

Easterside Primary Academy: An Enquiry into the development and pedagogy of Planning Boards, as a means of guided choosing in settings



Following an Enquiry, by the Enquire Learning Trust North East Hub Early Years Leaders in the Summer Term, I was asked to further investigate the research and development of Planning Boards, as an integral part of the Easterside Early Years pedagogy. The enquiry team were struck by the idea that children could carefully choose the area and activity which they would engage in during the session, providing the children will responsibility for their own learning whilst at the same time, ensuring, through colour coding that all areas of the curriculum were given equal balance and emphasis. Who would not want this in their Early Years setting?

The context

Easterside is in Marton, on the outskirts of Middlesbrough. The area has high levels of disadvantaged pupils. Nevertheless, their Early Years setting, incorporating a 52-place part time Nursery (mornings and afternoons) and two Reception classes is a hive of exceptional learning experiences, underpinned by well-designed routines and a stimulating learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, which is enhanced by a well-gelled team of skillful child development professionals. Planning boards are something that the enquiry team were fascinated by.

The protocol

An interview of Delyth Linacre, the Principal and 'EY Champion' was set up, incorporating another visit to the Early Years to see planning boards in action and to talk to staff about their development and the impact that they have on learning behaviours and outcomes for children. Since the last enquiry, the Early Years team had developed the planning boards further for the academic year 2016-2017.

The research behind and reasons for planning boards, as part of pedagogy

The initial thinking into improving Easterside Early Years, following an Ofsted whereby Nursery needed improvement was led by Delyth, as Nursery Teacher and EY Leader. Delyth attended training and researched the High Scope model (<http://www.highscope.org/>), which is based upon developing learners in a structured day. It features small and large group teaching, together with an environment, which enables children to learn and access resources independently, both inside and out, throughout the day and most importantly, the plan-do-review opportunities are dotted throughout the day. It is adult-child interaction and the process of working alongside children and communicating with them, both verbally and nonverbally to encourage learning, which underpins the plan-do-review in the High Scope model.

At the time, the emergence of the planning boards originated from staff observations of children 'flitting' from area to area and staff felt there was a need for a tool, which would scaffold the children's process of making choices. Every Early Years member of staff can also relate to the issue of 'the boys in the construction area' and the need to ensure that children have a balanced curriculum in Early Years.

In the early days of the model, the children had a piece of paper and circled different areas and reviewed what they had done. This initial model was quickly replaced and has evolved year on year, through adult reflections and the trial and error approach. Delyth explained that her leadership of this change was pivotal in its success. Furthermore, the team understood what they were aiming to achieve and it was a team effort to embed planning boards into their Cornerstones curriculum model.

It was decided that areas of learning in the classroom (areas, labs, centres) could be coloured coded according to the strand of the Early Years curriculum that they related most to. Red for CLLD and Literacy, blue for Mathematical development and IT, green for knowledge of the world and the children's understanding and yellow for creative development.

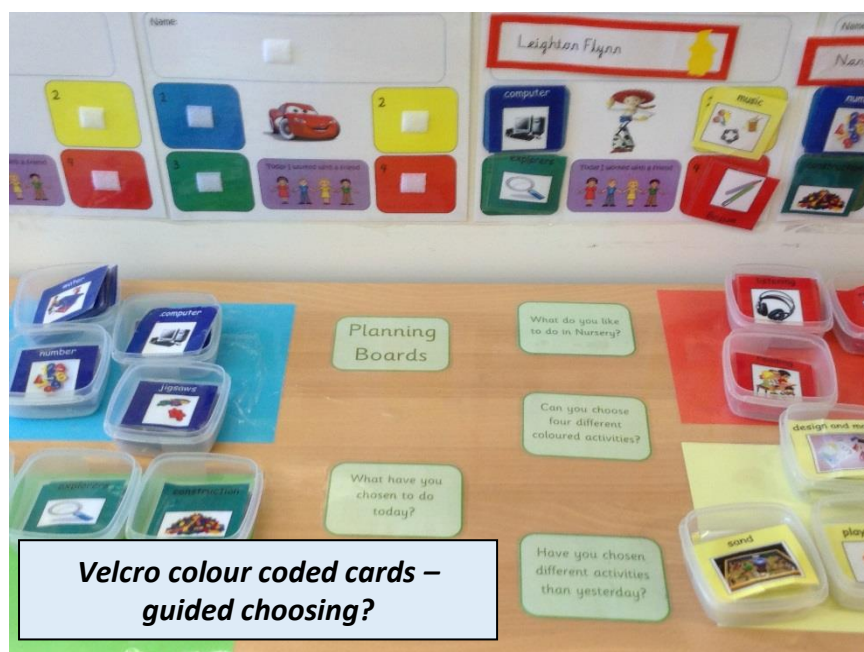
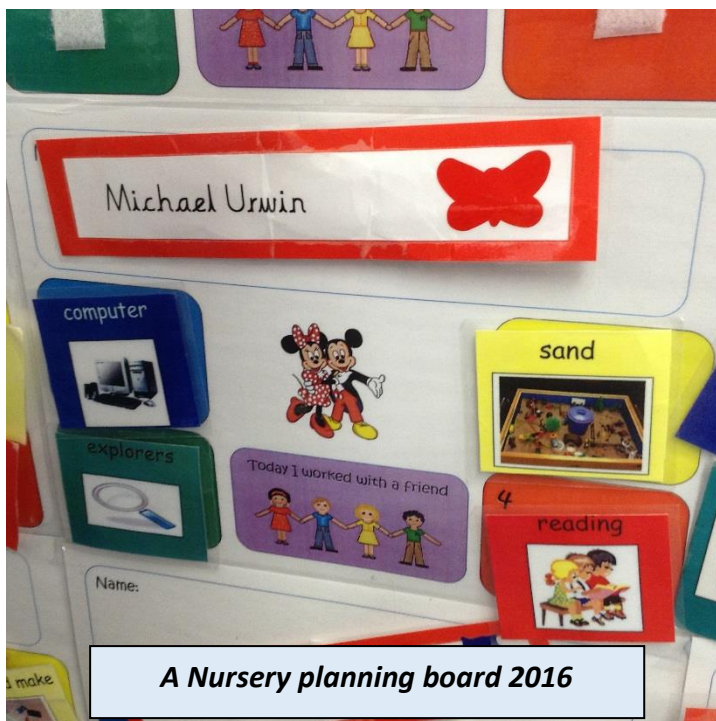
Each day, the children, supported by their parent/carer would choose something from each colour pot, hence not choosing the same area more than once a day, providing them with a bespoke day of learning activities planned on their own planning board. Their name would be added to the board and this also acted as self-registration, which was part of good practice. The planning board technique enables EY staff to know that every child has had a balanced day. The Early Years curriculum is so broad, yet every strand is important. Planning boards help the children to understand that all areas of the curriculum are equally valued. This is something that every educator needs to reflect upon, under the pressure of Literacy and Maths, faced by teaching staff across the country.

