

# Age-Appropriate Pedagogies: The Key to Unlocking Great Results.

Maree Frederiksen, Prep Teacher and Team Leader, Nundah State School, Queensland  
Australia

Over past decades a performativity culture has emerged in Queensland State Schools. In this paper, the author argues that the unintended consequence of this performativity culture has been the erosion of quality early years pedagogical practices that actually engage our youngest learners in the ‘what’. That is, the curriculum.

In 2007, Preschool was replaced with full-time Prep. The *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) provided teachers with a framework for interacting with our young children. The guidelines were based on active learning through real-life situations, investigations, routines and transitions, focused teaching and learning, and play. They included descriptions of early learning and development phases to help teachers to monitor children’s progress and preparedness for Year 1. The Australian Curriculum, with its associated achievement standards, developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, was implemented in Queensland state schools, including Prep classrooms, in 2012. Curriculum into the Classroom materials were introduced the same year. Since 2017, Queensland children have been required to undertake Prep prior to Year 1, as part of an entitlement to 13 years of education (Queensland Department of Education, 2020).

During my career, I have witnessed much change; I experienced the impact of the performativity culture most intensely before I was seconded to central office to work on the Department’s Age-appropriate pedagogies (AAP) pilot in 2015. The Department was in the process of publishing the *Foundation paper: Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling* (Department of Education and Training, n.d. (a)). The paper presented the findings of a review of international research undertaken by Griffith University on behalf of the Department. It also provided the evidence base that was informing teacher practice, as pilot schools were enacting age-appropriate pedagogies in their early years classrooms.

The research-led and research- informed work that I was involved with for the next three-and-a-half years, supported early years teachers to apply a range and balance of teaching

approaches and the characteristics of quality teaching in their classroom practice. Teachers were supported to align curriculum, age-appropriate pedagogies and assessment to maximise children's engagement in learning and to enhance outcomes.

In my then role as Principal Program Officer, I interviewed Michael Josey, Principal of Benowa State School.

His words have stayed with me:

*The essence of quality teaching sits in pedagogy. The what [Australian Curriculum] is given. Let's look at it, let's have a talk about it, let's see that we understand what our curriculum is saying because we have to understand the map. But once we've done that, let's move on, because the thing that is the life journey for a teacher is pedagogy. [Teachers] need to be working every day, every week, every month, every year for the rest of their careers reflecting on practices that are actually engaging students in the what.*

Here lies the rub! The unintended consequence of the performativity culture that has grown in Queensland schools, has been the erosion of quality early years pedagogical practices that actually engage our youngest learners in the 'what'. That is, the curriculum.

The *Every student succeeding – State Schools Improvement Strategy 2020-2024* provides an overview of our agenda and identifies the key elements we are using to enhance improvement across our system to enable every child and student to succeed (Department of Education and Training, n.d. (b)). The improvement strategy identifies the Department's principles as:

- › **Alignment** | Our shared understanding of the Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline, the Australian Curriculum, the senior syllabuses and the policies that govern our work.
- › **Precision** | How we use evidence to identify the 'right work' and do the 'work right' by planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing.
- › **Intentional collaboration** | The deliberate actions we take to work, learn and improve together.

The improvement strategy goes on to state that our teaching in early years classrooms is guided by the Australian Curriculum and supported by age-appropriate pedagogies which enables alignment, precision and intentional collaboration by providing a conceptual framework to support pedagogical decision-making and reflection. Positioned at the centre of the Age-appropriate Pedagogies Conceptual Framework is the child, their interests and capabilities. The teacher is also represented with recognition of their interests, skills, capabilities and philosophies. The three connected components of curriculum, context and evidence of learning, situate teacher decision-making within the teaching and learning

process. The conceptual framework then outlines the various approaches and inherent characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies.

Children learn best when they are actively engaged in purposeful learning experiences. The Australian Curriculum defines what is to be taught, and teachers use their knowledge of children's interests and capabilities to identify the most effective way to teach curriculum content. 'In sum, the research literature is very clear that age-appropriate pedagogies are necessary in the early years of schooling to engage young learners, achieve effective learning outcomes, and set children up for long-term success' (Department of Education and Training, n.d.(a)).

In my teaching travels, I have often seen results and age-appropriate pedagogies positioned as mutually exclusive. This is a false dichotomy. An increase in early years pedagogical rigor does not equate to a decrease in results. An active, collaborative and responsive inquiry learning approach investigating stick insects, will always trump a worksheet driven, teacher-centred exploration of the Biological Sciences strand in the Science Learning Area of the Australian Curriculum, in both engagement and results.

The *Age-appropriate pedagogies – Implementation Report 2016* states:

*Data from the research indicates that 87.8% of leaders and 84.7% of teachers from schools who commenced in 2016, and those who are continuing their implementation from 2015, agreed that children involved in age-appropriate pedagogies had achieved or exceeded expected academic outcomes. In addition to academic achievements, 98.5% of leaders and 95.2% of teachers perceived benefits beyond those focused on academic outcomes. This relates specifically to outcomes in the affective domains such as social and emotional development, physical development and creative and critical thinking (Department of Education and Training, n.d. (c)).*

There is no doubt that results are important. There is also no doubt that engagement is the key to unlocking great results. Age-appropriate pedagogies is the answer. The intersection between a teacher's deep knowledge of the Australian Curriculum and AAP is actually where the magic happens. I'm a teacher of our youngest learners, and I know this to be true.

*For the purposes of this article, Age-appropriate Pedagogies refers to the body of work undertaken by Griffith University on behalf of the Department. They are high quality, focused and relevant teaching and learning practices in early years classrooms.*

#### **About the Author:**

*Maree Frederiksen has held a variety of roles during her teaching career including Prep Phase-in Teacher, Regional Prep Facilitator and Advisory Visiting Teacher. Most recently*

she has led the development of professional learning materials for the statewide implementation of age-appropriate pedagogies.

## REFERENCES

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