

Thinking play: curriculum designers

Michelle Scheu



Through her practice as an early childhood educator, Michelle has developed a pedagogy known as Thinking Play. At her school, she is an early year's team leader, mentor and a cognitive coach. She is passionate about sharing her learning, striving to contribute to local and global educational communities. Michelle mentors teachers from across Queensland on implementing Thinking Play through classroom visits, emails and on networking websites. She has been published in *Reggio Australia*, *The Educator* and *Early Horizons* magazines. Michelle was awarded an ASG NEiTA National Teaching Award in Leadership and attended the Education Accord Summit in 2014. Michelle set up a YouTube channel to promote play-based education. The most well-known of her clips, titled 'Let the children play', has received over 3800 views worldwide.

Australian curriculum

It is a challenge for governments globally to design curriculum to meet the diverse educational needs of its young, enabling them to become effective members of society. Since the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, education has shifted from the reliance on trusted teaching professionals to provide developmentally sensitive learning, tailored to meet children's needs, to being replaced by a curriculum driven by an increasing use of over-generalised norm-reference testing. The impact of this change is most evident in the education of children under the age of eight



Play that is relevant to the lives of young children

where active, inquiry, play-based methods were once used to teach children to think and reason. In many settings, this style of learning has been replaced by passive formalised instruction where focused learning has become the testable restating of facts. If policy makers want Australian children to grow into effective members of society, this has to be reflected in the way its teachers implement the Australian Curriculum.

Accountability

Policy makers preference learning and teaching that can be easily measured through norm-referenced tests. These assessment tools create publishable data where learning outcomes can be compared between individuals, schools and regions. Such assessments focus on the acquisition and regurgitation of facts and procedures (Mergler 2010) potentially causing a negative impact on teaching and learning. Norm-referenced testing fails to explain what a child actually knows – an assessment of learning as opposed to an assessment for learning. This form of testing can dictate the teaching and learning process, and create a competitive culture that discourages children from working collaboratively to problem-solve and to share ideas and experiences – key skills required to work effectively within the 21st Century.



Rich real life experiences

Successfully educating individuals to reach their full potential depends on a multifaceted and complex web of contributing factors.

Education cannot be at its best if focus is given to only one or two factors such as norm-testing and accountability.

Decline in student performance

Australia has seen a steady decline in student performance in the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) scores, with the 2015 report showing the lowest in the past ten years (Bagshaw and Smith 2016). During this period, NAPLAN and the Australian Curriculum (AC) were introduced throughout Australia, and Curriculum to Classroom (C2C) was introduced in Queensland as a suggested method of delivery to assist teachers in implementing the AC in their classrooms.

Decades of teacher experience and craft knowledge is being ignored, as education leaders promote this approach as best practice in a top down model for all teachers and classrooms to adopt.

On the other hand, Finland's approach to education, which promotes a well-balanced, effective teaching cycle, boasts the highest PISA scores in the world (OECD 2015).

Open-ended learning

Concerned teachers are searching for alternative ways to implement the AC. These teachers and administrators, are investigating a return to inquiry-based learning, such as 'Walker Learning' (Walker 2007) 'Lane Clarke Inquiry Process' (Clarke) and Thinking Play (Scheu 2015) where curriculum is centred on an investigation that promotes open-ended learning.

Children assume the role of partner in the decision-making process, facilitating deep thinking throughout. Both essential and incidental learning is valued equally, to honour the uniqueness and individual intelligence of each child.

Teachers ensure education possesses real world relevance by tailoring the investigation to suit the individual needs, interests and real life concerns of the children they are teaching in the context of their local community. Assessment processes are built into the learning experience to facilitate children's view of learning as relevant and useful, becoming an assessment for learning (Mergler 2010).

Assessment

Assessment needs to be authentic, providing accurate information on a child's learning,



Children take ownership of their learning

demonstrating their ability to think, reason, inquire and construct knowledge. As opposed to driving the curriculum, authentic assessment focuses on the students' 'key knowledge, understandings, common skills and learning dispositions' (Mergler 2010, p. 52; Killen 2005). When assessment is authentic it informs practice and is part of a balanced teaching cycle (Ormiston 2011). Teaching that facilitates imagination, creativity and higher order thinking occurs when it is deliberately planned for. Albert Einstein (1953, 1947) expressed a similar view on education, claiming that a society's competitive advantage will not come from how well its schools teach the multiplication and periodic table, but from how well they stimulate imagination and creativity and train the mind to think.

Curriculum designers

Teachers build valuable relationships with children, their families and the wider community, and accumulate knowledge of each child and their developmental stage.

