



Principal Sabbatical Report Debra Harrod - Term 3, 2019

INVESTIGATION

To improve the engagement and achievement of Year 1 and 2 students by investigating methods such as learning through play and structured play, and to investigate how we can better support the social, emotional and learning needs of the students who transition into Aorangi School.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks and gratitude to:

- the Aorangi School Board of Trustees for their support and approval of my sabbatical application and purpose.
- my Assistant Principal who capably stepped into my shoes during my absence.
- the Aorangi School teachers, staff and students who worked together to ensure the smooth operation of the school.
- to my friends and colleagues, the Principals and teachers of the schools and early childhood centres who warmly hosted me during my school visits and who gave of their time to answer my questions.

Lastly, thank you to the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to have this time to reflect, rejuvenate and make plans for the future of Aorangi School.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a description of the attributes of Aorangi School students who transition into our school, my readings about the developmental stages of children and the benefits and possible issues involved in implementing a more play-based approach

to learning in the first two years at school and of my observations during school visits and of the research undertaken during my sabbatical.

BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

Aorangī School is decile 1 in a low-socio-economic area of Rotorua. The local community is mostly comprised of rental accommodation hence our student population tends to be transient.

A large number of students enrol at five years of age with little or sporadic early childhood education. We have a close relationship with our local kindergarten, Homedale, and they have supported our pre-entry class for 3-4-year-old children for the ten years it has been operating.

We note that while the pre-entry class is successful in ensuring smooth transitions to school for the children who attend regularly, most children are entering school with poor communication and oral language (particularly vocabulary) skills, little awareness of art and craft processes and tools for drawing and writing, poor alphabet knowledge and a lack of basic numeracy understanding. They are what our New Entrant teachers would term 'not ready for school.'

We are also noticing over the past two or three years a further group of five-year-olds, who as well as lacking the above skills also exhibit poor self-regulation, poor social skills, very short attention spans, poor impulse control, lack of empathy and inappropriate behaviours including verbal and physical violence towards others.

These children are creating stress for their teachers, who are trying their best to manage their behaviours plus teach them early literacy and numeracy skills, along with appropriate social behaviour. Trying to address the issues faced by students, teachers and families is also taking up a lot of the school leadership team's time and energy. We have discussed the play-based learning model which has been adopted by a number of local schools and wonder whether elements of this would benefit our junior students. The questions I have asked myself are "Are the programmes that we are providing, which have been successful in the past, now meeting the needs of our students in 2019? Are we engaging our students in learning? Are we providing a safe environment for all students? (and staff?)"

In 'Continuity of Learning: Transitions from Early Child Services to School', Iona Holsted in her foreword refers to "...a shift in emphasis from the 'child being ready for school, to the need for the school to be ready for the child'.

I wanted to look at how we as a school can better meet the needs of the students who enter our school.

*"If you always do what you've always done,
You'll always get what you've always got."*

Henry Ford

ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

1. To undertake reading and research into child development, factors affecting student achievement at school, and what teachers and schools have noted about students transitioning into primary school.
2. To attend a Longworth Education 'Play in the Classroom' workshop and to read and research learning through play, structured play and reflect on how this could be integrated into our school.
3. To visit schools and centres where learning through play has been put into practice and discuss with teachers their experiences of learning through play -
 - How has it been implemented in their school?
 - The pros and cons as they see them.
 - What has happened to the students and what their achievement data is showing?
4. To reflect on and discuss with Aorangi teachers on what an effective learning through play programme could look like at Aorangi School.

1. READING AND RESEARCH

Cognitive Development

Aorangi junior teachers report on the unpreparedness of children entering school. For around 15 years, we have noted children entering school who are not able to use scissors, hold a pencil or use other basic junior equipment. Traditionally, the majority of students enter our school with an oral language vocabulary as low as 200 words which is a two-year-old level. However, over the past three or four years, we are noting children entering school with little or no self-regulation, little empathy for others, poor social skills or graces, are impatient and/or impulsive and who have either not heard of or can not cope with the word 'no.' This is stretching the junior school's ability to assimilate new students into our school culture and ethos, teacher's ability to teach and to keep other children safe.

When I was at Hamilton Teachers College, Piaget stages of cognitive development were part of the curriculum for us students. He appeared to fall out of favour slightly but over the past few years, teachers are starting to talk about this again. Piaget's second stage, the pre-operational cognitive stage, which is where children are between the ages of two to seven years (approximately) includes the following characteristics.

