

Brother John Taylor Fellowship Report

Kim Moroney

The Importance of Early Childhood and the Academia of Play!

Introduction

This report is a fulfilment of the Brother John Taylor Fellowship for educational research. My research on the topic *The Importance of Early Childhood and the Academia of Play* included: an early years study tour to Finland and Sweden; a collegial meeting with Dr David Whitebread and his research team at The Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development & Learning (PEDAL) within the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK; and a study tour of Anji Play in Anji County, China. It is written under the mentorship of Dr Cathie Harrison, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, Education/Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, NSW.

In my current role as Education Officer Early Learning in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, I work with schools to implement diocesan Early Learning policy by facilitating a climate of contemporary thinking and understanding of Early Learning philosophy, pedagogy and best practice. Particular aspects of my role include supporting successful transition to school and best practice across the early years of schooling, play as pedagogy and self-determined play as well as the importance of environments for learning and wellbeing.

My image of the child as learner, researcher and citizen has been influenced by the educational project in Reggio Emilia. I am particularly interested in advocating for play particularly in the early years of school as well as the vital importance of environment and the spirituality of the child. I am invested in using an influential voice to highlight the importance of Early Learning and to make the child visible in education policy and practice.

This report is influenced by an essay written by Lilian G. Katz entitled *International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education: Lessons from My Travels* (1999). In the article, Katz shared seven hypotheses that occurred to her in the course of an overseas assignment conducting preschool training seminars in Barbados in the West Indies. This Fellowship report aims to take the reader on a journey via the mediums of language and photography in an attempt to respectfully and honestly report on observations, reflections and conclusions of the educational research opportunities.

I find that the experience of traveling and working with colleagues in other lands is enlightening, instructive, and enriching—not so much because of what we see, but because what we see makes us think about things that we have not thought about before. Or, perhaps it is simply that travel makes us think about something differently from the way we've thought about it before.
(Katz, 1999)

Setting the Context

Due to my research and experiences undertaken as part of the Brother John Taylor Fellowship, my understanding of play has significantly deepened and it has also been challenged. I deliberately used the word “academia” in relation to play in the title of my Fellowship application “The Importance of Early Childhood and the Academia of Play.”

In educational circles especially those removed from the early years, play is often viewed as trivial, unimportant and the opposite of real learning and “work” (Whitebread, 2015). This has been disputed more recently with researchers and scholars advocating for the life-long educational benefits of play (Brown, 2009).

One aim of my application from the outset was to present the academic, social, physical, spiritual, cultural, and wellbeing benefits of play and raise the profile of play in the early years of school.

My observations of pedagogy in school contexts indicates that play in the early years of school is particularly misunderstood, undervalued and underutilised.

This paper provides research which strongly recommends that immediate action to improve pedagogical understanding and implementation of play in Catholic schools is overdue and essential if we are to ensure 21st century learning capacities and social and emotional wellbeing.

Early Childhood is defined in international policy, academic and research literature as the period from birth to eight years

The first eight years are a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak (UNESCO). During this stage of intense neurological development, children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them. Early Childhood education therefore is more than just a preparatory stage assisting the child’s transition to formal schooling. It is a time of holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical capacities and needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation of lifelong learning and wellbeing (UNESCO).

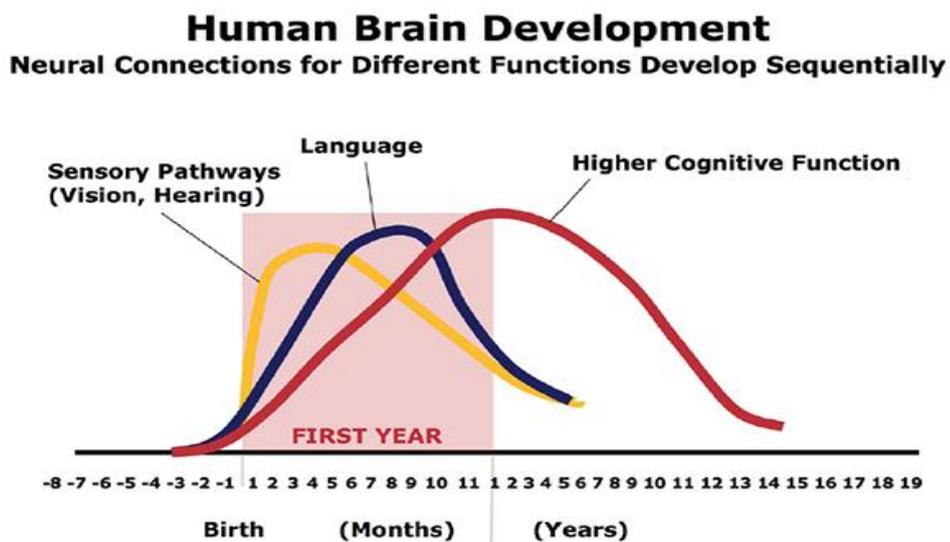
The Early Learner is the child in the age span from birth to eight years old.

My observations suggest that the child in the early years of school is often conceptualised as immature or deficient and therefore disregarded as capable, playful and curious. The educational research achieved as a result of the Fellowship, reinforces the unique capacities of the Early Learner and supports the importance of play for the Early Learner. It highlights the importance of play for the child transitioning into Kindergarten and the child in the school years of Kindergarten, Year One and Year Two where play is often undervalued, limited and in some cases non-existent.

Early Learning is both prominent and relevant in the current educational landscape of Australia and also on an international scale. The ground swell of interest, passion, data and research is partly due to contributing factors such as developments in brain science as well as re-imaging of the child as capable, playful and curious and a greater understanding and application of Early Learning philosophies and examples of best practice such as those explored through the Fellowship.

Brain Science

Research recognises that Early Childhood is the most significant time for brain development in the life of a human (Medina, 2008). The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences affect the quality of that architecture by establishing either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health and behaviour that follow. In the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second. After this period of rapid proliferation, connections are reduced through a process called pruning, so that brain circuits become more efficient. Sensory pathways like those for basic vision and hearing are the first to develop, followed by early language skills and higher cognitive functions. Connections proliferate and prune in a prescribed order, with later, more complex brain circuits built upon earlier, simpler circuits (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2000).



In the proliferation and pruning process, simpler neural connections form first, followed by more complex circuits. The timing is genetic, but early experiences determine whether the circuits are strong or weak (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2000).

Research also recognises the importance of play in activating the developing brain. A useful summary of key research findings regarding the value of play is documented in the ground breaking *Play for a Change* research review. *Play for a Change Play, policy and practice: A review of contemporary perspectives summary report* (2008) documents a collaboration by highly respected researchers Dr Stuart Lester and Dr Wendy Russell from the University of Gloucestershire. Drawing on research across a wide range of disciplines Lester and Russell suggest that play, as a distinct behavioural form, arises from brain body motivations in response to external and internal stimuli. The act of playing has an impact on the architecture and organisation of the brain, and this leads to the emergence of more complex play forms, which in turn enables the establishment of an increasing repertoire of behavioural structures and strategies.

While research on brain development is in its infancy, it is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration t assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life. (Lester & Russell, 2008)

Sadly Dr Lester passed away in 2017, leaving an impressive body of work in the field of play work, research projects at adventure playground and school playgrounds and on-going research with Play Wales. Dr Russell recognised as one of the world's leading researchers on play continues her work at the University of Gloucestershire. The power of this research was made evident in November 2017, when Dr Russell completed a successful national tour of Australia which I was fortunate to attend in Sydney. The tour entitled *Thinking Differently About Play: How it matters and why it is everybody's business* was an opportunity for Australian educators to reconfigure the ways we think about the relationship between play, space, childhood and adulthood.

Internationally...

On an international scale, the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that a high quality Early Childhood education can result in better outcomes in the later stages of life (OECD, 2012). A growing body of research recognises Early Childhood education can improve children's cognitive abilities and socio-emotional development, help create a foundation for lifelong learning, make children's learning outcomes more equitable, reduce poverty and improve social mobility from generation to generation (OECD, 2012).

International evidence indicates that almost all OECD countries have a curriculum or learning standards from age three up and in recent years, curricula or learning standards are often embedded with a lifelong learning

approach. A growing number of countries and regions have started to frame continuous child development from early childhood up to age eight, ten or eighteen. Many OECD countries focus on literacy and numeracy in their Early Learning frameworks. Some incorporate play as a separate subject area, while others embed it in other content areas (OECD, 2012). A growing body of research highlights the importance of play (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Albert Einstein noted, *play is the highest form of research* and is worthy of further exploration (Hobson, 2017). One of the most significant issues at the forefront of research in Early Childhood education (often referred to as Early Learning) is the role of play. Unlike any other time in history, the crucial role of play...*the academia of play* is attracting more national and international research, gathering evidence to support the role of play in contributing to better outcomes and success for children (OECD, 2006). The research has important implications for Catholic schools.

Recognising the importance of play is not new: over two millennia ago, Plato extolled its virtues as a means of developing skills for adult life, and ideas about play-based learning have been developing since the 19th century. International bodies like the United Nations have begun to develop policies concerned with children's right to play, and to consider implications for leisure facilities and educational programmes. But what they often lack is evidence to base policies on. Those of us who are involved in early childhood education know that children learn best through play and that this has long-lasting consequences for achievement and well-being. (Whitebread, 2015)

Nationally...

On a national scale; *Belonging, Being & Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009) is intended to support curriculum decision making to extend and enrich children's learning from birth to five years including throughout the transition to school. In NSW, the EYLF applies to children up to age five and the NSW Syllabus documents for the Australian Curriculum apply to children from age five in the school system. While not mandated for implementation throughout the first years of school, the EYLF informs pedagogy and practice for children birth to five and aligns with the Australian curriculum. The NSW syllabus documents for the Australian Curriculum recognise the significance of prior to school learning and the pedagogy of the EYLF (Connor, 2011).

The Australian Curriculum is aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework and builds on its key learning outcomes, namely: children have a strong sense of identity; children are connected with, and contribute to, their

world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; and children are effective communicators (ACARA, 2012 p.12).

The Australian Curriculum has direct and intentional links to the EYLF with play and inquiry-based learning identified as appropriate for children of all ages. Teachers are encouraged to make professional judgements about how to deliver the curriculum in appropriate, contextualised and cross-disciplinary ways.

Teachers are able to choose how best to introduce concepts and processes and how to progressively deepen understanding to maximise the engagements and learning of every student. Connections between the EYLF and Australian Curriculum are further elaborated in the ECA- ACARA paper (Connor, 2011).

The EYLF document has been influential, setting a direction in Early Learning especially in Australian prior to schools settings. The EYLF recognises that, “children’s learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated” (DEEWR, 2009, p.9).

Play is a context for learning that:

- allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness
- enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity
- enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning
- assists children to develop relationships and concepts, and
- stimulates a sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009, p.9).

The understanding of play outlined in the EYLF is yet to encompass the early years of school in NSW. This lack of understanding will be addressed throughout the report. Skills and processes recognised as being vital components of 21st century learning including critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, intra and interpersonal abilities, emotional resilience and creativity have all been linked theoretically and empirically to play. Children who engage in quality play experience are more likely to have well developed memory skills, language development are and able to regulate their behaviour leading to advanced school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). However, play opportunities for children, especially for those living in modern urban environments (now the majority of children world-wide) are changing - at home, in school and in the wider community. Children have less time and opportunity to play. Researchers (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009; Pui-Wah, 2010) point to a lack of play and playful methods in schools, particularly the poor integration of play with the curriculum (Lord & McFarland, 2010).

It is difficult to measure the impact of diminishing play opportunities on the developing child. One method of data collection about children is the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a nationwide measure that

looks at how young children have developed by the time they start their first year of full-time school. It measures five important areas, or domains, of early childhood development that are closely linked to the predictors of adult health, education and social outcomes. The five domains are:

1. Physical health and wellbeing
2. Social competence
3. Emotional maturity
4. Language and cognitive skills (school-based)
5. Communication skills and general knowledge (AEDC, 2009).

The 2015 AEDC results show that around 1 in 5 children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s), which is in line with results from in 2012 and an improvement from results from 2009. Similar to previous AEDC results, in 2015 more boys were developmentally vulnerable than girls. Twenty-eight per cent of boys were considered developmentally vulnerable in comparison to fifteen per cent of girls. This percentage has remained steady over the three data collections. Key gender differences have been identified in domains such as health, social and emotional development and language and cognitive skills. The disparity is consistent across socio-economic gradients.

There has been a decrease over time in the percentage of Indigenous children vulnerable on one or more domain(s), from 47 per cent in 2009 to 42 per cent in 2015. With such alarming statistics, play has been acknowledged as a method to specifically address the identified vulnerabilities across the domains so as to make improvements to the child's growth and development (AEDC National Report, 2015).

