

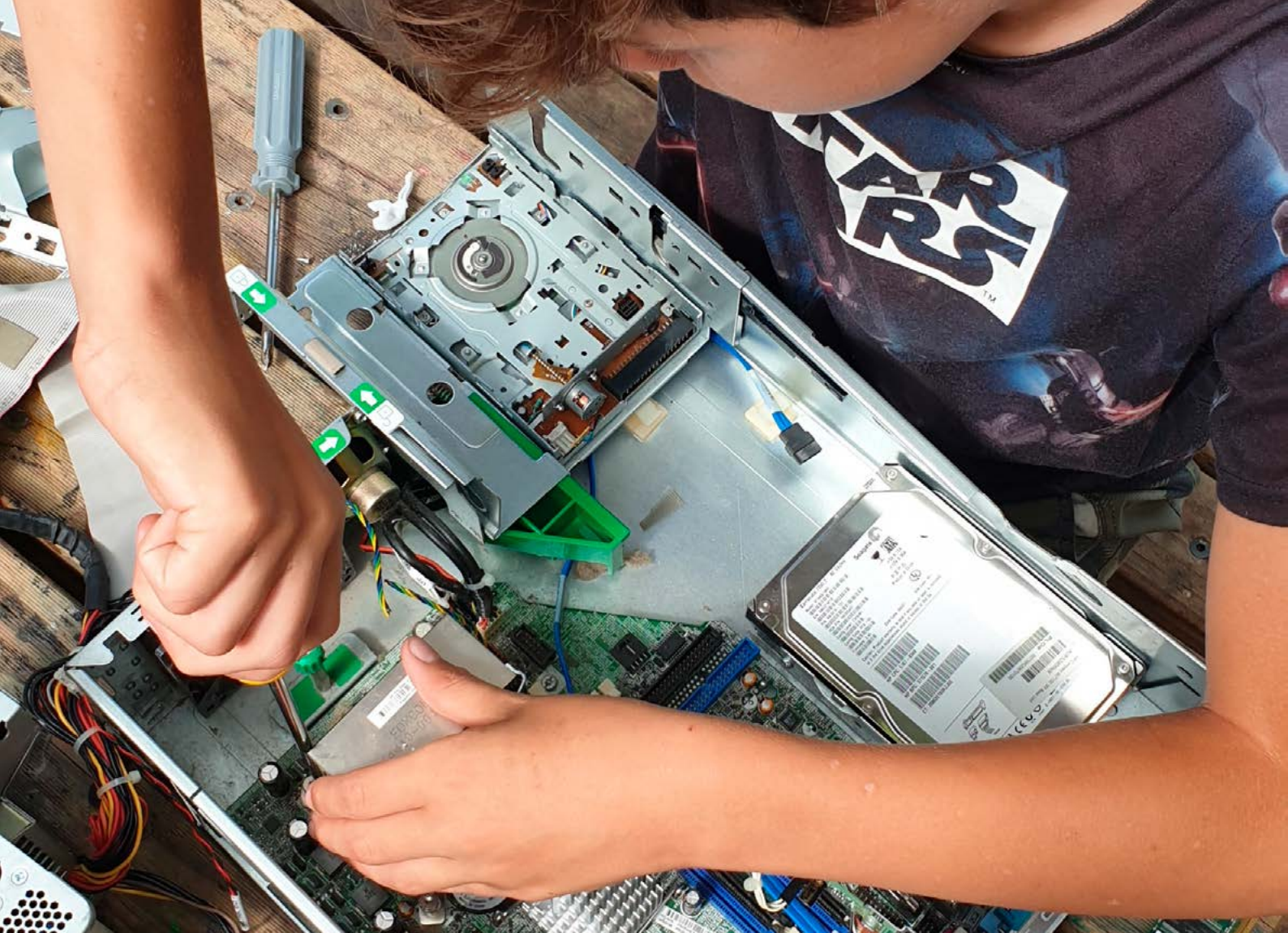
reflections

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YOU HAVE TO BE VERY BRAVE FROM A DINOSAUR YOU KNOW - RE-IMAGINING OSHC PROGRAMS AT LADY GOWRIE TASMANIA

Billie Cowell – Lady Gowrie Tasmania

“If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then, you are an excellent leader.”

