

**Building Better Beginnings: a case study of how a daily physical skills session is supporting overall learning and development for young boys.**

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## Abstract

This case study argues for the consideration of an adult directed physical skills session as an approach to supporting boys learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage in England. It exemplifies a model of professional development that utilises the individual knowledge and expertise of practitioners to support and extend others' practice. It recounts an action research project undertaken by a small nursery group to facilitate boys learning in the areas of physical development, communication and social and emotional skills. It argues for the ability of structured and planned sessions to be personalised so that individual children's needs and interests are catered for.

Key words: physical development, early year practice, boys learning, adult directed learning

## Introduction

It is acknowledged that young children need space, time, resources and encouragement to develop a range of fundamental motor skills (FMS) (Vidoni and Ignico 2011) and that there are links between motor and cognitive development (Nurse 2009) that need to be considered in planning appropriate provision for young children (Draper et al. 2012). This case study highlights how a nursery practitioner identified a gap in the current provision of the setting he worked in around effectively supporting some boys in engaging in their learning through physical activities. He started an action research project within the nursery, which became a programme rolled out across their nursery group entitled *Building Better Beginnings*. The success of the project was based on the achievement of the boys who undertook the programme who had earlier been identified as being delayed in a range of areas including behaviour, physical development, language and social skills. This article explores the project and how lessons learned have implications for improving practice in early childhood provision. The action research addressed two issues; it focused on ways of supporting boy's development and dispositions to learn but also engaged with the perceived lack of confidence and knowledge in staff about children's physical development.

This small case study recounts how the project started from working with an individual child to becoming a programme across the nursery group and into other settings in the local area. It shows how pedagogical practice that developed from one practitioner because of prior background, interest and empathy was able to be disseminated through a structured model of mentoring and support to increase knowledge and confidence of other staff in this very important area of young children's development (Stevens 2013). With the ongoing anxiety over the health of children and the emphasis on the need for appropriate activity there has been a clear steer within early childhood practice for settings to make more of outdoor provision (Waite 2011). For many settings the use of free flow play provides increased

access to the outdoors (Tovey 2007; Rea 2008), however this research suggested there may be a continuing concern, as voiced by the manager in this study, that staff may not be effectively using this element or feel confident in planning developmental physical activities. This view is supported by Doherty and Brenner (2008) who indicate a range of factors that can influence a practitioner's perception of children's engagement with physical education and therefore influence how confident they feel to be able to support children in this area.

This article will discuss how the adult directed sessions are seen as a means of establishing the necessary skills and opportunities that specifically support boys learning but also how they can be sympathetic to an approach that engages with the specific needs of individual children. The practice explored also provides a model for continuous professional development based upon the utilisation and then dissemination of staff expertise. It illustrates an understanding of equal opportunities linked to outcomes for children rather than just a provision of access to the same environmental or situational offer. What is clear throughout is that the project has thoughtfully addressed UK curriculum expectations by thinking about 'learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child and are assessed and reviewed regularly' (DFE 2014 p.5) and that 'children develop and learn in different ways' (DFE 2014 p.6). In doing this it demonstrates powerfully the importance for practitioners of having confidence in how they interpret curriculum guidance in a personalised way.

### **Literature review**

Physical development is recognised as a key component for young children with the Curriculum in England for birth to five year olds indicating it as a Prime area for learning and development (DFE 2014 p.7). The three main aspects of gross motor, fine motor and loco-motor skills (Cooper and Doherty 2010) are influenced by both genetic and environmental factors. However the early years settings children attend are seen as places which will assess, support and enhance development in these areas through drawing upon practitioner knowledge of curriculum frameworks and developmentally appropriate practices.

The notion that physical development underpins all areas of development is widely expounded (Cooper and Doherty 2010) and some of the specific links are made clear, for example the recent developments in neuroscience have highlighted the links between physical and cognitive development (Reeves and Bailey 2014). Stevens (2013) also acknowledged how movement is central to learning and development for all children and suggested that children need opportunities to practice and refine these movements to ensure the neural pathways have opportunities to develop. Vidoni and Ignico (2011) advocated that social and emotional domains are also impacted by physical development and that the interrelationship of the domains is important as a 'change in one domain can impact others' (p. 1263). These ideas are not new, work by Tansley (1967) linked the notions of understanding of the body and physical skills to building self-concept in children and Bailey (1999) wrote about the importance of physical play for both bodily and mental health.

