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Planning for Professional Learning
Gowrie's 'Theory Into Practice'
A New Way Forward
Reflection, Narrative and the EYLF
Embracing Diversity
"Kindness begets kindness"
Starting School for Children
with Disabilities

INSIDE:

Reflections is a quarterly publication by Gowrie Australia for educators and families in Education and Care Services.

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The opinions expressed in Reflections are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of Gowrie Australia. By publishing diverse opinions we aim to encourage critical reflection and motivate practitioners in Early Childhood Education and Care Services to respond. Gowrie Australia's privacy policy precludes the use of children's names. Fictitious names are substituted.

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Cover photo shows:

Elijah using a braille typewriter

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the Autumn issue of *Reflections*. In this issue we celebrate professional learning, reflective practice and diversity.

Staff from Gowrie SA share the thinking and investigations that have informed their projected plans for use of the Long Day Care Professional Development Program funding. They view this one-off funding as a unique and valuable opportunity for higher level learning for educators and staff in the early childhood sector.

In the second featured article, Joanna Cooper and Sabrina Klepp describe the Professional Support Co-ordinator Alliance Self Assessment tool and its value in supporting educators to examine the strengths and identify the gaps in their practice in the context of the Quality Improvement Plan.

In support of high quality education and care practice, Gowrie Australia has developed and launched a program in support of ongoing learning - "Theory into Practice". Contact your local Gowrie centre for more details or view a description of this program at <http://tinyurl.com/theoryintopractice>

Educator, Jessica Home-Kennedy recounts how ongoing studies have inspired her to use the elements of narrative and storytelling to examine her own identity, beliefs and her early childhood practice, and invites readers to join her in this reflective journey.

Elijah was born blind and his story, introduced by early years leader Jenna Kwon Sinkey, will inspire all educators to examine and review their philosophies on inclusion and embracing diversity. In a similar account, parent Marie Littlewood tells the story of how caring, knowledgeable educators have supported her family and given her son Heath an opportunity to lead a fulfilling life.

Emma Pierce, a Project Officer with Early Childhood Intervention, discusses transition to school for children with disabilities and the importance of everyone involved in a child's life working in partnership.

Over the last few months Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has figured prominently in the media. The recent announcements by the Federal Government relating to investment in the education and care sector were welcomed. Two examples of the Government's response to advocacy by the sector, and indeed, the broader community, include funding to continue Universal Access beyond the current period, and the announcement of the Nanny Pilot, to trial services for families for whom mainstream ECEC services are unsuitable.

While any investment in the education and care sector is welcomed, the requirements for the nanny educator to hold only a first aid certificate and working with children registration, without any qualification, is disappointing, particularly given the Government's ongoing commitment to the quality agenda. The research is clear – qualifications matter!

Given that this edition includes several articles focusing on children with additional needs, it is unacceptable to imagine such a child in the care of an individual without the knowledge, experience or skills to provide the appropriate environment and rich experiences to support that child's development. This view is further exacerbated by the educator working in isolation in a home, without the immediate support of a peer professional.

By the time this edition reaches readers, the Federal budget will be known, including the Government's position on the child care subsidy package, the activity test, and other recommendations from the Productivity Commission Report which the Government will adopt.

Regardless of the outcome, it is imperative that all children are central to decision making, and quality is not compromised.

Ros Cornish & Jane Bourne
on behalf of Gowrie Australia.

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Planning for Professional Learning

Lynne Rutherford & Eleanor Scrafton
Children's Program Leaders

Kaye Colmer
CEO, Gowrie SA

As leaders of two integrated early childhood programs our role involves leading a team of 36 educators as well as a further 15 regular relievers. Leadership literature recognises that leaders of services play an important role in supporting educator professional learning (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014).



Our planning for educator professional learning and development considers the individual needs of educators within the context of organisation goals. At the advent of the Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP) funding, we were excited because we could see the funds provided a unique opportunity to undertake deeper level learning at an organisation-wide level, involving educators from both our centres. We also realised this would be a one-off, time-limited opportunity that would not be available in the future. As such, we set out to plan for the most effective and strategic way to use the funding to benefit our service. We have maintained our current professional learning budget and have also set up a separate budget line for the LDCPDP funding, so that we can specifically invest in higher level learning for our educators and staff. We wanted to use the funding to undertake work above and beyond our current professional learning budgets. Research shows the value of collective and collaborative professional learning because it can contribute to educational change and innovation (ibid).

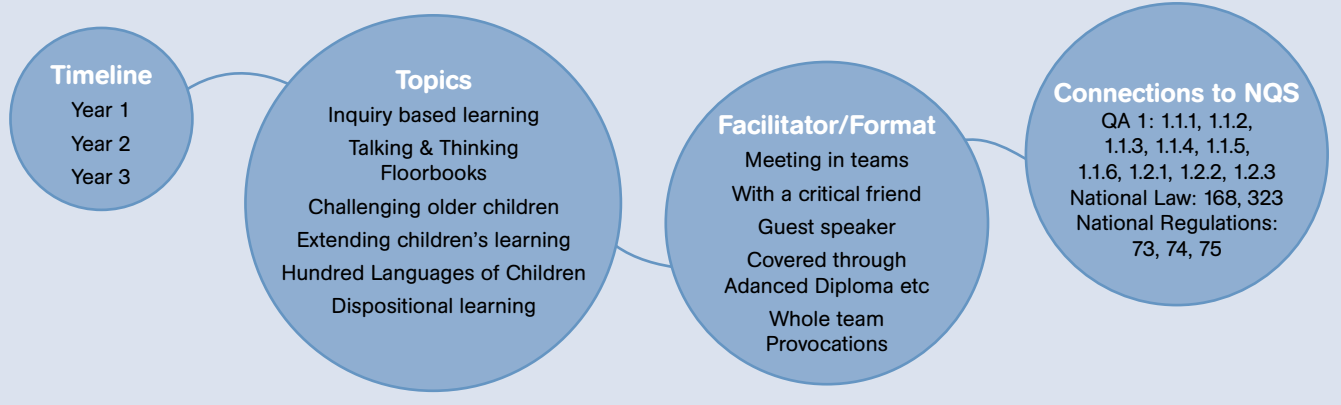
The starting point for our planning was to review educator appraisals and list negotiated individual professional learning needs. We also mapped the ongoing qualification and study needs of educators. We identified what we thought would be open-ended, ongoing professional learning as opposed to discrete sessions. Finally, we reviewed the professional learning priorities arising from our Quality Improvement Plan. This process resulted in a

