

reflections

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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 Early Childhood Education and Care Services to respond. Gowrie Australia's privacy policy precludes the use of children's names. Fictitious names are substituted.

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Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the winter issue of *Reflections* and another fine selection of articles to inform and challenge your thinking and your everyday practices.

PhD student Sandra Grant presents a balanced approach to early language and literacy learning and development, sharing reflections on her own practice and recommending strategies to be considered in your own ECEC environment. Having read this article, I am sure you will look forward to her follow up article in the Spring edition of *Reflections*.

In an article written jointly by teachers Alison Wyllie, Fiona Stary and Kimberley Kippin, we follow children's active engagement in decision making when presented with the task of considering what other children need to know when they first come into a new program. Called 'You can't put your forks in the toilet', the title reflects the children's suggestion of some of the things new children need to know, such as ... *You can't put any forks in the toilet, the toilet will get blocked* – of course! This article will make you smile, as well as inspiring you to see your own program through new eyes.

YOU are a superhero! And so are many of the children you teach! Teena Piccini shares ideas and discussions around the issues of superhero play, promoting a better understanding of this type of play and sharing some unexpected results.

We are delighted that Rhonda Livingstone, National Educational Leader for ACECQA, has taken the time to provide some pointers and ideas to support services working towards assessment.

Using a model called 'dilemma stories', Lynne Rutherford describes an inservice initiative which focuses on different perspectives and critical reflection with staff supported to examine and discuss incidents and to reflect and learn together.

In our final article in this issue, Lorraine Madden and Cristyn Davies describe the benefits of reading groups to provide a vehicle for reflective discussion. Conducted through teleconferencing, this study demonstrates the potential of this type of initiative for enriching practice and extending thinking.

Beyond the initiatives described here, there are some great opportunities for professional development, not just to "dot the i's and cross the t's", but to really feel energised, knowledgeable and confident in what we do. Sift through the professional development in your state or territory. Look for those who offer workshops and presentations to sustain your interest and support you to continue to research your ideas and actions. Find a network for other professionals and TALK.

Thank you to all those who have contributed to this issue of *Reflections*, and thank you to those who take the time to read it. Gowrie Australia is always eager to hear your thoughts and see your ideas on paper. Long winter nights are hitting our shores and our vast interior, so why not put pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard, and write an article to share your thoughts, your practices or your research. We look forward to hearing from you!

Jane Bourne

On behalf of Gowrie Australia

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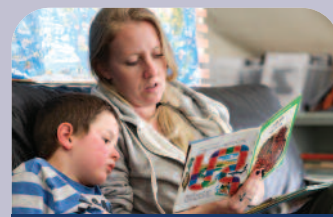
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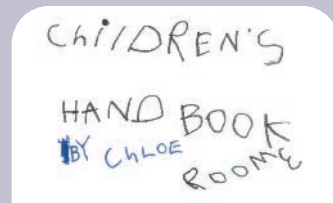
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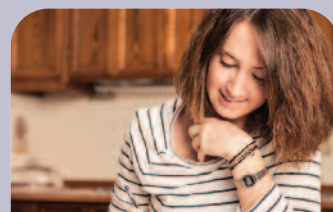
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Finding a Balanced Approach to Early Language and Literacy Learning and Development

Sandra Grant

PhD Student

Queensland University of Technology



In an era of increasing accountabilities in education, parents and educators alike feel the pressures of preparing children for life. The trajectory of preparedness - for kindergarten, for primary school, for high school, for tertiary studies, or as citizens helping Australia to take its place in a global economy - permeates the media and educational policy, and contributes to the pressures that impact on the everyday life of parents and educators. In trying to do what is in the best interests of their children, parents are bombarded with a plethora of ideas about what children should or could be doing. The implication being that those who ignore the latest form of 'edutainment' or new best idea, are somehow lacking as responsible parents. Conversely, parents who traverse the complex and often contradictory perspectives about education promoted through the media, can become overwhelmed by the pressure to introduce formal educational practices into young children's lives. When such situations occur it is often educators working with young children who feel the flow on effects of pressures to formalise and change their pedagogical practices.

In this article I use the context of young children's language and literacy development to illustrate the effects of the readiness and preparation push on educators' work with young children. Over the years I have found myself having to justify to parents and educators why I teach the way that I do, to explain the importance of play-based learning and to identify how language and literacy development is enacted in my program. I have also observed a change in parental expectations about the introduction of formalised phonics programs as the 'right' way to help children become literate. At times parents have pressured me to adopt such practices. Considering the media interest in literacy results in schools, and the apparent failures of the education system to achieve positive literacy outcomes for all young adults, it is unsurprising that formalised commercial approaches to literacy are flourishing. It is also evident that some parents anticipate seeing them within prior-to-school programs.

The process of talking with parents about such concerns has taught me invaluable lessons about how my personal and professional beliefs shape my thinking, influence the decisions I make, and the interactions I have with children and families. To be open and respectful in discussion, to recognise that different points of view do not equate with deficit or lack of parental understanding is key, because "the more teachers know about parents' beliefs and the activities in which they engage with children at home, the more they can help to build a bridge between home and school literacy" (Lynch et al, 2006). Equally importantly, I have learned the value of de-privatising pedagogical practice and developing the capacity to articulate clearly why I do what I do. When parents understand my professional perspectives and what shapes them, and I theirs, there is space for trust and collaboration to develop. Parents need to have trust in an educator's abilities to support and enrich their children's learning and development. It is hard to feel this way if an educator can't talk about practices in ways that resonate with parents and helps them to understand the educator's intent and focus. It's also frustrating for parents who raise questions about topics such as implementing commercial phonics programs (a query I have experienced most years) to be met with either a brick wall of disinterest or an educator who bombards them with a vision of the one true way to literacy, or takes the moral high ground as one who 'knows best'.

