reflections

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COMMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS
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editorial

Dear Colleagues

Recent media reports quoting the Shadow Minister for Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, Sussan Ley, indicate that should the opposition be elected to Government they would delay key elements of the National Reform Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care. The article also suggests that the sector is opposed to the reforms. While there may be some opposition, many within the sector have advocated for such reforms for many years, and celebrated the Council of Australia Governments commitment to pursuing substantial reforms to improve the quality of early childhood education and care in Australia.

As is the case with any major reform, there will be challenges to be faced during the transition process. Yes there will be 'speed humps' which will require us to slow down, think and perhaps take a different path before continuing on our journey. These challenges should not mean a 'stop' sign! Many within the sector have not taken the view that these challenges are insurmountable or not achievable – they have found ways of addressing them with a solution focused approach and many have already successfully implemented the reforms. This commitment is based on a strong belief in the long term benefits of the reforms for children, and a belief that access to quality early childhood education and care is every child's right.

Furthermore, as the reforms are being phased in until 2020, the focus is on sustainable gradual improvements that support early childhood education and care services to actively work, in their own time, towards achieving the requirements. So, as they say, it is not a race – it is not about being first but rather about lasting the distance!

In this edition of *Reflections*, readers are provided with a variety of articles that demonstrate how services are working to address the reform elements. Niki Buchan's article addresses documentation of children's learning with particular reference to Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee's narrative research tool, Learning Stories. It also refers to Claire Warden's Talking and Thinking Floorbooks, which can be used to inform and create Reggio Emilia inspired projects and displays in early childhood education programs.

Three Queensland Kindergartens share their approach to preparing for the assessment and rating process – all quite different but nevertheless identifying similar challenges. To support a seamless transition from an early childhood setting to the school environment, the Victorian Government introduced a program to support the consistent transfer of information between the two settings. Given that the reforms support a genuine integrated national system, applicable to both care and education settings, such programs can only support the intent of this unified integration.

Reflective practice features heavily in the National Quality Framework and now takes a more dominant role in early childhood education. The concept of collaborative professional learning circles as a tool for articulating reflective practice in one service is shared with readers in this edition.

Other articles also provide readers with perspectives that directly relate and influence the progress towards the reforms. These include a research project identifying increased interactions within integrated programs, peer appraisals to support continuous improvement of educators own performance, forms of assessment to support the new generation of early childhood educators and those furthering their knowledge and skills, and a community project which connected children with their local community.

As evident from these varied articles, the reform elements are being embedded and integrated into service provision in a myriad of ways. This further supports the view that, despite some 'humps', for the sake of Australia's 1.5 million children who access early childhood education and care services, we must not abandon or 'dumb down' increases in quality standards. We must not let this significant opportunity to improve the learning and development for young children disappear.

Until next time.....
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CEO Lady Gowrie Tasmania

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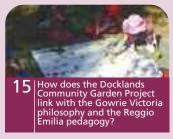
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Assessment – how, why, what is it?

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"Reindeer are birds 'cause' they can fly!" (Tim, 4 years)

This reflects Tim's current thinking and logic, assuming that all birds can fly and that everything that flies is a bird! Educators have the choice to either 'teach' Tim that he is incorrect on both assumptions or, through sensitive adult scaffolding, let him explore, experiment, hypothesise, theorise, problem solve, share ideas with his peers and reach his own conclusions.

Every child is unique. For the educator this could create a teaching nightmare or, it could create the opportunity to explore, share and build on a child's knowledge in a meaningful manner. Of vital importance throughout the learning process is the educational assessment where, not only knowledge, but also skills, understanding, learning styles and motivation are documented. Learning is a journey that should be recorded, shared and valued. Assessments throughout this process are valuable when they are used to plan further learning opportunities. If nothing is done with this new information, then the assessment is of no value!

Documenting a **baseline assessment** records children's initial interest, knowledge and motivation. Once this has been established, **formative assessments** document evidence interpreted by the children and the educators, decide where the learning currently is, where it could go and how best to get there. At the conclusion of the project a **summative assessment** is carried out. This is an evaluation process of the learning of that individual or group. Effective assessment of learning stimulates sustainable learning and influences the environment and opportunities which children are offered.

The detailed documentation of children's learning journeys allows adults and children to reflect on the journey in a manner meaningful to them and their families. In acknowledgement of the vast range of knowledge and experiences that children bring to the group, family language, knowledge and culture should be valued and included in documentation. Children's self esteem and emotional well being increases when they are actively involved in the documentation process, when they can see that their voices, actions and ideas are valued and recorded and that they can influence their learning and environment. Children consulted in this manner will reflect all five of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outcomes, that is, *children have a strong sense of identity, are connected with and contribute to their world, have a strong sense of wellbeing, are confident and involved learners and are effective communicators.*

Effective documentation can be achieved in a number of ways including, Reggio Emilia's large wall panel displays, Claire Warden's Talking and Thinking Floorbooks™, or Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee's Learning Stories. These three documentation forms are popular in Australia, all place a high value on narrative assessment, allow children and families to revisit and reflect on the learning, support in-depth investigations into subjects that really interest children, and inform planning. Adults are seen as the researchers. The evidence that is collected and collated consists of children's and adults' voices (both verbal and non verbal), photographs of the process, children's work, videos and recordings.

