Thinking Play
A guide for educators
By Michelle Scheu
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About the author

Michelle Scheu is known as a dedicated, dynamic and innovative early years team leader at Chevallum State School in Queensland.

Michelle uses many techniques to engage her young learners, including her Thinking Play method. Michelle developed Thinking Play as a play-based way of teaching that reflects real life. It enhances optimal development during a child’s early years and nurtures them towards reaching their full potential as an individual.

Since being awarded an ASG National Excellence in Teaching Award in 2013, Michelle has had the opportunity to be a spokesperson for children and educators struggling with the validity of the Australian Curriculum for young children.

Michelle has produced a range of YouTube videos including Let the children play, which was published in September 2014. Michelle has also collaborated with ASG to produce a parent e-guide and accompanying video clip.

Michelle is in constant demand from other teachers wanting advice and assistance to incorporate play-based learning into their classrooms and receives many invitations to present at conferences.

Introduction

With the introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2012, many early years educators were asked to put aside play for ‘serious’ learning.

Curriculum took up the space in early years classrooms; dress-ups and paints were moved aside while children sat at their desks having knowledge imparted by teachers.

I was fortunate enough to be given the support by my school to allow children to continue learning through play, but this was not going to be easy with the raised bench marks in the new curriculum. I figured the children in schools didn’t have a choice to opt out of the current educational climate so I would do what I could for the children under my care through the best practices I knew. Thus, the pedagogy of Thinking Play emerged.

About ASG

Thinking Play—a guide for educators is provided to teachers as an education support initiative of ASG.

ASG provides a range of products, information and resources to support children’s education from their early learning stage through to post-secondary studies.

We have been helping parents plan and save for the cost of their children’s education for more than 40 years. Parents make regular contributions to an education benefit fund that helps offset education fees and other expenses.

During this time, more than 520,000 children have been enrolled with ASG and more than $2.3 billion in education benefits and scholarship payments have been returned to members and their children.

The Australian Scholarships Group is a member owned organisation that strives to enhance the opportunity for children to gain a complete education.

Our education programs are classified as scholarship plans under Australian tax law. This means that ASG can claim a tax deduction on certain benefits and members receive a number of tax advantages.

For more information about ASG and its range of education and parenting support initiatives visit asg.com.au or asg.co.nz or call 131 247 (Australia) or 09 366 7670 (New Zealand).
Neuroscientists discovered many interesting facts by monitoring brain activity while children were doing various activities. This enabled them to monitor learning as it was happening, by watching the brain grow and neural pathways strengthen. The latest research in neuroscience supports what child development theorists have been saying for decades—play is important for the optimal learning and development of children under eight years of age.

As early as the 1880s, Frobel identified quality learning environments that promote play as most conducive to the overall development of a child. Both social and academic benefits were recorded in their future schooling years (Frobel 1890-1900). Further research on child development was done by Piaget in 1957 in mid 19th century, which supported play for providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities.

Other 19th century researchers such as Vygotsky and Malaguzzi discovered that guided play by trained teachers facilitating play was beneficial for the development of self-regulation. Self-regulation behaviour refers to the frontal lobes ability to manage one’s emotions, urges, impulse behaviours and the capacity to control attention and other cognitive processes, and the more children engage in particular types of pro-social play, the sooner and more completely they will develop frontal lobe regulatory functions. (Nagel, 2012).

Mature guided play assists learning as proven by the US based early childhood program Tools of the Mind. In guided play educators facilitate children’s learning as they work in their zone of proximal development, which refers to ‘the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’. (Vygotsky, 1978).

For more than 40 years children in early years’ classrooms in Queensland enjoyed a rich play-based education supported by the research of theorists such as Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori and Howard Gardner. Theorists such as Lev Vygotsky, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Loris Malaguzzi were added as they became world renowned and our understanding of a richer style of educational play developed with the introduction of the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines in 2007.

In the 1990s Reggio Emilia inspired teaching came to Melbourne and steadily spread to others states. In various primary schools, New Basics (A Queensland framework for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) was being trialled, which involved children working on rich tasks. Thinking Play developed in this climate, combining the concept of guided play with the deep learning style of New Basics, which was characterised by high expectations, a community focus, real life connections, and a culmination for a real audience.

This meant that Thinking Play, with its rigorous intellectual approach, remained relevant with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and has thrived as a way of holding onto play in the early years of formal schooling.
Early beginnings of Thinking Play

When raising education levels, I decided to stick to the best practice I knew for early years children and continued delivering instruction where the central motivator was guided play. I thought it was possible for children in my class to achieve these goals with great success and continue learning through play. I would add these higher expectations and continue to deliver learning through research based methods appropriate for their age.

With the support of my principal I developed a technique of delivering play-based education when I was asked to teach prep to grade one children in a multi-age class. It was known as Thinking Play, to help children distinguish this type of guided play from free play at lunch time.

Underlying principles of Thinking Play

Thinking Play is an intellectually rigorous, play-based curriculum. It reflects real life, which embeds child and community partnerships, to enhance optimal development during the early years of schooling. It is a combination of the rich principles and practice of past early years’ curriculum with a level of intellectual depth and art of instruction typical of New Basics that give Thinking Play relevance in the present Australian Curriculum.

Thinking Play combines the principles of the Early Years’ Curriculum with underpinnings of the New Basics curriculum, as follows:

- Children are capable and competent and have been learning since birth.
- Children build deep understandings when they learn through all senses and are offered choice in their learning experiences.
- Children learn best through interactions, active exploration, experimentation and by representing their learning through a variety of modes.
- Children’s positive dispositions to learning and to themselves as learners, are essential for success in school and beyond.
- Children learn best in environments where there are supportive relationships among all partners in the learning community.
- Early childhood programs are most effective when they recognise, value and build upon the cultural and social experiences of children.
- Building continuity of learning as children move to and through school provides foundations for their future success.

- Assessment of young children is an integral part of the learning–teaching process and is not a separate activity. (Source: Queensland Studies Authority 2006).
- Curriculum must be uncluttered to allow for deep intellectual engagement.
- Learning contexts must be transdisciplinary.
- Classroom climate must be powered by more than fun and feeling good.
- Curriculum must be connected to current and new worlds of work and everyday life.
- Teaching is a multi-faceted art.
- Teachers’ professional judgement about achievement must be highly valued.
- Rich Tasks need to connect to worlds beyond the four walls of the classroom. (Source: New Basics Project: Education Queensland, 2002).

In a paper on New Basics curriculum, Grauf states, ‘Serious pedagogical reform can only be achieved if teachers have space to uncrowd the curriculum so that students study fewer things but in much greater depth.’ Within the New Basics framework this is achieved through fewer but more connected curriculum organisers and fewer but deeper outcomes. This is why none of the components of the New Basics curriculum are stand-alone. They are part of an interlocking triad of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In the New Basics curriculum one of them cannot exist without the other two.

This balance is aimed for in Thinking Play by replacing Rich Tasks with developmentally appropriate Thinking Plays and adding the mandated basics of the Australian Curriculum.

Productive pedagogies is a term used to describe the art of teaching, depicting certain strategies which improve learning noted in The School Reform Longitudinal Study (Luke, Ladwig, Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 1998). In the current education climate in Australia, with the expectation on teachers to over assess and report on children, it is easy for teachers to feel their professional judgment is under scrutiny with pressure to constantly validate their practice. The art of designing and implementing curriculum, puts trust back where it belongs, with the teacher. ‘The claim made in the New Basics Project is that teachers need an expanded and flexible array of strategies to employ in classroom teaching. They then need to be encouraged to make principled decisions about what strategies to deploy based on the curriculum to be taught and the backgrounds, styles, interests and capabilities of their students.’ (Grauf, 2001).
Productive pedagogies underpin the cycle of a Thinking Play. They become an integral part of teachers’ planning, are the basis of group discussions; affect how teachers work alongside children in the enacting phase, and are used to assist teachers in reflecting on the effectiveness of a Thinking Play in the documenting phase. Productive pedagogies ensure the validity of the practice of Thinking Play and distinguish it from various theme based type teaching.

