



Educating Young Children

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the early childhood years*

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of all the lands that we live on, work on and travel through together. We pay our respects to their elders, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the spiritual connections, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. We recognise their strength and resilience and their long history of caring for and educating children here. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this region. We recognise the importance of continued connection to culture, country and community to the health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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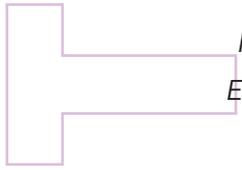


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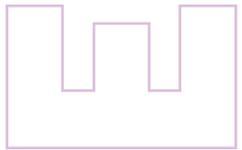


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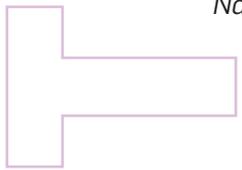
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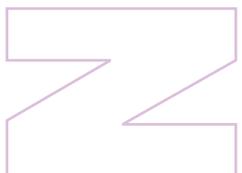


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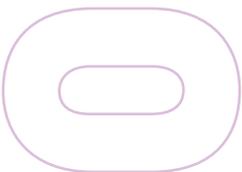
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From the President

Welcome to the last journal for 2019. This issue continues to feature articles submitted by our ECTA Early Childhood Conference 2019 presenters and has a focus on curriculum, particularly on the role of play in early learning settings. Queensland early childhood professionals (ECPs) across the sector are reporting the significant decline in opportunities for children to learn through self-initiated and self-directed play experiences, especially in the early years of schooling. This is happening despite significant international evidence indicating that play-based learning leads to quality outcomes for all children. We'd love to hear from you via ECTA Connect about what's happening with play in your setting.



ECTA Connect is the **NEW** online professional networking tool, within the ECTA website, that enables you to share questions, ideas, experiences, strategies, resources and so much more. Collaborate with professionals who share the same passion for teaching early childhood age groups just like yourself. Login to **ecta.org.au** and click ECTA Connect. If you can't remember your password do a Password Recovery. If this is your first-time logging in to the new site, you will be asked to confirm some of your details. e.g. work sector, address etc. we use this information to report on demographics of ECTA membership and to plan the conference.

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2020 Organisation Members will discover our new online format called ECTA Teams. ECTA Teams will allow the staff from organisational members to enjoy all the features of the ECTA website, including ECTA Connect, Groups with their own personal log in. Plus, each staff member will be have unrestricted access to all of the resource and professional development materials available.

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1. Registration Link – Any user that click this link can register for the team. The owner or manager can regenerate the link to de-active the previous link if required. This method is quick and easy
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Don't forget to play during the Christmas break. It is important to us all, not just children.

Kim





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The 'connectedness project': using the 'anti-bias approach' in early childhood



Sylvana Li has taught at Margaret Cribb Early Learning (MCEL) in St Lucia for the last two years. Before she worked at MCEL, Sylvana lived in Melbourne for more than six years, where she studied her Master of Teaching in the early years. She then relocated to Brisbane and did casual teaching in both primary and early childhood settings. Sylvana is a strong advocate of the Reggio Emilia approach; she is particularly interested in project learning and documentation. She recently took on the role of tertiary supervisor at the Australian Catholic University.

In recent years, a lot of research has dug deeply into the topic of social justice in early childhood. As Hawkins (2017) states, teaching for social justice is challenging stereotypes and advocates for the equity and dignity of all individuals, especially those who are disadvantaged and marginalised. It is essential for educators to meaningfully break down those stereotypes in daily practice. We often say that everyone is different, but how often do we explore the differences between you and me? Of all the differences between people, one of the distinct differences is race. Some educators prefer not to dig too deeply into this topic, as it can be highly sensitive (Broadbent 2015). However, we believe that children will learn better if we explicitly discuss those differences. This article will explain how a group of kindergarten children based in St Lucia took a learning journey in social justice and started the connectedness project.

'[Racial bias] matters mostly because we all matter, regardless of and because of, our skin colouring, our racial background, language, our cultural identity or beliefs. We all need (and deserve) to know we are appreciated in the education and care service we are a part of' (Scarlett & Bryant 2017, p.8)

The beginning of harmony

The connectedness project began on Harmony Day in 2018. Some children asked what harmony means, and we told them it is about being respectful to other people and making them feel safe and happy. An educator

later overheard some children talking about the seat arrangement, as two of the children were fighting about a seat. One said to the other, 'This is not harmony if you sit in someone else's seat'.

So we delved deeper into what harmony means, discussing ideas surrounding fairness, equality and supporting each other. On an individual level, we have had a myriad of conversations about the harmony in our room, which has empowered children to use their own agency to solve problems and build a sense of harmony.

The 'harmony fish'

Of all the books we had been reading in the lead up to Harmony Day, the story that most resonated with and inspired the children was *The rainbow fish*, written by Marcus Pfister. In this timeless story of redemption, the rainbow fish was the perfect character to embody the concept of





Raphael Cooney has been teaching at Margaret Cribb Early Learning Kindergarten for the last six years. Prior to studying teaching at QUT, he worked in Figtree Pocket. He has a graduate degree in early childhood education, as well as an honours degree in archaeology. Raphael is strongly focused on outdoor learning for children within a play-based learning environment. He is an advocate for nature play and engaging children with their local environment.

harmony. The educators were inspired to make a harmony fish and, as the children suggested how they could contribute to harmony and achieved daily harmony goals, they earned a scale for each goal. The harmony fish became the highlight of the program and, every day, the children came up with different goals such as respecting resources, being quiet at rest time and sharing resources with their friends. We also asked the children to set their own personal goals, to extend and build upon the wonderful work they had done as a group to foster harmony in the kindy room. This was an opportunity for them to reflect on their choices and on empathising with others.

Conversations about skin tones

The harmony fish experience was a resounding success with the children building a more harmonious environment. The harmony fish learning is ongoing, and the children have started to show an interest in skin colours, as many of them have had interesting conversations about this with their peers. We read *Happy in our skin* (Manushkin 2018), which talks about how everyone's skin looks different but we all come together as a harmonious community.

We set up a drawing experience in which children used skin-tone colour pencils to draw themselves, their friends and families. The children would compare the pencil colours to their friends' skin colours and tried to find the right colour to draw. We also talked about how skin can look different when people have freckles or dimples. The children did amazing portraits of their friends and families with the skin-tone pencils. It was beautiful to see that the children are recognising and embracing differences.

The 'rag doll' experience

Our art teacher extended this experience by giving the children the opportunity to draw and then

paint dolls from around the world, reinforcing and supporting the message of beauty in difference. The children also collaged the clothes of their drawings by using beautiful coloured paper, matching the patterns they saw in the dolls' traditional clothing. We have also made rag dolls from upcycled fabric offcuts. Each child was given the opportunity to choose the skin tone, size and clothing of the doll they would make. We were delighted by the wonderful creations they produced and the stories they began to tell about them. Each doll was different, and each had its own story. At the end of the project, we compiled the children's stories of their dolls and made it into a little book called *Kindy doll stories*. Many parents commented that their children absolutely loved this book, and some of them would read it every night before bed.

The connectedness project has created a positive environment for the children and the educators to initiate conversations about recognising differences and responding to diversity.

Implications and conclusion

Our project was sparked by a real-world interaction that showed us an unconscious bias we were unaware of. We were in an art class when a group of prospective parents came to visit. One of the mothers happened to be in a hijab, and the children could not see her face. Some of the children found this particularly unsettling and were fearful and worried for some time. We discussed this with the children, and their main concern was why that person was hiding their face.

We reflected on this and came to the realisation that many of the villains in

children's books and television shows hide their faces behind masks, and the children may have been linking the two ideas. We initially decided to discuss this issue as part of a short topic on Islamic dress and customs, but soon we realised that it would be far more genuine and richer to look at diverse cultures at our centre and around the world. This project is a practice of the anti-bias approach. A racially unbiased service may have educational programs and practices that:

'Ensure that children gain knowledge of different cultural practices and develop skills to communicate with children from different racial backgrounds to their own; encourage children to feel comfortable in expressing their difference; promote children's natural curiosity about difference' (Scarlett & Bryant 2017, p.6).

The connectedness project has created a positive environment for the children and the educators to initiate conversations about recognising differences and responding to diversity in a respectful way. Towards the end of the project, we were delighted to see that the children were proud to celebrate their identity and were also happy to value the differences among their peers. The connectedness project has also laid the foundation in the kindergarten room of

a positive learning atmosphere featuring empathy, understanding and respect. The children's use of the word 'harmony' is now woven into their daily interactions. The children and educators now use 'harmony' to describe positive behaviour. We feel that learning about harmony has enabled them to use positive language in many social settings, rather than using 'good' or 'bad', as not everything is binary. We hope that, through this project, we have gone some way towards alleviating children's fear and increasing their appreciation and respect for diversity.

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Finding magical moments in routine experiences



Nicole Halton is the co-founder of Inspired EC, Inspired Family Day Care, and TimberNook Newcastle, and is a former early childhood educator and director. For over ten years Nicole has shared her passion for the early years through workshops, conferences and consultancy. A highly regarded writer, Nicole writes regularly on the Inspired EC website, guest writes for other publications, and has had several books published by Teaching Solutions. Nicole is an advocate for children's rights and has a particular interest in positive school transitions, nature play, and working with infants and toddlers.

Elsie (seven months) stretches out on the change table, her arms reaching above her head as she yawns. Anja (the educator) is changing her nappy in preparation for her afternoon sleep. Suddenly something catches Elsie's eye, and she points to the wall behind the change table. 'Ahhh', she says. Anja responds, 'What can you see, Elsie?'

Elsie points again and Anja looks up after getting the wipes ready. She sees that Elsie has spotted a small rainbow on the wall, refracted from the sun shining in through the louvered windows. Anja begins to sing the song 'I can sing a rainbow' to Elsie as she changes her nappy. Elsie squeals and smiles.

When she has finished changing Elsie's nappy, she turns her around so that she can inspect the rainbow on the wall. Elsie reaches out to touch the rainbow and looks surprised when it appears on her hand. They spend a

few moments together looking at the rainbow on the wall, on Elsie's hand and on Anja's hand, before finishing up and heading off for a sleep.

Routine experiences. Our work with infants and toddlers is full of them. We often hear educators lament that they don't have time for the program because they are so busy with the 'care stuff'. In all honesty, in an infant environment, the 'care stuff' is the program. Time spent changing nappies, feeding, rocking off to sleep, and providing comfort to an unsettled child is time well spent. This is responsive caregiving and reflects the needs and development of this age group. And yet we can be guilty, at times, of rushing through these routines to get to the play, to the program, to the planned experiences. An educator recently confessed to us that she doesn't sing or play with infants during change times as it takes too much time, and she is under pressure from management





Tash Treveton is the co-founder of Inspired EC, which supports early childhood services nationally and internationally. Tash is a trainer and consultant for Inspired EC and has co-authored several books; she also co-founded Inspired Family Day Care and TimberNook Newcastle. Helping people who engage with children to understand the importance of their role and ability to make a positive impact is what she lives for. Along with her professional soulmate, Nicole Halton, Tash uses Inspired EC as a vehicle to promote excitement and passion about the early childhood profession that they are blessed to be a part of.

to ensure that each of the infants engages in one art activity per day, so she simply doesn't have the time. I really felt for this educator and urged her to push back, to question how a structured art activity holds more value than time spent creating connections.

In every routine moment, there is the possibility of magic. Way back when I was studying at TAFE, the focus was on making routine times, such as nappy changes, meaningful 'learning' times. This meant that educators were juggling to keep a wriggly infant on the change table, wrestle with a packet of baby wipes and open the bin with their foot, all while trying to sing 'Five little ducks' with a duck puppet! The interpretation of making the time meaningful was that it almost needed to be a one-on-one music/language group time, complete with stories, songs and props. While I don't think we need to be putting on a performance each time we change a child's nappy, it does sadden me when I see children moved through routine experiences as though on a production line, with little interaction,

affection and connection.

Yes, mealtimes can take a long time with very young children, made even longer when they are self-feeding; this concept is referred to as baby-led weaning and it promotes independence and self-regulation. It is crucial that we slow down and see the value in these routine experiences. Watching a child develop their sense of mastery as they navigate their meal with a spoon—that is magical. Observing a toddler passing a cup to a friend when he sees that they don't have one yet—that is magical. Delighting in the smiles of the children who spot a butterfly out the window and point and squeal—now that is pretty darned magical. Can you imagine missing those moments because you were rushing through the routine?

As educators, we need to slow down. We need to allow the children to slow down. When we give infants and toddlers time to have their curiosity and sense of wonder sparked, we see that there is magic happening in the ordinary, everyday, routine moments.



The 'table project'

I was working in a stand-alone kindergarten in southeast Queensland that ran an extended hours care program from 3–6 pm. The program had 22 children aged three to five and two educators; this is the story of how we painted a hot pink table together.



Evangeline Smaree Manassakis has completed a Master of Philosophy (hosted by the Faculty of Education) at Queensland University of Technology, following an honours project examining the perception of preservice early childhood teachers and design students regarding children's involvement in the design process of a child care centre. Her current research investigates children's views and decision-making on how spaces in indoor kindergarten classrooms are organised. Evangeline has ten years experience working in early childhood services and in registered training organisations, as a researcher and as an early childhood officer for the Department of Education.

'Project approach'

Project approach is recognised as one of seven age-appropriate pedagogies—approaches used with children in the early years of school and in early childhood services such as kindergarten and long day care centres (Department of Education, 2019). This is a teaching approach that involves an 'in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning about' (Katz 1994, p.1). The topic of the project could be an extension from children's interests, child-or-teacher initiated, or developed in collaboration and consultation with children (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2008; Helm & Katz, 2011; Sargent, 2011). Projects can last from days to months and be investigated by the whole class, small groups of children, or an individual child (Department of Education, 2019). According to Chard, Castillo, and Kogan (2017), the project approach has a beginning, middle, and end like a story—here is ours.

The story of the table project

One afternoon, I set up a paint area on a hot pink table under a tree. After painting on the paper that I provided, three girls decided to repaint the whole table; it changed from hot pink to a mixture of colours—brown and bits of yellow. I held back my initial thought of 'What a mess!' and asked the girls why they painted the table. One of the girls explained that they didn't like the colour of the table. After a pause, I explained that the paint they'd used would wash away and I asked if they'd like me to check with the director if we could repaint the table with proper paint that

would last. After receiving approval, we embarked on a four-month-long project repainting the table.

To gauge the interest of the whole class in the project, I showed photos of how the girls originally painted the table and discussed the need for repainting it. My colleague and I then designed activities to listen to children's views and opinions about how they would want to do this. Children were given opportunities to draw the table using their preferred paint colour, and I developed a graph so children could then vote for the final colour. Interestingly, the last child to vote (one of the three girls) identified that she couldn't decide on the colour she wanted to repaint the table because she wanted multi-colours. I then asked the whole class if they felt the same, and most agreed to repaint the table with multiple colours.

We contacted Bunnings Warehouse, which agreed to support our painting project with its time, sanding equipment and paint. As a class, we measured the dimensions of the table and, before sanding it, we explored the grades of each sandpaper by feeling the textures. We then made the table available for sanding every afternoon. Children started by using sandpaper and sanding cubes, and then we introduced the sander. We read the instructions, discussed safety, and the importance of wearing appropriate protection such as goggles. After weeks with the children and educators sanding the table, it was finally clear of all the paint. I put the sealer and undercoat on, ready to be painted the next day.

Children had noticed and learned:

1. Sandpaper isn't all the same, it has different grades.
2. When sanding the table, the paint peeled off and turned to dust.
3. The table had multiple layers of paint—underneath the hot pink layer of paint was a red layer of paint.
4. One child learned and taught other children that you have to hold the sandpaper and sanding cube properly, or you could get hurt.
5. The longer we spent sanding the table, the more paint was removed.
6. Sanding the table was fun!

As a class, children voted for a zig-zag pattern. On painting day, families, educators and a staff member from Bunnings Warehouse were invited to watch the children. Our Bunnings guest showed children how to paint and, in small groups, children got a paint roller and took part. I found that not all children wanted to be involved in the project all the time and, by giving them a choice, it made them feel competent (Hart 1992). Once the project finished, the children wanted to show the table to the other kindergarten classes and involve the table in their play.

Benefits of the project

The table project was child initiated and supported by educators so children could organise their ideas and listen to their peers' views. Children use more of their intellect when involved in projects: projects facilitate a higher degree of child initiation and decision making in the learning process, support children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to keep engaged in learning, encourage families to be involved at the early childhood service or school, and display their children's work (Helm & Katz 2011). As children initiated ideas and shared decisions with educators, their willingness to participate and their sense of agency increased (Hart 1992).

Improving the project

- Work more closely with children to identify the next step of the project, to ensure children have more opportunities to problem-solve and have their voices heard in the direction of the project (Hart 1992; Helm & Katz 2011).

