



Lisa Burman

Consulting in Pedagogical Change

September 2014

The Race to Learn

Nature Play Workshop

Twilight at St Teresa's
School, Brighton

Limited places available
Facilitated by Amanda
Bartram

Thursday 6 November

[Register here via Eventbrite](#)

USA Study Tour

April 11-21 2015

Boulder Journey School,
Colorado (early childhood school)

Wonder of Learning
Exhibition, Brooklyn, NY
Elementary School/s in NYC

[Itinerary available here](#)

**Registrations close October
3rd**

This article has spent a long time in the composing phase. I've spent many a long walk or interstate drive reflecting on the ideas expressed here and organizing my thoughts. Sometimes I wondered if it would ever make it to paper!

I am privileged to visit many different educational settings in my work: from childcare centres, to kindergartens to primary schools. They are diverse and unique places of learning, but they share one thing in common: everyone tells me they are so busy they feel like they don't have time to think.

It's true that some learning places are 'busier' than others, in that they seem to take on many new initiatives at the same time or provide a multitude of enriching experiences for their children that take them out of the regular learning day. BUT every place is busy in its own way and many educators feel the pressure of this at some time during the year.

This article doesn't pretend to have the answers to this struggle. The answers need to come from within teachers and within their learning communities because if there's one thing I'm certain of, a one-size-fits-all approach just does not work. What's right for one community will not be right for their neighbour. I hope my reflections expressed here can serve to open up dialogue and questioning about the priorities we choose to have in the important work of living side-by-side with children.



Less is More

(or 5 Reasons to Slow Down)

Lisa Burman

“Slow down, you move too fast. Got to make the morning last...”

The lyrics of the famous Simon and Garfunkel song resonate in my ears these days. Seems like life is getting faster and faster and schools (*I use this term inclusively of all educational settings*) are completely caught up in the race of life. This concerns me on many levels – for children, for learning and for teachers’ wellbeing.

Unfortunately, I don’t have any magic answers for this problem, but I do think that the first step in solving any challenge is exploring the issue and the possibilities. Here I offer my top 5 reasons (in no particular order) for why I believe it is essential for schools to slow down.

1. **Deep learning cannot happen when we rush.**

The brain needs downtime to process and form strong connections. Frank and Karlsson from University of California research the area of memory. They found that there was stronger

‘replay memory’ and more neuron activity in the brain during wakeful rest. These “resting-state networks” help us process our experience, consolidate memories and reinforce learning.

A personal ‘working theory’...

If we are always rushing to the next activity/task/event/topic, perhaps we are not giving our brain enough time to process our new learning.

This processing time is required for children’s learning but also educator’s learning. It doesn’t matter how old your brain is, it still benefits from time to process ideas and form personal theories. So slow learning is beneficial for professional learning too. Perhaps its time to take this more seriously and give educators time to think, reflect and be in dialogue with each other, rather than cramming too many new initiatives into the professional learning calendar?

Less is More

Top 5 Reasons to Do Less

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2. Teacher Burnout

Teachers often feel overwhelmed with the volume and pace of their workload. There is no doubt their wellbeing is affected. I worry about teacher burn out. The best educators work incredibly hard and give of their all for the children they teach. If they feel they are like a laboratory mouse on the running wheel they won't last the distance.

A personal working theory...

I wonder if this is part of the reason the teaching profession has such a high rate of drop out in the first five years of teaching?

The old saying is a bit clichéd now: "Work smarter not harder". But it is still valid. Educators are already working hard, but perhaps some of that hard work is misplaced. Are we investing a lot of energy into the wrong areas? Are we spending time and energy in the places that make the most difference to children's learning? (In my opinion, places like wellbeing, relationships, belonging, involvement, intellectual quality, and creativity.)

The only one who can answer this question for you is you. What is the balance of time and energy for you? Is the balance uneven and leaning towards those things that don't make as much difference to children's learning? (What are these areas? That's a huge question. Maybe things like test taking, summative assessment that doesn't inform teaching, teaching discrete bits of literacy and numeracy in isolation that don't support children to BE literate and numerate...?)

