

Who Needs Shoelaces? That's What Velcro Is For!

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Abstract: Recently there has been much media hype questioning young children's use of iPads in early childhood education, with the suggestion that young children today cannot tie their shoelaces, yet they can competently navigate an iPad. There was no question or debate of how developmentally appropriate tying of shoelaces is in early childhood. Many four year olds are still grappling with pressure (force), dexterity and hand-eye coordination (Connell & McCarthy, 2014), the skills needed for the complex tasks such as tying shoelaces. There had been no examination of whether this was an appropriate or functional task to be teaching children especially when most of their shoes are fastened with Velcro. Shoelaces are not children's reality in today's world; iPads are. Children see experience, and are not daunted by the technology they encounter in their environment. This is their learning life.

At Botany Downs Kindergarten our journey with iPads began in 2011 with the introduction of one iPad into an already technology-rich early childhood learning environment. This is our story.

Key Words: Children's learning, technology, change,

Introducing the iPad

Our decision to purchase an iPad arose from attending teacher presentations at the ULearn conference and seeing the vast possibilities for iPads to enrich children's learning. The teaching team talked at length about how to introduce the iPad to the children. We decided that we would charge the iPad, download a few apps that parents had recommended, and then place it on a table to see what the children would do with it. A couple of children walked by the table, then circled back again. There was some animated whispering. Within a couple of minutes the group was sitting together on the floor playing one of the drawing games. They had confidently negotiated their way into the iPad without any help from an adult. As Vanessa swiped her index finger across the screen and finger-touched the icons, it was evident that there was a leader in the group with some prior experience. Four other children looked on in eager anticipation, following Vanessa's moves. Vanessa generously proceeded to give others a turn and offer guidance.

Developing an iPad Policy

The Auckland Kindergarten Association requires all its teachers to undertake cyber-safety training, and we, the teachers at Botany Downs Kindergarten, had all completed the course. At the time we introduced the iPads, we were a three-teacher kindergarten, and while two of us had iPhones, none had had prior experience with an iPad. In our initial discussions we had debated whether we needed a policy before we introduced the iPad or whether we should introduce the iPad and develop a policy as the children showed us how they might use it. We looked at the argument that the children already had access to a computer and laptops in the kindergarten and we had not introduced specific policy for these other than that internet access would be supervised. We recognised that we didn't know what we didn't know, and that was okay – if we waited until the teachers were proficient iPad users, we might be waiting a very long time. We operate a high-trust programme and saw no reason why we should deviate from that philosophical stance when it came to the use of iPads. Thus, an iPad

policy was not developed prior to the introduction of the iPad, and nor has one emerged since. We follow the guidelines offered by NetSafe and continue to observe and be involved with children as they engage with the iPads.

Choosing Apps for the iPad

iPads have certainly become part of culture when you hear the powerful statement, “When you come to my birthday party I’m not going to let you play on my dad’s iPad.”

Therefore, we decided to send a note home to whānau to ask them to recommend some apps. We received a large number of recommendations and proceeded to load a selection of these onto the iPad. Questions arose relating to loading educational games as opposed to gaming apps. Was there a difference or was it a perception based on how adults had learnt at school? What is relevant for children today? How will we know and how will we make these decisions? The notion of “playing” on the iPad seemed to bother some educationalists, yet they accepted children playing at the dough or children’s varied stages of painting, climbing or literacy. Why should an iPad be any different? Do we give a child a pencil only when they can draw or do we encourage exploration to develop skills in a relaxed, supportive environment? Do we ensure a teenager can drive before we allow them behind the wheel of a car? These questions generated ongoing discussion, although we have yet to find the answers!

By loading a small range of a variety of apps we were able to monitor and note children’s choices. A number of children already had their favourite game while others were more experimental in their choices, often moving in and out of games. We did not discourage this as we believed it was all part of the experimentation that would lead to more sustained iPad use for that learner in the future. If we had not been alongside a child as they worked on the iPad during the day, we could quickly check in the unclosed apps exactly which apps they had been using. A list of some of the apps we have explored can be found on our website, botanydownskindergarten.org.nz.

Peer Tutoring

Perhaps the greatest delight in the introduction of iPads has been the way that children work together and share their skills. The children usually choose to sit on the couch or lie in a group on the floor. Much animated conversation takes place as they offer each other advice, discuss what they have experienced previously and possible choices, and solve problems. In most cases advice from their peers is well received. From time to time there is joint manipulation of a game – either invited or uninvited! But that it a challenge that we encourage children to solve themselves in the same way that they solve other problems in the kindergarten; i.e. the child should address the issue directly with the other child, and if that fails, they should seek out an adult for assistance.

Sharing is Overrated

Two questions that frequently arise are how do the teaching team limit children’s time on the iPad and how do we encourage sharing? When we observed children working on the iPads, we noticed that they needed time to explore the tool, they needed time to increase their skill level within a programme, and they needed time to put their skills into practice. So, how long can a child work on an iPad at Botany Downs Kindergarten? In our high-trust model we seek to build skills in self-regulation. Most children will move on without prompting. If we need to give a prompt after extended use, we will say, “Five more minutes and then you need to pass it to a friend.” In some instances we might use a visual countdown of five, four, three, two, one. When a time limit is set for each child to use the iPad of, say, ten minutes, we liken

it to the following scenario. You are watching your favourite television programme and twenty minutes into the programme someone takes the remote and says “It’s my turn now.” How would that make you feel? Does it make you feel fulfilled as a learner? We believe that children need time to explore and work through a game. This is the only way that they will have the opportunity to move to higher levels of a game and cement the picture of themselves as a successful learner.

