

## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:

- Engagement, listening and attention (Oral Language)
- Retelling and elaborating (Oral Language)
- Playful and creative use of language (Oral Language)
- Engagement (Reading and Writing)
- Motivation and choice (Reading and Writing)

### Why Make Teaching and Learning Playful?

We all know that young children love to play and, when fully engrossed in a high quality playful experience, evidence tells us that they display high levels of

- spontaneity and flow
- freedom, choice and control
- imagination and creativity
- curiosity and adventure

- motivation and challenge
- fun and excitement
- problem-solving and decision-making.



Reflecting the principles and practice guidelines in *Aistear* (2009), the Primary Language Curriculum shows the importance of play and playful experiences for children's language learning.

So, how can playful characteristics be infused purposefully and meaningfully into aspects of language teaching and learning in children's primary school experience?

### How Can We Make Language Teaching and Learning Playful?

To do this effectively, the teacher initiates and maintains a degree of playfulness in all aspects of language learning and teaching. For example, the tone is light-hearted and the activity becomes self-sustaining because of its enjoyable nature. Unexpected turns and directions are followed while still allowing a degree of structure to support effective language learning.

Playful learning is much more than play in isolation. Rather, it embraces six key pillars:

1. Foster warm secure **relationships** with children.
2. Cultivate playful and engaging **interactions** with children.
3. Create playful **opportunities** in all teaching and learning experiences.
4. Ensure **sensitive** pacing and matching, based on knowledge of developmental pathways.
5. **Respect** individual differences in ability, personality, age and culture.
6. Manage **progression** and transitions.

## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning



When thinking specifically about making language teaching and learning playful, it is important that children feel at ease to express their ideas and opinions and to 'have a go' at reading a book or writing down an idea without fear of making a mistake. The teacher also needs to be a proactive participant in the learning experience, displaying a degree of energy and enthusiasm to promote interest on the part of the children, while simultaneously progressing and extending their knowledge and understanding of language at a

pace appropriate to the individual needs of each child. Opportunities to be playful extend beyond a daily hour of child-led play. Children's **entire school experience can be playful**, i.e., during both child-initiated **and** more teacher-directed, task-related activities, all of which can be beneficial for young children's language learning and development. Drawing on evidence from Van Oers (1996), playful language teaching and learning can embrace two differing approaches, as shown above on the

### PLAY

Language

Here play is the main focus but aspects of language are drip-fed into the experience, e.g., a reception and waiting area is added to the play hospital environment. This area includes pens, notebooks, a computer, magazines, comics, catalogues and so on.

### LANGUAGE

Play

In the above scenario, the development of language skills is the main focus, while aspects of playfulness are infused into the experience. For example, the teacher might make use of puppets, jokes, popular culture, the outdoors or teacher-in-role as a means of grasping and maintaining the children's interest.

A high quality early primary experience requires playing, learning and teaching to become fully synchronised (Wood, 2007).

## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning



### The Role of the Playful Language Teacher

Playful teachers display their professional competence by

- having a sound knowledge and understanding of the three strands of the Language Curriculum

- knowing in what direction the children's skills and understanding may be expected to go next
- planning experiences in accordance with the needs and interests of individual children.

- Playful teachers also 'let down their guard' by
  - playing alongside the children
  - following their lead
  - encouraging creativity
  - injecting ambiguity and originality into the learning experience.

### Using a Topic-Based Approach

Using a **topic-based approach** embraces the fact that young children do not see concepts, skills and dispositions as belonging to discrete categories and curriculum areas. A topic affords children opportunities to make **meaningful connections**. It enables them to develop and **transfer** their skills and knowledge across different contexts. If children cannot make connections from one area to another, the learning experience is often discarded or forgotten.

An integrated approach recognises the importance of using children's own ideas and interests as a starting point for investigating a topic in more depth. This increases children's **motivation** to learn and their **engagement** with the topic. Learners' minds are



## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

more likely to be engaged cognitively when teaching is related to what is familiar to them and builds on the foundation of what they already know.

In addition, the more that is written about the brain and how it develops, it is becoming clearer that the emotional mind plays a critical role in young children's thinking and development. Offering



children a **topic-based** learning experience has the potential to nurture **positive dispositions** and **confidence**, as it allows each child to access the curriculum in a way that is playful and appropriate to his/her stage of development.

At the start of a new topic, a planning board allows the children to plan with the teacher. They talk about what they already know. They contribute their ideas about what they would like to find out. This encourages children to have ownership of their learning.

Listen to the case for why playful teaching and learning is essential in the early years of children's primary school experience.

### Topic of 'Chocolate'

Let's consider 'Chocolate' as a suitable topic for young children. The choice of topic will be negotiated with the children and it is based on something that is of relevance and of interest to them. It also has a strong literacy focus, being based on a very engaging pop-up version of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* book.



## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

### Child-Initiated Playful Experiences

Listed below are some of the playful learning experiences children might enjoy through the topic of 'Chocolate'. These have been organised into the three strands of the Language Curriculum.

