

*A Pedagogy of Play: Exploring  
the Power of Playful Teaching and  
Learning in Practice*

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INTO Education Conference 2023

18<sup>th</sup> November 2023

# Overview of Presentation

Setting the Scene

- Established Benefits of Play for Young Children's Learning and Development

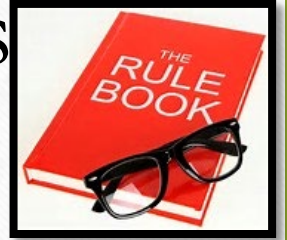
Reviewing the Evidence

- The Realities of Play in Practice from a Policy, Social and Research perspective

Towards a Quality Pedagogy

- The Infusion of Playfulness in the Teaching and Learning Experience: Playful Spaces, Playful Interactions and Playful Experiences.

# Established Benefits of Play for Children's Learning and Development



- Too formal an approach to teaching and learning in the early years is inappropriate and can be damaging for young children (Walsh et al, 2007)
- Children learn when actively engaged, emotionally secure and socially interactive (Walsh et al, 2007);
- A wealth of research evidence has shown that a quality playful pedagogy can provide an holistic learning opportunity for all young learners by educating socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically (Whitebread et al., 2012; Fisher et al., 2010, Zosh et al., 2017 and Walsh et al, 2019).
- Recent paediatric studies confirm the power of play in terms of improvements in executive functioning, language, early mathematical skills, social development, peer relations, physical development and health, and an enhanced sense of agency (Yogman et al., 2018);
- Play allows children's learning to be broad, interconnected and dynamic, where “children are not only encouraged to be happy and healthy in their lives today, but also develop the skills to be the creative, engaged life-long learners of tomorrow” (Zosh et al., 2017:6).

# Considering the Reality of Play in Practice

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# The Policy Context: The 'Politicisation' of Play

- While play has become a central tenet of many early years curricula across the globe:
- BUT
  - Policy versions aim to align what is possible with curriculum goals and outcomes
  - Play becomes subordinated to policy directives – real value over-shadowed (Hunter and Walsh, 2014).
  - Neo-liberal ideals of:
    - Efficiency
    - Productivity
    - Competitiveness (Wood and Hedges 2016)



