reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION • SUMMER 2011 • ISSUE 45

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Reflections is a quarterly publication by Gowrie Australia for educators and families in Children's Services.

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The opinions expressed in *Reflections* are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of Gowrie Australia. By publishing diverse opinions we aim to encourage critical reflection and motivate practitioners in Children's Services to respond. Gowrie Australia's privacy policy precludes the use of children's names. Fictitious names are substituted.

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editorial

Dear Colleagues

It is my pleasure to write the Editorial for this edition of *Reflections*. In the last edition we acknowledged the support that we have received from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, through the Child Care Conference and Publication Support Scheme, to assist with the distribution of *Reflections*. As a result of this support, we will now be able to provide the magazine in an electronic format, as an e-book available on Gowrie websites. Over the next few months we will gradually extend distribution via electronic means and we look forward to readers' feedback. We are hoping that this approach will extend access for individual educators. Our goal is to continue to provide a range of articles that inspire educators in deepening their own practice but also provide practical information. We are committed to supporting the implementation of the National Quality Agenda to improve outcomes for children's learning and wellbeing, and in most of these articles we draw attention to possible connections with the new frameworks and requirements.

Our lead article, by Melinda Miller, provides an in-depth look at critical reflection and the processes that can support educators to engage in their own critical reflection, to understand their own interpretations and actions, but to also explore possibilities for alternative ways to think about events, interactions and issues that occur in daily practice. These critical reflection processes are an essential ingredient of developing programs for children under the new learning frameworks and the National Quality Standards.

Melissa MacMaster shares experiences of building community connections and the importance of partnerships with families, providing practical information from one centre's approach to this work. The article makes helpful links with both the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the requirements of the National Quality Standards. There are two articles from practitioner perspectives which share educators' work in undertaking research within their centres and how the use of inquiry based projects can challenge long-held assumptions about the nature of early childhood work. In a similar vein, the article by Kathy Cloughessy and Manjula Waniganayake reports on research undertaken in early childhood centres to understand how educators respond to families from diverse backgrounds, in particular lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families. Hopefully as you read through the articles you can make useful connections between the various themes and your own work. Finally, we finish with an article about the EYLF and pre-service teachers' reflections on implementation in their practicum.

As you read through these articles you appreciate that our work can be challenging but is ultimately very rewarding for educators, and eventually leads to improved services for children and families. We would very much like to hear about work that is happening within the field and we welcome articles from educators across childcare, preschool, family day care and outside school hours care.

Let us share our professional learning.

Kaye Colmer
CEO Gowrie SA

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Critical Reflection

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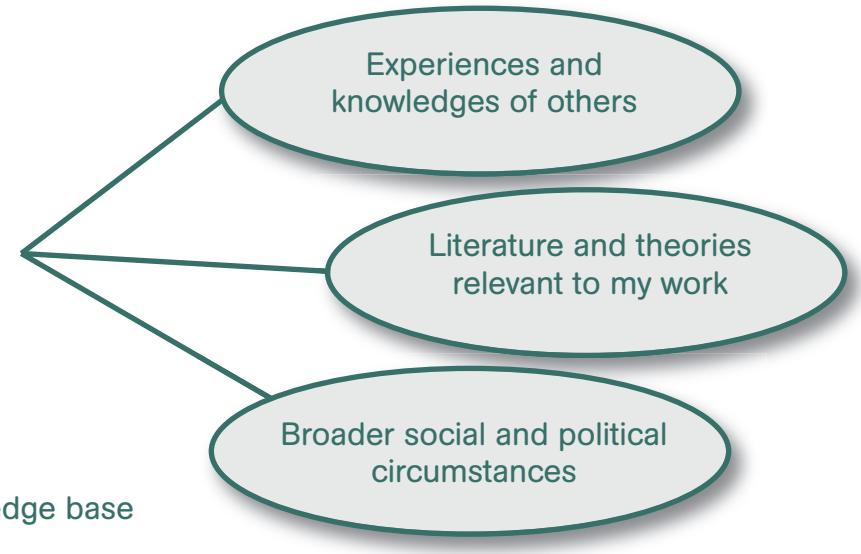
Critical reflection is a necessary component of professionalism in early childhood education. Evidence of critical reflection within a service draws attention to the intellectual work of early childhood educators and highlights professional capacities beyond the care of young children. Early childhood curriculum documents place strong emphasis on the importance of critically reflective practice. For example, the *Early Years Learning Framework* lists "ongoing learning and reflective practice" as one of five key principles of effective practice. Questions to help guide critical reflection are included in the document. Some examples are:
Who is disadvantaged when I work in this way? Who is advantaged? What are my understandings of each child? Are there other theories or knowledge that could help me to understand better what I have observed or experienced? (DEEWR,2009:13).

It is important for early childhood educators to understand the ways critical reflection is defined and what it looks like in practice. There is a common misconception that critical reflection is about finding fault or criticising an event or the actions of those involved. A useful definition for critical reflection relates more to a professional disposition (attitude) that allows educators to look at an event from a range of perspectives and to ask questions about that event to develop new ways of thinking and understanding. As Smith (1992:103) explains, critical reflection is "an attitude, a frame of mind".

It is also a learned skill. Many educators require direct instruction on processes involved in critical reflection, along with practice and perseverance to continue to develop their skill level. As critical reflection requires educators to look and think beyond what they already know (Schon,1995), they may need support to think about and apply additional layers needed for rich questions and inquiry. Additional layers can take the form of different perspectives to that of the educator's, literature and theories relevant to the educator's daily work; and considerations of broader social and political influences such as societal expectations, stereotypes and policy changes.

