‘Connections and continuity between learning experiences … make learning more meaningful’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 32).

Effective learning usually occurs over time as children practise and master new skills, concepts and techniques. It is rare that significant learning just ‘happens’; new learning typically builds on previous knowledge and experience. For this reason, effective learning environments plan for and build in continuity, predictability and repetition.

The National Quality Standard (NQS) (Element 1.1.3) requires that ‘the program … is organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child’s learning’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 30). Ensuring continuity and connections between children’s learning experiences is one of the important ways that we can do this. When children have repeated opportunities to use materials and resources; to engage with new ideas or knowledge; and to develop their skills and understandings; then learning is likely to be richer, deeper and more meaningful.

Continuity is not always something that comes easily or naturally. Sometimes the way that we organise our time, and plan for learning actually works against a sense of continuity. Because, as educators, we can be so busy just trying to get through the day, it can be hard to find the time to stand back and think about how to consciously plan for continuity.

Instead, to cope with all that needs to be done each day, we can fall back on routines that work for us as adults, but don’t necessarily provide children with connected learning. We can break our day into sections, so everything happens as quickly and efficiently as possible. But while this may be efficient, it is often to the detriment of children’s learning experience. All children need a measure of routine and predictability to their day. It provides an important sense of certainty and security. However, when routine becomes too rigid, and when time is arbitrarily divided up by adults to suit other purposes, the children’s learning and engagement suffers.
When children’s days are parcelled up into short blocks of time without opportunities for extended play, learning is likely to be superficial. When, on the other hand, they are given extended blocks of time in which to play, and have opportunities to return to what they were working on and continue it, then learning is likely to be deeper and more complex. Such extended learning experiences not only engage children in meaningful and absorbing play, but also promote higher level thinking as children recall and make connections to what has been done previously, plan ahead, and review and evaluate their thinking along the way. Typically, this process involves working with others and so the provision of ongoing and extended learning experiences is also an important way to support children to ‘work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities’ (NQS Element 5.2.1) (ACECQA, 2011, p. 136).

If we continually change the materials, experiences and resources that children play with, then we risk short-changing children’s experience. While some change is important to maintain children’s interest and introduce new ideas, change for the sake of change reduces the chances children have to re-engage with and master materials and ideas. Children will benefit more from deep involvement with a few well-chosen experiences than from superficial involvement with many. We may worry that children will become bored if the same experiences are repeated many times. In fact boredom probably has more to do with the inherent limitations of some activities and equipment rather than whether or not they are repeated. Some experiences and materials do not bear repetition. In general, rich, open-ended materials that can be used in multiple ways are likely to engage children’s interests for very long periods of time.

One of the skills of good early childhood educators is recognising and selecting such materials and experiences. Such choices will contribute to a service meeting NQS Element 3.2.1: ‘Outdoor and indoor spaces are designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments’.

A good test is: What possibilities for learning and development do particular materials and experiences offer? If there is little room for improvement, change or development then the value of the material or experience is likely to be limited. While it may be ‘fun’, its learning potential is often restricted. Natural materials such as sand and water are important examples of rich materials with endless possibilities. They are staple elements in most early childhood environments because we recognise their boundless potential to engage children’s interests and promote sensory experiences, investigation, experimentation and learning.

Other open-ended materials and experiences such as blocks, painting or drawing offer similar opportunities. When children have repeated chances to use them they quickly develop competence and mastery of the materials and are able to use them to express more and more complex ideas. Children who are experienced block builders, or practised painters and drawers will often amaze us with their abilities. Their success in using such materials is often due as much to the opportunity to practise using them as it is to any innate ‘talent’.
If children are always presented with new materials or resources (no matter how good the materials or resources are) they are constantly returning to square one—experimenting with and learning how to use the materials rather than learning how to use them in more sophisticated ways. Exploratory play is important, but it is most important when it leads to mastery.

If we want to learn to play a musical instrument we don’t pick up a guitar on Monday, a flute on Tuesday, a drum on Wednesday, a keyboard on Thursday and a trumpet on Friday and expect to be any good at any of them by the end of the week. If we want to learn to play guitar, we practise it each day so that we can get better at playing it over time. Meaningful learning is not about instant gratification. Rather, it is an ongoing process that can sometimes be hard work but that is also intensely engaging, interesting and rewarding.

Many of the most rewarding materials and experiences are those that require some effort on our part. The results of children’s hard work will be evident as they use their new-found skills to explore, investigate and discover their own potential.

Don’t pack me away!

Encouraging children to return to what they have been doing previously is an important way to promote continuity of learning. Too often we see ‘pack away’ time as the end of an experience rather than simply as a pause. If we are able to find ways to leave children’s creations and play materials for them to return to later, then they will often pick up where they left off. Of course it is not always possible to leave things out—the demands of space, time and weather often mean that pack away time is pack away time. But rather than questioning why we should leave children’s creations out, it is perhaps more helpful to think ‘why not?’—with the implied assumption we will try wherever possible to save them. Such an approach sends an important message to the children themselves—that what they do is important, and that they have the ability to decide when they are finished with it.

