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Reflections is a quarterly publication by Gowrie Australia for educators and families in Education and Care 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 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 our final *Reflections* for this year, a celebration of 2014! This past year has seen many within the sector expressing thoughts and concerns to the Productivity Commission Inquiry and, while we await a Government response, we can only hope that the spirit of collaboration and professionalism that has been exhibited will demonstrate, perhaps better than words, the 'soul and integrity' of the early childhood sector. Children are central to this submission, and we hope enough has been provided in order that their voices can be heard, and that the resulting outcome is one that we can wholeheartedly work with and support.

This issue of *Reflections* includes a host of ideas on sustainability, early literacy, outdoor play, cohesive teams and inspiring projects. Sustainability is playing a key role in many lives and Yvonne Paujik, from the University of Queensland's Campus Kindergarten, advocates for sustainability to be introduced to children as a way of thinking and living. In a second article on sustainability, Edina Kartal, from Gowrie WA, prefaces her article with a quote from the United Nations, "Education is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development" (Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008). These educators welcome this challenge and openly share their vision for the future.

Ros Cornish, CEO for Gowrie Tasmania, addresses the issue of professional development in light of the Abbott Government's \$200 million Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP). Ros gives advice and support on approaches to professional development and, particularly, the importance of professional development providers offering ongoing support.

Jacki Harris, from Gowrie WA describes the intricate learnings available to children through unstructured play and the impact on literacy development. Examining vocabulary development in kindergarten, Sandra Grant's second article for us is enchantingly titled 'Dancing with Language'.

Recognising the importance of belonging and being part of a team inspired Meghan Woods from Gumnut Cottage Childcare Centre, Macquarie University to write about the exploration of values to support the creation of cohesive teams. She challenges readers to examine their own work environments – "Do your teams really *feel* like a team?"

Inspired by poor results in the 2012 Australian Early Development Census, the 'Great Start, Great Futures' initiative has helped communities, staff and parents in the Darling Downs area of South-West Queensland to develop networks, strategies and activities to promote a holistic approach to early learning.

In Victoria a timely Telstra grant enabled a team of inspired educators to support a wonderful weaving initiative that has extended children's learning in various domains, involved community groups in meaningful and ongoing interactions, and set the scene for future projects through the purchase of a knitters' loom.

And finally, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you a safe and happy festive season. We thank those who have contributed to *Reflections* this year and to those of you who have read the articles and used them to be inspired, thoughtful and motivated in your work with staff, children, families and communities.

Jane Bourne

on behalf of Gowrie Australia.

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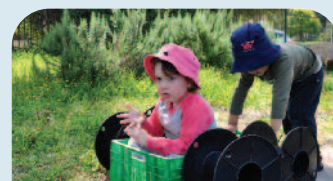
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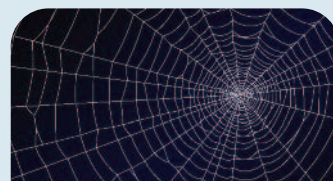


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Education for Sustainability at Campus Kindergarten is more than 'doing'... it is a way of thinking and practising

Yvonne Paujik

Curriculum Lead Teacher
Campus Kindergarten
University of Queensland

Sustainability is more than gardening, worm farms or composting. As educators, we have to think beyond these 'green activities'. Sustainability has shifted away from being just *about* environmental education to thinking about it as education *for* sustainability (Davis, 2010). Although both education threads are separate, they are certainly not isolated. Education for sustainability is about linking the '*about*' with the '*doing*'.



Campus Kindergarten is situated in a leafy environment within the grounds of the University of Queensland

The Queensland Department of Education and Training (2009) definition of sustainability is, *"Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs"* or, simply put, *"Enough, for all, forever."*

With that in mind, staff at the University of Queensland's Campus Kindergarten are always conscious of how education for sustainability looks in our programme, and that children are given opportunities to understand how their choices impact on their natural world, *"It is both present and future orientated. It's about learning to design and implement actions for the present, in the knowledge that the impact of these actions will be experienced in the future"* (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2010: 4)

Connecting to the natural world

Campus Kindergarten is situated in a leafy environment within the grounds of the University of Queensland. We are so fortunate to have a lush natural environment on our doorstep and we believe that in order to preserve and protect our natural world children need a connection to nature that goes beyond outside play. Children have to use their senses and dig deep into the earth and soil, hold a harlequin beetle gently in their hands, or discover the delight of playing hide and seek amongst our tall bushes.

Education staff members recognise the importance of children's connections to the natural world and further support this by posing questions, planning outdoor play together and testing out hypotheses in order to further refine children's understanding of their natural world and the responsibility they have in sustaining it. With the warmer weather, different types of animals from ducklings, to possums, to the tiniest native bees have been coming out into our immediate environment. Children and educators together explore the concept that we are part of the biodiversity of the environment, that it is not just about us, but about everything, including the most fragile of living organisms.

The many possibilities of education for sustainability

There are many opportunities for introducing children to ways of thinking about sustainable practices. As educators, we need to be cautious and avoid relying on one-off activities. Activities such as worm farms, composting and veggie patches are valuable in introducing children to the concept of sustainability and the challenge is to go beyond this 'green activity' learning. Our vision at Campus Kindergarten is to support children to understand that there are different issues surrounding sustainability and that it can't be solved by merely 'doing' a commercially produced sustainability resource. Our approach is to challenge children's understandings, to allow them to be immersed in uncertainty, to test out those doubts and hopefully to reach an understanding that there is no one correct answer, but multiple solutions.

As a centre, we encourage families to bring a litter-less lunch box for their children's meal times. This initiative came about when a staff member realised the amount of waste that pre-packaged goods were contributing to the centre's waste, which in turn goes to landfill. To address this, as a whole centre and with the children we did a waste audit where we collected rubbish for a week and then analysed our data. This activity alone allowed children to be a part of the sustainability process of identifying the issue, collecting the evidence, analysing the data and from there creating some sustainable solutions (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2010).

Other projects that came about as a result of the waste audit included an organic versus non-organic breakdown experiment and constructing a recycling workshop out of plastic bags. These activities are some examples of how to further extend learning opportunities and immerse children in critical thinking about making connections on sustainable choices.

Additionally, as a centre that values sustainable practices, there are simple ways that we express our commitment to being sustainably responsible - from purchasing natural materials, to encouraging the use of recycled materials in our collages, to reducing the use of paper in the administration building by using e-prints (digital) rather than paper.

It takes a community to raise a child

Davis (2010) suggests that education for sustainability involves all stakeholders in the early childhood setting and that it is about values, attitudes, ethics and actions. It is neither a subject nor an 'add on', it is a way of thinking, a way of practice. Education for sustainability is interdisciplinary and involves different members of the community with different expertise and knowledge collaborating together to tackle issues that affect sustainability. Again, as a kindergarten that is situated within the grounds of a university, we are so fortunate to have different community links within our reach. We started off with the ones that are the closest to us, the families. We have found that our approach of engaging children to be genuinely active participants in the programme - where their voices are heard and we challenge their thinking and allow them to see the multiple viewpoints of an issue - has tended to trickle into households and indirectly into parents' spheres. This has supported us, as educators, to engage in authentic partnerships with parents.

We are also fortunate to be a part of the 'restoration community' of the University of Queensland which works at restoring the natural habitat within the University's biodiversity. This represents one of many opportunities for children to go beyond doing 'green activities'. Children are immersed in thinking of sustainability as being broader than the environment, to thinking about how people and change can influence every living thing.



Organic vs non-organic breakdown experiment

Challenges for staff members

In an era marked by concerns about the future of the planet, education for sustainability can be empowering and an antidote to a sense of helplessness (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2012).

One of the many challenges for educators lies in unpacking the vast issues of sustainability, where there is never one easy answer. From the approach of 'reduce, re-use and recycle', to serious issues of depleting natural resources, educators may find that they are not knowledgeable enough to have real conversations with children. This is why education for sustainability is not easy and often gets marginalised in educational settings.

However, it is important that as educators we do not give up. It is certainly a pedagogy that is slow, and that requires us to critically reflect. As long as we have the image of the child who is competent and an active citizen of the world, issues of sustainability become more manageable to dissect and be engaged in. At the end of the day, what we hope to impart to our children is the ability to be socially responsible, to question things

that seem unfair and unjust, and to feel courageous and empowered enough to make changes to things that are not right. We need to make sure that our children will live in a world where they can still have clean water in their creeks, be able to have a diverse range of animal species, where global warming is a thing of the past and to simply be able to enjoy the natural world.

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Professional Development: An Essential Ingredient to Enhancing Practice

Ros Cornish

Chief Executive Officer
Lady Gowrie Tasmania

The Abbott Government's \$200 million Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP) supports long day care services with the cost of training and up skilling educators. The LDCPDP is a result of the Abbott Government's decision to redistribute the former Government's Early Years Quality Fund (EYQF) equitably amongst the sector, following an independent report that found the EYQF would have benefits for only one third of long day care educators.

The investment is indeed significant and if used wisely by services will support continued quality improvement and meet the requirements of the National Quality Framework. According to Russell (2009) and Waniganayake et al (2008), *".. there is recognition that engagement in professional development and support by those employed in early education organisations can improve their knowledge and skills and in turn enhance learning and positive experiences for young children."*

Quality professional development has the potential to enhance pedagogy, contribute to children's learning, and build linkages between education settings and other settings. It can challenge long-held truths and assumptions so that knowledge and skills are acknowledged and built on and, in turn, support change and a shift in thinking and practice.

"But engagement in professional development opportunities is not in itself an indicator of quality education and care" (Sheridan et al, 2006).

The measure of quality should rely on evidence of change and enhanced pedagogical reflection on actual practice – the impact of the professional development experience once the educators are back in their settings.

Raban et al (2007), state that ".. there is recognition that change after professional development is a slow process. Professional development is likely to forge change in educator practice only when it is sustained and intensive, and where the change is likely to be gradual and incremental".

Professional development of early childhood educators, at all levels of expertise, should be an ongoing process. All professionals need to continue to update their knowledge and skills through a coherent and systematic program of learning experiences. The LDCPDP provides this opportunity as the funding is provided over a period of time until 2017.

The leader within the service plays a crucial role in guiding educators to reflect on the effectiveness of their professional development experience and supporting sustained change. One-off professional development experiences without follow up mentoring and coaching may not be as beneficial as a whole of service approach.

A holistic integrated approach has the potential to optimise educator involvement, provides consistent information, fosters collaboration and consolidates shared understanding.

The LDCPDP allows services to identify their specific professional development needs in order to support the National Quality Framework, adhere to the National Quality Standard and deliver the Early Years Learning Framework or other approved learning framework. Services will be able to use the funding to meet their training and skills development needs and have the flexibility to do so in line with the circumstances of their service.

While services have only recently received the LDCPDP offer, already there has been a myriad of marketing material to the sector promoting a broad range of providers and services which are aligned to the LDCPDP. In order for this investment to be maximised and used wisely, services are actively encouraged to undertake a systematic and strategic approach to planning for the use of the allocated funds over the funding period. The LDCPDP guidelines outline the approved use of the funds and reporting and acquittal requirements.

Finally, when engaging professional development providers it is important to ensure they have:

- appropriate credentials
- knowledge and experience in the subject matter being provided
- an understanding of the principles of adult learning
- programs structured to promote linkages between research and practice
- an outcome based approach
- a commitment to follow up and ongoing support.

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There are few experiences which have greater impact on literacy development than unstructured play. Before children can learn to read or write, they must first be able to think symbolically and understand communication within their society (Corbett & Strong, 2011). Through individual and shared play experiences children imitate and practise not only the structures of their language, but also the skill of communication in its many forms.



Literacy development is believed to begin at birth when very young infants respond to the child directed speech of parents and carers who instinctively use low tones to soothe infants and higher tones to engage with them (Birckmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2008). Within the first weeks of life, infants will demonstrate their interest in language by quietening their body movements or turning their heads to listen to the spoken word. During this time infants learn to identify the sounds used in language and then, around 6 months of age, begin to respond in turn, using more sophisticated canonical babbling such as 'baba' or 'didi' (Birckmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2008).

While the speech of the infant may be limited to about 10 words at around 15 months of age, their understanding of words is far greater, and in the months that follow the words which the child can say increase to around 100 (Birckmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2008). As children's ability to comprehend what is being said increases they become more able to follow and give instructions themselves. By the time children are 2 years old they become able to express their wishes with more clarity by combining two or more words into short sentences such as, "Go outside". It is also about this age when children begin to demonstrate evidence of symbolic thought (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2010), that is, they are able to think abstractly and create in their mind something which is not in front of them. This is evident when toddlers begin to engage in role-play, such as pushing a block along the floor pretending it is a vehicle. As children develop they will also be able to think abstractly and, in the case of the block truck, be able to solve the problems the truck encounters during the play scenario. This symbolic development is essential if children are to understand that symbols have meaning.

It is also during the toddler years that children start to develop their ability to narrate stories (Birckmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2008). They verbalise, or through play experiences, recreate or recount, with increasing detail, events which they have experienced. If we are to look at individual events within the day of a young child, their days are rich in 'stories'. For example, a child sitting in a small sandpit pretending to have a bath is recounting this event from life and through this reflection developing the ability to tell a story. Photographing play experiences and placing photos in a book enables children and parents/caregivers to recall and recount prior experiences. Sitting with a child and talking about these pictures will help develop the understanding that the narrative within a story is linked to the pictures. These opportunities for reflection and retelling will also promote shared role-play amongst peers who recognise the environment within a story.

By the time children engage in shared role-play experiences they are already becoming skilled communicators. Engaging with peers in play helps children to develop the skills for entering and exiting a conversation, an understanding of how to make oneself heard within a group and provides practice for applying the cultural mores used within their society (Makin, Diaz, & McLachlan, 2007). If we observe the negotiations which take place to create a dramatic play scenario, we can see the strengths which children already possess and their growing communication competence.

Children may repeat the first couple of words of what they want to say, while others are still talking, to indicate they will be talking next, or identify when the existing speaker is about to finish, thereby creating a successful overlap within the conversation. In addition, children will use exaggerated expression to convey their feelings about their peers' suggestions and, in western cultures, powerful body language, for example, a child's pouting and folding of arms sends a very clear message of disapproval to their peers.