Rather than adopting a polarising position that does more harm than good, it is crucial to listen, recognise and act on the priorities of families. This does not mean simple acquiescence to anything, or ignoring ideas that don't fit with professional experience or beliefs. Instead it means taking a critically reflective stance, and examining what underpins individual pedagogical practices used in everyday interactions with children. It also means thinking outside the box of what has always worked well and considering alternate points of view. Educators with the capacity to articulate a *balanced approach* to early language and literacy development can do much to facilitate children's learning and development. Recognising children's prior experiences, drawing on their interests, and strengthening relationships with families, helps allay parental fears and promotes continuity of learning experiences in children's lives.

To talk with parents, families and broader community members about a balanced approach to language and literacy development, of which phonics is one part, first requires educators to have a clear conceptual framework of language and literacy development which informs and guides practice. The conceptual framework discussed here is grounded in socio-cultural theory drawing on the rich and diverse experiences children bring to kindergarten and preschool. This theory recognises the significance of social and cultural contexts in children's learning and the conceptual framework involves shifting from a technical view of language and literacy learning as discrete parts operating in isolation, to one that acknowledges the importance of social context. As Raban and Coates (2004) note, "the development of literacy is profoundly social and is being experienced and experimented with throughout children's daily lives."



To explain the model of language and literacy development used in this article, I refer to the model created for the *Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline* (2010) and designed to support educators working with children aged 3 to 5 years (see Figure 1). Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of developmental processes, this holistic socio-cultural perspective of language and literacy development identifies a set of interconnected factors. These factors include the importance of the educators' role, which involves:

- participating in critical reflection and keeping abreast of current research;
- building positive relationships with children and families;
- engaging children in rich conversations and meaningful learning experiences;
- creating inclusive learning environments that promote language and literacy development through play;
- facilitating learning through a range of intentional teaching strategies that draw on children's strengths, interests and competencies.

As a starting point begin with critical reflection. Rather than trying to 'educate' parents, the following questions are designed to aid reflection.

Step 1: Engage in critical reflection

- How have I engaged in critical reflection in the last twelve months? When did this happen, who was involved and where did this take us?
- When was the last time I read a professional article about language and early literacy development? What perspectives was the research based on and what does this offer me in terms of current practice?
- What opportunities am I creating for children to demonstrate their language and literacy skills? How would this be evident in the organisation of the physical environment, and in my interactions with children and families?
- Where is the evidence of literacy and language development goals in my planning and documentation?
- How do I celebrate and build on the diversity of language and literacy experiences children bring to the centre?
- How do I currently talk with families about supporting language and literacy development? Is the information shared current? What might need revisiting?

Engaging in critical reflection is an ongoing process and an important aspect of professional growth. It assists educators to understand what informs their beliefs and how this shapes their practices.

Step 2: Talk with parents not to them

Share your practices and knowledge without defaulting to a kind of 'eduspeak'. By this I mean avoiding educational jargon, and the need to educate parents. I have never met a parent who didn't want their child to become literate. However, as an experienced educator and as a parent, I recognise that a parent's time, energies and attentions are in constant demand. This means that parental priorities, and what it is possible for parents to do will vary. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, with parents generally doing the very best they can, at any given point in time.

Talk with families about what is happening in your centre and share ideas and information in ways that all families can access. Demonstrate sensitivity in your approach, recognising that some parents, for example, will find lengthy newsletters challenging because of language or literacy barriers. Be clear and concise in what you mean, and say, and write, and incorporate a range of strategies for communicating with parents. Recognise that differences in cultural and social experiences influence beliefs and priorities and shape the way that different people view the world, and that parental views that differ to your own are not deficit views, they are simply different. Treating this as a strength, opens up many more possibilities for ways of working with children and families.

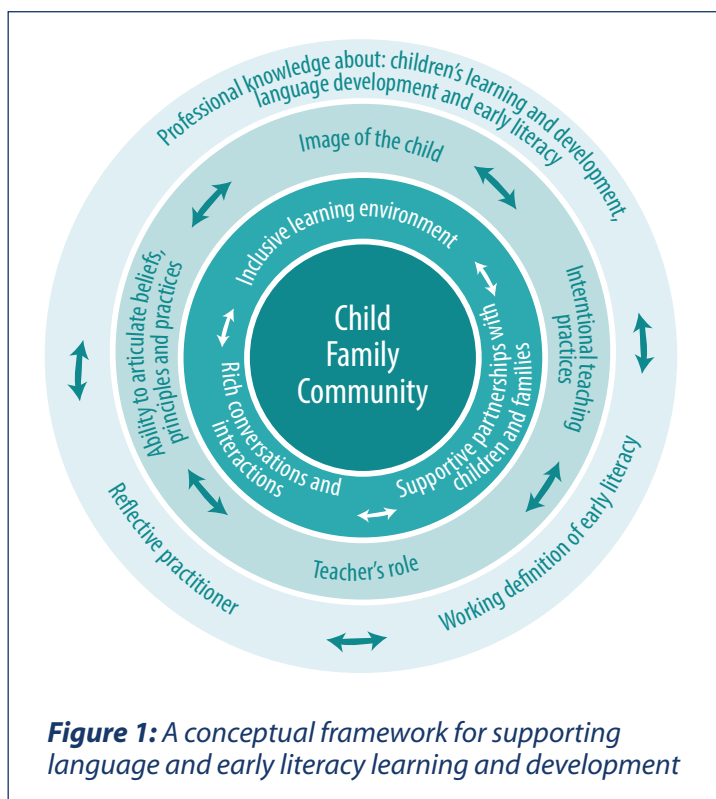


Figure 1: A conceptual framework for supporting language and early literacy learning and development

So how can educators explain this conceptual model of language and literacy development to parents and community members?