Case studies which are available on the AEDC website show that school communities are analysing data and implementing play in a variety of ways to positively impact and support learning, growth, development, well-being and success.

The educational research achieved through the Fellowship is an opportunity to challenge all in Catholic schools to think deeply about play as a pedagogy and the value of self-determined play for methods to benefit learning outcomes and wellbeing for children. It challenges leaders and teachers to value and implement play in the school setting for the benefit of the Early Learner and for building communities of care and compassion.

With a growing international focus on play there is much to be gained by investigating, observing, and reflecting on international best practice in early childhood education/early learning. The Brother John Taylor Fellowship has enabled me to investigate play-based learning pedagogies in Finland, Sweden, The Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development & Learning (PEDAL) at the University of Cambridge and Anji County, China.

Project Aim

The aim of *The Importance of Early Childhood and the Academia of Play* project was to explore substantial and compelling research and the implementation of best practice in relation to the role of play in children's learning and development in different educational contexts and settings and subsequently to investigate the potential of play-based approaches within our educational context of Catholic education. The project included three study tour components:

1. The Early Years in Finland and Sweden
2. Centre for Play in Education, Development & Learning (PEDAL), Cambridge, UK
3. Anjisplay, Anji County China.

Rationale for the Project

How is this educational research and report relevant to Catholic Schools?

Early Childhood education is a key challenge and educational priority in Australia (Brown, Sumsion & Press, 2009) and therefore totally relevant to Catholic schools. Representatives from the various dioceses of NSW and ACT meet at regular Early Years Network meetings held at the Catholic Education Commission (CEC) NSW, now Catholic Education NSW. These representatives also attend Early Years Network meetings organised by the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC). A national Early Learning forum organised by the NCEC has also been held annually since 2015. It is evident from these gatherings that there is a noticeable variance in understandings and practices in Early Learning between schools in the various dioceses across NSW and ACT, as well as significant differences between diocesan schools across the states of Australia.

Catholic schools are committed to and aware of the crucial role of Early Learning. This is particularly recognised through the work of the CEC NSW Early Years Network Committee. The Strategic Directions and Work plan 2016 of the then CEC NSW identified Early Childhood services as a key strategic issue. The Commission also identifies policy development and implementation to promote the best outcomes for all NSW school communities. Given the mission and the priorities of the CEC NSW, research and reporting on the most appropriate approaches to identify the key aspects of the purpose of Catholic schooling is critical. Early Childhood education (whether it be prior to school or at school) has been recognised as having great relevance to Catholic education and therefore each and every Catholic school.

The Importance of Early Childhood and The Academia of Play project will assist in achieving this goal. The Project's aim of promoting and enriching the multi-faceted aspects of Early Childhood; based on research and documentation will support a more consistent and high profile approach to Early Childhood throughout Catholic schools in NSW.

The project report facilitates reflection and discussion regarding the nature of Catholic education and Catholic identity in NSW Catholic school communities. The educational research of the Fellowship validates further developments in Early Learning and prioritises Early Childhood as a significant foundation for lifelong learning and social and emotional well-being that is consistent with Catholic ethos.

Why was overseas travel necessary for this project?

Overseas travel and first hand collegial examination of best practice internationally, provides insight to diverse contexts and practices. It offers a platform for global conversations about what works in Early Childhood and why. Observing pedagogy in action and discussing the complexities of Early Learning with international colleagues supports the dissemination of knowledge. The Fellowship enabled the consideration of best policies in collaboration and partnership with professionals from across the world possible. As outlined below the international study undertaken within this project promotes diverse, multi and inter-disciplinary perspectives on childhood and in particular, Early Childhood education that have relevance for the Australian Catholic education context.

Why Finland?

In Finland, the comprehensive school system has sat at the top of Europe's rankings for the past 16 years and has delivered academic success. PISA 2009 results saw Finland ranked 3rd in Reading, 6th in Mathematics and 2nd in Science. There has been intense worldwide interest in how the Finns manage it. The groundwork for good school performance begins earlier, long before children enter formal school. Play is central to education in Finland. The emphasis is not on Mathematics, Reading or Writing (children receive no formal instruction in these until they are seven and in primary school) but play. The main aim of Early Childhood education is not explicitly "education" in the formal sense but the promotion of the health and wellbeing of every child. The "joy" of learning, language enrichment, communication and physical activity are critical components of the Finnish education system. This will be further explored in the report.

PISA 2012 saw Finland drop to 6th in Reading, 12th in Mathematics and 5th in Science. Finland still outranked Australia's 2012 PISA results were Australia ranked 14th in Reading, 19th in Mathematics and 16th in Science. Concerned that sliding PISA scores reflected complacency in its schools, national curriculum changes were introduced in Finland last year. These changes now devote *more* time to play and art. Creativity is the watchword. Core competences include "learning-to learn", multi-literacy, digital skills and entrepreneurship. At the heart of the new curriculum, Finland's National Board of Education states unashamedly, is the joy of learning.

Why Sweden?

While most people interested in education have heard of the Finnish example of high quality education, fewer have heard that Finland's neighbour, Sweden is also an international leader in Early Childhood education. The Early Childhood education system is called "Edu-care." Swedish Edu-care respects young children as full human beings. Education in Sweden is shaped by respect for each child as a competent person in his or her own right, not just a receptacle for knowledge but a contributor and a creator. The success of the system rests on a firm belief in the human right of every child to be given the very best care, upbringing and education that the nation can offer. As outlined later in the report the study program in Sweden was to prove an informative and challenging experience.

Why the University of Cambridge?

The Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development & Learning (PEDAL) is a research centre within the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. The guiding focus of PEDAL's work is to develop substantial and compelling research concerned with the role of play and playfulness in young children's learning and development and the potential of play-based approaches within educational contexts.

PEDAL aims to address questions associated with 21st century educational provisions and the ways play opportunities for children living in modern urban environments are changing and to work with educators and policy makers to inform practice and policy in relation to this evidence. A visit to this centre of research assisted in making critical connections between the work of this progressive research centre and the work Early Learning in Catholic schools in NSW. The opportunity to meet Dr David Whitebread and some of the researchers in his team which was a highlight of my visit will be outlined later in the report.

Why China?

China is an immense country with enormous challenges and opportunities in early childhood education. These challenges and opportunities are being addressed in an innovative and exciting play-based program developed and implemented in Anji County. AnjiPlay is the internationally recognised Early Childhood curriculum developed and accessed over the past seventeen years by educator Cheng Xueqin. AnjiPlay is the curriculum of the 130 public Kindergartens in Anji County serving more than 14,000 children from age three to six. Through sophisticated practices, site-specific environments, unique materials and integrated technology, AnjiPlay is quickly establishing itself as a new global centre for excellence in Early Childhood education.

In the Kindergartens of Anji, children are supported to lead their own play. Self-determination in play, ownership of discovery, learning in play, time to express complex intentions in play all contribute to AnjiPlay acquiring a universal name of excellence and innovation.

PISA 2009 results saw Shanghai ranked 1st in Reading, 1st in Mathematics and 1st in Science. PISA 2012 saw Shanghai remain 1st in Reading, 1st in Mathematics and 1st in Science. Although Anji County is three hours away from Shanghai and may not directly relate to the excellent rankings of Shanghai; the importance of play and the relationship of play to academic performance and general wellbeing of children is being recognised throughout educational circles of China. In the past three years the government in China gave schools some leeway to implement new ideas. Although retaining nominal control over curricula and teaching plans, the government allowed experimentation, or at least did not interfere with it. Chinese President Xi Jinping recently commented, “...Chinese children do not play enough. They should play more” (2015). There is much to learn and share through the example of AnjiPlay.

For the purposes of this report, I have documented my educational research under the headings Finland, Sweden, AnjiPlay, Anji County China, PEDAL at the University of Cambridge and Key Pedagogical Principles. It is with pleasure that I report my findings, understandings and reflective thoughts through the mediums of language and photography on the *Importance of Early Childhood and the Academia of Play*.

Finland

I don't think that Finland has the magic answer to education or anything-no country whatsoever has that. In a way that's a myth. What Finland does get right is its child- focused approach, with an emphasis on play, a later school starting age and letting each child develop at their own pace. This conversation of having an extended childhood where children can play and be themselves, learn to be with other people-was recognised as an important thing in Finland. One thing that distinguishes Australia and Finland is we have much less concern about academic performance in the early years than you have here. (Pasi Sahlberg, 2016)

Setting the Scene

Finland is located in Northern Europe and has borders with Sweden, Norway and Russia. Finland's surface area covers 338 000 km² and there are 5.5 million inhabitants. Finland is thus a sparsely populated country: there are 17 inhabitants per square kilometre. Finnish and Swedish are the official languages of Finland. Sami is a recognised regional language.

My educational research in Finland began at Nuuksio Nature Centre in Espoo, one of Finland's government funded, sustainable nature centres which provides education, information and history about Finland and its natural environment. This visit gave a snapshot of life in Finland which assisted in developing a cultural understanding of the country and its people. It was stated time and again that being outdoors in an important part of life in Finland. Skiing, boating and ice swimming (dipping oneself in a freezing lake after spending some time in a hot sauna) are popular choices. Finland has over 150,000 lakes and children are taught to swim, skate and ski from a very young age. Finns have legally endorsed access to country (including privately owned land) through "every man's right" which allows all citizens to participate in leisure activities and pick wild foods such as berries and mushrooms.

As previously noted Finland's comprehensive school system has been positioned at the top of Europe's PISA ranking for the past 16 years. Debates on accountability, rankings and standardised testing that are an educational focus of many other countries, including Australia, are not part of the educational conversation in Finland. In the international best seller *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (2015) world renowned educator Pasi Sahlberg states that there is a way to improve educational systems, one that does involve stronger accountability for student achievement, tougher competition and more data. This way includes, "...limiting student testing to a necessary minimum, placing responsibility and trust before accountability, investing in equity in education and handing over school and district level leadership to experienced educational professionals" (Sahlberg, 2015).

The factors Sahlberg refers to such as limited testing, responsibility and trust and investing in equity, are common in some high performing countries including Finland and several of these are addressed in my observations and reflections. Finland is one of the few nations among thirty four OECD countries that has been able to improve educational performance as measured by international indicators. Finland has been able to transform its educational system from something elitist, unknown, and inefficient into a paragon of equity and efficiency (Schleicher, 2006). There is worldwide interest in how this has been achieved however Finland is not interested in worldwide competition and comparison. Sahlberg tells the story...

In the early 1990's when Finnish education was known internationally as average, the Finnish minister of education visited her colleague in neighbouring Sweden to hear, among other things, that by the end of that decade the Swedish education system would be the best in the world. The Finnish minister replied that the Finns' goal was much more modest than that. "For us," she said, "it's enough to be ahead of Sweden. (Sahlberg, 2015)

Since 2013, Early Childhood education (i.e. the education and care children receive before they start primary school at the age of seven) has been part of the Finnish education system. The Finnish welfare system provides parents of a newborns the right to parental leave. Maternity leave normally starts two months prior to the birth of the child and continues for five months after the child's birth. Maternity leave is followed by parental leave for approximately eight months and is to be shared by both parents. The majority of children stay home during their first year. In Finland every child has a right to highly subsidised pre-school education, and this is free to low-income families. Participation in pre-school education (the pre-primary year before formal schooling) became compulsory for six-year-olds in 2015.

Central to Early Childhood education in Finland is a later start to schooling than in Australia. In Finland children do not start formal schooling until seven years of age. The main aim of Finnish Early Childhood education for one to five year olds is the development of the health and wellbeing of the child.

The *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2016) focuses on the personal wellbeing of children, behaviours and habits that take into account other people and increasing individual autonomy gradually. The Curriculum emphasises the importance of the joy of learning, enriching language and communication and the important role of play in children's development and growth. There are no subject areas, as the core content is led by six orientations mathematical, scientific, historic, aesthetic, ethical and religious.

The pre-primary year (for children aged six) is guided by a *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education* (2014) which emphasises promoting children's growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible members of society by guiding them towards responsible action and compliance with generally accepted rules and towards appreciation of other people. School readiness in Finland requires schools to be ready for the child.

Early Childhood education (one to five years of age) and Preschool (six years of age) do not prioritise reading, writing and mathematics. Physical activity is a feature with children engaging in at least 90 minutes of outdoor play per day.

Observations and reflections of the Finnish immersion

The Brother John Taylor Fellowship study experience in Finland culminated in educational research documented under the following areas of significance.

Pedagogical Love

The origins of the term pedagogical love are said to be traced back to Uno Cygnaeus (1810- 1888) a Finnish clergyman, educator and chief inspector of the Finland's school system. He is considered the father of the Finnish public school system. He described teaching as more than delivering content knowledge, but the ability 'to blaze with the spirit of sacred love'.