Language is also used by children of 3 or 4 years of age to create or maintain social order (Docket & Fleer, 2003). An example of this can be seen when a group of children in conflict with another use words that sound similar, or use 'we' when making individual statements to demonstrate a unified front. The use of 'we' in this way can be a very powerful form of expression, as children sometimes use it to secure the support of their peers.

Children creating a dramatic play scenario also demonstrate their vast knowledge of what is required to tell the story they have in mind (Shagoury, 2009). They create an initial basic narrative, and alter the characters to suit the number of children involved in the scenario. Often seen when playing house, children will add a sibling or other relative when an additional child wishes to join in. Within such a scenario children express their often detailed understanding of characterisation within a story setting. For example, the 'dad' may use a low-pitched voice and engage in behaviours which the child perceives as 'dad like'.

By sharing narratives within play scenarios children are also broadening their view of their world, increasing their vocabulary and developing their understanding of communication (Campbell & Green, 2006). When a child without a pet engages in a role play scenario where the sick or injured animal is taken to the vet, that child learns from peers not only about the process of what happens in a veterinary office and the associated vocabulary, but is exposed to other forms of communication. Since this play experience reflects the child's understanding of what takes place at a doctor's surgery, the child can then transfer this knowledge from one scenario to the next. This sharing of knowledge occurs throughout play as children learn from, and teach, each other.

In addition to the creation of narratives, scripts and stories, dramatic play enables children to practise all forms of communication at their own pace (Birckmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2008). If we look again at the scenario of the sick pet, children can practise communication skills, role-play the use of the computer, engage in writing and interpret environmental print. To do so however, the environment must be one which provides children with the resources and freedom to explore - in this case a telephone, pencils and paper, and keyboard or toy laptop would be provided. The environmental print which includes both words and pictures is also of great importance and could include exit signs, the medical cross shape, posters about different pets, and what a pet might need such as food and water.

By providing writing materials within dramatic play spaces the play scenario becomes more realistic and children are able to document their experiences (Makin, Diaz, & McLachlan, 2007). Children may write or draw images to create lists, instructions, labels or signs, demonstrating their growing understanding of

the purpose of the written word. Enquiring about children's pictures and writing not only provides greater insight into children's interests and ability, but enables children to reflect on their work. Children can identify the places they could improve "I forgot to write..." as well as celebrate their achievements. This reflection creates habits which children will use when editing their own work in later schooling.

When looking at the 'writing' which occurs within play scenarios, it could be easy to assume a child's print is mere scribble. However, careful analysis will demonstrate the considerable understanding of print conventions that young children are practising during play. Children's 'writing' may run from left to right across the paper, or start at the top and work towards the bottom of the page. It may include series of symbols which reflect the print from within a child's home environment - for example, the English alphabet, Arabic or Kanji letters and often the letters/sounds included in the child's name. These letters may be written in random order to label a picture, or to write stories which can be read back to parents, educators or peers. When children are asked about their writing it shows them that those marks on the paper have meaning and purpose.

Through dramatic play scenarios children are also engaging in a range of reading experiences. Children who turn the pages of a book while 'reading' a story of their own creation are further developing an understanding of the connection between images and print, a skill which will be later refined as beginner readers. When provided with the resources to do so children will engage in a range of reading experiences through play. They will read maps, instructions and engage in literacy experiences which are useful to them as part of their play experience.

As with any pursuit, literacy development needs to be one which children themselves feel worthwhile (Healy, 2008). During play children explore concepts which interest them most, and apply new knowledge obtained from observing and communicating with those more capable than themselves. When parents or educators involve themselves in play scenarios with children, they are able to take on the role of the more knowledgeable peer to challenge and extend children's understanding at the exact moment it is relevant and useful to them, thus maximising the benefits of unstructured play.

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BELONGING: exploring values to support the creation of cohesive teams of educators

Meghan Woods
Early Childhood Teacher
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When asked to lead a team of educators on a part time basis (working three days a week), I was excited to find out who I'd be working with. My team included one 20 year old educator with 3 years experience, and another educator in her 40's and with over 10 years experience. Along with excitement I wondered how I was going to facilitate the creation of a community of learners and a program that met all of our needs and would continue to evolve on days when I wasn't present.



As early childhood educators we understand the importance for children to feel a sense of belonging. Children need to feel secure to engage with new challenges, to grow and develop. We are even guided by a document that has the word 'belonging' in its title, *Belonging, Being & Becoming - the Early Years Learning Framework*.

As educators, we actively seek to create a sense of belonging for our children and for our families. We develop procedures to ensure that we support children as they transition between rooms. We use family interviews, orientation visits, family questionnaires and other conversations and documentation to communicate with families and help us to create a sense of belonging and community.

By doing this we are acknowledging that as humans we strive for a connection, a sense of belonging from our very first breath. For many of us, knowing that we are valued by the people that we engage with everyday, whether at home or at work, is a fundamental goal.

