

The Importance of Play in the Social, Cognitive and Linguistic Development of the Young Child with a Moderate Mental Handicap

Knowledge of the nature of play and its relationship to child development is essential for the teacher of children who have a moderate mental handicap. These children often have difficulties in learning to play. Valuable learning experiences can be provided through a structured play programme in the early years.

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The early years are crucial for all children, and particularly so for children with special needs. Crucial developments in language, mobility and social skills take place during these years. These skills are vitally important for future learning, and the need to acquire them effectively and early has been widely recognised. This holds true for all children, including children with a moderate mental handicap. The role of play in facilitating this development has also been the subject of much research and debate.

ORIGINS OF PLAY THEORY

Educationalists, philosophers and psychologists have been concerned for decades with the nature of play and its role in learning. Mussen (1983) presents research on the early theories of play and gives a comprehensive overview of the positions which have influenced our current knowledge of the area. Four twentieth century theorists - Freud, Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky - have been the most influential in this area. While Freud's psychoanalytic theory of play tends to emphasise the significance of preferred play in children's emotional development, cognitive theorists have been more concerned with the link between play and intellectual development. Piaget (1962), in particular, chooses to consider play in terms of its contribution to the development of children's intellectual capacities. Piaget's theory of play has been criticised because of his concentration on the inter-relationship between play and cognitive development. However, it must be acknowledged that his theories of learning have had a dominant influence on

classroom practice. Indeed many educational programmes, including the Irish *Curaclam na Bunscoile (An Roinn Oideachais 1971)*, acknowledge his contention: "The need for educational programmes, that are rich and diversified in concrete, manipulative and sensory learning experiences, is consequently being realised" (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 1995, p. 59).

BRUNER, PIAGET AND VYGOTSKY: INFLUENCES

Another psychologist, Jerome Bruner, whose ideas of cognitive development paralleled those of Piaget to a certain extent, has also written exclusively about play (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976). Bruner, however, ascribes a great deal of importance to the child's social interactions, particularly with adults, in the early years. He maintains that children learn about some of the structured features of language, such as turntaking, from early non-linguistic games. These games, such as peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake, are regular, repetitive and predictable - features that make them ideal for learning language.

Like Bruner and quite unlike Piaget, the Soviet psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky also placed instruction at the very heart of human development. Indeed, he defined intelligence itself as the capacity to learn through instruction from more knowledgeable others. Vygotsky (1978) regarded play as a leading source of development in the preschool years. He argued that social interaction with peers and adults helps children to make sense and create meaning from experience within a shared cultural framework. It is specifically the means used within social interaction, particularly language, which lead to learning and development. In the process, children acquire knowledge, information and tools for thinking and learning.

THE YOUNG CHILD WITH A MODERATE MENTAL HANDICAP

Current educational provision for children with a moderate mental handicap in Ireland is influenced predominantly by the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap (1965). A Department of Education publication (1978), referring to the work of the 1965 Commission defined those with moderate mental handicap as:

Persons whose mental handicap, though not amounting to severe mental handicap, is yet so pronounced that they need special training, supervision and support. As adults some may be capable of working

under normal conditions but most of them will need sheltered employment. In so far as an intelligence quotient can be regarded as a measure of moderate mental handicap the persons concerned would generally have intelligence quotients from 25-50 (1978, p. 2).

INFLUENCE OF THE SERC REPORT

More recently, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (S.E.R.C., Department of Education, 1993) describes a person with a moderate mental handicap as one "likely to display significant delay in reaching developmental milestones; serious deficits in language development and a severe degree of apathy rather than a curiosity in relation to his/her surrounding" (p. 124). This Report further explains that this particular population may also have other "disabilities such as physical, hearing or visual impairment, autistic tendencies and emotional or communication disorders"(p. 124).