Evidently therefore physical development and the acquisition of FMS are of vital importance when looking at ensuring children have a good start in life.

Much of the practitioner based literature supports children acquiring these physical skills through access to appropriate spaces and a range of resources (Nurse 2009 ; Cooper and Doherty 2010) with Bilton (2010) strongly advocating a whole body approach to development. There are other writers who more obviously suggested a role for the adult in planning and organising a range of activities to support physical development. The *UK Physical Activities Guidelines for Early Years* (British Heart Foundation n.d.) suggested that children need access to a variety of activities some of which can be structured or adult led. Doherty and Brennen (2013) proposed that educators have a role to play in helping children develop their movement skills and body awareness. They also indicated that some early years practitioners might find it a challenge to support children with the need to move in purposeful ways, and that lack of challenge in activities means that children might find physical play 'boring' (p.77).

It is clear that once children enter primary school in the UK they begin a structured skills based adult directed Physical Education curriculum (Griggs 2007) however there is evidence (Ward and Griggs 2011) to suggest that not all children have acquired the basic competencies upon which the more complex requirements of the PE curriculum are to build. Doherty and Breenen (2013) argued for the importance of the preschool stage to develop the foundations of physical activities. Vidoni and Ignico (2013) suggest that it is not sufficient to assume these will be 'incidentally acquired', but should be 'taught through age appropriate activities within a sequential curriculum' (p.1263) and there is an understanding of the need for FMS not only to be taught, but learned and reinforced through a mix of structured and free play (Robinson and Goodway 2009). Reeves and Bailey in particular suggest that physical activity could improve cognitive benefits for those who have the 'lowest cognitive ability' (p.2). The literature does have some examples of specific projects that involve physical skills interventions that are reported positively for preschool children, although often the literature around physical skills programmes is talking about the primary age range and the PE curriculum. Iiovenen et al. (2011) reported a project in Finland where they suggested that preschool children (aged four - five) would benefit from an increased amount of organised PE in preschools and improved skills in the teachers. Draper et al. (2012) illustrated the importance of motor development and developing cognitive skills in a South African project that targeted children from disadvantaged settings. These two articles illustrate space in the literature for further reflections on physical development interventions.

Boys are often recognised as the ones more interested in physical development (Stevens 2013), however settings where young boys are engaged in playing , learning and developing are often dominated by female practitioners (Rolfe 2006) , who may not have the same understanding, empathy, skills or knowledge to effectively support their interests and

extend their physical skills development. Issues of PE teachers in primary school not being adequately trained to teach the subject are clear (Griggs 2007) and given the low level of qualification of many early year practitioners in the UK (Nutbrown 2012) it is probable the same issues exist in preschools.

Additionally more general issues of boys schooling and achievement have regularly made the headlines (Buckler 2011; Barwell 2012) and caused concern among those working in early years. As a result the UK government developed guidance for practitioners working in the foundation stage (DCSF 2007) and local authorities published examples of practice (Manchester City Council 2011; Smith n.d.) all with an aim to support boys with learning and creating dispositions for learning. The issues discussed in these publications often centre around practitioners engaging boys interests; for example in superhero and weapon play (Smith n.d.), an area that may have traditionally be censored in early years practice (Holland 2003). Or they looked at engaging in projects to support boys' literacy (Manchester City Council 2011) as this is an area an area where the gender gap is significant. In respect of approaches for supporting boys what is generally recognised in practice is that boys and girls develop differently in a physiological sense which means that often need to have some type of physical activity to engage their interest (McIlvain 2003; Biddulph, 2010).

It is essential therefore for all these reasons to explore what examples of practice are evident to examine how children, specifically boys can be supported in their learning and development and this case study illustrates an example of such practice.