long list of possible topics. In order to make sense of the many possibilities we then began a process of arranging our list into groups of related topics. As we were engaging in this process, Gowrie SA had developed an 'LDCPDP Planning Tool' which we used as a guide. We cross-referenced our initial list with current and upcoming areas of inquiry and projects for our two centres. This enabled us to centralise all the information we needed to plan for the use of the funds for the next three years. This process was very helpful as we were able to discuss the implications of working on particular topics and our excitement grew as we saw rich possibilities.

An example of how we organised our professional learning priorities is provided in the diagram on the following page. Among the topics on the list were - program documentation, nature play, emergent curriculum, challenging older learners, digital literacy and child voice. On a long list these topics would have been treated as independent topics for particular educators, but once organised as categories of a larger topic of pedagogy and curriculum we could see the relationship between these topics. What we know from research is that one educator going out to external professional development is unlikely to result in changed practice in a team of educators, but if we can gather topics together into a project approach where the learning is shared more broadly, the learning can extend over a longer period of time and be much deeper. In working through our list we ended up with three main areas of focus.



KEY FOCUS: CURRICULUM & PEDAGOGY



In collaboration with senior staff, we developed key major and minor focuses for professional learning across three years (Robinson, 2013). This helped us to work out which areas of professional learning we wanted to invest in each year. The value of organising professional learning into major and minor priorities is that it manages the demands of learning and ensures that work is undertaken in sufficient depth to embed changes in practice. If too many topics are attempted, then learning will not be consolidated and change will not be sustained. How many times do we waste valuable learning by not ensuring that practice changes and systems are in place to support educators to understand that the new practice is the norm rather than reverting back to familiar, comfortable ways of working?

Once we had our framework for the proposed key areas of professional learning, we invited the staff team to critique our work at a whole of organisation staff meeting. This provided opportunities for staff to ask questions, provide critical feedback about our thinking and to fine-tune the plan. In this way all staff were invited to engage in the process. We value opportunities for sustained shared thinking between leaders in different roles, however, for shared thinking, both parties must contribute and ideas must develop out of these. While leaders play a key role in building collaboration and change (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014; Garrock & Morrissey, 2013; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Nupponen, 2006) engagement of educators will only occur through genuine opportunities to participate. Where staff have decision-making capacity, the collaborative work that occurs is strengthened and the ongoing impact of professional learning includes improvement to practices which help to meet organisational goals and outcomes for children (Nupponen, 2006). Team leaders and educational leaders have an essential role within the overarching leadership of the organisation, whereby they bring an intimate knowledge of the needs and values of families and children (Colmer, 2008). We had thoroughly enjoyed the debate and shared thinking that went into the process of developing our plan from the beginning to reaching agreement with the team.

The next stage in our planning encompassed identifying who had the expertise required to provide our identified professional learning topics. This involved researching available resources such as Gowrie Australia's *Reflections*, the PSC, and resources from ECA to source current and relevant authors on our identified topics. We are now finding guest

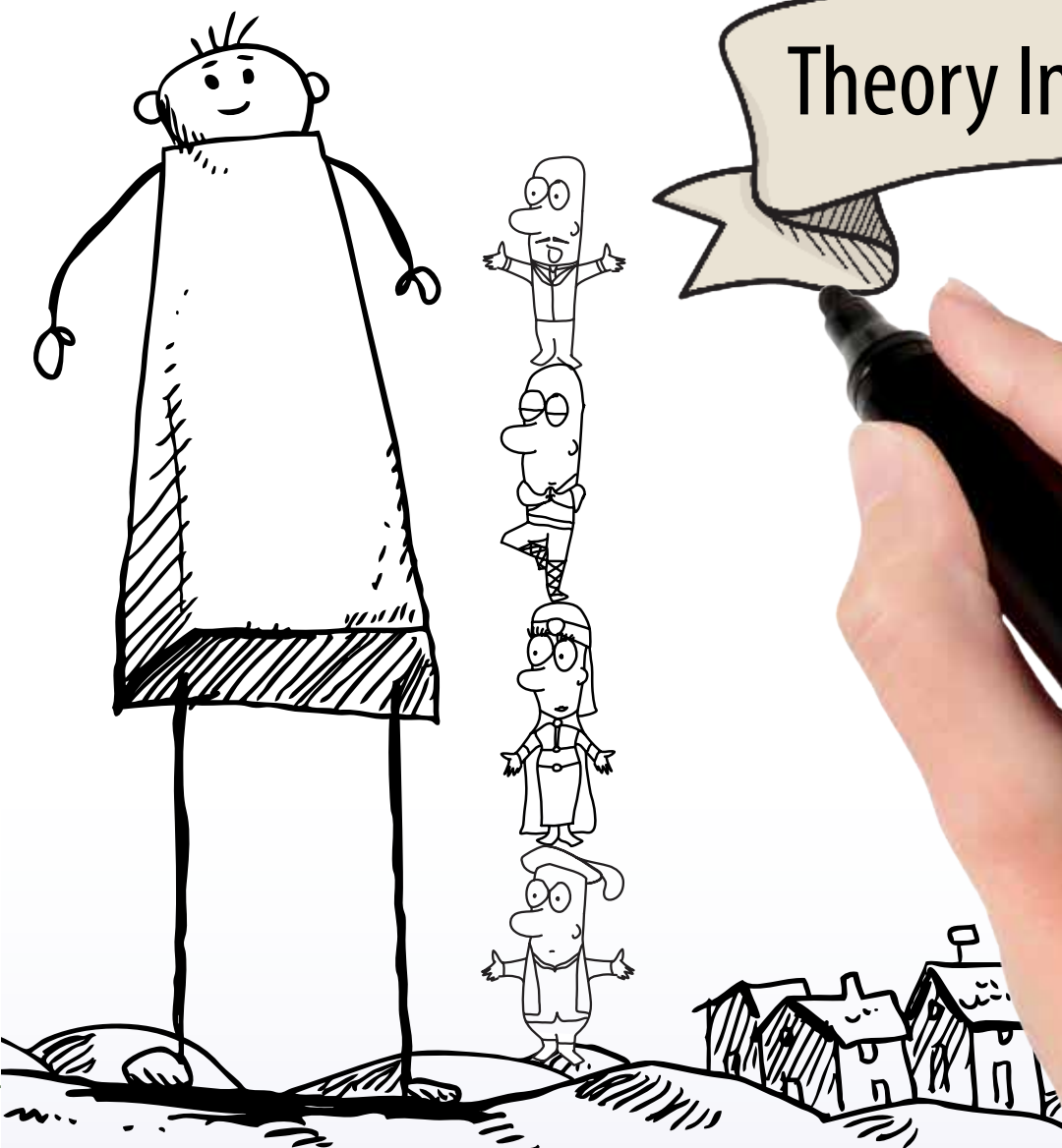
speakers or key academics working in the topic areas, as well as working with the Gowrie Training Centre. We were careful not to overlook our own internal educators and staff and their particular areas of expertise and have ensured that our professional learning will be provided with input from internal and external facilitators.

