

## Newsletter (1) 2010

### Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of our 2010 newsletter and a special welcome to the 240 new subscribers who have recently joined our other 6,000 subscribers. Since our last newsletter some wonderfully exciting and progressive things have been happening in education such as the exceptionally successful Early Years Conference held in Melbourne in March. In this issue we will be sharing highlights of these events with you.

The Walker Learning Approach is being heralded across the country as making a profound difference to children, teachers and school communities. The feedback on the Walker Learning Approach is the same whether it is from elite independent schools in Melbourne or remote homeland communities in Arnhem Land; exemplifying that this approach is truly and authentically child centered teaching that provides children with the ideal mix of explicit teaching and independent learning.

Early Life Foundations is a not for profit organization that conducts research and professional development for teachers and other professionals. Another major part of our service to the community is parent support: This includes the "outreach program" that we have developed over the past few years to voluntarily assist parents who need parenting support. We aim to provide a greater, wider and broader range of outreach programs to parents and organisations throughout Australia in effective parenting and lifestyle choices for children and families that promote resilience, self esteem, time for leisure and play and well being for children and families. The "parent-community outreach program" will be gaining a greater presence on our website shortly so keep an eye out!

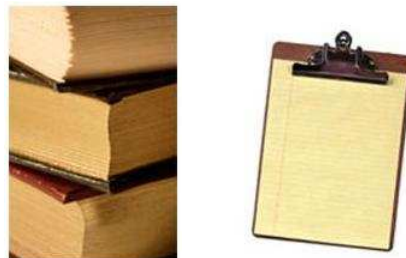
One initiative we are working on this year is to have the newsletter printed hardcopy so it can be disseminated more readily to parents and communities needing assistance but experience significant barriers to access support. If you have skills in newsletter production that you may wish to volunteer or know any person or organization who may be interested in sponsoring this initiative I would very much appreciate if you would please contact me directly.

### Education today

Education in Australia today is sadly a contradiction of terms – on the one hand in 2009 the new National Early Years Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming was launched. The Council of Australian Governments has developed this Framework to assist educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning. In this way, the Early Years Learning Framework (the Framework) will contribute to realising the Council of Australian Governments' vision that: *"All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation."*

In corollary, there is a noticeable ground swell (schools, leadership, teachers and communities) to revisit the importance of educating the whole child and what it means to be a successful learner.

Despite this the Australian Government persists in narrowing, minimizing and devaluing teaching and learning with initiatives such as NAPLAN and the My School Website. In this issue we will discuss why NAPLAN and the My School website present flawed and misleading information about our children's education. We challenge you to look beyond the government's rhetoric, stand up to these initiatives and demand a real "education revolution"!



**The traditional approach to learning: The child is the blank slate and all we have to do is fill it with content from books.**

**The holistic educational approach: is far richer, deeper and broader than that. It must encompass the emotional, the social, the skills, the ability to interact, problem solve, take risks, and learn how to learn more.**

## Paying Tribute

Every now and then we are privileged to have the presence of an individual who makes a contribution to the community that surpasses expectations of even the hardest working and enthusiastic amongst us: Individuals who engender passion, excitement, sharing, goodwill and an untiring commitment to children. Nehama Patkin who sadly died unexpectedly last month was one of these extraordinary individuals. Nehama devoted her life to educating and sharing the passion of music with children. She touched children and adults all around the world with her concerts, conference presentations, teaching and extensive voluntary and charity work. The death of Nehama is a great loss to so many who knew her and to those who missed the chance to know her. The loss of one so exceptional often prompts us to step back, take a breath and reflect about life and the contribution we make. We are pleased to be able to continue our association in the memory of Nehama through the Patma Music Family Concerts of which we are a sponsor for 2010.

**Shona Bass**  
**Editor**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Early Life Foundations**

## In this Issue

### Major topics in this issue

- Comment: Looking Beyond the Rhetoric: NAPLAN and My School Website by Shona Bass
- Feature Article: Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by Kathy Walker
- The WALKER Learning Approach: Kathy's trip to Arnhem land
- The WALKER Learning Approach: Grades 3-6
- Newsletter Rap: Early years Conference, WLA accredited teacher; New books – Play on and Parenting

### Associate Profile

- Find out a little more about our associates; in this issue we feature our new associate Marina Portelli.