# The Social Context: The Commercialisation of Play

- “Junk play” (Palmer, 2013)
- Kidnapping Childhood
- Technical Explosion





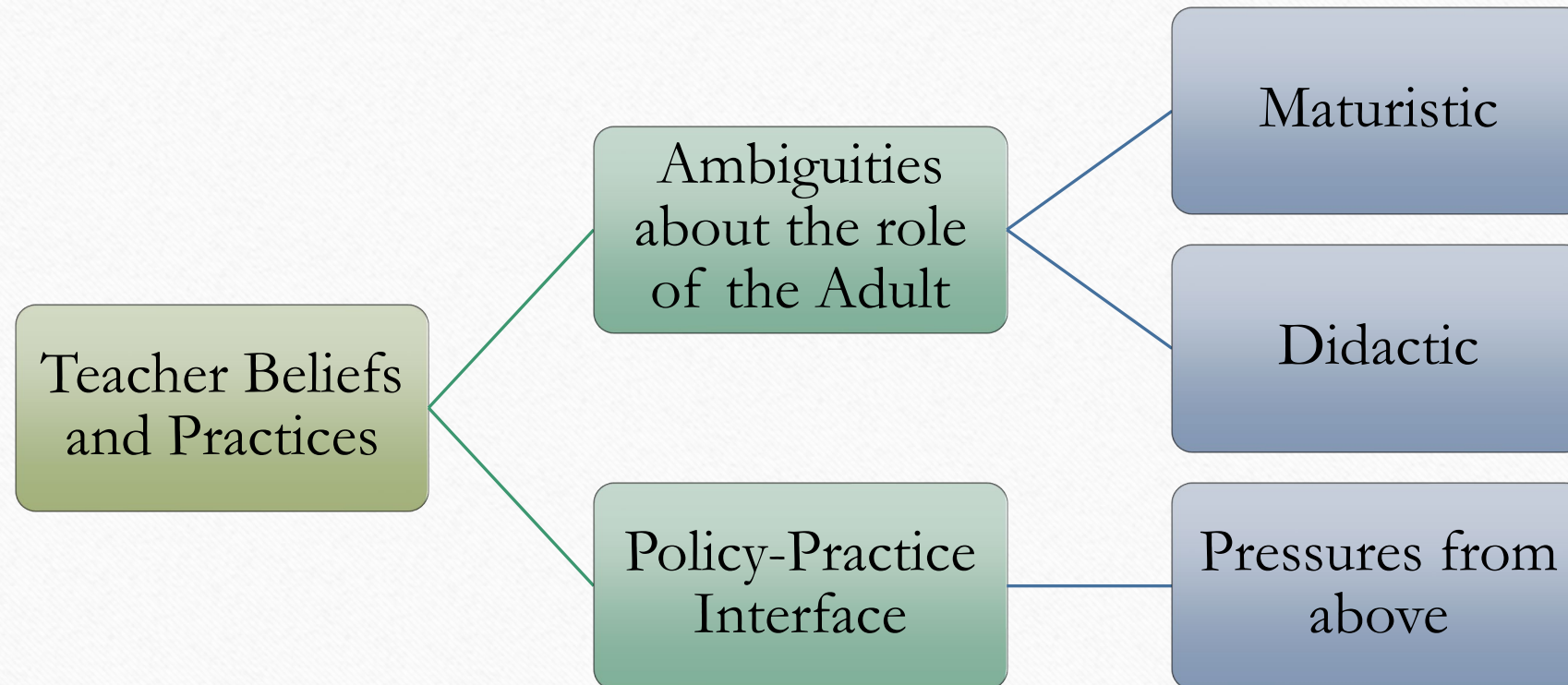
# The Research Context: The Realities of Play in Practice

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- A tradition of play in practice that is highly controversial and problematic (Walsh et al, 2007; Moyles, 2010, Stephen, 2012 and Wood, 2013) - constraints such as provision, adults' roles, parental expectations, and top-down pressures some of the reasons why play in practice is limited in “frequency, duration and quality” (Wood, 2004: 21).
- Research has shown that, whilst enthusiastic about the value of play for children's learning, many teachers are often confused about how they might captivate the interest and engagement of young children through the medium of play while still ensuring that they meet required academic curriculum goals and targets (Nicholson, 2018, Jay & Knaus, 2018 and Walsh et al, 2017).
- Studies suggest that practitioners appear comfortable when promoting the social and emotional aspects of learning through the medium of play, but when it comes to more academic learning they struggle, finding it a much more complex task (Pyle et al., 2017, Walsh et al, 2017 and McInness et al, 2011).
- Consequently, many teachers resort to more formal and traditional methods there has been an ‘international squeeze on play’ (Parker and Stjerne-Thomsen, 2019: 9).

# The Research Context: The Realities of Play in Practice' (Walsh et al, 2019)

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# The Underpinning Issue

- A direct response to these dilemmas that teachers are experiencing in practice
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Allowing children to express  
their autonomy and  
creativity through play



Providing enough challenge  
and to ensure genuine  
progression in children's  
social, emotional, cognitive  
and thinking skills



