

Terrace End School

Learning on the Terrace
'Ako ki te kura atea'



Sue Allomes

Principal Sabbatical Inquiry: Term 1 2020

Investigate classroom learning environments that have a focus on learning through play. The direction of including play-based learning appears to provide a natural transition from ECE environment.

My appreciation goes to:

- The Terrace End School Board of Trustees, for supporting my sabbatical application.
- To the Ministry of Education for granting me the opportunity.
- The Deputy Principal, Management Team and Office Manager for so willingly and capably supporting my absence by stepping up and embracing professional growth opportunities.
- Teachers at Terrace End School who supported me as I discussed my thinking and questions with them.
- The staff from other schools I visited, especially Apanui School Whakatane.
- My own family for their support and encouragement.

Ehara taku toa i toa takitahi Engari, he toa takitini

My successes are not mine alone, they are ours – the greatest successes we will have are from working together.

Purpose : The purpose of my inquiry is to investigate Learning through Play and to consider how best practice could support learners in our Junior team especially the new entrants as they transition into school from Pre-school.

Over the last few years our data has indicated many children display low oral language, and a struggle to achieve well in reading as well as some social problems involving communication, co-operation and collaboration.

Background: Terrace End school is a U4 school, decile 3 and a city school based in Palmerston North. The cultural breakdown of the school is: **NZ Maori 37%, Pacific 10 %, Asian 22 %, NZ European 25 %, Other 6 %**

We have many children selecting to attend Terrace End school who do not live in our community. We have a transient community with many tamariki leaving and re-enrolling.

Challenges. Planning in 2019 was to take my sabbatical in Term One 2020. Covid 19 had a major impact on my sabbatical. Visits to schools to look at practice became difficult as Alert Levels changed and schools reacted to the pandemic Covid 10. Travel became difficult and as the lockdown was

announced it was impossible and schools were closed down. My 10-week sabbatical was for term 1, a 10-week term that turned into an eight-week term. Holidays became a collaboration of all staff “hands-on deck” to ensure our children received work packages and / or online learning. This moved to bubble classrooms, goggle classrooms, zoom meetings and high levels of anxiety in whanau and children. Wellbeing became our major focus.

Background questions and information.

- Our whanau want their children to enjoy school, have fun and to settle in happily to regular attendance. We also want this.
- We have a focus on children achieving in core curriculum: literacy and maths. But many of our tamariki struggle to achieve at NZC expectations, especially in Junior school.
- Questions exist between the time spent in the freedom of playbased learning and the more structured teaching of core curriculum teaching reading, writing and maths.
- We have a high transient population, and require social skills support for many children as they accept that Terrace End School is their turangawaewae. Often the freedom of play enables new friendships and provides a breathing space as tamariki find their feet in another new school.
- Many schools have adopted the “Play based” direction some to a greater degree than others, and in a variation of ways, for our community which is the best way?
- We have been developing the science capabilities through “Discovery” learning. Our teachers provided “opportunities” for children to learn through more controlled experimentation. Learning becomes more facilitated as there is an agenda.
- Classroom times especially in the Junior Team have been trialling freedom of choice with “making, construction, role play, puzzles and equipment spaced out for the tamariki to make decisions where they wished to participate.
- Following Oral language PLD, teachers were aware of developing vocab and social interactions through activity.

There was much we were already dabbling in and lots we didn’t want to lose. So off I went to look at other schools, read lots and talk with others to see if our direction could be improved, or changed to make better learning opportunities for our children.

Play based Learning .

In the current world there are many differing opinions, reports, blogs, dissertations, research-based inquiries etc online that a reader could become stumped at the first post while trying to make a pathway through the information available.

What is play, and play based Learning? There are many definitions but the ones below appear to cover Play especially from an educational perspective.

Play is enjoyable, intrinsically motivated behaviour that is non-rule-governed, non-goal-oriented, and “just pretend”.

