Premier’s University of Wollongong Early Childhood Scholarship

Exploring The Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being, Becoming.

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Introduction

My career working with children started when I was 18 years old and eagerly seeking work so I could save for a year before heading off to university to study Public Relations. My two best friends were doing the same and our plan for the year was to save as much as we could, have as much fun as we possibly could and learn absolutely nothing. I picked up a job as an untrained assistant in a long daycare centre.

This job ended up changing my entire future. I discovered the magic of working with young children. I gained a respect for how capable and creative young children are, for their ability to explore and take risks. No two children were the same and on any given day you could never be 100% sure what was going to happen. I learnt something new every day. This was why I became an early childhood teacher.

I have spent the first four years of my teaching career teaching in the early years of primary school. I still learn something new every day but can’t help but notice the difference in the feel of a school compared to the feel of a high quality prior to school setting. There is more teacher direction and fewer child directed experiences, there are more time restrictions and fewer opportunities for spontaneity and play-based learning. While all settings pour time and effort into transition and orientation to school, it feels as though the two settings are speaking different languages and children are left making a huge leap from early childhood services to school. It struck me that so often when we talk about reducing these differences we talk in terms of prior to school settings becoming more like schools and not the other way around. Why couldn’t schools be more like prior to school settings? I was also struck by the lack of understanding/respect between professionals in the two settings.

The release, in 2009, of *The Early Years Leaning Framework*, a national framework to guide best practice when working with children from birth to five years and through the transition to school, provided a new opportunity for the two settings to work together.

*The Early Years Learning Framework* emphasises the importance of play-based learning in the early years and acknowledges the importance of language, communication, social and emotional development as well as building skills in literacy and numeracy. The document supports the three educational goals of children becoming ‘successful learners, confident and creative individuals’ and ‘active and informed citizens’. The document is based around the idea that in order to reach these goals children need to experience a sense of ‘Belonging, Being and “Becoming’.

Engaging with *The Early Years Learning Framework* refreshed my passion for play-based learning and led me to apply for the Premier’s University of Wollongong Early Childhood Scholarship in 2011.

Study Focus

I decided my study needed to address the following two questions:

* How can Early Stage One teachers engage with a play-based curriculum and the principles of *The Early Years Learning Framework* in order to improve student attendance and attitude towards school and learning while still developing skills in literacy and numeracy?
* Can mandatory syllabus outcomes still be met, and documented, when adopting a play-based curriculum?

Planning My Journey

I identified a number of high quality prior to school settings that adopted a play based approach to learning and were embracing *The Early Years Learning Framework*. I arranged to spend a week in each of these services, observing their practice, talking with their staff and trying to create links between this style of teaching and learning and our mandatory syllabus documents.

 In the end my journey took me to a range of different locations; St Kilda in Melbourne, Balmain in Sydney, Griffith in regional NSW, Tweed Heads on the border of NSW and Queensland and Warren in Western NSW.

Belonging

“Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. Belonging acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging.”

 The Early Years Learning Framework, p.7, 2009

A sense of belonging is essential to children’s confidence. When children belong they feel safe and happy and will explore and take risks. While children experienced a sense of belonging in each service I visited, it was created in a range of different ways. I was impressed by the way little rituals had been developed to help children feel that, not only did they belong to the service, the service belonged to them.

“We would love to have you in our room Liz but there are two things you must do at group. You must answer all the children’s questions so they can then try and guess where you are from so if any of them ask you before then don’t tell them.”

Easy. I can do that.

*“Then you must sing them a song.”* I smile up at the teacher. He smiles back and I realise he is not joking.

A lot of visitors pass through St Kilda and Balaclava Kindergarten. Much of their casual relief is provided by backpackers from other countries and many of the children’s parents travel overseas for work. The teacher has developed this ritual with the children. It provides them with an opportunity to not only learn about the world, but to welcome visitors and maintain ownership of their room, a place that belongs to them. I am blown away by their questions; “Are there farm animals where you live?”, “Is there a beach where you live?” I am also impressed by the way they obviously draw on previous experiences to guess where I’m from, starting with Asian countries due to my almost black hair. One child then asks if they can listen to my voice and begins guessing cities within Australia. These children are three and four years old.

As you walk around the rooms of Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning in Griffith you can’t help but notice the array of photo frames displayed around the centre. Each child brings in a framed photo of their family. The frames and photos are all different. The children can tell you whose family is displayed in each frame. I observe one child carry their photo around with them for the morning session.

There are a number of bikes in the babies’ yard but there is one clear favourite. When I commented on how much the children love this bike a staff member told me that it’s become a bit of a “celebration, rite of passage for the babies when they are finally tall enough to use that bike. It’s very exciting.” I observed one baby sit on it and swing her legs. She tried and tried for an extended period of time but was just a little bit too short. I also observed many of the bigger kids race for that bike when they came back for visits to the baby yard. Like the ritual around visitors in St Kilda it made you feel like this place really did belong to the children.

Positive relationships are crucial to belonging. I watch the different ways adults ensure they spend quality time, including one on one time, with children each day. One group of children each get a two minute head massage from an adult during rest time, other adults sit and eat their lunch and chat with children rather than just supervising and eating during their break, other adults spend time drawing with children or pushing themselves on the swing. They involve themselves in what is happening and are rarely just supervising.

Being

“Childhood is a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world. Being recognises the significance of the here and now in children’s lives.”

 The Early Years Learning Framework, p.7, 2009

Children need time to be. I notice that the children are engaged in activities for much longer periods of time than I expected. It is because they are given uninterrupted blocks of time. There are no bells, the day is not divided into literacy, numeracy, art, and science blocks. Children know their games and explorations are respected and they will be given time to complete what they are doing.

