

reflections

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In this edition of *Reflections* a number of articles again make reference to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

The page 10 article on cultural competence highlights the importance of educators having more than an awareness of cultural differences while the "ECEC Workforce Best Practice and Innovation Project" article shares a journey of discovery and sharing. It was pleasing to read of the commitment to building genuine relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services and how 'belonging' and the EYLF was used for engagement and ideas. To learn that this Project will now be delivered more widely in regions of NSW and ACT reflects the value of extending one-off projects more broadly.

Educators participating in professional learning are well positioned to contribute to ongoing improvement in their own practice and within their workplace, as illustrated in Annette Barwick's page 5 article on sustainable practice – and again linking strongly to the EYLF principles, practices and outcomes.

This edition also features a report on the recent Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Conference conducted in Alice Springs, along with a kindergarten sharing their participation in the KidsMatter Early Childhood Pilot. The child care union, the LHMU provided an update on the Modern Award and again raised major issues of professional wages and conditions for early childhood educators.

As 2010 comes to an end, this brings to a close the 70th anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the Gowrie Centres. The page 4 article shares the special event hosted by the Governor General, Her Excellency Quentin Bryce at Government House in Canberra.

It was ironic that this day immediately followed the Federal election and, at the time, the result was unknown. Of course, since then the outcome eventually became clear, with Prime Minister Julia Gillard returned to office – but not without some drama! In terms of early childhood education and care, the announcement of two Ministers caused some angst and confusion within the sector. The potential implications of two portfolios sharing responsibility for early education and care in the new Government appeared to result in the separation of education and care. This decision was seen to be inconsistent with the early childhood reform agenda and indeed the decision by COAG on 7th December, 2009.

Despite these concerns, at the recent Early Childhood Australia Conference in Adelaide, both Minister Ellis and Minister Garrett reassured the sector that the two portfolios would not be divisive for the sector, nor a retreat from the agenda of work that the Government commenced in its previous term.

Whilst the sector is not yet clear about the areas of responsibility, or the delineation of the broad portfolios, both Ministers have committed to working in collaboration to drive a coherent program of work.

Regardless of the allocation of areas of responsibility, young children, their families and those who work on a daily basis to provide education and care during the most formative years must be central to all decision making processes in order to support best outcomes.

Ros Cornish

CEO, Lady Gowrie Tasmania

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| | |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Ruth Callaghan | – Lady Gowrie Child Centre NSW |
| Gilda Howard | – Gowrie Victoria |
| Jane Bourne | – The Gowrie (QLD) Inc |
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Gowrie CEOs Celebrate 70 years

Afternoon Tea at Government House, Canberra

Author:
Ros Cornish

Convenor, Gowrie Australia

As shared in the winter edition of *Reflections*, 2010 marks 70 years of continuous services to children, families and early childhood professionals by the Gowrie Centres around Australia.

To mark the occasion, the Governor General, Her Excellency Quentin Bryce hosted an afternoon tea at Government House in Canberra. This event was attended by many friends of Gowrie – representatives from peak organisations and government, along with many colleagues from the early childhood sector. Also, past and present Board Directors and staff attended, and were presented to the Governor General and her husband Michael Bryce.

It was fitting that the event was hosted by the Governor General, as Her Excellency has a strong link to the early childhood sector. She was the inaugural Chief Executive of the National Childcare Accreditation Council, the agency responsible for implementing the quality assurance system for child care in Australia. The Gowrie celebration enabled her to connect with many former colleagues, making it a warm and friendly function. In addition, the Governor General has demonstrated a real commitment to supporting children and their families, particularly those who are vulnerable, to have the best opportunities in life.

The venue also has particular significance for the Gowrie Centres. Not only were the centres named for Lady Gowrie, the wife of the 1940 Governor General, but also Government House has a memorial garden in memory of the son of the Governor and Lady Gowrie, Patrick. Patrick Gowrie was killed in action during World War II and the private and moving memorial bears the name - The Gowrie Garden.

The Governor General welcomed attendees with a warm and moving address, acknowledging the significant contribution of the Gowrie Centres to the thousands of children, families and early childhood professionals throughout Australia. She was extremely generous in her remarks and clearly appreciated the importance of this milestone.

On behalf of the individual Gowrie Centres, the respective Board Directors, Chief Executive Officers and staff, I sincerely thank all those who attended this event for sharing this milestone with us. Also, I extend our appreciation to their Excellencies, the Hon. Quentin Bryce and Michael Bryce, for so warmly welcoming guests and hosting the function. What a wonderful celebration and coming together of so many like minded, committed individuals.