In the Reggio Emilia approach educators document the children's work on large panels throughout the classroom. This sometimes occurs spontaneously, although it is usually the result of a pre-planned intent, which could include information determining how particular projects might proceed, data for an educator's research project, or a means of communication for children's rights. Educators observe and assess and then plan the children's learning.

Claire Warden's Talking and Thinking Floorbooks™ are large A2 books used to record the process of the group's learning. Children have ownership of the book, sign their names as the authors and are able to choose, cut and paste photographs. They add their thoughts and ideas directly into their book, can revisit the book at any time and can add new comments after an investigation has been completed. The book is viewed and shared with families or peers at any time. Possible Lines of Development (PLOD) are noted in the Floorbook by the adult from child-initiated ideas, and are used to inform the planning. Curricular links are recorded on a sheet in the back of the Floorbook and links to planning are visible in the book. Additional opportunities may be offered to children through Talking Tubs™ containing real 3D objects and photographs to stimulate thinking and discussion, as well as 3D mind mapping used as a strategy allowing children to make 'visible' connections as part of the documentation process.

Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee from New Zealand developed a narrative research tool called Learning Stories that captures the context of the learning environment, allows assessment of the environment and tends to be written for an individual rather than a group. Learning Stories provide researchers, children and families with a picture of what is really happening for the child in real situations and allow adults to reflect on what could be changed, and what the effect of that change would be. A part of a Learning Story could show a child's progress over time, as well as some possible strategies for educator support. The Learning Story research method considers everything that plays a part in the learning, including the context, environment and the people involved. Future planning is recorded as 'Next Steps' or 'Where to Next'. These Stories can be held in the children's individual portfolios where children and families can access them at any time.

Using these three methods of documentation together allows for a high quality assessment tool. The Talking and Thinking Floorbooks™ form the basis of a child friendly detailed documentation which can also be used to inform and create Reggio inspired wall displays, as well as individual Learning Stories.

Through a child-led investigation, informed through assessment, Tim now knows that all birds have feathers, not all birds can fly and that everything that flies is not necessarily a bird! *"Reindeers got no feathers and wings and birds got feathers."*

For more information:
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Preparing for Assessment and Rating

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At a Mt Gravatt Kindergarten fundraising event, one of the fathers helps Toby to shoot a ball. Parents have played a large part in contributing to the kindergarten community.

From January this year, the National Quality Framework (NQF) has brought all early childhood services under a nationally consistent approach to quality and continual improvement. For many kindergartens participation in a formal quality assurance process with external assessment is a new experience. As state regulatory boards began sending out notification letters for assessment, services have begun preparing for their visit from the Authorised Officer with a mixture of fear and optimism. This article discusses the preparation undertaken by three Queensland Kindergarten services – Alderley, Hillsdon and Mt Gravatt – as they approach assessment for the first time.

All three services commenced their preparation early with a systematic approach to familiarising themselves and educating others in their sites about the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). Strategies have included running focus groups of staff, holding sandpit meetings* with parents prior to collecting their children at the end of the day and developing posters and newsletters for staff, families and management committees. Mt Gravatt Community Kindergarten also worked with children, collecting their ideas and including them in decision making about curriculum development for their program. This process has included discussing various areas of the EYLF and using a computer program called 'Wordle' (available at www.wordle.net) that makes keywords from the children's ideas more or less prominent in a word bubble, depending on how often the words are mentioned.

Each service's Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) was developed using a rigorous self assessment process of each Quality Area that involved key stakeholders reflecting individual contextual factors, for example, one kindergarten had to induct eight new members into their management committee, as well as introduce them to the NQF. All staff were involved in processes to review current practices and critically analyse the direction the service was moving in, with some of this work undertaken collaboratively at staff meetings, as well as staff reading and working in their own time.

One service also involved their management committee in this critical review process, while the other two kindergartens engaged their management committees through review of the draft QIP. Their committee's suggestions were then incorporated into the version that was submitted to the regulatory authority.

Hillsdon Community Kindergarten reported that they had really valued the reflective discussions they had undertaken about their pedagogy in the process of developing their QIP. They have made a commitment in their QIP to continue to focus on pedagogical conversations at their staff meetings, rather than the usual focus on housekeeping tasks that could be done in other ways.

