



# COLLABORATIVE IMPROVEMENT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

North Ayrshire Council, ADES & Education Scotland

## **Aim of Collaborative Improvement**

The aim of Collaborative Improvement is to bring about improvement through shared work involving staff from the local authority, Education Scotland, and Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES). Together the group establish the focus for the collaborative improvement visit and then undertake activities in the local authority that will result in an evaluative summary of where there are strengths and where there are areas that may require further focus.

This approach to collaborative improvement was initially outlined in the “Education Reform - Joint Agreement” between the Scottish Government and Local Government, published in June 2018, and was based on the recommendation for a “strengthened middle” in the 2015 OECD Report on Scottish Education, “Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective.” The approach is also intended to address the recommendation in Audit Scotland’s 2021 Report, “Improving outcomes for young people through school education” that Councils should work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners to promote partnership working to ensure sustainable improvements for all children and young people.

The model is resourced by an ADES Officer acting as coordinator. The coordinator secures the release of senior colleagues from some of Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities whilst Education Scotland identify a team of Inspectors and Officers to join the peer review team. Over the collaborative improvement visit the teamwork with the host Local Authority to explore overarching question of the host Local Authority’s choosing. In real terms, collaborative improvement enables an individual Local Authority to identify an area for further exploration based on their own self-evaluation and then benefit from an objective 3-day peer assessment of what is working well and what may require further focus.

## **North Ayrshire’s Context**

North Ayrshire Council is one of this country’s most deprived local authorities with levels of deprivation significantly higher than in other areas; 45% of our children and young people live in the postcodes that have the highest levels of deprivation in Scotland, and, according to UK government statistics, 24% live in relative poverty. Six thousand of our children and young people are registered for footwear and clothing grants. Such levels of deprivation have a significant impact upon our children’s ability to meet their early milestones and on their ability to access the curriculum. As such, North Ayrshire has been a challenge authority since 2015 working hard to close the attainment gap.

## Focus of North Ayrshire Council’s Collaborative Improvement visit

The focus for North Ayrshire’s collaborative improvement was play pedagogy in Primary 1. North Ayrshire strives to be one of the best places to grow up in Scotland and we believe that access to play and play pedagogy will support us to achieve this. We understand that effective play pedagogy can support the development of creativity and curiosity in our children. It will also engage our children in meaningful learning, encouraging autonomy and motivation and developing confident individuals.

The overarching question:

*‘To what extent is North Ayrshire’s approach to play pedagogy improving outcomes for our learners in the early stages of primary?’*

A programme was developed to enable members of the collaborative improvement team to explore four themes and focussed questions pertaining to the overarching question.

The four themes and questions were:

Theme 1: Leadership of Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the strengths and challenges to leading and delivering play pedagogy?</li> <li>• What should be the leadership priorities and/or actions to continue to develop play in our primaries?</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Professional Learning to Support the Development of Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent does North Ayrshire’s play professional learning equip practitioners with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to deliver play?</li> <li>• What professional learning is required to continue to grow and embed this model?</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Play Pedagogy in Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we ensure consistent quality of delivery of play across all schools?</li> <li>• How can we ensure that play pedagogy delivers on national policy &amp; priorities?</li> <li>• To what extent does play pedagogy facilitate early level outcomes (benchmarks, Es &amp; Os) for learners?</li> </ul>
Theme 4: Quality Assurance and North Ayrshire’s Data Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are we gathering the right data to inform the next steps?</li> <li>• To what extent is our quality assurance process for play tailored and robust?</li> <li>• How can we develop play pedagogy to be sustainable, measurable, and deliverable?</li> </ul>

The collaborative improvement visit took place over three days in December 2023 and was supported by an extensive team including:

- Michael Woods, ADES General Secretary
- Carol Copstick, Education Scotland
- Jacqueline Nimmo, Education Scotland

- Bernadette Martin-Smith, Quality Improvement Officer, Perth and Kinross Council
- Nicola Henry, Attainment Advisor, Education Scotland, Southwest
- Barbara Daly, HM Inspector from Education Scotland
- Catriona Gill, Education Officer Early Years, Education Scotland
- Denise Lorimer, Quality Improvement Officer (Early Years, Aberdeen City Council
- Heather Douglas, Head of Early Learning & Childcare, Glasgow City Council
- Sharon McDowell, Senior Manager, North Ayrshire Council
- Christine Grace, Head Teacher Professional Learning, North Ayrshire Council
- Joanne MacLean, DHT Professional Learning, North Ayrshire Council
- Lynsey Clark, Early Years Co-ordinator, Community & Education Services

Team members engaged in a series of focus groups designed to explore each of the themes, visited school settings to observe play pedagogy in context, attended a series of scheduled meetings with school staff and leaders, and took the opportunity to explore documentation and resources. This evidence was used to inform the findings of the team.

