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Introduction: New learning

‘Each day, you have the opportunity to offer your students the world, to give them life-changing knowledge and experiences. Relish the possibilities’ (Katafiasz, 1997).

Learning in early childhood is not just about pre-set curricula outcomes; it is about child-initiated discovery, children exploring and learning through play and successfully engaging and communicating with a range of people.

However, what we know about children’s learning is changing. This is because of more contemporary views of childhood and children, society attitudes to learning, the approach taken to viewing education and care for children before school, as well as parents’ changing expectations. All these factors impact on how learning is perceived and enacted within early childhood settings.

The concept of ‘new learning’ acknowledges that, in today’s society, knowledge is highly situated and rapidly changing, and that there are diverse contexts from which to learn. To embrace new learning, we need to take into account different knowledge and capabilities of young children, their diverse life experiences and their self-awareness skills, especially with regard to their learning disposition (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001). As Arnold and Ryan (2003) elaborate, ‘new learning shifts the focus from teaching processes and products to the contexts in which learning occurs, the individual characteristics of learners and the quality of their engagement with knowledge’ (p. 9). The quality of the engagement with knowledge is one of the four transformational elements of new learning according to Arnold and Ryan (2003). The other elements are:

- the deepening of the educators’ (early childhood practitioners’) functions, especially as learning mentors;
- enhancing the capacity for imagination, innovation and creativity; and
- the primacy of relationships as part of the transformative capacity of new learning.

These transformational elements provide a framework for thinking about children’s learning in the early childhood years, and the shifting nature of what counts as relevant knowledge and skills in contemporary times. Viewing children as active learners, involving them in the co-construction of knowledge, and setting a stimulating learning environment are ways of working within the transformational elements of new learning.
Perspectives of learning:

‘Beliefs that underpinned curriculum production in the early childhood field in the past are now being questioned.’

Our perceptions and beliefs about learning affect how we position children as learners, and this impacts on how we as adults interact with them. Early childhood curricula and pedagogy are steeped in traditional notions of what a good early childhood practitioner is, how curriculum should be constructed, how play is valued, how learning takes place, and the concept of childhood.

However, challenges to the traditional notions have emerged. Beliefs that underpinned curriculum production in the early childhood field in the past are now being questioned. The commitment to play by the early childhood field has been both challenged and reinforced by research (Wood, 2004). The ramifications of this pedagogical questioning is that early childhood practitioners are now rethinking how their own practices have evolved over time and how this process is linked to the construction and perpetuation of traditional notions of good practice. This influences how they perceive young children as learners. For example, to think about children in developmentally ‘ready’ or ‘not-ready’ terms can affect the way the child is viewed as a learner and consequently impact on their learning potential.

Traditional Western perspectives about the young child have assumed that children are vulnerable; so they are viewed in terms of what they cannot do, requiring adult care during this time.

This implies that children need protection and are relatively powerless in comparison to an adult. With this view of childhood, adults often see the need to determine ‘what is best’ for children and then ‘set out to meet these learning needs’ (Dockett & Fleer, 1999, p.109). While children need a great amount of adult care in their infant years, this is not the case as they reach an age where they can make some educational and care
decisions about their own lives. This can then be an ideal time for children to practise doing this, and to learn about themselves and the implications of their decisions.

Recently, for a number of reasons, the more traditional notions of childhood—such as a time of dependency on adults and a time of innocence—are beginning to change. For example, children are gaining greater access to popular culture and information, through activities including viewing television programs, using computer games and mobile telephones, and obtaining information from the Internet. It is argued that this greater access to popular culture ‘has subverted contemporary children’s consciousness of themselves as incompetent and dependent entities’ (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p. 17). The idea put forward is that new times have ushered in a new era of childhood where children can now be considered as active agents in and of their own learning.

We now outline some ways in which the child can be an active, capable learner.

Reflection points

Think of something you have learned recently. Now consider the conditions and factors that facilitated your learning...

* What was the reason for the learning to take place? (initiative, relevance)

* How did you feel? (level of motivation and interest)

* What assistance did you require from other people and what form did this assistance take? (inter-relationships, support from others)

* What was the level of engagement with the task? (enthusiasm, involvement, actual learning)
Perspectives of learning:

Reflection points

* Talk to the children you work with and ask them about how they learn best.
* How do their responses compare with your understandings about learning?
How do young children view learning?