- Centration - the ability to focus on one thing at a time in social and non-social contexts.
- Irreversibility - an inability to reverse the direction of a sequence of events to their starting point.
- Egocentrism
- Little understanding of the principles of conservation - that an amount will stay the same regardless of the size or shape of the container it is in.
- Inability to understand concrete logic.

- Inability to mentally manipulate information

Is the current system where most children in New Zealand start school at 5 years too early? Societal, historical and/or parental expectations are that children start school at five years. Possibly we are placing academic demands and expectations on a large number of students who are not developmentally ready. We get very few children at our school enrolling at 6 years and there are usually reasons why they do not enrol at five, such as being on the autistic spectrum. I plan to track this small group of students if they stay at Aorangi for their primary education to compare their progress and achievement with children who have started at 5 years.

Up until 1964, 7 years was the compulsory school starting age in New Zealand before it was lowered to 6. In Finland, children may not start school until they are 7 years of age. Finland's education system is widely respected and admired across the world. The Finnish model is very different from New Zealand's. There are no private or charter schools and all children under 7 years, attend daycare centres, where the emphasis is not on any formal instruction but on creative play. According to one daycare centre's headteacher, Tiina Marjoniemi, "We believe children under seven are not ready to start school. They need time to play and be physically active. It's a time for creativity." (Butler, p. 2). Early education programmes are tailored to develop social skills, health and wellbeing and how to make friends and show respect for others. There is also a major emphasis on physical activity. Skills such as perseverance, concentration, problem-solving and attention span, which are strong predictors of academic achievement are a focus of early childhood programmes. This is of particular importance for students (such as ours) who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and do not enjoy the cultural capital, or knowledge, behaviour and skills, of their more affluent peers. Once at primary school, Finnish students have a shorter school day than we do in New Zealand and there is more time for play. Learning through play in New Zealand seems to be a mechanism by which schools allow for early childhood experiences in order to develop children's readiness for formal school learning.

Eric Jensen (2010) has written extensively about the risk factors of poverty to explain behavioural differences amongst children. Children raised in poverty are more likely to have deficits in their environments, interactions with caregivers and relationships than other children and are far more likely to suffer from chronic stress. This stress inhibits the development of neurons in the prefrontal cortex of their brains. This area is responsible for the ability to make judgements, plan and impulse regulation. Lower SES children are more likely to have social conduct problems. Nathan Mikaere has written and talks about the first 1 000 days and the vital importance of love and interaction in developing children's brains and predicting success as a citizen and adult. At Aorangi, we have been looking into conduct and attachment disorders.

Attachment is the relationship between the child and the parent or primary caregiver. A healthy attachment between child and adult shows these principles:

- The parent engages the child, stimulates it and soothes it.
- The child responds and becomes emotionally bonded, or attached to their parent (a safe base).
- The child now feels secure and plays and explores, and the parent guides this.
- If the child feels anxious, it turns to the parent for help, and once supported, the child resumes exploring and learning.
- The parent corrects the child to keep it safe and teaches it the social contract.

These basic principles will then form a foundation for the child to develop relationships with peers and teachers at school. Children who have not successfully 'attached' to a parent or primary caregiver may be insecure, avoid opportunities to develop relationships or be disorganised or random in their attempts to relate to others. We see many examples of insecure, disorganised, avoidant or ambivalent behaviours in the students at our school.

Jensen outlines the six emotions that are hardwired into our DNZ; joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness and fear (p. 5, Chapter 2). Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds need to be taught all other emotional responses, i.e: co-operation, patience, embarrassment, empathy, gratitude, forgiveness, humility, compassion, and optimism.

Vygotsky is well known for his theory of human development and learning and the zone of proximal development which is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. In Vygotsky's view, pre-school children "overcome their impulsive, reactive behaviour (i.e., their 'knee-jerk response to the environment) and thus become capable of intentional behaviours." (Bodrova & Leong, 2017, p. 374).

Our dilemma is how can we ensure our students have the opportunities to develop sound attachments to their teachers and grow their cognitive ability and socio-emotional skills plus meet the demands of the curriculum.

2. LONGWORTH & LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN THE CLASSROOM

Vygotsky believed that the zone of proximal development was not just developed through specific teaching of children by adults or an expert, it was also developed through play. In this instance, a group of peers act as the facilitator or creators of the zone.

