(1,461 words excluding refs)

**Title: Kate as a Pedagogical Leader: Inspiring practice improvements through block play and beyond**

**Project Aim**: To improve the quality of block play and subsequently children’s engagement.

**Objectives**:

* To lead staff training to ensure educators have knowledge and skills to confidently promote and extend children’s block play and wider play experiences.
* To raise awareness of the importance of the characteristics of effective learning (DfE, 2021) within children’s play.

**Context**

The early years initial teacher training programme expects trainee early years teachers to lead practice change and Kate was keen to develop her leadership skills. She recognised there were challenges in developing a shared vision of good pedagogical practice for a relatively new staff team, that had predominantly formed under the constraints of Covid-19. Following the relaxation of restrictions, Kate identified the re-introduction of wooden blocks as an opportunity for practitioners to review and improve block play provision and pedagogy through training. Kate’s vision was to ensure that block play was better understood and valued by educators to increase children’s engagement and enjoyment and optimise learning and development. Kate was aware that collaborative staff development was likely to impact positively on interactions and children’s play experiences across the nursery setting.

**Rationale for the block play focus**

In terms of empowering educators to provide rich learning opportunities for children, block play provides opportunities to engage with all aspects of high-quality pedagogies. Blocks are perfectly suited to an emergent curriculum, providing countless opportunities for child-led investigation. A skilled practitioner can learn about children's intrinsic motivation by observing block play and then extend and enhance children’s play through sustained, shared thinking (Siraj, 2018), high-quality interactions (Fisher, 2016) and using provocations e.g. books, accessories. Blocks can also be invaluable to guided learning with specific outcomes, such as Expressive Art and Design: children building knowledge and understanding of materials in order to explore their interests (Early Education, 2021). With regard to the characteristics of effective learning (CoEL), block play is open-ended in nature encouraging active participation in the construction of learning, inspiring creativity and critical thinking and facilitating meaningful exploration.

Unlocking the potential of block play both ‘In the Moment’ (Ephgrave, 2018) and within guided learning requires experience, practice and a complex set of skills. Effectively training a new team of educators with varying levels of experience calls for a holistic approach. Busy educators may not have time to attend formal training, and some may not be receptive to that style of professional development. Kate understood that to scaffold all staff in providing high-quality block play and meaningfully embed an approach required multiple opportunities for practitioners to engage with a variety of learning materials. She provided opportunities for all educators to reflect and iterate ideas both in professional discussion and in their day-to-day practice.

**Implementation & Effectiveness**

The action plan is rooted in pedagogical leadership; leading others to pursue improvements to teaching and learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014). Pedagogic leaders disseminate current research and thinking to inspire, motivate and influence others and to create common goals. The targets below were drafted, discussed, and revised with the staff team; enabling an inclusive and shared project from the outset:

1. Provide whole staff training
2. Create a ‘Focus on block play’ display for educators including information on developmental stages and tips for sustained shared thinking so that educators have knowledge and skills to confidently promote and extend block play.
3. Increase block play access and encourage greater participation in block play through adult presence and modelling in the area, adding a photo display of children and educators engaging in block play and children’s constructions.
4. Inspire children to extend block play through encouragement, adding images of varied structures, books [including those that respond to children’s interests across the setting] and accessories as appropriate to the play.

The targets were displayed next to the block play area and observations showed educators using them for ongoing reference; they discussed the targets and made further suggestions, showing high levels of engagement with the project. The action plan proved effective in promoting collaborative working within the engaged staff team.

Some staff appeared anxious during the initial, more formal, training and were reticent to actively explore the blocks. This suggested a lack of confidence and familiarity within the team and/or the blocks themselves. However, staff were soon keen to share thoughts and ideas. Led by Kate, rich discussion included the relevance of the CoEL, EYFS areas of learning and development, levels of involvement, individual children’s interests and needs and the role of the adult.

Kate explained the developmental stages of block play and a display was added to the block play area. Educators, initially unfamiliar with these stages, were observed looking at the display and referring to developmental stages with children, using them in documented observations and to scaffold children’s block play skills e.g. an educator modelled bridging to a child who had mastered stacking blocks over several previous sessions. This extended the child’s block play and sustained high levels of engagement.

Kate used the training to build on prior staff knowledge and pedagogy from recent areas identified for practice improvement; promoting communication and language and critical thinking through sustained shared thinking (Clarke, 2009); the communication chain (Elks & McLachlan, 2016); the Ofsted definition of teaching, including modelling and setting challenges (Ofsted, 2021); and early teaching and learning of mathematics. The training effectively highlighted links between block play and these themes, encouraging practitioners to approach block play within the broader context of an enabling learning environment (DfE, 2021, p.6). Subsequent observations showed the training being applied in practice, for example educators being present and engaged more often in the space, using block play to promote conflict resolution, asking open ended questions about children’s constructions and allowing time for children to process and formulate responses to open questions and initiate conversation. The block play display provided a reference tool improving the likelihood of educators developing teaching competence and confidently promoting children’s learning and development across the EYFS areas of learning.

When ‘Getting Started’ with block play, Hansel (2016, p.51) states that adults must ‘first decide where to place the block area, what to put in it, and when to schedule time for block play.’ In relation to the ‘where’, Hirsch (1996, cited in Hansel, 2016) suggests dedicating one third of floor space to block play in an area away from high traffic. In response to this information, educators worked collaboratively to recreate a new block play space and were subsequently invested in its success. Traffic cones were added to create a moveable boundary to protect constructions from passers-by and provide flexibility so the space could be increased to accommodate larger constructions or more children. Staff observed more children being attracted to the block play area (playing and exploring), staying for longer (active in their learning) and building collaboratively with their peers.

Blocks now form part of the continuous provision and most of the day is spent in self-chosen play. This provides children with uninterrupted access to block play. Educators are now more open to agreeing that structures in progress can be left, and treasured constructions are preserved and recorded.

The target to extend children’s play was also met and children initially led this quite naturally as part of their individual play agenda. A child independently sought out loose parts, including shells, from nearby areas of the setting and used these extensively with the blocks (creating and thinking critically). Other children noticed and were motivated to follow this example. Whilst the extended play was child-initiated, educators valued their ideas becoming play partners. The play was repeated on subsequent days, for extended periods of time (active learning) and high levels of involvement were shown.

**Conclusion**

Overall, it was clear that sensitive pedagogical leadership motivated the staff team and a higher value was placed on children’s block play following training. Adults actively provided opportunities for the children to talk about their play, both in the moment and at circle time, they took photographs with children and used these for display and sharing with parents/carers. Improved interactions were not confined to block play: practitioners demonstrated a strong commitment to the project and were observed using relevant knowledge and skills in practice across the setting. Through carefully planned training, Kate increased theoretical knowledge and understanding, provided time for individuals and the staff team to reflect on current practice, make suggestions and identify additional areas for practice improvement. This created a shared vision through collaboratively developed targets. Kate observed high levels of engagement (Laevers, 2005) in the children, as well as a positive impact on CoEL and the seven areas of learning and development. Overall, Kate’s own learning, reading and planning enabled her to put a reflexive structure around pedagogical leadership and develop the skills needed to lead future practice improvements.

**References**

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