

reflections

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Dear Colleagues

In this edition of *Reflections*, contributors share their views and work in respect of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The lead article by Leanne Gibbs, from Community Child Care Cooperative NSW, highlights the important linkages between the framework and ongoing professional learning.

The practitioner inquiry project shared in another article not only provides readers with Margy Whalley's concept of 'leaderful teams', but also outlines research questions which could be adapted by other services to support a deeper understanding and respect for families.

Whilst the focus of many resources has been on the EYLF, the article by Dr Jennifer Cartmel relates to the My Time Our Place – Framework for School Age Care. In this article the potential of reflective practice to assist educators to transform their planning of programs is shared, with an outlined strategy of questions to support the reflective process. These questions could also be used in settings other than outside school hours care to support the implementation of the elements of the EYLF. Similarly, the Family Day Care Mentoring Project is another article which shares the journey of unpacking and implementing the EYLF using a strengths-based approach.

The second of a series of three articles reporting on the impact of playground design on play choices and behaviours of preschool children shares with readers the first of the research findings. Interestingly, natural play areas offered play opportunities that were more cooperative, diverse, imaginative and less aggressive. This is consistent with emerging research which indicates that children desire environments where imaginations can be continually stimulated by external factors. Perhaps such research will lead to less of the fixed, fantastic plastic, single use pieces of playground equipment and more natural play spaces with trees, shrubs, rocks and logs for children to climb, jump on, hide and socialise. The third and final article on this research project will be included in the next edition.

The early childhood education and care sector is currently experiencing a great deal of change – change that is welcomed and promises so much for Australia's children. In order for the initiatives of the reforms to be implemented, leadership is essential. Included in the leadership article are some simple tips to guide leaders in their role. Whilst on the topic of leadership, one of the great early childhood leaders, Margaret Clyde recently passed away. Margaret was a champion for early childhood during her professional life and beyond, having been actively involved in Early Childhood Australia and Gowrie Victoria after she relocated from New South Wales to Victoria. Our thoughts are with her colleagues and friends at this time.

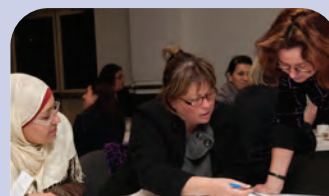
Finally, one of our dear Gowrie Australia colleagues, Gilda Howard has tendered her resignation as CEO of Gowrie Victoria effective end of May. During her 18 years at Gowrie, Gilda has made a significant contribution to supporting children, families and early childhood professionals in the various roles she has held within the organisation. As an integral and committed member of Gowrie Australia, Gilda will be greatly missed for her friendship, collegiality, and professionalism. On behalf of Gowrie Australia and indeed each state based Gowrie, enjoy the next phase of your life journey Gilda ... and thank you sincerely!

Until next time,

Ros Cornish
CEO, Lady Gowrie Tasmania

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Gilda Howard – Gowrie Victoria
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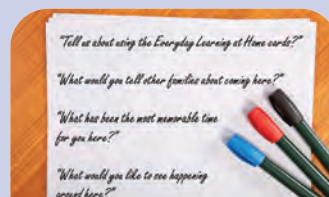
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The Lessons of the Early Years Learning Framework for Professional Learning and Development

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The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) “describes the principles, practice and outcomes essential to support and enhance young children’s learning from birth to five years of age as well as their transitions to school” (DEEWR, 2011). As a key component of the National Quality Framework and a foundation for the implementation of the policy of universal access, it is essential that educators and staff of early childhood programs feel a confident connection with, and a strong capacity to deliver on, the principles and practices of the Early Years Learning Framework. It is essential for this to be pursued through a professional learning framework that ensures deep understandings and promotes a passion for knowledge linked not just with the Early Years Learning Framework, but indeed the broad ranging content and ideas essential for working within the early childhood sector.

The Lessons of the EYLF

The energy, intellect and commitment that was dedicated to the development of the EYLF has resulted in a framework that provides a touchstone for children's learning, but conceptually extends well beyond outcomes for children. The EYLF travels from early childhood into the important area of adult learning broadly translated as a professional learning framework with the principles and practice coalescing backwards and forwards to perform a dance of deeper knowledge and understanding and a rich foundation for a lifetime of study and work within early childhood programs.

Essential to embracing any framework is to understand that it is not a continuum. Whilst a continuum should be endless, its limitations are characterised by a linear journey that has a starting

point. A professional learning framework draws its depth and richness from the concept of opportunity with multiple layers and entry points and is characterised here with the views of belonging, being and becoming.

Belonging is both the journey and the goal. Educators and Children's Services staff belong to a proud sector that has standards of professional practice, a commitment to lifelong learning and a creative drive that generates innovative and practical solutions to everyday challenges.

What does this mean for professional learning?
Our actions and initiatives must be inclusive and promote a sense of being a part of the profession.

Being is about making the most of opportunities and being deeply involved. Daily life in an early childhood program should be engaging, interesting, allow for critical thinking, be joyful, comfortable and give a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. This should be the case for the whole community within the program.

What does this mean for professional learning?

Our learning must be geared toward building our practice and creativity ... toward developing engaging learning situations and moments.

