

**Final Report Practice Development Grant
from
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& Calderglen Early Learning and Childcare Centre (Cheryl Lee)**

**Rediscovering the Benefits of Clay
January 2023**

Overview

Both settings had recognised that clay is an underused resource and its benefits not fully understood by all staff. Using practical training by a clay specialist and the insight gained by shared reading experiences, it was the intention of this project to explore the benefits and value of clay with a particular focus on how clay experiences can support the Froebelian principle of the holistic nature of the child's development through this open-ended resource.

Using careful observations, we aimed to highlight the value of clay as an open-ended resource, and we hoped that as children explored the clay with the company of a knowledgeable practitioner, they would be able to express their own ideas and make connections with the world around them through their own symbolic representations. We aimed to challenge the thinking of literacy activities being thought of as telling stories and providing writing materials and paper in specific areas. As settings that promote Froebelian principles we recognise that there is an interconnectedness of the resources offered to children and skills can be promoted using a variety of open-ended resources in every area of the setting.

Both settings intended to focus their observations of the children in relation to Communication, language and literacy development in the widest sense. Clay is often used in therapeutic approaches to encourage exploration of feelings, opportunities to transform and come to terms with these. Clay can be used in many ways for sensory exploration, to create functional and decorative objects and to express ideas. We investigated the gross motor movements involved in working with large blocks of clay that help to develop the shoulder and upper arm as well as smaller balls on clay that develop hand and wrist as well as finger movements.

On the next page is a series of photographs taken throughout the year. They depict children using clay in a variety of ways. Children had the opportunity to use large blocks of clay using a variety of tools and natural resources. Smaller pieces of clay also help children develop their fine motor skills and finger movements. Clay was used both indoors and outdoors with children given the freedom to express their ideas and stories with clay.



“I’m making a house”



“I like it when it goes slimy, it’s really soft”



“It’s a block of flats”



Throughout the academic year we aimed to provide a sample of detailed observations of children exploring the clay. We used our knowledge of child development and Froebelian principles to ensure that the daily opportunities to explore clay took into account the uniqueness of every child and support their potential. Link workers focused their observations in the clay area on all areas their development over the year, in notes, photographs and short pieces of film. The overall sample was balanced for age, gender, ethnicity, first language and any additional support needs. For this final report 20-30 observations were sampled from 15-20 children. There were opportunities for staff to share their observations with parents and each other.

Summary

Overall, the project was a great success. Both nurseries now ensure that clay is part of the daily provision and staff value this resource as part of the daily continuous provision. It is evident from the area's popularity with the children and the regular observations made of the children using the resource that clay is seen to be valuable in supporting many aspects of children's holistic development. The following observation highlights the therapeutic nature of clay and the development of a child's skill with regards to physical development and creativity:

Clay Observation

Observed/ Heard:

N chose to come to the clay area following a period of time when he appeared to be showing some distress in relating to his peers in another area.

He chose a large block of clay and he started to push lollipop sticks into the block. He then did this with some with the clay tools that were available.

N appeared to become calmer throughout this time while he pushed the material into the clay. N removed items and then pushed them back several times using his arm muscles and a palmer grip with his hands. N then pushed his large lump of clay into another, smaller piece of clay. He continued to push the remaining sticks into this. While doing this N appeared to be saying numbers and this appeared to relate to what he was doing with his hands.

N continued with to pull and push the stick in and out of the clay choosing different areas of the surface to push the sticks and tools into. He did this for a period 8-10 minutes.

This appeared to be a peaceful and enjoyable experience for N. He smiled frequently throughout the time, and he was focused on what he was doing with the clay.

N took what he had created to another adult, and he proudly showed them what he had done with the clay before returning it to the table and choosing another area.

Interpretation of significant learning (Assessment)

N appeared to find this a soothing experience. His body language suggested he was calm and he was very engaged in what he was doing.