It left me questioning myself. If a sense of belonging is such an integral part of successful growth and development, then why shouldn't I consider my fellow educators' sense of belonging?

This wasn't just a question of whether as educators we were friends, or liked working with each other, but about a connection between us that would positively impact on the program that we delivered together. And for me, as leader

within my room, how could I have more intent about this critical element of connection and belonging in my team building process?

We began a process of inquiry about our individual ways of being and beliefs about education. This created the opportunity for us all to share and document our ideas and to discuss our passions, goals and preferences for communication and management styles. Both intentions and challenges were set around the content and focus of the program we were going to create with our children and families. Having these to refer back to, throughout the year, helped our room meetings to be meaningful and kept us moving forward.

This year I have worked with a wonderful, motivated team of educators who support each other to strive for more within our program and documentation. We have had a few moments where we have had to revisit our initial intentions and discuss our different ways of being, and to modify our behaviours but, for a group of educators of varying ages and experiences, we are a cohesive team that has a strong sense of belonging, pride and commitment to our program.

Can you say the same for your team?

This is the challenge - to be more mindful about how we create our teams of educators within a service. This is an invitation for you to reflect on your own team. Does your team really feel like a team? What steps can you take to connect your team and discover your potential together?



The revamped outdoor environment features extensive use of natural materials and many opportunities to experience different textures

Which bin does this belong in?

Edina Kartal
Gowrie (WA) Inc.

It is now widely recognised that humanity faces urgent problems affecting local, regional and global environments, and social and economic development. The Earth's limited natural resources are being consumed more rapidly than they are being replaced, and the effects of global warming upon ecological balance and bio-diversity are well known.

A powerful statement was made in 1997 in the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO) Report, *Educating for a Sustainable Future*, "Education is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development" (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008).

There is a strong agreement and alignment amongst leaders and the early childhood education and care sector, that educating for sustainability should begin very early in a child's life. The following recommendations are listed in United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) for early childhood education (ECE) services worldwide.

ECE services are encouraged to:

- evaluate the service opportunity for growth and the promotion of changes to implement sustainability practices;
- review strategies and pedagogies in order to implement sustainability teaching practices within the service;
- include sustainability in the curriculum through content that fosters caring attitudes and empathy towards the natural environment;
- involve families and the wider community in sustainable practices emanating from the service.

Governments are encouraged to:

- increase investment in order to expand access to quality early childhood education to implement sustainable practices;
- invest in teacher training as a basis for learning and teaching about education for sustainable development.

It is in early childhood that children develop basic values, attitudes, behaviours and habits, many of which will remain evident throughout adulthood. With this in mind, early childhood education for sustainability should be much broader than simply taking children outdoors to discover the beauty of nature and speaking about the natural environment. It must include opportunities for children to engage in intellectual dialogue regarding sustainability, and to support children in their quest to develop understandings about sustainability and environmental care.

For example, a child centre can commence a shared project focusing on 'Saving our Environment' and the project can be seen as a journey of learning using appropriate language, embedding sustainability into everyday practices and introducing new ideas through

investigation. Displaying the framework of the project as in, for example, the diagram below, demonstrates the value of children's ideas, supports their learning and attests to the power children have in sustaining their own environment with support from their educators.



Early childhood education settings and services need to be environments where sustainability is communicated and practised. This means that all ECE settings should examine their own ecological footprints and work towards reducing waste in energy, water and materials.

Some of the recommendations outlined by UNESCO may be seen as daunting or challenging to early childhood service providers, especially if they have never implemented environmental care and sustainability practices in the past. But, the key is not to overthink the task, but to start one small step at a time.

An early childhood education and care centre in the metropolitan suburb of Kewdale in Western Australia has made efforts to implement the recommendations set out by UNESCO and the Early Years Learning Framework. The centre's journey began in 2012 when an organisational strategic plan was developed with the inclusion of sustainability as a focus for the future.

The initial assessment within the centre identified the areas that needed immediate attention and improvement. Strategies were developed, as well as longer-term goals, and a plan was formulated to assist children to take ownership of their environment.

In 2013 the Kewdale centre 'revamped' their outdoor environment with sustainability and environmental care at the forefront of their design ideas. The design of the play area was considered and, in consultation with children and families, the environment now reflects an environmentally sensitive play space for open exploration and investigation, with natural resources supporting children's learning and development.

An obstacle course utilises recycled tyres, timber and rocks, large existing trees provide natural shady canopies while grassed areas offer exciting areas to run, play, socialise or eat. Areas of different textures were introduced with the use of rocks, pebbles, mulching and limestone pathways. Recycling bins are used in the children's indoor and outdoor environments with paper and plastic being regularly recycled and children making use of recycled resources and objects in their art and in their investigations. Children regularly help to care for their environment by raking fallen leaves, honky nuts¹ and sticks and placing them in vegetation recycling bags.

