

Play-based learning environments aid transition and set children up for success

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Deirdre Tate is a Prep Teacher and Precinct Co-ordinator at St Rita's Catholic Primary School, Victoria Point. Deirdre has always been aware of the value in embedding oral language processes in an interactive environment to stimulate children's cognitive development. This desire to improve children's oral language led Deirdre to become involved in the set-up and organisation of *Early Learning Redlands* (an AEDC response group) and co-present the *S.P.E.A.K.* program (a partnership with Redlands libraries and local schools). Deirdre believes that educating the community about developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the early years will improve children's disposition towards life-long learning.

Consider two Prep classrooms. In one the children sit at desks in neat rows. The school day is divided into large chunks of time devoted to structured reading, writing and teacher-directed tasks. Play is restricted to break times only and is not connected with classroom projects. The main voice in the classroom, is the teacher's. Assessment is in the form of testing and happens frequently. The reading program is centered on a levelled reading scheme and children are grouped by levels. Simple 'take home' readers form the home connection to ensure children are practising after school, along with sets of sight words to memorise for testing back in school.

In the other classroom desks are arranged as learning centres. The children move from one to the other and in and out of a co-constructed role play area. Play, in its many forms, takes place both inside and outside the classroom and throughout the school day and is intentionally related to what the children are learning. The main voice in the classroom is the children's. Assessment is ongoing, based on observations, discussions and challenges. The reading program is centered on good quality texts written by recognised children's authors. The home connection is designed to ensure that children develop a love for reading while practising reading strategies in the form of games.

To a parent, the first classroom may initially appear preferable. The controlled environment and the regimented teaching seeming to indicate academic focus and higher achievement. However, what if we consider:

- Stimulating experiences are important to develop learning pathways in the brain and that a psychologist could have concerns about the levels of anxiety placed upon four- and five-year-olds when subjected to constant testing in an environment that does not allow for flexibility.
- Children learn language by listening to and using it, and that a speech pathologist could have concerns about the minimal level of opportunities to speak and respond.
- Children learn through being engaged and active, and that an occupational therapist could have concerns about the lack of movement throughout the day.

As a teacher and a parent, I have seen examples of both classrooms, here in Australia and in other countries. From my experience, and my studies, it is evident that the early years of school establish skills, knowledge and dispositions towards learning. The superior motivation children display when learning through a play-based approach, makes it easier for teachers to shape experiences so that each

child reaches curriculum goals. Tapping into children's natural curiosity and desire to explore, question and investigate the world around them provides rich opportunities for observational assessment.

At St Rita's, we use evidence-based teaching practices that encourage children to learn through questioning, exploring, investigating and interacting. Through our involvement in community groups like Early Learning Redlands – an Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) response group comprising occupational therapists, speech pathologists, Medicare local, child care centres, C&K, Department of Education and Training, Queensland Health, parents and grandparents – and co-presenting initiatives like Speaking Promotes Education And Knowledge (S.P.E.A.K.) with Cleveland State School and Redlands Libraries we aim to improve oral language in the community so that all children in the Redlands can better access the curriculum when they come to school.



Tapping into children's natural curiosity



Play in its many forms

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2011) 'the greater the discontinuity between the early childhood and care environment and school ... the more difficult the transition will be for children'. By recognising the importance of focusing on the whole child and providing the optimal learning environment for this particular stage of development transition becomes less of a concern and children are set up for success.

References

Rosier K & McDonald M 2011, *Promoting positive education and care transitions for children*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra.