

Developing & Supporting Early Childhood Physical Development

SKIP Cymru Reflective Journal

Whitestone Primary has 143 pupils on roll aged between 3 and 11, and we have two Specialist Teaching Facilities for children with moderate to severe learning difficulties. The school identifies around 28.6% of pupils as having additional learning needs. 20 pupils, mainly in the specialist teaching facilities, have a statement of special educational needs. Approximately 24.7% of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

Our children come from a range of family backgrounds and a large portion of them are following the 'less active' trend of their generation and aren't as physically active as they ought to be. The school is situated just a few miles from beautiful coast and woodland areas, which offer such a rich resource for outdoor play, and experiences to develop vital sensory integration as emphasised by Ayres (2005). Up to the age of 7 children gain sensory information from the world around them, from physical forces, objects, and people. To use that information to interact effectively, they need to develop sensory integration. So, children need lots of fun opportunities and activities that provide sensory feedback for the tactile, proprioception and vestibular systems, creating pathways in the brain that lead to motor development.

"Children are designed to enjoy activities that challenge them to experience new sensations and develop new motor functions." Ayres (2005)

SKIP training has allowed me to reflect on my own physical literacy journey. I have a real interest and passion for the huge benefits that being a physically active adult brings. As a child I did ballet, gymnastics, swimming and spent any other spare time outside playing with my siblings and the other children, gaining what I now understand to be a broad base to my 'mountain of motor development' that Clark and Metcalfe (2002) spoke of. I didn't have much experience with kicking games so I am not as proficient and less confident with kicking but played a lot of striking games like rounders, cricket and tennis. As an adult I enjoy playing netball, open water swimming, trail running, cycling, and competing in triathlons. Being active is a big part of my life and is ingrained in me, I have reached the 'top of my mountain of motor development' because of the opportunities I had in early childhood.

"If children cannot proficiently run, jump, catch, throw etc. then they will have limited opportunities for engagement in Physical Activity later in their lives because they will not have the prerequisite skills to be active" Stodden, Goodway, Langendorfer, Robertson, Rudisill, Garcia&Garcia, 2008 p291

I have really enjoyed discovering the significance that specific motor skill intervention can have on children's development and their levels of participation in physical activity in later life. The SKIP session observations, reflections, and my new knowledge have influenced my practice and in turn I have seen children's motivation, confidence and competence grow.

My class is a mixed year 2/3 class with 25 mainstream pupils and 3 children from the Infant Specialist Teaching Facility that join us for PE sessions. There have been a few challenges to try and overcome in the delivery of SKIP sessions. Space in the hall being one, lots of equipment and furniture is being stored in the hall thus reducing the space available. After the first SKIP session I decided it was best to only work with half of the class at a time, but this meant that if the TA had half of the class in the classroom, I was working on my own. Creating a better space, environment constraint, was more

successful and allowed for more focused teaching, but without other adult support it has been difficult to give my full attention to the focus groups.

As I work part time it was difficult to fit two sessions in a week as hall time is limited and the weather hasn't been great. To implement SKIP, as well as having at least one session a week, I have integrated some of the activities into our daily routine. For example, having a 'Physical Skills Station' set up in the classroom has meant a small group can have time working on their FMS such as practising tracking with scarves, rolling balls to each other, power throw – throwing at a target in the cloakroom area. We also spend 10 minutes a day doing yoga and mindfulness activities in the classroom, this includes stretching and core strength exercises, crossing the midline, balancing and gross motor movements.

Another way I have integrated SKIP into the school day is by using the 10 mins before or after playtimes to do a quick locomotive skills session, playing Pirate Ship, Traffic Lights, Colour Touch etc to concentrate on developing the locomotor skills, in particular skipping, hopping, and galloping as I observed early on that there were weaknesses with these, mostly with the year 2 boys.