## **Methodology**

This research reports on a practitioner based action research project that involved a nursery manager, two male practitioners who initiated delivery of the programme and five female practitioners who were being mentored to develop the required skills, knowledge and confidence to support physical development as a way into learning. They are all from a group of day nurseries and a preschool that offer care and education for babies to four year olds in urban areas with some level of deprivation. The research was undertaken by the practitioners with support from the local University over a period of two years and the results are presented here as an example of a case study (Newby 2010) by the academic who undertook four structured interviews with the practitioners, visits to observe the physical development activities at different points in the year and in different settings and recorded ongoing discussions with the two male practitioners through field notes. These were supplemented with assessment records undertaken and interpreted by the practitioners, feedback collected by the settings from parents and artefacts created by the practitioners.

A narrative style has been used in retelling the story of how the project began to allow the voices of the participants to be fore fronted as they tell the story of the action research itself (Bold 2012). This approach is important as I believe that it is the practitioners (name deleted

to remain integrity for review process, 2013) stories that need to be told to develop an informed sense of professionalisation in the sector.

### **The beginning of the project**

The project started when one child's individual difficulties came to the attention of a male practitioner who had recently started working in the nursery. This child, known as C, was two years old and had displayed challenging behaviour in a previous nursery. This behaviour manifested as difficulties with interaction which resulted in him pushing, shouting at, or hurting other children who got in the way or did not do what he wanted. His mother had become very anxious over his behaviour. Staff noticed an escalation in the behaviours and that C was unable to recognise or articulate how he was feeling and so could not resolve problems in a more acceptable way.

It is of importance to note that the practitioner recognised an empathy with C and speaks of;

Having been in some ways quite similar to C myself in school, finding it difficult to communicate my needs and feelings and acting inappropriately because I didn't know how to respond, I was concerned that people were too quick to label him. I felt that the environment and opportunities on offer to him were not meeting his needs and so the problem was ours and not his or his parents.

One of the key factors being raised at this point was the concern at the way in which children can become labelled by staff and therefore how behaviours can apparently be reinforced or expected. It suggests that sometimes staff may attribute the blame to a child even when that child may not have been involved in an altercation. This suggests there is a real need for staff to reflect upon how they are viewing children in their setting, particularly those who do not 'conform' to expectations and whether they are reinforcing a stereotype that will follow the child into school.

This empathy with the child and the situation provoked the practitioner to observe C to find out his likes and interests in order to try and find ways to change the environment and develop opportunities for learning. Following an initial intervention based around an observed interest in a book a range of activities were developed such as creating a writing space under a table with cushions and chalkboards on the wall (name deleted to maintain integrity of research process, 2013), this was followed by more activities where C was invited to work alongside the practitioner and encouraged to contribute ideas and suggestions to how activities could be developed. At the same time it was recognised that the physical opportunities offered to boys in the setting were limited and not delivered consistently, so it was decided to structure some activities that would then be offered to a group of four boys. The parents of these children were keen to be part of the trial and *Building better beginnings* was born.

The planning that was developed to support these boys included teaching a variety of skills needed to explore and be able to participate confidently in physical activities, construction and sport activities. Once these skills such as; lifting, pushing, throwing, catching, upper body strength, coordination and hand eye co-ordination had been developed the children were then observed using them to support their play and in other areas including everyday routines such as helping to set the table up for lunch. It was observed particularly in Charlie that his growing confidence had a knock on effect on other areas of his learning. Most importantly it appears that working with the group and developing these skills had also taught him how to work in a collaborative way, so that he was prepared to listen to others as well as share his own points of view. This sense of achievement was linked by the practitioners in their observations to increased confidence, increased self-esteem and clear improvements in behaviour. The next step was the use of physical activities as a starting point for teaching across the curriculum, particularly in mathematics and writing opportunities for example counting teams, recording scores and names.

At the end of the year it was reported that all four boys made a successful transition into school. They were visited by the practitioner who talked to both parents and teachers. C's parents reported a positive disposition to learning remained. His acquisition of physical skills continued to support him in his development of writing, problem solving, reading, listening, and perseverance and he was reported as not being afraid of making mistakes. His teacher confirmed that he was able to build and sustain relationships with his peers and work collaboratively with them, showing understanding and tolerance. Although school transition had not been the focus at the start of the project transition to a school environment was reassuring children who a year earlier had been having significant challenges with basic aspects of the early years curriculum.

