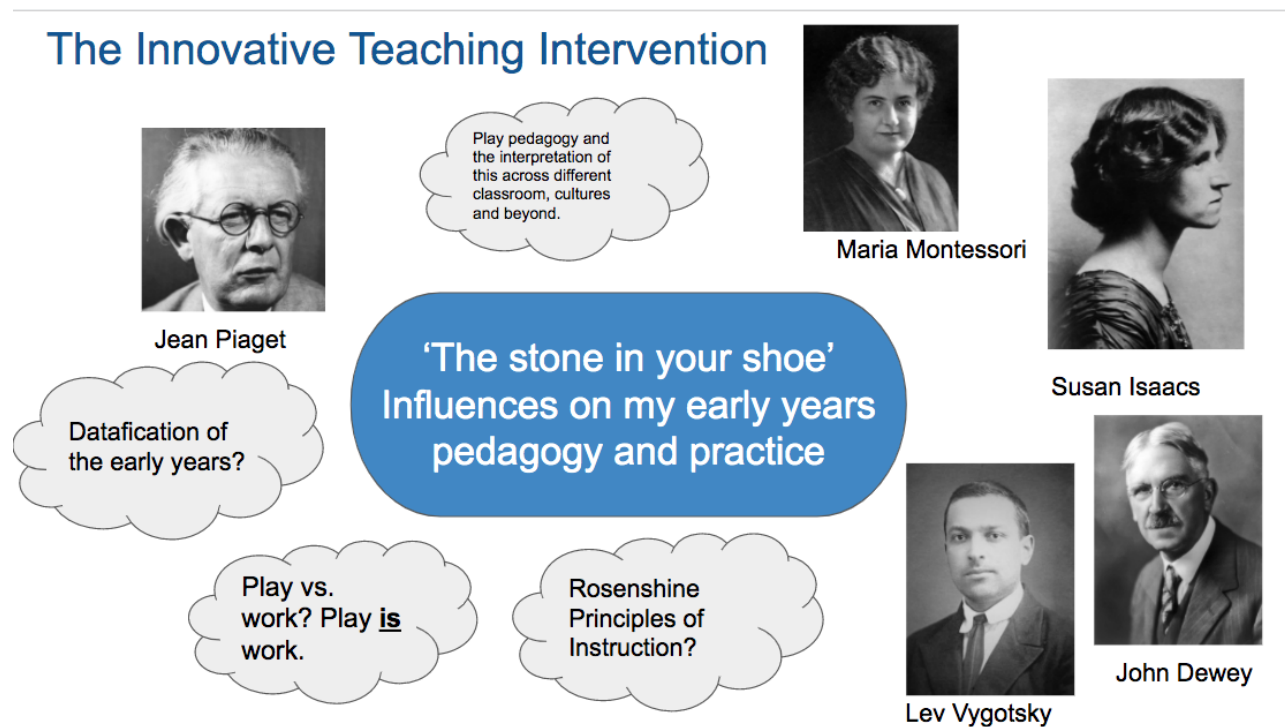


A structured critical reflection associated with the content of the slides

To begin to consider the most appropriate and impactful change in my practice, I began with reflection. As practitioners, we are continuously in a state of reflection in the pursuit of excellent practice, but also in response to the ever changing climate of teaching such as; a new curriculum which requires a change in pedagogy, a change in year groups, a change in children and more recently, a global pandemic. Whilst reflecting on my own practice, I also started thinking about the key influencers in my practice such as Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, Susan Isaacs, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky.

Slide 1:



I considered theories that already shaped my practice and what I felt needed further critical reflection in line with new thinking and challenges of being a 21st century learner. Alongside this, I considered 'the stone in my shoe' or the aspects of my practice I had already reflected on as part of my own professional learning as a result of moving into Reception. A huge part of my initial reflections were around play pedagogy; what exactly was play? How do you make it purposeful? Is there a difference between play and work in the early years?

Roberts-Holmes, G. (2013) criticizes the 'datafication' of early years practice following the intensification and focus on assessment from the UK 2010 coalition Government, challenging long-held child centred pedagogical values. Although the article is discussing the impact in an English setting and the increased accountability within The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), it serves as an important reminder for Wales and Welsh practitioners about the inappropriateness of framing thresholds within a neo-liberal race and reducing children to good data and bad data (Roberts-Holmes, G. 2013). It highlighted the vital need to consider the holistic child and the commentary surrounding their academic performance and progress. Around the time of these reflections, the Enabling Pathways Consultation document was shared with us as the Curriculum Design Team to engage with and provide feedback on. The document refers to learning before Progression Step One, which was a very promising document for our early years practice, particularly in raising the profile of play once again and importantly, observations. It also suggests that practitioners' pedagogy features 'play and playful learning' alongside 'being outdoors, observation and authentic and purposeful learning' (Department For Education, 2020). The Enabling Pathways document refocused my thinking to a Welsh context and highlighted the golden thread that has been arising throughout all of my reflections; what could play look like in Reception?

