

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: Stranmillis University College</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education</p>
<p>Title of case study: Learning to learn through learning to play: getting it right for young children in the early years of their educational experience.</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research conducted by Stranmillis University College (SUC) and Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) has made significant changes to the Foundation Stage (FS) of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum which is now statutory for all children aged 4-6 in the first two years of primary school, embodied in the Education Order (2007). This play-based curriculum will continue to change the experiences of approximately 50,000 children per year for the next 10-15 years. The research created frameworks, pedagogical strategies and assessment instruments which have impacted on policy and practice both in the contexts of primary and pre-schools in Northern Ireland (NI) and in the Republic of Ireland (RoI).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The research which underpins the impact was conducted by Dr Walsh (SUC) and Prof McGuinness and Drs Sproule and Trew (QUB). Dr Walsh was employed at SUC over the full period under consideration in this case study (2000-2014).</p> <p>The Evaluation of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum (2000-2009)</p> <p>Dr Walsh’s PhD contributed significantly to raising the play versus formal education debate in the NI context and created and validated an observation instrument called the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) [1]. This work was extended as part of an 8-year longitudinal evaluation of the impact of an early years play-based curriculum, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum which was being piloted in approximately 120 primary schools in NI. QUB and SUC were commissioned by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) to undertake this evaluation. An intensive classroom observation programme was led by Dr Walsh at SUC. The implementation of the play-based curriculum was monitored in over 100 FS classes using Walsh’s QLI and further reliability and validity research was undertaken [1]. The findings revealed the immediate benefits for young children who experienced a play-based curriculum compared to a more traditional curriculum resulting in the development of a novel pedagogical framework, known as ‘Playful Structure’ for 4-6 year old children [2,3] which reveals how playful learning can be infused across all areas of learning.</p> <p>A large scale quasi-experimental, longitudinal assessment of the Enriched Curriculum intervention in 24 primary schools in NI over eight years (with approximately 1000 children, 150 teachers and 1500 parents) was also undertaken to evaluate the impact of the Enriched Curriculum on children’s outcomes both in the short-term and the longer term. The longitudinal findings reported that the play-based curriculum in the first two years of primary schools had no negative impact on children’s literacy and numeracy outcomes at the end of their primary schooling and had a positive influence on their dispositions and motivations for learning [2,4].</p> <p>Extensions to the QLI and Longitudinal Study</p> <p>Dr Walsh and her colleagues at QUB were commissioned by CCEA to research on three emergent questions related to Early Years practice, developing young children’s thinking skills through play in the early years (Report to funders, 2007), debating transitions through accessing the voices of 4-6 year old children on playful learning (Report to funders, 2008) and examining developmentally appropriate practice and play-based pedagogy, which led to further refinement of the QLI and the development of professional materials for use by classroom teachers (Report to funders, 2010). Additional research was undertaken by Dr Walsh and colleagues at SUC for the Department of</p>

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Education and Science to examine Early Years pedagogy in the RoI, leading to the development of pedagogical resources for early years practitioners and teachers [5]. Recent research on the impact of the FS Curriculum on practice has been embarked on by Dr Walsh in an effort to promote further debate and enquiry on translating play as a policy directive into effective practice [6].

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

1. Walsh, G. and Gardner, J. (2005), 'Assessing the Quality of Early Learning Environments, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*,' Vol. 7, No. 1
2. Walsh, G., McGuinness, C., Sproule, L. and Trew, K. (2010) Implementing a Play-based and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum in NI Primary Schools: What Lessons have we Learned, *Early Years: an International Journal of Research and Development*, Vol. 30, Iss. 1, pp. 53-66.
3. Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C. & 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*, Vol. 31, Iss. 2, pp.107-119
4. McGuinness, C., Sproule, L., Trew, K., & Walsh, G. (2013) 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*. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3117
5. McMillan, D., Walsh, G., Gray, C., Hanna, K. Carville, S. & McCracken, O. (2012) Changing mindsets: the benefits of implementing a professional development model in early childhood settings in Ireland, *Professional Development in Education*, Vol. 38, Iss. 3, pp. 395-410.
6. Hunter, T. and Walsh, G. (2013) 'From Policy to practice?: The reality of play in primary school classes in Northern Ireland.' *International Journal of Early Years Education*. DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2013.830561

For all reports developed by Dr Walsh and the QUB team to inform the Foundation Stage Curriculum please see:

http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/research/eye_resource.asp

Funding For Early Years Research

The main funding for the research was from CCEA (through the Department of Education, NI) 2000-2009, £850,000 for the longitudinal project, together with smaller grants for specific impact projects, Thinking Skills in Early Years Classrooms, £10,000, Transitions in Early Years Education, £12,000, and Translating a Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum into Practice, £16,000. Additional policy related funding Dept of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland (90,000 euros), Early Childhood Ireland and Early Years in NI, £8,500.

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

Research from SUC and QUB is impacting the lives of children, parents and teachers in NI and internationally.