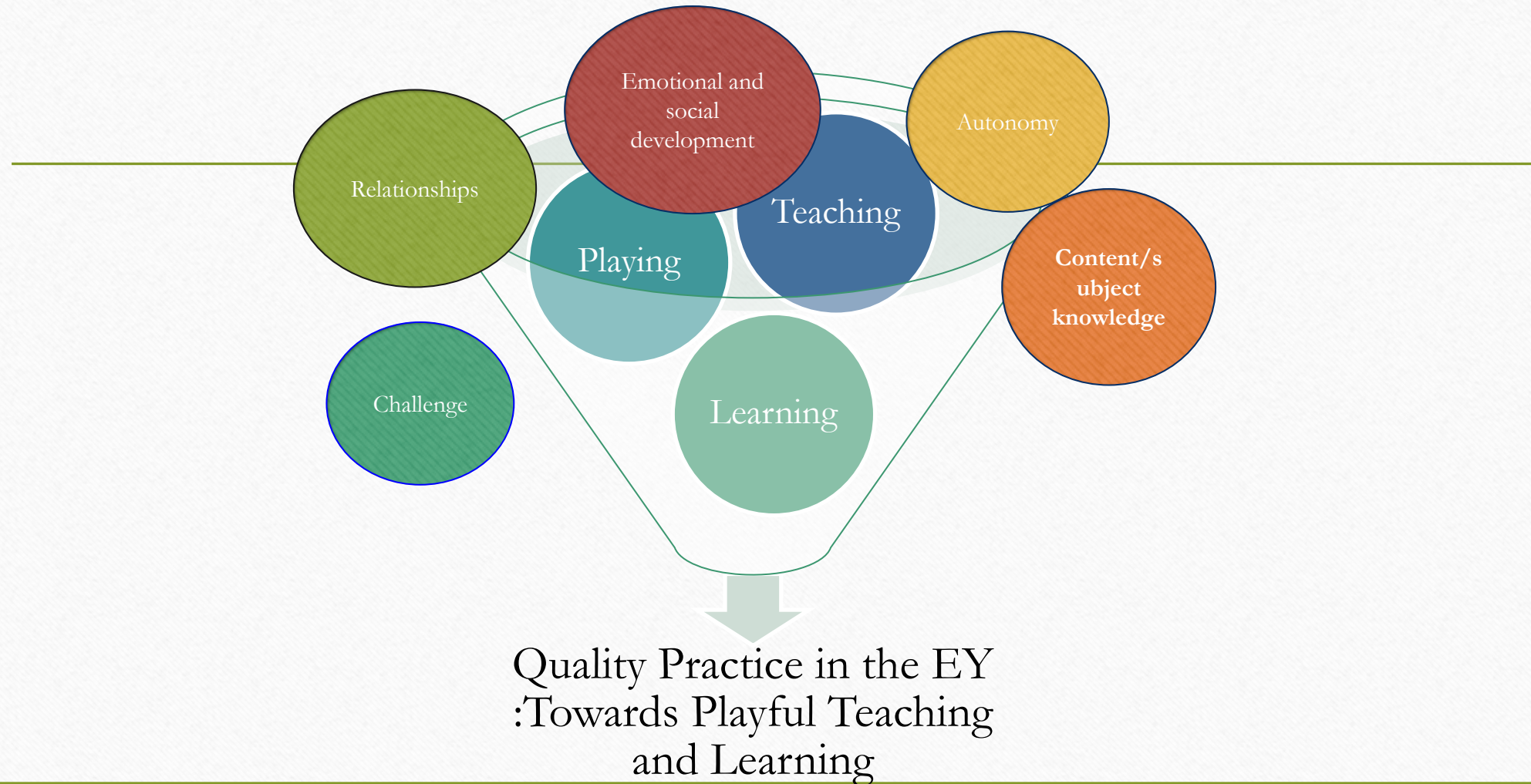
# The Concept of Playful Teaching and Learning Emerges

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- The answer lies in infusing **Playfulness** into the Teaching and Learning Experience



# Towards a more Balanced Approach to Early Years Teaching and Learning





## Benefits of Playfulness in Practice (Sproule et al, 2021).



- ***Relationships*** - children more relaxed about interacting with the playful practitioners to ask questions, get help with problems and show off their work, suggesting that the playful persona adopted by the teachers, even during the more curriculum-focused tasks, made them more approachable.
- ***Creativity*** - children more inclined to take risks, to think outside the box and to try out more challenging experiences without fear of failure, creating opportunities for higher levels of thinking to be sustained.
- ***Engagement*** - children seem to succumb to the playfulness of the experience and in so doing, transcend the rules, goals and boundaries that might be associated with the more task-based experiences.

