



Maree Costantini and Nicole Tainsh learn with their students through play...

“But they’re just playing!”

From the outside, two children playing in a ‘café’ might not look like deep learning. However, we can take another look at this scenario through the lens of an educator. Instead of seeing play food and dress ups, consider the play the children are engaged in:

- taking on the role of chef, waiter, customer;
- learning and using new words and phrases as they order food and take orders; creating and reading menus; writing specials; communicating orders to the chef;
- following and writing recipes;
- counting out money and so much more.

This list does not even take into account the interpersonal, critical and creative skills children are developing through sustained and productive play.

Play is an evidence-based learning pedagogy that builds on and complements explicit teaching from all Key Learning Areas while simultaneously developing children’s investigative and interpersonal skills (Walker, 2013). The Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) recognises play as a critical context for learning. Play allows for deliberate choices to be made about the learning environment, intentional teaching and a balance between child-led and educator supported learning. Play also provides the opportunity for developmentally and culturally appropriate learning that best meets the needs of individual learners in their first year of school. During this play, students engage in rich talk with other students and with their teachers. This is a key component of the learning as control over oral language sets children up for success in reading and writing (Hill, 2010).

All students need to play

Granville East Public School is a vibrant, diverse school of 400 students serving a culturally rich community in Sydney’s western suburbs. Ninety-five percent of the students have English as an additional language or dialect with over 24 different linguistic groups represented. The school has been supported by the Low SES School Communities National Partnership and by the Equity Program in



the past. The majority of students starting kindergarten have not accessed early learning outside the home. Typically oral language is limited in both their home language and English.

In 2013, we took stock. A number of students were not reaching end of year expectations and this gap was widening in Stage One. We realised that we needed to change our approach. Our students needed opportunities to be immersed in real world activities: watching, listening, playing, experimenting, exploring and talking about their learning. Learning Centres was developed as a framework to allow students to engage in authentic learning by directing their own play. The teacher's interaction with students during Learning Centres is crucial. It must be planned *and* adaptive, intentionally designed to move learning forward.

Kindergarten Learning Centres

At our school, Kindergarten Learning Centres run three times each week. Each session is approximately two hours and follows a structure so that we can best harness the students' play to have the greatest impact on their learning. Our philosophy is that play is not an addition to the timetable but is central to meeting the syllabus outcomes for our students. Explicit teaching is incorporated through the whole class introduction (20 minutes); teacher scaffolding during play; and reflection (20 minutes). There are a mix of thematic and 'role-play' centres such as Dinosaurs, Farm, Café, Doctor's and Post Office.

We have about 20 different centres and we are adding new ones regularly to respond to student interests and needs. Our two kindergarten classrooms are adjacent and can be opened into one large space, so all our Kindergarten students join together for Learning Centres with a total of eight centres available for them to choose from. Centres remain 'in play' for a number of weeks while student learning resulting from the centres remains strong. We are always observing the play at each centre carefully, ensuring it is appropriately resourced and play is purposeful. We re-think centres when this does not occur. Resources vary, but each centre has some quality hands-on resources, a small selection of appropriate fiction and non-fiction texts, topic word wall, blank paper and pencils to encourage students to recognise how they can incorporate their budding reading and writing skills into extended play.

Figure 1 – work samples and resources from different Learning Centres



During the introduction, the teacher selects a learning focus, based on observations from the previous session, that will support all students to progress their learning. It is syllabus based, carefully planned and explicitly modelled. Each introduction has a different explicit teaching focus such as mathematics, reading and writing that is linked to a centre. The teacher also models how the new learning is connected to other centres, and to student learning outside of Learning Centres. All introductions include teacher modelling of new vocabulary, links to new learning and over time build a bank of possible advanced play ideas.

While the focus will offer a concrete idea of what students might do in the play session, it is not expected that all students will take it up in the same session. Some will be deepening learning from a previous session, others might need additional support or take up time and some students will have ideas for their own purposeful play.

During each play session, teachers choose 3-4 students who are at a pause in their learning. These become our focus students. We usually work with these students for 10-15 minutes, leaving them to continue their learning independently before checking back in with them later in the session. We start with an extended conversation with the student to enrich and guide thinking and support new understandings (Touhill, 2012).

“My cookies are black!”: Maree Costantini (MC) reflects on teaching Hadis

The lesson below occurred in May 2018:

Hadis: My cookies are **black!**

MC: Oh no! Your cookies are **burnt!**

Hadis: I left them in too long (waves hand around oven).

MC: There is lots of smoke coming from the oven. It’s very hot. You need to get them out.

Hadis: Where are my **gloves?**

MC: Here are your **oven mitts**, they’ll protect your hands from getting burnt.

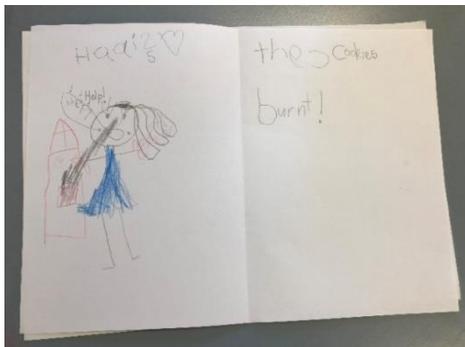
Hadis: I need help to put the **mitts** on.

