

Introduction

I work as a Higher Level Teaching Assistant in the Early Years Foundation Stage of a primary school in the north of England and I am a mother of two wonderful children.

Having reflected on my practice with families, I realised my passion for partnership was unintentionally not being reflected within my own home. As a practitioner, I am dedicated to supporting families and working together with parents to enhance learning and outcomes for children. It was important to me my values for practice were equally applied within my own home as my children deserved the best support with their learning too. Therefore, I decided to conduct a case study with my daughter and partner in hope to strengthen the partnership approach to home learning.

Ethics

To ensure my case study was appropriate I maintained balance between considerations of ethics and parenting. Ultimately, protecting my daughter and preventing harm being caused was imperative which Arnold (2015, p.19) discusses in her studies with her own grandchildren, sharing that relationships between them 'took precedence over all else' (Arnold, 2015, p.19) .I fostered this approach in my study, remaining ethically aware and using pseudonyms 'Jessica' for my daughter and 'John' for her father.

I provided John with a copy of my assignment brief, giving time to reflect and ask questions before obtaining his informed consent. I was mindful of 'the fear that taking work back to others in our stories might disrupt the very relationships and family systems we're trying to improve by writing' (Ellis, 2007, p.17).Therefore, I shared my writing throughout and 'embraced the risk of uncertainty' as Matthiesen and Szulevicz (2018, p.336) suggest 'by always being attentive to others' responses and adjusting actions accordingly'. I frequently sought approval of my writing and confirmed consent with John throughout as advised in British Educational Research Association (2018) guidance.

My Beliefs and Values

I believe parents are children's first educators (Department for Education, [DfE] , 2017), building important foundations. The quality of these foundations varies as families are diverse; each providing different opportunities. In my practice, I dedicate time to understanding individual families' lives believing parents' expertise is unmeasurable. Moran et al (2004) explain that recognising parents' expertise and doing things 'with' them rather than 'to' them is an effective way to form respectful partnerships and promote learning. I intend to improve my practice by learning from the knowledge and experiences my partner shares and applying this when supporting other families in the future.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) highlight the impact of the home on achievement. I understand modern pressures, juggling daily life alongside providing learning experiences. I am humble in my approach (Freire,1996) and honest about my own struggles as a parent creating authentic and relatable relationships. I have worked

with parents who feel they are not knowledgeable enough to work alongside practitioners. I believe services could be more focussed around the needs of the parent rather than the needs of the setting.

I can see a lack of additional support in my locality, cuts in funding have led to the loss of community services and external agencies, in particular Children's Centres which represented an innovative intervention unlike almost any other (DfE, 2012) for people to come together. Sylva et al (2015) expresses when families had opportunities to engage in local services, better outcomes were promoted as often the centres had potential to lessen the effects of disadvantage. I endeavour to mitigate against some of this through being an accessible figure of support, acknowledging the impact of poverty on the lives local children and families (Whalley, 2017). However, I acknowledge the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and how there are many interacting social systems that impact on children and their families, inferring my practice in isolation is not enough and a combined approach from all systems is needed to bring about great change. I respect the work of Freire (1996) and concentrate on the strengths of a family rather than the deficits. I reassure struggling families they can still provide the best for their child's development: interest and time. Through interest and time Blanden (2006) noted children can 'buck the trend' despite disadvantage. I believe supported oppressed families provides relief from the traps of poverty and the narrowness of the education system.

My Case Study

I created a leaflet explaining the concepts of involvement (Laevers, 1997) and schema (Athey 2007 and Arnold 2015) to support discussions with John. We analysed the observations using the Leuven Scale (Laevers, 2005) and schema theory (Athey 2007 and Arnold 2015).

I have detailed our discoveries about Jessica's development and what we plan to further support this below:

Observation One

Jessica picked a flower carried it over to the step. 'Need more' she called and set off. Jessica worked her way around the border of the grass selecting flowers. When each flower was picked she carried it to the step and placed it down forming a line. Each time, she returned to the border of the grass, appearing to be following a path she had created in her mind. A flower blew out of her line, she laughed and said 'He's out of the school line'. She picked the flower up, shook her head and placed it at the end of the line. She continued working her way across the border of the grass selecting more flowers and placing them down next to each other.

John and I agreed Jessica was deeply involved (Laevers, 2005) in her play, 'knowing what she wanted and needed to do' (p38-39). She showed many signs of involvement (Laevers, 2005) concentrating intently on the picking of each individual flower, the placing of it in the line and how she remembered the spot where she last picked a flower to return to. Her energy was another indicator as she was 'mentally active' (Laevers, 2005) throughout. Her play was complex and creative as Jessica gave her flower line her undivided attention and gave great care to every aspect. Her play was intricate with a purpose. Her facial expressions showed she thoroughly enjoyed it.

The repeated patterns involving lines in her play indicated a trajectory schema (Athey, 2007). Arnold (2015) discusses 'line schemas' when a child 'represents lines when lining up objects or making marks' (p75). John and I discussed 'the figurative' and 'dynamic' aspects of schemas (Athey, 1990), the line itself being 'figurative' while the 'dynamic' aspect is the linear movement, we could identify both aspects within her play.

Observation Two

Jessica was helping unpack shopping and took out a bag of oranges. She placed a tea towel onto the floor and began placing the oranges one by one in a line. She carefully removed the tops of the oranges and placed them all upwards on the tea towel. John asked Jessica what she was doing and she replied '*getting these ready*'. She then opened a packet of apples and began lining them up next to the oranges-'*getting them ready*'. When they were lined up she gave the fruit a slight push and watched them roll across the tea towel. Jessica smiled and laughed loudly pointing at the oranges as they rolled.

