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Understanding practice through professional learning



Fairholme
College

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 the last *Reflections* magazine for the year. This time last year, we were awaiting the response from the Government to the Productivity Commission Report. It has been a year where debate has been energised concerning the importance of early childhood in the education system and, particularly, in the transition to school. ECEC has been very much in the media as a voice for our children, and we have challenged with confidence the right to play in the early years.

In this issue of *Reflections* we have inspiring stories to share and, as always, knowledge to impart. We particularly appreciate the contribution by ECEC practitioners who have put effort and time into sharing their experiences and learnings with us all. Jo Darbyshire, from Fairholme College Kindy in Toowoomba has shared her inspiring and heart-warming journey of discovery that was prompted by 'Jessie' and the challenges she faced during her first weeks in kindergarten. The result involved a study of Auslan (the language of the deaf and hearing-impaired community in Australia) and encompassed the kindergarten children, staff, families and the school community in a new and ongoing learning journey.

'Risk' has had a lot of 'bad press' over the last few years and is generally viewed as something to be measured and avoided at all cost! But some educators ask, are children given enough risk in their day-to-day lives, are they being wrapped in cotton wool and is that a good thing? From their viewpoint of children as competent learners, Kate Stone and Christina Lipitkas challenge the idea of risk as a bad thing and share with readers the benefits of their exploration into benefit-risk assessment with children.

In another inspiring account, Cathy Cameron discusses the actions taken by Teng, the owner of a childcare service, as he worked to gain a better understanding of the National Quality Standard, of the theory behind good early childhood practice and of the importance of involving staff in a meaningful commitment to good practice. Teng's story is a challenge to us all to do better and to learn more.

In a very satisfying in-depth article, Fiona Starry answers all our questions on handedness and gives us some understanding of the life of a left-hander. From the discovery that left-handed Fiona spins a hula hoop in the opposite direction to the 'norm', we gain some insight into the development of hand preference, are encouraged to bring awareness of handedness into early childhood environments, learn about the connection between handedness, and the brain and get to ponder whether there is, indeed, a 'right way'!

Darlene Woodhall and Alison Rowley share with readers their exploration of indoor/outdoor play as part of a program of supported professional learning. Their article traces their initial tentative inquiry and their increasingly robust academic discussions, observations and documentation. We can all surely identify with their real life struggles and achievements.

If you are looking for quality professional development, take some time to view Gowrie Australia's 'Theory in to Practice' program. This is a professional learning partnership between Lady Gowrie Centres in NSW, SA, Vic, Tas and QLD. For Certificate and Diploma courses, Gowrie Centres from Vic, SA and Tasmania offer training in up skilling qualifications. Find out more!

We would like to thank Jo Musumeci, our wonderful Editor, for the many years of work she has put into her position on *Reflections* magazine, and it is with sadness that we see her moving onto new projects. Many heartfelt thanks Jo.

There is just room left for me to join with my colleagues, Ros Cornish, Kaye Colmer, Natalie Grenfell, Tonia Westmore and Andrew Hume to wish you all Season's Greetings. Thank you for your continued patronage and a very Happy New Year.

Jane Bourne

on behalf of Gowrie Australia.

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COMMUNICATING QUIETLY

Jo Darbyshire

Educator/Educational Leader

Fairholme College Kindy, Toowoomba, Qld.

Our journey with the Australian Sign Language, Auslan, began in 2012 when a child diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay and Intellectual Impairment was enrolled in the Kindergarten Program (we will call her Jessie).

There were many challenges facing Jessie during her first few weeks of kindy, but the one that seemed to cause the most frustration, was communication. Jessie had two intelligible words and therefore was not able to clearly communicate her needs, feelings or ideas to the educators, or to other children. The educators felt that if they were able to find ways to support Jessie to successfully communicate with both adults and children, that would reduce some of her frustrations, help her to feel connected within the kindy group, and it would support her developing self-identity. Speech was not going to develop quickly for Jessie, so the staff began to think of alternative communication methods. A local Speech Pathologist was offering 'Introduction to Auslan' evening classes and Jessie's kindy teacher, Sonya, attended these so she could trial Auslan with Jessie.

