



Play is children's work

I once read somewhere that "if we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living" (Gail Sheehy), it is with this thought in mind that my colleagues and I embarked on a new adventure under the insightful and passionate guidance of South Australia's Catholic Education Early Childhood Advisor, Tina Adamo and with the support of the leadership at our school at St Mark's College Port Pirie. It was an adventure of change, an adventure to bring learning closer and therefore more meaningful to the children that come to us each year. The impetus of this change was an evolution of pedagogical research surrounding the importance of education, especially within the early years, along with the personal experiences of the best way children in our classes learn, as well as the reform of continuous intake to single intake within our school.

As a recent graduate of an Early Childhood Education degree I was especially interested in exploring further how children learn in and through a playful curriculum, which I would discuss with my more experienced Junior Primary staff members. We became inspired by the writings of Loris Malaguzzi in his poem 'The Hundred Languages', and we began exploring the Reggio Emilia approach to learning which values children as capable of co-constructing and communicating their own learning, as well as understanding that the 'stage we set' in our environment has the potential to enhance or hinder the learning experiences of the children we teach. At St Mark's College we were lucky enough to have been given the opportunity to renovate our isolated and individualised classrooms to create a learning space which promotes a feeling of community, where children from different classes can learn together, unrestricted by the physical barriers of the classroom walls. In addition to this our passion to continuously review our pedagogical practices as well as our commitment towards those entrusted in our care led us to further explore the most beneficial teaching and learning practices available.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children

*'have the right to play and rest -
When I play, I use my imagination,
I characterize, I explore, I discover,
organise, I lead, I delegate, I contribute,
and relate my ideas, I question,
I compromise, I follow.*

*I work both co-operatively and
independently, I create, I socialize,
I practice caring and sharing, I regulate my emotions,
I indulge my senses,
I re-enact my experiences and tell stories
through games, I negotiate and problem solve.*

I am making sense of my world and my place in it.

*I am learning through play
for I will make a difference one day' (Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation Inc 2012).*

As educators we are aware that for *meaningful* learning to take place children need to be **interested** and **engaged** in the subject content. Through our research both academic and direct it was evident that quality play fosters children's social and emotional development, their cognitive development, their language development as well as their physical development (Bodrova & Leong 2005). This is because children are busy when they are playing, and they are learning when they play, in essence 'play is children's work'. For example, we understood that when children are lifting, dropping, looking, pouring, bouncing, hiding, building, knocking down, climbing, running, and play acting they are being exposed to numerous learning opportunities through their play. Learning opportunities such as:

- scientific concepts, such as what sinks and floats and how to balance blocks to build a tower
- mathematical concepts, such as how to divide toys or treats evenly, or what is bigger, smaller, more or less
- literacy skills, such as trying out new words, telling stories, or pretend play
- social skills, such as communicating with peers and teachers, getting along with others, make friends, and be respectful
- thinking skills, such as how to recognise and solve problems
- movement skills, such as walking, running, hopping, balancing, throwing and catching.

Further to this research also tells us that during meaningful play all of children's senses are alive and their brain sparks with new connections (Burman 2014). Teaching and learning through playful endeavours gives us educators the opportunity to 'enter into the world of the child' and teach to children who are **interested**, **involved** and **motivated** to learn. Furthermore, it provides opportunities to empower children to be creators of their own learning, Lev Vygostky (1978) theorized that 'in play a child always behave beyond (their) average age, above (their) daily behavior. In play it is as though (they) were a head taller than (themselves)'

Throughout the entire year's curriculum content, we as educators have been striving to engage the children in playful learning experiences. We are continuously working to ensure that we see 'the 100' just as the children do (Malaguzzi as cited in Edwards, Forman & Gandini 2011). Just as the children are learning through play, we as educators are continuing on our learning journey to ensure that we are continuing to improve our educational experience for the children we teach, there have been challenges and setbacks and even self-doubt, at times we as a teaching group have questioned the sincerity of our pedagogy. However, through all of this we continue to ask ourselves 'what is in the best interest of the child/ren?', and this leads us back on our journey. We continue to be challenged by a 'wonderful uneasiness' (Burman 2015) within our pedagogical practice and it is through this vulnerability that we are able to fully reflect, adjust, create and grow.

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