Challenge Based Provision

From Play to Purpose: Raising Challenge in the Early Years Classroom

by Emily Murphy

Project Overview

This project explores how the quality and engagement of continuous provision impacts learning and development in FS2 classrooms.

Challenge was identified as an area for development, with the aim of deepening engagement and encouraging independent, purposeful learning. The aim was to analyse each provision area, identify patterns of use, and understand children's interests, leading to targeted enhancements that support a broader range of learning opportunities. By aligning the environment more closely with children's natural motivations and extending the depth of challenge across all areas, the project seeks to strengthen child-led exploration, independence, and meaningful learning.

> "Instead of being passive consumers of knowledge, students become active seekers. They aren't just told how something works; they dive in, play, experiment, fail, retry, and ultimately succeed."
> – Brad Flickingerr (2024)

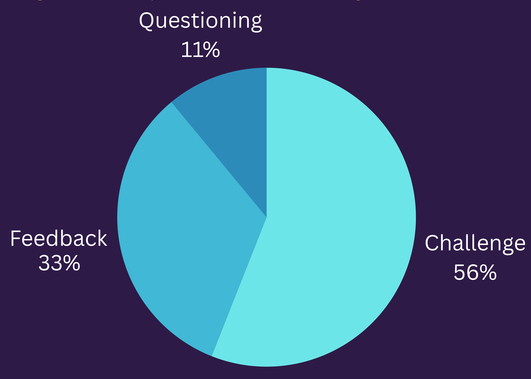
Methodology

A qualitative approach was used, combining an engagement rubric, time sampling, and child observations. Children also provided simple feedback using emoji charts to reflect on their experiences. This enabled insight into which areas lacked sustained engagement and where challenge could be introduced more effectively.

Key takeaway

Low level play → Enhance → Challenge

Which area do you feel is an area of development within your team?



Key findings before

- Maths and phonics areas had low engagement.
- High engagement in story corner, creative and outdoor areas
- Children preferred open-ended tasks with a role or purpose
- Challenge was more effective when linked to narrative or theme



Key findings after

- Challenge week using a class theme e.g. our Superhero theme. This embedded cognitive challenge.
- Maths area was a Superhero Codebreaker
- Sand tray was hidden messages to decode
- These tasks were open-ended, purposeful and linked to imaginative play.
- I introduced technology in the environment. This increased focus, engagement, creativity and storytelling
- Engagement in maths area increased from 3 mins to over 10 mins
- Children used more language related to problem-solving and perseverance
- Emoji feedback showed increased enjoyment and pride
- "I made a mask all by myself!" – Child A
- "It's tricky but I can do it!" – Child B



Scan here for use of technology in the classroom

Impact

I have observed a noticeable improvement in students' independence when leading their own learning. Embedding challenge into meaningful, playful contexts has led to deeper engagement and more independent thinking.
The use of technology has also made a significant impact, serving as a powerful tool for both teachers and students to deepen thinking and spark imagination.

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Conclusion

Embedding challenges within meaningful, playful contexts has led to deeper engagement and encouraged more independent thinking. The use of a qualitative approach, including time sampling, emoji based child feedback and engagement rubrics. This provided rich insights into how children respond to different types of challenge. These methods have enabled the identification of key provision areas where challenge was lacking and where targeted enhancements were most effective.

Moving forward, I plan to incorporate themed challenges more regularly and actively involve children in designing their own tasks. This will not only sustain motivation but also foster greater ownership of learning. Encouraging child voice in shaping provision has shown early signs of increasing confidence and creativity.

This research highlights the importance of continually assessing and adapting challenge based opportunities in the FS2 environment to ensure all children are appropriately challenged. It also reinforces the value of combining structured observation with pupil feedback to inform meaningful, child led provision development.