

'Playing' With the National Curriculum

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Libby Gaedtke is a Prep teacher at Xavier Catholic College in Hervey Bay. She has been teaching for over 23 years in Preschools and now Prep, through both Education Queensland and Brisbane Catholic Education, and her philosophy and practices have evolved over that time. Libby is also the ECTA Groups Coordinator, and the Coordinator of ECTA Hervey Bay Group, and loves to see the world through the eyes of her five-year-old friends.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum into our Queensland schools just around the corner, there seems to be some uncertainty in the air surrounding Early Childhood Education and the expectations on our young learners. Many teachers are facing changes in content that they may not feel equipped to deal with, many are worried that all they have strived for and believe in, that is child-negotiated experiential learning, may 'fly out the window'. Concerns about the 'push-down' of the curriculum to children who are not developmentally ready to take on this type of learning, are present and strong.

We must remember that PLAY will remain one of five contexts for learning. As we are well aware quality, scaffolded play does not mean letting the children run riot and do whatever they please. It is a carefully crafted and monitored environment where caring adults facilitate learning experiences and episodes for their students, based on interests and current events in their

lives and in the wider community. It is an opportunity to make sense of the complex world in which they live. Smith (2010) in *Children and Play* cites two very good reasons why children's play should be encouraged and supported: firstly, because it is fun and enjoyable, and secondly because it is useful. He believes that this enjoyment of play should be celebrated and treasured, and anthropologically it occurs in the early years of life, gradually diminishing with age. In terms of usefulness, Smith states:

Play is one way in which children get a lot of experience about the world.

The current climate of educational change is not the time to suddenly give up on what we believe so strongly in – that young children learn best through play. As educators of young children, we are very creative and clever thinkers. We will continue to use play as a tool for quality learning, and strengthen our programs with authentic literacy and numeracy

experiences. This is not to forget all the other equally important learning that our children need – how to listen; how to follow directions; how to interact in an acceptable way with peers; how to solve everyday problems such as how to get help when I can't open my muesli bar wrapper at lunch time, how I can get friends to make space for me in the circle at group time; how to develop the confidence to try something new – like writing! These are the everyday 'little steps' that we encourage and help the children in our care to take.

Reading in Prep is not a new addition for some, for others it's a looming challenge. How can we educate our parents to understand that reading environmental print – road signs, the latest toy catalogue, the shopping list, a letter from Grandma – is authentic and very valid for their children, perhaps more so than commercially-produced 'readers'? Why not produce together with the class, little books which are relevant to the areas of interest that they are investigating? Creating an environment rich in literacy is something we have done beautifully in the past, and this will continue with the introduction of the National Curriculum. Signs and labels that have purpose and meaning are valuable tools, and will encourage children who are ready to take that next step into reading to do so.

Writing can also take an exciting leap into play scenarios – using whole writing, having real reasons to write (for example: writing a letter to our groundsman to find out how the power comes into our classroom, writing to our manual arts teacher to ask him to come and teach us how to hammer nails safely, sending an email to Eric Carle to find out if his illustration is of a crocodile or an alligator – a much-debated point

one year!). In 'Kid Writing' by Feldgus and Cardonick (1999), the importance of making writing relevant for young children is evident. Many practical suggestions and examples are shown to demonstrate how teachers make the transition to 'creating authentic literacy challenges for children'. The concept is based on the notion that 'children learn best when their work is personally meaningful', and has strong arguments against the use of worksheets in early years classes as they *lack* relevance and are often out of context and unconnected to real experience.

Mathematics is an exciting element in early years classrooms, with concrete, hands-on materials used to explore ideas, formulate concepts and help the children move towards symbolic understandings. By grasping opportunities as they arise each day they begin to understand and connect learning. Using the clock to help develop understandings about time ('when the long hand is pointing straight up to number 12 and the short hand is pointing at 11, then it will be lunchtime'), introducing different types of clocks, looking at online calendars (there's a good one at www.starfall.com) are all opportunities for mathematical understanding that relate to *themselves*. And it happens whilst encouraging the children to 'have a go' in a non-threatening environment !

In my own Prep classroom the students have recently been exploring their world through their play. In our hospital, which was set up after one of our Prep children had a broken bone, and therefore was relevant to the children, evidence of exciting learning is in abundance – computer generated signs and props made through Sparklebox (www.sparklebox.co.uk),



Teacher Stories

waiting room magazines there to read, emergency phone numbers, time schedules, photo stories with captions written by the children in their amazing 'kid writing', notebooks for listing ailments (which are many and varied!) and patients, to name a few. Following the release of several movies over the holidays they returned to Prep keen to create a cinema. My teacher-aid and I sat back and observed as our class of five year olds organized themselves and each other, to produce posters, 'NO SMOKING' and 'NO MOBILE PHONE' signs, tickets and money, to monitor time, to arrange the room to suit their project, which incorporated the Interactive Whiteboard. Funnily enough, many of the hospital patients got better suddenly and popped next door to the movies swathed in bandages! This was a hive of busy creative learners at their best,

with literacy and numeracy happening in authentic and relevant ways!

So let's not throw out our philosophy with the bath water! Yes, the National Curriculum IS going to happen and it will bring with it many challenges, but let's remember how creatively we as Early Childhood Educators are able to solve problems ourselves, and continue to foster quality learning for these precious people in our care.

References

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