Table 1: Heuristics on categories of productive pedagogies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Focus questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher order thinking</td>
<td>Are higher order thinking and critical analysis occurring?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep knowledge</td>
<td>Does the lesson cover operational fields in any depth, detail or level of specificity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep understanding</td>
<td>Do the work and response of the students provide evidence of the depth of understanding of concepts or ideas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive conversation</td>
<td>Does classroom talk break out of the initiation/response/evaluation pattern and lead to sustained dialogue between students, and between teachers and students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge as problematic</td>
<td>Are students critiquing and second guessing texts, ideas and knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalanguage</td>
<td>Are aspects of language, grammar and technical vocabulary being foregrounded?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge integration</td>
<td>Does the lesson range across diverse fields, disciplines and paradigms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background knowledge</td>
<td>Is there an attempt to connect with students’ background knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness to the world</td>
<td>Do the lesson and the assigned work have any resemblance or connection to real-life contexts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-based curriculum</td>
<td>Is there a focus on identifying and solving intellectual and/or real world problems?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student direction</td>
<td>Do students have any say in the pace, direction or outcomes of the lesson?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Is the classroom a socially supportive and positive environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic engagement</td>
<td>Are students engaged and on task?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit quality performance criteria</td>
<td>Are the criteria for judging student performance made explicit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>Is the direction of student behaviour implicit and self-regulatory or explicit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Are diverse cultural knowledges brought into play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>Are deliberate attempts made to increase the participation of students of different backgrounds?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Is the style of teaching principally narrative or is it expository?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group identity</td>
<td>Does the teaching build a sense of community and identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active citizenship</td>
<td>Are attempts made to foster active citizenship?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: School Reform Longitudinal Study (SRLS) Report, October 1999)

With these pedagogies embedded in the practice of Thinking Play, the quality of play is no longer haphazard or left to chance, it is planned for deliberately. With deliberate planning and implementation rich learning takes place and goals are realised, giving Thinking Play credibility among administrators.
Practice of Thinking Play

In a Thinking Play classroom, play typically occurs for between one and two hours a day. Before the changes to the early years’ curriculum, children would spend most of their day in Thinking Play learning. Children—between four and seven years of age—successfully learn in this environment. This style of learning has definite application for younger children remembering however, the younger the child, the higher the ratio of play to other learning.

Thinking Play has a place in the day beside the more formal teaching of maths and language learning. Typically children in a Thinking Play environment begin by participating in whole group discussions where they work with other children and teachers to negotiate and plan for an extended learning period of approximately 10 to 15 weeks. The majority of the Thinking Play occurs with children working in smaller groups with an educator visiting the groups to facilitate learning as the group writes and enacts their plan. Whole group discussions are interspersed throughout the Thinking Play where necessary, to introduce new knowledge, and discuss and vote on ideas or issues which impact the other play groups.

When the Thinking Play is fully developed, it is then shared with an audience, which includes the families and friends of the children. The excitement of sharing their learning with important people in their lives adds purpose and value to their learning. The culmination is a community celebration to be cherished by everyone.

Different Thinking Play focuses

The four most common types of Thinking Play are as follows:
1. Process
2. Participation
3. Product
4. Performance

In a process-focused Thinking Play the aim is for the children to experience deep understanding through playing in a simulated situation. For example, The Community Thinking Play (see the blueprint on page 16) where play groups take on the job of providing a community service as part of a mini community that they build in their classroom. Doctors, hairdressers, shops, post office, emergency services and schools are popular with the children.

The children use timber blocks, cardboard boxes, dividers or hanging sheets to make their areas turn into the buildings that provide the service. They fill their space with the things necessary to provide their chosen service. Items such as old telephones, computers and play cash registers are handy. Many parents are happy to offload their old electrical items to meet these needs or children can make them out of boxes to do the same job. Uniforms can be sourced from dress ups or the kids can design simple uniforms from material pieces knotted or sewn together.

Once the areas are set up, the teacher declares the play open for business. Players select one or two children to have a ‘rostered day off’ each Thinking Play session and they become the customers for the other businesses. To extend this Thinking Play, roads can be made between the business, traffic lights and crossings added, as well as delivery vehicles for each business.
In a **participation-focused Thinking Play** experiences are provided for the invited participants to share the learning the children themselves have had throughout the unit. An example was our **Twilight Dreaming Thinking Play** where the children developed workshops for their family members to attend—to share their learning about Indigenous culture. This included boomerang painting, Indigenous dance, boomerang throwing, storytelling, and a tour through a cave displaying artefacts the children had made. Tribal gunyahs (Indigenous bush hut) the Thinking Play groups had made were also displayed for the families to explore. (See the blueprint on page 20).

In a **product-focused Thinking Play** the aim of the play is to make items to sell which reflects a real life situation. An example is **The Spring Fair** (see blueprint on page 17) or **Markets Thinking Play**, where children chose a market stall to prepare products or services to sell. The stalls included handmade jewellery, face painting, cakes, products, and a garden stall for which the kids made garden ornaments and grew plants to sell. On the day, the children were divided into three groups. Each group took a turn to man the stalls while the others enjoyed the fair with their families.

A **performance-focused Thinking Play** aims to create a performance to entertain an audience. An example was our **Circus De J Thinking Play** (see blueprint on page 22) where the children helped to choreograph animal dances for a big circus tent style event. We enlisted the help of a choreographer who taught sessions of movement and dance to give the children background knowledge before they worked with the choreographer to design their own dances. These were practiced over several weeks until they were audience ready.

**Combined focus.** In some Thinking Play, there is a main focus and a secondary focus.

In the instance of **Circus De J Thinking Play**, once we were underway with our performance groups, we added committee groups alongside their animal groups to add to the whole circus feel. The committees chosen were arts, organising, entertaining and food. The arts committee did a large entry poster, small posters and circus decorations. The entertaining committee chose to be clowns performing tricks, singing clowns and the clowns also performed a big balloons juggling finale.

The organising committee did the ticketing, organised the entry parade and circus tent set up. The marketing committee made handmade souvenirs and prepared food for stalls at the entry of the circus tent.
Stages of Thinking Play

Most Thinking Plays follow the roadmap below.

1. Provocation: The perfect situation is when the stimulus comes from something relevant to the particular group of children in a class and the community in which they live. A provocation may be a book, an event (personal, local, national or international), a letter or photograph from a travelling classmate, the local show, a circus visiting town etc. The astute teacher has a thorough knowledge of the curriculum and is always on the lookout for such opportunities to arise, and at times, creates these moments to time with the beginning of a Thinking Play if nothing arises.

On one occasion, a child brought in the book Potato People by Pamela Allen to share with the group. This became the stimulus to a discussion of a Thinking Play that lasted 15 weeks. The children made their own potato people then made a community out of cardboard boxes for them to live in—complete with houses, shops and schools. The interest in the play extended to roads, traffic signs and electrical power lines. The potato people started sprouting about half way through the play, presenting a problem to solve. The group came up with the idea of replacing the potato bodies with stuffed stocking bodies. We had a hand sewing workshop and the children made new bodies for their potato people. The potato bodies were then planted in a garden.

2. Teacher planning: Teachers get together to discuss key considerations (See Curriculum Design Questions Figure 11 on page 36). Firstly, the main goals for deep understandings, deep knowledge and the conceptual thread are discussed on which all learning is grounded. These goals are printed and displayed in a child friendly way with appropriate clip art to help developing readers. Teachers reference these goals at the beginning of whole group discussions, ensuring the focus of the play remains clear. A Thinking Play is planned as an investigative process to enable children to discover new learning, build on understandings and extend their knowledge. Another key consideration is the experience of the players as this may determine the type of Thinking Play chosen for a particular time of year—whether it be a process, participation, product or a performance focused Thinking Play (see types of play on page 6 for more information).

An overview is prepared where cross curricula considerations such as concepts in the area of science, history or geography can be covered during the Thinking Play. The underlying knowledge and skills in Maths and English learning are mapped out in 10 week blocks that run alongside the Thinking Play. Specific learning needed throughout the Thinking Play will give direction to the timing of that knowledge or skill. For instance, learning invitation writing in English or using money in Maths may need to be added to the plan.

The children also have set learning content, which is not negotiable within the confines of the Australian Curriculum. The children can negotiate the way this learning takes place during the play.

The children discuss a conceivable direction the Thinking Play might take. Front loading may be information or an experience to prepare the children for the Thinking Play they are about to start. The possible direction for the culmination and play groups are recorded.
The teachers’ thinking may be offered as suggestions for the children to consider as a springboard to their own thinking during the whole group discussion. The final decision of play groups and the direction of the culmination belong to the children. In light of this an original Thinking Play planning overview usually requires updating to replace the teachers’ imaginings with the children’s thinking.

For example, in our Twilight Dreaming Thinking Play, when we discussed the culmination, the children envisaged a cave full of indigenous art. The teachers had difficulty picturing how this was to be achieved. The kids were insistent and the discussion continued until a clear picture of how this could be achieved at the level suitable for a Thinking Play culmination was achieved. The end result was very effective. This was not imagined in the teachers’ planning session.

