

reflections

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In this edition:

Meaningful Encounters in Play – A Story of Practitioner Inquiry at Gowrie NSW

Learning on Country – Gowrie Broadmeadows' story of connecting with Country



MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTERS IN PLAY – A STORY OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AT GOWRIE NSW

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Over the past year, and continuing into this one, the educators across our eight Early Education and Care Centres at Gowrie NSW have embarked on a project of deep inquiry guided by pedagogues Wendy Shepherd and Janet Robertson. The ‘Practitioner Inquiry Project’ (PIP) – is described by Janet and Wendy as “provocation for contextually changing spaces, relationships and thinking about the environment including the consideration of beauty in each of the Gowrie Centres in NSW” (Personal Communication, 2020).

Through this article, the story of this project as it has and continues to unfold will be told. The perspective I will share is one of ‘looking in’ informed by listening to, observing, and reading the rich collection of examples that document this project.

Entry Points – Translating and Embedding Gowrie NSW Program Foundations

The Gowrie NSW Program Foundations provide an outline of the pedagogical practices seen collectively as the underpinnings of quality early childhood learning environments (Arthur, 2020). The entry point for the Practitioner Inquiry Project (PIP) arose from conversation about the ‘Gowrie Foundations’ particularly how to translate and embed the espoused beliefs of this document into daily practices of working with children and families. By honing in on the foundational area of ‘Intentional Play-Based Teaching’ discussions between our mentors – Wendy and Janet, our CEO – Nicole Jones and our Executive Director of Pedagogy – Michelle Richardson led to reflection about the learning spaces children would experience at Gowrie NSW. This vision is articulated in the following from Gowrie NSW Program Foundations:

MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTERS IN PLAY – A STORY OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AT GOWRIE NSW

Since its inception, Gowrie NSW learning spaces have been designed to facilitate play-based learning. Easily accessible resources on open-shelving indoors and flexible moveable parts in the outdoor environment, support children's access to loose materials for their own spontaneous play as well as planned play sequences (...). The Gowrie NSW learning environment has always encouraged children to explore nature with large trees, long grass, vegetable gardens and a range of animals. Learning environments are designed to facilitate exploration, hypothesising and discovery, to nurture children's sense of wonder and to support connections to the natural world and understandings of sustainability.

(Arthur, 2020, p.12).

Shaping spaces: the possibilities for pedagogy, play, learning and relationships.

The first step into this project focused on time for each service to connect with mentors Janet and Wendy and to begin a process of collaborative discussion with their team colleagues. Beginning to collect thoughts, images, and ideas about the environment that children and educators inhabit each day provides possibilities to deepen collective understandings about the "...critical role that the environment plays ..." in building funds of

knowledge to inform practice and pedagogy. (Personal Communication with Janet Robertson and Wendy Shepherd, 2020). At this first stage, the formation of new relationships between educators and mentors was an important step that soon travelled into a new territory where educative teams began to consider the "... responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things ..." (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.21). The learning and care environment began to be reconceptualised to see spaces as unique assemblages – innovative spaces that allowed "...objects, humans, ideas and discourses [to] meet and collide" (Charteris et al., 2017 cited in: Somerville and Powell, 2019, p.838). In this way, and as (Mulcahy & Morrison, 2017) describe:

Re/assembling 'innovative' learning environments' is concerned with how these spaces function as assemblages of relations and most particularly, affective relations. Assemblages are produced by affects that emerge through embodied encounters between subject and object, person and world. Such assemblages afford attention to how intensities of feeling can gather around and be provoked by objects as evidenced in the empirical material where walls that serve to either open or close learning spaces are shown to activate affect."
(pp. 756–757).



MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTERS IN PLAY – A STORY OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AT GOWRIE NSW

Remembering Children's Encounters with Blocks – The Role of Block Play.

As an observer of the Practitioner Inquiry Project, I was witness to the pedagogical fragments being explored in practice. One such fragment that I heard about and observed was the investigation into block play. I was curious and my curiosity took me back to my memory as a teacher at Glenside Rudolf Steiner Preschool. In this memory, I could see myself, with my basket of soft cloths and my jar of lavender infused polishing oil. It is a rainy day, and I am sitting in the corner of the room to anchor the play, ready to begin my work of polishing the blocks from the block shelf. As I begin this work, some children join me and help to gently oil each block. While other children, come to see what is happening then move to play after finding the blocks they need to add to their city or other imaginative creation.

Revisiting this memory provides a connection to 'Master Class Two' where Janet and Wendy shared that:

It is important to create a 'block culture' within the Centre. Where adults and children revel in block work, where it is a valued and rich form of play and learning, provided every day in every space, understood, and respected by adults as a non-gendered equipment and space, and the social 'rules' of play are clear for all. Blocks will only thrive in a Centre that understands and values their contribution to children and adults thinking. A block culture depends on what your pedagogical values are

(Shepherd and Robertson, 2020).