The Gowrie Garden



Professional Learning in Action

Author:

Annette Barwick

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Research informs us that ongoing professional learning, together with educators' engagement in reflective practice, influences improved outcomes for children and families. Professional learning provides educators with the opportunity to keep up to date with new approaches/learnings and to reflect on current practices, therefore enhancing their knowledge and understanding of children's learning and development and the importance of high quality curriculum provision.

Professional learning provides inspiration and motivation and empowers educators as lifelong learners.

Educators who attend a rich array of professional [learning and support] opportunities are well positioned to contribute to ongoing improvements in their own practice and make significant contributions to the quality of [curriculum] in their workplace (Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing Through Professional Development, 2008:6).

Educators continually seek ways to build their professional knowledge and develop learning communities. They become co-learners with children, families and community (Principle 5 – Ongoing learning and reflective practice. EYLF, 2009:13).

Recently Early Childhood Australia (Tasmania Branch) and the Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) Tasmania formed a partnership arrangement to provide early childhood educators within Tasmania with an opportunity to engage in a one day professional learning forum. The Tamar Valley provided a serene backdrop to the forum where educators could breathe in the fresh winter air, reflect on new learning and network with over 150 likeminded professionals. The forum's theme

'Sustainability – Our children's future' represented Tasmanian educators' commitment to a sustainable world where there is *enough for everyone forever!*

What is sustainability? It is the potential for long term maintenance of well-being, which in turn depends on the well-being of the natural world and the responsible use of natural resources.

Influence on practice associated with learnings from the forum was immense and below is the story of a small northern Tasmanian service's journey following the forum.

The Journey

The service in recent times had become aware of the importance of teaching and learning with children about sustainable practices and ensuring that they had an increased understanding and appreciation of their world. (Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world. EYLF, 2009:26)

Before the forum, the service had just commenced implementing changes in the environment, for example, planting herbs and vegetables. A letter was written to a major hardware/garden store seeking

donations and subsequently a worm farm was donated to the service. The children became involved in collecting kitchen scraps every day to 'feed' the worms, and the 'worm juice' was used on the herbs, plants and vegetables.

After the forum however, educators were inspired and motivated even further to implement changes and to involve their work colleagues, children and the families. (Principle 2 – Partnerships - *Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families.* EYLF, 2009:12). The forum had a positive impact on educators and they were very eager to share the passion and creativity with all stakeholders.

One of the first steps involved critically evaluating the outdoor environment and thinking about ways in which it could be improved. The area already had large open spaces as well as many established trees and shrubs. Educators began to explore ideas with the children about what they could do that would cost very little, or even cost nothing at all. An educator divided some of the plants in the services front garden beds and took them into the outdoor areas, where children and educators joined together in planting them into tyres and old pots. Natural resources were introduced, such as wooden off cuts. Educators noticed children using their imagination and exploring the materials in a variety of ways (*Learning through play - Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine.* (EYLF, 2009:15). For example, a child collected a container of sand, grabbed a small flat spade, sat with a crate of block off cuts and began to stack 2 side by side, added a layer of sand then added 2 more blocks and repeated the process. He communicated to the educator that he was "laying bricks".

Letters have since been written asking for donations as the educators and children are now keen to build a dry creek bed in one of the yards and have asked for large pebbles, rocks and cement. One of the educators has a property and has been collecting some fallen branches which will be cut down into discs to make stepping stones and natural seats.

Leaders of the service have noticed that the educators and children are engaged in the outdoor environment, with children actively displaying a willingness to be involved. Similarly, the service has noticed that this has filtered through to the families who are showing an increased interest in what is going on outdoors at the service. It has also prompted conversations about recycling and sustainability both at the service and in the home.

The service has also connected with the local University and is committed to be involved in a sustainability study currently being conducted by the University.

Experiences educators and children have worked together to implement include:

- avoiding plastic resources – this has inspired children to think creatively and imaginatively with open ended natural materials and educators have noticed children are more engaged in their play episodes;
- caring and nurturing milk carton seedlings;
- reflecting on the use of natural materials in the indoor environment;
- planting seeds in pots;
- investigating recycling strategies;
- growing awareness of and responsibility for the use of water;
- making a scarecrow (filled with straw);
- maintaining a vegetable garden;
- beautifying the yard by contributing to and caring for individual tyre gardens;
- incorporating a worm farm into the garden;
- mixing sand and water to create 'cement';
- making milk bottle scoops for sandplay;
- introducing boxplay/boxwork;
- using wooden spoons/bowls/old donated pots and pans for sandplay;
- creating a bush hut - inside the children sang songs including Waltzing Matilda, tunes on gum leaves and engaged in dramatic play - cooking billy tea, camp fires etc;
- establishing a nature table with materials to explore using all the senses;
- maintaining the garden – children contributed by pulling out old dead bushes and sweeping the paths.

