

## ***Where is the PLAY in worksheets, colouring-in, art templates, phonics programs, sight words and early readers?***

***Bronwyn McGregor***



Usually, I submit an article for the EYC when I have observed or heard about educators in early childhood settings who have demonstrated practices that I think others would

benefit hearing about. This time, however, I hesitated for quite a while about whether or not to submit this article, wondering if it might offend some early childhood colleagues. I am becoming increasingly uneasy about the 'state of play' as I listen to colleagues and observe practices in some early childhood settings. My concerns about what is happening in early education in Queensland – a state that purports to be offering good (even world's best) early childhood practice – are demanding that I speak up.

The belief in 'play-based learning' and/or 'play-based curriculum' that guided my own early practices as a preschool and primary school teacher now seems to be just a slogan repeated *ad infinitum* in posters and advertising but no longer a philosophy guiding teaching and learning for young children. Revisiting and standing firm in my own beliefs and values about play has made

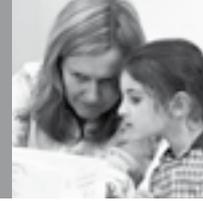
me begin to question the integrity of early childhood education and care in the "Smart State".

I despair as I encounter early childhood learning environments (and early childhood educators) who state they have a philosophy that learning is based on child-centred play yet, in reality, some of the practices taking place involve anything but play and even less about the child. If you think that I am being over-critical, let me share some anecdotes that demonstrate my concerns.

I heard recently of one early childhood setting that provided an experience for three-year-olds that consisted of a page containing an outline of the human body. Each day, for/by each child, a bodily organ (a brain, a heart etc.) was coloured, cut out (presumably by the child) and glued onto the page in the correct part of the body outline. (Understandably, the parent of a child in this setting was asking other parents about the age-appropriateness of such an experience for her child – and she wondered if she should be concerned that her child found this task a challenge ... not to mention that he wasn't there on the day that they 'did the heart'.)

*I wonder if the concept of 'play-based' learning still remains central to the early childhood philosophy, or if early childhood educators are abandoning what they know is best for young children as downward pressure is placed on the early years to meet the expectations of others with a more content driven approach to learning?*

# Teacher Stories



A primary teacher, now stay-at-home mum friend of mine, commented that the Prep class at the primary school her child is attending in 2010 includes a 'text book' as part of what is purchased with the parent-funded contributions. She quite rightly questioned the use of such a thing in a 'play-based' setting, and was consoled with the idea that it is just something that the children are given as an activity when they 'do' shapes, or height etc.

Conversations with other parents about Prep also raised the issue of school uniforms. In some cases, Prep children have a different uniform from the primary school children, others have the same. The ex-preschool teacher in me thinks, "Well, I guess it is better to get paint and glue on a school uniform than to get it on expensive clothes." Then I consider the parents' perspective ... uniforms can be quite expensive. To have one for just one year, then to buy another one ... they would be hoping their child doesn't get it too worn or stained so that they may be able to resell it or pass it on. So what pressure does this put on the child? And the teacher? Where does that leave experiences like messy play, finger painting, goop and the like?

A professional colleague confided recently that a group of schools in her area is planning on introducing 'home readers' and 'sight words' and maths worksheets in

Prep classrooms as a strategy to improve their future NAPLAN results. (Perhaps the next anecdote gives an indication of what lies ahead for children in these Prep classes.)

An early childhood teacher who now spends many days as a relief teacher in Prep classrooms, recounted an event where children in one Prep class told her that they had to read their readers to their teacher, and they demonstrated how this was done with the first reader at the start of a long line in front of her. When she asked if the children in the line read to each other as 'reading time' progress, they replied, "Oh no, we just wait here until it's our turn to read." (Seems like a great waste of someone's time ... and childhood, to me!)



Another primary school teaching friend of mine has retold countless anecdotes of the way Prep children have been 'included' in the school community. One

tells of how Prep children endured hours of waiting and watching from the far end of the sports field during school sports days. Is there an assumption that sitting in the hot sun watching school-aged children for most of the day and then running a single race is actually "participation" in a sports day? Why do schools use such inappropriate strategies in their efforts to include very young students in the school community? There are so many better ways to achieve this but it does involve altering some school traditions, finding a better cultural 'fit'.

*If you, as an early childhood educator and professional, are not concerned by these anecdotes then, indeed, I do hold grave fears for the future of early childhood philosophy and pedagogy.*

Even as I entered my own child's early childhood 'classroom', I sighed to myself as I noticed a wall covered in children's 'artwork' all practically identical, neatly displayed beside another wall covered in identical photocopies of a worksheet 'coloured' by the children (who are aged two and three years old). I asked myself, "Where is the creativity (not to mention



play) in a photocopied page that has been scribbled over?" I would have been more excited to see a display of blank pages scribbled all over!