Alderley Community Kindergarten found the process of self-assessment a very reassuring process for the staff team. They were able to see how they were currently fulfilling many of the requirements of the NQS and EYLF and, in addition, were able to develop a planned approach to making identified improvements. As an added bonus, the hard work involved in establishing new systems and structures to support the writing of the QIP has given the team an optimistic outlook on future assessment preparation. They feel they are in a position to build on what is already happening, as opposed to creating something new.

Each of the three kindergartens has had quite different experiences in the preparation for undergoing assessment, but there have been similar implications and challenges for each of their leaders in planning for and leading change. In the next issue of *Reflections*, a follow up article will explore some of the challenges that these leaders have encountered in introducing the NQF to their teams, and preparing for assessment.

The National Quality Framework has been met with support from the Early Childhood sector in developing a nationally unifying approach for a sector that has traditionally been segregated by service type. Australian Early Childhood Education and Care is taking its first steps into a brave new world and as we learn to walk a new way (with great optimism but also some fear of stumbling), we too have to become learners with an openness of mind to the possibilities and opportunities that such a change presents in shaping our profession.

* Pre-arranged but informal outdoor meetings around the sandpit.

Assessment in Children's Services Qualifications

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Assessment in Early Childhood Education and Care has been a rather hot topic in the last few years, in particular since the introduction of the *Belonging, Being and Becoming; The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) and *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (State of Victoria (DEECD), 2009). The publication, *Assessment in the Early Years* (Russell, 2010:3) offers a definition of assessment,

Assessment is a common term in education, but it can have different meanings in different contexts. At the broadest level, all assessment is finding out about a child's learning. The reasons for assessment; the time; the method and how assessment information is recorded, all impact on the effectiveness of the process.

The same is true when assessing students undergoing professional qualifications, under the national VET system. In the area of Early Childhood Education, the qualifications of greatest interest to us are:

• Certificate III in Children's Services
• Diploma of Children's Services (Early Childhood Education and Care) and
• Advanced Diploma of Children's Services.

Assessment in the Early Years (2010: 3) outlines three main ways we all use the term 'assessment'. These are:

• Assessment *for* learning
• Assessment *as* learning
• Assessment *of* learning

These three forms of assessment are equally important in fostering our new generation of early childhood educators, as it is for those professionals extending and furthering their skills and knowledge. Assessment *of* learning is the most common term identified with adult learners completing tertiary studies. This has been described as *summative* assessment, usually completed at the end of a task, or unit of study - "It is designed to provide evidence of achievement" (Katz, 2006:55). Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) certainly use this form of assessment to determine the competence of their students against the standards set in the relevant Training Package. These standards are set out in the Performance Criteria and statements of Essential Skills and Knowledge, and included in the Unit Descriptors for each "subject" within the qualification.

The second type of assessment is that of assessment *for* learning. Here the emphasis is on **formative** judgments, which form a useful investigative tool for educators - to find out how much a student knows and can do, along with what gaps there may be. This helps to determine what the next step might be for that individual. It assists us to decide on what strategies might be used to help that student (or child) move forward with their skill and knowledge development - "when this process is documented it forms the basis for individual records and planning, and can provide rich information about learning and teaching" (Russell, 2010: 3). An example of this, for adult learners, is the records kept for individual students, by their teachers and assessors. These record the student's progress

toward the qualification goals and outcomes. This acts in a similar way to children's individual records in that it informs the planning of the 'next steps' for that student, the basis of individual mentoring to increase skills, knowledge and attitudes. As in early childhood education, this works best when all stakeholders are informed about this progress and the strategies to be used. The stakeholders could include the student, the employer and/or workplace mentor, parents (where the student is under 18), and other support personnel identified by the student.

However, proactive and responsive RTOs will also utilise assessment *as* learning principles. Just as with children in their educational programs, RTOs place emphasis on the learning that occurs during the assessment process. An example of this may be the common requirement of a student undergoing Early Childhood qualifications – to design, implement and evaluate a learning experience for the children with whom the student is working. The intention of such an assessment task is that the student will learn from the requirement. In order for this learning to be optmised, students need to be given timely, meaningful, informative and honest feedback and advice on the success of the experience, both for the children, and for the student. It is also imperative for students to develop the ability to critically reflect on their own performance and on the learning that has occurred, for themselves and for the children.

In addition to these assessment principles, RTOs are required to assess their students according to AQTF (Australian Quality Training Framework) Principles of Assessment. These are: Fairness, Flexibility, Reliability and Validity. Each qualification also has a set of Employability Skills attached to it. These cover areas such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning and technology. At any Certificate III level such skills are determined to be basic, allocating responsibility for self-management "within the scope of their own role ... in a limited range of (known) situations", or guided by "relevant guidelines and protocols". In other words, there is an expectation that graduates of any Certificate III level qualification will "undertake mainly routine work" with guidance from more knowledgeable others, if not with direct supervision. Obviously, as the qualification level elevates, expectations of increased autonomy and ability in each of these areas also increases. Advanced Diploma graduates, for example, should be able to "apply specialized knowledge in a range of contexts to

undertake advanced skilled or paraprofessional work"(AQF Council, 2011).