Becoming in this context embodies lifelong learning and high expectation. Life in an early childhood program should be full of opportunity and growth. It should offer the chance for personal and professional development.

What does this mean for professional learning?

Professional learning must include accredited training and prospects for articulation to higher qualifications.

Understanding the implications of the Early Years Learning Framework for professional learning is the stepping off point. A definition of professional learning highlights its important role in promoting understandings of the framework and then identifying approaches and strategies. Learning can be described as "the acquisition and mastery of what is already known about something, the extension and clarification of meaning of one's experience, or an organised, intentional process of testing ideas relevant to problems" (Smith, 1982:34 in Clarke, 2003).

The starting point

Lifelong learning begins with the recognition of existing understandings, experience and learning styles. Adults have a great deal of valuable experience to draw upon. They may have preconceived ideas about content and new knowledge, firmly established attitudes, and expectations. There will be some situations where people will be internally motivated and others where motivation comes from the outside. These considerations must all be taken into account when planning for learning (PSCA, 2010). The best learning opportunities are also matched with the needs, interests and learning styles of the educators. Finding out about educator needs can be exciting and stimulating and choosing the right opportunities to fulfil those needs is the opportunity to exercise creative thought. It's the opportunity to get it right for the early childhood program.

The first question to ask is "How will our team of educators and individuals learn?" Analytical questions can be asked during meetings or of individuals and observations and peer evaluations will also contribute. In-depth discussion and appraisals will also guide plans for learning. With this foundation knowledge of educator learning styles and needs, the link with new knowledge and understandings is achieved through a broad range of pedagogies and strategies that have varying and parallel levels of engagement and entry points.



Reflective Approaches and Self-Paced Learning

The Early Years Learning Framework is fundamentally connected with beliefs, exploration of culture and attitudes. **Reflective journals** and encounters provide a great opportunity to promote personal and professional growth of understandings relating to children and the EYLF. The use of reflective journals as a professional learning tool was explored by Clarke (2004) in her work with teacher interns who took time to think and reflect on their practice through the keeping of journals. Clarke found that teachers expanded their understanding of critical reflection and were able to look for solutions and solve problems. Questions that may be appropriate as a starting point for educators could include:

- *What are you currently observing in your teaching that is related to your interests as an educator?*
 - *What would you like to know more about or be able to do differently in your professional practice?*
 - *My personal theory on how children learn is ...*
 - *What are you learning about yourself as a learner as you explore the principles of the EYLF?*
- (Adapted from Clarke, 2003:8)

Self-paced learning also offers the opportunity for reflective thinking and may comprise of guided reading tasks, individual learning packages that include on-screen presentations and questions to check comprehension, online learning and live hosted sessions. Live hosted sessions are real time sessions that are undertaken in an online environment with a group of others and a trainer. This is simple for both the training provider and for training participants. The trainer can view and control audio activity from within the meeting environment and by using a simple interface, the trainer can share any document or presentation.



Like face-to-face training, participants are expected to “get involved” using the online environment which consists of visuals, a chat feature and a whiteboard. There has been an increase in the use of online training in recent years as educators become more familiar with the online learning environment and see it augmenting face-to-face workshop sessions. Additions to online learning include audio such as podcasts and video on youtube and DVDs.

Self-paced learning also allows a deep engagement where in-depth reading, extended viewing and analysis combines to advance thinking. Learners are able to apply new ideas in the workplace and return to check these with their materials. Despite the popularity of online and self-guided learning, workshop sessions and shared learning experiences remain a chosen approach to professional development.

Workshop sessions and learning encounters

Current thinking on learning and training could lead to the devaluation of short workshop sessions. There are questions on the extent of learning taking place in this short period. Indeed several factors work against the success of the short workshop. People attending workshops may be tired and inattentive and the length of the workshop reduces the opportunity for revision and reinforcement. Time pressures can also lead to poor group dynamics and this inhibits learning but, the short workshop session offers a great opportunity to deliver key ideas in an innovative way. The challenge is to deliver the right experiences, stories, visual and aural aids to get the message across. The message will be effectively received when participants involve themselves and contribute. In a successful short course, facilitators and trainers see participants absorbing the ideas and growing and developing in a very short time frame. The short session also has a great capacity to inspire learners to undertake further research and follow up discussions with peers.

There are other ways that the short session influences pedagogy. The early childhood community is in constant contact through the engagement in one-off sessions or a series of seminars and so there is an ongoing narrative that is developed as a result.

This 'accidental' partnership means that educators and staff may be sharing conversations, ideas and recommendations over a period of 6 months or more. As a result there is reporting back on progress, resource recommendations, proud recollections of successes and initiatives. The accidental partnership is superseded by other learning encounters such as ‘in program training’ and the planned partnership that is intrinsically associated with successful practitioner inquiry and action research.

Practitioner Inquiry and Action Research

Action research according to McNaughton is the cycle of ‘think-do-think’, where thinking informs practice that then informs thinking. She notes that, “despite the risk involved in action research, many early childhood professionals choose it because they have hopes and dreams to improve the lives of children, parents and colleagues with whom they work” (2004:6). This type of research is most often undertaken as a shared experience within a broader group where spaces remain to make assumptions, ask questions and create possibilities. A number of action research projects on the EYLF have been inspired by conversations in team meetings and a shared exploration of the principles of the EYLF through a team meeting package developed for use in educator meetings (PSCA, 2010).

