

Principal's Sabbatical Inquiry: Term 2 2019

To explore what impact play based learning has on our students, especially Maori and Pacifica boys.

My thanks go to:

- The Roslyn School Board of Trustees, for supporting my sabbatical application
- The Ministry of Education for granting me this opportunity
- The Roslyn School Senior Management, for so willing and capably stepping into the roles left and for embracing the professional growth opportunities
- My husband for his support, encouragement and for putting up with all the paper left lying around
- To the amazing schools I visited. I was grateful for the time, resources and honesty shown to me.

Why?

I started with this inquiry statement as Roslyn School has been exploring and working within a learning through play environment (Y0-3) for a number of years and I wanted to know how effective it was going, what impact it was having on our students, staff and our school community. Also we are looking at options of other learning opportunities we can provide for our older students that will motivate and provide them with the skills that are aligned with our learning model.

During my investigation I altered my inquiry slightly to look wider at the whole concept of learning through play as I felt this might give me more answers.

Roslyn School is a multi-cultural, full primary, decile 3 school. We are into our second year of being a no-fees school as we believe in equity and ensuring where possible, all our students (and families) have the opportunities and not hindered by monetary or other restraints and/or resources.

Learning through play exploration started firstly in our new entrant class with my amazing visionary Assistant Principal who initially began with the Kathy Walker model. Over the next couple of years this altered and moved into the Longworth model as it supported our student's needs more effectively. At present we have four classes operating learning through play (Y0-2), with these teachers being involved in huge professional development. This time has been important to review practices, refine beliefs and develop common practices and expectations.

"In play a child is always above his average age, above his/her daily behaviour, in play, it's as though he were a head taller than himself" (Lee Vygotsky 19978)

Piaget (1962), defined play as *"assimilation, or the child's efforts to make environmental stimuli to match his or her own concepts"*.

Background

When looking at research and the many readings around learning through play I soon realised that there are many varying beliefs, ideas and ways that schools and theorists alike view learning through play. There is a huge amount of research around the younger years (0-5), but there is a lack of research of learning through play in the older age group and the impact of this on their learning.

Some theorists who criticise the use of learning through play point out that in the current climate of target setting and assessment, play is hard to evaluate and may not produce and tangible outcomes.

Umek & Muset (2001), believe that when properly structured, play can enable teachers to see pupils demonstrate their understanding of a subject, thus making it a method of effective assessment. They argue that “children can achieve higher levels of individual cognitive functions in their symbolic play than they demonstrate when the same mental operations are tested and measured in formal, non-play situations”.

The New Zealand Curriculum(NZC), gives some guidelines:

It states:

The transition from early childhood education to school is supported when the school:

- Fosters a child’s relationships with teachers and other children and affirm their identity
- Builds on the learning experiences that the child brings with them
- Considers the child’s whole experiences of school
- Is welcoming of family and whanau

This new stage in children’s learning builds upon and makes connections with early childhood learning and experiences (MOE 2007 pg 41).

Our National Curriculum identifies several values and key competencies that we strive to teach our children. Almost all of them can be developed through some form of play-based activities: innovation, inquiry, curiosity, and sustainability, respect, thinking, using language, and managing self, relating to others, participation and contributing.

As earlier stated, there are many terms and definitions around learning through play. The one that incubuses it describes how a child can learn to make sense of the world around them. Through play, children can develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally and gain the self-confidence required to engage in new experiences and environments.

“Learning through play is about continuity, bringing together children’s spheres of life-home, school and the wider world, and doing so over time”, (Susan Mackay).

In our school environment we still need to assess the development of our children.

