

By Ivan Kiley



UNICEF South Africa's Andre Viviers kicked off the conference talking candidly about the importance of homegrown role models in South Africa, and how damaging the current system of outcomes-based education has been. He drew on a theme that emerged often throughout the conference: the importance of play in childhood development. "Playing IS learning," he said. He talked about one of the major obstacles to practical learning solutions being what he termed "the policy police". Other groups that need reaching out to include parents and practitioners.

There were several events in this two-day conference; here I'm focusing on those I was able to get to, and which had the biggest impact on me.

TALK by Tina Bruce

Tina talked about ten underlying principles of early childhood education. She warned that these are principles for teachers to use, not for teachers to be used by!

- Children need a moral framework, not just raw knowledge
- Adults need to know how to assess what children have learnt without the use of tests
- Children need adults who begin where they are
- Children need open-ended material and conversation
- Children need to learn in their mother tongue
- Children need to be given responsibility and autonomy
- Teachers mustn't impose theory onto play where it's not appropriate
- Begin with what children can do, not what they can't
- Give children the verbal tools to express their frustrations
- Offer children language – tools for expression – without expecting them to use it or react to it immediately

All that being said, Tina concluded: we mustn't let theory get in the way of practice. Structural issues need addressing to put these principles into practice.

WORKSHOP by Carole Bloch

For me, Carole's presentation was about what could be seen to be the foundations from which Tina's ten principles are derived, providing context for the play-orientated methods of teaching.

Beginning from insights about the complexity of our brains, Carole talked about systems of writing and language, showing just how significant it is to contextualise children's learning.

She then synthesised this with South Africa's early literacy problems, explaining where it's gone wrong and how it can be improved. Many children aren't learning in their mother tongues or being evaluated in their mother tongues; there are too few books in African languages so they aren't reading and writing at home. The demands being placed upon them by an outcomes-orientated educational system are not practicable or fair. So a culture of reading and writing is more than just good practice, it lays the foundation for future learning.

Carole also talked about what a mistake it is to try to package things [curricular material] 'simply' for poorer schools in attempt to help them bridge the 'knowledge gap' between them and their more privileged counterparts. This impoverished approach starves already disadvantaged learners of substantive learning power. It is the complexity and richness in learning that captures children's interests and drives them to explore.

WORKSHOP by Georgie McCall and Peter Hadebe

Georgie's talk came at the workshop's theme of 'play' from a radically different angle: the outdoors. Her colleague Peter was the school gardener in Soweto where she worked, and the two came together to illustrate the importance of nature in the development of young minds.

Georgie's talk was also different in the sense that it began with her own life story, and how she herself had developed an affinity with the outdoors from an early age. So part of the talk centred on Georgie and her own experiences of the outdoors, and the tremendous value she'd gained from learning in nature.

The next part of the talk shifted us into the reality of public schools in Soweto, and what a huge need there is for books, and blackboards, and pens, etc. Georgie told us how beneficial it has been to move the teaching environment outdoors in Soweto, where objects in nature can be used as substitutes for school supplies. Chalk and blackboards become twigs and sand, things can be drawn and written everywhere. There's no end to the number of things to count and discriminate between. It's a great substitute for the expensive school equipment for all children, and it might even offer something that the indoors cannot.

Georgie then called people up to the front at random to feel inside a pot and describe what they were feeling. To the audible surprise of many, including myself, people were able to guess what was in the pot, guided only by the feeler's crude descriptions. They weren't always simple objects either, one could not simply guess 'flower'. It had to be hibiscus. Peter came around and showed our various groups how to preserve butterflies. The lesson of this talk was simple and profound. Learning in nature is practicable, rewarding, and in many areas the best option available.

WORKSHOP by Stella Louis and Mandisa Nakani

This was about the various schemas that young children share, and how teachers can facilitate learning in a way that harmonises with these natural patterns of play. If you force linear pathways of learning, Stella tells us, you lose access to non-linear ones. If a child wants to play with an object, for example, rather than use it for its functional purpose, we should not assume that nothing is being learnt. Children don't need to learn in linear ways, and a lack of focus and direction doesn't equate to a lack of learning.

Three sets of abstract, simple drawings were passed around and we were all asked to guess which one was done by a young child. They were all quite similar, which served to illustrate the point about these schemas being universal. The other two drawings had been done by prehistoric cavemen and modern adults respectively. Stella really struck home with a lot of her depictions of these schemas, prompting several listeners to share their own experiences of how children they've worked with have fitted into similar schemas. The insight into these schemas as natural mechanisms of learning and development was very powerful. It helped to destigmatise play as something that may be seen as a waste of time, or as inappropriate for the classroom environment.

Another powerful insight that Stella provided us with was to do with the multilateral levels at which play functions in children's lives. Playing and creating stories, she told us, is how children make sense of the experiences they've had. It's part of how they process their emotions. And the corollary of this insight is that adults have a responsibility to look a little deeper into their children's behaviour. "Use your eyes", as Stella said, to gain a deeper understanding of how children are processing their experiences.