- Not rushing the activities in the project is vital. I wrote the letter to Bunnings Warehouse, inviting them to participate; the educational potential could have been strengthened if children helped me write the letter.
- Families were involved in the table project at the very end, with the repainting. Meaningfully engaging families throughout the entire process, inviting them to help or share their ideas about the process of the project, would have improved it (Sanoff 2008).

Thoughts to guide critical reflection

- If I thought these children were misbehaving and just making a mess, this project would not have happened. Before being quick to judge, could we stop and ask children why are they doing something (direct link to NQS 5.2, ACECQA 2018)?
- In this project the topic was initiated by the children but, if I had directed it, what would happen next? How can we lessen the control we have over a project and collaborate with children on the direction of the project? Instead of educators planning what happens next, could we ask the children where they would find out how to repaint a table (direct link to NQS 1.2, ACECQA 2018)?
- Do all children need to participate in a project? Sure, it looks good in front of parents, but is it giving children the right to have their views heard and respecting their agency (direct link to NQS 1.3 and 5.1, ACECQA 2018)?



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Creating an inclusive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environment for the early years

'Inclusion' is defined in the Early years learning framework (EYLF) as '... taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children's experiences are recognised and valued. The intent is also to ensure that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 48).



Debbie Hoger is owner and director of Riley Callie Resources, an Indigenous business specialising in educational resources for the early childhood space which focuses on Indigenous perspectives. Debbie is a Dunghutti mother of two and is particularly passionate about utilising STEM as a platform for educators to introduce children to the rich depth of knowledge and unique perspectives that Indigenous Australia has to offer.

Inclusion relates to welcoming and celebrating diversity so that all children are provided with the space to feel that their unique background is recognised and embraced. In such an environment, all children can succeed and grow into empathic and respectful members of society. The responsibility to ensure that all children have access to such an environment belongs to us, as the adults who create the learning environments within which our children are situated.

This responsibility is shared between the early years settings themselves which, as a whole, should provide knowledge, equipment and resources to adequately promote inclusion and the participation of all children—and for the educators who work within these centres, 'on the ground', facilitating inclusion within their learning environments.

From an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, when we consider that there exist over 300 different languages belonging to over 500 different 'nations' across Australia (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies—AIATSIS 2019), we are hit by the sheer enormity of the task of ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social, cultural and

linguistic diversity is included in early years curriculum decision-making processes. The enormity becomes even greater when we acknowledge that each one of these 500 Indigenous nations across the country on which we all live, work and play, has their own distinctive cultures, histories and beliefs—their own unique stories, lores and ways of understanding the world.

When we acknowledge this incredible diversity, we see that Indigenous inclusion across the early years simply cannot be a tokenistic 'one day a year' (NAIDOC) type recognition; we must see regular meaningful and sustained engagement with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people, all year round.

Providing space for the local Indigenous voice is the first step towards facilitating the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into the classroom, which is absolutely necessary if true Indigenous inclusion is to be achieved. Only through engagement with our local Indigenous communities are we able to learn about the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander history and culture of our place and, in turn, our own identity as a community.

'Educators continually seek ways to build their professional knowledge and develop learning communities. They become co-learners with children, families and community, and value the continuity and richness of local knowledge shared by community members, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 14).

In addition to local engagement, educators must be provided with access to authentic stories and resources—basically, Indigenous resources made and created by Indigenous people. This could be story books written and illustrated by Indigenous authors and illustrators, toys or resources created by Indigenous businesses, or even curriculum content that has been developed with Indigenous perspectives embedded. The inclusion of such resources in your early learning space ensures authenticity and truth, and breaks stereotypes. It also highlights the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories are long, complex, multi-layered and, like any other culture, continually changing. Using authentic resources gives our culture the respect it deserves.

Incorporating Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander-led cultural experiences into your early years calendar is another easy way to ensure authenticity in your journey towards Indigenous inclusion. This could be in the form of Indigenous-led cultural excursions in

your local area, or perhaps Indigenous incursions to your centre. There are a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and businesses offering such experiences all across the country. These experiences are an invaluable way of exposing children to new and diverse ideas. For a register of Indigenous businesses, visit Supply Nation at www.supplynation.com.au. Supply Nation provides Australia's leading database of verified Indigenous businesses, and you can search by business name, product, service, area, or category.

Finally, it is also essential that educators work actively to foster an environment of cultural competency within their workplace. Cultural competency moves beyond just cultural awareness. It is:

'... the set of behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together to enable a system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations' (Bainbridge et al. 2015).

The EYLF describes it as:

- being aware of one's own world view
- developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views
- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 16).

How can we achieve the above points? We can look internally within our settings to evaluate what culture looks like in our workplace; from there we can consider what we need to do to work towards achieving cultural competency.

This may mean providing educators with access to professional development or training courses around Indigenous culture, history or engagement. It could also mean working as a team towards a 'Reconciliation Action Plan' (RAP). RAPs provide practical ways to introduce meaningful reconciliation initiatives in the classroom, around the school and with your community. Reconciliation Australia has a special online platform called Narragunnawali, which provides schools and early learning services assistance in developing a RAP, as well as providing teachers and educators with access to professional learning and curriculum resources to support the implementation of reconciliation initiatives.



Three simple ways to work towards inclusion in your early years' learning environment: engage your local Indigenous community, access authentic resources and experiences, and build a strong foundation of cultural competency within your setting. I firmly believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inclusion within the early years cannot be achieved passively. Educators and organisations alike must take a proactive approach to embedding Indigenous perspectives into their curriculum in an authentic and respectful way. The benefits of doing this are many, as we acknowledge and celebrate the rightful place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as our first cultures. Perhaps most importantly, by doing so, we provide our children with opportunities to learn about the importance of respecting diversity.

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From the Children & Nature Network Conference



Keeping children curious, creative and confident through offering the adventurous childhood they deserve—this is the principle underlying the play environments that Lukas Ritson works on. Lukas believes that play should be a holistic experience for children—one that fosters connection, encourages resilience, and cultivates compassion. His work has touched the lives of tens of thousands of children Australia-wide, through childcare centres, kindergartens, schools, community gardens, nature-focused events and professional development conferences/workshops.

To extend his own professional development and connect his inner-child back to nature, Lukas recently joined the biggest gathering of children and nature advocates across the globe, at the biennial Children & Nature Network Conference in Oakland, California. It's no surprise that Richard Louv is Chairman of the Board. The best-selling author, journalist and international keynote speaker has influenced and empowered educators for decades, and has been a mentor for Lukas during his career.

Lukas returned home to Queensland feeling re-energised, activated and hungrier than ever to bring children closer to nature, off digital screens and deeper into a world of memorable childhood adventure. Here are some of his impressions.

Inspirations from the conference?

The importance of the practitioner. I feel we get caught up aspiring to know everything in the early childhood and nature play movement, but the people making the greatest impact are those taking action.

It was a very fleeting moment with Richard Louv that gave me the opportunity to think about this. As I was highlighting the importance of his work, he said to me, 'Well, none of it would make any difference if it wasn't for the people putting it into action', which was super-powerful. So, I think it's the importance of taking action and being blessed in Australia with our resources: the luxury of honouring every child's right to play and learn in our beautiful country. Also, there are so many stories of people facing absolute adversity and challenges beyond anything we could

comprehend, from not being allowed to use public parks to having no funding or support. Opening a nature play school, ending up with over 70 children of 36 different nationalities, and supporting the children and their families is one of the stories that really stayed with me.

Inspirational people?

I'll give you a few. Adam Bienenstock (<https://www.naturalplaygrounds.ca>)—what a guy. Meeting Adam and understanding what could be achieved by someone building playgrounds was so inspiring. Adam sits on multiple boards and encourages risk-taking in schools. He is a huge advocate of play and has relationships with everyone in the field. Richard Louv refers to Adam as a hero of his, so that puts into context the impact of the work that Adam and his team do. At the conference, Adam ran a workshop with Angela Hanscom, a paediatric occupational therapist who wrote *Balanced and Barefoot* and runs a nature-based developmental program called *Timbernook*. Such incredibly driven, awesome people.

Another amazing person I met was Zach Pine (<https://www.facebook.com/Zach-Pine-Create-With-Nature-121270451928/>). He is a real practitioner with a wealth of knowledge. Zach creates pop-up nature play installations with loose parts on the streets of San Francisco. He also makes these fantastic things called sandglobes—I'll need to see if it works with our Australian sand! Zach's commitment and enthusiasm for what he does while engaging children from all walks of life is so inspiring. He sees it as supporting the children's right to play—from all ethnicities in all areas across the Bay

Area. It's really uplifting to see what can be achieved by one person, so be sure to check out Zach's work.

Implications for your own work?

I now have a very long list of things that I want to implement after meeting so many influential people. We have a huge responsibility as contributors to the wonderful sector of early childhood education. We need to support as many educators as possible and give them the resources they need to educate parents on this urgent issue of connecting children with nature again.



I'm really excited about publicly launching our loose parts play pod and teaming up with Nature Play QLD. It's an exceptional vessel and showpiece to demonstrate to our communities what can be achieved with loose parts play in a natural setting—and adding risk helps celebrate children's ownership by knowing their own boundaries. Simply put, it's about doing everything we can to give children of today the experience that so many of us had growing up. I'm open to suggestions on how we can continuously improve on that, so feel free to reach out.

International similarities?

There were definitely similarities right across the board from South America to Europe on very similar nature-based pedagogies. It was nice to know that it didn't matter what brand of education people followed, e.g. Montessori or Steiner, but the belief that nature-based practice was one of care and compassion paired with connection and community. It was beautiful to see, especially with all the academic research that supports the importance of connection.

There was also so much evidence on how nature play reaches beyond education and into the health field. We heard from Nooshin Razani—a lady who founded the Centre for Nature and Health, which is actually subsidised by insurance companies for Medicaid in America to prescribe nature as therapy for a variety of illnesses. For Razani to get that recognition is monumental and shows a huge shift in the commitment to using nature as an abundant resource.

Why nature play?

The early years of development are where we have the opportunity to create learning experiences that develop connection and go on to form a person's worldview. It's that experience—being immersed in nature and having a full sensory experience—of connecting/growing and feeling fulfilled that goes on to shape a person's life.

It reminded me of a conference I presented at in Finland when I asked the education minister, 'Why do you put such an emphasis on the early years of development?' He gave me such a perfect answer: 'It is our ethical responsibility because the research shows that it's impossible to catch a child up when they start behind'. Then I asked him, 'Why put such a big emphasis on education in general?' His answer was simply this, 'If you look after education, everything else sorts itself out.'

Other highlights?

The reminder of how fortunate we are in the country in which we live, with the resources we have—we have everything we need. I feel it's our responsibility, as people who reside in this clean, friendly, safe, resource-rich, nature-abundant country, to utilise what we have—whether it's free resources, a stick on the side of the road, education through associations like ECTA, or the infrastructure we have at the centres we work in.

Even looking at our curricula and those documents stating that it's a requirement for children to be exploring nature is such a blessing and something we need to be so grateful for.

Will you attend again?

One hundred per cent. It would be super-valuable to anyone interested in nature play and the development of children. The next Children & Nature Network Conference is in two years time on a lake in Atlanta, and I've heard that it will be stunning. More importantly, you can't buy the feeling of being empowered enough to go back to your community and instantly apply what you've learned.

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'The children and nature movement is fuelled by this fundamental idea: the child in nature is an endangered species, and the health of children and the health of the Earth are inseparable' (Louv (2013, p. 276).



It's brain play: how plasticine helps with plasticity (and placidity)



Dr. Rachel Bushing is a mum of three early waking children who are all engaged in early years education, and a clinical psychologist with 17 years of practice with children and families. She is passionate about setting children out with the very best start in life, and in providing peer education and clinical supervision which increases our capacity as mentors in children's lives. She runs a busy little private practice in Brisbane called POP Psychology, which has the aim of bringing the fun into therapy; she co-hosts the podcast 'Pop the kettle on', and most importantly, she takes pride in being imperfect.

Hi, my name is Rachel and I am a play-aholic.

We psychologists can get a bad rap. To the general public, a psychologist evokes the image of a serious, empathic, staring-down-dark-rimmed-glasses, eyebrow-cocked, blended-interested-and-concerned, quiet, calm, ever-present figure. Wise. Speaking slowly, measured, humourless, even. Alternatively, I fear that, to others, we can seem flighty and a bit mad, like Professor Trelawney from Hogwarts. Or we are tedious and trite, too concerned with our introspections on the internal condition to offer up any practical suggestions, married to our theories and forgetting to remember our audience (who may indeed be way more interested in an actual pragmatic strategy than our seemingly endless theorising, especially when we drone on about the differences between cognitive-behavioural vs. psychodynamic traditions, and that while neither are 'wrong', they are both 'right' depending on the context, because of 'duality'. Snore. Playfulness does not seem to fit within this serious professional image.

But you can't get away with any of that when you are a child psychologist. Children do not suffer fools and, as Benita, Noni and John, Justine, Teo and Alex from Play school have taught us over the past 53 years, you need to find ways to captivate your audience. And probably the most important lesson over those decades is to acknowledge that, truly, you can't have school without play.

Play and school

As adults, we like to pretend that play is passé. But play, much like psychology (and no, we don't all conform to the above stereotypes), is frequently misunderstood. When was the last time you played? Just unabashed, nonsensical, carefree, capital P, Play.

I ask some version of this question of almost all adult clients who I see. It might be more like: *What do you enjoy? How much time do you spend in that? When was the last time you did something just for fun? When are you bored, and you let your mind just wander? When do you feel 'in the zone'? Are you ever doing something just for the hell of it, for no purpose?* What fills you up inside and makes you feel the most like you? And of course, when the answer is 'No', I have to ask 'Why the hell not?'

Why don't we play anymore? This is a question that is so important that Nicole Lessio and I explored it together in Episode One of our podcast 'Pop the kettle on' (kindly find and follow us at www.popthekettleon.com.au). As adults, we seem to be labouring under a misapprehension that play is somehow antithetical to productivity. We have divorced play from work. We believe that our brains, starved of play and creativity, work better under fear of deadline and stress. We tell teenagers that they won't get an 'A' unless they study. As though our brains operate as a big bucket that we can pour sand grains of knowledge into, and somehow effortlessly churn out a sandcastle. But how could that possibly be the way it works? Of course, it's not. We have divorced ourselves from the neuroscience, from the realities of how learning and cognition work, and it needs to be better appreciated.

Play is school

Play is work. Play is learning. Play is 'wiring' the brain, laying down cable fibre networks of knowledge that are sophisticated and beyond the capabilities of human design. You know what we call a brain that is manufactured to learn, without play? Artificial Intelligence. Ornate, beautiful, curated systems that, while very smart, are somehow lacking. Let me explain.

One of the early theories of cognition (that is, the network of thought and other processes in the human brain), used a computer metaphor to describe what is happening inside your brain. During the 'information age' of the 1950s and 1960s, as computer science and technological advances began to take hold, certain terms in our lexicon began to be popularised when it came to describing the brain and its functions, to the point that these are now the dominant, synonymous terms we still use (Wikipedia 2019). Examples are input, processing, storage, retrieval, capacities, etc. If you open up the shell of a computer, you can see the information exchange in action, and it is exciting at this time to understand the long-time-mysterious processes of the human mind, once only the purview of philosophers and priests, as tangible elements that we can isolate, observe and, better yet, manipulate.

The only problem with this computer analogy, though, is that all modern neuroscientists and cognitive theorists agree that it is an imperfect and incomplete model of human consciousness. Our brains are made up not only of neurons (the electrical wiring), but also chemical neurotransmitters, insulating glial cells, stem cells, immunity cells—and the list goes on. Our brains are not computers, but more like ecosystems, in the same way that the gut is now considered to be a grand microbiome full of complex inter-relating bacterial organisms, creating an atmosphere of health and wellbeing. It is seen as a garden, where once it was considered only a singular mincing machine.

We want wise children, flexible problem solvers, invested, loving, and curious citizens. This is where play comes in.

We need to begin to understand that beyond the computational capacities, our brains are playing out an extremely complex and diverse universe of abilities that are not yet fully known to science and may indeed be beyond our understanding. We have mapped some 'galaxies' of the brain (like the visual cortex, or the memory functions of the hippocampus), but we

still sit on the frontiers in our exploration of the full dynamic dances of our brain and how learning and meaning works. We now know that our brains are more 'plastic' than we once thought, constantly shifting and changing, but are only beginning to understand what circumstances give rise to growth mindsets, and how we can harness the way our brain is supposed to work in order to mould and sculpt it in important ways. We haven't yet hit upon 'imagination land' or the 'creativity cortex', but we do know that flexibility, fluidity and diversity are important. Brains being in flow and being used to their full capacities are important not only for fact-based knowledge, but for something way more fundamental: wisdom. That should be the goal of any educator, of any parent, or any policy maker. We want wise children, flexible problem solvers, invested, loving, and curious citizens.

