This edition is organised around the work and learnings of a number of teachers from Brisbane Catholic Education schools as they undertake a postgraduate course in Early Childhood studies at the McAuley Campus of the Australian Catholic University.

The material has been gathered and developed by their lecturer Dr Pam Hanifin who introduces the context for this edition and provides a focus statement for each group of articles around the ‘themes’: Policy, Visioning, Collaborative School Culture and Play. I would like to thank Pam and the teachers for sharing their writings with the readers of Curriculum Matters.

As part of the Education and Training Reform for the Future (ETRF) agenda in Queensland, the early years phase has received emphasis especially through the introduction of a preparatory year. The articles therefore will hold an interest to all educators with an interest in this phase and for those who may have their own children attending school in these years.

Related material and resources from teachers which was not able to be printed in Curriculum Matters will be accessible electronically on the BCE Intranet as part of the Curriculum E library.

The next edition of Curriculum Matters will present aspects related to the senior years phase of the ETRF agenda and readers are invited to submit articles to Dennis Harvey (Senior Education Officer, Curriculum) or to myself for consideration regarding publication.

I trust you enjoy reading this edition.

Fran Ralston
Editor

Participants from the Early Childhood Studies course at ACU
Thoughtful teaching is central to professional growth. When teachers reflect upon instruction, they can analyse the result of their decisions about students. Classroom teachers who are active problem solvers are key agents in school reform. Teachers engaged in inquiry about their own practice must become an increasingly important aspect of the continuing development of teachers (McNaughton & Williams, 2005, Page 6).

In our work with children, we advocate for the sharing and celebration of learning. This edition of Curriculum Matters features snapshots of the teachers’ learning through the sharing of snippets of various aspects of their learning journey, including the grappling with new ideas, reflections on theory in action and practical applications. This is important, as the work of teachers deserves to be published and validated as a rich ‘textbook’.

The following concept maps provide graphic representations highlighting the relationship and connections among the unit modules.

The articles shared by the teachers cover many of these dimensions. These include visioning, reflections on current early childhood directions, policy development, inquiry learning, play based learning, transitions and forging partnerships with parents.

In 2005, Brisbane Catholic Education awarded scholarships sponsoring twenty teachers to undertake studies in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education - Early Childhood at the Australian Catholic University. The scholarships were an initiative to forge a partnership between Brisbane Catholic Education and ACU to promote professional learning in early childhood education. The Early Years Policy for Brisbane Archdiocesan schools was embedded in the course material.

When we began, the teachers’ enthusiasm was tempered with tentativeness. They were concerned about the demands of higher degree study in terms of time commitment, a ‘can I do it, particularly the assessment?’ question and the prospect of facing new and uncertain professional learning challenges. Now well into our second semester, these concerns are behind us. The group has forged a strong collaborative bond. Issues are raised and debated, and ideas, perspectives and resources are shared as we tap into the scholarship of theorists, researchers, policy makers and practitioners. We meet together on our set Saturday sessions and seem to be able to pick up where we left off. We work hard, but we do it in a relaxed and interactive way. Many of the teachers have formed their own support groups and meet outside of the set times. As the lecturer, I am energised by the group and appreciative that I have had the opportunity to work alongside such a passionate and committed group of teachers.

Professional learning and renewal involves critically reflective practice. This requires the questioning of basic assumptions and making implicit theories, explicit. It requires processes of inquiry into the perspectives of students, teachers, theories of thought, syllabus materials and literature, to name a few of those practices and processes. Our group agreed that inquiry into our teaching was not to be about reforming any one of us from a deficit point of view. It was not to be about fixing us, making us do better, or get better, or get more done. Our study and inquiry learning was not to be about ‘fixing mistakes’ or ‘finding fault’. It was to be - and IS - about aspirations. That is, we teach what we want for the children, and we consider what we ‘can do’ to work toward attaining that vision. It IS about renewal, and it IS about self-belief and courage to take risks. Most importantly, it is about commitment to explore educational possibilities and promises, and to frame efforts through vision to take action through inquiry.
As we focused our studies on nurturing connections for learning, we found both direction and motivation through the words of the verse, *No Way. The Hundred IS There*. The message reflects the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, which is a highly respected early childhood learning approach. It emphasises the need to keep a focus on the whole child, with respect for their capabilities and diverse experiences. It gives a strong message to educators to work from the ‘inside out’ i.e. the child as the start, rather than ‘outside in’ (starting with the program or assumption), to best support and promote each child’s learning and development. The QSA Draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines, (Pages 10 & 12), suggests that teachers reconsider their views of children and recognise children’s agency and voice in terms of the role they can play in curriculum decision-making processes. Agency involves children making choices and decisions. Voice involves hearing children’s ideas and valuing their diverse experiences within a supportive social framework. *No Way. The Hundred IS There* offers a very worthwhile point of reflection and starting point for dialogue about teaching and learning in the early years. As claimed by one teacher – ‘Maybe it needs to hang on the wall of every early year’s classroom!’ Its message is also relevant to all learners, regardless of age or year level. The following websites provide a wide range of information on Reggio Emilia.

http://regioinspired.com/keyconcepts.htm

---

The child is made of one hundred.
The child has a hundred languages
A hundred hands
A hundred thoughts
A hundred ways of thinking
Of playing, of speaking.
A hundreds, always a hundred ways
of listening
Of marveling of loving a hundred joys
For singing and understanding a hundred worlds
To discover
A hundred worlds to invent
A hundred worlds to dream.
The school and the culture separate the head from the body.
They tell the child to think without hands
To do without head
To listen and not to speak
To understand without joy.
To love and to marvel
Only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the child:
To discover the world already there
And of the hundred
They steal ninety-nine

They tell the child
That work and play
Reality and fantasy
Science and imagination
Sky and earth
Reason and dream
Are things that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child that the hundred
is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

---

Ask my own questions, try out my ideas,
Experience what’s around me, share what I find.

If I have plenty of time for my special place;
A nourishing space, things to transform;
You’ll be my patient friend,
Trusted guide, fellow investigator partner in learning;
Then I will explore the world
Discover my voice, and tell you what I know
In a hundred languages.