# Realising the Potential of Playfulness in Practice

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# Infusing Playfulness into Practice

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Creating  
Playful  
Spaces

Providing  
Playful  
Interactions

Enabling  
Playful  
Experiences

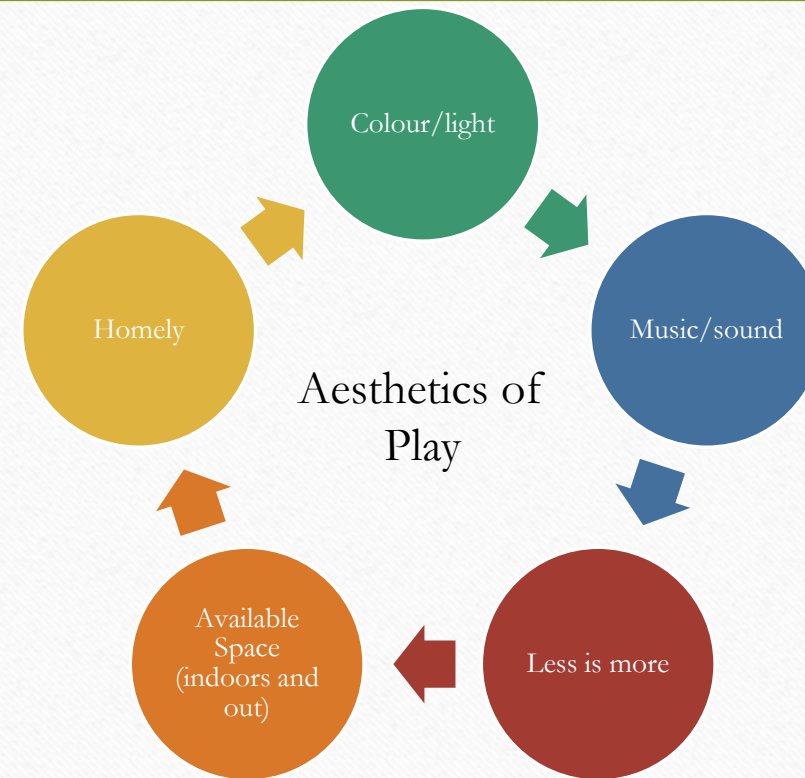
# Creating Playful Spaces both Indoors and Out

- Engaging
- Empowering and Respectful
- Welcoming and comfortable
- Collaborative
- Challenging
- Healthy and Safe



# Creating Playful (yet learning) Spaces

- Theories about play **moods** and concepts of **atmospheres** can enrich the field of play design (Skovberg and Sumartojo, 2023)



# Providing Playful (yet skilful) Interactions

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- Role of teacher in children's play as 'appropriately participatory'
  - Aligned with participatory learning theories (Hedges and Cullen, 2012)
  - Get to know the children and individuals – tuning into their acquired funds of knowledge and establish
    - Caring yet Nurturing Relationships (Walsh, 2017)
  - Adults' participation in children's playful experiences “is an essential part of a teacher's job” (Hakkarainen et al, 2013: 223).
  - Responsive to children's interests but also at times intentional – a fusion of playfulness and teaching.
  - Playful teachers are both pedagogically and emotionally engaged in playful learning processes (Melasalmi et al., 2023)
  - It's teaching but not as we know it (Walsh et al, 2019)