It is interesting to listen to children’s ideas about how they think they learn. The following selection of comments comes from a group of seven- and eight-year-olds:

- ‘I learn by concentrating. I can’t let anybody disturb me. If you don’t concentrate you won’t get stuff through your head.’
- ‘I learn by listening to my teacher.’
- ‘I learn from my mum, dad and my teacher. I never learn from my brothers because they won’t help me; that’s why I don’t learn from my brothers.’
- ‘We learn by listening to everybody.’
- ‘I can learn by helping others.’
- ‘Sometimes I teach myself.’
- ‘We learn by doing things.’
- ‘You learn by trying new things out and making mistakes. It’s terrific to learn because when you do you get better at the things you learn.’
- ‘We learn by practising.’

Discussions with younger children (three- to five-year-olds) also elicit interesting responses. When the children in this group were asked about what it means to learn, they responded:

- ‘You think.’
- ‘It goes in your brain. Then it stays inside it so you don’t forget.’
- ‘You listen.’
- ‘You play with things and think about things.’
- ‘I learn things when I am with my friends.’
These children also see that their learning is assisted and encouraged by friends, early childhood practitioners, parents and relatives, and through play. These views represent a number of ways that learning can take place, such as:

- the impact of social situations;
- natural exploration;
- involvement in sensory experiences;
- the importance of 'hands-on' experience;
- the chance to repeat things;
- the use of trial and error;
- reflecting on new concepts, knowledge and skills;
- having an opportunity to ask and answer questions;
- building on prior knowledge;
- building on family-child experiences; and
- having time to think, wonder and reflect.

It is through the building of connections to previous information, the sense of pride in achievements, the challenge of learning new ideas and skills, the engagement of the imagination and the enhancement of language that young children are able to learn. All this can be achieved only in an environment where practitioners play an important role as they weave these aspects into their program.
Common sentiments expressed by early childhood practitioners about play include:

- viewing play as a motivating force in a child's intellectual development, as the child's way of growing and coming to terms with life;
- using play as a way for children to discover themselves and their world; and
- the importance of play in providing a vehicle for learning.

Such views recognise play as a vital component in the child's overall development and therefore need to be encouraged and respected.

However, a dilemma can arise when talking about young children's learning, as direct instruction methods are often seen as a quick way for children to absorb new information and skills. This method of instruction has the adult at the centre of the learning, which is not conducive for the child to be an active learner in his or her own right. The child's learning is controlled and directed by the adult and assessed by the adult. On the other hand, 'free play'—where children can spend long periods of free, uninterrupted time playing—may not be the best way for them to learn either. We are not advocating that play be removed altogether, rather that it be revisited in terms of the children's learning as well as for their developmental needs.

One way to bridge the gap between learning through play and more formal learning is to merge the two concepts. Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005) label this 'educational play'. Acknowledging that their concept of educational play is paradoxical and controversial, they suggest that educational play:

- provides meaningful learning;
- provides practice;
- enables children to control the situation and their learning;
- develops flexibility and creativity; and
- makes learning fun.
By viewing play in this way we come to see that it has many significant characteristics that can be connected to enhance a child’s learning capacity —such as motivation, sense of self and empowerment; as well as a focus more on the process than on the product. There is no doubt that play provides a rich context for learning, yet it also has the capacity to provide an important vehicle for teaching (Hedges, 2000). The way that play can be ‘channelled into a very powerful learning tool’ (Moyles, 1994) requires further consideration. As Fisher (1990) reminds us, ‘the more a child generates ideas in play and informal settings the more fluent he will be in generating solutions to the real and important problems of life’ (pp. 44-45).

By allowing children to learn through more educational play, where there is a defined role for early childhood practitioners, we are enabling them to become builders of knowledge structures as they actively receive information and then relate this to other aspects of their lives and to previous information. The process relies on the child and adult being seen as co-constructors in the learning relationship, working within a rich, stimulating learning environment.
‘There is no doubt that play provides a rich context for learning, yet it also has the capacity to provide an important vehicle for teaching (Hedges, 2000).’

