

# *Risky business: Viewing intentional teaching as a risky endeavour*

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Intentional teaching practices are risky! Do outcomes match our intentions? Do they have to? The assumptions and judgments we make each day inform children's and adults' sense of belonging, being and becoming. This article offers some perspectives about intentional teaching from practice in order to open discussion and bolster shared understandings of the significance and implications of teaching with intent.

### **Teaching with intent**

Our early childhood environments offer enormous potential for young children. Dirt or digging patches, for example, afford opportunities for children to connect with natural and sensory experiences. One of the favourite games children love to play in the digging patch at our centre is making campfires.

### **Building a fire**

However, in order to enjoy the benefits of a campfire, preparation is required. Just as we might collect and grade sticks suitable for the purpose of lighting a fire, we need to take time and think intentionally about what practices or understandings children require. Building a fire takes time and planning. If we want to capitalise on the benefits of mud or campfire play for children, then it is critical that we take time to consider our intentions. Do children have time to reap the benefits of play? The provision of a dirt patch in our outside environments may give the message to children and families that children are welcome to play, and that we value this natural connection. However our practices may be at odds. Are we constantly hurrying



children, or limiting play in the dirt because children may get too dirty, or stopping play because of time constraints of cleaning up? Taking time to model clean-up procedures, and co-construct practices with children to support the responsible use and clean-up of the dirt patch, reaps rewards. Hold high expectations of children, and trust them to take on these responsibilities.

### **Smoke signals**

Once campfire play is initiated, it often involves children gathering sticks, threading leaves or paper for marshmallows, making mud stews or enacting camping games. A cursory glance in the direction of the play can offer an idea about the play, and possible learning outcomes and dispositions such as scientific understandings, cooperative play and social interactions. However, is this really happening? It is important to check the smoke signals. What are children learning? How do I know? Was this my intention? If not, what action is needed?

### Risk of intent

Intentional teaching is risky. We need to know children as individuals and group members, and make judgements. Often, action is called for quickly and we make a decision to act on the spot without the luxury of reflective thinking time. Our decisions are based on our knowledge and understandings of children. If we are to make sound decisions, we need to know that our actions are based on the best available knowledge we have at hand. The significance of knowing children cannot be underestimated. Each day presents opportunities for us to connect with, and deepen our relationships with children. We can be challenged; these day-to-day actions are risky. Affording time to get to know children; listening and talking with them about their interests; engaging them in discussions about their learning; and revisiting their play or investigations with them at later times are valuable ways of building our knowledge to support pedagogical decisions.

*Key to optimizing children's learning is taking time to carefully think about the intention of the experience and what expectations you hold for this. Sometimes we may hold an assumption about children's learning. We may presume that because an experience holds potential for exploring a particular content area or disposition, this learning actually occurs. What we intend may not result (Hunter & Sonter, 2012, p. 59).*

Consider the outcomes of dirt or mud play. Do they match your intentions? Are children reaping the benefits or are they too concerned about getting clothes dirty? Is the play fair? Consider the outcomes of camp fire play. Do they match your intentions? Are children actually measuring and grading the sticks or hitting ants or lizards?

*When children are playing, sometimes what's happening within the game is different to the educator's assumption. Similarly when children are engaged in specific experiences, sometimes what children actually learn is different to the educator's intention. It could however be just as relevant or more so. It could also be equally in conflict to the intention or atmosphere of learning (Hunter & Sonter, 2012, p. 60).*

### Intending risk

What deliberate obstacles or risks do we place in children's pathways? Intentionally creating experiences some may view as risky, requires us to clarify our reasons, be brave and act deliberately and pedagogically.

Taking time to weigh up the benefits of experiences, rather than closing these down because of an assumed risk is crucial if we are to support children's learning. Intentionally reflecting upon our personal view of risk is beneficial. How do we view risk? Do we consider a risk different to a hazard? Do we champion the benefit of risk? Undertaking a benefit-risk analysis, or re-framing dilemmas to consider benefits or other possibilities, may offer alternative actions.

### Risking to learn

It is equally important for us as teachers to take risks with our learning. Risking to learn means that we need to look carefully and listen genuinely to what children are doing or saying. Is there a match between what they are saying or thinking and the teacher's ideas? Take time to listen carefully, asking questions that allow children to give you the answers you don't know. Think through together how this might look and revisit this thinking, rather than adopting the 'right, you'll need ...' attitude. Balancing teacher and child input is critical. It can be a very simple idea but consider the complexity of skills used within this. Remember whose game or idea it is and champion the child.

If we are to acknowledge children's ideas we need to hear them. Children need adults to encourage, listen, observe and interact in play. They need to see that their ideas are valued. In co-constructed curriculum, children's and adults ideas are valued. If you see children as confident and competent, how does this influence your intentions?

### References

Hunter, L. & Sonter, L.J., 2012. *Progressing Play: Practicalities, intentions and possibilities in emerging co-constructed curriculum*. Brisbane: Consultants at Play.

