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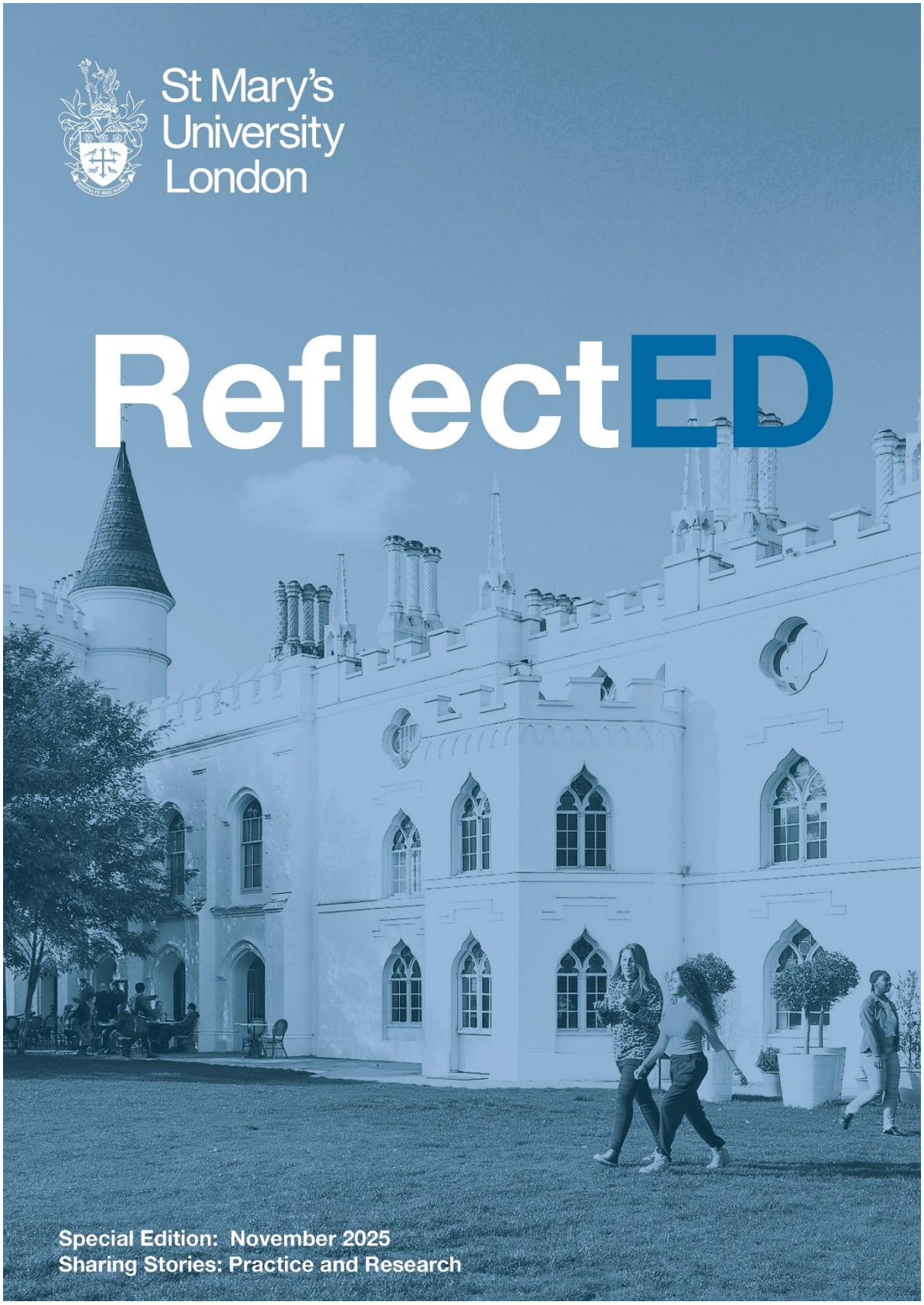
ReflectED



Special Edition: November 2025
Sharing Stories: Practice and Research

St Mary's University Education Research Journal

ReflectED is a collaborative initiative that provides a platform for emerging and established academics, to publish both ongoing and completed research.

Aligned with the Research Centre for Education, and rooted in the values of reflection, scholarship and community, **ReflectED** aims to nurture an inclusive research culture at St Mary's University. One that celebrates intellectual curiosity, encourages interdisciplinary dialogue and supports the growth of researchers and practitioners at all stages of their academic journey.

ReflectED aims to:

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- ***Develop academic capability:*** *offer practical opportunities and structured support for writing, editing and peer reviewing, which empowers individuals to engage confidently in scholarly publishing.*
- ***Reflect educational practice and research:*** *highlight work aligned with the mission and values of the Research Centre for Education by promoting reflective, evidence-informed approaches to teaching, learning and leadership.*

Our Editorial and Review Boards are currently under review. If you would like to contribute in any way to the development and success of **ReflectED**, please contact us directly:

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Special edition editorial: *Sharing stories – practice and research*

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Introduction

In June 2025 St Mary's University's Pedagogy Research Special Interest Group held our second Pedagogy Conference. 30 educators shared their stories of pedagogy and research, celebrating pedagogy in action from early years to higher education. This special edition presents a selection of papers from the conference, giving some insight into the breadth of topics covered.

Coming together to share our stories

Faculties and schools across St Mary's University and beyond engaged with the conference and made contributions from their disciplines. We were delighted to welcome colleagues from NHL Stenden in The Netherlands, The British International School of Stockholm, Canterbury Christ Church University, University of Manchester, Regent College London, local schools and independent consultants.

The day began with a keynote by independent consultant, Michele Baker. Michele is an experienced Forest School Leader, who has worked in the UK, Switzerland and Belgium. Her work focuses not only on promoting a sense of wonder about the natural world, but also on encouraging people to slow down and 'find calm in a world that can't stop moving'. Michele's keynote set the tone for a day of reflection and connection.

The range of topics covered in the parallel sessions that followed our keynote extends far beyond those included in this special edition. Topics included, but were not limited to, the use of generative AI in initial teacher education (Karen Kilkenny, Liz Birchinall, David James and Natalie Jayson from the University of Manchester), song as a pedagogic tool in Religious Education (Patricia Arundell (St Joseph's Catholic Primary School), and stories as a pedagogic device in PSHE (Olivia Richards, St Marys University), culturally responsive teaching (Elizabeth Kaplunov, Regent College, London), supporting grieving children and young people in schools (Anna Lise Gordon from St Mary's University and Emma Marfleet, founder of The Marfleet Foundation), why love matters more than exam results (Radha Jaipersad, self-employed consultant), developing teachers and children's knowledge and understanding of fluid intake (Josh Williamson, Canterbury Christ Church University), supporting disadvantaged children in primary schools (Stephen Crinall, Bedfont Primary School) and the importance of play in school based settings (Charlotte Rands, British International School of Stockholm). The variety of topics covered provided rich food for discussion much of which took place in our beautiful grounds, where delegates were able to enjoy the glorious weather.

Developing this Special Edition of ReflectED

All those who took part in our second Pedagogy Research conference were invited to submit a 3,000-word paper for this special edition. All papers submitted were double peer reviewed by members of the Pedagogy Research Special Interest Group and members of the review panel of ReflectED. For some, this was their first experience as a reviewer and an opportunity to develop competence and confidence in the process of providing useful feedback to emerging authors. Experienced reviewers also worked

collaboratively to support and mentor emerging authors, demonstrating the commitment to excellence that characterises pedagogic practice at St Mary's.

An overview of papers

This special edition showcases six papers. In our first paper **Viki Veale** and **Natalie Shaw** use a storying approach to present their reflections on conversations around lived realities and critical visions of early childhood education in their respective initial teacher education settings in England and the Netherlands. While their findings are reported elsewhere (Veale and Shaw, in publication), this reflective piece is a call for critical hope.

Continuing conversations around early childhood education, in our second paper, **Joelle Feudjo Maneze** explores the importance of reflective practice in day-care settings and how protocols which leverage lived experience can support this, while, in our third paper **Elle Dipper** and **John Siraj-Blatchford** report on an extended study of schematic practice in a private day care nursery. Both papers highlight the importance of reflection in developing pedagogic practice.

Moving into primary practice, paper four presents the findings of **Ellie Huggett** and **Kristy Howells**' study investigating a practice-based approach to improving motor competency in primary schools. Reflecting on their study, Huggett and Howells highlight the challenges associated with practitioner-led research while affirming the importance of connecting theory and practice in order to improve outcomes for children.

Our final paper is by **Juliette Claro** and **Charlotte Ryland** who explore how creativity and authenticity can invigorate language classrooms. Reporting on the work of a Special Interest Group for creativity and authenticity in the language curriculum, Juliette and Charlotte urge us to consider how these approaches not only support progress in language learning, but also improve wellbeing and equip learners with essential 21st Century skills.

Together, these papers emphasise the importance of reflective practice and critical pedagogy: a central theme across all presentations at our 2025 conference. We hope this special edition will inspire further reflection and critical dialogue and look forward to continuing the conversation about pedagogy at next year's conference

Changing the narrative: storying lived realities and critical visions of early childhood education

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Abstract

This article explores lived realities and critical visions of early childhood education (ECE) as they emerged during a project using 'utopia as method' with pre-service early childhood teachers. Using stories, narratives and narrative tropes as a lens to align their thinking, the authors offer a critical reading of the status quo of the neoliberal, outcome-focussed education system. Drawing on the concept of critical hope, glimpses of hopeful visions of ECE emerge through stories that offer a moment of breaking the tension by negating the status quo and arriving at a counter-narrative foregrounding teachers' collective agency.

Introduction

A little over a year ago, two teacher educators met at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Socio-Cultural Theory in Early Childhood Education Practice conference. Natalie Shaw is a lecturer in International Teacher Education for Primary Schools at NHL Stenden in the Netherlands. Natalie was educated as a teacher in England and worked in international schools in Germany, China, and Cambodia before moving into teacher education. She attended BERA that gloomy February day to report on a project exploring initial teacher education (ITE) students' recollections of the learning environments they enjoyed as children and how these recollections could help them work towards a systematic resource to critically reflect on learning environments. Viki Veale had spent most of her teaching career working in areas of deprivation in West London before returning to the university she trained in (St Marys, Twickenham), as a senior lecturer in early years and primary education. Viki had come to BERA to present her work on how understanding the lived experience of English nursery and reception class teachers could inform the future of ITE and support the retention of teachers working in this critical phase.

Although working in different contexts, their approaches, outlooks, vision and values as well as the issues they explored in their presentations and wider work were so closely aligned, they decided to keep in touch and continue their discussions. We were those

teacher educators, and this is the story of how we came to explore the shared realities and vision that shape our pedagogic practice, and that of our students.

Throughout our initial conversations, we noticed how often we referred to stories and narratives to align our thinking when describing concepts or experiences. In this article, we present the narratives that framed our initial thoughts and conversation topics. This shared narrative imagining extended to a collaborative shared project exploring our student's lived realities and visions of early childhood education. The project consisted of preparatory tasks shared on a padlet with consent from both cohorts of undergraduate early childhood students, followed by a 2-hour session where we brought both cohorts together online. During the online session, students worked through the phases of 'utopia as method' (Van dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier, 2022) with different conversational prompts. We use the steps of the method as headings in this reflective article, but report on the full project findings elsewhere (Veale and Shaw, forthcoming). While based on both the conversational project and further conversations with students within our own settings, the reflections offered in this article are therefore our own.

Drawing on Egan, Bullock and Chodakowski (2016, p.1002), who describe imagination as "the ability to think of the possible, not just the actual", we leverage the medium of stories as a way of developing a new narrative. As we both originate from, live, and work in a European context, the stories we draw on are part of the cultural repertoire of this region. In choosing these, we acknowledge the limitations that this presents and find it essential to point out that this choice is not motivated by a feeling that these stories are the only, or superior, ways of reading lived reality or storying visions. Rather, as Egan, Bullock and Chodakowski (2016) note, images are closely intertwined with emotions, and these stories are ones which embody the emotions and thoughts we experienced when preparing for, and reflecting on, our students' conversations about Early Childhood Education.

Teaching in troubled times

Perryman and Calvert (2019) suggest that what motivates people to become teachers is a desire to help others. However, neoliberalism has redefined professional activity as an act of compliance (Ball, 2015). Rather than focusing on supporting human flourishing, contemporary educational institutions are tasked with promoting conformity through performativity (Ball and Collet-Sabe, 2022). Indeed, since the introduction of professional frameworks and 'teacher standards', it could be argued that, the 'extended professionality' (Furlong, 2020: 53) that characterises transformative teachers has all but been eradicated in ITE in favour of creating 'job-ready zombies' (Hil, 2015: 5) programmed to work towards prescribed outcomes. These are troubled times indeed.

In these troubled times, it can be difficult to hold on to the hope that change is possible: difficult, but not impossible! Amsler and Facer (2017) explain that neoliberal regimes systematically eradicate hope and deliberately destroy criticality through their focus on

control and compliance. However, Biesta (2020) points out that times of crisis can also be critical points of reflection where we consider our options and make judgements about how we want to proceed. Biesta's (2020) perspective aligns with the work of Schwittay (2023) who uses the term 'critical hope' to describe the valiant act of acknowledging the realities of professional practice while actively seeking to transform them. As ITE lecturers, we are committed to nurturing critical hope in our students by adopting democratic pedagogies of possibility (Amsler, 2014) in our professional practice that foster in our students the confidence to confront anti-theoretical practice, challenge social injustice and ensure the best possible education and care for the children they will work with in their future practice.

While hope alone is not enough to change the systems that constrain us, hope is an essential quality in the struggle against them, and daring to imagine an alternative possibility is a powerful act of political resistance (Freire, 2021). As educators, our aim is for our students to see themselves as 'world makers' (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p.614) and active agents of change within the neoliberal context, capable of finding ways 'to live less destructively with others' (Nxumalo, 2018, p.148). Schwittay (2023, p.85) advises that critical hope can be fostered through creative pedagogies which allow students and educators to "collectively imagine heterodox responses to contemporary social, economic and ecological challenges." Like Schwittay (2023), we are committed to using creative methodologies to nurture confidence and critical hope in our students and decided to create a pop-up collaborative community of practice, bringing our students together to discuss their experiences and explore their vision for the future.

One hopeful approach is 'Utopia as Method' developed by Levitas (2013) and further conceptualised by Van dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier (2022). As an interactive, iterative method of engagement with complex questions, Utopia as Method (UaM) closely aligns with creative, critical pedagogic practices described by Schwittay (2023), involving as it does an act of collaborative reflection on reality and creative imagining of alternative possibilities. The method has three modes or distinct stages (archaeology, ontology, and architecture), which will be contextualised in relation to the stories that we linked to each stage in our conversations.

Archaeology: fixing the broken generator

Utopia as method begins by exploring the 'archaeology' of the situation in which the conditions that have led to a given current situation are excavated and examined (Van dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier, 2022). Here we asked our students to reflect on how they view the value and purpose of education as they perceive it currently in light of its history and ideals.

In this context, the narrative image that arose through our discussions is that of a machine crucial for survival, but openly beginning to fail over the course of time. A powerful machine standing at a heart of systems is a popular image in dystopian or

speculative narratives: In Fritz Lang's 1927 film 'Metropolis', an installation called the heart machine appears as the pivotal piece in a system of oppression of the working classes in a capitalist dystopia. Extending the image, a central *generator* is often portrayed as being the lifeblood of communities, such as in the young adult fiction novel 'The City of Ember' (DuPrau, 2004) or the television series 'The Silo', based on the book series by Hugh Howey. When these key installations at the heart of community support systems fail, their impending demise increasingly garners public attention, thought, and concern.