Other opportunities for practice of locomotor skills and gross motor movements include when we travel from the playground into the classroom or from the hall to the classroom, instead of walking, I give specific ways of travelling like hopping, skipping, travelling sideways.

Children have been focused, enthusiastic and excited about the sessions. They find the sessions fun and are fully engaged and work hard. In the first session Ava stated that she got hot very quickly, I explained that was great and a good sign that she was being active and working brilliantly on her physical skills, it also prompted a quick reminder to all the children on what happens to our bodies when we exercise.

After observing and completing baseline assessments it was clear that the children who struggle with fine motor, writing and reading skills also struggled with spatial awareness, coordination, and balance. Observations from the warmup games showed that locomotor skills of skipping and hopping need more practice, especially the Year 2 boys.

It has been interesting to learn the role that early reflexes have in developing the systems for motor skills and that retention of reflexes that have not been integrated have an impact on physical and cognitive development. As SKIP sessions progressed, through careful observations, two children in my class, I suspect to have retained some of these reflexes. Both children have speech difficulties, poor balance, spatial awareness, fine motor control, they avoid climbing activities, and physical skills are much poorer than their peers. They would benefit from more opportunities for sensory motor integration.

When planning the sessions, I found that re- visiting games helped to consolidate and develop skills, as the children became familiar with the logistics of a game they could then focus more on their execution of the skills. Each week I made slight adjustments to the obstacle course to further challenge and provide opportunities for developing specific skills that I have identified as needing more practice, such as the contralateral movements through crawling, stepping stones and climbing and the use of benches and wobble pads for balancing and using different body parts.

As my knowledge grew, I became more confident in assessing what stages the children were at for their locomotor and fundamental motor skills (Gallahue, Ozmun and Goodway, 2012), therefore allowing me to adapt my planning and ensure the appropriate constraints were used. Changing the task constraints is key for all the children to achieve success and feel good about their physical ability (Haywood & Getchell 2019).

I found it easier to group the children according to their FMS ability to ensure tasks were appropriate and to use the appropriate teaching cues. Considering the space available was also important, along with individual constraints to feed into the detailed plan. One session including a Power Throw Garden, was a great success as the children loved the challenge of throwing hard and hitting targets, but it became clear straight away that a wider space was needed, so I adapted the session to accommodate this.

“Newell (1984, 1986) suggested that motor skill development is based on the interaction between constraints from the task, the organism and the environment.” (Goodway and Branta 2003 p36)

It was interesting to read that gender is an individual constraint.

“Gender differences are present in throwing, boys being better than girls.” (Gallahue, D., Ozmun, J. and Goodway, J. (2012). p197) After observing the class and completing the baseline assessments the boy's throwing ability was better than girls, out of 15 boys 11 were stage 4 or above, out of 10 girls only 2 were stage 4 or above. So now I can ensure the girls are getting plenty of practise to improve their throwing ability.

The concept of using gardens worked well, all children were just focused on themselves and had success in the activities they were doing, all were active the whole time, ‘the no standing still’ rule for the obstacle course was effective. The use of gardens allows the children to feel less self-conscious, as no-one is watching, they feel safe and secure in that environment to give all activities a go. Some of my children are aged 7 and 8 and are going into middle childhood during which they become more aware of their actual motor skill competence (Stodden et al 2008). I have been mindful of Stodden's Positive Spiral of Engagement and have endeavored to ensure tasks and equipment constraints are appropriate for children's abilities for them to achieve success and not lose confidence. “The less skilled children will have lower perceived competence and perceive many tasks as more difficult and challenging.”(Stodden et al. 2008 p296)