### **Next steps**

From the success of the first year the project then began to seriously evolve with a second male practitioner supporting the work. Managers in two settings identified groups of boys who were likely to need some additional support to that provided by the continuous provision within the nursery, in the three Prime areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DFE 2014) . These areas are Communication and Language, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development. The EYFS states that although, 'All areas of learning and development are important and inter-connected...*The three prime* ... areas are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive' (DFE 2012 p4).

The two practitioners began to work with these children planning joint opportunities twice a week where they led activities for these groups. They documented what they were doing and had meetings to plan future opportunities and reflect on what they had done. At the end of the year they became convinced the foundations of physical skills learning were an important part of the overall success of the way in which boys were able to access the wider

curriculum and that it was important that the children were having opportunities to practice these regularly. A list of the important skills was developed drawing upon understandings of child development, the order of skills acquisition and related to goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum documents (DFE 2014). Alongside the skills, team games and activities were created that would help promote development in the two other prime areas of the curriculum.

At the start of the third year the project was delivered in five settings, and this led to the identification of Physical Development Leads (PDL) in the settings who could work on a daily basis with the children. These practitioners varied in experience, qualification level and length of time in setting, but were all happy to take on responsibility for physical development as part of their role. Programmes of activities and the relevant resources were made available to each setting, and the Physical Development Leads were supported and mentored by weekly visits from the two key practitioners leading the project. The uniqueness of each setting allowed for variations in approaches and ownership by children and staff of the games and activities, it also recognised the different levels of confidence or experience each PDL had. The culmination of the year was when all the children came together for a sports day shared with parents and friends.

Now in its fifth year *Building Better Beginnings* has a clearly articulated annual programme. The first weeks of the year are spent getting to know the boys though building up relationships as it is recognised that good relationships between adults and children are important for effective learning. This was something several PDL commented on in their interviews remarking about how they built strong relationships through the programme. This early period also provides time for initial observations and a baseline assessment to occur of what skills the boys already have in the areas planned for development. This is important as the EYFS indicates ongoing or formative assessment is a vital part of effective practice (DFE 2014).

Children are encouraged to become familiar with the routine of each activity session, as the element of routine and consistency is one of the important aspects of *Building Better Beginnings*, as it is believed this characteristic helps build the confidence and self-esteem of the children (Lindon 2012). One PDL commented about the routine indicating, 'In the beginning their attention span was so poor ... sticking to the routine and making sure the structure was there was incredibly important'. They also emphasised however that children were not required to always take part in the daily sessions, but could choose whether or not they attended. This element of choice, combined with the fact that the targeted children were not always in on the same day, meant other children could also be included in the activities from time to time and supported the settings in maintaining suitable staff /child ratios.

Sessions include a warm up, some specific skills training or practice and team games with a warm down at the end of each session. Sessions have an emphasis on adults modelling and

demonstrating activities, but it is the children that determine the length of the game or session by their involvement and engagement. Over the course of the year many of the boys themselves will take their turn at running the warm up, giving instructions for the games and negotiating turn taking and group formation. As indicated by a PDL who said, 'They will tell the other children how to play ...and it's nice because they have ownership, it's their game and their session'. This illustrates that although the focus on routine, i.e. the same elements is important, there is flexibility to change and adapt sessions to suit children's interests exemplifying how an adult directed activity can also allow child centred and child led elements.

### **Evaluation of the project:**

The main evaluation of the project occurred during the third year of implementation when five groups of children in five different settings were working with the materials and resources developed. Over this year detailed observations and discussions with the PDLs enabled all the team to record the progress of each targeted child against the relevant aspects of the EYFS, and show that all children made good progress in the areas being targeted. Assessments were carried out independently by the project leads and PDL against a rating scale made up of core skills from the EYFS. The resulting scores were then moderated. This approach allowed for assessments over a period of time and took into account that different adults would be observing in different parts of the day. While it was not suggested that *Building Better Beginnings* was the only thing that contributed to this development, it is a good indicator that the provision of this resource had significantly supported some aspects for all children who engaged with it.

