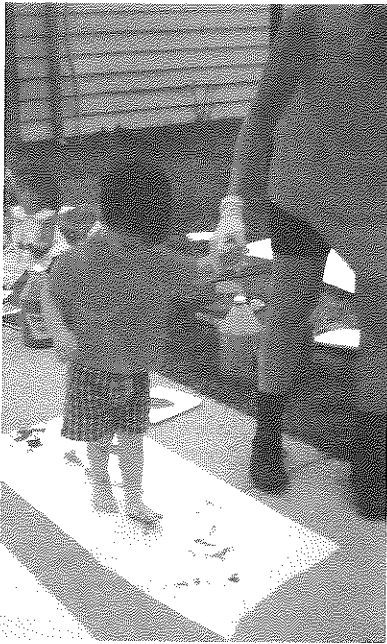


# Passion, power and planning in the early childhood centre

by Diti Hill

*The thoughts expressed here were presented at the Auckland College of Education Professional Development Symposium The Politics of Early Childhood Education in June, 2001. These thoughts continue to be part of a personal journey into an area of teaching that has fascinated and frustrated me for a long time.*



**"Where does my passion lie here? How do I perceive the power I have over children?"**

The mandatory *Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices* (Ministry of Education, 1996) underpins the practice of every early childhood teacher in licensed New Zealand early childhood services and it is the responsibility of every New Zealand early childhood teacher to understand these objectives and practices in the context of their own practice. The implementation document *Quality in Action- Te Mahi Whai Hua* (Ministry of Education, 1998) was specifically designed to assist the development of this understanding. I believe that by focusing on identified objectives and practices and reflecting on the terms, concepts and classifications used in the documents the teacher is able to challenge the notion of governance inherent in both documents, think deeply about his or her practice and create possibilities for self-governance. I also believe that without in-depth consideration of their practice and the concepts and words they use to describe it to others, early childhood teachers will perpetuate the unquestioned thoughts of others and, as Lubeck (1998) has said, will merely incorporate new ideas into old agendas, without changing the actual practices that deeply structure their professional lives. I believe that without what Foucault (1972) called 'care of the self',

the vision of the documents – that of quality early childhood education – will remain unrealised.

Under the section of the Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices entitled Learning and Development, the third objective reads as follows –

*Educators should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the learning and development of each child, identify learning goals for individual children, and use this information as a basis for planning, evaluating and improving curriculum programmes.*

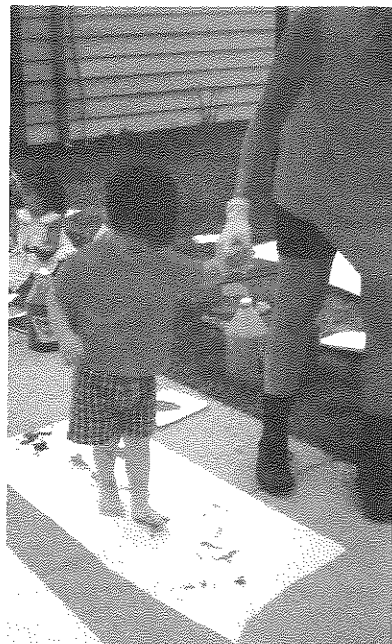
Quality in Action expands on this objective and states on page 30 that –  
*...children's learning and development are the starting points for planning the curriculum, which is founded on educators' understanding of current theory and on their understanding of each child's knowledge, skills, interests, disposition and cultural background.*

While there are several words here that deserve attention, it is 'planning' that I wish to question – to reconceptualise – and, in so doing, open up new ways of looking at this word and what it means for those who use it.

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It is perhaps no coincidence that problematising the word 'planning' begins in the documents themselves. In the introduction to *Quality in Action* (p.5) it states that –

*...learning is a complex process fundamentally controlled by the learner and assisted or facilitated by others who are more competent and often more powerful.*

It is this association of control and power with children's learning that should alert the early childhood teacher to the way in which the word 'planning' is understood and used. Foucault (1972) states that words themselves may well be of little account but the conventions surrounding their use soon reveal their links with both desire – or passion – and control – or power.

Further, he says that it is words which both manifest desire and are the object of it; similarly words both manifest power and are the object of it. And so according to Foucault a word like 'planning' which does not in fact exist outside of our own thoughts and actions, is tossed around by our thinking and can be the object of as well as give rise to both passion and power. However, our meanings and actions are dependent on how we 'see' the word or, as is often the case in early childhood education, on how we are told to 'see' the word. The problem is that in 'seeing' single, rigid meanings and subsequent actions, we run the risk of allowing ourselves to enter a network of contradictions in our thoughts and actions – precisely because we have blocked our thinking from acknowledging the broad and often conflicting possibilities that the word 'planning' has to offer us.