So what is play? According to the Play Therapy: Uk website, "Play is 'A physical or mental leisure activity that is undertaken purely for enjoyment or amusement and has no other objective'. However, it goes on to explain how play assists learning and development, can be individual or group and can be spontaneous or planned.

Neuroscientific research emphasises the importance of play in developing children's brains and minds. Gardner (cited in Brownlee, 2016, p.30) identifies eight intelligences which are processed in different parts of the brain

- Interpersonal intelligence - how to get along with others

- Intrapersonal intelligence - knowing and getting along with yourself
- Verbal linguistic intelligence - speaking and language
- Body kinaesthetic intelligence - motor development
- Visual spatial intelligence - spatial awareness
- Musical intelligence - awareness of rhythm and sound
- Logical mathematical intelligence - problem-solving, number and patterns
- Naturalistic intelligence - being nature wise

These intelligences can be developed through play, however, we must provide numerous and frequent opportunities for children to do this.

*“Learning is not the product of teaching.
Learning is the product of learners.”
John Holt*

A question often raised today is whether children know how to play. People of my own age often talk about being pushed out of the house during weekends and holidays in the morning and not expected home until around 5 o'clock at night. We were allowed to find our own play and playmates. We played in creeks, built forts out of sticks, rode our bikes for great distances, learned about ourselves and the wider environment, and learned about risk-taking. Today's children are often driven to school, spend long periods of time in front of T.V's or devices and/or are organised into countless after school activities. With the emphasis on health and safety, we discourage children from climbing trees and walking on walls. We structure every moment of their day both at home and at school. Even during break times we channel children into sports or other extra-curricular activities. With busy, working or stressed parents, there is often very little actual conversation in some homes. There may be a lot of talking about organisational topics but little rich conversation which stimulates thinking. Today's children lack a rich imagination.

The basic philosophy of the Longworth learning through play model is that children develop high order cognitive and socio-emotional skills through this approach rather than direct teaching and structured learning programmes. Play is vital for healthy childhood development.

The Longworth model is very closely aligned with the theories espoused by Piaget and Vygotsky. Longworth believe that play is:

- self chosen and self directed
- process rather than product driven
- contains structures or rules established by the players themselves
- imaginative, non-literal and removed from reality
- occurs between those who are active alert and non-stressed

from (Gray, 2013; Brewer, 2007)

Children are encouraged to follow their urges in play. Urges to throw, to gather, to connect, or construct are just some of the things that children are drawn to.

The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum: Te Whariki is also structured around the learning through play philosophy as it “provides a rich array of primarily play-based experiences. By engaging in these, children learn to make sense of their immediate and wider worlds through exploration, communication and representation. Young children are developing an interest in literacy, mathematics and other domain knowledge. They can exhibit imaginative thinking.” (M.o.E, 2017, p.15)

This approach would seem in direct contrast to that of schools who generally expect students to enter school being able to hold a pencil, sit still on the mat and be ready for learning.

The word Kindergarten or children’s garden was first used by Friedrich Frobel in 1840. He was not only referring to actual gardeners but to teachers becoming the gardeners or nurturers of children. However, the basic requirement of an effective learning through play centre is access to outside garden spaces where children can play by themselves or with groups of friends. The garden or nature space needs to be visually appealing with trees, plants, flowers and water.

Basic equipment or loose parts are provided to stimulate children’s imaginations as they develop games and activities or play. The loose parts are not toys as toys often limit imagination.

Some loose parts for both outside and inside areas are (Brownlee, Crisp, 2016, p.167):

- wooden cable reels, logs, rocks, railway sleepers
- wooden pallets, wood off-cuts, tyres
- plastic crates, wooden crates, plastic cable reels, plumbing pipe
- hose pipes, blankets, hessian, rope
- pegs, pine cones, shells stones.

Many schools have adopted the ‘play pod’ model where loose parts are stored in a shipping container which is opened at break times. These schools report students with greater cooperation, problem solving skills, resiliency and fewer incidents of bullying in the playground.

The role of the adult in learning through play is to observe and wonder, not to insert themselves into children’s play. This is a difficult concept for teachers to grasp as we have been taught to insert ourselves into children’s activities and to find the teachable moment; to ask open ended questions, to scaffold and/or to extend. Teaching then becomes what Brownlee & Crisp (2016) call “Enquiry learning in its natural setting.” (p. 149). This is where teachers do not tell, model or undertake any deliberate acts of teaching until the student asks the question/s. The student is ready to learn and what they want to learn is relevant to them.