Figure 4.1: Discovering rainbows

The teacher noticed that the children had started painting rainbows so she presented the children with a prism and a crystal. Together the teacher and children discussed the notion of trying to catch a rainbow, and what each one of them thought a rainbow was and how it was made. The children knew that it was to do with rain and sun but were somewhat confused. This led onto discussing about light and the spectrum of colours that come from light – which led onto the torchlight night which fathers were invited to attend with their child.

Children’s comments:

‘When the rain comes and the sun comes out it makes a rainbow.’

‘Rainbows have lots of light colours. The first colour is red, the second is yellow and the last one is blue. I know the rainbow song.’

‘The red is warm and the blue is cold.’

‘Maybe red is hot like on taps in the bathroom.’

Reflection points

* How do you position play in your work with young children?

* Is play regarded as a vehicle for teaching as well as learning?
Children as active learners

It is important to provide the opportunity for children to role play and make sense of the world into which they are growing.

Figure 5.0: Office dramatic play

It is important to provide the opportunity for children to role play and make sense of the world into which they are growing.

If learning is creating new understandings and meanings by making connections between already-known information and new information, then new knowledge must be actively constructed by learners (Emmitt & Pollock, 1999). This involves viewing the child as an active, knowledgeable thinker, as it is through this thinking and action that further meanings can be created. We are advocates of young children being seen as active, knowledgeable learners who can have input into their learning—sometimes directing and shaping their learning, sometimes managing and taking ownership of their learning. The important element is that learners need to be in control of what is being learned and how it is being learned, thereby making the learning a natural and easy process (Emmitt & Pollock, 1999).

Children need to be actively involved and see the relevance of the task.
When we view young children as active learners, rather than as children with needs or as recipients of curriculum content, it can open up new learning opportunities for them. For example, when considering Hargreaves’ (2004) set of generic learning skills or competencies for lifelong learners (see below) within the early childhood education context, it adds another layer of possibilities. Some of these learning skills are commonly practised and spoken about in reference to young children, while others have not traditionally been included. Hargreaves’ (2004) lifelong learning skills include:

- problem-solving
- thinking
- communication
- social and interpersonal skills
- teamwork
- research enquiry and investigation
- invention, enterprise and entrepreneurship
- managing one’s own learning
- leadership

Watercolour painting

‘I learned about colours and about smiles’ – Tessa 4 yrs.
... young children can invent, lead and be confident enough to take risks in their learning ...
However, when these learning skills are considered in light of recent early childhood curricula developments, such as in the Reggio Emilia approach where the child is very much viewed in terms of his/her capabilities rather than deficiencies, we can see the benefits of such a perspective. The first five skills listed are fairly well known to early childhood practitioners, who are aware that, in order to promote their learning, children require problem-solving opportunities, time for thinking and communication, experience in social and interpersonal development, and opportunities for teamwork. The next four skills—research enquiry and investigation; invention, enterprise and entrepreneurship; managing one’s own learning; and leadership—are not so commonly fostered in young children. At first glance, these skills do not seem applicable to children before school age. However, young children can invent, lead and be confident enough to take risks in their learning, as the following example will demonstrate.

*Invention*, as the practice of creating and devising new ideas, is clearly evident in Figure 5.1—the tree-house. The young children involved in creating their own masterpiece went through many processes. The Franciscus Henri song *Tree-house* (1992), introduced to the children during a music time, was used as a catalyst for the idea. The words to the song go something like this:

*Would you like to live up a tree high above the ground, just you and me?*

*We just need to find some nails and wood, build it nice and strong, it shouldn’t take too long ...*

The children, aged four and five years, used their own knowledge about tree-houses, and sought adult assistance for props and materials. They collaborated in putting forward various ideas about how to construct a tree-house and used information in books to assist with their designs. Each child was able to contribute to the process—some built and glued, some directed, some decorated the tree-house, others watched. Once completed, the splendid representation of a tree-house within the room became a learning centre in itself. This tree-house was changed over time as the children thought of further modifications and extensions.
Another lifelong learning skill, being entrepreneurial, or being confident enough to take learning risks and initiatives, is also evident in this tree-house experience. Children were allowed time to follow their individual pursuits, and were encouraged and supported by the adults, rather than having the learning experiences imposed upon them.