---

References


Developing an Early Years Policy

Dr Pam Hanifin, ACU

The Brisbane Catholic Education Early Years’ Policy is an example of collaborative efforts to have a common policy across the schools in the System Community.

EARLY YEARS’ POLICY STATEMENT
FOR BRISBANE CATHOLIC EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Catholic primary schools will strive to ensure continuity of learning for every child across the Early Years. This will be achieved through the provision of a wholistic, outcome based curriculum which is responsive to each child’s diverse and unique spiritual, social, emotional learning and developmental needs and circumstances. Continuity of learning will be enhanced through the establishment and maintenance of effective, collaborative partnerships within the learning community together with the incorporation of relevant and meaningful active learning experiences.

Policy making requires active commitment to advocate for change/renewal within a school community. This is advocacy in action. To be authentic, any early years’ policy within a school, needs to be contextually relevant.

The following process might be useful in guiding communities to create their own situational analyse in terms of implementing the Early Years’ Policy.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE BCE EARLY YEARS POLICY WITHIN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Possible Next Moves in the Early Years</th>
<th>Proposed plan of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish effective partnerships with children, parents / carers and other professionals to enhance learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore flexibility of learning groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote continuity of learning for each child throughout the Early Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Possible Next Moves in the Early Years</th>
<th>Proposed plan of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiarise all staff with the Early Years Policy and negotiate relevant professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide appropriate staffing ratios to enable all children in the Early Years to experience success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work collaboratively with parents and community to support the child’s ongoing faith development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Possible Next Moves in the Early Years</th>
<th>Proposed plan of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a learner-centered curriculum that provides opportunities for children to engage in purposeful and real life learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritize support for the development of each child’s literacy and numeracy learning across the Early Years in order to provide a foundation for further learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use collaborative practices when compiling profiles and reporting on each child’s learning and development in the Foundation Learning Areas and the Key Learning Areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Possible Next Moves in the Early Years</th>
<th>Proposed plan of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locate, where possible, Early Years classes in close proximity to each other for multiple and flexible use of resources and facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide and maintaining safe, flexible and developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor learning environments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Brisbane Catholic Education Early Years’ Policy is an example of collaborative efforts to have a common policy across the schools in the System Community.
Towards the end of the 2005 school year, Southern Cross Catholic College formed an Early Years’ Committee to develop both policy and procedures for implementation at the College across the early years’ classrooms. The committee consists of a Head of Campus, teachers from preschool through to grade three and parents of children in the College. We aim to meet regularly over the next two years to address the diverse and unique issues that are apparent in early year’s education. The goal is to have a distinct identify for the early years phase of schooling which reflects the overarching mission of the College and which is defined by a shared philosophy of teaching and learning in the early years.

The first meeting of the Early Year’s Committee provided a forum for a number of concepts to be discussed. These included the belief that quality education is critically reflective and values based. Topics such as the strengths of the early years in our College, the difficulties and challenges currently experienced and the hopes and goals for the future were raised. We recognised the need for a unified philosophy or vision, one that is based on an understanding of child development and learning, and the concept of multiple childhoods. Continuity and consistency in approach and the need for resources that supported play based learning were also named as basic to our vision. Ongoing professional development for staff and parent and community awareness of early years pedagogy was emphasised. At the conclusion of this meeting committee members were to prepare a concise statement to support an early years philosophy as the first step in developing a vision able to be supported across the college community.

This article is a critical discussion of current early childhood education directions and theories that I have studied as part of my post graduate studies. It presents my reflective insights on what we may need to consider in the development of the early years policy within our Community at Southern Cross College. Whilst it is written from my perspective as an early years’ teacher, I appreciate and acknowledge the support and encouragement from my head of campus to share what I am studying with my colleagues and others in our community. I recognise that when advocating for quality early years education, it is very important that those in our community work together to dialogue and debate on issues in order to ensure consistency and ownership. I personally feel really passionate about what is happening at Southern Cross and whilst it is a huge task, it is a wonderful learning curve.

The role of the early years teacher is both complex and ever changing. ‘Theory’ does not provide us with a policy, but it does provide starting points to bounce ideas with others in open, critical discussions. We are all committed to looking closely at developing shared understandings about learners in the early years, as well as developing a shared vision centred on active and inquiry based learning. We want to be defined by a strong united vision and quality classroom practice.

It is important to ensure that our philosophy reflects the many aspects involved in educating a child. It is fundamental that a wide variety of learning contexts and appropriate strategies and activities are selected and balanced to cater for the various interests and needs of children. The uniqueness of each individual must be nurtured with attention to his/ her social, emotional, physical, linguistic and intellectual development, capabilities and needs within the context of the school and the school community.

In order to write a policy that will support children in our College it is nesseasary to look carefully at the world of the child we teach today. The idea of universal
childhood is no longer relevant as the children we teach experience multiple childhoods. In developing our policy, we have to be aware that our programs and pedagogies change to meet the needs of children today. This is not negating the value of what was done in the past. It is responding to the different needs of children living in today's world.

To provide a holistic educational experience for a young child, we will need to look at the 'big picture' of the child’s changing identity that is influenced by both their family culture and the society in which they live (Marshall, 2001). The community in which the child participates can and does influence their sense of self and what and how they learn. Teachers see daily how Australian society and culture is subtly shifting (Ashman, 2005). From other dimensions, the health care provided by the local area, the social welfare and support for families, consumerism, media, terrorism, child safety, pollution, the working environment of parents in the community, friends, families and peers, all have impact on the child's learning.

The community at Southern Cross is not immune to this cultural shift. Not only is the College a large school catering for around fifteen hundred students, it is also unique in situation. Southern Cross Catholic College consists of three primary school campuses and one secondary campus situated in three different suburbs on the Redcliffe Peninsula, Scarborough, Kippa-Ring and Woody Point. Each learning community has a distinct identity, tradition, and history, having only been unified since 1996. When writing the policy it is important for the committee to be sensitive and aware of the diversity apparent within the community, particularly in how we define the family as well as contemporary theory regarding development and learning.