*“The playing adult steps sideward into another reality;
The playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery.” Erik H. Erikson*

3. SCHOOL VISITS

I was fortunate enough to visit three schools, one kindergarten and one childcare centre / preschool. I chose a limited number of schools as I wanted to look at a well established learning through play programme, plus visit schools with similar social-economic student rolls but then not be overwhelmed with information.

Two schools were running learning through play programmes in their junior school, particularly in Years 1 to 2. Both were considering and discussing methods of extending the programme into the middle and senior school and both also had a range of loose parts available for all children to use at break times.

School 1

Learning through play was introduced by the teacher after consultation at a parent meeting. All parents were on board. The programme is based on the key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007). The teacher observes and plans for authentic learning experiences for individuals and groups. The focus of the programme is on social, emotional and cognitive growth for the first years leading to academic learning when the child is developmentally ready.

There was no specific budget for the programme but loose parts were gathered by the teacher and donations of equipment provided a range of inside and outside opportunities.

Little reminders about rules for play such as 'please don't touch, play in action' were around the room.

Outside a group of students were climbing trees and playing with loose parts. There was a lot of student talk and this was friendly and cooperative.

One teacher aide observed the children at play and was on hand for any issues and this freed the teacher up to take instructional reading groups. The daily timetable was flexible.

The teacher had shifted control over what they were doing to the students. My time with this teacher was my third recent visit to the school and on all occasions I noted that children were working under their own supervision at different places around the school.

School 2

The second school ran a very similar programme, based on the Longworth model. Junior children were based in an open plan space. The school was also trialling a vertical class/syndicate with Y.0-6 children all part of the same group. On our tour of the school, we visited the Year 2/3 classes who were engaged in more formal instruction. Teachers explained that it was student choice to engage in more focussed instruction, a sign of readiness for formal learning.

School 3

School 3 was different in that they had trialled the Longworth approach for two years and then after a review, had decided to dis-continue it. Reasons were that despite the improvement in children's problem solving, creative and cooperative skills, achievement data showed that students who entered with low oral language skills at five, were even further behind than previous years in academic progress.

The model followed in the junior class I visited was very similar to junior classes from my teaching years, where a developmental type learning through play approach was used in the afternoons.

The morning programme was more structured with formal reading, writing and maths. I noted that some children who had only started school this year were able to write 120 words already. In the afternoon, students could choose from the activity taskboard which used pictures and words to label activities. The class was very well resourced and the teacher explained that she was given a \$2 000 budget, on top of their \$1 000 classroom requisite budget to purchase items such as kitchen tools, doll houses, white board markers etc.

Kindergarten

The visit to our local kindergarten was illuminating in that I noted that children who will be entering our school exhibited very similar behaviours to those students who are causing stress to our junior teachers. The same inability to self-regulate, and cooperate with others was evident. Teachers commented that they could no longer ask children to help pack up at the end of the day, nor could they have any more than four students around the food table as this caused too many problems. It was clear that the behaviours of the children enrolling in our school is not about to change in the short term.

Childcare and Preschool Centre

A group of teachers visited a local Early Childhood Centre which bases its curriculum on the Forest Schools concept. Forest schools have a philosophy of child-led learning, with a focus on all the senses. Much learning occurs outside with plants, loose parts and animals. Working parents pay to have their child in the centre and many of them go on to enrol at a high decile school nearby. While it was useful to look at and hear about the programme, there did not appear to be much common ground between the children at our local kindergarten and the centre.

4. LEARNING THROUGH PLAY AT AORANGI SCHOOL - CONCLUSION

My reading, school visits and reflection have led me to the understanding that we have to change our approach to teaching in the junior school. The majority of students entering at five are not ready for formal instruction. They have had limited or sporadic attendance at early childhood education and come from homes where while they are undoubtedly loved, often lack the resources to ensure that their

children have developed interpersonal, intrapersonal, verbal-linguistic intelligences (as well as musical, spatial etc). The junior syndicate and I now need to sit down and plan what learning through play will look like at Aorangi School in 2020. We also need to provide a balanced programme which includes a focus on early literacy and numeracy skills. Our students are behind the eight ball on entry and we can not afford to sacrifice academic progress and achievement. Our programme needs to be inclusive of the intelligences, early literacy and numeracy and social skills, what Brownlee & Crisp (2016) refer to as the three literacies; people literacy, eco literacy and cultural literacy.

The model adopted by School 3 would appear to have that balance so our task is now to develop and refine this to suit the needs of our learners and the skills and talents of our teachers.

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