By developing a plan that involves 3 steps:

- 1. critical reflection,**
- 2. discussions with parents and community members,**
- 3. a balanced approach to language and literacy learning.**

Step 3: Take a balanced approach to language and literacy development

Be very clear about what you mean when talking with parents about a balanced approach to language and literacy development. I remember once being asked when I would be 'doing letterland' (a commercial phonics program) in my class with 4 to 5 years olds. When I explained that I wouldn't, something in my demeanour or explanation created a barrier with that parent that took time to resolve. In retrospect, my surprise that a 3 year old was 'doing' a formal phonics program in long day care probably registered in my face and manner. In hindsight I wonder how I could have done things differently. Perhaps if I had asked the parent to share her child's experiences, and had given her a stronger sense of valuing her question, things might have started more smoothly. Reassuring her that phonics is one important aspect of my play-based language and literacy program, would also have helped this parent. Listening without judging was a valuable lesson learned, one that I have not forgotten.

When talking with parents about a balanced approach to early language and literacy development I draw on the work of Konza (2011). Konza describes a balanced program as one that promotes the following practices:

- establishing strong social relationships with children that draw on their experiences and prior-knowledge, strengths and interests;
- concentrating on the development of social communication skills in contextually meaningful ways (pragmatic language skills);
- enhancing vocabulary development;
- developing phonological awareness;
- developing letter-sound awareness (phonics);
- creating literacy rich environments where literacy use is purposeful and meaningful.

I also explain the fact that Konza's balanced approach to language and literacy development will occur through my play-based program that is designed to support children's interests, strengths and dispositions towards learning.

In a follow-up article I will provide explanations and examples of what a balanced approach to early language and literacy development looks and sounds like in practice. Incorporating professional vignettes and suggestions from the field, the next article draws together socio-cultural theory and pedagogy. Exploring Konza's six elements of a balanced language and literacy program, the examples provided will assist teachers to articulate practices with parents, families and communities.

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Critical reflection, leadership and professional development – essential components for improved ratings

Rhonda Livingstone
National Education Leader
Australian Children's Education and
Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

In the following article Rhonda provides pointers, practices and ideas to help services that are working towards a higher assessment rating in the National Quality Standard.



When developing the National Quality Framework (NQF), the Australian, state and territory governments recognised that some services would need time to meet the new, and often, higher benchmark of the National Quality Standard (NQS).

They also agreed all services, regardless of rating, should seek to continually improve their programs, practices, policies and procedures.

For a service to be awarded an overall rating of 'Meeting' National Quality Standard or higher, it needs to meet all 18 standards and 58 elements of the NQS. The ratings against each of the seven quality areas provide meaningful information to families, educators and others about the strengths of the service as well as the areas identified for improvement.

Receiving a rating of 'Working Towards' National Quality Standard does not mean the service has failed to meet any of the requirements that pose a risk to the health and safety of children. If there were any unacceptable risks to the safety, health or wellbeing, the 'Significant Improvement Required' rating would be given. To give an example, a service may be 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' National Quality Standard in a number of quality areas, as well as having one or more quality areas rated as 'Working Towards' the National Quality Standard, so it will receive an overall rating of 'Working Towards'.

As agreed, these and other aspects of the NQF will be evaluated in the Council of Australian Government's review to be undertaken later this year.

What the data tells us

The ACECQA quarterly snapshot, drawing on data from 31 December 2013, shows that of the 32% of the services that have received a quality rating, almost 60% have been awarded an overall rating of 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding'.

The data also indicates a significant proportion of services rated 'Working Towards' are operating at a level that is very close to achieving 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding', as they may have a small number of quality areas rated as 'Working Towards'.

The quarterly snapshot also reveals that services are more likely to be rated 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' in quality areas such as staffing arrangements, relationships with children and partnerships with families and communities. Services generally find it more difficult to achieve a rating of 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' in standards on approved learning frameworks, educational programs and sustainable environments.

We know that much work is being carried out by all services to continually improve and deliver quality services to children and their families and the sector should be congratulated on the significant achievements made in implementing the NQF to date.

Improving quality

So what can a service do to further enhance the quality of their service and improve their rating?

A good starting place is to review the Assessment and Rating Report and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). This will help services to identify the elements that were not met in the assessment and rating process and prioritise these for improvement.

Breaking down the areas identified for improvement into a series of manageable and achievable steps will substantially increase the service's likelihood of success.

To build ownership and commitment, it is important to involve children, educators, management, families and other key stakeholders in identifying and prioritising strategies and goals for improvement. For example, a service reported that they put enlarged copies of their QIP in the entry foyer, along with marker pens for families and children to add their thoughts and suggestions.

Assessment and Rating Report

The Assessment and Rating Report provides information on elements that were not met in the assessment and rating process, as well as what evidence authorised officers collected to inform the rating decision.

The report may also include suggestions for the service's QIP. It is therefore important for services to regularly review their QIP and prioritise areas for improvement. Any regulatory standards that are not met need to be prioritised for immediate consideration and action.

Resources and professional development available

Take time to consider what assistance and support educators will need to understand and meet the NQS and regulatory requirements. This may take the form of professional development programs or support and advice from the educational leader or a respected authority, for example, the relevant Health Department for issues related to Quality Area 2.

There are a number of online and paper resources that will assist in improving the service's quality. Online resources include:

- **Guide to the National Quality Standard** - this details the aims of each element and identifies what authorised officers may want to observe, discuss and sight in their assessment of the element.
- Approved learning frameworks - **Early Years Learning Framework** and **Framework for School Age Care**.
- Related educators guides - **Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework** and **Educators Guide to the Framework for School Age Care**.

The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* contains a series of reflective questions for each standard of the NQS and these are a key resource to promote discussion and improve practice. For example, if the service has prioritised taking an active role in caring for its environment and contributing to a sustainable future (Standard 3.3 of the NQS), educators could

reflect on how they model environmentally friendly practices and what messages the service conveys to children about valuing the environment and its resources.