The demise of education, similarly, elicits public and academic discourse, with its real or imagined 'failings' currently being conceptualised from various angles. In neoliberal terms, education's proclaimed failure to produce predetermined outcomes is an argument leveraged to advance international measurement agendas such as PISA – the Programme for International Student Assessment (Volante and Mattei, 2024).

The identification of the problem, so it appears, arrives immediately coupled with a suspiciously handy solution. In the image of the generator, we storied this idea as follows: the technicians who identify the machine's problems have also coincidentally brought all the necessary tools to help the ailing system, akin to the mechanism of PISA and global educational reform described by Sjøberg (2015) and Zhao (2020). The dialogue that might ensue upon inspecting the damage can be imagined thus:

> '*My goodness, this really is broken…'*
>
> *'Oh, no, that is too bad. Can anything be done?'*
>
> *'Luckily, I have the perfect tool for the job, and I just so happened to bring it along today!'*

Were this exchange to take place regarding our home boiler, we may much more easily call it a scam. Unfortunately, these all-too-handy tools appear to offer only quick 'fixes' (Volante and Mattei, 2024, p.1555, in reference to Meyer and Zahedi, 2014; Sellar and Lingard, 2014; Zhao, 2020) and are oftentimes rather crude instruments unable to repair the underlying problems.

As Rudolph et al. (2018, p.1) explain, the 'shine and shadow' of public education has never served the populace equally. Storying the *generator* as an image for educational systems from a more critical standpoint, it is possible to imagine it as a structure that was always rooted on uneven ground. As long as the fundamental problems of the generator only touched the unfortunate souls labouring close to the capricious installation, it could be proclaimed as more or less working and serving its purpose, which echoes Ball and Collet-Sabe's (2022) attestation of schools as institutions of normalisation and conformity.

In 'The Silo', the disenfranchised are fittingly portrayed as those living, figuratively and literally, at the bottom of society. Termed *mechanical*, they are charged with keeping the

ailing structure alive through administering continuous repairs at their own peril. Those dwelling in the shadows of the machine's structure know better than to expect to ever rise to higher echelons, where the machine's failings can be ignored and light and electricity enjoyed. Clearly, the *generator* always had its fair share of victims – in terms of education, those disenfranchised by systemic racism, colonialism, and other machinations of the selection system can be read as those readily sacrificed into the maw of its furnace.

In 'The City of Ember', the all-powerful generator is progressively failing, with repeated power outages plunging the underground community it serves into increasingly longer lasting dark spells. In fear and uncertainty, citizens resort to behaviours akin to magical thinking, conjuring the erstwhile creators of the underground city as saviours, whilst yet other citizen groups engage in ritualised public ceremony to collectively combat their fear of the ever-encroaching darkness. We imagine this ritualised refuting of the dark as akin to shiny new initiatives and ideas, meant to transform education – be it the 'discovery' of mindfulness in education (for a critical stance on this trend see Scherer and Waistell, 2017) or the push for socio-emotional learning (SEL) as defined by Western ideals (for an alternative reading on SEL see You, 2023).

Looking at the status quo of education, we notice signs of the crumbling of current structures. Increasingly, these are getting harder to ignore, leading to rather hectic activity around our *generator* as the repairs become ever more precarious. The image of one of the workers in 'Metropolis' comes to mind, hanging on for dear life and overstretching himself to fulfil the impossible demands of the machine. Following their often-altruistic motivation to help and support (Perryman and Calvert, 2019), more and more educators throw themselves at the structure, desperate to make right what no longer works. A vision arises of overstretched teachers, trying hard to stopper gaps, literally overstretching themselves whilst attending to multiple points of breakage. Victimhood and heroism appear as intertwined, with suffering and self-negation written into the story of a sole hero battling the odds. As Veale (2023) found, those who fail in their heroic mission may choose to leave in disillusion.

How long, we asked ourselves, will we keep at this endeavour before standing back and admitting that this very machine is out of control and beyond repair? The fact that "the world has the highest number of 'educated' people in its history and yet is the nearest to ecological breakdown" (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020, p.2) should offer some diagnostics as to the state of affairs of our generator. Or will we uphold the farce, studiously ignoring the ever-longer power outages, whistling in the dark and assuring one another that absolutely nothing is wrong? To be clear, we are not suggesting, nor rooting for, an end to education. Yet what emerges through our storied images, we hope, is the futility of patching up the neoliberal, outcomes-based system of education we find ourselves in today.

Ontology: the emperor's new clothes

As Derrida (1976, p.162) pointed out, before we can begin to imagine an alternative reality, "we must begin wherever we are…where we believe ourselves to be". The next stage identified by Van dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier (2022) is *ontology*. This involves clearly recognising, describing, and ultimately deconstructing the current situation.

Neoliberalism offers a seductive rhetoric of reward and promotion in exchange for compliance (Ball, 2010; Davies, 2005). The normalisation of neoliberalism may contribute towards a progressive blindness to its terrors (Ball and Collet-Sabe, 2022). The narrative image which arose from our work was that of the child in Hans Christian Andersen's (1837) 'The Emperors New Clothes' who, baffled by the behaviour around them, is unafraid to address the emperor's nakedness.

Within this dystopian reality, notions of quality have become distorted by the "burgeoning of initiatives, interest and resources" which have changed the shape and status of early childhood education beyond recognition (Nutbrown, Clough and Selbie, 2010, p.16). This hectic activity seeks to mask the failings by keeping people too busy and afraid for failure to speak out. In truth, as TACTYC (2019) commented on the introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment in England, the decision has been made quite deliberately to focus on what can be counted, at the cost of what actually counts. Within this dystopian world, we have forgotten that children must be at the heart of the education system (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1976), and that it was the desire to help them that drew us to the profession (Perryman and Calvert, 2019). In sharing and reflecting on their lived experiences, it was evident that our students could see the naked truth that things are very wrong in both our education systems.

Like the townsfolk in Anderson's tale, educators have been conditioned to suppress critical thinking and perceive difference of opinion as a personal failing. Rather than professionals, we are encouraged to be 'zombies' (Hil, 2015, p.5), mindlessly complying with directives. We have been sold the lie that if we can't see the value in new initiatives and increased accountability, then it is we, and not the system, who are inadequate. As Archer (2007) suggests, those who find themselves in this position are faced with the option of remaining and being unhappy, of becoming vitriolic critics within the system, or simply walking away to protect their sanity. These responses were reflected in Veale's (2023) study of teachers working in early childhood education in England.

Another possible storying presents itself here, that of Karen, the ill-fated dancer in Andersen's (1845) 'The Red Shoes' who, once she has put on the red slippers, is unable to remove them and dances herself to death. Both this dark tale, and that of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', show how external forces shape our realities. As neoliberal subjects, we can all too easily lose sight of the fact that we were not forced to dance, we chose to, and, although we have suppressed it, we still have the power to speak out, and in doing so, potentially open the possibility for others to do the same.

Architecture: finding our courage (and a different pair of red shoes!)

Finally, having explored their personal archelogy (the visions that informed their practice), and shared realities (ontology), we asked our students to become architects or 'world makers' (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p.614) and imagine a utopian vision of early childhood education. This final stage is an invitation to break the pattern, a defining a moment for both 'attention and judgement' (Biesta, 2020, p.222), a critical reflection point where we do not just expose the system but clearly identify our own complicity in it as well. This represents an invitation to engage in critical hope, adopt a pedagogy of possibility (Amsler, 2014), and summon the courage to believe change is possible.

In so many tales where the protagonist finds themself in a world that does not make sense, such as Lewis Carroll's (1865) 'Alice in Wonderland', their story takes on a nightmarish quality where, in each interaction, they seek confirmatory cognition but find it lacking. It is not until they find others who feel the same that they are able to wake up and change their fate. In storying the future, the tale that best captures our imaginings is that of L. Frank Baum's (1900) Dorothy in 'The Wizard of Oz'.

Over the years, there have been numerous interpretations of L. Frank Baum's work. Taylor (2004) put forward the idea that the way 'the great and all powerful' Oz had so successfully convinced every one of his benevolence and wisdom could be seen as a metaphor for the seductive lure of capitalism. We feel that the tale works equally well as a metaphor for neoliberalism, with Dorothy representing our pre-service teachers. Doran (2025) points out that, although Dorothy is joined on her quest by, what could be perceived as, fundamentally flawed characters who lack a heart, a brain or courage (here we see a parallel with various political parties) it is through her own actions that Oz is defeated and she is able to find her way home, where she can be fully herself again. This interpretation aligns with that of Kassinger (2003) who notes that Dorothy acts as a reminder that, while we may be unaware, forced to forget, or temporarily blind to it, the power to change things lies within each of us; all we need is the courage to follow our vision. It could therefore be argued that the fundamental flaw we must overcome in order to change the narrative in Early Childhood Education is not within ourselves as individuals but inherent in the system that suppresses professional confidence and collaborative practice.

Towards utopia: facing the darkness to ascend to the light

Our students are yet to make their vision a reality, however, the fact that they are entering the teaching profession committed to doing so gives us hope. Our positivity is not rooted in sanctioned ignorance, but in the belief that, together, we can refuse to pretend problems don't exist, while proactively seeking creative and potentially subversive ways to address them. While we work within neoliberal institutions and regimes which try to eradicate critical thinking (Amsler and Facer, 2017), within the community of practice created in this study, it became clear that our students are entering the workplace

equipped with the academic armour (if not the ruby slippers worn by Dorothy!) to protect them as they defend their vision. We know their journey will not be easy, as do they, but the critical hope that things can change and the understanding that they are not alone will help sustain them as they take action towards making their vision a reality (Schwittay, 2023). While we may not be accompanying them on the next stage of their journey, we remain committed to pursuing pedagogies of possibility (Amsler, 2014) and working towards changing the narrative in Early Childhood Education.

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Exploring a protocol for leveraging lived experience for transformative pedagogy in daycare settings

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Abstract
This reflection paper introduces the 'reflective protocol' as a structured yet flexible tool for embedding reflection into early childhood education and care (ECEC). Building on theory, professional practice, and lived experience, it explores three dimensions of reflection—self, structures, and lived practice—as pathways to uncover tacit knowledge, challenge systemic constraints, and enhance daily pedagogy. Outcomes include richer documentation, meaningful observations, responsive curriculum design, and transformative play. The reflective protocol positions reflection not as an optional exercise but as a professional stance that empowers practitioners to cultivate equitable, inclusive, and child-centred learning.

Introduction

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) depend not only on policy frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework but also on how practitioners critically engage with their own values, the structures that shape their work, and the realities of daily practice. While the statutory framework sets important ambitions, too often practice risks becoming routine or compliance-driven, concealing opportunities for deeper, child-centred learning. This paper introduces the *reflective protocol* – a structured yet flexible approach designed to embed reflection into everyday pedagogy. Building on theoretical insights and professional experience, it demonstrates how reflection across three dimensions – self, structures, and lived practice – empowers practitioners to reclaim agency, disrupt invisible practices, and cultivate transformative pedagogy that values children's unique identities and cultural capital.

Why reflective practice is needed

High-quality early learning is not only the central ambition of the statutory framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2024) but also an urgent necessity within daycare practice. Drawing on more than two decades of professional experience in practice and leadership, together with ongoing enquiry and reflection, I argue that high-quality early learning is essential for establishing the foundation of children's long-term success. This success is realised through the effective construction of cultural capital. Consequently, because ECEC practitioners hold a duty to provide children with the strongest foundation for their early

education, effective practice must include deliberate strategies to support children in building their cultural capital (Feudjo Maneze, 2024).

My professional vision is to guide ECEC practitioners in developing their own learning through daily reflective practice and to empower them to interpret and apply the statutory framework (EYFS) with confidence. Central to this vision is the development of a child-centred pedagogy situated within the statutory framework, yet responsive to the complex realities of day-to-day practice.

Through lived experience as both practitioner and leader, I have observed that many ECEC practitioners struggle to implement the statutory framework meaningfully. As a result, educational programmes are often limited narrow in focus and fail to become truly transformative. Over time, practice can become routine, repetitive, and shaped by superficial compliance rather than authentic engagement with children's learning and development. I describe this phenomenon as *invisible practice* (Feudjo Maneze, 2024): provision that appears compliant yet conceals missed opportunities for deeper, more meaningful learning.

Why a protocol is needed

My earlier work explored the why of reflection, emphasising the importance of practitioners' voices and lived experience as sources of professional knowledge. The present paper advances this inquiry by addressing the how. Specifically, it introduces a structured, practice-based protocol designed to embed reflective strategies into daily pedagogy.

Developing such a protocol is particularly important because the aspirations of the statutory framework, while clear in principle, often become challenging in practice. The gap between policy ideals and everyday realities means that practitioners need more than abstract guidance—they require practical tools that can anchor reflective practice in the flow of daily provision. Without this, the intentions of the statutory framework risk being reduced to routine compliance rather than lived, transformative pedagogy.

The EYFS statutory framework is underpinned by four principles: every child is unique; learning is nurtured through positive relationships; development occurs in enabling environments; and children progress at different rates (DfE, 2024). These principles are ambitious and inspiring, yet in practice their openness often creates difficulties. For some practitioners, flexibility encourages creativity and innovation. For others, it leads to uncertainty, over-reliance on paperwork, or superficial compliance with the statutory framework (Ofsted, 2019).

This observation aligns with wider research showing that many settings meet the *structural* requirements of the statutory framework—such as staff qualifications, ratios, and resources—but struggle to maintain consistently high *process quality*. In particular, sustaining responsive interactions, adapting to children's interests, and embedding reflective practice remain challenging (Brown et al., 2018; Melhuish et al., 2019). Authors

have noted that practice in Early years is inherently complex, shaped by multiple interwoven factors including staffing, policy pressures, and family contexts, complexities which policy frameworks often acknowledge but rarely address in practice (Cumming, Sumsion and Wong, 2015). Other studies emphasise how much of practitioners' work remains "invisible" under the weight of competing demands (Press, 2020) and how tensions can arise between predetermined statutory framework goals and the diverse 'funds of knowledge' children bring from home (Chesworth, 2022).

As a practitioner-researcher, I have found that reflection and action research can help expose the gap between what we assume we are doing and what actually happens in practice (Feudjo Maneze, 2024). Yet, without structured, research-informed protocols, such insights are difficult to embed. Professional development opportunities often remain too abstract, disconnected from the realities of daily practice (Sheridan et al., 2009). The result is a persistent gap between the statutory framework aspirations and lived practice—a systemic challenge that risks reducing early years education to routine compliance rather than genuine, child-centred learning.

Transformative pedagogy and positioning the protocol

In my earlier work, I have conceptualised transformative pedagogy as operating on multiple levels – from questioning everyday assumptions, to embedding inclusive practice, to redesigning provision in ways that strengthen practitioners' professional agency. The protocol presented here is situated at this latter level: it offers a structured tool for systematic reflection, ensuring that professional insight informs pedagogical choices. In this way, it moves practice beyond superficial compliance towards transformation grounded in lived experience and research evidence. Practitioner agency is key here, enabling teachers to engage proactively across micro-, meso- and macro-levels of practice (Reinius, Korhonen and Hakkarainen, 2021) and resonating with the view that agency lies at the heart of Emancipatory education, equipping educators and learners with the critical consciousness to enact positive social change (Bajaj, 2018).