A variation on the action research theme involves the individual ‘practitioner inquiry’ project where educators are led on a pathway of learning that encompasses the raising of questions, gathering of data, analysis and reporting. The intent of practitioner inquiry is shared action research by raising questions, challenging assumptions and looking for new solutions to old problems. The introduction of the EYLF offers a great opportunity for the exploration of, and challenging thinking around, children’s learning, curriculum and planning.

Leadership and partnerships

There is tacit agreement that the embedding of the EYLF in early childhood programs will only be achieved through strong leadership and partnerships.



Leaders within a program set the culture and attitude toward professional learning and development and this is enhanced through a leader's approach to their own professional development. Research undertaken by Macquarie and Charles Sturt Universities demonstrated that "the perceived value of PD&S (Professional Development and Support) is dependent upon the leadership shown by the child care centre's director/manager/owner operator. Those who access PD&S for themselves are more likely to value this for their centre staff" (Macquarie University, 2008:70).

Mentoring also offers opportunities for partnerships in learning. An example of this approach in the trial for the EYLF was the 'critical friend' who was available for phone conversations and became a source of guidance and feedback. This was cited by participants in the trial as one of the most useful options for growth. Slattery (2010:3) notes that the aim of any mentoring program is to build the capacity of children's services staff and to provide collaborative support for changes to practice. He goes on to say, "... the mentor and protégé work together to set goals, driven by the needs of the protégé (Ritchie, 1999). In meeting goals, the protégé draws on the experience of the mentor. The mentor encourages the protégé to uncover solutions themselves, rather than acting as the expert and simply providing answers (Linney, 1999)".

Formal learning-accredited training and qualifications

Strong acceptance and valuing of the Early Years Learning Framework will occur only when it has become a formality in accredited training and within a qualification framework such as a diploma or degree program of a tertiary institution.

Where to from here?

The EYLF is cited as underpinning the National Quality Standards and Framework and is therefore fundamental to the achievement of the National Quality Agenda. It is essential that intense effort is dedicated to ensuring the embedding of the framework within early childhood programs and that educators

have an in-depth and profound understanding of its importance in children's growth and development. This is not achieved through simple transmission of information and content. It requires a far more sophisticated approach that coalesces with the EYLF itself, reinforcing the layers of learning and engagement needed for deeper learning and understanding.

Educational and managerial leaders and educators will achieve the greatest success through programs that are carefully planned and meet learning needs and aspirations. Ongoing professional learning is essential for educators to keep abreast of change and provide quality education to children. A framework of professional learning takes the concept a step further where learning and training results in positive outcomes for educators and, more broadly, the workforce.

Personal and professional development, like education, should not be seen as static or unchangeable qualities, achieved once and for all, but rather as a process, an ongoing path that we follow from birth throughout our lives, now more than ever.
(Rinaldi cited in Macquarie University, 2008)

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LEADERSHIP

an Essential Component to Support
the National Reform Agenda

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The 7th December 2009 was a defining date for the early childhood education and care sector. On this day the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed and committed to the Reform Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care. This Agenda includes a number of initiatives including the development of national curriculum frameworks for early and middle childhood and a new national quality framework bringing together state/territory based licensing and quality systems into one nationally consistent framework.

The reforms are to be phased in over a number of years to enable the sector to plan and prepare to meet the implementation timelines. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is one initiative which has been designed for use by early childhood educators, to frame their work in extending and enriching children's learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school. The National Quality Standards (NQS) will commence on 1 January 2012 replacing the existing national childcare accreditation council systems.

Whilst many within the sector welcome the Reform Agenda with its aims of improving outcomes for Australia's children, now, more than ever, it is essential that there are talented, well qualified and influential educational leaders who can demonstrate strong and courageous pedagogical and organisational leadership.

Courage - because there is a need to engage in deep professional pedagogical conversations with colleagues. Such conversations may highlight differing beliefs and values, question some assumptions about everyday practices and may require a commitment to changes necessary to respond to the aspirations of the reform agenda initiatives.

Strength - because leaders stand out for their intelligence, for the passion with which they approach their goal and inspire others along the way and for their resilience. A true leader has a vision of something better and has the strength and conviction to pursue that vision.

Leaders

- ... are passionate about what they do
- ... focus on getting the job done
- ... believe in what they are doing and communicate that effectively to others
- ... have the ability to explain to others clearly and passionately, why and how they want to reach the target
- ... regularly share information or have information shared for them
- ... support and encourage leadership at all levels.

The Leadership Role

Leaders will be expected to be the captain of their ship, to steer and guide it through the myriad of obstacles and challenges ahead. But, before they can lead or steer others, before they can assist others, they have to discover and know themselves.

Therefore, it is essential for leaders to be well informed and know the requirements - they will need to be able to use this knowledge to prompt colleagues, helping them interpret meanings, encourage conversations about policy and practice and ensure that all are involved in decisions about changes that affect them. They will need to support and guide colleagues through processes of critical reflection that may lead to changed practice.

