



Scaffolding Alex: Actively Supporting Young Children in the Visual Arts

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 1, 43-48, 2005

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INTRODUCING ALEX



Alex is four years old, nearly five. He's an articulate and intelligent boy with lots of energy and enthusiasm. He goes to an early childhood centre where the staff are finding the behaviour of the nearly – five children quite challenging. This article deals specifically with some of the work that eventuated with Alex and his peers. It highlights the effectiveness of scaffolding children's learning by picking up on their interests and working with them, the importance of art as a cognitive tool, and the relationship between behaviour and the environment.

My professional development colleague and I met Alex and his playmates when we were asked to come and observe these nearly-fives to assist with developing behaviour management techniques for staff. We needed to observe the centre so that we could ascertain the centre's routines and policies, and watch the children's interactions within the environment so that we could develop a series of appropriate behaviour management workshops for the centre staff.

It was important for us to develop a relationship with the children as well as the staff so we could participate in the programme authentically. On our first visit to the centre we observed that Alex's teacher had 'animals' as the current programme focus. Consequently, on our second visit to the centre we took a big box of animal bones with us. We were able to share the contents of the box with the children at the early morning mat time.



Sharing the box of bones with children at morning mat time

Having had many years' experience of hands-on teaching we knew we were likely to spark the children's interest by talking about the bones. The range of different bones, as predicted, fascinated the older children. By using a reference book on bones, they were able to identify where some of the animals bones had come from. Alex was particularly impressed with the bones. He enjoyed talking about their differences and making comparisons between the animal bones and his own bones.



Alex works with the author examining a sheep's skull

We also knew that if we wanted complete captivation then all we had to do was throw in the word 'dinosaur' into the discussion. The children identified three of the bones as dinosaur bones! The children's interest in the bones was heightened by the move to sand and dramatic play by burying the bones in the sandpit for the children to find.

Alex participated enthusiastically in the search for the bones. As he played, he talked about dinosaurs and began to reveal his fairly extensive knowledge on the subject. He responded enthusiastically to new information about the subject and became a dedicated palaeontologist when informed about the types of scientists that studied dinosaurs. Adding TV reporters, with imaginary microphones, into the children's dramatic play created further stimulation. The children were able to articulate their knowledge of dinosaurs to an imaginary TV camera.



Alex and friends pretending to be palaeontologists being interviewed for a television documentary

Long after the dramatic play in the sandpit had ended, Alex pondered the bones he had found. He discovered that one of the bones was breaking down and if he banged it on a hard surface flakes of bone would come off. It was at this point that it was suggested to Alex that he might like to try drawing his bones. His interest was peaking and it was a good moment to introduce another way for Alex to express his interest in the bones. It was also an opportunity to challenge Alex in an area in which he was less confident. He was keen and went to the easel enthusiastically. The easel was situated outside, under the eaves, so access was quick and easy. Once paper and crayons were procured Alex was encouraged to draw his bone. His instant response was that

he couldn't do it! Alex was encouraged to try drawing the bone and reassured that he would be 'talked through' the process as he went. So Alex worked on his picture as the properties and shape of the bone were discussed with him. Once he had drawn his first bone he was away! He covered the paper with drawings of bones. His success with his drawing was hugely motivating. He began talking about the names of the dinosaur bones that he had drawn. He decided he needed to write these on his work. With adult support Alex was able to utilise his knowledge of the alphabet in a way that enabled him to spell the words he needed. Alex was extremely pleased with his work and he proudly showed his picture to other staff who, by genuinely praising and encouraging his efforts, reinforced his on-task behaviour and creative endeavour.



Alex is encouraged to observe the shape of the bone and draw what he can see

The work with Alex highlights several important aspects of teaching and learning in an early childhood environment:

- The importance of the teacher/adult role in providing scaffolding of children's new learning
- The importance of following children's strengths and interests
- The importance of art in children's cognitive processes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEACHER/ADULT ROLE IN PROVIDING SCAFFOLDING OF CHILDREN'S NEW LEARNING

There has been a shift in early childhood teaching practice over the past ten years. The more hands-off approach to teaching where children were believed to 'unfold' without adult intervention has been largely replaced with one in which teachers and adults take a more proactive role in engaging with children's teaching and learning (Jordan, 1998). The concept of the *co-construction of knowledge* – where a child's social interactions with adults and peers are crucial to their understanding and acquisition of new knowledge, and *scaffolding* – where adults or more competent peers guide and support children moving from one level of competence to another, are fundamental to the basic premises of this approach.

Children reach moments in their play and activity when they are ready to make important cognitive shifts or movements towards increasing their knowledge, and/or their competency in certain task or skill areas. This critical moment is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – 'the zone of proximal development is a dynamic region of sensitivity to learning the skills of the culture, in which children develop through participation in problem solving with more experienced members of the culture' (Rogoff, 1990: 14). Scaffolding

by adults, or their more informed peers, is an effective way of giving children the help they need to make these shifts.