Defining the protocol

The term *protocol* is used here in a specific sense: as a structured yet flexible set of guidelines that enable practitioners to apply reflective insights consistently. Unlike a framework, which sets out broad principles, or strategies, which describe discrete practices, a protocol provides a systematic way of connecting principles with strategies and embedding them into daily pedagogy (McDonald et al., 2013; Venables, 2018). For me, this distinction is crucial. I have seen how frameworks such as the EYFS inspire vision but often leave practitioners uncertain about how to translate that vision into practice. Conversely, individual strategies can be helpful but risk becoming isolated techniques rather than part of a coherent pedagogy. A protocol, by contrast, holds the middle ground: it organises strategies into a process that is repeatable yet responsive to context.

The three dimensions of the reflective protocol

Reflection is not a peripheral exercise in early childhood education and care (ECEC); it is the very process through which practice is made visible, accountable, and transformative. The reflective protocol offers a structured lens for examining the multiple dimensions of professional practice, emphasising that meaningful pedagogy emerges from the dynamic interplay between self-awareness, structural influences, and lived experience. Building on the work of Schön (1983), Johns (1995) and Bourdieu (1990), this paper explores how practitioners can critically engage with their own values and assumptions, interrogate the frameworks and organisational cultures that shape their work, and evaluate the realities of lived practice. By weaving together personal narrative, theoretical insight, and professional experience, I argue that reflection is not only a tool for individual growth but also a catalyst for equitable and transformative pedagogy that honours children's unique identities and cultural capital.

1. Reflecting on self

The first dimension of the reflective protocol – reflecting on self – requires practitioners to examine the personal values, beliefs, and assumptions that inform their everyday work. Schön (1983) argues that professionals must engage in both 'reflection-in-action', while immersed in practice, and 'reflection-on-action', after the event, in order to make tacit knowledge visible. Johns (1995) similarly describes reflection as a structured way for practitioners to interpret their experiences, developing self-awareness and greater professional effectiveness. These theoretical perspectives on reflection resonate strongly with my own professional journey, where the dynamic interplay between practice and self-awareness became increasingly evident. This became particularly clear early in my career, during my first Ofsted inspection, when my practice was commended for its alignment with the Statutory framework (EYFS). Yet, when asked to articulate the reasoning behind my actions, I struggled to clearly explain my rationale (Feudjo Maneze, 2024). This moment highlighted what Schön (1983) identifies as tacit practice and the gap between what I did and why I did it.

This challenge compelled me to engage in deeper self-inquiry, I uncovered what I later termed 'invisible practices – subtle habits and assumptions embedded in routines that often go unquestioned (Feudjo Maneze, 2024). In line with Johns' (1995) perspective, reflection helped me make sense of these experiences, revealing not only contradictions but also opportunities for growth. Such critical reflection allowed me to ask fundamental questions: *Who am I as an ECEC practitioner? What do I bring to my role, not only as a professional but as someone shaped by cultural transitions and personal commitments?*

Thus, reflecting on self is foundational to the reflective protocol because it uncovers the personal commitments behind practice, enabling ECEC practitioners to transform lived

experiences into professional knowledge that enriches pedagogy and supports children's cultural capital building (Feudjo Maneze, 2024).

Self-reflection has powerful implications for practice. First, it bridges tacit and explicit knowledge, enabling practitioners to explain and justify their decisions rather than relying on experience alone. Second, it validates lived experience as a professional resource. Therefore, I argue that when ECEC practitioners engage with their lived experiences critically, they can leverage it to refine pedagogy and build transformative practices responsive to children's needs (Feudjo Maneze, 2024).

Moreover, reflection empowers practitioners to lead their own professional development, moving beyond compliance with statutory guidance towards authentic growth. It also supports equitable pedagogy by encouraging practitioners to challenge hidden assumptions and biases, thereby valuing children's unique cultural capital and developmental trajectories.

Ultimately, reflecting on self is not simply an inward exercise—it is the cornerstone of transformative pedagogy. By aligning personal identity and professional purpose, practitioners become equipped to shift their practice from routine compliance to intentional, inclusive, and transformative action.

2. Reflecting on Structures

Reflection also involves examining the wider structures—policy frameworks, organisational cultures, and societal expectations—that shape practice. Bourdieu (1990) reminds us that practice is never neutral but framed by habitus and wider structures of power. In early years education, this interplay is especially visible in how the EYFS statutory framework and organisational culture shape daily practice.

(a) Reflection on the EYFS statutory framework

Drawing on my experience, the statutory framework has been both enabling and constraining. On one hand, it provides a shared language and structure for planning children's learning; on the other, its prescriptive learning outcomes can create pressure for practitioners to comply rigidly. An action research approach can help mediate the tension by reframing the EYFS Statutory framework as a flexible tool rather than a fixed set of requirements. This is achieved through ongoing observation, reflection, and adaptation, which allow practitioners to shape the framework around children's individual needs. (Feudjo Maneze, 2021).

For example, when welcoming a three-year-old child with a limited attention span into our preschool at that time, my team and I initially felt obliged to select age-related goals from *Development Matters* (DfE, 2012). However, through reflective observation, we recognised that the child's immediate priority was to develop focus and engagement before working towards specific curricular outcomes. Guided by action research, we built learning intentions around his readiness to learn. This shift not only aligned with

Ofsted's (2019) emphasis on curriculum impact but, more importantly, placed the unique child at the centre of practice rather than the framework itself (Feudjo Maneze, 2021). In this way, statutory frameworks shape practice by setting expectations, but reflective approaches enabled to interpret and adapt practice in ways that honoured individuality and upheld professional judgement.

(b) Reflection on organisational culture within the setting

Equally significant are the organisational cultures and expectations that shape early years practice. I argue that reflection should not be regarded as a luxury but as a necessity, particularly given the pressures faced by practitioners. In my own setting, the introduction of reflective journals about each child marked a turning point. (Feudjo Maneze, 2022),

Previously in the setting, learning journeys were dominated by photographs and descriptive notes, but these often lacked the depth needed to reveal children's processes of learning. Therefore, we used reflective journals not only to document significant events but also to interpret them. For example, during a team reflective session, we discussed the case of a preschool child repeatedly arranging blocks into triangular shapes. Rather than recording this as a simple mathematical concept of shape, we asked: *How might we extend this curiosity?* Instead of leaving the observation at description, we integrated outdoor construction activities with large blocks and loose parts into the weekly planning, assigning his key person to actively encourage and scaffold opportunities for him to build triangular structures on a larger scale. This approach enabled the child to investigate balance, develop collaborative skills with peers, and extend his fascination with shape into the physical environment, while also providing us with deeper insights into his learning processes. (Feudjo Maneze, 2022)

This reflective practice deepens staff engagement and fosters a collective sense of ownership in curriculum design. Room leaders facilitate reflective discussions, empower practitioners to articulate their professional judgements. Over time, this cultural shift transforms compliance-driven planning into a more collaborative, inquiry-based practice in which practitioners increasingly value their own voices and insights.

Together, these reflections illustrate how statutory frameworks and organisational cultures structure practice. The statutory framework provides a foundation, but it is through reflective and collaborative interpretation that practitioners reclaim agency. As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, practice emerges from the interaction between habitus and structure; in early years education, this means balancing the authority of statutory frameworks with the lived realities and professional insights of those working closest to children.

3. Reflecting on lived practice

Finally, reflection must return to lived practice: what practitioners actually do, how actions align (or not) with intentions, and what can be learned from experience. Boud,

Keogh, and Walker (1985) highlight that reflection involves revisiting experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating in order to create new understandings. Argyris and Schön (1974) further stress the gap between "espoused theory" (what we say we do) and "theory-in-use" (what we actually do). Lived practice, then, is where reflection is tested against reality. This dimension asks: *What did I actually do? How does this compare with my intentions? What can I learn from these lived encounters?*

For example, taking time to review my team's documentation of children's learning journeys. (Feudjo Maneze, 2024). At first glance, the records appeared detailed and professional. Yet, when comparing them side by side, I noticed something striking: many looked almost identical, with only slight variations. This raised a critical question – were we truly capturing each child's individuality, or had our practice slipped into patterns of compliance and routine?

This realisation made visible the gap between intention and action. My team members spoke often about valuing uniqueness, yet their documentation suggested otherwise. Argyris and Schön's (1974) distinction between 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use' was playing out in front of me. What we claimed to do – celebrating individuality – was not fully reflected in what we actually recorded.

Drawing on Boud, Keogh, and Walker's (1985) reflective cycle, I guided the team through the process of returning to these records, attending to the frustration they felt at their repetitive nature, and re-evaluating how we might document in more authentic ways. This led to subtle but powerful changes. Instead of recording generic milestones, practitioners began to highlight the richness of lived experiences: one child's perseverance in solving a construction challenge, another's imagination in storytelling, or the quiet curiosity of a child experimenting with sound. These reflections created documentation that was not only more individualised but also more meaningful for children, families, and practitioners alike. (Feudjo Maneze, 2024).

Yet, this experience also revealed how strongly structural pressures shape practice. As Bourdieu (1990) reminds us, practice is influenced by power and habitus. In this case, the statutory framework demand for standardised 'evidence' and inspection frameworks had created a culture of uniformity, where compliance often outweighed authenticity. My reflection showed me how easily these external expectations risk silencing the complexity of children's learning. By consciously resisting this pressure – encouraging practitioner-led inquiry and reflective documentation – I was able to support my team to reclaim professional agency and re-centre children's individuality at the heart of our pedagogy.

The three dimensions of the reflective protocol – reflecting on self, reflecting on structures, and reflecting on lived practice – demonstrate that professional growth in ECEC is a dialogic process between personal identity, external expectations, and everyday action. Reflection on self uncovers the personal commitments and tacit

practices that underpin pedagogy, while reflection on structures highlights the tensions between professional agency and systemic constraints. Reflection on lived practice then grounds these insights in the realities of daily interactions, exposing both contradictions and opportunities for authentic change. Taken together, these dimensions illustrate that reflection is more than an individual exercise – it is a professional stance that equips practitioners to resist compliance-driven uniformity, reclaim agency, and place children's individuality at the centre of pedagogy. Ultimately, by embracing the Reflective Protocol as an ongoing practice, ECEC practitioners can align who they are with what they do, cultivating transformative, inclusive, and contextually responsive education.

Benefits of the reflective protocol in practice

The reflective protocol is not an abstract model but a practical tool that actively shapes daily pedagogy by embedding reflection into every aspect of practice. Through the use of reflective journals, practitioners are able to move beyond surface-level descriptions to capture children's lived experiences in ways that reveal deeper patterns of learning and development. Meaningful observations, informed by critical reflection, ensure that children's individuality is honoured and that their cultural capital is recognised as a valuable resource in curriculum planning. Reflection also drives curriculum design, transforming it from a compliance-based task into an inquiry-led process that is responsive to the needs, interests, and readiness of each child. Finally, reflection enriches learning through play by encouraging practitioners to critically interpret children's engagement, extend their curiosity, and co-construct knowledge in ways that are both developmentally appropriate and transformative. Together, these outcomes demonstrate how the reflective protocol bridges theory and practice, empowering practitioners to cultivate pedagogy that is intentional, inclusive, and grounded in both professional judgment and children lived realities.

Conclusion

The reflective protocol offers ECEC practitioners a practical way to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and lived realities. By reflecting on self, structures, and lived practice, professionals can uncover tacit assumptions, challenge systemic constraints, and re-align daily actions with authentic pedagogical intent. The outcomes – richer documentation, meaningful observations, responsive curriculum design, and transformative play – show that reflection is not a peripheral task but a professional stance. Ultimately, adopting the reflective protocol equips practitioners to move beyond compliance, reclaim professional agency, and co-construct inclusive, equitable learning experiences that honour every child's individuality and cultural capital.

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Early years curriculum and pedagogy: beyond 'balance' – getting into 'tune'

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Abstract

This paper provides an extension of a study that was carried out by Dipper in 2023 to provide an additional level of analysis. In particular, the article aims to shed further light on the schematic nature of the practitioner's cognitive activity, and explore more deeply the challenge of 'curriculum-led' practice that resulted from introducing SchemaPlay 'child-led' pedagogy. An apparent tension between prescribed curriculum and pedagogic objectives has dominated early years discourse for decades (Wood and Hedges, 2016, p.391; Cameran and Moss, 2020, p.104), with the suggestion that educators should seek a balanced approach (Ofsted, 2015, p.23, p.56; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, p.56).

SchemaPlay™ is a unique approach to early years education, where educators focus on the schemes applied in children's free-flow play to scaffold their learning and achievement of curriculum objectives (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016; Brock and Siraj-Blatchford, 2019). Dipper's (2023) study of SchemaPlay practice was carried out in a private day nursery setting in Surrey, England. The data was initially collected through semi-structured interviews and observation documents with four participants. Data was triangulated with questionnaires collected from twenty-two participants who engaged in the SchemaPlay™ award in a variety of EY settings across the UK. The study found that SchemaPlay empowered the early years educators to advocate for children's free-flow play by challenging 'top-down curriculum-led learning' and embedding 'child-led pedagogy'. In turn, this reformed the power relationships between children and adults, redefining their adult roles in support of the children's learning through free-flow play.

The additional analysis reported in this paper has provided us with a better understanding of the pedagogic processes and curriculum knowledge that were employed. In the process, we developed a clearer understanding of the nature of early years curriculum and pedagogy, and identified their reciprocal co-constructive nature. In fact, the practitioner respondents implicitly referred to this themselves, describing it as being in 'tune' with the children. The study concludes by providing an innovative and original model of pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) that shows that in effective early years schematic practice, elements of both curriculum and pedagogy are co-constructed.

Introduction

The paper reports on our extended analysis of Dipper's (2023) data and analysis that found that the training and mentoring in the SchemaPlay Award had empowered the early years educators to advocate for children's free-flow play by challenging "top-down curriculum-led learning" to embed 'child-led pedagogy'. The findings also indicated that approaches to observation were transformed, and the early years educators allocated more time to free-flow play. However, a question that had not been resolved concerned the perceived nature of the apparent challenge to 'curriculum-led' practice by 'child-led' pedagogy. As Kriegler (2024) has argued, the child-led versus 'adult-led' dichotomy has created a false choice, a restrictive binary for early years educators:

> … intentional teaching and play in ECEC have often been positioned in opposition to one another. This has created a seemingly intractable problem (Edwards, 2017)

The question of 'balance' was often referred to in the data. Still, we were unclear whether it was considered relevant to the balance between curriculum and pedagogy, or related to adult-led vs child-led practice. A research review by OFSTED (2015) addressed this issue of 'balance' directly and argued that the most successful preschool settings that had at that time been inspected:

> … saw the interplay between adults and children as a continuum, with the adults making constant decisions about the level of formality, structure and dependence that would promote the best possible learning (OFSTED, 2015, p.6)

In our discussion and re-analysis of the primary data, we agreed with the OFSTED review's assertion that the framing of *teaching versus play* was a false binary dichotomy. However, while this recognition was important, we felt the review did not fully resolve the underlying tension, particularly regarding what this balance meant in practice. We also agreed with the review that these questions regarding the relationship between teaching and play are most pressing in the context of disadvantaged children, whose learning outcomes are most sensitive to the quality of early years pedagogy. In this context, the evidence is clear: play-based practice is the most effective approach, and it is *precisely* disadvantaged children who benefit most from high-quality, intentional play (Sylva *et al*., 2010). Yet, the challenge remains: how do practitioners understand the issue and translate this into daily pedagogy without reverting to narrow, outcome-driven teaching or unstructured free play?