Assessments in a play based environment (like any other classroom), should be varied and

ongoing. Assessment such as observations, student voice, photos and the like, are interwoven with what they do as they actively play and discover. It also allows teachers to see the development of skills. This development, of course, is not static, but ever changing. We know that children develop at different rates in different domains (physical, cognitive, social, emotional). These are influenced by and dependent upon the opportunities they have, this is why children need different types of experiences. Administering an assessment that presumes every child will be at the same place at the same time undermines a teacher's ability to provide these varying experiences and opportunities. Conducting assessment in a meaningful and organised manner is important so children's progress can be well understood and influence next steps. To be meaningful, the assessment should be conducted in a similar way to all children, but not necessary through the 'traditional' methods. This is where teachers need to be very focused on what they provide in terms of environment and skills needing to be developed, and why activities are being undertaken.

Benefits?

From discussions, readings and observations, learning through play seems to develop problem solving skills, learning about cause and effect. Also learning to play with others through compromise, conflict resolution and sharing (with emphasis on the Key Competencies), along with the development of fine and gross motor skills. Children learn best when they are engaged, active and immersed in deep learning experiences.

Studies have shown that play-based learning is more effective than direct-instruction approaches, which are the traditional academic oriented teaching styles. One study has shown that in addition to improving play skills and narrative language ability, play-based curricula has a positive influence on grammar acquisition. As children negotiate roles, they are building the skills of communication and collaboration, as they look around for new materials to incorporate into their present reality.

With our increasingly changing world, children need skills and mind sets that allow them to step into this changing world and be able to create opportunities for themselves and their communities and learn throughout life.

"Realising children's potential in the face of this uncertainty means supporting them to be: happy, healthy, thinking caring and social children who will become collaborative, creating, competent and responsible citizens of tomorrow", (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek 2016).

Some common misunderstanding around learning through play are;

1. **We are wasting time of their first two and three years on developmental goals related to brain development. They will be 'behind'.**

It is a lot easier to pick up students and their needs in a quality environment based on play and developmentally appropriate approaches. The development of strong relationships and eliminating deficit thinking and working from a place of competence. Students only fall through the 'cracks' if the system in schools allow them to do so and set targets for learning that are not appropriate for where their brain development is up to.

2. If we do not teach them to read and write as soon as they walk through the doors we are putting them behind and /or holding them back.

This could lead to having many reluctant readers, due mainly to them not being ready developmentally, or they may not be interested or even curious about the environment around them. Students in a quality play-based literacy environment:

- Are in a rich vocabulary environment, they hear and engage in rich discussions, which they take full part in
- They explore and talk and learn at their own pace
- They feel safe and happy, not anxious about not being able to learn
- They revisit learning as many times as they need to
- They imagine, create and innovate
- They are exposed to wonderful and varied print
- They see reading, maths and writing in beautiful authentic contexts
- They drive their own learning

More importantly, teachers/adults engage with them at their point of developmental readiness.

3. All they do is play wildly and it is lazy teaching. This should be for the early centres and not for schools.

Yes, to a point the play can be loud, at times unruly, varied and filled with many characters of fantasy. I would question the term 'lazy teaching'. What I have observed in my own school and in others teachers are fully involved, supporting through questioning, recording development (photos), working with individual students on their learning path, urges and goals. At other times during the day explicit teaching is taking place through small groups or individually.

What about meeting Maori and Pacifica student's needs and interests?

When researching this area of learning through play it was quite hard to find a lot about what benefits learning through play would have upon different cultures. Generally, I found that involving students within the environment that is natural and familiar with them, allows them to feel confident and valued. Very little research has been conducted on Pacifica perspectives of play. Play may not in essence be viewed in the same regard from one culture to another and in some cases may not be deemed as being appropriate. One real bonus is that it is easier to involve parents and whanau where their skills can be utilised in the form of planting, weaving, language, music and construction.

Learning through play (Roslyn School), has reduced the behaviour numbers and allowed our special needs students to be at the same 'level'. It has been noted that accepting our students from where they are at: taking their prior school experiences and building upon it allows them to feel valued and builds that relationship with adults and peers quickly. The transition to school is smooth and the development of oral language develops quickly.

Using the great resource of Tu Rangatira and it's seven key roles of leadership - He Kaitiaki (guardian), He Kaiwhakarite (manager), He Kanohi Matara (visionary), He Kaiako (teacher and learner), He Kaimahi (worker), He Kaikotuitui (networker) and He Kaiarataki ((advocate).

