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Navigating the Tensions Between Creativity and Curriculum: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Implementing a Play-based Writing Pedagogy in a Mixed-key-stage Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the tensions between creativity and curriculum in primary writing instruction through an autoethnographic account of implementing a play-based writing pedagogy – Curious Quests – in a mixed key stage classroom. Against a policy backdrop that prioritises measurable outcomes and technical writing skills, creative and play-based approaches are often marginalised, particularly beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage. Drawing on theories of motivation and interest development, this study examines how play can enhance writing engagement, autonomy and skill development within statutory requirements. The narrative captures the emotional and pedagogical journey of a teacher navigating systemic pressures while striving to reconnect children with the joy of writing. Findings demonstrate that when carefully adapted, play-based writing can not only meet curriculum goals but also transform attitudes toward writing, nurture deeper engagement, and re-energise teaching practice. The article calls for greater recognition of creative pedagogies in policy, more professional development in play-based literacy, and further research into their effectiveness in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 settings.

KEYWORDS

Play-based learning, writing pedagogy, teacher agency, curriculum constraints, autoethnography

Definitions

While literacy encompasses interpreting, navigating, and shaping the world across multiple modes, this article adopts a deliberately narrower working definition to align with current curriculum expectations in English primary education. Here, literacy is examined through the lens of writing: developing competence in composing texts, using language creatively and technically, and expressing ideas in written form. This narrowing reflects the study's scope and the dominant policy discourse, while acknowledging the risk of obscuring more holistic, socially-situated understandings of what it means to be literate.

Introduction

Fewer than 30% of UK children aged 8-18 report enjoying writing, an 18.1% decline over 14 years (National Literacy Trust, 2024). Because engagement is closely tied to writing achievement (Wang & Troia, 2023), this trend is troubling. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that motivation thrives when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet, current classroom climates often undermine these factors, particularly in writing.

Since 2014, English policy has amplified technical components of writing (e.g., SPaG and handwriting) and narrowed opportunities for imaginative composition (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2025b), part of a wider turn towards measurable outcomes and a centrally defined 'canon of core knowledge' (Neumann et

al., 2020, p. 706). The accountability climate constrains pedagogical flexibility and discourages approaches that cultivate motivation through play-based, inquiry-driven approaches (Keddie, 2012; Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Priestly & Drew, 2016). In this context, it is timely to explore practices that integrate creativity with curriculum demands.

Curious Quests, developed by Greg Bottrill, offers one such approach: a structured, story-driven framework that aims to couple statutory content with autonomy, play, and sustained interest. This study examines how a play-based writing pedagogy can be meaningfully enacted within the current policy landscape. Through an autoethnographic account of implementing Curious Quests in a mixed key-stage classroom, I examine tensions between policy demands, professional identity, and pedagogical values, and consider implications for educators and policymakers navigating the relationship between creativity and standardised expectations.

As a newly qualified teacher in a small, mixed-age Year 2-3-4 class, my professional context increased the urgency of these questions. Working in a rural school where small cohorts magnify accountability pressures, I experienced first-hand the tension between statutory expectations and the desire to nurture joy in writing. Holding dual roles as practitioner and researcher enabled me to interrogate the mechanics of implementing a play-based pedagogy and its emotional, ethical, and political dimensions. This dual perspective underpins the narrative that follows.

Literature Review

Policy, Pedagogy and the Marginalisation of Creativity

Policy in England appears to prioritise measurable attainment over intrinsic motivation and creativity. The Primary Assessment Curriculum and Experience (PACE) project found in the 1990s that a National Curriculum had resulted in a pressurised environment in the classroom with little scope for pedagogic flexibility and pupil autonomy (Anders et al., 2008). This concern intensified following draft proposals for an updated National Curriculum in 2012 (Alexander, 2012). Since 2014, policy changes have further marginalised creative pedagogies in favour of standardised testing and structured skill acquisition (Hall & Thomson, 2017; Smith, 2019; Chandler-Grevatt, 2021). This has left little space for teacher autonomy or learner agency, both of which could be seen as essential conditions for developing intrinsic motivation in writing.

Recent policy evaluations have highlighted challenges in achieving an inclusive curriculum that balances breadth and depth, suggesting a need for approaches that ensure comprehensive coverage while engaging students meaningfully (DfE, 2025a). The vast curriculum objectives currently reinforce skills-based instruction, limiting teacher capacity to innovate with creative or play-based methods, especially beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Theoretical Framework: Motivation and Interest

Deci and Ryan's SDT (2000) provides a useful lens to observe these challenges. They emphasise the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness – three conditions that are often absent in rigidly structured writing teaching. As a result of tightly prescribed learning objectives, children engage in writing primarily for extrinsic reasons, such as meeting assessment criteria, pleasing the teacher, or earning praise, rather than the joy of creative expression. While extrinsic motivators can secure short-term compliance, research suggests they rarely sustain engagement or lead to creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Over time, this can erode motivation and diminish enjoyment.