This is particularly relevant given the emergence of the changes associated with the National Reform Agenda. Leaders must know and understand the elements of the EYLF, the principles, practices and learning outcomes. They will need to prompt colleagues to read and engage with the EYLF and help them to interpret what it means in practice. Leaders must become familiar with the requirements and expectations of the NQS and then engage with their colleagues to ensure shared understanding and the interrelationship with the EYLF.

Strategies to support the leadership role:

- Use delegation to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility and be open to new learning - leaders cannot do it alone.
- Build supportive relationships, create a climate in which others experience a sense of belonging and provide ways for views and thoughts to be expressed.
- Foster the belief that what is being done is creating something different and important for children.
- Engage with educators, build a sense of enthusiasm and challenge about the changes.
- Establish work teams and engage in ongoing cycles of inquiry that promote deep learning.
- Encourage and support educators in reflective action - reflect on and learn from experiences, stand back, monitor and modify practices.
- Support continual development by 'snack learning' - educators receiving frequent, bite sized chunks of information.

During times of change leaders will need courage to unglue patterns of behavior and ways of doing in order to ensure the aspirations of the Reform Agenda are understood and successfully implemented into everyday practice.

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

John F Kennedy, 1963

Reference:

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments. (2009) *Belong, Being and Becoming. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT.



Brisbane Family Day Care Early Years Learning Framework Mentoring Project: A Strengths-Based Approach to Empowering Educators as Agents of Change - *the ripple effect*

Author:
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In 2009 Brisbane Family Day Care's (BFDC) Manager Kathy Eisentrager proposed the pilot of a mentoring project designed to inform Family Day Care (FDC) educators about the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in a practical way. This knowledge would then be reinforced through mentoring colleagues using a 'strengths based approach' and hopefully creating a 'positive ripple effect' throughout the scheme.

Kathy Eisentrager explains:

I saw the EYLF as providing Educators with the tools to assist children to reach their full potential. However, with the demands already placed on educators and coordination unit staff, I could see the risk of the EYLF becoming just another document that collects dust on everyone's shelves. During the Family Day Care (FDC) international conference I attended a workshop on the benefits of mentoring in a strengths-based method. The light bulb went [on]! We could use this method to implement the EYLF, and we could have educators assisting [other] educators in their journey of exploring the EYLF. From this the mentoring project was developed.

BFDC implemented this research project (February to July 2010) through a funding partnership with Professional Support Coordinator Queensland (PSCQ) and Lighthouse Resources. From July 2010 to Feb 2011 we saw the continuation of the mentoring model and post Feb 2011, a move towards self-sustaining of the mentoring model.

It was important to communicate to stakeholders that the trial reflected and catered for the uniqueness of family day care settings, learning environments and the very special service that they provide. Family day care educators involved were keen to know more about the EYLF and how they could embrace its philosophy. In an ever changing world where families require flexible care, it was apparent that FDC could provide a viable and high quality option for families whilst embracing the EYLF philosophy.

We recognised that the expertise and the strengths we already had within our scheme represented some of the 'tools' required for change. By empowering educators to become the 'agents for change' it was hoped that the 'ripple effect' would be instrumental in bringing everyone 'on board'. The EYLF was opened up, taken off the bookshelves and became a 'living' document used in daily practice to support young children's learning.

It is exciting knowing what and how the children learn... The children in care have benefited by being given opportunities that I would not have even considered would benefit children. Things like the day we cut up squid and cooked it. It has opened up my thinking. Now I always "think outside the box" when planning for children.
(Sue, a participant, 27/7/10)

'Up skilling' already experienced educators within our service enabled those educators to provide pedagogical leadership to peers in a professional, strengths-based team approach. By using a teacher in this project the scheme hoped to demonstrate the value of formal qualifications and to inspire educators to continue studying.

The project consisted of two main elements:

- embedding EYLF into daily practise (in situ) and
- mentoring a colleague.

Research shows that children who have access to the knowledge of an Early Childhood teacher are better set for life and a key element in this project was the 'marrying' of the theory contained within the EYLF document (using the teacher's expertise), with the practice of educators 'at the coal face' in the family day care environment. We focused initially on educators enthusiastic to know more about the EYLF vision. Four experienced educators with formal qualifications (mentors) and 4 less experienced educators (mentees) with limited or no early childhood formal qualifications were offered the opportunity to take part in the trial.

An Early Childhood teacher visited mentors in their home environments for 4 hours once a fortnight for 6 months. The teacher provided 'best practice' demonstrations, resources, professional conversations and co-constructed activities with each mentor to suit that particular group of children.

Karen (mentor) spoke about her experience,
[By] watching the teacher interact with the children in real and practical situations, demonstrations of language, vocabulary and questions used to extend learning [were most helpful]. Family Day Care can be isolating...but showing and sharing with someone was most powerful.

Also provided were fact sheets and mentoring opportunities, modelling and unpacking of the EYLF in detail and online professional development through 'Elluminate'. Professional readings catering to the educators' needs and interests were shared and from this new and deeper understandings about 'children and how and why they learn' became a topic of conversation and investigation. Excursions to GOMA (Gallery of Modern Art), Reverse Garbage, Ipswich Art Gallery, and QPAC (Queensland Performing Arts Complex) were also encouraged as examples of 'connecting' with the community.