Allowing the block culture to thrive at our eight Gowrie NSW centres involved key steps of inquiry such as:

- photographing the 'block areas' to consider how blocks were or were not given reverence
- reflecting about the forms of learning that block play enabled, and
- the vocabulary adults could use to facilitate and prompt children's imaginative exploration of this resource.

Through the Masterclass, educators were introduced to the rich, holistic learning that is possible through enabling a culture of inquiry through block play. Within each centre, educators began to notice children engaging in new and diverse ways with blocks and the language educators chose to describe this engagement highlighted children's engagement, creativity and collaboration across many domains of learning. Educators described how children were using blocks to do more than just 'build' but to develop their imaginative thinking.

I have enjoyed watching how the children use the blocks to do more than 'build'. Our children have used them as slides for animals and fences as well. Developing their imaginations.

(Personal Communication – Leonie Derrick, June 2020).

Other educators observed how children explored roles and collaborated to extend and connect concepts of their world and community.

They built a city with one child being the town planner and others following and adding their own ideas. More children came over and added some details such as red traffic lights as well as animals 'because sometimes we see kangaroos when we are out!

(Personal Communication – Mikaela Plessnitzer, November 2020).

Many diverse structures appeared in the children's explorations from a rabbit cage, to houses, walls, bridges, a prison, and stations. At one service, block play enabled partnerships with the centre community as a parent noticed the children's interest and shared their knowledge and passion of architecture.

A family member noticed the children's interest and was excited to give us more plans and sketch paper. The family member was then invited to the service, to talk to the children about architecture and architectural plans. Through this, we encouraged the children to look at [pictures and photographs of] the buildings in the folder and draw what (they think) it looks like. From this, we decided to challenge the children to build a structure with the blocks, ... taking some time to draw it out. Extraordinary work and children's observations allowed little details to be sketched by each child.

(Personal Communication with Mario Boustani, October 2020).

Anne Schiller says that: "The most important thing a teacher can do to facilitate block play is to have great interest and reverence in blocks. It can't just be that you're leaving the blocks passively on the shelves hoping that [the children] will discover them. ... Blocks are something you help children to discover. You show them. You discover blocks alongside them."

This reverence for block play can be seen in the different ways that educators invested time in preparing spaces or 'block worlds' and even extended to some educators taking the time using their strengths to create a treasured resource for the children to use in their play.

The Practitioner Inquiry Project (PIP) is an ongoing inquiry in process. This story highlights how through intentional connection with, and examination of the materials in the play environment children are able to express the signs of

"...sustained engagement – excitement, intensity, vitality – where the senses and the child's body are fully immersed in what they are doing"

(Somerville and Powell, 2019, p. 835).

In this way educators are recognising how to respond to play and embed the practice foundation of 'Intentional Play-Based Teaching'. In providing the opportunity for

MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTERS IN PLAY – A STORY OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AT GOWRIE NSW

educators to engage in practitioner inquiry we are developing and shaping a culture of inquiry that draws from the historical origins of our organisation. This growth is twofold seen in the pedagogical identity as an organisation as well as the professional identity of the educators and teachers engaged in this project.

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7 (Images from: Gowrie NSW Erskineville EEC)



LEARNING ON COUNTRY – GOWRIE BROADMEADOWS' STORY OF CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY

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In 2018, at Gowrie Broadmeadows, we collaborated with our management team to plan for the implementation of a fire pit. After a year of hard work, planning and dedication, we lit our first fire. The learning through this process, on the benefits of coming together, was enormous for our children and educators.

When reflecting on our learning, as a regular part of our programming cycle, we became curious about how we could extend the children's connection with their natural environment to understanding the history of the land on which they live and play. We then started exploring ideas and possibilities. We felt we were ready for the next stage, which we identified as connecting with Country. This involved planning & advocating for children's learning to take place outside the Gowrie environment. We saw that connecting to Country was both the extension of risky play introduced during time around the fire pit and an opportunity to build further understanding of the natural environment and the history of these spaces.

We participated in a professional development session on embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. Key learnings during the session were the importance of connecting to country and allowing children time to gain understanding of what country is as well as providing opportunities to deeply connect with the land on which we play and learn. During a reflective conversation, we thought what better way to achieve this than to start a bush kinder program where we could play and learn directly on the land.

A collaborative discussion with our management team around the possibility of a bush kinder program resulted in lots of positivity, excitement and many reflective, open-ended questions. This ensured, from the beginning, that deep and thorough plans were made. First and foremost, we needed to think about a respectful and culturally safe name for the program whilst ensuring children had ownership over the decision. We brainstormed and reflected with children and decided on the name 'On Country Kinder'.