Martti Henrikki Haavio (1899-1973) Finnish poet, professor of folklore, influential researcher of Finnish mythology was one of the most significant forces of Finnish education in the 1950s and 1960s. He emphasised the meaning of pedagogical love in teachers' work and considered that teachers' work consists of the following two obligations: attachment to learners and dutiful perseverance of life values. Haavio believed pedagogical love is addressed to every learner regardless of his or her various outer abilities, features, appearance, behaviour, or personality traits. It is a way of teaching that speaks to interdependence—the recognition and acceptance that we need others (Haavio, 1948).

The term pedagogical love and the Finnish understanding of the term was one I was unfamiliar with before my time in Finland. Interestingly, I did not hear the term referenced as 'pedagogical love' throughout the study tour, however the understanding of the term was ever present and observable. The Finns often speak of pedagogical love as good 'teacherhood,' a method and attitude that involves trust in pupils' abilities. It appears in teaching as guidance, patience and trust, creating a setting where children can proceed to maximise their own abilities and talents. It lays the foundation for motivation and interest for children.

Dr Tom Stehlik, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of South Australia studied teacher education and schooling in Finland as Endeavour Executive Fellow in 2014 in his article, *Is pedagogical love the secret to Finland's educational success?* states:

The notion of a strengths-based approach to learning, which recognises that learners are individuals with particular strengths that can be directly addressed and enhanced in working with the active power and strength of children. Strengths can include emotional intelligence and creative imagination as well as academic ability or physical prowess. Contemporary responses to

this in a curriculum sense include Play-Based learning in Early Childhood Education, and Individual Learning Plans and Personal Development goals.

Pedagogical love would rather aim at the discovery of pupils' strengths and interests and act based on these to strengthen students' self-esteem and self-image as active learners. In Finland however, pedagogical love appears to manifest at a far deeper level than just as curriculum frameworks or individual learning plans.

In fact, while children and young people are valued as individuals, there appears to be a more collective approach to learning in which all children experience the same curriculum, the same opportunities and the same support from the whole community to achieve collaboratively. The greater good appears to be more highly valued than individual competitiveness and achievement. (Stehlik, 2016)

The concept of pedagogical love has the possibility of aligning well within Catholic education, however the complexities of school funding models, teacher training, curriculum expectations, accountability, learning progressions, standardised testing and an array of other educational, cultural, social and economic differences creates a multitude of challenges. Pedagogical love can work as an inspiration to evaluate how child-centred our practices are and more deeply consider trust, responsibility and wellbeing of the child.

Trust

As previously mentioned, the education system in Finland values responsibility and trust over accountability. In 2014, the Finnish National Board of Education reformed the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. The number of lessons in arts and crafts were increased considerably as well as lessons in civics and history. Education providers, municipalities and private education providers draw up local curricula and annual plans on the basis of the national core curriculum. The local curricula complements the objectives, core content and aspects related to instruction with a local emphasis. The needs of children, local specificities as well as results from evaluation are taken into account. School principals and teachers have key roles in curriculum development and school planning. They are trusted to understand and implement education informed by the local context and based on the needs and capabilities of children. This level of trust creates a teaching culture of responsibility, rather than accountability.

Another important aspect of teacher responsibility is assessment. Finnish preschools and schools do not employ standardised tests to determine progress of success. Education policy in Finland gives priority to personalised learning and creative teaching. The progress of children is primarily judged against their respective

characteristics and abilities, rather than a reliance on uniform standards and statistical indicators (Sahlberg, 2015).

By comparison in Australia instead of a climate of trust, from my perspective there appears to be a developing climate of fear. With fear comes more regulation, organisation and supervision of children. Children are often not trusted to make decisions and things are done *for* them instead of *by* them. Results from the AEDC suggest that some Australian children are less independent than Finnish children who are raised to be independent from an early age. In Finland children often walk to and from school from the age of seven without adults and have more unsupervised play, sometimes going to familiar places by themselves. Finnish children are trusted, listened to and actively involved in education, whatever their age. The enriching interaction between children and teachers is at the core of education. The trust in the children is directly related to the Finns image of the child. As Carita Vilamo-Nurmi (2017) Headmistress of Mörrintupa Centre stated, "we trust they can do it."

Commitment to Wellbeing

Repeatedly it was brought to the attention of the study tour participants on the study tour that Finnish education is not interested in academic comparisons to other countries or the results of testing. It was emphasised that the happiness and wellbeing of children is central to Finnish culture and society and therefore the focus of education.

Finnish education is child-centred. The focus on helping children take responsibility for their own learning reflects key values which underpin all National Core Curriculums.

This is described as below,

The learning environment must support the pupil's growth and learning. It must be physically, psychologically, and socially safe, and must support the pupil's health. The objective is to increase pupil's curiosity and motivation to learn, and to promote their activeness, self-direction, and creativity by offering interesting challenges and problems. The learning environment must guide pupils in setting their own objectives and evaluating their own actions. The pupil must be given the chance to participate in the creation and development of their own learning environment. (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014)

Finnish education focuses on developing in children dispositions such as creativity, flexibility, risk-taking, problem solving and innovation and it is believed that play helps develop such dispositions in the Early Learner. Finnish education also focuses on how best to promote learning. The active involvement of children,

meaningfulness, interaction between children and teachers and joy of learning are the basis for all frameworks and curriculum. Irmeli Halinen, Head of Curriculum Development of General Education for the Finnish National Board of Education, commented, “we think children need sports and arts and play to help them feel good about themselves. If a child feels good, he/she learns better” (2016).

Play

Play is the central tool of pedagogical activities in Finland. Children’s self-motivated play is understood as a natural way to learn in relation to their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. Play is seen as satisfying a need for freedom and it is believed that children live and feel freedom in play. The *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland Background Report* prepared for the OECD states,

A child is not just an object and receiver of activity, but he or she is an active participant in a communal learning event. According to the current belief, learning has a strongly social character. A child learns together with others. The adult is no longer the only one who knows or creates knowledge, but learning is perceived as active analysis of one’s own knowledge structure, which is founded on the child’s own experiences and beliefs. Small children’s self-motivated play has a central role in learning. Teaching and educating mean providing opportunities and constructing a good framework. (2000)

This commitment to play was very evident in practice. The study tour participants visited Auringonkukka, a daycare centre in Helsinki, which is opens from 6.15am-10pm. Head of the centre Marja-Liisa Karkkainen explains,

At our centres, we believe that children learn through interaction and play. They have plenty of time for free play and most of the teaching is done through playful activities. Our teachers and nurses have a lot of freedom to choose suitable methods and activities for their groups. They are quite sensitive to the individual developmental needs of the children.

A commitment to play and being active continues through the school system. Finnish children have fifteen minutes of play per hour at school. Play as a pedagogy in delivering the Australian curriculum is underutilised and undervalued and my observations also suggest that our prescribed timetables and content driven curriculum, fifteen minutes of play per hour would be deemed as frivolous.

The outdoor environment

The commitment to play in Finland was accompanied by a commitment to children spending time in the outdoor environment. This was very evident in the study tours visit to Mörrintupa Day Care Centre, a privately funded

forest preschool situated a few kilometres from the centre of Helsinki. The centre is housed in a century-old, two-storey home with a fireplace, a small garden with an orchard and outdoor playhouses.

Thirty children attend the preschool and there are five staff members. Mörrintupa has use of two forest sites that the children walk to daily: one has large rocks and trees and the other is a flatter area with trees and playhouses.

At Mörrintupa, each morning is spent in the forest, where children observe what happens in nature and engage with nature. They participate in experiences which develop their language and communication skills, literacy and numeracy, fine and gross motor skills, problem solving skills, social skills, emotional wellbeing and creativity.

Spending time in the forest with the children was powerful. This was my first experience in such a spectacularly cold, winter setting with children totally immersed in the flow of play; comfortable, confident and at one with nature. The teachers were present and available, but they did not interfere. The only resources were those naturally available in the forest. There was an old piece of farming equipment, branches, logs and sticks. The value of such materials is reinforced by Simon Nickelson in *The Theory of Loose Parts: An important principle for design methodology* (1972). Nickelson states, "...in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it."

The natural, open-ended loose parts in the forest were being manipulated and transformed by the children through their self-determined play. We were in the forest for two hours and during this time the children were engaged, active, social, self-regulating and risk taking. Children demonstrated respect and support for one another, they took turns and developed their own agreements/rules in relation to the play. They treat the forest with care and familiarity and in turn, the forest is their friend. Together within the forest the children are joyful, content, free and forest experts as they know it so well. It was peaceful, yet buzzing with activity. It seemed that the simplicity of the materials enabled lengthy and creative exploration by children and this prompted reflection. We in Catholic schools need to carefully consider the environments, resources and materials we develop, produce and provide for children. Less is often more. The importance of open-ended, flexible and accessible resources remains important in whatever time or context. Carita Vilamo-Nurmi (Headmistress of Mörrintupa) explains,

...we don't need to plan these activities with specific goals in mind. We just do them because we know children will benefit holistically in many ways. We do real things with meaning so that the children can learn by imitating. We have good relationships with the parents and they are committed to the concept that we are outdoors for so much of the day. We use what is in nature. In the winter, we ski and skate with the children regularly. In the summer, we go on a boat trip with all the families to an island near Helsinki.

The weather does not interfere with outdoor play and parents are most supportive. Finnish children dress for the outdoors as well as the indoors. In Australia, play in the outdoor environment is often regulated to recess and lunch breaks. Outdoor environments have become more of a feature of educational settings, especially in prior to school settings. Catholic schools are developing a greater understanding of how and when outdoor environments can support and encourage the child to engage in play and learn to respect and care for the environment. In Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the Early Learning policy has recently challenged and supported schools to re-image environments. Schools are re-imagining playgrounds with the involvement and contribution of children and their families. Catholic school communities can be further encouraged to recognise how and when the outdoor environment can be used. Our playground environments have so much more potential to be used for play as a pedagogy and self-determined play as do the outdoor environments in which schools are located.

Further conversation about the importance of risk taking and self-regulation for children when in play is necessary. Often Catholic schools are resistant to risk-taking because of the development of a litigious culture in Australia. This conversation needs to engage all stakeholders in meaningful dialogue about the benefits of risky play based on research and evidence.

Examples of outdoor environments in a variety of preschools visited throughout the study tour are included in the following photos.

Outdoor Environments



Outdoor Environments



Outdoor Environments



Outdoor Environment



Outdoor Environments



Outdoor Environments



Final Contemplation

The major objective of Finland's education system is to support the child's growth towards humanity and ethically responsible membership of society while supporting children to develop knowledge and skills necessary in life. It is in the *how* the objective is implemented that sets it apart from other education systems around the world.

In Finland, implementation of this objective is made in a variety of ways including a focus on wellbeing; a climate of trust and involvement; pedagogical love; respecting the importance of joy when learning; the significance of play; the importance of outdoor environment and active learning and equity, interaction and community.

Some aspects of Finnish education may be culture-specific and non-transferable, however there are many other features from which we in Catholic education can learn. My experiences and contemplation leads me to believing that the best place to begin (or continue) is with our image of the child. As a nation and culture a consistent, rich and thoughtful understanding of image of the child is necessary. This is the language and philosophy of Early Childhood but it is often not as part of the dialogue, professional learning and practice in schools. It is often lost in the early years of school to the noise of Best Start, learning progressions, bench marking and tracking. The language of accountability dominates, not trust and responsibility.

Without the belief that children are fully human beings who are competent, creative, capable and spiritual we will continue to look elsewhere instead of inward for inspiration.

Sweden

Setting the Scene

Sweden is a Scandinavian country in Northern Europe bordering Norway and Finland and is connected to Denmark by a bridge-tunnel. Sweden's surface area covers 450,295 km² and has a population of 10 million. It has a low population density of 22 inhabitants per square kilometre. Approximately 85% of the population lives in urban areas. The official language of Sweden is Swedish. Along with Finnish, the other minority languages are Meankieli, Sami, Romani and Yiddish.

My educational research in Sweden began in the offices of Sweducare, a Non-Government Organisation that works with Early Childhood services. Elisabeth Thorburn, co-founder of Sweducare addressed the group and began with the statement, "...a sustainable world begins with children, all of whom have the inalienable human right to education from birth onwards." This was an excellent way to begin our immersion into Early Childhood education in Sweden, as it provided an insight into Swedish society; culture, social constructs, politics and education. The presentation focused on the importance of 'Playing-Learning in Swedish preschools and how and why Swedish Early Childhood education services have become a 'corner stone in society'.

