



## Defending Children's Right to Play: Things we Learned while Implementing the Principles of Contextual Education

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### Abstract

*Play is the most important part of child's life, and the importance of play cannot be matched. Through play children are solving problems, thinking critically, communicating, exploring new things, and learning about the surrounding world.*

*Some of the other skills that children learn, develop, and strengthen through play are: taking initiative, taking risks, making mistakes, making choices. They also learn to regulate emotions, sharing, resilience, leadership, flexibility, independence...the list may go on.*

*The problem early childhood educators face today is that preschool has become Kindergarten, and Kindergarten – first grade. The DfE (Department of Education) has selected the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to 'design and deliver' a new Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA), which is being trialed in schools from September 2019. The Baseline will be mandatory for all pupils in England from September 2020. It looks like – despite anger from teachers – more and more testing, worksheets, and structured activities are finding their place in preschools all over the Western world.*

*Therefore, we have decided – as an independent school – to go against the trends and have play as an important part despite hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, and increased attention to academics.*

*With a strong belief, that it is not an either/or situation, we built play – indoors and outdoors - consciously into a daily schedule. Just in several months, we have seen children's ability to amuse themselves increase, they started taking risks bolder, and they began using imagination more.*

*Two of the biggest challenges were parents' and teachers' hesitance and/or resistance, therefore, we introduced play into Teachers' Academy and Parents' Academy where we taught adults about the importance of play and we taught them how to "support children so that their play contributes in deep and far-reaching, lasting ways to their lifelong learning" (Bruce, T. 2011).*

**Keywords:** *Early childhood education, fair play, changing mind-sets, parent education, teacher training, developmentally appropriate practice.*

### Introduction

Contextual education system was developed to fit the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century children. Today children need not only a clear structure, but also freedom to create, conditions for the conscious learning in an unpredictable, ever-changing world. The system of contextual education emerged while searching for the balance between theory and practice, challenging and applying the theories of J. Dewey, M. Montessori, L.Vygotsky, and adapting to the needs and challenges of the 21st century.

Throughout the years, 10 of the principles of the Contextual Education emerged:

1. Teacher as a guide
2. Contextual planning
3. Personalization through differentiation
4. High expectations
5. Parental involvement
6. Freedom of expression
7. Character and value education
8. Questioning
9. Curiosity
10. Learning through play

Although learning through play is one of the principles, it is applied while implementing all of them. Besides, having met with hesitance and/or resistance (both parental and that of the teachers'), we

have realized that we need to include learning through play as a discipline into our internal teacher's academy and educate our parents as well on the developmentally appropriate practice.

### **Setting the stage**

Since play provides a context for children to access the curriculum, we started off with training sessions for the teachers about the importance of play. Since contextual education takes into consideration previous experiences, we talked with the teachers and the parents about the importance of children to build on previous experiences, about the environment as the third teacher, and about the teacher as a guide who sets the stage for learning in a safe environment.

During the cpd sessions we talked about the ways play promotes children's development, develops curiosity, and empowers to develop through a range of contexts spanning all subjects.

The theory behind play and all the scientific explanations were a good place to start since it gave a broader understanding that play is not a useless activity, but a developmentally appropriate practice that enhances learning. Therefore, it gave rationale and minimized resistance to an idea that children "will play and not learn".

### **Explaining the implementation**

Once we had the teachers and the parents understanding that play is important, it was crucial to explain what to expect and when to expect certain activities and what it means.

When it came to integrating play into our daily schedule, we understood that we need to have dedicated time for play in order to have play. Therefore, play was included into everyday activity schedule, we began to see it as an activity that permeates the day and is a part of all the daily activities taking place. What we realized was an important thing to do (we learned it as we went, it was not implemented right away), was to define the roles everyone has in an environment where play is important: the children, the teachers, and the parents.

### **The Planning**

Since we have developed contextual curriculum, it was our starting point. We also started implementing teachers' questions and childrens' questions that were based on the interests of the children, and connected to the theme they were exploring. That way we ensured that learning through play not only met curriculum requirements, but also involved children and they became active participants in their own learning. It also taught them and encouraged them to ask questions and demonstrated their learning. What we were very proud of was that we built in reflection into our planning process, and the teachers would have regular team meeting during which they would reflect on the learning they have observed.

We have also incorporated questions for teachers into our planning that ask specific questions regarding play. We have received feedback that it was especially helpful for our novice teachers who were inexperienced with our methodologies. For example: How will I organize my classroom? Are there opportunities for outdoor play and learning? Are the children engaged? Am I connecting the learning? Etc.

### **The Process**

One of the very common myths, still prevalent among Lithuanian parents, and sometimes even among the teachers is that play is when the teacher is not involved, therefore, many parents fear play thinking that it's free-range education if play is emphasized, and they think that their children's learning will be compromised. Therefore, it is very important to prove that this is a myth and it's far from the truth.

First of all, we needed the above mentioned continuous professional development sessions for the teachers not just about the importance of play, but about their continuous role during the process: about the importance of them interacting with the children, observing and intervening when needed, encouraging children to think, discuss, and talk about their experiences, be the one who facilitates, is actively involved in guiding, and organizes while seeing the number of contexts that children bring into their learning.

We have also learned that the self-help skills, the socio-emotional skills, and the life skills need not just be included, they need to be also actively taught and the importance of their role in early childhood education needs to be constantly explained and communicated to parents. Therefore, we started having seminars for the parents about purposeful learning, about emotional intelligence, about self-help skills, the importance of setting goals, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and/or problem-solving. The

seminars were taught by our curriculum coordinator, psychologists, and teachers – depending on a subject.

One of the biggest challenges was teaching flexibility and adaptability to teachers – not children, since they were much more adaptable! We have also learned that not all of the teachers saw it as something of importance, and their cpd was quite a challenge.

## Conclusions

In order to be able to reflect, we have built into a schedule regular pd sessions when teachers meet for half an hour and discuss their practice and the challenges they face. During those sessions they also share good practice. The great outcome was that the teachers learned to reflect on their practice, not to take personally constructive criticism, and it has led to them adjusting teaching, being able to evaluate their work, discuss their practice, and revisit (AND adjust!) their plans.

Once teachers have learned to reflect and review, we have started including the children in the process as well. We have also included them into parent-teacher conferences which have become parent-teacher-child conferences which are led by the children. Once the children started reflect on their learning, they have also started to think about the ways to demonstrate their learning, because they were incredibly proud of it.

Since our teachers were familiar with documentation, we already had many means to assess learning (demonstration, photographs, written comments (we have a special application), videos, etc). We have also began to implement more observations of behavior and to set tasks which require children to use specific skills or apply certain ideas, and teachers have begun using success criteria both for themselves and for the children.

It's a work in progress, but we can definitely say that at least within our organization we have proven that a well planned play supports children in their learning, and the fact that we have managed to get majority of our teachers and staff on board is a good indicator that we're on the right track while implementing developmentally appropriate practice and getting the support of the stakeholders who are crucial when it comes to childrens' learning.

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