Northern Ireland: Policy and Practice

Dr Walsh's PhD thesis entitled *The play versus formal debate: a study of early years provision in Northern Ireland and Denmark* (2000) led to discussions with policymakers, educational advisors and practitioners about the development of a more play-based approach in the early years of

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primary school.

The evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum pilot project commissioned by CCEA (2000) was designed to provide continuous feedback, on teaching and learning in the early years of primary school. From 2001-2010, dissemination seminars were held with principals from the participating schools, local authority curriculum advisers and representatives from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI, NI) to keep them informed about the on-going findings, so that they could fine-tune training and practice for subsequent cohorts. This project strongly shaped the Foundation Stage Curriculum which became statutory for 4-5 year olds in 2007 and 5-6 year olds in 2008. [1,2]

Dr Walsh led the development of a set of professional development resources based on Playful Structure (2009-2013), derived from the Enriched Curriculum evaluation and subsequent studies, which are to be distributed to all primary schools in NI and are freely available on the NI Curriculum website as an aid to deliver the more play-based FS Curriculum. [3,4]

These pedagogical materials have informed the development of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) course for FS teachers. The course was devised by Dr Walsh delivered by SUC for the first time in 2012-2013 in a number of Learning Hubs across the province. SUC has developed a number of regional partnerships with schools across the Province which are referred to as 'Learning Hubs'. These schools act as regional venues where CPD courses are delivered by Stranmillis staff. To date approximately 150 teachers have completed the FS training course. The positive impact of this course has been recognised by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) with plans for further expansion currently being discussed. [5,7]

Dr Walsh worked with curriculum development officers to formulate and develop a pedagogical framework, which was developed into a poster format and a series of information leaflets for parents that drew directly on the sub-study from the EC evaluation "Thinking Skills in the Early Years" (CCEA, 2007). These resources were distributed to all primary schools and nursery schools throughout NI (approximately 1000 settings) in 2008 and are freely available on the NI Curriculum website. [4,6] Dr Walsh was invited to act as a reviewer for the Northern Ireland aspect of the Creative Little Scientists project, a comparative study across nine European countries (Creative Little Scientists, 2012) with a focus on promoting creative thinkers in the early years.

A refined version of the QLI is also freely available on the NI Curriculum website which has been promoted by Education and Library Boards across NI and the feedback has been very positive. All Early Years associate assessors for the Education and Training Inspectorate have also been trained on the use of the QLI (April, 2013) as have all prospective Early Years teachers/professionals who undertake their training at SUC i.e. approximately 100 students per year. [3,7]

Republic of Ireland

Play-based learning is also having impact in the RoI, where the Department of Education and Skills commissioned additional work using SUC's methods to develop policy and practice on teaching and learning in early years settings. [8, 9]

Within the Republic of Ireland, Dr Walsh acted as a consultant to Early Childhood Ireland and Early Years in NI to inform the development of the All Ireland Centre of Excellence Award (2012-2013), and developed an evaluation tool for early years practitioners for use across the entire Early Years sector (Report to funders, 2013). She is also frequently invited to speak at professional development seminars across Ireland on playful learning.

United Kingdom

From 2007-2010, Dr Walsh, as a result of her research, was invited to act as the educational consultant for the NI version of Sesame Street, 'Sesame Tree' which has been aired since August 2008 through CBeebies to a national audience. Dr Walsh advised on the content of the scripts and

live action films and participated in dissemination seminars. Her contribution also led to the development of a series of professional development resources which have been distributed to all primary schools and preschools (both voluntary and statutory) throughout Northern Ireland. The impact of this work is embedded in the large scale media coverage that it received locally, nationally (Sunday Times) and internationally (e.g. the work was featured in the New York Times) and it has also attracted the interest of national magazines *Nursery World* and *Nursery Management Today* [10].

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

Playful Learning Impact in Northern Ireland

1. Change to the legislation re Foundation Stage, *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006*
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2006/1915/pdfs/uksi_20061915_en.pdf
2. Guidance on the Foundation Stage
http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/foundation_stage/UF_web.pdf
http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/research/eye_resource.asp
3. Pedagogical resources and the Refined Version of the QLI
http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/research/eye_resource.asp
4. Testimony from Curriculum Manager for the Foundation Stage, Northern Ireland Curriculum Council
5. CPD for Foundation Teachers from Stranmillis University College
<http://www.stran.ac.uk/media/media,396223,en.pdf>
6. Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities in the Foundation Stage
http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/TSPC/getting_started/foundation_stage/index.asp
7. Testimony from Representative from ETI
8. Department of Education and Skills, Republic of Ireland, Early Years Policy Unit,
http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Early-Years/eye_exam_pedagogy.pdf
9. Testimony from the ROI Early Years Policy Unit
10. *Nursery Management Today* Article
<http://www.stran.ac.uk/nont4docs/SesameTree.pdf>