FUNCTIONS OF CHILDREN'S PLAY

Children's play takes many different forms and serves many different functions. Its significance to the child's development is stated by Vygotsky (cited in Cooke and Williams, 1985): "Play is not the predominant form of activity, but in a certain sense, it is the leading source of development in pre-school years" (p. 28). It is through the medium of play that the child is able to develop new skills and practise those already acquired. The skills acquired range from motor dexterity to social competence. Cooke and Williams (1984) have identified seven functions of play.

FUNCTIONS OF PLAY

- **Play allows the child to develop new skills through observation, exploration, discovery, conjecture and imitation.**
- **During play a child is able to practise skills already acquired.**
- **The child's symbolic understanding and concept formation develops through play experience.**
- **Play is a pleasurable activity that relieves boredom and frustration.**
- **Play allows for the release of physical energy.**
- **Play provides an opportunity for expressing negative emotions of fear and anger in a harmless manner.**
- **Play forms a part in developing the child's sex role identity.**

The play of a young child with a moderate mental handicap may be inhibited by his intellectual disability, and oftentimes by an additional physical handicap. Cooke and Williams (1984) identified a number of factors that affect the development of play.

FACTORS INFLUENTIAL IN DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

- **Impaired vision or hearing can limit the kinds of play available to the child**
- **Perceptual problems may affect the child's ability to play**
- **Emotional or behavioral difficulties may result in abnormal patterns of play in a child**
- **The child may lack the opportunities to play because of a lack of toys appropriate for his/her age and ability, time, space or someone to play with.**

PLAY AND CHILDREN WITH MODERATE DISABILITY

Children with a moderate mental handicap present with a wide range of sensory intellectual and physical abilities. Nonetheless, they all share the disadvantage that the handicapping condition interferes with and alters the normal pattern and rate of development. There are also gross differences in functioning, such that each child presents a more or less unique profile. Even children who share the same label can show clearly contrasting patterns of behaviour, so that generalising about behaviour, and specifically play, can be questionable. However, according to Mogford (1977), all these children have one thing in common; that is, - "that their ability to explore, interact with and master the environment is impaired, with a consequent distortion or deprivation of normal childhood experience" (p. 171). Although children with a moderate mental handicap can come to compensate for their difficulties, it usually demands considerable effort and engineering by those providing for their care and development. For many such children however, this impairment only confounds the effects of the primary disability, and robs the child of opportunities to learn, practise skills and find ways around the handicap barriers. In the course of normal development, opportunities to explore and vary experiences multiply as new capacities and abilities unfold. However, for the child with a moderate mental handicap his/her lower development means that the effects of the handicap can be cumulative.

Teaching children with a moderate mental handicap confronts us with the challenge of having to plan deliberately and systematically, how to teach a child to look, listen, move, explore, play, relate to others and to understand and speak his/her own language. In addressing the challenge, there is strong ideological and theoretical support for a play-based curriculum in the early years for children with a moderate mental handicap. If play provides a rich context for learning, then surely it must provide a rich context for teaching.

PLAY IN SOCIAL, COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT

If play in school is to promote children's learning, it must be structured. This structure must address cognitive, social and linguistic aspects of children's development, without losing sight of the sheer enjoyment which children derive from their play activities. Structuring does not mean a rigid set of conditions and rules into which children's play is forced. On the contrary, structuring children's play is successful only when the teacher builds on their spontaneous play and takes his/her cues from the children.

When structuring play, teachers must leave the children with freedom of choice. If play is organised in such a way that children are given no opportunity to select their own materials, space, time and playmates, or to develop their own ideas, teachers defeat their objective - the child stops playing. In planning for play, we must look at it through adult's eyes to see all the learning that is possible, and look at it through children's eyes in order to present it in such a way that it is accepted by them.

Structuring may be defined under two headings - provision and the acceptance of an active role. Provision addresses a number of issues: the provision of space and time; the provision of materials to start and maintain play; the removal of materials when they have served their purpose; the making of rules to safeguard the children, protect equipment and enable play to occur in school. Another aspect of structuring play is the acceptance of an active role by the teacher. Such a role would involve the teacher joining in the children's play, to further each learning situation and promote physical, emotional, social and linguistic development.