As my research was raising more questions than it answered, it felt important to focus my thinking on my own context and I had to consider key questions as listed below in Slide 2.

Slide 2:

The Innovative Teaching Intervention

What will be my pedagogical focus for this intervention? What needs to change? Starting with reflective practice:



Key questions to consider:

- What is important to and for the learners within my classroom this year?
- What impact will our new curriculum have on my pedagogical practice and their learning?
- How far do I need to consider the impact of the global pandemic on learners?

When I began to think about the children in my classroom and their developmental needs, namely the need for play opportunities and playful learning, I began to consider the role of the adult in play. Jerome Bruner was a key thinker in the area of play, seeing play as a mode of learning, rather than something separate from learning (Smidt, S. 2010). This idea of play being a vehicle for learning sparked some key thinking for me, alongside Bruner's theories that children were playing to make sense of their experiences and their world. I asked myself was I providing enough opportunities for this? Were my resources open-ended enough to meet the varying needs of all children within my classroom? When further researching open-ended play, Bruce (1991) utilised the language of 'free-flow play' where the outcome is not important, but the process, the analysis of the play and the adults ability to notice their schematic play is. Schematic play is a term coined by Jean Piaget; 'patterns of repeatable actions that lead to early categories and then to logical classifications' (Athey, 1990, p.36). Piaget's focus was on children's ability to physically explore objects and then from that physical exploration, classify them and that would lead to logical thinking (Smidt, S. 2010). Children need plenty of opportunities for assimilation and accommodation and what may seem like unpurposeful or even chaotic play to us, often is the result of children exploring schemas, and we should not try and refocus play with our own agenda or learning objective.

Not always attending to our own learning objectives can be challenging; I began to acknowledge the impact of an already oversaturated curriculum and the time pressure that brings, particularly on the early years, however, the need for uninterrupted time to play had to take precedence. As part of the school Curriculum Pioneer team, responsible for designing and implementing our new school level curriculum, I had the opportunity to share research, such as Montessorio's belief that play should be at the heart of the curriculum (Williams, K.M. 2017), with the wider team, alongside the Enabling Pathways document, to highlight and secure the time within the curriculum for play and observation, initially starting with Nursery and Reception. This professional dialogue with the Curriculum Team made me contemplate how our school is in a fortunate position to have enabled cultural change that allows us to make changes to our practice, such as creating time and space for play and observations, without the need to be monitored or provide evidence. I considered how I felt empowered as a practitioner to make pedagogical decisions, however, would I feel differently if I was in another setting? It's an important question to ponder in relation to the wider context and the disparity that can exist between schools.

Slide 3:

Pedagogical Theories & Principles - Key Influences

Jean Piaget	Maria Montessori	Susan Isaacs	Lev Vygotsky	John Dewey
- Schemas (information processing structure) - Active learners - Environment needs to be appropriate to let children explore - Child-led - Open-ended questions - Long periods of uninterrupted play - Observations	- Learning through senses - Self-correctory - Phonics - Child-centred - Minimal adult intervention - Constructing knowledge through experiences	- The Curiosity Approach - Free flowing between indoors and outdoors - Following children's interests - Learning through play - Observations	- Child actively trying to make sense of things - Higher and lower order thinking - Play critical for learning and self-regulation (adults knowing when the step away at the right time) - Learning together and from one another	- Internal motivation - needs, wants, desires - External motivation - curriculum, teacher, resources - Meaningful participation - Belonging - Real life learning

Boulton, P & Thomas, A (2021) *Lecture 1: Theories of Child Development and How They Manifest in Practice*, [Virtual lecture from USW for The Federation]. 15.12.21