3. Coverage isn't Learning

There is a growing focus on 'covering the curriculum' to the detriment of focusing on the learning. Coverage isn't learning. I'm reminded of the old Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown brags that he has taught Snoopy to whistle. He and Linus stand by Snoopy's kennel waiting for him to whistle. "I thought you said he could whistle?" Linus asks. "I said, I taught him, I didn't say he learnt it," replies Charlie Brown.

This feels too familiar to what is happening in many schools these days. We're focusing too much on what is taught and not enough on what learning is taking place. We have had the 'crowded curriculum' as long as I can remember being a teacher (from the mid-80s), but we keep adding and adding to it. Enough is enough!

Many educators are de-cluttering their physical environments in order to "de-institutionalise" them and I think we would also benefit from a de-cluttering of the curriculum.

Doing less is doing more, for sure. But it's more than that. The way we structure learning, the ways we plan, timetable and programme for learning all have impact on a cluttered curriculum.

Perhaps one way to stop the focus on coverage is for our planning to focus on the big concepts and ideas rather than the discrete small parts of learning. Focussing on concepts helps us to see connections between learning areas and helps children to contextualize, apply and transfer their learning. The alternative

sometimes looks like a lot of separate boxes of 'knowing stuff'.

A personal 'working theory'...

When we compartmentalize learning into boxes of 'knowing stuff', is it more likely to stay in the short-term memory and not be understood at a conceptual level; therefore making it difficult to be transferred over time and contexts?

Starting our planning with two clear views I think could help connect all the discrete parts of the curriculum. Firstly with a clear view of the children we teach and secondly by thinking about conceptual understandings within a curriculum. It's definitely hard work to do this. It requires teachers to really know the curriculum – and, most importantly, really know their children. Once we know the curriculum we are in a place to be able to play around with it – to move it around, to connect it and to stretch it within meaningful contexts that make more sense to our children.

Traditionally, curriculum design has been "topic" rather than "concept" based. This has led to what Lynn Erickson calls "*Two Dimensional Curriculum Design*" that's focussed on coverage ("inch deep, mile wide") and is intellectually shallow. *Three Dimensional Curriculum Design* is focussed on ideas and concepts and regards facts as providing a foundation to understand conceptual, transferable ideas rather than knowledge being an end in itself. It has intellectual depth because it requires types of thinking other than remembering – that is, processing, connecting, inferring, hypothesizing and so on (*Erickson, Concept-based Teaching and Learning IB Position Paper, 2012*),

I firmly believe the pedagogy we choose to use makes all the difference. A pedagogy that embraces playfulness in all its broad meanings

is one way to do so. A playful pedagogy does not mean dramatic play, or having a sandpit or a block area. It is about taking a pedagogical stance and choosing practices that are open, creative, collaborative, intrinsically satisfying, child-directed and messy (cognitively and maybe physically). And for all ages, not just for young children!

4. Mixed Messages About Learning

What do we want children to understand about the process of learning? Personally, I want children to understand that deep learning takes time and effort: that learning isn't always easy but it can be satisfying even when it's hard. I want them to understand that when something is difficult it means there is potential for learning if we're persistent with it and trust ourselves as learners. I want them to see the connections between things they learn so they can use and apply their learning. I want them to feel the satisfaction of working hard on something or thinking hard to understand something. Above all, I want them to develop the dispositions and skills to be a confident, powerful lifelong learner so their life is rich and full.

I think we are giving children some mixed messages about learning these days. When we rush learning, moving from one activity or learning area to the next, we give children the message that being a strong learner is about getting the task done and moving onto the next. The focus is on the wrong place: it's on the task not the learning.

When we separate our days into too many different learning areas or 'lessons', we give the message that learning is about surface thinking and we often keep learning in the boxes of 'knowing stuff'. There is little opportunity to make connections because there's no time given to it.

When we plan for too much in our day, too much in our week and too much in our term, we create the illusion that strong learners get a lot done, they work quickly on the task and move onto the next thing when the teacher tells them too. We are actually creating the conditions for compliance and superficial learning. We want children to do their best, but also tell them to hurry up and finish the task. We want them to become deeply involved in their learning but don't give them the time to do so.