By contrast, intrinsic motivation arises when learners are driven by curiosity, personal interest, or the satisfaction of the activity itself. Intrinsic drivers are more closely associated with persistence, depth of learning, and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this study, the preference for intrinsic motivation is more than a theoretical stance: it is a pedagogical necessity for creating conditions where children want to write for themselves rather than solely to meet demands. The Curious Quests approach, as explored in the findings, sought to reframe writing as an intrinsically rewarding activity, balancing unavoidable extrinsic requirements with opportunities for autonomy, play, and self-expression.

Hidi and Renninger's Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (2006) builds on this by demonstrating the need to carefully and progressively cultivate interest. Traditional writing instruction typically engages students, at best, in situational interest through structured tasks designed to capture attention, but fails to sustain engagement long enough to develop deeper, long-term interest in writing.

Play-based pedagogies, outlined in the subsequent section, embody these principles of motivation by embedding writing within collaborative, imaginative adventures that children co-create. The playful structure and open-ended tasks promote autonomy and relatedness, creating conditions for sustained interest and deeper writing engagement. Research has demonstrated that such tasks can help build long-term interest in writing by making it more relevant and engaging for students (Hidi, 1995; Alexander & Jetton, 1996).

Play-Based Learning and Literacy Instruction in Primary Education

Play-based learning is widely recognised as fundamental in the EYFS, with strong evidence for early literacy development (Miller & Almon, 2009; Wood, 2014; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Whitebread et al., 2017). Extending such practices into KS1/KS2 is harder within an outcome-driven, policy-led curriculum (Alexander, 2020). The assumption that play only benefits the early years is unfounded: play can provide exploration and autonomy, helping children take ownership of learning in meaningful, immersive contexts and improving motivation (Fisher, 2021). Policymakers should therefore reconsider how play might enhance writing across primary education.

By playful pedagogy in writing, I refer to approaches that embed exploration, imagination, autonomy, and collaboration (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In practice, this includes imaginative role-play, oral storytelling, creative prompts, and multimodal composition (Cremin et al., 2017; Wohlwend, 2011). Crucially, such approaches do not remove structure. They scaffold writing with purposeful, autonomous experiences and contrast worksheet-led routines by encouraging narrative invention, voice and audience awareness.

Play encourages higher-order thinking and meaning-making, essential for developing writing fluency (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Oral storytelling, role-play, and imaginative engagement support narrative coherence, vocabulary expansion, and syntactic complexity (Paley, 1990; Cremin et al., 2017). Further, studies demonstrate that those involved in child-led, play-integrated literacy instruction demonstrate greater persistence and creativity in their writing (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Wohlwend, 2011; Portier et al., 2019). Rigid tasks can cause anxiety (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014; Yu & Zhang, 2022), whereas play-based approaches offer low-stakes, exploratory spaces where children feel more confident expressing ideas through writing.

Structured play can balance curriculum objectives with engaging contexts, enabling measurable literacy progression while retaining cognitive and motivational benefits (Moyle, 2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Fisher, 2021). Despite growing advocacy, few studies examine play-integrated writing beyond EYFS, and integration into standardised curricula remains challenging (Zosh et al., 2018; Alexander, 2020; Fisher, 2021). This study contributes evidence from later primary, demonstrating how a play-based approach can be enacted with policy constraints.

Extending Playful Literacy Beyond the Early Years

A policy landscape prioritising measurable outcomes over engagement-based approaches has discouraged investment in empirical studies on play-based literacy instruction in later years. Without such research, practitioners lack clear guidance on systematically integrating play into KS1 and KS2 curricula. Addressing this gap is critical if policymakers are to encourage literacy strategies that support both attainment and long-term motivation. The artificial division between playful early years pedagogy and formal instruction in KS1 and LKS2 is not grounded in research but in institutional prioritisation of assessment over engagement. Curious Quests is a model that successfully integrates play while covering National Curriculum objectives to enhance writing outcomes, without compromising accountability.

