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## Play-based education essential for successful school transition

**Play-based teaching methods need to be prioritised in junior primary classrooms to enhance young minds and smooth the transition to formal schooling for children, according to research by Notre Dame Lecturer and PhD graduate, Dr Linda Bellen.**

Using several case studies and in-depth interviews with educators in New South Wales, Dr Bellen found that the pedagogical differences between prior-to-school and formal schooling under the *Australian Curriculum* are too extreme because, in schools, teaching through play was “limited, constrained or marginalised”.

Dr Bellen said that play, the former prevailing medium for learning and teaching in early years’ settings, had been replaced with a stronger academic focus as a result of community pressures that had been building over the past 20 years.

Play is a learning vehicle adopted by early childhood educators which gives children the opportunity to explore, imagine and create meaningful experiences that enhance their sense of wellbeing and uniqueness.

“I was anecdotally aware that misconceptions and misunderstandings existed about play-based pedagogy and its effectiveness in learning. I had furthermore experienced that early years’ teachers struggled to defend its value amidst pressure from families, school staff, community members and the government sector which supported more academically-oriented learning,” Dr Bellen said.

Part of Dr Bellen’s contribution to new knowledge in this field was developing a common definition of play-based pedagogy to be shared by all educators. This definition draws together the separate and distinct terms used in the current early childhood curriculum framework.

*Play-based pedagogy: responsive, reflective educators provide a balance of child-directed and adult-guided purposeful and meaningful play possibilities to support and extend children’s thinking and learning based on their inquiries and interests. Educators co-construct knowledge with children, in both planned and spontaneous opportunities, achieved through the use of intentional teaching strategies that are deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful to promote sustained shared thinking and high quality verbal interactions.*

Dr Bellen said schools should work in tandem with early childhood settings to best prepare children for academic and personal growth in the classroom.

“We need to develop an equal partnership – one that is bi-directional with the vision of a shared co-construction of transition between the two sectors.” Dr Bellen said.

“Our goal should be promoting an understanding of how young children learn best so that as teachers we can provide high quality, developmentally-appropriate learning environments in both spheres and ensure successful transitions for all young children.”

Dr Bellen was conferred her PhD in Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia’s Sydney Campus Graduation and Annual Awards Ceremonies on Tuesday 14 March 2017.



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**Caption:** Dr Linda Bellen says play-based teaching methods are essential in junior primary classrooms in order to build young minds.



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