This is where play comes in.

Play in school

The truth is, given our orienteering into the more complex systems of brain functions, we haven't yet fully mapped out why play is integral to children's development, and moreover why it is essential at any age. This can make it hard to explain the importance of play in educational settings to parents, policy makers, and politicians. But if you think about it, it is rather self-evident. As play therapist Garry Landreth (2012) states, '*Play is the singular central activity of childhood, occurring at all times and in all places*' (p.7), and when observing children unrestricted, it is not very long until you notice how they naturally and spontaneously use play in their everyday experiences. From an evolutionary biology standpoint, play must be doing something, or the kids wouldn't be doing it.

The best way that I have found to convince adults that play is important is to begin to interrogate the mythology around the idea that for them, as adults, they learn and grow best through lecture-style presentations, or poring over text books. Reams of adult learning literature can tell us that most adults learn best through experience, actually doing the thing and seeing how it turns out. We use trial-and-error, we make mistakes, we re-orient, brainstorm, re-consider, take a new perspective. That is when we are open to the 'Ah-ha' moment, and that is when the learning goes in, and new wiring is formed. A child at play is doing just that, safely using the objects around them to experiment, using toys to symbolise a concept, to inquire, to observe, to experience. Experiential learning is more impactful than didactic learning.

And guess what else? Play makes them calmer, more focused, more engaged, and more present.

We have known for a while now that a mind at rest (when we are bored, focused, in creative flow, and at play), is activating what is known as the 'Default mode network' (Raichle 2015). Our brains are active even when they are seemingly at rest. This circuitry activates our higher-order reasoning in the prefrontal cortex, our attention, and our self-focus, and it embeds associations (i.e., meaning making). Play, while from the outside appears to be free-wheeling and casual, is in fact rule-driven and systematised. As psychological researcher Peter Gray (2008) points out, play is critical for learning self-control, and as he more delicately states, through the vehicle of play, children 'practise the art of being human'. Through pretence, they come to learn what is real.

Play is jumping into your spaceship and filling the universe of the mind with interconnected galaxies of meaning-making, relativity, consolidation, and cohesion. And I dare any detractor out there to produce a worksheet that could do all that.

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NB. Sections of this article were first published on the 'Pop the kettle on' blog, 'Why don't we play anymore?', posted 1st October 2018.



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Developing successful transitions: one school's approach

In the last eighteen months, Woodcrest State College has developed a suite of programs—Woodcrest Little Possums—to help address the issue of transition for students entering our school. These programs were developed to support families in the school community whose children are not yet of school age. They are designed to support these families to feel a part of the school and to value the education of their children and the work that school staff do for their children's education.



Chrissy Curtis is the Early Years Transition Officer at Woodcrest State College, which is a P-12 school in the developing area of Springfield, Ipswich. She has been teaching students from Prep-3 since 2002. She has a Bachelor of Education and a Diploma in Autism Studies. Chrissy is passionate about supporting students, parents and educators by delivering successful transitions as children move from pre-Prep programs into formal schooling systems.

The aim of our Little Possums programs is to foster successful transitions that support the needs of students, parents, early childhood educators, and the school and teachers. The school has based these programs on the belief that children's early transitions play a significant role in building the foundations for success in learning throughout their schooling and beyond. Given the diverse community surrounding the school, it is more crucial now than ever to ensure that we are responsive and ready to support all children as they make the transition to Prep and school (Amerijckx & Hamblet 2015; Petriwskyj 2013).

With the knowledge that the environments and experiences children are exposed to in their formative years shape their development, and an understanding that families across the board face challenges raising children, Woodcrest State College used the most recent Australian Early Development Census data to begin discussions around supporting children and families from birth through to school age. The data has assisted the school to plan for the needs of children from our catchment. But we didn't want to be reactive to this data; rather, we wanted to be proactive and help families to ensure children's development is supported before they start school; thus the introduction of Little Possums.

We began providing these



opportunities in Term One last year by offering weekly 'story time' to families of current students who have younger siblings. Story time is a short 30-45-minute program held in the school library which simply focuses on oral language—reading, listening to stories and finishing with a small simple craft activity. It is also an opportunity to invite parents into the school in a friendly, non-threatening way, allowing them to meet other families and build familiarity, confidence and community. This was well received by parents who have also enjoyed participating in our story time and was a quick and easy way to establish an early years' program on site.

'My two sons—now three and four—have been attending the Little Possums programs for the past year and a half. They thoroughly enjoy going to the school and participating

PARTNERSHIPS

in the different programs offered and each week look forward to seeing their friends and singing songs with Chrissy Curtis (the coordinator). I have seen a change in the boys' attitudes towards books during this time, as they have learnt to sit and listen to stories. They have loved each book as it has come alive during the Little Possums story time. They really love to listen to stories now and want to read more' (Lisa Ried).



This was quickly followed in Term Two by our Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Little Possums visits, where we released one of our Prep teachers to visit and spend time in our feeder early childhood centres. Our aim was and is to foster and strengthen relationships between the school and early childhood educators; to ensure better communication across settings; and ultimately our hope is to support centres with professional development opportunities and collaboration to ensure the needs of young children are met and their move into the school system is as smooth as possible.

Term Two also saw the introduction of our Little Possums Playgroup. This group is for children from

0-5 years of age and focuses on the whole child. Their social and emotional, gross and fine motor, and communication skills are all considered in this program. The program runs



for one and a half hours and is staffed by our transition teacher and a teacher assistant. This is a free-flowing program based around the Queensland Playgroup Association's 'play steps' model, allowing parents to interact with their child and other parents in a nurturing and safe space within the school environment that fosters growth and learning. Parents also have the opportunity to develop relationships with other parents and school staff. This program also allows parents to access support from the Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP) through our referral system, providing early intervention for students with additional needs.

In terms three and four of 2018, another element of our transition suite was introduced, with a focus on those students who were enrolling in Prep in 2019. Initially, this consisted of four separate programs, each of four weeks duration. Our goal for this Little Possums pre-Prep program was to provide students



with a smooth transition into the school environment. We wanted the students and parents to feel like they are part of the school community, able to interact with all staff members and feel comfortable moving around the school. The focus of this group is introducing routines, oral language, and early literacy and numeracy skills for students. For parents, who were required to remain on site during all pre-Prep sessions, we aimed to provide workshops on how they are best able to support their child to develop literacy and numeracy skills that will benefit them throughout their schooling.

The initial results from the introduction of these simple programs are very positive: *'My youngest son (nearing four) has been attending the Little Possums playgroup for the last year and a half. It is the highlight of his week. He absolutely adores Mrs Curtis and her team and is quick to dole out hugs on arrival each week. Each week affords him the opportunity to work on his development, through a well planned and executed selection of play-based activities. This program is a fantastic opportunity to further a toddler's development in preparation for kindergarten and school' (Lisa Hawkes).*



On entry to Prep in 2019, the students who attended these programs were more comfortable within the school environment and also settled into school and displayed increased engagement with learning opportunities. These students also performed better on our 'on entry to Prep' assessments. Students who attended these programs demonstrated the skills necessary to successfully begin school. Results in reading have also improved across the board with students not only learning to read, but enjoying the reading process.

'The Little Possums program was an integral part of Emily's smooth transition into school life. I felt that Emily's positive experiences in the program helped her feel at ease within the school environment. Her engagement in early literacy and numeracy activities gave her clear expectations about prep. I also took away useful information about how to support Emily's learning through the parent workshops on offer' (Kylie Stace).

We have also seen an increase in requests for our transition teacher to attend ECEC settings both for student sessions and parent information sessions within their centres. The students in our

feeder centres are excited about going to school and to have visits from our transition teacher. A number of centres have expressed a willingness to bring eligible students to our upcoming pre-



Prep programs and have also attended early years' celebrations held this year, including our Easter bonnet parade and 'under-8s day' activities.

'The children in our Kindergarten program have loved the regular visits from Chrissie Curtis. As soon as she walks through the door, they recognise her and get ready to listen to a new story. Chrissie always leaves a fun learning activity for the children to do at home with their families. Many parents have commented on how much their children enjoy doing these with them in the evenings. The visits help all our children to transition more smoothly to the next stage of their learning journey: Prep' (Kate Shapcott, early childhood teacher, Springfield Child Care and Early Education Centre).

In 2019 Woodcrest State College has further expanded its Little Possums program suite due to the number of students and parents wishing to participate. This year we

are supporting approximately 120 children and families within our school-based programs. Our ECEC program has increased to include 14 local centres with some of these having two groups supported, thus reaching approximately another 350 children and families. We have been successful in receiving funding to build a community hub on the school campus to further expand our capacity to support students and families. Our goal



is to ensure that all children are excited about learning and have a smooth transition into school, whether this is at Woodcrest State College or a neighbouring school. Early results and evidence suggest that our move into this early years space is both necessary and beneficial to all stakeholders involved.

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Why children in Prep can't hold their pencil properly—and what you as an educator can do about it

As an occupational therapist (OT) in the private sector, this topic came about last year when I had many professional conversations with teachers of children of multiple ages, in multiple sectors. These colleagues wanted to know about pencil grasp and what was causing so many children to enter school without an established grasp. Why are fine motor skills still so important in this day and age? What is causing children to potentially have reduced fine motor skills? Finally, what can educators do to remediate these skills or prevent future difficulties?



Sarah Cavallaro is the Senior Occupational Therapist in the Health and Wellness Clinic at the Mater Hospital. This clinic is a private service for families accessing paediatric allied health. Sarah has over 15 years experience working with children with disabilities and additional needs. She has a passion for working with children on the autism spectrum as well as working with, and walking side by side, families. Sarah has additional training in ASD as well as her mental health accreditation.

Why do we care about fine motor skills?

Children these days don't often handle money, many can use an iPad before they are one year old and some don't have pegs at home because their parents use their dryer exclusively. So, why do occupational therapists still care about fine motor skills? The research in this area is very compelling.

Fine motor skills are essential to early learning and success in the Prep classroom (Grissmer et al. 2010). On average, 33–66% of the day in Prep will involve fine motor skills such as colouring, copying, cutting and drawing. Better fine motor skills are also statistically linked to school adaptation, social behaviour and classroom engagement (Pitchford et al. 2016). Poor fine motor skills predict underachievement in able students at school (Stoeger et al. 2013), as well as increased anxiety and poor self-esteem.

We also know that there is a close association between motor and cognitive development. Cognitive and motor development was traditionally thought to occur across separate areas and be operated by different regions of the brain. Recently, evidence has emerged from imaging studies, developmental disorders, and typically developing children

to suggest that cognitive and motor development is more closely related than previously thought and might have similar developmental trajectories (Davis et al. 2011).

Most interestingly, research tells us that there is a strong relationship between fine motor skills and arithmetical abilities in children. This relationship seems to be stronger for maths than the link between fine motor skills and reading ability (Asakawa et al. 2019). Additionally, in a study with first graders, intervention in fine motor skills showed greater improvement in maths abilities than in the control group (Asakawa et al. 2019)

Why do we see children with poor fine motor skills and/or pencil grasp?

There are some simple reasons that we see children with poor fine motor skills. Firstly, we know there is a gender gap in the development of fine motor and gross motor skills. For some reason, we see boys often meeting gross motor milestones before girls, and girls meeting fine motor milestones before boys (Livesey et al. 2007). We also know that underlying developmental difficulties such as cerebral palsy or autism can contribute to fine motor difficulties, as well as a child's socioeconomic status and therefore

their access to educational opportunities (Morley et al. 2015).

In addition to these simple reasons, we have more complex interplaying factors in increased screen time and decreased 'green time' for the children of today. Research is emerging on the impact of time spent in front of screens on young children's motor skills, but what we do know is that competency in motor skills is positively influenced by physical activity and that children with more sedentary time have poorer motor skills (Wrotniak et al. 2006). It makes sense that, if young children aren't practising and using fine motor skills in daily life and through daily routines, they won't acquire the necessary skills for Prep.

So, what fine motor skills do children need before they go to Prep?

The following sub-skills contribute to a functional pencil grasp:

Hand dominance is important for children to acquire before they enter Prep, due to the volume of pencil-related tasks they will be expected to do in the first year of schooling. Handedness trajectories (this means the consistency of hand use early in development) have been linked with better language outcomes (Nelson et al. 2017). Girls aged 5 to 9 with a consistent hand preference scored significantly higher on assessments of verbal intelligence and reading achievement at school (Kee et al. 1991). Usually hand dominance emerges around 2 years and establishes by 4 to 6 years. It is important for educators to note that sometimes left-handers develop hand dominance slightly later, and educators can promote hand dominance by cognitively drawing attention to a child's 'helper hand' and 'doing hand'.

Dissociation of the two sides of the hand is our ability to use our thumb, index finger and middle finger as the 'skilled side of our hand' and to be able to isolate our ring and pinkie fingers as the 'resting or non-skilled side of our hand'. When children are able to separate these and really develop the skilled side with precision, then they can improve their overall fine motor skills. Educators can explicitly teach and promote this separation by placing a small object such as a pompom under the ring and pinkie fingers during fine motor activities.

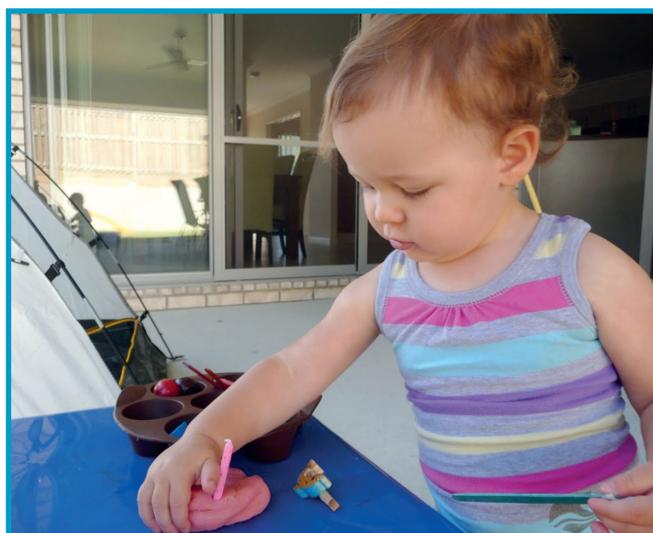
Hand strength is the force we need to grasp objects and manipulate them with precision. Hand strength also stabilises finger movement. A child with decreased hand strength will have difficulty opening water bottles and lunch boxes and will either hold their pencil very loosely or will over-

compensate and grasp their pencil extremely tightly. Educators can build hand-strength activities into their daily programs through the use of tongs, tweezers, scissors, playdough, and by scrunching paper.

Visual motor integration is the integration of the visual system and the motor system. We see success in this space when children are able to imitate early shapes during drawing. Children who have poor visual-motor integration have trouble drawing simple shapes or learning to form their letters. Educators can promote visual motor integration through activities such as copying pre-writing patterns, lacing, using peg boards and playing ball games.

Motor planning is the ability to plan a motor action and perform it smoothly and automatically. 'Kids who struggle with motor planning can seem clumsy. They might seem slow to learn basic skills and take "forever" to complete physical tasks like tying shoes' (understood.org). Educators can incorporate fine motor tasks into the games that they use regularly for gross motor planning, e.g. 'Simon says' and obstacle courses.

In-hand manipulation is the ability to move objects about in our fingers. We use in-hand manipulation skills when we handle coins, do up buttons and zippers and open packets and water bottles. Children with poor in-hand manipulation skills will shy away from fine motor activities and will have delayed dressing skills. Educators can promote good in-hand manipulation activities through open-ended loose-parts play with a variety of different sized objects.



What is a functional pencil grasp?

When children have the above skills, they will go on to develop a functional pencil grasp. It is important to note that the research has shown that there are four different grasps that are considered to be 'functional'; that is, mature and not impacting on speed or legibility (Schwellnus et al. 2012).

Dynamic tripod: three-fingered grasp with the thumb, index and middle fingers controlling the pencil. This is the most commonly recommended pencil grasp.