The forum inspired educators to develop the curriculum with the children, including but not limited to:

- nature scavenger hunts;
- walks around the community;
- collection of leaves of all colours (from the ground rather than picking from the tree/bush);
- use of natural fabrics to create with and explore;
- reduction in plastic outdoor equipment - natural resources included wooden beams and ladders;
- introduction of bags of natural objects to smell and explore – “Guess what it is?”.

Overall, the service has noticed a high level of engagement both in children and in educators. They have developed a sense of ownership over the environment and all the experiences have enhanced their connection to their world. Although the service had started to think about the environment, the professional learning and support provided a catalyst for lasting change and influenced educators to work *with* the children, families and the community.

The professional satisfaction and deeper level of understanding about our work with children and families was demonstrated through the evaluation forms completed by 90% of educators attending the forum. The contribution to developing practice through professional learning and support cannot be underestimated.

Many forms of professional learning and support can contribute to the quality of our services. An active approach to planning for professional learning and support can ensure that services become dynamic learning communities with committed [educator] teams learning and growing together (Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing Through Professional Development, 2008:36).

References:

- Australian Government (2009). *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*.
- Professional Support Co-ordinator Alliance (2008). *Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing Through Professional Development*.



Strathalbyn Kindergarten Staff Reflect on their Participation in the KidsMatter Early Childhood Pilot

KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) is a national mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative developed for early childhood services.

The four components of the KMEC framework are:

- creating a sense of community
- developing children's social and emotional skills
- working with parents and carers
- helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

The KMEC Mental Health Initiative has been developed in collaboration with *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*, the Australian Psychological Society and Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*.

Background

Strathalbyn Kindergarten is situated 56 kilometres from Adelaide and services 7 townships. The kindergarten operates across 2 sites, the second site being co-located with Strathalbyn Child Care Centre. The kindergarten also offers occasional care for over 2 year olds.

Farming, viticulture and mining are the communities' main economic drivers. Socio-economic backgrounds include stay at home parent/s, self-employed and full and part-time working families that necessitate working long shifts away from home. There is increasing transience and an increase of families from multicultural backgrounds.

Our vision is – “Communities united through play”. This involves providing a high quality, safe, inclusive play based curriculum in partnership with our communities. Our values include trust, respect, nurturing, caring, responsibility and empowerment.

Following their participation in the KMEC Pilot program, the team at Strathalbyn Kindergarten were asked to reflect on key questions developed by the KMEC National Team:

Author:

Carol Russell

Teacher
Strathalbyn Kindergarten

Q Why did you become involved in KMEC?

A We had previously been involved in the Healthy Minds, Healthy Futures regional initiative that focused on children's mental health. We saw KidsMatter as a natural extension to this research. The staff at the centre felt passionate about participating in this pilot initiative, particularly as the ongoing focus for our kindergarten is children's wellbeing and child, family and teacher relationships. We strongly identified with the KidsMatter philosophy of connectivity with families.

We recognise the importance of the development of children's social and emotional skills as the basis for building positive mental health and well-being which results in a child's positive self-esteem. A strong focus in our program is to identify the value in learning how we can more effectively reach out to families, to communicate the importance of mental health and wellbeing. We aim to gain knowledge as a staff team to enable us to work in partnership with families to demystify the concept of mental health and work together to promote a holistic view of children's health and wellbeing.

Q What are you doing differently as a result of your involvement in KMEC?

- A We are:
- increasing staff awareness of how we create a sense of belonging, including networking with families from outlying areas, particularly connecting with local families;
 - working toward more indepth connecting and networking with parents, for example, talking, greeting, remembering parent names, introducing parents to staff and each other and helping new parents form friendships;
 - promoting a greater awareness amongst parents and the community that our two sites are one, to create a sense of community between sites - this has led to the planning of combined site events including an end of year celebration;



- supporting relationship building between all staff, including part-time staff and our KidsMatter facilitator, through discussions and opportunities to come together and connect with each other.

