

Leading age-appropriate pedagogies in the early years of school



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Abstract

There is increasing pressure on leaders and teachers to improve the academic achievement of children in the early years of school. Alongside this is recognition that social and emotional development are the important drivers of children's school and lifetime success. This paper reports on the design and leadership of the pilot phase of the Age Appropriate Pedagogies program commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and Training to refocus pedagogical practices in the early years of school. This refocus was deemed to be necessary in order to achieve strong academic outcomes while ensuring that children's holistic development remained a key component of all learning and teaching. The program was developed by a Griffith University research team using an innovative research-informed and research-led design framed around the core premises that underpin Fullan's theory of action for educational change. The program consisted of both professional learning and research, with these two components being inextricably linked via school-based action research projects. Findings from the pilot, conducted in 45 state schools across three regions, illustrate the positive effects that can be generated when systems, schools and universities work together in a research and professional learning partnership

Background

Internationally, economic and social investment agendas have identified the importance of early childhood education in improving life prospects for all (Heckman, 2011). However, accompanying this recognition has come increasing pressure on leaders and teachers to improve the academic achievement of children in the early years of school (Irvine & Farrell, 2013). As a consequence, teachers in these early years are being drawn into a wider school performativity culture and using increasingly formal and didactic methods of teaching (Roberts-Holmes, 2016). Such methods are often in conflict with the natural learning strategies of young children that include investigation, action, creativity, dialogue and play (Broström, 2017), making the transition to school more difficult for some children (Dockett, Petriwskyj, & Perry, 2014).

Children's successful transition to school and the development of strong social, physical, emotional and cognitive competencies, outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, are seen to support school completion, tertiary education, and citizenship (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). To develop such competencies, and the knowledge and skills needed for success in the 21st century, children need activities that engage and stimulate high levels of concentration, interest, enjoyment and challenge (Shernoff, Abdi, & Anderson, 2014).

Direct teaching or instruction that is narrowly focused on the achievement of specific curriculum goals, especially those that are emphasised in national testing processes, is therefore insufficient. Instead, teachers need to employ a repertoire of pedagogies that take into account the interests, capabilities and characteristics of individual learners, as well as the context and purpose for their teaching. With this in mind, the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) engaged researchers from Griffith University to design the Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program. The program engaged system leaders, school leaders, and researchers working together to support Foundation (Preparatory or prep) teachers in the use of age-appropriate pedagogies to teach the Australian Curriculum. The program was piloted in 45 state schools within three regions of Queensland in 2015, and trialed in 115 state schools and eight independent schools in 2016. The 2015 design and pilot of the program are the focus of this presentation.

Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program

The design of the Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program was underpinned by three principles. The first was

the importance of research-informed practices. All participants had access to a foundation paper providing a synthesis of key international research relating to early years' pedagogies (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2015). The second principle was the value of action research as a vehicle for both informing and leading change processes. Teachers and school leaders were co-researchers, creating and implementing their own action research. The third principle was an appreciation of the potential for positive impacts when there is true collaboration between systems, schools, and universities. Stakeholders at all levels of the system worked together.

The program was further framed around the following seven core premises that inform Fullan's (2007) theory of action for educational change:

1. a focus on motivation—without individual and collective motivation improvement is not possible
2. capacity building with a focus on results—strategies that increase the collective effectiveness of a group
3. learning in context—learning in the settings where you work
4. changing context—changing the larger school context and building capacity laterally, with schools and districts learning from each other
5. a bias for reflective action—doing, reflection, inquiry, evidence, more doing
6. tri-level engagement—within school and community, region and state
7. persistence and flexibility in staying the course—building capacity to keep going over time in the face of inevitable barriers.

Three components were utilised in the program's design: a literature review; a professional learning program; and a research process that both informed and led the change. These components were inextricably linked, because the professional learning was initially informed by the review of the literature and then extended as teachers and leaders engaged in school-based action research projects. A wrap-around study, conducted by the research team, including surveys and interviews, further informed the ongoing program. Each of the components is outlined briefly.

Literature review

A meta-analysis of more than 100 papers drawn from recent international research about effective pedagogies in the early years was conducted and findings incorporated in a foundation paper (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2015). Within it, 10 large-scale research studies were of particular importance in identifying key messages that contributed to an overarching notion that a range and balance of pedagogies is necessary in the early years of school.