LAYERS OF REFLECTION

My own experiences and knowledge base



These additional layers contribute to a more comprehensive look at an event and can lead to a deeper understanding about what occurred and why. If educators focus solely on their own interpretations of practice, then evaluations of events and interactions may be surface-level. A singular focus may also result in reliance on one's existing knowledge, rather than a commitment to access a range of perspectives and resources to inform the reflective process.

Consider the following scenario related to a child's capacities with self-help skills. Beyond a personal reaction or response, consider different ways of thinking about this event by adding layers of reflection. Some examples are provided.

SCENARIO:

A male child aged 3.10 arrives at Kindy wearing a nappy. In response to the centre's expectations, his father takes him to the toilet to change into underpants. Throughout the day, the child is taken to the toilet by educators and placed on the seat in the presence of other children. He displays discomfort with this process and typically soils his clothes 2-3 times a day. When the father collects the child in the afternoon, he is again placed in a nappy. Due to family preferences and cultural reasons, the child is not expected to be autonomous in self-care routines at home.

Layers of reflection - Guiding questions:

My own experiences and knowledge. What do I value in terms of independence and interdependence? How do my values influence my responses to this event? In what ways are my choices influenced by the expectations of the service and fellow educators?

Experiences and knowledges of others. In what ways have I considered the perspectives of the parents and the child? How is this evident in my response to this event and my interactions? How are fellow staff in the Kindy room impacted by this event?

Literature and theories. Developmental theories indicate to me that by the age of three, children are typically autonomous with self-care routines. Does this Western view of child development apply to all children? What other literature or theories will provide me with different viewpoints about child development? What does literature on inclusivity say about responding to family preferences in the child care program?

Broader social/political circumstances. In Australia, most Kindy rooms do not have nappy-changing facilities. What does this tell me about what is valued in early childhood education in Australia? What does this imply about children's capacities at certain ages? Does this place an emphasis on 'readiness' (e.g. for school) rather than what is suitable for a child at any given time?

Processes of Critical Reflection

When considering how to move from reacting to an event, to thinking more critically about what took place, it is useful to think about different levels of reflection. Adapted from Bain (1999), the following three levels of reflection show how an educator can move from 'reaction' to 'critical reflection'.

Level 1: Reacting
- Commenting on one's feelings related to an event
- Providing a straight description with no added observations or insights
- Making an observation or judgment without detailing reasons for the judgment
- Developing a shallow understanding of what occurred and why.

Level 2: Elaborating
- Comparing one's reaction to other people's responses and perspectives
- Analysing an event by asking questions and considering alternatives
- Seeking a deeper understanding of an event by relating it to current literature and theories.

Level 3: Reconstructing
- Drawing revised and new conclusions about your practices and the practices of others
- Ongoing exploration of relationships between practice, literature and theory
- Planning further learning on the basis of your reflections.

As seen in Level 3, effective critical reflection should lead to findings about what occurred and why, as well as the development of plans for change. Ongoing questioning of changes to practice and one's thinking is essential to the reflective process.

When Do Educators Reflect?

Educators reflect in-action (rapidly and thoughtfully during an action) and on-action (briefly and systematically after an action) (Schon, 1995). What is reflected on in the course of a day and over time should be meaningful to educators, children and families. It is not practical to reflect critically on everything that occurs within classroom practice and service delivery. Critical reflection can be focussed on a long-term issue, or more spontaneous events and interactions that have meaning for key stakeholders. Reflections can occur verbally between educators and also in thought. Educators may include written reflections as part of their documentation or in a communal journal. Where appropriate, reflections should be shared with children and families to draw attention to the intellectual and evolving nature of educators' work.

Building a Reflective Culture

A reflective culture will support all educators, regardless of their qualification and experience, to engage in critically reflective practices. Key elements required to build a reflective culture include:

- ***Direct teaching:*** some educators require explicit support when learning about and applying processes of critical reflection.
- ***Modelling:*** educators with experience in critically reflective practice are well positioned to model processes of reflection to colleagues. Examples from everyday practice can provide a basis for discussion, modelling and teaching.
- ***Collaboration:*** a collaborative approach to critical reflection is valuable because multiple voices and perspectives are included in discussions. Collaboration can occur between educators, other professionals, children and families.
- ***Physical spaces and resources:*** consider if there is a space within the service that invites critical reflection. Educators require access to current literature (professional magazines, journal articles, texts) to extend their knowledge base. Prompts such as a highlighted section of an article or a question written on a noticeboard can be used to support critically reflective practice.
- ***Time:*** effective critical reflection takes time and practice. Opportunities for individual and collaborative reflection are necessary to build educators' skill levels.
- ***Expectation:*** curriculum documents highlight expectations around critically reflective practice, but this should also be a priority for educators in leadership positions. When time, physical spaces and resources are provided, then expectation can be built into the culture of reflective practice at the service.

Developing critical reflection takes time and courage. A key component of courage is the willingness and ability to 'step outside' one's own interpretations and experiences to explore new ways of thinking about events, interactions and issues that occur in daily practice. When this occurs, educators, children and families will benefit greatly from deep reflections about professional practice.

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BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

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We all recognise and understand the value of the early years. We know what an impact a positive start to life can have on a child's emotional health and wellbeing. We know that what we provide children with today they will take with them into their future. However, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that the early childhood years are not solely about preparing children for the future, but also about their active participation in the present - the here and now.