The obstacle course is most successful as children show that they can work independently using variety and creativity as they move around the equipment, and they perceive this as a real fun activity. Demonstrations work well and the children love showing each other what they can do and how creative they are being. Alecia and Frankie have excellent quality of movement as they are gymnasts so using them for demonstrations shows the quality I'm looking for. However, I am mindful of their skill level being much higher so when I ask them for demonstrations, I choose movements that are achievable for the other children too. I observed that Buddy and some of the other children in Alecia's group were taking her lead on using arms outstretched and pointed toes when travelling on the bench, really demonstrating a better quality of movement than was observed in the first few weeks of SKIP. Frankie's group were also emulating her excellent posture, use of arms and landing techniques, so they were also learning from each other. I was pleased to see Zayd now having the confidence to try new ways of exploring the equipment, he had a go at travelling as a crab under the arches, this is a great improvement, he wouldn't have attempted that at the beginning of SKIP. Also, children are challenging themselves more now, Gabi Buddy and Hayden were keen to do a standing jump over the arches, up until now children have only travelled under and around as they are quite high.

As children have become used to the SKIP sessions their confidence and ownership has grown. It was great to see Morgan suggesting to Seb that they roll the ball in the Treasure Chest Game. Morgan is at Stage 1 for catching (Gallahue, 2012), when we did the baseline assessment, I explained that we will be working on ways at improving our catching skills and I showed him then that he can already roll the ball and receive a rolled ball, so he was already on his way. This pleased him. So, when I introduced the treasure chest game, I made it clear they could choose how they passed the ball. I had purposefully put Seb with Morgan as he too needs lots of tracking practise. Both boys had

a positive experience then by making the choice of rolling and by having success each time they rolled the ball.

Opportunities for children to control the task by choosing whether they roll the ball or throw or choosing the equipment they would like to use depending on what they have most success with, gives autonomy, ownership, and motivation. As Seb and Morgan are getting older they are more aware of their motor competence, so it is vital that they have positive, successful experiences.

Newell (1984) states that selection of appropriate tasks plays an important role to promote throwing development. So, I was conscious that the tasks involved ensured the target was at a suitable height, there was enough distance to put power behind the throw and strategies were in place to promote a contralateral step (Gallahue 2012). Bella and Gabi were still using an ipsilateral step, so I used a hoop for the thrower to stand in and a sticker on the foot they needed to step out with. This really helped as I could see them glancing down at their feet before throwing to remind them which foot to step out of the hoop with, with lots of practise they can now both use a contralateral step.

Seb and Morgan have clear gaps in their movement vocabulary, especially with direction and pathways, they need more experience with these. I found that my instructions needed to be very specific and referring to their bodies really helped too. Eg arms out, follow your hand to move sideways.

Giving consistent cue words for catching worked well, in line with the importance of this as stated by Goodway, Crowe & Ward (2003). Seb had more success when reminded to have 'hands ready', 'eye on the ball' etc. Throughout the sessions children have become familiar with the cues now, during a recent warmup game that involved catching in pairs it was great to see Kai remind Ali to have, 'hands ready' without prompting. This shows that reinforcing the cues every time is having an impact on the children's understanding of what is needed and the ability to help each other. Giving specific praise to children helps them to acknowledge what exactly is good about their movement and it also demonstrates specifically to the other children the quality of movement I am looking for. Eg "What an excellent shape you did in your jump with tucked knees, and I liked the way your arms were held out to steady your landing."

Parents that I have talked to during a recent parent evening were very interested in the SKIP program and were keen to help their children at home. Seb's mum and dad have been concerned about his physical development for a while, they said that he doesn't want to try riding a bike or scooter, he is reluctant to play on slides and climbing frames. I explained that helping him improve his core strength, balance, co-ordination will improve his ability to try those things when he is ready. After careful observation of Seb's FMS and locomotor skills I put together some exercises and fun activities that would give him opportunities to practise some of the skills he needs to develop, I also included some gross motor movements that would help increase integration of the reflexes.

Through SKIP Cymru my depth of knowledge has improved and has had a positive response from the children. It has allowed me to reflect personally and professionally and adapt the way I work to reach the best outcomes for the children's development. Children's smiles and laughter have been apparent throughout, their engagement and body language has shown confidence in their actions and a willingness to try new things.

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