LEARNING ON COUNTRY – GOWRIE BROADMEADOWS' STORY OF CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY

Our next step in the process was selecting an appropriate location for 'On Country Kinder'. We walked to nearby park/bush lands where we could implement the program and chose an open grassy space, away from water, and close to a path. We agreed that the space looked appropriate as a place where children could assess their own risks and engage in open-ended play. Next, we invited the management team to the space, and again many reflective open-ended questions were asked. These included questions around options for children, access to shade and opportunities for challenge. Using these questions as provocations, we reflected on the opportunities for children's learning and for children to engage in risky play in an open grassy area and with limited natural elements.

As a result, we continued to explore the surrounding park/bushland. This time we crossed a busy road outside the service and discovered a space surrounded by shrubs, trees and water. We explored both sides of the creek and the various walking tracks and observed the potential to cross the creek and eventually extend the classroom to other areas of the parkland as children's confidence and abilities developed. This raised more questions, 'How will we get all the resources here and make sure the children are safe?' 'How will families drop off children here?' 'What if a child doesn't want to come out for the day?' 'How will children access a toilet?'

Throughout these discussions we learnt this project was going to come with a range of barriers and challenges. To ensure we had thought about and covered as much as we could, we interrogated possible scenarios and arrived at solutions within a clear plan.

To ensure the 'On Country Kinder' program complied with all relevant aspects of the service's policies, procedures, and practices, it was essential for us to meet regularly. These meetings included, but were not limited to, writing the risk assessment, mapping out our area, developing permission forms, and collaborating with the management team for advice and answers to questions. We endeavoured to cover unexpected incidents, harm and hazards likely to cause injury and ensured that we were prepared for emergencies or extreme weather events. The risk assessment was a crucial aspect of the setup of 'On Country Kinder'. This document was created in collaboration with management over a 9 month period through a process of continuous communication and feedback on what we could add, including prompts to think more deeply about risks. At the end of June we received final approval and the document was signed.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic our community entered into a stage 3 lock down. Advice around this lockdown resulted in minimal excursions and minimising movement in the community. However, we were still able



LEARNING ON COUNTRY – GOWRIE BROADMEADOWS’ STORY OF CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY

to take small groups of children to an open space with additional COVID-safety measures, including the mandatory wearing of masks for educators. With these practices it was possible to take the initial steps of embedding ‘On Country Kinder’ into our routine.

The first excursion to ‘On Country Kinder’ was in the middle of our first lockdown, meaning attendances at the service were low. A small team of educators accompanied 7 children, from both our 3-5 kinder room and our 2-4 kinder room. The experience resulted in positive engagement, lots of excitement and reflection from all children and staff. This excursion gave us great insight into what the program was going to look like and allowed us to align the ‘On Country’ Program with children’s interests. The children showed their creativity, their imagination and their ability to adapt to learning in a space with natural and limited resources. We observed a very empathetic and caring culture whilst the children were on Country.

The excursion started off with an Acknowledgement to Country which included sharing our knowledge about the land we were playing and learning on, Wurundjeri land. This led to setting our initial expectations for the children

in respect the space. These were that the children were not to play beyond the natural fence, that the children care for the space and one another, and that any natural resources found on country were to be left on country.

The children began exploring and discussing whether ‘..... big foot lives in this bush land.’ They climbed trees and we discussed the large muscle movements and coordination skills we were observing. The children’s play evolved and an idea then emerged about building a ‘hidey hole’ (tepee made from sticks) to hide from big foot. We discovered lots of rubbish and the children discussed how this makes the bush feel sad and what we could do to help.

From this excursion our program goals were to:

- Care for country – cleaning up the space and leaving natural resources how we found them.
- Connecting to the land and embedding culturally inclusive language.
- Creation of stories using imagination.
- Creation of a tepee with the use of natural resources – discussions around shelter and safety.



LEARNING ON COUNTRY – GOWRIE BROADMEADOWS' STORY OF CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY

We progressively began to increase the number of children coming out on Country. Now all three Kindergarten classrooms participate in the excursions in small groups. The goals continue to be embedded across the program, and the commitment to engage children in the development of the program has meant they have taken greater organisational responsibility while out on Country. We now take tongs and rubbish bags to pick up the rubbish and have deep reflective conversations on the importance of leaving natural resources on Country. We have written many stories including 'What big foot does in the bush', made 'crocodile stories from the clouds', and also created a story of 'How the ducks got in the river'. The children have been digging for treasure and using this to decorate their houses (tepees).

We are all so excited to see what more will come from 'On Country Kinder'. We continue to work with the children and their families to develop our program, to deepen our connection with Country and to sharing our learning with families and the broader community.



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