The findings suggested that children participating in *Building Better Beginnings* benefited from working in a group and this allowed development of social skills and understanding of how to work with others. Children acquired the confidence to take turns and to wait for their own turn, they developed relationships with the other boys and with the adults involved. There was evidence to suggest that engaging in the project improved concentration and attention span and was good for supporting development of communication skills. All PDLs were positive about the improvements they witnessed as exemplified by the following statements. 'One of my boys would not speak to any staff at the start of the year, he was very quiet, now he has his own group of friends, he will come in and talk to everybody, his confidence has gone up,' and 'you can see the change in the boys, one child has slimmed down, is more willing to do things, he'll sit and listen for longer' and 'It's giving them more confidence and self-belief'. The PDL's also recognised there were other contributing factors such as maturational development that also contributed but they were overwhelmingly positive about the value of the planned sessions. One explained, 'I think it would be naïve of me to say its' because of the project...you just can't ...they're

growing and they are older, but from seeing how I started and seeing how the project runs now, I do believe it has an impact, it's had an influence on who they have become now.'

In addition the support and mentoring of the PDLs in each setting led to a growing understanding of the importance of the development of physical skills and growing confidence in the staff themselves in managing a group of boisterous boys. All PDLs undertaking this work complemented the practitioner leads on the way Building Better Beginnings was organised and the way the weekly sessions and the support at the end of the phone enabled them to gain confidence and understanding for supporting physical development. This professional development opportunity was highly valued and reflecting upon her development one PDL said 'They have helped us push ourselves as much as they have helped the children develop'. Typical comments from interviews conducted with these physical development leads revealed their growing knowledge, which they then applied to working with other children in their care, for example another said, 'I have increased confidence to look at the whole nursery now, to support other practitioners with physical development' and 'I'm now able to support other with ideas'.

Additionally the project appears to have supported the PDLs to recognise that there are other ways of accessing the curriculum such as writing and creativity that can be facilitated through activities for children who may be less willing or engaged with typical early years provision such as writing tables and creative areas.

## **Conclusions**

What is clear from this case study is that the introduction of a daily planned physical skills session has impacted individual children's growth and development. While it is not being suggested that the physical skills intervention is the only thing that contributed to this development, all practitioners involved including the nursery managers have felt it has made a significant enough change to consider it worth spending time and money developing further.

The sessions have provided a physical skills training that is graduated and responsive to individual children's needs and interests. It gives them opportunity to practice skills in isolation and then use them through the team games and activities. The positive improvements in all three prime areas of the curriculum for young children indicate the benefit such a programme can have and argue for creating a space in daily sessions for adult directed physical development tasks. However it is also clear that the flexibility of the programme facilitated children making choices and taking the lead in the session enabling them in improving issues such as self-confidence. The case study argues that because physical development is a core area of the early years (Nurse 2009; Cooper and Doherty 2010) there is value in developing a more structured intervention as a stepping stone to a more physically active paradigm of supporting active learning across the curriculum and that

this might be a way for a mainly female workforce to engage more fully with the requirements of all children.

The professional development and growing confidence of the PDLs exemplifies a form of effective professional development beyond the narrow constraints of many formal training and CPD events. The ability to gain support from a fellow practitioner who models the activities in the setting provided individualised learning opportunities. All PDLs commented on the improvement in their skills and knowledge in a range of ways, and suggested that they had had fun in doing so. This approach proposes that utilising staff expertise in a mentoring model might be one way of improving pedagogical and developmentally appropriate practice and is something van Zandvoort et al. (2010) also suggested as they indicated they found that childcare providers valued opportunities and approaches that allowed them to share one another's expertise and enthusiasm. It is clear however that a method such as this requires commitment of time and finances, in order that the 'experts' can be released from ratio requirements to mentor others. However this case study exemplifies the creativity that is resident in the early childhood workforce that enabled this nursery group to support an individual practitioner's idea and in doing so improve the learning and development of many children within the settings. In telling the story of the action research project as a case study it is to be hoped it can act as inspiration for others.

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