

Launch of Southern Cross University's Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) course

Speaking notes for a speech given by Pam Cahir at the launch of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) course at Southern Cross University's Tweed Heads/Gold Coast Campus – 19 November 2008.

Before I begin I wish to acknowledge the Bunjalung people, the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which this meeting is taking place.

I acknowledge too elders past and present and Aboriginal people here today.

In so doing I acknowledge Early Childhood Australia's and my own personal obligation to work towards the achievement of social justice, human rights and reconciliation with and for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) does this at all meetings. It attends in recognition that each and every one of us is a beneficiary of the dispossession of Aboriginal people that began in 1788.

It does so too as a reminder that, in every situation, ECA has an obligation to think about what this acknowledgement means for its work everyday.

Acknowledgement of country must never become simply automatic and so token. It must be a signal to us all to reflect on what it means for the way we do our work every day and, indeed, how I go about my own work here today.

This is even more true since the Prime Minister's apology to the Stolen Generations and his commitment to bridge the gap in outcomes for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country.

Thank you Karen (Martin) for the opportunity to speak at the opening of this new Gold Coast/Tweed Heads Campus of Southern Cross University.

Here, new entrants to the early childhood profession and hopefully also people who are already working in early childhood will undertake study to become early childhood teachers.

Teaching is the profession on which all others depend and the early childhood teacher has a role of equal – and I would argue greater – significance than all other teachers.

This is reinforced by the evidence about the significance of early experience in children's long-term development and about the relationship between degree-qualified early childhood teachers in leadership positions and high-quality outcomes for children (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004).

The preparation of the future pedagogical leaders in early childhood services will take place in this institution. Your graduates will have an effect on children's lives in the here and now and into the future. Indeed, how they work with young children will also be significant in the role those children will play as adults in shaping the lives of future generations of children.

Your graduates will be entrusted with the most significant role that a society can entrust to any individual – the responsibility for the development and learning of young children.

So today, in the time I have, I want to talk briefly about two things:

- The role of early childhood teachers in the post-apology context.
- What all children should be entitled to gain, or make gains towards, as a result of their experience in an early learning setting which is led by a person who was educated in their profession on this campus. In other words, what are the outcomes to which all children are entitled?

In regard to the first point, the question I am asking is: *Are there any different demands on the early childhood teacher in the post-apology era because the Prime Minister promised, on behalf of the nation as a whole, that all of us will work towards and beyond true reconciliation?*

Karen Martin, the course convener of the Birth to Eight Early Childhood Education Degree, that will be undertaken on this Campus, said recently at a public symposium about the proposed Early Childhood Learning Framework that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities want two things for their children:

- They want them to be culturally strong – to know who they are and where they come from.
- They want them to access to have and participate successfully in mainstream society.

These words echo the work of Joy Cullen from New Zealand who argues that all children are entitled to two kinds of culturally valued knowledge:

- The culturally valued knowledge which underwrites their identity and belonging in their own families and communities.
- The culturally valued knowledge which underwrites successful participation in the political, economic and social life of mainstream society.

I would argue that there is some truth in the proposition that without the first you will not have the other.

These two objectives must be part of the non-negotiable work of all teachers of young children and particularly of those teachers who work with children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

The threshold question then for all early childhood teachers and those responsible for their education as teachers is: *What does this mean for the way we work with children and prepare teachers for that work?*

This is an everyday question which must permeate our everyday practice – because things cannot remain the same.

This question has to be integral to all the work that is done on this campus. Only then will we be playing our role in realising the potential the apology has to raise the outcomes for all children.

The second thing I want to think out-loud about with you tonight is the question of what are the outcomes to which all children are entitled to make progress towards as a result of the participation in a service led by one of the early childhood teacher graduates from this campus.

While I am focusing on outcomes here I am not denying the equal significance of pedagogy, the relationship between adults and children and the relationship of adults to the parents and communities of the children for whose learning they are responsible. The quality of these relationships are essential to high-quality teaching and learning in early childhood settings.

I am also not ignoring the importance of high-quality play in which children are deeply involved in learning, developing and practicing skills. Play is practice in choosing, thinking negotiating, problem solving, taking risks and much else.

Neither am I unaware of the need to support children to talk through problems/conflict so they learn that differences are issues that can be resolved.

And, importantly, I am not ignoring the need to be clear that the role of the teacher is to be intentional in supporting the learning that is taking place. Teaching is a planned, intentional and interactive process. This is the case whether what is happening is child-led or, as it must sometimes be, teacher directed.

All of these are things that people in early childhood think about. But I know that often, in the early childhood field, there is some resistance to talking about outcomes.

I find it very hard to understand this.

If we are engaging intentionally with children as teachers we must have something in mind that we are trying to achieve as a result of those interactions. If we cannot describe the anticipated outcomes of our interventions then what is the purpose of our work as teachers?

Being able to describe outcomes is an imperative if we are committed to the goal of equity, and that goal goes to the heart of our obligations to children and their entitlement to those two kinds of knowledge I have spoken about previously.

A document which I have found most helpful in talking about outcomes in early childhood is the document produced by the Tasmanian Education Department in 2004 called *Essential connections*.

To me this document sets out one of the most cogent arguments for, and common sense approach to, the identification of outcomes for young children in early learning settings that I have read.

Essential connections organises outcomes under the headings of 'thinking', 'communicating', 'personal futures', 'social responsibility' and 'world futures'.

The research – namely the EPPE study – tells us that early childhood professionals, teachers and others, are much better at social and emotional learning ('personal futures' and 'social responsibility') than they are at cognitive learning.