We found that SchemaPlay pedagogy offers a compelling response to this unresolved puzzle. Rather than defaulting to either child-led or adult-led models, SchemaPlay reframes the early years educator's role: to begin by observing children's *schemes* and *schemas* - the deep structures of their play and their thinking, rather than focusing initially on the predefined curriculum objectives (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016). As Dipper (2023) explains, this approach enabled her research participants to *tune into children's enquiries*, respond responsively, and design future learning opportunities that were meaningful, purposeful, and embedded in play.

Importantly, SchemaPlay also supported the early years educators in articulating the value of play to parents (Dipper, 2023), a critical aspect of advocating for play-based learning in settings that may feel pressured by school-readiness discourses. In this way, SchemaPlay addressed not only the pedagogical dimension of the teaching-play balance but also the professional and relational ones, equipping the early years educators with the professional vocabulary and evidence to sustain play as a valid and powerful learning medium (ibid).

From the start, we considered it necessary to recognise that reciprocal teaching and learning moments were the essential and ubiquitous features of all effective educational practices. We also shared with Carlin and Moutinho (2022, p.56) a concern to recognise the knowledge resources that both early years educators and children tacitly assume, and rely upon, to make an educational event happen. As we came to recognise, educators draw upon their pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002), especially their understanding of the learning progression in each subject area, and their knowledge of individual children. It may be helpful to provide a concrete example of what we mean by this 'understanding of progression' at this point: Many readers will be familiar with the fact that young children often miscount. They may, for example, count out "one, two, three, seven, ten". Suppose the practitioner recognises the child's significant learning demonstrated here by their application of one-to-one correspondence, stable order, and the cardinal principle. In that case, they can encourage and celebrate the achievement. Without that knowledge, they might even discourage the child with correction (Brock and Siraj-Blatchford, 2015). In SchemaPlay training, early years educators learn how even the child's simplest operative schemes are increasingly drawn together into complex operations (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016). For example, if we investigate the pre-requisite schemes that support the complex operation of writing, *trajectory* and *rotating* schemes are essential for letter formation; a *matching* scheme may support children to match letter sounds to written letters; *ordering* and *sequencing* schemes may facilitate hearing the sequence of letter sounds and sounding out words; and the positioning scheme may support the understanding of writing from left to right (ibid; Dipper, 2023).

SchemaPlay theory and practice

A unique feature of the SchemaPlay approach is its application of a distinction that Piaget (1969) made in his later work between schemes and schema (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). This was a distinction that has largely been lost in translation. As Furth (1969) has put it:

> English versions of Piaget's books do not consistently translate the French schème, although most commonly it is translated as schema, so that the above distinction could not easily be articulated.

A notable exception to this loss of the scheme-schema distinction within developmental psychology was in the writing of Neisser (1976), who is often cited as one of the founders

of cognitive science as a discipline. Athey (1990) wrote: “Piaget makes it clear that schemes refer to real operational systems of knowledge and schemas refer to figurative knowledge”, and emphasised that this distinction was “...worthy of further investigation". Siraj-Blatchford and Brock (2016) took up this challenge, studying Athey’s research notes in the Froebel archives, and they developed the SchemaPlay model in response (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016; Grimmer and Siraj-Blatchford, 2022).

However, the term ‘*schema’* has been used in early childhood pedagogy for many decades to refer to the operative patterns observed in children’s play (Louise and Featherstone, 2008; Meade and Cubey, 2008; Arnold, 2010). What we have come to understand as ‘*schemas’* were defined by Piaget as ‘*schemes’*. Schemes refer to children’s operative knowledge; that is, what they know how to do, which in early childhood, we observe in children’s movements and actions. For example, trajectory ‘schemes’ can be observed in children’s play as they explore horizontal trajectories through throwing, running, rolling balls or cars; and their use of vertical trajectory may be observed as they drop items from a highchair, or take an interest in stacking tall structures. Whereas *schemas* refer to figurative knowledge, that is, what children know about, which we often observe in their interests (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016). Continuing the example above, children demonstrate their ‘schema’ knowledge in their choice of slopes, balls and cars, and stacking objects as they explore their trajectory scheme.

It could be argued that the terms we apply in making this distinction do not particularly matter; the principle is the same whether Early years educators observe and extend children’s schemes and schemas, or “schemas” and interests. However, as Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2002) and Siraj-Blatchford and Brock (2016) argued, the distinction itself *does* matter because, as we explored above in the example, how children connect their schemes and schemas is the very crux of learning through play. Unfortunately, our cognitive tendency to seek understanding through breaking things into parts often stands in the way of our appreciation of the interconnected and indivisible nature of such holistic dualisms. In identifying the reciprocal relationship between these terms (see below), Brock and Siraj-Blatchford (2015) therefore found it useful to present them as ‘two sides to the same (educational) coin’.

Pedagogic content knowledge

Pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) was identified as of significant importance in the Research in Effective Practice in the Early Years (REPEY) study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), where it was suggested that PCK was critical in determining effective practice. In that classic study, attention was drawn to the educator's knowledge (‘curriculum schema’) related to early reading and phonics, mathematics, science, and design and technology (op cit, p.67–76). Furthermore, the data included many implicit references to their use of ‘pedagogic schemes’. The study was influential, as it drew upon and was

integral to the effective preschool practice in education (EPPE) studies (Sylva et al, 2010). In that context, PCK was defined in the following terms:

> Different pedagogic techniques are often required to make different forms of knowledge, skill and understanding accessible to young children. In teacher education the identification of appropriate strategies is often referred to as 'pedagogical content knowledge'. Requires knowledge of the 'subject' being taught and the child's level of learning. (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002, p.7)

Dipper's (2023) primary research data provided numerous striking examples of the research respondents demonstrating both their pedagogic content knowledge as pedagogic *schemes,* and also their curriculum *schema*. One example of this was in Participant A's observation of 'Sara', who was observed in her free-flow play:

> Sara placed her duck toy on top of a car; she pushed her duck around on the top of the car around the classroom. I also noticed Sara pushed a truck in the sand backwards and forwards making track marks. She was showing me her trajectory, transporting and positioning schemes. To seed the environment I will provide more opportunities for Sara to explore her Trajectory scheme using different media and I will provide more transporting toys such as carts baskets. I will show her how she can make different marks in different media, e.g. paint and sand by using her fingers and different mark making tools (Participant A, 16.05.22).

The child's schemes are identified as 'trajectory', 'transporting' and 'positioning', and we were also able to code the adult (Participant A's) schema knowledge of 'emergent literacy' and 'mark making'. The adult schemes we coded as 'seeding' (choosing resources to scaffold learning) and 'demonstrating' ('I will show her'), and the PCK as the adult's recognition that Sara could be supported through the encouragement of her "mark making with different tools in paint and sand".

The following table provides an example drawn from the data collected from each of the participant observations:

Date	Participant	Child Schemes	Adult Schema	Adult Schemes (Pedagogy)	Pedagogic Content Knowledge
16.12.21	Observation A	Trajectory Transporting Positioning	Emergent Literacy: Mark Making	Seeding Demonstrating	Mark making with different tools in paint and sand.
19.06.23	Observation B Robert - Water Play	Containing Trajectory V	Capacity and Volume	Seeding jugs Expressing – "Full to top" "Large" "Small"	Pouring with different size jugs, cups, bowls, pans
27.06.22	Observation C Rosa - Indoor Play with basket and boxes	Containing Trajectory Transporting	Capacity and Volume	Seeding box Explaining "Too Small" Demonstration	Introduction of different size Boxes
19.05.22	Observation D Oliver – Floor play with vehicles. Building Towers	Trajectory H-V	Capacity and Volume. Properties of 3D shapes. Nesting/stacking (Frobel). Forces and Gravity. Emergent Numeracy: Ordering.	Seeding: Blocks and Duplo. Nesting/stacking boxes. Tube and pom-poms for posting. Expressing "Properties of 3D hapes"	Stacking blocks and nesting boxes, cubes, cuboids, cylinders and squares.
	Questionnaire 3 Child Aged 2 – Water and Building Play making cement	Containing Trajectory Sorting and Grading	Measurement Volume	Seeding cups	Introduction of different size cups. Filling and emptying in art activities and in role-play

Table 1: Research participants' PCK

The questionnaire data (from Participant 3) included in the final row is worthy of presentation in full:

> Schemes are helping the entire team tune into what children are actually exploring… [child] is two. She liked containing. Initially, we think it was just filling and emptying that she enjoyed. We offer different sized cups water play because we saw she liked filling and emptying and we thought this was a good way in to seeing changes in size and possibly explore exploration of value. We had ways of filling and emptying in art activities and in role-play. [The child] loved the builders role-play of making cement in the trays. The schema play method has changed our aspirations for the children. We didn't use words such as volume before and we didn't view the mathematical and scientific explorations in this way before. [The child] went on to sorting by size grading and exploring a lot… her language is all about size and 'a lot' and 'less', which we supported with books and rhymes (Dipper, 2023, Appendix C3, Excerpt 5.3, 13:3).

Participant 3 was not alone in referencing academic curriculum knowledge in the broad terms of mathematics and science, and it is evident in her recognition that "seeing changes in size" would be significant in supporting the child's developing understanding and skills in (emergent) measurement. Slightly adapting McCray and Chen's (2012) model, we at first considered the relationship between these forms of knowledge in terms of three components (Figure One):

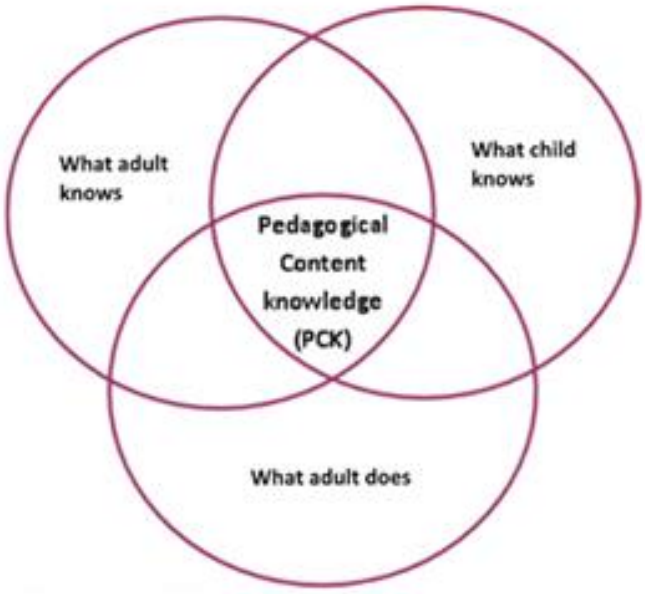

Figure One: **Adapted from McCray & Chen, 2012**

For example, in the above excerpt, we considered the child's schemes of ordering, grading, and trajectories, where reporting on *What the Child Knows; What the adult knows* was their evident understanding of 'emergent literacy', their knowledge of 'capacity and volume', the properties of 3D shapes and 'gravity'. *What the adult did* was to employ their pedagogic schemes of 'seeding' the play, 'demonstrating' and 'explaining'. The PCK employed was through mark making, pouring jugs, discriminating between large and small, their demonstrations and explanations. But Participant 3's use of the term 'tune' was also significant here, and it certainly struck a chord (sic) with other participants in the study.

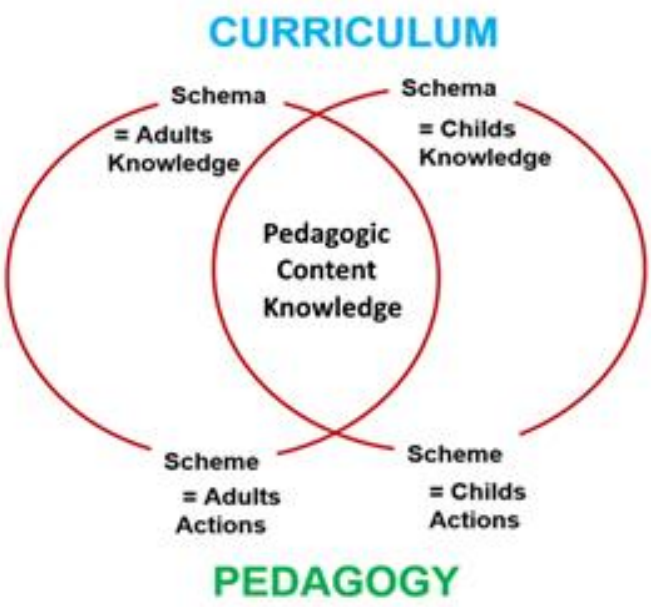

Figure Two: **The Co-construction of Curriculum and Pedagogy**

While the term ‘scaffolding’ (Wood *et al.*, 1976) is often applied in describing the nature of the teacher support required by children, this has often been taken to simply suggest some kind of unilateral action of the educator – ‘delivering’ the academic curriculum. But considered from a Vygotskian perspective, the curriculum might be better considered to be the locus of socially constructed meanings, or what Newman *et al.* (1989) referred to as a ‘construction zone’ involving reciprocal appropriation. In this case, instructive activities must match the child’s current understandings, capabilities and interests, and the teacher’s knowledge of their developing understandings, capabilities and interests may therefore be considered crucial. Within the reciprocal pedagogic teaching and learning processes, there needs to be a ‘meeting of minds’, a ‘cognitive engagement’, or ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) – both parties must be ‘in tune’.

In considering this model of pedagogic content knowledge further, we therefore became aware of a contradiction in our reasoning: while we were considering the child’s play as a meaningful combination, in the moment, of a particular schema object and action scheme, we were treating the adult’s application of a curriculum schema and pedagogic scheme quite separately. The three-circle PCK model was inadequate in capturing the reciprocal nature of the interactions. It treated the adult’s knowledge schemas and pedagogic schemes as if they were somehow separate. Yet every learning moment must always involve both a curriculum schema and a pedagogic scheme. When we were treating them separately, it made it harder for us to recognise this essential duality, and we were reifying them as separate phenomena, treating them as if they had a reality of their own. In the analysis process, we now recognise curriculum and pedagogy as ‘two sides of the same coin’. Our model came to be represented more usefully in the two-cycle model shown in Figure Two.

Conclusions

Our research has sought to provide a better understanding of the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood education. In identifying curriculum as the schema, and pedagogy as the schemes applied by educators, we have shown both the relationship between them, as a duality, as the ‘form and content’ of education, and we have simultaneously drawn renewed attention to the importance of both in training. There is a need to promote greater understanding of the need for effective early years educators to strengthen and draw upon. their schematic knowledge of individual children, and their pedagogic content knowledge (PCK), most especially their understanding of the learning progression in each subject area. In this study, we have developed a new model of pedagogic content knowledge for early childhood education, and it shows how, at its best, both the curriculum and pedagogy may be co-constructed.

Perhaps most importantly of all, we hope that our new conceptualisation of the reciprocity of the teaching learning moment may support a wider recognition of the intrinsically motivated and fully immersed, deep practitioner engagements that we have

often observed in effective early years educational practice. This is a recognition that the practitioners, just as much as the children, at these moments are in free-flow. At this time, the notion of the adult and child being 'in tune' seems especially apt; perhaps we should regard each collaborative teaching and learning moment as an improvised performance.

Studies have consistently shown that the prior level of educational attainment of early years educators strongly influences the quality of early childhood educational provisions. For example, the influential REPEY study identified a problem with practitioners' knowledge and understanding of phonics education (Sylva *et al*., 2010). It is often assumed that this requires higher academic qualifications to enter the profession. Yet, a greater focus upon PCK, especially on PCK in early childhood teacher education, may provide an additional or alternative option.

