

The Primary School as a Playful Space

Theories and Practices in an International Perspective

Francesca Berti, Simone Seitz (Eds.)

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Let's Play! Interweaving All-Day Education and Playfulness in the Italian Context

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical value of play in all-day education contexts. Playfulness makes it possible to go beyond transmissive methods, encouraging student agency, creativity, experiential and collaborative learning, and the strengthening of relationships. In all-day education contexts, where school time is also an educational variable, play offers opportunities for interdisciplinarity and rethinking traditional lesson structures. After having structured a theoretical framework that interweaves play, playfulness and all-day education, a qualitative study conducted in northern Italy during the 2022/2023 school year is presented. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven primary school teachers working in all-day education classrooms. The thematic analysis of the collected data revealed three topics: (1) ideas on all-day education; (2) play as a marginal and “disorganised” experience; (3) play as a primarily pedagogical moment. There is a general loss of pedagogical meaning in all-day education, with play often seen as a filler between unstructured moments; only in a few cases is it recognised as pedagogically valuable.

1. Introduction

The role of play and playfulness in educational processes has received considerable international attention (Lytle, 2003; Proyer et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2011): creating non-frontal learning environments centered on students' protagonism implies pedagogical work in a democratic sense and allows valuing each pupil's uniqueness in terms of languages, access to knowledge and relational skills (Beatty, 2017). Student protagonism, as understood in this study,

refers to students' active and reflective participation in their own learning process; it goes beyond mere engagement, encompassing agency, voice, and responsibility in shaping their educational experience (Shier, 2019). These are fundamental aspects for the promotion of experiential learning that supports student motivation and the co-construction of knowledge.

The educational value of play is evident in all-day education contexts (Martlew et al., 2011; Newman et al., 1996): the time spent in school should not be a sequence of different subjects, but a cohesive set of interdisciplinary experiences that foster creativity, critical thinking, and learners' emotional and relational skills. Therefore, time is considered an educational variable that must be shaped according to a precise conception of schooling and education (Silva-Maceda et al., 2016).

In this chapter, we examine the close connection between play, playfulness, and all-day education in primary school in order to offer an original and critical perspective on these issues. Having elaborated the theoretical framework, we present and analyse the results of an exploratory study conducted in the Italian context: it is focused on the importance that teachers attribute to all-day education and on the space assigned to play as a pedagogical tool. The results of the study, while reflecting the specificities of the Italian context, also provide an opportunity for reflection for school systems that share similar characteristics and problems.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework presented in this study is formulated around the concepts of play and playfulness and the theme of all-day education. This second topic is then placed in the Italian context in order to better understand its history and development.

2.1 Play and Playfulness as Pedagogical Tools

Before delving into the pedagogical value of play, it is essential to clarify what is meant by play and playfulness, as the two are often intertwined but theoretically distinct. Play refers to a set of activities that are voluntary, intrinsically motivated, and governed by rules or imagination, often associat-

ed with interaction, exploration, and enjoyment (Huizinga, 1938/2008; Caillois, 1992; Bateson, 2020). On the other hand, playfulness denotes a personal disposition, an attitude of curiosity, creativity, and openness, that can be expressed across various contexts, including non-playful tasks (Lieberman, 2014; Proyer, 2017).

The reflection on play as a pedagogical tool (Colliver & Veraksa, 2019) primarily aims to emphasise the need to overcome frontal and transmissive forms of teaching (Fine, 2014; Youell, 2018). In fact, play succeeds in making learners active participants of their learning: they do not passively absorb information, but co-construct knowledge and interiorise concepts after experiencing them first-hand and developing a sense of mastery and self-efficacy that the frontal approach rarely offers (Tang et al., 2020).

Through play, learners can explore and develop their individual and social selves (Chang et al., 2013): during playful activities, they interact, learn to respect rules, cooperate and resolve conflicts. By playing together, learners develop soft skills such as empathy, active listening and cooperation (Altomari & Valenti, 2023). Play therefore not only promotes autonomy and self-confidence, but the acceptance of diversity and the building of positive relationships with peers too (Proyer & Tandler, 2020; Scheuer & Cremin, 2024). In addition, any play activity provides a safe space for the expression of emotions and for coping with feelings, which is crucial for personal development (Tidmand, 2021).