The analysis and challenge provided by the collaborative improvement team has contributed to reflecting upon our progress so far and in exploring the next steps in our improvement journey. We will now refocus the key aspects of our action plan to be undertaken by the service. The findings of the visit are outlined below.

## **What is working well?**

### **Leadership of Play**

We have a strong commitment to the development of play pedagogy within our authority. Play pedagogy is a focus on our Service Improvement Plan, and we have central officers with key responsibility for Learning, Teaching and Assessment who are committed to the development of play pedagogy within the early stages of primary.

Our Professional Learning Academy has played a key role in delivering North Ayrshire's vision for play. They have engaged with national and local partners to support the development of this vision, creating leadership opportunities for practitioners within the PLA (Professional Learning Academy) and our establishments.

North Ayrshire's play pedagogy rationale was developed with senior leaders in the central team, Professional Learning Academy staff and school personnel including Head Teachers, Class Teachers, and Early Years Practitioners.

The Professional Learning Academy facilitated a network to encourage practitioners to engage in professional dialogue and support critical thinking and peer collaborative learning.

Staff within some schools have a strong commitment to play pedagogy. This includes Head Teachers, Class Teachers, Early Years Practitioners and Classroom Assistants.

We have several schools who can, and are eager to, share their journey of play and support new adopters of this pedagogy.

Local authority Quality Assurance visits have highlighted play as having a positive impact upon raising attainment and pupil voice.

## **Professional Learning to Support the Development of Play**

The central team in our Professional Learning Academy have undertaken training at a national level to ensure they have sound pedagogical knowledge and skills to provide training and support for early adopters of play in some of our schools. The PLA staff also worked alongside our Early Years central team benefitting from their experience and knowledge. This partnership then provided a team to take forward the professional learning on offer to our school staff.

Some of our early adopter schools who embarked on play last session were provided with an Early Years Practitioner. The Early Years Practitioners were appointed to SIMD 1 and 2 schools. All early adopter schools had access to a teacher with experience in setting up play within the early stages of primary. This was invaluable and staff within the establishments all recognise the importance of being able to use the experience and skills of the Early Years Practitioners and the teachers.

Staff were supported to engage with documents such as Realising the Ambition, The Early Years Framework, and the Play Strategy for Scotland.

All staff in early adopter schools were provided with training sessions throughout the year. These included establishing a play ethos, learning environments, observations, planning, outdoor play and embedding literacy and numeracy. This has been evaluated and next steps have been identified.

Networks and trios were established to provide peer support. All practitioners speak highly of these stating that they provided a space to share good practice, discuss successes and highlight any issues or concerns.

Several documents were developed to support the self-evaluation of play within establishments. These were trialled and the environmental audit tool and How Good is Our Play Pedagogy (HGIOPP) were received with enthusiasm.

The PLA established a Play website. This contains signposting to good practice, links to useful documents and case studies. A Teams page was also set up for practitioners to access and share resources.

## **Play Pedagogy in Practice**

Some early adopter schools received an Early Years Practitioner based within their P1 classes, who modelled good practice for core school staff. The Early Years Practitioners supported planning, adapting the environment, and developed understanding of the importance of observing young people in play as a mode of assessment.

Over one third of our schools participated in our play pedagogy offer last session. This demonstrates a positive appetite across the authority for the development of this pedagogy in our schools. In addition, several other schools have accessed training through the SWEIC (South-West Education Improvement Collaborative) delivery and Professional Learning Academy twilight offer for pedagogical practice in play.

Some schools have demonstrated that a collegiate approach across the early level, between the Early Years team and P1 staff demonstrates provision can be enhanced through strong links and sharing of expertise.

Our school leaders and practitioners have demonstrated professional courage to start delivering play especially in context of both stretch aims and the measurement culture.

All establishments reported an improvement of their environments with a focus on play. Staff were able to discuss the improvements made and the impact on children and young people within their settings.

School leaders recognise that play has a positive impact on the emotional wellbeing of the young people in their schools. They report that the young people have shown increased motivation and a readiness to learn. Young people are also demonstrating progress in their development within the four capacities.