We recognise our own role as pedagogical leaders in creating a culture which values ongoing professional learning (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Not only do we want our educators to be engaged in connected and purposeful professional learning, we also want to engage as active participants. We have now created a holistic plan for professional learning for the next three years. This learning will connect strongly with our Quality Improvement Plan and our work with children and families. We have also built in review points and kept this plan flexible so that we can change it as the needs of educators, children and families will also change. We are excited that we have this opportunity and are hopeful that there will be long-term benefits of planning for professional learning in this way.

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Theory Into Practice



Ongoing professional learning provides the opportunity for educators to examine and re-examine the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of what they do to support continuous improvement in the provision of high quality education and care programs.

As Gowrie Australia moves into its 75th year, we have taken time to look back on the legacy of reflective, considered pedagogy and practice that has been created over many years. This year Gowrie Australia is launching **Theory Into Practice**, a professional learning partnership between the Lady Gowrie Centres in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

View the YouTube video on **Theory into Practice** at:
<http://tinyurl.com/theoryintopractice>

For further information on this program please contact the Gowrie Professional Learning Team in your state.



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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The performance of educators, coordinators and staff members is evaluated and individual development plans are in place to support performance improvement (7.2.2 ACECQA 2011).

The introduction of the Long Day Care Professional Learning Program (LDCPDP) has drawn focus on the professional learning needs of all early years' educators and the need for services to have a rigorous and robust plan, not only to improve the quality of current practices but to effectively manage professional learning budgets.

It is timely to plan for the professional learning needs within your service by taking a strategic approach to quality improvement both at service level and to support individual educators in their career development. Professional learning, rather than fitting into a matrix of required hours should involve targeting educator's specific learning needs and capitalising on the range of adult learning approaches.

In recognition of the importance of developing a considered plan for professional learning, the Professional Support Coordinator Alliance (PSCA) developed a tool to assist services to determine the future learning needs of their educators by applying a strategic approach to quality improvement.

The **Self-Assessment Tool - Professional Learning Plan** aims to work within the context of the service's existing Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and philosophy and can be applied service-wide or on an individual basis. The tool assists staff teams to reflect on current skills and practices, revealing strengths and identifying gaps.

The tool is divided into quality areas using statements that reflect the National Quality Standard (NQS) and elements requiring honest evaluation by using a numbered rating scale - level 1 (aspiring) to level 4 (confident) - to assess competence in relation to each statement.

After reflecting and rating using the scale, it quickly becomes clear, simply by looking at the levels, where the learning gaps exist. Using the tool in team meetings supports reflective and stimulating discussions and contributions, allowing all voices to be heard. Service needs recognised as a priority can be fed directly into the QIP.

Recent research suggests that overall effectiveness of professional learning is diminished when sessions are chosen on behalf of educators (Barber, Cohrssen and

Church, 2014). To positively impact the learning outcomes of children through educator professional development requires reflection and input from the educators themselves around the topic and the approach to learning.

Working in teams to develop professional learning pathways may include the following considerations:

Context:

How might you link personal and professional goals to the service philosophy and needs identified in the QIP? Ensuring the QIP is available to the whole team will support educators to determine their role in resourcing their own learning.

Availability:

In a climate where a range of professional learning opportunities and associated resources abound, it is important to determine the professional learning approach required to target the learning need and develop strategies to select quality professional learning providers.

Systems:

The systems to support educators to access professional learning are all important. Protocols you have in place may include:

- backfill and time release;
- expectations for sharing knowledge gained;
- embedding changes into practice;
- allowing time to reflect and review.

Professional Learning approaches:

The creation of professional learning communities and networks should be a deliberate goal of the professional learning process (Barber, Cohrssen and Church, 2014).

Adult learners will all respond to different learning approaches and in many circumstances, one size does not fit all. There are numerous professional learning approaches that can fulfil the learning needs of educators as whole teams or as individuals. Traditional modes include single sessions or series, sessions customised for the whole team, and e-learning options. It may not be appropriate to meet a professional learning need the same way every time and certain in-house approaches may better suit the service, time frame and budget.

... a new way forward

Joanne Cooper
Leadership and Learning Consultant

Sabina Klepp
Professional Learning Team
Gowrie Victoria

A culture of lively professional enquiry can be fostered within service teams by:

- using special interests or skills of educators to drive projects;
- using more experienced educators within the service to mentor the less experienced;
- engaging in professional reading;
- establishing a peer to peer review system;
- visiting other services;
- attending professional networks.

Targeted, effective professional learning has the potential to not only impact overall quality improvement within services but raise the status of the profession through deepening the pedagogy of educators. Ultimately, it is children's learning that benefits most.