Each of these roles underpin the philosophy and beliefs surrounding learning through play. They provide a platform for enjoying educational success as Maori and experience successful educational outcomes and being proud to be Maori. I think the main focus is that the learner is intellectually stimulated within an environment conducive to learning.

Older students?

What happens when students who have been immersed in the learning through play environment move through the school? How does the school utilise their skills they have learnt and how does this change in the learning environment affect them? This will be the next step of my inquiry. Again there were a variety of approaches used by schools in the older age groups, under the headings of: passion projects and urge sessions.

When students develop the ability to explore their environment, be resourceful about the materials, people and skills that they engage with, and think flexibility about different approaches to a situation, they are better equipped for whatever challenge next confronts them. So we as educators need to keep this in mind when we develop the learning environment, especially with the older students.

Allowing older students to be involved with their learning, to actively be immersed in the "play" of the theme at hand - through drama, dance and inquiry.

Teachers need to have a clear vision in mind when setting up a learning through play environment for the older students. Maybe calling it "learning through exploring: (or something more exciting). There are various programmes operating across our schools with students having some form of degree of ownership. It would be great to have an environment that embraces learning through play from new entrant to secondary (and beyond), or this already in place through models such as Montessori or Reggio Emilia?

Thoughts

From my visits and readings, I have discovered there are so many forms and varieties of learning through play environments happening across our schools. While this is great as it shows New Zealand teachers (and schools) are not afraid to embrace change and seek out alternative learning models that will meet their students' needs, we need to continue to gather various forms of data across a wide field so that we are delivering a quality learning environment for our students and that is will not be a flash in the pan.

Like effective teachers, many of the models I observed came from sound data, but all of these (and any new ones), must have sound educational understanding and research. Otherwise it could just be a time for play with little or no learning or substances.

My suggestions (for what they are worth)

- Visit, talk, observe and connect with schools operating learning through play around New Zealand (and beyond). Unpack their reasoning, beliefs and systems
- Start small, get parents and whanau on board with lots of communication
- Get the rest of your staff on board with meetings, observations and data, to explain your beliefs, reasons why and vision
- Start small, we started with one class and then moved on from there
- Take your time, small steps
- Research and keep up with the latest readings and blogs. There are many and most of good quality
- Talk, talk, and talk with each other. This allows for honesty and support
- Attend professional development sessions. I strongly recommend Longworth Education as one model
- Become a recycler, a scavenger and the like when it comes to developing your equipment environment. Make sure you have an area for storage as well for ease of access for all
- Develop some form of assessment, reporting to parents, school. What is important to you and your parents (and board)

Where to from here for Roslyn School's learning through play?

I am not sure if I have even answered my inquiry question, but the journey this term has allowed me to feel confident in the classes at my school that are currently operating learning through play. There is always the need to continually reflect upon what we are currently doing, where to next and gathering the voices from both the students and their families.

The next step for us is to involve our whanau more in terms of including various natural environment as well as their skills that they could bring. The teachers already have amazing vegetation in and around the classrooms but it would be great to include our whanau more so that all cultures feel included as well as working more with our school's garden. To review our monitoring system as well as viewing how effective our Seesaw programme is when communicating with families.

What about advancing it into our Y3/4 team and beyond? The pure learning through play allows students to develop skills I have already touched upon. Personally I would alter the learning exploration in the Y3/4 team to be a shared approach from both teachers and students. This could be through an inquiry approach, under a theme or urge whereby groups of students can explore at their own pace. This would support those learned skills from the previous year.

We are very lucky at this time in our schools, whereby we are able to freely respond to the needs and interests of our students and to utilise the skills of our staff. We are needing to

build upon our local curriculum and learning through play could be an amazing part of this. I encourage everyone to look beyond the square and see what we can provide for our students so they can have those skills for a successful future that we probably now very little about.

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