

Pandemic

An opportunity for implementing early years pedagogy beyond reception in England

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted practitioners with many challenges. For those of us working in early years and key stage 1, it also provided opportunities to sustain child-centred and play-based approaches to learning for longer than is usually the case. This reflective article draws on direct experience to argue for the importance of such approaches to learning, and to advocate their value in year 1 (and beyond) as well as in reception.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; early childhood education; reception; key stage 1; play-based approach; pedagogy

The year 2020 has been an unusual period of reflection for us all. Turmoil caused by a virus that seemed to appear from nowhere has prompted us to think about what we can do to make the future better. What can we do as educators to make education more purposeful for children and their families? I believe we need to implement with older children those child-centred approaches already evident in the early years foundation stage (EYFS) in England.

My pedagogy has been shaped by working as an early-years practitioner and as a teacher in private day care, children centres, Montessori nurseries and state primary schools. This reflective piece will draw on critical observations I have made throughout the course of my teaching, and discussions I have taken part in with colleagues during the Covid-19 pandemic.

But first, to set the scene. Early childhood education has long been influenced by developmental, child-led, play-based philosophies that emphasise the importance of learning through hands-on experiences of the world, in a child-centred way (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004). The early childhood community mostly welcomed the introduction of a foundation stage in England because of its emphasis on child-led play-based learning (Wood, 2004). We tend to agree that 'Good quality play is linked to positive learning outcomes in the cognitive, emotional, social and psycho-motor domains' (Wood, 2004, p19). A child-led, play-based approach can be seen in the development matters framework (2012), which supports the early years framework (2008). The EYFS 'early adopter' reforms (2020), which some schools are taking forward this year, continue

a tradition whose overarching principle is that every child is unique. These reforms emphasise the importance of learning and development through child-led approaches, and acknowledge that children develop and learn at different rates.

There is a sharp contrast between the learning characteristically seen in the EY phase and the more formal learning expected within the national curriculum (2013) at key stage 1 (KS1) with children aged from five. It is worth noting that here 'aged five' can mean anything from the day after the child's fifth birthday to the day before their sixth: a long time in the life of a child. There is even more of a contrast between the formal learning seen in KS1 in England and that which is the norm in other industrialised countries around the world, where the formal age to begin school attendance is more commonly set between the ages of six and seven (Whiteboard and Bingham, 2014). In particular, as regards approaches in reception and year 1, there is a tension between educational discourses about what is more appropriate for, and impactful on, children's learning at this watershed moment (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004).

Why think and act now?

Why is it important to be thinking now about opportunities for implementing EY pedagogy at KS1? There are three reasons. The first is that in the past we have seen innovative approaches to education form during times of turmoil. New nursery settings were established after World War II in Reggio Emilia in Italy with an orientation from parents and the community to ensure that children were nurtured to think for themselves and be independent learners (Bruce, 2011). In England, the McMillian sisters set up an open-air nursery in Deptford, London, just before World War I that supported families and children. The sisters emphasised outdoor learning and health for young children (Liebovich, 2018).

The second reason to think and act now is because of the missed developmental opportunities that children have suffered in schools during the lockdown periods. Some children will have had access to developmental opportunities, and we should not underestimate the role of the family in facilitating this learning. But some children will not. Most children in England have missed over a third of their year in reception. That is a third of their year being exposed to a tailored learning environment that offers a developmental basis for interest-led, child-led practice with an emphasis on learning through play. This loss should be remedied.

Nor should we underestimate the role of play as therapy. Even before the pandemic, the Save the Childhood Movement (2014) found that wellbeing of children in the UK was poor. One in ten children were diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and 80,000 children and young people suffered from severe depression. The 2014 report attributed some of these figures to the pressure of a schooling system which restricted freedom

and lessened risk-taking.

There is still uncertainty over precisely how the pandemic has affected families and children. Through my work, and not least from listening to worried parents during weekly telephone calls, I have encountered the pressures parents face: pressures to provide food for their family and to keep their children inside. Such pressures may well have adversely affected children's wellbeing.