The Inclusion Professional Support Program (IPSP) [online library](#) offers educators the opportunity to search under subject matter and provides details of a number of up-to-date resources that will assist services in meeting the NQS. For example, if looking for information on sustainability, a Gowrie Tasmania [fact sheet](#) can be found that unpacks what children learn through gardening activities.

The Early Childhood Australia website also has a range of resources, newsletters and videos on this subject. For example, [E-Newsletter No 67](#) focuses on embedding sustainability in practice.

Your Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) and peak organisations are valuable contacts to identify additional resources and professional development opportunities available.

Services rated as 'Working Towards' should contact their PSC to access Intensive Support. The PSCs are funded by the Australian Government Department of Education to provide comprehensive and in-depth support to eligible services who may be experiencing challenges or who have received a rating of 'Working Towards'. As part of this program, skilled consultants work with a service's leaders and educators to provide a wide range of strategies (including visits, exchange programs, telephone and email support) to guide and support improvement in education and care practices.

ACECOA recently spoke with consultants working with these services. Based on their experiences, they agreed that to maximise success, it is essential that approved providers, management, educators, staff and the educational leader share a commitment and willingness to work collaboratively.

Working together to develop and implement prioritised strategies is vital in enhancing outcomes for children and families using the service.

While the consultants can support, resource, mentor and challenge educators, to be effective, meaningful and long-lasting changes need to be driven from within the service. Developing a culture of ongoing critical reflection will support this. The service leaders (approved providers, directors, coordinators and educational leaders) have an important role to play in mentoring and supporting educators to critically reflect on their practices and implement sustainable changes.

Eligible long day care centres are set to receive financial support for professional development from the Australian Government from a new program, so it is important that reputable and targeted professional development is chosen to assist the service to meet or exceed the NQS. The Department of Education will be providing further information about the new program, including information to help providers to choose effective professional development, on its [website](#) shortly.

If your service has made considerable improvements since your initial rating, you may want to consider applying for a reassessment and re-rating. An application for reassessment and re-rating can only be made once every two years and must be made in writing to your regulatory authority, including the relevant information and fee. For additional information refer to section 139 of the [Education and Care Services National Law](#) and regulation 66 of the [National Regulations](#).

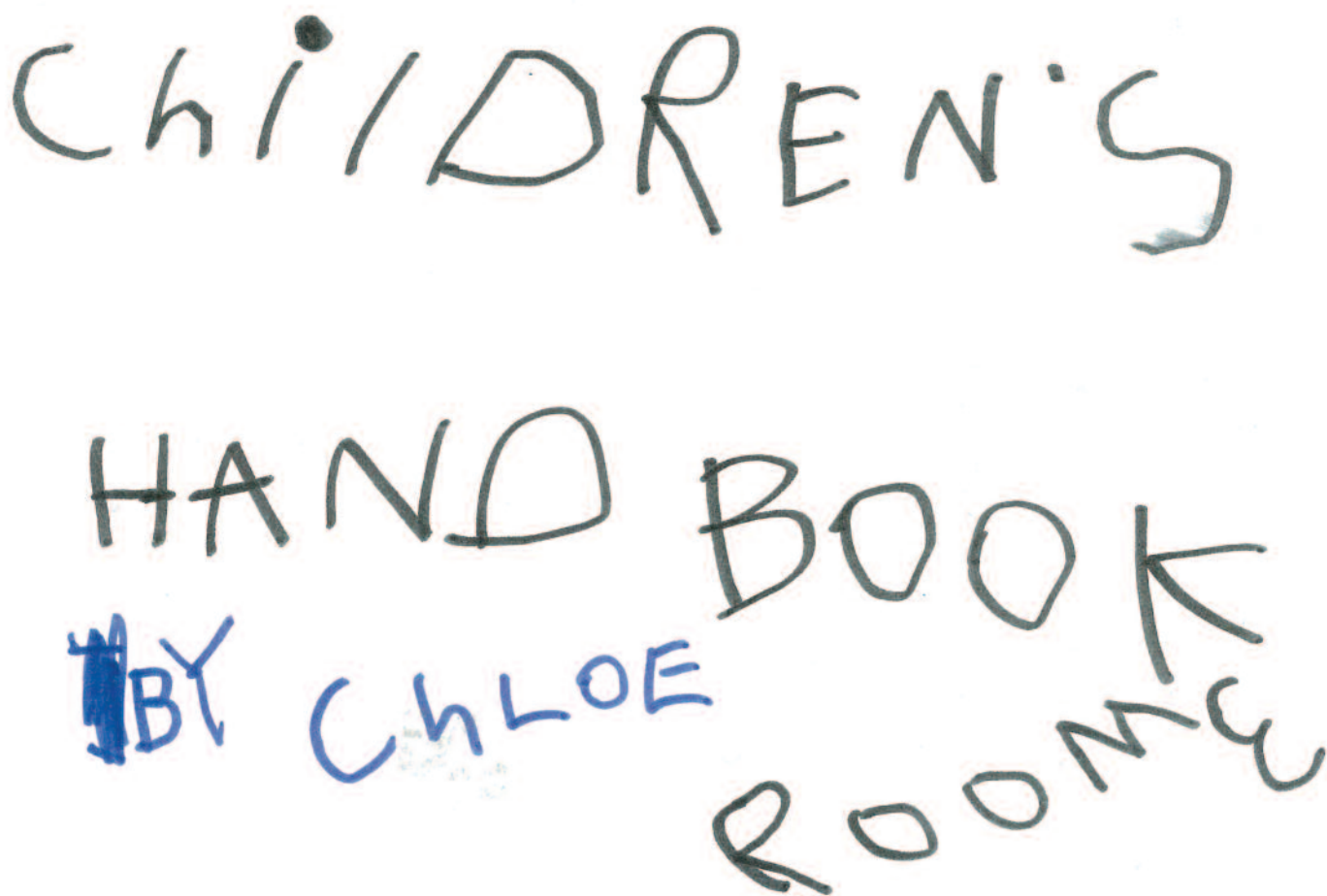
Apart from the online resources listed above, please bear in mind that there are also numerous hard copy resources available for purchase or borrowing from libraries.