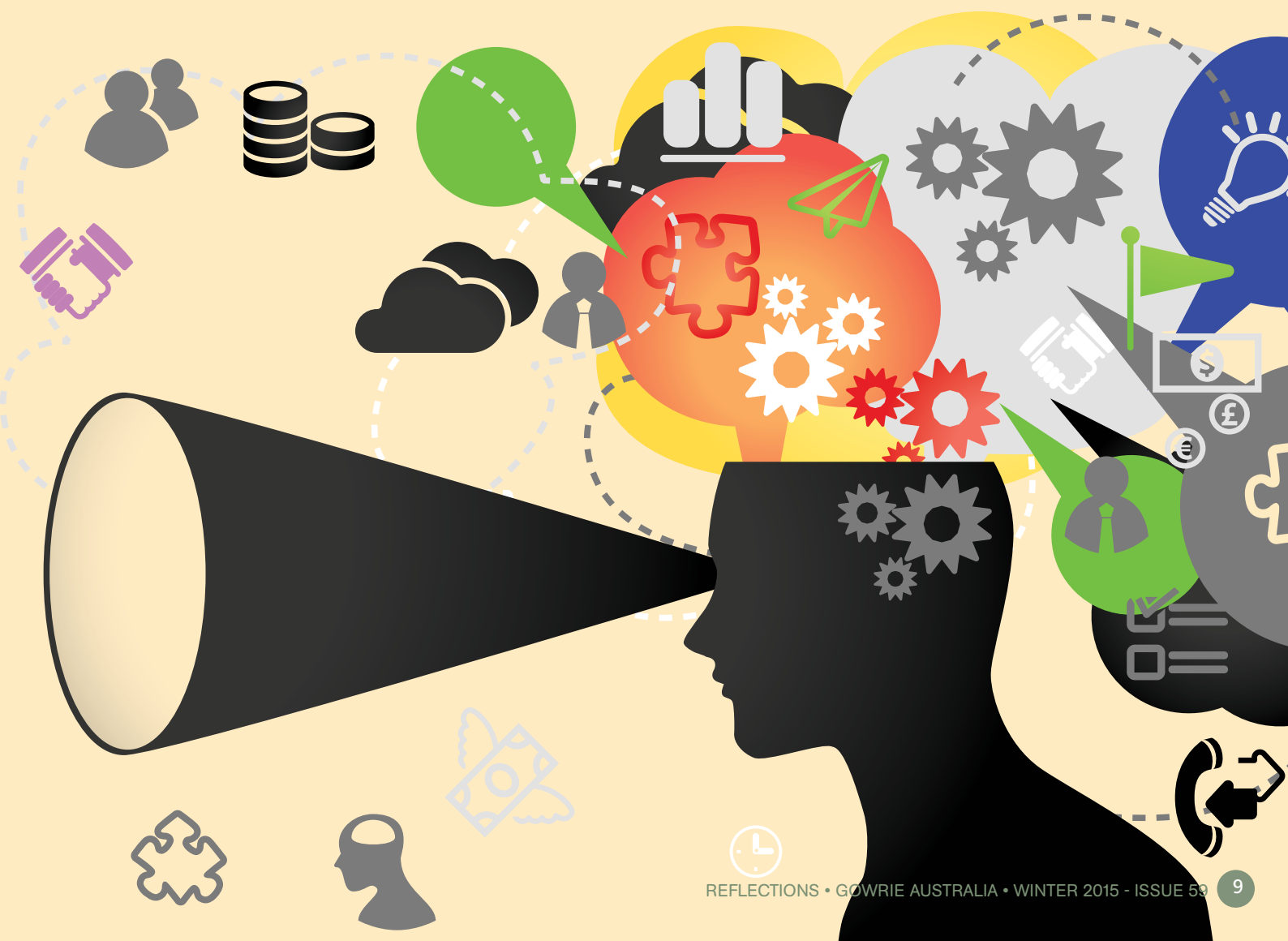
The Self-Assessment Tool - Professional Learning Plan (PSCA) can be found in the IPSP Online Library which can be accessed by visiting www.pscalliance.org.au

The tool is downloadable in Word format and provides live links within the document.

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Understanding Our Sense of 'Being': Reflection, Narrative and The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

Jessica Horne-Kennedy

Tell Me a Story

It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are.

They do their work in silence, invisibly.

They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self.

They become part of you while changing you.

(Okri, 1996 as cited in Perrow, 2008 p.xvi)

"Mum, tell me the story of how I got this bed!" were my three-and-a-half year old daughter's words one evening at bedtime. So the story was told about how we had set off on an adventure, early one morning, to find a 'big bed'. There are many fine details in this story that we shared, like: how we got lost and had to ask a friendly man walking his dog for directions, the vegemite sandwich that was eaten on the way, and the big trees in the park that we walked past. These and other details were included each time the story was retold, and if I forgot one my daughter quickly reminded me of the missing thread. For me, this moment of connection with my daughter highlighted how important stories can be for supporting children's emerging sense of self-identity.

Stories and storytelling are transformative and stories are an important part of who we are. We each hold within us a particular narrative that is unique to our identity: who we are, where we have come from and the direction we are travelling in. Our personal and professional 'story' holds the essence of our 'being' – of who we are as educators working with young children.

In the Rudolf Steiner early childhood environment, storytelling is a fundamental practice (Long-Breipohl, 2012). A story is a bridge from the outer world of social relationships and experiences to the inner world of emotions and feelings (Perrow, 2008: 10). Every day, in the Steiner preschool, a story is told using simple hand-crafted puppets, objects from nature, and coloured cloths made from silk or other natural fibres. Stories are also brought to the children in spontaneous ways like on daily walks when we notice the seasonal changes in the world around us. The emerging blossoms on a previously bare winter tree or the new shoots of broccoli in the vegetable garden are ways a story may be inspired and shared with the children. Stories are seen as a way of bringing children into an awareness of the world around them.

As a mother, educator, and researcher stories are an important part of my beliefs of working with young children. For this reason narrative has informed the design of research I have undertaken as part of my Masters study at the University of New England (Horne-Kennedy, 2014).

