

Developing Block Play Inside

'Rich block does not just occur. It develops when the adult acts as a powerful catalyst working hard to enable it.' (Bruce in Gura1992:26)

Introduction

The aim of the project was to develop the block play of children inside the setting, using wooden 'unit' and 'hollow' blocks, "the larger versions of Froebel's 'gifts'" (Tovey, 2017, p85). For children to engage in sustained and complex building beyond the early stages of Harriet Johnson's (1933) seven stages of block play. Stage one: carrying, stage two: stacking, stage three: bridging, stage four: enclosures, stage five: patterns and symmetry, stage six and seven: early and later representational. (Wellhausen 2001:41)



It was hoped that the children would use blocks in the setting as Froebel had intended "to represent: forms of life...forms of beauty...forms of knowledge" (Tovey 2017: 85).



Implementation

The existing block area was extended to almost three times its original size offering children plenty of space to work alone, alongside or collaboratively. Four sizes of blocks were provided and organised (with shadowing) so that the shapes flowed, logical patterns could be seen and connections made of parts making a whole, supporting children both mathematically and creatively.



Froebel's freedom with guidance was discussed, with emphasis on adult guidance to be given by respectful and sensitive adults observing and participating alongside the children, "A well planned block area includes freedom to choose and adult guidance in sharing the space."(Tovey 2020). For adults to be active observers, not directing play but ready to extend play through open ended comments or questions if appropriate.



The supporting adult was also needed to help with keeping the block area accessible and inviting to play in, this meant creating a climate of 'returning the blocks' when finished. Photographs of constructions were taken with children quickly accepting that what they built and created would be kept for only a short time once they had finished.



Conclusion

Observations of block play prior to this project were few in number and were almost entirely around block play outside. The observations during the project showed how sustained and more complex block play had become part of everyday play seen and participated in by many of the children. Block play inside has become a popular choice for children both individually and in groups, some children remaining engaged for very long periods of time.

The role of the adult has been pivotal, adults in the block area have had to be flexible and adaptable responding to the different stages children are at in their play. They have needed to protect constructions, support children with negotiations, encourage children to 'have a go' while being active observers who can extend the children's thinking. The high increase in block play observations and child engagement levels with blocks was maintained throughout the year, with complexity of play and building increasing as the children became more experienced block players and builders.



This project has also increased the visibility and profile of block play within the setting, the whole nursery school and with parents. The impact on individual children has been observed and recorded, those now leaving for school go with the knowledge and experience of sustained block play, its creativity and the self-initiated challenges they have met. Many of the returning children are now experienced block players and builders who will be able to continue developing and exploring while also being the role models for the new children. This continuous cycle will mean that block play at different stages will be taking place throughout the year, with children sharing and learning from and alongside each other with supportive adults to offer guidance.

References:

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