After attending a virtual lecture with Dr Amanda Thomas and Pavla Boulton from USW for our school's professional learning session, I reflected on my ability to manage the wide understanding and knowledge of play theories whilst balancing planned learning outcomes and pedagogical approaches, alongside a carefully planned learning environment; an arguably skilful balance to strike and one I, at times, felt overwhelmed to get right. Martlew, J. *et al.*, (2008) comments that understanding play can be what presents challenges for early years educators, rather than the inability to provide those opportunities to play. It was also important to note that play would not and should not be the only way that children learn and I had to also consider that it would not be every child's preference (Brooker, 2002). When thinking about planning for play, I considered Piaget's constructivist approach which emphasizes knowledge gained from the environment as well as their peers (Rogers, S. 2010). It was also important to note the growing skepticism and wide challenge surrounding Piaget's generalised interpretation of his data, which was also taken from a narrow sample (Aslanian, T. K. 2018). Like Piaget, Lev Vygotsky believed that children were continuously seeking to make sense of the world around them and he coined the term 'imagination in action' (Smidt, S. 2010) and it is why he felt so strongly about play being a tool for learning, however, Vygotsky believed that for it to become play children first had to "move beyond what can be seen or felt or heard to what is imagined" (Smidt, S. 2010, p. 9). In other words, the child no longer needs the actual object to begin to imagine and consider 'what if?' This made me return to my previous consideration about the resources that we utilise within the classroom; if play needs to stand or represent something else, it needs to be open-ended and have the ability to be many things for different children. This also was important for using symbols as seen in Piaget and Vygotsky's theories, particularly as they go on to become symbol users and become literate (Smidt, S. 2010). This became the first actionable point for my practice; ensuring that provision had open-ended areas, alongside more carefully enhanced provision. I utilised some of John Dewey's philosophies about classrooms reflecting real life situations and experiences (Williams, K. M. 2017) and I considered what all the children in my classroom would have experiences of, and although a

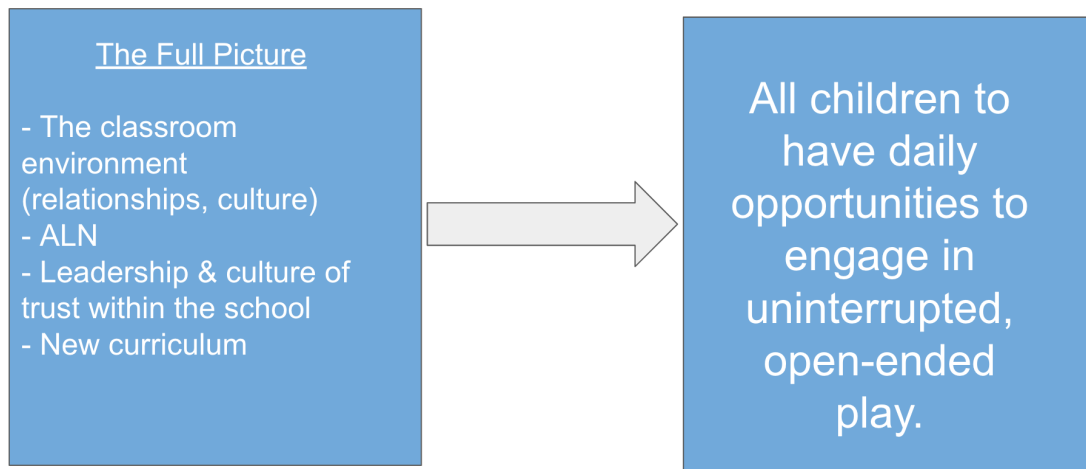
castle themed role play or a spaceship role play may be exciting and have limited learning opportunities, I knew that every child had an experience of their own home life, and this would be particularly pertinent after the global pandemic, so I created a 'home corner' containing a kitchen, a kitchen table and a sitting room. This open-ended role play area offered learners an opportunity to role play their home life experiences, potentially from lockdown and begin to make sense of their experiences. As a school, during the pandemic, we have often found that we were returning to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and having to address the basic and psychological needs of many families such as food, water, warmth and rest and certainly for all, their safety needs of security and creating that sense of belonging and love (Fisher, M. & Crawford, B. 2020).

Like Dewey, Montessori also believed that classrooms were uninspiring and believed in a very child-centred approach (Brendtro, 1999). I wanted to dive deeper into some of her theories and when researching further, was surprised to find that much of the Enabling Pathways document utilised similar language, such as playful learning and experiences (Peng, H.H. & Md-Yunus, S. 2014; Lillard, 2013) and that Montessori is still a very popular approach with over 3000 Montessori schools around the world (Thayer-Bacon, 2012). When watching 'Inside Montessori Schools' (OurKidsNet, 2012), an American school shares how they are a Montessori school and it draws many comparisons to our Foundation Phase practice here in Wales, however, what arguably they do better is the teacher being the link to the environment, rather than being the leader of the room. The teacher also carefully observes to assess children and ask themselves what do they know? How well do they know it? This was an area of my practice that changed, without intention but as a direct result of the research I engaged in. I became more responsive to the children's play from observations and changing the resources to reflect this. This was the beginning of the evidence of the impact of the process of evidence informed pedagogical changes.

