

The role of the adult and learning environments

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Research question:

“To what extent does planning creative opportunities allow children to develop sustained independent investigation skills?”

What changed?

Following a learning environment audit, there was a focus on developing resources so that there were more opportunities for open-ended exploratory play. For example, train tracks and garages were swapped for blocks and natural loose parts. This created endless opportunities of what the children were able to create with the materials.

In addition to this, the children were provided with open-ended experiences and problems to solve. The adults used the skills of facilitation to develop the children’s concentration and independent investigation skills.

In Reception, teachers introduced homework linked to the current theme of learning. The children and parents were set the task of finding out about an area the child wanted to learn about connected to the theme. This developed the children’s knowledge about the theme whilst raising parental engagement.

Nursery Case Study

We removed ‘closed’ resources from the classroom and presented the children with the problem of how to overcome not having a garage for the cars, which was usually the focus of their play. They gathered different resources, and created a roadway instead, complete with tunnels, grass, slopes, bumpy tracks, bridges and ponds, all of which the cars and trucks had to navigate.

This activity led to a wealth of ideas, extensive conversation and negotiation, as well as strong teamwork and collaboration. In addition, there were discussions around which vehicles would manage better over the difficult terrains. What would happen to the smaller cars crossing the pond? Which vehicles negotiated the narrow track more successfully?

Following on from this activity, on the same day, one of our focus children decided he wanted to design and build his own car using various resources, rather than returning to playing with the cars.



The role of the adult and learning environments (continued)

Reception case study

"The curious incident of the dinosaur in the classroom". Alongside enhancing the resources within the learning environment to provide more open-ended learning opportunities, teachers provided the children with imaginary experiences to ignite curiosity and investigative skills.

During a learning theme about dinosaurs, teachers set up a scene where 'someone had visited their classroom and created a mess. Several clues were left for the children to explore, including an egg, some footprints, and poo! The children were set with the task of investigating what could have happened. This created awe and wonder in the classroom and the children worked collaboratively to explore and investigate. The adults used the skills of interaction and facilitation to ensure that pupils could sustain their thinking and investigation.

Following this, the children collectively decided that a dinosaur had visited their classroom. They spent time exploring the egg, discussing what could be inside and how they could help it hatch, wrote about dinosaurs, and dissected the poo. This gave the children opportunities to develop their knowledge about dinosaurs, while applying skills in writing, measure for mathematics, and the cause and change effects of water.

What we noticed

In both settings, over the course of the project, it was observed that the children engaged for longer periods with their environment and had more confidence to try new things. The children worked more collaboratively with one another using the open-ended resources to construct creations to enhance their play. They listened to one another and adapted their creations and their play developed and celebrated achieving a shared goal. The children would make connections with their learning and orally recall previous learning and use this to support them when trying something new.

Points to consider

What do you need to do:

- Review the resources and enhancements available to children. Are they open-ended? Do they create awe and wonder to spark curiosity and investigation?
- Plan experiences that make learning purposeful and motivating.
 - Link experiences to what the children know and are interested in so that it can build upon their knowledge.
 - Support the interactions through in-the-moment/teachable moments cycle of facilitation.

What to avoid:

- Only using closed resources, such as building sets designed to be one thing, e.g. a ready-made pirate ship.
- Teaching children something that is factually incorrect. So, in the above example, although they believed a dinosaur had visited their classroom, the children also needed to know that dinosaurs are extinct. This may arise incidentally through the learning experience if a child raises it but would ideally be reflected upon following the learning experience so that the engaging and immersive nature of the opportunity is not spoilt. After all learning can be magical!