Auslan is a language of the deaf and hearing-impaired community in Australia. It is a visual form of communication that uses hand, arm and body movements to convey meaning. Head and facial movements or expression are used to convey emotion and emphasis. Jessie had already been supporting her limited verbal communication with physical gesture and facial expressions. She responded positively to Auslan and so Jessie and Sonya began to learn Auslan together. Sonya used the internet to teach herself new words/signs then passed these on to Jessie, her family, the rest of the children and the educators. Just as children do when they learn a spoken language, the first signs to learn are single, meaningful words such as 'eat', 'goodbye', 'yes', 'no' or 'toilet'. Sonya also found it helped Jessie to learn some instructional signs such as 'wait', 'stop', 'play' and 'sit', words that expressed emotions such as 'sad', 'happy' or 'angry', as well as the signs for 'please' and 'thank you'. DVDs and YouTube clips were used to support Sonya's explicit teaching of Auslan signs (see the resource list on p6). Towards the end of the year, Jessie was joining signs/words together to communicate "My turn!" or "Can I play?"



The following year Jessie returned to this kindy class where a new group of children joined her. Now she was in the powerful position of already knowing and using some Auslan, while the new children were yet to learn this second language. Sonya's enthusiasm and interest in Auslan grew and she began to attend advanced evening classes where she developed a conversational level of Auslan. The class instructor was James Kerwin who is deaf, a qualified teacher and an enthusiastic supporter of those willing to learn Auslan. He began to visit Jessie at kindy to improve her signing, and began to work with her family to further develop their Auslan skills. Having a deaf teacher in the kindy room built on every child's awareness of deaf culture and supported the centre's inclusivity. By now, all the kindy groups were having regular Auslan lessons each week, and using the signs during the day.

Many of the signs in Auslan are iconic, in other words, they look like the sign's meaning in some way. For example, the sign for 'dog' is to pat your hip, as if you are calling for a dog to come over, and the sign for 'house' is to trace the shape of the roof and walls with your hands. This helped the children to quickly learn many signs, but was confusing for some families. As the kindy children began to use these signs at home we began to get many questions about whether they were the correct signs, or were the children just making them up. The kindy offered some weekend family sessions to allow the extended families to develop some understanding of Auslan and some afternoon sessions for staff in the rest of the school.

Several years down the track, with Jessie now attending school, and with greatly improved verbal skills, Auslan is still embedded in our kindy program. There are several reasons for this. The educators recognise and value the benefits of the children learning a second language, exposure to Auslan raises awareness amongst the children of diversity, and children who find communication challenging are supported by learning some Auslan, as was the case recently for a child with Autism. But, the

overwhelming reason for our continued use of Auslan in our program is attributable to the positive responses from both the children and their families. During the past few years the educators, the children and families have been on a learning journey together, and we feel there is great value in this. We are all at a different place in our skills, confidence and abilities at using Auslan, but we are all respectful of the willingness to try and the challenges involved in learning something new.

Children's observations:

We are doing signing. We sign because some people are deaf. Deaf means your voice is off and you can't hear. We might see a deaf person. I like signing. Lexie 4.3yrs

We do signing because if I see a deaf person down the road or make a friend with a deaf person then I could talk with my hands. They can talk a little bit. If you see a deaf person you could say "How are you?" Sometimes I use it with Scarlett or Mummy. Lucy 4.10yrs

Useful Resources:

- DVD-'A Time to Sign' Auslan for Beginners. Available from James Kerwin-web page "Deaf Friendly" www.deaffriendly.com.au
- DVD-'Something to Sign About' songs for children in Auslan. Available from James Kerwin-web page "Deaf Friendly" www.deaffriendly.com.au
- Auslan words-iPad app Royal Institute of Deaf and Blind children
- Sign Planet www.signplanet.net
- Youtube-"The Very Cranky Bear" Auslan
- Youtube-"Feathers for Phoebe" Auslan
- Youtube clips-Ryan Moore Nursery Rhymes
- Auslan Sign Bank www.auslan.org.au
- iPad app-Hairy Maclary signed in Auslan
- SCOPE Victoria (Key word sign)
- PDF Education Supplies and Resources for Early Childhood have signs in Auslan fingerspell <http://www.pdfeducationsupplies.com.au/>



Theory Into Practice

Ongoing professional learning provides the opportunity for educators to examine and re-examine the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of what they do to support continuous improvement in the provision of high quality education and care programs.

As Gowrie Australia moves into its 75th year, we have taken time to look back on the legacy of reflective, considered pedagogy and practice that has been created over many years. This year Gowrie Australia is launching **Theory Into Practice**, a professional learning partnership between the Lady Gowrie Centres in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

View the YouTube video on **Theory into Practice** at:
<http://tinyurl.com/theoryintopractice>

For further information on this program please contact the Gowrie Professional Learning Team in your state.