The multiple roles of teacher as nurturer, educator and advocate would need to be a central focus of our policy document. All teachers on the Early Year’s Committee are advocates of play based learning and believe that a shared vision across the College can provide children with opportunities to learn through active interaction and participation. An optimal learning environment is one that is organised and structured in ways that allows children to build on their previous knowledge by engaging in activities that are stimulating, challenging and catered for in a safe and caring environment. The key to quality teaching is to provide opportunities for children to engage in a range of worthwhile contexts for learning, using various structures and types of play including investigation and inquiry.

Learning is not the result of development: learning is development. It requires invention and self organisation on the part of the learner. Teachers need to allow learners to raise their own questions, generate their own hypothesis and models of possibilities and test them for viability” (Twomey Fosnot, 2000:17).

Another component of the policy is that of partnerships. Building partnerships with people in the school and wider community to achieve common goals will offer children greater opportunity to reach their potential. Teachers of the early years have an obligation to students in their care to act as advocates when dealing with other staff, parents, school and the community. It is imperative that we raise awareness of the importance of these years, so that we work together to ensure that young children have the best of opportunities to succeed at school.

When the Policy document has been developed, the work of the Committee will be redirected. There will be a need to create an understanding of the early years philosophy with the staff of the College. Raising awareness and educating staff will result in the overturning of some misconceptions about early education. For example, there will be a need to provide a strong rationale for play based learning across the early years (Prep to Grade Three). This might be achieved by expelling the myths about play based learning, and educating staff about the importance of the early years in building foundations for lifelong learning.

These same principles apply when working with parents. We need to recognise the wealth of knowledge that can be accessed when working in collaboration with parents as the first educators of children. Creating open channels
of communication based on mutual respect and clear guidelines further enhance the early year’s community. Our policy document must reflect the importance of this partnership, actively encouraging parents to work with us in creating a quality learning environment. When working with parents it necessary to have shared goal for the education of all children.

This advocacy of early learning also needs to stem out into the wider community. During the Early Years Committee meetings, concern over societal misconceptions about learning was discussed. It is our role to take our knowledge into the wider community and advocate for quality learning for children in a wide variety of contexts. Working with other professionals such as occupational therapists, opticians, dieticians and others will allow the children in our care to receive the best opportunity to learn. As our understanding of the workings of the brain and body expand, and through the modern day wonders of science and technology, teachers have more sophisticated information to assist children with their learning.

The writing of our Southern Cross Catholic College Early Years Policy is just the beginning of a long and necessary journey. Through the issues raised in this report and the commitment of the Committee, we are beginning to create environments for the children in our College which will provide direction to ensure that early years education is truly and authentically supportive of all students and their needs as well as promoting optimal learning.

References


Visioning

Dr Pam Hanifin, ACU

To begin the exploration into finding ways to nurture connections for learning, teachers faced the challenge of writing their own Vision Statement in a clear, succinct and authentic way. They found they needed to reflect on their own beliefs and values, as well as what their community valued about teaching and learning in the early years in order to explicitly name and explain their vision. The vision needed to reflect values and represent a dream of what their efforts are directed toward. Whilst this took time and effort, the teachers found the task to be worthwhile. As a group, we discovered that the real challenge lies in so much more than framing a philosophy and articulating a vision. It involves critical reflection that comes from an informed perspective about what we think and what we do, in the name of quality education. The following extracts from some Vision Statements created by teachers along with some prompts may provide a model or a guide for those who are or about to face the challenge of creating one.

Some prompts could be:

• The importance of education in the early years of schooling
• The purpose for early childhood education
• The nature and needs of children/The way children learn
• What children need to learn
• Hallmarks that you bring to the learning situation
• The multiple roles of the teacher
• Relationships and partnerships
• What you value and how this influences practice
• Ethics and professionalism
My Vision statement

Glenda Mellor
St Rita’s School, Victoria Point

Initially, I found writing a vision statement to be a difficult task. In working through it however, I was able to reframe my thinking and focus on what really mattered in working and interacting with year one children. I found it very worthwhile to share my Vision Statement at the Parent Night, as it gave me a frame of reference to explain the practicalities of what happens in the classroom.

I believe that:

- Children learn best when they are safe and happy. Therefore I am committed to providing a learning environment that is welcoming, flexible and fun to be in.
- Each child is a unique, capable learner who brings different life experiences, cultural values, prior knowledge and life skills to the classroom. I acknowledge each child’s spirituality by observing and nurturing the holistic development of each child in my care.
- Children and teachers must work collaboratively to negotiate the curriculum. Therefore I will promote a flexible learning environment that accepts constructive input by children and the classroom helpers.
- Due to the busy-ness of family life, children need time to sit quietly and reflect. Therefore I will create outdoor and indoor spaces where children can experience a quiet, reflective activity each day.
- Children learn best when their environment is safe, relaxed, colourful and supportive of play and active learning. Therefore, I will create a classroom that:
  - promotes play-based learning
  - is visually stimulating, resource rich and
  - scaffolds the learning experiences of each individual child.
- Creating a welcoming classroom environment where children share classroom work with their families on a regular basis promotes positive partnerships with parents and friends. Therefore, I will include ‘open classroom’ mornings each week as part of my weekly routine.
- It is important that children celebrate their spirituality and Christian faith. Therefore I will work in partnership with teachers and parents to organise meaningful liturgical celebrations throughout the year.
- Children and families need support when managing transitions from one learning setting to another. Therefore I will work proactively to establish positive partnerships with all families and school staff and include open classroom mornings each week as part of our weekly routine.

Fiona Frost
St Kieran’s School, Brighton

Like many of my colleagues, I found writing a Vision Statement much harder than I initially anticipated. I needed to reflect on my choice of words to ensure that I was saying what I meant and what I could realistically do. I created an information booklet for parents with children starting school. The school Vision Statement along with my own statements of beliefs and values, helped to guide and direct my efforts.

I believe that every child is unique and capable.

I acknowledge that each child comes to the learning environment with diverse understandings, capabilities and dispositions due to their different social and cultural experiences.

