



PLAY AND WRITE: AN EARLY LITERACY APPROACH

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Play and the light machine

Arguably, the literacy skills of students are fundamental to successful learning in all curriculum areas. The *Australian Curriculum: English Foundation to Year 10* (ACARA, 2011) Foundation Year (first year of school), and knowledge of its explicit and inherent link to the pre-school years guided by the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) provides educators, for the first time, with a seamless link between the pre-school and school settings to embed play as pedagogy in the school years. It was proposed by the authors that the pedagogy of play was the key to successful transition between the pre-school years and the Foundation year, specifically in relation to writing development. Consequently, the teachers embraced this notion of writing development from scribble to script (Reid & Schultze, 2005) as having potential for harnessing children's interests while catering for their developmental capabilities in relation to writing. It also allowed students to engage in authentic opportunities to develop oral and written literacy skills whilst giving them voice in what they wished to play and write about. What began as a part of transition continued throughout the entire year because teachers and students reaped the benefits

of the Play and Write experience in developing the Literacy skills of writing and building teacher and student enquiry.

This has spawned the question of the relevance of play in the school context, specifically, in relation to



the development of early literacy skills which underpins life-long success.

The notion of authentic engagement through play as a motivation for writing in early school contexts may be controversial, but, two teachers at Good Shepherd Catholic School used play as a motivation for writing in a session they called, *Ten Minutes Play, Ten Minutes Write*.

An inspirational setting ...

Good Shepherd Primary School, Plumpton, is located in a low socio-economic area in western Sydney. It has a cohort of 67% English as Additional Language (EAL) students. It has been identified as one of the most vulnerable areas, according to the AEDI (Australian Early Childhood Development Index, 2009) where a high percentage of students were identified as vulnerable in two or more developmental domains. The teachers of the Foundation year were also faced with the task of catering for the developmental differences of students aged between four and six years. The teachers were aware of their moral imperative to cater for each individual at their point of need and tap into the interests of the students. The modern context also demands that we address inclusive practice, English as Additional Language students, different learning styles and gender considerations. Coupled with this is the technological revolution

and the necessity to become multi-literate. How can teachers address all this?

Could play be the answer to enhancing literacy skills ...?

Embracing play as pedagogy within a formalised school environment, which is traditionally broken up into different learning areas, addresses this. 'Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behaviour, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning' (Bodrova & Leong, 2005, p. 4). Play is the universal language of childhood. Everyone can do it. It differentiates itself and fosters all developmental domains. It crosses over into all subjects and integrates itself. It offers children opportunities to collaborate, problem solve, extend their thinking and develop critical thinking skills. Play causes reflection, internal dialogue and discussion fostering Early Literacy skills and cognition. It assists in the development of neural pathways of the brain. Hence, 'flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life' (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9) challenges students by causing cognitive dissonance and thus higher order thinking as they move through different belief systems about how things work.

Play is enjoyable. It is perfect for transition from Early Childhood through the school years. It respects children as capable learners and gives opportunity for student voice. Play can be individual or social. Play and Write sessions offer students the additional opportunity to engage in personalised, authentic learning experiences for them to write about. The play sessions are just as valuable as the writing process to follow. Play enhances developmental skills and provides opportunities to integrate ideas across subject areas which could challenge the discourse of thinking for many teachers in school settings. Yet, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13, states that: 'The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice' (UNICEF, 1989).

Accepting all writing attempts ...

The teachers were inspired by the work of Dewey, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Bruner, and the writing continuum from a text by Reid and Schultze (2005). With respect to the wide range of capabilities within the learning space, the teachers wanted all of the children to experience

success in writing, to view themselves as capable writers and to develop a love of writing. Given this, all attempts were accepted within their ZPD. Some students scribbled, some drew representational pictures, some strung random letters together, others labelled with words by sounding out phonetically or using words from word walls or one another's name tags. Students then moved towards writing sentences, paragraphs and sustained pieces of writing. Teachers would annotate the children's work to communicate with them and their parents, and additional teachers and teachers' aides as to what the next step in the writing learning process would be. Students were invited to take their books home to share their learning with their families. Parents were able to read the annotations written by the teacher and invited to write a comment back to their child about their Literacy learning. This demonstrated an invested interest in the child's learning from the micro through to the macro according to Brofenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. Offering the experience daily meant that the play and write process became a contextualised Literacy Learning Community and contributed to the embedded learning of fundamental literacy skills.

The role of pedagogical documentation ...