Vegetable gardens are maintained throughout the year providing children with opportunities to learn about growing organic vegetables and to experience the flavour and texture of freshly picked produce. A worm farm enables children to recycle food scraps from snacks and meals, along with other appropriate materials such as paper. The worm farm produces 'worm tea', a natural, chemical free fertiliser which is collected by the children and fed to the vegetable gardens. In addition, children and educators also maintain a compost bin in which organic matter is allowed to rot rapidly to produce a natural, good quality fertiliser for use in the vegetable gardens. These 'waste neutral' practices support wonderful learning opportunities for the centre community.

To involve families in the development of sustainable practices, the centre has implemented recycling stations where the children and families are encouraged to recycle objects by bringing their recycling to the centre from home. This was implemented to involve families and to encourage sustainability practices at home as well as in the service.

To further reduce the centres' carbon footprint, the service has turned to local food suppliers where possible, for example, meat is now bought from a local butcher who sources meat from West Australian farmers. Another centre initiative is adherence to a daily 'earth hour' when staff turn off all unnecessary lights, computers and power points for one hour during the children's rest period.

Educators at the centre have been pleasantly surprised by the manner in which children, other educators and families have responded to the strategies. Children who attend the centre are taking notice of their environment and are actively implementing strategies to care for it, based on what they have learned. The centre coordinator described one particular incident which really captured her attention.

One afternoon a group of children in the 3-5 year old age group were invited to help rake the outdoor playground in the infant's area. After a collaborative discussion, including the inventive repurposing of a slide to transport raked leaves to the recycling bags, one child approached the centre coordinator with a bucket full of leaves in one hand and a small decayed cardboard box in the other. The child's observation, "This does not belong in my bucket, this needs to go to that other recycling bin." was clear validation that the strategies put in place to teach children about everyday sustainability and environmental care, were being realised.

The question remains, will the recommendation made by UNESCO and the Early Years Learning Framework have a positive impact on the global capacity to make positive changes to the sustainability of our planet? Is one centre's effort in implementing these recommendations going to make a difference? Can one centre be a role model for many others within their community or can it impact a wider radius? We believe that a united effort to equip this generation of children with an understanding of the importance of sustainability and environmental care, is planting the seed for many generations to come.

**We only have one world...
let's not put it in the wrong bin!**

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¹ 'Honky nuts' is a Western Australian term for the seed pods of gum trees, commonly known as gumnuts.

GREAT START, GREAT FUTURES: An Early Years Approach in Darling Downs South West Queensland

OUR CONTEXT

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment's (DETE) Darling Downs South West (DDSW) Region is a vast area west of Brisbane. It covers about 28 per cent of Queensland's geographic area (about the same size as Victoria).

The DDSW Region regulates 232 approved services for children aged from birth to school age. It caters for 41,000 students in 211 state school sites.

The 2012 Australian Early Development Census results indicate that children in the Darling Downs South West Region are relatively more vulnerable across developmental domains compared with the Queensland and national results. Nearly one in three children starting school in the region were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains, compared with one in five children nationally.

A bridging approach

Continuity dilemmas reported to local DETE staff by parents and educators across early childhood education and care (ECEC) and schooling sectors indicated that a capability building approach was required to ensure reciprocal and respectful relationships to support all educators, parents and communities working with children. The Great Start, Great Futures Early Years Transition Approach aims to ensure optimal development and learning experiences for all children from conception to starting school by focusing on 5 leadership pillars that enable purposeful use of data, collaborative partnerships, multi-level support for vulnerable children and families, optimal transition practices and pedagogical leadership.

DDSW Transition Lead Model:

Leadership pillars for guiding responsive transition to school programs



The approach strengthens the capability of school principals to engage in local partnerships that support successful transitions to the first year of schooling. Key to the approach is reframing readiness building on the Ready Child Equation (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).



By working with early childhood services, families and communities supporting children from conception to age 8, schools investing in a holistic early years approach increase the likelihood that children will have successful early learning experiences.

Achievements

Schools who have engaged in the Great Start, Great Futures Early Years Transition Approach in the DDSW Region have created innovative, responsive partnerships and initiatives to support transitions that value and promote continuity and change from 0-8 years of age. These have included:

- eKindy hubs on school sites in remote communities;
- facilitated playgroups that promote the importance of universal access to kindergarten;
- early childhood educator networks, including shared professional development and transition planning based on local data;
- community early childhood service networks including co-authoring strategies and activities to promote child development, learning and transition;
- reinventing playgrounds through the lens of the National Quality Standard to create outdoor learning environments;
- elevating the concepts of agency, voice and sustainability within the learning program at the school.

Looking forward

Reciprocal, respectful, informed and productive local partnerships are critical to the wellbeing, development and learning of all children. The DDSW Region will continue to support local collectives in evidence-based responses for learning and development for all children in their community context.