Q *What impact on staff, children and families have these changes in practice had?*

A We have seen the development of a more cohesive learning environment for families. There has been an increase in parents initiating conversations as they feel more comfortable and safe in the environment. This has happened between parents as well as parents and staff. Staff have also indicated a greater sense of rapport and comfort in relationship building with families.

The KidsMatter parent surveys have shown an increase in parent satisfaction, particularly in regard to communication and information sharing, as well as how we address children's mental health and wellbeing on a daily basis. The percentage of parents returning surveys has also increased.

Parents have become more interested in how we can establish connections across sites and have initiated ideas and put forward their own suggestions. The idea of combined centre activities arose from a Parent KidsMatter meeting.

Q *How do you communicate the KidsMatter framework to your families and the wider community?*

A We have introduced a number of strategies including:

- incorporating KidsMatter information and booklets in our pre-entry Information sessions;
- dedicating specific noticeboards explaining KidsMatter, including displays of information staff put together to teach each other aspects of the Mental Health Initiative;

- displaying photos of children involved in kindergarten experiences relating to KidsMatter principles to attract parents' attention and to make KMEC more relevant to them;
- inviting our KidsMatter facilitator as Guest Speaker at our Annual General Meetings and at certain parent meetings;
- compiling a 'Special Edition' Newsletter specific to KidsMatter;
- planning special events in consultation with parents as part of our exploration of Component 1 of the Mental Health Initiative.

Q *Has anything unexpected occurred as a result of being involved in KMEC?*

A There have been staff changes requiring us to 'speed teach' philosophies to new staff. This has happened quickly and easily, due to shared beliefs in the value of the KidsMatter components.

We have increased the 'tools'/strategies we use in relationship building and inclusive practices. Our current practices are being challenged and, as a result, the language of staff is changing. We have increased our use of reflective practice and have observed child/adult interactions and patterns of behaviour through the use of videos. This has helped us understand our role in providing positive language and encouragement to children in order to strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing. It has also highlighted the difference between what we think we are doing and seeing, to what is actually occurring.

Through discussion sessions with our facilitator, some of us have been surprised at the ease with which we can address seemingly insurmountable issues regarding children's mental health and wellbeing, just by reflecting on and reassessing what we already do and, in some cases, just by altering the language we use. We are now looking forward to progressing through the next 3 components of the KMEC journey.



Completing Culturally Competent Transition Learning and Development Statements for Children

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Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses:

- Being aware of one's own world view
- Developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- Gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views
- Developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.

(Early Years Learning Framework, 2009:16)

The reference to **cultural competence** in the Early Years Learning Framework has introduced new terminology for many early childhood educators who are more familiar with terms such as cultural diversity, multiculturalism, culturally respectful and inclusive practices. Cultural competency is evidenced across the five outcomes for early childhood that are detailed in the Framework.

The word 'competent' implies capability, skill, the right aptitude and knowledge. Cultural competence requires educators to be aware of multiculturalism and respect the cultures of others, and also understand their own culture and sense of '*being*' and '*belonging*'. They must be able to reflect on their own cultural influences and be positive, receptive and tolerant of difference.

Culturally competent educators respect and embrace diversity, and develop positive relationships with children and families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. It is important for educators to value bilingualism and understand about the stages of development of English as a Second Language (ESL) to maximise opportunities for children's development.

Acceptance of race, class, ethnicity, religion, language and ability all contribute to the development of positive self esteem (Clarke, 2009). Children with a strong sense of identity will settle better at school and make friends easier.

Completing the Transition Learning and Development Statement for children from CALD backgrounds is an opportunity for educators to highlight aspects of learning and growth (*becoming*) that has been evidenced in the time the educator has known the child. The Statement also provides information that will be helpful for other educators to know, in order to continue to foster children's sense of self and identity as they commence school. Communication with parents who speak limited English should demonstrate multiple strategies that extend beyond the obvious tools such as translated materials or use of an interpreter. Pictures, role modelling and body language also contribute to effective communication.

The challenge for early childhood educators completing Statements for CALD children is to ensure that the information they include reflects accurate, culturally relevant and meaningful, information. Writing culturally competent Statements requires educators to "honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families" (EYLF, 2009:13).

This is not a hard task. If educators have engaged with CALD families from the time the child enrolled at the centre/service they are likely to have a relationship with them and know most of the relevant information. Language and culture will not have been treated in isolation. Simple steps such as knowing how to pronounce parents names will have indicated a willingness to learn by the educator. Asking relevant questions such as how long the family have lived in Australia, what their religious practices, customs and traditions are and who is in the extended family indicates an interest in the child and respect for the family's culture.