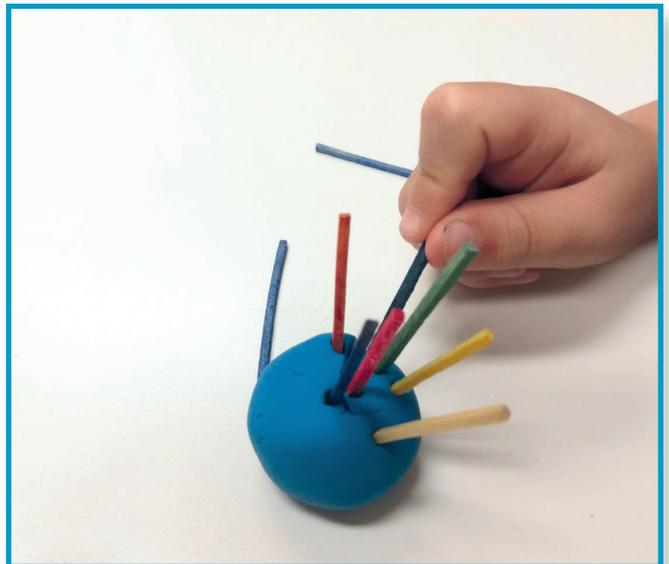
Lateral thumb tripod: as above but with the thumb wrapped around the pencil shaft.

Dynamic quadruped: similar to the tripod but with four fingers on the pencil shaft.

Lateral thumb quadruped: as above but with the thumb wrapped.

Where to from here?

If you would like more information on fine motor skills, or you feel that children in your care require more intervention for their fine motor skills, then please don't hesitate to get in contact with an occupational therapist. OTs are trained to assess and provide intervention for children in the area of fine motor skills from birth to the end of life. Many OTs specialise in school readiness as well as handwriting skills in primary school.



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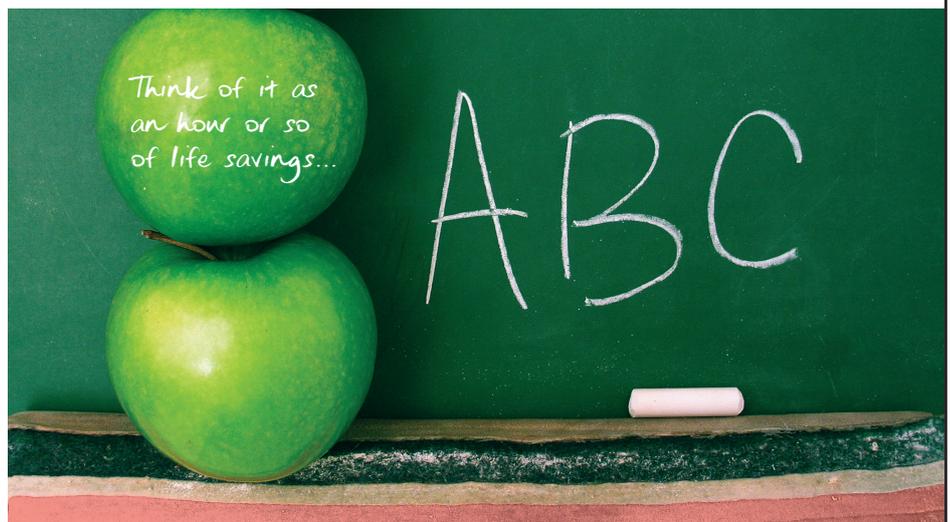
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No play before school



Madeline Avci is the director of Jump up for Kids, and is a huge advocate of children balancing their time in front of screens with playing outside, where they ignite all of their senses. At work and through her own children, she sees the joy in children's eyes as they meet nature's challenges. Jump up for Kids brings together over 20 years of Madeline's experience in occupational therapy, teaching and parenting to support children and families to develop independence and resilience in their daily lives.

Rules are designed to keep our children safe and allow our services to operate in an orderly manner. However, many who have worked in the sector for some time now have seen a shift over the years from common sense rules to stifling restrictions on both children and staff that alter the healthy development of the children we are supposed to be nurturing. Currently, many of us are asked to enforce rules that we intuitively know are not in the best interests of healthy child development and instead narrow our children's opportunities.

At the 2019 Childhood Summit hosted by Nature Play Queensland, early childhood educators developed a long and passionate list of rules that they felt hampered or harmed the development of the children in their care. The list included rules like don't climb trees, don't run, do not play in bare feet, no play before school, and many, many more.

The problem with enforcing rules that limit the natural activities of children is that the abilities of children are lessening, their fitness and general physical health is decreasing, and their willingness to give things a go is waning. I visit many schools, kindergartens and childcare centres as an occupational therapist and commonly meet children who:

- **cannot hold themselves up when sitting**
- **have never climbed a tree**
- **recoil from paint or other messy play**

These are neurotypical kids whose experiences have been so curtailed that they now are unable to manage the demands of their day-to-day life, and so they are referred for occupational therapy.

Healthy child development

Healthy development is reliant on the development of the mind, body and spirit (Chapparo & Ranka 1997).

In today's society, many children (and adults) have an imbalance in their life roles that results in ill health, failure to thrive/launch, and a range of mental health disorders. For example:

- For some children there is an over-emphasis on academic performance at the expense of all else.
- Some children spend excessive amounts of time gaming (leisure) at the expense of other life roles.
- There is no expectation on some children in relation to participating in jobs around the house or even their own self-care.

In contrast, a healthy childhood is when a child has the ability to imagine, plan and carry out roles in the areas of self-maintenance, productivity (work/school), leisure and rest, while interacting with people and their environment. Engaging in a broad range of life roles and the routines and tasks associated with these roles provides us with a sense of reality, mastery, competence and autonomy.

Adults can support healthy child development by preserving, maintaining and developing valued roles for our children in the areas of self-maintenance,

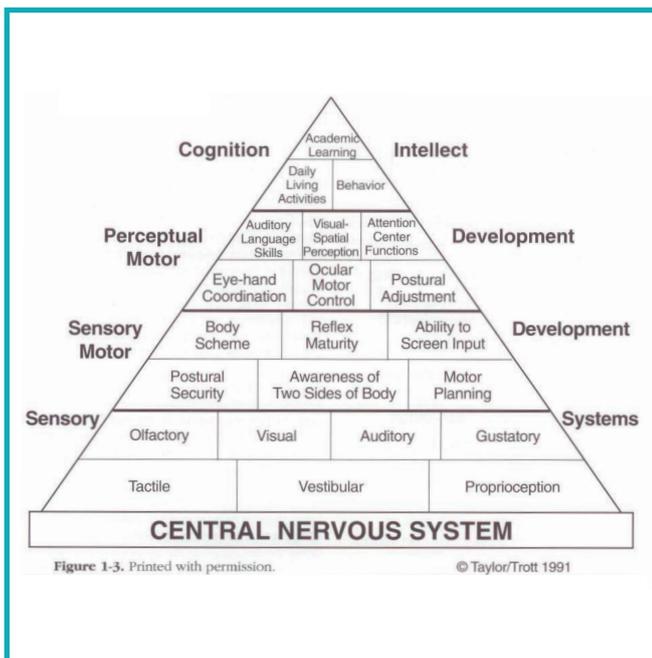
productivity, leisure and rest. Providing this balance enables the body, mind and spirit to develop and thrive (Chapparo & Ranka 1997).

To further explore the adult role in promoting healthy child development, we must consider some basic principles that we know to be true for children:

1. Development occurs sequentially.
2. Play is an essential part of life and has a particularly unique role in childhood.

If we are able to keep these truths central to our decision making around children, then it provides a path forward for common sense decision making that promotes healthy children who develop into healthy adults.

Developmental sequence



The 'Pyramid of learning' by Taylor and Trott (1996) creates a visual explanation of children's development, with a focus on the sequential nature of development. Successful acquisition of higher-order skills (the skills toward the top of the pyramid) relies on a solid foundation of lower-order skills (the skills that form the base and middle of the pyramid). Children must develop the underlying 'infrastructure' in order to be able to master skills higher up the pyramid, such as academic learning and regulated behaviour.

In a school setting, this means that academic learning will be more easily achieved by a child who has

developed the underlying 'infrastructure' at the bottom of the pyramid of learning; a child who has focused on academic learning at a young age, without opportunities to develop the underlying 'infrastructure', will be unable to progress at the expected rate and, if they do, it will be at an enormous cost in terms of energy needed and stress induced.

Not only are the skills in the pyramid sequential, but they also take **time and opportunity to develop**. Without time and opportunities to develop skills at each level of the pyramid, children often experience slow progress, disengagement from learning and inappropriate behaviours when they are required to operate at the higher levels of the pyramid before they are ready.

Provision of opportunities, time and environments that support child-directed, unstructured play allow children to form a strong developmental base.

Play

Play is an episode of activity that is child-chosen and viewed as play by the child. Each play episode includes some or all of the following descriptions: spontaneous, non-literal, pleasurable, flexible, means-oriented, intrinsically motivated, meaningful, active, and rule-governed (Sturges 2007).

Play where the outcome has been predetermined and directed by an adult rather than being child-led, **is an activity and is not play**. Good quality, true play experiences are uninterrupted (where children become absorbed in their play), self-determined and meaningful. There is still a valuable place for adults playing with children and providing fun and playful activities that assist learning. We must, however, ensure that there is also significant time, place and opportunity for child-directed, unstructured play, or else risk negatively impacting a child's development.

Child-directed play empowers children to direct the process and the outcome of their play. This is how creativity, imagination, and executive functioning skills thrive.

Often we try to manipulate and fix children in order to achieve the desired goal. However, if we consider what play truly is, it gives us a more effective approach to supporting healthy child development: an approach that preserves the integrity of play while also achieving the required outcomes. If we can create a set of circumstances, environment and time for children to truly play, then they will figure things out for themselves—they will use the skills they have, they will extend their limits as they assess the risk and figure out what's okay and what's not, and they will

engage with and learn from each other. Play is such a powerful, natural and innate occupation for children that, if we remain true to the principles of play, then the developmental benefits will naturally follow.

Conclusion

It is essential that all educators understand and advocate regarding the principles of sequential development and the role of play in the healthy development of the children. We must challenge the current state of childhood and advocate for a common sense approach to decision making related to children. I implore all educators to not only break the rules, but start making new ones, so that our children have access to experiences and opportunities that promote rather than restrict and diminish their development.

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Supporting educators to develop their practice



Tash Treveton is the co-founder of Inspired EC, which supports early childhood services nationally and internationally. Tash is a trainer and consultant for Inspired EC and has co-authored several books; she also co-founded Inspired Family Day Care and TimberNook Newcastle. Helping people who engage with children to understand the importance of their role and ability to be a positive impact is what she lives for. Along with her professional soulmate Nicole Halton, Tash uses Inspired EC as a vehicle to promote excitement and passion about the early childhood profession that we are blessed to be a part of.

In the years since its introduction, the role of the educational leader has evolved to meet the needs of individual early education and care services. As a former educational leader, I am acutely aware of the ever-changing landscape of the sector and the subsequent challenges of working within the role. While early on, many educational leaders may have directed their focus towards checking up on programming and monitoring observations and documentation, most educational leaders have begun to find a deeper, more meaningful element to the role—that of a mentor.

As educational leaders and mentors, it is crucial that we develop meaningful connections with each of our educators. Does this mean that we all need to be the best of friends and get together on weekends? Not

at all. But, when we take time to get to know someone, to know what is going on in their world, to understand how they like to learn and receive information, we create a supportive environment that puts educator well-being at its heart.

Have you ever lamented the apparent unwillingness of educators on your team to attend professional development opportunities such as workshops and conferences? Lucky you if you have not but, for many educational leaders and nominated supervisors, this can be a pretty constant source of frustration. A great new workshop comes through via email and you excitedly print it out and display it in the staff room with a note saying, 'Please let me know if you would like to attend!' Two weeks later—no takers. You even





Nicole Halton is the co-founder of Inspired EC, Inspired Family Day Care and TimberNook Newcastle, and is a former early childhood educator and director. For over ten years Nicole has shared her passion for the early years through workshops, conferences and consultancy. A highly regarded writer, Nicole writes regularly on the Inspired EC website, as well as guest writing for other publications, and has had several books published by Teaching Solutions. Nicole is an advocate for children's rights and has a particular interest in positive school transitions, nature play and working with infants and toddlers.

suggest to one educator that it would be a good fit for their personal goals, but they decline. Why? Is it a lack of motivation? Perhaps it is. Or, it could be that the training is on a weeknight and weeknights are difficult for them because they are a single parent and don't have care for their child. Or it could be that they find face-to-face training challenging and would prefer online training.

Do you know the old saying, 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'? Well, the same applies here. You can lead an educator to professional development, but you can't make them attend! In all seriousness, even if you could force an educator to attend a professional development session—would you really want to?

As the educational leader, it is vital to develop an understanding of each educator and to support them in the ways that best suit them. If they are reluctant to attend professional development, find out why. Is it a lack of interest or motivation, or is there more to it, and can there be ways in which you and the service can offer support to enable the educator to continue developing their practice? Some support may include:

- accessing professional learning materials in a range of formats such as videos, webinars, face-to-face training, email-based support, reading articles and books, discussion groups
- seeking out professional development at times that suit the specific family needs of the educator
- connecting the educator to other support services that may be able to assist

If, after conversations with the educator, you discover that there seems to be a lack of interest or a reluctance to grow ('I already know all about that!'), then perhaps it is time to look at service documents

and the emphasis that they place on the role of professional development. Simple questions to ask and discuss may include:

- How does our philosophy describe the role of the professional?
- What do our service policies say about expectations of educators for professional growth and development?
- What does the position description of each educator say about their role in accessing and attending learning opportunities, particularly if they are provided by the service?



As educational leaders, we need to remember that we are all at different points in our pedagogical journey. We all have different things happening in our personal lives. We all have different ways of doing, of learning, of being. Take the time to make the connections and truly understand the motivators and de-motivators for educators; take the time to know their preferences and their desires for their professional learning and growth.



Fiona Zinn is an early childhood, primary and tertiary educator based in Hobart, drawing on 25 years experience as an educator and pedagogical leader in schools and early learning centres. Fiona currently collaborates with educators and leaders in Australian early childhood contexts and international schools around the world to provide guidance and professional learning. Her work boldly re-imagines early years and early primary pedagogy, along with learning environments, in response to research. She has a keen interest in collaborating with teachers to develop a 'shared pedagogy' as an authentic reflection of their culture, community and context.

Environments for play and inquiry: questions and concepts for exploration

It is now three decades since authors Geva M Blenkin and AV Kelly declared that the most 'neglected and misunderstood dimension of the planned curriculum is the creation of an environment or a setting in which education is to take place' (Blenkin & Kelly 1988, p.35). This agenda has gathered speed in recent years, with a chorus of voices (Imms et al. 2016) calling for new ways to think about how we evaluate and understand learning spaces. Not limited to the early years, the significance of the environment has engaged practitioners across the education continuum in a quest to understand the deeper relationships between the structure and impact of their environments.

Positioning play as the 'engine of

learning' (Miller & Almon 2009), early years educators use play as the catalyst to plan and create stimulating spaces where inquiry learning and playful investigations can unfold over time. Like yeast to dough, the 'engine' of play is activated when reinforced with engaging materials, participants and environments, all of which allow play to act as an activator of learning and transformation. The idea of playful spaces for inquiry learning has fascinated me for quite some time—not just because play is a self-propelling force for learning, but also because the relationship between purposeful, intentional spaces and children's unfolding play supports the active construction of meaning and experience.

I recently heard a colleague speaking



about the writings of Carl Jung, describing how Jung's view of the world had shaped her own reflections about the practices of educators in the early years. My colleague shared a story about a particular moment when a parent in her class had helped her to encounter Jung's theory of synchronicity (Jung 1973), which resulted in a great leap of understanding as they began to see the connectedness of children, ideas and environments differently. Jung's theory of synchronicity centres around the idea that everything is universally connected, that there is a togetherness and systemness of things (Jung 1951). His theory explored the ways in which elements of life and the world around us work in connected ways to generate experience and potential. This conversation led me to consider the interconnectedness of 'play' and the learning environment—the synchronicity of learning. It presents a compelling lens for reflection on the contextual relationships between children's learning experiences and their corresponding environments.