Two little girls spent over thirty minutes using kitchen equipment located outside and natural resources to make me some cupcakes. They spent time deciding what to use, deciding who would do what and then making the cakes.

A group of four boys spent over forty minutes in the block area making a “Christmas Factory”. They used every block. The boys left their construction to go to their trapeze lesson and while other children came and looked at what they had made, nobody touched it as they knew the boys may come back to it. When the boys showed their teacher he said “It’s great. Tell me what happens in your Christmas factory.” This open request led to a lengthy talking and listening experience full of rich language.

Allowing children to be is acknowledging that not all children will learn and behave in the same way. It is knowing the children you work with and accepting their individual style. It is group time at Warren Preschool. One of the children in the group had told the teacher that while he was swimming in the river on the weekend he had seen a snake and it knew how to swim. This became the focus of their group time for the day. The boy told the other children what had happened. They then talked about what you should do if you see a snake. The teacher showed them a factual book about snakes and they talked about the different types and which ones you might see in NSW. The teacher remembered there was a snakeskin in the storeroom and they got it out and looked at it. They discussed why the skin may have come off the snake. All the children got to touch the skin and they discussed what it felt like. I watched a boy sit, seemingly disengaged from the group playing with his toy phone. I was surprised the teacher was not taking the phone from him and insisting he listen. Then he yelled out “Hey Miss Lisa I’m just downloading us some more information about these snakes we’re talking about on my phone.” The teacher responded positively and he repeated some of the facts the group had been talking about. While he wasn’t sitting in the same way as the other children his teacher knew him well enough to know he was engaged in what was happening and allowed him to be in his own way.

Children are allowed to be when they are not expected to know the correct answer but are supported to discover it for themselves. It is one of the first really hot days of the year. A group of boys are playing in the sandpit. They start making “a pool” by digging a really big hole. They ask if they can have the hose to fill it with water. The educator says yes but she’s not sure the water will stay there. The sand will soak it up like a big sponge. They try anyway and the sand absorbs the water. “So, what can we do?” the educator asks. The children try putting water in faster but it doesn’t work. She suggests putting plastic in the bottom. They try this but the plastic moves too much. One of the children suggests putting the water trough in. They dig the water trough in and have their pool. As only two people fit in the pool at once they make a waiting list of people who wish to go in and get a stopwatch to time. Each pair will get five minutes and then they will move to the next pair on the list. A child is placed in charge of the list, another in charge of the stopwatch. By allowing these children to be and supporting them in discovering the answers to their questions they are also becoming confident learners and developing new skills and knowledge.

Becoming

*“Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasises learning to participate fully and actively in society.”*

 The Early Years Learning Framework, p.7, 2009

Children experience many transitions and changes. My study tour took place in November so many children were thinking about their move to kindergarten, their first year of formal schooling, at the beginning of the following year. Children were provided with a range of props such as desks, uniforms and chalkboards so they could explore this transition through dramatic play and act out some of their expectations or fears.

Two girls sit behind a desk with school dresses on and look to a third girl who stands by the chalkboard and says “I’m the teacher and you are the goody goodies”. Each of the children happily takes on their assigned role. The teacher models some writing (scribbles moving from left to right with some letters) on the board and the students copy it onto their paper. The teacher moves to their desks to ensure they are doing it correctly. She returns to the board and says “This is six” as she accurately writes numeral 6 on the board. The students copy it and they continue to do this with different numbers. One of the students becomes frustrated when she cannot write the numeral 8. “That’s OK” says the teacher “I will show you”. She helps her write an 8 on her page. The student is so proud she goes and shows it to one of the real adults in the room.

In another service hundreds of kilometres away I watch a group of girls sit quietly in uniforms as another child yells “Sit still! Be quiet! You’re not allowed to move or talk at big school!” An adult observing the play moves in and talks to the girls about why they think they won’t be able to move or talk at big school.

Significant Learning and Changes to Practice

This trip has reminded me just how capable young children are when they are in a safe supportive environment where they are encouraged to explore, ask questions and follow their interests. The need to belong is life-long and does not end when we reach they age of five. This is something I am going to focus on in my classroom in 2012 adopting some of the ideas I have seen including framed family photographs and ensuring programmed one on one time with children is not pushed aside due to other interruptions.

It has reiterated the importance of play in the early years as a powerful form of learning. We often say young children have short attention spans but I have watched children engage in activities for extended periods of time because they were interested in what they were doing and adults were providing support and extending their play. Play is often seen as a time filler in schools rather than a powerful form of learning. This is because it is often used to fill time when other activities finish early, when children are tired or when there are not many adults available. I have learnt that for play to be valuable it needs to be given a large block of time and be supported by an appropriate number of adults. While there is not the same level of flexibility in a primary school time table I am going to set aside at least ninety minutes a day for children to engage in a play based curriculum in 2012. This will occur during the hours that there is an Early School Support and Student Learning Support Officers working in the room.

It also demonstrated for me the impact that the physical environment has on children and their learning and given me a range of ideas about how a classroom could be set up.

Conclusion

The study tour experience has been a refreshing one. It reminded me why I love working with young children. It gave me the opportunity to see some extremely high quality educational settings. The thing I found really valuable was that being away from home and day to day life I also had the time to reflect on what I was seeing and then on my own practice in relation to this. I had the time to go and find more information about things and pull things together.

This scholarship has reinforced some of my practices and forced me to reflect on others. It has given me the confidence to change some aspects of my teaching and also to share my ideas with others. It has given me the opportunity to engage in research which I really enjoyed at university, and have thoroughly enjoyed again, while still staying in the position of classroom teacher which I also love.

Reference List

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009), *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework For Australia*. Commonwealth of Australia: Barton.