3. Whole group planning: Whole group discussion and planning is used to focus thinking and deepen ideas for children to facilitate rich play. The children sit as a class on the carpet as substantive conversations bounce between teachers and children. Depending on the group of children, ability to sustain interest and time restrictions, sessions can last for between 15 to 40 minutes. Either the teacher or assistant scribes for the discussion in the form of a concept web and simple drawings to help maintain interest and make the recorded ideas accessible to developing readers.

During the whole group chat, teachers are open with the initial thoughts they had in the teacher planning session. They also discuss the curriculum necessities the play needs to include. The teachers then facilitate a brainstorming conversation to gather children’s ideas. All ideas are recorded in a Thinking Play class discussion overview.

It is important to mention here, that teachers’ questioning is integral to the success of a planning session. Thoughtful questioning and response to ideas given, encourages great thinking, deepens discussion, and links the children’s ideas back to the planned learning. It also sets the scene for the high quality required for a Thinking Play to be a legitimate learning experience.

Due to the amount of depth required, these sessions are achieved in small chunks at a time over two or three days. This helps hold the children’s interest.

Taking time at this stage to fully flesh out ideas rather than rushing into a Thinking Play is important, as this group planning sets the scene for the whole Thinking Play. A record of the children’s thinking is kept on a class discussion overview and added to during each planning session. It is left up in the room for the children to see their thinking is valued.

At the end of the whole group planning session, the children give their ideas for the types of small group plays and the top five children’s choices are recorded. In the instance of Circus De J Thinking Play—which was a performance focused play—we discussed lots of options for the circus animals and the children came up with many favourite animals and their reasons why the animal would be suitable. These options were listed and considered by the children before they voted on their favourites and the top five animals were established as Thinking Play groups.

4. Small group planning: Once in small groups (usually around six to eight children per group) the details of the play can be figured out. Each group has their own discussion—to work out the details and clarify the end goal of the play. This plan becomes an important document placed near the play area for easy reference. Children are encouraged to refer back to their plan, reflect and edit where necessary once they start enacting their ideas.

5. Enacting: The enacting stage of the play happens when the small group’s plans are complete. The children set up their play and make the things required to reach the end goal of their group.

To assist the enacting process, small groups reflect on the effectiveness of their session with questioning and discussion, which helps provide focus and direction for the next Thinking Play session. De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats (Bono, 1985) approach is a useful way to share feedback from teachers and other children on the effectiveness of play. This is most efficiently done as a class discussion with small groups coming together to listen and learn from the other groups.

The enacting stage also involves occasional whole group discussions, carefully placed at the start of a Thinking Play session to restate the learning goals and give deeper knowledge to inform learning. A new skill may be introduced during a whole group session or through workshops with their small groups, depending on the skill required.
Due to *Thinking Play* learning being open-ended, children of diverse abilities all find a level at which they can experience success so all children can be valued and work together as a group towards group goals which are realised in the culmination.

6. **Culmination:** The culminating of a *Thinking Play* is a much anticipated event, where family members and school leaders are invited along—as an audience member or a participant—as the children’s learning is shared and celebrated. School friends, special family friends, and community members may be included on the invitation list depending on the particular *Thinking Play*.

Children often find or make some type of dress up to wear during the play and the scene is set with all the things the children made during the *Thinking Play*. Often food is involved, either prepared by the children or brought along by the adults, to share during the culmination. The event is recorded using both still shots and film to document the learning.

For a major *Thinking Play*, a volunteer photographer is organised so the teachers are free to be fully present with the children during the culmination stage.

**Typical culminations**

- **Process:** areas manned by the children as they act their roles and parents become participants in the play.
- **Participation:** workshops and experiences designed for participants.
- **Product:** high quality items produced for an event such as a market, fete, show or festival.
- **Performance:** polished performance with audience and tickets such as a dance, drama, music performance.

7. **Documentation**

As *Thinking Play* educators, it is beneficial to document the development of play groups. This is ongoing through teacher reflections, (see figure 10 & 11) teacher-teacher conversations, teacher-child conversations, drawings, writings, checklists, oral reflections, photos and video evidence. The purpose of keeping evidence of learning is multifaceted

- Reflect on the overall effectiveness of the *Thinking Play* through whole group discussion, deciding on documentation to display around the room to celebrate and revisit the *Thinking Play* learning.
- Monitor the effectiveness and progress of each group to assist the teachers plan for the following *Thinking Play* session
- Reflect on and monitor the educator’s own practice towards improving teaching effectiveness. This may be done individually or with the group of educators implementing *Thinking Play*.

- **Track how individual children or groups of children are reaching set goals (socially, intellectually etc.) to make informed decisions using authentic assessment**
- **Keep evidence of learning for children’s digital portfolios for use in conversations with parents, support staff and administrators**
- **Collect suitable still shots and footage to use to celebrate children’s learning, as a class group. This often becomes part of a culmination**
- **Record *Thinking Play* learning on school files for other interested educators to refer to as a stimulus or resource for planning their own unit.**

**Conversations**

Chatting to children individually, as a small or large group using substantive conversations, is an efficient way to check in with their developing understanding (formative assessment) or their final understanding at the end of the *Thinking Play* (summative assessment).

**Work samples (drawings/writings/artefact)**

Collecting children’s work throughout the *Thinking Play*, whether it’s a design for a costume, a draft for an invitation or a letter, a map for a culmination set up, a construction etc., is a valuable way to document. (Figure 9 on page 34) Throughout the *Thinking Play*, children will have specific learning towards developing the knowledge and skills necessary to have success completing various drawings/writings/artefacts that are important in working towards the culmination. All children will be encouraged to attempt the writing/drawing/artefact at their own level of skill, some perhaps with support. Depending on the items, sometimes all children’s work will be part of the culmination (e.g. artefacts in the exhibition). At other times, while all the children work on their piece, only one will be required for use in the culmination (e.g. one map to copy and distribute to visitors to The Bug Theme Park). In this instance, the children from each group will vote on work to be used for the purpose of the *Thinking Play* group.

Particular work samples will be chosen to go through a moderating process at an early years meeting with other teachers for assessment purposes.

**Checklists**

A checklist is a handy tool to use to monitor the collection, collation and assessment of documentation. It is also helpful if a teacher would like to collect data to monitor children’s participation, social involvement, independence, choice of activity etc. during a *Thinking Play* session.
Photos and videos
Teachers are often seen with a camera in their hand during Thinking Play, taking shots of children in the process of their work and play. This gives teachers valuable information as to children’s ability to stay on task, their involvement in various tasks, success at working as a team member and much more. Photos are also taken of paperwork and artefacts to keep a record of learning evidence for digital portfolios. The originals are displayed in the room, kept to use in the culmination or sent home. For the culmination, someone other than the teacher, usually a parent or friend with photographic skills, takes still shots and another takes video footage to free the teacher to coordinate the Thinking Play culmination (Figure 9 on page 34).

Oral reflections
At the completion of a Thinking Play, usually the following day, it is very common practice to interview each child individually on video, asking children key questions to check their knowledge of deep understandings of the unit, perhaps to demonstrate the acquisition of skills, explain their method for constructing a product and where appropriate how it works (e.g. musical instrument).

Reporting
Documented learning evidence is used to report to parents, celebrating the learning distance children have traveled, whether they have made small steps or great leaps as they make progress in each developmental area. This is shared with parents at parent-teacher interviews throughout the year. A digital portfolio with a collection of all the documentation of each child is given to each parent to keep. (Figures 1 and 2 on page 30).

This evidence is also used to fill out necessary reports for the education department. Parents are educated about the damaging effects of seeing their child in light of how they do or don’t measure up to a grading system that may or may not be representative of their child’s age. Parents are encouraged to celebrate who their child is and what they are good at—in preference to having unrealistic academic expectations in areas where their child is less comfortable, which can be damaging for a child’s sense of self-worth. Parents are reminded that the reward for great parenting is that they have given their child every opportunity to do their best, not that they have guaranteed high academic grades for their child. It is quite possible for a child to be putting in 100 per cent effort and to receive a sound school achievement. Giving parents’ permission to celebrate ‘sound’ as a result of hard work is quite liberating for them and their child. Alternatively, taking the pressure off the high achieving child by encouraging their parents not to focus on and over celebrate high grades, allows the child to own their own successes without feeling they will be worth less if they don’t uphold their high standard.

Key factors for successfully implementing a Thinking Play

There are some key factors that attribute to the successful implementation of a Thinking Play. Setting high expectations for a quality culmination, the role of the teacher, the role of the child and developing desirable attributes in children to prepare them for their first Thinking Play.