So, how can you help foster the development of a new generation of Early Childhood Educators? Our Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (ECA, 2006) provides some practical guidance in this area. Provide students with opportunities - support placement requests where possible; encourage students to complete their practical requirements; provide honest, formative feedback in a timely manner and mentor your students. Most of all, the greatest gift you can give students is to accept their diversity, acknowledge their strengths while supporting them as they work on things they need to improve, and recognize the little steps forward - with your encouragement these may become giant leaps. Assist students to become 'reflective practitioners'. Principle 5 of Belonging, Being and Becoming; The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Dept of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009: 13) states, "Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice". Learning does not stop once we have achieved success in acquiring a qualification. Learning is a lifelong journey. Support students by fostering an atmosphere of self-reflection by role modeling this vital Practice Principle - "Educators continually seek ways to build their professional knowledge and develop learning communities" (Dept of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009: 13). Ultimately, we all play a major role in the future development of our profession. To quote Sue Dockett (2011: 8),

Ethical assessment generates and shares information in ways that acknowledge children's (and student's) strengths as well as areas of challenge. It recognizes the diversity of children's (and student's) experiences and celebrates children's range of achievement and areas of potential. Ethical assessment looks to the future as well as recognising the present and reflecting the past.

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Supporting Continuous Performance Improvement Through the Use of Peer Appraisals

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Element 7.2.2
The performance of educators, co-ordinators and staff members is evaluated and individual development plans are in place to support performance improvement. (ACECQA, 2001: 182)

Under the National Quality Standard the performance of educators will be a focus of Authorised Officers when conducting their assessment and rating visits. Not only will the performance of educators be observed, so too will the processes services undertake to implement and evaluate performance improvement processes. During assessment and rating visits, Authorised Officers may engage in conversations with educators about how the performance improvement process enhances learning and further development; how the performance improvement process identifies strengths and areas for development of educators; and what processes are in place to ensure all educators receive ongoing feedback about their performance (Guide to the National Quality Standard, 2011: 182). One way of implementing a robust performance improvement process is through incorporating a peer appraisal practice that focuses on continuous performance improvement within the service. The incorporation of peer feedback in performance improvement processes is often shied away from by services but, if it is developed in a holistic way, it can strengthen the whole service's commitment to providing high quality education and care services.

Research on the benefits of peer appraisal highlight that by collecting data from multiple perspectives, especially colleagues, collegial support is enhanced, along with professional lifelong learning (Wilkins & Shin, 2010; Cintrón & Flaniken, 2011). The inclusion of multiple perspectives during an appraisal process provides a complete picture of an educator's performance as peers are often the most frequent observers of the educator's work and are affected by the performance (Drexler, Beehr & Stetz, 2001: 334-335). Often, the educator's team leader or line manager does not see all aspects of their work and peer feedback can provide additional, informed perspective and in-depth information which would otherwise be unavailable or unobservable (Drexler, Beehr & Stetz 2001; Roberts 2003).

In addition to the inclusion of multiple perspectives, Dominick, Reilly and Mcgourty (1997: 510) state that "peer ratings provide individuals with an opportunity to reflect on their own behaviour and to establish normative standards and personal improvement objectives". So, not only do peers provide feedback to colleagues, they also provide fellow educators with the opportunity to reflect on their performance, to develop a framework for understanding their behaviour in the context of the service, and to focus their attention on how well they are exhibiting certain qualities. Through this process of self-reflection, educators are able to maintain or improve their work performance (Drexler, Beehr & Stetz 2001; Dominick, Reilly & Mcgourty 1997). Introducing performance qualities to educators within a service through a peer performance appraisal process also communicates certain behaviours and qualities that are important and valued by the service (Dominick, Reilly & Mcgourty, 1997: 515). Through being involved in the peer performance appraisal process, and being introduced to the behaviours and qualities that are valued by the service, educators have opportunities to engage in reflective practice and set goals that will enhance the level of education and care being provided within their service.

However, for a peer appraisal process to really have an effect on continuous performance improvement, it is important that educators are involved in the development of the process. In order for educators to feel acceptance and ownership of the process, collaboration is essential in the design, the performance criteria and rating procedures. The process also needs to be relevant, meaningful and contextual to the service (Cintrón &Flaniken, 2011: 31-32). When educators are involved in the process, they feel more confident and comfortable. With a transparent process they know what to expect when they are invited to provide feedback to a colleague.

The incorporation of peer appraisals can promote reflection and collaboration of educators within an education and care service and, when used as a pedagogical approach, it can promote the professional development, confidence and growth of an educator (Wilkins & Shin 2010). When educators are continually reflecting on their performance and the performance of others, they are creating a community of learners that encourages open and honest feedback.

