

Play on!

Introducing less formal learning to Years 1 and 2 is producing positive results, reports *Annette Rawstrone*

In stark contrast to an increasingly pressurised, results-driven climate, some schools are bravely saying goodbye to a formal approach to teaching and removing the desks from their Key Stage 1 (KS1) classrooms. They are extending the principles of the EYFS into Years 1 and 2 and harnessing children's individual interests to solve problems and learn through their play.

The role of play in early learning is constantly under scrutiny, most recently in a Teaching Schools Council report, *Effective Primary Teaching Practice*. Rather than extending play-based provision into KS1, it noted, 'Schools that most effectively supported transition bring Year 1 approaches into Reception.'

Critics of the report pointed to its lack of input from early years experts, among them Jan Dubiel, national development manager at Early Excellence. 'Rather than direct teaching, children should be able to take ownership of their learning and this remains vital in Key Stage 1,' he says.

'This should not be seen as unusual. In many countries, formal education does not start until age seven and there is no distinction between Reception and Year 1. Developmentally, this makes sense because age seven is a more significant milestone to change the approach.'

Tony Draper, head of Water Hall Primary School in Milton Keynes (see box, page 6), agrees, 'Children in KS1 should be able to learn through a play-based approach with their teachers taking the learning forward. These children are not able to sit for long periods of time, and it's particularly effective for many boys who want to play and chase around rather than sit with a pencil in their hand.'

'For a child to learn, they need to understand the relevance – what is in it for me? Why should I do that? If it is part of their play and fun interactions then they don't know that they are learning, they are just doing. The more fun and meaningful something

is then the longer they will remember it. Finding relevance for the child hooks them in and they are then able to take their learning further because they are engaged in something that they enjoy doing.'

By taking ownership of their learning, children are able to make meanings, choose and plan what they do, all essential dispositions emphasised in the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Instead of simply soaking up abstract knowledge, children develop richer language, concentration, exploration skills and curiosity, which may not be measured academically but have positive implications for how they approach future learning.

BARRIERS

Many would cite Ofsted as a barrier to adopting play-based learning in KS1, but Mr Dubiel emphasises that the regulator has no preferred style of teaching as long as the approach can be justified and there are good outcomes. 'To turn things around, if you do not take on the approach, it will be a challenge because it reduces the potential of the child and closes down opportunities for learning,' he says. 'But there are external pressures, especially from what is measured in KS1.'

Getting the support of the head teacher and recruiting skilled teachers and teaching assistants can be a challenge. Mr Draper, says, 'The head has got to be prepared to take the risk. Ultimately, it was my neck on the line, but we were under the cosh with outcomes and the traditional methods were not working, so I believed that this was going to really enhance children's learning and chances and make it more fun.'

'It's for very highly skilled professionals. They need to be people who know how to observe children, listen and use this information to plan learning. They need to be able to let children independently choose, but know when they need to intervene. It's also time-consuming because teachers have to sift through a lot of



At Prince Edward Primary School (above, bottom right and overleaf), play is regarded as quality learning time

information. But now it's not just the children that come to school to play but the staff too. The children see this and are enthused.'

CASE STUDIES

Prince Edward Primary School, Sheffield

Play is not used as a reward for finishing work but regarded as quality learning time and is referred to as 'independent learning' at Prince Edward Primary School, Sheffield.

The KS1 team works alongside the EYFS team to ensure the transition is smooth, which includes staff spending time together in classrooms and reflecting on observations. Environment and provision are then planned appropriately to maintain challenge and progress.

Throughout Year 1, the children learn through play, which is continued into Year 2. Classrooms are set up with different learning areas such as small-world and role play, sand and water, workshop, writing and ICT to encourage hands-on learning.

'Children learn best when they are given the opportunity to explore, play and investigate, so we adapt our plans and the national curriculum as much as we can so that children can access it in their own way, without being sat down and receiving "formal" teaching,' explains KS1 leader Charlotte Varley. 'We still reinforce



high expectations, but this way of working encourages children to be more co-operative and work collaboratively, and promotes speech and listening skills.'

Children join together for whole-class learning, but also work in small groups – with or without an adult – or choose their own learning activity. Teachers will sometimes direct children to planned learning challenges depending on their needs. They are awarded a 'challenge ticket' when they complete a learning challenge and also earn a ticket for good work during a self-chosen learning activity; for example, writing instructions for a model they have made. These tickets are put into a weekly class draw for two children to attend a Friday treat, such as baking biscuits.

Resources are organised so children can access them easily, allowing them to make links and extend their own learning independently. Some areas have a specific focus, such as painting a repeating pattern, whereas others are open-ended; for example: 'We have been reading *The Gruffalo*. What could you write about?'

Ms Varley says, 'Child-led learning makes children much more expressive and interested in what they're doing, but it takes lots of planning and preparation. This year, I have a Minecraft-mad, boy-heavy class, so the challenge is to transfer this

interest to their learning. One boy has been making Minecraft figures out of multi-link cubes. We've been looking at the properties of squares and reinforced his counting. There's now lots of figures ready for him to use to tell a story.'

Teachers observe children and plan so that over a week there is an equal balance between adult-directed, adult-initiated and child-initiated work to ensure all children get quality focus group time and independent learning time. Learning gradually becomes more formal in the summer term of Year 2 to prepare children for Year 3.

Hillside Primary School, Reading, Berkshire

The school is in its second year of using an Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) approach in Key Stage 1, where children are set questions to explore and investigate alongside their own questions within all subjects. They are then supported in the process of discovering answers, using many different resources that the children can relate their thinking to. This was introduced to ease the transition from the Foundation Stage, with children learning through their own investigations based on their fascinations, which in turn has given them the motivation to learn and a purpose for what they are learning.

