



CONVERSATIONS

*with Dr. Kimberly Bezaire
about*

**LEARNING IN
THE EARLY YEARS**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Context for the Viewer	2
The Child as Learner	2
The Educator In Classroom Play	5
The Learning Environment	6
The Power of Classroom Play, Part 1	9
The Power of Classroom Play, Part 2	10
Making the Most of the Full Day	12
Further Reading and Resources	14
Thank You	16

CONTEXT FOR THE VIEWER

This video was created to support a workshop series for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario called *Learning in the Early Years*. Many of our early years educators asked for opportunities to further unpack the workshop, and for opportunities to network and share their thinking about learning in the early years. We asked Dr. Kimberly Bezaire to share her insights and her research to complement the variety of topics encompassed within the workshop and to give participants the opportunity to expand their thinking with provocations and reflective prompts.

This facilitators' guide is provided for educator teams, individuals and teacher leaders to use as a guide for discussion and reflection (see the "Think About and Discuss" section), as well as future directions and professional learning (see the "Actions and Next Steps to Try" section).

This video will help you as an educator to frame and extend your thinking, and will provide further information to consider as you explore learning in the early years and its impact on you and your children.

THE CHILD AS LEARNER



Think About and Discuss ...

Think about our changing image of the child.

- Talk about the traditional image of the child versus our image of the child today. Offer words and phrases to compare prior understandings of children and norms for behaviour (e.g., expected compliance, seen and not heard, etc.) to current understanding of children's capabilities (e.g., capable learners, valued part of a community, problem-solvers).
- Talk about the image of the child as a member of a community, as a compromiser, as a converser, and as very capable of developing learning dispositions and habits of mind. Discuss the parts of that you are comfortable with and others that cause cognitive dissonance. Which ideas were disruptive to you, and where does that discomfort come from?
- How is our practice influenced by our broadened understanding of poverty, diversity, English Language Learners, as well as the cultural and linguistic contexts of the communities in which we are privileged to teach? How does

awareness of these factors focus our responsiveness to the diversity of learners in our care?

- Talk about the following: “Their world has changed a lot, but children stay the same.”

Think about the young child as learner.

- What aspects of growth and development are unique to the young child? Why is this important to think about?
- What is the result when we talk about and value children as scientists, artists, experts and capable learners?
- How are rapid changes in society (including the influence of technology) affecting our view of the child as a life-long learner, deep thinker, theorizer, listener and empathetic member of society? Why is this important?
- What is current brain research teaching us about emergent literacies and numeracies, roots of empathy, and how “responsive caregiving grows brains”?

Think about the power and intrigue of play.

- Think back to your own experiences as a young child and your perceptions of play then and now? As you recollect, which memories are most vivid? Where and when did they take place? Who was with you? Why are these memories most rich or real for you? How can we access our memories and experience to better relate to the playful nature of the children in our learning spaces? How can we bring our own playful imagination into the learning environment to further enhance children's play opportunities?
- Children are innately curious as they develop theories about their world. How do we, as educators, intentionally offer materials that invite exploration and the opportunity to “play” with concepts and test theories? How does this affect our understandings of the potential of the environment as third teacher?
- How did the caring adults around you model their values of the importance of play?
- Why are children particularly engaged in the outdoors?
- Why is it important that we sharpen our lens to view the play world through a child's eyes?

Think about how Ontario is on the vanguard with play-based learning.

- How are we, as a province, aiming to optimize the potential of this generation of child learners and of our future?
- Play-based learning is unique to Ontario; it is not happening in the same way anywhere else in the world, and the world is watching to see how it will unfold. What is the implication for us as educators?
- The inclusion of four-year-olds in full-day, play-based learning environments is unique to Ontario. Even where full-day play-based programming exists, it doesn't tend to include younger children. In British Columbia, for example, parents are reacting positively and research is reporting positive outcomes of learning through play for five-year-olds. What are the implications of including younger children in full-day, play-based learning? For the child? Families? Schools? Communities?
- Compare early learning in Ontario (two years of universally accessible full day Kindergarten, where one in ten Canadian children live in poverty) with examples of other early learning approaches and contexts, such as those found in Asian countries (which are not play-based), and Scandinavian preschools (which are rich in play and where child poverty is virtually non-existent).

Think about the role of the educator in a play-based program.

- How might revisiting our childhood play experiences support our natural interactions with children at play in our programs?
- What knowledge and understandings do you bring from your own childhood experiences, as well as academic studies, to your interactions with your learners?
- How does the change from "teaching" to "engaging learners" influence your role?
- Talk about your role as "researcher alongside your students".
- How do we maintain a positive, calm demeanor in a busy environment of play and inquiry? What influences should be considered? List positive strategies to add to your teaching toolkit.
- How can the social environment foster empathy, language and healthy emotions, and how do we nurture opportunities for these to naturally emerge?



Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- Consciously set aside time to observe, take notice and think about your learning environment. Consider changes that would better reflect a space to grow what Lilian Katz (1993) refers to as “learning dispositions” or “habits of mind”. What materials and experiences invite reflection, inquiry, innovation, invention, resourcefulness, wonder and puzzlement?
- Remove materials that don’t invite the depth of thinking of which we know children are capable. Observe changes to student learning behaviours.
- Observe and document interactions between the children and their environment. Then, invite conversation about materials and their potential uses. What other materials and experiences are your students interested in that would further their learning?
- Consider if there are any “perceived” barriers that are preventing depth of learning for the children? (For example, “I can only write when I’m at the Writing Centre as the writing materials are only in that spot.”)
- How does the flow of the day reflect the shift from “teaching” to “engaging learners”?
- We know that children represent their thinking in many ways, demonstrating many literacies. Choose to explore a process of representation relatively new to you and your students. Invite a guest expert to support this learning (e.g. Aboriginal Elder storyteller, drummer, artist).

THE EDUCATOR IN CLASSROOM PLAY



Think About and Discuss ...

- Think about what is influencing our current practice. What implications does current brain research and learning theory have on our role in a full day program?
- Talk about our role as learner, as caregiver, as researcher, as an educator on a team.
- Generate an initial list of roles we take on as educators and reflect on situations in which you took on these roles (e.g., provocateur, play leader/scaffolder, resource provider, design consultant, child watcher/follower, documenter,