High expectations and quality standards
An attribute that typifies a Thinking Play is quality. Learning is centred on child friendly goals for attaining deep knowledge and understandings that enables individuals to produce their best work. This is achieved through educating children on the criteria for a high standard of activity during the enacting phase. When children are brainstorming ideas for specific groups to work on for the culmination, the ideas have to pass a quality criteria.

Will the suggested idea:
• have potential for intellectual depth in preference to the regurgitation of facts?
• provide enough scope for the diverse children in each group to be involved?
• deepen children’s knowledge and understanding of the conceptual thread to enable them to share their learning with others?
• allow for investigative learning towards the overall goals? (i.e. wonderings, hypothesis, data collection, findings, reflection)

Another very important criterion is the expectations for something to be ‘culmination ready’. To be culmination ready it has to be ‘audience worthy’. That is, a performance has to be polished; artifacts and costumes made of durable materials using sturdy workmanship, artwork and presentation reflecting what might be seen in real life, a business/shop/stall having all the necessary things prepared to serve costumers.

These quality standards are spoken of often in whole group discussion, with small groups and individual children as they plan, work towards goals, reflect and evaluate. Quality standards are an integral part of the way children work in a Thinking Play.
Role of the teacher

The teacher is first and foremost a facilitator. It is easy to get nervous when curriculum expectations are raised and want to take control of the children’s learning. Children learn how to crawl given the right environment, encouragement and opportunities to practice. So too they learn to be play masters, to solve problems, to read and write in a similar way with the teacher facilitating (not formalising) learning during the early years.

Children innately love to learn. It’s like a flame lit inside them. If we as teachers use our professional expertise to establish a careful balance of facilitating learning and empowering children to learn independently, we will keep their desire to learn alive. If however, teachers attempt to control learning by spoon feeding children, giving the same sized mouthfuls in a ‘one size fits all’ approach, a child’s intrinsic desire to learn is at the risk of being extinguished.

If learning is catered for by providing a smorgasbord of experiences, in a rich environment with the right amount of encouragement and input from an astute educator, learning can be tailor-made to suit each individual. This means the child who is intellectually hungry because they are developmentally ready, can take extra large portions.

Another child who is a little intellectually peckish because they are still maturing, knows they only need small sized mouthfuls. Teachers who use a ‘one size fits all’ approach will overfeed one and starve another in trying to guess the average sized mouthful of a group of 25 children.

During Thinking Play, if a teacher attempts to over plan for and control each experience, the children don’t develop independent learning and problem solving skills. As teachers, if we step back and watch for a while before jumping in, it is surprising what children do without an adult.

Most children are keen to stay with their group and work together on their play. Their interest is high as they were part of making the decision and writing the plan for the play. Occasionally, a younger child may need to be buddied up with a more mature child in the group to provide modelling on how to keep on task at Thinking Play time. If the older child is encouraged to take the child with them as a helper when they are working, before long, the younger child learns the ropes and starts working without the need of a buddy to keep them on task.

Role of the child

In Thinking Play, the teacher has to take a back seat and use guiding questions but ultimately let the children make decisions and problem solve about the implementation of their plans. The teacher’s questions are powerful in raising the bar of quality, challenging decisions that are not in line with the plan, clarifying ideas and assisting in unrealistic thinking towards a practical application. However, the teacher has to be wary of attempting to guide the children towards their own picture of what they think is best when the children’s idea may be just as valid in fulfilling the plan and criteria for Thinking Play. The teacher works as a coach or facilitator, placing confidence in the kids as they direct their own play and play out their own ideas.

Any adults who come into the learning environment to work as Thinking Play facilitators are encouraged to empower children by answering one question with another question rather than giving the solution.

For example:
Child: “Will I use red paint for my sign?” Facilitator: “Why do you think red will work best?”

Child: “Does this look good for my sign?” (The child is holding up a piece of paper with a word written on with a felt pen) Facilitator: “I like the way you have written the word. Can you remember the criteria we talked about for making a Thinking Play sign? Does your sign meet the criteria?”

Preparing the children

Before the very first Thinking Play is introduced with a new group of children at the start of the year, earmark a time to prepare the children with behaviours needed in this style of learning. With some groups this takes two to three weeks and a month or more with others.

Multi-age classes have a distinct advantage in this process as half the group of children have already spent a year in the class and have Thinking Play experience. The important thing to add for this group going into their second year, is the need to step into the role of leaders, demonstrating increased skills and behaviours that are required of play leaders.

Desirable attributes

Desirable attributes encouraged for Thinking Play participants:

- be independent
- be a learner
- share thinking
- work as a team
- consider others
- be responsible
- be industrious.
Independence is developed from the first day a child arrives with the environment set up for them to do most things themselves. Initially children act with support as they learn how to operate within the systems that run in the room. This support is withdrawn fairly quickly so children don’t become dependent on others.

Parents and other adults who come into the environment are encouraged to allow children to do things for themselves. Encouraging independence confirms to a child they are capable and competent.

During conversations and in whole group discussions, the children are often asked to share their own thinking on ideas, concepts and new learning presented to them. The teacher gives a good amount of wait time for each child to retrieve or form an idea. Once thinking is shared, the teacher uses additional questions to probe deeper to support the child to clarify their thinking or to move forward in developing their thinking on what they have shared.

Initially, some children make comments that are not directly relevant to the topic. With quick thinking, the teacher can grab a thin thread from the child’s comment and help direct the idea, making it seem like the child’s thinking was more related to the conversation than it was originally. This also gives the child confidence to join in discussion and models thinking to the whole group.

During the discussion, the teacher positions themselves as a learner along with the child, never setting themselves up as the only source of knowledge. Teachers show the child their thoughts and opinions are valued. Children learn how to do class voting in the first week, and quickly experience how they can have a say about things that happen in their room. Using practices that value a child’s thinking and capacity to learn new things builds the children’s positive disposition to learning and their view of themselves as successful learners.

To set up a learning environment that allows for deep discussions, children need to be a part of a whole group session where all participants show respect to the speaker by listening attentively, patiently, and considerately while another child speaks. This way they keep their mind on the conversation so they can participate with their own ideas, which will in turn build on the ideas of the child speaking.

Team work is at the heart of Thinking Play. This means children have to learn about putting their own interests aside for the needs of the group. This is a difficult lesson for those children who are holding onto their egocentric stage with both hands!

From the first day, older children are teamed up with a younger child in a buddy system. A multi-age class has a benefit here as the older children are automatically chosen to lead the younger age group. However, this can also be done with the older children in a cohort of children.

The buddy system is relied upon heavily in the first few days as the older children are taught to support their younger buddy as they learn about the routines and policies in the room. Nurturing and guiding behaviours are modelled, explicitly taught, encouraged and celebrated. Once the buddy system is underway, daily helpers are put in place, which gives every buddy team a turn at having the responsibility of being class helpers for the day.

The final layer of helping others is the elected peer leaders who serve for a 10 week term. These children are voted in by their peers and are set up as reliable helpers with responsible tasks to help their room run efficiently as well as to be a helper and friend of any child in need.

Interestingly, the child who is very egocentric, even though they may be very confident academically, never gets chosen by their peers. This will often be a wake-up call for that particular personality type, who then adjusts their behaviour to become a more effective team player. Children are very perceptive and wise even at such a young age!

The peer leaders also represent their class at the school level with responsibilities to deliver messages or go on errands throughout the school and also at school assemblies.

All these class roles reinforce the value of teamwork and the principle that children learn best in environments where there are supportive relationships in the learning community.

During the first few weeks in a Thinking Play room, children learn that the room and all the things in the learning environment belong to every child in the group. It is theirs to enjoy but it is also theirs to be responsible for and look after. They are taught to clean up after themselves and look after class belongings.

The children are trained in and practice caring for common resources like pencils, felt pens and paper. Each pair of buddies are given specific jobs to help care for their environment. This practice passes on a sense of environmental responsibility.
Children are taught to be responsible for themselves, their behaviour and their belongings. Teachers need to know that a group of children can behave in a way that is respecting of themselves, other learners and their environment without the teacher having to take on a policing role. This way the teacher is free to move between several Thinking Play groups working concurrently with the knowledge that the other groups are getting on with their own work.

Industriousness and work quality are accentuated with each piece of learning. Individual children are encouraged to work hard to produce their best work in an appropriate amount of time, creating a sense of pride when this is achieved.

While work quality is demonstrated and celebrated, children are not compared with each other but instead encouraged to compare their own attempts with their previous attempts at matching expectations.