Dolly Parton

Often maligned and mis-named as the ‘poor cousin’ of education, now more than ever, Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) is playing an increasingly vital role in the lives of children and their families. This year, when Tasmanian schools moved to remote learning in response to the COVID 19 pandemic, OSHC programs continued to operate, providing care for children of essential service workers. Under normal circumstances, in addition to before and after school care, when there are public holidays, school holidays and student free days, it’s OSHC that steps in to offer supportive and nurturing experiences for children.

Across time, community expectations of OSHC have changed. This is reflected in the Strong Partnerships initiative, which was developed in 2018 by The Department of Education, Tasmania, in close consultation with the Tasmanian education and care sector. The Strong Partnerships Framework, which provides a range of tools and resources across seven domains, demonstrates a strong and shared commitment to children. This commitment suggests we are now entering a *golden age* for OSHC, with its legitimacy gaining ground.

With strengthened community and school expectations for children come increased expectations for the OSHC sector to deliver fluid school to care behaviour support plans, community involvement schemes, complex and rich vacation care programs and the sustained delivery of high quality education, as seen through the lens of *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*. So where does this leave our OSHC teams and their leaders with their professional development? How can OSHC leaders continue to inspire and motivate their

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teams to “dream more, learn more, do more and become more”?

Earlier this year, Lady Gowrie Tasmania OSHC team leaders and managers were invited to participate in a project with Gowrie Training and Consultancy. Initial workshops, designed to strengthen connection and focus across the leadership team, addressed shared areas of professional interest, including communication, environments and leadership. Each workshop was followed by a series of online meetings, where team leader's perceptions were further challenged, around everything from afternoon conversations with parents to the way in which documentation was managed for program enrichment. In due course, we all agreed to be brave and turn the mirror towards our own professional practices and spaces.

With the gradual easing of COVID 19 restrictions, Gowrie Training & Consultancy was able to venture out into the community to see Lady Gowrie Tasmania OSHC programs in action, engage in reflective conversations and look at pedagogical documentation. These visits led to further questions and added layers of professional development complexity to the project.

As we moved through the project, ‘environments’ took centre stage. Were our environments reflective of best practice? Were our environments inspiring curiosity and playfulness? Were our environments supportive of the complexities that go hand in hand with working in what is sometimes a *tricky* space?

When speaking with the educators, we would often hear the reasons as to why they *couldn't* and reasons as to why they *didn't* but rarely did we hear stories of where they had *tried, reflected and tried again*. Limitations on

space, storage, rolling in and rolling out of halls and classrooms, lack of capacity to be able to really make a space feel like their own, all of the obstacles in the way, both perceived and real, over time had become barriers to bravery. One educator, reluctant to consider change, commented, “What if it doesn't work?” My response to him?

“You'll never do a whole lot unless you're brave enough to try.”

Dolly Parton again!

And besides, don't we owe it to the children and families we support to try? To at least be a little brave?

Scott Gibson, from Gowrie Training & Consultancy is a practical, hands on coach, and it was his approach to service visits, along with a thoughtful session devoted to exploring materials and their potential for enriching OSHC environments, that encouraged our OSHC leaders and educators to work towards overcoming their barriers, to *try, reflect and try again*.

“What I've realized,” one educator said, “is that I'm actually afraid. What if something were to happen, you know? I'm not sure I *am* brave enough to try changing up the environment so much. And how do I find the space and the time to do this stuff?” This was a profound reflective moment for the educator as she examined her (perceived) professional limitations and the (perceived) limitations of the space in which she worked.

“We could totally do that ...” another of my educators murmured to me, holding a pile of loose parts and tinkering tools in her hands. “...we could set up a table



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and have an educator there to guide the children and they would love this! We could *totally* do it!" There it was, the spark of imagination, the first glimpse of bravery. This ripple of conversation spread through the room and continued in team meetings and informal conversations in the weeks that followed. Some educators continued to be confronted with practices and environmental inclusions they saw as dangerous, like loose parts, ropes and fire, yet others were increasingly inspired to get started.