All children can achieve when they engage in the active and social construction of meaning.

I believe that children build deep understandings when they learn through all of the senses and are offered a choice in their learning experiences.

I will use play, real-life situations, investigations, routines and transitions and focussed teaching sessions to promote learning.

The early years play a crucial role in developing a child’s identity and in establishing strong foundations for their continuing success. I will ensure that continuity is enhanced through the establishment of partnerships that are supportive and respectful of the child.
In order to meet the challenge of writing a Vision Statement I identified three major concepts to form a basis, which I named - conditions for learning.

The first significant condition I saw is that of creating an optimal learning environment with, rather than for the children. I saw this as being multi-dimensional, multi-resourced and involving multiple interactions among staff, children and parents. I envisioned children engaged in a rich and stimulating environment that was theirs and a place where they were accepted and belonged. This concept connected with the idea that learning must be real. My goal was to explicitly find ways to ensure that the children would see the value in their learning and allow them scope and support to make connections between new and existing knowledge in order to make learning significant and real. I now firmly view the child a capable learner. Instead of taking a deficit view of children in terms of what they can’t do or are not developmentally able to do, I am consciously recognising what they can do and building from there. I see challenge in linking new learning experiences with existing understanding and increasing the complexity of tasks.

In our classroom, I have seen the positive outcomes of scaffolding and guided participation across many Key Learning Areas. This has been particularly evident in the use of literacy groups involving children working with parent helpers and staff. I believe this supports the children's exploration of new meanings, relationships and knowledge whilst providing a means to consolidate what the child already knows. Learning takes place through discussions, activity and modeling. Children are matched with tasks that both interest and challenge them to succeed.

Condition number two concerns the holistic development of the child. It is necessary to establish an environment for children to experience success in learning, which means connecting with each on an emotional level. I needed to make, take and prioritise time in order to listen to children and build relationships. These relationships form the basis of trust that could free children to make the most of school and optimise their learning. I also felt that if I was to tap into and build from children's prior experiences, then I needed to get to know more about the child. A parent survey was sent home asking parents to provide information about their child’s interests, habits, fears and strengths in order that I would have a broader insight into the world of their child. I also asked parents to name their own goals and hopes for their child at school. This exercise was effective as parents took the opportunity to tell me more about their child.

The third condition requires learning to be built on and from children’s life experiences and interests. Learning was not about to commence when they sat in my class for the first time. I came to appreciate the shift in paradigm from a universal view of childhood to that of many childhoods. This made me realise the importance of acknowledging the relationship between the child’s school life and family life. I became consciously aware of the influences of the home, childcare, preschool, school, community, media and the indirect influence of political, economic, social and cultural factors on the child’s changing identity as a person and their own sense of self as a learner. I realise that some of the children may come to school seeking emotional and physical safety. Others may find the school environment enriching and already an optimal space for learning. The concept is reinforced that each child comes to school with different perspectives, bringing diverse experiences, expectations and needs. Each will experience life at school in a different way. Having a better understanding of the child enables me to choose more appropriate teaching strategies to assimilate what they know, understand and can do.

With attention to these conditions for learning, my teaching partners and I have begun to plan units of work where children are more engaged in the doing and the ‘explorations’. We discuss and share ideas so that our planning and teaching is more focused on using processes of inquiry and co-construction with the children. In the past, we had planned a Science Unit called Grouping Materials. This was implemented mainly through teacher modeling, with some limited hands on activities and quite a few worksheets. We changed the unit to Investigating Materials, and took on roles as scientists, involving the children in planning a science expo. We used more hands on activities with concrete materials and provided scope for children to
“play’ and investigate. We set up partner discussions and group decision-making as part of the process of the investigation. Instead of directing, we challenged; instead of telling or answering questions, we reframed and used language of inquiry such as ‘why?’, ‘how?’ and ‘what would happen if…?’

Our evaluation of the unit indicated that the children became very involved, excited and motivated. They proudly presented the findings of their discoveries with a Science Expo for parents. The child as a capable learner came to the fore, as children used quite complex language to explain their thinking about the properties of materials and offered many alternative ideas on how the materials could be used. Many parents commented on the complexity of the children’s knowledge. This showed that the knowing was most certainly in the doing. As a result, we plan to rework other units of work to incorporate more inquiry based, interactive learning. We found that the knowing was constructed through the doing and the talking!

The process of writing and reflecting on my vision statement has allowed me to identify and clarify what I find important in my teaching practice. Having a clear vision of what I value and then reflecting on how I can achieve this in my practice has been affirming, as well as challenging. I discovered that the path to meaningful inquiry is that children need to be able to interact with others, the investigation needs to be meaningful to them, they need to have enough scope to go in a direction that I, the teacher never considered and they need to be redirected and guided back to the purpose and challenge of the inquiry when they become ‘lost’, side tracked or lose interest.

Viewing children as capable learners and co-constructing learning with them has and will continue to see changes in my teaching. I also feel validated that much of what I do and what happens at our school is nurturing the connections for children as lifelong learners.

The Early Years – An experience in its own right, not a simple preparation for something else.

Kay Buxton
St Dympna’s, Aspley

Teaching and learning occurs where
There is a blending of religion and spirituality that permeates every aspect of curriculum development
The organization of the environment is flexible
The process of learning rather than the product is important
Learning is considered a social process
There is a multifaceted approach to diversity
We are all living and working within an increasingly diverse population.
Assessment is continuous and part of learning
Reflecting on learning is vital

Learning is active. The child learns ways of talking, reasoning, observing, analyzing and writing. The child formulates questions, makes mind maps, listens to guest speakers, collects information during excursions, acts out dramatic sequences, debates issues, speaks in public, reads aloud for pleasure etc. The child is involved in literacy blocks where there are language experiences, where there is a social and an active construction of knowledge, where there is shared reading, guided reading and independent reading, where writing is modeled, shared, interactive, guided and independent.
Dr Pam Hanifin

The school is increasingly being perceived as a learning community. This perception has particular relevance for education in the early years where the student is nurtured as a life long learner within the ‘school’ structure. It is during this stage that connections are built and partnerships established between the school, parents and families, other early years staff, the school and the broader community.

