

*Developing and Supporting Early Childhood*

*Physical Development*

This essay is a personal reflection of the knowledge and skills that I have acquired from the SKIP-Cymru training sessions, and how I have applied this into my teaching practice to best support the physical development of young children in my class. The discussion will focus upon two reflective cycles. The first cycle will be a reflection on the first half of my training following Day 2 of SKIP-Cymru training, and the second cycle is the reflections of my practice post Day 3.

This reflection focuses upon implementing SKIP-Cymru training in a split class of 26 Reception and Year 1 children with ages ranging from 4-6 years, within a large, inner-city community primary school. The school is situated in an area of relative social and economic deprivation, holding a Free School Meal rate above the national average (Estyn, 2014). Within my Reception and Year 1 class, several children experience poor attention span, pencil control and struggle with their spatial awareness in a classroom setting. Many children have reported of having little-no opportunities to engage in physical activity since the beginning of the Global Pandemic in 2020, particularly during periods of National Lockdown. This factor, coupled with research that children from more deprived areas are more likely to demonstrate developmental delays in Fundamental Motor Skills, FMS (Goodway and Branta, 2003, p.37), suggests that SKIP-Cymru training could serve as an effective intervention method to best develop and support physical literacy levels in young children.

### **Cycle 1: Reflections after day 2 of SKIP-Cymru**

Prior to the SKIP-Cymru training, my knowledge of how to support the development of physical literacy in children was limited. As a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), having only gained Qualified Teacher Status in August of this year, I am new to the teaching profession and my confidence in leading and developing learners is developing daily. Furthermore, since my PGCE teacher training took place during periods of Government enforced National Lockdowns, the opportunity to practically learn and teach physical literacy was lost due to Covid-19 health and safety regulations; this resulted in having no University or School-based practical physical education training. Reflecting back, the four short lessons I delivered before embarking on SKIP-Cymru training lacked any understanding of physical literacy and the techniques required to teach it. Admittedly, I had not considered the need to differentiate my teaching of physical development in the same format that I would when delivering lessons on core-based subjects such as Literacy and Numeracy.

Further to the above, I also held the misconception that Fundamental Motor Skills (FMS) develop naturally through age. However, since engaging the module's physical literacy readings, it has since transformed my understanding by highlighting that FMS require 'formal practice and feedback for

competence and proficiency to develop' (Gallahue, Ozmum and Goodway). Critics have further identified that many children are not achieving levels of proficiency in FMS, which drastically hinders their opportunity to engage in sports later on in life given that FMS serve as the foundation for which advanced movement skills are developed (Ozmun and Goodway, 2012; Gagen and Getchell, 2006; Stodden et al, 2008; Clark and Metcalf, 2002). As Gallahue et al note, higher levels of motor competence develop a greater repertoire, creating a positive spiral of engagement in sporting-activities in life. This draws connections to the United Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), with particular concern to Article 26 outlining a child's right to become the best they can be (UNCRC, 2021). This has made me view my practice of teaching physical literacy through the lens of a child's right, which also draws connections to Margaret Whitehead's findings of how physical literacy enables the 'realisation of human potential' (Whitehead, 2018, p.254).

From the perspective of sensory integration, consulting the readings of Ayres has highlighted the vital importance of developing FSM within the first 7 years of a child's life due to higher levels of measured risk taking (Ayres, Stodden et al, p.297). Critics have argued that if FMS are not adequately developed before the age of 7, this hinders a child from engaging in structured sports activities later on in life as they have not developed a broad range of movement skills required to engage in the activity successfully (Hulteen et al, 2018).

At the start of the first cycle I was able to draw upon this research in addition to how children exhibited low level of perceived failure quite often falling over from poor balance skills and predominately being Stage 1- 2 catchers (Stodden et al, 2008, p.287). Due to SKIP-Cymru training I was able to recognise the relative correlation between poor sensormotor processing and both fine and gross motor developmental skill delays, with research corroborating its role in attributing to a child's emotional, behavioural and academic attainment (Ayres, 2005; Eeles et al, 2013; Smith, 2019).

This training further enabled me to identify a child, Child X, in my class who experiences great difficulty in his reading, writing, concentration, speech and the ability to sit still in his when working at a table. Whilst I have created intervention sessions for the child's academic learning, I had not considered how I could utilise physical literacy to support the learning and developmental needs of this child prior to day 2. Ayres and Eeles et al cite the above areas of difficulty as being indicative of poor sensory processing (Ayres and Eeles). Observing this child during and consulting the module readings informed my planning of the SKIP practical sessions so that I could ensure that all physical activity movements can be differentiated to cater to all ability levels within the class, maximising their opportunities for practice.