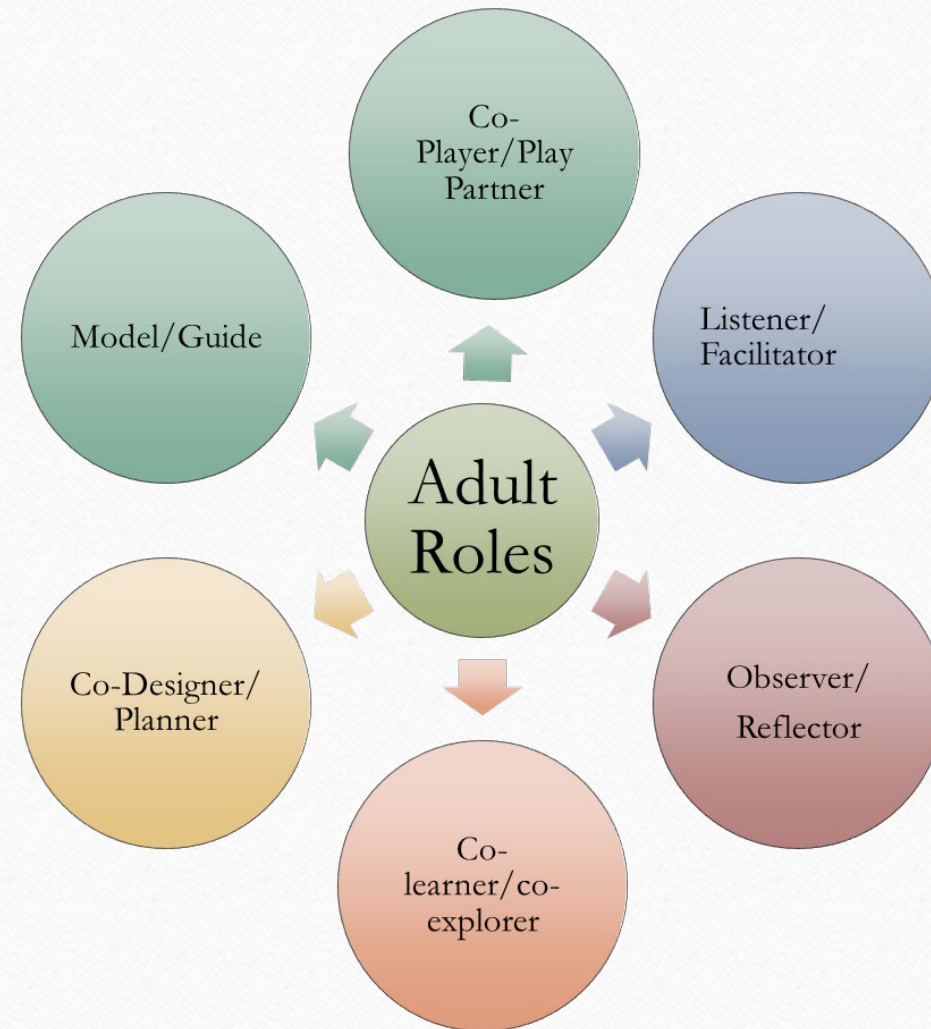
# Playful Teaching

The **participation**, the **engagement**, the **interaction** that takes place between **the educator and the children**:

Are light-hearted in perspective, despite the learning outcomes being quite serious;