Parents are acknowledged as the primary, first educators of their children and as continuing partners in their child’s schooling. In an effective partnership, the partners recognise their shared interest and different responsibilities as they work together to nurture the child.

The following articles offer snapshots of practical ideas that some of the early childhood teachers used to connect with parents. Their aim was to better understand the child and to ensure that they were informed about the ‘what, why and how’ connections that enable the children to contribute to the school and for children, families and all in the school community to contribute to the community.

Look at What We Can Do!!!

Tracey McTaggart and Renae Collier
St Anthony’s Kedron

When planning for a parent information session about inquiry and play based learning, we decided to try something different. ‘Look at what we can do!’ was prepared and presented with the intent of opening collaborative dialogue and discussion about young children’s learning with parents, rather planning something for parents. Our aim was to broaden the parent’s perceptions of their children’s learning at school by demonstrating how and why we use flexible combinations of teacher initiated interactions and ones that are co-operatively negotiated with the children.

We also hoped that parents would gain an informed understanding of how play and inquiry based learning are worthwhile contexts for learning, and integral to teaching and learning in the early years. High on our agenda was a need to create the image of the early years classroom as a place of dynamic, meaningful activity – activity that is characterised by conversation, discussion, investigation, demonstration, exploration and celebration. We also wanted to highlight connections between home and school and the interconnectedness of all aspects of our program.

We found this session to be a simple yet a very worthwhile way of forming real partnerships with our parents as well as broadening their understanding about inquiry learning and the play based approaches used in our classrooms. In planning the session, we deliberately focussed on the idea of parents as first educators and highlighted the positives of what parents do know rather than what they don’t know about teaching and learning.

The following table provides an overview of the main elements of our presentation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Play the song “Flowers are red” by Harry Chapin. Distribute copies of the words to parents to reflect on. Use of the ‘Think, Pair, Share’ share strategy to engage parents in discussion about the message behind the song. Invite parents to share their ideas with others. Record responses on whiteboard.</td>
<td>We chose this song as it aligned with our vision. It was a useful resource used to gain the parents’ attention and provide a starting point for them to share their ideas and insights. We also wanted to show parents that there is more than one way for children to achieve an outcome. We emphasised that if we as educators do not nurture these differences we are not enabling children to take risks and benefit from significant learning opportunities through exploration and creativity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Invite parents to form groups of 3. Distribute a range of games and play for 10 mins. Teachers interact with parents and model the strategies of scaffolding, guided participation and co-construction of meaning with parents. Invite parents to discuss their involvement and to share thoughts with the group. Record responses.</td>
<td>We wanted the parents to be fully aware that play involves interaction with others and that this can help children socialise appropriately, learn from others through modelling, and solve problems through hands on activity and communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Show a series of slides depicting young children learning a particular skill. Pose questions such as: What is the child/children doing? Why are they doing it? What are they learning? How are they learning? Where is the learning taking place? Who is involved in the learning and in what way?</td>
<td>Our aim with this activity was to highlight that parents themselves use a range of techniques when teaching their children. We highlighted the following points: Children engage enthusiastically when presented with an opportunity to learn through problem solving and social interaction. Learning can take place at anytime. It is not always predictable. There is planned and unplanned learning. We use scaffolding, we model and dialogue (co-construct) with children. We use real life situations to expand children’s interests and innate curiosity. Sometimes we directly teach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Distribute photo cards of children engaged in a variety of learning experiences at school. Invite parents to examine each photo and discuss the following questions: What are the children doing? Who is involved and in what way? What are the children learning? How are the children learning?</td>
<td>This activity aimed to link and build from the ideas of the last activity to that of school learning. We really wanted to emphasise that learning does not have to take place in the four walls of the classroom and be totally directed by the teacher. We also wanted to reassure parents that it was also not a ‘laissez faire’ approach, but carefully structured and established to challenge children as capable learners. We deliberately chose pictures that showed children engaged in discussion and inquiry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Present a visual representation that highlights the values of play. Invite parents to discuss and comment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 6. Share some ideas/prompts parents might use to encourage children to share their thinking about their learning. Share questioning prompts and invite parents to offer other ideas. | We found that working on and from the parents’ experiences, understanding and knowledge of children’s learning was more effective than simply providing an overview of the theory behind what we do at school. The parents were responsive, and they connected with the ‘active learning’ message of the song. They engaged in the dialogue, were very open to ideas presented and gave positive feedback. Although we took a risk in raising issues for discussion, we found that by showing respect for the parents as educators of their children, providing the forum for open dialogue on specific areas and engaging the parents, all helped to make the session successful. We gained insights about the parents’ perspectives and concerns which provided a meaningful context to address false assumptions and concerns in an open manner. This helped us to build reciprocal trust. We respected their roles as educators and they were reassured that we did know what we were doing as teachers of their children. 

This session was followed up with a celebration of learning which involved the children interacting with their parents and showing them how they learn and what they can do! We would most certainly use a similar approach and format again. |

My vision for nurturing connections for learning in the early years recognizes each child as unique, competent and capable. The children I teach in Year One arrive with an amazing array of skills, life experiences which are rich and diverse and an impressive knowledge of their world.

I designed a poster with a blank outline of a child for use in an Orientation meeting for parents of children commencing Year One in 2006. I used this image to explain my view that children do not arrive at school as blank templates, or empty vessels ready to be filled. My purpose was to both acknowledge each child’s prior learning and the importance of the parents’ role as educators. I explained that in the Early Years we value diversity and cater for individuals. Too often I experience parents comparing their child with another and equating difference with deficit. I spoke of the importance of looking at the whole child and identifying individual strengths. Together we need to track, support and celebrate progress and achievements on our journey of “life, love and learning” at Christ the King.

The parents reflected on what their child knows and can do and recorded this on coloured paper. Each was attached inside the child outline. Parents, children and teachers enjoyed viewing a clearer, brighter, fuller picture of the newest members of the school community. This proved to be a simple, but very effective way of building relationships with parents, sharing early childhood philosophy with them and gaining further insights about the Year One children’s interests and capabilities.