I'll admit it has been almost a decade since I taught in an early childhood setting, so perhaps my idea about what is good practice is not as 'current' as I think it is. Yet, as I flick through the "Learning Outcomes" component of the new Early Years Learning Framework for children in the preschool years, nowhere do I see mention of the use of 'worksheets', 'colouring-in', 'craft activities', 'phonics programs' or 'art templates' as a strategy to achieve any of the five key learning outcomes. I will also admit that, in my time, I have used phonic-based worksheets

and the odd structured/craft-based art experience with children under eight, but NEVER with children under four and there were certainly lots of open-ended, context-based experiences that gave these 'tools' meaning in a play-based situation which supported their use.

I am now beginning to wonder how such practices continue to occur when we know so much about how young children learn, and have known for so long about the importance of play and creativity in the learning of young children ... not to mention copious research that has been done on the significance of responsive, reciprocal relationships on early brain development, social and emotional development, school readiness and later life outcomes. Having also been part of the Children's Services Training sector, and having associations with universities with post and undergraduate programs in early education, I KNOW that these practices are not acknowledged as best practice, so I wonder once again why these practices are still evident in today's early childhood settings. Somehow, we are failing to support our graduate teachers in selecting tools and strategies that create a learning culture guided by maintaining true to early childhood philosophies and values. Somehow we are also failing to support our



# Teacher Stories

*My role in the learning environment is to scaffold children's learning. I spend much of my time 'being with' the children as they play, rather than preparing, setting up and organising group activities.*

experienced early childhood teachers to advocate for the early childhood philosophy. Most importantly, we are failing to support



our children's childhoods and their futures in the way that we know is best.

Perhaps you feel I am painting a grim or even unfair picture of what is really taking place in some early childhood settings in Queensland, and maybe that is so. But let me ask you this: as early childhood professionals, if we begin to view the practices such as those I outlined earlier in this article as developmentally appropriate/ acceptable in even one of our early childhood settings, and we do not question their validity in a child-centred, play-based philosophy, then are we willing to accept learning experiences that are less than our children deserve and less than what our profession knows is best quality practice?

If my article has aroused strong thoughts and feelings in you, then I challenge you to channel those thoughts and feelings into critically reflecting on early childhood practices that you encounter (particularly your own), and questioning practices that may be less than best. Consider the following:

If you are planning on handing out some photocopied worksheets to young children this week, run through this mental checklist:

- What is the purpose of this work?
- Is there a play-based alternative that will provide similar learning? How can I provide this instead?
- Does this work extend on the child's own ideas or is it teacher-driven?
- Do all children need to do this? If some children can do it without my assistance ... do they really need to do it? If some children can only do it with my assistance ... is this the best way for me to support what it is they need to learn?
- When this work is done, who will gain the most satisfaction and pleasure from it ... the child ... the teacher ... the parent?

If you are providing 'craft templates' or 'colouring-in' activities during this week, run through this mental checklist. Start by asking yourself all the same questions listed earlier for worksheets ... then ask:

- Where in this work is there room for the child's own expressive work and ideas?

- What will my role be as the child completes this 'activity' and how does that contribute to supporting the child's learning?
- What skills will this 'activity' require and is it appropriate for the age and stage of the child/children taking part?
- How will I react if the child's work doesn't look the way I thought it would/should when it is completed?
- How much enjoyment will the child get from this 'activity'? How much enjoyment will I get from this activity?'

*Finally, if you are providing a child-centred, play-based learning environment, how many of these statements can you answer with a resounding yes?*

- I have had conversations with the child and with his/her parents/family about the child's interests, strengths, capabilities.
- When I come to the learning environment, I am open to where the play will take me, and I have a range of resources available so I can respond to where the children lead the learning.
- The learning environment belongs to the children. I encourage the children's self selection of materials and resources as they work and play within the boundaries and routines of the day.
- I am able to recognise each child's development and potential and I can build on this using play-based experiences, rather than formalized 'instructional teaching'.

- I am able to allow the children to make decisions about their learning. I do not do all the planning and deciding about learning with colleagues during planning sessions – without the children.

Bronwyn McGregor is an active member of the ECTA State Coordinating Committee.

Her association with ECTA first began in 1990 when she was president of the Longreach regional group. Bronwyn is currently working on a Qld Health Mental Health Promotion project – the Social and Emotional Early Development Strategy (SEEDS). Prior to that she was working for Disability Services Queensland, and previous to that was part of the Children's Services Team at the Open Learning Institute of TAFE. Her love of young children lead Bronwyn to teaching, and she studied her Diploma of Teaching Primary (with ECE specialisation) at the Mt Gravatt BCAE. After graduating in 1987, she took up her first teaching position as Teacher-in-charge at the Gayndah State Preschool. Two years later, she headed west to teach Preschool and Year One at the Longreach School of Distance Education. Bronwyn's other early education teaching experience extends to Reception and Year One classes in London, various age groups in Child Care in New Zealand and a year teaching in a Montessori Preschool (also in New Zealand).