These personal qualities are discussed on the first day the new class is formed. The class decides on classroom policies that will help make their class a nice place to belong. Teachers might use questioning to come up with any important policies the children may have left out. Once decided on, these are printed up with appropriate clip art to remind the non-readers what they are about. These are then put into a catchy song that is sung daily in the first month until all the children know the policies.

These protocols are also reinforced when on-the-spot situations arise and before various routines or systems where these are particularly relevant. These policies or standards become a goal that every child strives to achieve. While there may be an odd exception made for the child whose level of social learning is not yet up to the challenge (particularly children with ASD, ADHD, or other labelled challenges) the teacher rarely accepts any behaviour that doesn’t meet the expectation. When misbehaviour occurs, this is dealt with by referring back to the policies and giving the child a choice to adjust their behaviour or withdraw from the activity or group to consider their behaviour.

If the child leaves the activity they sit at a ‘Thinking Table’ with a large five minute sand timer to consider how they will fix the problem they created. When the time is up, the child returns to the teacher where they are given the opportunity to restore the wrong done and return to the activity or group. This is known as level 1 action. If the behaviour reoccurs, the process is repeated. If the behaviour is repeated a third time or the initial behaviour is extreme, e.g. another child is harmed, a restorative justice conversation between those involved (level 2 action) is invoked. For continuing niggling low level behaviour, level 2 involves the child being withdrawn from their own class to an older buddy class to work quietly while they consider restoration.

At level 3, the principal gets involved for a restorative justice chat. This has relevance in an environment where the child is respected as a learner and learning to behave is seen as a skill to be developed just like the skill of learning to read.

### Possible protocols:

- When the speaker is talking, everyone is listening.
- Use quiet voices inside, outside voices outside, walking feet inside, running feet outside.
- Keep our hands and feet to ourselves.
- Look after our own things and respect other people's things.
- All help tidy up at tidy up time.
- Be in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing.
- Treat other people as you want to be treated.

### Where to start?

Once the children are prepared, it’s best to start in a place that is familiar to the children you are teaching. The local community is an obvious choice but there are many others depending on the particular group.

It is important to note, the first Thinking Play will require more scaffolding and time. However, the reward will be evident as subsequent plays require less scaffolding and the children become more independent.

In the first Thinking Play of the year, the whole group planning session may be done in slightly shorter sessions over more days. The small group planning session may be done in short bursts of easy to achieve steps with clear directions on what the children need to do in each section.

- **Step 1.** Children decorate and write their name in the 'players' section of the plan.
- **Step 2.** After discussing the types of jobs required for their play, the children either draw pictures of their job or use approximated spelling to record their ideas—teachers scribing to clarify for later reference.
- **Step 3.** After discussion, the children record the things they will need to collect for their play (from resources in the room, home, the shed or storeroom).
- **Step 4.** In the final step, the children record the things they will need that are not available to them. They will need to make these.
The enacting phase

Once the children have finished their planning and are ready to enact the plan, you may feel a little hesitant letting them head off to start their work. There are a couple of things to note that can help.

1. If your group are fairly mature players, you could try allowing them to make these choices themselves and having different children in the group doing different parts of the plan—depending on where their interest takes them. If you don’t want to take this risk initially, choose a small task to achieve during the Thinking Play session.

2. A great place to start is having each play group select a space around the room and set up the physical boundary of their play area or working space. If it is a ‘process Thinking Play’ and they are building something in which to play, they need to consider how they are going to define their space and how to make it look like their chosen play.

3. Be over prepared with resources readily available for children to help themselves. Keep paint, various brushes, boxes of varying sizes and shapes, collage items, large sheets of paper, bendable wire, string/rope, strong tape and glue, lengths of cardboard etc.

4. Have the less independent children team up with the more independent children to work together so one can work with and help direct the other.

5. Don’t be afraid to stop the group and ask them to pause and listen if you notice something that is not working well. Alternatively sit the group down and ask them what they think is working and what they think isn’t working. A piece of information for one group may help other groups.

Moving into culmination

When teachers can see the play is nearly ready for sharing or the chosen date for the culmination is coming closer, hold a class meeting to decide the details of the culmination. This will give the last few weeks of the Thinking Play more specific direction and the urgency required to get everything ready.

Checklists are made of things to do: date and time, invitations and food organised if necessary, and decisions made on any decorations or signage.

If it is the first Thinking Play, the teacher might take on the responsibility of sending out a note to parents to bring a plate to share, and the play areas will become the show pieces without the need for decorations. If it is a participation, product or performance play, you may decide on committee groups to get these tasks done.

We usually select a date for our Thinking Play culmination closer to the end of our play when we can see it’s almost ready to share. Having a date in mind though, helps keep the momentum going. Being too locked in to this date however, may mean a missed learning opportunity if the children branch off in a way that hadn’t been envisaged and are extending the Thinking Play through further learning experiences. The concept can be tailor-made to individual situations.
Thinking Play blueprints

Attached are a collection of plays that we have enacted, which have been very successful. Included is the teachers’ planning overview of the play, a small description and some photos to give you an idea of each play. These may provide a place to start or a springboard for thinking towards creating your own Thinking Play.

The Thinking Play blueprint examples include:

Business from the community

Description: Children selected businesses from the community and created a small community in their class. Once the businesses or places of service were ready, they opened for business or service, and played in their own Thinking Play and also had rostered days off to become the citizens in the community.

Play focus: process

Size of group: 25 children

Main learning: space and place, sense of community, mapping, goods and services, needs of living things.

Type of culmination: afternoon tea where parents become community members and visit the Thinking Plays to shop, have their hair and nails done, be a patient at the hospital, become a student in the school or phone the rescue centre to experience a rescue mission.
Fair/marks

Description: During the Spring Fair Thinking Play, the children chose ideas within the framework of setting up market stalls for a country fair. They decided on a plant stall, a food stall, face painting, a merchandise stall as well as rides and games for the visitors to enjoy. Children then worked together with their play group to plan, design and create all the things required to ready their idea for the Spring Fair. Using their knowledge of the five senses, they considered what they needed to help create an atmosphere of fun and relaxation to encourage customers. Committees were also chosen to organise music, artwork and oversee the set up. On the day of the Spring Fair, the area was busy with stalls, decorated with market art and alive with all the excitement of the rides and games. School friends, family members and school leaders brought along small change to purchase food, various handmade items, plants the children had grown and have their face painted. They were entertained with music, singing and dancing by the entertainment committee who created their own bush band instruments, played, sang and did country dancing. The Thinking Play children were rostered on to experience the excitement of operating their own markets stalls as well as given time to enjoy being with their family walking around the markets they helped to create.

Play focus: product
Size of group: 50 children

Main Learning: senses, money, production, marketing, mapping, goods and services

Type of culmination: fair with market stalls, activities, shopping, music and refreshments.
Multicultural festival

Description: The children worked on a festival called One Country, Many Stories, dealing with diversity and the many people groups who call Australia home. The children designed and planned the Thinking Play as a whole class group. Then they chose a country and also chose a committee to work on—organising, arts or entertainment.

Children made their own costumes. They also made individual artifacts that were displayed in cultural tents, giving the visitors a snapshot of each country. The entertaining group designed costumes and sang welcome songs after they gave the Welcome to Country. The arts committee designed and created a large flag symbolising diversity, acceptance and cooperation. The organising committee mapped the area, planned for the parade, lowered the environmental impact and created invitations and posters. Family members, special family friends and school leaders came along to watch a multicultural parade before sharing in a multicultural feast with their children.

Play focus: performance
Size of group: 50 children
Main learning: cultural understanding, prop creation, personal histories, space and place.
Type of culmination: parade, music and shared afternoon tea.
Claymation

Description: The children chose play ideas within the framework of creating a stop motion movie. They chose part of a story from a book, adapted the text, and designed and made sets. They worked as a team to take photos and prepare for the world premier of their Claymation Creation (see YouTube channel).

The evening the movie theatre opened for business, children took turns at selling refreshments at the candy bar, taking photos on the red carpet, and taking family members on a tour through the sets before taking their seats to watch the movie. (A photostory of the creation of the Claymation Creation ran prior to the première.)

Play focus: product
Size of group: 25 children
Main learning: stop motion, set design, script writing, narratives, making movable clay characters, money.
Type of culmination: a movie evening at school with a canteen for movie treats.
Indigenous event
Description: The children worked in tribes with elected student elders. They chose tribal names, created artwork, designed and made a tribal flag, instruments and costumes. Together the tribe constructed a gunyah (indigenous bush hut) and planned, created and manned a workshop activity during the Twilight Dreaming culmination.

