



Lisa Burman

Consulting in Pedagogical Change

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.”

Albert Einstein

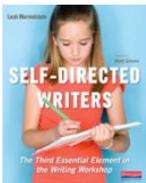


Resources

NEW BOOK

Leah Mermelstein “Self-Directed Writers”

<http://www.heinemann.com/products/E04800.aspx>



Some Curious Educators to follow on Facebook

Listen – Joanne Haynes

Matapihi Kindergarten

Flights of Whimsy

Purple Studio Three

Il Nido Children’s Centre

Purple 2A/2B

Purple West BANB7

Professional Curiosity

Welcome this quarter’s newsletter/article. Welcome to your new school year, those in the Northern Hemisphere, and for us in the south, we might just be sneaking out of the winter blues!

Recently, I have been thinking a lot about the importance of curiosity in learning. We often connect the value of asking questions and being curious to inquiry learning processes and to dispositions for learning. However, how often do you think about your own curiosity as an educator? What ARE you curious about? Do you tap into this curiosity to drive your teaching?

Being a curious educator, I think, is the first step to being an ‘everyday researcher’. I am inspired by the idea expressed by the educators in Reggio Emilia that the teacher is a researcher. This makes me think about how I want to live my profession this way – researching in everyday situations, rather than researching in an academic sense.

Currently, I’m curious about why educators are so often looking for a program to ‘fix’ their concerns or answer their questions. I’m curious about how to fit the pieces of the ACARA/EYLF puzzle together within an authentic pedagogical stance. I’m curious about children’s view of themselves as learners and how this can empower or disempower their learning. And more...



What are you curious about?

Special Needs or Special Rights?

An excerpt from “Are You Listening? Fostering Conversations that Help Young Children Learn” by Lisa Burman, published 2008 by Redleaf Press

How do you view childhood? What is the image you hold of children - are they:

- Innocent and need protecting?
- Sponges who are dependent on adults to fill them up with new knowledge?
- Threatening to our sense of order and need us to control them?
- Born with great competencies to learn and form relationships?

Most of us would answer the final view of course. It is clearly written in our curriculum documents like the *Early Years Learning Framework*, that the competent view of the child is the compass for pedagogical decision-making in Australia. However, too often the decisions schools and ECEC sites make reveal a deeply held view of children as innocent, needy, empty or need us to limit and control them.

This tension between our words and actions, between our beliefs and our practices is evident in mainstream education but, I believe, is an even tighter tension when reflecting on how we educate children with disabilities or learning difficulties.

How does a teacher’s view of the child change if the child has a disability or learning difficulty? Why does it change? If teachers’ view of the child sees them as competent, then where does an image of a child as having limited competencies fit? Do we see the child with disabilities as also having competencies, resourcefulness and knowledge? Do we believe they too have the capacity to be curious and excited about the world? Do we see how they too desire to be connected in relationship with others? If not, why not? Is a teacher’s view of the child different when the child has a disability? Should it be any different?

The view many Western schooling systems hold of children with unique ways of learning (that is, “disabled”) comes from a deficit model. These children are often defined and even described by what they struggle with, and not what they are successful

with. In many learning settings, they are considered limited in their abilities and limiting to the class or school. The children are viewed as not able to learn (“dis-abled”), the focus is on what they cannot do or understand, and they are considered to be in need. Being a needy child implies they are dependent upon someone else to do for them, as they cannot do for themselves. They are dependent upon the teacher to teach them and will not learn without this. This doesn’t match the competent view of the child at all. It is a disempowering view of children: it disempowers the child in her potential for learning, her family in believing in their child, and her teachers in creating the conditions necessary for successful learning. This can be particularly true of schools and systems focused on measuring and valuing learning through standardized and comparative testing. They can see these children as a liability to their success.

Children from different cultural or social backgrounds are often similarly disadvantaged. Unconsciously, teachers view them in a similar way to children with disabilities: as less than competent. They too can be defined by their struggles or their “difference” rather than by what they can do. Worse still, this deficit view inaccurately labels children as being less than able, or even unable to learn. Expectations for them are low. Many students struggling to feel successful in school learning could be better served if schools changed the view of the child from deficient to holding potential, from needy or incapable to resourceful and with abilities. This competent view of all children raises our expectations for them, and allows us to hope and dream with them and their families, rather than setting limits on what they will achieve by not expecting very much to start



with. The educators in Reggio Emilia refer to children as having “special rights,” not special needs: a view which is more empowering, and which conveys belief in their ability to learn and their inherent value as people (Smith in Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1988).

The challenge for us all is to think deeply and seriously about the view we hold of children, and to ask whether this view is unconsciously different for the child with disabilities. Seeing a child from a deficit or incapable view is often such a deeply hidden view, that we are unaware of how it influences the ways we treat, respond and facilitate the learning of certain children. A “less than able” or “less than competent” view of a child might be unconsciously lived out when a teacher:

- assumes Milly won’t be able to do something before giving her the chance to show him what she can do
- focuses his planning for Milly in terms of what she can’t do while ignoring what she can do
- unconsciously gives Milly the impression that learning is too hard for her and something she is not good at, because most of her learning experiences are set up to focus on her “weaknesses”
- fails to discover Milly’s prior knowledge and existing schema before planning, but plans an intervention program without her in mind
- sets Milly up for dependency by limiting the opportunities for her to explore, discover and learn independently, or to complete tasks independently of the teacher’s involvement
- only values the learning which happens while he is directing the experience, documenting and measuring the degree of support needed rather than focusing on Milly’s increasing independence
- only uses Milly’s language, literacy and mathematical skills to determine her abilities, without exploring other ways she can show her thinking
- tells Milly’s family mostly about her struggles rather than her successes and competencies, so that her family begins to view Milly as a deficient or incapable learner
- focuses only on the end ‘outcome’ like a tick-box, rather than on the journey travelled and progress made.

Children with special rights are, in my view, some of our most competent learners. They have learnt determination, persistence and to celebrate the small steps. That is, if they haven’t developed a ‘learned helplessness’. Too often, out of care and love for the child, we end up creating a dependency upon the adult. When this happens, the child develops a view of herself as someone who always needs the adult’s help. They have a ‘learned helplessness’ that is very dangerous to learning and also diminishes their potential. Intervention programs that are only focussed on knowledge acquisition or on completing tasks result in the educator feeling pressured to focus on ‘getting the task done’ or ticking the box that an outcome is achieved.

I believe that if we change our thinking about how we work with children with special rights we will better empower and enable all children to see themselves as competent learners. I don’t mean a rose-coloured view of their abilities, but an understanding of their strengths and challenges - and strategies for learning with both of these. A competent child has a realistic view of himself as a learner. A competent teacher has a realistic view of the child also, and would focus on supporting the child to:

- be more and more self-determining in his learning
- develop self-regulation and self-talk about his learning processes
- develop abilities to think metacognitively: to plan for his learning, to stop and reflect and evaluate his learning
- above all, to be in relationship with his peers, to be a learner alongside and with his peers, rather than being withdrawn and made separate

I don’t pretend that this is an easy road to take. I don’t pretend to have all the answers either. What I do believe, however, is that this kind of learning is more likely to last a lifetime and set a child up to BE the competent learner he was at birth, rather than BECOMING the ‘needy, dependent’ learner that schools can unconsciously create.