TAKING THE EGO OUT OF TEACHING
Learning the value of stepping back and listening

As we continue to evolve in our understandings of early childhood research and theory, in particular in the area of neuroscience, we are moving in directions that are increasingly challenging for educators to adapt to.

To sum it up in a nutshell, it is the concept of stepping back. We know so clearly that uninterrupted, child-led play is THE most valuable use of children's time in an early years learning environment, yet despite our deep knowing and understanding of this, we are still constantly getting in their way...and if we are truly, completely honest with ourselves, this actually comes back to ego.

Any educator who explores the idea of stepping back will inevitably be forced to pose the question at some point - "if I'm not running group times or setting up structured activities...what am I supposed to do?". Firstly, if you've reflected and reached the point where you are asking this - congratulations! This is the moment of awareness, of waking up to what needs to change and moving from "why should I?" to "how can I?".

For educators, this ego aspect is actually not a negative one, it's a matter of professional integrity. We have learned about teaching standards and strategies, we have observed how our influence has brought about transformational change and learning in children's lives and we are not willing to move to role of babysitting and hoping for the best. It goes against all of our best teaching instincts and raises uncertainty.

So, let's reflect together. If we collectively shift our focus from content-based learning to VALUES-based learning, we begin to look more deeply at the TRUE value of best intended interventions into play. Perhaps we've seen an interest arise in a few of the children, sometimes in nearly the whole class and so we decide, in our best teacher wholesomeness, that as a class, we will undertake a project to extend on that interest. At this point, we have a choice.

We can either push forward with our best intentions and trust that this will be valuable for ALL the children to be involved with...OR we can do a values-based audit. We can begin to break our teaching intentions down into percentages.

Every teacher has seen this a million times and so I know we all will relate. In every planned and compulsory group experience I have offered, the percentages will look a little like this:

Between 1-20% of the children will be truly, deeply engaged in the content. They will listen attentively, ask questions, develop theories and make plans for the future of this project. This percentage decreases for every extra minute they are made to participate in this experience once the interest has begun waning.

- Between 20-90% of the children will be passively compliant. They will sit and just stare out the window or fiddle with their shoes or simply observe and listen with the potential for interest to be piqued by one of the ideas or experiences explored.

- Between 1-15% will be passively noncompliant. These children tend to be the followers. Not quite brave enough to overtly misbehave, however, the second they see a courageously noncompliant child who inspires them to follow in their antics, they are in. When one child starts calling out a chant, they are the ones who keep it going. When a peer decides to start rolling all over the floor, they turn it into ground wrestling. These children always come from the passively compliant category and this percentage dramatically increases the longer children are made to participate.

- Between 1-5% will be courageously noncompliant. These are actually the children we should be proud of. They are establishing their personal boundaries in a very clear way. They will interrupt, disrupt, pick fights with children nearby, call out, ask inappropriate questions or tell unrelated personal stories. They become increasingly visible and take more and more power from the experience.

Now that we've done the math, we can safely say that on a REALLY good day, we will only have a handful of truly, deeply engaged children and possibly a few that might like to just look on from a distance. We also know that there will be a number of children who are disengaged at best or disruptive at worst.

What we really need to be honest about with these children is "why are we interrupting their play and forcing participation when they would gain much richer opportunities from learning through play?" We can cite school readiness as a responsible reason. This can be a dangerous road to walk down, however, as it can lead to all kinds of well intentioned "readiness" myths that cause more harm than good. It has been clearly documented that early formal literacy learning does NOT indicate success at school. On the contrary, the literature tells us that at age seven, children who spent more time in unstructured play-based settings always outperformed their peers from structured settings.
Not only that, but I feel we've misunderstood what school readiness means because we got stuck in a content-based mindset over a values-based.

If we are content-based, we're always implementing what WE consider are the true essentials of learning - If we move to values-based, however, we focus on observing and listening to where the children really are. Not just what we consider "learning", but seeing who they are as a being and how their play is already supporting their development.

So maybe it's time that we took our own maths lessons on board and took a deep breath, acknowledged our own insecurities about "not doing enough" and let the children play.
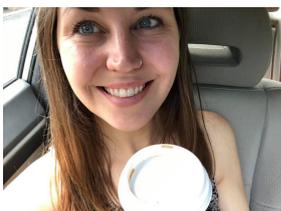
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She was a finalist in the Outdoors Queensland awards and worked in different schools and services as the ECT, teacher and educational leader.