The Swedish preschool is based on thirty years of research and documented experiences. Regarded as the first step of a life-long learning, education is combined with care, so called edu-care. Playing is important for learning in Swedish preschools, where children explore and develop different skills. We have chosen to define the Swedish preschool as a playing learning preschool. (Sweducare Website, 2018)

Throughout the presentation, the importance of work-life balance and equality in Swedish society was discussed. Thorburn commented that equality is the "basis of Swedish society," resulting in the wellbeing of citizens as crucially important, especially the wellbeing of children who are viewed as 'co-creators' of society.

Thorburn referred to Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), (1989) which refers to parents being jointly responsible for the upbringing and development of their child. The Swedish parental insurance program was developed in line with the Convention "and is written in the best interest of the child." Thorburn went into detail about parental leave entitlements. Parents receive 480 days of parental leave with 390 days on 80% of normal pay. Each parent receives 240 days each of parental leave of which three months cannot be transferred to the other parent. This is a contributing factor to Sweden being identified as a leading nation of gender equity. Few woman leave the labour market when they have children.

The Swedish Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] Model- A Playing, Learning Preschool (2016) is the framework for Swedish preschools and is the foundation document for philosophy, pedagogy and practice in all the preschools I visited throughout the study tour. Like Finland, Swedish children remain in preschool until the age of seven. The main form of Early Childhood education are age integrated preschools known as “forskola” which are provided by municipalities for children from one year to five years of age. Preschools have been recognised in the Swedish school education system as the first step in the child’s education. Children younger than one do not attend preschool or any other service as it is culturally accepted that they stay at home with a parent and this is supported by parental leave. Swedish preschool emphasises the importance of play, with a curriculum which aims to ensure the child’s individual needs and interests are catered for. Gender-aware education strives to provide children with the same opportunities in life regardless of gender.

After the forskola years, all children are guaranteed a place in a one-year “forskoleklass” starting in the autumn of the year they turn six until they start compulsory schooling. The emphasis is on “place-based” learning which involves children learning about their culture and heritage, with play integral to all daily activities. Being outdoors is a central focus, no matter the weather. From the age of six, every child has equal access to free education in Sweden. Democracy, human rights and the CRC are the basis for Swedish Early Childhood education and as such have highly influenced the curriculum for preschools and the preschool year.

Democracy forms the foundation of the preschool. The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates that education in the preschool aims at children acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote all children’s development and learning, and a lifelong desire to learn. An important task of the preschool is to impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. (Sweducare Website, 2018)

Swedish compulsory schooling from the age of seven is in three stages (Years 1-3, 4-6, 7-9) and children between six and thirteen are also offered out of school before and after school hours. Upper secondary school (Years 10-12) is optional.

Observations and reflections of the Swedish immersion

The Brother John Taylor Fellowship experience in Sweden culminated in educational research documented under the following areas of significance:

Image of the Child

This is a child who has power. That is wonderful, for children to think, 'Oh, if I were like Pippi I could say to Father, "You don't do that!"' . . . She has power, but she never misuses that power, which I think is the most splendid thing, and the most difficult. (Astrid Lindgren, Swedish writer and author of Pippi Longstocking, 1907-2002)

In Sweden, the child is viewed as an agentic learner who is capable and who contributes to his/her own learning. The framework *The Swedish ECEC Model- A Playing Learning Preschool* is influenced by the research of Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, Goteborg University, Sweden.

In a paper entitled, *The Playing Learning Child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood* and co-written by Maj Asplund Carlsson the authors' state,

In our view (based both in practical work with children and many years of research in the area), organising the children's learning process in early childhood education means that:

- teachers must be aware of both their own and the child's perspectives—this is of paramount importance;
- both the child and the teacher must be involved/engaged in the process;
- the teacher's goal direction and sensitivity to the child's perspective have to work simultaneously; and
- both the communication and interaction between teachers and children and between children are necessary, this also includes power, positions, freedom to choose and creativity.

(Pramling Samuelsson & Maj Asplund Carlsson, 2008)

This research is reflected in *The Swedish ECEC Model- a playing learning preschool* (2016) which states, "Children are interested and eager to learn, but we as adults have to give them agency to act and develop as active citizens. One element in this is to view children as competent with wishes and ideas."

My opportunities to observe children mostly took place during play in the outdoor environment. There were many instances when children were so immersed in play and in their interactions with the environment that there was little interaction with teachers. When this interaction did exist, the teachers were fully present to the intentions of the child. The teacher was interested in what the child was doing and saying and the child's perspective, thoughts and ideas were listened to and valued.

Playing-Learning

Play is important for the child's development and learning. Conscious use of play to promote the development and learning of each individual child should always be present in preschool activities. Play and enjoyment in learning in all its various forms stimulate the imagination, insight, communication and the ability to think symbolically, as well as the ability to co-operate and solve problems. Through creative and gestalt play, the child is given opportunities to express and work through his or her experiences and feelings. (Curriculum for the Preschool, 2016)

The philosophy of Playing-Learning is that children do not separate play and learning and neither should adults. Playing-Learning accepts that children's fantasy and reality can be intertwined in their life. Children bring their own ideas and meanings into Playing-Learning which enables expansion of understanding. The children work with literacy, numeracy, science, technology as well as "value questions" in the everyday life of the preschool and not in subject areas.

Playing Outdoors

In Sweden children play outside at every opportunity. Younger children will often have their midday nap outside. Outdoor activities, like in Finland, are culturally significant. Outdoor experiences give children possibilities to play and learn in and about nature. Children develop an understanding about environment, seasons, flora, fauna and sustainability. Playing outdoors gives the children opportunity to be physically active.

Pre-primary school and preschool should attach great importance to environmental and environmental issues. An ecological relationship, ways of thinking, a positive future and trust will characterize the preschool's activities.

Preschool should contribute to the child's commitment to a careful approach to nature and the environment and understands its participation in nature's cycle. This will help the children to understand how everyday life and work can be designed to contribute to a better environment both in the present and future. (Curriculum for the Preschool, 2016)

The study tour took participants to Hälsöförskolan Friskus, where manager Maria Ekeberg explained that the main aim of the preschool is...

for the children to be health-conscious and interested in their wellbeing. We work consciously with the children to develop healthy living habits. We strive to give the children a good balance and daily routine when it comes to everything from food, movement, play and learning to

relaxation. They are outdoors for a lot of the day – ice-skating, skiing and sometimes swimming – and the younger children sleep outdoors all year round, even in minus temperatures. (2017)

Study tour participants were fortunate to be with children as they ice skated on the frozen local lake. The children wore one-piece overalls, hats and gloves as they walked together as a group to the nearby lake. They had time in the local park freely exploring the natural surroundings and displayed skills of self-regulation, communication, independence, organisation and incredible physical skills as they skated on the ice.

My research in relation to play in outdoor environments in Sweden is similar to that of Finland in that it reinforced how beneficial being outdoors is for all involved, both children and teachers. Benefits for the children include positive physical and emotional wellbeing outcomes, literacy and numeracy skills, science, social skills, problem-solving skills and collaboration skills. The play in outdoor environments once again ignited reflection about Simon Nickelson's *The Theory of Loose Parts: An important principle for design methodology (1972)*.

The outdoor environments of Sweden reinforced my commitment to eclectic, re-imaged, recycled and sustainable outdoor spaces/playgrounds, materials and environments for their value for learning and creativity. In comparison high-end commercially produced and expensive environments and resources do not offer the same opportunities for children.

Examples of outdoor environments in a variety of preschools visited throughout the study tour are included in the following photo collage.

Outdoor Environments



Creativity

The Swedish *Curriculum for the Preschool* (2016) identifies that the child should be active with the whole body and mind. Music, rhymes, movement, dance, drama are part of everyday. These features were evident in the preschools visited on the study tour, especially when the children were outdoors. Children were singing and rhyming and exploring space with their bodies.

The Swedish model also speaks about aesthetics being viewed as a language in which children and teachers express themselves and communicate with one another. The aesthetics of the indoor environments of the preschools I visited were not an outstanding feature possibly because the aesthetics of the indoor environment has difficulty competing with the natural beauty of Sweden and the priority given to the outdoors. My experience of visiting high quality indoor environments in Australia prior to school services that have embraced aesthetics as a language offers many wonderful local examples. I have been privileged to see environments which are intentional, authentic, thoughtful, respectful and incredibly beautiful. This is not yet the case in the indoor environments/classrooms of many schools and there is much to be done in Catholic schools to investigate and understand the direct link between play and environments. Visits to high quality prior to school services in Australia provide a more accessible opportunity to view the commitment to aesthetics within indoor Early Learning environments.

Values

The Swedish preschool is viewed as a social and cultural meeting place. Learning about cultural heritage and the cultural heritage of others is believed to contribute to the child's ability to understand and empathise with the stories of others and develop values of respect and empathy. It is a recipe for wellbeing, understanding and tolerance.

Gender pedagogy is also increasingly common in Swedish preschools. The purpose of the gender pedagogy is to work against gender stereotypes and assigned roles by freeing children from the expectations and demands society have traditionally put on boys and girls. One of the preschools visited was a gender neutral preschool called Vita Bergen Preschool. The staff had been trained to work with issues of human rights, equality and anti-discrimination, and to foster and promote a more inclusive environment. Teacher Karro Olofsson explained,

We feel it's up to the child to decide its gender. Instead of saying "boy" we use the child's given name. In the older groups, we introduce a gender-free pronoun, 'ze/they.' Each day, children have the opportunity to place a picture of themselves beneath three pronouns on the board,

'he', 'she' or 'they'. This represents what they feel they are on any given day, and it changes. They are also free to change their birth name, and we take this very seriously.

The extent to which gender equity is a focus in this preschool highlighted cultural diversity and challenged most of the participants on the study tour.

Final Contemplation

It is my childhood that I long to return to, When I go home, I intensely experience my childhood again and again. And if I dare to be so bold as to speak of inspiration, I must say that it is there in my childhood home that I get many of the impulses that can later appear in a story. Rocks and trees were as close to us as living beings, and nature protected and nurtured our playing and our dreaming. Whatever our imagination could call forth was enacted in the land around us — all fairy tales, all adventures we invented or read about or heard about, all of it happened there, and only there. Even our songs and prayers had their places in surrounding nature. (Astrid Lindgren, 1965)

The images created by Lindgren place the reader in the natural beauty of the Swedish outdoors. These images hold true to what I was fortunate to experience. Children deeply engaged with their imagination and creativity. Children free to explore, hypothesise, problem solve and develop understanding through engagement and interaction with each other. Children who were equals in a democratic space. Children who were capable and competent and are treated as such and children who felt the love and joy that is unique to childhood.

AnjiPlay, Anji County, China

A Revolutionary Movement of Play: AnjiPlay!

In April of 2017 I found myself standing in what felt like a “city” occupied, owned and run by children, for children! I was standing in one of the preschools in Anji County, China. The experience of walking through the entry of the preschool, turning the corner and being immersed into the outdoor environment of this “city” is one I’ll never forget. Powerful! Breathtaking! Almost indescribable! Children were engaged, joyful, connected, immersed in play and doing and being. The atmosphere was vibrant, eclectic and mesmerising. There was so much to explore and understand and my senses were awakened. I felt like I belonged; that I was accepted as a friend and supporter and was meant to be there while simultaneously it felt like I was *really* seeing children and *true* play for the very first time. Of all my unique experiences afforded to me by the Brother John Taylor Fellowship, this is what I’d been waiting for...a deep and immediate reaction to something extraordinary!

This “city” I was standing in was Jiguan Preschool which accommodates approximately 700 children. I could see children totally immersed in the flow of play. My mind raced back to an AnjiPlay introductory meeting from the previous day for study tour participants where Dr Chelsea Bailey addressed the group. Dr Bailey, formally Professor and Director of the Early Childhood Education program at New York University and now an AnjiPlay team member commented,

The core of AnjiPlay is love. It’s the starting point and the ending point. How do you create a school where love is the blood? What does love look like? What does love feel like? Smell like? Use your senses as a filter for observation. Observe the embodiment of love in all nine of the Kindergartens you will visit on this tour. AnjiPlay is the right of every child as it returns the right to play to every child. Protecting the child’s right to play is not an easy struggle. (Dr Chelsea Bailey, 2017)



The Chinese character for listening includes the elements of heart, eyes, ears and undivided attention. This character became an important symbol to me throughout my time in Anji County as I was particularly aware, more than any other time throughout my Fellowship experience, of the responsibility to authentically observe and truly represent (not just interpret) all that is AnjiPlay and to share not just the details of AnjiPlay but the depth of AnjiPlay. As the first

Australian to participate in an AnjiPlay study tour this took on even greater significance. I was soon to learn that my AnjiPlay experiences would challenge, shape and reward me as a teacher, education officer, policy writer, researcher, play advocate and human being.

The Evolution of the Play Revolution: From No Play to False Play!