The workshops included a walk-about tour, artists’ cave, Indigenous inspired animal dancing, storytelling, and boomerang painting and throwing. The evening was opened by a local aboriginal elder after which the children sang We Are One with sign language. The evening concluded with a twilight family picnic.

Play focus: participation
Size of group: 50 children
Main learning: cultural understanding, art, musical instrument making, personal histories.
Type of culmination: workshops and a shared family picnic.
Art exhibition

Description: The children explored the concept of imagination. They watched the film, *The Lorax* by Dr Seuss at the cinema. The children then investigated ideas around innovation and creativity. They set out to create a world where the environment was respected and cared for—a world in which the Lorax would want to return to live.

The children designed and created environmentally friendly machines and worked in play groups to make wind mobiles out of recycled materials. At the end of the Thinking Play, the children put on *The Lorax* art exhibition, invited parents and displayed the delightful world they had created.

Play focus: product

Size of group: 25 children

Main learning: recycling, innovation, imagination, invention, artistic expression, designing posters and invitations.

Type of culmination: afternoon opening of an art show, with wine (apple and grape juice), cheese and crackers.
Circus
Description: The children voted on five animal groups and chose to be in lions, horses, birds, monkeys or dogs. They worked with their play group to choreograph an animal dance, design and create masks and tie dye, paint, and create their animal costumes.

The children then worked in committee groups to provide the entertainment, prepare food, create souvenirs and artwork, and oversee the organisation of the event. The school hall was set up as a circus tent with streamers connecting to a hoop on the roof and chairs in a circle around hay bales. Stalls were set up outside. The audience enjoyed a circus parade and a circus show before shopping at the circus stalls outside.

Play focus: performance
Size of group: 52 children

Main learning: living things, habitats, movement and dance, gross motor skills, costume creations.

Type of culmination: parade, performance and stalls selling ticket, food and souvenirs.
Bug Theme Park

Description: Following children’s interests, we recorded their ‘wonderings’ about insects. They then chose a wondering to investigate in thinking play insect groups. They gave their hypothesis, collected data and recorded their findings. The group then decided on various ways to share their learning at a Bug Theme Park.

A dance choreographer and a trombone player worked with each insect group to help create a contemporary dance to open The Bug Theme Park. Over the next few weeks, children designed and made their own bug costumes for the opening.

On the day of The Bug Theme Park, the front of the school filled with family and friends as ‘insects’ emerged from various bushes followed by ‘little scientists’. They beckoned the visitors to follow them along a pathway where they discovered insects hovering on the grass, jumping down the bank and crawling out from under a shrub. The insect parade continued, leading the visitors to The Bug Theme Park where they enjoyed entertainment, educational games, constructing craft insects, food, riding a ‘monorail’ and investigating the Exploritorium.

Play focus: participation

Size of group: 50 children

Main learning: scientific investigation, performance skills, costume design.

Type of culmination: areas set up in and outside the classroom with games, a story telling area, a craft making area and an Exploritorium.
Christmas pageant

Description: At the beginning of November, the children began practicing a Christmas pageant. They auditioned for their chosen parts and helped to edit the script to suit their personalities. They worked on committees to make artwork, props, snack bar food and organise posters and ticketing.

Early in December the children did a dress rehearsal where professional photos were taken. During the following week, the play was performed for school classes with one performance each day. Their final performance was a very special evening performance for their families and friends, followed by a shared Christmas supper provided by the children’s parents.

During supper, the professional photos were offered for sale for parents to purchase as a memento of the event. A professional video was also taken during the event, which was available for parents to order.

Play focus: performance
Size of group: 25 children

Main learning: oracy, Christmas traditions, performance skills, singing and acting, personal confidence, script writing, prop design and creation.

Type of culmination: a staged drama performance complete with costumes, music, props and a shared supper.
Frequently asked questions

How many adults will I need for my small groups?

Usually there are three or four Thinking Play groups to 25 children. The adult ratio is best done as a team approach. A team approach works well with the teacher assistant and additional education staff being involved, when available, across the groups to increase the number of adults available to facilitate. For example, because there are three full-time adults in our double teaching space, the teachers usually oversee two groups each and the teacher assistant oversees one group. The additional education teacher works in the group where they are most needed.

There is a risk of having too many adults available. The children may look to the adult as the leader of the group and the decision maker instead of having the confidence to give the decisions back to the group. We purposely do not have our parent roster running during Thinking Play as it takes a little training for an adult to learn the skills of facilitating in preference to initiating. However, we do encourage parents to come in as experts in their field and share their knowledge and skills when appropriate to enrich our play.

What if I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed with what we planned?

Sometimes you may start to feel overwhelmed in the middle of your Thinking Play and wonder how you are going to get to the end. Firstly, this feeling is quite common before it all comes together, and it may just be a matter of sitting down with the kids and clarifying what is left to be done. Make a timeline and checklist of what needs to be completed in each play session.

However, if your group is very ambitious, be prepared to change and alter the play to make it more focused and manageable. For example, around the Winter Olympics in 2012, we decided to do a multicultural Thinking Play involving food, costumes and sports competitions between countries. To do the multicultural learning well, we ended up dropping off the sporting competition and focusing on a parade with props, musical instruments and costumes followed by a shared multicultural feast.

An important thing to remember after your initial planning discussion has taken place, is that the children own the plan as much as you. If a change needs to happen, it is important for the children to be involved in the discussion and vote on how it is to be altered—it’s their work as much as yours.

How does Thinking Play fit with the Australian Curriculum?

All teachers in our school are considered curriculum designers and as such, design curriculum around the Australian Curriculum standards to meet the needs of the children they teach. Our teachers are fortunate to be teaching in a multi-age school, which is not to be confused with composite classes. Multi-age classes are two or three year cohorts of children specifically grouped in ‘family groups’ (class groups) for educational advantages. The children ideally continue for two or three years with the same teachers. This allows teachers to get to know students’ individual learning styles very well and gives more time for the students to develop deep knowledge and understandings, eliminating both the two month settling in and wrapping up periods at the beginning and end of the new year.

Given time, many younger children catch up to their peers as they gain maturity over the two or three year span, attaining the complex learning required to meet the Australian standards on exiting a family group.

In a classroom, the common mismatch of developmentally appropriate learning with what children are being asked to learn can put children in a state of stress where they are feeling intellectually overloaded. This is due to their brains still developing the architectural framework to deal with this higher order learning. In Thinking Play rooms, the teaching of more formal skills of reading and writing through rotations and activities that require movement, an element of fun or artistic expression, helps lower this potential stress on learners.

Thinking Play is inherently motivating. It becomes a welcome motivator for children to learn during more formal learning situations. It offers children an immediate reason to read, write and solve problems as Preps and Year One students work together writing play plans, creating signs, menus, invitations, letters, exchanging money, measuring, building and constructing.

As younger children observe older, more capable children modelling the behaviour of a skilled master player, they are motivated to develop as an active, skilled member of a Thinking Play group. Inclusivity of all children, including those with additional needs, is naturally promoted as every child is encouraged to work within their zone of proximal development.
How does Thinking Play fit into a school day?

Our plan and our day is structured with Thinking Play as the centre piece, giving meaning and purpose to all the other learning. We know the children need to be independent during Thinking Play so we make sure this is a major part of their social and emotional learning.

The children require reading, writing, problem solving and mathematical skills to be most effective during Thinking Play. The learning sessions, which support Thinking Play are goal focused towards this end.

Thinking Play occurs for at least one hour each day. In the last few days coming up to a culmination, as much as two hours a day may be set aside for Thinking Play, to bring all the learning together to a suitable quality for sharing with an audience. See example timetable below.

