopting an intentional teaching approach, teachers are encouraged to provide consistent, yet flexible timetables that incorporate both child-guided and adult-guided learning experiences. Furthermore, intentional teachers identify the right mix of this combination by identifying learning opportunities that are suited to peer collaboration (for example, child-guided play or peer-mediated learning opportunities); learning opportunities that require explicit adult instruction (for example, guided reading or small group learning opportunities); or a timely mixture of learning experiences (Epstein, 2014; Snyder et al., as cited in McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). In practical terms, this requires teachers to adopt a timetable in which play with active teacher engagement is the consistent activity available to children in the setting, with selective and explicit teaching of smaller groups, as well as larger or whole-class activities strategically timed across the school day.

While the direct instruction of literacy and numeracy may not be as relevant for ECE teachers, there is a need to ensure that opportunities to develop children’s early literacy and numeracy understandings are intentionally planned for within the ECE context consistent with learning outcomes in Te Whāriki. To achieve these outcomes teachers are challenged to integrate oral language, emergent literacy and mathematical learning opportunities in naturalistic and play-based ways, supportive of children’s own interests and inquiries.
Provision and management of resources for play (Learning environment section)
The use of varied and multi-purpose play resources within the learning environment has its roots in theory related to design and creativity (Nicholson, 1971). Described by Nicholson (1971) as loose parts, resources that support play effectively are open and flexible and provide children with opportunities for creativity, social interaction, engagement and ownership over their learning (Dillon, 2018; Gauntlett, 2011; Gauntlett, Ackermann, Whitebread, Wolbers & Wekstrom, 2013; Resnick & Silverman, 2005). The benefits of multi-purpose resources within play settings are widely recognised by ECE teachers, with many centres providing rich examples of how to manage these resources within the learning environment effectively to address and support the learning needs of their students. In contrast, primary school teachers are less accustomed to the use of such resources, and as such, meet challenges including locating, acquiring and storing these resources within the school classroom context. However, teachers who have a clear understanding of the role loose parts have in a play setting will engage with their wider school community to source these varied materials and introduce them into the environment in ways that encourage creative thinking, imagination, problem solving and innovation. They will plan to address issues that arise including storage, expected behaviour when using these resources, and how to link children’s use of loose parts to the wider curriculum areas.

Examples of loose parts in a primary setting do not differ drastically from resources included in the ECE classroom. They might include wooden blocks, clay or dough and lego or mobilo; natural loose parts such as shells, seeds, leaves and sticks; large loose parts such as log rounds, tyres, PVC pipes and cardboard tubes; and an array of recyclable and reusable items, such as those pictured in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Photo examples of recyclable and reusable loose parts. Reprinted with permission from Sarah Aiono

Intentionally extending children’s knowledge and/or skills in their play (Teacher behaviour section)
This key practice involves teachers supporting specific skill and knowledge development, by intentionally teaching knowledge and/or skills needed by the children to advance or extend their learning while in play. Drawing on Vygotskian constructivist theories (Bruner, 1961; Vygotsky, 1978;) and intentional teaching literature (Epstein, 2014), teachers will recognise and respond to moments that arise in children’s play when children reach a point of having exhausted all that they know or can do. Teachers, recognising children at this point are operating within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), will purposely challenge, scaffold, extend or support new ideas and information within the play, while preserving the valuable components of child-led play such as the child’s current focus or level of engagement. They might do this by commenting on their discoveries and posing exploration-promoting questions; co-playing with children; or exploring materials in ways children may not have thought to do. For primary or ECE teachers this may look like providing explicit instruction in order to support a child’s learning of a new skill, such as measuring accurately, using a specific tool, or introducing new domain-specific vocabulary into the
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...it might also include drawing on socio-emotional skills and dispositions, creating opportunities for turn-taking, explaining and expressing feelings, or learning the rules of a new game. This practice relies on teachers having an awareness of their children’s existing knowledge, skills and interests and identifying potential learning goals that, at the right time, can be enhanced within the play with their support. Whether ECE or primary school based, teachers need a strong knowledge of the relevant curriculum and learning progressions in order to integrate these into children’s play effectively (Milne & McLaughlin, 2018).

**Assessing, documenting and communicating learning through play**

Both ECE and primary-school teachers will be drawing upon assessment data to document and provide evidence of student/child learning within their play environments. While narrative assessments tend to be the primary assessment method for ECE teachers (Cameron, 2018; Mitchell, 2008) and domain-specific assessment may be more common for primary-school teachers (Crooks, 2002), there is a need for multiple forms of assessment in both contexts (Drummond, 2012; Fraser & McLaughlin, 2016). A combination of domain-specific assessments (for example oral language, literacy and numeracy based), structured observations, and narrative assessment approaches can be used to capture the learning demonstrated in children’s play (Drummond, 2012; Epstein, 2014; Heritage, 2010).

Assessment, when implemented and analysed appropriately, is useful in guiding teachers’ decisions about the learning strengths and needs of their children, and the way in which they can support further learning and progress to occur. In a play environment that draws on a balance of adult- and child-guided play, teachers will use assessment to inform on-going pedagogical decisions and communicate learning progress with the children and their families.

Narrative assessment, commonly referred to as learning stories in New Zealand ECE, can complement the traditional summative assessment model of the primary-school report, drawing on observation as the key method of data collection (Carr & Lee, 2012; Reisman, 2011). Teachers engaged in narrative assessment gather observational data about their children’s key competencies in addition to identifying links between the play observed and the learning areas of the curriculum (MoE, 2009). Observational data can be drawn from a range of structured and unstructured observation methods (Podmore, 2006). In addition, teachers should identify opportunities and possibilities for how the teacher may respond to the learning observed, including the provision of new resources, material or information that extends or supports further learning (Heritage, 2010) Teachers synthesis of children’s learning and plans for supporting future learning is then written in a narrative, story format that can be shared directly with the children and their families, with a written contribution by the family encouraged in response (Carr, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Teachers adopting play pedagogies within the primary sector recognise the value of play as a valuable learning and teaching tool. To ensure the benefits of play in education settings, teachers require support in understanding the important role they have in enriching play experiences and extending learners within the play environment. Project teachers engaged in the first author’s doctoral research were able to build confidence, knowledge and skills in their practice with the use of a set of evidence-based effective teaching strategies, such as those captured within the PBLOT and PIC. As part of the PLD intervention, project teachers were encouraged to bring intentionality to their teaching through play practices. This included the way in which they considered the structure and management of the learning environment; teacher interaction with, and the extension of, children’s interests and curriculum knowledge; the establishment of a balanced approach to the explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy within a child-centered play environment; and the continued and varied use of assessment methods to make pedagogical adjustments to their teaching responses. Teachers who apply a strong, varied and complex interaction of intentional teaching practices in the play setting will ensure an increase in the effectiveness of play-based classrooms within the New Zealand education setting.
References


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