Rethinking how we schedule or timetable our days is one place to start changing this for children.

- Provide long chunks of time for children to engage in learning experiences and teachers to observe, notice and interact with learners
- Stop scheduling 'subject areas' each week but timetable chunks of time around a concept that is being explored, inquired into and reflected on
- Include time for remembering, revisiting and reflecting
- Experiment with whole days devoted to exploring a concept or big idea rather than boxes of subject areas. How does the freedom to follow the learning and flow more authentically and naturally with the learning feel to you as the teacher and to children?

5. Do we teach children or the curriculum?

Carl Honore says we are living in a '*cult of speed*'. I tend to agree. Who is the first one in our street to get a new car? Which teacher gets their reports in first? And of course, the most striking example for children is: Who

gets to the highest reading level first? (More about that in my previous article "*I'm More Than a Reading Level*" where I talk about 'video game reading'). In schools, I wonder if the seduction of speed, of winning the race of learning, leads us to follow the curriculum more than the learner.

Too many teachers tell me things like, "There are still some children who don't understand this...(maths concept, for example) but I have to move on because we've got so much to cover." Or "The children are so interested and engaged in learning about ...and they have so many questions they want to explore. But we have to finish this topic/inquiry by next week because our yearly overview says we need to move onto..."

Planning is important. I'm a huge planner! It helps us to organise our thinking, to make connections between ideas and concepts, to frame learning in meaningful contexts for children. We often plan far too much though. I do this all the time when I'm planning professional learning workshops! I have to remind myself that if I planned it, I can 'un-plan' it too. Just because it's written on paper or in my programme doesn't mean it HAS to be done. Consider your forward planning as *possibilities* that help to get you mentally prepared for what might happen. We can prepare resources and lesson ideas, but if we relentlessly forge ahead with the plans with little regard to the children, we are in real danger of leaving them behind.

Two ways I've been working with educators to explore forward planning in a flexible way that doesn't constrict us to chasing our tail and following the plan without the child are:

Anticipatory Mapping – I learnt this idea from exploring The Project Approach many years ago. Make a mind map around a concept

(the big ideas not the discrete bits of learning), but consider it a collection of possibilities rather than ‘must do’s’. The children’s thinking and learning may take you down one path but not another. You won’t know this until you are in the midst of the messiness of learning. I also recommend adding any new pathways you and the children discover along the way: a balance between forward and reflective planning.

‘Strings of lessons’ – I learnt this idea from my friend Leah Mermelstein who is a Literacy Consultant in USA. Beginning with a concept or big idea, you can plan strings of lessons around a learning intention. A string of lessons can be long or short. You won’t know for sure if it will be a long string or a short string until you are engaged in the learning with your children. Your formative assessment will tell you the length of the string. You might even add new strings to your plan along the way, as you learn from your formative assessment and from the children’s thinking. Planning with the child in mind means that we constantly reflect on children’s learning: our formative assessment information, which can be observations, work samples, photographs, child self-evaluation and other assessment tools. Observation and reflection remain the most powerful assessment tools in my toolkit.

I’m reminded here that the above ideas assume that we are already planning for learning not for tasks. Reflect on your own planning and programming. How much of it reflects the learning intentions you have for your children, and how much of it looks like a list of activities or learning tasks?

The learning experiences are the vehicle for learning not an end in itself. It is important to plan for rich, engaging, active learning experiences (this is the playful pedagogy I

mentioned earlier), but it must always start with a clear idea of what you hope the children will learn, explore and develop. Without this intentionality on the part of the educator, it remains a list of fun activities or things to do.

Reflection:

- Am I clear about what I hope for children to learn by being engaged in a particular experience?
- Do I explain to the children what we are learning, or do I assign a task for them to complete?
- Do I explain the relevance of this learning – why it is important or how it will help us or be used by us?
- Do I provide children with opportunities to explain what they are learning, not just talk about what they are doing?