The direction of the work we engage in at Gowrie Victoria is driven by our purpose and vision. Our vision describes the following: Each ***Child*** is part of a ***community. Education and care*** is about ***partnerships.*** We ***lead*** by ***doing.***

How is a community built so a child can not only exist, but thrive within it? How do we form authentic partnerships so best outcomes for children are the driving focus? What message will we strive to deliver to the wider community about why we do what we do in our early childhood programs? When I reflect on the work that has been done to strengthen the community in which I work, it appears that it first begins with a shared goal. This goal has children's wellbeing and learning at the core. It is driven by a mutual respect and a trust of the people within it. It is maintained through developing meaningful connections, acknowledgement of contributions, opportunities to celebrate achievements and a deep sense of ownership.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* for Australia (2009) has a vision to provide children with a sense of *Belonging,* a recognition and celebration of their *Being* and support for their *Becoming*. This is achieved when members of the community identify and understand what this looks like in practice. It is our job, as early childhood professionals, to ensure this is visible and discussed at every opportunity. We also need to know, really know, our audience. Educators need to recognise that the family is the first and most influential teacher in their child's life and take the time to learn about each family's cultural beliefs, practices and expectations for their child. We need to consult families and draw on their areas of expertise and see that invitations are provided for them to engage in the program in a diverse range of ways. A sense of belonging and connection to the centre community is created when children and families are familiar with the environment and feel welcomed when they walk in the front door, by a team that view themselves as *supportive partners*. To assist in building that sense of community whenever we send emails to families and educators, we always begin with *"Hello Gowrie Community"* before proceeding with the message. This is one way of acknowledging, maintaining and reminding people that they belong to and are valued members of the our community.

The Children's Program has an ongoing commitment to ensure *each child is part of a community* by extending on the developing relationships *within* the local community. Inviting people into our space is one way of achieving this, but our intention is also for children to be more visible *within* the local area. We are all really excited about being able to share the world with young children, but we cannot do this without a shared vision and a strong partnership with families.

"Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities" (NEYLF, 2009:9) Our aspiration is for the community to view children as we do, to respect and value their capabilities and contributions and, most importantly, to embrace them as active members of society ….we want to grow the notion that children belong to and are an *active* part of the community.

In Australia, legislative requirements mean educators need to gain written permission from families to take children outside the premises of the early childhood service. The time it takes to gather this written information can inhibit the momentum of spontaneous adventures and learning experiences, especially when the desire is to do this on an ongoing basis in response to children's interests and emerging ideas.

With this in mind we have developed the 'The City's Children Project'. The aim of this project is to connect children to their community. We would like children to be *connected with and contribute to their world* (Outcome 2, EYLF: 2009) on a regular basis. One of the tools we have established in order to achieve this is an annual excursion permission form that, when signed by the child's family, will enable educators to provide small groups of children with access to the local area in an ongoing and spontaneous manner. The proposed local excursion areas have been clearly identified on a map that accompanies the

permission form, so families are clear about the parameters of the 'community' in which we aim to explore. Educators are then able to take children to visit the local park, the many local shops and even the library - places that will enrich children's early years experiences. *Adventures* outside of Gowrie's Children's Program occur during the operating hours of the services. Safety is paramount, so child staff ratios and qualified requirements remain higher than those required under the Victorian Children's Services Regulations (2009). A minimum of two staff accompany small groups of children at all times with ratios of 1:4 for children over 3 years, 1:3 for children 2- 3 years and 1:2 for children 0-2 years being maintained at all times. Educators respect the partnership with families by ensuring they are always informed and consulted about local adventures prior to, or on the day of, the excursion. Excursions outside the specified local area require a separate permission form, as per the centre's policy and procedures.

The new National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care (2009:26) state, "Community partnerships that focus on active communication, consultation and collaboration also contribute to children's learning and wellbeing" **(Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities).** We want to provide children with rich experiences to broaden their understanding of the world in which they live, to create a local dialogue and a shared understanding among members and create a strong foundation for the development of responsible and caring citizens.

When children, families and educators feel connected to the community, they uphold the values of that community and promote the wellbeing of its members. Building collaborative partnerships empower its members to be advocates for children and families. The future is uncertain…. we don't know what knowledge our children will need in order to succeed. What we do know, is that relationships are central to wellbeing and there will be challenges to overcome. When we aspire to raise children at a community level and teach children to know that they have a right to belong to many communities, we are investing in the quality of our today and the enrichment of our tomorrow.

Building Environments that Nurture

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In Reggio Emilia, it is believed that children are made up of a hundred different languages of expression. If a child has a hundred languages, surely one of those languages is the language of relationships. With the release of 'Belonging, Being & Becoming', the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF, 2009), it will be an ongoing challenge for educators today to balance the human environment with the physical, in order to develop a context for the language of relationships within individual settings. This paper follows the journey of staff at Gowrie SA in an ongoing inquiry to develop such a context.

Having worked through an extensive process of developing a new philosophy for the organisation, we needed to ensure that it matched the reality of everyday practice for children and families. Investigating environments was a way to ease the whole staff team into critiquing their practice - as environments are viewed as less threatening than personal beliefs and practices. Given the natural links we have made between our philosophy and the Reggio Emilia approach, we felt there was much to be learned from more research into the Reggio philosophy and practices.

In 2008, two members of our staff were fortunate to travel to Italy and take part in an international study tour of Reggio Emilia Infant Toddler Centres and Preschools.

A key thing that our staff noticed about environments for children in Reggio Emilia was that they were exceptionally inviting. Staff commented that such deep thought and consideration went into not only the presentation of resources but also the introduction of these resources to the children; that there seemed to be a new provocation around every corner. Paula Cavazzoni and Mirella Ruozzi (2008) state that "the environment created the dialogue for relationships with objects and people". This formed the foundation for the inquiry project Gowrie SA staff have spent the last two years working on.