Recommendations for further work

In further developing our collaboration, we believe it will be possible to raise the professional status of early years educators by emphasising more clearly the intellectual research demands of their work. In many respects, the SchemaPlay accreditation process may be seen as having engaged the practitioners in collaborative action research (Carr and Kemis, 1985; Elliott, 1991). Still, the day-to-day pedagogic practices they developed may be closer to the 'teacher as researcher' model promoted by Stenhouse (1975). The early years educators came to see their educational interventions as provocations, as experimental actions that had been developed in response to their observations of an individual child's play, and according to their knowledge and understanding of progression in learning. As Ward et al (2017) have argued, Maria Montessori promoted a similar model: *"the teacher must not limit her action to observation, but must proceed to experiment"* (Montessori, 1949). Furthermore, in Reggio Emilia, *"the role of the teacher is first and foremost to be that of a learner alongside the children. The teacher is a teacher-researcher, a resource and guide as she/he lends expertise to children"* (Edwards *et al*., 1993). In identifying more clearly the reciprocal nature of the teaching and learning encounter, where both the adult and child learns from and develop the knowledge of each other, we hope to promote these conceptions of the teacher as researcher and argue that SchemaPlay provides a means of achieving this.

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All tables/figures are the work of the authors.

Bridging developmental gaps: a practice-based approach to improving motor competency in primary aged children.

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of a school-based motor competency (MC) interventions on the physical development of 5–6-year-old children in a primary school in the Southeast England. Recognising motor competency as a foundational domain for both academic readiness and physical wellbeing, the study addresses growing concerns around developmental delays. Through structured observations aligned with the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and using validated motor skill assessment tools, the research tracked progress in 11 gross and fine motor skills over a 19-week period. Results revealed significant improvements in locomotor skills such as galloping, hopping, and running, while fine motor and stability-based skills, including catching and balance, showed minimal progress. These findings underscore the complexity of fine motor development and the need for repeated, targeted instruction. The study also highlights challenges associated with practitioner-led research, including observer training and time constraints, but affirms its value in linking theory with practice. Given the disproportionate impact on children with Special Educational Needs and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the paper calls for embedding MC interventions into daily teaching, aligning educational policy with physical development goals, and enhancing teacher training to support early motor skill acquisition.

Introduction to motor competency

Motor competency (MC), encompasses both fine and gross motor skills, is a foundational domain in early childhood development, critical for enabling young children to engage effectively with learning and social environments (Gallahue and Ozmun, 2022). Fine motor skills such as hand–eye coordination and manual dexterity are necessary for classroom activities including handwriting, scissor use, and manipulating classroom tools (Grissmer et al., 2010). Gross motor skills, meanwhile, support larger body movements and are essential for playground play, balance, postural control, and physical activity (PA) participation (Piek et al., 2019).

Research increasingly links early motor development with later academic and behavioural outcomes. For instance, Cameron et al. (2012) found that young children

with higher motor proficiency scored significantly better on executive function tasks, suggesting that MC and cognitive self-regulation are closely intertwined. Likewise, Pagani et al. (2010) demonstrated that children with early motor difficulties were more likely to struggle with reading fluency and mathematical reasoning by age 7. In this way, motor skills form a critical bridge between physical development and cognitive-academic readiness (Robinson et al., 2015).

From a health and wellbeing standpoint, children with poor MC are also more likely to experience lower levels of PA and higher risks of obesity (Stodden et al., 2008). This creates a compounding cycle: less movement opportunity reduces the chance for motor practice, further delaying MC. Recent data from Sport England (2022) indicates a significant drop in children's PA levels and core strength, attributed to lockdown-related restrictions and reduced outdoor play. The Department for Education (DfE, 2023) further reported that only 79% of Reception children met expected levels in Physical Development in 2022, compared to 90% pre-pandemic.

Developmental gaps

Developmental gaps in MC can emerge early and widen over time if not addressed, leading to long-term disparities in health, academic achievement, and social participation (Clark et al., 2018). These gaps are often most pronounced during the transition from early years to formal schooling in Key Stage 1, a period when children are expected to demonstrate increasing autonomy and MC (Rudd et al., 2015). Research indicates that children who begin school with motor delays frequently continue to fall behind their peers unless specific, supportive interventions are implemented (Cairney et al., 2010). Moreover, longitudinal studies show that initial differences in MC are predictive of PA trajectories and weight status into adolescence (Lopes et al., 2021), underscoring the need for early, school-based strategies to mitigate widening disparities. Without timely intervention, children with early motor difficulties risk becoming entrenched in a negative developmental trajectory that is harder to reverse in later years (Westendorp et al., 2014). As such, identifying and addressing these developmental gaps through embedded pedagogical approaches is both preventative and imperative.

Furthermore, there is growing concern that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face additional barriers to acquiring motor skills, due to reduced access to green space, structured sports clubs, or parental time (Hardy et al., 2021). Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are also disproportionately affected, often requiring targeted, differentiated support to achieve age-appropriate physical development (Valentini et al., 2017).

Given these dynamics, school-based MC interventions embedded within daily teaching practice represent a promising, inclusive approach. They can offer equitable, consistent exposure to motor learning experiences without demanding additional resources or time

beyond the curriculum (Logan et al., 2017). This study explores the impact of such an intervention, delivered within a rural primary school context, on the physical development of 5–6 years-old children, many of whom presented with developmental delays during the ages of 4-5 years old (Huggett and Howells, 2022).

Research context and setting

This study was situated in a rural Church of England primary school located in the Southeast of England, serving a community characterised by low socio-economic conditions. The school is a small, one-form entry institution with a total enrolment of 202 students at the time the study was undertaken. The student population reflects a diverse socio-economic mix, including children from families living in social housing as well as more affluent gated communities. This diversity provides a rich context for examining developmental and educational outcomes across different backgrounds. The research focused on a group of 25 children aged five and six years (n=14, five-year-olds; n=11, six year-olds), with data collected over three academic terms, from February through July (for clarification purposes the three academic terms were from February half term, to Easter holiday, then after Easter to May half term break, then after May half term break to July end of term, also see Table 3 below).

Demographic characteristics and Special Educational Needs

The case study school demonstrated a higher-than-average representation of children registered with SEN at the time of data collection. Nationally, the average proportion of students on the SEN register is 12.2% (Department for Education, 2022b). However, this school's SEN register stood at 18.32%, indicating a greater demand for additional support services within the student population. Within the 28 children involved in the research cohort, six (approximately 21.43%) were identified as having SEN. This higher incidence of SEN is important to consider in relation to the study's focus on developmental progress, as children with SEN may experience different trajectories in motor and cognitive skills development (Norwich, 2014).

Methodological approach: observational data collection

The study utilised observation as its primary research method, aligning with established practice in early years education where direct observation is considered a core strategy for understanding young children (Moyles, 2010). Observational data were collected on all 25 children in the class, allowing for a comprehensive view of developmental progress within the cohort. The observations were conducted collaboratively by a teacher within the school (who also served as the researcher) and a teaching assistant, ensuring consistency and reliability in data recording.

Observation serves a critical function in early childhood education by enabling teachers to capture nuanced behaviours and learning patterns that may not be evident through formal assessments (Drake, 2006). It supports the holistic understanding of children as

individuals, facilitating tailored teaching strategies that respond to each child's developmental needs (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

Development and use of structured observation tools

To systematically capture data related to physical development, structured observation sheets were designed focusing on fine and gross motor skills. These sheets were constructed in alignment with the Early Learning Goals specified in the Department for Education's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (DfE, 2021a). The developmental criteria were further informed by the age-related physical development expectations outlined in the Development Matters guidance document (DfE, 2021b), which provides detailed milestones for physical skills acquisition in early childhood.

Using such structured tools ensured that observations were focused and comparable across participants, allowing for reliable tracking of individual progress over the three-term period. This approach also aligns with best practice recommendations that advocate for the use of developmentally appropriate and evidence-based frameworks in monitoring children's MC development (Piek et al., 2008).

How can practitioner research guide theory and classroom practice?

Traditionally, research has been seen as the domain of academia, especially in universities (Gutierez, 2019). However, teacher-led practitioner research has gained traction as educators use their classrooms for data collection and professional growth (Gutierez, 2019). Despite ongoing debate, practitioner research offers a vital link between theoretical knowledge and practical teaching. While some educators find academic research too theoretical and disconnected from classroom realities (Bevan, 2004), others see practitioner research as empowering teachers to be lifelong learners who critically reflect and adapt their practice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009).

Practitioner research aligns closely with action research, focusing on improving teaching strategies within specific classroom contexts. In this study, baseline data informed a tailored scheme of work (SOW), which was regularly reviewed and adjusted based on ongoing assessment, ensuring targeted interventions addressed areas of minimal progress. This cyclical evaluation approach supports reflective practice and personalised solutions (The Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.).

Engaging students in the research process also enhances curriculum relevance and supports learner autonomy (Johnston et al., 2019). In this study, children chose activities and tasks, promoting decision-making and ownership of their learning.

Behind the lens: training observers for clear, consistent data

Observing children provides valuable insights into their learning, but when participants know they are being watched—an overt observation—it can influence their behaviour, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect (Holden, 2001). To reduce this impact, practice observations were conducted beforehand, making the research observation

part of the children's familiar routine. Ethical considerations guided the choice for overt observations, ensuring consistent, unbiased data collection required thorough observer training. Since multiple educators and assistants collected data, a 'mock circuit' session was held, allowing everyone to practise using the observation sheets and calibrate their understanding of each success criterion. This careful planning helped minimize observer bias and uphold data quality throughout the study (Hammer, du Prel and Blettner, 2009).

Research vs. reality: the practical struggles of classroom inquiry

This study involved 25 children aged 5-6 years, with the researcher released from their own class to implement the interventions as the school's expert PE lead; however, to maintain research rigour, they were not the regular class teacher of the participating children. Despite growing enthusiasm for practitioner research, significant challenges remain. Classroom chaos (Radford, 2006), difficulties securing permissions (Sarkar, 2014), and limited time within the school day, can all lead to delays within the research proposed timelines.

Motor competency based assessment criteria for skills

Over the past several decades, creating dependable and precise tools to assess MC – encompassing skills like coordination, balance, agility, and sprinting ability - has played a vital role in the field of motor development research (Morley et al., 2015). Typically, motor skill evaluations have involved individuals performing designated physical tasks, with their results compared to standardised norms based on established reference data (Cools et al., 2009).

In this study, the success criteria (SC) for each motor skill were informed by established and credible sources. The TGMD-2 (Ulrich, 2000), a widely recognised norm- and criterion-referenced tool, provided the basis for assessing locomotor and object control skills. To evaluate climbing ability – an area not included in the TGMD-2 – criteria were drawn from the qualitative climbing assessment developed by Plevnik et al. (2014). Balance and core motor control were assessed using simplified adaptations of one-leg balance tests from Hutchinson, Yao, and Hutchinson (2016), conducted on both stable and unstable surfaces. The overarching approach to assessment was designed to be reliable, relevant, simple to administer, and adaptable to change. The SC for each skill can be found below in Table 1 below.

Skill	***SC***	***Skill Component***
Hopping	SC1	The non-support leg swings forward in a pendular fashion to produce force.
	SC2	The foot of the non-support leg remains behind the body.
	SC3	The arms are flexed and swing forward to produce force.

	SC4	The child takes off and lands three consecutive times on their preferred foot.
	SC5	The child takes off and lands three consecutive times on their non-preferred foot.
Running	SC1	The arms move in opposition to the legs.
	SC2	There is a brief period where both feet are off the ground.
	SC3	Foot placement is narrow, landing on heel or toe (not flat-footed).
	SC4	The non-support leg is bent approximately 90 degrees.
Galloping	SC1	The arms are bent and lifted to waist level at take-off.
	SC2	The child steps forward with the lead foot followed by a step with the trailing foot adjacent to or behind.
	SC3	There is a brief period when both feet are off the floor.
	SC4	The child maintains a rhythmic pattern for four consecutive gallops.
Sliding	SC1	The body is turned sideways so shoulders align with the line on the floor.
	SC2	The lead footsteps sideways, followed by the trailing foot sliding next to it.
	SC3	The child completes a minimum of four continuous step-slide cycles to the right.
	SC4	The child completes a minimum of four continuous step-slide cycles to the left.
Dribbling	SC1	The child contacts the ball with one hand at around belt level.
	SC2	The child pushes the ball with fingertips (not a slap).
	SC3	The ball contacts the surface in front of or to the outside of the foot on the preferred side.
	SC4	The child maintains control of the ball for four consecutive bounces without moving their feet.
Underarm roll	SC1	The preferred hand swings down and back, reaching behind the trunk while the chest faces the cones.
	SC2	The child strides forward with the foot opposite the preferred hand.
	SC3	The knees are bent to lower the body.
	SC4	The ball is released close to the floor, so it does not bounce more than 4 inches high.
Climbing	SC1	Climbing is very rhythmic.
	SC2	The child focuses only on the direction of climbing.
	SC3	The child primarily uses an over grip and closed grip.

	SC4	The child frequently uses a diagonal reciprocal movement activation pattern.
Balance	SC1	There is no upper extremity or torso movement beyond the central balance line.
	SC2	The contralateral foot is not placed onto the ground.
	SC3	The child demonstrates good hip control with no dropped hip.
Kicking	SC1	The child uses a rapid, continuous approach to the ball.
	SC2	An elongated stride or leap occurs immediately prior to ball contact.
	SC3	The non-kicking foot is placed even with or slightly behind the ball.
	SC4	The ball is kicked with the instep of the preferred foot (shoelaces) or toe.
Catching	SC1	There is a preparation phase with hands in front of the body and elbows flexed.
	SC2	The arms extend while reaching for the ball.
	SC3	The ball is caught using the hands only.
The use	SC1	Hold the scissors in dominant hand with the correct fingers
of scissors	SC2	Open and close the scissors when cutting in oppose to tearing the paper
	SC3	Cut in a straight line
	SC4	Rotate the paper whilst cutting

Table 1. Success criteria (SC) for skills.

Scheme of work: developing motor competency

PA declines sharply during childhood, a trend difficult to reverse without systematic policies (Oxtoby, 2021). Research suggests early intervention is key to long-term impact (Heckman, Stixrud an Urzua, 2006), and multi-component interventions targeting various PA modalities are the most effective (Sallis et al., 2020). Reflecting this, the SOW developed here includes a diverse range of engaging activities designed specifically to meet the physical development needs of Year 1 students and help them achieve Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Physical Development Early Learning Goals (ELGs).

For PA initiatives to succeed, they must align with children's developmental stages and motor capabilities (Kohl & Cook, 2013), a principle central to the design of this SOW.

Difficulties with fine motor skills (FMS) and gross motor skills (GMS) persist throughout childhood (Harrowell et al., 2018) and do not resolve with age alone (Hillier, 2007). Motor skills require deliberate learning, practice, and reinforcement (Robinson and Goodway,

2009; Valentini, Ramalho and Oliveira, 2014), countering assumptions that FMS develop naturally through maturation (Clark, 2005).

The focus of motor development interventions is on structured instruction aimed at skill acquisition. Systematic reviews highlight the importance of teacher and parent involvement alongside effective therapies but also reveal a shortage of high-quality MC interventions (Veldman, Jones and Okely, 2016). More recent research confirms school-based programmes yield positive but variable effects (Eddy et al., 2019).

