Charlotte Bowes and #Play4P1 Case Study

Background
P1 teacher Charlotte Bowes founded #Play4P1 in March 2020 with colleague Anita Le Tissier. Inspired by the work of Highland Council, she felt Edinburgh needed its own network to encourage dialogue around Playful Pedagogy. From the off, she was surprised at the flood of followers (with over 85 members and counting) and the levels of rich conversation, which demonstrated that she’d tapped into an unmet need.

Starting with the launch of the #Play4P1 hashtag through her Twitter account, Charlotte has since introduced a Padlet to share practice around Education Scotland’s vision for early years’ Playful Pedagogy. With the support of Education Scotland, she is now in the process of collating all of #Play4P1’s experiences into a one-stop Google resource for P1 teachers.

Her adventure “down the rabbit hole”
Charlotte first encountered Playful Pedagogy on her 2nd year teaching. Her stage partner was using it as a part of carousel rotations, where children work and play in 15-minute intervals. With the benefit of hindsight, Charlotte now believes this “downtime” was not play at all.

Her “lightbulb moment” was a debrief with her mother where they unpicked her initial belief, having only had a week’s experience of play provision during her PGDE, that the carousel breaks were “just letting children play”. She then set out to understand what play really was. It has subsequently been 6-years and counting “down the rabbit hole” to gradually transform everything she thought about what constitutes good early years’ practice and teaching. Charlotte has written her own blog of her experiences which can be accessed here.
She cites an MEd (Learning and Teaching) project which focused on play as a key influence, and where she became aware of the sheer volume of developmental theory, research and literature which endorses Playful Pedagogy. She warmly welcomes, Realising the Ambition, which she sees as the Scottish Government’s validation and endorsement of a play-based approach, finally giving primary schoolteachers everywhere “permission to play.”

Why #Play4P1?
Aside from her probation year in P2, Charlotte has only ever taught P1 children. It is a stage where play has a fundamental role in developing cognitive capacities which enable them to take other people’s perspectives and think conceptually. A typical P1 class entails a diverse range of competencies and support needs, and evidence shows those first classroom experiences can set the stage for long-term academic success. As a result, it is this year group where it is both most important and difficult to get pedagogy right.

Experiences
Charlotte suggests that planning for Playful Pedagogy should always start with observation of the children and should be responsive to their interests and needs. This can then be extended by picking a related Experience and Outcome (E&O) and developing a provocation which supports a child-led exploration of their learning.

Many schools choose to offer pre-assigned P1 topics with bundled E&Os, which through class discussion, voting (on motivating provocations and challenges) and careful observation can still become child-led. Once the topic is in motion, the teacher can start watching for opportunities to loosely frame and braid in other E&Os for as long as the topic sustains children’s interest.

For example, last year children in Charlotte’s class talked about a Christmas TV advert opposing the destruction of Indonesian rainforests for palm oil, where an orangutan messes up a child’s room. This provided Charlotte with an opportunity to create a topic initiated by the children’s interests and linking to multiple E&Os. The next morning, she messed up the classroom before they arrived and began the day with the provocation that the orangutan had visited overnight. The adventure into further learning on the topic started from there.

After honing her craft, Charlotte has moved onto skills-based plans for continuous provision and to observation-based responsive planning in-the-moment. She is now seeking to spread her wings further by exploring topics which are motivating for the children (on an individual basis), but which have no clear curricular frame. Here E&Os from every curricular area are linked through observation and backward reflection. She is excited and determined by the challenge, and the opportunity to further develop her know-how.

Space
For Charlotte, one of the biggest impacts of playful pedagogy has been the improvement of her classroom (and other) learning environments. A key principle is
letting the children lead on the development of spaces. For teachers starting out, she recommends the Play Scotland's Play Types Toolkit as a thinking tool, as it gives guidance on which loose and creative materials enable a range of different types play.

Interactions
A key theme characterising Charlotte’s journey has been learning to let go. She started out with the traditional view of the teacher at the front of the class, with children putting their hands up in response to her questions and following lesson plans to the letter.

She now believes that children learn best when they are not just active participants in the teacher’s plans but lead the way in their own learning, and so she began gradually affording her class more autonomy. This started with taking away desks and introducing flexible seating and allowing children to vote for tasks and create aspects of the classroom environment. However, she still felt she was somewhat dictating experiences, and has therefore continued to relinquish classroom control. This had been the most challenging aspect of her journey.

Through letting go Charlotte is discovering a new and more powerful kind of pedagogical influence: participation. The learning emerges moment-to-moment in interactions between the children, teacher and physical environment. This is an intrinsically-motivating and collaborative journey of discovery and she says she is now able to spend more time on focused support and less on behaviour management.

Charlotte welcomes academic theory which argues that Playful Pedagogical processes necessarily entail a balance between adult and child influence, and the curricular framework. She describes this as like being expected to give the cast total responsibility for a theatre production, when ultimately the director will be held accountable for its success. In addition, she felt intuitively that adult influence brought value to Playful Pedagogy, provided it was underpinned by the right intent; the adult seeking to understand the playworld and journey through each child’s eyes, and intervening only if invited, to enrich and contribute to its integrity.

Charlotte also notes that many pupils are desperate to have the teacher involved in their play to share the magic and joy of what they’re doing. They also quickly learn that the teacher can get them things they need to take forward their adventure - like a friendly genie rather than a boss. Some children need adult influence more than others, and she notes that striking the right balance is about learning to trust your own instincts while reflecting critically on interventions and their effects.

Outcomes
Charlotte recommends The Leuven Scale for observing and evaluating play-based CfE E&Os. This assesses individual child behaviour on the two key indicators of successful Playful Pedagogy: motivation and wellbeing. She also tracks progress
using child-led learning journals (on the i-pad), and by recording pupil voice in-the-moment, and facilitating whole-class reflection on learning.

Challenges remain in tying open-ended experiences to individual outcomes and reporting. Charlotte is therefore developing an approach to evidencing play which can satisfy the multiple demands school teachers face.

Bringing Parents and Colleagues on the Adventure
For teachers with sufficient confidence in their approach, the best way to change the perceptions of sceptics is to bring them in and show them first hand. She believes this soon changes minds when they see children challenging themselves in ways relevant to attainment.

Charlotte gives the example of “thinking out of the box”, a simple child-led challenge she used towards all curriculum E&Os, which employed nothing but cardboard boxes. She simply added cardboard boxes to her environment’s continuous provision and watched to see how different children interacted with the resource. She took a picture of what the children had done with their boxes and recorded how each child explained their creation. Parents were astonished at and converted by the richness of the language and imagination their children had exhibited (and the breadth and depth of curriculum coverage that arose from a single, open-ended resource).

What’s Next for Charlotte?
Charlotte’s future plans for #Play4P1 include continuing the weekly Twitter conversations to unpick policy and research and share professional enquiry projects. She is also setting up a newsletter, a ‘speed dating’ sharing practice catalogue from a breadth of practitioners, in-depth spotlight features with experts on all areas of play and education, class visits, a book club and a #Play4P1 policy. She has also been recently awarded a research grant to explore the applications of a play-based approach to improving parental engagement and involvement, framed around “Realising the Ambition.”

Charlotte welcomes anyone who wants to be a part of the #Play4P1 network to join in the buzz and the fun too. Since she began this journey 6 years ago, she says she has never looked back. In her words “my ‘to discover’ list is still just as long but I’m now confident I’m on the right track. I still put my heart and soul into my classroom space, interactions and experiences: the children learn and they are happy, but they are also so much more!”