And the third reason? It's because, perhaps unexpectedly, the pandemic has made for an unusually interesting time for those children and adults who worked in schools during the summer term of 2020. Children of key workers, who continued to attend school, have been able to learn in ways that differ from usual classroom practice. There has been more time for child-led conversation, more time to work on children's interests, more time for creative, hands-on activities and more time for play.

What follows is a reflection on a small number of observations I have made during this lockdown period, and an argument for seizing the time and extending approaches characteristic of the early years into key stage 1.

Crisis and response

At my workplace we responded to the crisis caused by Covid-19 by creating small 'bubbles' comprising ten to fifteen reception children with two adults. Teaching and learning were experienced in ways unlike that usual in a summer term. As practitioners, we found we could continue to follow children's interests, using outdoor environments and a play-based approach to learning as we do in the autumn and spring terms. By contrast, in an ordinary summer term we would be trying to prepare reception children for 'transitioning to KS1', with all the pressure to ensure children are 'year 1 ready': able to follow hand signals which direct them to their tables; able to sit at tables at the same time and for longer than would usually be expected.

As Brooker (2008) notes, many EY practitioners argue that pressure from the KS1 curriculum, from parents and from school leaders, obliges the preparation of children for a more formal curriculum too early. Furthermore, current Covid guidelines for schools (DfE 2020), which suggest positioning classroom tables to be forward-facing and advise a limit on the use of hands-on resources, potentially constrain EY and KS1 classrooms to become more formal, less exploratory, hands-on and play-based. Whitebread et al. (2015) point out that the KS1 curriculum squeezes out play even though the children in this year group are still within the age phase of developmental learning.

Yet there are schools where practitioners implement a play-based approach to learning in KS1 successfully. Anna Ephgrave (2017) writes about 'year 1 in Action'. She flips the view that reception-aged children should be ready for the formalities of KS1, and instead gives a month-by-month guide to taking EY pedagogy into the next

school phase. Children continue to be encouraged to pursue their own interests and ideas thanks to enabling environments, supported and facilitated by adults. Ephgrave believes that children learn best by being active and autonomous through exploration, creativity, and taking risks – in short, through play-based activity. She writes that the formalities of KS1 can place unrealistic expectations on young children, stifling learning and causing stress (Ephgrave, 2017).

I have seen these pressured expectations too often in schools over the years. As the pandemic allowed KS1 children more free play, I observed a six-year-old using block play. We had a conversation about year 1 subjects. The child said: 'I like English, but I don't like maths all of the time'. I asked: 'Why do you like English and what don't you like about maths?'. He replied: 'I like English because my writing is really good and I like to do my spellings'. He then thought for a bit and said 'I'm not very good at times tables, I can't remember them very quickly, I have to look at the numbers on the wall to help me'.

Enabled by play

A handful of barriers to this child's learning came home to me. He easily attributed being better at something to enjoying it more. He saw the challenges in learning his times tables as something that made him dislike maths. He saw using a resource to support his learning as a negative. His statement that he felt he disliked and was not very good at maths didn't align with the sophisticated maths play that he had been engaged with for almost the last two hours. I had observed him use block play and transient art materials (these are small pieces of materials which can be moved and manipulated into various patterns and arrays as the child deems necessary). He created his own racing track, an activity which was variously and ingeniously educative. The built circuit filled up the carpet space, used furniture to lift the race track higher or lower, required counting skills that included grouping and times tables, used symmetry and pattern, and included collaborating with another child, allowing both to articulate thoughts and ideas. The child whom I'd spoken with had made a garage using blocks of two in a line, and needed to find out if he had made enough spaces for the cars. He said: 'I think we have enough because two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen ... Oh no! We have fifteen cars, so one of the cars can just go on top, yes?'.

The approach to problem-solving used here is purposeful to the child. He was interested, and could maintain focus and attention for a long time. Despite saying that he disliked maths and was not very good at it, he was perfectly able to engage in play that involved mathematical problems which challenged him, allowing him to practise and embed maths skills and overcome challenges. A play-based approach to learning allows all this to happen.

Anning (2015) writes that confusion can surround the play-based approach, and

this can lead to conflict between its implementation or the implementation of a more formal approach. Confusion can arise because research into learning through play is often disconnected from how children learn in educational settings. Moreover, EY professionals can be accused of justifying play-based learning on ideological grounds rather than on empirical research. Yet there is research to show a biological basis for the value of learning through play (see for example O'Donovan and Melnyczuk, 2015).