Social and emotional learning is about personal wellbeing and identity as well as about self and social awareness, relationships and working with others. It includes a positive sense of self and all that this implies about the cultural embedded-ness of this learning, and the imperative that children are culturally strong and know who they are and where they come from.

Early childhood professionals, so the research says, are good at this but not so good at making intentional provision for children's cognitive growth including the development of strong thinking skills. Yet the research tells us that social and emotional learning and cognitive growth go hand in hand (Galinsky, 2005; Sylva et al., 2004).

So yes, early childhood teachers do have obligations to support young children's cognitive growth, but it is true to say that there is a real resistance in the profession to be explicit about what this means.

I think this is partly because it challenges some of the gaps in our own knowledge – that we know less about how literacy, numeracy and science and technology develop in early childhood and we are personally less confident in our own knowledge in some of these areas. The effect of this is that we are less confident about how to foster these skills and understandings. Certainly, many early childhood professionals would say that thinking is part of the process and so does not need a particular focus in our work or its outcomes. I think this is not the case as quality thinking is a learned, not necessarily intuitive skill.

So the two outcome areas I want to focus on for a moment are *thinking* and *communicating* and in doing so I hope to ignite or fuel your commitment to give these areas as much focus and attention as you will to children's wellbeing, including their social and emotional growth and the development of a sense of social responsibility.

Thinking is essential and the key elements of thinking are inquiry, which includes gathering information, asking questions, investigating etc. and reflection, which is about looking for causes and reasons, seeing and respecting different perspectives etc. I encourage you to read the detail of this in *Essential connections*.

Thinking is fore-grounded as an outcome to give it the attention it deserves – of course thinking does not exist in isolation: we think about things but quality thinking does not happen naturally. We all know of examples where quality thinking has been absent e.g. 'if you don't all sit still none of you can go outside' or 'I won't start reading until you are all sitting on your bottoms.'

Teachers need to plan for and be explicit about supporting quality thinking. They need to plan an environment which provokes thinking, curiosity, encourages a sense of wonder and prompts questions and investigations (Department of Education, 2004).

Teachers need to interact with young learners in ways that model thinking and problem-solving and challenge existing ideas about how things work, and support children to hear what others have to say, to think about similarities and differences between the ideas of others and their own and think about (reflect on) what this means for what they are thinking. Early childhood teachers have an obligation to support this process.

The focus on thinking as an outcome is about the emerging development of 'habits of the mind' such as learning to persist, to think flexibly and try new ways to gather data etc. These are part of children's early development as independent learners and essential to successful learning into the future.

Programs in early childhood should be concerned with quality thinking as an important outcome in itself and not simply as a process through which other learning occurs. This does not mean that in our work we need to disaggregate this process but it does mean that we need to see it and plan for its development.

Communicating is the other outcome I want to talk about today. Communicating is essentially about conveying meaning – it is fundamentally about using symbols: words (spoken and written), numbers, pictures, movement, drama etc. to communicate with others.

Essential connections also identifies communicating as an essential learning outcome and clusters within this outcome being:

- literate
- numerate
- information literate
- arts literate.

Children move along the trajectory towards these skills in their early lives, albeit at different rates. As early childhood teachers we need to plan for their development. These skills, as with thinking, are fundamental to children's capacity to shape and engage in the world they live. As early childhood teachers we have an obligation to intentionally build children's capacity in these areas.

I am aware that there are many ways to understand how children grow and learn. I am not arguing for a lock step – ages and stages approach – this has been well discounted.

However, accepting that the (whole) arc of possibilities for human development is wide does not mean that the progress of children's development cannot be anticipated.

We must not ignore either of these in our work with children if we are to give voice to the entitlements to the two kinds of culturally valued knowledge to which I referred earlier. If we are to support children's emergent capacity to communicate in each of these areas we must know and understand how these ways of communicating develop over time in young children and how, as teachers, we engage with children to support their learning in these areas. If we do not know these things how can we support the emergent development in all children?

Communication and quality thinking are essential to the development of a democratic world. They are, along with a strong sense of self-worth and social responsibility, the foundations of our relationships with each other and our capacity to be innovative and face challenges now and into the future.

Notwithstanding this, the essentials of communicating and thinking as I have described them are fundamentally about the development of those skills and concepts that early childhood has the most difficulty with being explicit about.

As early childhood teachers we have to do better than this – children are entitled to these skills and knowledge and it is legitimate for a society to want this for all of its children.

Although I have focused on communicating and thinking I know, if children are to have access to the culturally valued knowledge which underwrites their identity and belonging in their own families and communities, and the culturally valued knowledge which underwrites successful participation in the political, economic and social life of mainstream society, this will not be possible unless there is an equal focus on children's social and emotional strength and the growth of social responsibility and the sense that their futures are connected to the futures of others.

To finish I will leave you with two sayings which I think challenge us to not take refuge in certainty.

The first is a message my adopted nanna (a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany) left me in a letter when she died:

‘If you want to go to new places you have to lose sight of the shore.’

And, from my daughter when she five years old or less:

‘How come Mummy what I knew all about yesterday I know all about today but I know it differently?’

Thank you.

References

Department of Education (2004). *Essential connections: A guide to young children’s learning*. Hobart: Printing Authority of Tasmania.

Galinsky, E. (2005). *The economic benefits of high-quality early childhood programs: What makes the difference?*. Washington, DC. Retrieved 19 November 2007, www.ced.org/docs/report/report_prek_galinsky.pdf

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project: Technical paper 12 - The final report: Effective pre-school education*. London: DFES/Institute of Education, University of London.

Hedges, H. & Cullen, J. (2005). Subject knowledge in early childhood curriculum and pedagogy: Beliefs and practices. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 6(1), 66–79.

Pam Cahir
CEO
Early Childhood Australia