PLAY: PRINCIPLES FOR CURRICULAR PLANNING

In general, most children are capable of being the initiators of their own play. Parents and others respond, thereby shaping and developing the child's own initiated activities. This does not appear to happen with children with a moderate

mental handicap. Such children often appear to be 'stuck' at an immature level of play. For these children the stimulus for further developments has to come from both parents and teachers. Yet for these adults to do this effectively it will involve more than merely providing the child with toys. Surprisingly, there have been very few attempts to encourage the play of children with a moderate mental handicap in as systematic a way as for other aspects of their development, for example, self-help skills and language. Nevertheless, the principles which underlie the intervention in these areas could be applied to the development of a play curriculum.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

- **Teachers will need detailed knowledge of the child's present level of play development. This is particularly necessary with children with a moderate mental handicap, as their age is not a reliable guide to their abilities.**
- **The child should be encouraged to move on to the 'next step' in play; the step just above his present level of competence. In Vygotskian terms, the teacher assesses the child's 'zone of proximal development'.**
- **These steps in development have to be small and the child will need plenty of repetition at each stage before moving on to the next one.**
- **The teacher needs to select toys and methods carefully, ensuring that such toys and methods will in fact stimulate play development. Research findings point to the necessity for bringing the child with a moderate mental handicap into contact with the greatest possible variety of toys and play situations.**
- **Finally, the child's progress must be evaluated regularly and, if necessary, the teaching method /approach modified accordingly.**

STAGES OF PLAY DEVELOPMENT

The literature proposes four main stages in the development of play; exploratory, relational, self-pretending and simple pretending. According to Jeffrey, Mc Conkey and Hawson (1979), the main features of the exploratory stage is that the child tends to do the same actions with all objects; he does not discriminate between them. The major actions observed are as follows: mouthing, shaking, hitting, examining, dropping, throwing, feeling and rubbing. During the relational stage, instead of playing with objects singly, the child now attempts to relate two or more objects, for example, the child will place one object inside another. At the

self-pretending stage, the child varies his actions with the objects according to their functional use; for example, the child will pretend to drink, but only from a cup. Finally, at the stage of simple pretending, the child links the pretend actions into a sequence, thereby sustaining the pretence for longer. The development which teachers could expect to see in children's play, and the methods they select to bring these about will vary according to the child's present level of development. The only way to ascertain this is to assess the child.

ASSESSMENT THROUGH CHILD OBSERVATION

The best way of making an assessment is through watching the child playing. In order to obtain reliable and detailed information the teacher must prepare in advance by:

- Selecting carefully the toys he/she gives to the child. It is important that the toys should be fairly realistic looking and of a size that the child can handle with ease. A good basic set is as follows: a rag doll (dressed in removable skirt/pants); a doll's bed with 'pillow' and 'sheet'; a chair and table for the doll to sit at; doll's cup, spoon and comb; a cardboard box for doll to lie in (this can become a bath, car, bed, boat, etc.). Other toys can be added, but too many may confuse the child rather than encourage him/her to play. It is best to use fairly novel toys and also to use the same set with different children, for then it is easier to compare their stages of play development.
- Knowing what to look for. The teacher needs to be familiar with the main characteristics of the different stages in play development.
- Reducing distractions and ensuring the child is comfortably positioned with all the toys within easy reach.
- Planning to keep a record of the child's actions by using a carefully compiled checklist with audio and/or video taping.

Usually a ten minute session of active play is long enough for the observer to collect sufficient information without the child becoming bored. Some children might be reluctant to play with the toys, so plenty of non-directive encouragement needs to be given. If necessary, toys may be handed to them and the teacher may react positively when the child handles them. If this fails, then the teacher should start playing with the toys, preferably using a second doll. Simple pretend actions, like feeding the doll and putting it to bed would suffice. As the child starts to join in, the teacher gradually withdraws and concentrates on observation. If the child is still reluctant to play, then it is best to stop and try again on another day.