Scott's service visits saw the boot of his car laden with ropes, tarpaulins, gears, pulleys, natural fibres, boxes of ancient keyboards and phones - a traveling treasure trove of exploration, fine motor manipulation and inquiry rich invitations to play, build, assemble and disassemble. "It was great!" a service team leader said to me, brimming with enthusiasm. "I knew this is what I wanted to offer the children but I didn't know how. You don't just dump this stuff on a table and walk away. You have to be willing to play, have a chat and just be that role model they need." She talked about how excited she was to see Scott pull up, the buzz amongst the children as they slung ropes over low hanging branches of the trees in the school playground, and how the children worked together to create simple machines as a team. "It was so easy. But like you said, we just have to be brave enough to do it."

Two weeks later, when visiting the service, I encountered a floor with a path across it made from squashed cardboard boxes, "Watch out!" some children cried as I strayed from the path "The floor is LAVA!" I jumped back onto the boxes. How foolish of me to ignore the environment around me, to not be informed by the clues and cues being given by the arrangement of the resources. How could I have ignored the towering city of

shoe boxes to my right, the pit of angry dinosaurs to my left, surrounded by a sturdy barrier of braided wool, tangled ropes and soda water bottles? "You have to be very brave from a dinosaur you know", one of the kinder children whispered to me, taking me by the hand and helping me along the path to safety. She was right.

This OSHC environment demanded our bravery, and not only that, the children deserved it too.

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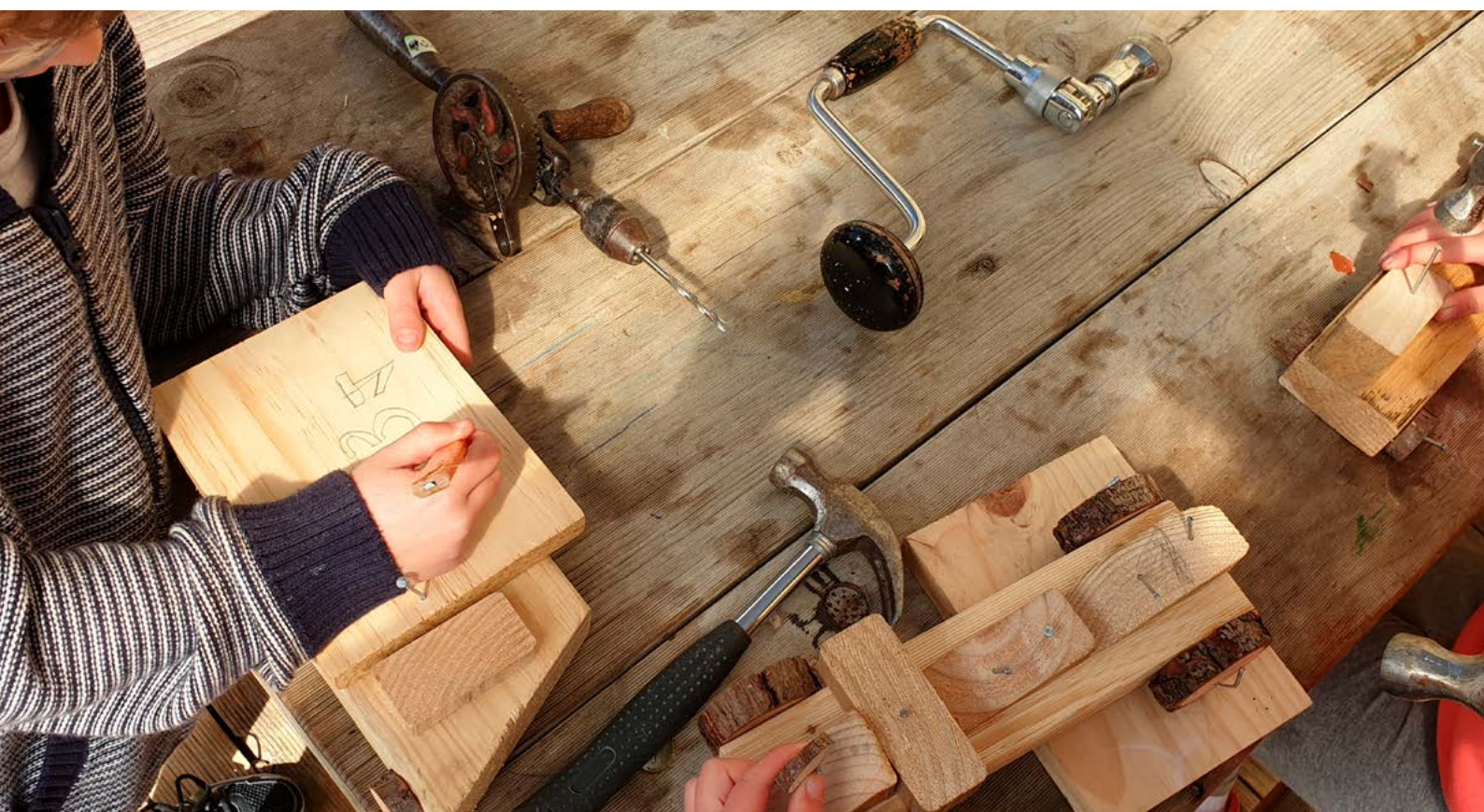