Identity and 'Being' as Starting Points for Storytelling

In all stories there is a beginning point, and an important beginning point in my research involved a process of reflection where I asked:

- Who am I in this work as an early childhood educator?
- What does it mean to 'be' an early childhood educator?

As an emerging researcher these questions helped me to position myself in order to understand my role and the influence that this role would have on the study. My 'being' as a researcher and early childhood educator were intertwined and layered with other facets of identity such as my 'being' as a mother, storyteller and Rudolf Steiner educator. When I uncovered these aspects of self I could see clearly the starting point of a personal narrative that wove through the research. By standing in the present (like the moment where my daughter remembered the story of her bed) the experiences from the past cumulate and work together in a process of meaning-making and new understanding. An example here are the experiences I had when returning to work, after a period of parental leave following the birth of my daughter. Before becoming a mother I worked as a Steiner preschool educator in a metropolitan area of Sydney, Australia. When my daughter was nine months old, I began working in a non-Steiner preschool in a rural New Zealand setting. These experiences brought forth many questions for me – questions about forming relationships with children and about personal philosophy. Central to these questions was a process of seeking out my professional identity. This identity was embedded in the mixture of contrasts that described the specific time and place I was experiencing.

The way that I had worked to enact my beliefs and philosophy as a Rudolf Steiner educator felt different to the way that I worked in the non-Steiner setting. This feeling of difference led me to ask new questions about my practice and ways of working with children. I questioned why my interpretation of the Steiner philosophy was at times different to the interpretations of my colleagues who worked with the same philosophy.

Philosophy is a huge component of early childhood practice and to begin my Masters investigation of this, I needed a map - for guidance. The 'map' I chose came in the form of an instrumental case study. This form of case study focuses on deepening one's understanding about a specific issue by gathering information about the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). How our personal beliefs and philosophy impact on our work with children and families was the specific issue that this case was intending to investigate.

The map of this professional issue about philosophy began to be sketched out. At the heart of this map were two questions and from these a search of literature was undertaken. This initial literature search highlighted three key areas: Theories of Attachment; Belonging; and Personal Philosophy and the EYLF. Two of the areas that spoke to identity in the study were 'Belonging' and 'Personal Philosophy and the EYLF'. These two areas while separate, were also very close in their relationship. In the following part of this paper these two themes will be outlined and discussed.

Belonging, Personal Philosophy and the Early Years Learning Framework

Thinking about 'Belonging' led to reflection about my 'Being' as a Steiner educator. In this state of 'being' I hold a specific picture of childhood that ultimately influences how I interact with children. This reflection has brought me to questions about philosophy, especially how an educator's beliefs and personal philosophy impact on the actions of working with children and families. The concept of belonging spoke to the process of exploring identity through critical reflection and this understanding arose through reflecting on the following statement by McMullen (2010, p.10):

I often urge my students to welcome opportunities in which they face some cognitive dissonance and are forced to question or revisit their long-held beliefs. I tell them that it is good to shake up old, dusty assumptions about how things are supposed to be. Yet when faced with such a challenge myself, I almost ran from it. I came to value this experience precisely because it exposed me to people with beliefs and practices in sharp contrast to the field's widely accepted and my own deeply held understanding of best practices. It helped me reflect on and confirm what I believe in a way I never had before.

This statement has been highly important to me throughout the process of undertaking the research, as it has emphasised how much can be learned from being open to the views of fellow colleagues. Being open to difference is a starting point for deepening early childhood practice, and supporting this belief was the following statement that emerged in the literature.

Valuing difference means difference is recognised and talked about. Excitement is shared with others about difference, and difference is enjoyed. There is no longer a need to be embarrassed with difference. Difference can be talked about openly and questions asked. There no longer needs to be a pretence that we are experts. It is appropriate to ask questions; to not know but be willing to find out.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* suggests that educators ask questions and reflect on their practices of working with children and families (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, 2010). So I did this, and asked the following questions in relation to the background literature of this research:

- How do we define our personal philosophy within the context we work in?
- What is outside the boundary of practice?

On the map of this research these questions led me to interview four educators about their beliefs and practices of building relationships with children. While working with the participants, a process of personal reflection occurred that enabled me to look differently at my philosophy and the way I worked with children and families.

A strong aspect of this process was the action of listening to the stories that the participants told and 'co-crafting' a narrative that gave insight into their practice. Writing the stories about the essence or 'being' of each educator was a highly reflective process and some specific questions guided this. When I wrote each educator's story, I asked:

- Who is this person?
- What beliefs are held about relating to children?
- What perceptions are held about Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of education?
- How does this person perceive the EYLF?

While these questions strongly informed each participant's story, they also wove through the narrative of personal reflection that I documented throughout this research. Giving space to listen to this thread has been a personal outcome of this research.

Tracing a Self-Narrative – Using a Map Metaphor for Reflection

In this research, the starting point for writing the participant's story came from sharing a conversation through an interview. However, in this paper I am proposing a different starting point: a map where educators can begin to craft their own story to use as a tool for critical reflection. Reading maps can be complex as they hold different signposts and landmarks. An important place to begin a process of reflection, is by identifying the signposts that are on our individual 'journey map'.

Signposts can be envisioned as memories, thoughts, feelings and encounters or meetings with other adults and children. A signpost could also take the form of a place you have visited or a book read. These signposts are important to recognise because they tell us how we arrived at a particular point in our journey as an educator.

Tracing one's journey and story can help to bring an awareness of how we see ourselves in our work with children. A practical way of tracing these journey points is to draw a picture of a map that represents our 'being' – who we are as an early childhood educator.

Steps in Mapping out a Journey

What signposts can be seen on the map of our personal journey as an educator?

1. Remembering

The first step is to draw on a mental image – a memory. What is the memory that comes into your consciousness if someone were to ask:

'What made you first decide to work with young children? Was it a moment you shared with a child? Or a personal need or interest?'

2. Drawing

With this memory in your mind's eye, take a large piece of paper (or a page in a journal) and draw marks, shapes, or patterns to represent these signposts. Then describe these signposts with words. These are the beginnings of a map that marks a specific journey - unique to the individual making it.