This SOW incorporates these insights by focusing on learning, practising, and repeating motor skills, aligned with the Department for Education's (DfE, 2022a) recommendations to develop core strength, coordination, GMS, and FMS. Examples of the warm-up, cool-down and MC intervention activities can be found below in Table 2.

Category	*Activity*	*Description / Purpose*
Warm-up activities	**Traffic lights**	Respond to commands (red/green light) to improve spatial awareness, timing, coordination, and pace control.
	Stuck in the mud	Navigate space quickly, change direction to avoid capture, enhancing agility, positional awareness, and observation.
	Stuck in the mud with a twist	'Stuck' children hold crab position; teammates roll a ball underneath to 'unstick', promoting balance and core stability.
	Simon says	Follow verbal commands requiring spatial awareness and movement control.
	Mirror movements	In pairs, children mirror each other's movements to build spatial awareness and synchronisation.
	Animal crawls	Mimic animal movements (bear crawl, frog hops, inchworms) to engage core muscles, coordination, and agility.
Motor competency interventions by term	**Term 4**	Build obstacle course (locomotor, object control, balancing and climbing) Baking cookies (object control and fine motor skills) Outdoor adventurous climbing (locomotor, core strength and fine motor skills)
	Term 5	Gardening (object control and fine motor skills)

		Build obstacle course (locomotor, object control, balancing and climbing) Scissor skills (object control and fine motor skills)
	Term 6	'Moving house' game (wrapping items, packing boxes) Indoor adventurous climbing and swinging (locomotor, core strength and fine motor skills) Homemade playdough (object control and fine motor skills) Build obstacle course (locomotor, object control, balancing and climbing) Weaving (object control and fine motor skills)
Cool-down activities	**Stretching circle**	Group gentle stretches targeting major muscles, held 10-15 seconds with deep breathing to release tension.
	Yoga	Simple poses (child's pose, cat-cow, downward dog) to promote relaxation and muscle calmness.
	Animal breathing	Mimic animal sounds with deep breaths to combine mindfulness with imaginative play, promoting calmness after activity (locomotor skills)

Table 2. Activities found within the motor competency scheme of work

Data collection overview

Over a 19-week period (across three academic terms), data was carefully gathered at six key points to capture a dynamic picture of development. Each round focused on the SC for 11 distinct skills, with observations taken before and after two school holidays to monitor any regression or growth. Below, Table 3 shows the timeline of the study.

Term	***Activity***
Start of Term 4	Baseline data collection
Term 4	Deliver scheme of work (SOW) interventions
End of Term 4	Data collection
Post-Term 4	Edit and review SOW based on Term 4 results
Start of Term 5	Data collection

Term 5	Deliver revised SOW interventions
End of Term 5	Data collection
Post-Term 5	Edit and review SOW based on Term 5 results
Term 6	Data collection
Start of Term 6	Deliver further revised SOW interventions
End of Term 6	Final data collection

Table 3. Timeline of the study

Measuring Growth: tracking success across skills

The bar chart below compares the number of SC that showed significant improvement versus those that did not, across all skills (hopping, running, galloping, sliding, dribbling, underarm roll, climbing, balance, kicking, catching and the use of scissors). Each skill is represented on the X-axis, with two bars per skill: one indicating significant improvement and the other showing no significant improvement.

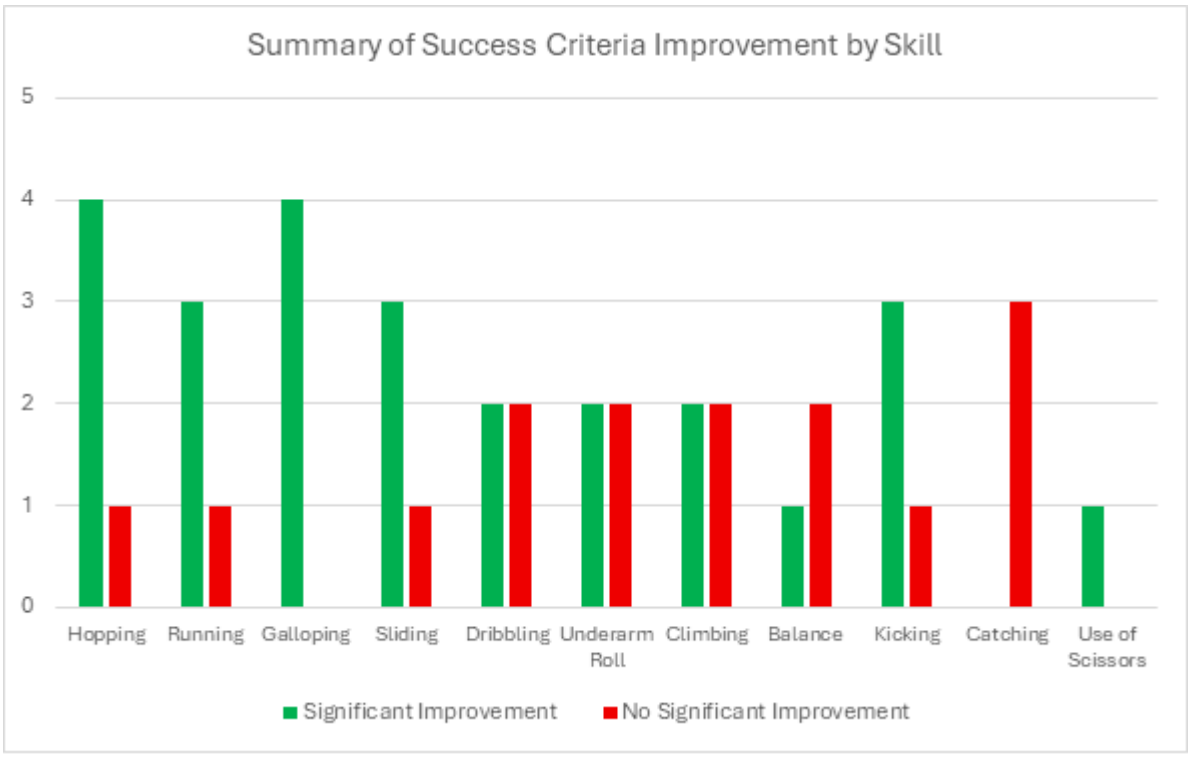

Figure 1. Summary of success criteria improvement by skill

The chart shows that locomotor skills such as hopping and galloping had the highest number of SC with significant improvement, while skills like catching and balance showed little to no significant progress. Running, sliding, and kicking also demonstrated more improvement than not. In contrast, skills like underarm roll, climbing, and balance had mixed results. Overall, movement-based skills showed greater improvement compared to fine motor or stability-focused skills.

A percentage increase was observed across all 43 SC spanning the 11 targeted skills throughout the intervention period outlined in the SOW. These percentages represent the number of children meeting each SC at all six data collection points, demonstrating consistent progress over time.

Skill	***No of success criteria***	***No of SCs with significant improvement***	***Range of improvement (%)***	***SCs without significant change***
Hopping	5	4	48% - 75%	SC4
Running	4	3	40% - 44%	SC4
Galloping	4	4	28% - 32%	None
Sliding	4	3	32% - 44%	SC4
Dribbling	4	2	36% - 16%	SC1, SC3
Underarm roll	4	2	20% - 40%	SC1, SC4
Climbing	4	2	32% - 36%	SC1, SC2
Balance	3	1	36%	SC1, SC2
Kicking	4	3	36% - 48%	SC4
Catching	3	0	N/A	All SCs
Use of scissors	4	1	16%	SC1, SC2, SC4

Table 4. Percentage Improvement of Success Criteria of Skills

Table 4 shows varied levels of improvement across different skills based on the number and percentage range of SC with significant improvement. Galloping showed the most consistent progress, with all SCs improving significantly. Hopping, running, sliding, and kicking also demonstrated strong gains, each with three or more SCs improving and relatively high percentage ranges.

Skills such as dribbling, underarm roll, climbing, and balance showed more limited improvement, with only 1–2 SCs improving significantly. Catching showed no significant improvement in any SC, and use of scissors had minimal progress, with just one SC showing a 16% improvement.

Overall, locomotor and gross motor skills showed stronger improvement, while fine motor and control-based skills like catching, balance, and scissor use had less or no significant change.

Bridging the gap: addressing uneven motor skill development

This study highlights both encouraging progress and persistent developmental gaps in young children's MC. While gross motor skills such as galloping, hopping, and running improved significantly, fine motor and control-based skills, particularly catching, balance, and scissor use, showed limited or no significant gains. These findings mirror existing research suggesting that fine and stability-focused skills are more complex and less likely to improve without targeted, repeated intervention (Hillier, 2007; Valentini et al., 2017).

The gaps identified suggest that current classroom experiences may not provide sufficient opportunities for developing fine motor precision and postural control. Contributing factors likely include the lingering effects of COVID-19 restrictions, which limited access to diverse physical experiences critical for holistic motor development (Sport England, 2022; DfE, 2023). Without structured and intentional support such as that given from the SOW within this study, children -especially those with developmental delays or from disadvantaged backgrounds - risk falling further behind (Hardy et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2018). The positive gains in locomotor skills suggest that embedded, tailored MC interventions can effectively support certain aspects of motor development when well-aligned with children's developmental stages (Logan et al., 2017).

Our call to action

To ensure every child develops essential motor skills, a coordinated effort is needed across schools, policy, and training. Key steps include:

1. **Implementing MC interventions** *in all schools, supported by practitioner and teacher observations*.
2. **Embedding school-based programmes into national policy** *to enhance fine and gross motor skills, coordination, and core strength, thereby increasing PA levels nationwide*.
3. **Expanding training opportunities** *through continuous professional development and university courses, so educators are equipped to develop and accurately observe MC levels*.

Together, these actions can create a stronger foundation for children's physical development and lifelong health.

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Invigorating the language classroom through creativity and authenticity

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Abstract

The number of young people in England opting to learn a language beyond the age of 14 is in major decline. Meanwhile, the recognition of creativity as an essential 21st century skill is growing internationally. Despite this situation, there has been very little research to date either into the potential for a languages education to foster learners' creative skills, or into the potential for a creative languages curriculum to increase intrinsic motivation and improve uptake. This paper introduces the work of a new Special Interest Group for creativity and authenticity in the languages curriculum, setting it in the context of the knowledge-rich curriculum and existing research, and pointing forwards to new research pathways.

Authenticity in language teaching refers to the use of materials and interactions that reflect real-world language use, while creativity encompasses the development of innovative, engaging teaching strategies that support learners to become active creators in the classroom. Through a review of current literature and varied classroom practices in successful languages departments, this paper presents evidence that integrating authentic materials and creative approaches can not only enhance language acquisition but also cultivate a positive classroom atmosphere that increases engagement and motivation for learners. This, in turn, can boost learner confidence, motivation, and language retention. Crucially, the early findings presented here suggest that constraints on creativity and authenticity are generated not by learner (in)ability, but by curriculum and preparation time and the availability of resources. For teachers, embracing authenticity and creativity promotes professional fulfilment, reduces burnout, and brings cultural awareness into the classroom: echoing the National Curriculum invitation that 'Language learning is a liberation from insularity'. Through brief case studies and empirical evidence, the paper indicates practical strategies for creating an environment that encourages both learners and teachers to thrive in the language-learning process. This study underscores the need to revisit the knowledge-rich curriculum, ensuring that there is room for pedagogical approaches that integrate authenticity and creativity. This approach has the potential to enhance progression in language learning, improve wellbeing in schools, and deliver critical 21st century skills to all learners.

Why are we talking about creativity in the languages classroom?

The role of creativity in education is gaining prominence internationally, in particular with the growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI). In 2020, the World Economic Forum (WEF) found that "critical thinking and problem-solving top the list of skills employers believe will grow in prominence" by 2025; and in their *Future of Jobs* report (2025) creative thinking, resilience, flexibility and agility are in the top five fastest growing skills by 2030. In May 2025 the OECD published a report on *Creative Minds in Action*, highlighting the role of learners' "imagination and ideas in storytelling, design and problem-solving tasks" in the PISA test: further evidence that the importance of creativity for young learners, and its connection to the skills of design and problem solving, are increasingly recognised and researched internationally.

Meanwhile, for well over a decade the Languages curriculum in England has prioritised knowledge over all skills, including creativity (DfE, 2013). In 2021, the then Schools Minister Nick Gibb praised schools that had adopted a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, referring to this as the 'Gift of Knowledge' (Gibb, 2021). He criticised the previous curriculum for focusing on general aptitudes with limited subject content.

Also in 2021, Ofsted's review of Modern Foreign Languages [MFL] introduced the 'three pillars of progression' – phonics, vocabulary, and grammar – as essential components of language learning. This supported the knowledge-rich approach and encouraged schools to adopt aligned curriculum models and resources which are now following the vocabulary lists in the new GCSE specifications for French, German and Spanish. While this intervention is intended to reduce learner anxiety, there is a clear risk that the current guidance will limit the development of broader linguistic skills including problem-solving, critical thinking and resilience.

This paper reflects on the findings of teacher and learner surveys conducted by a new Special Interest Group (SIG) on creativity in the languages curriculum. This SIG was established in 2025 to explore the issues outlined above, to develop peer support structures for teachers wishing to develop a creative curriculum, and to generate capacity for new research in the field. The SIG investigates the role of creative resources in languages classrooms within a system shaped by accountability and exam pressures. Drawing on insights from 59 participants, including languages teachers from England, the UAE, France, North India and Sweden, it explores how creativity can support language acquisition, teacher satisfaction, and learner engagement. The group evaluated the benefits and challenges of using authentic materials and creative approaches across year groups, and shared resources to support workload reduction. These early findings indicate that creative approaches can reinforce the 'three pillars' of a knowledge-rich curriculum while also fostering a 'liberation from insularity' (National Curriculum, 2014).

What do we mean by creativity in the languages classroom?

Despite the growing interest in creativity in education internationally, there is relatively little research on creative approaches in Languages. This is testament, perhaps, to the subject's often uneasy position within the secondary curriculum, where it may be perceived neither as creative (like the arts) nor useful (like the sciences). In 2016, the Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review highlighted the fact that Languages "are often learners' least favourite subject in secondary school" (Bauckham 2016, p. 5). The Review calls for a holistic approach to teaching the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), avoiding teaching them in isolation, and emphasises the importance of the 'meaningful' use of language that allows learners to explore the language beyond the textbook and the classroom walls through cultural exchanges, authentic materials and authentic situations:

> Such material should be stimulating and chosen to extend learners' knowledge and widen their perspectives. Using the new language to teach learners about the history, culture, and literature of the new country or countries is a very effective way to do this. (p. 13)

The importance of creativity as a means to stimulate the executive functions of the brain has been widely documented, and current interpretations of creativity refer to originality, creation of something new and to purpose or 'usefulness' (Patston *et al*. 2021 p. 1).

For the purposes of this study, we use Collard's definition of creativity in the curriculum (Education Scotland, 2016):

- constructive curiosity;
- open-mindedness, flexibility and lateral thinking;
- exploring the imagination by generating new ideas and content; *and*
- problem-solving.

How do creativity and authenticity merge in the languages classroom?

The simplest way to define authenticity in the languages classroom is perhaps through what it is not. Authentic material is not written by a textbook author or a teacher in order to serve a particular purpose within the classroom. Instead, teachers may take excerpts from poetry, graphic novels, films, songs, and so on, and integrate them into their classroom practice. Gilmore's definition, which builds on Widdowson (2003) and Morrow (1977), is helpful here:

> (authentic language is) a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort (p. 98)

This is a 'real-life' experience, then, that links learners to speakers of the learned language beyond the classroom: when they read a newspaper article in German or a

picture book in Spanish, they are connecting with real speakers of that language, who do that sort of thing every day.