Barriers to Implementation: Tensions Between Creativity and Accountability

Despite the growing evidence in support of creative pedagogies, such approaches remain peripheral to mainstream practice due to deep-rooted systemic constraints. The emphasis on accountability in English

education policy fosters a climate in which teachers feel pressure to adopt direct-instruction approaches rather than exploratory, play-based methods (Bradbury, 2019; Alexander, 2020; Neumann et al., 2020). As a result, teachers attempting to foster creativity and engagement face a number of structural and cultural barriers that inhibit implementation. This section examines the policy-driven tensions that shape teachers' decisions and limit their capacity to enact creative approaches to writing instruction.

Assessment Pressures

In an era of high-stakes accountability, English instruction is increasingly shaped by external performance metrics rather than pedagogical best practice. Schools prioritise quantifiable literacy outcomes over broader engagement, leading to an emphasis on formulaic, tick-box writing tasks designed to meet assessment criteria (Wyse & Bradbury, 2023). Pressure for improvement creates a reliance on skills-based teaching over exploratory learning (Moss, 2018). The frequency and weight of standardised assessments, including statutory phonics checks, SATs, and internal progress tracking, require frequent reporting and reduce the time teachers feel is available for play-based literacy instruction (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). While standardised assessments aim to ensure literacy proficiency, their emphasis on technical skills often comes at the expense of engagement-driven strategies (Neumann et al., 2020). Balancing these priorities is a major challenge.

The demand for high-stakes testing discourages practitioners from seeking out and implementing creative pedagogies. Creative tasks are seen as 'risky' in data-driven school contexts (Beresford-Dey, 2022; Mentini, 2024). Even when teachers recognise the value of imaginative, child-led composition, many feel unable to prioritise it due to the constant pressure to produce evidence of technical proficiency (Clarkson, 2023). In this way, assessment frameworks not only shape what is taught, but also how and to whom, limiting the space teachers feel is available for alternative pedagogies.

Time and Curricular Constraints

Detailed English objectives are outlined for each year group in the 2014 National Curriculum, leaving little room for flexibility. For the most part, the structure of the school day prioritises explicit instruction in SPaG, guided reading, and comprehension, limiting time for creative writing and exploratory storytelling (Hall & Thomson, 2017). Teachers struggle to justify time-intensive, play-based activities when faced with tight schedules and required curriculum coverage that is overwhelmingly dedicated to mechanics over meaning-making. While structured play can be aligned with literacy objectives, it requires time for immersion, dialogue, exploration, and reflection – conditions not easily accommodated within rigid timetables and narrowly-defined lesson objectives.

Teachers often report that the practical demands of coverage make it difficult to justify extended writing opportunities grounded in imaginative play. Play-based instruction is widely recognised in EYFS policy but receives little to no mention in KS1 and KS2 frameworks (Fisher, 2021). Without official recognition in curriculum guidelines, teachers will continue to struggle to justify play-based methods within such a busy and pressurised education system. This challenge is particularly significant in schools serving communities under increased accountability scrutiny, where senior leaders may prioritise strategies that promise rapid gains in performance data. Until curriculum policies acknowledge the value of play in later primary years, structured play will remain challenging to integrate systematically.

Professional Development and Institutional Support

The marginalisation of creative pedagogies is reinforced by gaps in teacher education and professional development. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and professional development (CPD) focus predominantly on phonics, grammar, and structured literacy frameworks rather than balanced approaches (Burnett & Merchant, 2020). Many teachers lack formal training in implementing structured play beyond EYFS, making it difficult to integrate these strategies into KS1 and KS2 classrooms (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The absence of CPD opportunities in creative literacy instruction, for teachers and senior leadership alike, fosters a culture of risk aversion and prevents teachers from developing systematic, research-informed strategies for integrating play-based learning into primary literacy pedagogy.

The widespread adoption of commercial schemes and standardised planning across Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and schools exacerbates the constraints on teacher autonomy. Increasingly, teachers are required to deliver scripted lessons they have had no ownership over, limiting responsiveness to pupil needs and further marginalising creativity (Craft et al., 2014; Alexander, 2020). In literacy education, this reduces writing to a technical exercise devoid of meaningful engagement. Navigating the tensions between fidelity to schemes and adapting pedagogy to support joy, autonomy, and curiosity remains a critical yet underexplored challenge for practitioners.