## **Quality Assurance and North Ayrshire's Data Narrative**

Senior Officers with responsibility for the Quality Assurance of our schools identified a need to create a self-evaluation document to support discussion about play in schools. How Good is Our Play Pedagogy was developed to enable school staff to self-evaluate their provision and consistently moderate the provision of play across the authority.

Establishments used the HGIOPP document to self-evaluate and although in the initial stages of being used, schools who have used this report that this has supported them to acknowledge their progress and identify next steps for play pedagogy within their establishments.

HGIOPP also provides a framework to support Senior Managers when conducting Quality Assurance visits.

This self-evaluation has shown that practitioners are increasing in confidence in their use of play pedagogy to support their delivery of learning and teaching.

A few establishments have feedback from parents as part of their data set for play. The feedback is extremely positive with parents acknowledging the worthwhile impact this pedagogical practice has had on their children with many identifying how their child is happy to go to school and that they demonstrate increasing independence.

Data was gathered for the early adopter schools and when comparing the milestones entry data and the ACEL data at the end of P1, we can see that numeracy outcomes improved. There has been an increase of 1.4 percentage points in the expected numeracy attainment between children entering P1 and by the end of the academic year.

Data also showed that there was a rise in attainment of 2.9% for the schools who received additional staff.

One school has compared their SNSA data for the past 3 years. They use this as evidence that play is raising attainment in both literacy and numeracy. This picture is replicated in other schools who were part of North Ayrshires early adopters. Other schools have similar data pictures.

## **What is next?**

### **Leadership of Play**

North Ayrshire is committed to ensuring Play Pedagogy supports the delivery of high-quality learning and teaching in our establishments. Whilst we have some establishments who can share good practice, we do not have a consistent approach and it is evident that not all leaders or practitioners have a good understanding of play pedagogy.

A Service Improvement Group will be established to develop a 3-year strategic plan for the delivery of play pedagogy in North Ayrshire. This group will consist of senior leaders and practitioners and will be led by a Senior Manager within the central team with responsibility for Learning, Teaching and Assessment. This group will further develop North Ayrshire's vision and rationale for play pedagogical practice in our establishments. The expectations of North Ayrshire schools in terms of the delivery of play pedagogy will be clear and, appropriate support for the implementation of this will be available.

It has been acknowledged that the Service Improvement Group should also include an Educational Psychologist to support research on pedagogy that is appropriate developmentally to children to ensure impact.

North Ayrshire's updated play pedagogy vision will be shared with all school leaders. Early adopters will share their journey and evidence their good practice.

The Early Level of CfE is intended to support the implementation of a responsive, continuous, play based curriculum from 3-6 years. It describes experiences and outcomes for children's learning in ways which have supported a more active, play-

based approach to learning and teaching. Early Years Practitioners have a wealth of knowledge and skills that P1 staff and beyond would benefit from. As such we will explore how we can maximise the impact of Early Years Practitioners' skills and expertise to support the development of play into P1. An emphasis will be placed on the progression of Early Years to enable children and young people to develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors.

We will review the trio model which was used by our early adopters which involved Class Teachers, Early Years Practitioners and Classroom Assistants. We will consider how this can be used to support practitioners to engage in professional discussion to critically reflect and determine further developments in the successful delivery of play pedagogy including planning approaches, tracking, interactions etc.

### **Professional Learning to Support the Development of Play**

The principles and purposes of the Early Level are outlined in CfE and Realising the Ambition. In practice establishments should have a shared rationale and a shared language for play. This should be consistent across North Ayrshire.

School staff highlighted training as being important and crucial to their journey. Their experience, knowledge and skills should be captured to support and influence the next iteration of play in North Ayrshire.

Professional learning should be expanded to support the development of early years environments focussing on interactions, experiences and spaces that support play pedagogy. To smooth the transition from play based pedagogy in the early levels into more traditional pedagogical approach in the latter stages of primary, professional learning and training will be necessary.

There is a clear requirement to develop further the skills of early years staff in primary to use observations to assess children and young people within play. This would strengthen our practitioners' ability to identify what the child's actions, emotions and words are telling them about their development and their learning. In addition to this, practitioners should be supported to develop their planning to ensure it is led by their observations of the children in their class. Our practitioners will become more skilled in interacting with the young people in their class.

It is recognised that establishments will require varying level of CLPL to support leaders and practitioners at various levels of understanding and engagement in the play pedagogy journey. Further consideration is required to support establishments to support schools towards excellence. Feedback from schools involved in trios was incredibly positive therefore this should be considered by the Service Improvement Group within their planning to ensure practitioners can engage in professional dialogue, share good practice and be solution focussed.

