Learning through play: Perspectives from research in the health and education nexus

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Introduction
The key goal of DARS projects within the Health and Education nexus was to develop areas of strength to build capacity which would then spill into other activities like new grants, new HDR students and new expertise to inform postgraduate and undergraduate teaching and learning. “Play” was identified as a context enabling this process.

Aim
The project sought to bring together perspectives from diverse research areas and examine their capacity to inform the concept of “play” and its relevance to the health and education nexus.

Methods
A symposium and a number of workshops were created. Workshops sought to encourage researchers to reflect on the relevance of their own research and experiences to the concept of play. These activities also aimed to:
- attract teachers;
- attract MEDI and research students;
- build and mentor research teams thus integrating Health and Education evidence and perspectives into all courses and research areas in the School of Education.

School of Education staff were introduced to these objectives and proposed ways to address this focus. IGCE themes were also requested to contribute. MEDI students were invited, as well as school teachers. Workshops and symposia focused on issues which traditionally are marginalised by virtue of learning being seen more as a left-brain activity, a response to stimulus (such as teachers’ questions or explanations), and language conceptualised as words and grammar “in context”. The experiences shared drew on evidence from neuroscience, psychology, cultural studies, music, linguistics, phonetics and physical education. These are in stark contrast to practices traditionally legitimised as standard and “working”, and based in concepts informed by tradition, not science (see picture below).

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Results
• Relevance: Huge interest from schools.
• School of Education: The School of Education presentations invited and supported by the project Chief Investigator resulted in 6 brief presentations during the initial “2-day workshop”, one presentation from the Wellbeing theme for the Play Symposium, and a single-author publication for a book to be published with Rutledge.
• “Play” and Health and Education nexus: No specific research or interest teams were formed within the School of Education that would explicitly engage “play” as an area for building capacity. This leaves play on the periphery of research in the School.
• Book “Learning through play: Perspectives from research in the Health and Education nexus”: Contributors are mostly external, with Menzies and the CDU School of Psychology being represented, language, science, and marginalised focused areas. These are also authored contributions engaging a larger pool of expertise from the SoE, including research or MEDI students.

Discussion
The project tested its methodology, as well as the capacity of the School of Education, to respond to “play” as a research interest. The findings suggest that as long as research projects are perceived to be the responsibility of a specific research team, the impact of those projects will also be confined to that research team. In the context of this study, Food for Thought and other research seminars were shown to stimulate little, if any, conversation and collaboration.

Recommendations
A concerted effort is needed for the School of Education to develop processes whereby projects invite, rather than limit, staff participation in DARS-like studies if the development of areas of research strength is to be the end objective. The alternative is to engage in a lot of disconnected projects that, at best, build capacity of partner institutions.

Conclusion
In a world of education dominated by direct instruction methods and techniques, complemented with outlived theories from psychology, research in the Education and Health nexus opened opportunities to develop a unique niche of expertise, especially in the area of pedagogy and teacher training. For now, the two areas are not linked sufficiently to demonstrate research capacity. This weakens the School and its capacity to lead and inspire innovation. There is a need to fund bigger projects that engage and build diverse expertise, and to open space for strategically relevant institutions to join in, all to further, test and contest the relevance of our work.

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Epistemology of play
1. Wayne Cristobal: The seriousness of play in developing our reflectivity: Reflections on and from Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy’s thoughts on play spaces as “The legitimacy of spaces”.
2. Ania Lian: Is language a sense? Utilising perspectives from neuroscience, psychology and cultural studies to expand conceptual tools engaged in play.
8. Andrew Lian: Play-based strategies for integrating rhythm and timbre for building cognitive and affective control, predictions in speech, language, and communication: Perspectives from technology and neuroplasticity.
10. Ania Lian and Amy Normak: Emotional analysis of texts and its advantages in developing children’s critical disposition in play based environments.

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