Autonomy-Accountability Dilemma

Teachers navigating an accountability-driven education system face a fundamental tension – the pedagogical autonomy required for effective creative instruction is directly at odds with the rigid structures of performance-based evaluation. While educators recognise the benefits of creative literacy instruction or play-based pedagogy, they report feeling constrained by top-down policy mandates and assessment frameworks (Ball, 2016; Pyle et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2022). Studies indicate that teachers' beliefs about their own professional identity and their autonomy in decision-making both play a key role in their willingness to experiment with creative pedagogies (Kelchtermans, 2009). Teachers who view themselves as empowered and supported in their roles are more likely to engage with innovative practices that challenge traditional, outcome-driven methodologies (Craft et al., 2014). However, Ofsted evaluations and school performance targets emphasise quantifiable attainment metrics, leading to a risk-averse approach to teaching (Bradbury, 2019). Teachers who attempt alternative, play-integrated approaches to instruction may face, or fear, scrutiny if they do not result in immediate, tangible results. Over time, this constraint on professional agency leads to a narrowing of literacy pedagogy, where creative writing and exploratory play are treated as optional rather than essential elements of education.

Curious Quests and similar approaches depend on teacher autonomy, yet autonomy is difficult to exercise in a system that rewards standardisation and discourages deviation from prescribed norms. The infrastructure of accountability not only limits what teachers can do but also shapes what they believe is possible within their role.

Autoethnography as Method

Traditional educational research frequently prioritises empirical data or quantifiable data, mirroring the way schools rely on standardised data. Such approaches struggle to capture the nuances of teacher-student interactions, the affective dimensions of play, or the subtle negotiations of creativity within rigid curricular expectations. Autoethnography offers an alternative: a method capable of capturing the lived emotions, dilemmas, and pedagogical negotiations of implementing a creative literacy pedagogy within a policy-driven classroom (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Rooted in an interpretivist paradigm and constructivist ontology, this approach treats knowledge as socially situated, constructed through my experiences as both teacher and researcher.

Data Collection

Data was collected through multiple, overlapping forms of reflective documentation. The central source was a personal diary, in which I recorded daily reflections on questions arising from my practice, as well as accounts of both positive and challenging classroom moments. These diary entries provided a space to interrogate my pedagogical choices and emotional responses as the project unfolded.

In addition, lesson plans were annotated both during and after teaching, noting observations in the moment and reflecting afterwards on what had worked, what had not, and what might need adapting moving forwards. Formal lesson observation notes written by senior leaders were also incorporated, offering an external perspective on classroom practice. Alongside professional reflections, I documented spontaneous comments from children and parents – noted in my reflective journals – which offered further insights from other stakeholders into how the approach was being received.

The dataset was collected between July and February, spanning the cycle of professional frustration

that initially prompted change, the inception of Curious Quests pedagogy in my classroom, and its eventual consolidation as a sustained approach. The breadth of these sources allowed me to capture the practical enactment of Curious Quests as well as the shifting emotions, identities, and relationships surrounding its implementation.

Data Analysis

Analysis was iterative and layered, moving between descriptive accounts and interpretive meaning-making. The diary entries, annotated lesson plans, observation notes, and recorded comments from stakeholders were first read chronologically to preserve the unfolding narrative of the academic year. This allowed me to trace the emotional and pedagogical arc from a period of dissatisfaction with existing methods, through the introduction of Curious Quests, to its eventual embedding in classroom life.

This was followed by a process of open coding. Segments of text were highlighted and labelled with descriptive codes such as frustration with curriculum demands, moments of joy, student response, leadership response, and parental feedback. These codes were revisited and refined through multiple readings, gradually clustered into broader categories that captured recurring tensions and opportunities, for example curricular constraints, emergent engagement, and teacher identity development.

These categories were used as signposts for narrative construction rather than fixed outcomes. Autoethnography is analytic but also a representational practice; the decision of which episodes to present involved privileging those that were most resonant, illuminating, or disruptive. Episodes were selected for frequency and their capacity to highlight the lived experience of navigating creativity and accountability.

The analysis was, by nature, reflexive and recursive. As both teacher and researcher, I moved continually between immersion in practice and critical distance. At times, this meant foregrounding the teacher's emotional voice; at others, stepping back to situate events in wider policy debates. This multi-voiced process is central to the analytical frame, allowing the narrative to capture the entanglement of personal experience, professional identity, and structural constraints.

Representation of Data

While my analysis involved coding and categorisation, the decision was made to present the findings through continuous narrative rather than separated themes. This reflects the commitment of autoethnography to preserve the emotional and experiential integrity of the data. In a field where teachers' voices are often backgrounded in favour of measurable outcomes or abstracted themes, it felt crucial to represent my diary entries, annotations, and reflections in the storied form in which they were originally produced. Presenting the data narratively allows the reader to encounter the lived realities of teaching in ways that centre affect, uncertainty, and professional identity alongside pedagogical practice.