Culturally competent educators know that "genuine partnerships occur when Early Childhood Professionals ensure that the interests, abilities and culture of every child and their families are understood, valued and respected" (EYLF, 2009:11).

References:

- Australian Government (2009), *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*.
- Clarke, P. (2009), *Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years)*. VCAA.



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) 2010 Conference

Authors:
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Lady Gowrie Child Centre NSW

Representatives from Lady Gowrie NSW and the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU NSW & ACT) travelled to Alice Springs from the 26th to the 29th July to partake in what can only be described as a truly inspiring National Conference delivered by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). Over 1000 delegates from across Australia and a number of international speakers provided the keynotes, preconference sessions and workshops.

As a team we ensured that we were able to fully participate by attending different sessions to share the breadth of knowledge and understanding that each presentation afforded us. The preconference speakers truly challenged us! Grant Sarra gave us an opportunity to travel in the footsteps of a people who have had country, family, culture, language and life experience taken away from their 440 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Nations. As a room we were divided and conquered (literally moving our chairs and possessions). We were sent to jail, demoralised and disenfranchised. We were figuratively removed from our land, our elders, family and kinship system. We found ourselves in a place where we felt disillusioned, disadvantaged, lost, angry and scared. Ultimately this workshop gave us an inkling of what has occurred to this land's Traditional Owners during European colonization. It was a truly powerful experience and one that will not be easily forgotten.

Cindy Blackstock spoke about similar themes in her Opening Keynote Address as she described the plight of Canada's First Nations People. She highlighted some very interesting parallels between the Indigenous people of Canada and our own Indigenous people. Significantly, the child protection system in her country seems to closely reflect what is happening in Australia today. The facts (in Canada) demonstrate a direct link between family disadvantage (poverty, poor housing and substance abuse) and the circumstances leading to a child being reported for neglect.

These same themes were repeated by Professor Dorothy Scott as she reflected on her role as the Foundation Chair in Child Protection at the University of South Australia. She reminded us that nine times as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain in the Child Welfare System as a result of child protection proceedings.

These all too familiar statistics were discussed in many workshops where dedicated early childhood education and care, social and welfare professionals spoke about supporting families to stay together. The themes that constantly recurred were ensuring that we respect and afford these families the dignity they deserve. Many spoke of the importance of finding different ways to nurture children. The models presented were truly uplifting. More of these strengths based stories should be told and shared rather than the picture we are often given through the media.

The highlight of the Conference for the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU), was the heartening presentation from ten services which included six Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), three Aboriginal Playgroups and one Long Day Care Centre from NSW and the ACT on "Talkin' up their services". Though funding for these services has remained static in recent years, they maintain culture through the everyday experiences they provide for the children, families and communities in which they reside. They spoke of their histories both past and present and their goals for the future under

the National Quality Framework. They shared these stories through photos in an extended Powerpoint presentation. It was truly remarkable to witness their achievements and to share their knowledge and experience with other representatives.


The Conference Dinner was a great experience..... whilst we didn't partake in the great Todd River race, we did actively contribute to the biggest wok cook off in the same dry creek bed by cooking for 800 people! The evening afforded us opportunities to team up with our services and celebrate the presentation. We also met others attending the conference and caught up with old and new friends. We established networks that a conference such as this affords those of us who work in the DEEWR* funded Inclusion and Professional Support Programs.

We all work "to grow our children strong" and Karen Martin asked delegates to consider speaking to children about their aspirations and finished with the wonderful words of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1993), "To our Father's Fathers....the pain the sorrow. To our Children's Children...the glad tomorrow". It was a pleasure to see children performing each day at the Conference to remind us of why we had all come together. As one of our services said, "Their talent was a delightful way to begin each day. What a credit to their families, communities, teachers and themselves!!!"

*Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

"To our Father's Fathers....the pain the sorrow.
To our Children's Children...the glad tomorrow".





Authors:
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Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Best Practice and Innovation Project

This project, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) was developed by Lady Gowrie NSW, the provider of Indigenous Professional Support Unit NSW and ACT (IPSU NSW/ ACT).

Project Background

This best practice and innovation project provided a 'sister service' opportunity through partnering a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) with a non-Aboriginal child care centre in the same locality to create an environment which supported the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences. The project did this through conducting in each region:

- three joint staff meetings
- staff exchange opportunities
- a combined training session.

