

‘All they do is play’

An article about the importance of play during the early stages of learning with a focus on those with special educational needs and disabilities.

‘All they do is play’ is a phrase that most staff in an early learning environment will have heard, whether it be in the working environment or in conversation in the wider community. In this article, we would like to discuss the importance of play and open-ended opportunities for students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) in a curriculum pathway for ages 4-16.

Working in the early years for the majority of our careers (25 years combined) and then specialising in children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), has allowed us to gain a deep understanding of the importance of play for our children. There is a wealth of research, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Loris Malaguzzi to name a few, and policy and guidance e.g. Birth to 5 Matters, Ofsted, Early Years Framework, that supports the need for high quality play in education.

Working in a specialist setting with an increasing intake of students with SLD, it was identified that the current curriculum provision required a re-write. From research, we have created a play-based curriculum for students age 4-16 that supports their developmental stage whilst incorporating content that is prevalent to actual age. E.g. independence, independent living, life skills etc.

Building a curriculum that is appropriate for our students and their developmental stage, whilst acknowledging their age, is essential for achieving their maximum potential. A play-based approach focussing on communication, relationship building and functional skills is, as we have found in our practice, an effective way to support student progression. Vygotski argued that ‘play’ is the fundamental cog in turning the keys of learning. It provides opportunities to practice life skills, learn important maths and English skills, build positive relationships, explore the world around us and understand real life situations in a safe way. (Whitebread, 2012).

Having a play-based curriculum can sometimes be misinterpreted as one where random toys are set out and children are left to their own devices. It is important to recognise that this is not how a successful play-based curriculum is implemented. Children and young people need support, guidance, facilitation and repetition of activities. Playful learning occurs when a learner is ‘leading learning, exploring the unknown and finding joy’ (Ryan, Krechevsky, Baker, Schulz et al. 2023, p49). ‘Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning and how to learn’ (Malaguzzi, 1998, p83).

As practitioners we understand that ‘play both indoors and outdoors is a fundamental commitment to children throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems’ (Birth to Five Matters, 2021). Despite there being seven areas of the EYFS curriculum there should be a key focus on the prime areas. The prime areas are of the highest importance to ensure that people with SEND are able to live a fulfilling and independent life. A key focus on communication and language is the golden thread that runs through an effective SEND curriculum and can be nurtured effectively through play. Without simple communication skills students are not able to express their wants and needs and therefore not able to access learning. ‘All children have a ‘voice’ but the way they communicate their wants, needs and rights will differ. It is our responsibility as practitioners to ensure that a child's voice is not overlooked because it is not

communicated in conventional ways for example through speaking' (Prodger and Devine, 2021). Picture Exchange cards, Objects of Reference and Makaton sign language gives those who can't communicate verbally a method of initiating communication, reducing frustration and challenging behaviours. Other communication therapies and theories such as Intensive Interaction, Interactive Play and Sherbourne Developmental Movement should be entwined within the everyday play offer for children with more complex needs, instead of it being a weekly intervention session. These therapies and theories show children 'how to enjoy being with other people- relate, know, understand and practice communication routines and turn taking' (Hewitt, 2011). Staff are encouraged to spend less time undertaking paperwork and more time playing directly with children to support communication progression. With an iPad in hand, eye contact and body language cannot always be understood by students with communication difficulties.

Practitioners working with children with additional needs should understand that progression will look different to their neurotypical peers; 'age-related expectations are not appropriate for a significant proportion of pupils; and that the way we measure their progress accounts for potential differences in the way these pupils learn' (Rochford Review, 2016). The play-based curriculum should be adapted to meet the developmental stage of the students as they 'deserve and need distinct and separate pedagogies, which in turn drive and inform distinct and separate curricula' (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2013). Learning should be individualised to each student and Educational Health Care targets should be at the forefront of the practitioners focus as these targets are unique to that child. Developing parents' understanding of the importance of play is essential for consistency. 'When working collaboratively with parents of children with SEND, the key worker plays a significant role in building trusting relationships with both the child and their parents' (Prodger and Devine, 2021) thus promoting the support of progression for the child. A tailored curriculum, alongside a keyworker for each child ensures that the child is fully supported through their early years, Key Stage one and Key Stage two.

Play continues to be the main form of learning throughout our entire pathway curriculum. As we progress to Key Stage three and four, the three main areas of learning remain and further links to the community are built upon, leading to learning as many life and relationship skills, steps to independent living and building upon communication. Once students reach Key Stage four they complete ASDAN Lifeskills accreditations which offer 'a flexible way to recognise and reward small steps of achievement, with a focus on personalised learning and progression' (ASDAN, 2024). We progress the provision through play by adding in further 'real life' opportunities that are appropriate for our students that link to living independently. This is where play starts to blur into real life. This blurring is a seamless transition as students have had opportunities to understand and explore situations through play before meeting the real-life ones.

'All children want to play. This is also true for children with disabilities. Facilitating their engagement in play, whatever children's capacities, is a central premise of people who view play as fundamental for their development and well-being' (Bianquin, Encarnação, Ray-Kaeser, 2018). One Key Stage two teacher from the pathway commented on how 'I have worked with a child for over year now and since changing to a play-based curriculum I have seen more progression in her in one month than the whole previous year'. Another teacher from Key Stage four commented on how the 'Key Stage four students have responded well to the new curriculum style. They enjoy accessing their curriculum through a more hands on approach and have fun while they are learning key skills. They have been able to develop their life skills and are even able to access accredited units through a play-based curriculum. They enjoy their days and move quickly through learning and play tasks that keep their attention and captivate their imaginations, broadening their experiences'. In conclusion, the research and our current

implementation of a play-based curriculum shows us that play forms the basis of all learning for students with severe or profound learning difficulties and a low cognitive age. (Anderson, 2022).

Key words – play, special needs, progress, learning, curriculum

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