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Benefit-Risk Assessments with Children

Kate Stone & Christina Lipitkas
Kindergarten Teachers
Gowrie SA, Thebarton

At Gowrie SA Thebarton, the children in our kindergarten have been exploring benefit-risk assessments through their play experiences, both formally and informally. Exploration of risk in play has unfolded alongside children's and educators' growing appreciation for loose parts and nature play (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015).

Educators value children's right to a rich learning environment where they can express their preferences, voice their ideas and be heard. Children are viewed as *"active participants and decision makers"* in their learning (EYLF, 2009, p.9), and as such, they are supported to engage in the use of benefit-risk assessments when engaging in risky play. This partnership between educators and children allows for educators *"to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn"* (EYLF, 2009, p.9) as they watch, wait and give children the space needed to explore their own capabilities and engage in the risk assessment process.

Educators highly value the need and right children have to learn in natural environments. We are committed to establishing environments which provide children with the opportunity

to become the best learners that they can be. The importance of children's engagement in nature moved to the forefront of our thinking after many of our educators viewed 'Project Wild Thing', a UK initiative working towards getting children and their families back into nature. Considering this, and our commitment to sustainability, we incorporated the use of natural and reused materials, such as collections of branches, bricks, recycled tyres and lengths of timber for building and climbing, into our program. At the same time, benefit-risk assessments support our community to make informed decisions around these types of materials and learning environments.

Informal Benefit Risk Assessments through Play

Our value for natural environments exposes children to risks involved in the natural world. As we observe children's learning we pose questions to them to provoke and challenge their thinking and understanding of the risks they are confronted with or may face. This supports the development of children's ability to identify potential risks, hazards and benefits associated with their explorations, and make informed decisions taking these factors into consideration. In doing this, as they weigh up the benefits and risks involved in their actions and ideas, children practise hypothesizing, predicting, experimenting and investigating.



In our programs, opportunities for these discussions occur daily, whether it is in the moment, when risk becomes visible, when children are actually doing risky things, or during group times when risks are discussed.

Key words that are used in conversations with children include 'benefit', 'dangerous', 'safe', 'hazard', 'risk', 'manage', 'plan', 'explore', 'safety' and 'strategies'.

As children's understanding of risk becomes stronger through these informal conversations, they progress into exploring formal benefit-risk assessments to further strengthen their understanding of assessing risk in collaboration with peers and educators. Educators model and pose questions to provoke the children's thinking as they explore risks and challenges in their play, asking questions such as, 'Have you assessed the risks?', 'Do you feel safe?', 'What things could you check for to keep yourself safe?', 'How will you keep yourself safe as you...?', 'How do you know the people around you will be safe?'. Educators collaborate with small groups of children to collate their thinking into formally written benefit-risk assessments about common risky play explorations such as tree climbing and building with bricks. In recent play, children were encouraged to contribute to and engage in this process, in their own capable way.

As we continue to engage children in formal and informal benefit-risk assessments, we believe that exploring and

extending children's learning about risk supports them to become capable learners throughout the whole of their lives. It builds on their skills and capacity to assess risk, problem solve, collaborate with others, document their thinking, challenge their own ideas, as well as those of others, recognize risk in other aspects of their lives, and make informed choices and decisions.

“Children are viewed as competent learners – their natural curiosity and plasticity, their desire to communicate and relate with other people and their desire to grow all offer a rich potential for strong and powerful development”

(Ebbeck, Ebbeck, & Wan Kam, 2010, p.10).

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THE POWER of Professional Learning

Cathy Cameron
Gowrie SA

This story details the early stages of a learning journey that a Director of a long day care service embarked upon. The service was on the third floor of a busy shopping centre and challenges included how to engage with natural environments when your outdoor space is a windy balcony area, and how to achieve an improved assessment rating in such a challenging situation! These challenges were on the owner's mind and he realised that he needed to engage both as a leader, and a learner, if they were to be resolved.

Teng Zhao and his family first bought the child care business in 2007 as an investment. In 2010 Teng realised he needed to know his business better and became involved in the day-to-day management of it. In 2011 Teng began to enrol in Gowrie professional learning sessions and courses to learn more about child care, and to develop the skills he needed to lead his staff team from their current poor assessment ratings, to improved outcomes for the children and families they worked with.