## Comment

### Looking Beyond the Rhetoric; NAPLAN and My School Website

When many other western countries are re-visiting "testing" and "league tables" the Australian Government for some reason under the bizarre banner of an "education revolution" are fast tracking to these approaches!! The empirical evidence clearly substantiates that these approaches are flawed and

provide little information in terms of the success of our teaching and learning in Australian schools.

In the USA for years teachers have been given the instruction that they must "teach to the test." In some instances children do not have recess or lunch time because they are being taught to the test ...to keep up the data expectations!! Robertal Golinkoff reported that in one State in the USA children are required to recite a daily pledge that in class they promise that they will do their best on the standardized tests! Of course many would say "that is in the USA. It doesn't happen here in Australia"; unfortunately it IS happening here. Our organization works with 1,000's of schools across the country and teachers are being told to "teach to the test".

### So what is the big deal, what's wrong with teachers teaching to the test and why can't we use NAPLAN as a true indication of our children's education?

Education is so much more than children being able to rote learn answers to perform well on a National Test. Christine Blower, general secretary of the National Union of teachers in the UK says that National Testing only gave children the right to pass exams, not the right "to be educated in the round" (Blower 2009). They reduced children to "little bundles of measureable outputs trained in a mechanistic model of education."

Opponents of the NAPLAN are generally not anti assessment – of course assessment is a critical component of any education system. **The question is not - to assess or not to assess; the question is how to assess teaching and learning and children's education in a meaningful and relevant way.** The NAPLAN is narrow and misleading and the fundamental premise on how it is designed is flawed. It assumes that every child at a particular time in a particular community being tested will be comparable. The approach assumes a one size fits all approach; it doesn't take into account cultural differences, SES, special needs and the many other factors that impact on how children learn, develop and are educated. It perpetuates a belief that learning can be measured by data. In our next newsletter there will be an article on how teaching and learning can be assessed in a meaningful and authentic way.



**We can't possibly know all of what the future will hold except that we need to equip children with the skills for the future, whatever that future requires!!**

NAPLAN places pressure on school leadership to perform, it places pressure on teachers to teach to the test. These pressures at different levels of the school hierarchy interrupt more meaningful and relevant teaching and curriculum areas. Children are taught to rote learn at the expense of acquiring skills, problem

solving, interacting, developing oral language, building resilience and being independent learners. Most educators around the world recognize that there are many ways in which we can assess, monitor, evaluate and report about children's learning and development without going down the path of a one size fits all model. This point has been highlighted in the recent report delivered to the House of Commons, where four former Education Ministers appeared before the education select committee; Ken Baker, David Blunkett, Estelle Morris and Charles Clarke. "The way teachers have responded to the government's approach to accountability has meant that test results are pursued at the expense of a rounded education for children" (Baker to Balls: the foundations of the education system). In the feature article by Kathy in this edition she explains what is needed to be a successful learner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

It is interesting that in the field of medicine we rely on "evidence based practice": that a drug or treatment regimen is rarely used unless there is high quality rigorous empirical research underpinning the safety and effectiveness. In education "evidence based practice" or "evidence based pedagogy" rarely exists. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are often invented at the whim of a politician with advisors who have their own agendas – rarely is there a rigorous empirical basis to these decisions. Douglas Carswell (Baker to Balls: the foundations of the education system) says "At last I understand why we have the education system that we have. For decades, each new set of politicians thinks they know what needs to be done. Few stop to ask if it is really right for people in "SW1" to impose these decisions in the first place. The case for having a state-run curriculum and testing was never really made. There was an assertion made that a curriculum was needed to help children move from school to school - and that politicians needed to have "levers to pull". There was an assumption that if something has to be nation-wide; it must be run by government."

In any field of study empirical testing in its own right is not enough unless there is the appropriate interpretation by skilled and knowledgeable professionals; this is highlighted in just two scenarios (i) the outcomes claimed are not what is sought to be measured (for example: NAPLAN outcomes claiming to successfully measure children's learning but only providing evidence of retaining content ) and (ii) the outcomes of learning are achieved through developmentally inappropriate practice that disengages children in learning (for example: literacy rotations).