The first step I identified and implemented was the need to improve the learners' overall object control skills. Improving object control skills was not only for the benefit of Child X, but also for the overall benefit of the class as research has shown how object control skills aid tracking which strengthens a child's ability to follow words from left to right when reading (Goodway et al, 2003, p.302). Critics such as Stodden et al have demonstrated a correlation between increased physical activity and neuro-motor development which aids the development of FMS (2008, p.298-300).

With this research in mind, I have incorporated warm up games and movement concepts that would first develop whole-body movements that would enable them to then engage in object control activities that could be delivered both during SKIP-Cymru practical sessions and in the classroom. This involved introducing the children to activity games such as 'Me to You' whereby the practice in pairs rolling the ball over the spot and having to track the ball with their eyes and catch it with their hands, signalled by cues such as 'hands ready' and 'eyes on the ball'. I found these games particularly effective in being able to identify which stage a child was in their catching ability and used the rolling concept to differentiate and progress the child's learning by incorporate additional steps to make it easier (positioning closer together) or harder (kneeling, to standing, to rainbow throws, to children catching outside of their 'X' zones). Evaluating how many children were stage 1 catchers, I decided to incorporate this into my daily teaching activities, as I know that a constraint the school has the limited access each class has to the sports hall facilities. Thus, I integrated catching 'Me to You' gardens into the children's enhanced provision, 'Rainbow Challenges', in which they had to practice reading a different word that was written on the ball each time they caught it. I similarly utilised this activity to practice cross-curricular learning by implementing in in their numeracy lessons whereby the had to practice either number recognition or addition and subtractions skills by rolling the 'snow ball' to build a number snowman sum; this linked to their Christmas themed learnings.

The first warm up game I trialled was 'Splat the Frog' which enabled the children, including Child X, to develop movement concepts improving their spatial awareness. This allowed for movements involving; different levels (stretching tall and crawling low), alternating directions (forwards, backwards and sideways); pathways (zig-zags) and speed (fast and slow) when moving around the 'frog' spots. I utilised cues which prompted children to 'splat the frog' hard or gently using different body parts such as one foot and one hand or sitting on the frog on their bottoms to practice their balancing skills. Depending on my instruction, children could tap, jump or sit on the frog, allowing for lots of opportunities to different dynamic movement concepts in line with developing their spatial awareness. This activity has since been developed so that children play 'Splat the Frog' by themselves at playtime whereby the use chalk to draw circle spots on the yard, allowing them to

practice the movement concepts independently, allowing for continual practice and development of FMS.

At the start of the first cycle of delivering practical sessions, I created three different 'gardens' including an obstacle course. I found that whilst I had received the SKIP-training, my supporting staff had not, and therefore were not consistently implementing the same differentiation point that I was. I additionally quickly realised the importance of modelling the activity and movement skill to the children before the commencing the activity. During my first session, I did not do this enough and had to stop the session to go back and remodel the movement more clearly and slowly. This outcome is supported by research, which shows that the effectiveness of modelling activity demonstrations can be hindered if the child does not have a prior grasp of that skill or weak FMS (Newell 1991). After my demonstration, I provided consistent feedback to the children so that they could refine their movements, which acted as way of continuing to model the skill whilst letting them practice the skill themselves rather than simply observing myself.

### **Cycle 2: Reflections after day 3 of SKIP-Cymru**

Following day 3 of the SKIP-Cymru training, I realised that in order to provide a higher-level of support to differentiate the activity tasks for the learners, I need work with fewer children in a garden at time. I decided to work with an even number of 6-8 children to allow for pairing, and meant I only had to create 3 or 4 stations at a time. I found this far more effective in terms of managing both the children's behaviour, focus and practice of the skill, which created higher quality learning. I also introduced music to enhance the sensory stimulation of the physical literacy experience, which also enabled me to signal to the children the time to transition to a new garden by stopping the music. I additionally benefit from having extra time to complete to deliver the SKIP sessions as I were able to access the sports hall to receive two 45 minute sessions each week, opposed to the two 30 minute sessions we had prior in the first cycle. Having this additional time meant that I had more time to aid development through using tasks constraints such as using scarfs to indicate stepping forward with the opposite leg when practicing and underarm throw during 'battleships' (Gagen and Getchell, 2006, p.230).

During the second cycle, I also experimented with altering the equipment in the obstacle garden each session to sustain the children's engagement. This resulted from of noticing that children were less focused in the obstacle garden when compared to the first cycle; I concluded that this was because the two other gardens involving practicing a new movement concept whereas the obstacle garden remained the same. Thus, I decided to restructure the way I laid out the equipment and used different

length benches, box heights, colours and shapes of equipment to present the obstacle in a more engaging way, despite the movement concepts being practiced remaining the same. In the obstacle course I also introduced more movements which encourages crossing their midline after identifying in cycle one that the majority of children struggled to perform this movement; this included activities where children has to move the beanbag from one cone to another by crossing their body. I also introduced more activities which promoted contralateral movements such as climbing and crawling and hurdles to aid the development of children's dynamic balance and stability skills, which is suggested by Gallahue et al to be lay the foundation for a child practicing their FMS (Gallahue et al, 2012, p.151).

