

How Play Supports Language and Literacy Development In The Foundation Stage?

'It is important to establish a definition of play and the importance of play in the development of the child. I will give an overview of the various stages of the different types of play. I shall be using theories as examples and discuss various educational studies. Moving on from there, I shall focus on how social dramatic play supports a child's language and literacy development and how the different types of activities could support this area of learning. The importance of the adult's role during the child's play will be discussed. In conclusion I will discuss about the importance of play, language and literacy.

The importance of play should always be remembered when devising programmes for children. Through imaginative play, children practice and come to terms with aspects of daily life. Children can also be encouraged to express themselves and learn about emotions through play. Play is a vital part of the growth and development process between the stages of being a totally dependent newborn individual and becoming an independent adult. Play brings together the ideas, feelings, relationships and physical life of the child. It supports children to operate what they know and how to comprehend things about the world and people they meet. When children play they can rearrange their lives, for example, children grow physically as they rearrange (gross motor) the large elements (table, chairs, cradle) of the interest area and as they manipulate (fine motor) contents (food boxes, dolls, clothes, and hats) of the interest area. They practice their real life situations, reflect on the past and get their thoughts, feelings, relationships and physical bodies under their own control.

Primarily, through playing, children gain a sense of self-reliance and competence, which helps them to face the world and cope with it. It is a process by which individuals can explicit themselves and develop a range of cognitive and social skills by interacting with their environment and other individuals. It also offers them the opportunity to apply their existing knowledge and then prolong this through thinking skills. This would involve a child being physical active, as this would provide the child with first hand experiences.

Furthermore play helps children to develop, it must be both structured and unstructured. Children need to be allowed to play independently at their own level without intervention as this allows them to develop independently and socially establishing who they are and how they feel. Educators today believe in the importance of planning play in order to level children's development. Drake (2001) believes that children can develop through play and adult support but the support needs to be effective adult support. Adult support, in regards to children's play, is essential and much observation is required to monitor the child's development, this allows the practitioner to ensure the child is progressing forward with their development. Play and planning are linked in that children learn to make sense of the world around them through play- it is their work and as such should be afforded the high status and considered planning it deserves. (Drake, 2001) Another link is that in play children continually practice the complicated, stressful process of living, communicating and achieving satisfactory relationships with other people. (Eysenk, 2000, p 358).

Play is positively one of the most powerful vehicles children have for trying out mastering new skills, concepts, and experiences. Play can help children develop the knowledge they need to connect in meaningful ways to the challenges they encounter in the foundation stage. Play also contributes to how children view themselves as learners. As they play, they resolve confusing social, emotional, and intellectual issues by coming up with new solutions and ideas. They experience the sense of power that comes from being in control and figuring things out on their own (something children often do not get to do in real life).

Also, in play children are given the opportunity to learn in a way, that we as adults are unable to teach them. It is an activity that is self-directed, open-ended, free, spontaneous and creative or unique. According to Vygotsky (1978) states: play provides opportunities for exploration, experiment, and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge and contributes to the development of representational thought. During play, children examine and refine their learning in the light of feedback they receive from people. It is through play that children develop their imaginations and creativity. During the early years, children's play becomes more rule-orientated and promotes the development of autonomy and

co-operation, which contributes to social, emotional, and intellectual development.

(Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p 125). Playing helps children to explore their world and become acquainted with people and things in relation to themselves: Play is derived from a child's intrinsic motivation to understand his/her needs.

According to Piaget (1978) play is the best preparation for adulthood, especially in our high technological, comparative society. That is because play whether in the classroom, at recess, or outdoors, is all about discovering and practising. It allows children to form an understanding of the social, emotional, moral and intellectual concepts, to which they are being introduced at every turn as they rapidly develop. (Garvey, 1991, p62).

Playing helps children to make sense of and internalise all the stimuli by which they are being bombarded; it provides emotional release from the increasing stress of modern life, children also learn to make sense of the world around them, explore worlds other than their environment and interact with others. Child psychologists emphasise the importance of play in helping children develop. It prepares children for educational and social experiences later in childhood.

It could be said that, many activities, especially those that require

co-ordination efforts teach children how to take turns, and how to interchange. The children can keep playing and having fun but in return will also experience the freedom to experiment with language, high order thinking skills, and new ways of sharing a toy.

An activity implemented in the foundation stage curriculum recognises that children learn in many different ways particularly through exposure to a range of different experiences. Activities implemented (see appendix 2) through playing, talking, observing, planning, questioning, experimenting, testing, repeating, reflecting and responding.