The second part of the Mentoring Project required each mentor to guide a mentee in the EYLF. Mentors were required to demonstrate the 3 Bs (Being, Belonging and Becoming) to another educator during a play session at their own, or their mentee's home once a fortnight. This process was designed to reinforce both participants' EYLF understandings and provide practise in using and communicating their combined EYLF knowledge and skills.

Miles, a mentee states,
[Shared play opportunities] were an integral and very influential element as I could talk to my mentor and discuss elements of the EYLF, both "in the moment educating" and allowing the discussion of aspects outside of the intended teaching plan of the day, once the children had gone down for rest time... [I benefitted from her]..Utterly infectious enthusiasm and an understanding of multi age group inclusion.

This continued cyclic 'REFLECTION' on what 'best practice' looks like, sounds like and feels like, as well as sharing 'success' stories, inspirational ideas for

everyday learning, new research and professional reading created the 'ON GOING CYCLE' of authentically embedding the EYLF into daily practice.

Janelle (scheme coordinator) makes the comment,
Educators are now asking open-ended questions to the children and are having meaningful discussion and intentional teaching moments. [They are] taking pride in their new found knowledge about learning environments for children and have taken initiative to make appropriate changes to their environments to stimulate learning, for example, creating art studios accessible to children all day and bringing in pictures and real items like flowers, rocks, wood, reverse garbage and recycled materials to inspire creative thinking. Educators have had access to Noah's ark and have used GOMA and Ipswich Art Gallery as resources for learning.

[With regards planning/documenting] I would say all of the Educators are finding the documenting side of their work more enjoyable and a creative outlet for themselves. As they have read and really had time to reflect on and study the Belonging, Being and Becoming document, educators are finding that they have the tools to convey children's learning outcomes in a professional manner.

What became evident was that a collaborative leadership model was most beneficial in spreading the EYLF vision. The educators, teacher and scheme unit coordinators all became part of the team learning process and the increased contribution from children, families and the community became seen as most valuable.

One trial parent commented, "... fantastic program ... my child learns through play experiences led by her interests ... Allie's program has always been fantastic however she has raised the bar even higher. We are so lucky." (Sue B 25/7/10)

Educator networks promoting authentic EYLF demonstrations and open two way conversations using 'common language' and encouraging 'reflective' practice within the scheme were fostered. The EYLF vision was also demonstrated through the BFDC scheme playgroup, with experiences reflecting investigations, explorations and open ended play activities.

At the completion of the 6 months project trial mentors were invited to apply to become an EYLF ambassador within the scheme. Their role is to support new mentors and thus to begin to grow the 'expertise' base. It is important for the mentoring model to become 'self sustaining' as a four year trained early childhood teacher is not currently funded through the Federal Government.

Our next undertaking is to continue this journey, maintaining and self-sustaining best outcomes for children, families, educators and staff within this scheme. Maintaining the momentum for future professional growth is possible when we use the expertise that is already within our service as part of the process. We believe that a strengths-based mentoring model is certainly a step in the right direction.

Techniques for facilitating reflection

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When I was travelling around Australia, as part of the consultation about *My Time Our Place - Framework for School Age Care*, in my presentation I highlighted the need for educators to engage in ongoing reflective practice. Subsequently, I was constantly asked how to encourage educators in school age care services to get involved in reflective practice. There are a range of strategies educators can use to gain feedback about the experiences that occur in school age care settings. In fact, some of the ideas work equally as well with school age children, as they do with adults.

Reflective practice has the potential to help educators to gain confidence in their principles and practices, to transform their planning and implementation of programs and their interactions with children. The process of reflective practice involves a number of steps which require deep levels of thinking. For school age care educators one of the barriers is finding the time to engage in deep thinking, due to the structure and timing of the school age care sessions.

I encourage educators to use the strategy, **Before and After Questions** (described below), in their daily conversations with each other. This simple strategy is easy to fit in to the daily schedule and will reap rewards, particularly in achieving high quality programs in school age care. It supports the kinds of questions that need to be asked in developing a Quality Improvement Plan as part of the National Quality Framework.

Before and After Questions

These types of questions are particularly useful for enquiring into educators' ideas, thoughts and understandings about what they value, think is important and enjoy doing when they are planning programs in school age care settings. They can be used prior to the beginning of the program or experience, at the end of the day, after a session, or during debriefing sessions with staff (and children).

Before a session or at the beginning of the day

What are your thoughts before commencing the day's program or session?
What are your feelings before commencing the day's program or session?
Describe some of the plans or purposes or intentions you have, before commencing the day's program or session?

After a session or at the end of the day

What are your thoughts now?
What did you make of that?
What do you understand about the activities that occurred during the session?
What was influencing your understanding/practice?
Were you having any internal thoughts, feelings or reactions during the session that you did not share with your colleagues or with the children? What were they?
The idea that you have just expressed, how have you come to know that?
What would you have liked to have seen happen?
When you did..... what was that about? (e.g. changed the equipment, spoke to a child)
You said '.....' - can you tell me about that?
Consider your language, what do you think that suggests?