There are also a number of books available on the subject.

“You can’t put forks in the toilet.” ... children’s voices in action

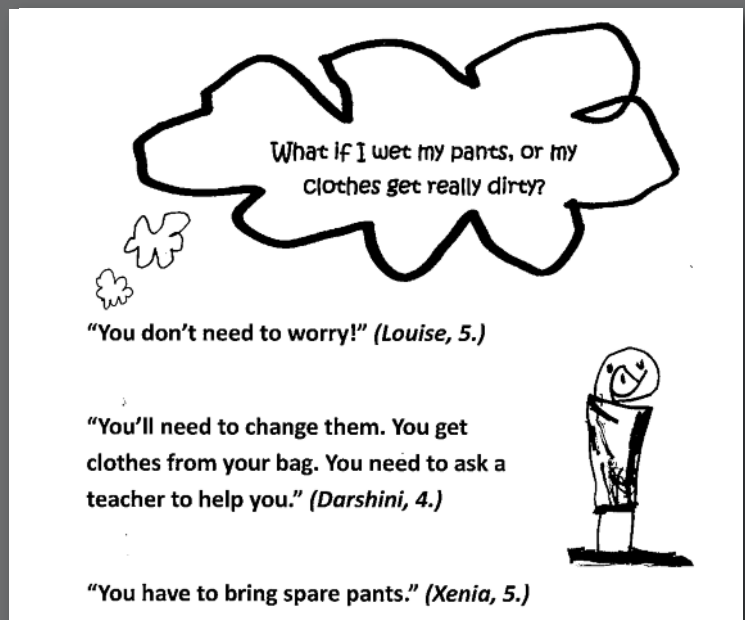
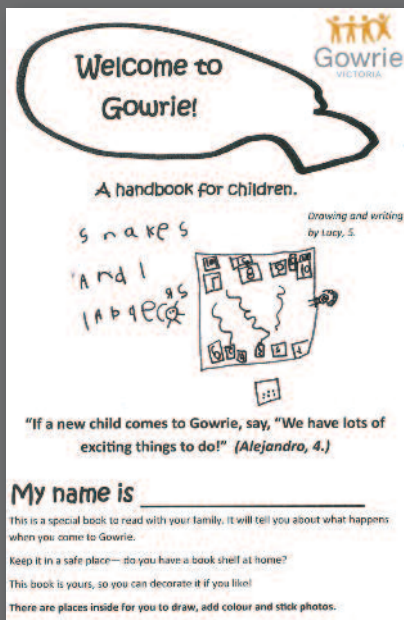
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CHILDREN'S
HAND BOOK
BY CHLOE
ROOMER

It is only when we ask, that we discover children’s capacity for knowledge, wisdom and insight. Our teams at Docklands and Carlton North became acutely aware of children as experts as we set about developing Children’s Handbooks.

As we reflected on our orientation process for children and families, we discussed ways to make improvements, with particular attention to children settling into their room environment. Part of the review of this process meant seeking feedback from our families through the family committee, and annual survey, with feedback contributing to our QIP (Quality Improvement Plan). An area of improvement that was identified by families can be succinctly expressed through a comment from one of our parents (who is also the chair of our family committee): *‘When the year started, we didn’t know much about the room or the teachers or how a typical day might go (and) as a result it was a little difficult to talk to our son about this new place’*. On hearing this feedback it dawned on us that although we give lots of information about our program, philosophy, policy and procedures through our Family Handbook – what was missing was a down-to-earth practical guide to each child’s new room, (as all rooms are run slightly differently). Out of these reflections the Children’s Handbook was devised as a tool to be used in conjunction with the Family Handbook. Every child who attends a Gowrie children’s program has, at some point, been new to the service and gone through the settling process - even changing rooms can be a big adjustment in the life of a child and the child’s family. We felt therefore, that existing Gowrie children were well qualified to advise on how to make the orientation process as child friendly as possible.



While the common goal of creating a Children's Handbook took the form of a similar process of implementation across the two sites (Carlton North and Docklands), the outcomes were different, reflecting the children in their own community:

Carlton North

The process began by asking children at group time if they were staying in the same room the following year, moving to a different room, or going to school. The conversation moved to what new children coming into the room next year would need to know. The children came up with ideas relating to the different play spaces, rules, responsibilities and practicalities of knowing, for example, where the toilets, fruit basket, plates and cups are kept. The children were extremely creative but quite serious in their responses:

'If they follow the trail, they will know where the toilets are.'

'You can't put any forks in the toilet, the toilet will get blocked.'

'We need to show them what to do with their painting - they need to put their name on it and put it on the drying rack.'

'They need to know how to share and be kind to other children.'

Using the elements of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to help us focus and articulate the learning that was occurring during this experience, we were able to support children to effectively communicate their ideas through group discussions and through drawn, written and photographed images. Educators intentionally set aside many weeks for this process to unfold, knowing it would take time for children to formulate their own ideas, opinions and be confident to explore different ways to contribute to the project.

Another element of intentional teaching came through the second part of the process where we asked children to take on the responsibility of showing new peers around the environment. As a result, a 'checklist' was developed listing important things for new children to remember and see. The children took photos of important places and responsibilities and these were printed as a table providing an area for children to write yes, or place a tick, as they completed each 'task'. The checklist was attached to a clipboard and pen so the children could refer to it and mark off elements when completed. This component provided children with something concrete and purposeful to work with to maximize their learning during the orientation process.

