

Summary from Early Childhood Australia - National Conference

“Seasons of Change”

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As recipient of the CPAT Emerging Leader Scholarship, sponsored by Dance Fever Multisport, I was privileged to attend the Early Childhood Australia National Conference, Seasons of Change. Over three days I was involved in keynotes and workshops themed around leadership, community and identity with a common thread of young children’s wellbeing. I have been exposed to a wealth of information that invigorated and inspired me upon return. I would like to share some of this information and resources with you.

Decoding the next Generation

The conference began with a keynote from Michael McQueen, entitled de-coding the next generation, which focused on the following:

- The fundamental social shifts that are shaping the next generation of young people (Gen Z and beyond);
- The impact technology is having in how young people today learn, connect and socialise;
- Practical strategies and insights for motivating, connecting with and engaging across the generation gap; and
- Why issues of resilience and mental health are so prevalent in young people and tips for addressing this.

Michael’s website, <http://michaelmcqueen.net/>, provides e-resource downloads and video library with more detailed information for leaders, employees, teachers and parents looking to engage the next generation.

Leading the Change: Increasing the quality of mathematics learning in play-based programs

A workshop focusing on results from a longitudinal study called E4kids, focusing upon 3-5 year olds mathematical and verbal competence. Results showed that mathematical competence was significantly higher in children who attended informal care. With other supporting research they suggested early years educators report mathematics related anxiety and need more support to increase the quality of mathematics learning in play-based programs. They emphasized the need for professional learning in order to provide a teaching and learning program that facilitates concept acquisition, mathematical thinking and language, and supports children’s learning dispositions. The importance of purposeful mathematics programs was emphasized with the following key elements:

- Planning playful experiences to scaffold children’s understanding and to

- facilitate “math’s talk”;
 - Identifying and supporting mathematical thinking in children’s play; and
 - Correcting misunderstandings before they become habitual.
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Connecting the dots: Neuroscience, early childhood, family and community

Neuroscience research has now established incontestable evidence for the critical importance of development in the first years of life, and its implications for lifelong health and functionality. As a result, questions have been raised about the priority of early childhood education and the programs developed and implemented by schools to connect with families and the wider community in order to provide environments to foster optimal learning from birth. As families play a critical role in the development of children we must develop engaging partnerships with parents, extended family and the wider community in this endeavor.

Kay Boulden shared insights from a unique program in the Torres Strait in which skills and understanding about early childhood development have empowered parents and communities. Through charting the establishment, operations and outcomes of the program for babies, toddlers and primary caregivers, she explored the possibility that investing in early childhood can become a driver of community renewal.

For further information on how educational settings can respond to the developments in neuroscience in terms of pedagogy, environment and program content, the work of Steven Hughes, Jack Shonkoff and Adele Diamond can be referred to.

Bush Kinder: Learning beyond the four walls and the perimeter fence

Doug Fargher is the founder of the *Westgarth Bush Kinder Pilot Project*. The Kindergarten children spend 3 hours a week in public parkland in an open community space with no fences where the children are immersed in the community. The project recognises the importance of outdoor learning and is based on the following research (as cited in Doug Fargher’s keynote):

- Children who spend more time outdoors in nature are happier, healthier, stronger, smarter and more social. [White, R 2004 Young Children's Relationship with Nature]
- Being out in the wider community benefits children. Effective education involves the whole society -families, work places and the community all help to stimulate and develop children’s ability to learn and understand. [Bentley, T 1998 Learning beyond the classroom]
- When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development. [Ofsted2008 Learning outside the classroom]
- Having children outside benefits our community. (Blank M, Melville and Shah B 2003 Making the Difference Research and Practice Community Schools]

This program addresses the reduction in outside play in recent years and acknowledges the importance of risk taking to give children experiences that will keep them safe in the future as well as challenging students physically for whole child development.

Read more at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/better-out-than-in-westgarth-bush-kindergarten-plunges-kids-back-into-nature-20140717-ztyxx.html#ixzz3J7HFIHDg>

or visit Doug's Facebook page BushKinder Doug

Young children as change agents for sustainability

Dr Sharon Stuhmcke workshop focused on the difference that early childhood educators make by working with children, families and the wider community in order to tackle the contemporary issue of sustainable living. She introduced a transformative teaching model where the children are empowered to direct and control their learning. Educators equip children with the knowledge to recognise and confront injustice and inequity and to challenge the 'status quo' enabling students to demonstrate environmental stewardship and advocacy. Practical examples can be found in her book *Young Children and the Environment*.

From Teaching to Thinking: Reigniting our Role as Educators

Ann Pelo is a teacher educator, program consultant, and author whose primary work focuses on Reggio-inspired, social justice, and ecological teaching and learning. Her keynote encouraged teachers to reshape our attention from teaching to thinking, from instruction to inquiry, paying more attention to what the children pay attention to rather than what we think they should, assisting children in their search to make meaning and to know rather than to learn.

“We can strive to understand children’s thinking, strive to tune ourselves to children’s intricate and insightful dance of curious and committed study. We can refuse to be seduced by the simplistic and superficial recitation of facts, we can sidestep the snares of checklists and accounting, and, instead, embrace the intellectual project of education: the development of an investigative attitude towards life -- in ourselves and in children; the cultivation of curiosity, persistence, and intellectual agility; an outward expansiveness of thought in ourselves and in children.” (Ann Pelo)

Anne gave a powerful example of the authentic learning that can come from genuinely paying attention to what the children are and the questions they ask in order to make sense of the world they live in. She described a learning sequence that evolved from a child’s question, “How can you tell which seeds come from which squash? After an initial investigation the educator could have chosen to follow up with artificial imposed activities on the children such as using the seeds to write their names or counting how many there were. Instead the educator turned her attention to

the children's asking, "How do seeds know what to become?" What followed was an authentic investigation that celebrated the children as curious thinkers and investigators as well as valuing the co-construction of knowledge instead of teaching it. Even though the learning followed a path unknown by the educator or children it did not matter, as the outcome was integrated within the process, the outcome of developing nimble and reflective thinkers, children who have the capacity to analyse and interrogate and hold an investigative attitude.

Children's Rights panel: Agency to participation

A panel discussion took place on the last day entitled Children's rights: Agency to participation, a powerful reminder of the importance of understanding and enacting these rights in order to form strong and inclusive communities. Australia, in 1990, was one of the first countries to become a signatory to *The Convention of the Rights of The Child*. The panel discussed how genuinely these rights have been embedded into daily practice within the early years sector. The question was raised as to how we can better honour these rights through enactment in our settings in the future. A key question remains: How are *The Convention of the Rights of The Child* visible in our schools, communities and as a nation? The challenge remains: Is it enough to be a signatory? As a nation what is our responsibility to support, protect and maintain all children's rights?