Reference:

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2005). *Getting Ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: A 17 State Partnership*, Providence, Rhode Island: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

This story begins in the spring of 2013 when an idea generated by a group of confident and capable young children set off a chain of exciting learning opportunities. From one simple question - *“What would you like to see in the outdoor play space?”* came the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response of **“A giant web!”**

This conversation led to children interviewing peers and creating designs for the space and then, just by chance, we received an unexpected email that Telstra was offering grants for projects just like ours and that we could use this money to facilitate the strong interest the children had to create a web in our garden. We were in no doubt we had to apply for this grant! After a few short email enquiries from Denise Courtney (Telstra employee and Gowrie parent), an application was sent off. We kept our fingers crossed and in December 2013 we received the funds to extend on this idea with the children.

Although many of the kindergarten children involved in the early discussions and planning for the project had continued on to school after the summer break, the educators reintroduced this idea to the current children. We had a discussion around what the grant would entail and then reflected on these discussions with the children. This led to more questions - *What would be a suitable outdoor material to reflect a web? Would it be safe? Would it match with our philosophy? Could we make further community links? Would it be sustainable and would it reflect the views of the children?*

After seeking advice from managers and fellow educators we considered the concept of webbing through the implementation of art installations which could be used to complement the outdoor play space, and throughout other areas of the program. With a mixture of both excitement and anxiety we started to explore a range of weaving techniques with the children and set, as our ultimate goal, the purchase of a loom for the centre, so that this could become an ongoing webbing experience for years to come.

An informal conversation, which took place in our staff planning and collaboration room with a co-worker, connected us with a weaving expert and local community



artist, Ilka White. Ilka works professionally creating items on looms and also teaches weaving classes to beginners. After some email exchanges with Ilka, one educator began taking classes as a first step to implementing the project in her room, and ultimately across the service.

Meanwhile, the children continued to explore various forms of informal weaving techniques including outdoor weaving, weaving on trees, paper weaving and weaving string around cardboard pieces. All of these experiences supported learning and development in hand eye co-ordination and fine motor skills and facilitated creativity, imagination and problem solving.

In addition, Ilka came out to our service for a weaving session and demonstrated to the children how to use a loom correctly and how to weave using arms as the warp and the weft in a giant webbing piece - thus 'intertwining' other learning outcomes, such as spatial awareness and gross motor abilities, into this context. Following on from this experience we then had two excursions within our local community to the Hand Weavers and Spinners Guild in Carlton North. The Guild members were more than happy to have "the next generation of weavers" visit and we

were met by many of the volunteers who shared their passion and expertise with us. On our second visit to the Guild we successfully purchased our knitters' loom for the program. These excursions and interactions demonstrated the importance of children participating collaboratively with wider communities in the local vicinity.

As we now head towards the end of our year with the Telstra Funds Grant, and bearing in mind that the children's interests have developed and changed throughout the year, we felt that it was important to also develop a link across multiple learning areas. We are proud to announce that our first piece on the loom, which is currently in progress, recognises our nation's history and the first true inhabitants of our land, the Aboriginal community. In conversation with the children we are using red, black and yellow wool.

Through listening to children's voices, setting high expectations and viewing children as competent and capable citizens who can actively take part in the community, children can indeed achieve anything they put their minds to. A huge thank you to all the families, educators, Telstra, Ilka, Hand Weavers and Spinners Guild and, most importantly, to the children, for their contribution to this project.



An interest in space led to the creation of a shooting star using chicken wire and ribbon

Following on from an earlier article, 'Finding a Balanced Approach to Early Language and Literacy Learning and Development' (*Reflections* Issue 55: pp 4-7), this second article discusses the ways to implement a balanced approach to early language and literacy learning and development. Exploring Konza's (2011) elements of a balanced language and literacy program, the following examples focus specifically on vocabulary development and are designed to assist teachers to articulate the importance of building a rich vocabulary.

The Importance of Vocabulary Development

Kindergarten is a time when children begin to build more and more connections with the broader community through increasing social experiences, for example, at Kindy, swimming lessons, extended family events and through 'play dates' with friends. These experiences provide opportunities for children's vocabularies to expand accordingly. Vocabulary development in kindergarten is important as a child's vocabulary is not only expanding rapidly at this age, but is also an essential precursor to reading and writing. As Scarborough (2001: 2) observed, "Preschool children with strong receptive vocabularies tend to have better listening comprehension, word recognition and reading comprehension in the latter primary years."

Role of Supportive Adults

The role of a supportive adult is crucial, as children need exposure to a rich and expansive vocabulary in order to build on their existing repertoire of words. Children build their vocabularies through repetition and a diverse range of experiences that enable them to use words *expressively* in their talk, and to understand the meaning of words *receptively* as peers, family and friends talk with them. Luongo-Orlando (2010: 42) likens the process to a kind of dance, "Language learning is embedded in the conversations of everyday life. Learning to talk is a partnership between language users who offer personal observations and feedback to keep the dialogue or social dance going." In kindergarten the possibilities for enhancing and expanding children's vocabularies are endless if incorporated into every day experiences that are meaningful, authentic and arouse children's curiosity.