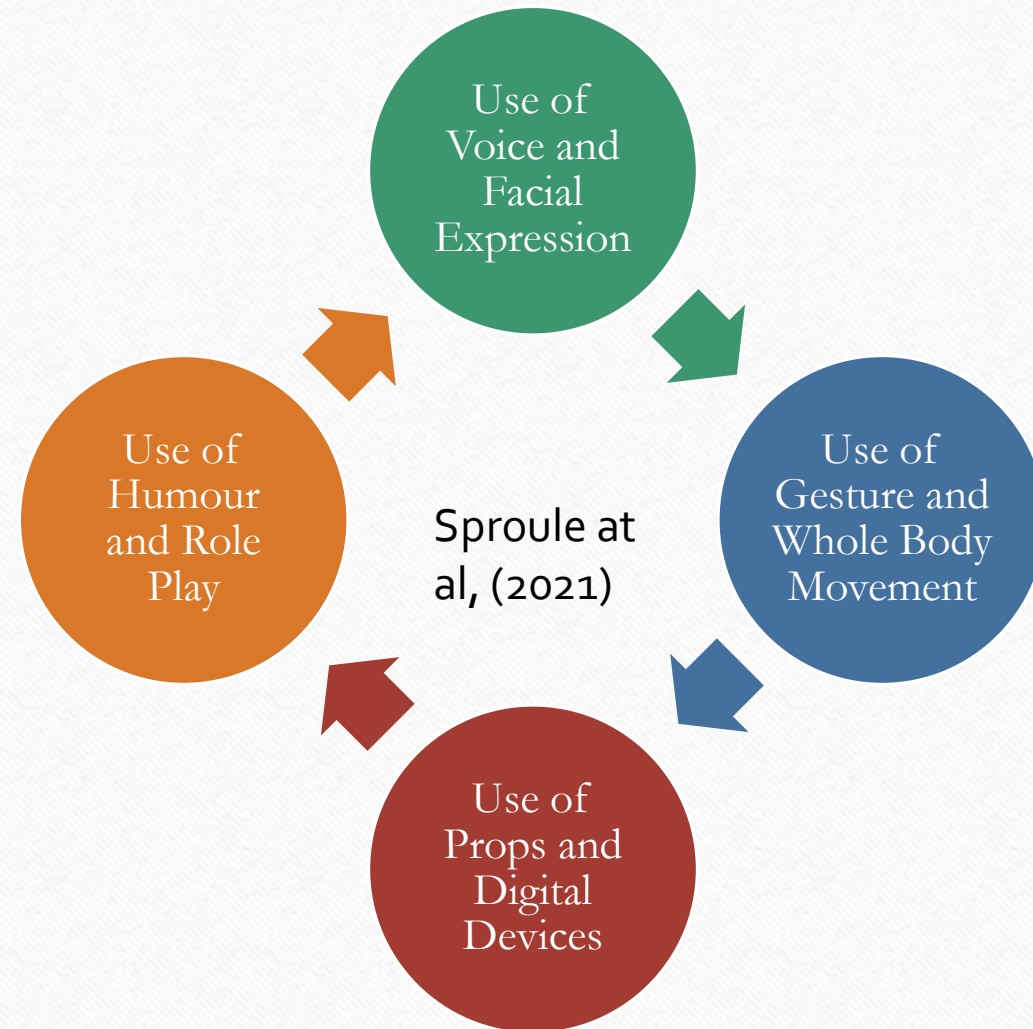
Afford opportunities for spontaneity, risk-taking and thinking outside the box, yet drip feeds curriculum content at every opportune moment.

Ensure a high level of interest, energy and enthusiasm on the part of both parties, whilst blending in challenge, extension and progression in the process (Walsh, McGuinness and Sproule, 2019);



## Signalling Playfulness

The power of playfulness as a pedagogical tool:



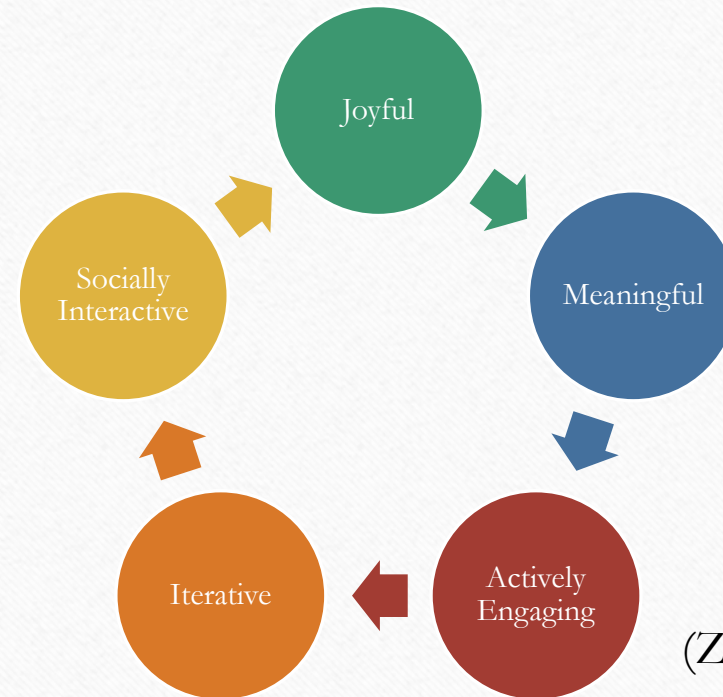
I have learned the importance of following the children's lead as a professional and taking action regarding their comments,

Moving away from the perception of play as rigid areas has allowed a degree of fluidity to emerge in my playful experiences and has encouraged me to support children's own interpretations of play. This change in practice encouraged a new level of respect for children's decisions during play, challenging the personal need for pre-planned outcomes and criteria.

