

Raising the Status of Block Play

Developing Froebelian Practice

An Early Learning and Childcare setting identified block play as an area requiring development. The aim was for the changes to have a meaningful impact, resulting in an increase in *creativity, self-activity and collaboration for children*. Of paramount importance was the development of Froebelian practice which would empower children to play and uphold their right to play.

Rationale for Change

Practitioners knew that children often played enthusiastically with blocks, though not on a daily basis. Concerns about the display of blocks and the organisation of the block area informed a rationale for change:

- There was insufficient space for block play to happen unhindered by other forms of play
- There was little order to the display of the blocks and this impeded self-selection and tidying-up
- Though children enjoyed using blocks, their engagement and creativity was limited

The development of practice based on Froebel's Philosophy would support change and establish good practice.



Cramped storage led to a lack of respect for blocks, neither children nor staff cared for them



The block area was too close to other resources

Process of Change

Over a six-week period, changes to the block area aimed to address concerns and develop Froebelian practice relating to unity, freedom and symbolic representation. Throughout the whole process observations and photographs documented changes to children's creativity, collaboration and what they represented with blocks.

Froebel's Principle of Unity

To Froebel (1887: 135) Unity meant appreciating the whole of something and its parts equally, he believed educators should give "prominence to the ever-living unity that is in all things". A well-considered display showed mathematical relationships between the blocks. It developed children's understanding of the blocks as a whole entity and gave prominence to each individually shaped block. Seeing the whole display at the start of play, building with individual blocks and creating the whole again when finished, reinforced Froebel's Principle of Unity.

Froebel's Principle of Freedom with Guidance

Froebelians value free play with blocks, however, some rules should apply (Tovey, 2017). Children had the freedom to create and collaborate as they wished, transporting and combining blocks was encouraged. The carefully designed display used coloured silhouettes and block names to support self-selection and provided guidance, establishing a caring and responsible attitude towards blocks.

Representations of Forms of Life, Beauty and Knowledge

Froebel believed that when children engage and build with blocks, they represent their inner understanding of life through their creations. Froebel categorised three forms of representation (Tovey, 2017):

Forms of Life

Using the blocks to create and represent things and events in the world around them

Forms of Beauty

Where the focus is on aesthetic aspects of pattern, order, symmetry and harmony

Forms of Knowledge

Exploring mathematical forms and scientific concepts such as shape, size, area, stability and balance



The new block display provided order and harmony and the larger area provided more space to play



Coloured silhouettes supported self-selection, guided tidying-up routines and showed mathematical relationships



Forms of Life - "This bit is Daddy's favourite, London, because he goes to work".



Forms of Beauty - "I did the sides the same because I like symmetry".



Forms of Knowledge - "I added these bricks there, so if the top bricks fall, it will keep them up".

Impact from Change

The changes to block play and the development of Froebelian practice impacted meaningfully upon children:

- Children's confidence and ability to symbolically represent ideas through blocks developed rapidly
- Progression of building ability and representation of the Forms of Life, Beauty and Knowledge were evident
- Children's creativity, self-activity and collaboration increased, so much so that by the end of the observation period these strengths were observed daily, whereas previously children had played with blocks intermittently

Practitioners reflected upon the impact and concluded children had become highly engaged learners, playing with true intensity. Children altered and perfected their block creations, maintained full attention, collaborated and seemed to the observer to be emanating contentment. When analysing this depth of involvement in play against the Leuven Involvement and Well-being Scales, it was agreed children were now showing signs of extremely high-level learning and well-being (Laevers et al., 2005). Froebel valued the depth of learning afforded by play. He believed when children played with blocks they were functioning at their highest level (Bruce, 1992).

Impact to the learning environment was evident and self-evaluation confirmed how successful the changes had been. In summary, the work for this project successfully raised the status of block play to the level of rich play. Education Scotland (2016:24) advises curriculums should be "offering rich and exciting play and learning opportunities", whereas, Bruce (1992: 26) identifies rich block play "develops when the adult acts as a powerful catalyst working hard to enable it". To conclude, the biggest impact came from the practitioners and their commitment to enable transformational change. The change to practice promoted children's creativity, self-activity, collaboration and fully upheld their right to play, as advocated by Article 31 of the UNCRC (Unicef, n.d.).



Froebel's (1887:55) opinion of play and what it provides children became most apparent: *"it gives... freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world"*.



References

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