The 10 key messages were:

1. A balanced repertoire of age-appropriate pedagogies is needed to ensure that educators are responsive to learners and fulfil teaching goals.
2. A balance is needed between holistic development and academic goals in order to give children a strong foundation for success at school and in later life.
3. A balance is needed between child-initiated and adult-initiated learning experiences in order to recognise children's agency and promote their capabilities.
4. Positive personal relationships among teachers and peers are needed to foster motivation to learn, social collaboration, engagement and enjoyment.
5. Playfulness should pervade learning and teaching interactions.
6. High-quality verbal interactions are needed for sustained shared thinking in collaborative learning.
7. Adult leadership and scaffolding is needed for cognitive challenge and the development of higher-order thinking.
8. Opportunities for active learning are needed in real-life, imaginary, spontaneous and planned experiences.
9. A change in pedagogies in the early years has a flow-on effect for the following year levels that must be considered and factored in to the provision of training, resources and support.
10. Professional demands on teachers need to be supported and the lead-in time required to establish new approaches recognised.

As these messages suggest, selecting and utilising a range of age-appropriate pedagogies is complex but essential, in order to ensure that teaching is responsive to learners and attends to holistic and academic goals. As Luke (2013) stresses, there is no single effective strategy, approach or method of teaching, for singular approaches ignore the range of children, cultures, communities, age and developmental levels, subjects, skills and knowledges in the classroom.

Professional learning

The professional learning program consisted of two regional workshops. The first aimed to create the impetus for change, ensure teachers and school leaders embraced the rationale for range and balance in early years' pedagogies, and introduce action research. The second, at the end of the pilot, provided an opportunity for leaders and teachers to share their action research findings and change journeys.