Through play, motivation to learn can be fostered due to the enjoyment of the activity and its inherent immediate gratification (Kangas et al., 2017). Students who are having fun and feel involved are more likely to focus, participate and face challenges without becoming discouraged (Cook & Artino, 2016). This active participation is crucial for maintaining high motivation, an essential element of any effective learning process. Furthermore, a playful approach allows content and teaching methods to be adapted to students' preferences and interests, making the learning path more stimulating and less stressful (Walsh et al., 2011).

Play enables experiential learning, i.e., learning based on direct experience and experimentation (An, 2018; Rice, 2009). By playing, students are confronted with concrete situations and problems that require a practical solution and thus they develop skills that are applicable to the real world. This

type of learning allows students to move from theory to practice and gives them the opportunity to experiment and test their ideas, hypotheses and intuitions (Whitton, 2018). Direct experiences facilitate the understanding and memorization of concepts and promote the ability to deal with new and unexpected situations independently (Jørgensen et al., 2023).

Play fosters creativity by allowing students to imagine, invent, and experiment without fear of mistakes, which are viewed as learning opportunities (Bateson & Nettle, 2014). This promotes flexible, original thinking, which is essential in a complex world (Edwards, 2022). Many games also support storytelling, artistic expression, and the creation of imaginary worlds, helping students explore and represent their own perspectives (Haynes & Murris, 2013).

Play promotes the co-construction of knowledge (Kangas, 2010): students learn to pool their ideas, discuss and integrate different perspectives, creating shared knowledge that goes beyond individual knowledge (Gray, 2013). This approach reflects a horizontal dynamic in which the role of the teacher is that of a guide and facilitator rather than the sole holder of knowledge (Li & Kangas, 2024; Pinchover, 2017). Sharing knowledge through play helps students understand the importance of collaboration and develop skills that are useful for adult and professional life.

2.2 All-Day Education and Playfulness

All-day education is a pedagogical model where students attend school both in the morning and afternoon (Pfeifer et al., 2008). This extended time is not meant for more subject instruction but for rethinking teaching in participatory, dialogical, and experiential ways (Bae, 2019; Stecher, 2019). The ultimate goal is to enhance schooling outcomes with a focus on equity, efficiency and effectiveness (Dyson, 2010; Fischer et al., 2014).

By supplementing traditional lessons with artistic, sporting and social activities, the holistic development of students is sustained (Mendes et al., 2021; Orchard, 2007): the aim is to promote learning that takes into account cognitive, emotional and relational skills and promotes psychophysical well-being and comprehensive development. The integration of school and community is a fundamental aspect (Cummings et al., 2007; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994):

local authorities and organisations collaborate with schools, enabling students to root their learning in social reality and develop a sense of belonging.

In addition, all-day education promotes the personalization of the school experience and the co-construction of knowledge (Murray et al., 2024). Each student can explore their passions, develop individual talents, and actively learn by participating in collaborative projects that foster skills such as empathy, communication and conflict management. Therefore, this model not only enriches academic knowledge, but also prepares students to live and work responsibly and collaboratively, focusing on their personal and social development.

Thus, the intertwining of playfulness and all-day education becomes clear. Indeed, by interpreting time as an educational variable to be organised and shaped (Millot & Lane, 2002), it is possible to use play to act in an interdisciplinary perspective and foster the development of creativity and critical thinking in students (Tang et al., 2020). Furthermore, play provides an opportunity to disrupt the traditional rhythm of class time through active forms of student engagement (Parker et al., 2022).

In recent years, the concept of playful learning has gained traction in educational research. It describes an approach that combines structured learning objectives with elements of playfulness, such as curiosity, experimentation, and joyful engagement, across all subjects (Whitton, 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant in all-day education contexts, where extended time allows for a more integrated and exploratory curriculum design.

