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Chapter 1: The importance of play

The characteristics of effective teaching and learning are grounded in children's play. Therefore, to understand how essential play is as a component for young children's learning and development, it is important to reflect on the theorists and pioneers who truly valued play, and have highlighted how children learn through play. This has, in turn, informed the development of the early years curriculum and led to how we plan play in the early years.

Theories on play

Friedrich Fröebel (1782-1852), a German educator who invented the first kindergarten, said that, *'play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul'*. The garden was central to Fröebel's kindergarten, as he believed that the outdoors environment opened a world of learning possibilities. He explained that, when outdoors, children have opportunities to use their senses which can extend vocabulary.

Susan Sutherland Isaacs (1885-1948), an educational psychologist and psychoanalyst, stressed the importance of an enabling environment to support children's exploration and play and placed emphasis on the practitioner as an observer, recording their play through observation-based assessment.

The McMillan sisters, Margaret and Rachel, (1860-1931 and 1859-1917), opened an open-air nursery school in 1914. They emphasised the importance of nurturing children as well as educating them. They believed

Reggio inspired learning at Woolenwick Nursery and Infant school, Stevenage

Christina Anderson, Inclusion leader at the nursery and infant school, explains the Reggio inspired philosophy behind the learning at Woolenwick.

The school sits at the edge of a forest, where forest school is offered to all the children on a daily basis. During this time, children explore nature. They identify leaves and trees. They create patterns and art from the twigs, leaves and bark. The children have opportunities to run through the forest, climb and explore. It is a natural enclosure making it safe for them to wander within the confines of the forest.

The forest school also enables stories to be told using natural resources, such as pebbles, twigs and sticks. Children tell their stories before writing them down. Natural resources can be seen throughout the setting with pebbles used for counting, pegs scribed with letters so that children can make words, old torches, radios and telephones that can be taken apart with screwdrivers so that children can find out how they work. Children are encouraged to be curious, to explore and to be active in their learning.

The setting also has various open rooms where children learn to create and gain information around their interests. The hall is used daily for yoga, mindfulness and music. Children enjoy these experiences, and they are especially valuable for those who find it difficult to settle or focus, as they are calming experiences.

An ongoing project on felt patterns came about as the children were interested in the name of the school 'Woolenwick', which means that it

He saw the practitioner's role as working in the zone of proximal development, knowing where the child is at and where they can succeed, but within the comfortable boundaries of not feeling stressed or pressured.

Practitioners regularly liaise with parents or carers and other professionals about children, but it is just as important to involve children by talking and listening to them at every opportunity, especially if they are not experiencing these interactions at home. Practitioners need to be positive in their practice, attitude and language, and energetic in their play. They need to be constantly reflecting on the best way that children learn in their care.

Foster independence, resilience and boost self-esteem

Practitioners need to encourage and motivate children to be adventurous, foster curiosity, problem solve and find solutions to gain a full understanding. In order to do this they need to enter the child's play in a way that will help them discover, wonder or experiment more. They must know the best time to involve themselves in their play and when to just let them play, giving them uninterrupted time to fully explore.

There should be an emphasis on 'risk benefit', in other words considering the learning that can happen when children are allowed to push boundaries. For example, a child climbing the lower branches of a tree might fall and could be hurt. A standard risk assessment may conclude that the lower branches should be cut to remove the risk, rather than looking at ways to minimise it by placing a mat below the tree and checking that the branches are strong enough to support a child's weight.