Another study, undertaken between 2000 and 2001 in over 100 schools in Belfast with children aged four to six, looked at sustaining and evolving play-based practice beyond year 1 – as I am arguing for – and in particular at how to enhance the image of a ‘playful structure’ within a classroom (Welsh, Sproule, McGuinness and Trew, 2011). This research found that some teachers were initially unsure of the educational value of play and if play were to be embedded in classrooms beyond year 1 practitioners would need to: ‘Know developmental pathways in a variety of domains (not just reading and mathematics) so that they can scaffold children’s learning in developmentally appropriate ways’ (Welsh, Sproule, McGuinness and Trew, 2011, p116).

This suggests that the role of the teacher in the classroom, and the teacher’s understanding of developmental theory, needs to be addressed when bringing EY approaches into KS1.

Ofsted acknowledged in 2015 that teaching doesn’t simply mean a top-down didactic model but should also embody the many interactions that practitioners make with children each day as they play. For example: ‘Communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges’ (Ofsted, 2015, p11).

This comes as welcome news. The way in which EY teachers and their work has previously been framed failed to recognise how these practitioners support children’s development, enable it and further facilitate it through observation (Moyles. J. et al., 2002). Carnie (2003) laments that initial teacher education can be less about building knowledge of child development and educational philosophy and more about teaching beginner teachers how to deliver what she sees as a narrowed national curriculum. I tend to agree, though I recognise the variety of training providers nationally and the ways in which they differ in their approaches.

Purposeful play, effective learning

Another teacher colleague found she was able, during the pandemic, to hold more purposeful conversations than usual with her KS1 children. For example, a child was picking strawberries and counting them. This led to a conversation about the various parts of the plants. My colleague did not need to plan a lesson about parts

of plants, or ask the child to come and sit with her to count colourful teddies, for learning to take place. This offers evidence of the value of the three M's (Bottril, 2018) that practitioners can use to ensure they are thinking about their role as the adult whilst giving children the opportunity to thrive through play. These are: *making conversation* – are there opportunities for language development whilst the children explore their environments at their own pace?; *mark making* – is the environment resourced well so that the children can make their own symbolic meanings within the world they are exploring in?; *mathematics* – is there opportunity for children to play with mathematical concepts? Bottrill further explores the unnecessary phrase ‘Can I go play now?’, all too frequently heard soon after children are brought to a table for adult-led learning of the kind not always purposeful or meaningful for the child. Very often the child is already exploring through play concepts that adults have planned to ‘teach’.

What have been called ‘characteristics of effective learning’ are important in considering how children learn (Hutchin, 2013). Children learn in many ways, including through playing and exploring, being willing to have a go, being involved and concentrating, keeping on trying, making links, creating and thinking critically, choosing ways to do things and finding new ways (Early Education, 2012). Hutchins writes that to foster desirable learning characteristics, practitioners should allow time for children to think and reflect, provide a stimulating environment, and encourage play and exploration.

Such practices have been given an opportunity by the pandemic. For example, my teacher colleague discussed a day where her ‘pod children’ (a term describing children of key workers and vulnerable children placed in mixed age groups during the summer term) showed an interest in a set of atlases they had found. My colleague was able to give the children time to explore these in a way that was meaningful for them. The children, who were aged from six to ten, wanted to find out more about Africa, so they decided to pick a country each and the teacher suggested they could present in ways of their choosing what they had found out. She noted that the children worked independently on posters or presentations while sharing ideas as they did so. Geographical work is often prone to being marginalised, so it was great for her pod to be given the time to explore like this. Perhaps even more important was the chance for children to concentrate, have a go at something new, make links and create in a child-led way.

The pandemic has brought many challenges to practice. It has also given educators time to use child-led approaches with children beyond reception. As the current crisis ebbs and more normal days return, teachers at KS1 might consider the value of implementing in their classrooms those pedagogical approaches which inform and infuse early years practice. For the importance of play across the whole of childhood needs to be restated in school and restored there.

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