2.3 All-Day Education in Italy¹

As far as the Italian context is concerned, all-day education started according to bottom-up logic at the end of the 1960s. A group of teachers at an elementary school in Turin (northern Italy) decided to organise afternoon activities to meet the specific needs of the school population, which consisted mainly of southern Italian students who came from families with low schooling. By extending school time, teachers wanted to help students acquire basic skills

¹ The focus on the Italian context proposed in this paragraph is based on the author's work published in Italian (Ferrero, 2023).

through experimental pedagogical approaches that moved away from frontal methods.

This experience was institutionalised in the 1970s with a law that introduced this pedagogical model nationwide (Law 820/1971). Originally, the all-day education was also planned for middle schools, but actually it has only spread to primary schools. However, critical problems immediately arose in its application, such as territorial disparities, the lack of teacher training to implement an idea of school that was not just about extending school hours, and ineffective pedagogical measures. In the 1980s and 1990s, new laws were passed to curb these critical issues that still persist today.

At the beginning of the 2000s, school autonomy was introduced. It would have allowed individual institutions to organise all-day education with greater freedom in terms of curricula and timetabling. Nevertheless, numerous critical points remain, particularly with regard to territorial disparities and the quality of the experience offered to students.

3. The Exploratory Research

Our research aims to understand the space allocated to play in Italian elementary school in all-day educational contexts and teachers' ideas regarding this pedagogical model. Considering the small number of participants, the study has an exploratory character. A qualitative approach was used.

3.1 Research Questions

We want to answer the following research questions:

1. how do teachers interpret all-day education?
2. what types of playful activities are intentionally designed and implemented in all-day primary schools?
3. what role does play occupy in terms of curricular time, physical space and pedagogical planning?

3.2 Participants

Seven primary school teachers took part in the study. All teachers have at least five years' experience; two have a fixed-term contract, while the other five are permanently employed. All teachers work in all-day education contexts.

3.3 Tools and Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews via video conferencing software between December 2022 and March 2023. A guide was created: it included questions about the teachers' professional experience, their involvement in the all-day education context, their ideas about this pedagogical model, their teaching methods, their beliefs about the pedagogical value of play and the use of play in the classroom (Appendix A). The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), within a constructivist epistemology. Coding was inductive and semantic, based on iterative reading of transcripts to identify patterns of meaning. Manual, line-by-line coding was performed. The analysis prioritised the interpretative relevance of each code over frequency. Themes were developed through recursive engagement with the data, supported by reflexive memo-writing and theoretical notes (Appendix B).

4. Results

The results are presented from the thematic strands identified during the data analysis, i.e., ideas on all-day education; play as a marginal and "disorganised" experience; play as a primarily pedagogical moment.

4.1 Ideas of All-Day Education

Most of the teachers interviewed perceive all-day education simply as an extension of the school timetable, without recognising time as a meaningful educational resource. Their focus tends to be on the additional hours that are available to cover subject content, with little attention given to the possibility of designing a cohesive educational approach that integrates diverse methodologies and transcends rigid subject boundaries.

I don't see much difference between all-day education and "normal" school. We simply have more time for the school subjects... We don't have to rush through all the planned content. (Teacher 1)

I have worked both in an all-day education context and in schools with reduced hours... Honestly, there is no difference. (Teacher 3)

In all-day education contexts, as teachers we can work better, do more... We have more relaxed times and we can organise our work better. (Teacher 7)

The emphasis is usually on the amount of knowledge that students can acquire, from a transmissive perspective. Conversely, other teachers emphasise the gradual loss of the ideals that led to the bottom-up development of all-day education in Italy in the 1960s.

The spirit of 1960s all-day education no longer exists! There was a strong pedagogical project, with politically and ethically engaged teachers. Today that is no longer possible: we are overwhelmed with bureaucratic requirements and have no time to sit down together to think up a school idea. (Teacher 2)

Everything has changed. In the 1970s, there were two teachers per class in all-day education contexts. Now there are even five or six. Everything is fragmented and it is not possible to imagine time as a mosaic of experiences... It is still divided into individual subjects. (Teacher 6)

Only one teacher works in an all-day education context in which time is treated as a pedagogical variable.