This type of questioning has many advantages as it taps into educators' on-the-spot and current understandings - particularly if this strategy is used just prior to, or after a session, or at the end of the day. It reduces the limits of trying to remember things days or weeks after they have happened and it also means that educators are less selective in what they can recall because they have thought more deeply about the experiences. This sequence of questions provides the opportunity to immediately challenge, extend, affirm or redirect the principles and practices used by educators in achieving the desired outcomes for children.

Once educators become familiar with using these questions in reflective practice sessions with other staff (and children), and convinced of the benefits in their practice, they find it easier to include ongoing reflection and self-evaluation as part of their daily practice.

(Please note: The suggestion above was inspired by the ideas of Jennifer Osmond and Yvonne Darlington who wrote *Reflective analysis: Techniques for facilitating reflection*.)

Reference:

Osmond, J. & Darlington, Y. (2005). "Reflective analysis: Techniques for facilitating reflection", *Australian Social Work*, 58 (1), 3-14.

PUTTING OUR QUESTIONS ON THE TABLE

"Tell us about using the Everyday Learning at Home cards?"

"What would you tell other families about coming here?"

"What has been the most memorable time for you here?"

"What would you like to see happening around here?"



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In 2009-2010 a joint practitioner inquiry project was sponsored by Gowrie SA and the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). Preschools, child care centres and integrated centres in South Australia were invited to submit an expression of interest to participate. Twelve centres were selected to participate in the 18 month project. Dr Margy Whalley was the keynote speaker at the first project forum and she challenged participants to consider the outcomes they were achieving for children and families and to consider this from a leadership perspective. Forums that brought together all the participants were held every quarter throughout the project. This report describes some of the processes undertaken by one of the participating centres.

When we were offered the chance to be part of an Inquiry Project we leapt at the opportunity to use practitioner research to build leadership within our new Children's Centre for Early Childhood Development and Parenting. The Children's Centre is situated in Port Augusta, a northern regional city with high statistics of aggregated disadvantage. We are co-located with Carlton R-9 Aboriginal School. "Children's Centres" are a State Government program to provide integrated centres for early childhood services for families. This centre was placed with an already existing Learning Together Program (a DECS program for families in areas of disadvantage, for children birth to four years, with a family literacy and learning focus).

Our research team was:

- Lynette Geerling, R/1 teacher at Carlton School
- Sue Gerschwitz, Learning Together teacher
- Cathy Cameron, Manager Early Years Programs at the Children's Centre

The chance to work with Margy Whalley, local skilled leaders and a range of other early years practitioners was an extra bonus for us, as a relatively remote setting. The new concept Margy introduced of "leaderful teams" was an opportunity to deepen our own knowledge and understanding of a challenging situation.

After a lot of discussion the inquiry question we ended up with was:

"How do we develop a cohesive, integrated service which meets the needs of our families?"

Just the process of debating this question and sharing understandings about the language we used was a powerful beginning towards building our "leaderful team". The opportunity to have dedicated time away from the site to have these discussions was essential and definitely a must for future teams.

We saw that our question led to two paths of inquiry:

- our work
- the needs of families.

We planned the staff development to be consistent with our overall approach with families. We insisted on a strengths-based approach, with respectful dialogue used to build shared vision and understanding of issues which in turn can allow co-construction of new learning. This work is still ongoing, but is building a strong team which has the capacity to manage constant change and to welcome new partners into our integrated service.

The second line of inquiry, the needs of parents, was about why some families choose to come to the

centre and why others don't. It was decided to try and collect parent voice through a form of "focus group", which we labelled "table-top talks". We used the principles of Appreciative Inquiry when formulating the topics. We hoped this approach would be non-threatening and supportive for families with low literacy levels. This method appealed to us as it gave participants the opportunity to raise their own issues, as well as discuss our agenda. We also believed that a group or family setting is more comfortable for our Aboriginal families. This method was particularly relevant to us as it has the potential to identify information to continue to build on learning. We were also concerned that we should always model the kind of behaviours we would like parents to use with their children. Therefore our research behaviour needed to be responsive, respectful and follow the lead of the participants.

In this method we covered a large table with blank white paper and placed a container of felt pens there, as well as a question or topic on a piece of cardboard. Parents at the group were invited to write their response to the question, talk about it with others, add to others' responses and have their comments scribed for them if they wanted. We asked four questions over a period of about six weeks. We repeated the same question at several different playgroups or parent learning groups so that most parents attending over that period of time had an opportunity to participate.

The topics we asked about were:

"Tell us about using the Everyday Learning at Home cards?"

"What has been the most memorable time for you here?"

"What would you like to see happening here?"

"What would you tell other families about coming here?"

We began the questions with:

"Tell us about using the Everyday Learning at Home cards?"

Each family receives a bright box and small cards are produced weekly with ideas for learning at home activities for children. The relatively poor response was not a huge surprise to us. We had had little feedback from families about the cards and many were not regularly collecting the new ones (produced weekly). We had decided to keep the system going a bit longer, but really pushing the taking of the cards, making it a routine part of the playgroup and talking about the use of them at home more explicitly. Already we are noticing an increased interest in the cards and parents are reminding us when we have not had them ready for collection at a group.