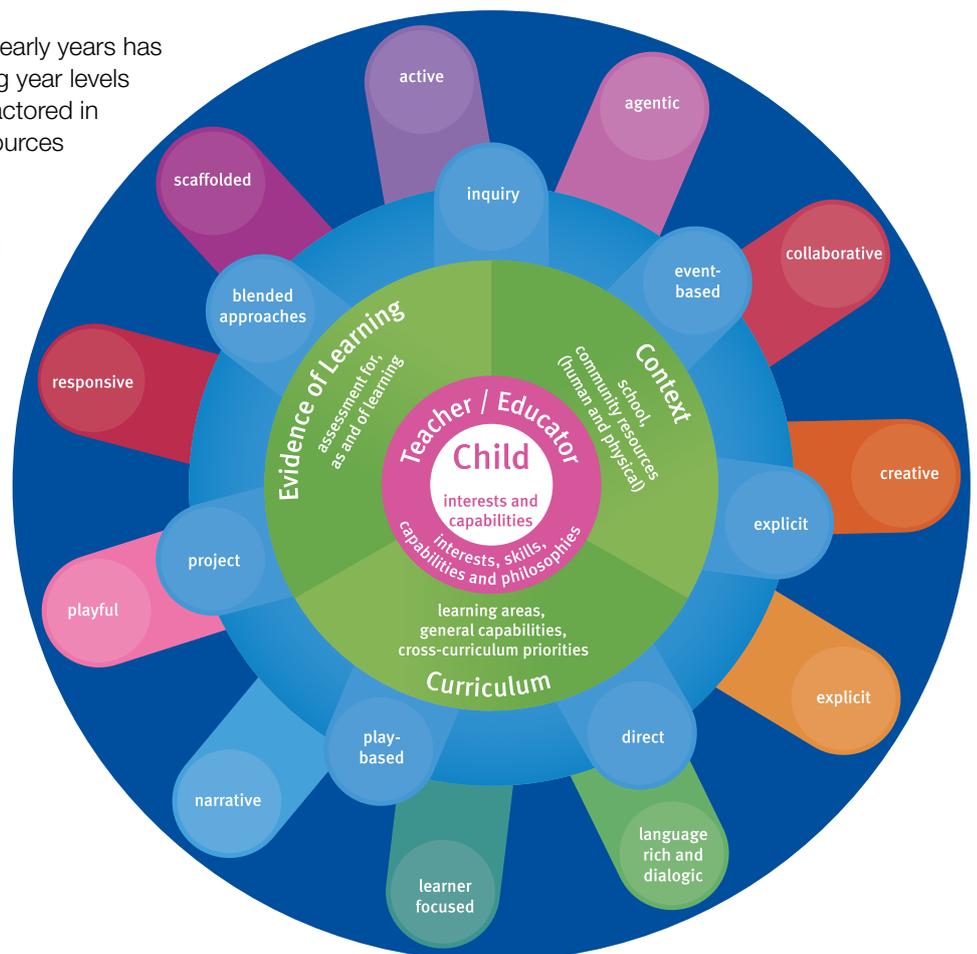


Figure 1 The Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program conceptual framework

Source: Queensland Department of Education, 2016, p. 7

In addition, teachers and leaders in schools were supported by four individualised on-site support visits from the researchers. Each visit was responsive to individual school priorities, and involved consulting with members of the school leadership team to discuss ongoing support, as well as meeting with classroom teachers to scaffold their practice. Teachers were further supported by regionally-based pedagogical coaches funded by DET and print resources that included professional readings, reflection frameworks, and evaluation tools created specifically for the pilot by researchers and the Learning Pathways team within DET. Additional support, offering specific guidance as requested, was provided by the researchers through email communication. The role of the researchers in such cases was that of a 'critical friend', offering encouragement, provocation and constructive feedback.

A deliberate feature of the professional learning component was the construction of learning teams that included the principal, early years' teachers, and where possible, other staff involved with the early years. This approach was adopted because Australian and international research on building school-wide capacity for improvement suggests conditions associated with school organisation, the task and the individual are important to manage change, improve classroom practices, and student outcomes (Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, 2012).

The professional learning process was further supported by a conceptual model that places the learner's interests, capabilities, and experiences and understandings of school and schooling at the centre of teacher planning and decision-making (see Figure 1).

The model is centred first on the interests and capabilities of the child, but second, on the beliefs and philosophies, skills, capabilities and experiences that teachers bring to the teaching process. These elements inform and influence the teacher's pedagogical relationship with the children and their learning.

Other components of the model recognise the influence of context (including school and community location, ethos, culture and diversity, and the human and physical resources available within that context); curriculum (considerations of content, focus, skills, knowledge, general capabilities, cross-curricular connections, standards and criteria); and evidence of learning progress (identifying and recording children's learning and development).

The final two layers of the conceptual model represent the (non-exclusive) approaches and characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies that were identified in the literature. These are presented as flexible and movable so that purposeful selections that support children's learning can be made.

The model identifies 11 characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies: active, agentic, collaborative, creative, explicit, language-rich and dialogic, learner-focused, narrative, playful, responsive, and scaffolded. It identifies seven approaches: inquiry learning, play-based learning, project-based, explicit instruction, event-based, direct teaching or instruction, and blended. The model suggests that when a range of approaches and characteristics are selected and utilised over time, balance is achieved.

Research process

The pilot consisted of two distinct forms of research: school-based action research, designed and implemented by teachers and school leaders, which generated unique and grounded understandings of the processes, challenges, and impact of working toward a pedagogical refocus; and wrap-around research conducted by the university research team designed to gain broader understandings about the refocus processes and outcomes. An action research approach was used for the school-based research because, as an embedded practice, it provided opportunities for teachers to examine and reflect on their teaching practices, while also having the capacity to 'empower, transform and emancipate individuals' (Creswell, 2012, p. 597).

For the wrap-around research, a case study approach was employed, with the case being bounded by the scope of the pilot. The following question framed the investigation initially: 'How best can regions and schools support prep teachers to re-focus on and incorporate a range of age-appropriate pedagogies in their programs to achieve expected student outcomes?' This question was later broadened to include the impact of participation on teachers and children.

Data sources included interviews with school and regional team members, questionnaires and the interim and final reports generated by each school. As such, the bulk of the data collected was phenomenological in nature for the goal of this over-arching study was to generate an understanding of the participants' experiences as they described them. Although these data privilege the perceptions of individuals, triangulation of multiple data sources ensured a robust and comprehensive examination of multiple data sources and strengthened the validity of the research. Statistical analysis of questionnaires and content analysis of the school reports and transcripts of interviews with key stakeholders was undertaken to generate the findings.