Action leads to difficulty; difficulty leads to doubt; doubt leads to hypotheses; hypotheses lead to experimentation; experimentation leads to conclusions; conclusions lead again to action, in this way evolution is infinite. (Tao Xingzhi 1891-1946)

Anji County is in the city of Huzhou in north-western Zhejiang province, People's Republic of China with a population of 461,800 as of the end of 2013. It is less than three hours by road to Shanghai. AnjiPlay (Chinese: 安吉游戏) is an internationally recognised Early Childhood curriculum/philosophy developed over the past seventeen years Cheng Xueqin Director, Office of Pre-Primary Education, Anji County Department of Education, Zhejiang Province. The focus of the program is the participating children's self-determination in choosing what, where, and with whom to play and the role of the teacher as observer, particularly in instances of physical risk. AnjiPlay is the curriculum of the 130 public Kindergartens in Anji County serving more than 14,000 children from age three to six. Some Kindergarten are large and some are small village Kindergartens. Every child in Anji County has access to Anji Play kindergartens. 99.5% of children 3-6 years old in Anji County attend Anji Play schools regardless of their legal status or financial means.

Through sophisticated practices, site-specific environments, unique materials and integrated technology, AnjiPlay is quickly establishing itself as a new global centre for excellence in Early Childhood education (AnjiPlay Website, 2017).

In 1989, China signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. In 1996, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China released the *Standards for Kindergarten Education* which recognised play as fundamental in Early Childhood education. Article 5, Section 25, Subsection 6 of the *Standards for Kindergarten Education* state that Kindergarten education should treat play as a "foundational activity to be included in every type of educational activity." Before the release of the *Standards for Kindergarten Education* there was no play in the crowded Kindergarten classrooms throughout China (AnjiPlay Website, 2017).

The years 2000-2008 are identified by Ms. Cheng as years of "false play." During this time teachers began designing play experiences for children and creating environments to encourage play in an attempt to meet the requirements of the *Standards for Kindergarten Education*. Ms. Cheng described the play as "false" as she

observed children limited by the predetermined themes and goals of the teacher. Children could not go beyond the limits set by the teacher- determined play. Ms. Cheng observed joy being “ruthlessly stripped” from the children in the service of adult ideas about how play should be directed to serve specific educational and developmental goals. No right of self-determination existed for the child and the common practice of “false play” in China created “false joy” for the child therefore, no true happiness in play.

Play Memories

During this period of “false play” Ms. Cheng began to explore her own play memories by recalling her deepest memories of play as a child. Ms. Cheng began to ask teachers, administrators and parents about their play memories. The data she collected found that deepest memories of play were defined by risk and self-determination and that meaningful play involving imagination and cooperation often took place on a large scale using real equipment and material. On one of the first nights of the study tour, Ms. Cheng with the assistance of Dr Chelsea Bailey led participants through a powerful exploration of our own play memories. What was fascinating about the play memories shared from this eclectic group of people of various ages, nationalities, religions and life experiences is that we shared many commonalities in relation to what we recalled about our early play experiences. Some of the observations made by the participants in relation to their play memories include:

- Play often involved being outdoors, in nature.
- Play was self-determined by the child.
- There was a sense of both freedom and of trust.
- Play was social with children playing with siblings, friends and neighbours.
- Play was imaginative and physical.
- There were less or in some cases, limited toys so children used real objects or symbolically represented what they needed in their play.
- There was more time to play. Children played for hours on end with minimal interruptions.
- There was limited, if any technology.

Participating in this activity (now known as Play Memories) as part of the study tour and experiencing its effectiveness as a tool to more deeply understand and value play has been of benefit in my role as Education Officer Early Learning in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. Since returning from Anji, I have facilitated the use of Play Memories in a variety of professional learning opportunities and inservices for leaders, teachers and educators involved in Catholic education. I have also used Play Memories as an activity when working with parents. In all cases it instigated an insightful conversation about play. Play Memories enable participants to think of play more deeply and unpack some of the cognitive, physical, creative, emotional and social aspects of

play. It prompts teachers to value play as pedagogy and encourages teachers and parents to provide more opportunity for the child to engage in self-determined play. This powerful tool can be used in Catholic education across all settings from prior to school settings to school.

The Emergence of True Play

From 2009 the “true play” of AnjiPlay started to emerge!

True Play is an important form of expression and representation for the child that reflects their spiritual and cultural worlds. In the child’s self-initiated, self-determined play, and in the child’s interaction with other children, there is a continuous and uninterrupted experience of failure and success, rules and freedom, process and product, and the realization of self-initiated learning. The child continuously affirms the self in relationship to others, which is not only the natural need of the child in the process of physical and emotional development, but also provides the basis for that development to take place. (Ms. Cheng, 2017)

Ms. Cheng’s reference to the child’s spiritual world is of relevance to Catholic schools. Spirituality is increasingly acknowledged to be an essential part of child development. (Hay & Nye, 2006). Children are capable of profound and meaningful beliefs from an early age. (Hay and Nye, 2006). A three-year research study into young children's spirituality concluded that spirituality in education needs to overcome traditional approaches to education and encourage teachers to consider new approaches to foster children's natural spiritual development. (Hay and Nye, 2006). Children’s spirituality often operates at a non-verbal level, in art, play, movement and through the sensory (Nye, 2009).

Core Elements

The four core elements of AnjiPlay are:

1. Materials and Environments
2. The Child’s Right to Play
3. Role of the Teacher
4. Role of the Parent

Materials and Environments

Ms. Cheng began to introduce large, minimally structured materials and open-ended environments to the Kindergartens of Anji. Materials and environments continue to be refined. In AnjiPlay's current implementation, children have at least two hours of outdoor play every day.

Natural materials including ropes, light bamboo ladders, clay pots, tyres, barrels, large blocks, stones, moveable carts, trolleys, crates etc. are a daily feature of the environment. The materials are carefully designed, selected and organised to maximise creativity and problem solving rather than achieve specific goals or outcomes. The accessibility and flexibility of the materials enables children to challenge themselves at their own level of self-determined risk. A commitment on providing materials which access the natural world is a focus. Commercially produced toys are not a feature of AnjiPlay apart from small bikes that children ride on the playground.

Children are totally responsible for care of the materials including packing away the materials. The packing away process is one of cooperation, communication and team work as children work together while music plays over loud speakers. Children take their responsibility seriously to ensure materials are secure and ready for use the next day. This includes the coordination of moving ladders and large blocks demonstrating capability, skill and competence. This responsibility encourages self-respect, respect for others and respect for the materials. The children truly care for the materials and as such learn about sustainability, recycling and ecology.

The intentional and thoughtful materials and environments of AnjiPlay challenges those in Catholic education throughout NSW to carefully consider both indoor and outdoor environments and to question if our spaces make play accessible for the child. There is a lucrative commercial market for playground design, redevelopment and building with many schools spending large amount of money on playgrounds. The tenets of AnjiPlay have the potential to influence an approach in the Catholic schools of reusing, reimaging, recycling, sustainability and the use of natural, minimal and open ended materials to promote ecological sustainability and improve wellbeing for children and communities who are concerned for the future of the planet. Pope Francis, in his Address to General Audience on United Nations World Environment Day, 2013 said, "Nurturing and cherishing creation is a command God gives not only at the beginning of history, but to each of us. It is part of his plan; it means causing the world to grow responsibly, transforming it so that it may be a garden, a habitable place for everyone."

Examples of materials and resources located in the outdoor environments in a variety of preschools visited throughout the study tour are included in the following photo collages.

Minimally structured materials and open ended environments from a variety of AnjiPlay preschools



Minimally structured materials and open ended environments from a variety of AnjiPlay preschools



Minimally structured materials and open ended environments from a variety of AnjiPlay preschools



Minimally structured materials and open ended environments from a variety of AnjiPlay preschools



The Child's Right to Play

The children of Anji experience freedom of action and a deep sense of security, without external demands or restraints, without the pressure of assessments of success or failure. This is truly the optimal psychological context for learning, inquiry and creation. For that reason, children in Anji engaged in play exhibit the highest expressions of creativity and ability. (Dr. Hua Aihua, China National Society of Early Childhood Education, Department of Early Education 2017).

Play is a fundamental right and a basic need of all children regardless of where they live or their specific circumstances. It is the responsibility of adults, particularly educational professionals and policy makers, to promote and protect these fundamental rights. Ms Cheng states, "...the right to play is also to the right to joy, the right to love, and the right to engage in deeply meaningful learning experiences and the right to grow, learn and develop" (2017).

The most important aspect of Anji Play is that it returns the right of play to the child. It allows the child freedom, mastery and self-awareness in the development of their own play. We call this self-determined play. Originally, play was the right of the child. But in the practice of early education, over a relatively long period of time and to a relatively large extent, the child's right to play has been subject to control, even to the point of being confiscated from the curriculum. (AnjiPlay website, 2017)

All too often in many parts of the world the right to play has been stripped away from children. In many parts of the world time to play has been replaced by a push down of academic outcomes, objectives, standards, learning intentions and testing. Often when standards are not reached, there is more testing and more teacher directed learning. Examples of such testing in Early Childhood education in the early years of school include Best Start, a mandatory, one-on-one assessment of Kindergarten children in schools across NSW and the future possibility of a national phonics test for Year One students.

In *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*, Dr David Whitebread states,

'Play' is sometimes contrasted with 'work' and characterised as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose. As such, it is seen as

something that children do because they are immature, and as something they will grow out of as they become adults. However, this view is mistaken. Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. The value of play is increasingly recognised by researchers and within the policy arena, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being. (Whitebread, 2012)

Recommendations of *The importance of play* include the need to:

1. promote awareness and change attitudes regarding children's play
2. encourage improved provisions of time and space for children's play
3. support arrangements enabling children to experience risk and develop resilience and self-reliance through play
4. establish funding agencies that promote play and play research.

As previously stated, although play has a significant role in prior to school services play is underutilised, limited and in some cases non-existent in schools. In relation to policy for Catholic schools, it is both possible and necessary that play is an integral part of learning. In the Early Learning Policy recently completed for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, both play as a pedagogy and self-determined play are identified as crucially important to the Early Learner. Implementation of the recommendations of *The importance of play* is appropriate for all Catholic schools.

Play as a pedagogy is the play which accesses the curriculum for the child. Teachers are encouraged to make professional judgements about how to deliver the curriculum in appropriate, contextualised and cross-disciplinary ways. Teachers are able to choose how best to introduce concepts and processes and how to progressively deepen understanding to maximise the engagements and learning of every student (ACARA, 2011). When considering what is "appropriate" in how to deliver the curriculum, teachers of children in the early years in schools are required to reflect upon and implement Early Childhood principles, philosophy, pedagogy and best practice for the Early Learner.

Children do not magically become different kinds of learners as they move from prior to school settings into the first years of school, so there are principles of teaching, learning and provision that apply to educators in both sectors (ECA/ACARA, 2012).

As documented in the Early Learning Policy for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle (2017) self-determined play is a right of the child and an important part of the child's learning and experiences at school; time where the child is able to make choices and decisions about how, where and what to play. This places significant relevance on the school playground to be an engaging outdoor space which provides opportunity and accessibility for different constructs of play.

The influence of research and understanding gained through the Brother John Taylor Fellowship directly impacted and actually informed the writing of the Early Learning Policy for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. An example of this is the inclusion of self-determined play into the policy.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers have an important role in the learning and discovery that takes place in the Kindergartens of Anji. Teachers in Anji observe and take part in play if requested, but they do not intervene. During the study tour, the teacher's role was described as a "parallel participant" with teachers encouraged to step back, listen, observe the children and "put their hands down." They do not structure play towards specific goals or learning intentions. Children are viewed as sophisticated and creative thinkers who do not need to be directed toward achievement. Teachers enable children to resolve their own conflicts, manage and regulate their own risk and develop rules if needed to enhance their play.

An important role of the teacher during play is not only to observe but to record, through the use of mobile phones, both photographs and videos of the children in play. Later that day during 'Play Sharing' the photos and videos are projected for the group and the children reflect upon and discuss their experiences, insights and discoveries. The teachers carefully decide which photos and video footage to project and they go on to facilitate a discussion with the children enabling the children to reflect on their experience and allowing the children to interpret and explain their experience.

Teachers skillfully ensure each child has a voice and often support children as they express a different point of view to their peers. Later, the children draw, paint, collage, construct and write using a variety of materials about the play. They document their experiences and represent the play and their learning.