He appeared to be able to manipulate the clay in the way he wanted to. N appeared to enjoy the repetition of what he was doing. Throughout the observation N appeared to understand that the clay was reacting differently each time he pushed a stick or tool in. This could be seen by the amount of force he would use to place the sticks initially compared to latterly (after he made the initial hole)

Skills Used/ Developing

- N uses his fine motor skills when holding the sticks and tools first using his whole hand and then a pincer grip
- N's gross motor skills were being developed in his arms and upper body especially when pushing and pulling the sticks into and out of the clay.
- N created an image he was proud to share with a familiar adult, he had a clear plan of what he was creating.
- N appeared to be using the clay for the purpose of instilling a sense of calm and self-regulation. The sensory aspect of the resource appealed to him, and he was observed as focused, peaceful and purposeful in his plan. He was immersed in his self- activity.



Initial challenges to the project were the staff's overall understanding of how clay could be used in the nursery as part of the daily provision. Clay was seen more as a therapeutic resource or a resource that was more often used for a very specific (product based) experience. This did not fit well with the Froebelian principles which both the nurseries have at the heart of their vision, values and aims.



Example: Balgreen Nursery School Vision, Values and Aims

In particular, the principles of children being Autonomous Learners, allowing children to explore and learn through their own chosen experiences and Creativity using the power of symbols by allowing children to represent their ideas in their chosen way allowing children to express their inner thoughts and make meaning from them.

The Grant allowed us to access valuable training from Thelma Millar – a clay specialist. This was one of the key successes of the project as it was integral to supporting staff to understand the importance of this key Froebelian Occupation. Supported by Thelma's knowledge, staff were able to experience first-hand, the benefits of this resource as they were able given the opportunity to explore the clay as the children would. The enthusiasm generated by the trainer radiated through the staff and the everyone was eager to put into practice the rich learning they had gained into their approach with the children. Clay quickly became part of the daily provision, and the staff observations of this area became much more insightful in relation to each child's holistic development. The senior leadership team noted that the observations taken in this area did not just relate to expressive arts but also physical development, emotional development and most importantly the emergence of early literacy skills. These observations regarding early literacy were not only related to the physical development aspects of early writing skills but also storytelling and the sharing of children's inner thoughts and feelings in a symbolic (outer) way.

Another key success is the confidence in the staff team in sharing these observations with the parents. We are often asked by parents "when do we teach reading and writing", staff were able to confidently share that using open ended resources such as clay, children are able to explore the concepts relating

to literacy development through play and exploration and this was evident through the observations posted on Learning Journals from both settings. Both settings are now at the stage where we are able to share our key learning and the benefits of the project to other settings through a poster. We are now looking forward to sharing how valuable this project has been to our nurseries and the share how promoting clay as an everyday occupation has enhanced the nursery experience for all our children.

Lessons learned

Throughout this last year the staff team have undertaken training and shared reading to enhance their knowledge and confidence in providing this valuable resource to the children in the two settings. Recently we were able to reflect on our observations of the clay area and how these observations differed before and after the training. We hoped to see practitioners taking a different approach to observing children's emergent literacy and symbolic representations and understand that these can be supported and encouraged using clay as a resource. Our early observations of children using the clay were based on exploratory and sensory experiences. It was also noted that the observations were often short, with children only staying in the area for a few minutes before exploring another area.

An example of an observation taken early in the project:

Clay Observation

Observed/ Heard:

A approached the clay table with his friend. They both sat down, and they used some baby oil on their hands.

A did not pick the clay up with his hands, initially he uses the tools to poke a hole and lift the piece of clay of the table.

L (Staff Member) encouraged him to use his hands to explore the clay. With guidance A, went onto to squeeze the clay with his whole hand and then he used his finger to poke several shallow holes in the clay.

He did this for a few minutes, then left to wash his hands. He indicated he was finished.

Interpretation of significant learning (Assessment)

A is at the early stages of exploring the clay. He was curious about the clay and with encouragement he was able to explore the material with his hands albeit briefly.

A understood that the baby oil would help with this exploration.

