Early Years Twilight Seminar Video

What is learning in the early years?

I'm going to start by perhaps saying something that is kind of obvious to particularly educators in the sector – um, that learning is stuff that happens all the time, right?

And in this short period I've got, I want you to think about ‘What is learning in the early years?’ in terms of four things – person, process, context, time.

And what I mean by that is, you know, at the personal level, learning is something that children are experiencing. It's the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities.

It's an attribute of the child. And the process element of learning is the interactions that child has that support the acquisition of those knowledge, skills and abilities.

And, you know, we can go back to theory and, you know, no doubt all of you have, uh, you know, assignments or books with, you know, Vygotskian ideas around learning.

But interactions are not just, uh, with other children. They're with educators in settings, they're with objects, with symbols in their environment.

But the most important one that we're talking about here, tonight, is interactions with educators and other children in early childhood settings. And the reason why that's important is because it is the things that educators do that support kids to learn.

Right? Context – well, that's everything else that's going on in the world for the kids, what sort of resources are around, what's going on in their home lives. And time I'll come back to in a minute. OK, so, that's how I want to think about learning in the early years.

If I was to ask people here, and people via video, ‘What is it that children learn?’ I'm gonna bet that we'd get a thousand different ideas. Right? Children learn to play, to think, sing, to interact with one another, they learn the rules.

And I think, as a sector, that's a really, you know, interesting and unique perspective on learning. It's much more holistic than what we see in other developmental sciences.

And what I hope that this literature review does is provides a bit of a bridge, because we do get down into the developmental science a bit and try and say, ‘Well, OK, taken what it is in the VEYLDF,’ ‘what tools are out there that are valid and reliable to measure learning?’

And I find it useful to think about that in terms of two things.

We can think about domain–general skills – that is the things children learn that are not tied to a specific skill, like reading or writing, but that they use in a wide range of aspects of their lives.

And, so, that's things like critical thinking and social skills and motor skills, and you'll see, we'll talk about all of that in a minute.

And those domain–general capabilities are different from domain–specific learning, which is much more aligned with the traditional academic idea of learning – literacy and numeracy, but also playing the piano, things that are very specific.

We're going to talk tonight about four domains of learning inside that idea that idea of domain–general skills.

Jen's gonna talk, I hope, a bit about, you know, where they're evident in the VEYLDF.

But just to give you a heads–up, the things we're going to talk about tonight are learning in the areas, in the domains, of executive function.

So, that's children's ability to inhibit autonomous responses. So, to process information, to think, and to respond in a meaningful way.

Their memory, their working memory, their ability to hold pieces of information in their memory and then use it. And their flexibility.

So their ability to change their behaviour, given a change in the rules. We're also going to talk about problem solving, which is a personal research area of mine, and that's really about how do kids approach new things for the first time?

How do they use inductive reasoning to come up with strategies to approach a novel problem and act on it? And how do they use quantitative reasoning?

So how do they use mathematical thought to solve problems, or symbolic thought to solve problems?

We'll cover social and emotional skills. This is another really interesting area because there's a nice dichotomy in here.

One way of thinking about social and emotional learning is, what problem behaviours do children have and how do we support them to lose those behaviours?

Hitting, biting, kicking, spitting are some of the obvious ones. Or are we more interested in the sort of pro–social aspects of children's learning?

So, their ability to interact with their peers and to transcend social difficulties. And the last outcome we'll look at is motor skills.

So, motor skills, we can think about gross motor skills, children's ability to orient themselves in space, to move their lips around. Through sport is often a good example, but to balance and walk.

But also their fine motor skills, which includes things like being able to draw and write and manipulate pens and pencils.

The most important thing I wanted to talk about, if we go back to that idea of person, learnings about the child acquiring knowledge, skills and abilities.

Process – how do we support, through our interactions, kids' learning and development? Context, I'll leave out and we can talk about that another time.

But time, for me, is the really important issue in learning. And that's because more than anything, learning is about growth.

Right? It is about the acquiring of knowledge, skills and abilities over time. [PHONE CHIMES] Sometimes we abstract away from that idea and we use things like... That's my warning bell to stop now.

But sometimes we abstract away from that idea of growth and we, you know, look at skill descriptions in a curriculum document or we use a kind of ages and stages approach to say, ‘Well, 4–year–old children should be able to do this.’

Those are useful ways of thinking about learning in some regards, right? Which children need more support. Which children are really gunning it.

But the most fundamental idea for us to take – particularly in our idea around learning as it applies to practice – is, well, we know that learning is cumulative, right?

So, what we do now supports children in their learning and development once they enter school and through their life course, and so growth is important, demonstrating that children are progressing along some continuum over time.

And that ties into really neat ideas inside early childhood, like the idea that all children should be expected to and can learn.

That's something that I think, as practitioners, we hold dear, and so a lot of what we're going to talk tonight about is, how can we demonstrate evidence that children started somewhere, in a particular domain – in this case, in domain general skills – and show that over time they acquired new knowledge, skills and abilities and are on the right track.