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Growing with early childhood education

Barbara James

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Introduction

'Where is early childhood education heading? I asked myself—the many changes it has undergone over the years evident from the books on my shelves.'

I decided—with some regret I might add—that it was time to clean out my professional bookshelves at home, to make room for new books and resources. This task would take time. Before donating my precious and well-loved books to a worthy cause, close friends who might be interested in them, or consigning them to the garbage bin, I needed to scan the books' contents. There was always the possibility of coming across old 'hidden treasure'.

But after having sifted through my old 'treasures' I realised I've changed. My teaching practices, some of my values, and most importantly my view of our 'little people'—who are yet to have a voice loud enough to be heard by the people that matter—have changed. I had moved to a new paradigm.

The education of children in their early childhood years has always been my ultimate mission in life, because the early years of a child are so important. Early experiences mould and shape the child mentally, physically, socially and spiritually. I believe a child's processing of their experiences does not necessarily end with the early childhood years, but continues much longer, and hence, influences present and future relationships.

At Avondale Early Learning Centre, the staff and I help the children to form healthy relationships in a warm and friendly environment. In this context we encourage the children to communicate and express their feelings in appropriate ways and thus curtail feelings that sometimes give rise to 'distorted' behaviour. Such feelings—including frustration, hurt, injustice, fear, or isolation—often trigger anger and hence are displayed through certain behaviours.

As a Christian early childhood educator, I have the privilege of facilitating age appropriate play that assists with developing positive outcomes for children. The key features are the expansion of children's cognitive processes and language development. As children acquire communication

skills they also learn to use language to adjust their social behaviour; developing greater confidence and a sense of security. Children grow and develop to their full potential when they feel safe within their environment and, more so, when they trust the people within it. Furthermore, when young children are provided with the opportunity of developing a number of survival skills and strategies that work in their interactions with peers, these skills become automatic. Gradually, with encouragement from parents and teachers, children identify and own them as their strengths, and more so, they become part of their 'self'. Identifying one's 'self' allows children to derive meaning from their situation. This further enables them to make and explore other connections and relationships.

Children in their early childhood years learn without textbooks; they learn through observing and practising. Our challenge as educators is to provide the best opportunities we can for the children. On occasions, when in doubt, we share our thoughts with the parent/carer and fellow staff members. As we do this, we grow and gain a better understanding of ourselves and the children. Consequently, we also must be genuine and open to learn. Indeed, learning new understandings, skills and strategies is a continuous, life-long process.

Early childhood practices, no doubt will continue to advance, grow and change, just as I have! Yes, I've made room for more new books and journals on my bookshelves. **TEACH**

“Early experiences mould and shape the child mentally, physically, socially and spiritually”



1 Student at Avondale Early Learning Centre

[Photography: James Bennett]