In order to support their goals, Teng and the service have had to create a strong focus on professional learning – both for the leadership team and for the whole team. Teng has since completed the Advanced Diploma in Community Sector Management and Treena Vatsinaris, the Director, is currently also completing this qualification. Teng says, *'I benefited a lot from the Gowrie study to support my role.'* Teng and Treena and other staff members have also attended a variety of calendar sessions and booked mentoring visits from facilitators.

Visiting the centre, it is easy to see the commitment to learning and improvement. Staff teams share their work on wall displays. Blank Quality Improvement Plan forms sit in every room to be added to as staff notice needs, and the ideas are collated each month or so. In the preschool area the programme is called "Investigations" and large shared books and folders document the learning and are accessible for children and families to share. Teng works shifts in every room and observes and shares practice knowledge. He sets clear, short-term, achievable goals with staff. Frequent appraisals monitor the progress towards these goals and set the next ones. Teng is constantly looking for new, authentic ways to measure and assess the improvements.

Teng credits the Advanced Diploma with *'knowledge and ideas, especially the way of thinking.'* He approaches all new challenges with the question, *'Is this relevant for children, for families, for staff?'* By understanding his multicultural community and staff, and by learning about ways to make the NQS relevant, he has been able to embed the National Quality Standard into all their work. Teng varies the pace of change in his centre because he wants to build sustainable practices and systems, and realises he needs to consider staff energy levels when making timelines for changes to be implemented. He has developed flexible planning and documentation systems because he feels rigid plans prevent future improvement and limit the imagination.

Through engaging with professional learning opportunities, Teng and his team have created a natural environment in which children can grow and learn, despite the restrictions of their location. Their ability to understand and articulate the program and monitor outcomes for children has also improved, and all their hard work has resulted in an environment and culture of learning. Their recent assessment process has returned an 'Exceeding' result.

So where to now? Both Teng and Treena readily acknowledge that their improvement journey has really only just begun. While they are celebrating their wonderful assessment results there are many new Quality Improvement Plan items to work through. An ongoing relationship with Gowrie SA is an integral part of their Professional Learning Plan.

Teng is continuing his learning journey by enrolling to study his Masters in teaching at University next year - what a great role model for his community!



A SHOW OF HANDS.... a meditation on handedness

Fiona Stary
Room Leader and Teacher
Docklands, Gowrie Victoria



I had an interesting realisation during a hula hooping class. Having never hooped with others before, I realised that I was spinning in the opposite direction to most of my fellow classmates. I tried spinning in the conventional direction and it was remarkably awkward.

This didn't surprise me, exactly – as a strong left-hander, I am accustomed to doing many motor tasks in a different way to most others.

However, the hooping observation made me consider the complexity of the laterality and asymmetry of our bodies. Not only do we have a hand preference, but also typically a foot, eye and ear preference, and it seems, a directional spinning preference.

Why do lefties exist?

It is commonly held that 10 to 12% of the global human population is left-handed, although there are geographical variations and cultural biases. Handedness polymorphism (the phenomenon of difference in hand preference) is found in all societies, with left-handers always present, yet at a substantially lower frequency than right-handers. Left-handedness seems to occur at a percentage somewhere between the low single digits and roughly a quarter of the population.

There is no single definitive answer as to why handedness polymorphism and right-hand dominance exist in humans, but it has been demonstrated right back to at least the Upper Palaeolithic period. The low-level yet consistent presence of left-handers suggests that there is evolutionary pressure resulting in the continuance of this trait.

Left-handers have an advantage in hand-to-hand combat, for example (and its modern-day expression, competitive sport), because both left and right-handers are accustomed to mostly battling right-handers, so lefties have the element of surprise on their side. Left-handers are therefore often over-represented in the elite levels of interactive sports.

However, the downside for left-handers is that the world is subtly set up in a way that makes many tasks more difficult or problematic than they are for the right-handed majority.

There is no single factor that determines hand preference in individuals, but genetic, hormonal, developmental and cultural factors may contribute to an individual's handedness. Interestingly, approximately 18% of identical twins have different hand preferences, suggesting factors other than genetics are relevant. Males are more likely to be left-handed than females.

The heritability of left-handedness is complex, but two left-handed parents have a 30-40% chance of their child being left-handed, with both genetic and environmental factors coming in to play.

In practise, this means that parents often have to learn how to help and guide a child whose handedness they do not share.

Mixed-handed or strong-handed?