The beginning of this project posed more questions than answers as staff teams began engaging in a reflective process of investigating their indoor and outdoor environments. Individual teams used scrapbooks to record their reflective processes as they began to wonder about the considerations behind the development of environments, the need for continuity of environments and child participation in developing environments. Teams (with support and encouragement) looked for 'black holes' and 'what if' spaces within their environments. The use of

Relationships

photos and individual thoughts about staff values and beliefs led to some staff writing 'belief statements'. Team leaders then offered their individual progressions to the team leader group to discuss, question, deliberate on and make sense of.

This was an intense process for several months as more questions were raised and deeper thoughts and discussions were flowing across the organisation. The next challenge was for staff to find a balance between the children's lead and the adult's role, whilst providing continuity for children. Our philosophy highlights the right of children to access a rich learning environment. Teams had begun noticing that they were becoming skilled in developing engaging spaces but needed to further examine their role in sustaining play. Building intentionality continued the discussions further amongst the teams and team leader group.

A group of colleagues were fortunate to travel to Melbourne in August 2009 to spend time at the Carlton and Docklands Gowrie centres investigating their environmental philosophies and age groupings of children.

The group noticed that these centres used multiple natural resources through their rooms to create displays and adjuncts. The environments were artfully arranged with furniture and screens to divide space into nooks and crannies and create defined play areas, encouraging small groups of children to work in partnership with adults. Intentional space arrangement, for example, placing quiet play areas next to the sleep areas, and linking the bigger and nosier play spaces towards the door to the outside play environment, enabled children to sleep in the same room as the children who were playing. In addition, creatively using different heights for different experiences (ie table vs floor) enabled children of different ages to participate safely.

With the philosophy in mind that children have a right to a rich learning environment with spaces that inspire curiosity, a desire to explore and investigate and a need to be supported in developing secure relationships, staff began to experiment with using some of the principles from the Victorian Gowrie environments. Teams continued to explore the idea of providing continuity in the environment in order to be able to support children's sense of connectedness and security. A next step involved the children - talking with children, capturing their voice, drawing maps and discussing how spaces would be used. Team energy and enthusiasm increased as staff could see the flow-on effects in children's sense of connection, engagement and empowerment through having participated in the changes within the environment.

The impact our environments have on relationships with not only children, but families as well, has been one of our biggest learning curves as an organisation. What our spaces say about children and how they make families feel, at those crucial drop off and pick up times, is of great importance to building and maintaining relationships. The foundation for all of this is the understanding of the triangle that supports these relationships - parent-staff-child. Working together in partnership provides a greater opportunity for higher levels of wellbeing for all.

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The Consultation and Planning Process for a Change to Birth to Three Programs

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In January 2009, Gowrie SA (Lady Gowrie Child Centre Inc) began a journey to look at what constituted high quality, particularly regarding transitions for young children, in our integrated early childhood service. Our programs are based on the importance of relationships using attachment theory and a model of primary caregiving.

As part of this journey, we looked more deeply at the transitions from one room to the next that small children (under three years) were going through. We noted that children were moving to a new room every nine to twelve months on average and that many children would have to cope with three transitions before they were three years old. Lally (2003) says that too many changes of educator can result in a child's reluctance to form new relationships. We were concerned about the undue stress this caused children and families as they settled into each new room with a new primary caregiver. We also considered the amount of preparation time needed for every transition – which entailed interruptions to the programs and learning for the children over a 4-5 week period.

Our toddler rooms seemed to be challenging no matter how well staff were emotionally available and responsive to children, or how high the staff: child ratio was. What was the impact of having children at similar periods of social development in one room together and how did this contribute to incidents? Did this increase the competition for particular resources based on children's developmental stage? We wondered whether grouping children with other children of a similar age could truly support their growth and development and whether this was a natural environment for them to be in.

Programs that group older children with younger ones have been shown to have improved levels of educational dimensions (Mathers & Slyva, 2007). It was possible that older children would role model language, skills, empathy and cooperation for younger children. Securely attached infants have been shown to be more successful in peer relationship development, 'engage in more complex and creative play', and show positive outcomes on a range of mental health indicators (Manning-Morton, 2006:47). Our wonderings led us to talk about the relationship and educational aspects of our programs in depth, as well as the impacts on children, families and staff.

We organised someone independent to the children's programs to analyse the literature and research around same versus multi-age groupings. The findings from the research supported what we had been thinking about the negative impact of transitions and changes on children's wellbeing and the positive impacts of multi-age groupings. We also visited Gowrie Victoria for professional development opportunities with colleagues who use a birth to three, three to five program model. Over an eighteen-month period, we held consultations with families and staff, using a variety of methods to gather information and comments on the potential challenges and opportunities for this model. These included surveys, focus groups, information evenings, FAQ documents, newsletters and inviting feedback.

As part of our plans, we had to address the issue of change within our staff teams. We provided opportunities for educators to explore and talk about the challenges that came up, as well as sharing the excitement that educators were feeling about this model. One of our educator said, "…change is inevitable and we all have the opportunity to grow, adapt and flourish; and to use our current strengths and passions to create new ones, or broaden our experiences and joy." The processes we used helped create a connected staff team, included families, and enabled us to jointly explore the opportunities and challenges in a positive way.

After this extensive learning and consultation process we concluded that changing to birth to three age groupings was in the best interests of children, families and educators. With fewer transitions, children would not have to cope with the unnecessary stress of adjusting to new people and environments or losing a significant attachment relationship already established with an educator (Zero To Three Policy Centre 2008). Deeper relationships would be developed over a longer period of time. Planning for children would be richer and more informed. Educator's time would not be taken up with ongoing transitions of children and families to other rooms. This model would enable families to choose to have siblings in the same room with the same primary caregiver, enabling continuity of care. Having children of different ages in our spaces would allow modelling and nurturing behaviours to be developed and would reduce competition around resources.