Gilmore highlights the challenges that pre-made resources and textbooks can present, and reminds us of the importance of balancing resources carefully when planning the sequencing of our languages curriculum:

> The contrived materials of traditional textbooks have often presented learners with a meagre, and frequently distorted, sample of the target language to work with and have failed to meet many of their communicative needs (p. 103)

For authenticity and creativity to merge, though, the classroom activity needs to move beyond a passive reception of the authentic source. There is significant value in reading poems, watching films, and listening to songs, but the potential impact on the learner increases when they are able to interact creatively with the authentic source. It is this link between creativity and the appropriate use of authentic materials in particular that the Special Interest Group has set out to explore.

Practical insights from the languages classroom: what are the barriers to bringing creativity into the languages classroom in England?

When reflecting on the potential for innovation in the Languages classroom, it is essential to take account of limited curriculum time, accountability measures, and exam pressure. These constraints are particularly prominent at Key Stage 3 and 4. To stay in line with the knowledge-rich focus of the Languages curriculum in England, authentic and creative need to match the curriculum content and learner ability. They also need to be carefully scaffolded in order for learners to access and be creative with them (Conti, 2016; Smith, 2017).

This is the context within which the Special Interest Group is operating. Composed of over fifty teachers and practitioners from three continents, the group comprises 21 curriculum leaders for languages, nine trainee teachers, and five Early Career Teachers (ECTs) across primary and secondary schools.

There is a selection effect at play here. The professionals who joined the group were already interested in using authentic resources creatively in the classroom, in most cases already engaging their learners through creative practices and with a range of source materials that go beyond their textbooks and frameworks. Taking this into account, we began by exploring curriculum leaders' perspectives on the constraints imposed by accountability measures, curriculum pressures and specific school policies.

The barriers to creative approaches and authentic materials suggested by languages colleagues in English schools were as follows:

Barriers linked to workload	Barriers linked to exams and curriculum	Barriers linked to school systems or external policies
Finding appropriate authentic resources that fit with the topic taught and ability of the classes can be time consuming Creating new resources as well as other school commitments can be overwhelming it is easier to use off-the –shelf resources or textbooks Non specialist teachers may not necessarily know where and how to find authentic resources and how to initiate spontaneous creative tasks with their classes at the appropriate level Using pre-made resources is easier for non-specialist teachers and reduces workload.	The new GCSE examinations framing the vocabulary to 1200 words Heavy content at Key Stage 4 and lack of time to be creative due to a greater focus on exams Lack of curriculum time at Key Stage 3 to allow for creativity to take place: focus on phonics, vocabulary and grammar	Accountability measures driving for students to meet or exceed target grades Limitations from government directions: eg: Ofsted review 2021 - Introduction of the Knowledge-Rich curriculum – new National Curriculum reforms 2014 School policies on consistency and behaviour management can limit the creativity aspects of MFL lessons when school policies direct specific methodologies in some contexts. Reduction of teacher autonomy and agency

Although our group clearly emphasised the limitations of their curriculum time and resources available, it is important to note that none mentioned the ability of learners as a barrier to using creativity in the Languages classroom. All colleagues shared the importance of scaffolding and modelling as essential, but not as a barrier. These findings are ones to hold on to, as they provide a basis for future action research into how scaffolded creative approaches can support and motivate disengaged and lower ability learners.

Trainee teachers shared their enthusiasm for creativity in the Languages classroom but claimed that it was often curbed by their mentor or colleagues in their placement schools, because they are required to follow the sequence of the centrally planned curriculum. Trainee teachers reported feeling 'trapped' within the sequenced curriculum and pre-made lessons on their department's shared drive. One trainee claimed that their mentor replied: 'We don't have time to use songs and poems'. Instead of a tokenistic add-on that can be perceived as distracting from curriculum time, we therefore need to consider how authenticity and creativity can be integrated into the curriculum.

Participating teachers in France and Sweden report more creative activities with authentic materials, with a greater emphasis on building learners' autonomy using the target language. Colleagues working in mainland Europe referred to creative tasks as a

means for assessment, engaging learners in high-challenge, low-threat tasks in written or oral expression. There is scope to consider further research on this in the future.

Creativity in the languages classroom: a theoretical framework

There is no consensus on the relationship between motivation and the creative use of authentic materials. Some argue that the complexity of authentic source material may put learners off (Smith, 2016, Conti 2017), while others state that it is an excellent tool for intrinsic motivation because it shows learners what they can understand and produce when they encounter an authentic source (Widdowson 2003, Gilmore 2007, Wilson *et al*. 2014, Hazell 2020, Claro 2021, Ryland 2023).

Key pedagogical and neuroscientific concepts provide a helpful context for the role of creativity within the Languages curriculum.

A. ***Developing resilience first: Zone of Proximal Development, self-motivation and neuroscience***

Ryan & Deci (2000) find that a positive psychological environment can turn passivity and alienation into self-determination and intrinsic motivation. When psychological needs, competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met, motivation and engagement can transform learning. A learner's self-motivation can enable them to step into Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD, 1978) through teacher support, scaffolding and modelling. With reference to the classroom resources that SIG participants have shared, colleagues explained how they scaffolded the tasks to make the use of authentic resources such as songs or poems accessible and engaging. We explore this in more detail below.

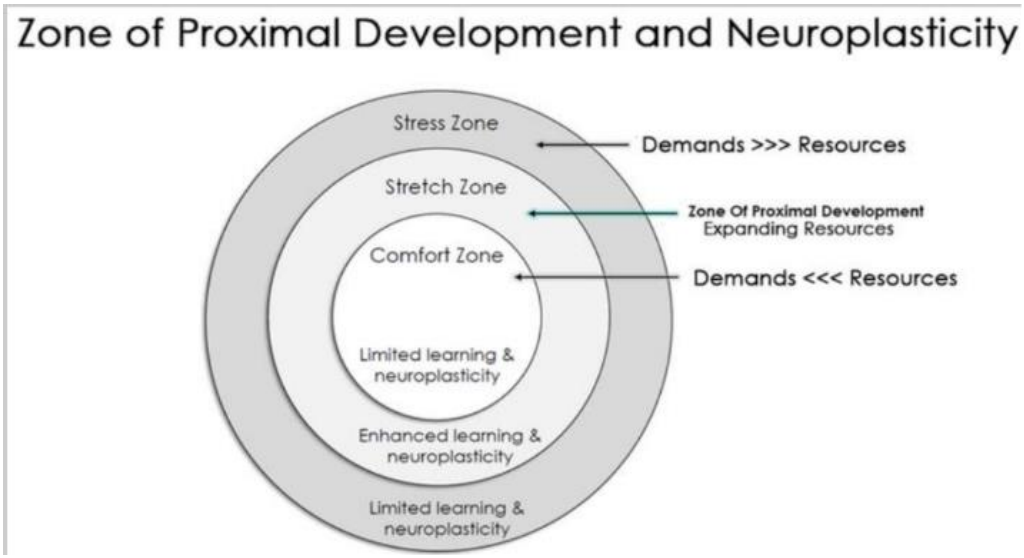


Figure 1: Zhou et al. (2022, p. 3)

Zhou *et al.* (2022) remind us as language teachers that:

> The social and cognitive safety net that enables learners to aim high while taking risks and to turn failure into resilience is rooted in safe relationships (with adults and peers) and in holding a growth mindset (p. 3)

Echoing Vygotsky (1978) and Zhou et al (2022), teachers in the SIG also emphasised the importance of nurturing the learners' potential to be creative in the target language, by prioritising the learning process and problem-solving skills instead of the finished product.

B. ***Setting the scene for creativity in the languages classroom***

'Ditching the textbook' (Hazell 2020 p.105; Claro, 2021) to allow learners to apply languages skills creatively requires careful planning. The importance of positive routines was highlighted by the group, who echoed Hazell's argument that learners feel more confident to be creative in the language and to use authentic materials when they have low-stake exposure to target language regularly. Starter activities can be used to retrieve prior learning and become an "awakening to the senses and a warming up of their ears and eyes to languages" (p. 19). Participants reported that many of these activities appeared to increase engagement without adding language anxiety. Lesson starters allowing students to problem-solve using their prior knowledge of the language to decode more complex concepts in new contexts encourage student curiosity (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: M. Tournier – year 9 French topic in Scheme of Work Mon temps libre

Figure 3: M. Tournier, J Claro Year 7 End of Year film project after Language Festival

The group highlighted the importance of matching the creative activity with learners' prior knowledge, echoing the theory of alignment between prior knowledge and new contexts (Conti and Smith 2019). Suggestions for scaffolding activities prior to the creative activities included:

- recalling prior knowledge in a starter activity with key vocabulary
- reviewing key vocabulary and phonemes with chorus repetitions
- trap door speaking activities with sentence builders
- listening and dictations with key vocabulary
- using glossaries and sentence builders
- mini white board retrieval activities
- reviewing/translating an artist's basic biographical information before exploring their artwork
- contextualising the activity via cultural input (maps, describing a photo, quizzes)

Low-stake input of this kind builds learner confidence, readying them to be exposed to more complex content:

