



A Journey of Change

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GOWRIE MELBOURNE



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Presented by **Debbie Cole**

Lady Gowrie Child Centre (Melbourne) Inc.

In 2005, the Lady Gowrie Child Centre in Melbourne embarked on a research project with the Faculty of Education at Monash University. The aim of the project was to investigate, develop and evaluate a program of high quality curriculum and pedagogy in the children's program, and identify ways in which the program could be shared with the early childhood community.

As part of this ongoing research staff in the children's program have participated in a range of workshops, seminars and conferences. Staff and management have also been involved in individual and group interviews to gather data about current and past practice. This data has been used by Monash University to challenge, provoke and engage staff in discussion that has supported the aims of the project.

Since the project began in March 2005 a number of changes have been made to program planning, documentation, environments, and the way staff foster relationships with children and families. These changes have been the culmination of feedback from children, families, staff and other early years professionals, with the key focus on creating a learning environment that is child and family focused.

Five main themes underpinned the project:

1. **Relationships**: understanding the most effective ways that children, educators and other centre staff can relate to each other as learners
2. **Dispositions**: identifying how educators and other centre staff can effectively engage with new ideas and practices
3. **Settings**: investigating the cultural, historical, social and political contexts for work and learning in early childhood services and the implications of these for future practice
4. **Knowledge**: strengthening the educators' role in creating new ways of thinking about teaching and promoting children's learning
5. **Critical pedagogy**: practising techniques for reflecting critically and constructively on how things are, as well as how things might be, in early childhood services.

Further opportunities to reflect on practice have enabled staff to consider new ways of planning and documenting the program. As the formal part of the project drew to a close in 2007, the centre now plans to make further changes that enhance the curriculum and pedagogy, and begin sharing the journey with other practitioners.

In the initial stage of the project the staff were keen to move away from traditional methods of program planning and develop tools that would actively engage children and families in the program. As a demonstration centre with over 2000 visitors a year, it was also imperative that the centre was implementing a model of innovative curriculum and pedagogy based on current theories in early childhood education.

The importance of professional learning and critical reflection were also integral to the aims of the project.

The initial shift by staff in 2005 was based on critical reflection of developmental psychology as the main focus for program planning and documentation. The staff wanted to ensure that children and families had real opportunities to contribute to the program and share information in meaningful ways. They also wanted to develop pedagogical tools that would be easily accessible to children and families, and would better support a shared understanding of the child.

The staff were influenced by communities such as Reggio Emilia, socio-cultural theory, including the work of Rogoff and Fler, and curriculum documents from New Zealand and other states in Australia.

During this first year staff made significant changes to program documentation including the introduction of group reflections and portfolios. The staff wanted to develop collaborative ways of working with families that would invite participation and create a shared approach to planning and documentation. This partnership has also improved relationships with children and families as they see their perspective as an important part of the program.

A number of the specific changes made by staff have included the greater use of visual images to support written documentation. This change has engaged children and families in ways that written documentation alone was unable to. It has also enabled families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or with low literacy levels to actively share their child's learning and experiences at the centre. Program documentation now invites families to contribute to individual portfolios with the aim of creating a shared picture of the child. The portfolios have been made more accessible to children to enable them to play an active role in the construction of their own learning. This extends through to families as the portfolios can be taken home and shared with other family members.

Group reflections replaced the traditional wall plan and are used to share the group program with families. This form of documentation has enabled staff to reflect on the program and record information about group learning, shared interests and collaborative projects. The stories and analysis in this tool are also used to make links to individual portfolios. In addition, staff use these tools to plan, evaluate and highlight the benefits of a play based curriculum. Staff have also used the group reflections to present information to families about how they are discussing and managing specific issues within the program such as bullying or gun play.

In 2006 the staff wanted to further improve the group reflections and individual portfolios and began reflecting on the key elements they focused on when observing and documenting children's learning. Although they still saw the relevance of including developmental skills they also wanted to acknowledge other aspects that were fundamental to a child's competence and success as both an individual and member of the group.

Workshops and professional development opportunities enabled staff to consider four key areas that would become the foundation of the program:

- ***dispositions***
- ***concepts***
- ***skills***
- ***values.***

As the year concluded the staff used their understandings of these four areas to develop specific elements they would focus on for each age group. By articulating a clear set of dispositions, concepts, skills and values for babies, toddlers and preschoolers, the staff created what is now described as the 'Core Curriculum'.

The aim of this document was to develop a set of guidelines and language that would assist staff in each room to consistently observe and document similar aspects of children's learning. As many staff had undertaken their early childhood qualifications with developmental domains as the main focus of program documentation, it was difficult to shift their thinking without a clear framework for practice.

In addition, the Core Curriculum was developed to give families a better understanding of program documentation and the intent behind staff practice and written reflections. The document was also designed to create a flexible framework that could be adapted to suit changing communities, staff and understandings of children.

The staff have been using the Core Curriculum since 2007 and are continuing to reflect on how this tool has supported the overall aims of the project. Initial feedback has shown a more consistent approach to documentation as all staff are working from the same framework. The use of similar language to record stories and analyse children's learning has encouraged greater input from families and a better understanding of the program goals. The staff have also made changes to the portfolios and group reflections to improve relationships with families and streamline the number of tools being used for program documentation.

Although the project was undertaken as a collaborative research project, it is now being sustained independently by the centre. A long term aim of the project was to develop resources and that could be shared with other early years professionals. This is now being implemented through professional development, conference presentations and journal articles. Several training sessions and conference presentations have already been conducted over the past twelve months. The centre also aims to develop supporting documentation for the curriculum that can be used as a resource for the early childhood field. These learning opportunities make the process of change visible to the early childhood community and enable practitioners to consider new ways of working with children and families in their own settings. It is hoped that these training sessions and resources will enable individual communities to develop their own curriculum model and pedagogical tools.