Presenting the findings as continuous narrative is a methodological and ethical choice that preserves the lived texture of the data. It invites readers to encounter the affective realities of practice, catalysing discussion and deepening understanding of how creative pedagogies are enacted under policy constraint, while affirming emotional resonance as a legitimate contribution to educational research.

Positionality and Voice

Autoethnography requires critical reflexivity about positionality. My professional role as newly qualified teacher in a small, mixed-age primary class shaped what I was able to observe and how I interpreted it. My simultaneous role as researcher created a dual lens in that I was both immersed in daily teaching realities and stepping back to analyse how those realities reflected broader policy tensions. At times my writing foregrounds the voice of the classroom teacher, at others the voice of the reflective researcher, at others still a critical policy perspective. Making these shifts allows readers to see how meaning was derived across multiple vantage points. This multi-voiced narrative is not a weakness but a deliberate methodological choice to highlight the ways in which teacher identity is continually negotiated across different roles and demands.

Justification of Autoethnography

While other qualitative methods could have explored play-based pedagogy, autoethnography is suited to this study as it foregrounds insider knowledge and the emotional dilemmas of practice. It allows for an account to unfold that is simultaneously personal and political – situating the micro-level experience of classroom innovation within the macro-level pressures of curriculum and accountability. Rather than attempting to demonstrate the effectiveness of a practice, the aim is to provoke dialogue about what literacy instruction could look like if teacher agency, student engagement, and curricular expectations were held in dynamic balance.

Ethical Considerations

The study follows the British Educational Research Association's (2024) ethical guidelines. Given the personal and relational nature of autoethnography, no children's names or identifiable details are included. Reflexivity is central to maintaining ethical integrity, as such I remain critically aware of how my interpretations may privilege certain voices over others and how my dual role as teacher-researcher shapes the story told. Following Adams et al. (2021), I approach writing itself as an ethical act that requires continual negotiation, self-questioning, and care to ensure that authentic experiences are represented responsibly and without harm.

Autoethnographic Reflection: Implementing Curious Quests

The narrative episodes that follow are drawn from my coded diary entries, annotated plans, SLT notes, and stakeholder comments (July to February). They are presented in continuous form to preserve context, affect, and voice.

Early Challenges: Feeling Deflated

'The combination of the July heat and my attempt at teaching poetic devices was resulting in a sea of dispassionate faces staring back at me or, worse, out the window. I was bored and demotivated and couldn't blame the children for feeling the same. Children in Year 2, I could tell, were lost in the depths of technical vocabulary that was well beyond them, and children in Year 3 and 4 were tired of recapping things they had mastered years ago. My first year and I was already feeling deflated... I got into teaching to impart a love for learning, one that I hold so passionately, yet here I was feeling pressured to cram children's heads with SPaG knowledge and encouraging them to tick off success criteria boxes as they wrote. I knew very few children were actually interested in the writing process and becoming better at it, and if they were I felt it was only to please me and achieve well in assessments. I felt stuck, quickly being overwhelmed by the amount of time it was taking me to plan guided groups, independent work, and whole class inputs that differentiated content between three year groups, all to be delivered with precision in the one-hour slot before lunch. No space for creativity, or choice, or even response to children's needs.'

Exploring Alternatives: Finding Curious Quests

'I thought back to the teaching experiences I had in my training year, desperately trying to find a solution. Drawing Club. Could that be it? I had observed a lesson in EYFS that followed Greg Bottrill's Drawing Club framework, where writing was magical and added powers to children's drawings. I remembered how the children's faces lit up, and they fought to write. I reminisced wistfully about how much joy could be shared with children in EYFS through play and imagination, sure that actually there was little that I could transfer to LKS2.'

'Nevertheless, I googled the programme and found Greg's website. It was as though someone else had recognised the problems I was facing. "Children become detached from writing when adults turn it into a task," reads the website. Although designed for KS1, I enrolled in an online walkthrough at my own expense.'

'As I sat on the Zoom training, I was emboldened in my resolve to bring the level of exuberance Greg spoke of into my own classroom. I was excited to put myself and the children back at the heart of what I was

teaching and to, hopefully, see the English lessons become more vibrant for all of us.’

‘However, as the summer term was closing, some of this excitement shifted to uncertainty. Was I kidding myself into thinking that it was possible to incorporate all the learning while letting the children have fun and autonomy? Would the senior leaders (SLT) at school even let me give it a go? I knew how much pressure we were under as a small school to demonstrate that children were achieving what the curriculum dictated, with every child accounting for between 7% and 20% of the data, depending on the size of the year group. I ploughed on anyway, drafting plans for the new academic year, carefully checking that I was able to include everything I needed to before I would broach the subject with SLT. I wanted to make sure I was fully equipped to answer any questions they might have.’