I work in a lucky context. At the beginning of each school year, we engage in serious scheduling. We intervene in the curriculum, the subjects and the organisation of the classes. It's a multifaceted task where we try to create a personalised school experience without losing the community nature of learning. (Teacher 4)

As far as the interviewed teachers are concerned, some do not recognise the special features of all-day education. Others recognise its importance, but find it difficult to put it into pedagogical practice and lament the loss of the original ideals. Only one teacher reported pedagogical efforts to organise school time according to a precise idea of education.

4.2 Play as a Marginal and “Disorganised” Experience

Most teachers interviewed do not interpret play as a pedagogical opportunity. Play is seen as a frivolous interlude between serious moments and occupies a marginal place in everyday school life.

It is important for children to play at school, because this is how they develop their social skills. During the breaks I let them play as they wish. (Teacher 3)

I'm used to organising short games at the end of the school day, before going out. We end the lesson ten minutes early and play some games at the blackboard. (Teacher 6)

Children can play, of course! Each pupil works at a different pace... Whoever finishes an activity first can play silently, without disturbing their classmates. (Teacher 7)

Play is not perceived as having significant educational value, but is seen as an interlude between activities that are considered more typical school activities. Furthermore, it is often only allowed during unstructured moments and is only given marginal attention. It also happens that it is not seen as a

moment of free expression for students, but as a means of control to prevent those who have finished their activities more quickly from disturbing their classmates.

We don't have time to play in class with all there is to do! Sometimes we still have time at the end of the morning or afternoon... During the physical education lesson, I organise movement games. But the students are aware that the place to play is not at school. (Teacher 1)

We cannot play at school... We need to make it clear that this is a serious place dedicated to learning. (Teacher 5)

The teachers interviewed do not regard play as a pedagogical tool, but classify it as a filler activity or even avoid it because it would jeopardise the seriousness of the school experience. The result is an impoverishment of the educational pathways of students, who could instead see play as an opportunity to learn and grow.

4.3 Play as a Primarily Pedagogical Moment

Two teachers recognise playfulness as a pedagogical element that should be encouraged in the teaching and learning process. It is clear from their words that they are aware of the educational potential of play, even if it is used in different ways. The first teacher even emphasises its extrinsic value by explaining that it is a means to address disciplinary content, while the second highlights its intrinsic value.

I teach Maths. I'm a great advocate of alternative teaching methods. That's why I often use games to promote logical-mathematical skills. In class, we play cards and do other activities that use typical game mechanics to stimulate problem solving skills. (Teacher 2)

Thanks to the all-day education model, we have longer periods that allow us to overcome the rigid division between subjects. Together with my colleague, we have planned interdisciplinary moments. One of them is dedicated to play: every day there is a time when the students play certain games

(motor games one day, board games the next day, strategy games the next day...). This helps them to socialise and develop skills such as creativity that are difficult to use in traditional subjects. (Teacher 4)

In the first case, play is used in an instrumental way to achieve specific disciplinary goals. In the second one, play is used as an interdisciplinary and experiential platform due to its heuristic and social value. It is no coincidence that this happens in the school where more attention is paid to the pedagogical importance of all-day education: in fact, the awareness of the need to build an organic educational project aimed at the holistic development of students means that play is valued for its potential, without it being considered merely as a tool for acquiring subject-specific skills or as a break for insignificant and unstructured moments.

5. Discussion

The exploratory study highlights the need to recognise the educational potential of time within all-day education contexts (Andersen et al., 2016). Indeed, the extended school day is often perceived merely as an opportunity to cover various subjects without the pressure of time constraints, overlooking its potential to foster methodological pluralism and to develop a school model that embraces personalisation, active learning and genuine student agency.

This loss of the eminently educational value of the school experience (Biesta, 2012) not surprisingly also affects the value attributed to play. Our research shows that there is an urgent need to reaffirm the importance of play as a pedagogical tool with its own validity, so that it does not become a parenthesis between moments of the school day that are mistakenly considered more serious. In fact, play enables the integration of different disciplinary approaches and promotes a critical and creative co-construction of knowledge (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Lester, 2019).

In our exploratory study, play is used for purely pedagogical purposes in only two cases. In the first situation, the objectives are disciplinary, whereas in the second, play is used for its intrinsic value and potential in terms of holistic personal development, active participation and increased motivation,

experiential learning, the promotion of creativity, critical thinking and the co-construction of knowledge.