After the play session the checklist and /or tape is analysed by the teacher who is looking for the types of play in evidence and the percentage of actions for each type. The practitioner may find it useful to refer to Jeffree et al (1979) who outlined an observation scheme which teachers can use to record play. Five main types, derived from research carried out with babies and young children with a moderate mental handicap, were included in the scheme. Once this information is obtained the teacher can begin to consider how to help the child to develop further in his/her play.

IMPORTANCE OF REPETITION IN PLAY

Repetition is a basic feature in children's play. Children need to repeat their play so that an experience can be absorbed, a role understood, and so that what has been learned can be reinforced. They need time to consolidate their mastery and develop confidence. Unless a teacher has observed carefully, she/he will not know whether the children need to repeat their play, or whether it has reached stalemate. The teacher can tell only from observation what help the children need to develop their play: whether they need a new idea or new materials because they have repeated their play sufficiently and cannot extend it by themselves; or whether they need help because their insecurity causes them to repeat the same play continually.

Children need plenty of opportunities to play: short daily play sessions are best (10-15 minutes). It is especially important for the teacher to continue modelling even though the child is apparently taking little notice, because it is only by repeatedly seeing the teacher's model that the child develops his/her play.

Children also learn by watching other children playing and, invariably within a group of children with a moderate mental handicap of similar age, there will be some whose play is more advanced than that of others. The teacher can arrange small groups of two or three children to give the less able children an opportunity to learn from other children as well as from the teacher.

EVALUATING PROGRESS

Finally, teachers need to check that the child's play is progressing. This may be done quite easily by repeating the initial assessment sections. Some children may show little or no change in their play behaviour. They may need more time. The teacher needs to guard against giving up too soon. Alternatively, the teacher might consider her choice of play actions; they could be too advanced for the child. The

teacher may need to change the toys and methods being used with the child. Pretending should not be confined to doll play sessions. Other activities that teachers can introduce at this stage are glove puppets, dressing-up games, role playing, mime and story.

TOYS AND MATERIALS

Commercially available toys are not always the most suitable for, or indeed the preferred toys, of children with a moderate mental handicap. There are a number of drawbacks attached to using them:

- the toys are often not sufficiently robust;
- they do not cover the earliest stages of fine-motor play actions, thus making it difficult for some children to develop more controlled hand movements;
- there are quite large jumps in the difficulty levels of the toys, with the result that children may prefer to play with the familiar toy that is within their competence but from which they will learn little more, rather than tackling a new toy.

In this regard, the teacher may need to make simpler versions of ringstacks, formboards and postboxes, although this does require some creativity on his/her behalf. With the child who is just starting to pretend, the teacher's role is one of encouragement. One way in which he/she can do this is by selecting appropriate toys. It is important to use fairly realistic props for the child's initial pretending - cup, spoon, comb, bed, etc. of the size appropriate to the doll. Small rag dolls are better than plastic dolls - they are lighter for the child to handle and easier to manipulate into positions like sitting on a chair. Gradually the teacher may introduce new objects into the play like a toy telephone, tea-set, bus. Eventually the teacher would use less realistic toys and objects - cardboard boxes and yoghurt cartons instead of beds or cups, so that by this time the child really does have to use his/her imagination.

CONCLUSION

It must be emphasised that play is first and foremost a child's activity. This said, there are times when teachers need to intervene to encourage children to develop further in their play. Alongside these play sessions with the teacher, a child needs lots of opportunities for initiating his/her own activities when they can have freedom to experiment and to make his/her own rules. In this way, the child will be able to consolidate the new skills he/she has acquired through the structured sessions. The child may even develop these skills further by combining different skills. Most important of all, if these children are to learn independence, opportunities for spontaneous play are essential.

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