Play-based learning takes place in a setting that results from the active engagement of the child and the interaction between the child and her peers or her environment.

(Emily N. Daubert, PhD Student, Geetha B. Ramani, PhD, Kenneth H. Rubin, PhD University of Maryland, USA)Piaget (162), defined play as “assimilation, or the child’s efforts to make environmental stimuli to match his or her own concepts”.

What does our NZ Curriculum say about Play based Learning?

Heaps, there are active blogs and stories of experience to provide information about Play Based Learning.

The NZC Online Environment, "Learning Through Play, What's it all about?" describes Play based learning as..

"An effective learning through play programme that enables children to engage in self-directed play that is internally motivated. Teachers can support children in play-based learning by providing an enabling environment and sensitive interaction. There is a role for the teacher to discuss, embed and extend the learning with students"

The building of relationships between children and teacher, and children and children is very important. Teachers establish provocations, support tamariki with vocab, encouragement and resources. Children engage in non rule bound, imaginative, self-directed play with adults alongside providing support, vocabulary but not direction.

Is Learning through play, good pedagogy for children our 5-year olds transitioning into school?

Theorists agree that play is vital for healthy social development. Children develop socially and cognitively, develop confidence and wellbeing as they engage with each other and new experiences.

Children practise self-regulation and conflict resolution through pretence. Through play opportunities children learn to follow social rules, cope with challenges and stress, share considerate behaviours and friendliness. Values and Key competencies (NZC) naturally flow into learning as children practise using language and managing self, by relating to others, participating and co-operating.

I looked at schools who subscribed to the " Walker" and /or the "Longworth" model. Curiosity, authenticity, self driven and choice underly the philosophy behind the approaches.

I have read lots of blogs, reports and research documents all which have similar directions. The Brain functions and cognitive development direct the path of play. Therefore Playbased learning expectations need to align with the development of the brain.

(kaimai.school.nz/play_based_learning/why-play-based-learning..)

"It is important that we, as educators keep referring to what we know is best practice based on how a brain functions. Nathan Mikaere-Wallis states that we will get better outcomes for students if we teach them at their cognitive stage, so it is important that we understand a child's brain development and what needs must be met in order for a student to achieve academically.

Wallis (2017) states that "the more play you have under the age of 7, the more intelligent you will be." This [link](#) is a National Radio interview on the 8th of May, 2014, where Wallis speaks about what 3 to 7-year-old children need.

This has implications for the types of activity, the length of concentration and the resources required to support New Entrants to transition successfully into school. There needs to be korero with ECE and school to ensure appropriate learning for each child as they transition into school.

Our NZ Curriculum Document provides guidelines, that transition to school for children is supported when School:

- fosters a child's relationship 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 experience of school
- is welcoming of whanau

As educators in Primary, at TES we make links and connections with the early learning experiences of ECE. Play would seem a natural connection. Play builds a continuity between the school's NZC and the ECE's Te Whariki with a focus on growing values and principles and key competencies.

Pre-schoolers from our local Kindergarten visit us regularly and participate in the classroom learning activities.

The Tensions:

Students spend class time in play as described, however we have historically seen low achievement in Junior school especially in Reading.

Reporting back to parents is against NZC expectations, and there is a society expectation and a desire for children to grow foundational skills enabling them to participate and achieve in reading, writing and maths. Will play then, on its own, raise achievement? and how will we know?

Research tells us that quality and deliberate acts of teaching accelerate learning and raise achievement. Teachers have the most significant impact on achievement:

In "Visible Learning " John Hattie lists and then rates 150 influences on student achievement. He indicates that Teachers are the most powerful influence and it is their job to make the learning visible to the tamariki and to the teacher.

Some questions ?

Play based learning provides opportunities to learn, but so do well planned teachers with effective assessments, next learning steps and deliberate acts of teaching. The specific sharing of knowledge and skills required to become competent readers, writers and mathematicians, is equally important. The role of teacher and teacher aides based on accurate individual assessments and individual need in core curriculum areas is essential.