3. Listening

Tuning into the voice of intuition is crucial to any reflective journey. When we allow time and space for reflection, our personal narrative becomes a place where we can discover and uncover aspects of our identity that surprise or even unbalance us, but that ultimately help us to critically examine who we are in what we do in our practice (Mellon, 2000).

In the action of listening to another person, MacNaughton and Williams (1998) suggest that we move beyond merely hearing the other person to a place where listening becomes a tool to actively construct meaning from the multiple signals that the speaker is sending, both verbal and non verbal. Storytelling can be seen as an exchange for this form of meaning-making because through it we tune into another human being and form meaning about their story. When we tune into another person through active listening the content of our own narrative changes and deepens, thus enabling new meaning.

Sharing in a process of reflection with another educator can help us to see outside the frame of our individual 'being' to co-construct new meaning and perspective about our practice. From this perspective the connections (highlighted on our map) that we have with others create important patterns and movements in our personal narrative.

Using Story as a Tool for Practice

Shields, Novak, Marshall, and Guiney Yallop (2011, p.63) discuss how life experience is fundamental to self-story because it works to connect the past and present to help us find "...the roots of our present-day perspectives and actions that we can incorporate into our everyday meaning-making...".

In this research, I explored my life experiences and through these wrote the beginning of my narrative. Then, through listening to the narrative of others, I was shown a powerful way to process and understand my practice as an early childhood educator.

The intention of this paper has been to share my process of using story and to show how it can be a potential tool for critical reflection in early childhood practice. As a starting point for critical reflection, mapping our personal narrative can highlight particular patterns of practice. Mapping can help educators to trace the origin of their beliefs and so bring an awareness of how personal philosophy and one's sense of 'being' influences the practices we use when working with children and families. By tracing the origins of our identity we can understand who we are in our role as educator. When we share our story with another educator, new connections are formed which ultimately bring forth new possibilities for professional development in practice.

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EMBRACING DIVERSITY

Jenna Kwon Sin Koy

Early Years Leader

Gowrie Victoria, Docklands

Inclusion in the early years is the educational practice that supports children to play, learn and interact together. It advocates for an environment where all children, regardless of their background or abilities, are valued and given access to equal opportunities.

At Gowrie Victoria we, as educators, work at providing a program that reflects the cultural and social needs of all our children and families. We encourage all children to engage in play and learning experiences and we adapt our language and gestures according to children's needs. Educators promote a sense of belonging for children and families with specific practices, for example, children's family photos are displayed in the children's lockers, on several photo walls and on bed baskets. The children regularly go to the photo walls as a way of feeling close to their families during the day. Where children have little or no vision, or some other impairment, we may also provide familiar sounds, music or objects for children to connect with.

We view children as skilled learners and have high expectations of all children. With families, we set goals at the beginning of the year and we review and reset new

goals throughout the year. We also work closely with early intervention organisations such as Vision Australia and Noah's Ark to ensure the best outcomes for children and families. Through close partnerships children's abilities are recognised and celebrated.

Inclusion allows children to learn about the world around them and to learn from each other. We support families in reassuring them that we are here to assist and help their children to participate in all experiences and develop relationships, friendships and to further develop their skills. We have ongoing communication with all families on a day-to-day basis about each child's day, and we embrace together all the learning that occurs.

Following is a beautiful story written by parents, Josette and David whose son Elijah is blind. They describe their very special journey as parents.

Story by Josette and David Agius

'Inclusion' in the childcare setting, from our perspective, is very important and vital to a child's growth. For us, this is especially true, as our son Elijah, who is two-and-half years old, was born blind. Elijah started his attendance at Gowrie when he was one year old, and like many children, it took time for him to settle in and become comfortable with the idea of parting with Mummy and Daddy while they went to work. Introducing Elijah to his new surroundings, carers, children, parents, objects and sounds, was a lot for him to absorb. It's been a long transition, and taken a while for Elijah to adapt to the idea of coming to Gowrie.

From the early days of his attendance, we spent many drop-offs with tears, tantrums, and unease. However, staff took extra steps to make the transition more fun by including a trampoline or a walker into the room for Elijah to play with. This was a positive thing because Elijah had these things at home and it created a sense of familiarity for him. I even recall Sarah, the room leader, wearing the same perfume on the days that Elijah was there to ensure he had the same sense of smell, or a necklace for him to feel which created that feeling of familiarity and consistency. He adapted really well to this and it assisted in the drop offs and settling him.

The decision to send him to Gowrie has been a very positive move for us. Seeing Elijah grow, learn, interact and partake in activities with all his friends and carers in his room has been beneficial for him and very rewarding for us as parents. To us, inclusion in the childcare setting means involvement, togetherness and, equally, opportunities to participate. Elijah's way of learning differs to that of sighted children, however this does not mean he is excluded from activities done by other children at the centre. Perhaps some things are altered to address his special needs, but he is included in the same setting, has the same opportunity to participate and be involved. We, as parents, have a role to play in giving opportunities to our children. This is where Gowrie is also assisting with our process, with giving him the opportunities to feel part of a team, whether it's from helping collect lunch from the kitchen, going out on excursions into the community, or having his *Feelix* books* read with his friends. He too, is learning many values being with his peers, and certainly learning additional things to what we could teach him at home. Being a part of the room and team, he is included and encouraged to make choices in his daily activities, whilst learning and playing in a safe, loving environment. Going on excursions, playing and singing with his friends, having routine meal times with others – these activities give him social skills that he'll be able to use throughout his life. We believe that presenting opportunity allows him to be the best person he can be.

Gowrie plays an integral role in Elijah's life. The two days he is there, he knows that there is routine, which includes process, but also choices. From getting dressed, having breakfast, driving into the city on the freeway, to arriving in the lifts and saying hello to Stacey at the desk, to placing his

own bag and cane in his space and then saying hello to his friends – he is being included at every step of the way and I find he is much more responsive when he is given the opportunity to make a choice, then follow through with action on that choice.