Skills Used/ Developing

- A uses his fine motor skills to manipulate the clay

Staff were honest in sharing that they felt unsure how to support children's exploration further and they shared how their observations focused more on a child's enjoyment of the resource. Clay Training with Thelma Miller took place in October 2021. The workshop was an opportunity for staff to explore clay from the children's point of view. It offered staff practical experiences and knowledge of clay as an open-ended resource. Practitioners were afforded the time to play and explore with the guidance of a knowledgeable practitioner and it was evident after the training that the Froebelian principle of "Freedom with Guidance" was something that needed to be carried on in the clay area with the children.



With the support of the training, and shared reading of ‘Exploring Clay’ by Lucy Parker and ‘Observing Young Children’ by Stella Louis, we took time to reflect together on the observations we had made previously. It was agreed that we wanted to capture more detail and ensure a more holistic observation, based on our new knowledge of the benefits of clay.

Throughout the months that followed it was noted that practitioners were now more available in the clay area. There was an obvious enthusiasm and increased confidence in supporting this area. Practitioners were gently encouraging the children to explore the properties of the clay and extend on these initial explorations. When sharing written observations with each other it was clear they were becoming holistic and taking into account many emerging skills which staff were supporting children to recognise. Observations were focusing on not only physical development but also children’s symbolic representations of their stories and their environment.

The observation on the next page highlights how staff were observing many communication and literacy skills. Staff shared that they would more often encourage this in a more “traditional mark making area with children using pens and pencils to represent their thoughts and ideas.

Clay Observation

Child's Name: J E **Date:** 21/06/22

Observed/ Heard:

J was rolling the clay, making a sausage shape, using both his hands. He asks "Can you help me? making Knuckles" "look, that's arms and legs. I don't know how to make his eyes, but I'll make some eyeballs" I ask J about Knuckles and we look up a picture on the iPad together and find a picture. As J is telling me about Knuckles, he is using his fingers to pinch and pull the clay in an upwards motion to get enough clay to continue with his plan. Using the palms of his hands he rolls a sphere shape for the head and body. He rolls another sausage shape for another leg. "I'm making a leg first and now I'm making the arms" asks me to change the picture to "his hands like this" putting his hands on his hips. I change the picture on the iPad and J begins to look at the details on the screen while manipulating the clay. He manipulates the body parts that he has made and pushes the pieces together. He smiles and looks at me when he is finished. J asks to keep it safe "to get hard" and we work together to move it from the board to a tub to dry. He looks at me and asks, "Can you help me make Tails" and changes the picture on the iPad. "I'll have my own Sonic figures" "I'm going to make Sonic; he has a blue suit and spikes and a tail" as he says this he has another block of clay and he is pinching sections upwards to make what appear to be spikes. He continues to do this for a few minutes, then pulls a large piece of clay which he begins to roll into a ball. He rolls this for several minutes and pushes it against his "spiked" piece. J decides he is finished and leaves the clay area.

Interpretation of significant learning (Assessment)

J has demonstrated that he had a clear idea of what he wanted to create as he manipulated the clay. He was able to visualise what it should look like and when he needed help, he was able to ask for an image on the iPad.

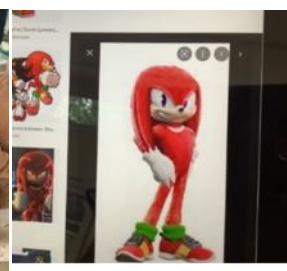
He showed perseverance to complete his model with detail.

J demonstrates that he is developing his fine motor skills using a pincer grip to manipulate the clay and we can see he shows skill in manipulating the clay in many ways with his hands.

J demonstrates his ability to describe a character of interest in great detail. He is demonstrating his prior knowledge of clay. He knows it will be a permanent object he can keep.

Skills Used/ Developing

- J uses his fine motor skills to manipulate the clay
- Becoming fluent and can recall the past
- Can share ideas and information
- Chooses ways to create images
- Creates visual information that records my experiences



Practitioners were noting the development of emergent skills for writing such as large muscle development as we worked with slabs of clay and fine motor skills when pinching and rolling small amounts. They were able to see that children who did not readily explore writing materials were developing the same fine motor skills in the clay and often sharing descriptions of their clay representations as other children would their drawings with pens and pencils.