Findings

The following findings are drawn from the *Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program Progress Report*

2016 (Queensland Government Department of Education and Training, 2016), a publicly available document produced by the Queensland Government Department of Education in response to the detailed report created by the research team.

In this section of this paper, the findings outlined in that summary report have been reconfigured to align with the premises that underpin Fullan's (2007) theory of action for educational change. This structure has been applied in an attempt to make explicit the potential of the program's design for effecting educational change.

Motivation and engagement

Leaders reported that the alignment of messaging from all levels of the system contributed to schools' engagement with the program, with the strong authorising environment motivating the leaders to make a commitment to more holistic views about teaching and learning. The clearly articulated and research-informed evidence base was also important in building and sustaining participation as it provided a high degree of validity for school and system leaders (p. 12). Engaged leaders were central to the program as their role in driving change, maintaining consistency and embedding change within existing school priorities was imperative to the change management process (p. 13).

Teacher motivation and engagement with the Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program were reported as high. Working with age appropriate pedagogies re-affirmed their enjoyment and commitment to teaching in the early years. Approximately 98 per cent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that application of age-appropriate practices enhanced their motivation and professional engagement. High motivation and engagement were also stimulated by close alignment between the program frameworks and teachers' existing philosophies.

Teacher responses to post-study questionnaires indicated they are happiest and feel a stronger sense of professional identity and agency when there is close alignment between their own deeply held beliefs about learners and learning, and the approaches and practices they are implementing.

Responses to a question about the characteristics 'affirming my early years' philosophy' drew strong agreement from teachers. Again, 98 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. While teachers acknowledged the strong alignment with personal philosophies, they also acknowledged the need to adapt or change their current practice (p. 13).

Capacity building with a focus on results

Many leaders reported a commitment to maintaining high expectations of learners and retaining a focus on

delivering a rigorous curriculum, in line with the stated expectations of the Australian Curriculum. To this end, emphasis was placed on understanding the pedagogies and approaches as tools to support teaching of the curriculum. Building capacity within school teams and regions was seen as a priority to 'future proof' the program in any further implementation (p. 12).

Learning in context

Some teachers reported that they were afforded opportunities to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practices in the classroom settings in which they work, as well as opportunities to observe their colleagues and teachers in other schools. These responses went largely unreported in the *Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program Progress Report 2016*. However, leaders acknowledged the program as both 'flexible' and 'responsive' to the dynamic and changing nature of schools and their emerging needs (p. 12).

Changing context

Fullan proposed that theories of action must have the capacity to change the larger context and to build capacity laterally, so that schools and regions learn from each other. While this, too, was not reported in the *Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program Progress Report 2016*, the importance of building capacity within school teams and regions to 'future proof' the program in any further implementation was reported as a priority (p. 12).

A bias for reflective action

Teachers acknowledged the impact self reflection had on their practice. They found it useful in aligning philosophy, practice and curriculum knowledge. Some teachers also found this challenging, with (for example) one teacher revealing that deep reflection had forced her to confront the fact that there were weaknesses in her teaching ability and that she had a distance still to travel (p. 14).

Tri-level engagement

Leaders reported that a strong authorising environment was appreciated, and that the alignment of messaging from the highest levels down contributed significantly to schools' engagement with the program (p. 12). Strategies that promoted 'mutual interaction and influence' (Fullan, 2007, p. 11) within and across the state, regional and school systems, however, were not reported.

Persistence and flexibility in staying the course

As the Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program grew from a pilot phase to a trial in 2016, adjustments and refinements were made to strengthen opportunities for

mentoring of teaching teams, professional learning and regional capacity building (p. 16). The persistence and flexibility needed over time to maintain the focus on age-appropriate pedagogies in the early years of school has yet to be tested.

Discussion and conclusion

The Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program was designed to be both research-informed and research-led, with the professional learning and research components of the program inextricably linked through school-based action research projects. This design positioned the schools and university research team as co-researchers, affording opportunities for mutual collaboration and responsiveness. In an attempt to make explicit the potential of such a design to facilitate change, the core premises that underpin Fullan's (2007) theory of action for educational change were used to frame the findings. Although limited by the summary nature of the *Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program Progress Report 2016*, findings illustrated some of the positive effects that can be generated when systems, schools and universities work together in a research and professional learning partnership.

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