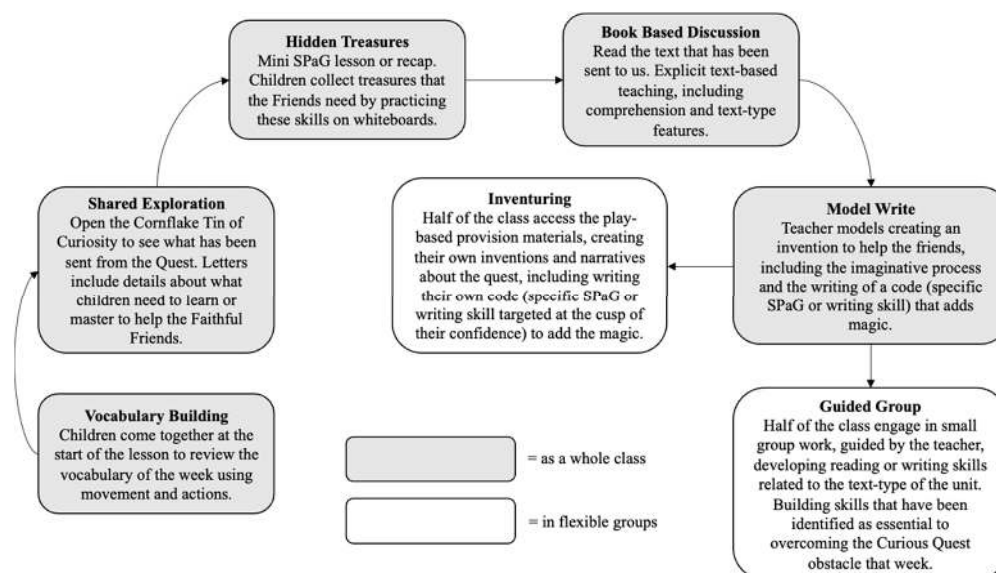
Implementing Change: The Trial Period

‘The head and I agreed to a half-term trial of Curious Quests in the Year 2-3-4 classroom... I had 8 weeks to prove (to myself and SLT) that it could cover the necessary objectives, help children make progress, and produce enough evidence to support assessment. I felt the pressure. I desperately wanted this to work; I was confident that teaching in this way would make the children feel more excited about English, but I was aware that it would not be enough to make this a feasible pedagogy for my class.’

‘The Cornflake Tin of Curiosity was loaded with a letter from this imaginary world. It was time to put this to the test. I had spent hours making sure that I was covering all the statutory content, building opportunities to demonstrate skill progression, and making adjustments to the suggested lesson structure to make it work for us. It had been hard work. It had been time-consuming. I hoped it would be worthwhile.’

Figure 1

Structure of a Curious Quests lesson (adapted to suit my class and school expectations)



‘The children were hooked. Questions swirled about the letter and this world. I couldn’t help but beam when I chatted to the children about their incredible inventing... But enthusiasm for code writing lagged. What if this is why teachers in KS2 don’t try and incorporate play-based provision? I quickly began to question my decision, the pressure of performing heavy on my mind. I had to prompt a lot of the children to complete their code writing, packaging it as “adding the magic” to their invention. Children were perplexed by the free choice, “What do I need to write about?” It was, for some, paralysing. If I’m still telling them that they need to write, then I might as well have them sit at desks; at least there is no risk in that. No matter how engaged and interested the children were in learning, I could not shake off these concerns.’

‘A few weeks later, we had a routine. They knew what they needed to do, and we were beginning to reap the rewards. Planning was quicker than my old carousel of guided groups. Children were engaged in

carpet sessions, paying attention to the SPaG and structural text features we had to learn – all the things that I had seen them switch off to. During inventuring they knew where to find their codes, and many chose to finish writing, and refine it, before moving to play. The creativity was still flowing, the conversation, excitement hadn't died down, and there was clear evidence of skill progression and writing competence. It wasn't perfect; some children still needed prompting, but they no longer showed the same disdain for writing. Children who had, in the past, not accessed English lessons without heavy support or who had feared writing because it was 'too tricky' were writing every lesson, and doing so happily and with relative confidence.'

'12:15; I found two Year 4s sat on the floor at the back of the classroom drafting a fable "to help the Faithful Friends if they meet The Greap." "It's lunchtime," I said. "We know, but this is fun!" It was the first of many self-chosen lunchtime writing sessions for many children. This was a small marker of ownership that soon spilt beyond inventing into skill practice too.'