As the second cycle progress I found that I started to develop far more confidence in myself to deliver the SKIP-Cymru sessions as my knowledge of physical literacy theory and observations of the gardens became stronger; I was able to quickly identify what was working and what needed changing far more quickly and efficiently. In doing so, I was able to differentiate my teaching strategies relevant to each child's developmental stage. This meant that my planning became far more refined and the quality of my teaching became stronger. I also found that I was more able to identify the stages of a child's throwing and catching skills, the greatest success being a child moving from a stage 1 to stage 3 catcher, a child that refused to engage in physical activity at the start of term.

Further to this, the second cycle involved me introducing kicking to the children following observation of different activities from day 3. Reflecting on my class, with Child X in mind, I felt that kicking could potentially be more challenging in terms managing the behaviour of learners; Child X often becomes distracted by fast moving objects, which can contribute to a period of hyperactivity. To manage this, I decided to have a kicking garden consisting of only 3 children as opposed to 6 or 8 which in turn enabled me to provide greater levels of feedback to the children.

The first kicking activity I trialled was 'The Coconut Game' whereby each child has to kick a ball forwards to knock over a cone. Reflecting on cycle 1, I have realised the importance of readily having the differentiation strategies to make the game easier or harder. Child X in this instance required additional support and I implemented more cones (targets), a reduced distance for kicking and encouraged them to dribble up to the cone. I additionally increased the size of the ball they were kicking as I quickly noticed that as a stage 1-2 kicker, Child X struggled to achieve success in hitting the ball with their foot and I wanted the Child to have as many opportunities for successful practice to create a positive spiral for engagement (Gallahue et al, 2012, p.155). For the children exhibiting higher stage kickers, I encouraged them to try kicking with different parts of their foot, kicking with their non-dominant foot, and also having less cones targets) and kicking further away. Reflecting on this

experience, I found that sometimes I encouraged a child to move up a stage before they were fully confident, however I learnt from this quickly and move the child back to their previous stage so that they could continue to practice it until mastered. Luckily, the children's confidence was not impacted due to having a low level of perceived failure (ref). Whilst I had noticed that the children's demonstrated sustained engagement in kicking activity, the second cycle was significantly shorter than the first. Therefore there has not been adequate time to yet observe any vast progress in the children's kicking skills, however I am confident that as my continuation of delivering SKIP-Cymru sessions continues hereafter, the children will continue to practice and develop these movement skills. This will enable them to engage in sporting activities later on in life having developed a broad range of movement skills (Gallahue et al, 2012, p.153)

### **Reflective conclusion: SKIP-Cymru**

Reflecting on my overall experience, SKIP-Cymru has transformed the ways in which I will now teach physical literacy to young children. As an NQT, I have benefitted from having this experience at the start of my teaching career, being equipped with the knowledge about the importance of movement in a child's education, and the practical skills of how to deliver it effectively. Prior to engaging in SKIP-Cymru training, I held the misconception that fundamental motor skills (FMS) develop naturally through ages, however engaging in the readings from Ayres and Gallahue et al has educated me that FMS require opportunities for practice. This has had a great impact on my practice by deepening my understanding of how the development of FMS and object control skills is an essential foundation that helps a child engage in reading by developing their eye coordination tracking skills. This has transformed the way I approach my literacy teachings to the children and I have been able to identify those who struggle to follow words from left to right when reading, with the knowledge of how I can best support them, by first developing their object control tracking skills. This has led to myself incorporating object-control tracking activities as part of the children's enhanced provision that continually runs alongside the main teaching activities so that there is always an opportunity for the children to work on developing their object control skills, without needing to specifically have a SKIP-Cymru lesson taking place. I have found this to be extremely effective, as the children have thrived from the opportunity to be leading their learning with a greater sense of autonomy. Furthermore, SKIP-Cymru training has enabled me to realise how physical literacy teachings underpins a child's rights. Drawing upon the UNCRC, I now understand that in order for a child to become the best they can be (Article 29) from an academic point of view, they must first have the FMS to enable them to fully engage in classroom learning through pencil grip and reading tracking for instance. This consolidates

Whitehead's interpretation that physical literacy is the vehicle that drives the learning for a child to 'realise their human potential' (Whitehead, 2018, p.254). I will continue to embed SKIP-Cymru theory and practical skills in my teaching practice and develop my own physical literacy learning so that my class have the opportunity to become the best individuals they can be and to enable them to engage in structured sporting activities later on in life.

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