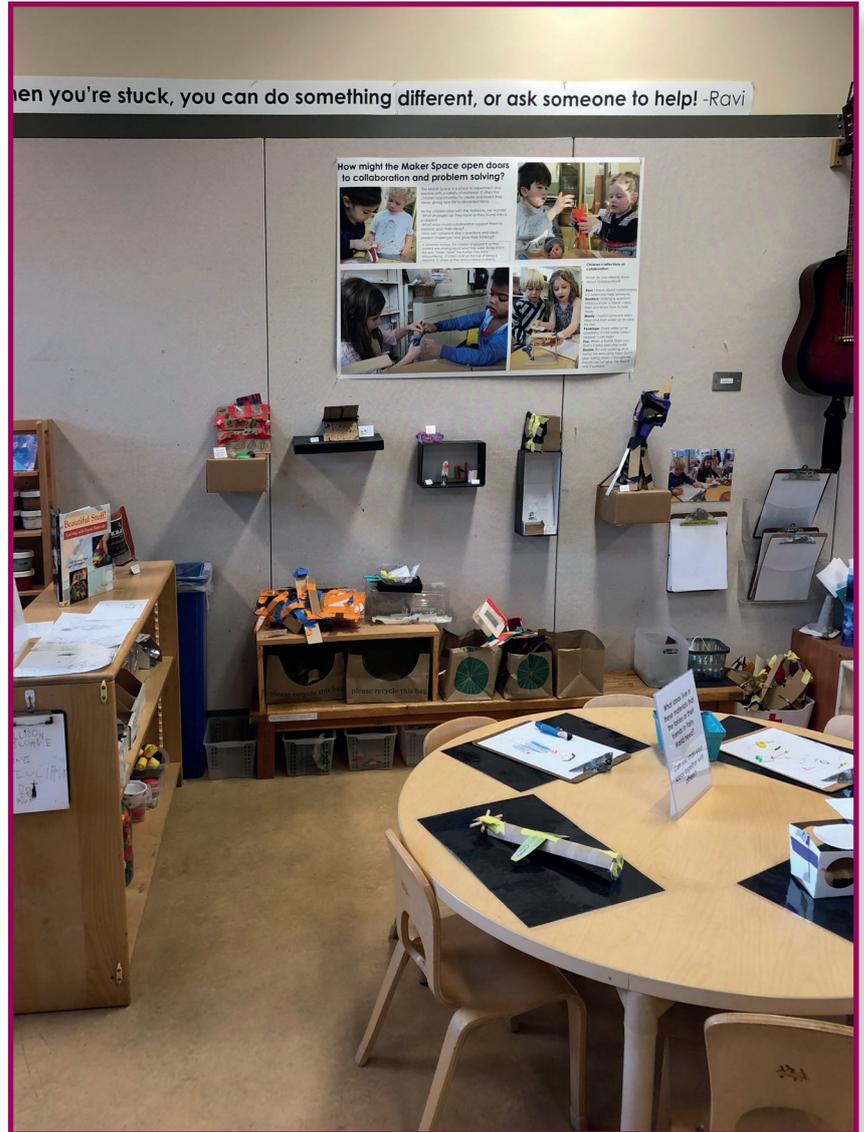
I began to wonder...

What activating forces shape children's experience of learning through play?

What is the role and impact of the environment on play?

How does the environment shape experience and trigger possibilities for play?

A complex territory for thought, this idea aligns with a famous concept—'environment as the third teacher'—first proposed by Loris Malaguzzi. This concept forms part of a series of principles that underpin the cultural, social and political experience of the 'Educational Project' of Reggio Emilia. Anchored in democracy, the approach to education in Reggio Emilia values the intrinsic component of active participation where teachers are engaged as 'researchers' (Rinaldi 2006) inside a constant process of pedagogical co-construction, all of which is tethered to a strong and distinctive vision of the role of the learning environment. This story is not new. Educators in Reggio Emilia have relentlessly pursued a different vision for children and their education over many decades. Propelled by Malaguzzi's permeating declaration of



the environment as the third teacher, the significance of the environments of learning recognises that 'education can only become fully recognised when the environment is a fully participating element' (Malaguzzi 1986).

Around the world we often hear educators speak of their environments in this way, co-opting the phrase 'environment as the third teacher'. This is a description we know well but it begs further investigation. What does this phrase really mean to us? How do we recognise the power and impact of the spaces that we plan, construct and engage in with young children? Does it literally mean, as some have suggested, that after the parent and the teacher, the third most significant force in children's education is the environment? Or perhaps it is something more layered, mercurial and perplexing than this. Environment as the third teacher offers us a complex metaphor to unpack and investigate, opening the door to new ways of understanding the significance of the spaces that

we all encounter when we are learning.

More than just a physical space, the concept of the 'environment' refers to the emotional, relational, aesthetic, political, pedagogical and cultural spaces that we participate in and share with children, colleagues and families. These spaces provide fertile grounds for research as we observe the connectedness between spaces, experiences and relationships between individuals and the social group.



On a recent visit to the Opal School in Portland, USA, I observed the classroom spaces of an entire school where the team of educators are united by a deep understanding of the value and power of learning environments for 'playful inquiry'. Opal School caters for children from three years of age through to the end of primary school (Year Five). Here the spaces were lined with complex questions and thinking, displaying evidence of children and adults' unfolding journeys in inquiry learning. As visitors to the school, we encountered an open dialogue and iterative process of socio-constructivist learning made visible through the many layers of the environment's 'communicative skin' (Tedeschi 2003). Laced with the memories, histories, journeys and stories of shared inquiry, the Opal School environments allowed us to come to know the pedagogy of the group slowly as we read

documentation, observed classes in action and then shared dialogue with educators after each session in the school. It was powerful not only in its advocacy for children and their learning, but also for the courageous stance taken by all teachers at the Opal School to create spaces for learning that contest the common American experience of elementary school learning environments. The connectedness of pedagogy and continuity of experience between all of the classrooms at Opal School was quite remarkable, leaving the visiting educators with much to digest.

So, when we think about the environments that we design and construct for children's play and learning, we might all benefit from beginning the process with some important questions in mind:

How can the environment support deep inquiry learning through play, rather than seeing play experiences as activities or strategies to meet pre-determined developmental outcomes?

Which spaces work well for our children, colleagues and community, and why?

How can the way the physical space is structured welcome an open climate of collaboration, support, wonder and joy?

When Sir Ken Robinson said 'Education is a sophisticated human process, not an impersonal delivery system' (Robinson as cited in Keene & Glover 2015), he offered a challenge to educators not only to think about the significance of our humanity in education but also to consider how highly agentic human spaces communicate different messages to their inhabitants. To this end, we need to think carefully about how the environments we create and construct for learning speak loudly about the 'way learning happens here'.

What messages are we, consciously and unconsciously, communicating through the spaces that we create?

How do others 'read' and engage with our spaces?

What opportunities for choice, wonder and delight do they offer?

What sense of agency do our spaces honour?

Whose agency matters in playful environments and when/how is it valued?

Devoting time for dialogue on questions such as these is a critical component of coming to understand the learning environment and its impact. Beginning with a shared process of spatial analysis is a key step towards understanding and improving. In order to act

as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible; it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs, to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge (Gandini 2007).

Working with many early childhood teams in different contexts, I have found that often we bring a very diverse set of ideas, beliefs and practices to our process when it comes to designing the spaces of learning. It can be a tricky ground to navigate and is compounded when we bring amorphous and slippery words such as 'best practice' to the discussion. Over the years, I have supported teams with a series of analysis tools for collaborative discussion as we unpack words like 'quality' and 'best practice' through a spatial lens. Over time, we have found that the most transferrable and useful strategies in this process have been environment analysis tools that are concept based and inquiry driven, rather than those that present a finite list of things to do or include in the space. However, we know that, just as there is not one perfect environment for learning, there is also not one perfect environmental analysis tool.

As you reflect on your space, the process of engaging in shared observation and dialogue, I encourage you to start with **open-ended questions** that unpack **key concepts** in your team discussions. You may like to begin by using the following concept lenses and questions:

Function: *which elements of the space work well? Why? How?*

Relationship: *how does the space afford and promote interactions, connections and relationships between the people that participate in it?*

Impact: *how does the way the space is constructed impact the emotions and learning relationships of the participants who engage with it? How does it impact the experience of learning?*

Change: *how do changes in the space create change in the teaching and learning experience and vice versa?*

Agency: *how does your space support and recognise the agency of all who come to participate and learn within it?*

Diversity: *how does your space welcome, include and engage with the different points of view of the people who experience it?*

Organisation: *how does the way we organise our resources, time, routines and practices give shape and structure to our spaces for learning?*

Responsibility: *how are the responsibilities of planning*

for, constructing and maintaining your spaces shared between all participants?

With an increased focus on learning environments, the impact of the spaces and places we plan and create has never before been so well understood. Through a process of conceptual analysis and an emphasis on dialogue, educational teams can discover new layers of meaning about the way learning environments shape experience and communicate values to all stakeholders. Shared analysis provides the opportunity to enhance our understanding of the significance of engaging learning environments in which play, inquiry and relationships can thrive.

I wonder, when you next engage in discussion about your space, what will you pay attention to and what will you do differently?

* All images taken from Opal School Study Tour, Portland

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Marrying play pedagogies with standardised curriculum



Dr. Jodie Riek has been involved in early childhood education for more than 20 years, through a range of education environments including childcare, primary education, vocational and higher education. In 2012 she began working in higher education as an early childhood and elementary instructor at Oklahoma State University, returning to Australia in 2016 to take up the position of Early Childhood Education Lecturer at CQUniversity—Mackay City Campus. Her current research interest areas are early literacy, the impact of pedagogical learning communities on the practices of early childhood teachers, and restoring play pedagogy in early years primary classrooms.

Play pedagogies have been a persistent pillar of early childhood curriculum design in Queensland, not only in preschool settings but also in early primary classrooms. With the increased focus on improving NAPLAN results through a narrowing curriculum, there has been an ever-growing division between this standardised approach and play pedagogies. The problem is that, while both play pedagogies and standardised curriculum have the shared goal of improving student learning outcomes, both are working against each other. The study sought to explore the realities experienced by first-and-second-grade teachers as they use play pedagogies to deliver the standardised 'curriculum into classroom' (C2C) planning documents in the Central Queensland Mackay Region. Further, this study intended to: (1) explore how teachers in public education within the Mackay region are using play pedagogies, and (2) how they are using play pedagogies to deliver the *Australian curriculum* through the state government standardised framework of the C2C planning documents.

Posited within a curriculum theory framework, the study defines 'curriculum' as a verb, as opposed to a noun (Pinar 2012). Accepting that realities are constructed through experience with the world, and that multiple realities can exist at any one given point in time, this study sought to understand the realities and experiences of early childhood educators working in a system absorbed in an audit culture. Although the foundational understandings were assembled through a quantitative approach, in order to gain a clear understanding of how teachers are

using play pedagogies to deliver standardised curriculum within their early primary classrooms, a mixed-methods approach was used. This project provided a platform for these educators to have their voice heard and their story told. It also discussed successful strategies and potential barriers in implementing play pedagogies to deliver standardised curriculum within these grades.

Purpose of study

While it is recognised that the public education organisation in Queensland is promoting age-appropriate pedagogies through the department's transition-to-school initiative (Department of Education and Training 2016), this program is specifically targeting and focusing on supporting teachers in the Prep grade level. The null curriculum (where the emphasis placed in specific curriculum areas shows that other areas are not important) that is being taught through this narrowed attention to the Prep grade level is that the characteristics of effective pedagogies are more acceptable in transitional school settings, and after Prep is where serious learning occurs. This identifies a clear space to assess how teachers in grades one and two in Queensland public schools are using play pedagogies to deliver the *Australian curriculum* through the standardised framework of the C2C materials.

This research study had the overarching research question of how, if at all, are early childhood educators currently using play pedagogies to deliver the C2C curriculum. To further clarify avenues of discovery and consequential findings, the following

research questions were used to further guide inquiry:

a) Which key learning areas are most likely to be delivered through the implementation of play pedagogies?

b) What strategies do teachers use to include play within the enacted curriculum?

c) What obstacles do teachers encounter in not only adopting but also consistently using play pedagogies in early primary classrooms?

d) Where do educators seek support and guidance in developing the enacted curriculum?

Findings

Through the findings of this study, it was clear that participants held strong pedagogical beliefs throughout their career about the importance of play as a process for learning. One hundred percent of all teachers involved in the study indicated that play pedagogies were vital and almost all of the participants (96%) indicated that developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) were important. While play pedagogies were held in high esteem within teachers' pedagogical beliefs, participants indicated that their use of play pedagogy decreased through their career. Ninety percent of graduate teachers in the study identified that they regularly use play as a pedagogical practice, as opposed to 63% of lead teachers indicating that teachers' use of these approaches is stifled. This would support Jay and Knaus's (2018) findings that 'teachers found it a struggle to fit everything in that they were expected to teach and that this impeded their ability to implement a play-based program' (p. 121). Although the teachers are constrained by the ropes of the standardised curriculum, they have found the areas that have some flexibility, enabling them to use places where play pedagogies can fit.

Finding 1: Mathematics and play pedagogies

Although one of two key learning areas that are subject to regularly standardised high stakes testing, mathematics was found to be the most common key learning area where play pedagogies were enacted.

Ninety-four percent of participants indicated that they regularly engage children in play experiences within mathematics learning experiences. The use of rotational activities where students engage with manipulative materials (such as unifix cubes, scales, dice, counters, pattern blocks, and geoboards) was cited as providing the opportunity to regularly engage in play experiences while addressing the standardised curriculum goals. In addition to the use of concrete materials in small group activities, teachers also sought to have students explore learning outside the four walls of the classroom. This presented opportunities for children to play movement games which required students to physically respond to a mathematical challenge, as well as undertake the challenge of obstacle courses which developed directional and positional language.

Finding 2: Perceptions of play

There was a definite common understanding amongst early phase teachers that their direct supervisors—those in middle management—view the use of play pedagogies as acceptable in the Prep grade level, but not in first and second grade. As there is no requirement for principals and other middle management personnel to have experience in early childhood before obtaining these positions, educators in these roles may not necessarily have an understanding of early childhood philosophies or practices. One participant explained how, in her school, the middle management have come from an upper primary background 'so they don't get that play-based learning. They don't understand the philosophies or pedagogical approaches in the same way'. School leadership teams that do not understand or support the use of play pedagogies provide early phase teachers with a difficult choice: risk disciplinary action or put aside their pedagogical beliefs and conform to expectations. It was clear that this perception of the acceptability of using play pedagogies, combined with the increased narrowing focus on assessment and accountability, heavily influenced the pedagogical practices adopted by the teachers in this study.

Finding 3: Confidence and competence

Teachers' own self-image and self-efficacy had a direct bearing on their ability to challenge the expectations of the audit culture and perceived perceptions of play pedagogies. Having the confidence in one's own knowledge and abilities to not only be competent in delivering the curriculum through the use of play pedagogies, but also to be a proactive advocate for this marriage of approaches, appeared to be a key factor for both graduate and more experienced teachers

alike. A graduate teacher, who had several years of experience using play pedagogies within preschool settings, explained that she lacked the self-confidence in enacting such practices in the formal school setting. She was particularly candid about her lack of confidence in her new teaching context, stating:

'I probably feel because I can't talk the talk, I can't get away with putting [play] in there. Um it's my probably weakness as well, in my own learning so therefore I don't understand as much how to make it fit. I'm sure it could be done, but I'm not at that level yet where I can do it, if you know what I mean. Like I'm still trying to get my head around teaching them what they need for the assessment, carrying the assessment out, marking the assessment, getting the result back.'

Regardless of the school context or the career stage of the teacher, it was apparent that having the confidence in one's own knowledge and abilities, to not only be competent in delivering the curriculum through the use of play pedagogies, but also to be a proactive advocate for this marriage of approaches appeared to be a key factor in their capacity to action this.

Finding 4: Play pedagogical mentorship

As outlined earlier, there was a definite decrease in the use of play pedagogies as teachers progressed through their career, even though their beliefs about the importance of these pedagogies remained unbroken. Almost 80% of participants in the study indicated that they would like to include more opportunities for play within their daily practices, and yet it is clear that marrying play pedagogies with standardised curriculum is difficult for most teachers. A common theme emerging from the interviews was the role that senior, experienced early childhood teachers played in supporting teachers in their efforts to seek ways to use play to deliver the standardised curriculum. A highly accomplished teacher explained:

*'When I moved here, we had *Vicki (a locally recognised early childhood leader) as one of our Prep teachers and she and another great teacher that had come up from kindy. So, we had a lot of really good kindy-orientated play-based teachers that moved up from kindy into Prep and some really great play-based preschool teachers that stayed in that Prep space when it changed over. So, we had lots of knowledge and experience to learn from and models ready to mentor, me in particular, in that play-based stuff.'*



Clearly, it was the experience of being a member of an authentic learning community through teacher mentorship that allowed teachers to gain the skills to improve their own instructional practices while also attaining the coveted goal of raising student performance outcomes. This would indicate that, for practices to become not only achievable but more importantly sustainable long term, it is imperative that a community of practice is developed amongst the teaching faculty.

Finding a pathway forward

The data collected and subsequent findings have presented a very illuminating representation of the current realities faced by early childhood teachers trying to marry play pedagogies with the standardised curriculum. There were many encouraging aspects that suggested a union may not only be possible, but that teachers in grades one and two are actively walking down the aisle towards this coupling. Through the conscious action of not relinquishing their pedagogical beliefs and instead seeking ways to enact them within the standardised curriculum, early childhood teachers are reimagining and redefining play pedagogies. Reclaiming their role of pedagogues, teachers can embrace the union between standardised curriculum and play pedagogies, while being agents of change and advocates for play within primary classrooms.

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Continuity of learning in the early years: do we see ourselves as part of a learning continuum?