We Shine

A picture can tell a thousand words! Barbara Kiernan from Christ the King at Graceville created a PowerPoint for a parent information session demonstrating how children learn through active engagement.

The words were set to images of children ‘doing’ with music by Shannon Noll, “Shine”.

We SHINE!
In the Early years we are active learners
We imagine, We create, We investigate
We experiment, We construct, We paint,
We listen, We collaborate, We ask questions,
We laugh, We move, We run, We sing,
We marvel, We nurture, We dance, We perform
We dream, We get our dads involved
And our mums and grandparents too
We SHINE!
Transition to School – A Parent Booklet

Anita McEwan
St Joseph’s School, Bardon

As teachers work from the paradigm of multiple childhoods rather than one universal view of child, new experiences are built on and from prior learning and ways of being. Often orientation to school can be confused with transition. Whilst transition programs involve orientation activities to familiarize parents and children with the new environment, transition programs will focus more on the individual needs of children and their parents within a particular class, school and the surrounding broader community.

Anita McEwan of St Joseph’s School, Bardon writes of her experiences.

As Year One teacher, I felt that parents of children starting school were often not sure of how to best prepare their child for the first few weeks of school and what to expect. Though the parents had the formal orientation sessions, I looked for ways to offer practical information that parents might be interested in, involving the transition to school.

To try to meet this need, with support from my principal, I created a parent booklet. This provided practical information about children’s learning and development and what parents might expect and ideas on how they could respond in different situations. I found the booklet to be helpful (for both children and parents) as a means of mediating and building bridges between the old and new. It was very well received helping me to work with parents and building a trusting relationships with the children. Having the booklet professionally printed greatly enhanced its initial appeal, adding to its value.

The booklet can be viewed by going to the Curriculum eLibrary on the BCE Intranet. Look under Curriculum Publications, or type Parent Booklet in the search feature.

Legitimising Play in Teaching & Learning

Pam Hanifin (ACU), Priscilla Holmes (Sacred Heart, Sandgate), Kay Buxton (St Dymphna’s Aspley), Glenda Mellor (St Rita’s, Victoria Point), Melinda Gravina (St Vincent’s, Clear Island Waters).

Play is one of the most fundamental aspects of human interaction in terms of cognitive psychological and sociological value. Research on play with adults and children strongly advances play as an important mediator for learning and of strong sociological and psychological value. The call for play abounds in early childhood literature as being a vital medium through which children learn. Few would doubt this stance as we observe very young children engaged in play activities and experimenting, exploring, imagining, creating and representing and making sense of their world.

Possibly because of its association with very young children, as a concept, play brings forth doubt and confusion in terms of its relevancy and usefulness in formal learning. This raises the question as to when and why does the construct of play stop being such a vital medium for learning? If it is so vital to early childhood contexts, why is not considered as such in the early compulsory years of schooling and beyond?

Perhaps the problem is embedded in the misconceptions surrounding play. Its image brings with it many assumptions, conceptions and mixed meanings. As often
happens in education, terms are used interchangeably and can have very different meanings. Play conjures images of having fun, of being relatively easy but not always of learning. Yet children’s play can be engaging and deliberate, requiring effort and commitment. One has only to observe children totally absorbed in play to validate the statement. This begs the question, why not use this natural way of learning? And why not use it as more than a motivational activity?

The findings of contemporary Brain based-research is not only fascinating, but thought provoking in terms of its support for active learning. These show that the brain is directly and decisively affected by early experiences. They also highlight how all learning is mind-body. Learning engages the entire physiology – all that affects physiological functioning affects the formation of neural connections and networks, which impact on the capacity to learn. As young children actively engage in play and hands-on multi-sensory experiences, neural connections are being formed to create neural networks in the brain. Through active learning, there is a need to connect the knowing with doing, the physical with the cognitive, and to do so in a psychologically safe and nurturing environment. This would see the child free from threat of embarrassment and a sense of failure as a learner.

Play is a vital part of learning. Yet, the idea of learning through play and teaching through play continues to open debate on whether the children are doing real work? The misconceptions about play are often framed from this debate which polarises play as the opposite of work. Perhaps there needs to be a frame between work and leisure rather than play and work.

However play should not be idealised. It is an erroneous idea that all children do in early childhood settings is play. When advocating for play-based learning approaches, there is a need to keep a balance. It is a myth that other strategies, particularly direct or focused teaching are not valid. Indeed the QSA Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (2005, Page 26), identifies the following contexts for learning.

- Play
- Real-life Situations
- Investigations
- Routines & Transitions
- Focused Learning and Teaching

Another common misconception is that children play in preschool and learn by doing ‘school work’ once they enter primary school. The image of the teacher as facilitator confuses the issue even further. The role responsibilities of the teacher as one who sets up the environments, watches and waits tends to get confused with the image of the teacher as educator and co-constructor. There are many forms of play and many degrees of structure. There are many levels and degrees of teachers’ involvement. Play can be incorporated in an ‘add hoc’ way; it can be incorporated as time filler or it can be a pedagogical tool where learning through play aligns and interconnects with teaching through play. In such a situation the teacher assumes multi-dimensional roles.

It might sound simple, but it really does come down to understanding children, and then matching the ‘what’ with the ‘how’. Each context has its value and purpose as being appropriate in promoting learning outcomes. The qualifier is active engagement through matched, open-ended tasks. Many teachers would agree that these contexts are often interconnected within the rhythm of the daily life of the classroom as children make shifts between contexts and as learning progresses. Children need opportunities to revisit, reflect and interpret their learning experiences as capable learners. This lays foundations for children to be and become critical and creative thinkers, innovative, socially adept and interactive, emotionally resilient and informed participants in their world.

When working with young children across the early years, it is important to critically confront our own assumptions and the assumptions of others that may be framed around a narrow view of play as either leisure, or a glorification of play as ‘the only way’ to learn. Such assumptions can confuse the argument for a play-based approach and take time and reflective thinking away from creating possibilities in terms of not only learning through play, but also teaching through play.

