

Quiet undertones to promoting literacy in early years: a reflective experience

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Introduction and background

In my nursery setting, we had been fortunate enough to receive some new craft resources which were delivered in a large cardboard box. After much excitement, the children helped unpack the contents. The empty box was placed in the construction area where the boys in particular immediately started to chat amongst themselves about what this box could be. One boy suggested a pirate ship; from this other boys then made suggestions. One child found some strips of packing paper, which he laid out around the box exclaiming this was the sea. Crayons and pencils were used to decorate the box.

Throughout the morning this activity continued to develop, more elaborate ideas were brought into the scenario; the children only left this activity to have snacks and were deeply absorbed in the experience. This box remained all week and each day the boys reinvented their play. Sadly, the box collapsed after five days of captivating play.

This box play led me to consider how we provide opportunities which enable boys to actively engage in experiences that will influence and nurture early mark-making (and ultimately literacy skills. The box play may have led to many different outcomes if practitioners had felt it necessary to continue only with the planned activities for the week. Thinking about this play has enabled me to re-evaluate the experiences we offer particularly to the boys in the nursery setting. Whilst resources have a valuable part to play, sometimes we need to be more attentive to differing learning styles, thus providing a stimulating environment to aid boys' learning and development.

The play experience had no targets; it was purely spontaneous. Whilst observing this play I was very much aware of the links to the children's learning outcomes. I needed to provide evidence to support learning, something commonly requested by OfSTED and

early years advisors, to ensure practitioners can demonstrate children's progression. This involvement can, on occasions, feel very constraining and intrusive. However, during the box play, I did not feel the need to reach for the post-it notes but just enjoyed the wonder of imagination: this whole experience allowed the children to become immersed in real play, free from pressure and outcomes (Bruce, 2001). Whilst there is a place for recording progress – it can identify where a child may need additional support – there's also a need to create a manageable balance whereby forms of recording and assessment, and the gentle encouragement of emerging literacy skills, do not intrude on the child's real learning experiences.

May (2011) has emphasised that imaginative play in holistic form enables high levels of learning in a stress-free environment. Therefore the sheer value of the cardboard box play on a developmental level would appear to exceed both play with pre-determined resources and opportunities where the adult is leading the play. A toy which is created from imagination allows the child to explore their inner creativity (Steiner, 1997:32; Broadhead, 2004). Boyle and Charles (2007) consider the role of socio-dramatic play for emerging writing skills, in that it provides experiences to mark-make enabling children to progress from experimental mark-making to a developing writer (Boyle, 2010).

What the experience provided

The cardboard box experience enabled the boys to engage deeply in socio-dramatic play. The physical movement during this experience was self-directed and informative to me, the observer. Children demonstrated intricate fine movements in manipulating the paper for the desired effect. Having previously read some of the literature in relation to movement and literacy, the cardboard box experience has challenged me to think whether I have previously overlooked (or even dismissed) some of the key movement experiences and the value and influence of this on future literacy learning and other areas of young children's development? Although I still believe there is much to pursue in this area, this has had a direct impact on my professional practice which I want to share in this article.

Physical play and literacy

The implementation of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage in England lists physical development as one of the prime areas of development. Cooper (2010) believes that early physical skills, in the form of movement, may have a direct impact on future literacy skills. Therefore, in relation to professional practice, practitioners need to encompass and gently guide more opportunities for this form of play, particularly for boys who are known to be underachieving in literacy (Primary National Strategy, 2007). Goddard-Blythe (2005) places high value on movement and its relationship to early learning, making reference to early pioneers such as Isaccs (c.1930) and Winnicott (c.1940) who valued 'unintruded-upon space' by which they can deeply express their thoughts ideas and dreams (Goddard-Blythe, 2005: 258).

Early manipulative skills are the basis for the skills needed to hold a pencil, which takes some intricate action. Cooper (2010) identifies the ways in which development proceeds; large muscles need to mature in strength before the fine motor skills develop to enable pen control. Early years curricula can impose an unnatural writing environment which is measured against predetermined norms which they are expected to attain by the end of the EYFS.