### Family J Ragamuffin Homeroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Times</th>
<th>A typical day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.00 Set up</td>
<td>Kids to help log computers on before school ready for math rotations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.20 Doors (job reminder)</td>
<td>Year One kids change reading books (group boxes and individual home reading books)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.30 Reading groups</td>
<td>Reading books with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.40 Welcome (check morning jobs, greeting)</td>
<td>On or just after bell, call kids with ‘Hey you’ rap into six train groups, welcome and check morning jobs out on the cement. Farewell parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.45 Physical Development Program (5 min rotations for perceptual motor, kinesiology, skill development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Drink of water, zip up bags, hats in tidy trays, sit on the main carpet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.00 Group Time: wetather/policies helpers</td>
<td>Family Group chat on main carpet. Class news/birthdays/singing/weather and Daily Helper songs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.10 Math Rotations</td>
<td>Warm Up Game: number array quick recognition Focus: take away number stories • computers • o’clock • half (cutting up shapes) • dice game with number line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.10 Morning tea</td>
<td>Lunch box litter learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.20 Language Rotations</td>
<td>Warm Up Game: word wall whack Focus: Big Book Mrs Wishing Washy • computers on Bailey’s Book House • pictures ‘Rs’. rainbow writing • Word Wand game of rhyming words • word sorts initial letter sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.20 Lunch</td>
<td>Healthy food choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00 Reading</td>
<td>Kids read with books in their reading leveled groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.15 Thinking Play (transdisciplinary learning)</td>
<td>Communities: Whole group discussion: transfer learning on the goal of individual working for the good of the whole community from class buddies to Thinking Play Working in play groups - enacting and reflecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.15 Tidy up</td>
<td>Personal care: pack and zip bags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.20 Afternoon tea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.50 - 2.30 Diary writing, handwriting, sharing bags, communication bags</td>
<td>Handwriting capitals - C, O, Q model and children copy in handwriting books. Years One and Preps fine motor activities - play dough, reading, cotton bud painting Writing reflection in novel writing books (catching letters, environmental print)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.40 Family Group singing</td>
<td>Tidy room and packs bags before singing two songs then the goodbye song</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is Thinking Play expensive?

Many components of Thinking Play just use class resources, which are covered by parent contributions at the beginning of the year.

However, if special things are required, we build this costing in the Thinking Play. For market plays, things are made for sale—a small price is set on the item to cover the cost of the resources. This adds to the reality of the Thinking Play, as real money is used in the experience.

We also charge a gold coin entry fee to special events like the circus for example, to cover the added expense of producing the event. Volunteer parents help to sew the costumes for the Christmas pageant if particular items required are not already in our dress up collection. The material for costumes is covered by the sale of the professional photos and DVD of the event.

Does Thinking Play work for different class sizes?

Thinking Play can be adjusted to work in small classes up to a cluster of several early years classes working on the same play. Single class plays are definitely more manageable early in the year when the children are learning what is expected in Thinking Play. However, as the year progresses, the more classes involved, the more options you have for the diversity of play groups offered and the range of culmination possibilities.

Small school: One teacher from a small school who is implementing Thinking Play only has 12 children in her class. She has found splitting the play groups into two and enacting two for half of the time and then both groups focusing on the second two for the second half of the time works well. She is able to have enough learning take place and provide enough variety to make the culmination interesting. She also networks with two other teachers from nearby schools who do their Thinking Play, planning together, enacting and discussing their plays at the same time.

Single class: A single class play has lower risk as one teacher is working with one group of children with whom they are very familiar. The downside of this number is there are usually only four play groups with 25–28 children, slightly limiting what can happen for a culmination. One Thinking Play I did with a single class of children involved each child planning and making individual projects. They came together in committee groups at the end to plan for the group’s culmination (see Claymation on page 19).

Double class: A double space with approximately 50 children is very workable for Thinking Play. Meetings happen as a whole class. Four to eight play groups are chosen, depending on the type of play and the teachers. An assistant and other adults are responsible for one or two groups. The class teachers generally have two groups and the assistant teacher and other adult may share a group or have one each depending on their availability. Children can then choose between a greater range of play groups (see Circus on page 22. Fair/marks page 17).

Multiple classes: Several classes in an early years team plan together and enact the same plan. This can culminate in classes having separate celebrations in their own class or as a combined day with all early years’ classes having their culmination at the same time.

To make further use of the multiple class concept, class teachers plan together and when Thinking Play groups are offered, these are offered across the range of teachers in all of the classes, making use of the different talents of each teacher. This means Thinking Play occurs at the same time across the early years classes and children move between classes at designated times.

For example, a child in one class might choose to be involved in the pottery stall for the spring fair or markets Thinking Play. The teacher taking the pottery group might be in an adjoining class so when small group time happens, she walks with a few friends to an adjoining class. This has great advantages for the culmination as class groups can take on a different committee, e.g. food for one double class, entertainment for another class, and arts and organising for the third class. The size and quality of things provided at the spring fair just grew threefold.

Multiple schools: Small groups separated by distance, may do planning together, enact separately then come together at one campus for the culmination, with some schools travelling and bringing along their Thinking Play, things to set up for the culmination.

The market stall or spring fair concept would work well for this idea. Obviously the planning for this type of event would be huge as transport for the children and the Thinking Play items needs to be considered as well as the feasibility of parents travelling to the event. However, just imagine the benefits of gathering children and teachers from small schools together to work towards the same culmination.
How does Thinking Play cater for children with additional needs or talents?

In my experience, the diverse learning needs of a group of children are more easily met through the opportunities provided by regular planned sessions of guided play. This is in preference to a scripted ‘one size fits all’ approach to education where children are asked to stretch to meet requirements outside their zone of proximal development.

Due to the high demands of the Australian Curriculum, quite an alarming number of children have not developed the necessary foundation skills prior to entering Prep. The active, hands-on learning that Thinking Play provides, allows these children opportunities to develop these necessary skills. Thinking Play also gives them an opportunity to experience successful learning in other areas of intelligence to help build their confidence as a learner.

Some children are very capable of constructing things and solving problems with their hands but have not yet developed an understanding of more formalised maths. Others may be very artistic or have well developed physical skills but are a little less mature in the area of language development. The group structure also helps support those children who are not developmentally ready for formal learning. They can be involved in discussion with someone else recording their ideas as writing is modeled. They can work with other children to achieve goals without pressure on them individually.

How is learning assessed and documented?

Photos and videos are used almost daily during a Thinking Play to gather evidence of children’s learning. Photos or videos of the children’s planning, constructing, writing and problem solving are all valuable pieces of evidence. A checklist can be made of various skills, artefacts or behaviours for which evidence is required or desired so evaluating is not forgotten in the excitement of a Thinking Play.

This is particularly important for a piece of science or history evidence required for end of term reporting. After the culmination, the children’s reflections are gathered through drawing, writing or a video interview. This can be collected together and stored to be given to parents alongside other reporting or can become part of the reporting document.

I personally disagree with young children being reduced to a three page report stating how a child does or does not measure up against a chosen standard when often these standards are not researched based. While we as teachers still have to do the OneSchool reporting, parents in our class choose not to receive a OneSchool report and instead receive a digital portfolio with the evidence celebrating what their child can do.

We have experimented with a few different versions of the portfolio, gradually making it easier to produce. Figures 1 and 2 on page 30 illustrate the cover pages of the digital portfolio. The version shown in Figure 3 (page 31) includes colour coded assessment to give parents information about how their child is doing, without sharing this information with the child.

Figure 4 (page 31) shows a more manageable version and simply includes the evidence of what a child can do with an overall development profile at the end showing the multiple intelligence areas shown in Figure 5 (page 32). This is usually given out with the option of the parents having the wording printed from OneSchool reports, which can be provided by your principal by asking for an ungraded report printed as a PDF.

Figure 9 (page 34) gives some examples of the digital attachments that open when a link is selected.

The most manageable digital portfolio is where we store the overview pages and child’s individual development overview as picture files on a USB along with the collection of photos and videos. This is usually shared during a parent teacher chat and then the USB is taken home as a keepsake, where children enjoy watching the photo slide show as often as they choose. See Figure 8 (page 34) for an overview of contents.
Conclusion

A child is only young for such a short time. The unique way in which the child’s brain develops during early childhood is dependent on how emotional, physical and learning needs are met. During this delightful stage, the child is intently inquisitive, full of the wonder of life and very capable.

As teachers we have a great responsibility to do our best by each child. A child hasn’t got time for us to get off track and deliver passive curriculum. If we see our teaching responsibility as merely delivering instruction we have short-changed the child.

It’s time to unclutter curriculum, to build deep understandings and knowledge alongside authentic assessment as an integral part of the learning process. It’s time to be co-curriculum designers with children, working on intellectually rigorous tasks in which children are highly interested and invested. It’s time for teaching artists to emerge, facilitating dynamic, developmentally appropriate curriculum, backed by research.

Giving teachers the gift of time allows them to become more deeply attuned to each child; to listen and respond without rush, as they build meaningful relationships that can impact a child for life. It’s time to play.

Thinking Play resources

View the YouTube channel Michelle Scheu Education for more information: www.youtube.com/channel/UCBXotkDMgnITPhA5siv3jig

Any questions?