The second question was:

“What would you tell other families about coming here?”

This question was more popular with the parents and they were keen to give their contributions. The staff were generally surprised by the responses. We were particularly impressed by one young, single mother who asked Cathy to scribe her answer for her. She was able to clearly articulate her views about the importance of the service being accessible for all families. It was a humbling experience and made us feel very proud of our service. Most families responded that it was friendly, welcoming and children learnt good things at the centre. All the staff members were very pleased with the feedback from this question and several reported that they were surprised about the appreciation that the parents expressed. We know from previous surveys that the main reason people start coming to our groups is through “word of mouth”. With such positive messages coming from our current families, we feel confident that we will continue to attract new families to the service.

Our third research question was:

“What has been the most memorable time for you here?”

This was quite a challenge for some of the parents. They said that picking a single memory was too hard for them. We tried to encourage them to at least “have a go”, without putting undue pressure on them. Once a few parents had started the “table top talk” then others came back, read those entries and then added their own contributions. Cathy was privileged to be at the table when a young mother wrote the comment about “putting structure into her day-to-day activities”. She looked up from the table with tears in her eyes and said, “I would have lost my children or my husband if we hadn’t got things under control.” When Cathy relayed this to the rest of the staff we also shared tears, as we had not realised this young family was so close to breaking point.

Several of the staff were also unaware of the depth of feelings the parents had about the care and support they receive from us. It has been a learning time for us all and we believe it has enriched our emotional investment and rewards from our work.

The fourth inquiry question was:

“What would you like to see happening around here?”

The parents seemed more able to add quickly to this sheet. The frequent comments about needing more space were endorsed verbally by several other parents as they read and added to the sheets. As a staff it has given us many ideas for directions for our programming in the future.

“Table-Top Talk” has become a regular part of our groups. We will continue to use it as one of the main tools for parent voice and parent opinion collection. We will extend it so that parents can suggest topics, too. We believe it gives the community the opportunity for “generative capacity building”, to improve outcomes for participants, families and communities. (Ball and Pence, 2006)

The parent responses about over-crowding in groups has led us to establish a limited enrolment policy for particular groups. Because this was based on parent views and ideas, we have had only positive feedback from it and our attendance figures have continued to improve. Parents have commented that they appreciate that we responded to their concerns.

Staff have developed a deeper respect for the parents we work with and an appreciation of their view points. They have also learnt much more about each other and their role in a joint team effort. This general deepening of attachment throughout the organisation has led to better engagement and learning for all - children, staff and parents. It certainly is developing many outcomes in terms of “Belonging” in our new framework.

We still feel we don’t know enough about the families who don’t come to our Centre although we know, through other research, that these families really need help to ensure the best outcomes for their children. We don’t know who they are, what they want, how we could meet their needs, or how to make a connection. We don’t know if our team learning strategy is sustainable, or how we can expand this approach to include other service providers who work with us e.g. Health, Families SA etc.

We have all been learners through this process. We wish to acknowledge the great support it has been to have this Practitioner Inquiry framework to motivate and guide us. Having days away from the work place, to talk together about issues and plans, has been empowering and stimulating.

Although we have many more questions, we are sure we have started Port Augusta Children’s Centre for Early Childhood Development and Parenting off in the right direction, on an exciting learning journey.

Reference:

Ball, J. and Pence, A. (2006) *Supporting Indigenous Children’s Development Community-University Partnership*. Vancouver, UBC Press.

The Impact of Playground Design on Play Choices and Behaviours of Pre-School Children

(Part two of a three part series)

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PREAMBLE: In the previous edition of *Reflections*, we presented the foundations of a joint research project between Lady Gowrie Tasmania and researchers from the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. As described in the previous article, this project aims to enhance knowledge about the impact that playground design can have in creating a healthier physical and social environment. In this second article, we present some of the key results related to where and how children are playing in one of the recently renovated Lady Gowrie playgrounds.

Four Lady Gowrie Tasmania Early Childhood Education and Care Centres with very different outdoor playgrounds were profiled in this research project. They varied in terms of their size, the amount of equipment, the quality of natural settings, and the ratio of hard and soft surfaces. In this article, we present some of the key findings from one of centres that has recently been redesigned and renovated. The Battery Point Education and Care Centre playground underwent a major redesign and redevelopment in 2008. At the time the playground was in much need of a general upgrade, however leaders within the organisation were becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of challenge the playground provided for children. This view, coupled with the importance of physical activity as an early intervention strategy for the increased early childhood obesity issues, was the impetus to 'push the boundaries' in respect of playground design in early childhood education and care settings. It was considered that children were increasingly being 'bubble wrapped' and 'wrapped in cotton wool' as a mitigating strategy to risk management - to the detriment of children's developmental needs.

Funding to design the playground was provided by the State Government Department of Health, under the Child Home Injury Prevention Strategy, with the Lady Gowrie organisation funding the development phase. The playground was designed in consultation with key stakeholders – families, educators, regulatory authorities, recognised health and safety authorities and, importantly, the children. The desired outcomes of the project were to:

- provide a playground that supported children's physical and cognitive development
- provide a natural environment by using natural materials as opposed to plastic equipment
- minimise the provision of single use fixed play equipment
- provide a broad range of opportunities to support and encourage children to engage in increased physical activity
- provide a demonstration model for early childhood playground developers
- undertake research/analysis of comparative data to identify the prevalence and type of playground accidents and incidents (previous playground/new playground).

