

Let The Children Play. Please.

In my work I meet early childhood and primary teachers who are grappling with setting up play based programmes which tick all the boxes for the child, the teacher, the parents and the auditors. From my observation, the most difficulty lies in setting an environment where creativity, problem solving and deep learning are the natural outcomes. When we get the environment right, the rest is a doddle, but it is as if the cultural lenses we wear for 'learning and education' are not the right fit for the task.

Our luminous curriculum *Te Whariki* says nothing about creating a school environment in early childhood, quite the opposite; yet nearly every early childhood environment in the land is a direct copy of school, right down to the furniture, the fittings, the language ("classroom" "preschool"...), the displays of work and 'educational' posters on the wall. How does this happen?

Subconscious Power

It is estimated that only 5% of our total learning comes from direct instruction, the other 95% comes from subconscious downloading of the 'environmental features' we are immersed in. An example of how this works is learning a second language. Adults who immerse themselves in a second language, (e.g. exchange students), can speak and dream in their newly acquired language after three months. Dreaming is a function of the subconscious mind. Contrast that with enrolling in Te Reo classes and using the conscious mind to learn the language. Few, if any students are fluent within three months, or even within a year. Many find the conscious learning-process of language so difficult that we give up. When I was fifty I trained to teach English as a foreign language. Getting conscious about the structure of my first language was a very challenging experience. That's where we are with 'play' and 'school'. we have powerful subconscious learnings for each. The challenge is to become conscious of them.

You Had To Be There

We haven't been immersed in 'school' for three months, we have all been immersed in school for a minimum of twelve years - more if you count kindergarten and tertiary education. Much of our subconscious learning around education and learning is making it difficult for us to consciously implement play as the vehicle for learning. Figure 1 shows the structure of the schooling we have been immersed in. There is the all important classroom for teaching and learning, and the less valued playground. From a child's point of view, however, unless she is bullied in the playground,



Fig. 1

playing with friends at playtime is one of the most valued parts of traditional schooling. For many it is the most valued.

When we were at school we did not “play for a break”, we only played for short times because that’s all we were allowed. When schools call playtime ‘interval’ or ‘recess’ they disclose the value they place on play. Interval and recess are nouns for the ‘gap between important proceedings’. Play is the gapfiller, with the corresponding value rating firmly embedded in the subconscious of parents and teachers alike. This is a problem.

Subliminal Programmes

The programmes our culture has around learning are subconscious, and indelibly imprinted on into the subconscious of all who have been immersed in the institutional structure of schooling:

1. Learning happens inside the classroom. On the bell students must come inside to the designated learning space in order to learn.

This assumes the outdoors is not the place of ‘proper’ learning. The bell which demands a return to the classroom also discloses the power dynamic implicit in traditional schooling, the Dynamic of Domination. The dynamic of domination doesn’t lead easily to learning autonomy.

2. Learning is involves reading, writing, maths and STEM.

This assumes that if learning that doesn’t involve reading, writing, maths, science and technology it isn’t valued as ‘proper’ learning. Because the rational-logical functions of the head have been elevated above those of the body and emotions, the expressive arts hold less value in education than the alphabet, numbers and the periodic table. This elevation of writing as *evidence* of learning could explain why so many primary teachers instruct students to write about their play.

3. Learning happens in the sitting position; whether that is on the floor, at a table or a desk, students sit still to learn.

This assumes that learning is abstract and overlooks the biological reality that learning is creating a ‘body of knowledge’, quite literally. The human ‘brain’ is the embodied nervous system. Movement cements learning.

4. Learning happens when the teacher sets the topics and activities for students.

This assumes that teaching equals learning, which it does not. Equally as erroneous, it assumes that students aren’t able to follow their own internal motivations and curiosity to lead them to make their own ‘body of knowledge’. Which is strange when you think about it, because we know that if we want to know something, nothing will stop us from finding out and learning.

5. Learning has to be measured to prove it has happened.

This has led to a regime of testing, which in turn has led to teachers teaching for

testing. Testing begins as early as, “Can you write your name?” or “Let me hear you count to twenty”, and progresses to cover every aspect of every subject. Testing assumes all children reach the same levels of accomplishment and memorisation within a narrow window of time. This is not real life.

**Learning is not the product of teaching.
Learning is the product of learner activity.**

John Holt

6. Learning happens in two dimensions - formerly that meant most classroom time was filled with paper and pencils/pens, latterly that means devices.

Contrast this with children’s play outside, forest schools, the Spirit of Adventure, Outward Bound, or scientific research. Each of these examples calls on all the senses, all of the body, the three dimensions of space (and time) to cement real life learning in real life. Each builds a ‘body of knowledge’.

When we read through these six points consciously, we might agree that they do not (necessarily) support children’s growth and unfolding, yet still both the environments we set up for children and our practice reflect them. Subconscious programming is so powerful that we abide by it *without thinking* because that is the way the human subconscious works. Unexamined, these programmes can make it difficult to change our teaching practice to a play-based programme.

Observation is the Key

We will need to familiarise ourselves with the universal patterns of children’s play. Then we can see at a glance what is unfolding, in this moment, through this child. That way we can see how - or if - the child’s engaged activity is becoming more complex as the days and weeks go by. We’ll know if there is enough environmental support for the child or whether we need make additions.

Not least, we will need to turn the lens of observation onto our own habitual behaviours and practices because our habits ‘display’ the programmes that are embedded in our subconscious. We’ll also need to ask ourselves a lot of questions, just like a four year old.

- How can we ensure our babies have free indoor-outdoor access to meet children’s need for being in nature? Babies and children long for nature because they are a part of it.
- Can our babies and little ones actually see outside, do they have a view or are they too short?
- When they are inside, how can we ensure natural light is the main light source, especially for infants? Questions 1 and 2 might require extra windows - or sky lights? We have watched plenty of DIY programmes, so we’ll have ideas.
- While we are having ideas, how could our Team make over the rooms that look

and feel like 'school' into rooms that look and feel homely and nurturing? Centres and kindergartens who have done this discover a peace and calm settles which in turn calms the children's behaviour.

- If we are thinking 'homely not school' we'll probably find we have too many tables and chairs. How could we replace them with more homely items of furniture? How could we use things like couches and sideboards to create 'intimate play spaces' in the area that was once Table Top Activity Land?
- Where are our little ones going to lie down and chill when they have played themselves out? Do we have throws and blankets they can wrap up in, all snuggly, warm and comfy?
- Longing for Nature means our children are almost always happier outside than in. Does our playground look like a school playground with fixed structures? Fixed structures are the 'worksheets' of outdoor play, they leave little room for creativity, construction and problem solving. How can we source materials which enable or children to construct their own (temporary) playscapes?

A Conscious Mindset


For all of human history except the last little blink children have not spent most of their childhood and adolescence inside a school. They grew up in a homeplace with family, and they played in nature. These environments better match what children need for their nurture and their play, the two things required for the human child's brain to operate at the genius level.*

Our cultural world is increasingly a world of accelerated change. If our children are going to manage and succeed in the volatile environment they will inherit, they will be counting on us to take our 'school hats' off and put on our learning and nurturing hats. We can do this.



Learning

Home-like
Nurture and Relationship
Learning



Play, explore, create, imagine
Nature Places
Learning

Pennie Brownlee • July 2019

* The N.A.S.A sponsored longitudinal study with 1,600 children found that at age 4-5 years 98% of children when faced with problems came up with 'genius' answers. By 10 years it was 30%, 15 years - 12%, and by adulthood - 2%. TED Talk, Dr George Land "The Failure Of Success".

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