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Articulating Reflective Practice: Engaging in Collaborative Conversations

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Meaningful, reflective conversations can sustain and nourish us. They can raise individual and collective consciousness. Above all else they involve a discussion of values. This is at the heart of the improvement process.

(Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998: 189)

Reflective practice has certainly taken a more dominant role in early childhood education in recent years, not only due to the direction of theoretical perspectives, but also with the emphasis on new curriculum and legislative frameworks.

Reflective practice features heavily in the National Quality Framework. Whether working in long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, pre-prep or kindergarten services, directors, service managers and nominated supervisors need to examine the strategies which have been put in place to encourage collaborative conversations among staff, and look closely at ways to enable educators to confidently articulate their practice.

One vehicle that has proven to be particularly useful for verbalising reflective practice in our services, is the concept of the **Collaborative Professional Learning Circles** (CPLCs). CPLCs enable us to come together with other educators on a monthly basis to share knowledge and expertise, reflect on pedagogical practice, and explore new ideas and challenges. In these sessions, everyone has a place at the table, with new graduates and teaching veterans bringing different perspectives and making the conversation richer by sharing a diversity of perceptions and ideas.

In addition to these gatherings, our service managers also aim to implement their own strategies to promote positive change in our early learning environments.

In the following 'conversation' one of our service managers, Cassie, shares the thinking and planning behind her leadership style. She describes how she enables collaborative practices by creating a safe space for sharing perspectives. Colleagues are viewed as valuable resources with unique knowledge, experience and ideas. This, in turn, builds rapport not only within the team, but also across the broader spectrum of services, and strengthens the concept of unity and shared vision across all the staff. Once this foundation has been established, educators can then take the next step in their reflective process, making the move from introspective documented reflection, to a reflection that is shared and articulated amongst the team as a whole.

If I was to describe the service I work in, I'd like to think I could call it warm, calm and homely. I like it to be interesting, but not overwhelming. I choose quality over quantity. I'd also like to think that this helps to create an environment where people feel comfortable - comfortable around others, as well as comfortable to be themselves.

When educators develop this level of ease, they begin to show the different facets that make them who they are. We aim to encourage educators to share their thoughts and beliefs, the areas they consider to be their strengths, their personal interests and the types of activities that they enjoy doing. Acknowledging and respecting the various skills that team members bring to work each day not only boosts their self-esteem and feelings of worth and value, but it also promotes an appreciation for diversity and strengthens the way in which people connect.

The educators in my service prefer to communicate verbally rather than in a written form. This isn't to say that we don't use any written styles of communication - we still have staff memos and noticeboards in the staffroom, as well as reflective diaries for team communication within each room, and individual journals for educators to use as reflective tools. However, we find conversing with people to be the most effective way of communicating quickly and clearly. For this reason, and because everyone in this sector is short on time, we aim to support educators by creating opportunities for conversations to take place.

Our staff room has two couches that face each other to provide opportunities for relaxed discussion in a calm environment. Our staff meetings are structured so that after we all gather initially to touch upon service issues, we then split up into room teams and allocate time to converse about aspects that are relevant to our own programs. We also have time regularly allocated for me to visit the rooms during a quiet time in their program. This enables educators to touch base and reflect upon how the program is progressing, how interests and needs can be extended upon, how intentional teaching focuses could be furthered, or how environments and spaces for learning can be developed to make them even more rich and stimulating.

I try to encourage a culture of inquiry by empowering educators to research proposals themselves when they approach me with new ideas. If we decide to take on new challenges as a team, positive recognition is always given to the person who started the project.

We try to really share ideas and commit to developing as a community of learners where all educators see each other as valuable resources with specialised knowledge and skills they can tap into. We approach each other for advice, bounce ideas off each other and actively seek out people who might specialise in something which will help us with a project - whether it's sewing, computer skills, reading sheet music, landscaping, experience in the field of additional needs, other languages, an interest in literacy or accountancy.

Everyone has something special to offer, everyone brings a different perspective and, by sharing, everyone benefits. It also builds up the respect and trust for one another which is essential to have as a foundation when educators critically reflect together on aspects relating to teaching practices, planning and documentation, and interactions with children, families and colleagues.

Another service manager, Kylie, shares her journey towards creating a culture of inquiry. Kylie describes the process of verbally sharing experiences, challenges and successes within her team. This process of challenging ideas and testing the boundaries of educational methodologies becomes commonplace and begins to build a culture of respect as team members are seen as co-learners and researchers. Kylie feels that it is through this sense of questioning in a safe and supportive environment that we are led to develop an attitude of inquiry, and a commitment to continual growth and development in our teaching practices.

I think a lot of people are nervous about approaching other educators to discuss practice, or ask questions about the bigger issues. I see my role as a service manager to facilitate these reflective conversations by giving educators the tools to feel more confident to have these conversations.