The guidance for the foundation stage identifies that well - planned play in various settings is an effective way in which children learn.

Furthermore the role of the practitioner is well defined and considered paramount in planning and resourcing for support during planned play activities, to allow extension of spontaneous play and in developing children's language and communication.

Children who enter the early year's education system all have different abilities and experiences and aim to deepen their understanding by playing, talking, observing, planning (QCA Curriculum for the foundation stage, p6.) The foundation stage curriculum states well planned play is a key way in which children learn with enjoyment and challenge during the. I think this statement is the first to back up the need for children to be able to learn and is an important factor in the development of children (Foundation stage curriculum, p7.) They learn when they make connections between experiences and ideas that are related to any aspect of their life in the setting, at home and in the community. The development and use of communication and language is at the heart of young children's learning.

There are various distinct types of play and activities that a child exhibits, as they grow older. As the child develops he/she will go through the process of having the experience of going through different stages of play. The first is sensory motor play, which happens at around the age of 6-18 months, according to Piaget (1962). He described sensory motor play as practice play, where infants and toddlers experiment with sensations and motor movements. (Macintyre, 2001, p7). By 6 months of age, infants will have developed simple but consistent action schemes through trial and error and much practice, for example by pushing, pulling and grasping, in order to make things happen.

Constructive play, which occurs from around 18 months, children will enjoy building with bricks and knocking down the structure. They will replace the bricks with increasing cleverly using their fingers and thumbs rather than the whole hand, which makes letting go difficult. They will enjoy repetitive play and will begin to show an interest in simple puzzles such as inset board or 6 piece puzzles.

Symbolic play takes place between the ages of 2 & 3 years, children use one object to represent another. Their developing imaginations allow them to pretend, for example that a wooden brick is a car and

they will drive the brick along the pretend road with accompanying realistic noises. At this stage children stay immersed in their games for a longer spell because they have the physical ability to move around and have better ideas about what different objects do, just as they can pretend about or imagine one thing is something else. They also begin to pretend that they themselves are other people; this is the start of role-play. At this age, children will also begin to play in parallel rather than in solitary way, which they did earlier. This means that they will play alongside other children making occasional contact with them. For example briefly showing interest in what they are doing or making occasional contact with them, or moving towards them to show their own play. These communications gradually lengthen and lead children to play together, perhaps by engaging in co-operative role-play.

Children at the ages of 3-4 years social dramatic play takes place. Dramatic play is an imitation of reality. Children create play themes and act them out by participating in various roles. By doing so, they are able to imitate the physical world and human relationships through symbolic representation. Children perform with concrete objects (e.g. dolls, pots, tricycles, or sticks), which are symbols for something else children have experienced directly or indirectly (e.g. babies, cooking, cars, or swords) (Landreth, 1991). For example, children may pretend that a log is a boat, or that they are Batman and Robin fighting all the bad guys. Dramatic play is a time of non-literal, symbolic behaviour that merges the child's imagination with the real world, giving everything an as if nature. In order for the child to go onto the next stage of play, he/she has to first master the first stage of play in order to go to the next stage, according to Piaget's theory (1962), play is vital to cognitive development. However, he explains that children are not acquiring new skills during their dramatic play episodes; instead, they are practicing skills they have recently acquired in non-play situations. Without this practice in play contexts, Piaget explains, their skills would be quickly lost. Play allows children to assimilate information they are gathering from their environment into their minds and helps them make sense of it. Through play they are able to own their knowledge.

Dramatic play can also be viewed from a preparation for life perspective. Jones and Reynolds (1992) explain that pretending allows

children to represent real-life problems and practice solving them. They are able to question things and to learn about the world in ways that make sense to them. Play is self-motivated practice in meaning-making; its themes are repeated over and over until the child is satisfied that she's got this figured out? (10) (author's emphasis). By participating in dramatic play, Jones and Reynolds (1992) argue that children are developing learning and problem-solving strategies, as well as utilizing their knowledge and skills.

Early play consists of repeating actions that give babies pleasure. During the early months the child learns hand-to-eye coordination, and new things about their environment, and become familiar with the people they come in contact with practically every day. (Barnes, 1998 p 239)

Piaget suggests that the changeover from playing alone during the mastery play stage to playing with other people is graded. He believed that within the preparation stage children's play reflects their increasing experiences and imagination. Children pretend to be someone else, imitating their behaviours, and see how others respond. They also learn to communicate symbolically through language.

Again Piaget claimed that during the concrete operation stage, around the age of 7, children are capable of far more advanced activities. Children learn about rules, which are imposed on them by others. They can understand how this affects themselves and other players. During this stage children also learn to give and take, and understand their and other people's rights and responsibilities.