For example, when we use the word 'planning' we may understand a certain action by it but when the same action is expressed in different words we are likely to fragment our understandings to suit the words, rather than work towards the truth



It is the teacher's responsibility to develop an awareness of the power and passion that she might bring to the learning moment.

contained in various meanings and actions. Let me give an example from Dunkin and Hanna (2001 p.21), where the suggestion is made that – "Adults can plan to interact with particular children and consciously build on an interest or strength they have shown."

The reader is likely to draw certain meanings and envisage accompanying actions from these words. A little more than 10 pages later, the reader is asked to engage with the question – "how often do I really follow the child's agenda, and resist following my own?" This is followed by a suggested metaphor for being responsive to a child, imagining oneself – "becoming weightless, like a dandelion seed floating in the air".

A change in words enables a change in meaning and a dramatic change in the power structure inherent in the words. If the reader wishes to avoid a fragmentation in the actions that might ensue from reflection upon these various words, in-depth attention must be given to the effect of the combined words upon the reader's philosophy and practice. The reader must pause and ask – what do I want the words to mean? Where does my passion lie here? How do I perceive the control, the power, I have over children? What words and accompanying actions must I use to realise the desires, the passions, of

children and the control, the power, that they have over their own learning?

To further explore the potential for reconceptualising the notion of planning within our own practice, it is necessary to take a look at what the generally accepted understanding of the word 'planning' is. Although *Quality in Action* mentions the words 'plan' and 'planning', there is no definition of the words in the glossary. The New Zealand Pocket Oxford Dictionary (1990 p.579) defines 'plan' as –

*...a method or procedure, especially conceived beforehand, by which a thing is to be done; to arrange or work out details of a procedure beforehand.*

The word 'planning' in this dictionary is relegated to – "the controlled design of buildings and the development of land" (p.580).

'Planning' is not associated with human encounters and it is interesting to speculate on where and how, in the history of Anglo-Saxon education, children and their learning became linked to 'things to be done'. However, it is planning as 'how things are to be done' that seems to spring to the minds of the early childhood teachers with whom I have spoken – with an emphasis on the future tense implied in 'to be'. To

“  
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me, applying this commonly accepted dictionary understanding of planning to the early childhood setting, to the exclusion of other understandings, has several aspects of concern .

If we wish to really follow the child's agenda, as suggested by Dunkin and Hanna (2001), and resist following our own, we must avoid removing the learning moment from the control of the child. Any filling of the future with experiences and activities is power over the child's own learning in the present, over the desire of the child to learn, a desire that is not finally known until the moment of learning. With planning for children's learning so morally charged, I believe that it is necessary to make a careful distinction between planning for the learning environment and planning for learning. The former offers some leniency in terms of the future tense and separates control over inanimate objects from control over the thinking processes of human beings whose lives are fluid and unpredictable... from control over children who have no real interest in the adult notion of 'planning'. Children do not live their lives in curriculum fragments.

In the dictionary sense, planning for the environment may offer early childhood teachers an expanded view of the environment as something they may believe they have primary control over, and thus responsibility for, until the moment when the child engages with it. At this point in time, the power must be shared or reside only with the child. In the moment all planning must be given over to learning. It is in the moment that the value of a responsibly prepared environment is realised. That many teachers confuse the learning environment for learning itself is evident in the number of early childhood centres cluttered with the little known resources and artifacts from past learning opportunities and other people's learning stories.

It is little wonder that Loris Malaguzzi (1993, cited in Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1996), noted that the centres and schools of Reggio Emilia do not have a planned curriculum and that this would push the centres and schools toward teaching without learning; he emphasised that the teachers follow the children, not the plans and that while the word 'planning' is not used, the word 'reconnaissance' is a strong word in their vocabulary.

The New Zealand Pocket Oxford Dictionary (1990 p.641) defines 'reconnaissance' as – "a survey to ascertain strategic features". It is interesting that the word 'reconnaissance' so defined has such a strong sense of the present tense.

If the word 'planning' is to be reconceptualised within a framework of current theory, we must understand that any act planned for the future is firmly rooted in the past. Planning then becomes a retrospective act, one that reflectively draws upon past experience in order to address the future but an act that is only ever fulfilled in the present, soon to be the past. And so planning can be viewed as the interface between the past, the present and the future. Kingston and Wright (2001) challenge the preoccupation with planning for the future, always trying to prepare children for the next big thing, and they ask why

teachers do not value children's lives now, why teachers cannot engage in what Kingston and Wright term 'non-planning'. They focus on processes set in the present such as: listening, co-constructing knowledge, authenticity, adults and children interacting, learning from each other... valuing equal power relations, valuing relationships and interactions, valuing the teaching-learning process as reciprocal and valuing and creating opportunities for child and adult passions and emotions to flourish.