Teachers are advised to not intervene and instruct, but to observe. From an outside perspective, teachers are taught to trust the children and understand how children navigate conflict and collaboration. It also frequently leads teachers to a deep admiration for their capabilities. Admiration, joy, trust, participation and understanding are the ingredients for a

relationship of love between child and teacher, the foundation of the bonds of attachment that support a child's emotional, social and brain growth. (AnjiPlay Website, 2017)

Participants were given opportunities to converse with teachers throughout the study tour via interpreters. A deep commitment toward AnjiPlay was evident and a deep connection to children was beautifully communicated by the teachers. I was privy to see teachers facilitate discussions with the children during 'Play Sharing' and engage with children during 'Play Stories'. This will be further explored later in this paper.

Role of the Parent

Ms. Cheng explained that at the beginning of the evolution of AnjiPlay parents were opposed to play in the preschools. Many protested that time was being wasted in play when children should be studying. Others protested about risk taking and the "messiness of the play". Some parents complained to the Ministry of Education and some stopped sending children to the preschools. In response Ms. Cheng printed, bound and sent copies of the *Standards for Kindergarten Education* to every household in the county. She invited parents and other family members to visit the preschools with the standards and observe the children at play. This was influential in educating parents about the value of play for the child.

Throughout the AnjiPlay study tour there were open discussions with parents and community representatives. It was a privilege to listen to the views of parents and members of the community. AnjiPlay is connected to community. Often preschools and council chambers share resources and meeting spaces. There is great pride for AnjiPlay. "Parents witnessed that their four year olds were possessed of such high levels of bravery, compassion and intelligence. Parents have become adamant supporters and took on the role of training incoming parents on the skills of observation and documentation." (Cheng, 2017).

Since returning from Anji, I have worked with several schools to embed parent involvement in play with their child and also parent observation of children in play into the transition process from prior to school settings to school. As both play as a pedagogy and self-directed play are components of the Early Learning Policy for Catholic schools in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, both opportunities are invaluable in assisting parents to understand why play is present and important in the early years of school. Through meaningful observations of children in play, parents are re-imagining and deepening their beliefs about children as capable, confident, creative and agentic individuals. As noted on the AnjiPlay Facebook Page (2017), "...parents are a critical component of any large or small scale change. We also have the power Part of our mission is to work with teachers and communities at the grassroots level to create sustainable, feasible models for local revolution!"

Guiding Principles

The principles and practices of AnjiPlay are suited to all children, regardless of their age, and True Play is the right of every child. Every child of every age needs our full trust and needs us, as adults, to step back. And it is not only children in play who require love, risk, joy, engagement and reflection, but as adults, our work and our learning should also manifest these five core principles. Ms. Cheng (2017)

The five guiding principles of AnjiPlay are:

1. **Love**
2. **Risk**
3. **Joy**
4. **Engagement**
5. **Reflection**

The guiding principles of AnjiPlay were part of the daily conversation in every context and setting throughout the study tour.

When we see a trapeze artist we feel vertigo; when we see hunger we feel pangs in our own stomach; when we see a child make a discovery, we feel that same sense of wonder. That is the transformative power of joy and love in educational settings. When we provide love, we see love and we feel love. When we see joy, we feel joy. Whatever that love and joy is nurturing, fortifying and repairing for the children we see, it is also nurturing, fortifying and repairing in us. (AnjiPlay Facebook Page, 2017)

Love

Love is the foundation of all relationships. This guiding principle should resonate to all involved in Catholic education. Ms. Cheng says that all relationships in the preschools of Anji are characterised by love. Love plays a critical role in establishing the AnjiPlay ecology and influences schools and the life of the community. "Love is waiting. Only when you step back and provide freedom, space and time, will you discover the extraordinary child." (Ms. Cheng, 2017).

Risk

AnjiPlay supports risk taking for children arguing that only in an environment that supports freedom and self-expression can the child engage in physical, emotional, social and intellectual risk, continuously discover and pose questions and challenge oneself to the furthest limit. During the study tour Ms Cheng (2017) explained, "...every time we do something without being certain about the outcome, we take a risk. For that reason, all true learning is inherently risky. As adults, stepping back and seeking to truly see children feels like a risk, but the benefits are, in fact, certain" (Ms. Cheng, 2017). This view is supported by Mariana Brussoni, an investigator with the British Columbia [BC] Children's Hospital Vancouver, Canada and assistant professor in University BC's School of Population and Public Health and Department of Pediatrics. Brussoni presents research from the University of BC and the Child & Family Research Institute at BC Children's Hospital which shows that risky outdoor play is not only good for children's health but also encourages creativity, social skills and resilience. The findings, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, found that children who participated in physical activity such as climbing and jumping, rough and tumble play and exploring alone, displayed greater physical and social health.

We found that play environments where children could take risks promoted increased play time, social interactions, creativity and resilience. These positive results reflect the importance of supporting children's risky outdoor play opportunities as a means of promoting children's health and active lifestyles. Playgrounds that offer natural elements such as trees and plants, changes in height, and freedom for children to engage in activities of their own choosing, have positive impacts on health, behaviour and social development.

These spaces give children a chance to learn about risk and learn about their own limits. Researchers found that playground safety standards and too much supervision prevented children from engaging in risky activities. We recommend considering policy, practice and built environment approaches to risky outdoor play that balance safety with children's other health outcomes. (Brussoni, 2015)

In Anji, children select challenges according to their own ability, comfort level, expertise, time and place. In the exploration of the limits of their own abilities, children discover and solve difficulty. The teacher is present to observe, document and support but not to interfere, intervene or direct unless there is specific danger to the child or the child has truly exhausted all approaches. The child's peers are also present to support and provide advice, encouragement and knowledge in a risky situation.

Conversations about risk benefits are beginning to take place in Catholic schools. Such conversations have been happening for some time in prior to school settings. When considering risk taking we need to go beyond physical risk. Risk taking is ever present in the social constructs of interactions and relationships and ever present in an

individual's emotional growth. Without risk, there is no opportunity to solve problems which can result in new understanding and learning. Without risk there is limited opportunity for self-regulation, limited opportunity to fail and in turn limited opportunity to develop skills of perseverance and resilience. In Anji, I was witness to children in relationship with their own courage by being able to make thoughtful decisions about risk.

Joy

Without joy, play cannot possibly be true play. Joy is the outcome of self-determined participation in play, self-adjustment to the complexities of play and continuous reflection. A standard that AnjiPlay teachers use to assess the content of each day is whether the child has achieved a state of joy in their activities. In their experience of joy, the child can be quiet or focused, they can be raucous or expressive...joy is the state of mind that nourishes the life of the child. In the preschools of Anji, joy is viewed as a contributing factor to physical and emotional wellbeing.

In my conversations with teachers in Catholic schools I ask teachers “...*what joyful moments did children experience today? What joyful moments did you experience?*” If those moments are difficult to identify, we are doing something very wrong.

Engagement

True engagement arises from the process of a child's passionate exploration and discovery of the physical and social worlds. AnjiPlay confers the greatest degree of freedom to the child, allowing the child opportunities to move within an open-ended space, to fully explore and experience the surrounding environment and therefore fully engage body and mind.

Reflection

AnjiPlay uses reflection as a crucial process which aims to transform the child's experience into knowledge. In AnjiPlay, the children reflect and express their daily experiences through a range of means and continuously adjusts their own knowledge of the world and build on the foundation of their pre-existing experience. The teacher and parent, both through materials and environments, support the self-determined reflection of the child on the child's own experience, and through their observation of the child and exploration of their memories of play, participate in the child's reflection.

I was witness to love!



I was witness to risk!



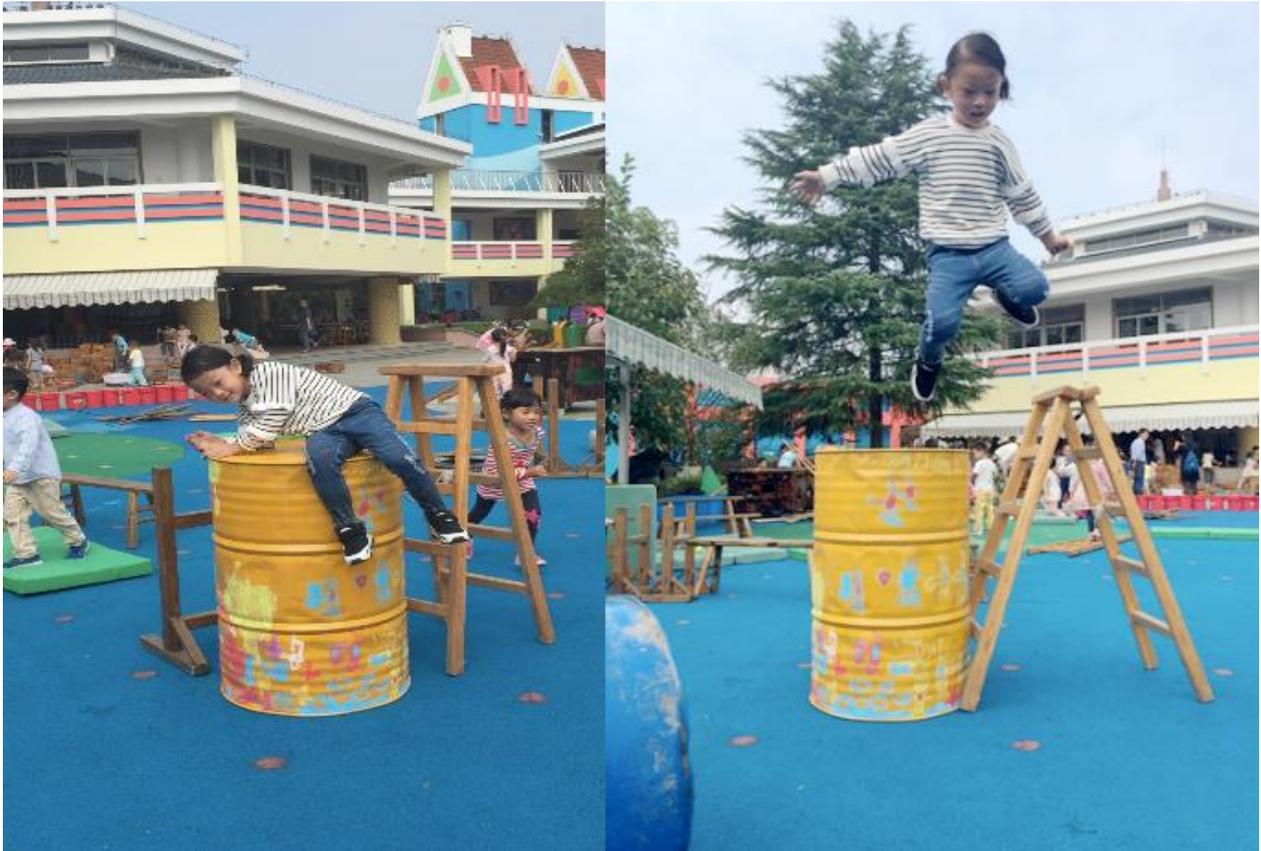
I was witness to joy!

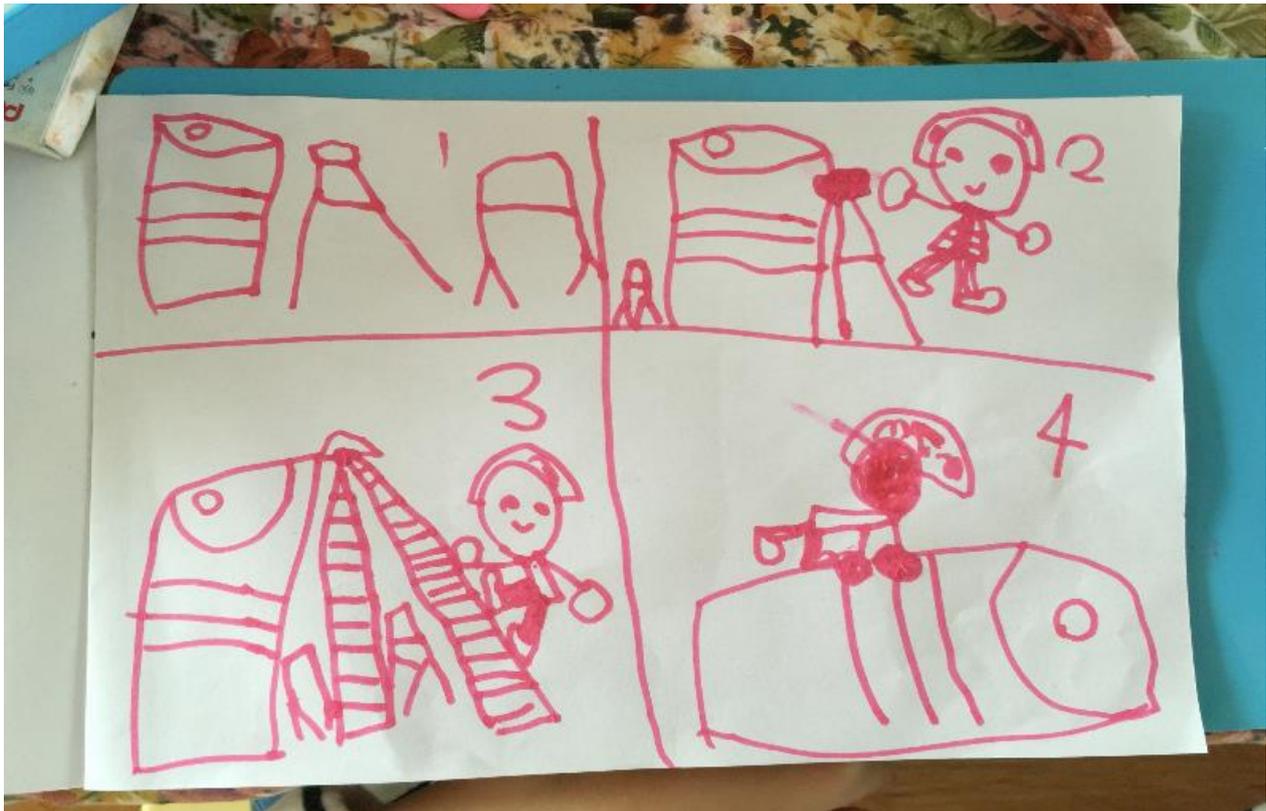


I was witness to engagement!