**What can you do as a parent??** You can request that your child is not involved in the NAPLAN testing – it is easy; all you have to do is sign a consent form or write a short letter and that's it! The more parents who take this action, the greater the message from the coal face that we want meaning and relevant assessment for our children and a teaching and learning approach that is not centered around teaching to the test.



**Students must be empowered to own some of their learning, to see how it relates to them personally and to be intrinsically motivated to want to learn how to learn**

**My School Website** is another initiative being rejected by other western education systems, yet somehow is now making teaching and schools accountable! As has been reported in the UK recently: Stats stigmatize and undermine struggling schools by publishing their raw results and dissuade teachers from inventing creative lessons; the report (Baker to Balls) argues "A better approach would be for the government to place more faith in the professional teachers and to support them with a simplified accountability and improvement system that encourages good practice. If pupils' attainment is used to judge teachers and schools, teachers cannot be expected to be dispassionate assessors of that attainment and teaching to the test is a likely consequence.

Despite the assurance that these data would not be used as league tables they have been. Parents have called our office saying that they have chosen the school for their children based on the rankings of the website. Despite the fact that we were assured that comparisons would be relevant and equitable, we know in many cases they are not and despite the fact they assured us that this would identify high quality teaching it has not! We are privy to the most outstanding teachers across the country that work incredibly hard with exceptional skills with the most disadvantaged children and yet their 'ranking' on the website suggests the contrary.

Education in Australia needs to accommodate a vast diversity of learners, cultures and needs within the country. We need to assess and our educators need to be accountable – but a one size fits all is not the answer, neither is a data point on a page.

On the eve of this newsletter being published I am shocked to hear that Julia Gillard is suggesting that parents can supervise the NAPLAN tests if teachers boycott the testing! How divisive can a government be? To pitch parents against teachers, to use parents as the traditional "scab" labour? Julia Gillard came to the education portfolio with such promise and gave us such hope, hope that we would have a true and authentic education revolution – what we are ending up with is the dark ages!!

**Shona Bass**  
**CEO**  
**Early Life Foundations**

**Note:** Reference details are listed in suggested reading.

## Feature Article:

### Revisiting Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

It is most exciting that PLAY is well and truly back on the agenda. I would never have dreamed that my colleague Shona Bass and Carol Copple (International Keynote speaker) would have been meeting with the Victorian Government who were asking, "How do you implement play into the classroom as a pedagogical tool"? That was unheard of from a government perspective even 3 years ago!!

**One of our greatest challenges at times is to remember the humanity and profundity of what we are all here for and what it is we need to provide for our young children.**

Despite current trends in measurement, benchmarking, standardised testing and rankings, we must not lose track of the profound individuality of all children. This remains one major fundamental reality in all that we do.

We have challenging times in relation to society in general which impacts upon all aspects of our children. Some of these include:

- The intrusion of 'electronic entertainment' in everyday life
- Early sexualisation of children, particularly girls
- Exposure of children to experiences and life opportunities earlier and earlier
- Overscheduled children
- Preoccupation by some with having "bright children"
- Cyber bullying

**"One of the greatest problems of our time is that many are schooled but few are educated. To be educated is not to be schooled" (Thomas Moore)**

As soon as we attempt to measure the success and quality of a teacher or a learner through the narrow lens of some data on a page, we turn the profound humanity of a child into a narrow number on a table that is meaningless and misleading. We turn the deep complexity of a life and learning and experience into the simplicity and narrowness of a graph on a page.

Thomas Moore states,

**Education is not the piling on of learning, information, facts, skills or abilities that are training or instruction. Education is making visible what is hidden.**

This type of education is hard to measure and ultimately has no standard or end point. It is embedded in a wisdom, something profound that is difficult if not impossible to articulate.

The contemporary philosopher AC Grayling discusses education in the following way.

**The aim of liberal education is to produce people who go on learning after their formal education has ceased who think, question, and know how to find answers when they need them. Members of a community cannot afford to be unreflective and ill informed if civil society is to be sustainable. The contemporary view of education distorts the purpose of schooling, by aiming not at the development of individual as ends in themselves, but as instruments in the economic process.**

The key is to distinguish between education and training. We certainly need to recognise both. Children do require the skills and scaffolding and instruction of literacy and numeracy. According to many philosophers and commentators it is the education of the heart, the soul, the development of identity, culture, appreciation of reflection and belonging that is being lost.