Our next step was to gradually increase the age range in our baby and toddler rooms, while decreasing the number of children in our busiest rooms. We started planning for educators to visit other rooms to see what planning for older or younger children might look like. We allowed time for discussions about programming for different ages, and met with individual staff and parents who had concerns, questions, or feedback. We reviewed our current equipment and resources and began planning for what we could share and what we might need.

We transitioned to birth to three programs officially in January 2010. In the birth to three rooms, it has been observed that older children are demonstrating nurturing behaviours to younger children, the environment is calmer, educators have more time to talk and interact with children and families and there is less competition among children for resources. Fewer accidents/incidents between children have also been recorded. Educators and families have been positive about the transition and visiting families have been keen to enrol. There is still much learning to do with educators having to plan for new routines (such as children requiring 2 sleeps per day) and issues around what is safe and challenging for all children in the room and which resources are appropriate.

We recognise that as part of this transition, we need to ensure that birth to three programs are offering children and staff high quality care and education.

We are using several methods of evaluation, including observation, taking video footage, research projects and liaising with other services interstate and overseas to build our knowledge and understandings.

There will be further learning opportunities through professional development as well as sharing and talking with each other about our programs and planning. Our professional network has also been extended with opportunities to talk with colleagues interstate and overseas who have or are interested in similar programs. All in all we are excited by this opportunity and expect that our primary caregiving practices and quality of care and education will be enhanced with this change in our program model.

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Educator Responses to Children with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents

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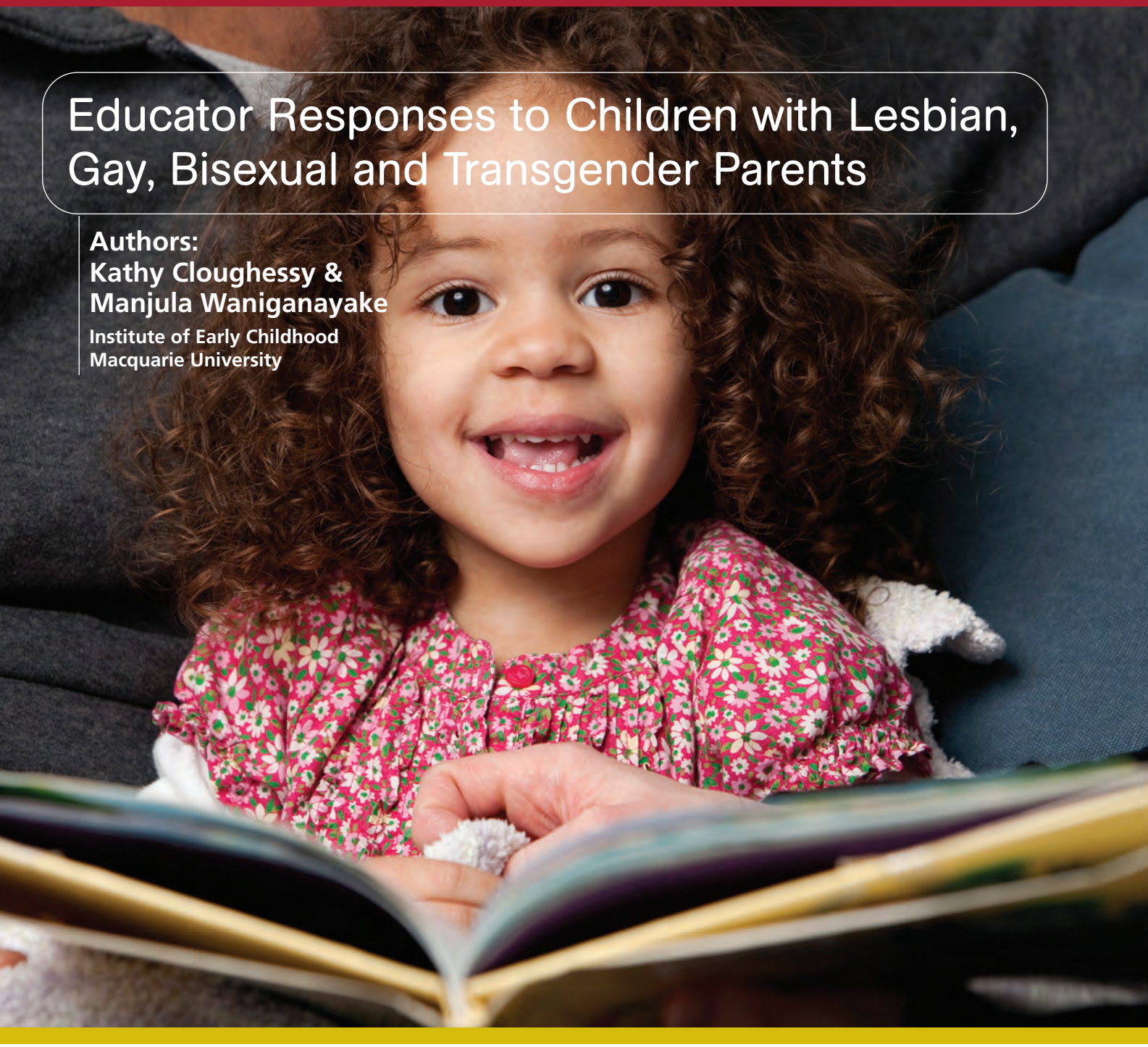
Macquarie University

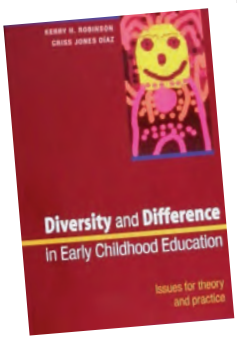


The *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009:13) clearly indicates that educators are expected to cater for a diverse community in their programs and policies as evident in Principle 4 "Diversity". Children with lesbian parents are one such family group that educators are encountering in their work with young children. Despite this, educators report feeling unprepared to address lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) matters in early childhood education (Bower & Klecka 2009; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008) and as such remain silenced (Robinson, 2002).