While most people identify themselves as being right or left-handed, usually as a function of which hand they write with (at least in our society, where writing is culturally important), handedness is not a binary phenomenon. There are degrees of, and variations within, handedness and overall bodily laterality.

In addition to the distinction between left and right-handedness, there is also a distinction between mixed and strong-handedness.

Strong-handedness is where an individual exhibits a strong preference for one hand across almost all tasks. Mixed-handedness (a.k.a. "cross-dominance" or "inconsistent

handedness") is where one hand is preferred for some manual tasks, and the other hand is preferred for other tasks. Whether or not these individuals are classified as left or right-handed largely comes down to what hand they use for specific culturally important tasks, such as writing and eating. Mixed-handed people may consider themselves to be ambidextrous, although in the majority of cases this term is a misnomer. True ambidexterity – the capacity to use either hand with equal dexterity in all situations – is rare, applying to one or two per thousand people.

Right-handers tend to be strong-handed, while left-handers tend towards mixed-handedness. On the Edinburgh Handedness Inventory, performing at least one of the ten activities with the non-dominant hand would indicate mixed-handedness.

Some researchers, including psychologist Stephen Christman, even believe that the degree of handedness (strong/mixed) is a more appropriate and powerful classification than the direction of handedness (left/right), and has more implications regarding cerebral structure and behaviour.

Handedness and the brain

There are neurological/cognitive features associated with the different kinds of handedness (left/right, strong/mixed). The brain itself is not an entirely symmetrical structure, and while the body's motor functions are largely controlled by the opposite brain hemisphere, left and right-handed people do not simply have mirror-image brains. The different hemispheres have their own particular functional specialisations, a phenomenon known as brain lateralisation.

Left-handers and mixed-handers tend towards more varied and diffuse cerebral functions than strong-handers and right-handers, and tend towards more interhemispheric communication, a lesser degree of brain lateralisation, and a larger corpus callosum (the structure that joins the hemispheres of the brain).

This potentially has wide-ranging (if usually subtle) implications, from what musical instrument an individual is best suited to, to how they remember and recall events and how they process language.

Greater interhemispheric interaction has benefits and drawbacks. To use a musical example, mixed-handed people may do better with tasks requiring the two hands to temporally cooperate (such as stringed and woodwind instruments), while strong-handed people will do better than mixed-handers at tasks requiring the hands (and brain hemispheres) to perform separately, such as tapping out two separate rhythms simultaneously. This may predispose them to be more musically suited to keyboard and percussion instruments. A potential drawback of more interhemispheric communication is more "background noise" and stimuli overload. Strong-handers may have an advantage on tasks requiring independent processing by the hemispheres.

The take-home message – there are both advantages and disadvantages to features associated with different handedness types. There is also so much individual variance that you should probably just disregard your handedness type and choose the hobby that appeals to you the most.

Why is having a distinct hand preference important?

In bimanual tasks, the hands take on different roles. The dominant hand takes on tasks requiring force and/or dexterity, and the non-dominant hand provides stabilisation. Establishing and habitually using a dominant hand for a given task is necessary in developing skilful usage, and in wiring the brain's motor patterns and bilateral coordination abilities.

It is important to establish a dominant hand for each skill set, even if (as with mixed handers) the dominant hand is different for each task. If a dominant hand is not established, the result may be two mediocre hands rather than a specialised hand and a stabilising hand.

Determining hand preference in children

Prior to about the age of three, hand preference is not necessarily consistent, however the hand used to reach for food may be a better indicator of handedness than hand usage during other tasks. It is normal at this age to experiment with both hands for various tasks, and using both hands is essential in developing strength and dexterity in each hand. If a baby or young toddler is not using one of their hands, this may be a symptom of a problem.

By the time a child is in their preschool year, a distinct hand preference has usually emerged. Hand preference usually becomes evident between the ages of two and four.

If a child in their preschool year or beyond is still swapping hands and has no clear hand preference, the assistance of an occupational therapist may be beneficial. Indications of which hand will become the dominant hand may be found by observing which hand is used for eating, throwing, picking up items and drawing.

In determining handedness in a child with unclear preference, it is helpful if items are offered or positioned in such a way that the child has to make a choice of which hand to use, rather than simply use the closest one.

There may also be other related issues that require intervention – for example, a child may be swapping hands due to fatigue, there may be issues with stability and strength in their core, shoulders or wrists, or there may be issues in their ability to cross the midline.

