**The Power of Play in Kindergarten. Peta Fell**

Over the years, throughout my studies of Early Childhood Education and experience in the field, I have come to realise the true power of play for young children. I have read many articles and been to some great workshops that highlight the educational opportunities in less structured and open ended play. I love the enthusiasm and creativity of Kindergarten aged children. They have little inhibitions and care less what others think of their imaginative ideas, as they have a strong self belief. They invite others to join in their creative adventure and if they decline, they seem to see it as their loss and they continue on.

I love to combine both indoor and outdoor, unstructured and guided play into our Kindergarten program. One of my highlights is our outdoor adventures on the way back from the café each day. Some lessons are guided with a particular focus e.g. measuring or describing items found in nature such as sticks, leaves or rocks etc. Other outdoor lessons are totally free and unstructured. The only guideline is that they need to be able to see me, then I can see them. The students form their own groups, create their own imaginary games. Some children hide, some climb, some run and all smile and laugh. I love to observe and take note of their interests, friendship groupings and their ‘getting along’ skills. This proves to be a great opportunity for students to show their ability to demonstrate our Kinder goals to “Be Safe, Be Kind and Be Our Best”.

Another highlight is our play based opportunities inside the classroom, where learning is blossoming everyday. We have both guided and unstructured opportunities for children to play with each other and build on their interaction and communication skills. We also learn a range of literacy, numeracy and scientific skills through play as well. This term we have our ‘Kindy Café’ which has developed from our project ‘Paddock to Plate’. The children are reading, writing, dealing with money, sharing, turn taking, being imaginative and creative and learning to communicate in a friendly and kind manner. This is an example of how one play station can teach so many different things and it’s all disguised as ‘free time’. The children don’t realise they are learning as they are so engaged in what they are doing.

I have learnt over the years to teacher talk less and spend less time creating boundaries. In the past, I would put out an activity and then spend a great deal of time explaining each one from my perspective, explaining what I thought they should or would do with the equipment. Over the years, I have observed many students creating their own ideas and different twists on the activities I planned. The students’ ideas are often more creative and purposeful than my own. I now realise how much I can learn from my students, if I give them the freedom and opportunity to teach me. I love to just put things on tables now, with no instruction and see where the children take it. The students should not be bound by one idea, from one teacher, but given the opportunity to help steer and guide their own learning.

Children need to be engaged to learn and be active participants in their learning to retain. Play is the perfect way to engage, learn, refine and retain and most of all develop a life long love of learning. It is the job of all Kindergarten teachers to give children the best start to school they possibly can to ensure they see school as a fun, happy and awesome place to be. I’ll leave you with a quote from Arja-Sisko Holappa, a counsellor for the Finnish National Board of Education. She said “Play can provide the opportunity for children to learn with joy. Those things you learn without joy you will forget easily”.