Amy Barnwell, Year 1 teacher and leader of teaching and learning, who undertook practical training in the approach with Early Excellence, says, 'This year the children settled into Year 1 within a matter of days, where before it may have taken a few weeks



MORE INFORMATION

- For coverage of, and links to, the Teaching Schools Council's *Effective Primary Teaching Practice* report, see: www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1159503/reception-practice-report-flawed
- www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act
- Talking and Thinking Floorbooks, www.mindstretchers.co.uk
- Enquiry Based Learning, <http://earlyexcellence.com/national-training/join-a-cluster-project>

due to the more formal method that our Year 1 teaching used to be. The classroom is now set up with the areas of learning they're familiar with from the Foundation Stage. These areas are then enhanced with resources to reflect their age group and topic focus at the time; for example, we'll have Lego instead of Duplo and maths resources that enable them to explore independently all aspects of the national curriculum objectives.'

She adds, 'Now we have times of whole-class input and then the TA and I move around the class and work with different groups. We question children to unpick what they already know and give every child quality time to build on their knowledge through practical, interactive tasks. The children have gained the confidence and resilience to question and challenge each other. We focus more on the process of learning and what things mean rather than the correct answer.'

'They are excited and enthused because the learning comes from their ideas and explorations rather than what they've been told to do. EBL gives real purpose to learning.'

Ms Barnwell acknowledges it has been a personal learning curve for her, her partner teacher Lisa Short and her Year 1 team, and there are always going to be challenges along the way. 'It's essential to do lots of observations in order to tailor the enquiry to children's interests, and logistically so that the timetable ensures that quality time has been given to all subject areas in a week,' she says. She is fortunate to have the support of two TAs in the morning, enabling children to ➤





have more support with their enquiries and stretch their thinking.

It is felt that by Year 2, children are better prepared for a more formal way of learning, but the EBL approach is continued in the afternoons for topic work and science.

Friars Primary School and Nursery, Southend-on-Sea

Staff moved to a more child-centred approach three years ago and have since seen children thrive in nursery and Reception. So, from the start of this school year, the core principles



MORE INFORMATION

- Singapore Maths, www.mathsnoproblem.co.uk/singapore-maths
- *Achieving Excellence in the Early Years: A guide for headteachers* by Early Education, www.early-education.org.uk
- *The Multiple Identities of the Reception Teacher: Pedagogy and Purpose*, edited by Anna Cox and Gillian Sykes (Sage)
- 'All to play for' by Annette Rawstrone, *Early Years in School* supplement, January 2016, www.nurseryworld.co.uk

WATER HALL PRIMARY SCHOOL

Walk in to a Key Stage 1 class at Water Hall Primary School in Milton Keynes and you'll see children lying on rugs, sitting on comfy seats with lap trays or on stools at counters. There are some tables, but traditional desks were thrown away last year, which head teacher, and former NAHT president, Tony Draper believes has given the play-based curriculum a 'massive boost'.

'The children are comfortable and able to listen more, so what they produce is brilliant. They are developing every year,' he says.

The curriculum is fluid, with teachers planning learning through the day which is flexible, depending on where children's interests take them. There are formalised literacy and numeracy lessons, but teachers aim to introduce concepts through other activities and subjects. The Singapore Maths approach (see 'More information') is followed, which aims to build on children's maths ability and encourages

them to think mathematically, rather than learning by rote.

'The play-based approach shows that a teacher understands what a child can learn and how they learn best,' says Mr Draper. 'If a teacher knows what they want a child to learn, then they can tailor it to that individual, such as kicking a football to their key words or introducing them while playing with sand.'

Before starting a new area of working, teachers use Floorbooks (see 'More information') to explore what children know before planning how to take their knowledge forward. Children work in small groups to discuss and write down what they know. 'The teachers have to be highly skilled to cue in to a lot of children and pull out information so that they can plan learning from the right point,' says Mr Draper. 'Our staff are great at pushing boundaries for children and taking educated risks to ensure that they move forward.'

of the EYFS have been extended into Year 1, overseen by EYFS and Year 1 leader Elaine Bennett.

'It's still early days and we're constantly reflecting and evaluating our practice, but we can already see a difference with the children. They are so inspired to learn, curious, settled and motivated. No child was scared about the move to Year 1,' she says.

Many of the tables and chairs have been removed from classrooms and replaced with construction, role-play and creative resources. Year 1 children now have direct access to a large outdoor area shared with Reception where there is sand and water play. There are three classes, each with a teacher and learning support assistant, with at least one of them having experience of working in the EYFS.

'Sometimes practitioners not familiar with EYFS practice find it challenging as they are used to a more prescriptive way of working,' says Ms Bennett. 'If we had the funding, we'd like to have a nursery nurse because their knowledge of child development is phenomenal; they scaffold learning through play brilliantly.'

Instead of sitting at tables for adult-led activities, children have meaningful learning experiences, with adults going to them and supporting them in their learning. 'We regard every interaction as a teachable moment – such as helping a child with a treasure hunt and talking about left, right, forward and backwards,' Ms Bennett explains.

'We have daily maths and phonics input during carpet time and inputs on subjects like science, art and history. However, we look more for how children learn and apply these skills through their play. We have taken the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning into Year 1. So, if we've been talking about measuring, we will ensure there are tape measures in the construction area and rulers in the art area. Children have maths, writing and topic books, but so far there are photos in these of children engaging in activities, our observations and their "work". As the year goes on, the children will record more when they're ready to and not before.'

Learning gradually becomes more formal depending on individuals' development, but Ms Bennett plans to always have play. 'Our children in Year 1 play every day, inside and out,' she says. 'They are highly engaged and motivated in their self-chosen activities and this play moves on their learning and gives them power over it.' ■