When I first began educating, I thought little about continuity of learning for children. The Early years learning framework (EYLF) had not yet been imagined, and the Preschool learning guidelines were a non-compulsory guide for preschool educators in long day care. I programmed and planned for children using play-based pedagogy and a needs-based observational lens. The concept of an emergent curriculum was years from actually emerging. In the early part of my career, I worked very hard to ensure that I was getting all the

children ready for 'big school'; I felt validated when the nearby school praised my work by saying 'We know which children come from your service'.

As time went on, children's services became regulated and the National Childcare Accreditation Council was formulated to guide practice. I began to look differently at the nature of the work I was so passionate about. The EYLF reminded us that belonging, being and becoming are important. This was significant for me, as I saw



my focus shift from getting children ready to offering rich foundational learning opportunities for everyone in my classroom. I knew the work I was doing was important, but the Early years learning framework articulated this for many of us who did not have the words to describe or conceptualise it.

Seeing learning as a continuum is a way of acknowledging and valuing the contribution that all settings make to a child's education and care. Continuity of learning values home learning, playgroup, child care settings, kindergarten and then school. Continuity of learning is not about being the same but does seek to identify a range of shared perspectives and practices. Many educators in both school and before-school settings have limited understanding of the alignment of the EYLF, the Queensland kindergarten curriculum guidelines (QKLG) and the Australian curriculum (developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority—ACARA). If we do not know where children are coming from and we don't know where they are headed to, sometimes the roadway of learning is lost. We do not want to 'schoolify' the early years, but it is essential that we see the links to understand a child's learning journey.

This challenge is not new or unique to Australia and has been discussed for decades and in many countries. Marie Clay described this in 1993: 'At entry to school, children have been learning for five years, since they were born. They are ready to learn more than they already know. Why do schools and educators find this so difficult to understand?' (Clay 1993, p.9)

More recently the ECA-ACARA paper, Foundations for learning (2011), identifies significant alignment and recognises generalised understandings that blend from the learning outcomes to general capabilities. The rich experiences and outcomes of the EYLF form the foundational skills for the general capabilities within the foundation curriculum.

An example of this is Learning outcome 1: children have a strong sense of identity and how that links to personal and social competence in the Australian curriculum. Children in the foundation year are supported to understand themselves, manage their relationships, learn and work effectively. Children are encouraged to recognise and regulate their emotions, establish positive relationships and make responsible decisions (general capabilities—personal and social capability). The before-school opportunities in outcome 1 become the foundation level for skills on the personal and social capability continuum.

Another important factor in continuity is the focus on quality transition for children from a before-



school setting to a school setting. Dockett and Perry (2014) based their work on recognised findings on the importance of smooth school transitions. Transition to school is part of the continuity journey for young learners. Going to school is a significant time in a child's life, and recognising it as such is essential to ensure that children and families are supported to competently move through the transition. Educators are key to ensuring that this process occurs at an optimal level by developing strong relationships between families, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and schools. Dockett and Perry (2014) describe these relationships as secure, respectful and reciprocal.

Throughout the south-east region, attention and focus has been on developing these partnerships with the formation of Neighbourhood Networks. These networks are formed by local schools and ECEC services, collaborating to examine key issues like ensuring smooth transitions and providing alignment between curricula to support continuity of pedagogy and practice.

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Teaching kindergarten using an executive functioning lens



Sue Southey is Co-director at Springwood Community Kindergarten, where she has worked with families and young children since 1980. She teaches part time and uses her non-teaching days to provide training, in-house support and professional development for early childhood educators throughout Australia. Sue has a Master of Education, Bachelor of Education Studies and a Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood). She has worked as a sessional academic at both QUT and Griffith University, at Brisbane School of Distance Education, and the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority. She has been awarded an Inspirational Teaching Award by the National Excellence in Teaching Awards Foundation and an Inspirational Teacher Award by the Down Syndrome Association of Queensland.

With increasing downward pressure on child-centred play pedagogies, it is vital that kindergarten teachers continue to advocate for children's rights while meeting the demands of families and community to prepare children for more formalised learning at school (Riek 2019). One approach is to move away from a focus on teaching content to build children's capacity to think and engage with learning. Solid research over the last ten years provides greater understanding of the neuroscience that underpins children's capacity to learn, particularly in higher thinking skills known as executive functioning (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2011). Assessments of executive functioning during preschool years consistently predict academic achievement and social maturity throughout school years (Blair & Raver 2015).

What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning skills are the high-level thinking processes that allow children to plan, monitor and guide their own goal-directed behaviour, control their responses (inhibitory or effortful control) and process multiple bits of information. Shonkoff (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2011) refers to executive functioning as the 'air traffic control' system of the brain. This high-level thinking occurs in the prefrontal cortex area of the brain and focuses on the processing of working memory, inhibitory control and flexible thinking. Executive functions take many years to develop; however, their development is accelerated during the preschool years and at the beginning of adolescence, which makes kindergarten an ideal

time to focus on building executive functioning skills (Raver & Blair 2016).

What is an executive functioning lens?

A focus on the development of executive functioning skills does not require us to move away from traditional and familiar kindergarten activities. Rather, the focus changes from building children's content knowledge to supporting children to become more self-regulated thinkers and learners. This takes the form of making children more aware of the control they have over their thinking and actions and providing opportunities for them to practise using their memory, their inhibitory control and flexible thinking. Many of the everyday experiences in kindergarten provide opportunities to do just this. Everyday routines and transitions require children to recall where they place their belongings, the sequence of actions in a toileting routine, or to problem solve when there is not enough room at the dough table. Child-initiated play such as dramatic play, story-making or construction play constantly requires children to use flexible thinking as they work through possibilities, solve problems and manage materials. Group times require children to exercise inhibitory control, concentrate, and to stay engaged and focused. A kindergarten day is rich in opportunities for children to exercise their executive functioning skills. The difference is the lens we use to plan experiences and the way in which we observe how children respond. Within a group there will always be children who easily access their executive functioning skills and those for whom

this is a challenge. Using this lens, teachers are able to use a problem-solving approach to support children who have difficulty engaging in experiences, inhibiting their responses and problem solving.

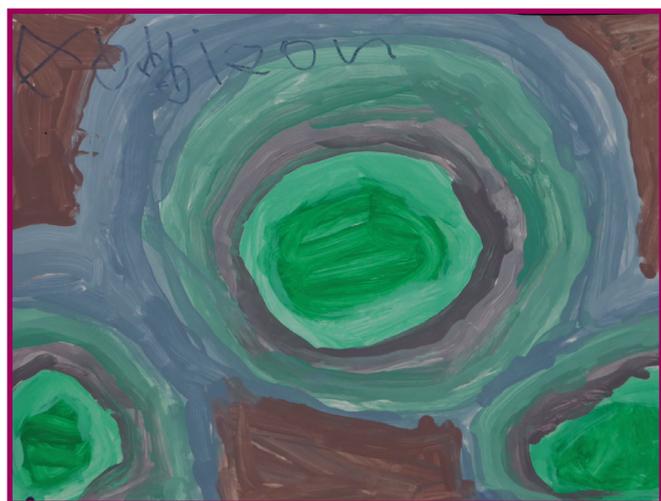
An example of executive functioning in action

Opportunities for developing executive functioning are inherent in many kindergarten experiences. When we focus on the executive functioning opportunities, we provide ways for children to build their thinking skills and to become more aware of their thinking (metacognition). The following is a simple art experience that is highly motivating for children but also provides opportunities for children to practise their executive functioning skills.

An exercise in mixing colours

My long-term goal is for the children to become competent at managing tools and materials so that they can use painting to express their ideas and thinking. In the shorter term, I want children to become familiar with using the acrylic paints to make new colours, so we introduce the children to this exercise in mixing colours. This is a popular activity; the children enjoy discovering new colours and feel satisfaction in the designs they create. It is important that children are motivated to participate either because it is a goal they have chosen themselves or that it looks interesting enough so that they are willing to give it a go. This motivation is necessary because using their executive functioning skills is effortful and requires children to expend energy to stay focused and engage in the process. As kindergarten teachers, we need to plan open-ended experiences so that children can participate at the level that they can just manage, rather than feel discouraged by not meeting their own or another person's goal.

This is the process we teach to build children's skills at mixing colours with the acrylic paint:



1. The child chooses a colour to paint a shape (or shapes) on the page.
2. White paint is added to the original colour and the child paints around the original shape.
3. The child chooses white or another colour to create a new colour and continue to paint around the growing shape until the paper is filled.

An initial assessment of this learning experience suggests that this is an easily achievable task. However, from an executive functioning point of view, it is possible to see how this experience challenges children's executive functioning, particularly when they are learning the skill. The learning experience can be analysed to describe some of the tasks that call on each of these executive functioning capacities:

Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recalling the routines for setting up their art experience • collecting tools and materials • recalling the sequence of the activity • recalling the process for cleaning up after the activity
Inhibitory control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staying focused on the task • ignoring distractions to reach their goal • persevering until the page is covered • following the steps in the process
Flexible thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choosing from the range of colours • generating an initial shape • problem solving when things don't go as planned, e.g. when they can't find a paint brush

This framing of the experience around executive functioning capacities gives us a lens to make judgements about the child's thinking skills. We can see, from what children say, do and make, to what extent they are able to call on these capacities. This guides us to provide support that might help the child use their skills to achieve their goal. For example, when a child is setting up their space with the tools and materials, they may forget where to find painting paper. Rather than telling them where to locate it, we might say, 'Close your eyes and see if you can remember where we keep the paper. Can you see this picture in your head?' When they have finished painting, rather than reminding them to place their painting on the drying rack, we say 'Have a think about what you need to do next'. To assess the child's

inhibitory control, we pay attention to how focused and engaged the child is in the task and to what extent they can ignore the distractions around them. This is one of many kindergarten experiences that allow us to focus on dispositions to learning so that children become more mindful and intentional in their thinking.

Conclusion

The lens of seeing experiences through executive functioning enables us to focus on dispositions rather than on content and opens up opportunities throughout children's kindergarten experience. The development of executive functioning skills is a long and gradual process but helps create learners who are self-regulated and ready to cope with the challenges of more formal learning at school.

A kindergarten day is rich in opportunities for children to exercise their executive functioning skills. The difference is the lens we use to plan experiences and the way in which we observe how children respond.

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Emotional intelligence: what is it? Why do we need it? How do we get it?



Melissa Strader is passionate about helping people build strong, positive relationships with children, based on empathy and connection. It was from her personal desire to parent well and understand children better that her business, Enjoy Parenting, was born. Melissa is a registered teacher and an art therapist, an authorised parent effectiveness training (PET) instructor from Gordon Training International, and is reality therapy certified (RTC) by the William Glasser Institute of Australia. Melissa's ongoing vision is to help parents and teachers enjoy their roles more, for it is only with happier parents and teachers that we will have happier children.

The concept of emotional intelligence was attributed to professors Peter Salovey and John D (Jack) Mayer in 1990, though it was popularised by Daniel Goleman in his book by the same name, which was first published in 1994.

Since then, emotional intelligence has become a generally accepted term used to describe a person's ability to process emotional information and use it to navigate social environments. The term emotional intelligence and its abbreviated forms, EI or EQ, are now used across a variety of contexts including education, business, leadership, relationships and parenting.

It is the '... *ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour*' (Colman 2008 p.43).

Why do teachers and students need emotional intelligence?

It is believed that EI is an accurate predictor of a person's success across a number of different areas such as health, relationships, career, wealth, and general happiness. Having said that, EI is not necessarily more important than intelligence quotient (commonly known as IQ). A highly developed intellectual capacity is in

and of itself an advantage, particularly in regard to education and wealth outcomes (Goleman 2006).

However, while approximately 25 percent of achievement is attributed to innate intelligence, approximately 75 percent of achievement is attributed to psychosocial skills such as perseverance, resilience and determination (Olszewski-Kubilius 2013, in Ricci & Lee 2016).

'Helping children improve their self-awareness and confidence, manage their disturbing emotions and impulses and increase their empathy pays off not just in improved behaviour but in measurable academic achievement' (Goleman 2006, p.xi).

Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence are able to better manage their emotions and behaviour, navigate their school and social environments and build positive relationships with others. This can help students develop improved self-motivation and more effective communication skills, which are essential in helping them to become more confident learners. In the long-term, these EI traits can be applied to other situations (for example, work and personal relationships), often leading to more skillful conflict management, problem solving, rapport building, teamwork, collaboration and leadership (Goleman 2006).

How do educators help the children in their care to develop their emotional intelligence?

When working with children, it is

easy to see that for some, emotional and social skills seem to come easily and naturally to them. For other children, the ability to read social situations or regulate their emotions is obviously a challenge that requires guidance and explicit teaching.

Emotional intelligence includes a vast array of competencies, such as self-control, adaptability, optimism, understanding of others, communication, co-operation and conflict management.

Goleman (2006) has grouped these and many other emotional traits into the five main areas of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In order to review how adults can more effectively help the children in their care to develop emotional intelligence, let's look at these five key areas and what teachers can do to promote growth in each one.

Self-awareness includes awareness of one's own emotions, accurate self-evaluation, and an understanding of the impact of our emotions on others and on one's own self-confidence.

The ability to monitor feelings as they happen leads to insight and self-understanding. With these competencies, people are better able to direct themselves according to how they personally think and feel, rather than being at the mercy of their strong feelings. This is the beginning of intrinsic motivation.

An educator's role in helping children learn to become more self-aware is to assist them in identifying their feelings, and their thoughts about their feelings. Teachers can do this simply by verbally reflecting back to a child what they think the child may be feeling. For example, 'You're really frustrated that you haven't had a turn on the swing yet. It is hard to wait when you are so excited about having your go!'

Also, once a child has calmed after an upsetting experience, teachers can help the child process and understand that experience by asking questions such as, 'What were you feeling/thinking when it was time to pack up but you weren't finished building your tower?'

Self-regulation is a degree of emotional balance requiring a number of other skills including impulse control and the ability to monitor, evaluate, modify and manage one's own energy states. It also includes adaptability and flexibility in handling change or new situations.

Managing one's emotions is a competency that builds on self-awareness, and it is important to remember that the extremes of emotions seen in very young children

are a natural and typical part of their development. There are many causes of emotional dysregulation and helping children regain balance after an emotional outburst is, I believe, part of an adult's role in raising or working with children.

We do not do this by telling a child to calm down or to stop crying. Connection and empathy are more effective than behavioural consequences in helping children to calm down, and help them become more receptive, rather than defensive or reactive. Children's brains are constantly being wired and rewired, and the experiences that adults provide will no doubt impact on how children's emotional landscapes develop.

Motivation is driven by the emotional tendencies that help a person reach their goals. This requires the competencies of optimism, internal drive and delayed gratification.

'Marshaling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention, for self-motivation and mastery, and for creativity. Emotional self-control—delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness—underlies accomplishment of every sort' (Goleman 2006, p.43)

Motivation is included as one of the key competencies in emotional intelligence because an ongoing drive to succeed and overcome challenges relies on emotional traits such as enthusiasm and perseverance, particularly when faced with setbacks. When a teacher helps a child to handle emotions, it enhances the child's ability to think, plan and perform, to pursue a long-term goal and to solve problems, rather than have their feelings distract or overwhelm them.

Growth mindset and optimism can be communicated to children via the language that educators use, the questions they ask, and the way they respond to students' difficulties.

Cultivating a child's mindset and perceptions towards ones of growth and optimism requires that, firstly, an adult becomes aware of their own thinking and, secondly, that they monitor how they speak with children. A child's explanatory style (the way they explain events, successes and failures to themselves) is continually forming throughout early childhood and is highly influenced by the ways that adults

communicate with them, particularly in regard to criticisms (Seligman 2006).

Growth mindset and optimism can be communicated to children via the language that educators use, the questions they ask, and the way they respond to students' difficulties. Comments to encourage optimistic thinking may include, 'What did you find out

Empathy '*... is the skill or ability to tap into our own experience in order to connect with an experience someone is relating to us*' (Brown 2019).

when you were trying to complete the puzzle? What would you need to do in order to sit still during the story? If you had another chance, what would you do differently?'

Educators can also play a role in disputing and reframing children's pessimistic thinking with questions such as, 'What tells you that you can't do this? What tells you that you can? When else have you overcome a tricky challenge like this?'

These types of responses communicate to children that their carers trust in their ability to solve problems for themselves and empower them to do so, all the while fostering their optimism, growth mindset and resilience.

Goleman (2006) describes empathy as the fundamental people skill. Primarily it requires taking the perspective of another person and communicating back to them your understanding. The key to recognising others' feelings and experiences is largely via non-verbal means: body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures. People who have this ability are more attuned to the subtle cues that indicate the needs and desires of others.