Frequent interactions and observations by the teacher help to design rich inquiry-based curriculum. This addresses the individual learning needs of each child with support, as they work in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). Dedicated early years teachers have grieved the loss of researched, play-based inquiry teaching



Literacy is embedded in play

methods where curriculum was child-initiated and designed in collaboration, and where developmental continua were used to track learning (Early Years Curriculum Guidelines 2006).

In many Prep classrooms familiar resources such as painting easels, blocks, costumes and manipulative equipment have been pushed aside for desks as teachers feel pressure to implement the teacher-directed, formalised learning of the scripted C2C units with accompanying worksheet-style assessments. The autonomy of teachers in their role as curriculum designers has been ignored with many teachers being asked to follow a single approach to instruction.

Nurturing the full potential of the child

One of society's greatest responsibilities to its people is to educate their young wisely. The over-generalised, over-assessed education of the masses cannot effectively compete with curriculum designed by teachers who are well-informed in researched-based pedagogy and highly skilled in the practice of meeting the individual needs of the child. These curriculum designers facilitate developmentally sensitive learning to enable the child to work in their zone of proximal development, ensuring each child views themselves as capable and successful.

Learning becomes excitingly dynamic when the child is asked to think and not just to know, to be a partner in curriculum design and not just a passive receiver of information.

Nurturing the full potential of a child in their development as a valued, effective member of society must be embedded in educational pedagogy. It is time to give trust back where it belongs and reinstate teachers as curriculum designers. When curriculum design is moved from the preferences of political parties and entrusted to teaching professionals who implement researched-based pedagogy to address the individual learning needs of children, progress will become possible.



Skills for life - collaboration and co-operation



Children are partners in the decision making processes

References

Education Queensland 2006, Queensland Studies Authority, Early Years Curriculum Guidelines.

Einstein to Vivienne Anderson, May 12, 1953, AEA 60-716.

Killen, R 2005, *Programing and assessment for quality teaching and learning*, Nelson Australia, Melbourne.

Mergler, A 2010, Chapter 3: Diverse assessment practices. In D. Tangen, T. Sedgley, A. Mergler, D. Bland, E. Curits, R. Spooner-Lane, & L. Mercer (Eds.), *Engaging diverse learners*, (2nd ed., pp. 49-67). Pearson, Australia: SOS Print + Media Group Pty Ltd.

New York Times, May 18, 1921; Frank 1947, 185; Brian 1966, 129, Illy, 25-32. Frank, P. 1947. Einstein: A Centenary Volume. Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press.;

Brian, D. 1996. Einstein: A Life. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.; Illy, J., ed. 2005, February. "Einstein Due Today." Manuscript. (Courtesy of the Einstein Papers Project, Pasadena.)

OECD 2010, *Finland steady and slow reform for consistently high results*, viewed 25 April 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46581035.pdf>

OECD 2015, Government at a Glance Finland Country Fact Sheet, viewed 25 April 2016, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Finland.pdf>

Ormiston, M 2011, "Creating a Digital-Rich Classroom: Teaching & Learning" Solution Tree Press.

Programme for International Students Assessment, PISA Australia ACER, Accessed April 4, 2016. <https://www.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/the-australian-pisa-data-files>

Scheu, M 2015, 'Thinking play: honouring the child', *Journal of the Early Childhood Teachers' Association Inc.*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. [??].

Bagshaw, E and Smith, A 2016, 'Education policy not adding up: OECD asks what's wrong with Australia's schools?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 2016, viewed 4 April 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/education-policy-not-adding-up-oecd-asks-whats-wrong-with-australias-schools-20160323-gnpno9.html>

Henderson, D 2011, *Virtual Learning Network, Lane Clarke Inquiry Processes*, viewed 27 May 2016, <http://www.vln.school.nz/resources/view/46948/lane-clarke-inquiry-processes>

Vygotsky, L 1978, *Mind of society: the development of higher mental processes*, trans. M. Cole, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Walker K 2007, *Play matters: engaging children in learning the Australian developmental curriculum, a play and project based philosophy*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Victoria.

Teacher Tom Blog: Teaching and Learning from Preschoolers 'Weighing the Pig Doesn't Fatten It'. Date: August 13, 2009. Accessed April 4, 2016. <http://teachertombsblog.blogspot.com.au/2009/08/weighing-pig-doesnt-fatten-it.html>

Ian Seath's Blog: Simply, improvement... 'Weighing the pig won't make it fatter' Date: April 12, 2012. Accessed April 4, 2016. <https://ianjseath.wordpress.com/2012/04/12/weighing-the-pig-wont-make-it-fatter/>