We acknowledge the undertaking from Oorunga Wandarrah MACS and Guardian Angel Child Care Campbelltown, Allira MACS and Rainbow Cottage Child Care Dubbo, and Birrelee MACS and Rumpus Room Child Care Tamworth. The three MACS participating in this project were selected due to their stable staffing environments and are all innovative and proud of the education and support offered to the children and families within their community. The non-Aboriginal services were selected through close collaboration with the Inclusion Support Agency (ISA) in each region.

The commitment of the staff from all centres was outstanding and fundamental to the success of the project.

Project Aims

A key aim of the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) / Non-Aboriginal Child Care Centres Partnerships Project was to increase the capacity of Aboriginal child care educators to work collaboratively with non-Aboriginal services to support engagement with local Aboriginal children and families. In broader terms, it was a local focus on "closing the gap". The project also enabled non-Aboriginal child care services to acknowledge and work with Aboriginal services in an experiential way, where they were challenged to reflect on their own practice.

Where to Start

The staff involved from all services had very diverse education and experiences. We surveyed all staff separately to establish current levels of understanding in a range of areas, including cultural awareness, importance of play, quality care, and community communication.



The majority of non-Aboriginal staff wanted to learn more about the Aboriginal culture and how to engage with Aboriginal families. There was a level of fear about doing the 'wrong' thing, so their responses at that time tended to be very limited. These surveys reflected how the staff's own experiences influenced their thinking and challenges in approaching this Project rather than their education.

Some survey responses demonstrated similar viewpoints, for example, in response to the question, *"What are the benefits of play for a child?"*

- A teacher in an Aboriginal service replied, *"Play is a child's work, it is the way children learn and develop all areas. Imagination has no limits during play. This provides great opportunities to teach new concepts and revisit already explored ones. Play also benefits children further by developing social skills and sharing interest with their peers, building new friendships and exploring how to do things in a team".*

- A teacher in a non-Aboriginal service replied to the same question *"Play is the means through which children learn. Play allows children to explore and understand the world around them and provides an opportunity for all areas of development to be refined and mastered. Play provides the opportunity for children to engage in relationships with others and challenge their own thinking."*



Responses that demonstrated the wonderful differences in pedagogy are evident when asked, *"How would you define high quality child care?"*

- A teacher in an Aboriginal service responded, *"When we have contributed to the development and ability of a child to belong and have a strong and healthy attitude to self".*

- A teacher in a non-Aboriginal service responded, *"A service that is positive, nurturing and that caters to children's individual needs. A service that strives for best practice by ensuring that staff training is available regularly, policies and procedures are reviewed regularly and where staff, children and families communicate regularly and effectively".*

Strengths Identified by Aboriginal Services:

- knowledge of the community they directly service through interactions with the wider Aboriginal community members;
- family involvement through community life;
- implementation of local Aboriginal language in the centre;
- a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff with a very strong commitment from both to bridge the gap for Aboriginal children;
- strong emphasis on equity and accessibility for all socio economic groups;
- access to Aboriginal Elders to ensure cultural relevance and identity.

Strengths identified by Non-Aboriginal Services:

- diversity of cultures attending the services;
- strategies for inclusion of children and the recognition of support agencies to build the capacity of families;
- family involvement through daily interactions at the service;
- holistic development of all children through programming and reflective practice;
- understanding of the regulatory requirements;
- Accreditation.

Team Meetings

Team meetings were established with each Non-Aboriginal service coming into the Aboriginal service for the first meeting and then rotating between services. This initial meeting was challenging for all staff as they felt nervous about meeting each other and sharing their own space. To ensure this process had the best opportunity for success, 'rules of engagement' were identified and agreed within each group to ensure meetings were respectful.



Each centre philosophy was discussed and participants reflected on what each service valued. This activity also created the opportunity for each service to reflect on the time span since the last review of philosophy, giving a clear link to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The non-Aboriginal services reflected on this requirement as part of the Accreditation process.

Discussion included children's behaviour and staff responses. Routines and practices were discussed at some length, as each service revealed different approaches to transitions within the day. Staff commented that it was a good experience for them when asked to identify their strengths as they had not explored this before.

The project was described in more detail and the staff swap opportunity was a point of great interest and some trepidation. By the end of the first staff meeting, each service was talking about what activities they might both be involved in together – right through to next year!

We recommend that dinner be provided as part of the Project as sharing a meal became an important feature of all events as it provided an informal opportunity for staff to get to know each other and 'yarn'.