There are many ways for adults raising and working with children to teach empathy. One is to model empathy, which involves earnest listening, acknowledging feelings and communicating your understanding of the child's perspective, even when you don't agree with it. Suspending judgment and the urge to problem solve can help with the process of communicating empathy.

Secondly, adults can explicitly teach empathy through the use of stories, role-plays or puppets and toys by discussing the perspective and feelings of characters in various situations. Empathy can be further developed by encouraging children to express their feelings

appropriately and listen to other children in the group, as well as helping children to decipher the non-verbal cues and facial expression of others.

Social skills are largely about handling relationships and include competencies such as the ability to influence others, read social cues, build rapport, work as a team and manage conflict. These are the abilities that underlay popularity, leadership and interpersonal effectiveness (Goleman 2006).

In the same way that empathy can be modelled and taught, so can social skills. Just like any other skills, children need to know what social skills look like and they need to practise them. Social skills include communication skills (using the right words for the situation, decoding and encoding meaning, reading body language, smiling, using eye contact, and listening); group skills (knowing how to join a group, sharing, taking turns, following rules, cooperating, managing conflict, and helping others); and friendship skills (how to be a friend, being respectful and kind to others, and being assertive).

Summary

While some of the suggestions I have made for growing children's emotional intelligence require explicit teaching, most of the recommendations can be easily integrated into what teachers already do. Most emotional competencies can be effectively modelled by teachers and developed in children through play and during everyday interactions. By paying attention to and fine-tuning what they already do, educators will be well on their way to providing the children in their care with the emotional and social foundations they will need in order to live happy and fulfilling lives.

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Seeing what is: observing children without judgement

Why a child enters the world with challenges is a philosophical debate. Individuals are just that, individual: events which affect some people very deeply may not affect others at all. All have some imbalances; some have greater imbalances than others. This diversity cannot be viewed negatively. We cannot know the future of our children: for example, Einstein was a particularly diverse and unco-operative child, and his early beginnings did not suggest his later achievements. During gestation there are many variables, external environmental and internal environmental; thus a developing foetus may or may not be affected by these variables. Arriving in the world and beginning the journey of childhood, there are further variables.



Jackie Cox Taylor began her teaching career as a teacher of the Deaf. She spent 18 years working in a mainstream setting with children diagnosed with ASD and challenging behaviours, implementing a Steiner curriculum. Since 2015 she has worked as a consultant mentoring in Steiner kindergartens, primary schools and special schools. She has travelled extensively in China delivering the special needs component of kindergarten training. Her particular research interest is understanding the effects of lower senses development on behaviours and learning, looking through the many lenses that Steiner gave.

Karl Konig (1999), curative educator and physician, stated that disability is simply 'arrested development', maintaining that we are all disabled at varying points in our lives. At birth we are all paraplegic as we can neither stand, sit up, or walk. Konig was the founder of the Camp Hill Movement in Scotland, which builds communities for people with disabilities. Konig based his work on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. Steiner (2003) developed an education and curative education program based on his understanding of child development. Many of Steiner's observations and suggested therapies are concurrent with current mainstream practice. He gave lenses through which to observe the child:

- constitutional types
- temperament types
- the twelve senses.

The **constitutional types** refer to polarities, indicating a tendency toward too much or too little. When we refer to activity or movement, we can see this is reflective of what we might diagnose as ADHD or a fixed, more sluggish demeanour. Steiner speaks of the polarities of metabolism as the child living very much in the imagination or the child who is literal (as we might see in a child diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome), and the polarities of sensitivity, physical and emotional.

There are four **temperament types** which affect the way in which we approach events. A simplified description of the temperaments might be:

sanguine—a temperament of being interested in many things at any one time, possibly flitting from one thing to the next. A light-hearted temperament

choleric—a decisive temperament, possibly slightly a bulldozer

melancholic—indecisive, concerned with the feelings of oneself and others

phlegmatic—the tortoise in the race, slow and steady.

The twelve senses offer a comprehensive lens through which to observe the child. Traditionally only five senses have been acknowledged, but current pedagogues also include others.

The **twelve senses** as identified by Steiner (2002) are grouped into three: one group being the higher senses of ego, hearing, word and thought; the middle senses being warmth, smell, sight and taste; and the lower senses being touch, balance, movement and life. When Steiner described the senses and their implications, he also related the four lower senses to early childhood 0–7 years, the middle senses to age 7–14, and the higher

senses to 14–21. The senses are all interconnected, and healthy development of the lower senses supports the development of the other eight senses.

While these four lower senses, the senses for early childhood, are not the five common senses, their healthy development supports those five common senses. These senses are commonly labelled:

interoception—the connection to self, the awareness of self, the ability to make sense of internal body signals

proprioception—the sense of movement which continuously provides information to the brain as to the position, location, orientation and movement of the body

sensory integration—a crucial foundation for more complex learning and behaviour; it includes the senses of touch.

The **sense of balance** is prevalent in all diagnoses, hyper or hypo, too much or too little. It also relates to the vestibular system, which indicates balance, imbalance, spatial orientation, hearing and vision disturbances.

When a child enters the world with the least intervention, he pushes his whole curled up body through a vagina. He is touched from head to toe, squeezed and pushed. Later, when he is released from swaddling, he will reach out with stretched arms and legs and feel the boundaries of his cot. The boundaries will be confirmed as he is dressed, held and secured in prams and car seats. Walking barefoot, he will feel his toes. Touching objects, he will feel his fingers. Laying his head on the pillow, or kissing Mummy, he will know his head and face. The small child builds a picture of himself where he begins and where he ends, not only on a physiological level but also at the beginnings of the boundaries of social living. Parents determine rhythms, routines and make decisions, and the child feels secure within the created boundary. This is the sense of touch.

Recognising a need to use the bathroom, recognising hunger, thirst, being too hot, being too cold, feeling nauseous or body pain—this is interoception or the sense of life. Becoming 'toilet trained' relies on recognising a full bladder. Not becoming overheated or hypothermic relies on recognition of body temperature. When the body is not comfortable, it's impossible to think, concentrate or study; not recognising pain or temperature can be dangerous.

Children who experience difficulty with:

- interoception may also experience difficulty interpreting their own emotions
- proprioception may show too much or too little movement, a need to fidget, a need to sit at unusual angles, or an unusual gait because proprioception includes both balance and movement—a sense of equilibrium.

Children may be unaware of their imbalances, which may impair their ability when participating in activities such as reading, copying from the board or writing.

Observation of the children—observing 'what is'—can be followed by activities to adjust the imbalances. Introducing activities with an element of imagination will provide children with more than mere physiological activity.

- Recreate a bear hunt through squishy squashy, ooey goeey, prickly tickly, slippery sloppy mud! (See photo 1 below.)
- Cross the bridge: don't fall in the river; watch out for crocodiles. (See photo 2 below.)
- Sleep like the hungry caterpillar in his cocoon. (See photo 3 below.)
- Build a cubby; this is the seating—group work. (See photo 4 below.)



School grounds can be designed to provide sense stimulation. A sensory path can have scented plants like lavender, thyme, rosemary and also can have textures to walk along bare foot. (See photos below.)

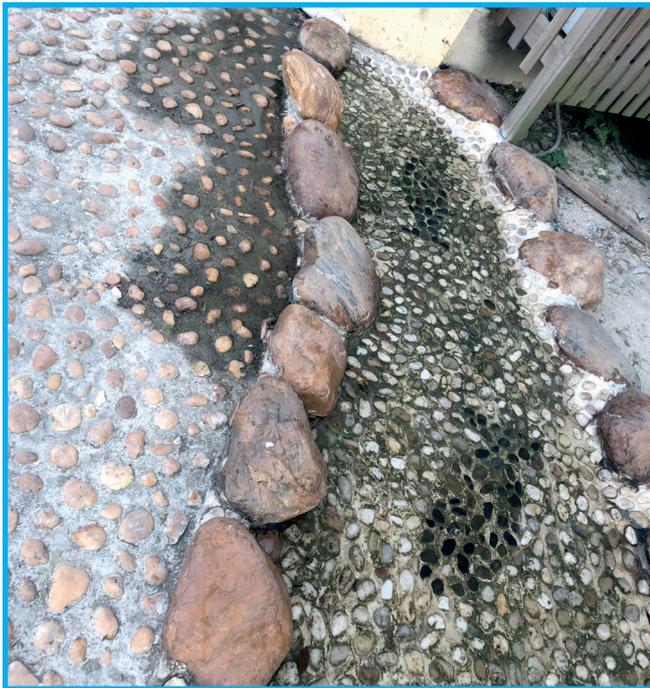
The healing journey is not one of instant analysis or categorisation; it takes patience and evolves. The challenge of solving the riddle and working with children is not necessarily easy but it is the task of the educator to bring balance to the child. The ideas shared here might provide a helpful starting point.

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Steiner, R 2003, *Education*, Sophia Books, UK.



Title:

Picturing the project approach: creative explorations in early learning

Author:

Sylvia Chard,
Yvonne Cogan &
Carmen Castillo

Publisher:

Gryphon House

ISBN: 978-0-87659-572-5

Reviewed by:

Kate Shapcott

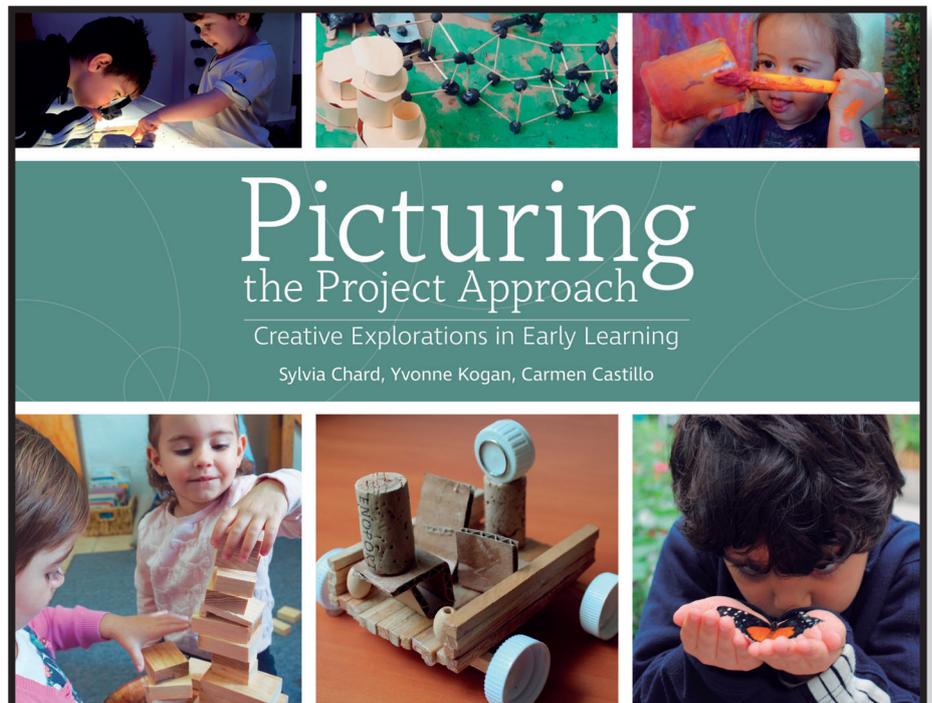
If, like me, you have ever wondered what the 'project approach' is about or if you are doing it 'correctly', then this book is for you. For the last five years, I have been challenging myself to go deeper with the projects or investigations that the children in our kindergarten program have explored. It was time to get some clarification and inspiration, and this 2017 book provided it with beautiful illustrations and explanations.

The chapters are arranged in a very accessible and logical way. The reader is guided through what is the essence of the project approach and then, step by step or chapter by chapter, how to create, implement and conclude a project. Chapters on supporting social emotional development and STEM learning answered many questions that popped up as I read the text and gazed at photos.

The text is written in an easy-to-read style that flows beautifully. Reading it, I felt as though I had a group of friends beside me sharing their own learning journeys. The final chapter on sharing project stories uses abundant illustrations, supporting documentation and presentations that excited and inspired me.

Using a practical approach, numerous appendices provide tools including sample letters, how to make a topic web and ways to document curriculum outcomes. A useful index completes this volume as a valuable resource for those wanting to incorporate this approach in their practice.

This book has helped me see the possibilities and limitations of my current setting. I now have a guide to support me through the next stage of my journey. I have a clearer understanding of how this approach has been adapted and integrated into different pedagogies and how I can use it in my work.



Title:

Mince Spies

Author:

Mark Sperring

Illustrator:

Sophie Corrigan

Publisher:

Bloomsbury Publishing

ISBN: 978-1-40889-347-0
(HB)

Reviewed by:

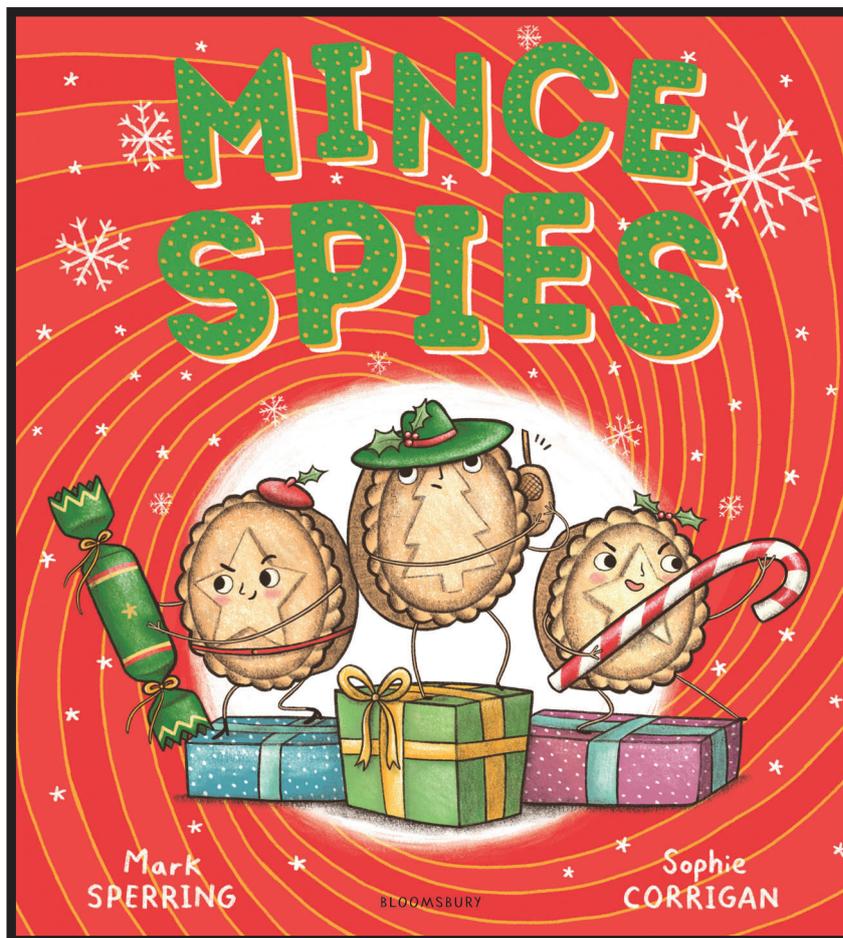
Jeanie Watts

Something is tampering with the Christmas festivities. Someone is destroying the spirit of Christmas. The Christmas spies get into action in order to find out who is the culprit. The culprits are found—they are some sprouts! The sprouts are healthy foods, and don't really match with the traditional idea of Christmas food. Santa comes in to play as the impartial umpire who gets the opposing factions to cease hostilities and restore the peace.

This book has a lot of similarities to a superhero movie. There are the two conflicting parties who are brought together by the mediator—Santa! It also has lots of literacy treats—the use of upper-case and lower-case letters for expressive effect, expression marks, and rhyming words. The humour is very catchy, and children will readily become engaged with the subterfuge and plot of this spy story.

What do spies do?? They have walkie-talkies, binoculars, and secret missions! This story, although aimed at a specific time of the year, would lend itself to a great role-play game of spies. There is also the option of embedding further literacy into reading the story, through the making of a recipe book—how to make mince pies, shortbread, white Christmas, or any other traditional Christmas food. 'I liked it when the spies used their jetpacks', said David. 'And I liked it when they went down the zipline', added Trent.

This simply illustrated story will definitely captivate young imaginations, especially when Christmas spirits are high.



Title:

Grandpa's Noises

Author:

Gareth St John Thomas

Illustrator:

Colin Rowe

Publisher:

EK Books

ISBN: 978-1-92533-598-9-4

Reviewed by:

Sue Webster

It is a long time since I have giggled through an entire children's book. Maybe it is just my warped sense of humour, as I know that I should not laugh at a grandpa's body noises—but it is written in such a manner that you cannot help yourself.

The title is relatively self-explanatory—this book is all about the wonderful and disturbing noises that Grandpa makes as he goes about his daily activities.