I was witness to reflection!





Play Sharing and Play Stories

As previously documented, each day after outdoor play the children are provided with opportunities to reflect on their play in 'Play Sharing' and 'Play Stories'. Experiences, interpretation, discoveries, insights, problems, conversations and feelings are expressed in a multitude of ways. During this time observation, reflection, expression and technology play crucial roles in the practice of AnjiPlay. 'Play Sharing' and 'Play Stories' are critical practices of action research in which the experience of the child in play becomes the basis for the child's knowledge of self, others and the principles that underlie the physical world.

'Play Sharing' and 'Play Stories' have potential to be used in a similar way in the early years' classrooms of our Catholic schools. When using play as a pedagogy to access curriculum for children in Catholic schools, 'Play Stories' and 'Play Sharing' can be incorporated into any Key Learning Area (KLA). Currently I'm beginning to explore the application of 'Play Sharing' and 'Play Stories' with teachers and children via a Unit of Work in an identified KLA.

As many opportunities as possible are given to the children so they can express their experiences verbally, visually, abstractly and concretely. Literacy and numeracy is ever present. 'Play Stories' can include the child's narrative of their experience of play transcribed by a teacher.

Play Sharing and Play Stories support metacognitive reflection which enable children and adults to gain greater insight into the complexity of their thoughts, actions, learning and development, foster greater complexity and challenge in play and allow adults to appropriately support play by informing their decisions about environmental and material design and developing a stance, practices and language to describe the meaning and value of the child's experience.

These practices of observation, reflection and research form the basis for professional development in Anji Play ecologies and extend beyond the teacher to include the engagement of families and communities. (AnjiPlay Website, 2017)

Examples of Play Sharing and Play Stories in a variety of preschools visited throughout the study tour are included in the following photo collage.

Play Sharing and Play Stories



Play Planning

'Play Planning' has recently evolved in the Kindergartens of Anji specifically in relation to design and construction when using blocks. Children have an opportunity to collaborate together on the design of what they wish to build. They then draw their design on large whiteboards and they take the whiteboards outside during play and refer to their design as they construct and build.

It was fascinating to observe the children emerge onto the playground from the classroom, locate where the blocks are housed, stack the blocks on trolleys and wheel the blocks to a location where they work as a team to build the design. Communication skills, collaboration, inclusion, physics, organisation, problem solving, creativity, literacy and numeracy are ever present.

The sophistication and the beauty of the constructions in all preschools was detailed and superior to many constructions I have seen in settings throughout the world. Contributing to this is the time the children have to work on design, the length of time they have to construct in collaboration with others, the quality of the resources and the genuine interest the children have in the play. Another contributing factor is the freedom the children have to return to this activity over and over again until they become expert designers and builders. They were truly in a flow, totally attending with passion and joy.

Examples of Play Planning and design and construction with blocks in a variety of preschools visited throughout the study tour are included in the following photo collage.

Play Planning and Blocks



The Revolutionary Movement of AnjiPlay

In today's fast changing world, nothing is more important than the ability to think and act creatively. I see AnjiPlay as an international leader in preparing today's children for tomorrow's society. (Dr Michael Resnick, LEGO Professor of Learning Research, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Princeton University, 2016)

Today Anji Play is internationally recognised as an early-childhood curriculum used in 130 public kindergartens in Anji County, China.

In May 2017, The Ministry of Education in China initiated a month-long national initiative to promote the values of "self-determined play" in all public and private Early Childhood education programs across China. The month started with a series of major meetings and an exhibition about the history and principles of AnjiPlay in Anji. The meetings, exhibition and tour of Anji's Kindergartens were attended by the directors of Early Childhood education from every Chinese province and from the Ministry of Education.

The event marked the beginning of the final phase in China of bringing national Early Childhood standards and practices in line with the principle that true, self-determined play should be the fundamental pedagogy in Early Childhood education in China (3-6 years) and that elementary schools should accommodate playful, joyous children.

Zhejiang Province has begun province-wide adoption of the AnjiPlay by supporting one AnjiPlay pilot Kindergarten in every county. Existing public kindergartens at the county level will apply to be selected for participation in the pilot program. AnjiPlay has also expanded internationally, being adapted in the United States beginning with One City Early Learning Centers in Madison, Wisconsin and by the Madison Public Library.

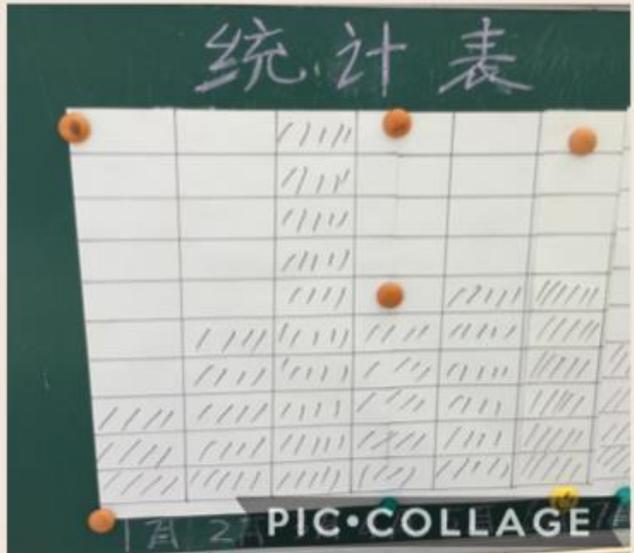
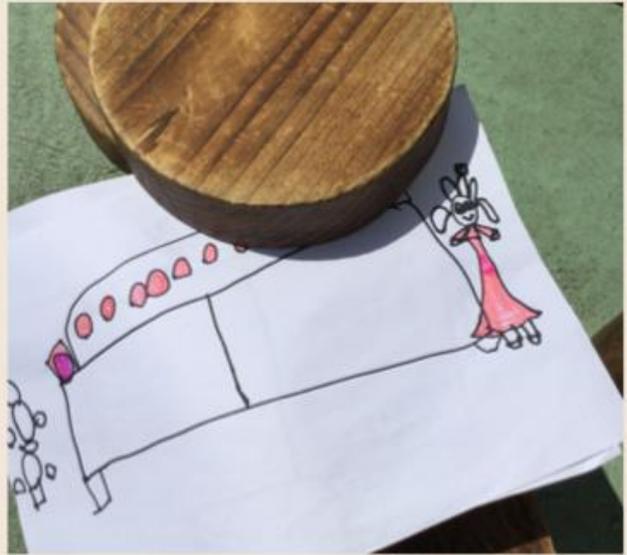
Recently, Anji County hosted a three-day Ministry of Education-UNICEF training event which was part of a joint Ministry of Education China-UNICEF Project for Rural Early Education Quality Improvement. AnjiPlay is now often referred to as a revolutionary movement of play.

Self-determination in play, ownership of discovery, learning in play and time to reflect upon, express and share complex intentions in play all contribute to AnjiPlay acquiring a universal name of excellence and innovation. The image of the child in Anji is one of competence with ability to resolve their own conflicts, manage and regulate their own risk and develop agreements during play. The child in Anji is creative and capable. The powerful image of the child creates an atmosphere of agency for the child. Children were challenged by

materials and possibilities. In the Kindergartens of Anji I was witness to deep, rich learning through play. Children were given time to think, explore, interact and engage. Literacy and numeracy were ever present though play.

The photo collages include photos of literacy and numeracy in various preschools visited throughout the study tour as well as example of the indoor environments.

Literacy and Numeracy



Indoor Environments



Final contemplation

I continue to seek greater understanding of AnjiPlay. I continue to research, reflect and experiment with: the complexity of the play; how to raise the profile of self-determined play in Catholic schools; materials and environments; the social and cultural context of what I witnessed in China in relation to Australia; the outcomes of children acting on their play intentions with extensive time; the opportunities provided by 'Play Sharing,' 'Play Stories' and 'Play Planning'; the possibility of 'Play Memories' to support teachers and parents in understanding play; and the image of the child in our Australian educational landscape especially the child in Catholic schools. In doing so, I also refer to theoretical understandings and research.

AnjiPlay provides a lens through which the rich possibilities and the potential of play can be explored. Currently Anji County is well known for its bamboo, white tea and ecological-friendly agriculture and industry. It's only a matter of time when the world knows about the evolutionary movement of "true" play called Anji Play!



With the visionary Ms Cheng

Enjoy the AnjiPlay video. Images from the April 2017 study tour

<https://www.facebook.com/AnjiPlayWorld/videos/1715730605111375/>

Centre for the Research on Play in Education, Development and Learning (PEDAL), University of Cambridge, UK

PEDAL, located in the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education was launched in October 2015 with funding from the LEGO Foundation. PEDAL's mission is to conduct academic research into the role of play in young children's education, development and learning to inform wider practice and policy. The mission of PEDAL is further unpacked below,

Play is an integral part of a happy childhood. All children and most adults engage in playful activities, including physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretence play and games with rules.

At the minimum, it is clear that play is enjoyed by its participants, and this alone indicates it has motivational value in relation to learning. However, beyond this, play is currently under-researched. Play advocates claim that it enhances learning, has a clear role in education, and supports emotional well-being, good mental health, creativity and social competence. As such, it follows that play may have the potential to contribute to economic, social and cultural development. Through PEDAL's research, the role of play in children's education, development and learning will be more widely understood by those involved in their care and education. New insights will inform effective evidence-based policy and practice – and will unlock a source of knowledge and inspiration that will improve children's lives around the world. (PEDAL website, 2017)

PEDAL'S research informs evidence based policy and practice and the initial focus for the research teams are:

Research Strand A: What is Play? - Creating a framework for the conceptualisation and measurement of play, helping to explore the role of play in social and emotional development.

Research Strand B: How does play develop? - Establishing a longitudinal study of play throughout childhood and beyond.

Research Strand C: Does play have a role in school? - Investigating playful approaches to children's early learning through the lens of science.

Fellowship Research at PEDAL

For some time prior to my visit to PEDAL, I corresponded with Dr David Whitebread, Director of PEDAL. Dr David Whitebread, BA, MEd, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology & Education and a developmental cognitive psychologist and early years specialist. He has been a member of Homerton College, Cambridge since 1986, where he established a highly regarded initial teacher-education course for the early years. On joining the Faculty of Education in 2001, he set up a new Masters course in Psychology and Education, which attracts students from the UK and around the world.

Dr Whitebread is widely recognised as a leading international expert in early childhood development and education, and has given lectures and undertaken consultancies in this area in many countries, including Australia, China, India, Canada, Poland, the USA, Chile and the UK. His research interests are concerned with young children's development of metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities and the implications for early years and primary education.

Dr Whitebread's writings and research are well known to those in Early Childhood circles. He has published widely in academic journals and book chapters, and has edited or written a number of books, including *Teaching and Learning in the Early Years* (2015) and *Developmental Psychology & Early Childhood Education* (2012). His current research focus is concerned with the early development of metacognition and self-regulation in young children and with the role of play, social interaction and language in supporting this development.

It was indeed an honor that Dr Whitebread kindly agreed to meet with me and he was both surprised and delighted that I travelled from Australia to meet with him. He was particularly delighted that I work Catholic schools and very interested about how schools are embedding play into practice and also how it is being written into system directed policy. Our meeting took place in his small, unassuming office at Homerton College in the Faculty of Education where we were surrounded by books and papers.

