



COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT – TEACHING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE TALK IN AN OUTDOORS-BASED SETTING

OLD FORGE DAY NURSERY, DERBY

My name is Shaun Preston and I have been supporting learning and leading teaching practices in the Primary and Early Years education sector for around 10 years. My Masters degree in Education has facilitated me in underpinning my practice with clear, defined links to research and theory, pairing well with my Level 3 Forest School qualification as this combination has enabled me to craft and implement a range of high-quality outdoor learning experiences for a wide breadth of developmental stages.

COLLABORATIVE TALK IN THE OUTDOORS

The importance of speech and language development within the Early Years sector cannot be overstated, especially during this current period of time. Data from Public Health England [PHE] shows that approximately 10% of children face having long-term speech, language and communication needs (PHE, 2020), whilst evidence from the charity Speech and Language U.K suggests that this figure is likely to worsen due to the influences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Speech and Language U.K, 2022).

It is imperative, then, that Early Years practitioners and settings must face these adversities to language development head on via dynamic and effectual practice.



One example of such an approach that is employed within our Nursery setting is using the outdoor environment. This has proven to yield positive and impactful results as a stimulant and a platform to encourage collaborative talk and dialogue between people. It is well documented throughout international research that the outdoors offers a rich, expansive and vibrant learning space, in which it is possible for children to 'hear and apply language through the sharing of ideas, providing reasons, and building on each other's ideas' (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2024); the practice of collaborative talk.

The children that attend our setting are currently aged between 8 months to 4 years and, whilst their language developmental stages and capabilities may vary greatly, their curiosity and yearning for learning (coupled with our practitioners' passion for the outdoors) encourages their innate desire to explore.

One example of a session that perfectly encapsulates the essence and power of teaching through collaborative talk in the outdoors comes from our toddler room (aged between 2 – 3 years), revolving around a simplistic activity that many Early Years settings will be familiar with; going on a bug hunt.

Practitioner: [Lifting up and pointing under a log] What can we see under here?

Child A: A worm!

Child B: Two worms!

Practitioner: Wow, good spot. They're quite long aren't they?

Child B: [Pointing] That one is hiding.

Practitioner: Yeah, its starting to burrow under the soil. Where might it be going?

Child C: Maybe he going to sleep.

Child A: Yes, sleep!

Child B: Why he sleeping?

Practitioner: Maybe he was asleep when we lifted the log and we woke him up – he might still be tired.

This short extract of a collaborative discussion involving multiple children and a familiar practitioner exemplifies a variety of different speech styles and skills which engages the children in different cognitive functions, in turn prompting further language use.

Arguably one of the core successes of this group exchange was the initial stimuli; the coupling of an engaging environmental stimulus with an appropriately-pitched question asked by the practitioner. Undoubtedly, the outdoors offers children a wide range of exciting and thought-provoking features and details which fuel a child's intrinsic impulse to explore and investigate the world around them (Maynard and Waters, 2014); indeed, 'Understanding the World' is identified within the EYFS statutory framework document as being one of the targeted 7 areas of learning (Department for Education [DFE], 2023). Providing children with the opportunity to indulge in this desire to explore begins to engage their inter-linking cognitive capabilities, (Mercer, Wegerif and Dawes, 1999) which can then be pushed and expanded upon further by a practitioner via inviting the children to verbalise their thoughts and ideas through open-ended questioning.

In this instance the practitioner's questioning draws the children's focus onto what specific detail they can observe in their natural environment, leading to multiple children willingly responding with their observations. Once the floor has been opened and the children's confidence grows, they begin to steer the collaborative talk session in a direction that is natural to them, following their interests and curiosity stemming from the natural world around them.



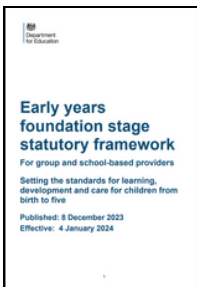
The practitioner continues to support their input, offering a range of relevant vocabulary that can be picked up and used at any point by the children (e.g. 'long', 'under', 'burrow' etc.), yet doesn't force the discussion down these paths, instead letting the children take the lead and asking questions based on what they are saying.

This modelling of listening and asking questions can be seen to be replicated on a basic level by the child participants, as when Child C suggests that a worm is 'going to sleep' Child A affirms this idea before Child B responds with a question of their own ('why he sleeping?'), as this notion has intrigued them and they actively wish to find out more. This brief exchange between the three children demonstrates a wide scope of linguistic and communication skills (suggesting, questioning, active listening, affirming), which can be taken forward into new avenues (or developed further) depending on the involvement of the practitioner and what the natural outdoor setting provides.

SUMMARY

Talk, language and collaboration between children and adults is undoubtedly a powerful tool within an Early Years practitioner's arsenal and, if used effectively and skilfully, can create rich learning opportunities. However, in order for this style of collaborative talk to reach its full potential the environment should be inviting, stimulating and engaging so as to fuel the children's natural sense of inquisition and desire to explore; something the outdoors offers in spades via its myriad of flora, fauna, fungi, weather patterns and human interactions, to name but a few of the possible experiences available.

REFERENCES



Maynard, T. and Waters, J. (2014) Exploring Outdoor Play in the Early Years. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Mercer, N., Wegerif, R., and Dawes, L. (1999) 'Children's talk and the development of reasoning in the classroom', *British Educational Research Journal*, 25(1), 95-111.