Garnetbank Primary School, whole-school approach to Playful Pedagogy

Background
Garnetbank Primary School is a multicultural school in the heart of Glasgow. The playground is 95% asphalt and very small for the number of children who use it. In the autumn of 2017, the parent council paid for a wide range of open-ended markings that children use in their play for artwork and physical activities and loose parts were introduced. In the spring of 2018, a play den was opened along with a garden area providing children with daily access to a natural zone filled with colour and a range of plants.

Ethos and Rationale
Under the leadership of their Head Teacher and the full team's commitment, collaboration and solution-focused approach, Garnetbank is a long way down the road to full implementation of a Rights-Respecting Playful Pedagogy Ethos.

Earlier in her career, the Head Teacher had been involved in an experiment where the progress of an early years’ “Playful Pedagogy” class was compared against a control group. The main finding was that while academic learning was on a par, the children who had play integrated with their learning measured significantly higher on their independence, creativity and problem-solving.
On the basis that these skills and attributes are central to the purpose of education, she has wholly committed to Playful Pedagogy ever since. While acknowledging it is difficult to demonstrate success in the absence of a control group, she considers a measure is the fact that as a main driver, literacy is enhanced through rich and meaningful contexts for learning; in the older years engagement in learning is high, children are moving from off track to on track in academic learning and management of the classes gets progressively easier as a result of children’s increasing self-sufficiency.

Reorienting Culture and Systems
The Head Teacher acknowledges that enabling and embedding Playful Pedagogy successfully is a non-trivial challenge, as the traditional “bums on seats” school setting and systems have evolved around prescribed processes and outcomes. With Playful Pedagogy, the transformation begins with open-ended experiences and best practice, and then asks how spaces and systems can be adapted to best enable and support these without creating additional burdens for teachers. At Garnetbank, this is and has been a collaborative whole-school process, taken in small steps.

Children’s Participation in Decision-making
Many systems within Garnetbank have been reoriented to be child-centred and responsive, ensuring all have a say and their voices heard. There is a pupil council who are consulted about outdoor play and playtimes. Weekly assemblies are used to ask children's opinions, seek clarification and gain feedback. A playground charter has been developed by the Rights Committee. The pastoral system gives children immediate access to the management team if they wish to seek support from, or talk to, an adult. The children have been actively involved in all aspects of making the changes to practice, including working with parents on ideas for developing the grounds, and with the Child Development Officer to design and build outdoor features.
Putting practice first, not paperwork

The Head Teacher was already well aware of the threat to Playful Pedagogy of “paralysis by analysis”. Additionally, there was the exhaustion and demotivation of teachers trying to apply reporting approaches designed to record detailed progress for each child by way of narrowly prescribed lesson plans, to open-ended tasks involving a wide diversity of learning experiences.

Over time, through a process of dialogue between staff, Garnetbank has developed a rationale and model based more around observation, tracking needs and key moments, and continual reflection on the correct balance of adult-initiated interaction and scaffolding. A key part of this is nurturing trust. This is both in the practitioners for their own instincts, so they can feel comfortable curricular objectives are being met without constant explicit measurement. It is also in the parents, so that they feel confident that they’re trading off a detailed picture of their child’s progress for more effective teaching and richer learning experiences.
Enabling and supporting staff to deliver best practice
There are many ways Garnetbank works with staff to improve their play skills and manage the burden of designing and facilitating playful pedagogy. This includes a collaborative and trusting approach between teachers, support staff, Child Development Officer and managers; a structured induction and training for new staff, and continual reflective dialogue around practice.

Nevertheless, the challenges of facilitating play pedagogy with large classes can still be overwhelming at times for a single teacher alone. A key innovation in this respect has been Garnetbank’s use of the pupil equity fund to bring on a Child Development Officer, who
The Child Development Officer helps to bring the whole school vision to life in many different ways including through his deep knowledge of Play Pedagogy and outdoor learning; his ability to build relationships and buy in with parents; and by providing targeted support where needed. He is able to take the weight off the teacher-to-pupil ratio and afford greater flexibility for all staff to facilitate, and support each other, on learning adventures, and manage specific pupil needs.

Balancing “Interactions”
The particular educational challenges faced by Garnetbank perhaps illustrates why purely child-led learning, while it may remain the guiding principle and aspiration of playful pedagogy, is not always practical in the real world. 70% of Garnetbank pupils have English as their second language, and therefore many begin school with significant and diverse language support needs. The idea that these could be met through free play, without scaffolding and significant adult intervention is untenable, let alone in a situation where one teacher is responsible for a class of 25 children. However, the Head Teacher stresses that even adult-initiated and highly-structured literacy and numeracy experiences can still be made to feel ‘playful’ to pupils, for example, by giving them clipboards and the autonomy to choose where they sit, or by taking lessons out of doors. This is where the Child Development Officer can also provide support by enabling smaller group interventions which address particular shared literacy needs.

Leveraging the Outdoors
The Head Teacher also highlights the time and procurement challenges associated with resourcing classroom play, and the additional burden this can place on staff. This is one of the drivers for using and developing their outdoor spaces. Despite the significant limitations of being a city centre school and starting with a small impoverished playground, Garnetbank has worked wonders in this regard.

Together with the children, staff and parents, they have developed new zones, introduced open-ended loose materials, tyres, a water wall and music wall. The children helped the Child Development Officer directly design and build aspects of the playground such as the
mud kitchen in the P1 space, pirate ship and musical instruments in the main playground. The outdoors has become a rich environment where children can explore, create, collaborate, construct, relax, climb, jump, balance and investigate. In addition to the loose parts, there are a range of other activities from a football area, a dance and music space (very popular with the older children) and a blend of traditional offerings such as space hoppers, skipping ropes and so on. Everything is well used, and the playground is said to have a happy buzz about it.

Bringing Parents on the Adventure
The Garnetbank team recognise both the challenge and value of gaining buy in from parents for playful pedagogy. Parents can have strong expectations that their child is to get down to desk-based literacy and numeracy right away, or misassumptions regarding what play is and the value it has. However, the Head Teacher highlights the fact that literacy and numeracy performance is markedly higher than the UK in countries that emphasise play (e.g. Scandinavia) and only begin formal literacy and numeracy in later primary school.

The ways Garnetbank works to bring parents on board include “coalition” statements or letters (see example below) which set out clearly the collective ethos and rationale for the approach. These are considered important as an expression of solidarity from which the staff can derive confidence. So too is giving shyer staff, or those new to the practice, space to develop their self-belief, knowledge and experience before being exposed to open-ended family sessions. One important element of involving parents in the whole-school journey has been the Playground Architecture Club, where children worked with parents to give their ideas about developing the grounds. The parent council together with the school have also been responsible for procuring loose materials for play, and parents have raised funds to enhance the grounds.
Does it work? Ask the Children
At Garnetbank, the Head Teacher has led the co-creation of a unique and special whole-school approach to incorporating play pedagogy, enhancing playtimes and increasing involvement of children in decisions. This has taken staff, children and parents on a huge journey, which continues to evolve as the whole team works together, one step at a time. In the words of international play expert, and author, Juliet Robertson, “to spend so much PEF money on play and transforming playtimes is rare. I see in Garnetbank an example that other primary schools can learn from”. She also adds that, to assess the effect of playful pedagogy at Garnetbank, “the best thing to do is to go visit and ask the children directly”. Their continued journey can be found @PlayLearnGrowG1