Our observations also reflected the amount of time children were now spending in this area. At the start of this project children would spend an average of 4 - 8 minutes at the clay. As we came to the end of the academic year observations were lasting up to and beyond 20 minutes. As a team we recognised that the children needed a “supportive and reflective practitioner to help them to feel secure and supported in developing their ideas.” (Stella Louis - Jan 2022) and that this was vital to supporting the children as they explored this valuable resource. It has been wonderful to see that there now appears to be a better understanding from the staff team of what they are observing when children are exploring the clay and it is wonderful to see this occupation being used in many ways by the children to share their stories, skills and feelings.

Below are the observations from the Senior Leadership teams in both settings, highlighting how clay provision is used within Balgreen and Calderglen following the project:

Both settings ensure that the areas for clay provision are inviting and tempt curiosity and enquiry. We value the myriad of rich learning across the curriculum that can take place, which is why it is now part of our core provision. The children often take comfort in exploring the clay as a rich sensory experience which can be therapeutic. Quality resources are carefully selected to be enticing and allow for open-ended play. These are readily accessible to children. Clay tools tend to be wooden and include tools to move, roll, manipulate and sculpt. We also have a variety of open-ended resources such as shells, corks, stones and leaves, which children can use to extend their play and learning.

Learning is limitless and is supported by the skilled interactions of our practitioners. We can pose open-ended questions to promote discovery learning and challenge cognitive understanding. We model language to extend vocabulary, support social skills and promote learning across the curriculum. Children have opportunities to make progress in their learning, develop co-ordination, fine motor skills, be creative, use their imagination, problem solve and work together. As part of our daily responsive planning, practitioners record observations and interactions to support and extend learning through clay play. Children’s learning and skills developed at the clay areas are recorded and shared with the children and their parents. Resources can be added to clay areas to support and challenge and are recorded in the daily responsive planning.

Children’s interests and enquiries are at the heart of all planning, and this may be captured and further developed on Floorbooks to deepen their understanding. Both settings provide clay outdoors too. The learning here doesn’t mirror the learning indoors. Instead, it offers children further opportunities to develop learning concepts and skills such as gross motor development, co-ordination and cooperation while they explore on a larger scale. The outdoor environment provides a natural opportunity to explore changes in properties of clay when it is affected by the weather. These opportunities occur naturally, and learning is supported by our skilled practitioners who inspire our children to take notice and ask questions about the world around them.

Outcomes

As a result of the project, both nurseries have a dedicated space for clay as part of the workshop area. The clay area is well resourced with different types of clay and various natural materials and tools to encourage children to engage with the resource and to support the expression of their own thoughts and ideas. Staff are always available to support and observe the children in, what has now become a key area of the nursery.

The second aim of the project was to challenge the thinking of literacy activities being thought of as telling stories and providing writing materials and paper in specific areas. We recognise that there is an interconnectedness of the resources offered to children and skills can be promoted using a variety of open-ended resources in every area of the setting. For the latter part of the academic year both settings focused their observations in the clay area in relation to Communication, language and literacy development in the widest sense.

Following the training, staff were more aware that clay can be used in many ways for sensory exploration, to create functional and decorative objects and to express ideas. Our observations highlighted the gross motor movements involved in working with blocks of clay that help to develop shoulder and upper arm muscles as well as smaller balls on clay that develop hand and wrist as well as finger movements. We observed children who would not readily explore the writing materials on offer exploring the clay and using the same skills observed in these “writing areas” when the children were using the clay. Observations also highlighted the way in which children would use clay for story telling purposes. Clay would be moulded and re-moulded to represent characters and objects, children would share their stories and recall familiar nursery tales.

The final aim for the project was to share our learning with other nursery colleagues across the Learning Community and the city wide. Both settings will produce a poster highlighting the benefits of clay as part of the daily provision and showcasing the work undertaken.

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