IPads and Inclusion

We were eager to use the iPad with children who have special needs. We recognised that the children with special needs were as diverse as the rest of the class – some had had prior iPad experience and some had not. Without exception, they were just as enthusiastic to use the iPads. What was problematic was their ability to negotiate group entry into an existing group of iPad users, and teachers often needed to facilitate and maintain this process. What we did discover was when a child with special needs was using the iPad, other children were drawn to them and interacted through the shared interest. Having a wide range of apps installed on the iPad ensured that there was a range of entry levels available to all children.

Developing Teacher Skills

One school of thought suggests that teachers should be competent with the iPad before introducing it to children. We deliberately decided to reject this notion. None of the teachers had used an iPad before the device was introduced at the kindergarten. We knew we were about to embark on a steep learning curve. In effect, the children taught us about iPads. They guided us through programs, demonstrated how to move to higher levels of a game and, frequently, how to problem solve. One of the key differences we found between the teachers and the children navigating the iPads was that the children were not afraid to make mistakes and were not daunted by what they didn’t know. It seemed that they could always find their way back and start again. We were inspired by a session presented at ULearn in which the teachers shared a story of the children of Papakowhai School who had been spending half an hour a week tutoring teachers on iPads. This project raised the self-esteem of the children while building the teachers’ skills. Without exception, our children were eager to share their knowledge with the teachers. What can be more powerful than being the holder of the knowledge? Our stated aim in our centre’s strategic plan is *to build a community of resilient, risk taking, creative thinkers who inspire each other*. In this instance the children were inspiring us. The Auckland Kindergarten Association provides ongoing, high-quality professional IT development at no cost to teachers, so were able to expand our knowledge of iPad possibilities at a professional level as well.

Moving Forward

Within a short time we recognised the diversity of the learning experiences offered by this new tool in the kindergarten and we were excited. With the children playing on the iPad, we were moving through what we described as the “scribbling stage”. Confidence was growing all around. The iPad is such a portable device, and that itself opened possibilities. Our most exciting acquisition has been an Apple television. We began by explaining to children that they could mirror their game onto the TV screen and all their friends could watch what they were doing. Initially they would grab chairs and sit in front of the TV to be in on the action. Now, this might sound as though we spend a lot of time in front of the TV, but that is not the case. This was an initial phase, and we were happy to support the children’s choice. Now, this is an option they choose from time to time.

In 2010 we began Skyping a new entrant class at Botany Downs School every Thursday at midday. When we began, we were using a computer, separate camera and speakers, and a

projector and screen, and all were fraught with the possibility of letting us down at a vital moment, testing our disposition to persist. Currently we use an iPad and Apple TV, a system that is almost devoid of technology challenges. It is now possible for the children to hold the iPad and conduct the conversations without teacher assistance. We rate this as our most exciting move forward. In 2013 during Grandparents Week, we offered grandparents the opportunity to Skype their grandchild at kindergarten. The child then took them on a tour of the kindergarten and introduced them to their friends and teachers. This option was taken up by grandparents throughout New Zealand and the world.

We were already prolific movie makers at Botany Downs Kindergarten, so it seemed natural to continue the movie making using the iPad. We began by using the app Puppet Pals. With the portable nature of the iPad, the children were able to get the gist of some to the finer points of movie making and movement before they moved on to more action-based movie making. We had been using the cameras to record children telling their news. A child would be the “news anchor” and proceed to interview children about their news; the news was then played at group time. With the addition of the iPad, we were able to film, edit and show the news in one quick easy format in iMovie. This was then added to our news channel, botanydownskindergartennews.blogspot.com. However, our bubble burst in a spectacular fashion when we decided to canvas the children for their thoughts regarding this process. Every single child interviewed stated that they would rather tell their news in front of the class than have it on TV. We believe that standing in front of the class makes the children feel important, more important than being on TV. With that information in hand, we put a temporary stop on our news channel blog (botanydownskindergartennews.blogspot.com). The iPad is not the answer to everything. Just ask the children – they know.

Cautionary Tales

When we talked with primary colleagues, we were aware that we were the only ones who did not have a protective rubber surround on their iPad. We confidently shared that the children had been using the iPad for more than a year and we had not experienced any problems. As if on cue, someone stood on the iPad the following week and broke the screen. We suspect that it had been left on the floor and an adult had stood on it. We replaced the screen and immediately purchased a surround for it. We have never regretted this decision as it does make the iPad significantly more robust – and also, being red, it is easy to find!

Another challenge we had to grapple with was the amount of internet data we were using. We evaluated what we had used over the past month and it was higher than usual, but we were sure the iPad usage did not account for this. As we monitored the children we discovered that one young learner was adept at accessing YouTube, and we suspect that he was the culprit in our internet shortfall. We decided that we needed to be more vigilant in resetting the “no internet access” each time after we had used it.

With the continual turnover of children that we have as children leave kindergarten and go to school, we have to remind ourselves to go back to basics from time to time to ensure that skills are developed. However, we believe that children are entering kindergarten with more prior knowledge of iPads and their capabilities.

Conclusion

The teaching team at Botany Downs Kindergarten is committed to continuing our technology journey. We have since added two further iPads to our resources, and each one has more improved technology, which is what the children expect from a tool. We are firm in our belief that we should continue our IT journey. This is the children’s world, and it is the

teachers who must adapt and change. Tying shoelaces does require dexterity, concentration and perseverance – but it is a skill that the children will rarely need. Pure pragmatism tells us we are on the right path. The iPad is just one tool in our technology kete. We do not “do IT”; rather, it is embedded in the programme, and we seek to use the best tool for the job at hand, whether that is an iPad, a book or a conversation of shared knowledge. For us, the most important notion is being open to new learning and new possibilities, whatever they may be.

References

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