One simple way to encourage this is by using signs that children can place on their work so it doesn’t get packed away. Such ‘Don’t pack away’ signs not only help to ensure that children’s work is saved, but also allow children to make their own decisions about what they want to continue with and what they don’t. In doing so, they contribute to a group sense of achievement and accomplishment, as children notice and respond to what others have been doing, and what they have deemed important and worthy of keeping. ‘Don’t pack away’ signs, along with accompanying notes, can also help to demonstrate the value of written words and signs as means of communication.
When children have such opportunities to engage in extended learning, the sophistication and complexity of their play also increases. Not only is there the time to plan and refine ideas, but there is also the motivation of knowing that you have the time to finish what you have started. If there is only half an hour to play with the blocks and you know that at the end of that time they need to be packed away, there is little incentive to build something complex and interesting. When you know that you can come back to your construction and continue with it until it is finished, then there is a reason to invest some commitment, energy and enthusiasm into the task.

Where it is not possible to leave constructions or other materials out then photographs or children’s drawings can provide opportunities to revisit what children have been doing at a later time. Displaying photographs or drawings of previous work and using them as a basis for discussions with children about what they were doing previously can be another way to create deliberate connections between learning experiences and encourage children to revisit and continue their play.

Continuity of educators

In addition to a consistent and predictable learning environment, consistent educators are vital to the creation of continuity of learning and connections between learning experiences. As NQS Element 7.1.3 makes clear: ‘Continuity of educators, coordinators, practice and processes plays a significant role in promoting children’s learning and development’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 177).

Consistent adults help to provide children with a sense of stability and security. By virtue of their ongoing involvement with a particular group of children they are better able to observe, follow and guide learning over time. Such consistency promotes the development of supportive learning relationships and helps to establish a learning culture within the classroom. Educators who have opportunities to form ongoing relationships with children are able to use these relationships, and the understandings of individuals and groups of children that they bring, to engage children in meaningful and significant learning that extends from day to day or week to week. They are also better able to draw children’s attention to the connections between learning experiences that help to consolidate learning and support children to transfer learning from one context to another.

In this regard, consistency between settings (not just within them) is another critical factor in thinking about effective learning over the long term. While children are certainly resilient and adaptable, their experiences of transitions and change are likely to be more favourable when there is as much consistency and continuity between settings as possible.

Children’s lives will be marked by many transitions and discontinuities. While we may not be able to change this fact, we can work to make such transitions as smooth and seamless as possible. In doing so, we can foster and preserve children’s sense of wellbeing; a sense that is vital if they are to remain confident and successful learners into the future.
The making table

The ‘making table’ is a space for children to engage in creative exploration. In many ways it is what would otherwise be called our ‘art and craft’ table. But it is about more than just ‘art and craft’. My experience with the ‘making table’ began with the idea of creating a consistent space in which the children could explore art, creative expression and making. Watching how the children have responded has made me think about the importance of children having opportunities to guide and direct their own creativity in an environment that supports a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude.

As a result of their experiences at the making table, our children have all become what I like to call DIY children. A DIY child makes their own resources for their play from the materials available at the making table. A DIY child sees the potential of everyday materials and turns them into something new and exciting.

The making table had existed at Preschool House before I joined the team, but its form was inconsistent. One day it would be for clay, one day for painting, one day for box construction, and the next day, nothing. This disconnection resulted in low levels of engagement for the children. They would come to the space, quickly create something, hang it out to dry and move on to something else. Educators seemed to focus on bringing variety to the space to promote deep engagement. In fact, the opposite occurred. Children were not engaged or inspired as they did not have the time to discover their potential and develop their ability to work with the ever-changing materials.

As I thought about what was going on, I realised how important it was to shift the making table from something variable to something continuous. Now children can access scissors, tape, glue, pencils and recycled materials every day. Further, in our very play-based curriculum, we program for long periods of uninterrupted play time, meaning these materials are available all day. Children come to the making table with a sense of familiarity but also with the opportunity to engage in deeper exploration.

For DIY children, the sameness of the making table is not boring, it is exciting. Knowing that it will always be there is not a dull comfort but a thrilling possibility; children come with an idea and walk away with a resource. Continuity has enabled children to take the step from being not only constructors of their own learning, but constructors of their own learning resources.

In the early stages, there were many conversations about the sameness of the space; some educators were concerned that children would get bored with the same things out all the time. But the opposite has proven to be true. Having the same materials out each day, and adding unusual items of interest to these materials, has resulted in sustained engagement and an evolving culture of DIY among the children. Now, Preschool House is home to a group of competent DIY-ers who create their own resources, see the potential in everyday materials, and support one another to create something new. Continuity has enabled a culture of learning through which children imagine, plan, create, evaluate, and play with what they have made; a culture where familiarity breeds not contempt, but creativity.

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References


Biography

Luke Touhill is an early childhood consultant and writer. He has worked in early childhood for 20 years as a teacher, director, manager and trainer. As a teacher his interests include project-based learning and the integration of ‘real’ experiences such as cooking, woodwork and gardening, into early childhood programs.

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