

**An in-setting display and how it promotes play based  
learning**

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**Word count: 1,491**

When working with children, the learning environment needs to be enjoyable and engaging, so that children will be interested and motivated to learn and develop. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states in its' "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" document (2020); that educators in early childhood settings, should use a broad range of resources and assessment methods to identify areas of children's interest and to ensure that all children, regardless of age or developmental stage, can access the resources and learning.

When deciding how to present a display that embraced a play-based approach, inspiration was found after researching education pioneer Robert Owen. The intent behind this display was to echo Robert Owen's ideology of bringing nature into the classroom to study, to encourage the natural curiosity of children and to capture experiences on various mediums (Pound, 2006). This researcher felt comfortable with the task due to personal experience in education settings and understood how displays can be a powerful and effective tool in connecting resources to practical learning.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the display could not be created in collaboration with children and was instead created independently. The intended audience of the display was children ranging from three to five years old in a setting that specifically focuses part of the short-term timetable on outdoor learning; and integrates this commitment to outdoor learning throughout the week, as a stated requirement of premises suitability in the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS) (2017). The location of this kind of setting is a smaller school in a rural area, that resides in a more intimate community with a blend of family dynamics; and shares a close partnership with parents and carers.

The children involved are each unique and are influenced by their own interests and personal situations; but share a passion for outdoor learning. The intended display reflects Froebel's views on encouragement of the natural curiosity that young children possess and to better understand the world through spirituality and sensory exploration (Pound, 2006). The display requires children to go on a walk together with key adults to collect natural

found items and bring them back into the classroom to explore. The intended outcomes from this display compliment all areas of the Development Matters (2012) document that early years settings use as a guide to assess child development. This is achieved by including malleable and exploratory tools to manipulate the found items, ensuring there are enough resources for children to play together or to share resources, encouraging children to understand the uses of the resources, to offer opportunities to play with others and to have discussions with adults. The display also features fiction and non-fiction books and vocabulary, numerals and measuring instruments, natural items, technological items, information relating to plants and the seasons to promote the development of each child's world knowledge, and space to display artwork and 'action shots' of the children exploring and playing. Technological items such as digital cameras for children to photograph points of interest while outdoors were additionally introduced together with resources to explore natural artefacts and potentially initiate roleplay scenarios to promote the development of creative and imaginative play. With elements such as these, the three prime and four specific learning areas of Development Matters are supported.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning (COEL), also featured in the Development Matters of the EYFS, are another important aspect of learning for children in the Early Years, the development of which will be supported when children are using the display. COEL are significant because they demonstrate how a child learns when involved with meaningful, engaging and active learning experiences.

The educational pioneers and theorists who inspired the format of the display were Robert Owen and Freidrich Froebel who both suggested that children thrive and develop through interaction in outdoor and nature-centric learning. The display also fosters an element of Possibility Thinking as popularised by Anna Craft (1992) cited in Wegerif et al. (2015); as the display has the potential to be altered and the resources interpreted by the users to support their own play. Moreover, the display compliments elements of Reggio Emilia education by supporting children to be "authors of their own learning" through

exploration of their own interests. Children engage with these experiences through meaningful play and independent projects, developing their own ideas, making interpretations of the play they are engaging in and by revisiting these ideas to make refinements and clarifications on how they understand differing areas of learning (Hewett, 2001).

Feedback from the formative assessment presentation yielded lots of positive critique. Upon reflection, the display looked effective at promoting the areas of development in terms of the Early Years assessment criteria. Looking through the lens of Goodman's Levels of Reflection (Jasper, 2013), the presentation of the formative portion of the assessment fit comfortably into the first level of reflection, in the sense that the display was described in detail to peers; but also resides in the second level of reflection, because the display compliments the views of educational theorists mentioned, as a means of explaining why certain qualities are present in the display. Throughout the planning of the display, critical reflection happened to evaluate how effective each characteristic was for promoting play-based learning and ensuring the display was more child-led and less clinical. In the third level of reflection, the wider influences are taken into consideration, primarily from political and ethical influences. When considering the real-life implications of creating displays in education settings, other aspects come to the fore, such as the financial capabilities of the setting, ensuring that all children can access the resources, and that policies are being followed to ensure the safety of the children using the equipment. These restrictions could be due to cultural differences such as having items that cannot be handled by people of certain faiths or easily utilised by children with special educational needs or disabilities.

A personal critical assessment of the display found that if it had been made in the classroom as planned, the adjustments needed would have been much easier to achieve and there would have been more resources to hand, however in the context of the physical manifestation of the display, this could only be achieved on a table and therefore would not be accessible in that

sense. Some resources were difficult to source such as themed books and magnifying glasses as these are more commonly available in settings.

Feedback from the formative assessment also found that the connections between the display and the documentation for Early Years was well embedded, in terms of being clear on how the seven areas of development and which COELs could potentially be assessed when children used the display. It was also noted that the theorists connected to the development of the display were appropriately related. Thirdly, the feedback suggested that the introduction of more sensory experiences such as fragranced plants, added extra opportunities for children to develop and to also “learn about learning”. It was mentioned that although the display did not have a title, leaving the area at the top of the board for children’s artwork and photographs of the experiences pertaining to the display, were a positive use of the space, and a reflection of some of values held at Reggio Emilia schools. Further suggestions from peers included the potential to extend the learning on the theme of nature, by including real-life experiences of watching seeds grow in a controlled environment. The theme of nature also means that the learning can be extended in numerous ways, including making bug hotels and gardening.

In conclusion, the display was appropriately resourced for its’ intentions. After its initial use by the children, there is the perfect opportunity to collaborate with the children to make improvements. It also has the potential to be a display that could be integrated into the long-term plan of the setting and be changed throughout the year depending on the season. It could be changed to reflect activities that suit fictional books, examples could include stories by Julia Donaldson, such as ‘The Gruffalo’ or ‘Stick Man’, and Eric Carl such as ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ or ‘The Seed’.

The display helps children to understand the world around them by creating responses of curiosity and exploration in a child-led activity with practitioners available to ask and answer questions; as questioning enables children to develop in various ways such as promoting interest, explaining knowledge, creating a dialogue with others, and developing vocabulary (Brown, 2017). By

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providing experiences such as those available on the display, children are supported to critically analyse the world around them and make sense of it.

The theorists mentioned were suited to the nature of the display and the versatility of the display means it can be changed according to the children's interests or areas of development. In that sense, the Possibility Thinking extends beyond the display to embrace all children's need and interests in the setting.

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