Image from Gowrie NSW Discovery House.

UNFOLDING PARADIGMS – FORMING PEDAGOGICAL IDENTITY AT GOWRIE NSW

Jessica Horne-Kennedy – Gowrie NSW

“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.

Traveller, there is no path, the path must be forged as you walk.”

(Machado cited in David, Gooch and Powell, 2015, p.26).

By considering Machado’s musings, we have a point of reflection for our work as teachers of young children. How do we find the ‘correct’ or most ‘appropriate’ pathway to take? What prompts us to take this pathway and travel in a particular direction? From the theories, philosophies and histories that inform our work, which ones continue to help us along our way?

Questions such as these have informed an ongoing focus of embedding philosophy into practice at Gowrie NSW. The intention being to reach a shared and contemporary pedagogical identity across all programs within the organization. Focusing on a shared pedagogical identity

has resulted in the development of our ‘Program Foundations’. This work involved our teachers, educators and the wider leadership team being guided by Dr Leonie Arthur to collaboratively develop four underpinning foundations of what practice means and looks like at Gowrie NSW. These foundations: Practitioner Inquiry, Play-Based Teaching, Respectful Relationships and Empowerment form a shared agreement about the image educators’ hold of children and childhood, the language that we use collectively- to express this view, and the methodologies that we use to enact our practice.

Now, we have arrived at a point on our pathway where we are focusing on how to authentically implement these four underpinning program foundations into practice. A series of unfolding practice-based paradigms are being used as the model or plan for this process of translation. This article will discuss the first of these paradigms where the focus has been on *Respectful Mealtimes*.

Articulating why we have chosen the paradigm as a tool for this work can begin to be answered through the question – where does our pedagogy come from? George

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Monbiot strongly advocates for a shift in our approach to education through developing “... philosophical frameworks that steer educational practice through a dynamic web of connectedness: to one another, our ecology and our universe; mindful of what has gone before and what is yet to come” (Powell, 2020, p. 3). Monbiot’s words have provided our early education and care teams with provocation for inquiry about what a paradigm is and means for practice. As Monbiot says, being mindful of ‘what has gone before’ has been integral to the development of our first paradigm because we have seen this as an opportunity to remain faithful to the integrity of our organization’s past and to use this rich history to inform the way we enact practice in the present.

Looking through a window – what mealtimes once looked like.