Alongside these key pedagogical theories and principles, I considered Donaldson's 12 Pedagogical Principles, which does not recommend one specific approach and recognises that

teaching and learning is context specific and that the best person to make those pedagogical decisions are the teachers themselves. Our school also follows this principle, however, it has been interesting to engage in professional discussions with colleagues from other primary schools who utilise the 12 Pedagogical Principles as a checklist for each lesson, which is arguably inappropriate for some learning. Again, the disparity between interpretation of documentation is a concern for Welsh practitioners. Orchard and Winch (2015) state that the difference in quality of teaching can create a worrying attainment gap for children, however, they do not blame individual teachers, but more the changes made at the highest political levels which permeate down into our school leadership. Another current influence is Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction, which was created from research undertaken in the field of cognitive science and research on master teachers and cognitive support. During some professional discussions with colleagues, we considered the implications of using Rosenshine's Principles as a formulaic lesson plan and how this could stifle creativity and pedagogical freedom, however, we also discussed that for a Newly Qualified Teacher it could be a helpful toolkit for them to draw upon whilst planning for learning. When we begin to dig deeper into our pedagogical interpretations in Wales, it is clear that there is the potential for a worrying gap to widen between schools with strong leadership and those without, particularly with the launch of the New Curriculum. This disparity between settings could also have a further impact on our OECD's PISA results. On the other hand, our new curriculum focuses so greatly on the holistic picture of the child that we must question whether PISA testing would be fit for purpose for Wales. Alexander (2012) questions the validity of the PISA results suggesting that the top three scoring countries have excellent results in maths, reading and science, but how well do those children learn in other areas of learning? Can our vision for Wales really be captured in a test for three subjects? Interestingly, we continue to compare countries around the world with huge cultural differences and expectations in attainment, but PISA can be best utilised for sharing some best practices from high performing countries, however, grading should be ipsative.