Managing one's own learning, in terms of young children's learning, is already being applied in many early childhood settings, with children responsible for directing their learning interests, finding information and assisting their peers with new skills and knowledge. For example, some early learning practitioners are creating portfolios of the children's work, with the children making the decisions about the samples to be included. Comments from the children about what they were doing and thinking at the time are also added.

Recognition of young children as successful leaders can come about by giving children responsibility for their own learning, where and when possible. The collaboration and negotiation called for in the construction of the tree-house demonstrates how there are times when children need to take on leadership roles in order to complete the task at hand. During the tree-house experience 'leaders' delegated roles and responsibilities in the building process, while also working as part of the team themselves. When we see children provide an idea and communicate it to others, work as a team, set goals, monitor and communicate achievements, and facilitate and encourage the development of individuals, we see children showing leadership abilities. These elements, considered by Rodd (2006) to be effective leadership characteristics for adults working in early childhood settings, can also be seen in children.

Learning, as a function of experience, involves:

* Taking initiative instead of waiting to be told.
* Generating useful alternatives and making decisions.
* Solving problems, posing problems and designing ways forward.
* Thinking, pondering and revisiting ideas.
Adults stepping in and out of young children's play and learning

In opening the door and welcoming the child we are opening the door to their growth, their learning and connecting and their participation in a daily journey of discovery and fulfilment. (Roslyn, early childhood practitioner.)

There are many terms used within the early childhood field to describe the process of teaching or facilitating children's learning. Terms such as co-constructing, scaffolding, supervising, modelling and monitoring learning are all used to describe the adults' role. In a play-based program where the materials and the environment are seen as the educators, the questions that need asking are: 'What role should the adult play in the children's learning?'; 'How active and hands-on should the adult be in the children's learning?'; and 'Is there a time and place for the adult to be more active in the children's play and learning?' Grace, an early childhood practitioner, says:

The adult's role is crucial in young children's learning as it intertwines with so many other aspects of children learning. Setting the scene; stepping away from play can be as important as stepping into play.

We advocate that children learn through play, but how much 'free' play is learning? Is all free, uninterrupted play productive learning? And what type of learning is taking place during free play? Are there some times within an educational program that learning could be best guided by the adult?

Whether consciously or unconsciously, we are setting the physical and social learning environment by default. Sometimes it may just take the adult to add materials to inspire the children and direct them toward productive play and learning, or the adult could teach the child a certain skill. Other times it may
be a comment or a question from the adult. Either way, it is the adult who has the ability to inspire, motivate and engage young children in meaningful inquiries and investigations.

Jordan (2004) asks: ‘Who is directing the learning?’ For example, are the adults scaffolding for the children or co-constructing with the children? This distinction about the adult’s role here is important. For children ‘to be empowered as equal contributors to learning situations, they need to be in an environment in which they learn that they have the power to make decisions about the direction of their learning’ (Jordan, 2004, p. 42). In an environment where children do have some choices about their learning, they are more often motivated and enthused by all the learning possibilities and engaged with their own learning journey.

Reflection points

* How important is the adult’s role in young children’s learning?
* What is the adult’s role in directing and guiding young children’s learning?
* What balance of child-initiated learning and adult-initiated learning do you think should occur?
* Think of all the ways that adults can support children’s learning.
* What strategies and ideas do you have to inspire young children to learn?
We, as adults, hold the key to making the child's play more meaningful by extending the play through the use of additional and diverse materials, or by involving the child in related discussions and by asking questions to challenge their thinking. We have to continually search for ways to encourage thinking and assist young children in making their learning connections.

Entering play may be for reasons such as safety, guidance, motivating, challenging, giving knowledge, emotional support, behaviour guidance, to present questions, to query what is taking place. These are all reasons for an adult to move into play. To interrupt under these conditions is in fact a good thing (Natasha, early childhood practitioner).