The final staff meeting in all regions demonstrated a significant change to the first, with all staff very engaged in conversation and more staff members attending. Staff discussed what new skills/knowledge they had achieved as a result of the project.

Training Event

Two of the three geographical areas requested their training be directly linked to EYLF and how the practices would indeed reflect 'best practice' through EYLF. While the MACS services are not required to undergo Accreditation both determined this would support their understanding and implementation of high quality child care and link directly to government requirements.

Staff in the other region determined that a workshop on understanding and guiding children's behaviour would significantly enhance their own understanding of supporting children to develop strategies to enhance their self image and ability to manage their own behaviour in a cultural context. The majority of staff from all services attended the training provided.

Staff Swap

This was the most anticipated component of the project and undoubtedly the most challenging. Some staff felt very nervous about the change and expressed concern that they didn't want to leave 'their' babies. Details of the staff swap varied and while the whole day of attendance was more effective, enabling staff to be in a centre for a longer time, it could not be determined that this was the correct timeframe for all the staff, as each centre was so different.

We recommend that if half days are to be the timeframe for the staff swap, then this should happen on multiple occasions. We recommend that any supporting agency help the centre with this task.

All staff said that they were glad this event occurred after the initial staff meeting and training event, as they felt more comfortable both going to the other service and also welcoming a person into their own service. Organising staff re shifts and regulatory requirements and providing a mentor or support person to guide incoming staff was undoubtedly an additional challenge for Directors. Nevertheless, all services have expressed their commitment to continuing the staff swap opportunity in the future.

Heartened by families' positive reactions, it is recommended that centres involve or advise their families of the Project and the prospective outcomes at the commencement of any continuing project opportunities.

Outcomes

One of the key approaches to the Project was to demystify both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal services in the eyes of each other and to build genuine professional relationships based on knowledge and trust so that staff could exchange good practice and ideas and learn from each other.

The project challenged all participants to reflect on their interpretation of best practice and to engage with the EYLF in an experiential way. Staff were encouraged to identify good practice and to identify areas where they could learn new things or engage in the diversity of ideas. In relation to "Belonging", for example, children arrive at the Aboriginal services by bus and the non-Aboriginal services wondered how they would engage with families, if they did not see them at drop-off. The Aboriginal services demonstrated how extended Aboriginal family and cultural networks mean that there are many opportunities through community cultural events and family meetings to engage with families. This lack of formality and level of engagement with the community as a whole is a great strength of the Aboriginal services.

All staff recommended that more time in larger blocks be allocated in each service to truly appreciate the meaning of culturally effective practices.

Conclusion

For such a small and modestly resourced project this Project has had some very effective and enduring outcomes. It enabled a 'full and frank' reflection and discussion of different approaches to early childhood education and care and created genuine partnerships between staff, children and families.

Over a period of four months, staff moved from no contact or collaboration, to openly engaging with each other in a professional capacity and establishing practical arrangements to continue working together. Centres have been on joint excursions, arranged to continue staff swaps and to establish an Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal community picnic.

The enduring nature of the outcomes is reflected in a recent comment from a participating centre:

"The best outcome for us was definitely the relationship we have established. In the time since the project ceased we have met up on several occasions. Birrelee staff have visited our centre and we have visited theirs. We were proud to take part in Naidoc week celebrations and participate in the march. Louise (Birrelee

Director) has been kind enough to invite us to several training sessions hosted by Birrelee..... opportunities we would not normally have had access to.

For me personally, I have gained confidence about my knowledge of Aboriginal culture and my ability to connect with Aboriginal staff and families. Recent interaction with Birrelee staff has encouraged myself and my staff to continue building on these relationships as we all have a vested interest in that we ALL hope for bright futures for the children in our care. We are proud to be associated with Birrelee instead of being in competition with them (as was the attitude previously).

All in all, this project has broken the barrier and allowed Rumpus Room and Birrelee MACS to create a mutually beneficial relationship that will hopefully continue to grow in the coming years. Even baby steps bring us closer to acceptance and respect. Thanks again!"
Stacey Hardcastle – Owner and Director Rumpus Room Children's Centre Tamworth.

The achievements of the Project clearly illustrate the ripple effect of using early childhood education and care as a non-threatening and universal contact point to explore common goals and reconciliation.

Where to From Here

Gowrie NSW has successfully gained support through the PSC NSW (Children's Services Central) to deliver this Project in a further seven regions in NSW and ACT, using the same format. Using feedback from the initial Project, we hope to continue with this great work and enhance the outcomes. Finally, we would like to acknowledge DEEWR for its leadership and financial support of the Project. We have to take risks to do new things, but we also need financial support to be able to do them.