That learning is fundamentally in and of the moment and that planning 'for things to be done' is problematic, has been acknowledged over time with the appearance of terms such as 'flexible planning', 'possible lines of direction' and 'the teachable moment' and most recently the term 'the ordinary moment'. Rather than allow these terms to be labelled serendipitous, loose and even unprofessional, early childhood teachers need to trust in the process of reconceptualising the notion of planning as it relates to their own practice; they must reclaim the present tense as a viable and integral part of responsible teaching. Fleet and Patterson (1998) support this by suggesting that rather than deciding on children's learning as a list of detailed expectations in advance, it is more valuable to represent their learning as work-in-progress, to document the on-going processes and to invite children and their families to join in reflection upon the recorded learning moments.

Early childhood teachers will have a clearer appreciation of changing power relations and of the place of passion in the learning moment when they allow their understanding of planning to include a time dimension, where planning moves freely between the future and the past and is realised in the present. Watkins (1999) says that the teacher's desire must be evident in

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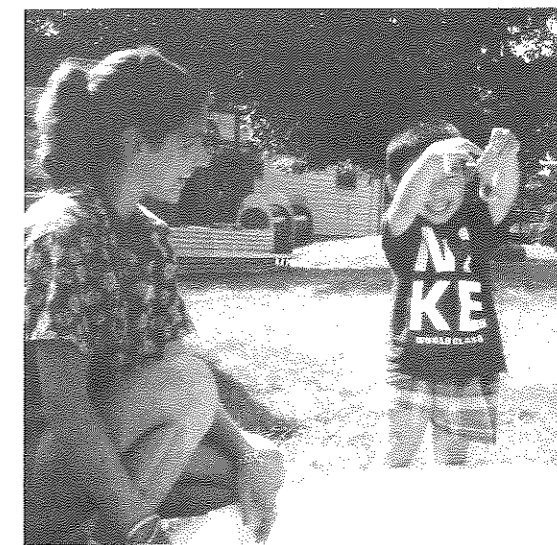
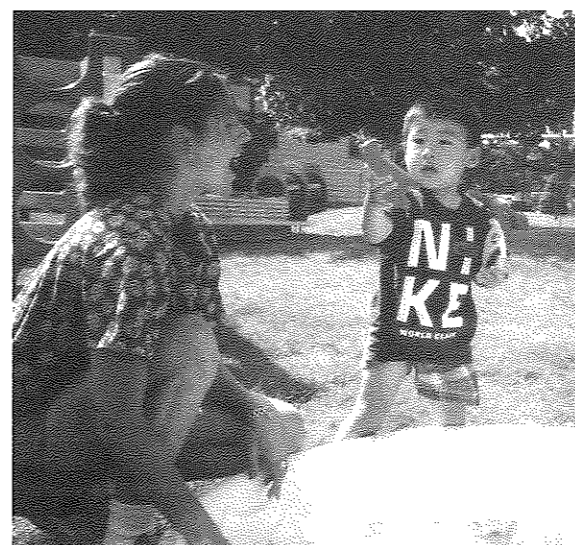
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his/her living work if learning desire is to be ongoing and productive, and that achieving the fine balance of this teaching-learning dynamic is difficult. In the learning moment the meaning given to the word 'planning' determines the way the moment is committed to history – to the learning story of the child.

If planning is not reconceptualised and remains a dictionary-defined act of the future, teachers run the risk of planning for a hidden curriculum. Cannella and Viruru (1997), talk of the hidden constructions of power and illusions of choice in apparently 'child-centred' environments. Teachers must see both the powerful 'can plan to interact' and

the powerless 'becoming weightless' as lying at the heart of the teaching-learning process. This is the "starting point for planning the curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.30).

If "learning is a complex process fundamentally controlled by the learner" (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.5) it is the teacher's responsibility to recognise this and to develop an awareness of the power and passion that he or she might bring to the learning moment and to allow it to be complicated by and give way to the power and the passion of the learner. In the moment, an understanding of the word 'planning' must include a sense of shared decision making and the creation of responsive, reciprocal and emotional relationships. As the teachers from Reggio Emilia have reiterated, it is only when the child is powerful that the adult becomes truly powerful, with a capacity for self-governance that honours the intent of a national document such as the *Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices* (Ministry of Education, 1996) by honouring the intent of the child.

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