

Enabling Environments: Continuous provision - Part 2 - It takes two

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Early years practitioners are themselves part of the provision in any setting. Anne O'Connor outlines their role in and responsibility in promoting learning.



When we develop a 'continuous provision' approach, we are not just making decisions about the layout and organisation of the environment and resources. The approach also demands that we make sense of our roles, relationships and responsibilities as the adults engaging with children while they direct their own play.

Loris Malaguzzi, an important figure in the development of the Reggio Emilia approach, talked about 'the pedagogy of relationship through which children learn their essential connectedness'. A very important aspect of the pedagogical relationship between a child and the practitioner is that it should be reciprocal. This means that the adult and child are partners in the learning process.

Malaguzzi used the metaphor of throwing and catching a ball to describe the reciprocity of the learning relationship. The child throws the ball to the adult and it is thrown back and forth in a series of exchanges in which both are equal partners, constructing together the ideas and understanding.

If we think of active learning developing in this way, then we need to consider how we plan the environment so that the child is motivated to find and pick up the metaphorical 'ball' in the first place, in order to throw it to us. A continuous provision approach provides the space, time and encouragement for this to happen.

Just as importantly, we need to reflect on how our organisation and planning supports our availability and readiness as practitioners to spontaneously catch that 'ball' when it is thrown, and to engage with the learning process.

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project suggests something similar when it talks about 'sustained shared thinking'. This is defined as 'where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.'

An important feature of this is 'active listening' on the part of the adult. We need to 'hear' the child's thinking so that we can recognise and engage at the right level and with the right amount of reassurance, support and challenge.

OBSERVATION

An in-depth knowledge of a child's experience, motivations and interests is the key to being able to reciprocate in this way. The relationship between families and practitioners is a valuable way of gathering this important information. Observation also has an important part to play in the process.

Being aware of a child's previous experiences enables us to recognise the way a child may incorporate them in their play. This knowledge provides us with evidence that a new concept, skill or attitude is embedded in a much more powerful way than if the child is presented with an assessment task outside of a context that is meaningful for them. Such tasks can only provide us with 'hit and miss' information. They might appear to have 'learned' something one day and yet have forgotten it the next.

But if a child who is 'wallowing' in high-quality play chooses to use a skill, explore a concept or display a positive disposition, then we can truly know the learning is embedded, because of the contextual meaning the child has brought to it.

Knowledge of a child's experience and how this links to their motivations and interests also helps us to plan responsively for their individual needs. This might involve providing enhancements to the continuous provision, in the form of specific resources, or a particular kind of input, such as a story or a visit.

ADULT ENGAGEMENT

Just as importantly, we can plan to be ready to provide the particular kind of adult involvement that our observations tell us a child might need at any given time.

In her book, *Sustaining Shared Thinking*, Jenni Clark refers to the work of Christine Pascal and Tony Bertram in the Effective Early Learning project. This important research from Worcester College looked at the 'engagement' of practitioners, noting the range of adult behaviours that were observed among those involved in supporting early learning. The project identified these key features of adult behaviour in promoting thinking and learning:

Sensitivity: The adult's ability to be aware of the children's feelings and emotional well-being; the ability to empathise and to acknowledge children's feelings of insecurity and to offer support and encouragement.

Stimulation: The adult's ability to offer or introduce an activity or resource in a positive, exciting and stimulating way. This includes the ability to offer extra information or join in with play in a way that extends thinking or communication.

Autonomy: The adult's ability to give the children the freedom to experiment, support children with their decisions and judgements, encourage the expression of ideas, involve children in rule-making for everyone's safety and well-being.

DEFINITIONS

In practical terms, there are many different ways in which we engage with children and their learning. Here are the dictionary definitions of just a few.

Enabler: to empower, make possible, permit, prepare, set up

Mediator: to arbitrate, intercede, conciliate, negotiate, reconcile, restore harmony

Observer: to watch, concentrate on, take notice of, pick up on

Role model: to show how something is done, to demonstrate, to be someone worth imitating

Facilitator: to make easy, make possible, assist, smooth the progress

Guide: to advise, look after, accompany, influence

Supporter: to advocate for, comfort, defend, sustain

Leader: to inspire, prompt, motivate, support, be responsible

We also act as safety supervisors, tutors, play companions, coaches and admirers, and provide technical support for tricky things like buttons, scissors and shoelaces!

SPONTANEITY

Our planning for continuous provision needs to reflect this range of adult engagement and what might be required of us in response to what we know about the current needs and motivations of children. But just as we expect the children to be spontaneous in their play, we also need to be ready to respond to them spontaneously.

We can do that most effectively when we:

- are armed with as much information as possible about our children - we know them really well
- have a sound knowledge of early childhood development and how children learn
- are able to reflect on our own understanding of the pedagogy involved so we value approaches that put the child (not the curriculum) at the centre of the process
- we are emotionally available to the children in our care and interested in their view of the world.

LEARNING TO LEARN

Malaguzzi advised us that 'learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn.'

The Campaign for Learning has identified 5Rs in their Learning to Learn project:

- Resourcefulness
- Responsibility
- Resilience
- Readiness
- Reflectiveness.

Not only are these all relevant to children in the EYFS, they are also five very essential qualities for a practitioner wishing to engage in the highest quality early years' practice.