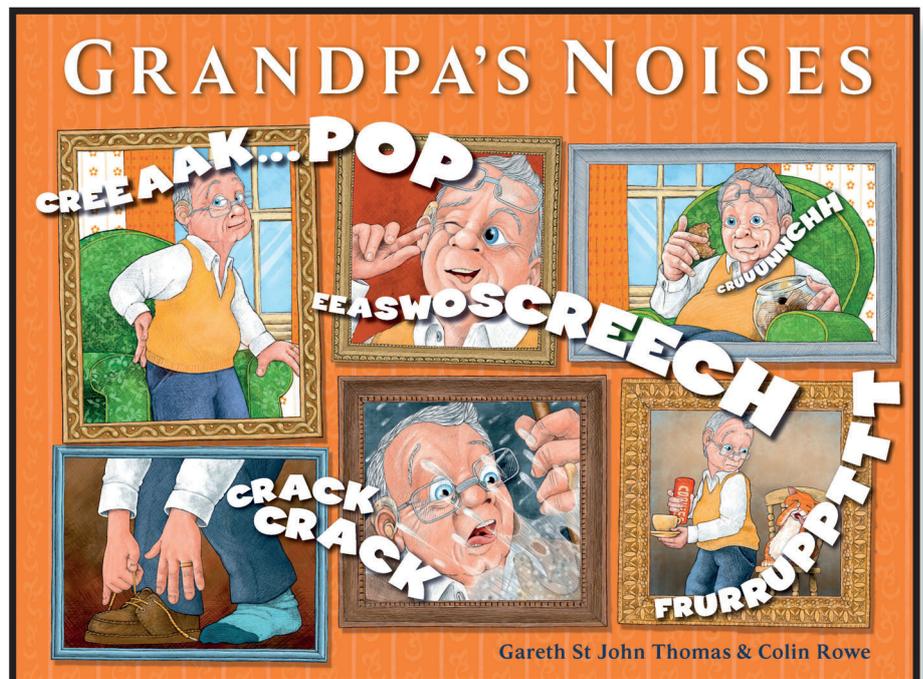
Grandpa does not talk much, and when he does it is a mystery to most, but his insightful grandson knows just what he is on about. 'Eyenoleessgofurawark' of course is Grandpa-talk for 'I know, let's go for a walk' and 'Eeeawoscreech!' is the sound of his hearing-aid complaining. Noises even escape Grandpa's bottom, but none of this scares his grandson who gleefully narrates this delightful story about Grandpa's day.

As a teacher, I saw many opportunities to talk about the elderly, our love and care for our grandparents, the joy of having grandparents in our lives and the compassion that is shown to others who may not move, hear or speak like us.

The illustrations by Colin Rowe bring the story to life and very successfully add to the sense of fun and irreverence throughout this story.

A great read for young and old. A chance for children to reflect on the older family figures in their lives and a chance for adults to see themselves and others through the eyes of a child.

I look forward to reading this book to my students now and my own grandchildren one day.



Title:

I'll Love You Always

Author:

Mark Sperring

Illustrator:

Alison Brown

Publisher:

Bloomsbury Publishing

ISBN: 978-1-68119-847-7

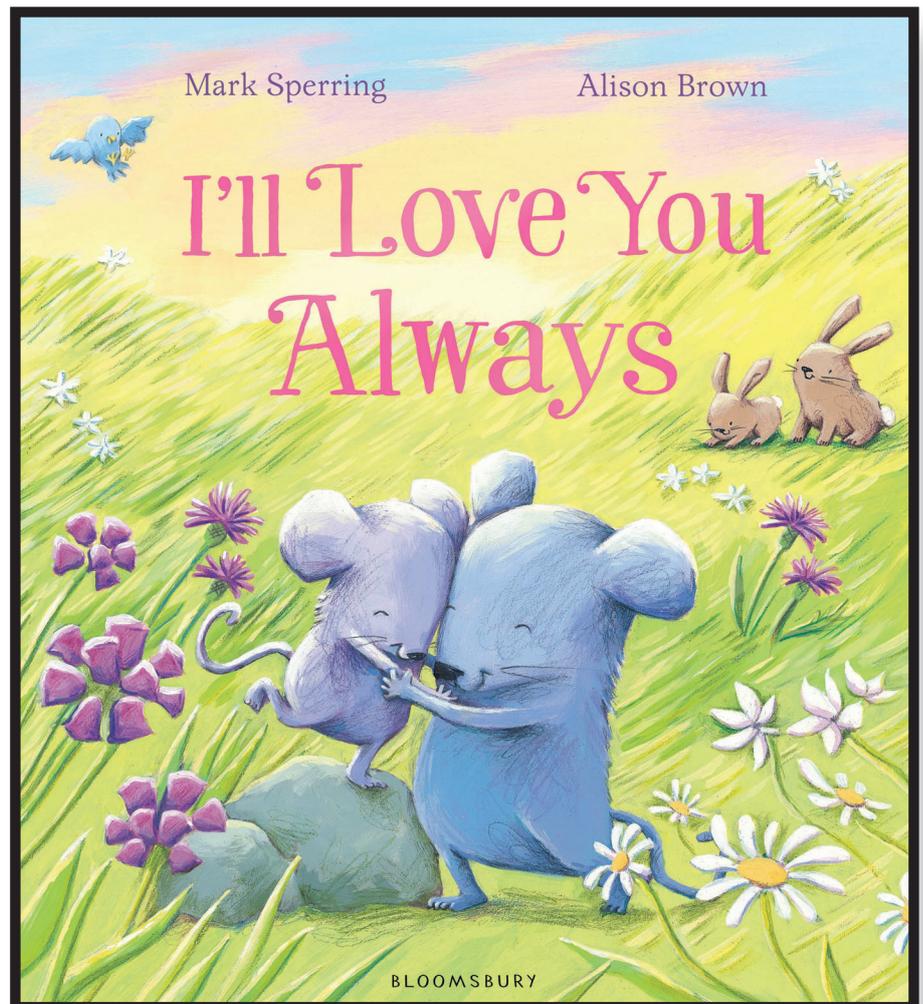
Reviewed by:

Sue Webster

Mark Sperring has written a book that every Mum and Dad will love to share with their young children. This is a robust board book that allows a parent to explore and explain the depth of love that they have for their child. Really—how can that be put into words? But somehow Mark has truly managed the task; the language is relatable, and I applaud the way Mark has investigated time.

If it sounds a little 'mushy'—well, it is—and I felt my heart swell as I read it. The illustrations by Alison Brown support the story beautifully. They are simple and cheery and full of expression. The colours are calm and peaceful, and I can fully imagine reading this in bed with my child every night as they drift off to sleep.

Yes, I really love this book for parents and their young children.



Title:

Dress up with Ted and Time to go with Ted

Author:

Sophy Henn

Illustrator:

Sophy Henn

Publisher:

EK Books

ISBN: 978-1-40888-078-4
and 978-1-40888-087-6

Reviewed by:

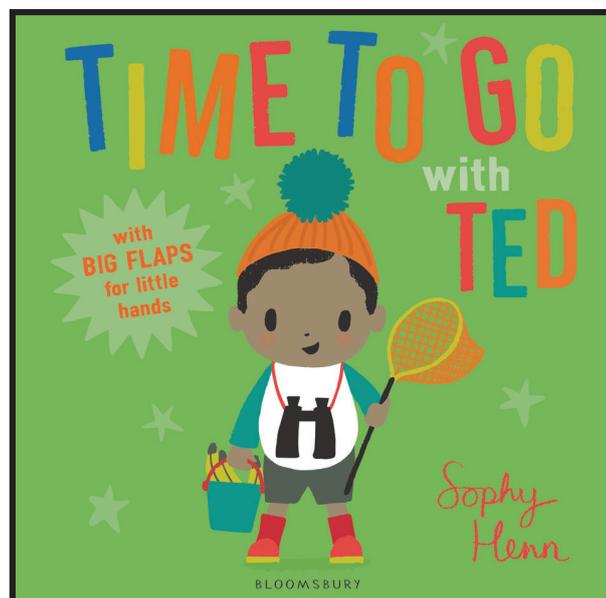
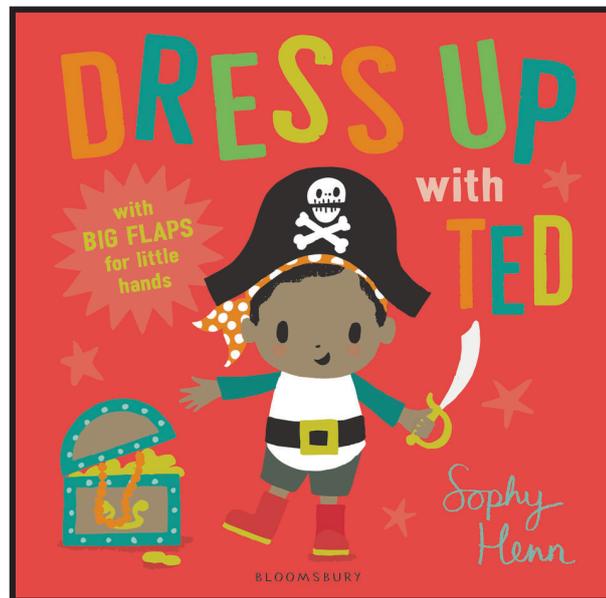
Sue Webster

Sophy Henn has written and illustrated two gorgeous books following the adventures of Ted. Ted is playing dress up in one and heading out and about in the other. Both books are beautifully illustrated with bold colours that will appeal to the toddler age group. They are also both board books with a large lift the flap on each right-hand page. There are clues given to what the under flap may depict that will allow for chances at prediction and guessing skills.

I particularly enjoyed Dress up with Ted as I felt there were many teachable moments available. These included guessing, from the clues on the page, what Ted may be dressing up as, while still enjoying a well written story.

Time to go with Ted allows for a feeling of adventure with visits to the park, shops, pool, swings and home. Again, there are many opportunities for teaching, and I enjoyed this book as I felt it would resonate with children because of its depiction of many activities that children would do in their week—so very easy to relate to.

I look forward to more of Sophy Henn's books.



Title:

The Lonely Christmas Tree

Author:

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros

Illustrator:

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros

Publisher:

Bloomsbury Children's
Books

ISBN: 9781408892923

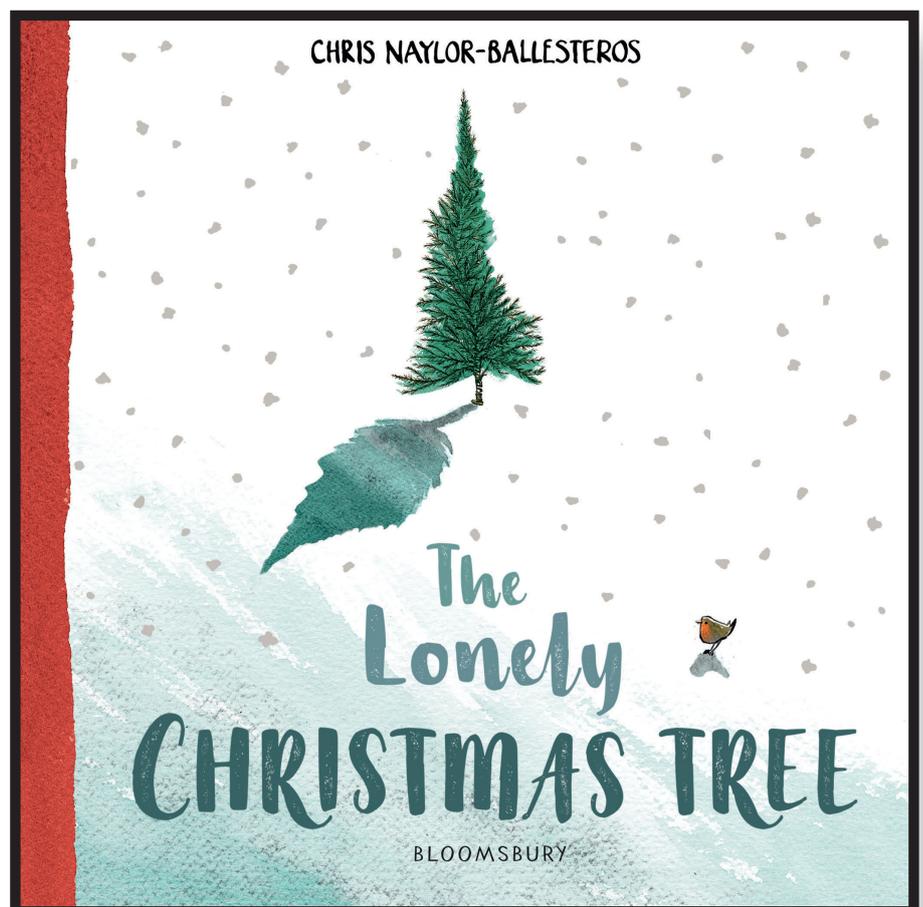
Reviewed by:

Kim Walters

The Lonely Christmas Tree would be an excellent book to read during the Christmas season to children aged from birth to lower primary. For older children it would be a wonderful stimulus for other innovations on the classic story 'Twas the night before Christmas.

A lonely tree stands on the cold, frosted hillside gazing at the other trees sparkling in the village below. How it longs to be with them! Then suddenly out reaches a warm friendly hand, and with a wobble and a shake, a very jolly fellow takes the tree on a journey to a new place ... where the tree will feel that it belongs once more, surrounded by old friends and new.

It has an uplifting message about overcoming loneliness and celebrating being together.



Guidelines for writers

The EYC editorial panel welcomes articles and ideas for possible inclusion in the journal.

One of the journal's strengths is in the variety and individuality of contributions. These style guidelines should help you to prepare your contribution in the EYC 'style'.

Style

We like to maintain a uniformity of approach within the journal. Here are some examples of the preferred 'house' style.

- Use Australian spelling in preference to American.
- Write numbers up to twelve as words; figures are used for numbers 13 upwards. (For example: one, eleven, 18, 200.) Exceptions are where numbers appear in a table, list or refer to a measure. (For example: Anne was seven-years-old when she walked 5 kilometres to school.)
- Use the following examples to help you write dates and times:
15 February 2006, 1900s.
She left at 7.25 am in order to catch the seven-forty train.
- Usually, you would write amounts of money in numerals. (For example: 20c or \$0.20, \$120 and \$88.15.) Words may be used in approximations such as 'he made millions of dollars'.
- Use italics for titles. For example: *The Australian* rather than 'The Australian'.
- Use a single space after full stop.
- Use single quotes.
- Use an en dash between spans of numbers.
- Aim for a style that is free of jargon or slang (unless this is relevant to your contribution).
- Don't assume that your audience has prior knowledge of your topic. For example, it is possible your readers will not be familiar with an acronym that you use every day. You should use the full reference the first time, followed by the acronym in brackets as shown here: Early Childhood Teachers' Association (ECTA).
- Advertorial should not be included.

Referencing

If your contribution concludes with a list of references, you should check these carefully as the editor may only pick obvious typographical errors. A search on Google usually brings up any reference you do not have to hand.

Maybe you need help with referencing. If so, The preferred style for the *ECTA Journal* is the author-date system (pp. 188–208 of the *Style manual for authors, editors and printers, 6th ed.*).

Example of in-text citations: This approach (Smith 1995; Tyler 2002) suggests ...

Example of book referencing: O'Hagan, M 2001, *Early years practitioner*, 4th edn, Harcourt, London.

Example of journal referencing: Bredekamp, S 2006, 'Staying true to our principles', *Educating Young Children*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 21–4.

Direct quotations within your article should be in italics and referenced with name of author and the source.

Specific terminology

We are presently compiling a standardised list of frequently used terms. Examples are:

- day care (rather than daycare or day-care)
- child care (rather than childcare or child-care)
- preschool (rather than pre-school)
- the Preparatory Year or Prep (rather than prep)
- Year One, Year Two/Three (words rather than numbers)
- 'the staff members are' (instead of the awkward singular noun 'the staff is ...')
- five-year-olds (i.e. age with hyphens)

The journal committee reserves the right to undertake some minimal editing or rewriting in order to maintain conformity of 'house style'. If an article is provisionally accepted, but fairly major changes are required, we will contact you to discuss this.

Length of contribution

- Article: 1200 words
- Book review: 300 words
- Regular article: 650 words

Form of submission

Your contribution should be submitted via email to info@ecta.org.au Photographs may be submitted digitally – minimum 3 megapixels on the highest resolution. Art works should be scanned. Photographs require a release agreement. A hard copy should also be included.

Author release forms must be signed and a hard copy forwarded to ECTA 20 Hilton Road, Gympie, Qld. 4570. Where original artwork or material has been submitted it will be returned at the contributor's request. All contributors will be sent a copy of the journal.