When people feel listened to, and their opinions valued, relationships deepen, trust builds and the potential for smaller problems to manifest into more complicated ones decrease. I don't think effective communication is just about the ability to deliver a clear message, it is also an opportunity to better understand another person's point of view. When people feel informed and are working towards the same goals, the team is strengthened from within.

I also model. I try to be out of the office and in the rooms as often as I can, to play, to interact and to observe. When educators see me in the rooms, they know I'm connected to the service, and that I'm aware of what's genuinely happening in their programs. While I'm there, I'll pose questions and encourage them to do the same. This gives them the opportunity to voice their opinions and their perspectives, and also provides practice in using professional language and responding in thoughtful ways to the type of questioning which will take place during the National Quality Standard assessment. I find the questions in the actual document listed under the "Assessors may discuss..." section of each element to be particularly useful. Questioning in this way encourages educators to think about different ways of documenting and assessing learning, and allows them to articulate the diverse ways in which we as educators approach learning outcomes.

It has taken me about two years to get to where I am now, as a reflective practitioner who actively encourages educators to critique practice at a service level. With those who have been long-standing team members, we already have a very solid, trusting relationship where foundations for reflective practice have been well

established. We constantly ask each other questions, we bounce ideas off each other, we'll seek each other out to challenge stereotypes or to simply ask, "What do you think about this....?"

For the newer educators, I strive to maintain open communication. My door is always open, and if I can't discuss something straight away, I'll schedule in a time, on the same day wherever possible, so that each educator knows that their concerns are important to me. If the issue is about practice or educational programs, I'll redirect the discussion to the educators involved, and empower both parties by providing them with the words needed to express themselves in a professional and respectful manner. More often than not, no follow-up is needed because the matter is resolved and educators feel satisfied with the results. I reassure them that it comes down to the way in which you approach a person, so that the person feels respected, not ambushed. It's about listening to understand, not to find flaws, about bringing assumptions to the table for inspection and discussion, and about discovering new possibilities.

At the start of the year, especially, there are new children, new teams, new educators and new relationships with families. Routines are being trialled and established and often rooms can get busy, especially during transition and mealtimes. If something in the room isn't working efficiently, it's important that it's addressed so that educators can have those collaborative discussions about improving the program and moving forward in the same direction together.

Everyone needs to feel heard, and to feel that his or her voice has worth and value within the service. It's about finding that balance and approaching any discussion in a professional and respectful manner that maintains harmony across the team.

We are confident that valuing and developing reflective conversation practices will strengthen our familiarity with and understanding of the National Quality Framework. This, in turn, will be reflected throughout the assessment process. Our educators will feel confident in discussing how and why we do what we do in our services, articulating how our philosophy transcends into practice and is reflective of each individual service community, whilst still sitting with the foundations of our organisation as a whole.

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How does the Docklands Community Garden Project link with the Gowrie Victoria philosophy and the Reggio Emilia pedagogy?

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Art to me is a humanitarian act, and I believe that there is a responsibility that art should somehow be able to affect mankind, to make the world a better place.

Jeff Koons (interview with Klaus Ottmann, 1986)

The Docklands Community Garden Project was a unique collaboration between Lend Lease, City of Melbourne, Places Victoria and Gowrie Victoria (Docklands). In the project the children at Gowrie Victoria (Docklands) were asked by these businesses to visually represent their view of the local community through painting a series of plywood boards. The idea of what to paint on the boards was a joint negotiation between the children of each room and their educators. This was conducted by open discussions, questioning, planning collaboratively and offering children a range of choices about what might be relevant and suitable for the project. The boards were completed, then arranged by Places Victoria and are now on display in the Docklands Community Garden (in an 'annex' near Victoria Green Park). However, this authentic display of children's work is more than just about large organisations forming an association. Rather, it represents the opportunity for young children to develop knowledge of, and respect for, community history, and to take an active part in the local community.

The Gowrie Victoria philosophy acknowledges the important educational links that are made when children are connected with their community. Instead of viewing young children as passive observers within their surroundings, the culture here provides them with a range of opportunities to interact as active citizens. By encouraging decision-making, questioning, and by role modelling appropriate social interactions, we support children to express their opinions on matters which affect them.

This perception of the child as being an active participant who is able to make links in the local community is directly aligned with the Reggio Emilia pedagogy of early childhood practice. Reggio Emilia is a small city in the north of Italy where an educational pedagogy emerged based on socio-cultural and constructivist theories of child development (Giamminuti, 2011). Based on a view of children as social, competent and intelligent individuals who learn through active participation, it has a particular focus on the child's capability to partake in democratic decision-making, and to consider personal responsibility within a civic community (Giamminuti, 2011).

Although this ideology originated far from the streets of inner city Melbourne, it invites educators, children and their families internationally to consider the importance of positioning oneself in time, history and place, through creating a collective sense of locality. And beyond that, it highlights the significance of conceptualizing living early childhood settings as places that truly belong to children (Giamminuti, 2011).