It is striking that this simple tool, as part of Early Years pedagogy is a scaffold for developing children's independence and more importantly, their thinking skills. The child planning their own day/session means they have total ownership of their learning and sets the precedent for future learning behaviours at Easterside.

How are they used?

The High Scope concept of Plan – Do – Review has been part of Early Years pedagogy for many years. Each setting has different ways of incorporating this into their day. However, practitioners always find the Review aspect tricky to either squeeze in and it gets forgotten or the really important part, when adults support children to get true learning from the experience doesn't happen. It should be stated that 'Review' is the most important part of the cycle if our youngest children are going to learn that the journey of learning is about the process and not necessarily the outcome.

The concept of reflection and review at Easterside is intertwined into the day. There are opportunities for review at the end of the session or the day. These are the types of session whereby children feedback what they have been learning and staff, as facilitators help guide the children to begin critiquing learning in its simplest form. Delyth talked about the published ideas for this process such as; children talking into a telephone to say what they had been doing as the adult gave a narrative for this learning and asked questions or encouraged the children to question each other or having a hula hoop as the spotlight to report their morning session to the group. This type of review is formal, planned in and most EY settings do something similar.



At Easterside, staff in Nursery begin by training the children in using the planning boards and the children do not have to do everything on their board. Again, the process of learning is important here and the child's personal, social and emotional learning is at the heart of this provision. This year, staff have made the active choice to remind the children on their boards about being friends 'Today I worked with a friend'. Cooperative learning is valued from day one and sets the tone for learning throughout the academy.

During the session, staff encourage the children to look back at their planning board when they are ready to move from

one activity to another. It gives the children an extra layer of support, which is adult supported, at first but quickly becomes part of the learning ethos of an Easterside learner. There is something particularly empowering about this process. From the age of three, children are given the tool to help them self-regulate their learning based on prior thinking. This actually goes beyond the concept of independence and means that these children are operating at a higher level of thinking, simply due to the creation of a planning board. It is quite magical to see.

In Reception, the children follow the same routine, building on their prior learning behaviours and supporting a smooth transition. With their parents/carers, they choose four areas, one for each colour and add their name to the planning board. This year, staff have added a writing challenge to the board to ensure that every child is writing independently, every day. This writing challenge will develop over the course of the year, in line with age related expectations in preparation for meeting the Early Learning Goal (ELG).

As the children are in school all day and have developed their play to be sustained for a longer period of time, the expectation is that the children do two activities before lunch and two after lunch. There is an undertone of responsibility placed on the children, which engrains high expectations into the culture of Reception learners.

The children, by the time they reach Reception are able to self-manage the planning boards with staff support. During the session, staff again have informal discussions with children about their progress on their planning board. 'Which activities have you done?' and the children can verbalise where they have been, what they have been learning and what they still have to do. As adults, we might have jobs to do lists at work or at home and this tool can be seen here in action with the youngest of learners. There is a satisfaction that oozes from the pupils when they know they have achieved one of their colour coded activities.



The organic process of reflection with adults and other pupils is key. Adults make time and have time to celebrate with children and support their next steps. Children do not flit because they have full buy-in, as a result of their ownership of how their day pans out. Of course, feeling safe and secure in an inviting environment also supports this pedagogy. Easterside do this so well.