Working with Alex illustrates examples of scaffolding that were occurring at regular moments throughout the adult/child interactions. However scaffolding was most crucial when working with Alex at the easel. This was a point where Alex had reached a critical ZPD. By supporting Alex with language, demonstration, prompting and praise, he was able to achieve a level of competence in drawing a bone that he would have been unable to achieve alone due to his anxiety about his ability to perform the task. His sense of achievement when he completed the task was powerful enough to motivate him to take new risks with spelling. Again, an adult scaffolded his attempts. Again, Alex achieved a new level of competence.



Alex writes the word 'diplodocus' but has assistance with spelling

It has been noted that there are significant environmental conditions that will allow this type of teaching to occur successfully:

- Teachers/adults having the opportunity to spend time with child 1-1, or in small groups, for sustained periods of time.
- Awareness by teachers/adults of children's levels of competency – through observation and participation in their play.
- An awareness of the types of appropriate techniques that can be used to scaffold children's learning – e.g., questioning, prompting, confirming, modelling, praising, encouraging, discussing, reflecting.
- An awareness of the moments when children are ready to move from one level of competency to another.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOWING CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS AND INTERESTS

Early childhood educators are becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of being aware of children's interests, and the need to plan their programme in response to these. The basic premise for this approach is that children are more likely to learn and engage in learning activities if their curiosity and imagination are sparked by something they are interested in. Sylvia Ashton Warner, a world-renowned educationalist who worked in rural New Zealand in the 1950's, pioneered this approach in primary school teaching. She developed the concept of a key vocabulary (Ashton Warner, 1963). By tapping into children's interests she was able to use the interests of her new entrant children to help them to read and write. Whilst early childhood educators do not specifically teach reading and writing skills, being aware of children's interests (both at a group and individual level) and planning the programme around these

identified interests can significantly increase young children's skills and knowledge in many areas.

The concept of an *emergent curriculum* describes a programme which recognises that planning needs to emerge from the children and adults in the programme, especially from children's interests (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Early childhood educators working with this model become active facilitators and supporters of children's learning. Fundamental to a programme which focuses on children's interests is a good system of observation and analysis. Attention to what is happening for children can lead teachers to develop programmes that are a collaboration between teachers, children and the community. Consequently, 'teachers who subscribe to a pedagogy of this nature come from a place of curiosity, believe in children's capabilities, and know they are engaging in a process that is unfolding, not static.' (Curtis & Carter, 2000: xiii)

In the example of scaffolding work done with Alex, it can be seen that by hooking into things that interested Alex and his peers – dinosaurs and bones – the professional development coordinators were able to use his existing strengths and interests to move him into new areas of skill development. His existing levels of competency were utilised to the fullest and he experienced personal success and reinforcement from the adults around him.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ART IN CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE PROCESSES

Children's cognitive or intellectual development is often measured by their understanding of 'second order' representations, that is, their ability to read and write. However, it is important to realise that young children's ability to symbolise their world by using 'first order' representations such as drawing, painting, dancing, dramatic play and so on, involves just as much cognitive processing as creating 'second order' symbols (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997). It is important for teachers and educators to create as many opportunities for young children to engage in experiences that require them to think about their environment, and the objects and people in their environment that are important to them, and allowing and encouraging access to resources that will enable them to recreate these experiences symbolically. Engaging in these creative activities can enhance children's cognitive skills. Indeed 'the arts are every bit as symbolic and sophisticated as the sciences' (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997: 7).



Alex showing his picture to a younger child at the childcare centre

With Alex, adult support and scaffolding were important for assisting his move from the sandpit to the easel and encouraging him to recreate his experience symbolically through drawing his picture. After he had completed his drawing he was able to then utilise his knowledge of letters – 'second order' symbols – in a useful and meaningful way. His creative process of drawing the

bone was of *equal* cognitive value as his writing process. Having the easel in the outside area meant that the resources necessary for this activity were easily accessible and available. It has been noted that having art activities available outside, for children who favour outside activities, can result in greater use of this medium by this group of children.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood environments which are well organised and provide enriching art experiences for children like Alex, and which draw upon their interests and capture their imaginations, are likely to have children who are engaged on-task and ready to take risks. Alex was able to experience a high degree of success in this area of new learning which, with continued support from his teachers, will motivate him to express himself through art and writing.

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New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2005

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Lisa, an artist herself, has a passionate interest in art in childhood and in the way young children use this domain of learning to enhance communication and literacy skills, particularly children who have English as their second language. She is interested in cultural diversity and as the recipient of the 2003 Margaret May Blackwell Travel Bequest travelled to Australia and the United Kingdom researching children's services which support children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Her other interests in early childhood development include the involvement of families in early childhood education, and the role the physical environment plays in young children's learning.

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