

Building on what children know

'Take the child on from where they are now' has long been a slogan in early childhood, but I wonder, as educators, if we always do it?



BELIEVING CHILDREN ARE CAPABLE

My four-year-old granddaughter, Mia, is extremely capable with modern technologies; she can use a mobile phone and digital camera and browse a DVD to select particular scenes in a movie. She is not 'print literate', but she is 'techno-literate'. I'm not advocating techno-skills for babies, but I am conscious that this competence may not be valued as she goes into preschool. She may well be told 'that's ok at home, but we do things differently here'.

My second granddaughter, Maddie, when aged five, entered Prep and, when I asked what she was learning 'at big school', she said: 'We do an awful lot of counting'. Questioned further, she explained: 'We don't do add ups, sharing, how many or how long; we do a lot of counting'. So, the curriculum emphasis was on learning by rote without attention to meaning, ignoring important aspects of mathematics such as problem solving and comparing and classifying.

My concern is not just that the Prep curriculum is narrow; it's that the fundamental premise of recognising and building on children's existing concepts, skills and understandings was not part of the pedagogical mindset at school entry.

RECOGNISING WHAT CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW

At the time when Maddie was being drilled in what she already knew to the point of boredom, she really needed help to learn the social strategies to join in games and make new friends. It seemed the teacher was preoccupied with meeting accountability requirements for measurable bits of learning, rather than sensitively responding to the child's needs.

If the educator in her preschool had been asked what to do to help Maddie 'get ready' for school, she too might have replied: 'Help her to write her own name, recognise some letters and count to 10'. These are all laudable aims, but they're not the key knowledge children will need to thrive in school.

The most important foundation for future success is learning to believe in yourself as a capable, resourceful learner.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE TO SCHOOL

So, how can early childhood educators help children across the bridge to school?

First and foremost, as Leonie Arthur in her *Research in Practice* booklet (Arthur, 2010) suggests, educators in the years prior to school should focus on 'Building confident learners'.

Confident learners, as Leonie says:

- ask questions and are open to different perspectives
- try new ideas and resources
- commit to a goal and learn to persist when problems arise
- learn to listen to alternative points of view and to collaborate
- are sensitive to the rights and needs of others and able to reflect on their own learning.

These are powerful competencies to take to school learning.

Second, educators in the prior-to-school sector can help children to 'know about school'. Even when children from one centre will be going to a number of different schools, educators can find out about the teachers and classrooms, playground, canteen and the rules and routines of the schools children will attend. *Every Child* Vol. 16 No. 4 (2010) describes a range of practical 'getting ready' strategies including placing uniforms in dress-up areas and inviting siblings back to talk to preschoolers about 'doing school'.

SUPPORT FROM BOTH SIDES

While times of change can be exciting, research (CCCH, 2008) suggests that discontinuities around *learning, relationships* and *support systems* can be detrimental to children's adjustment to school.

Continuity of children's learning is enhanced when before-school educators, with family permissions, share positive and explicit information about each child with their colleagues in schools.

And, continuity of learning is greatly enhanced when educators in the first year of school ensure that they are very familiar with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and its directions so that they can assess children's progress towards the Framework's Outcomes and build on children's developing capabilities.

If the preschool educator knows the EYLF, she will recognise that Mia is skilled in 'using information and communication technologies to access and investigate ideas and represent (her) thinking' (Outcome 5). She will also note that Mia needs support with the persistence aspects of Outcome 4 and with developing a sense of fairness and respect for others (Outcome 2).

To build *relationships* with children and families, the research (Dockett and Perry, 2002; Margetts, 2005 in CCCH, 2008) tells us that a 'one-off' orientation visit by children to their new school is vastly insufficient. Schools need to collaborate with families to arrange an extended program that meets their needs. Such a program not only helps to make a child feel comfortable about going to the new place, but also helps families to feel confident that they are accepted and valued in 'the culture of school', and the school will work closely with them.

Some children will need specific kinds of *support* as they enter school. This requires educators, families and professionals, such as speech pathologists, therapists, medical and welfare personnel, to liaise to maximise the *continuity of support* for children's individual learning and development.

TAKE THEM ON FROM WHERE THEY ARE NOW ...

If Maddie's Prep teacher had time to get to know her, she would have realised she had a thoughtful child who mulls over problems, comes up with creative solutions, thinks very logically and gains enormously from quiet, reflective conversation. She would have been able to build on her strong understanding of 'how symbols and pattern systems work' and her ability to 'engage with a range of texts and make meaning' (Outcome 5). She might have asked Maddie what she knew about numbers and avoided 'an awful lot of counting'.

Time is the most precious commodity in smoothing transitions for children; time for professionals to get together; time to talk deeply with families; time to get to know each child to find out what they already know and can do. Providing this time is the responsibility of centre directors and school leaders, knowing that it will pay off in terms of children's long-term learning success.

Internationally acclaimed early childhood programs amply demonstrate that you can't get cognitive outcomes without investing in relationships with children and families.

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References

All mentions of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) in this publication can be attributed to the following reference:

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: DEEWR.

Arthur, L. (2010). *The Early Years Learning Framework: Building confident learners*. Research in Practice Series. Canberra, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

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