During the course of the morning and afternoon sessions, key worker groups are interwoven into the routine for daily Phonics (Letters and Sounds), Mathematics and English. Everyone stops at the same time and carpet time, in different areas of the setting is established. A mutual respect exists, throughout the Early Years Unit, modelled by staff and children that everyone is learning. At the end of these sessions, staff remind the children to check their planning boards when independent learning time begins. There is a sense of planned play which is different for every child. This works seamlessly, as children access the provision, both inside and out, with a shared understanding of what they are doing/learning and use the planning boards to remind themselves.

The learning environment at Easterside is spectacular, as a result of careful team planning and an absolute commitment to high quality continuous provision, together with enhanced provision by proficient staff. A team planning session means that the infrastructure of routine sustains effective practice. Staff know children very well and cleverly intervene to accelerate progress during the day. The team work as a whole team and pool their professional expertise and resource to meet the needs of the children.

Furthermore, the engagement of parents and carers, which is a challenge for the school is given priority. Well planned, engaging stay and play sessions across Nursery and Reception enables parents to feel comfortable in the setting and with staff. This is vital in building positive relationships with the parents in order to support them to make a difference to their child's learning at school and at home. This is rooted into the practice of Early Years at Easterside and makes a significant contribution to the planning board process because parents are familiar with the provision in areas and what their child might be learning in that area.

Leadership decisions

It is worth noting that Planning Boards alone have not contributed to successful provision and improved outcomes for EY children at Easterside (a 30% increase in Good Level of Development over recent years). However, they contribute to the pedagogical system, which makes Easterside a very special place to learn. They are embedded across the curriculum from Nursery and furthermore, they underpin KS1 provision too.

Delyth explained that the support for her previous Head teacher enabled changes to be made. There is a strong point to be made here about Early Years leadership and the role it plays in making decisive changes to improve provision for children. Delyth describes it as 'power' and some may call it 'professional discretion or freedom' but nonetheless, an Early Years champion and leader, combined with a Senior Leadership Team who value and understand the importance of Nursery and Reception education is crucial to the success of the school.

In addition, the success of a system, like planning boards can lead to its own triumph. The accomplishment of planning board pedagogy in Early Years at Easterside has meant that its development into key stage one was an obvious step. Delyth successfully led that change and explained to staff the positive impact, which was seen in Early Years and what that could mean to the rest of the school and its learners. At the heart of the Easterside success has been a consistent approach to children's independent learning in areas. All staff have a great understanding of how they design great learning sequences which enable children to make rapid progress.



Y1 practical area – hands on experiences



Y1 planning boards – consistent independence

Transition and beyond

At the time, and for some now, the idea of having areas in KS1 might be seen as a risk. However, the concept that children's learning behaviours, which are secured during their Early Years provision are part and parcel of their smooth and effective transition to KS1 is common sense. Have you ever asked the question: where does all the children's independence go as they enter KS1?

Using Planning Boards progressively throughout KS1 has built upon the learning powers, which Early Years staff have developed in the learners at Easterside.

In Year 1, children have two activities to choose from at the beginning of the day. The concept of continuous provision, related to skills based activities linked to the children's current topic is evident. It builds on their independence and motivates the children. Delyth explains that staff have time to teach, giving focused support and teaching to aid small groups of children and the children access carefully planned activities. The quality oozes from each classroom, as well-resourced, engaging activities are designed across the learning areas in key stage

one. Not only that, but children of all abilities know what they have to do, without an adult there to support because children read an instruction or sound tins are used effectively for children who need to listen to an instruction, rather than read it.



In Year 2, the children have group planning boards. The classrooms again have practical learning spaces alongside the more traditional tables, chairs and carpet space for whole class input. There is an expectation that children spend shorter periods of time on the independent, self-chosen activities. However, the quality of outcomes remain high and children are fascinated to learn, once again because they have chosen how they want to learn. The expectation in Y2 is that the children are working hard to reach age related expectations by the end of Y2. Learning behaviours are embedded and children use the learning environment to support their needs. Staff have time to teach and when children have completed their work to a high standard, checking their work against success criteria, they consult their planning board to complete activities. The children’s independent activities are marked and feedback given. This provides an excellent opportunity for the staff to assess a completely independent piece of work as evidence. At Easterside, it works well, meeting the needs of their learners and

most importantly, it impacts positively upon the end of Key Stage One outcomes.

Professional giving

The aim of this enquiry was to establish a case study for the fascinating development of Planning Board pedagogy and the difference it makes to guided choosing at Easterside Primary Academy. Special thanks to Delyth Linacre and the staff of the academy for welcoming me and allowing their practice to be ‘placed under the microscope’ and shared.

In writing this piece, and in reading the case study, one striking conclusion must be drawn and reflected upon. The young people who arrive in our Early Years settings are at the very beginning of their learning journey. What Early Years practitioners and school leaders need to consider is how well do we prepare our learners for learning in Y1 and beyond? The idea of choices in education will permeate every child’s life. Are we teaching knowledge and skills from a curriculum, which in a few years might change again or are we teaching children how to be better at making choices, as learners for the rest of their lives?



Amy Gee,
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