There is a range of suggestions on catering for children with LGBT parents in recent journal articles. These suggestions include challenging discriminatory language by children (Burt, Gelnaw & Klinger Lesser, 2010, Fox, 2007, Powell, 2003); using children's books that depict diverse families (Burt, Gelnaw & Klinger Lesser, 2010, Fox, 2007, Powell, 2003, Sapp, 2010, Souto-Manning & Hermann- Wilmarth, 2008, Rowell, 2007); representing different kinds of family structures with curriculum materials such as posters, puzzles, photos and dolls (Burt, Gelnaw & Klinger Lesser, 2010, p.100); considering the language educators use (Burt, Gelnaw & Klinger Lesser, 2010) as well as the relevance of mother's day or father's day (Burt, Gelnaw & Klinger Lesser, 2010, Fox, 2007); creating a "queer home corner" (Taylor & Richardson, 2005); facilitating authentic discussions with children to explore their perspectives (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008); presentation of alternative stories such as lesbian Cinderella (Cullen & Sandy, 2009); development of effective partnerships with LGBT parents (Meadows, 2001); displaying gay friendly icons such as rainbow stickers (Fox, 2007) and developing policies and forms that identify the different types of family formations (Fox, 2007).

Researching educator responses to children with lesbian parents

A grant given by Lesbians Incorporated (LINC) facilitated a small pilot study to explore how early childhood educators are responding to the needs of children with lesbian parents in early childhood centres in NSW. The participants in this research were educators who attend a regular network of early childhood leaders in a regional centre in NSW. It is recognised that non-metropolitan areas are often absent from research and this location was chosen to address this gap. These participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their experiences of working with lesbian parented families. Twenty-five participants accepted the invitation to participate in the study and twenty-one completed questionnaires were returned. These participants were given a resource booklet that collated some of the suggestions developed by the Victorian Rainbow Families Councils for early childhood educators (Rainbow Families Council, 2010) and a rainbow sticker that was produced by the author which had the phrase "ALL families are WELCOME here". It should be noted that this survey was timed to coincide with the annual Mardi Gras in Sydney, held in March, 2011.

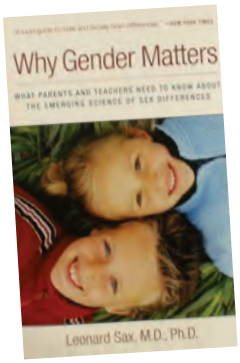


What did we learn from this research?

Over half of the participants had knowingly worked with children who had lesbian parents. However, Burnett (2003) warns that assuming that there are no families such as these should be cautioned as parents may choose not to disclose this information. A number of participants had worked with more than one child who had lesbian parents. Of the participants who had worked with children who had lesbian parents, all but one of the families had disclosed their identity. This reflects a similar pattern found in the research by Lee (2010) in New Zealand, where the mothers disclosed their lesbian identity to the educators. Of the educators who had knowingly worked with children who had lesbian parents seventy-five percent could recall conversations where the child had discussed their family. This finding supports Litovich & Langhout (2004) who stated that children from LGBT families readily shared their family composition with others.

Many participants in this research study also reported that they responded positively to this disclosure. One participant actively challenged a child's assumption that "a child can't have two mothers", by responding that it is possible to have "lots of different family structures", thereby confronting heteronormative comments that tend to marginalise children with LGBT parents. Educators reported that in their experience, these children referred to both their mothers by using a variety of maternal identifiers (such as Mummy, Mum or Mumma) conjoined with their first name to distinguish between the two mothers. These terms were honoured by the educators as they worked with these families.

Other examples given by the participants when responding to children with lesbian parents included celebrating Mardi Gras with a fun hair day and broadening mother's day or father's day to be "Special Person's day" so that children whose family grouping did not include a father could still celebrate a special relationship. Forty-two percent of participants identified they used books to discuss family diversity. When asked for specific titles of these books, participants could not identify any which may reflect limited memory recall or indicate that these books are used infrequently as was suggested by Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007).



Eighty percent of participants believed that their centre policies incorporated an anti-discrimination or anti-bias perspective that supported children with LGBT parents and explained that their enrolment forms did not list mother and father instead choosing to use parent 1 and parent 2 or caregivers. However, none of the participants noted that often lesbian families sit outside the usual two parent models because there may be more than two adults involved in caregiver roles with each child (Cloughessy, 2010; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007).

Two participants commented that they didn't have any children of lesbian parents and so were not sure how to answer the survey questions and another stated, "we need to review our policies." These comments indicate Robinson's (2002:425) reflection that some educators only address issues of sexuality "when it becomes necessary to do so". This perspective ignores contributions by those such as Derman-Sparkes (1989) who highlight the benefits of an anti-bias curriculum for ALL children and the need to challenge and resist heterosexual privilege in non-tokenistic ways. This is in stark contrast to one of the participants who commented about proactively providing an article to her colleagues as, "something to think about" and another who stated that they had a child due to be enrolled and so had been discussing ways to ensure the centre was ready for this child. Two participants also identified where they could access support for their service such as Children's Services Central.