North Ayrshire's play pedagogy website will continue to provide a space for leaders and practitioners to access information and research linked to play. This should be expanded to include more case studies and evidence of good practice. We will explore the idea of the website becoming more interactive with links to high quality



environments to support schools with no Early Years classes or those who are at the start of their journey. Video links and photos will evidence high quality practice within our authority. Realising the Ambition will become more explicit throughout the website.

## **Play Pedagogy in Practice**

There should be a commitment to ensuring that play pedagogy is understood by all to deliver high quality learning and teaching particularly within the early level in primary schools.

North Ayrshire will provide establishments with a clear vision. We? will communicate our? expectations with strong links to quality improvement processes to track and monitor the progress of our schools in collaboration with school leaders and practitioners. Moderation of practice will be considered as part of the trio development.

A focus on supporting staff to support the transition of pupils from Early Years setting to P1 will ensure that our children and young people progressing into P1 will continue their learning at the appropriate developmental level and pace. There is a need for an improved trust and respect across Early Years staff in making professional judgements about children's development. The milestones should provide information about pupil learning, and this should always be used effectively to support our young people. There should be a shared understanding that this is the responsibility of all Early Years staff.

There is scope to enhance the use of digital technologies. This should be explored by practitioners, and they should consider how to support the recording of children's voice during play (iPads, talking buttons etc...). This may also be supportive if used as a prompt to redirect children's learning if the teacher is engaged in focused groups.

A focus should be on planning and assessment of play. This aspect needs further consideration and development to ensure staff are not expected to provide two levels of planning. Planning needs to be adapted to fit with the play pedagogy agenda.

## **Quality Assurance and North Ayrshire's Data Narrative**

The Service Improvement Group should consider carefully how the impact of play will be measured. It is challenging to change well established ways of learning and teaching and to enable us to do this we should deepen our understanding of what learning looks like through play in different contexts and settings. The learning environment will be central to supporting all young people to learn and reach their full potential and as such we need to further develop our measurement tools to monitor play and acknowledge that play cannot be simply measured by traditional attainment data.

We will consider ACEL data and formative testing alongside softer measures. We need to raise awareness of how play may not impact on the attainment at Early

Level however research has shown that the progress rate within first level is often much quicker. Gains may take time to see, and we should be prepared for this. Pupils will be tracked from their progress in milestones through to CfE data over several years. We will consider specific aspects of literacy and numeracy particularly within language and communication.

We currently have an observation document, based upon the Leuven Scale, for practitioners to use within their establishments. However, this should be revisited. It is currently not sufficiently capturing the breadth of skills that young people are developing within their play. We should ensure that we are capturing the development of young people including physical, social, emotional, cognitive and creativity skills. To capture pupil progress, we should train our staff to use observations more readily and robustly.

We will revisit our How Good Is Our Play Pedagogy document and ensure that Realising the Ambition is more explicitly referenced within it. We will work with our senior leaders to ensure all establishments understand and are engaging with this self-evaluation document. It will then be used as a moderation tool across the local authority to identify gaps and establish consistent practice. CLPL can then be targeted, and we will need to consider how we support establishments at various stages of their journeys. The progress will be evaluated throughout the year.

We will also consider measures such as: feedback, capturing data around parents' interpretation of their children's happiness, engagement, and wellbeing.

Overall, we should ensure that we engage staff in agreeing on the relevance of data collection and offer reassurance about utilising the naturally occurring data resulting from play.

## **Reflection on the process**

The collaborative improvement process has been exceptionally beneficial to the Education Service. In general terms the team has validated our own self-evaluation and endorsed our long-term vision. They have shared national best practice that can now be used to enhance our approaches and these areas will be taken forward with support from the team where beneficial. The team has also provided a helpful reminder to pause and take stock of how far many have come and guided us to start to consider arrangements to support good or particularly good settings to drive their own on-going journey to excellence.

## **What will happen next?**

This report will be shared with the sector, at a Head Teacher meeting, with the central team and with the Children's Services Strategic Partnership.

A Service Improvement Group will be established to plan and oversee the work moving on from this collaborative.

Actions that can be taken forward with relative ease will be prioritised for completion by June 2024, other areas will be used to inform Service Plan and School Improvements Plans for 2024/25.

The Education Service will engage with the ADES Officer and Education Scotland to secure on-going support in areas agreed with them.