If the adult is to promote children's learning, there needs to be a certain amount of respect given to young children as able, competent, thinking citizens. That does not necessarily mean that young children can think and reason in an adult sense, but are able to have input into decisions that affect them and have opportunities to use their newly-developing skills.

Figure 6.0: Role of the adult

Adults can be active participants in children's learning
The learning environment in the early childhood years is crucial to the success of children engaging in and sustaining their interest in learning. We see the environment in physical terms in the programs, learning experiences and content offered, as well as in social and emotional terms, the interactions and learning.

Working with young children, we have the opportunity to provide a physical environment for a play-based program that is practical and educationally inviting, broad and inclusive, and relevant to each child and family. For learning to take place, the physical environment needs to be one which excites the imagination, promotes exploration and discovery, provides challenge, and extends the child's ability to provoke ideas, solve problems and construct meaning. The environment needs to be flexible enough to change and evolve as children and adults explore and discover together.

The nature of the environment, the availability and presentation of materials, and the opportunities and possibilities in the program can inter-relate as the child and early childhood practitioner share together in the learning journey.

The environment should be designed to enable a child to acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours needed to become a participating and contributing member of a community. Within such an environment, an early childhood practitioner can nurture creativity and help the child to recognise and use their talents and abilities.

Discussion starters to use with children

When asking these questions you need to allow adequate time so that children can give considered responses. Also think about different ways that you could document their replies.

• What is your favourite place/spot here at the early learning centre? Why is that?
• What is your least favourite place/spot in the early learning centre? Why is that?
• How can we make this particular spot/place special for you and your friends? What can I do to help? What can you do to help?
• Where do you learn best?
• Where do you have the most fun here at the early learning centre?
• Why do you think this is?
The physical environment can be informative and aesthetically pleasing, full of young children’s creations. Look at the rocket ship (Figure 7.0) and see the proud position it holds in the middle of the room, and the time, energy, and careful consideration the children put into it.

The ideas and creative flair of children and adult/s working together can create an engaging environment. Adults setting the scene and empowering children to follow their ideas can create an inspiring learning environment. For example, see Figure 7.1—the Eiffel Tower. A good starting place for improving the early learning environment is to ask the children what they think about it.
Reflection points

* With the complexities of a learning environment, what do we need to consider when planning?
* What could the purposes, processes and outcomes be?
* Do you build your program by combining the children's own life experiences with new knowledge and skills?
* Do you first find out what the children know, feel and think?
* How much importance do you place on the inter-relationships within the setting?

Figure 7.2: Spider's web

Figure 7.3: Charcoal sketches with wheels

This work was prompted by the children's interest. It was seen as an opportunity to encourage children in the use of creative materials and as a way to include aspects of local culture in the program.

There was an air of excitement among a group of four-year-olds as the Grand Prix was being held in a few days time. Children had seen various news items on the television and a couple of parents were involved in the Grand Prix. The teacher had a circle meeting where the children's interest in and knowledge of the Grand Prix was documented. The children decided they wanted to make the Albert Park Race track and to make some cars. The children studied the street directory to get an understanding of the track and set to work with collage materials to create the track, Albert Park and the Lake. Photographs and pictures of races and cars were displayed and reference books were provided for the children's information.

A couple of Formula One cars were constructed out of cardboard boxes, tape and painted by the children. The race track was made so that the children could actually play with cars on it. As well as this the teacher provided photocopied wheels as a catalyst for sketching cars and vehicles at the easels. The result of this was a number of very creative charcoal sketches of a variety of vehicles.
Taking interest and delight in young children’s developing skills and knowledge should be viewed as a crucial aspect of working with children. This book has outlined many of the components required for engaging young children in learning. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to how young children learn, but rather a taste of how our attitudes as adults can hinder or promote young children’s learning. It is essential to note that learning is not about imposing formal structure, but more about finding a unity between playing, learning and teaching (Wood, 2004).

While we advocate for educational play to be considered, it is only part of the program, as children also need time to freely interact with each other on their own terms.

We believe there is a time and place for both free play and educational play within an early childhood program. We hope the ideas presented here will start you thinking about how young children learn through play, and how best we, as early childhood practitioners, can allow this to happen.
References