I am mindful of how language, such a powerful tool for conveying meaning has changed so much in relation to education.

Measuring, ID numbers, benchmarks, outcomes, standards, data, testing, ranking. Instead of using the phrase or expression- child centred learning, we use outcome driven. Instead of having goals and objectives for children, we now have benchmarks and standards.

We are faced with a paradox.

We now know more about the individual nature of how children learn, their unique personalities, cultural influences, life opportunities or lack of, and we speak more now about meeting individual needs, early intervention, .... But at the very same time, we are all being besieged by a data driven, economic focus of education.

**What are the key components needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

- Leadership
- Philosophy
- Evidence Pedagogy (as distinct from curriculum or framework of content)

We have a range of facts; evidence based about what it is children need in their early years. They require:

- Access to rich cultural experiences that reflect their own family culture.
- A right to have their own language (inseparably linked to their culture and self esteem) being part of their early years of preschool and school experience.
- Active engagement in authentic and meaningful experiences that relate to their own local community and culture.
- Instruction, guidance and scaffolding
- Relationships, staff who hang in for the longer term and build relationships with the families and community.
- Family involvement

## How do we change?

Let us consider the term revolution: It can mean a variety of things including, transformation, reform, innovation, and uprising. Change in my experience comes not from waiting for the government to change things, but to stand up and be clear about what it is young children need and have a right to in their early years of education. That is where the real revolution is occurring as it always does in a real revolution. Not from the government but from the real people at the coal face, who really notice and understand what is happening and recognize that things need to change.

**The diversity of this huge country we live in defies the logic of a one size fits all.**

Let's embrace change and continue on with our quiet revolution!!!

### **Kathy Walker Director and Author Early Life Foundations**

Extract taken from Kathy Walkers Keynote address at the 2010 K-2 Conference held in Melbourne.

**Every student can learn, just not on the same day, or the same way (George Evans)**



## **Kathy's Trip to Arnhem Land**

Marina Portelli and I spent a week in the NT working with teachers and indigenous communities in remote parts of Arnhem Land (Nhulunbuy, Gapuwiyak and Elcho Island). To get to Gapuwiyak and Elcho Island requires a flight in a single engine small plane.



### **On the way to Gapuwiyak**

All locations are classified as remote and are at the top end of NT to the right of Darwin. Nhulunbuy is a mining town and the school is quite large compared with Gapuwiyak and Elcho Island. Gapuwiyak is very small

and Shepardson College on Elcho Island is larger with primary and secondary schools.

At Gapuwiyak and Elcho Island almost all the children are local indigenous children. The remoteness of these places naturally means that resources, access to PD and particular issues of the communities themselves is often challenging but also richly rewarding.

One of the most powerful conversations I had during this trip was with a local community elder called Valerie who is a teacher assistant at Elcho Island. She described how great it was for the young children to have the Walker Learning Approach as part of each day. She said,

**"This play, this exploration is the natural way we teach our own children in our own communities. They want to come to school for this time. Sitting at desks is not our natural way."**

I was so pleased to hear these comments from her. To provide developmentally and culturally appropriate learning experiences is so integral and imperative in teaching and learning right across the country.



### **Children's' Artwork at Elcho Island**

I was often challenged during the trip by the remoteness and the particular needs of each community. I was also reminded about how diverse our country here in Australia actually is and how more than ever I know that a one size fits all model doesn't apply in Australia.

## **Walker Learning Grades 3-6**

The Walker Learning Approach was developed in the mid 1990's for the first three years of school, (the early years). It has a strong emphasis upon engaging children through opportunities for individualised learning, self expression, exploration and creativity that also integrates many aspects of literacy, numeracy, the arts, science and other key learning areas. In the early years this is achieved through a mix of projects, investigations and directed play experiences. Empirical research shows comprehensively that this approach leads to improved oral language, well being, literacy and numeracy and engagement (particularly in boys).

The success of the approach in the early years has led to the development of the Walker Learning Approach (3-6) where the key principles of active, authentic and individualised engagement and learning can be continued into the middle and upper primary years. The extension of Walker Learning into the upper years of primary ensures a seamless and consistent philosophy and pedagogy across all years of the school.