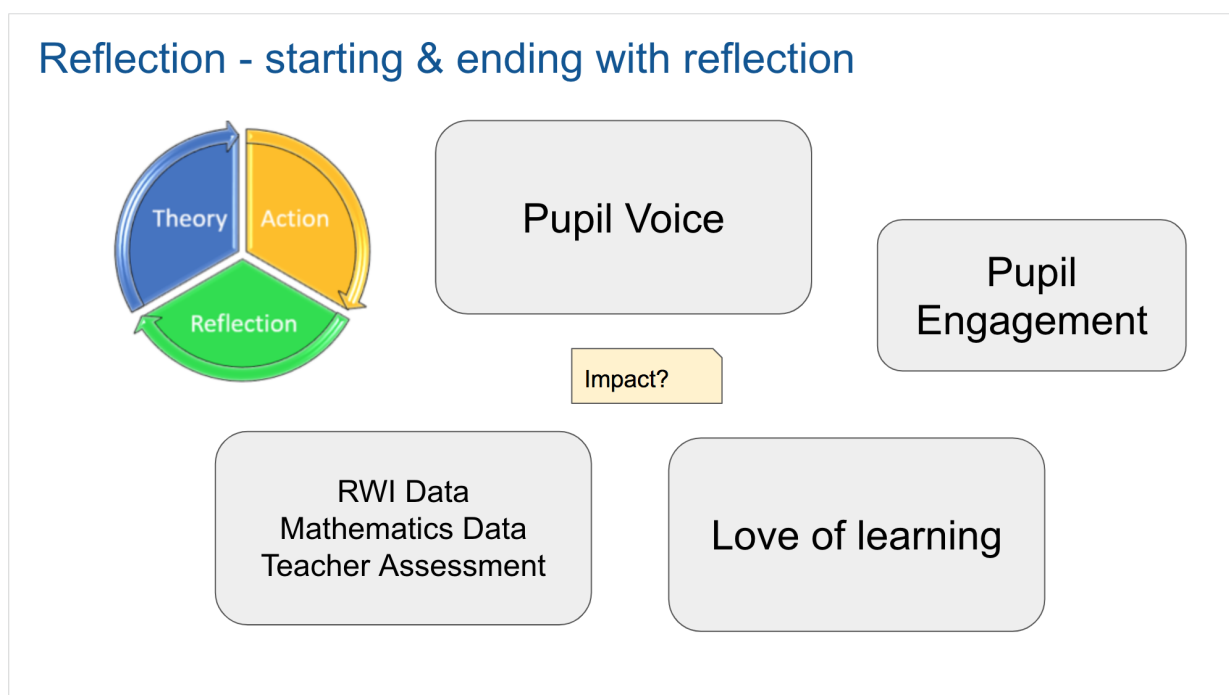
The Innovative Teaching Intervention



When considering all these theories and influences, simply stated, I wanted to create opportunities for uninterrupted play, but as research has shown, this was the end product of a highly skilled and planned approach. If I had just changed my practice in-so-much as keeping the provision the same, but letting children play for longer, I anticipated that the learning from play would have been limited and potentially behaviour incidents may increase as a result. As aforementioned, some key changes we made in the provision to enable this change, including implementing open-ended resources such as a home corner and also a block play area; through observations when working with other children, I noticed that children were poorly engaging in the Construction Area by either emptying all storage boxes, or spending a few fleeting minutes within it. I decided to condense what we offered and scale it back to simple wooden blocks of varying size, wooden peg dolls and some gems. Another consideration for these resources was the variety of needs within my classroom, however, Gascoyne (2012) states that 'treasure baskets' of open-ended resources give rich and meaningful opportunities inclusively. As I began to make these changes, I addressed the other part of the environment, the adults. Smidt (2010) suggests that adults have the ability to help or harm play, therefore, it was vital that the three Teaching Assistants within the room, who are regularly engaged in

provision, understood exactly what we wanted to achieve during the children's longer play sessions and with the changed resources and exactly what we meant by play. It was important to reiterate that some play may not make sense to us as adults and for us to start to step back and observe, but also know when to step in and redirect children. I shared with the Reception team specific things that would make an impact as practitioners; their responsiveness to their play and interests, intersubjectivity and interactivity (Smidt, S. 2010). This was also underpinned by the strong relationships in our classroom where all practitioners show a genuine interest in each child.

Slide 5:



Measuring the impact of these pedagogical changes was nebulous and varied; the value was greatly in the process of the intervention and resulted in the changes in the mindset of the practitioners within the room. To get to this point as a team, we engaged in research rich professional dialogue regularly. I often would reflect in action and observe staff with the children and see how their practice had changed in provision, as well as reflecting on my own practice. Observing staff and seeing the pedagogical shift amongst all staff showed the strong impact of play pedagogy; staff were observed to be noticing what children were paying attention to,

attempting to understand the play and from those observations making changes within the provision. This had a wider impact on the children and their engagement within the provision; children were observed to be creating a variety of different imaginative play sequences within the block play varying from creating castles, ramps for cars, a sleigh for Santa, their homes, school and their route from their home to school (utilising blue gems as a stream they pass). The impact here can be measured against if we compare to our previous practice where we might tell the children to make something in line with our learning objectives; perhaps they would have made that one structure, but then the play would be over quickly and very limited. These few examples show how the children used problem solving, team work with their peers, communication skills and importantly, their imagination to extend their own play. Having an extended and uninterrupted time to continue their play was also important as previously we would call them for a task and would stop that play and the potential brain growth we know happens in the early years when given the appropriate environment (Smidt, S. 2010). Other practitioners within the school had also commented on the culture of the classroom; many commented that there was a buzz of learning with engaged, happy children who have a strong love of learning, which is also evident in their want to seek out knowledge and challenge themselves. This impact is also seen alongside data from RWI and Mathematics assessments alongside teacher assessment; all children made progress within their RWI and Mathematics and although this is taught through direct teaching and was not changed as part of the intervention, I would argue that the love of learning and opportunities to challenge themselves cognitively within the provision has meant that they have stronger cognitive gains and more capacity to engage with short, sharp directed teaching. My teacher assessment when compared with their baseline data has also shown that the children have all made progress within each AoLE. Although data is useful, I believe that the biggest impact is evident in the children and their engagement with the provision and their play.

Engaging in reflective practice, particularly challenging my own thinking around play in the classroom, has led to interesting and important changes that have had a significant impact

on the children and the practitioners within the Reception team. We have also shared the research and evidence of impact with the Curriculum Team and we are beginning to think about how to best disseminate this with the wider staff so they can begin to engage in critical thinking and reflection around their own pedagogy. These changes have become part of our day-to-day practice and we will continue to reflect on our play pedagogy throughout the year.

3007 words.

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