**Kay as a Transformational Leader: Exploring Risk and Resilience through Working with Tools**

**Project Aim:** To improve children’s experiences and promote staff confidence through a ‘Tools Use and Woodwork Project’

**Objectives:**

* To challenge and improve staff understanding of child competence.
* To promote scaffolded risk-taking in play, building resilience in children and staff.

**Context:**

Kay is an experienced early years educator and SENCo working in a small non-profit, committee run church preschool. The setting has a genuine inclusive ethos and opens their doors to all children; the preschool is known locally for its advocacy and expertise working with children with SEND and EAL and their families. As a graduate in environmental studies, she has a strong interest in outdoor learning and her Tools Project was influenced by the Forest School Approach.

**Rationale:**

Kay’s Early Years Initial Teacher Training took place during the early days of the Covid19 Pandemic, when families were adjusting to heightened levels of social isolation. Although at that time, the long-term effects of lockdowns on young children were unknown, Staff were aware and concerned that the isolation could have an impact on children’s emotional resilience and in particular those identified as more vulnerable.

Kay understood that although historically, resilience has been seen as the ability to recover from disaster or hardship, it has developed a broader meaning. Resilience has come to involve learning from a situation in order to become stronger and better at tackling the next challenge. For researchers and professionals working with children, it is not just about ‘bouncing back’, but also about ‘bouncing forward’ (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013).

Kay's research led her to examine existing tensions between the child’s right to safety and their right to autonomous exploration. Inspired by the image of the child as ‘capable and powerful as opposed to unskilled and passive’ (Krechevsky et al., 2013), she wanted to challenge the safety conscious and protective culture in her setting, increasing opportunities for risk-taking and mastery in play.

**Implementation and Effectiveness:**

As someone committed to social justice, transformational leadership (sometimes called moral leadership) reflected Kay’s natural practice in leading change by building meaningful relationships and for the benefit of the whole setting community. Transformational leaders are said to be charismatic, inspirational, visionary and smart (Reams, 2020). Bass and Bass (2008) introduced four elements of transformational leaders that Kay used at different points of the project:

* **Individualised Consideration** – the leader considers the uniqueness of participants, they listen, value input and respond with empathy.
* **Intellectual Stimulation** – the leader challenges assumptions, encourages the creativity and ideas of participants. They take risks following ideas of others.
* **Inspirational Motivation** – The leader provides a well-communicated vision that appeals and inspires participants. The community share purpose and motivation and self-belief.
* **Idealised Influence** – The leader models ethical behaviour and gains trust and respect from the community.

Kay understood that in a busy setting with an established and experienced team, practice change could be implemented in manageable steps, with opportunities for individual mentoring and coaching, both in the moment and later on (**Individualised Consideration)**. Her first step was to share research on ‘aggressive play' (Grimmer, 2020) that highlights how such play enables children to practice important social skills in a context where real harm is unlikely to occur". The team reflected on setting policy and practice towards weapon and superhero play and decided to relax their approach on superhero costumes, making them available as part of the setting’s continuous provision (**Intellectual Stimulation)**. They also re-examined their policy on construction play. Where they had previously discouraged children from building weapons, they decided to follow such interests, and to narrate associated play so that peers could be included in developing play theories.

Staff found that the use of expressive language increased for all children when speaking with peers and adults about their imaginative play. In addition, children with EAL were heard speaking to each other in a shared home language and this included children who had previously been non-verbal or in a ‘silent phase’.

Educators observed that the children were not more aggressive in this play, a concern raised, rather they were more aware of each other’s feelings and ‘looked after’ each other when ‘wounded’, asking for the hospital equipment and plasters to enhance their play. The educators reflected that promoting this type of risky play was having a positive impact on building children’s verbal and non- verbal communication skills, as well as encouraging co-operative play and empathy.

Kay and her team adopted a Scandinavian-inspired approach (Knight, 2013) to childhood, in which children are seen as competent rather than being thought of as deficient in skills and in need of protection. This approach incorporates the idea of a ‘return to nature’, through exploration of the outdoors. In Scandinavian countries, forests are easily accessible, and nature is part of the everyday learning environment. The wild yet supported environment of a Forest School ensures that children learn to assess risk and are encouraged to make sensible and informed decisions related to unfamiliar and unpredictable situations such as climbing trees, using tools and building shelters. Learning is the natural result of the child being presented with opportunities to test their abilities in a real-life context.

Reflecting on the Forest School pedagogy and processes, and using her own background in environmental education, Kay identified elements of the approach to incorporate into setting practice. She took account of the over-protective mindset of some educators, the limited outside space and access to nature. Whilst undertaking research into the Reggio Emilia approach to early education, Kay was inspired by an image of a carved marrow and used this to motivate staff and provide more ‘risky’ tools to the continuous provision.

Kay modelled a sequenced approach in introducing tools to the setting. Initially the children were offered a variety of resources to carve marrows and pumpkins including play dough tools that they were already familiar with and new additions e.g. peelers, hammers, golf tees and nails. Some children, and staff, were initially reluctant to try the “real” tools, preferring to use the familiar play dough resources. However, as children witnessed more confident peers having successful experiences, more embraced the new equipment (**Idealised Influence)**. Educators were mindful not to put pressure on the more reluctant children, allowing them to watch whilst giving encouragement and support. Those children with additional needs were given 1-to-1 support when necessary so they could participate. Two children with SEND joined in showing greater competence and engagement than some educators expected and as subsequently the staff team ’s motivation for and confidence in using hand tools with the children increased greatly (**Inspirational Motivation)**.

Kay drew on The Characteristics of Effective Learning (COEL) (DfE, 2021) to assess the outcomes of the Tools Project. The COELs encourage educators to consider intrinsic motivation and multiple “languages” of expression when planning and assessing. Observations of the children using tools in their play showed high levels of engagement in risk and challenge, deep and focused involvement in the tasks presented, and a growing understanding of how resources could be used creatively. This more open-ended approach to play gave the children an opportunity to try new things, take risks, make mistakes and challenge themselves. Children became willing to ‘have a go’; curious to further investigate the potential of the tools. Their confidence increased with experience supported by sensitive educators as they took control of their learning and came to terms with fears, dangers, and the unpredictability of the world. These factors are key in helping children to identify their success and to bounce back from difficulties, naturally building their resilience through play.

**Conclusion**

Kay successfully led the team to introduce more risky play and enhanced the tool provision. Whilst recognising staff concerns and the collective responsibility to protect and safeguard children, Kay challenged assumptions that children would harm themselves or others when using tools. Children were given responsibility and used tools with care and success, their confidence and competence grew, and they became more resilient.

Kay used research effectively to challenge the existing practice and explain why a new approach would be beneficial. Using the image of the unique and powerful child as an overarching principle throughout her project, she remained sensitive to the needs of both staff and children and ensured that the risks and challenges she introduced were not overwhelming. By remaining reflective and communicative and by making space for multiple outcomes rather than one fixed objective, Kay was able to encourage resilience not only in the children but also in the educators.

Together the team developed a belief that every child is capable of developing a resilient mindset and will be able to deal more effectively with stress and pressure (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). No child or adult is immune to pressure in the current, fast-paced early years sector and even those fortunate enough not to face significant adversity or trauma may experience stress through a pressured environment and expectations placed upon them. As educators we can support each other and every child to become more resilient and manage stress more effectively. Initiatives like the Tools Project can give children skills to develop realistic goals, solve problems and relate meaningfully with others, enabling them to bounce back from disappointments, and bounce forward with greater resilience.

**Reference List**

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