The redeveloped playground was officially opened in late 2008 and has subsequently been awarded the Housing Industry Association Best Outdoor Project in 2009 and in 2010 received the Kidsafe National Playspace Award.

Observations of more than 649 children playing in the Battery Point playground provide strong and conclusive evidence that this playground is offering unique opportunities for play and physical activity. As a starting point, children were very fairly evenly distributed across the whole playground – something not found at the other centres, where children were often congregated in certain areas. Secondly, unlike some of the other Lady Gowrie playgrounds included in this study that tended to favour boys or girls, there were no differences in the numbers and distribution patterns of boys and girls at the Battery Point site.





A key finding to emerge from this research is that the most popular areas at the Battery Point playground were the natural areas: 24% of all children observed in this study were found playing there! The research team noted these natural areas offered play opportunities that were more cooperative, diverse, imaginative and less aggressive than play opportunities offered in traditional play areas. In the natural areas at Battery Point trees, shrubs, rocks and logs defined a variety of places to jump, climb, run, hide and socialise. Moveable, natural materials such as sticks, branches, leaves and stones provided endless opportunities for children to engage in imaginative play, such as building shelters and huts – an appealing and almost universal experience of childhood.

Recent research offers some insight into why these findings may have emerged. These areas are diverse environments where children's imaginations can be continually stimulated by external factors. A mounting body of evidence suggests that children desire natural, complex, challenging and exciting play environments that provide options and choice for play. In light of this desire, it is not surprising that the natural areas of the Battery Point playground were as popular as they were.

Interestingly (and surprisingly), the sand feature at Battery Point was the least popular area of the playground – and was used by 5% of the children. This is in stark contrast to the other playgrounds, where up to 25% of children were observed in the sandpits! Given this finding, perhaps sandpits are 'easy' design solutions when seeking to provide children with constructive/symbolic play opportunities. Children at all centres were observed to be happily playing in them, but the evidence emerging from this study suggests that they may not be children's first choices – as evidenced by the Battery Point finding where children are choosing to use other areas (e.g. natural/green area) to engage in constructive and symbolic play. Sandpits are almost a ubiquitous part of most playgrounds (at home, at pre-school centres, in the community) – it is possible children might get bored with them and, given an alternative, might choose another area as a first choice play spot.

Another noteworthy finding from the Battery Point playground is the relatively limited use of the paved areas. The paved area was notably less popular at Battery Point (only 17% of children observed playing there), as compared to the other playgrounds where up to 50% of the children were playing on the pavement. Perhaps the diverse nature of the Battery Point playground provided children with more opportunities to choose play spaces that were less familiar, more exciting, less barren and less hard. Sadly, playgrounds that are dominated by pavement often tend to favour the play behaviours of boys that want to play in active, rule bound games – often leaving girls and boys who don't want to participate in that kind of play to be relegated to the sidelines, unwilling or unable to play.

These findings, when considered alongside the findings that emerged from the other three playgrounds, present strong evidence that playground design is undeniably influencing the play patterns and behaviours of preschooler children. The innovative, natural and green design of the Battery Point playground is providing exciting opportunities for children to engage in different kinds of play. As a result of these findings, commonly held assumptions around playground design are being challenged. These results are also inviting dialogue among children, parents, early childhood education and care professionals, researchers and policy makers. These are important first steps in providing the best possible play settings for children that stand to maximise their social, emotional, mental and physical well being.

In the next issue of *Reflections*, we look more closely at the findings related to physical activity and design. If any reader would like any further information about this project, please contact Dr. Janet Dymont at the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania in Hobart (janet.dymont@utas.edu.au).

National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE



Spring 2010



Summer 2010



Autumn 2011

Reggio Emilia Australia

Information Exchange

Biennial Conference 2011

*Landscapes of a Hundred Languages :
Possibilities for relating, reflecting,
researching*

14-17 July 2011

Canberra, ACT

E: erin@destination.com.au

W: <http://destination.com.au/reaie/2011>

Early Childhood Conference of Performing Arts 2011

20-21 August 2011

Melbourne, VIC

E: mjdods@optusnet.com.au

The Power of Play National Playgroup Conference 2011

All Together Now

12-14 October 2011

Park Hyatt, Melbourne, VIC

E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au

6th World Environmental Education Congress

Explore, Experience, Educate

19-23 July 2011

Brisbane Convention &

Exhibition Centre

W: www.weec2011.org/Home.aspx

Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity 11

*Inspiring changels : insights,
challenges, hopes and actions*

18-19 November 2011

University of Melbourne, Parkville,
Melbourne, VIC

E: [education-ceiec-
conference@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:education-ceiec-conference@unimelb.edu.au)

NIFTeY Conference

*Children's place on the agenda ...
past, present and future*

28-29 July 2011

Darling Harbour, Sydney, NSW

E: niftey-ccch@conferenceaction.com.au

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.