Overall, our research highlights that incorporating playfulness into the design of learning pathways is closely linked to a critical reflection on the role of all-day education. Specifically, the use of play is associated with a growing awareness of time as an educational variable with intrinsic value. This underscores the importance of developing both initial and in-service teacher education programs (Boysen et al., 2022) that encourage reflection on the significance of all-day education and the potential of play to foster cooperative, participatory, and dialogical learning processes. In summary, our findings respond to the three research questions as follows:

1. teachers interpret all-day education primarily as an extension of school time, with limited reflection on its pedagogical reconfiguration – except in rare, context-sensitive cases.
2. playful activities are rarely “activated” as part of structured pedagogical projects. When they are, it tends to be within game-based learning or scheduled “play slots.
3. play occupies marginal spaces in the school day, often relegated to end-of-day transitions or recess. Only a few schools integrate it into the planned curriculum, valuing its holistic potential.

6. Conclusion

On a theoretical level, all-day education and playfulness share the goal of fostering experience-based learning and student protagonism. All-day education supports methodological pluralism, encouraging practical, creative, and collaborative activities that develop social and emotional skills. This aligns with playfulness, which brings spontaneity and enjoyment to learning, making content more accessible. By extending learning time, all-day education creates more opportunities to integrate play and exploration, supporting holistic development beyond the cognitive domain.

Our exploratory study shows that in primary schools that adopt the all-day education pedagogical model, play is not always seen as a central element of pedagogical planning. In particular, play is often confined to un-

structured moments. The teachers who instead choose to use it in their own planning emphasise its extrinsic value in terms of supporting subject teaching as a trigger for engagement with the different curricular domains and its intrinsic value as a platform that runs between subjects at different times of the school day for the holistic development of the person.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the findings are not generalisable but offer valuable insights into the role of play and playfulness in primary schools adopting the all-day model. While grounded in the Italian context, our reflections may be relevant to other systems facing similar challenges. Overall, investing in teacher education is essential to raise awareness of the educational value of time in all-day settings and the pedagogical potential of play to foster collaborative, active, and dialogic learning.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

This appendix includes the full interview guide used in data collection. The questions were designed to elicit teachers' experiences and representations regarding both all-day education and the use of play in that context. The guide was built around two main thematic foci, i.e., perceptions of the all-day school model and pedagogical uses and meanings of play/playfulness. Questions were open-ended and exploratory in nature, to allow participants to articulate their views freely and generate rich, contextualized data.

1. Can you briefly describe your professional background and teaching experience?
2. How long have you been working in an all-day school context?
3. What are your thoughts about the all-day education model?
4. In your experience, what are its main strengths and weaknesses?
5. How is school time usually organised in your class?
6. How would you define the role of play in your teaching practice?
7. Can you describe situations in which play is used intentionally?
8. What kinds of games or playful activities do you use, and why?
9. How do you balance structured learning and free play?
10. Do you collaborate with colleagues when planning playful activities?
11. Have you received any specific training on using play as a pedagogical tool?
12. What would help you better integrate play into your teaching?

Appendix B – Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, recognising that themes do not emerge passively from the data but are actively constructed by the researcher through an iterative, reflexive engagement with the material.

Analytical Positioning

The analysis adopted this perspective:

- semantic focus, meaning we coded explicit meanings within participants' language, without looking for latent structures;
- inductive orientation, avoiding pre-defined theoretical codes and allowing themes to be shaped by the empirical material itself;
- reflexive logic, acknowledging the role of the researcher in interpreting, organising, and giving significance to the patterns identified.

Process

1. Familiarisation With the Data

The seven interviews (ranging from 40 to 70 minutes) were fully transcribed and read multiple times. During this stage, marginal notes were added using Word comments to highlight initial ideas (e.g. "play as reward", "rigid schedule", "loss of original vision").

2. Coding

Each transcript was manually coded using units of meaning, typically clauses or short paragraphs. Coding was carried out line-by-line, generating a total of 164 initial codes.