Therefore, if we look at the Docklands Community Garden Project as a whole, it has given children a positive way to actively participate and consider the wider community. This experience has physically highlighted just how the Gowrie philosophy and the Reggio Emilia pedagogy can work simultaneously to achieve what we believe is an important aspect of a high quality educational program for young children.

The benefits of this experience for the children include a concept of locality and a sense of pride and ownership of this, as well as a shift of perception about their roles in society - no longer is the child seen and not heard. We would encourage you, as a parent or educator, to consider this perspective of children, have discussions with them and the wider community about the roles and responsibilities that young children could have in a local and global context, and to simply ponder what amazing things might be produced were we to allow children's voices to be heard.

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Transition at Carlton North Primary School

Handling transitions is something we all do in our own lives and a key element in planning our educational programs for children and families. In Victoria children are eligible to start primary school at 5 years of age. The importance of the transition from an early childhood setting to the school environment has been acknowledged and supported by the State Government. As part of the overall improvements in relation to quality in the early years, the Victorian Government has implemented 'Transition Learning and Development Statements' to support the consistent transfer of information between the early childhood setting and the school environment. This provides an opportunity for children, families and early childhood professionals to collectively create a record of each child's progression of learning and development. The statements provide insights into children's current understandings, their learning styles and dispositions and this information assists primary school teachers to plan for each child's continued learning and development.

Schools and early childhood services work together to ensure the transition process is valuable and relevant for each community.

At Carlton North Primary School (CNPS) we have identified transition as a goal within our Strategic Plan. Our aim is 'To improve student pathways and transitions into, out of and within CNPS. To ensure continuous effective learning and support for all students and their families.'

We believe it is our responsibility to make students' transition to formal schooling as smooth and enjoyable as possible. There are four components that form the CNPS Transition Program. They are as follows:

Transition Statements

Transition Statements are a key component, supporting students' successful transitioning from kindergarten to school. At CNPS these statements are highly valued as they enable teachers to gain an insight into the whole child - strengths, needs and learnings. Our preference is to foster an understanding of the child through the Transition Statements, discussions with the kindergarten teacher and visits to the kindergarten. We find this provides a full picture of the child and allows us to personalise the welcome to our school community for both child and parent.

Prep Transition Program

We provide a Prep Transition Program that gives students and their families a sense of security and the opportunity for social, emotional and physical adjustment.

We offer the opportunity for kindergartens to come and visit our school and have a positive experience in the school environment. The kindergarten children can play on our playground, visit our library and have a snack in our hall. The Prep teachers visit the kindergartens to meet the teachers and children. It is a wonderful opportunity to observe the children engaging in their kindergarten environment.

Our formal Transition Program consists of three sessions. In this time, students experience Prep learning spaces, participate in learning activities, play with other students and make new friends. They also get to meet their 'buddies'. The buddy program at CNPS connects a grade 5/6 student with a new Prep student. The older students participate in learning experiences with the Prep students and help them to settle into the new school environment, to understand the school routines, and to make new friends. The Prep teachers use this time to observe the learning behaviours of the Prep children to better understand their strengths and needs.

We also provide new parents with a booklet and information sessions during the Transition Program.

We run a Welcome Night at the beginning of the school year that enables parents to gain knowledge about the school and ask questions of staff members and existing CNPS parents.

Another initiative that we are excited to offer is a Parent Mentor Program, in which we connect existing CNPS parents with new parents. Families can form links during the summer holidays and be a source of valuable information regarding everyday school life. New families are also welcomed into our school community via the school website.

Project with Gowrie

To assist with the smooth transition to primary school, a successful project we have adopted in partnership with Gowrie Victoria is the "Picture Storybook Project." Our Grade 5 students work together with the children in the kindergarten program at Gowrie Victoria to produce a shared picture storybook. The children spend time collectively developing ideas, crafting stories and producing illustrations.

This project aims to build community links and leadership capacity in our students, whilst nurturing meaningful connections between both groups of children. Particularly for the children in the kindergarten program, it is about developing their confidence and sense of belonging to a new school community. There is opportunity for the kindergarten children to visit our educational setting and demystify any myths about that place called "school" and to familiarise themselves with the classroom environment.

Yarra Network Initiative

The K-S Yarra Network supports communication and learning between kindergartens and schools. It brings together early childhood professionals to discuss, share and learn about innovative ideas and practices. This directly supports transition by strengthening the lines of communication and builds relationships between kindergartens and schools. We are able to learn about the many different quality programs operating in kindergartens and schools that directly support successful transition.

The notion of seamless transition is something that we value, support and promote. It is these practical initiatives that allow us to provide authentic opportunities for children to develop their sense of community. As part of our continual improvement processes, we gather feedback and use it to improve our program. Feedback regarding our transition has been very positive and would indicate that what we are doing is making a difference for children.

