

In character

Play and self-regulation go hand in hand on the road to effective learning, finds *Helen Moylett*



Play is crucial to self-regulation, which in turn is key to how well we learn

It is now well established in research (Bronson 2010, Whitebread 2012) and practice that a major determinant of children's success as learners is their ability to self-regulate. As a result, self-regulation has emerged as a major strand of the Newham Reception Innovation Project, in which a group of east London school leaders is seeking to 'maximise pupil progress through play-based learning in Reception classes'.

Emotional self-regulation concerns having positive feelings about oneself as a learner, a sense of well-being, and the ability to manage one's feelings and behaviour. Cognitive self-regulation is built on positive dispositions to learning plus awareness and control of one's own thinking.

The importance of self-regulation – and what we know about it – lies at the heart of the Characteristics of Effective Learning within the EYFS: **Playing and exploring** –

engagement: Finding out and exploring; playing with what they know; being willing to 'have a go'
Active learning – motivation: Being involved and concentrating; keeping trying; enjoying achieving what they set out to do
Creating and thinking critically – thinking: Having their own ideas; making links; choosing ways to do things.

Children are born playful and curious and need time and space to develop and learn through their natural desires to engage with other people and the environment in which they live. 'Playing and exploring', 'Active learning' and 'Creating and thinking critically', underpinned by deep levels of well-being, combine to produce emotionally intelligent learners.

Respect for children as active, playful learners may seem at odds with the idea of early learning goals and setting out what children will learn by the time they are aged five. Many

FURTHER READING

- Bruce, T (2001). *Learning Through Play: Babies, Toddlers and the Foundation Years*. Hodder
- Clelland, M et al (2015). *Stop, Think, Act: Integrating Self-Regulation in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Routledge
- Rogers, S and Evans, J (2008). *Inside Role-Play in Early Education*. Routledge
- Rose, J and Rogers, S (2012). *Adult Roles in the Early Years*. Open University Press
- Stewart, N (2012). *How Children Learn: The characteristics of effective early learning*. Early Education
- For all references, see: www.nurseryworld.co.uk

young children in Reception cannot meet all the early learning goals but are still good learners. It is therefore vital for them to have the chance to demonstrate their skills and for practitioners to recognise the importance of the characteristics in action.

As Froebel said all those years ago, 'Play is the work of the child', and as Helen Huleatt of Community Playthings reminds us, 'He was counter-cultural in his day, vehemently protesting the "stamping process" of an educational system in which children were forced into a mould instead of being valued and nurtured as individuals. Our results-driven system is not fundamentally different.'

The formal behaviourist approach where all learning is shaped by the teacher, as in the direct instruction pre-schools of the High Scope evaluation (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997), has no long-term impact on the aspects of life that help us sustain our long-term learning, loving and earning power.

Concentrating in the early years on how children learn by supporting their well-being and learning strategies enables them to be more self-reliant active learners who can exercise control over their own lives. If we concentrate on what, rather than how, children learn, any short-term gain soon wears off and these children are then left with insufficient emotional and cognitive ➤



THE NEWHAM RECEPTION INNOVATION PROJECT

Last summer, a group of Newham head teachers and early years leaders were becoming increasingly uneasy about whether they were really encouraging children in Reception to be independent active learners.

One concern was that EYFS practice in Reception could become less play-based than it should be if schools felt pushed into having children learn for a short-term gain.

All these leaders believe children are entitled to become good learners whatever their circumstances and that the best early years pedagogy rests on a deep understanding of child development and the characteristics of effective early learning. The big question was how to bridge the gap between these convictions and the everyday practice and lived experience of the children in their schools.

Reception-class colleagues all professed to understand the power of play, but there was growing evidence to indicate that in some schools the value of play was becoming misunderstood. In



response, the leaders applied for funding from the Local Authority Innovation Fund and set up a project with the aim of 'maximising pupil progress, through play-based learning in reception classes, by developing: effective EYFS leadership skills, and the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers and other Reception-based adults'.

This approach recognises the crucial role of both vision and influence in leadership. Participants are working on their own leadership skills in order to support their colleagues successfully in changing their practice.

Some of the questions being addressed are:

- What does an EY leader really need to know?
- How do areas of provision enable children to progress?

- How does an EY leader need to monitor and professionally develop their staff?

A key feature of the project is peer learning and regular meetings of leaders to share ongoing work combined with a visit to the early years classes.

The first meeting helped to share an understanding of excellent Reception practice and led to a simple audit of provision in each school based on the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

Schools were starting from different places and have varying levels of staff experience and expertise, but all are working on making practice and provision more playful. There are also emerging themes of developing staff's early language interaction skills, the power of imaginative play and following children's interests.

Taking part are Kaizen, Sir John Heron, Earlham, Gainsborough and North Beckton Primary Schools, Woodgrange Infant School and SEBD school Eleanor Smith.



Pretend play has an important role – expressed in the Characteristics of Effective Learning as 'playing with what they know'. This sort of play marks a move to a higher level of thinking and connects to logical and abstract thought – all very important in becoming a good learner.

Practitioners working on the Cambridgeshire Independent Learning project found three- to five-year-olds demonstrated metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities during playful activities, particularly in constructional and pretend play (Whitebread et al, 2007). Whitebread and O'Sullivan's (2012) study of complex social pretend play reviewed extensive self-regulatory opportunities within this kind of play. It found children guide the play narrative forward either in character ('Oh dear, the baby's crying!') or by stepping momentarily out of character ('OK, you pretend you're the baby and you're crying because you're upset').

Whitebread (2013) reminds us of the crucial importance of the adult role, 'This is perhaps the most sophisticated type of play in which young children engage, and one that many children struggle to perform well. As such, it is a prime example of where a skilful adult can participate, taking on some of the regulatory role, and if they are able to sensitively withdraw as the children become more competent, it can be an excellent vehicle to support a range of linguistic and self-regulation abilities.' ■

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self-regulation resources to manage their lives successfully (CfBT, 2010).

It was the concentration on how we learn that ensured the High Scope children were more likely to go to college, rather than filling them up with knowledge that is soon forgotten.

This concern about play and the foolishness involved in expecting children to be good learners if we ignore their interests and desires has informed the development of the Newham Reception Innovation Project (see box).

ADULT ROLE

An overarching theme of the Newham case studies will be the adult role – how all adults based in Reception classes can help children to play and learn well through the positive relationships and enabling environments they provide.

As Rogers (2013) reminds us, 'We

should not think only in terms of the characteristics of effective learning but also the characteristics of effective pedagogy and what these might mean for adults working with young children.'

Focusing on how children learn leads to better outcomes