Conclusion

This small study illustrates possibilities open to educators to raise awareness and understanding of lesbian parented children and their families and suggests a range of strategies aimed at creating a welcoming environment for LGBT families broadly. This study highlighted the importance of honouring children with lesbian parents, for instance, by reflecting on the language used by educators with regard to maternal identifiers which commonly includes both mothers. Overall, responding appropriately to children and families from LGBT families includes challenging our assumptions about family diversity based on only heterosexual family structures, proactive discussions amongst staff, children and families and sharing of relevant literature to guide educators' practice. This will involve educators gaining access to relevant support and resources including information about celebrations of culturally significant events such as the Mardi Gras. Future research could explore the challenges encountered in how educators enacted these strategies and the extent to which they created a welcoming environment for children from LGBT families.

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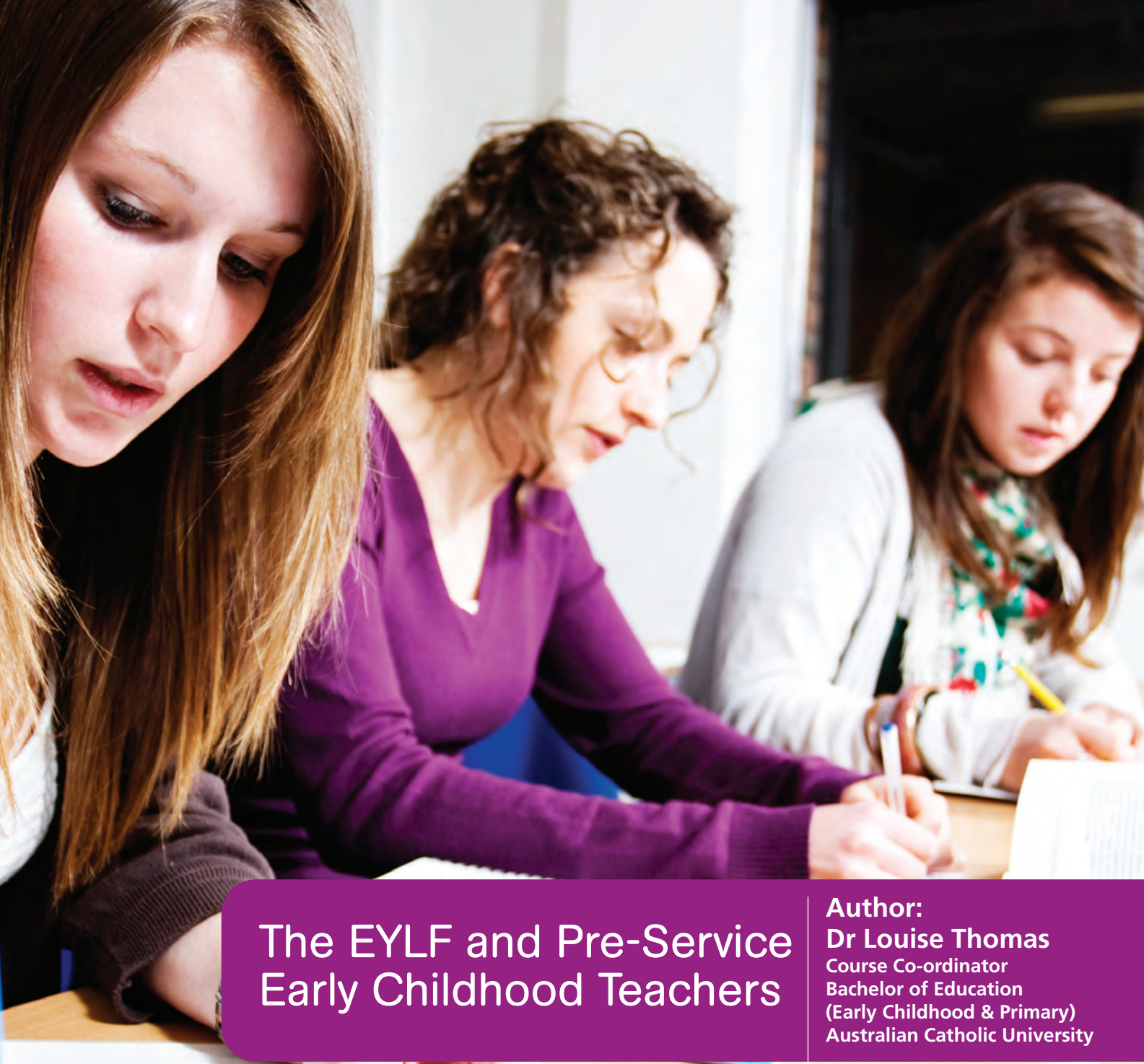

The EYLF and Pre-Service Early Childhood Teachers

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As a teacher educator, the introduction of Australia's first, national, prior to school curriculum provides many opportunities to support the learning of pre-service early childhood teachers. However, as with most change, there are also challenges and a level of anxiety. These opportunities and challenges have an impact on teacher educators, pre-service teachers and the centre based staff who support students during their practicum placements.

When I asked Katie O'Brien, an early childhood lecturer at Australian Catholic University, to share her thoughts on using the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) her comments reflected a sense of opportunity and challenge:

Introducing and unpacking EYLF with first year early childhood pre-service teachers provides opportunities and challenges in many ways. Many of the students I work with have never entered an early childhood setting prior to attending university. This, in itself, provides a challenge for university staff. However, EYLF, through its principles, practices and learning outcomes supports the process of introducing pre-service teachers to the concept of linking early childhood theory and the practical elements essential in supporting young children's learning.