Those of us who are involved in Early Childhood education know that children learn best through play and that this has long-lasting consequences for achievement and well-being. But the kind of hard quantifiable evidence that is understood by policy makes is difficult to obtain.

Researching play is inherently tricky. (Whitebread, 2016)

The unique opportunity to meet with Dr Whitebread and members of the research teams was a highlight of my Fellowship experience. I was able to meet with each individual team and speak with them about the three identified areas of research.



With Dr David Whitehead

The ground-breaking research of PEDAL is proving how important play is to the early learner in achieving successful learning outcomes, developing literacy and numeracy, well-being, self-regulation, problem solving, social interactions, risk taking and creativity. Although all strands of research at PEDAL are relevant to my educational research, the PEDAL research strand “*Does play have a role in school?*” is of particular interest to the purposes of this Fellowship.

Since April 2016, a team of four researchers have worked with teachers in focus groups, reviewed the research literature and established partnerships with approximately twenty schools interested in research about if play has a role in schools. The team is utilising theory and research evidence from developmental and educational psychology including but not limited to the following:

- Play embodies many active learning skills: creative, independent problems solving and control over one’s own learning
- Playful experiences have been linked to better learning and developmental outcomes
- How aspects of playful learning might develop children into active learners.

Theory and research evidence is used in conjunction with expertise from educators to develop and test a new playful education program aimed at science learning in the early years. This will be achieved by following these steps:

1. Build a theory of change that suggests how we might adapt teaching practices to support growth in children’s flexible problem-solving in science

2. Create a professional development program to train teachers in techniques that we have identified as critical in our theory of change
3. Assess the impact of this program on children's flexible problem-solving & learning more broadly (PEDAL, 2016).

The research team works with teachers as co-researchers to develop and test children's active learning through playful activities. Currently the research is based in the UK, yet the research team expects the program to be scalable with the aim to reflect a process not a product. There is detailed information about the research team's questions, approach, development and testing and future directions which can be accessed on the PEDAL website.

The preliminary findings of Research Strand C: Does play have a role in schools? indicate that play positively contributes to learning as stated below, "Our working model proposes that when teachers of young children adopt more open-ended, playful approaches to science learning, children develop their problem-solving skills" This in turn supports the growth of children's autonomy in learning (PEDAL, 2016).

The model of accessing science in the early years via play is an example of play as a pedagogy. It is an excellent example for Catholic schools to understand the potential and possibilities of play in the early school years and how to implement play as a pedagogy while accessing the curriculum.

Toward a playful pedagogy in literacy:

In addition to the three research strands, Dr Whitebread informed me about collaborative projects PEDAL is involved with. One in particular in PLaNS (Play, Narrative and Narrative Skills) project, a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and the LEGO Foundation. Dr Whitebread and researcher Dr Marisol Basilio worked closely with nine teachers to design and implement pretence and construction play that supported writing, storytelling, creativity and collaboration skills of children in Year 1, 3 and 5. The team developed and evaluated an innovative approach to teaching writing skills through play.

A common factor in all the various Fellowship experiences in relation to play, whether they were in Finland, Sweden or China is the importance of the child having valued input into their learning. This relates directly to image of the child and it is evident in the PLaNS project. "This approach gives children control over their learning process in a manner that is fun, hands-on and engaging, while providing the necessary instruction support through the design of activities and explicit learning objectives" (Whitebread & Basilio, 2016).

Contrary to popular belief that “play in the classroom is a waste of time” our results indicate that children learnt just as much as they were required to do in the course of an academic year. We see this a very promising result, since children in the project spent a considerable amount of time playing and planning through collaborative building activities, as compared with more traditional forms of writing. (Whitebread, Baker, Gibson, 2015)

The progress of the 108 children who participated in the project were compared to the children from the same teacher’s previous year group and the children who participated in the project improved in the formal aspects of writing based on National Curriculum Levels just as much as their peers.

The preliminary findings of the PLaN Project are detailed below:

1. Motivation: Children wrote for longer and produced more creative stories at the end of the project. They independently dedicated more time to writing their stories.
2. Creative writing: Children’s stories were more creative towards the end of the year.
3. Metacognition: Children’s ability to control thinking processes and the knowledge they had them improved during the year.
4. Collaborative skills: Children learnt to collaborate more effectively in groups. Groups in which the children were more playful were also the groups to show better collaboration skills (PEDAL, 2016).

The PLaN project is another example from which all in Catholic schools can learn so as to understand and implement play as a pedagogy while accessing the curriculum. Many primary school children find writing difficult but a playful stimulus is far more effective than an instructional one (Whitebread, 2015).

As strong possibility is that play supports the early development of children’s self-control. These are our abilities to develop awareness of our own thinking processes-it influences how effectively we go about undertaking challenging activities. In a study carried out with toddlers and young pre-schoolers, children with greater self-control solved problems quicker when exploring an unfamiliar set-up requiring scientific reasoning, regardless of their IQ. This sort of evidence makes us think that giving children the chance to play will make them more successful and creative problem-solvers in the long run. (Baker, 2015)

The preliminary findings of the research strand and the PLaN project both support the notion that play is important in the early years of school.

Final contemplation

The inclusion of the PEDAL experience as part of the Brother John Taylor Fellowship considerably impacted on the quality of the overall experience, including the quality of educational research about play. In fact, the evidence based research of PEDAL assisted in reinforcing the learnings and understandings gained through the individual immersions to Finland, Sweden and Anji County. It served as a bridge between practice and theory.

It was indeed an honour to spend time with Dr Whitebread and his research team and the timing was fortuitous as Dr Whitebread retired at the end of 2017. His contribution to education is significant and I commend the reading of *The Importance of Play*, (2012) written by Dr Whitebread and contributions from Marisol Basilio, Martina Kovalja and Mohini Verma.

Since the retirement of Dr Whitebread, The University of Cambridge has appointed Professor Paul Ramchandani, a world-leading researcher as the first LEGO Professor of Play in Education, Development and Learning. Part of the Professor's role will involve translating PEDAL's research into hard evidence for international and national bodies as they produce policy around children's right to play. This evidence will be crucially important to Catholic schools as we move toward a greater understanding about the importance of play and how both play as pedagogy and self-determine play can be used to improve outcomes for children.

Key pedagogical principles of the Fellowship educational research and key pedagogical messages for Catholic schools:

Quality early learning is one of the most important determinants of a child's life outcomes. Early childhood education brings a wide range of benefits, for example, better child well-being and learning outcomes for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility and better social and economic development for a society at large. (Starting Strong III, OECD, 2012)

The Brother John Taylor Fellowship educational experiences provide important research into the importance of Early Childhood and most specifically the academia of play. Key pedagogical experiences are detailed through the report. The research identifies some key pedagogical principles which are common to the educational environments of Finland, Sweden and Anji County, China.

These key pedagogical principles include:

- the starting age of formal schooling is seven years of age
- play is essential, recognised and valued as having positive outcomes for the child's academic, social, emotional, spiritual, physical, cultural and creative development as well as having positive benefits for the child's health and well-being
- love, joy and trust are foundation values of each education system
- children are viewed as an agentic learners
- children are involved in planning and reflection
- the importance of engaging with the outdoor environment and outdoor play
- risk taking is present and encouraged
- the well-being and happiness of children is a priority
- creativity is valued
- the use of open-ended, flexible resources
- the role of teacher as co-researcher with the child
- less interference from teachers
- the support of parents and community
- a culture of responsibility, not accountability

The common key pedagogical principles identified through the study tours to Finland, Sweden and Anji County sit alongside PEDAL's substantial and compelling research about the role of play in children's learning, development and wellbeing; as well as the potential of play-based approaches within educational settings. The

kinds of skills and accomplishments that are widely recognised as being vital components of 21st century educational provision, including critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal abilities, emotional resilience and creativity, have all been linked theoretically and empirically to playfulness and playful learning (PEDAL, 2016). Once the individual research strands and projects of PEDAL are complete, it is intended that a professional learning programme for teachers will be developed to share findings and enhance the repertoire of pedagogy that the teachers require.

The research provided by the Brother John Taylor Fellowship strongly recommends that a scholarly conversation about play is needed in Catholic education, most specifically in Catholic schools. However, preceding this conversation there needs to be recognition and understanding that the early years of school (children aged 5-8) are Early Childhood years (children aged birth to 8); therefore the philosophies, pedagogy and best practice of Early Childhood apply to the early years of school not just the prior to school years.

Early childhood education in Australia has been a rapidly growing part of the education sector and while complex has, until recently, generated limited discussion in mainstream educational policy arenas (Elliott, 2006). The recognition and understanding of Early Childhood needs to be front and centre of Catholic education and schools. Consequently, image of the child as an agentic learner in the early years of school needs to be further explored. It is only from there that the true value of play can be understood.

Such an understanding of play also relies on the other disciplines from which we have drawn evidence in this review, namely the sociologies and geographies of childhood. These studies have been amassing evidence that have challenged our understanding of childhood as a period of socialisation and preparation for adulthood during which children are weak and dependent. They have shown that children are competent social actors capable of negotiating complex social landscapes, building relationships through play, testing and contesting adult authority and power in direct and subtle ways. They have also shown that children have not forgotten how to play, rather that we as adults may have forgotten how to see how they are playing, or remember what it feels like. Such an understanding of children has a number of challenges for our relationships with them, especially if we are seeking to support their play. (Lester and Russell, 2008)

There is a need for pedagogical awareness, understanding and expertise by leadership and teachers about the importance of play; both play as a pedagogy and self-determined play in Catholic schools. Play as a pedagogy has almost disappeared from many schools. Often it is not legitimately acknowledged as a way of accessing curriculum and is often discounted in favour of teacher-directed methods of instruction. As Bo Stjerne Thomsen from the LEGO Foundation noted, “There is a great need for establishing play as a central arena for learning and development in the minds and actions of those influencing children’s lives” (PEDAL, 2016).

Time, opportunities and spaces for play are all necessary. Teachers require support to expound their pedagogical approach to play because merely increasing time, opportunities and spaces along is not adequate for enhancing play and learning. As well as a pedagogical understanding of play, teachers need to know how to use play to meet the individual needs and capabilities of the learner within the culture of the school and school community. The professional learning of teachers about the importance of Early Childhood and specifically in relation to a pedagogical approach to play as well as the importance of self-determined play directly links to all seven standards of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (2011).

Deepening insight and strengthening implementation of Early Childhood philosophy, pedagogy and practice improves the domains of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement for Catholic school teacher.

It is envisioned that with improvements to the domains of professional knowledge, practice and engagement, teacher in the early years of school will:

- develop play as a pedagogy to access the curriculum and develop self-determined play both which support the child's right to be connected to the world and to experience joy and wonder in learning;
- work collaboratively with children as agentic learners, making connections to and about their world and supporting them to expand their own theories and understanding of how the world works;
- create opportunities to learn about nature, culture and community as well as understandings themselves as a lifelong learner;
- re-image environments including indoor and outdoor spaces to invite the child to play.

Play and environment cannot be separated. Environments should be inviting; an invitation for the child to play. The indoor and outdoor environments of Catholic schools are slowly being re-imaged to enable Early Learning pedagogy and best practice to evolve and to transform ways of being, doing and learning. Such re-imaging projects not only support the learning needs and capabilities of children but purposefully create spaces which support social and emotional growth and wellbeing.

It is recommended that Catholic schools do not underestimate the value of self-determined play. In the school context where learning is often driven by curriculum demands, the opportunity for self-determined play is limited. Frequently, the only time a child has for self-determined play are break times at school such as recess and lunch. In addition to limited time for self-determined play at school, the opportunity for self-determined play for children in society has declined with the increase of more structured and supervised activities. This places even greater importance on the quality and opportunities provided for play in the school environment.

Children's play is under threat from increased urbanisation, perceptions of risk and educational pressures. Over half the world's population live in cities. Play is curtailed by perceptions of risk to do with traffic, crime, abduction and germs, and by the emphasis on 'earlier is better' in academic learning and competitive testing in schools. (Whitebread, 2015)

The educational research provided by the Brother John Taylor Fellowship sets a direction which requires immediate discussion and action. Dr Pasi Sahlberg, who has recently taken an academic post at the Goneski Institute for Education at the University of NSW, believes that Australia can benefit from the Finnish experience especially in reference to the value of children's play.

High quality play teaches children about personal responsibility in ways formal lessons cannot and has much support among Australian educators. Every time I mention play in my times in Australia, people stand up and they applaud. Early Childhood day-care, preschools and primary schools should support kids to play. (Sahlberg, 2017)

Catholic schools cannot be complacent about the importance of Early Childhood and the academia of play. Catholic schools in the dioceses across NSW are urged to act boldly. The time of limited discussion is over and the time of scholarly conversation and collaborative action has emerged.

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