#### Oral Language

- Engaging in natural conversations during role-play in *Wonka's Chocolate Café*
- Adopting the role of the chef or waitress and using the specialist vocabulary associated with the role
- Collaborating on the task of building a large-scale construction model of Wonka's factory. This encourages rich communication as children negotiate roles and discuss their plans.
- Enjoying playful language around the water-tray as children engage with the story and make up nonsense rhymes for Augustus Gloop
- Using subject-specific language as children investigate how to make the water flow through the marble-run

#### Reading

- Reading the menu and making choices in *Wonka's Chocolate Café*
- Reading mathematical language as children use their clipboards and non-standard measures to construct their models of the various rooms in Charlie's factory
- Navigating computer programmes associated with the topic, and reading as they explore and navigate through the website/programmes
- Reading instructions about how to make chocolate rice-krispie buns for *Wonka's Chocolate Café*

#### Writing

- Creating and redrafting menus for the café
- Writing orders for customers
- Using clipboards and colourful markers to plan their construction of Wonka's factory
- Strengthening fine motor skills by manipulating the malleable chocolate-scented dough to make items for the café
- Manipulating paintbrushes of varying sizes to paint with melted chocolate

## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

- Using tweezers at the sand-tray to search for golden coins in the coco-pops

### Task-Related Teacher-Initiated Playful Experiences

Listed below are activities which, although more structured and teacher-initiated, still have playfulness infused in them. As earlier, these have been organised into the three strands of the Language Curriculum.

### Oral Language

- Adopting the role of the book characters and using language and phrases gained from *Shared Reading* times; using recordable ICT sound buttons for children to record their interpretation of the voices of the characters
- Communication generated when discussing the 'Chocolate' topic **mind map**. A mind map can be helpful as a way of planning with the children at the start of the topic. The word 'Chocolate' is in the centre of the planning board and question words such as *who*, *where*, *when*, *what*, can help the children to think of directions their learning might go in.



- Generating descriptive words to describe settings from the book, e.g., on entering the 'Chocolate Room'...
- Using their imagination as they enter a world of make believe when their teacher arrives into the classroom in role as Willy Wonka and they are invited to become his factory workers

## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

### Reading

- Sequencing the story or the order of the characters who won the golden tickets
- Sequencing the journey of the cocoa bean to the bar of chocolate (differentiated using picture cues and simple words and phrases)
- Clapping out the syllables of the characters' names using rhythm sticks
- Manipulating rhyme based on the Charlie and Chocolate Factory rhymes

### Writing

- Writing topic words on gel-boards
- Using coloured gel pens, topic-bordered paper and clipboards to encourage creative story writing associated with the topic
- Doing procedural writing – how to make anything with chocolate!
- Writing a Mr Cadbury fact
- Designing a Wonka bar and wrapper
- Writing golden tickets for the Wonka bars





## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

### Monitoring a Playful Learning and Teaching Experience

Tuning into the children's responses to the playful experience is of particular value as an aid to determining the overarching quality of the learning that is taking place. The following reflective questions may act as a starting point.

- Did the children display high levels of **interest and enthusiasm**?
- Did they show signs of **creativity and imagination** in the process?
- Were they **curious and inquisitive** about the learning experience?
- Did they **remain on task**?
- Did they show signs of **precision and care**?
- Did they offer **suggestions**?
- Were they able to **comment on their own work**?
- Did they show **interest** and a degree of **competence** in using language across the three strands of the Language Curriculum?
- Did they tackle the activities **without hesitation**?
- Did they **interact confidently** with others?

Infusing playfulness into language teaching and learning not only motivates young children to want to learn more, it can be an enriching experience for teachers also!





## Infusing Playfulness into Language Teaching and Learning

### References

Harris-Helm, J. & Katz, L. (2011). *Young Investigators: the Project Approach in Early Years*. Washington: NAEYC.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009). *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

Van Oers, B. (1996). Are You Sure? The Promotion of Mathematical Thinking in the Play Activities of Young Children, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 4, 71-89.

Walsh, G., McGuinness, C., Sproule, L. & Trew, K. (2010). Implementing a Play-based and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum in Northern Ireland Primary Schools: What Lessons have we Learned?, *Early Years*, 30:1, 53–66.

Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C., Trew, K. & Ingram, G. (2010). *Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. A Handbook for Teachers. Guidance submitted to Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum Assessment and Examinations (CCEA)*. Available at: [http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/foundation\\_stage/eye\\_curric\\_project/evaluation/Playful\\_Structure\\_Handbook.pdf](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/foundation_stage/eye_curric_project/evaluation/Playful_Structure_Handbook.pdf)

Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C. & Trew, K. (2011). Playful Structure: A Novel Image of Early Years Pedagogy for Primary School Classrooms, *Early Years*, 31:2, 107-119.

Wood, E. (2007). Reconceptualising Child-Centred Education: Contemporary Directions in Policy, Theory And Practice in Early Childhood, *Forum*, 49: 1, 119–134.