Recently I attended a 2-day workshop in Melbourne with three of my colleagues on the importance of ‘play’, not only in early childhood settings but throughout children’s lives—indeed, throughout the lives of us all!!

‘Play’ as a word has become somewhat overused and misunderstood in the past 10 years. Still to this day, I often have people saying ‘Oh, you must have the best job in the world, just watching children ‘play’ all day’!! Yes, I do have the best job in the world, but I do not ‘just watch’ children play. I observe, research, respond, document, plan, record and interpret this essential language of learning that children possess in these precious early years of education.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky states:

*Play creates a zone of proximal development, allowing the child to move beyond his or her current skills or level of knowledge. During play children rely on and alter the objects and behaviours in their environment. Play serves as a means through which children attain abstract thought. Through the acquisition and invention of rules along with the use of imagination, the child’s conceptual abilities are expanded.*

It makes sense, then, to assume that when a child leaves the security and warmth of an Early Childhood setting (where play is essentially their ‘mother tongue’), this should continue throughout their years in school. Obviously, as children grow and mature, so too do the environments of play and the interpretations of such. The offerings and provocations for children in the ELC would look very different to those in a Year 3 or 4 classroom. What would remain constant, however, is the incorporation of this ‘natural’ language throughout their daily curriculum.

Some of the key aspects of true play-based projects include:

- actively engaging all children in their learning—careful and skilled planning ensures that both boys and girls are maximising their full educational potential.

This play- and project-based approach highlights key elements of children’s development, learning and the social environment in which they live and experience life. It seeks to scaffold children’s knowledge through making explicit links and opportunities for them to discover their own learning. It also allows the acquisition of skills that are useful and sustainable over time.

It is important to note, and it was made very clear to us at the workshop, that this philosophy is not an ‘add-on’ aspect to an already crowded curriculum and busy day. It seeks to use elements of children’s interests alongside practical, hands-on learning experiences that quickly engage children in the learning process.

It is my belief that not all children are ready to learn the same thing at the same time and in the same way. They will not all be ready to meet the same benchmark or literacy level at the same time, as environmental and developmental influences impact upon their rate of learning achievements. Play then shows us another way, where young people can be true to their innate state and where we, as parents and educators, can be authentic linguistic interpreters of their profound knowledge and understanding, not only at the tender age of 4 and 5 years but also possibly at 10, 11 and 12.

As Loris Malauzzi’s writes in his poem 100 languages:

*The child has a hundred languages (and a hundred, hundred, hundred more)But they steal ninety nine. The school and the culture Separate the head from the body.*

Let us become our children’s linguistic keepers and forever cherish and allow the importance of play and an investigative curriculum.

Mrs Lomax
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