Again, Jessica was involved (Laevers, 2005) in her play, she had chosen the activity independently. We placed Jessica's involvement (Laevers, 2005) at four on The Leuven Scale (Laevers, 2005) as we could see 'her eyes were showing brightness and her body language demonstrated her involvement'. When lining up the fruit her eyes were fixed and her body was still and when she placed fruit in position her satisfaction was evident, she was relaxed, laughing loudly.

Again, Jessica's play indicated a trajectory schema (Athey 2007). She was creating lines with the fruit (figurative aspect- Athey 1990) and slowly moving the fruit (dynamic aspect- Athey 1990).

Observation three

Jessica was at the dining table preparing to make an Easter bonnet with her grandma. She selected a box of cotton sheep, organising them into a line individually. Each time a sheep fell over she tried again to carefully stand it. As parents it was intense to watch but Jessica never gave up and succeeded through persistence. She then collected the chicks whilst muttering to herself '*go to boe-boes*' lying the sheep down in a line. After ten minutes her grandma

asked her 'shall we make the bonnet now?' Jessica observed her 'line masterpieces' and replied 'No I'm done!' leaving the table.

It was clear to see Jessica was deeply involved (Laevers, 2005) she was fixated on standing the animals up in a line. We rated her involvement (Laevers, 2005) as 'five' on the Leuven Scale (Laevers, 2005). She showed deep concentration and persistence. Her reaction time when the sheep fell over was remarkable and she was willing to keep working until her line appeared how she wanted it to be. It was clear her interest centred on lining the animals up rather than actually making the bonnet.

At this point we could see how Jessica's schemas (Athey 2007 and Arnold 2015) were evident and guiding her play. She naturally played in an organised and structured nature with objects and this appeared to be the goal.

Jessica's learning

Working in partnership with John in relation to our daughter's learning has been an enlightening experience. Jessica's love of ordering objects into lines and her delicacy when doing this was heart-warming to observe. We have learnt so much about her changing character and her growth as a learner. Through self-initiated play Jessica is beginning to notice her strengths and competency, showing she is a self-regulated thinker and learner.

Going forward, we are going to provide richer opportunities for Jessica to organise items on a larger scale. We aim to help Jessica develop the vocabulary to describe her ordering of items and together, in partnership, we are going to talk to Jessica's setting about her interests (Athey 2007 and Arnold 2015). This way learning is being promoted in all environments she accesses.

Reflection

This experience has been an amazing opportunity to share with my children's father. Together, we have spent time talking, researching and sharing Jessica's learning. John's confidence has increased. He recently explained Jessica's play and potential schemas (Athey 2007 and Arnold 2015) to the wider family, showing images of her learning and explaining it assertively and concisely. It was a pleasure to watch. I am eager to share the leaflet I created along with my experiences and expertise with parents in my setting. I hope they will grow in confidence and togetherness in their children's learning as John and I have.

We both feel our parenting has improved thanks to our deeper connection and focus on learning opportunities at home. This experience has motivated me to reach out to more fathers in my setting. John expressed he often felt '*outnumbered*' by mothers in educational settings, influencing his desire to participate. I feel by creating sessions for fathers I can break down this barrier and may investigate this expression further in a wider study opportunity.

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Appendix one

What is Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is the state of being comfortable, healthy and happy.

When a child has high levels of wellbeing he/she can become an active learner.

Signs of wellbeing include:

- Openness
- Receptivity
- Flexibility
- Self-confidence and self-esteem
- Being able to defend oneself ; assertiveness
- Vitality
- Relaxation
- Inner peace
- Enjoyment without restraints



Frameworks For Thinking: Schema, Involvement and Wellbeing.



What are Schemas?

Schemas are repeated patterns of actions and behavior. We develop them through childhood to make sense of our world.

Have you noticed your child likes to:

- Line up their toys?
- Take things from one place to another in prams, trolleys or bags?
- Cover themselves or others with blankets or paints?
- Spin the wheels on toys?
- Empty all the blocks out of the box and scatter them across the floor?

This could be your child's schema - their repeated behavior/action that enables them to process their surroundings and play in a way that they enjoy and understand.



Types of Schemas:

Trajectory- A child will be interested in how things and themselves move. You may see your child often running around, throwing things or playing with running water .

Connecting- A child will be interested in joining things together . You may see your child tying things together with rope and tape, joining train carriages together or taking them apart and enjoying joining dots when drawing.

Rotation- A child will be interested in things that are circular or rotate. This includes playing with wheels on toys, playing with water wheels in sand or water and enjoys watching the washing machine.

Scattering- A child will love to empty things onto the floor or table etc. and scatter them around using their body.

Orientation- A child will be interested in looking at themselves or others from different angles and areas. They may like to hang upside down, turn toys upside down and look intently at them or look through peep holes.

Transporting- A child will love to move things from one place to another. This can include putting objects into trolleys, prams or buckets and transfer them from one place to another. Nothing will remain in its place.

Enveloping- A child will enjoy covering themselves, others or objects. This may be with blankets, paints or paper.

Enclosure- A child will enjoy creating enclosed spaces or being in closed spaces. Sometimes they can place objects/toys in closed spaces or may just like to be in there themselves.

It is important to remember you can only consider behavior a schema if you see it occurring regularly across the child's play.

What is Involvement?

Involvement refers to how engaged a child is in their play.

Deep Involvement enables children to access deep level learning.

Your child may show involvement through their:

- Concentration
- Energy
- Complexity and creativity
- Facial expressions
- Composure
- Precision
- Reaction time
- Verbal expression
- Satisfaction