This process also enabled children to express pro-social behaviours in helping others, listening, sharing and being responsible. For example: Noa, Jasper and Luca showed Alyse around. Jasper held her hand and Noa and Luca worked through the checklist. They both held onto the checklist to steady it with Noa doing the ticking.

Docklands

At Docklands, the children in the kindergarten program drove much of the process. We started by asking the children what they would want to know if they had just started in a new place. It's always impressive to ask a group of pre-schoolers what they know on any given topic, because inevitably a wealth of knowledge just pours out, and you get an insight into what is important to each of them. Sometimes it's little things that you hadn't even considered.

Docklands initially brainstormed in a large group, with smaller groups meeting and coming up with questions over a two-month period. We asked the children to consider questions such as:

How can we make people feel welcome?

What do children need to bring to Gowrie?

What can children do if they are hurt, worried, or need to get changed?

- Having a rest (you might have a sleep, or just do a quiet activity like listen to a story)



"Rest time." Drawing by Laila, 4.

- Cleaning and tidying up
- Going to the toilet, or getting a new nappy
- Getting picked up at the end of the day

We know that children learn best when they are actively engaged in relevant real life situations. Whilst the project was initially about hearing children's voices in the orientation process it became so much more than that.

The Docklands Handbook became a more 'interactive' one, as the Docklands service is much larger than the Carlton North service, with nine different rooms. Each child was given a sheet of stick-in photos of educators, and spaces relevant to each individual room.

While the book was primarily the work of the 3 to 5 year olds, we had a fantastic contribution from 1½ year old Zara who walked her educator through the process of a nappy change: showing where nappies and change of clothes are kept, walking up the steps to the change table, lying down on it, wiping down the mat, getting down from change table, washing hands with soap and drying them. This is a great example of how a younger child can demonstrate knowledge, understanding and agency.

As part of our reflective process feedback is welcomed and instrumental to our ongoing cycle of learning. This is what some parents had to say:

'I liked the list of things to bring. We have cut it out and put it on the wall.'

'When we got home that night she immediately cut out your photos and stuck them in, and was proud to show me what was in the handbook.'

'After being at Gowrie for two months, I think it was a good way for him to process the experience, and it gave me the opportunity to point out that the teachers are there if he needs help.'

'We really liked being able to read the Book with our son, who started at Gowrie this year. It was a very good way of inducting him and helping him to feel some ownership of his room and teachers, and the outdoor space.'

'It's been easy dropping my child off each morning; he knows where everything else is thanks to the Book and races into play. It doesn't feel like a child care centre it is more a learning environment.'



The photo of the two girls on our cover and this drawing of people hugging were used together on one page of the handbook with the caption 'They would need to know how to share and be kind to other children.' India 5.3 years

Conclusion

We know that children learn best when they are actively engaged in relevant real life situations. Whilst the project was initially about hearing children's voices in the orientation process it became so much more than that. Elements of literacy, numeracy, responsibility, pro-social actions, communication, collaboration and a sense of community involved children developing in all areas of the EYLF. This project was also about how the adults in our community (educators, staff, parents and family members) viewed children, and was an exercise in highlighting their potential. Giving children opportunities enables their agency to be demonstrated in meaningful ways.

The Possibilities of Superhero Play

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The theoretical backdrop

We all understand that children use play to develop their understandings about the world in which they live, but what happens when the 'thing' that children are striving to understand is violence? In our society, children are exposed to violence, pretend and real, through coverage of international conflicts, stylised media violence and sometimes conflict within the home. As early childhood educators, we understand that play is the most likely tool through which children will strive to make sense of violence (Levin, 2003).



Children's consumption of popular culture has pronounced impacts on their play. The superhero genre has traditionally been marketed to children with films and television series being created solely for this purpose (Barbaro and Earp, 2008). Meanwhile, many adults are concerned about children's consumption of popular culture, specifically the superhero genre, through viewing films and cartoons, integrating action figures into play and wearing trade marked costumes for play.

Superhero play and play which explores violence remains a contentious issue for educators and families alike. Some of the major concerns explored in recent literature include:

- The negation of flexible imaginary play through the use of narrow story lines in children's films and cartoons (Glenn Cupit, 2006).
- The depiction of the female as the submissive victim stereotype and a sexualised object of desire, relegating girls engaged in superhero play to powerless, peripheral roles (Marsh, 2010).
- The clear but restrictive messages associated with masculinity in superhero play - superheroes are quite strictly aggressive, strong and quiet, while villains are associated with a much wider range of personality types. Marsh (2010) asserts that this sends a strong message that to stray from the prescribed masculinity is inherently bad.
- The assumption that toy guns and pretend violence is connected to the development of aggressive behaviour and using this reasoning as justification for a zero tolerance policy on superhero play (Holland, 2003).

Despite the concerns outlined above, there is much evidence to suggest that superhero play is, in fact, an essential learning tool for many children (Marsh, 2010).

Children have a real need to explore the themes upon which superhero narratives are based - violence, dominance, good and evil (Levin, 2003). It seems that the largest pulling factor drawing children into superhero play may be centred around children's own experience of life compared to superheroes. With superheroes representing strength, power and integrity (Barnes, 2008), we should not be surprised when children enjoy bringing these qualities into their play (Glenn Cupit, 2006).

Supported superhero play

In our service, superhero play had been developing in the kindergarten room and educators began to closely observe the themes which children were bringing to their play. With the understanding that superhero play is often about allowing children to feel powerful and to explore different aspects of violent behaviour, intentional teaching possibilities were carefully considered.