Like Piaget, Vygotsky's work has also had a major role in how we analyse a child's development, as he believed that play has a more direct role in the cognitive development. According to him, young children are incapable of abstract thought because, for them meaning and objects are fused together as one. Vygotsky believed that play helped children to make sense of what they learn for the reason that, during play they are free from all the practical constraints of real life situations.

He argued that children learn much more through play and claimed that: Play creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD of the child.) which believes that external forces and ideas effect our inner resources,

for example, a child is able to copy and adult doing an action better than trying on his own but with limitations (Palmer, 2001). In play a child always behaves beyond his average, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he was a head taller than himself (Eysenck, 2000, p 428)

Fundamentally, play is a very powerful tool, which acts as a role in all aspects of child's development. However the main focus of this assignment is how play supports a child's language and literacy development. All forms of play support a child in practising language, as they are always trying out new words and sentence structures to describe and explain things.

According to Bee (1992). Through play, children develop new concepts and with each concept there is a set of associated descriptive words. As children learn new words they incorporate these in to their play and the play becomes more complex. (Garvey, 1991, p 62)

Children may use language in their play in order to develop social relationships with other children and with adults. Through play children are able to practise their language ability in particular types of play. For example doll play, home play, cooperative play and imaginative play can all offer opportunities for the child to try out new words and sentences.

According to Vygotsky (1978), language is central to the play and learning process. It is a psychological tool for thinking and learning for children at an early stage of language development or those with language delay (Godwin & Perkins, 2002. P109)

From the ideas of Vygotsky and others we can see there is some need for play to occur in the early years of young children. Children's learning has to be holistic and external factors have an effect on the way a child develops both socially and educationally. Vygotsky believed a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that will become their basic level of real action and morality (Vygotsky 1930).

Children use language in their play all the time, when talking to themselves, or to toys and playthings. A particular, and sometimes underrated context for the development of language, communication

skills and competence is in the area of pretend play. This is often accompanied by complex language interactions, where we often see children adapting the roles of other individuals, for example a doctor, nurse, teacher or any one else. Where they experiment with a wide range of vocabulary, which we may not often understand but makes sense to the child. Below Meek (1989) gives a better explanation of this.

According to Meek (1989), pretend play provides children not only with the opportunity to begin where they currently are, but to use their real imaginary experiences for language and learning. All children delight in doing the apparel and imagined role of a nother. Particularly those characters from the adult world whom they attempt to understand through emulation?. (Moyles, 1992, p48)

Developing literacy means coming to grips with a second symbol system. Children use symbolic play through the process of transforming an object or oneself in to another object, situation, or event through the use of motor and verbal actions in a make believe activity, which provides an important source for literacy development.

As both play and literacy involve handling words in such a way as to represent objects, ideas and actions, it offers and gives them a wider understanding by allowing them the chance to explore literacy in a contextualised situation.

A study carried out by Halls (1987) in a literate home corner, showed that where paper, pencils, newspapers, planners, telephone directories, cookery books and catalogues were added as part of the environment. During the four hour days of this study children were engaged in 290 literacy events. For example it was found that the frequency, duration and complexity of children's play with print increased and that the objective encouraged self-generated literacy activity. A particularly interesting finding was that children in the intervention group often transformed the literacy objects into something else. Another example was the cookery books became magic genie books, and newspapers became magazines. (Drummond & Pollard, 1998, p78)

However a similar type of study was carried out by Brown (1985), where she examined specifically the nature of the use of literacy in social

dramatic play areas in kindergartens. She was able to identify 10 types of usage. (See appendix 1).

By the same token stories and nursery rhymes too are an effective medium for the development of language and literacy, in the way which social dramatic play is. When we read stories and nursery rhymes to children, a whole host of language is involved with in this, and then providing the relevant puppets and props related to these stories and nursery rhymes is even more beneficial for the child, as it gives them the opportunity to practise out those images they have of these stories and rhymes using their own interpretations. Carol Fox (1993) found in her study that, children between the ages of 3 and 6 could tell oral stories using the language of books in their play even before they were able to read. (Drummond & Pollard, 1998, p 86).

Some of the evidence provided in this assignment does appear to show that when given the opportunity with appropriate play situations to reveal language and literacy behaviour children do demonstrate a commitment, and eagerness to act out their experiences. In order to make sure that children carry out these practices, we as professionals have to make sure that the early year's classroom is resourced with the relevant equipment for children to demonstrate and test out these experiences.

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