

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: A LENS FOR ENHANCING CREATIVITY AND EXPLORATION

Background

We noticed our children were relying on resources, peers and technology expecting that educators would entertain them rather than creating their own play experiences. Children seemed to have lost the ability to think outside the box and would only seem interested in familiar, safe experiences. We wanted to help them to explore beyond the activities and experiences with which they are familiar in order to reduce their reliance on technology as a source of entertainment.

We started to think about diminishing creativity and thought that the structured environment of school had perhaps stifled children's ability to think creatively. This was somewhat supported by results of the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking* (TTCT) whose data indicated that since 1990, even as IQ scores have risen, creative thinking scores have significantly decreased.

We wondered if adults had played a role in the diminishing resilience of children and if this impacted their capacity to explore new things and ideas. Evidence indicates that some of the processes thought to play a part in promoting resilience include managed exposure to risk; opportunities to exert agency and develop mastery; strong relationships with supportive parents or carers, or external mentors and other social networks; positive school experiences and extra-curricular activities; and capacity to 'reframe' adversities (Newman, 2004).

We also thought about children's attention spans, wondering if the instant gratification of our modern society had impacted children's capacity to engage with anything requiring detail and effort. Research indicated the contrary. Children don't have short attention spans and can focus for hours on a single project when it is relevant and meaningful to them. However they need to have the time and the space to accomplish it.

We were concerned that children may have difficulties articulating their thoughts and ideas due to lack of opportunity to think and act independently. We observed that adults tend to do a lot for children particularly in directing their thoughts and actions. Research tells us that children take an active role in the learning process, acting much like little scientists as they perform experiments, make observations, and learn about the world. As children interact with the world around them, they continually add new knowledge, build upon existing knowledge, and adapt previously held ideas to accommodate new information. Therefore, when children are given the opportunity to explore and are listened to, they will learn and interact in their environment. They need freedom to take risks, make mistakes and know that it is okay to be wrong and that failure is a learning opportunity.



Research Questions

Our thinking about children's diminishing creativity and resilience, their perceived lack of ability to sustain focus and attention as well as their apparent lack of ideas led us to the following question to frame our research:

How can we foster children's creativity and exploration through play in such a way that:

- encourages their input;
- promotes independence; and
- upholds their rights?

Our action research project and data collection methods were chosen to respond to this question.

Research Method and Data

Throughout the cycle of our action research we gathered data using written surveys completed by teachers from public and private schools long day care educators, family day care providers and parents.

Our most powerful data however came from our conversations with children and observations of play experiences and experimentation. We were able to identify case studies within our research which informed our findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Firstly, we discovered the children needed to be involved in more than just what to do, how to do it and the resources needed to accomplish this. They needed to be involved in how the centre ran and other matters that affected them. As a result we implemented a student committee to give them a voice in decision making in our service.

One of our 12 year old, male students was totally obsessed with technology. If he could not engage with any form of technology, he would become quite agitated. Getting him to engage in any form of creative or artistic venture was a struggle. He would wander around the room stating his boredom and disturbing other children. Our mission was to get him engaged in the program. When we had our student council elections, he reluctantly got up and gave a speech. After the votes were counted, he was voted in as Vice Chair. That afternoon, he proudly told his mum that he was joint Vice Chair with another child. The day they got their badges he was so proud. From that moment we started to see a change in him. He started to share with us times that he had helped the younger children, taking ownership of the service and becoming involved. Getting him involved with activities other than technology was a significant challenge we faced. We set limits on technology encouraging the children to do other activities until technology was available. To our satisfaction, they became so involved in the play they forgot about technology. Our disengaged 12 year old went from being disruptive to sharing some of the most amazing and creative work we had ever seen from him. When we did the lino prints he spent hours drawing and carving with great detail. We were so proud of his accomplishment we felt great personal rewards.

Our next case involved a group of boys who showed no interest in participating in a talent show that we were holding. They claimed it would be totally boring and that they were not willing to be involved. After speaking with them and discovering they had a shared interest in Parkour, we encouraged them to use that interest as their talent. We recorded their performance and put it on facebook. They had 743 views and went from being a group of children who were disengaged in the program to being highly engaged and motivated.

Theoretical Framework

The rights of the child was the framework that underpinned our reflection and analysis of the data. The following Articles were drawn upon to inform our findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Article 3 All organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for each child.

Article 12 Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account

Article 13: Right to freedom of expression

Article 14: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Article 15: Freedom of association

Article 17: Access to appropriate information

Article 31: Children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities



Findings

Giving children a voice promotes self-esteem and self-worth. By giving them a voice through expressing choice, opinions, feelings and emotions they learn that they are important and valued and this promotes their development. Children involved in decision making develop a strong sense of agency.

Active participation for children is about having the opportunity to express a view, influence decision-making and achieve change. It is the informed and willing involvement of all children.

Meaningful and worthwhile participation is grounded in a respectful relationships and the interactions between children and adults need to be receptive and responsive and based in trust.

As educators we found that we had to change our view so there were a number of key principles that guided our actions. These principles included:

Viewing the child as a valued citizen We view children as experts in their own lives. They are our key informants and best source of advice on matters affecting their lives (MacNaughton et al, 2003).

Appropriateness Young children are wiser than many might think, under the appropriate circumstances they have the capacity to express their views powerfully and often simply (Christensen & James, 2000; MacNaughton et al, 2003; Moloney, 2005).

Respect for the child means consultations are based on respect and reciprocal relationships with them. 'Handing the floor' to the child does not diminish adult responsibilities toward the child (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). It is important that adults ensure a safe and secure context in which the consultations occur and demonstrate a genuine interest in what the child is expressing.

Trust develops through active listening which is more than just hearing what a child says. It enables a child to open up to you when talking. When a child trusts you they will tell you what they want and how they feel and will feel safe to be themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

When children see and hear us giving their words importance and meaning, they are empowered to share their thinking and knowledge with even greater freedom. As educators, we have a unique responsibility to engage with what a child is thinking and learning. We have the power to impact thoughts and learning with our presence and our words. When we stop, and actually listen to children and give their words power and meaning we empower children to be voices of change. If young people are to be able to express their opinions about issues that affect them (Article 12), they need information (Article 17) and they need to be able to gather with others to discuss issues (Article 15). Without freedom of expression and freedom of thought (Articles 13 and 14), children cannot have a voice.

Throughout the action research journey we have been on, the capacity of both educators and children has increased. We have seen the children go from declaring they are bored, unable to express their creativity, driven by technology and not being engaged within the program to some incredible exploratory play and amazing creativity.

Educators have gone from being highly stressed, traffic controllers who were not invested in their work to excited visionaries motivated with a reignited passion. Each day is a new learning experience for all stakeholders.



Therefore, it is our view that all organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for each child (Article 3) and ensure children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities (Article 31).

References

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