Sustaining Innovation: Beyond the Trial

'The approach lasted beyond the first half term, but it wasn't secure yet. With writing scrutiny looming and an SLT observation scheduled, I still felt pressure to justify a play-based pedagogy in LKS2.'

'The head settled in at the back of my classroom. My heart raced; I felt there was a lot on the line. I taught as usual. We got up and moved to recap the vocabulary of the week; opened the tin to reveal a photo of the Insidium (the dark and dangerous place we needed to overcome that week); and settled in to collect a Hidden Treasure (items that the Friends need to gather to progress in the quest). These treasures are collected by us all, practising a skill together. That day, it was to practice writing a poem. Children chose their topic and wrote freely using a scaffold provided. I saw the head smile to herself as she watched 26 children, all enthralled in writing, empowered to do so independently and enthusiastically. Poems about football, Minecraft, animals, friends, and many more appeared, and children proudly showed them off to her, me, and each other. The children broke off into a guided group with me, as usual, and 'inventurers', those accessing the play-based provision. She observed the 'inventurers', worked with them, and looked at the work they produced. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive – "all children were focused on independent, open-ended experiences, which promoted creativity and critical thinking. Lots of children chose to write," the feedback form records. "It was great to see how enthusiastic and independent the children were. I really enjoyed myself," the accompanying email reads. We both sat and discussed, at length, the brilliant outcomes we were seeing as a result of this pedagogical approach. I sighed a huge sigh of relief as I left that meeting. The children and I had done it. We had proved that this works for us!'

'Writing scrutiny echoed this. There was sufficient evidence of differentiation, skill development, and individual progress.'

'After that, I stopped feeling that I had to prove it. Coverage was secure; children were engaged; I felt reenergised. English became the highlight of our day, and there were groans when it wasn't on our timetable.'

'Parents evening came and it was here that I gained feedback that I wasn't necessarily expecting. "He always wants to write. He asked us to get a diary for him to write in at home," one parent reported. Another told me, "Her interest in writing has skyrocketed this year; she was never really that interested before." I knew children had become more engaged at school, but I was elated that this translated to their wider attitudes towards writing. I teared up on my drive home, feeling I was making a real difference. I truly felt that my classroom might be the starting point for undoing the shocking statistics I had read about how few children enjoyed writing.'

'Curious Quests is now firmly embedded in our classroom. Looking back, this journey fills me with intense emotions. I cannot help but think about what might have happened if I had let those initial doubts win: without this change, I would still feel stuck, and many children would still avoid writing. The journey affirmed that, even in mixed-age KS1/2, play, imagination, and joy do not need to stop at the Reception door.'

Discussion: Bridging the Gap

The challenges and successes documented reflect and extend themes in the literature on the barriers to creative pedagogies. This discussion draws explicit connections between my lived experiences and existing research, while highlighting the distinctive contributions of an autoethnographic account of play-based writing approaches beyond the EYFS classroom.

Play-Based Learning as a Catalyst for Engagement

Curious Quests reenergised my teaching and reconnected children with writing. Pellegrini (2009) emphasises that playful experiences give rise to deeper cognitive links and higher levels of motivation, a pattern mirrored in my classroom when story-driven prompts from the Cornflake Tin of Curiosity provoked eager participation and sustained discussion. These immersive tasks reflected Cremin's (2015) argument that play can lead to greater participation and confidence, whilst confirming that this potential extends into KS2 contexts.

The initial resistance of some children when confronted with free-choice writing illustrates how highly structured systems can suppress student confidence in open-ended composition (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). My experience of 'choice paralysis' emphasises the need for careful scaffolding: children required modelling and prompts before they could embrace autonomy. This adaptation aligns with the literature on free-choice education, which traditionally examines informal learning in settings such as museums (Dierking, 2005; Falk & Dierking, 2011). While my classroom could not replicate unbounded freedom, Curious Quests translated free-choice principles into a scaffolded framework. The quest narrative provided a collective purpose, while tasks allowed individual variation (in writing topic, play materials, and oral storytelling) within clear boundaries. This balance created what Falk and Dierking describe as 'bounded agency': autonomy within structure.

Over time, children moved from hesitation to ownership, reflecting Hidi and Renninger's (2006) model of interest development – from Triggered Situational Interest to sustained engagement. Diary notes documenting children choosing to write during lunch breaks, or lesson plan annotations noting increased independence, exemplify how structured play nurtured both competence and confidence. These outcomes challenge assumptions that creative pedagogies compromise rigour, showing instead that carefully designed play-based approaches can promote progress while sustaining joy.