Deliberate teaching of structured reading, writing and maths skills provides less opportunities for self-direction, imagination and authentic play. The opportunity for students to be creative and make their own choices in Play Based learning is incredibly valuable.

So, it would seem a mix of both becomes important. The role of the teacher is important in both Playbased and Structured teaching. It would seem to be the balance that requires discussion. Staffing places limitations on the optimum program, allow children freedom to select playbased learning opportunities and teachers and teacher aides withdraw small groups for core curriculum learning.

Where to for us now?

We continue on our direction to provide the best learning environment for our students, as we trial and explore the best balance of both directions to support our learners.

We are still on our journey. Play based learning is an integral part of our school programme in our Junior Team. We have a "Discovery Learning " day each week in the Senior Team. This day fluctuates from child led learning to learning that teachers have a specific direction they want the children to experience.

We provide times of choice and times of direction.

Our core culture of TEAM continues to support tamariki in building the NZC Key Competencies as well as supporting achievement in the in the Core curriculum areas of Literacy, and maths. We remain committed to a balance. We also continue to look at our achievement through data, to identify priorities, and to focus on growing our student wellbeing.

The Junior Team have well established Play Based Learning opportunities within class with opportunities to self-direct. There are also times when activities are directed and sometimes guided through oral support (especially in developing the science capabilities)

Implications

After looking at some great practice in other schools we are looking to grow our resources and opportunities to self-direct learning. The BOT are keen to support the development of outside kitchens, wet areas, areas for construction and sand play. The examples of these types of activities I saw on my visits, were active, engaging and untidy. We are now actively discussing where and how we can source and then integrate materials and then store them away safely from vandalism.

We are excited our tamariki will have a wider experience in play-based learning than we have at present and are especially keen to develop a more play-based area outside allowing a more creative freedom during break times. Placing this area closer to junior rooms means it can be utilised during class-time as well.

This direction has had implications on our upcoming building refurbishment. We have made some changes to remove some inside space to allow for a more accessible outside area that will provide space for more creative (and often messy) play based activity in an area that is still easily monitored by staff but allows for child freedom.

We have been introducing ways to increase movement and physical confidence in the Junior Team: including balance, flexibility and activities using left and right brain, both inside and outside the classroom, as part of the play. We have a few resources but are on the look for more.

Conclusions: I have been impressed with the play-based learning activities I have seen especially at Apanui School in Whakatane. It was obvious children were developing their communication skills as well as the creativity and initiative required to “think outside the square.

I loved the use of driftwood to create a golf course on the school grounds, and was impressed with lots of flexible yet readily available playground equipment, (Tyres, bread trays, stages, pallets) which meant the tamariki had lots of opportunity for imaginative play at break times.

We will continue to use the Learning through Play approach and balance this with deliberate Acts of Teaching in core curriculum into our Junior classrooms.

Codicil : looking at great practice in other schools, and having time to read what others are doing raises other inquiry questions??..after watching children learning with decodable texts, after being withdrawn for small group phonics tuition from play-based activities, we at TES, we have also moved to a letter and sounds phonics based reading direction...but that’s another report.

The value of a sabbatical cannot be underrated .My thanks to MOE, Bot and the staff at TES.

References

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The New Zealand Curriculum

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Play-Based Learning and Social Development

Emily N. Daubert, PhD Student, Geetha B. Ramani, PhD, Kenneth H. Rubin, PhD
University of Maryland, USA
February 2018

And lots of Reading material

Tataiako : MOE, Ka Hikitia : MOE

Play Matters : Kathy Walker

Play: A pathway for Children's cognitive Development. Rafiath Rashid . Snr manager Ed
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When should a child learn to write?: What 3 to 7 year olds need to learn — Nathan Mikaere-
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The Knowledge Gap. Natalie Wexter