The box play experience had a direct effect on the boys engaging in mark-making both with the use of props, mark-making implements and the signs and pictures they made throughout the week. These included pirate drawings, lots of 'x' marking the treasure, and some detailed imaginative sea creatures. Educators clearly have the ability to enable or restrict a child's play and learning environment with boys in particular thought to benefit from experiences which provide alternative learning styles in which they are empowered to become confident and capable learners through a creative environment (Primary National Strategy, 2007).

Vygotsky (c.1930) firmly believed that the writing experiences offered to preschool children should be 'something the child needs. They must be relevant to life' (cited in

Schrader, 1990: 99; Christie, 1991: 210). Given the amount of documentation the public, practitioners and parents are exposed to regarding literacy, I question what impressions we are forming and creating and how this influences the ways in which the EYFS literacy requirements are implemented? With all the media and government initiatives to narrow the gender gap in literacy, careful consideration must be given regarding the impact this may have on the future learning of boys as a whole. The boys in my setting, given the right opportunities, are well motivated to learn and have a desire to find out about how things work.

While undoubtedly literacy is an important area of development, practitioners should consider carefully the appropriateness of more play-based activities in view of the age range of the children in nursery settings. Previously in my early days as a practitioner, there were far fewer objectives, targets and outcomes to meet and this allowed for more spontaneity with children. There is a balance somewhere between professional judgement and following policy requirements which is vital because our encouragement of the box play could have easily been undermined worries about assessments and the need to focus on the next steps. Such thoughts can sometimes take us away from observing and understanding children's deeper play which is a problem many practitioners seem to face.

On raising this notion with colleagues, they appear to perceive a downward pressure to focus on encouraging the children to engage in more formal approaches to letter and numeral recognition and formation. Although some children demonstrate quite advanced early literacy skills, some are still at the stage where they are experimenting in the use of mark-making and need more play-based learning (Moyles, 2010). The revised EYFS framework suggests an approach where young children are to be made 'ready for school' but this may well not be appropriate for many children and where what they are asked to do may have little meaning for them.

Challenging policy

The pressure to conform within the current policy framework is huge. This top-down approach means literacy and numeracy are targeted as the most important areas in England and it is certainly true that we all need to be competent readers and writers no matter what future profession we chose. However, the age at which literacy skills are pushed in the early years needs serious consideration. The introduction of the EYFS (2008) addressed the need to recognise individuality: each child is unique and stages do overlap. However, government views often conflict with the individuality of each child. Staggs (2009) remarks that, although there has been much investment in the child achieving reading and writing skills at an early age, the problem of lack of progress may be the set pre-determined goals, not the child (Ward, 2009).

Duffy (2010) believes the idea of narrowing the curriculum focusing only on literacy, numeracy and behaviour is outdated and does not feel that this will strengthen practice in the early years (Tims, 2010). In the early years where a child is constructing an early perception of appropriate dispositions to learning, it is vital that the learning opportunities presented meet the child's needs. Although the revised EYFS has seen some welcome changes, there are some worrying concerns regarding 'overly cognitive demands' placed on children below statutory school age (House, *et al.* 2012).

The concept of children as 'unfinished' or 'empty vessels' which should be filled and shaped according to the norms of society (Boushel, *et al.* 2000) is still prevalent in England today. There is a danger that practitioners get bogged down with targets, outcomes and the pressure of ensuring all of these expectations are met. But does this affect our ability to both challenge and evaluate the ways we work and play with young children? The wording of many initiatives within the EYFS suggests a test-led approach, such as adult-directed learning and readiness for school (EYFS, 2011; TACTYC, 2010). We need more initiatives enabling us to empower and nurture these early skills which develop when a child is ready not when government opinion judges they *should* be ready. The revised EYFS has narrower outcomes than its predecessor which may not account for

the individuality of each child's learning. Just because a child is not meeting predetermined outcomes and goals may not mean a label of underachievement automatically applies. Maybe the child just needs time to mature without the top-down pressure which risks damaging their future dispositions to learning.

What do you think?

- **Has the revised EYFS reduced such pressure on practitioners/parents and children alike – or has this increased this with the many sections which imply a 'readiness for school'?**
- **Are we getting bogged down with too many next steps rather than celebrating where children are now?**

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