Kathy Walker, the designer of the Walker Learning Approach has worked with teachers for the past 9 years to develop and implement this approach into older cohorts without compromising the need for a wider subject brief and increased learning outcome expectations from state and territory frameworks.

They key issues that face middle and upper primary teachers include, how to:

- Engage students in meaningful rather than tokenistic ways?
- Help students develop some responsible decision making and independence as well as inter-dependence in their learning?
- Motivate students in this age group to self motivate and take some responsibility for their own learning and behaviour?
- Cover the content and issues expected from governments in ways that are relevant and meaningful and useful to students?

Many educators have grappled with these key issues for many decades.

What research highlights as being most conducive to student engagement includes:

- Students are more likely to engage and find learning meaningful if they have some ownership of their learning and the learning environment
- Students require some opportunities for their learning to be individualised, thus ensuring that the particular strengths, needs and interests of each student are best met
- Students require opportunities to contribute to their learning, to ideas and to offer suggestions

In recent years, terms such as differentiated curriculum and individualised learning, all seek to support and provide students with the above mentioned opportunities.



**Life is often like a puzzle. We have to keep on keeping on, placing bits where they best fit, having the ability to move, to change and to reorganise in order to complete tasks and solve problems.**

The Walker Learning Approach (3-6) provides a set of guiding principles and practices that have been tested, trialled, evaluated and researched in the upper level classroom.

The Walker Learning Approach (3-6) reflects a system of practices that continue to instruct, provide explicit instruction and direction but also reflect a set of additional strategies and practices for the teacher and students. This is achieved through a mix of:

- **Student project work (Education Research Project)**
- **Clinic groups**
- **Explicit teaching**

## Associate Profile: Marina Portelli

Hello, my name is Marina Portelli. Since the beginning of this year I have been working as an associate with Early Life Foundations. I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity to work with Kathy, Shona and the associates and I have been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm, interest and commitment of staff at schools that I have been mentoring in implementing the Walker Learning Approach.



I have been teaching at schools in the western suburbs for many years, with most of my experience being a Grade Prep classroom teacher and the last few years as a team leader.

For several years I have been using the Walker Learning Approach in my classroom. It has been such a pleasure to observe the children during their investigations. They are so happy!

Through the Walker Learning Approach I have been able to learn each child's interests and needs thoroughly and I have been able to engage them in their learning using this knowledge. Teaching using the Walker Learning Approach has been a sheer joy and it is with great pride and excitement that I now enter my role as a mentor.

Over the past 12 months we have had many visitors come to our school and I have been privileged to be able to model tuning in and reflection times for them. Their excitement about the Walker Learning Approach is invigorating and the children really enjoyed having lots of other teachers in their classroom too.

This year I have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to accompany Kathy to visit some schools in the Northern Territory, including schools in remote communities. It was an amazing experience. I look forward to future learning opportunities and also my continued work with a variety of schools, including country, metropolitan and independent schools.

## Newsletter Rap!

### Embracing Play in K-2 Today!

Recently 500 teachers from Victoria, Canberra, NSW, Tasmania and the NT attended this year's K-2 Conference "Embracing Play K-2 Today".

The conference audience were treated to two international (Carol Copple and David Elkind) and one local (Kathy Walker) keynote speakers. All three keynote speakers are renowned international experts in early childhood and early years education. They all are well respected authors, researchers and teachers in the field. All three have committed to making a contribution to this newsletter: David Elkind was published in No.3 2009, Kathy Walker in this edition and Carol Copple's contribution will appear in the next edition.

The conference was an outstanding success; with high quality speakers running 7 concurrent sessions over two time slots in the afternoon.

### Meet and Greet Carol Copple

The "Meet and Greet Carol Copple" morning was for leadership, teachers and other key organizations interested in and/or implementing the Walker Learning Approach (Australian Development Curriculum). The fifty who attended included principals and leadership from a range of schools and included representation from the ACT and Northern Territory.