When translating play into practice, it is easy to become a controlling practitioner. Indeed, I often interrupted children's play to insist that they write prescriptions or make patient notes. ... I have learned that I need to be flexible and not expect children to interpret play in the exact way I have planned

# Enabling Playful (yet challenging) Experiences (Ensuring hungry minds)

- Rich experiences which retain their sense of **enjoyment** but yet afford opportunities for **depth** and **challenge**;
- Materiality significant : use of authentic resources rich in possibility and adventure – ‘whatever you want them to be places’;
- A spirit of investigation and inquiry is promoted;
- A sense of agency and ownership established
- A ‘hard fun’ experience in practice (Walsh, McMillan and McGuinness, 2017)



(Zosh et al, 2017)

# Taking Time to be Playful



- Children need time to be playful
- Children need time to practice playfulness
- Patience required on the part of both children and teachers



# Playful Learning Experiences in Abundance!



# Making Play Playful



# Playfulness in Music, Stories and Dance

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# Daisy Hill Farm

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- Having visited Daisy Hill Farm the previous Friday, the 4-5 year old children at Meadow Green Primary school were enthralled to learn on Monday morning that they were going to set up their own farm in the classroom. Using a planning board, they explored ideas about what they would want to call their farm, what they would want to see there and what they would want to do there. The children were full of ideas from milking cows, driving the tractor to baking their own bread in the farmhouse oven. Mrs Harmony was delighted with their ideas and set to task finding materials and resources to ensure that the children's interests were built upon, but at the same time that her overarching learning intentions, focusing on 'people who help us' – in this case 'the farmer' and the story of milk – were fully met. On Tuesday morning, when the children arrived into class, the nursery was transformed. Daisy the cow was waiting to be milked with glove attached, the water in the water tray was now white and several different sized bottles were waiting to be filled and brought to the nearby farm shop. In the junk area, large cardboard boxes were waiting for children's eager hands to be transformed into some form of farm machinery and the smell of flour, margarine and sugar filled the air as Mrs Harmony awaited the children's help to get some soda bread in the oven.

# Infusing Playfulness into the Learning Experience

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I now fully realise that if play is going to have cognitive value it can't remain simply woolly and warm. If we want to deepen and extend children's learning they need rich and varied opportunities to encourage them to think outside the box. Setting up challenges for the children in the form of constructing dens using natural materials, following clues on the iPad to find hidden treasure, using recipes to concoct specialities in the mud kitchen or toasting marshmallows on a real camp fire all help to foster children's logical reasoning, creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. Play has to be much more than a few objects lying at the bottom of a sand tray. It has to be well planned in advance but flexible enough to allow the children's own interpretations to be taken on board (Student B).

# The Role of the Playful Professional

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- Enthusiast, Not Clown;
- Partner, Not follower;
- Professional, Not amateur.

(McMillan, 2017)



# Playfulness: can it be taught?

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- Donning a playful persona may come naturally to some teachers i.e. it is innate
- Others may find it particularly challenging and may need to be taught
- Pinchover's (2017) research highlights that too often play and playfulness are not given the academic and practical scrutiny required in teacher education programmes to the detriment of our early years' workforce.
- The need to teach students teachers how to be playful again – Play Labs in HEIs

# So it's much more than 'Just Play'

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- The time is ripe therefore for all involved in early years education to be 'key actors' (Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014, 212) and work together to move beyond narrow, superficial and low-level interpretations of play in practice i.e. 'just play' and instead embrace a more advanced and sophisticated appreciation of play as playful pedagogies (Walsh and Fallon, 2019) by fostering a more playful, practitioner workforce who inspire more playful children and in turn more engaged learners in our classrooms (Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness, 2021). Surely our youngest children deserve it!

The End



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*Thank-you for listening*

Question Time



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