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## **Changing Pedagogy in Scottish Primary Schools: Insights from the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project conducted by the School of Education, University of Strathclyde (2017-2018). EPP1 was commissioned by Renfrewshire Council as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge to support the improvement of children's educational outcomes through a targeted professional development programme exploring pedagogy and theory to inform practice in primary one. 90 teachers from 30 primary schools in Renfrewshire participated in the 8-week programme and evaluation activities. The evaluation research strand aimed to assess the programme's impact on teachers, schools and children's learning experiences. Data was collected using interviews, semi-structured classroom observations and questionnaires. Research findings showed improvements in teachers' reflexive practice, confidence and knowledge and understanding of young children's learning. The training led to teachers designing more enabling environments with a wide range of play-based learning opportunities resulting in an increase in independent and child-led learning.

### **Summary of research**

The Scottish Government's focus of closing the attainment gap in our schools is a laudable but complex aim. Firstly, it calls for Scottish primary teachers to examine the changing philosophy and methodology of their teaching. The changing philosophy is based on the principles of active learning, increasing children's choices, creating more personalised learning pathways and ensuring teachers provide an appropriate level of educational

challenge for children. At its core, the new model aims to support teachers tailor the pedagogy used in primary one more explicitly to the way young children learn.

In order to take this new pedagogy forward, a training model was developed in Glasgow, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire Local Authorities in partnership with Strathclyde University. The training was structured as a series of expert-led workshops delivered over an 8-week period, and included practice-based tasks and course reading for teachers to explore pedagogical approaches and theories to inform practice, increase reflexivity and develop skills for effective planning, documenting and classroom design. The programme content was informed by research and policy on learning and education in early childhood including the influential work of Fisher (2013), Moylett (2013) and Stephen (2010), and Education Scotland's (2016) 'How good is our early learning and childcare' (HGIOELC) framework.

The EPP1 project documented and evaluated the implementation and impact of this 8-week programme in Renfrewshire Council. EPP1 was one of a series of interventions adopted by Renfrewshire Council as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge initiative to improve children's educational outcomes in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles one and two. The project ran for the duration of 18-months and involved 90 primary one teachers and 30 head teachers from 30 primary schools in Renfrewshire.

Informed by Guskey's (2002) programme evaluation model, the research strand gathered data on the programme's impact on schools, teachers' thinking and practice, and children's learning experiences. The project employed qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews with teachers and management, pre- and post-training questionnaires, and semi-structured classroom observations using an observation schedule designed around the HGIOELC quality indicators. Statistical and iterative thematic analysis was carried out on the data.

Initial findings showed an increase in teachers' knowledge and understanding of play-based and child-led approaches following the training. Teachers gained a better understanding of the ways in which the learning environment can facilitate or potentially restrict aspects of young children learning. With this improved knowledge and understanding of the theories underpinning early childhood pedagogy, the teachers engaged in more thoughtful design of

classrooms and the opportunities they afforded. By creating enabling environments, children were better able to lead their own learning and take ownership of the classroom. Children were described as more confident and engaged, and demonstrated improved transitions and collaborative learning. Learning became more personalised on account of children's increased involvement in planning and decision-making. Teachers became more responsive and were better able to extend the learning in children's play experiences. They devoted more time to classroom observation and employed strategies learned through the programme to use this data more effectively in planning.

The training increased reflexive practice and strengthened professional dialogue among teachers within individual schools and across the local authority. Teachers were supported to look at their practice and environment through a more critical lens and by drawing on colleagues' expertise as critical peers, teachers can continue to develop knowledge and practice. These outcomes have important implications for sustaining the new pedagogical model. This programme has given teachers the tools to ensure the long term capacity for change beyond the duration of the programme.

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