The centre also acknowledges who is present in Elijah's life. For example, Vision Australia who is a major part of our life are involved with making suggestions on how we can improve Elijah's experience at home or even at Gowrie and the enthusiasm that is adopted within the room is encouraging. Gowrie's way of understanding the importance of this has assisted our journey as parents too in an enormous way, especially when we are working together towards a milestone in Elijah's development. It's great that Gowrie also encourages and welcomes extended members of the family to participate. We are very lucky to have the support of Elijah's grandparents, who occasionally assist with drop offs and pickups.

Our main decision to send Elijah to Gowrie was because we saw this as an opportunity for him to learn, interact, socialise and give him the feeling of being included in the community. We think that the earlier he adapts to this, the better his journey is going to be, and we feel this will give him the confidence to explore whatever he wishes to. With this attitude, we believe our little boy will be able to achieve anything, despite his blindness.

It brings us so much joy as parents, especially with a special needs child, to hear that our son has partaken in an activity with his friends at Gowrie. All parents want their kids to excel and find their way in life, for us, knowing our son is blind, the worry of him being alone haunts us. But knowing that Elijah attends a place, other than his home, where he is nurtured and treated equally makes me smile, especially on days where he talks about his friends at Gowrie and how "At Gowrie we sang" and "At Gowrie I jumped". We have a very quick drop off with a hug, kiss and a "Bye Mummy, Bye Daddy" and we, as parents, are much more relaxed and confident, knowing we are walking out of the door and he is happy.

Sources:

<http://education.gov.au/inclusion-and-professional-support-program>
<http://www.inclusionnow.org.au/>
<https://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/221/2.html>

** The 'Feelix Library' for children is Vision Australia's response to the need for very young children who are blind or have low vision, to have access to stories like their sighted peers. Well-known picture books are annotated with Braille so that parents, carers, siblings and the child's peers can learn about Braille and share wonderful stories together.*

“KINDNESS BEGETS KINDNESS”

Marie Littlewood
Parent



I was attending the ‘Circle of Security’ parenting course at Gowrie SA around the time my son, then aged two, was suspected of having an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

At the time, there were so many things to think about. Was it the right time to commence child care and return to work? Was it the right centre to be placing my son? What was this Primary Care relationship based practice all about? And more alarmingly, the growing concern that there was something very different about our child and his development.

A comforting answer came one evening as I was discussing the possibility of Autism with the teacher at the Circle of Security group. Her response went something like, *“If Heath does have Autism, we can help you with that, we can help you make decisions surrounding his care and support you however we can”*. I could’ve wept. I think I did. Kindness, and its wonderful expansive quality seems to permeate the Gowrie philosophy.

As it transpired, Heath did receive a diagnosis of Autism. We did choose Gowrie SA as his child care and preschool setting and I didn’t ever return to work in the capacity that I once did as it seemed we were all on a new path of learning and discovery.

There were vast benefits in having the combination of Long Day Care and Preschool in one setting. The staff and grounds were familiar for Heath and with our changing needs there was greater flexibility with working hours. A preschool session could extend or be preceded by a child

care session so pick up times were less rigid than at some preschool only settings. If a family crisis came up (sadly there were 3 deaths in our family during Heath’s time at Gowrie) then Heath was able to attend on extra days as a child care booking, thus reducing the stress of change and avoiding unfamiliar carers. We were particularly grateful for this.

The relationship with the Primary Care staff member felt beneficial for all of us. There was someone who understood our child and could act as a conveyor of information to other staff members as well as a welcoming figure for allied health professionals who came to visit Heath at the centre for Speech Therapy or Occupational Therapy.

The Primary Carer could also be present at multi-disciplinary team meetings to advocate and to provide information regarding behaviours and successful strategies around those behaviours. These group meetings were a great opportunity to exchange knowledge and assist Heath to build on positive experiences. The meetings usually consisted of an educator from Autism SA, the Director of Children’s Services, the regional Disability Coordinator from the Education Department, the Primary Care staff member and myself.

The enormous outdoor play area was fantastic. Heath could enjoy physical play in the garden prior to group time, which made quiet sitting in a circle possible. If things felt a bit noisy and intense inside, there was always the expansive space and/or solitude of the natural environment outside.

The outdoor play area enabled staff to accommodate Heath’s sensory needs in a natural manner and in so doing build on his ability to participate at group time and other play activities.



The decision to maintain a natural environment inside, in the wake of primary coloured decor at other centres, created a peaceful and homelike environment that reduced the likelihood of overstimulation.

Heath received extra support at preschool and child care. This was presented to me as a possibility by the staff and it felt like a gift, one less thing I had to research for myself. Of course this provided Heath with the wonderful benefit of having someone to assist him in regulating his emotions and providing scaffolding around play with others.

Early discussions around transition to school began in the year before Heath started school. Heath attended the Early Learning Centre (ELC) at the feeder school for one morning a week in Terms 3 and 4 to enable him to become familiar with the geography of the school and meet some other children who might be in his class in the following year. These discussions were initiated by the Gowrie team, in conjunction with the transition educator from Autism SA. It was helpful for Heath to attend the new learning environment while maintaining the security of his association with Gowrie. He was just beginning to form some friendships so it didn't feel like a good idea to uproot him altogether and start anew. It was also helpful for me to get to know the new staff whilst still being supported by familiar staff.

In addition to the usual two transition visits to school, Heath visited his future classroom with his support worker from the feeder ELC and observed the children. A book about his new classroom and pictures of the school environment were produced so that we could read it together and talk about things such as where the toilets were, where to seek

help at lunch time, safe boundaries, etc. Visits were also made during recess time to show Heath what sorts of activities he could do during these periods of free play.

Extra meetings were required to establish what the school expectations were and how we could assist Heath and the teaching staff to meet those expectations. Alternative visuals and fidget supports were provided that were aligned with the school's Steiner philosophy of natural materials. Other aspects of Steiner methods were discussed, for example, the tradition of oral story telling and metaphor and whether this was appropriate for a child on the spectrum.

Time was made available for Heath to explore and become familiar with the new environment when it was not in use.