Group Reflection written by Dr Pam Hanifin

Rather than using the term ‘play’, many teachers prefer to use less generalised terms such as active learning, investigative play or inquiry. There are endless ways that teachers can (and most probably do) use a play based curriculum that connects with inquiry based learning. The activities used to support and promote achievement of learning outcomes can be re-thought and designed through the lenses of investigations and inquiry learning. These often don’t require more resources per se, but a rethink on how they are used; a re-consideration of the role of the teacher in the inquiry: how much and how far the teacher might go in directing, prompting, questioning or guiding; how boundaries are set up and how the available physical (both indoors and outdoors) and temporal learning environment is used. The challenge is to create an educative place from a space!

Curriculum may be inquiry based when framed through the child’s personal and social knowing and when it actively engages them in the construction of knowledge. This might be explored through perspectives evident in the knowledge system (e.g. through learning areas such as Science, SOSE, Mathematics and Religious Education), and/ or in the multiple sign systems (e.g. Language, Visual Art, Technology, Drama and Music). Essentially, learners work through a series of inquiry events to gain broader understandings and insights about their questions and their curiosities. These work with the many ‘whys’ that are so much a part of the young child’s thinking and questioning about the phenomena they encounter in their world.

All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity and interest in constructing learning, in engaging in social interaction, in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them. Teachers are deeply aware of children’s potentials and construct all their work and the environment of children’s experience to respond appropriately.


The possibilities for inquiry and investigation in early years’ classrooms are rich and endless. Inquiry enables us to see potential and possibilities through multi-faceted ways of knowing and doing.

The following ideas were generated after a brainstorm by undergraduate and postgraduate early childhood students and gathered from books, conversations and observations. They offer some possibilities that might be used to bring inquiry to the early years’ classroom.

Unit Level

- Build planning around big ideas. Reword passive topics or themes to ones that focus on investigation.
- Tap into the interests and wonderings of the children and extend their thinking. Make the inquiry challenging and interesting. Young children are naturally curious about real places and things: the strange, rare & absurd, how things work, and phenomena in their world. Young children have endless questions and wonderings.
- Give time to the investigation to enable children to engage, become absorbed and ‘get somewhere’. Plan for the use of unit activities within blocks of time, rather than small segments.
- Create the investigation around the imaginary. Take on roles of scientists, explorers, service people etc through socio-dramatic play.
- Provide resources and raw materials that will prompt interest and inquiry. These need to be hands on and concrete to enable children to manipulate and use what they need. Provide opportunity to explore phenomena through first hand experience, more so than through abstract representations on worksheets.
- Create the environment - displays and learning spaces with the children. Provide scope for them to create plans for the room, to create displays and add relevant items and information to class projects. When turning a space into a place, engage children in observing and noting the light sources, dimensions, colours, textures and other elements. Provide children with the opportunity to view the room layout and design from different angles and perspectives. Engage the children in defining the best ‘traffic areas’.
- Question rather than direct children with what they are to make or discover. When relevant, rather than providing steps/ procedures, redirect and reframe questions such as ‘What do you need to do or find out’.
- To increase the complexity of inquiry, encourage and challenge children to discover more than one answer.
or explanation to every challenge. Use language such as - 'Discover another way' or ‘How many ways can you find to…?’

• Use the outdoor and community environment when and where possible.

Further Ideas for Planned and incidental Learning Contexts

• Create a curiosity session. Instead of ‘morning talks’ encourage the children to take turns to share their understanding about some phenomena or to ask questions about some curiosity. Play ‘I wonder’ games.

• Extend the curiosity session and set up a class Curiosity Shop, a Tinkering Table or a Make It & Fix It Shop. Provide opportunities for children to tinker with items and gadgets using a range of tools. Provide some dismantled items to be ‘fixed’ or some materials that can be ‘purchased’ for a specific task, invention or the creation of a game. This shop could be set up in front of a cupboard or set of shelves that stores classroom stationary items, junk material and tools. Specific materials for a specific guided task could be included in the shop when appropriate. The collage tray could also be added to the “shop.”

• Have a Curiosity Table. Provide a table to display a collection of items such as ‘tools’ (e.g. magnifying glass, scales, tape recorder), sounds and books or for tinkering with gadgets to discover how they work. Encourage the children to add to the table and to use their senses and to look, touch, hear and smell. Add something that doesn’t belong and encourage children to explain why this is so in order to extend the activity. Games involving memory, sorting and categorising could also be played.

• Use the senses. Provide opportunities and items for children to touch and feel, examine, pull apart and put back together. Engage children to tinker and examine the parts of things we use and see how they work. Include real items such as tools, sticky tape dispensers, magnifying glasses and items relevant to the topic being investigated, or items based on their interests. Encourage children to name what tools they need.

• Use other senses, e.g. investigate sounds. Take a listening walk to identify sounds in the environment and then explore ‘sounds’ further.

• Set challenges. For example, ask how could we create a beach in a box using real sand and water? How can we do this? Provide scope for the children to determine the box they will use, to find materials and to work through the problem.

• Ask questions: How can we turn a whole sheet of paper into pieces without scissors? How can we not get wet when we don’t have a raincoat? How can we stop our sandwiches from being all soggy?

• Investigate ways to solve everyday problems. For example, fix the squeaky door, create storage space, configure the classroom and have desks in certain areas, make a box for the chalk that will hang on the hook, find the best way to hang up and display work without it falling down, find ways to cover puddles, stay cool and stay warm.

• Create a problem story using props. E.g. the space ship’s engine failed and the space captain needed something magnetic, something that was able to be moulded, something the size of...etc. The children find the solution to fix the ‘engine’ through an investigation of different materials.

• Allow children to use a range of materials and give them the freedom and the scope to arrive at ideas regarding how they might be used e.g. using old teacher set squares and chalk some year three children created a representation of a city on cement. They solved problems of what shapes to use, what needed to go where and why. Another group reconfigured a room by arranging desks into streets (which they named), and added traffic signs and pedestrian routes.

