

consulting in pedagogical growth



LISA BURMAN



Listening to the Educator

A NOTE FROM LISA

In this article, I'm featuring the reflections of Kellie Byrne, an Early Years educator who was working at St Margaret Mary's School, Croydon, South Australia at the time of writing. Kellie shared her reflections with me while we were involved in a professional learning project together. It is a powerful reminder to take - and make - the time to truly listen to children and not make assumptions about their intentions, knowledge or understandings. I'm sure you'll enjoy how well Kellie tells this story - you'll be able to imagine yourself having a conversation with her!

Are You Really Listening?

KELLIE BYRNE

My colleagues and I were in the first part of a full day PD session with Lisa Burman. Our R/1 team had worked closely with Lisa throughout the year and really valued the knowledge and passion for quality education that Lisa had shared with us.

During this particular part of our learning, we were examining the links between playful learning and the Australian Curriculum. While we knew these links could be made, it was valuable to look at them in terms of the General Capabilities. Lisa had created an observational tool in the form of a recording sheet with the General Capabilities listed with space to record what we saw and heard while children were at play.

Off we trooped to our learning spaces where we were to choose one child to focus on during the playful learning time and record our observations. "How exciting!" I thought to myself. "I have just the child in mind". I was so smug in my preObservational walk to room 15. After all, Serena was one of the most creative children I'd ever met. "My example of matching playful learning to General Capabilities was going to be amazing," I thought. "Would she be making a cardboard city complete with skyscrapers and cathedrals out of cereal boxes? Perhaps she would be leading a small group in dramatic play where they had crafted microphones from 3D shapes and scrunched up paper and were performing their own version of Australia's Got Talent... How impressed would Lisa Burman be?"

We wandered into the learning space (a three class, open unit with an outside learning space that runs across the back of the building) and each teacher went scurrying off to locate his or her child to observe.



I found Serena walking around the room with a piece of paper in her hand. She headed over to get a pot of coloured pencils. "Hi Serena!" I greeted her with the level of enthusiasm usually only seen in Tupperware sales people. "Hi," she said with no particular care for how important she was to become in my day. "And what are you creating in playful learning today?" I asked. Serena didn't respond in words. Rather, she held up the paper she had been carrying and continued walking through the doors to a table in the outside area. What fresh horror had I just witnessed? Serena, my creative prodigy was holding up a blacklineO master picture of a crown. "Lisa friggin' Burman" was in my classroom and there was a child about to do colouring in! I was so mortified that for a while I just looked around the room for another child to follow. I was the man overboard, waiting for someone to throw me a life jacket. These children had no sense of my desperation and casually went about their play with not a care in the world.

Thankfully, I managed to compose myself and decided to follow Serena outside to find out more about what she was doing. I watched her colouring her crown picture and thought about how mind numbing this was for Serena. Why had she decided that colouring in a picture was something she wanted to do? She had free choice during playful learning.

The children all knew where to access materials and resources and I had been proud of their independence and motivation during play, as the year had gone on. If they couldn't locate what they needed, they would come and ask. We often had shared what we had learned and many times I'd been amazed at their ingenuity and resourcefulness.

I began to question Serena as curiosity had taken over from horror and I wanted to find out more about her choices. The crown picture looked like a photocopy. I asked Serena where she got it. Serena informed me that she had planned her play at home and printed off the crown picture at home. Her idea was to use it in her play (my understanding was that it would be a prop). I asked her about how she might put it together and she said, "It might be hard. The lines help us but make us trace it". (General Capability: Critical and creative thinking.

I asked her more about printing it off at home and she told me she had used the home computer to find the picture. "I had to use Dad's printer because the other one was out of ink." (ICT Capability).

I also was curious about the fact that Serena was working alone. She was a very social child and could often be found running mini 'workshops' on how to make fans or create costumes from paper and wool.

She kept an eye on what was going on around her. I asked Serena about what she might do with it when it was finished and she replied, "Celebrate the Hannah Montana show with An." (Personal and Social Capability.)

When I asked how someone else could make a crown if they wanted to, Serena said, "I could trace it really hard so the lines go through to the paper..." (Critical and creative thinking.)

We talked about who would wear a crown and Serena said, "A princess...Rapunzel." She talked about the story of Rapunzel, using vocabulary like, "big, tall, castle" (Literacy)

Talking to Serena about her playful learning, asking questions and getting her to think about, 'what if?' highlighted to me the amazing learning that was happening here. What I had initially dismissed as meaningless, time wasting was in fact a wellOplanned, creative process that provided Serena with opportunities for engaging in literacy and ICT, creativity, problem solving, dramatic play and social interaction. I learned that just because something is not evident right then and there, does not mean there is not learning behind or following on from the play we witness. I was so glad that I stopped and talked with Serena, sharing the learning experience with her. I can guarantee that whatever she learned from that special project, I learned just as much.

Thank goodness for those children who can open our minds like Serena did. I will make more of an effort to put aside my opinions and values of what 'good play' is and let the children show me themselves.