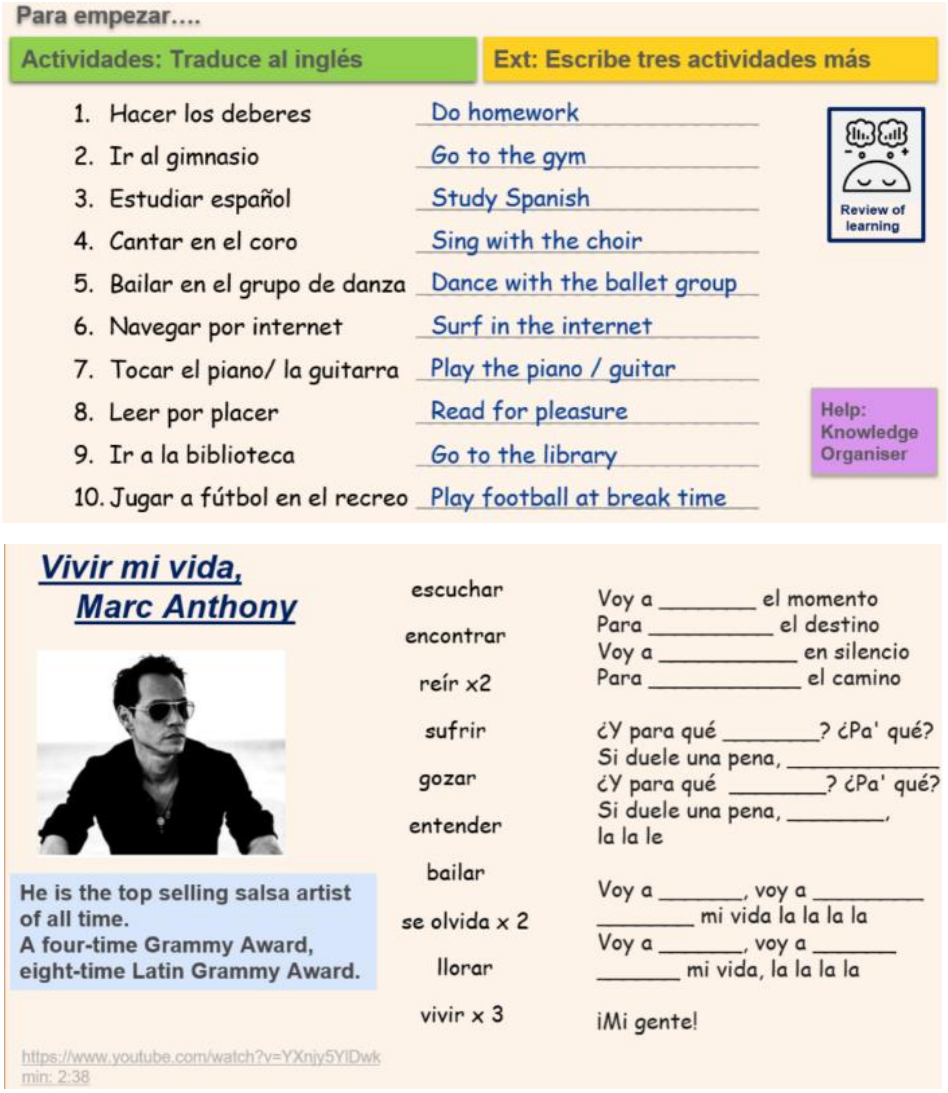


Figure 4: B. Lopez Year 10 Spanish revision on near future with song

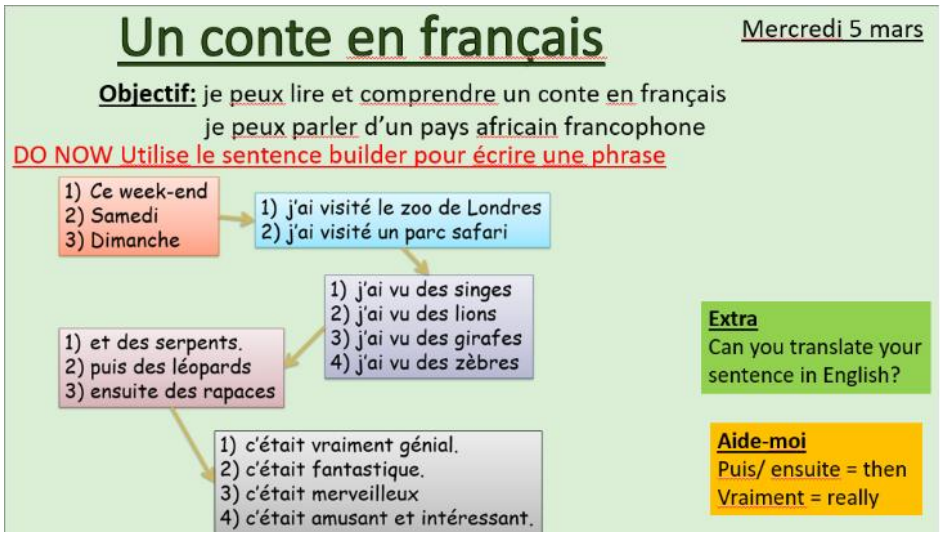
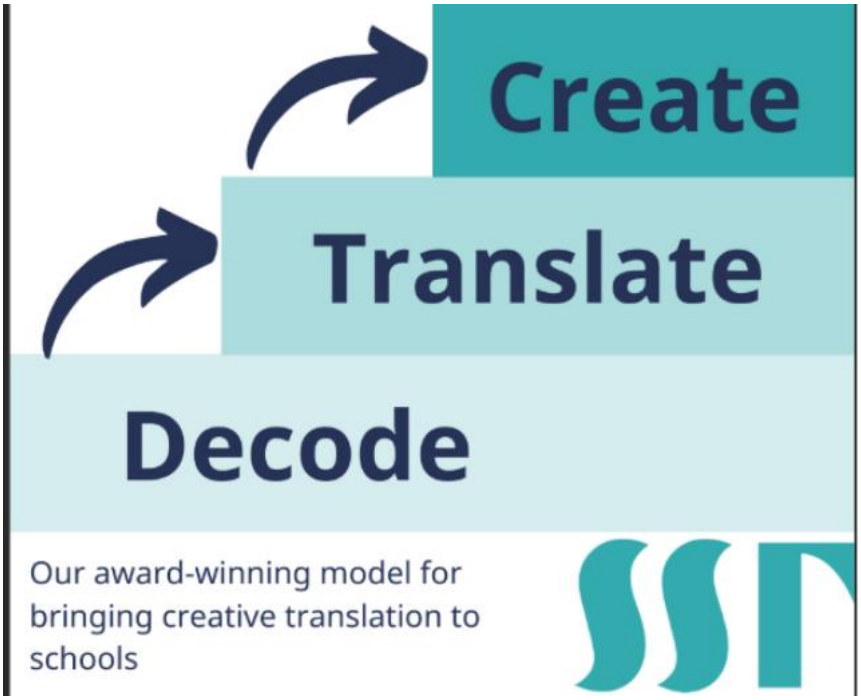
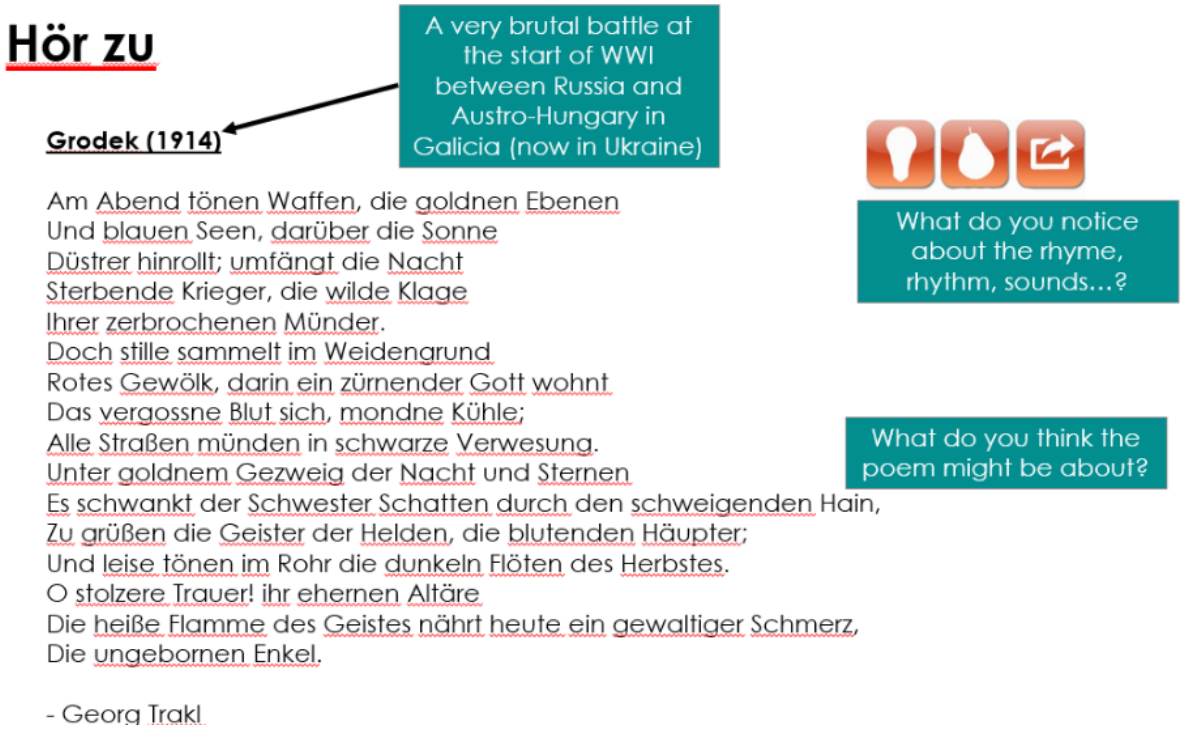


Figure 5: M. Tournier year 7 French Starter activity before reading a fable from Burkina Faso

The Stephen Spender Trust model for creative translation was shared by colleagues in the group as an effective approach that scaffolds using visuals and glossaries, in order to unlock learners' potential to translate poetry, fiction or non-fiction into English. Students decode a poem using glossaries and create their own version of the translation in English using their imagination and grammatical knowledge to make sense of the original text.





Figures 6 and 7: Ada Lovelace I. Howarth Year 10 creative translation using the Stephen Spender Trust Decode-Translate-Create model

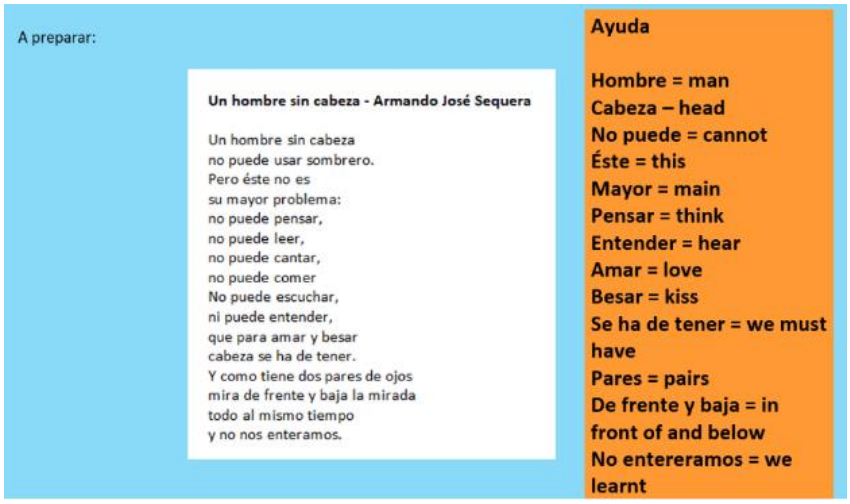
C. ***Building confidence through phonics and performance in target language***

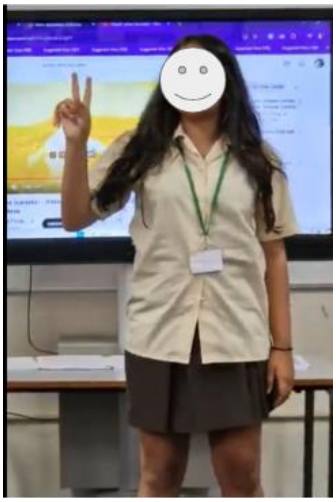
SIG participants highlighted the importance of keeping creative and authentic tasks low-stake and engaging, to avoid cognitive overload and feelings of frustration. The aim is to 'hook' learners on culture (Claro 2021) and build confidence through engaging activities.

Participants highlighted the fact that speaking is often the most stressful skill for learners, especially at secondary level when learners are more self-conscious. However, learners often enjoy speaking in pairs or groups in a low-stake environment. Providing opportunities to build confidence in speaking is essential to help learners become more creative with the language.

The group shared examples of authentic and creative speaking activities that required little preparation:

- songs to learn new vocabulary in chorus repetition (primary and secondary)
- creating dialogues based on familiar vocabulary and sentence builders that learners perform in pairs or groups (creative homework videos, role plays, language festival performance on stage)
- image stimuli for description of famous paintings, cultural events and film scenes
- reading poems out loud to practise phonemes (chorus or in pairs through gamification)
- the Year 8 Poetry Live event (St Mary's University annual Languages competition) was highlighted as a motivating event by colleagues: pupils learn a poem by heart and perform it to their peers in school. Pupils may then vote for finalists to enter the central competition, hosted by St Mary's. The methodology was replicated for in-house events in schools as a way of promoting languages and culture.





Figures 8 and 9: Learners in Year 8 decode a poem in Spanish, learn it and perform it for the Poetry Live competition organised annually by St Mary's University

D. ***Using videos and films to support the curriculum***

In March 2025, the non-profit partnership *Languages for All* gathered professionals from the education sector to share a pilot model that encourages learners to continue learning Languages at A Level, in a plateauing and in some cases declining post-16 landscape.

Alongside career relevance, extra-curricular opportunities, and a genuine feeling that they are succeeding, Year 12 students highlighted the key role that cultural interest had played to choose a language at A Level. Enjoyment prior to A Level of films, music, podcasts or series in target language helped learners to develop their intrinsic motivation to learn the language beyond GCSE.

Rather than relegating this cultural interest to end-of-term treats, the SIG participants have reflected on ways to integrate it into the curriculum, by connecting it clearly to curriculum content.

Colleagues in the group shared ideas on how to incorporate films, clips of films or videos into the curriculum sequence:

Ideas to incorporate films and clips in the Languages classroom
1. Choose films that align with the themes and allow colleagues to exercise their professional judgement to use the film that is most appropriate for their classes. 2. Incorporate the viewing of the film in the sequence of learning or scheme of work, supporting for example the acquisition and consolidation of key vocabulary: e.g. watching an extract of *Le Petit Nicolas* to consolidate adjectives and describe family members and characters. 3. Watch the film in chunks with activities to complete: this can motivate learners because they wish to find out what will happen next. 4. Use booklets to provide a logical sequence that always builds on prior knowledge. 5. Develop project work in pairs or groups, for example supporting pupils to design an A3 poster on a film that incorporates descriptions of characters, plot, and their own opinions. 6. Use mini competitions: for example, learners write down on mini whiteboards or books all the words they hear and understand as they watch. 7. Create a listening task from a film script (gap-fill with a transcript, who says what?) 8. Use film trailers to create a stimulus for descriptive activities (Who? What? When? How? Why?

Creative assessments: high challenge, low threat

Colleagues shared ideas on how to incorporate creativity as a means to assess learners in the target language. The table below summarises the opportunities for creative assessments:

Embedding creativity in assessments	• Create a sense of purpose for pupils • high challenge low stake and fun • clear assessment criteria shared with pupils so they understand what they will be assessed on • share WAGOLL (what a good one looks like) • importance of giving students a choice of how they will be assessed (storyboard, newsletter, blog, comic strip.) • choice of video for speaking: dialogue, role plays, scenarios with toys, puppets to assess speaking instead of doing it in class) • Use of Artificial Intelligence tools for different purposes (Avatars saying the content out loud to assess expression, or Avatar where students need to put their own voice to assess speaking) • Use of AI with creativity makes it more complex for Generative AI to produce content, and pupils are more inclined to try to do it themselves when it is fun and creative (eg: Use of Canva shared to create infographics in target language by students shared by teach of English as a Foreign Language in France)

Pupil voice: early findings

Some of the Special Interest Group participants shared a questionnaire with their pupils. 74 learners have participated in this action research to date. Learners were asked to reflect on their experiences of creative activities and authentic materials, on what helped them to engage and feel a sense of progress.

Learners' top four creative activities that support authentic learning:

1. Games involving creative use of the language
2. Songs
3. Use of technology for creativity
4. Films, videos and clips

Although more research needs to take place to refine our research, early findings from our learner voice questionnaire across different year groups and schools suggest that students not only enjoy the cultural contextualisation of the phonics, vocabulary and grammar, but they also find problem-solving using the language in a new authentic or creative way helpful to their learning.

Considerations for future practice and research

Colleagues in the SIG at both primary and secondary schools valued highly the use of authentic resources and creative activities in their practice. The discussion highlighted the following factors:

Taking into consideration the challenges teachers face in incorporating creativity and authenticity in the Languages classroom, colleagues recommended:

1. Planning the creative lessons within the intended curriculum and its logical sequence.
2. Developing a nurturing environment where mistakes are welcome, and learners feel safe to step into the zone of proximal development.
3. That creative resources are shared by curriculum leaders and incorporated into the schemes of work. Successful practice often allows for joint planning by colleagues on a shared drive, so that all can use but have the flexibility to adapt where needed.
4. Teacher development, for non-specialists, through Professional Learning communities.

While our SIG represents a small sample of schools and languages, the teacher and learner voice has offered valuable insights into how creative and authentic activities can impact engagement and learning. Teachers used varied pedagogical approaches, and a key takeaway was that there is no 'one size fits all' in language teaching.

Conclusion and reflection on the declining of linguists in England

Modern foreign languages face declining uptake post-16, where it is often considered to be difficult and not to provide skills that enhance life chances and career opportunities. Research to date and these early findings from the SIG indicate that teaching the core curriculum content of phonics, vocabulary and grammar via creative approaches that integrate authentic materials has the potential to improve engagement and language acquisition. Culture remains the gateway to the National Curriculum's call for "liberation from insularity" (DfE 2013, p. 1). Creativity and authenticity serve as motivational hooks, helping learners enter a state of 'flow' – a deep, focused engagement (Dörnyei, Henry, and Muir, 2015).

Creativity enables learners to problem-solve, be independent and gain a sense of satisfaction and success. The British Council (2015) has warned that a 'sterile' learning environment threatens language learning. If languages are taught through creative approaches and via authentic materials, with scaffolded tasks that recycle prior learning, this sterility can be replaced with a lively experience that enhances the cognitive development of learners, offering dimensions far beyond exam content and accountability frameworks.

Such a change can be conceived as a shift from memorising vocabulary lists, and word-for-word translations of short texts to process. It requires acknowledging and rewarding the skills that develop through storytelling, creatively translating, narrating, and reflecting on cultural media rather than focusing on the end product. Creativity and authenticity in the languages classroom offer perspectives and skills that go beyond GCSE and A Level grades that brings ''an element of unexpectedness and unpredictability' that 'stimulate[s] imagination and its related characteristic: empathy" (Graham et al., 2020, p. 166)

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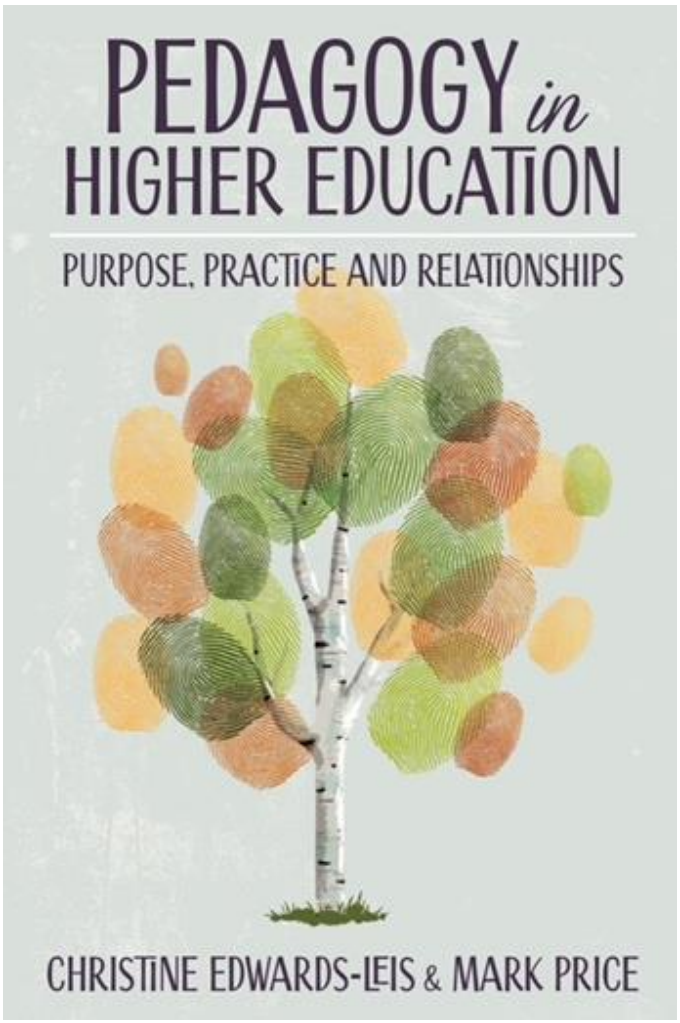
and coming very soon:



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