There has been a raft of changes in the childcare sector in the last 12 months, designed at introducing nationwide quality standards and minimum wages and conditions. Here, the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union (LHMU) - the childcare union - will outline what the wage changes mean and their vision of what the next stage of child care reform should be.

New Rights at Work for Early Childhood Education and Care

As part of the Fair Work Act, the Federal Government introduced national minimum wages and conditions across all industries. These are called modern awards. For early childhood educators, this means around 15 state specific awards were collapsed into two separate national awards, one for education and support staff and one for teachers.

The new awards will be phased in over a transition period of 5 years. The government has said that modern awards shouldn't leave any worker or employer worse off, but with so many staff on different minimum wages and conditions this was difficult to achieve. To get the best result possible, LHMU child care members spent much of last year talking with various employers and other unions to try and get agreement about what the modern award should look like. This was proven in other industries to get better results for workers.



Julia Gillard with LHMU members
discussing child care issues (file photo)

Some of the rights early childhood educators won included:

- All staff with programming responsibilities to get 2 hours of paid programming non-contact time.
- All compulsory meetings to be paid.
- Junior rates of pay to apply only until staff are 19 years old, instead of waiting until 21 years.

The minimum pay rates set out in the new award vary substantially across the country, depending on historical award practice but will align in 2015. Services can have agreements with employees that are higher than the wages and conditions in the awards. If an employer operates in more than one state or territory, an agreement could also provide for uniform wages and conditions. If employees have questions about specific wage rates they should contact their local branch of the LHMU.

Wages and conditions for early childhood educators are still very low in comparison with other industries. This means that the child care sector can struggle with staff retention. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations research into turnover rates in the child care sector makes for sobering reading, as the table below indicates:

Job turnover by job classification over the previous 12 months (Australia, 2005)

| | Total staff | Total vacant positions | Job turnover |
|--|---------------|------------------------|--------------|
| Director/coordinator/teacher in charge | 10,013 | 2,782 | 28% |
| Preschool/kindergarten teacher | 8,575 | 2,165 | 25% |
| Qualified contact worker | 21,458 | 7,255 | 34% |
| Unqualified contact worker | 23,462 | 8,761 | 37% |
| Other | 4,788 | 1,185 | 25% |
| Total | 68,297 | 22,148 | 32% |

The one consistent issue when it comes to pay is that the pay rates do not appropriately reflect the skill, experience, dedication or work of staff employed in early childhood education and care. LHMU members are working with other child care professionals, providers and government to win funding to help deliver the pay and conditions the sector deserves without significant impacts on affordability.

A Lot Done, More to Do

While LHMU recognise this as a step in the right direction, more needs to be done. The next stage of reform must address the critical issues of professional wages and upskilling, given their potential to improve retention issues. There are a number of initiatives that can facilitate staff recruitment and retention including:

- Helping existing workers access the courses available through TAFE, University and RTOs to gain the new qualifications required in the sector.
- Recognising the skills already present in the sector through recognition of prior learning.
- Rewarding professional work with professional wages.

Christie Goss, an LHMU member from Malagenna Children's Centre, Tasmania says: "We welcome the Government's attempts to reform the sector, but the quality vision can't be fulfilled till we can genuinely access up-skilling and be appropriately paid for the skills we have and acquire, and the work we do".

The LHMU has embarked on achieving these changes through its Big Steps in childcare campaign. As Monique Wickham, an advocate for the LHMU explains: *"The LHMU Big Steps in childcare campaign is about us early childhood educators getting together to win an appropriately funded, professionally recognised child care sector. As LHMU members we are committed to improving the professional standing of the early childhood education and care workforce"*.

For further information on the Union's campaign or to find your local branch visit www.lhmu.org.au

Gowrie Australia Resource and Professional Development Series



Autumn 2010



Winter 2010



Spring 2010

For copies of the Gowrie Australia *Assessment in the Early Years* resource (hard copy or PDF) OR to enquire about the Professional Development Series:

- Assessment in the Early Years - a 7 hour/full day overview with a complimentary copy of the *Assessment in the Early Years* resource
- *Noticing, Recognising, Responding Series* - three X 3 hour sessions

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Gowrie Australia

Promoting and supporting quality services for all children.

Our Mission

A national collaborative approach to better practices which benefit children, families and the children's services sector.