Staff from Gowrie attended these meetings to advocate and to provide information about Heath and share strategies that had been successful in the preschool setting. Recorded examples of supporting Heath through some strong feelings were supplied to the future teaching staff.

Throughout our experiences at Gowrie and in the last 8 weeks that Heath has successfully commenced school, I have taken my lead from that initial conversation and tried to foster an attitude of "how can we support each other"? It is beneficial in so many ways. It paves the way to mutual understanding whilst acknowledging that the situation has challenges, but they can be faced together and without judgement.



SUPPORTING TRANSITION TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

What makes transition to school successful for children with disabilities?

In the past there was a greater emphasis on “school readiness skills” and preparing each child for school. More recent thinking about the transition to school recognises that *school readiness does not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves* (Kagan & Rigby, 2003, p.13).

The most supportive and smooth transition to school process happens when a community-wide or ecological approach is used, where everyone involved in a child’s life work in partnership (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

A source of practical information for families and professionals is the Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW) Transition to School Resource website www.transitiontoschoolresource.org.au. A specific “ready services” section of the resource is linked with the EYLF and Quality Standards to support early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in their roles, and the “ready communities” section of the website provides strategies and information relevant to Out of School Hours Care professionals.

While the Transition to School Resource has been developed in response to a literature review and extensive consultation with families, service providers and school staff across NSW, the majority of information in the resource is applicable nationally.

How can Early Childhood Education and Care professionals support a child’s transition to school?

As an ECE professional, you:

- play an essential role in the transition to school for young children with disabilities;
- develop trusting relationships with children and their families over a number of years, often during the critical early childhood period when families are adapting and adjusting to their child’s disability;
- have strong knowledge and experience of child development and the types of skills and behaviours which impact on children’s functioning and independence;
- observe and relate to young children in a group context, and are uniquely placed to support children with developing social interaction skills, practicing and generalising self-help skills and learning to regulate emotions and behaviour.

Starting school is a major milestone for all children and families. When a child has a disability, transition to school requires additional time, planning and collaboration. Early childhood education and care and out of school hours care professionals can play important roles in the transition to school process for children with additional needs.

SITATION TO SCHOOL H DISABILITIES

Emma Pierce
Project Officer
Early Childhood Intervention
Australia (NSW Chapter)

How can you, as an ECEC professional, support families with transition to school?

- Start conversations with families about transition to school by the child's 3rd birthday.
- Identify how the ECEC setting can support any goals in a child's Individualised Family Service Plan (IFSP) in relation to transition to school.
- Link the family with accurate information to support their child's transition to school.
- Offer to be part of the family's transition support team.
- Attend transition to school meetings if asked by the family.
- Support effective communication between all members of the child's transition to school team.
- Invite school staff to meet and observe the child in their ECEC setting prior to the end of the school year.



“The strong collaboration with different agencies is essential. We work very closely on family priorities with our local Early Childhood Intervention service and we also aim to develop connections with local schools.”

Preschool Director.

Here are some practice examples which may prompt reflections on your own experiences:

Jamie has always arrived at child care needing lots of emotional support and comfort. He seemed anxious about what was happening next and would often stand at the gate watching for his Dad. Staff worked with Jamie's family and the Inclusion Support Facilitator to determine what might help make this transition smoother for Jamie. The centre have now set up a photo board to show the main routine events in a day at our centre. Some kids call this the “day clock” and many other children refer to it at various times throughout the day.

The previous example highlights inclusive practices which support all children's participation in an early childhood setting. By supporting transitions within the children's day using visual supports, this can help increase confidence and decrease anxiety for children and their families. Building on this success, these same strategies can be shared with the new school and adapted to support a child's transition to school.

Jai has been attending the same long day care centre since he was 6 months old. His development across all areas has been delayed since birth. He is about to turn 4 and his parents have expressed concerns about how he will cope with starting school next year. The family are considering moving him to a preschool as they are worried that he isn't being prepared for school enough. Centre staff have noticed that Jai has made some positive gains in increasing his independence and interacting with other children and is now participating in all aspects of the programme with limited support from staff.

Staff identify that they need to find a way to share the ways that their programme helps prepare children for school, the progress that Jai is making and how this will assist Jai when he starts school, to help the family make an informed decision about whether or not to move him to another centre.

This example emphasises some common questions asked by families about child care placements for their child in the lead up to school. The importance of the relationship and communication between staff and families is highlighted here. There is a need to share priorities, goals, and progress and to ensure that families can access the information they want and need about their child's learning and development in ECEC in order to support families with their goals for their child as they approach school starting age.

The following link offers additional practice examples which relate to specific relevant Quality Standards <http://www.ecia-nsw.org.au/tts-content/eylf-and-qf/the-quality-framework-and-the-transition-to-school>.

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National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE



Spring 2014



Summer 2014



Autumn 2015

40th ECTA Annual Conference 2015

Lighten Up! Humour is FUNdamental
27 June 2015
Sheldon College, Sheldon, QLD
<http://www.ecta.org.au/default.asp>

Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange 2015 Biennial Conference

Landscapes of Imagination
2 – 5 July 2015
Melbourne Convention Centre, VIC
<http://www.reaie.org.au/2015-biennial-conference>

ECMS Early Childhood Conference

Beyond Tomorrow: Reaching out in early childhood
6 August 2015
The Melbourne Convention Centre, Melbourne, VIC
<http://www.ecms.org.au/2015-beyond-tomorrow-early-childhood-conference>

2015 WA Early Childhood Education & Care Conference

1 Voyage: Exploring Excellence in Early Childhood Education & Care
7 – 8 August 2015
Crown Perth, WA
<http://waecec.com/>

6th SNAICC National Conference

Community Voices: Sharing Knowledge and Practice
15 – 17 September 2015
Perth, WA
<http://www.snaicc.org.au/conference/index.html>

Gowrie NSW & Macquarie University

2015 Infant and Toddler Conference
Practice, Pedagogy and Research
25 - 26 September 2015
NSW Teacher's Federation Conference Centre, Sydney, NSW
<http://www.infantsandtoddlers2015.com/>

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Promoting and supporting quality
services for all children.

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Nationally committed to
optimal outcomes for
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