Balancing Creativity and Curriculum Requirements

One of the greatest challenges navigated was the perceived incompatibility between creative pedagogy and curriculum accountability. Early diary entries recorded my doubts about coverage and scrutiny, yet subsequent observations from senior leaders and positive outcomes from writing moderation demonstrated that these tensions could be productively managed. Embedding statutory content in the quest structure allowed me to ensure coverage while situating learning in meaningful contexts.

This finding strengthens the arguments put forward by Moyles (2010) and Fisher (2021): curriculum goals, when approached meaningfully, do not need to compete with engagement. My experience confirms that careful planning, aligned with reflective practice, can meet institutional requirements while transforming classroom culture. The success of Curious Quests in writing scrutiny illustrates that assessment evidence and creativity are not mutually exclusive but can, with thoughtful pedagogy, become mutually reinforcing. Such insights are vital for advocating systemic change, where policy might allow greater space for professional judgement and contextualised approaches.

Teacher Empowerment and Professional Identity

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is the perspective it offers on the teacher's journey. Autoethnography, by its nature, centres the lived, emotional, and professional realities of educators – dimensions often absent in research that privileges measurable student outcomes. My narrative documents a trajectory from frustration and uncertainty to renewed enthusiasm, reinforcing Kelchtermans' (2009) argument that teacher identity is formed by practice and reflection.

Leadership support emerged as pivotal. When school leaders provided validation, it empowered me to take professional risks, maximising both agency and innovation. This confirms Craft et al.'s (2014) view

that systemic support is essential for sustaining creativity.

Foregrounding teacher voice through autoethnography makes two significant contributions to these discussions. First, it reveals the affective labour of implementing creative pedagogies under policy pressure – a perspective largely missing from play-based learning research that focuses on children’s outcomes. Second, it offers an ethnographic account of teacher identity development, creativity, and discovery, which are underexplored in policy discourse that often positions teachers as implementers rather than creative professionals.

Beyond the classroom, these insights carry implications for teacher wellbeing and retention. My reflections repeatedly documented the contrast between burnout associated with rigid practice and the renewed enthusiasm sparked by creative approaches. Amidst a climate of heightened accountability and narrowing curriculum, reclaiming joy in teaching may serve as a buffer against attrition. Autoethnography makes visible the personal and professional stakes of pedagogy, demonstrating how systemic support and imaginative practice can together sustain both teachers and learners.

Implications and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that play can be integrated into structured curricula without compromising rigour, challenging the dominant discourse that play and creativity must be sacrificed to achieve measurable outcomes. For practitioners, this work affirms that creative practices can align with statutory objectives, provided they are adapted thoughtfully to suit age groups, classroom contexts, and school expectations. My adaptation of the Curious Quest model highlights the importance of reflective, practitioner-led design in making innovation both effective and sustainable.

These insights call educators to question assumptions about writing instruction. While structured, teacher-led methods have their place, they are not the only way to support successful literacy development. By incorporating choice and play, children can become more intrinsically motivated writers who learn deeply and retain skills over time. At a systemic level, this work supports calls for increased curriculum flexibility and for rethinking how attainment is measured. Standardised assessments capture only a fraction of student learning, and more holistic approaches are needed if motivation, creativity, and sustained engagement are to be valued alongside technical competence.

Professional development must be expanded to support creative approaches beyond the EYFS. Investment in CPD that explores diverse pedagogies and empowers teachers to take creative risks could improve educational outcomes and teacher wellbeing. Without such support, innovative practices will remain isolated, dependent on individual teacher perseverance rather than institutional endorsement. As an autoethnographic account, this study does not claim causal impact on attainment; rather, it evidences how a play-based approach can be enacted under policy constraints and how it shapes teacher identity and student engagement. Further empirical research is needed: while play is well-established in Early Years, its potential in later primary remains underexplored. Longitudinal and comparative studies could examine impacts on writing development, engagement, and identity, as well as questions of scalability across diverse settings.

Taken together, these findings advocate for a more expansive, humanising vision of literacy education that values both the joy of learning and the lived realities of teaching. Reclaiming joy in writing instruction does not mean sacrificing academic rigour; rather, it depends on educators being empowered to take risks and design contexts where imagination and autonomy thrive. By constructing classrooms where creativity and curriculum are not at odds, we can begin to undo the troubling statistics surrounding attitudes to writing and create classrooms where children feel capable, motivated, and excited to use the written word.

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