After receiving little response to efforts from educators to insert real life heroes (emergency service personnel) into children's superhero play narratives, **power** began

to be more closely considered as a possible point of interest for the group. With the involvement of the entire kindergarten group, a list of superheroes was compiled, including many female characters. This brainstorming session piqued the interest of every child, as all were able to share their knowledge and contribute to the discussion. With a very long list recorded for the group to see, the children were then challenged to consider what made each of the listed characters a superhero.

When asked, "*What is it that these characters do that makes them super?*" the children had a variety of suggestions:

- They help people out.
- They are clever.
- They are strong.
- They wear costumes.

When the group reflected on the list, all of the children identified as having the top three character traits. Of course, the fourth led to a flurry of costume making. Through intentional teaching moments during play and formal whole group meetings, educators encouraged children to consider what superheroes would do if they were at kindergarten - *How would they show that they were clever and strong? How would they help people out?*

These discussions led to significant changes in the nature of superhero play observed within the group. Superheroes in the kindergarten environment supported their peers with difficult tasks, conducted safety checks of the environment, showed more confidence in social problem solving, and displayed increasing independence in many ways.

In an unexpected extension of this supported-superhero-play, the focus moved to 'Superfoods' with a parent led nutrition presentation, many cooking experiences and, eventually, a review of the kindergarten menu provided from the service's kitchen.

With a theoretical understanding of the benefits of superhero play, the children's interests were harnessed to promote a sense of belonging and security as children actively showed care, concern and respect for one another. At the same time, healthy eating habits were promoted from a perspective of building 'super' bodies.

Perhaps, most importantly, children experienced an increasing sense of control as they developed understandings around how *they*, rather than their favourite superhero, could be super.

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Sharing a Successful Leadership Initiative

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Gowrie SA comprises two Child Centres in different inner suburban locations, offering long day care and preschool programs for approximately 400 children ranging in age from birth to six years. Each Child Centre employs a four-year, early childhood degree qualified Children's Program Leader who has overall responsibility for the children's programs. These positions support all educators and, specifically, the leadership teams within each room.

Leadership requirements within the current climate of government initiatives and change in the early childhood sector are increasing (Blackmore, 2010; Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2013; Stamopoulos, 2012). Educators who have decision-making responsibilities for educational practices have a role as leaders (Stamopoulos, 2012) and need to be skilled and effective in their leadership enactment (Blackmore, 2010).

Gowrie SA has long valued opportunities to create environments in which aspiring leaders can learn new skills and practice these. In order to do this a leadership structure has been created which can change and evolve with the needs of the staff and the organisation. In each children's room there is a Team Leader, an Assistant Team Leader and one other educator. The qualifications held by these educators are a two-year Diploma in Children's Services or a four-year Bachelor in Early Childhood Education.

In a Team Leader's absence (due to sickness, annual leave, professional development or study opportunities), the Assistant Team Leader makes the necessary leadership decisions required for the room. When this occurs, that staff member receives an additional loading to their salary called 'Higher Duties'.

For some time, there was regular feedback from Team Leaders that when they were absent, the children's rooms did not function as well as they normally did. This included Assistant Team Leaders not following usual routines, avoiding leadership decisions, showing low confidence, feeling stressed and occasionally contacting the absent Team Leader for advice. This resulted in frustrations from the Team Leaders and sometimes the families and children. Both Children's Program Leaders supported the Team leaders and Assistant Team Leaders in solving problems as they arose. This support often involved telling educators what to do in particular situations, or stepping in and resolving issues for them. Over time it became clear that a different strategy was required.

During a practitioner research project opportunity in 2009, Margy Whalley, a visiting speaker from the Pen Green Children's Centre in the UK, shared a model called 'dilemma stories'. Using this model, one person (the storyteller) shares a problem, issue or dilemma they are having or have experienced. When the storyteller finishes, other participants ask questions of the storyteller, both to deepen the storyteller's understanding of the different perspectives to the dilemma, as well as to deepen their own understanding of the multiple perspectives which could be considered during that, or a similar dilemma.

The questioning has a focus on analysis rather than problem solving. There is no right or wrong answer, which enables the storyteller to feel comfortable throughout the process rather than feeling defensive or judged by their peers. This model demonstrates the many complexities involved in dilemmas once multiple perspectives (shown through critically reflective questions) are considered (M. Whalley, personal communication, April 14, 2009).



To address the difficulties experienced by the Assistant Team Leaders in enacting decision-making and leadership responsibilities, the dilemma stories model was used to create a learning environment specifically for this group of educators. Over time, participation in the dilemma stories model has increased the ability of Assistant Team Leaders to reflect and learn together through contributing and listening to each other's perspectives on a dilemma. A benefit of using dilemma stories means participants can ask questions from different perspectives. Some perspectives focused on family needs, some on educator needs, some on processes and some on underlying feelings.

One of the difficulties in leadership roles in early childhood contexts is that, due to the busy and constant nature of the work, there is often little time in which to make decisions. Providing the resources (such as time and relief staff) so that Assistant Team Leaders and Children's Program Leaders can participate in the Learning for Leading group every six weeks has been an important investment for the organisation.

In relation to the original difficulties when the Assistant Team Leaders undertook Higher Duties, the dilemma story model has, on the whole, shown success. Assistant Team Leaders have shown increased confidence in managing competing demands when their Team Leader is absent. They have shown greater capacity for consultation and the ability to consider multiple perspectives in their decision-making, which in turn, has influenced their responses and actions. This has resulted in a reduction in complaints from families. In addition, the Assistant Team Leaders have shown increased reflective and critical thinking and they have created a stronger support network with other educators and staff across the organisation (Amble, 2012; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2010; Howard, Sanders & McClannon, 2010).

The Children's Program Leaders have also benefited from the Learning for Leading group. We are now more deeply questioning our own decision-making and assumptions, and helping other staff in the organisation to do the same. This has led to thinking and learning about issues around the impact of social justice and equity. Based on the success of this model in our context, our work and learning together will continue.