Integrated Infant and Toddler Programs

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Australian early childhood services are currently in a period of change to meet a range of new legal and Standard benchmarks that are intended to improve the quality and consistency of education and care offered. The National Quality Framework is being used in many ways to improve practice. This article describes a research project that was undertaken to monitor and evaluate a major change in structure in one centre – specifically the grouping of children in the first three years of life. Historically, in the long day care programs at Gowrie SA, babies and toddlers have been separated by age - birth to 18 months, 18 months to 2.5 years and 2.5 to 3.5 years. From January 2011, Gowrie SA moved to integrated infant and toddler programs. This program change was carried out in order to minimise transitions for children and families, to create smaller group sizes in order to reduce stress for children and educators, and to improve overall quality.

In this study four main areas were investigated - the length of time educators spent directly interacting with children, the depth of documentation used to assess children's learning, the length of family and educator interactions at drop off and collection times, and family and educator perspectives about integrated programs.

The length of time educators spent interacting with children

An overwhelming body of research demonstrates that the quality of the relationships formed between educators and children in the very early years can have a significant impact on children's development (Honig, 2002), and the time spent in interactions is critical to such relationships forming. In our study we found that smaller group sizes (particularly for children from 18 months to 3 years) enabled educators to spend more time in relationship with children, which was likely to lead to more consistent and deeper attachments. Using video footage and jottings data, we compared the length of time educators spent directly interacting with children before and after the change to integrated programs. We found that the percentage of time educators were interacting with children in play, learning and routines was statistically significantly higher for the integrated program. For segregated age groupings the minimum and maximum percentages of time educators spent interacting with children ranged between 72.3% and 87% respectively. For integrated age groupings the minimum and maximum percentages of time educators spent interacting with children ranged between 86.28% and 95.72%.

Documentation

It was expected that having a smaller number of children spread across a larger developmental range would allow educators greater opportunities to more deeply understand children's motivations and development, so they could provide programming opportunities that would better extend children's interests. Our research compared the documentation in the form of learning stories collected by educators before and after the change to integrated programs. Once the learning stories were analysed for quality using nine criteria, we found that, statistically, the documentation quality was significantly higher in the integrated programs. These findings demonstrate that within an integrated program, educators may have opportunities to become more knowledgeable about children, and as a result be more reflective and intentional when recording children's learning (Carter, 2010).

Parent-educator interactions at drop off/collection times

The informal communication opportunities during children's drop off to, and collection from, the early childhood setting are critical times for communication between educators and families (Duncan et al, 2006). It would be expected that continuity of care enhances relationships between families and educators, which is likely to lead to deeper shared understandings and reciprocal partnerships. We compared the quality and length of communication and non-verbal interactions with families, particularly during peak drop off and collection, between the two program types. We found that when age groupings were integrated, the length of time educators and families spent interacting at these times was statistically significantly longer.

Educator and family perspectives

Change can be a challenging process. In order for the change of programs to be successful, it was important that families and educators were involved participants throughout the process. As part of the research, the perspectives of families and educators were sought and recorded prior to, and after, the program change. It is likely that inviting families and educators to be involved in the initial discussions about a change to integrated groupings in our infant and toddler programs, as well as providing opportunities for feedback about the integration of the programs, has supported the overall process.

Conclusion

The National Quality Framework has provided a context within which education and care services can improve practice. The first three years of life are critical to long term outcomes for children in health, behaviour and the capacity to learn (McCain, Mustard & Shankar, 2007). This research provides initial evidence that integrated groupings of very young children, coupled with primary caregiving practices, may be a very worthwhile direction for reform in this area. Over the coming editions of *Reflections* we will explore our integrated programs in more depth.

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National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE

The Gowrie (QLD) Inc National Conference
Are We There Yet? Reflecting on Practice and the National Quality Framework
International Keynote Speaker - Professor Ferre Laevers
28-29 September 2012
Bardon Conference Centre, Qld
W: www.gowrieqld.com.au

Early Childhood Australia's 2012 National Conference
Consulting the Compass - defining directions
3-6 October 2012
Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre, WA
W: www.ecaconference.com.au/

Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc
Keeping the infant in mind: cherishing, connecting and containing
11-13 October 2012
Stamford Grand Adelaide Hotel, SA
W: www.sapmea.asn.au/aaimhi2012

2012 NAEYC Annual Conference and Expo
Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the 21st Century
7-10 November 2012
Atlanta, Georgia, USA
W: www.naeyc.org/conference/

QEC 7th International Conference
Connecting with Families: through Community, Culture and Collaboration
15-16 November 2012
The Sebel Albert Park, Melbourne, VIC
W: www.qec.org.au/

Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity 12
Troubling truths: bridging divides for equity
16-17 November 2012
The University of Melbourne, VIC
W: www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/ceiec/

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