For digital resources, arrange a classroom visit, parent information evening or conference presentation, email to ask questions and sign up to be on the mailing list to receive updates thinkingplayedu@gmail.com

Notes and references


5. Mark Church, as cited on his website braindevelopment.co.uk


10. Urie Bronfenbrenner, as cited in Allred (2207, p. v).


Acknowledgments

Thank you to Marc from Austin Zande Imagery for many of the beautiful photographs included in this teaching guide.

I gratefully acknowledge Lyn Winch and the staff of Chevallum State School Sunshine Coast, Queensland, for over 20 years of inspiration, professional dialogue and for the perfect environment to grow and develop the pedagogy and practice of Thinking Play.
Sample templates

Digital portfolio

Figure 1

Chevallum Early Years Portfolio of

Child’s Name

Family Group: J Year Level: Prep
Teachers: Michelle Scheu & Amanda Strid
D.O.B: 00.00.00 Year: 20_

NB: The information in this document reflects the child’s learning in a play-enriched, multi-aged setting. This report is in no way supports labeling a child by the levels attained in this summary. It merely reflects a point in time assessment on the particular learning provided in the units covered. Child achievement will fluctuate over time depending on varying influences, child’s rate of intellectual growth & individual personalities. As educators, we suggest using this document to celebrate what the child has learned & work with the child to set realistic goals towards further learning. Each child is, & should always remain an individual with the right to be valued for who they are, not what they achieve.

Michelle Scheu @ 2013

Figure 2

Curriculum Areas

Australian Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Measurement &amp; Geometry</td>
<td>Science as a Human Endeavor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Statistics &amp; Probability</td>
<td>Science Inquiry Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Historical Knowledge &amp; Understanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Curriculum Areas

Early Years

Social & Personal  | Health & Physical  | Active Learning Processes |
| Social           | Diversity           | Gross Motor |
| Diversity        | Personal            | Fine Motor |
| Health           | Thinking            | Thinking |
| History          | Technology          | Technology |
| Creative         |                      | Creativity |

Phases of Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BA</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>WW</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming Aware</td>
<td>Exploring</td>
<td>Working With</td>
<td>Making Connections</td>
<td>Applying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence of Learning

| Work samples, hard copies, usually begins, child’s work stored in folder (e.g. artwork, writing, diagram, drawing etc.) |
| Photograph of a skill or task |
| Video of a skill or task |
| Photograph of child’s reflection |
| Checklist of learning observed |
| Learning tracked over time |

Figure
### Digital portfolio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Area</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Phase of learning</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td><strong>Sustaining relationships</strong></td>
<td>During discussions on thinking play, Child’s Name cooperates well as a member of a group, demonstrating a solid understanding of roles and responsibilities. Child’s Name takes a leadership of group meetings, instilling thoughtful ideas and helping other group players to keep on track as the group works towards a common goal. Child’s Name is responsible for his own belongings as part of our class policies, keeping things in his bag &amp; closing the bag. Child’s Name cares for his communication bag, putting it in the home group box each morning &amp; returning it to his bag each afternoon.</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td><strong>Understanding diversity</strong></td>
<td>Child’s Name has demonstrated an inclusive skills appropriate to the selected equipment, materials, tools and object. Child’s Name can use different locomotor and non-locomotor movements, positions, actions and combinations of direction with increasing strength, flexibility, balance and coordination. He regularly engages in exciting tumbling, jumping with control. Endurance over 50 consecutive skips. Child’s Name combines positional language to describe positions and locations of self, others or objects on the obstacle course. He draws obstacle course plans, including several pieces of equipment &amp; indicates direction using symbols &amp; labels.</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal learning</td>
<td><strong>Self &amp; independence</strong></td>
<td>Child’s Name consistently uses predicting and questioning to make meaning from texts. He recalls key events in detail from texts with familiar topics. Child’s Name accurately names different types of tests and identifies many similar characteristics between them. He thoughtfully responds to texts and explicitly connects events and characters with his personal experiences.</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td><strong>Fine-motor</strong></td>
<td>Child’s Name consistently uses predicting and questioning to make meaning from texts. He recalls key events in detail from texts with familiar topics. Child’s Name accurately names different types of tests and identifies many similar characteristics between them. He thoughtfully responds to texts and explicitly connects events and characters with his personal experiences.</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Digital portfolio**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Area</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td><strong>Sustaining relationships</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td><strong>Understanding diversity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal learning</td>
<td><strong>Self &amp; independence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td><strong>Fine-motor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Language</td>
<td><strong>(e.g Oral language)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td><strong>(e.g. Read and write)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td><strong>(e.g. Write and shape)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td><strong>Number &amp; Algebra</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement &amp; Geometry</td>
<td><strong>Statistics &amp; Probability</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chevallum Prep Individual Development Overview

- **Intrapersonal** (Social/Personal)
- **Interpersonal** (Social/Personal)
- **Logical/Math** (Math Understandings)
- **Verbal/Linguistic** (Lang/communication)
- **Visual/Spatial** (Art)
- **Body/Kinaesthetic** (Health/Physical)
- **Transdisciplinary Thinking** (Science, Geo, History)
- **Musical/Rhythmic** (Music)

**Phases of Learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BA</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>WW</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming Aware</td>
<td>Exploring</td>
<td>Working With</td>
<td>Making Connections</td>
<td>App</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher comments:**

child has ...

Michelle Scheu © 2016

Figure 5
Unit plan

Term: ____  Week: ____  Date: ____  Class: ____  School: ______________

- Reggio Question:

- Real-Life Situations:
  - Partnerships
    - Parents:
  - Special Needs Staff:
  - Parent Roster:
  - Specialist Staff:

- Routines & Transitions:

- Investigations:

- Flexible Learning Environment
  - Songs & Dance:
  - Games:
  - Books:
  - ICT:
  - Art skills/experiences:
  - Block corner/Sandpit/Water trough/Garden Experiences:

Unit plan overview

Figure 6

Figure 7
### Portfolio Evidence

#### Figure 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development Area</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>Soc</td>
<td>P1. Observation: buddy</td>
<td>P2. Lunch Box Reflection</td>
<td>P3. Bag Reflection</td>
<td>P4. Lunch Box Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual/Spatial Technology</strong></td>
<td>Trans</td>
<td>P1-PS. Thinking play related: art/ construction/dance</td>
<td>P5. Staff portrait</td>
<td>P6. Thinking Play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Musical</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>F.2-F.7. Thinking Play Related: art/ construction/dance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Portfolio: Sample Evidence

**Figure 9**
**Thinking Play documentation**

**Transdisciplinary**
- **Deep Knowledge:** I live well with others when I respect their family and culture.

**Scientific Investigation**
- **Deep Knowledge:** Materials have different properties and behaviours.

**Transdisciplinary**
- **Deep Understanding:** What interesting things can I learn about my own and other’s families and traditions?

**Scientific Investigation**
- **Deep Understanding:** How can I apply my knowledge of materials to make items to represent my chosen culture?

**Conceptual Thread:** Diversity

**Group Name:** Italy

**Term:** 3  
**Year:** 2015

---

**Thinking Play documentation**

**Thinking Play:** ____________  
**Family J:** ____________  
**Group:** ____________  
**Documenting Teacher:** ____________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date: _________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Forward Planning:**
Curriculum Design Questions

**Curriculum Intent**
- What is the purpose/intent of the unit? (deep knowledge & understanding)?
- What are the learning targets and which will be enriched through application in the Thinking Play?
- What relevant knowledge, skills and understandings do children require in the investigative play?
- What learning and inquiry skills will be integrated in the Thinking Play and what learning will run parallel?

**Learning Potential**
- What learning evidence will be collected to demonstrate alignment with ACARA Descriptions?
- Will children be able to achieve learning targets and how will individual needs be met?
- What knowledge and skills will children need in order to achieve deep understandings? (backward mapping)
- How will targets be modified or extended to differentiate for individuals?

**Sequencing Teaching & Learning**
- How will children be front loaded with prior knowledge and understanding?
- What Thinking Play learning and resources will be required for child to explore deep thinking and learning?
- What teaching sequences and resources will be required for children to attain the required learning targets?
- Which teaching sequences and resources will be used for consolidation or extension?

**Making Judgements**
- What essential evidence of child’s learning will be collected?
- Are assessment criteria grids available or do they need to be created?
- What considerations are necessary when gathering evidence of learning to ensure authentic judgements?
- Is there evidence reflecting a child’s thinking as well as skills and knowledge?

**Feedback**
- How will children reflect on their learning throughout the Thinking Play unit?
- How will feedback about children’s development inform implementation of this unit and the next?
- How will the team ensure consistency in the implementation and assessment of learning evidence when moderating?

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Figure 11

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