A soaring vocabulary ... Australian bird exhibits borrowed from the local museum provided the impetus for a wealth of language experiences.

In practice, this requires educators to engage in a range of intentional teaching strategies as part of everyday classroom practice. By intentional teaching I mean being 'an opportunist' and a planner. In other words, someone who is able to seize the moment as it arises in children's play to introduce new and descriptive words. Building children's vocabulary also involves planning so that new vocabulary is introduced through play, through real-life situations, investigations, routines and transitions - basically any context at kindergarten. Wasik (2010: 623) explains that it is important to plan for vocabulary building as part of oral language development and to be spontaneous and flexible:

How teachers initially present and explain words, purposively use the words throughout the day...and intentionally weave these words into multiple different events and activities for children have determining influences on how children hear, understand, and use these words, all of which ultimately shape how well they internalize and recall this content.

Building Vocabulary as Everyday Practice

This next section provides some examples of how to build children's vocabularies as part of daily interactions in kindergarten. The example in the following vignette is based on an experience that developed from a child's interests in birds. It demonstrates the capacity to seize an opportunity that presented itself and the planning designed to support a child's interest and to build on existing vocabulary.

A soaring vocabulary

One of the children was fascinated with the local birds that often entered our centre, so we borrowed a few Australian

birds exhibits from the local museum. One of the bird specimens happened to have its wings set out to full span so we talked about the ways those wings would move. Before I knew it we were chatting about birds flying, and sharing what we knew about birds. When I asked the children for some ways to describe birds' wing movements they suggested flapping, fluttering, floating and soaring! The richness of children's suggestions was a delight and a great stimulus to the group as a whole and led to some spontaneous animal movement experiences throughout the week. Later in the day I also wrote the words children had suggested and put them with the display. That's when one of the children noticed that several of the words started with the letters "fl" adding another dimension to our language experiences.

Children's connections to letter awareness through the writing examples also gave me useful insights into their developing literacy skills.

Building children's vocabulary, to coin a familiar expression, "is not rocket science". But to envision the possibility of becoming a rocket scientist, will surely take an expansive vocabulary - one built with supportive adults who make time to listen carefully to children's conversations, provide rich experiences as part of everyday life, and share the joys of playing with language. While a four year old may not remember the time a teacher invests in this work, their parents most definitely will. I remember with great affection my eldest child's kindergarten teacher, someone who loved to play with language and introduced the children to the pleasures of nonsense rhymes, ballads and poetry as a gift we value enormously.

The examples in the Table below also show how vocabulary can be built into daily routines in kindergarten.

Building Vocabulary in Kindergarten through Everyday Practice

Context	Learning Experience	Language introduced
Outdoor sand play	Oh no look, your tunnel has collapsed!	Descriptive language
Small group investigation	That caterpillar has been crawling up the leaf. It must be hungry because now it's chewing the leaf really quickly.	Verbs to describe actions
Taking shoes off for dance	My sandals are bigger than yours.	Comparison
Routines	After you've washed your hands then you can help us cook.	Ordinal language
Carpentry	Referring to an object : Pass me the hammer please.	Nouns
Story	Providing an explanation : When I press the pause button the e-story will stop.	Nouns
Group discussion	Talking about people : What do you call the clothes worn by children at school? Who else wears a uniform?	Nouns

Adapted from QSA article, *Supporting language and early literacy practices in kindergarten*, (2011).

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National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE



Autumn 2014



Winter 2014



Spring 2014

The Australian Early Development Census National Conference 2015

Bridging the Divide - Linking data to action in schools, communities, and governments across Australia

18 - 20 February 2015

Glenelg, Adelaide, SA

<http://www.aomevents.com/AEDC2015>

23rd Annual International Conference on Childhood Education

The Oxford Round Table

15 - 19 March 2015

Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

<http://oxfordroundtable.com/index.php/view/Sessions-Item/id/187>

UTS Child Care, Gowrie NSW & Campus Life (Macquarie University)

Inspiration: A Catalyst for Quality

21 March 2015

Aerial UTS Function Centre, Ultimo, NSW

<http://www.gowriensw.com.au>

14th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

Cultural responsiveness in a multi-agency world

29 March - 1 April 2015

Auckland, New Zealand

<https://www.etouches.com/ehome/acan2015>

ECA National Reconciliation Symposium

Advancing reconciliation in early childhood education and care

8 - 9 May 2015

Stamford Grand, Adelaide, SA

<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/reconciliation-symposium/>

2015 Early Childhood Education Conference

Together we grow - investing in our future

29 - 30 May 2015

Caulfield Racecourse, Melbourne, VIC

<https://www.togetherwegrow.com.au/>

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