The principles and practices which underpin the EYLF curriculum outcomes provide students with opportunities to engage with, and reflect on, the philosophies and theories which have shaped, and continue to shape, early childhood practices. When we use the EYLF support documents, in conjunction with the curriculum document, we are able to provide students with an introduction to the complexities and importance of supporting children's learning in prior to school settings. Students are also provided with clarification, in a user friendly way, of how to engage young children in all aspects of their learning through the use of play as a teaching and learning tool, and through the use of intentional teaching practices. The EYLF materials provide easy to follow and well thought out scenarios that introduce students to what they might observe while on their practicum placements. Students are encouraged to reflect on the content of the EYLF documents through lecture presentations, tutorial activities and to make distinct connections to the principles, practices and learning outcomes in all aspects of their assessment.

When first year pre-service teachers step from the university classroom to the early learning context to undertake their practicum, they take with them some knowledge regarding EYLF. With the support of experienced and skilled practitioners, students can draw on this knowledge as they engage first hand in a setting. Through this supported process students are able to link their theory with practice.

As I engage in the process of introducing to future early childhood teachers, new and changing curriculum materials, drawn from the National Quality Framework agenda, I experience a level of both excitement and anxiety. The excitement comes from the opportunity to share with the students an increasing political and social awareness of the importance of early learning. The anxiety comes with the need to work with curriculum materials that are still being grappled with by the sector as a whole. It can be a little overwhelming for students as they are introduced to so many new policies and associated materials. It can also be a little disconcerting when they realise that their lecturers and the centre based staff they will work with during their practicum placements are also learning 'on their feet'.

Students have the opportunity to witness experienced early childhood staff working to hold together the certainty and assurance of familiar practices with the uncertainty, anxiety and excitement of reflecting on new possibilities. Personally, what excites me the most is when students are 'invited' by experienced early childhood practitioners to join in this reflective process. Such opportunities enable students to witness, and hopefully experience, the process of continual professional learning. By being part of the introduction of EYLF, pre-service teachers are able to see the strength of the often used education mantra - 'life-long learner'.

Pre-Service Early Childhood Teachers reflect …

Shelby Lindsay

As a second year early childhood pre-service teacher I undertook a practicum in a prior to school setting. Entering an early learning centre as a pre-service teacher for only the second time was daunting. Added to this pressure was an expectation of effectively implementing a new curriculum, a curriculum with which both I, and the centre staff, were fairly unfamiliar. What supported me through this experience was the learning I had engaged with as part of an on campus unit focused on curriculum understanding and critique. It was in the second year of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) course when I was given the valuable opportunity to analyse various curriculum approaches and specific documents.

An aspect of the unit involved critiquing the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). This critique enabled me to reflect on my previous learning about curriculum. Upon initial consultation with the EYLF document, I found that it was reinforcing all of the units I had already undertaken as a pre-service early childhood teacher. The EYLF document focuses largely on the importance of play, which was evident throughout our units, and also highlighted the importance of relationships with families, another key aspect of our studies. Essentially, I felt the EYLFdocument presented a clear overview of the key attitudes, values and beliefs evident in early childhood education.

I personally found the EYLF document highly accessible and useful. It provided many examples of how children can appropriately work towards and successfully achieve particular outcomes. I believe the most advantageous aspect of the EYLF document is the examples provided to teachers of ways to encourage children to engage with learning experiences related to each outcome. Throughout my practicum in a learning centre in the pre-prep room, these examples allowed me to provide children with learning experiences which would support them in working towards these learning outcomes.

When completing my second year practicum in a kindergarten setting, the framework assisted me in determining my role as teacher. I aimed to facilitate children's learning by establishing a safe, supportive and welcoming learning environment in which diversity was valued. Children were encouraged to share their ideas and thoughts. Planned and spontaneous learning experiences were responsive to the interests and needs of all children and play was considered a vital context for learning. This flexible approach to education provided children with opportunities to be actively engaged in their own learning.

Stacey Lenihan

As a pre-service early childhood educator, the Early Years Learning Framework has been an important part of my teacher education and practice and influential in shaping my personal teaching philosophy. I see the principles of Belonging, Being & Becoming (DEEWR, 2009) as being about early childhood teachers supporting children as they develop their own identities, form relationships in which they feel safe and supported, and create meaning about the world around them.

While it was challenging to implement practice that supported the needs and interests of all children at all times, I found the Early Years Learning Framework to be a valuable support. This document affirms my beliefs about early childhood education and informed decision-making during my practicum. The Early Years Learning Framework is a valuable resource which, I feel, should be utilised by pre-service and in-service teachers alike.

Shelby and Stacey are pre-service teachers currently completing a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) at the Australian Catholic University.

National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE

Autumn 2011

Winter 2011

Spring 2011

13th New Zealand Early Childhood Research Conference

26-28 January 2012

Wellington City, New Zealand

W: www.childforum.com/

The Early Years Conference 2012

The Development of Children's Mental Health: How Do We Become Who We Are?

2-4 February 2012

The Hyatt Regency, Vancouver,BC

W: www.interprofessional.ubc.ca/EarlyYears/

18th National Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect

Celebrating the Past – Imagining the Future

16-20 February 2012

Hilton Washington Hotel, Washington, DC

W: www.pal-tech.com/web/OCAN/

ECIA Conference 2012

Pathways to Participations: *Engagement and choice for children and families*

8-10 August 2012

Burswood Entertainment complex, Perth, WA

W: www.eciaconference2012.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/

Gowrie Australia

Promoting and supporting quality services for all children.

Our Mission

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