3. Theme Construction

Codes were grouped into tentative categories, which were iteratively refined. Themes were defined not by frequency, but by patterned meaning across the dataset that addressed the research questions.

4. Reviewing and Refining Themes

Themes were reviewed internally for coherence and externally for distinctiveness. For example, the theme "instrumental uses of play" was split into extrinsic vs. intrinsic patterns under theme 3.

5. Defining and Naming Themes

Themes were written up with definitions supported by thick description and quotes.

6. Producing the Report

Themes informed the structure of the Results and Discussion sections.

Reflexivity Note

The researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity through memo writing and theoretical annotations, especially in cases where personal experiences in the Italian school system resonated with teachers' frustrations. This awareness of positionality contributed to a richer, more situated interpretation.

Coding Summary

- Approach: Reflexive thematic analysis
- Epistemology: Constructivist
- Coding logic: Inductive
- Level: Semantic
- Software: Microsoft Word (manual coding)
- Theme construction: Meaning-based, not frequency-based
- Reflexivity: Active, through memos and annotations

Coding Process

The coding of the data for the extracts used in the paper is shown here.

Theme 1 – Perceptions of All-Day Education

Sub-theme 1.1 – Continuity with Traditional Schooling

Interpretation: Teachers do not perceive significant pedagogical innovation in the all-day model.

I don't see much difference between all-day education and "normal" school. We simply have more time for the school subjects... We don't have to rush through all the planned content. (Teacher 1)

I have worked both in an all-day education context and in schools with reduced hours... Honestly, there is no difference. (Teacher 3)

In all-day education contexts, as teachers we can work better, do more... We have more relaxed times and we can organise our work better. (Teacher 7)

Sub-theme 1.2 – Loss of Educational Mission

Interpretation: Teachers report the erosion of the original pedagogical vision of all-day schooling.

The spirit of 1960s all-day education no longer exists! There was a strong pedagogical project, with politically and ethically committed teachers. Today that is no longer possible: we are overwhelmed with bureaucratic requirements and have no time to sit down together to think up a school idea. (Teacher 2)

Everything has changed. In the 1970s, there were two teachers per class in all-day education contexts. Now there are even five or six. Everything is fragmented and it is not possible to imagine time as a mosaic of experiences... It is still divided into individual subjects. (Teacher 6)

Sub-theme 1.3 – Intentional and Participatory Planning

Interpretation: Some teachers describe shared planning processes as attempts to recover pedagogical meaning.

We intervene in the curriculum, the subjects and the organisation of the classes. It's a multifaceted task where we try to create a personalised school experience without losing the community nature of learning. (Teacher 4)

Theme 2 – Play as Marginal or Regulated

Sub-theme 2.1 – Play Restricted to Specific Contexts

Interpretation: Play is allowed in regulated or transitional moments, rarely integrated into formal learning.

During the breaks I let them play as they wish. (Teacher 3)

We end the lesson ten minutes early and play some games at the blackboard. (Teacher 6)

Whoever finishes an activity first can play silently, without disturbing their classmates. (Teacher 7)

Sub-theme 2.2 – Institutional Resistance to Play

Interpretation: Teachers describe time and institutional culture as barriers to play-based pedagogy.

We don't have time to play in class with all there is to do! Sometimes we still have time at the end of the morning or afternoon... During the physical education lesson, I organise movement games. But the students are aware that the place to play is not at school. (Teacher 1)

We cannot play at school... We need to make it clear that this is a serious place dedicated to learning. (Teacher 5)

Theme 3 – Play as a Pedagogical Resource

Sub-theme 3.1 – Play Supporting Disciplinary Learning

Interpretation: Play is used as a methodological tool for specific curricular goals.

I often use games to promote logical-mathematical skills. In class, we play cards and do other activities that use typical game mechanics to stimulate problem solving activities. (Teacher 2)

Sub-theme 3.2 – Structured Time for Play

Interpretation: In rare but significant cases, play is intentionally integrated into the curriculum through planned time slots.

Every day there is a time when the students play certain games (motor games one day, board games the next day, strategy games the next day...). This helps them to socialise and develop skills such as creativity that are difficult to use in traditional subjects. (Teacher 4)