Hadis: (The cookies all fall off the tray as it is removed from the oven) They fell off the **plate!**

MC: Let’s put them back on the **tray** together.

In the above example I modelled use of new vocabulary specific to the context by engaging in the student’s play scenario rather than interrupting the play to teach. Hadis was able to think using this new vocabulary when she used it straight away in her play and later when she recorded her play through drawing. She then went deeper into her learning the following week, baking cookies that were “not burnt!” It is important to note that learning during this type of scaffolding is a two-way process. I learnt that Hadis was able to develop a strong play scenario but had limited vocabulary to use in her play. She was using assimilation to name objects in her play but was able to revise her thinking to accommodate new language that deepened her play experience.

Figure 2 – Burnt cookies to ‘good’ cookies!





“It’s bigger than a person!”: Nicole Tainsh (NT) reflects on teaching Moussa

The lesson below occurred in July 2018:

NT: Tell me what you were looking at in the book?

Moussa: I found this dinosaur (indicating match between illustration and plastic dinosaur model)

NT: Wow – it’s a Tyrannosaurus. This word (pointing to heading) tells us the name of the dinosaur. Can you say ‘Ty-ran-o-saur-us’? (Teacher and student practice together).

Moussa: It’s bigger than a person!

NT: How do you know?

Moussa: It’s here (indicates to a box on the page with information about the size of the dinosaur – illustration shows the dinosaur in relation to the height of an average human).

NT: How interesting. That drawing does show us the Tyrannosaurus was bigger than a person. Actually it tells us how big the dinosaur was! Can you see this number?

Moussa: It’s 12

NT: Yes, 12 metres. That /m/ stands for metres. It’s a way we can measure large animals. From the whiteboard to the reading corner, that’s smaller than 12 metres!

Moussa: He’s big!

NT: I wonder how big some other dinosaurs are?

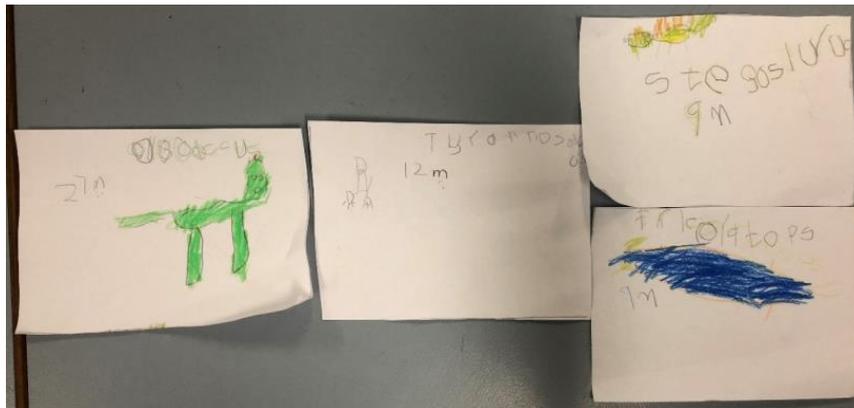
Moussa: I’m going to find out!

Moussa then chose and located the ‘size box’ for three additional dinosaurs and recorded the information he found. During this exchange, Moussa learnt about the concept of metre and used this information to organise his dinosaurs from smallest to largest. When he discovered that two of the dinosaurs he selected were the same size, this was another opportunity for a conversation around ordering his dinosaurs.



This is how he did it:

Figure 3 – Largest to smallest dinosaurs



From the exchange I learnt that Moussa could confidently read and order two-digit numbers out of sequence. He understood smallest to largest and could organise his dinosaurs either way. I realised he didn't have a concept of using numbers to measure. To him the pictures just showed that all the dinosaurs in the book were bigger than people. By understanding he could read the different sizes of the dinosaurs, he was excited to demonstrate how his thinking had been extended.

Good learning together

At the end of the session is a whole-class reflection time. This is an important time for students to think about their learning and that of others. The role of the teacher is to explicitly point out the good learning that students have engaged in as they will often mistake the product (their drawing) for the extent of the learning.

Learning Centres have had a significant impact on student learning at our school. Oral language skills of students have increased and a growing number of students are reaching or exceeding end of year expectations. With ongoing refinement of the program and the extension of Learning Centres into Stage One we are looking forward to going even deeper into the possibilities of play.

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Maree Costantini is an experienced K-6 teacher who has worked in western Sydney schools for 12 years. She is a trained Reading Recovery teacher and has spent many years teaching early literacy and mathematics skills to students. She established and developed the Learning Centres program in her school to meet the learning needs of Kindergarten students from a disadvantaged area with a diverse range of language backgrounds by scaffolding children's play to target literacy and numeracy skills. The play based program has since been implemented across K-2 in her school. She is currently mentoring teachers to implement best practise literacy and numeracy programs in her role as Deputy Principal Instructional Leader.

Nicole Tainsh has taught in primary schools in regional NSW and South Western Sydney. She is an experienced classroom teacher, Assistant Principal and Instructional Leader (current). Nicole is a regular contributor to ALEA's Practically Primary magazine and has published a feature article as well as numerous reviews of children's literature. She has co-lead the development of the Learning Centres program at Granville East Public School, including expansion of the program to Years 1 and 2. The program has a focus on rich learning experiences and play based learning to support student progress and achievement across all key learning areas.

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