The metaphor of looking through a window to explore what mealtimes once looked like provided a prompt for reflection. This ‘window’ appeared in the form of photographs drawn from our historical archives. This first stage, of translating our foundations into practice, was a form of reflective research – similar to the work of a phenomenologist who is concerned with the significance and essence of lived experiences. Max van-Manen describes this kind of inquiry as being like “...an artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and eloquent. (...) phenomenological inquiry is determined by the questioning of the essential nature of a lived experience: a certain way of being in the world.” (1984, p.43). The intention of using this research approach – of looking

through a window to the past– was to provide our educators’ with an opportunity to engage with the significance of our past and to translate the meaning of this into the present. To support the inquiry process, we asked questions like:

- *What do you notice – what is different about the ‘picture of mealtimes’ in the past at Gowrie NSW?*
- *If you were one of these children sitting and eating together – how would you feel?*
- *What small elements express an ‘attention to detail’ for you?*
- *How do you think this would impact on the child’s experience?*
- *What message would this communicate to the child?*
- *What is different to how the table is set in 2020?*

Educators identified elements of detail in the images that for them, evoked feelings of warmth, care, a ‘home away from home’, enjoyment, slowness and belonging. Also, the educators especially noticed the aesthetics of the dining spaces shown in the historical images and commented on seeing: ‘real flowers, napkins or tablecloths as well as the use of china plates, glasses, and knives and forks’. In many of the images, it was observed that the teachers were sitting with small groups at a carefully prepared table for the meal.

It was agreed that for the children, experiencing a mealtime such as the ones presented in the historical images meant that eating shifted from being just a ‘routine’ to a ‘ritual’ – something that would provide a sense of belonging, community and connection (Valentin, 2018).



The Dining Room (Cumpston and Heinig, 1944 p. unknown)

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Cumpston and Heinig, 1944 p.75



Cumpston and Heinig, 1944 p. unknown

A Lens of Empowerment

In our Gowrie NSW Program Foundations, Empowerment is seen as a “respect for children’s agency” through the way that: “Learning environments, routines and interactions are respectful of children’s rights to ensure their voices are taken seriously.” (Arthur, 2020, p. 19). In our ‘mealtimes paradigm’, empowerment became the natural lens through which to articulate how we would plan for respectful and responsive routines around eating. By combining the lens of empowerment with our unique picture of history and the theories and philosophies underpinning our pedagogical practice a set of signposts were identified that authentically align with our program foundations and beliefs about pedagogy. These signposts formed a set of established practices that clearly describe how mealtimes will look at Gowrie NSW. Our focus is to create contextual, unique rituals around mealtimes across our organization and this paradigm shift has been happening through mentoring and guidance in the following key areas:

- Educators being flexible and responsive in their approach to mealtimes.
- The experience of eating being a calm and unrushed one. Children having adults available and present – who are there to provide support where necessary.
- Mealtimes being a considered experience with careful attention to the aesthetics of the physical dining space.
- Children being involved from start to finish in the mealtime experience. This means that they are part of the whole process and by having a role in the preparation, setting up and packing away children and adults engage in partnership together.
- Wellbeing is central to the experience of mealtimes for children and adults. The words of Emmi Pikler – “Food should always be a pleasure” are integral to this signpost (Pikler, date unknown, cited in Brownlee, 2011, p. 2).

Loader and Christie (2017), express the destination that our education and care services are traveling towards when they say:

Mealtimes are a sacred time for nourishing the body, coming together with loved ones, and provide an opportunity to reflect on the day or recent events. Paying attention to the nuances that make a mealtime ritual a rich experience is one way of creating an ethos of gratitude and respect for the preparation and ingestion of food. Engaging children wholeheartedly in the process stimulates a deeper understanding of where food comes from and the pleasure that can come from enjoying a meal alongside others

(Loader and Christie, p.39).

UNFOLDING PARADIGMS – FORMING PEDAGOGICAL IDENTITY AT GOWRIE NSW

Engaging with this first practice paradigm has so far enabled growth to enhance the quality of our pedagogical practice around mealtimes. By being attentive to the ‘nuances’ of mealtime rituals, small but significant changes are providing a meaningful and responsive experience for the children that come to our services. Educators are becoming aware that when there is clarity about what underpins how we teach – our identity and intention is strengthened and the experience for the child is enhanced.



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