• Encourage children to design constructions linked to particular concepts and then to use this plan to make it. Encourage them to follow the original design, print, redesign and make it. Question children about why they changed the plan, chose to use the materials etc.

Most importantly learn with the children. Give them quality time to investigate and focus on their interactions and engagement. You will be amazed at their capacity to construct knowledge and learn as they make sense of their world.
Play Based Learning – Great in Theory … or is it?

An edited reflection… but no answers

Can play be a way to engage students in learning in really worthwhile ways? It sounded fine in theory and it was suggested that we question our practice to see if more play could be incorporated into the curriculum. However, the following concerns arose:

- Surely school is a place to learn, not play most of the day?
- Would the parents accept playing during school time?
- If they play how can they learn to concentrate and sit at a desk the next year?
- What happens if they miss out on the basics?
- There is just too much to cover now, there is just not enough time in the day as it is.
- How do I fit one more thing in?

How does one implement a play-based approach and stay relatively sane? The issues are real. Overcrowded curriculum, pressure to cover set topics in particular time frames, overcrowded classroom, overworked teacher, trying to negotiate the curriculum whilst pleasing parents, teachers, admin, curriculum support teacher, learning support teacher and children as co-learners! And with all this, add in play?

Yet despite these many concerns, and many thoughts, a strong desire to give ‘play’ a go began to develop. The question arose - does one go with the children and co-construct with them (as the theory and guidelines promote) or does one start small and find the time to play and enable the children to pursue their own interests? The past four years had seen me including play in my weekly planner, only as time filler.

The desire to genuinely test out ‘playing to and for learning’ was strong and so the trial began. Someone needs to be an advocate for play. But do I have the courage to see it through? Are my notions about play supported by current research? Certainly my study of the research has started to alter my concept of play. This is not a desire for more ‘free play’ as such, but an attempt to negotiate with the children and work from their interests through inquiry.

So although not fully accepting a play-based approach, an action learning project as part of my studies was accepted as the way to move ahead. The concept of play involving more than ‘rotation around set activities’ or just a ‘free for all’, needed to be put to the test. I want to include children in the negotiating process in ways that sees them actively engaged rather than passive participants. I need to take on a role that sees less of me as teacher directing, and more of me questioning and listening.

I know in all honesty that I fear letting go of the controls and moving more with the children’s ideas. I question whether I have the knowledge of constructivist learning to keep children interested, motivated and engaged whilst covering all the learning that needs to be covered? Space, school officer time and the lack of resources are all issues. These are challenges that need to be explored!

The Teacher’s Role in Children’s Play

- Guides the play, but does not direct or dominate the situation or overwhelm children by participation;
- Supports children to verbalise thinking and feelings; not enforce an idea or point of view on them;
- Models play when necessary and demonstrates ways to solve problems that involve children interacting on their own behalf either in or outside of the play frame;
- Asks questions; clarifies with children what is happening;
- Guides children to start, end and begin again and provides verbal and non verbal clues to enable them to follow through on an idea;
- Focuses children’s attention on one another and encourages positive social interaction and conflict resolution;
- Extends on the play potential by making statements and asking questions that lead to discovery and exploration;
- Retains a sense of humour and keeps things in proportion for themselves and children;
- Creates with the children and appropriately resourced environment;
- Prioritises blocks of time for play based activities.

Social Living & Learning Through Play

The Card Shop

This idea involves children in constructing the card shop or display and creating and designing cards using various collage materials and tools. The cards created are used throughout the year to acknowledge each child’s birthday, special events, to say thank you to helpers, to send best wishes to a child who is sick etc. The children can also create or select cards for family members, friends or even their pet! The giving of cards develops cultural understanding, social skills and promotes a sense of belonging to the group.

- Each child designs and makes a greeting card or cards using a range of different materials. (cardboard & paper of different textures, colours, size, cut outs shapes, springs, 3D shapes, stickers, collage materials; various craft scissors, hole punches)
- Greetings are added using stamps, cutting and pasting messages from used cards, printed greeting messages and adult modeling.
- Match to an envelope (Check size of envelope against a postage guide) or design one.
- To increase the complexity, children could price the card according to specific criteria. (e.g. size, collage materials, purpose)
- The cards could be categorised and possibly filed & stored in shoe boxes or other containers
- The children can continue to find materials to create and make their own cards, wrapping paper and other items such as bookmarks to add to the card shop throughout the year.

A number of Play based Learning Activities from Early Years resources are found in the Curriculum eLibrary under Publications - Curriculum Matters - Resources from Early Years Edition of Curriculum Matters 2006.

The Newsy Bits

The release of Curriculum Update 59

Update 59 responds to recent Government Legislation on Reporting. This is the first of a number of information possibilities and will be complimented by workshop opportunities for principals and further advice on all reporting and accountability requirements. In a snapshot, BCE is accommodating the regulations in a way consistent with our approach to teaching and learning. This is underpinned by the notion of progress and the continuation of our commitment to a learning outcomes philosophy. Of significant note is the fact that QSA KLA syllabuses and the BCE Religious Education Guidelines remain the key reference for teachers 1-10 in assessment and reporting.

First Steps

Recently a total of fifteen teachers and curriculum consultants graduated from training as facilitators in the 2nd edition version of First Steps - an acknowledged professional development programme for teachers in aspects of teaching literacy. The training offered teachers from across the Archdiocese, other Dioceses and Education Queensland schools, an in-depth programme into professional leadership on the reading component - an aspect of literacy receiving much media attention in recent times.

Graduates will be looking forward to working with their staff and those from neighbouring schools as they update their knowledge and pedagogical skills regarding the teaching of literacy. Consultants from the curriculum team will be able to assist and offer support to the facilitators and schools in this important area of literacy professional development. For more information contact Pauline Chester - pchester@bne.catholic.edu.au

Helping children and their families start school off on the right foot - St Brendan’s, Moorooka

St Brendan’s Moorooka have developed information booklets in Arabic, English and Cantonese for students and their parents as they start Pre-school and Year one classes. These simple attractive books are complemented by beautiful photos of the children demonstrating the simple written message about learning and the processes and organisation surrounding ‘school life’.