**Meet and Greet Carol Copple: Kathy Walker (ELF), Carol Copple (USA), Gayle Chamberlain (NT), Karen Modoo (NT), Hettie Duke (NT) and Shona Bass (ELF)**

### Northern Territory Teacher Accredited

In 2006 I graduated from University of Southern Queensland as a mature age student completing a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood). My first position was Borroloola, a very remote indigenous community in the Northern Territory. At my next position in Katherine the leadership supported me to introduce a play based program within my Year 1/Transition classroom. During this time I was fortunate to attend a three day Early Childhood Workshop called 'Celebration of Best Practice' (Kathy Walker was the guest speaker). I left even more enthusiastic and passionate to further development my play based classroom. My principal offered me the empty

room next door, so we opened up the doors and I had two classrooms to spread out and set up the workstations!

At the end of 2008 I transferred to Nhulunbuy (another remote community), as luck would have it Nhulunbuy had already won a grant to bring Kathy Walker to Nhulunbuy. I was so thrilled to work with Kathy and Shona Bass.....after they left I was constantly on the phone and emailing Kathy and Shona – I am sure I drove them crazy!!!

In June 2009 I was successful in winning a grant to support myself and two other teachers from our school to attend the inaugural four day Walker learning Approach Conference in Melbourne. This was truly amazing to visit schools who were three to four years down the track of implementation. It was also reassuring to know that I was also on the right track of implementation and understanding.

I flew to Darwin in September 2009 to Anula to attend another professional development with Kathy and Shona. This time I attended the extended version and was able to network with other like minded teachers who were on their journey with Walker Learning. Kathy visited Nhulunbuy again in March 2010 when I was successfully accredited in the Walker Learning Approach. I continue to learn and grow from such an amazing educator.

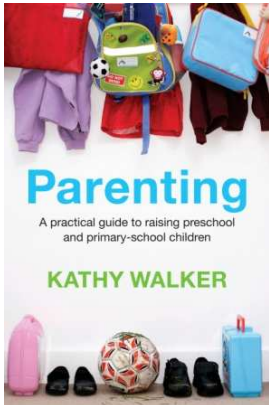


**Gayle Chamberlain receives her award for successfully meeting the criteria for accreditation in the Walker Learning Approach**

A week later I took leave without pay to attend the K-2 Conference in Melbourne, I was delighted and so privileged to meet Carol Copple and shadow Kathy and her associates for the week. This was a very busy, remarkable but fabulous week where I gained so much more insight and knowledge of the Walker Learning Approach.

I am now working in a wonderful team of Year 1 teachers who are implementing the Walker learning Approach. We are enjoying watching the children grow and develop, as they become very independent learners through the project/investigative approach. If there are changes in the program or we are running a little late, the children beg for 'Investigation' time every time.

## New Books!!



Kathy's new book on parenting was launched in February this year and has become an instant success with not only parents and grandparents but also teachers!

"It's a page turner" .....an easy read with lots of ideas and practical strategies that work!

After only 2 months **Parenting** is in its 2<sup>nd</sup> reprint with **6,000** books sold in the 2 months since publication!  
**Congratulations Kathy**

### **"PLAY ON" Walker Learning Approach (grades 3-6)**

**We are very excited about signing the contract (this week!) with ACER for our next book for teachers called "Play On" The Walker learning Approach for Grades 3-6!**

**We are anticipating that Play On will be in the book stores by early next year.**

## Further Reading

**Play Matters. Engaging Children in Learning; The Australian Developmental Curriculum**  
ACER Press Camberwell 2007

Copple C and Bredekamp S  
**Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs.** National Association for the Education of Young Children. USA 2009

Hirsh-Pasek K, Michnick Golinkoff R, Berk LE, Singer DG  
**A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool Presenting the Evidence**  
Oxford University Press , New York 2009

**Baker to Balls: the foundations of the education system**  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/422/42203.htm#n5>

**Christine Blower (2010) Sats tests limit children's education**  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/apr/06/nut-conference-sats-tests-blower>

**Douglas Carswell (9 March 2010):**  
<http://www.talkcarswell.com/show.aspx?id=1329>

Edward Miller and Joan Almon (2009). **Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School.** College Park, Maryland: Alliance for Childhood.

Gestwicki C  
**Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Curriculum and Development in Early Education. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition**  
Thomson Delmar Learning, Clifton Park, NY 2007

**Recent reports and frameworks can be accessed from the "library" on the Walker Learning website**