In addition to work annotations, the teachers chose to engage in pedagogical documentation. After attending a Reggio Emilia conference, they saw the merits of following students on their learning journeys, documenting discoveries and posing provocations to ensure that the learning through play was explicit. This learning was made visible to the children, the teachers and the wider community and was displayed for students to read and reflect on. Hattie (2003) posits the idea that the best predictor of student achievement is teacher quality and making the learning visible so that the teacher sees the learning through the child's eyes. The use of provocations in the pedagogical documentation was paramount as it stimulated thinking in both teachers and students, empowered the student with the necessary vocabulary and took the learning to the next level. The use of photos in the pedagogical documentation allowed the learning to be revisited with the children beyond the Play and Write experience to develop critical talking and listening Literacy skills. Pedagogical documentation also allowed the teachers to reflect continually on their pedagogical practice and philosophy while providing opportunities for assessment for learning. The writing experience after the play sessions allowed teachers to observe which skills students were using as a result of the explicit literacy block instruction. For example, teachers could observe whether students used words as

discrete units, space, punctuation, phonics, sight word vocabulary and were aware of audience. According to Cunningham and Cunningham (cited in Allington & Allington, 2010), 'When students write about something they care about, they use conventions of spelling and grammar because it matters to them and their ideas are communicated, not because they will lose points or see red ink if they don't'. The younger students developed a passion for and ownership of their writing and developed a sense of empowerment.

Choice and voice ...

The inquiry approach adopted was an inductive inquiry process where students were able to make open-ended choices in regards to their play choice. Students could choose a different activity each day or they could work with the same equipment. Some children chose to work on projects. It was found that even if children chose the same equipment they would differentiate the task for themselves and their play experience and writing experience would never be the same day after day. The process of writing was a deductive tail end. There was an expectation that writing would be an outcome at the end of the play experience. It also provided the teachers with opportunities to engage in teacher inquiry using the Timperley cycle (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Hart (1994) supports the notion of choice and student voice as an authentic form of developing citizenship.

A zebra for Ally ...

An example of an ongoing authentic learning and writing experience that the children created was in the form of a sewing project. Ellen wanted to make a toy for her baby cousin who was coming to visit. After rifling through the scrap material box, she decided to create a stuffed zebra toy out of stripy material. She and girls involved worked tirelessly for weeks of Play and Write sessions, storing their project each day and resuming it the next. They experienced sewing skills, design, negotiation, problem solving, documenting their own learning through reflecting, fine motor skills, persistence, trial and error and a myriad of other skills. Each day the children would have 10 minutes to write about what they had completed that day. The girls also wrote a procedure of how they made the zebra, which was done in the play time session. Most importantly, the students were committed to the creation of the zebra for someone else, which demonstrated their selfless and tenacious attitudes. Literacy skills were being fostered through this authentic experience. Hence, 'Playing is linked to the development of

resilience and the beginnings of empathy as children begin to understand other points of view' Barblett (2010).



A present for Ally

A box is NOT a box ...

The teachers decided to offer cardboard boxes to the children during the Play and Write session to *See what happened ...* Different children chose to play with the boxes on a daily basis. Although the students may have chosen the same play experience over and over again, they differentiated and varied their own experiences. One group of children decided to build a pyramid and as a group they drew a plan and wrote a procedure about how they were going to make it. During the next Play and Write session they built the pyramid with gaps in between each box. The construction collapsed. The children then decided to make a plan for their next attempt. During the next session the students built a new pyramid, this time without gaps, and this time, with success! They wrote about it with great enthusiasm.

The advent of the new Australian Curriculum has seen a paradigm shift in thinking both politically and educationally. The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) for Early Childhood services is our first National Curriculum Framework and has been specifically written to complement the Australian Curriculum (AC). This means that, for the first time, we have the possibility of educational continuity between the Preschool and school years. The EYLF and the AC provide opportunities for a realisation of the seamless progression of learning from birth through the traditional formal years of schooling. This also means that we as Australians are embracing the notion of the lifelong learner. The EYLF is a comprehensive play based framework and consists of five over-arching outcomes while the AC is a comprehensive and mandatory set of syllabus documents. The General Capabilities

within the AC offer teachers the opportunity to reconsider program delivery with the need to teach traditional, digital and multiliteracies.

The challenge for educators in both preschool and early school years is how to use the pedagogy of play to foster early literacy skills in an authentic manner. Play and Write offers us the opportunity to stimulate critical thinking skills and literacy skills with rich purposeful learning tasks.

How can I implement play and write in my setting ...?

Some provocation questions for you to ponder:

How can play and write be used in the preschool context as a purposeful learning task for transition to school? For example, drawing a picture of what they have been playing with.

How can schools embrace play within the formalised school setting as authentic engagement in order to act as a stimulus for writing?

How can Play and Write be used in your setting to enhance Literacy skills?

What types of experiences could you offer your student voice through choice?

What philosophies inform your current practice?

What text types does Play and Write lend itself to?

Where do your students fit on the writing continuum?

How could you begin to implement pedagogical documentation in your setting?



Play and write

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