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Reading Groups as a Method of Reflective Practice – implications for practice



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In this article, we share the outcomes of a research project that used a reading group approach as a means to engage in reflective practice (Madden & Davies, 2011). While this research was conducted with NSW Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs), the process can be readily applied to support critical reflection and professional dialogue by early and middle childhood educators across a range of settings.

The project titled *Rethinking Inclusion*, aimed to explore participants' understandings of inclusion and to enhance their knowledge around inclusive practice. Our approach was informed by the evidence base of effective professional development, which identifies the importance of professional development programs being conducted over an extended period of time, with opportunities to engage in reflective conversations with others (Raban, Nolan, Waniganayake, Ure, Brown & Deans, 2007). The reading group provided a mode of learning to complement other professional development opportunities, including training, coaching and mentoring.

Context and Theory

Drawing on best practice research, we facilitated a reading group for NSW ISFs based around issues of inclusion. ISFs support eligible child care services to build their capacity to promote quality and inclusive programs for all children, as part of the Australian Government's Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP). The project was supported with funding provided by the NSW Professional Support Coordinator (PSC).

The research project recognised the key role of ISFs in supporting early and middle childhood educators to engage in reflective practice in their work with children and families. Much of the professional literature on reflective practice draws on the work of John Dewey, an American psychologist and educational reformer. Dewey (1933:6) defined reflective thought as "*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends*". Schon (1983; 1987) later differentiated reflective practice according to whether it occurred in the moment, "*reflecting-in-action*" or afterwards, "*reflecting-on-action*".

Drawing on theories of reflective practice, and particularly Greenwood's (1993) focus on reflecting-before-action, the reading group provided a space for ISFs to participate in reflective discussions pertaining to inclusion. It also assisted them to support early and middle childhood educators to engage in reflective practice, which is a critical component of the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and *My Time Our Place*.

The Reading Group Process

Prior to each reading group, participating ISFs were sent a journal article or book chapter which addressed an issue relating to inclusion. To prepare for each session, participants were asked to read the selected article or chapter and reflect on the following questions:

- What are the key issues raised by the author of the article or chapter?
- How do these key issues relate to or intersect with my role?
- How does this contribute to, broaden, or extend my understanding of inclusion?
- How can I use or apply this knowledge in my role?

Participants were encouraged to keep a reflective journal between sessions to record their thoughts and impressions, application of the knowledge gained, and emerging issues and questions. One ISF stated that while she had always kept a journal, the description of "reflective" was new terminology for her.

Participants phoned in to each reading group using a teleconference facility. This methodology allowed ISFs from across the state to participate, ensuring equity and accessibility across geographical locations. While we were initially concerned that meeting over the phone might be a limitation, this approach actually became a strength, as participants identified the phone link up as convenient and time and cost efficient. One ISF also commented that talking about issues over the phone provided a sense of anonymity, which created a safe space for talking about more difficult issues.

Significantly, participants in the reading group reported that their involvement in the project assisted them to develop and refine their reflective practice skills, which they could then utilise with educators. One ISF commented that, "[participating in the reading group] did mean that I was reflecting more on what I was doing when I was in centres". She noted, "being pointed to different readings was useful, [as was] having questions to focus on. I would probably use those questions all the time now as a focus for reflection. We tell services to reflect, so we have to do it ourselves". Another ISF spoke of using the EYLF as a reflective tool in her work with educators. She reported, "...it [the EYLF] has given us the perfect chance as ISFs to have fabulous discussions around why people choose to do the things they do in their role as early childhood staff. It has been inspirational ... working with teams of staff, and seeing real change ... within the service, has been incredible".

Key Findings

At the conclusion of the reading group, ISFs were surveyed about what reflective practice meant to them and how it related to their role. Participants described reflective practice as taking the time to reflect on and evaluate their interactions and conversations with educators, with a view to improving their practice. The flow on effect of this was that they then felt more confident in supporting educators to further enhance their practices. One ISF reported, "I like to digest these thoughts and decide whether I would change my thinking [and] my practices so that I can constantly improve and develop my skills [and] knowledge when dealing with services. It relates to my role, as I need to be constantly evolving as a person

so that I can help my services evolve and develop themselves". Another ISF commented on the importance of being critically reflective commenting, "For me reflective practice is examining what I do, think and say, and analysing it for unintended bias - looking at who is included and who is excluded by my actions or lack of action. It's about being fair (in the fullest sense of the word) and ethical in all my dealings with others. It is integral to my role as ISF - If I can't be reflective about my professional practice, how then can I expect others to be so?"

For Reflection

Reflective practice is a core principle of the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and *My Time Our Place* and supports ongoing learning, continuous improvement and quality practice. Therefore, the processes applied in the research project with ISFs make it relevant and applicable to early and middle childhood educators. In fact, a cohort of educators took part in a reading group facilitated by the first author in 2012. These educators commented that they enjoyed hearing different perspectives to develop thinking and inform practice. They also valued the opportunity to participate with colleagues, and to read and discuss together. This feedback provides evidence of the effectiveness of reading groups as a tool to promote reflection and professional learning. It also builds on the evidence base demonstrating the positive impact and outcomes emerging from the ISF reading groups.

To consider how a reading group may be applied in your context, we leave you with some reflective questions:

- What are your current reading practices?
- Ideally, what would you like your reading practices to look like?
- What would success around your reading goal look like?
- What are the challenges to your ideal reading practices?
- What content areas do you feel you have a good knowledge and understanding of?
- What content areas would you like to build on?
- What is one small step you can take to address your reading goal?
- What supports or resources might assist you with this goal?

Considering these questions will support educators to engage in critical conversations, challenge their current thinking, and consider how they might apply new understandings in everyday practice.

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