If a preschool (or older) child appears to be swapping hands when writing/drawing/cutting due to fatigue, the child should be encouraged to rest and shake out the hand, before continuing with the same hand, using the other hand for stabilisation of the paper.

Setting up early childhood environments that are inclusive of all handedness types

When setting up environments that are inclusive of different handedness types, the following should be considered:

- Are the available tools biased towards right-handedness? Ensure scissors are available that can be used by both left and right-handers. Scissors that work both ways are easier for left-handers than having to find the one or two pairs of "special" left-handed scissors within a room.
- Do the spaces allow for adequate use of the left hand? If experiences are set up against sidewalls, is there enough elbowroom for both left and right-handed children?
- Are items placed on tables in a way that favours right-handers, rather than centrally?
- In school settings and table-based activities, it is useful to place left-handed children on the left side of desks, to avoid elbow clash.
- If left-handed children are copying or referring to something as they draw/write, is the source material placed on the right, so that they can easily see it? For example, if children sign in their name on a chart, it is useful for left-handers if the space for their contribution is to the left of the source material.
- When teaching left-handed children to write, the direction of each movement is reversed relative to right-handers – a pulling movement for a right-hander is a pushing movement for a left-hander.
- It may be easier for a left-hander to learn a manual skill from a right-hander who is facing them, instead of next to them.
- Is there a barrier between the left and right sides of an activity? For example, it is very difficult for a left-hander to write on paper in the right hand side of a ring binder.



Which way is the (ahem) right way?

One of the biggest decisions for parents of left-handed children is whether to teach them skills the conventional right-handed way, or the left-handed way. This decision-making process tends to happen periodically throughout a left-hander's childhood.

Teaching a left-hander to play an instrument or knit (to use just two examples), the conventional right-handed way will mean they can learn by doing exactly what their instructor does, have access to mainstream equipment, and fit in physically and aesthetically within groups (for example, all musicians having their instruments facing in the same direction.)

However, the conventional way has likely evolved for a reason – because it suits a particular aspect of the task being undertaken with the dominant hand. This may place left-handers at a disadvantage if they undertake it in the conventional manner, at least until they become proficient enough to cancel out the initial disadvantage.

Learning a skill in the left-handed way provides equivalence with right-handers in terms of which hand is doing which tasks, but adds an additional layer of complexity, such as finding an instructor capable and willing to teach a “mirror image”, physically fitting in the reverse item within ensembles and groups, and sourcing specialised left-handed equipment, which is usually also more expensive.

While choosing the left or right way is a very individual and context-based decision, as a left-hander myself I feel it is certainly more straightforward to be able to do what the majority do, especially if it is just a hobby and you are not planning on rising to elite levels and attempting world domination.

I have heard a rumour among left-handed guitarists that the annual run of left-handed instruments is made while the master luthiers take their annual leave. I cannot confirm or deny this, but it speaks to the feeling that many left-handers have regarding the predicament of fitting in to an oppositely oriented world.

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Understanding Practice through Professional Learning

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Gowrie SA, in partnership with the University of SA, was funded by the state Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) to offer an intensive project aimed at strengthening Universal Access Preschool Programs. The 12-month project was developed to support long day care to improve the implementation of Universal Access to preschool. This unique project reconceptualised professional learning and support to enable participating sites to choose the level of engagement for their team - opportunities included a series of lectures, leadership modules, hub groups, mentoring, phone support, social media and site-based research projects. This intensive model of professional learning supported deeper level change. To read more about the project go to <http://www.gowriesa.org.au/sites/default/files/Universal%20Access%20Project%20report.pdf>, or to enquire about similar customised support for your centre contact Gowrie SA. The following article follows one centre's journey of professional learning.

We were invited to participate in the Strengthening Universal Access Preschool Programs Project to support the delivery of the program at our service. Over several months we attended hub group meetings where we were provided with access to resources, professional conversations and opportunities to network with other professionals across Universal Access sites, University of SA and Gowrie SA. Part of our involvement in this program was to develop an inquiry question to research, improve practice and present at the end of the project.

When thinking about our inquiry question, with around 35 staff members, we wanted the question to be something that would involve and benefit the entire service. We had recently been looking at our outdoor spaces and how we could ensure a better 'flow' of play between the indoors and the outdoors. We noticed that this was not a consistent practice and presented a challenge for some of our educators. We observed that children were being moved around in large groups, making transitions difficult, with children remaining inside for extended periods of time, and with the outdoor environments not seen as learning environments. From this we developed our inquiry question - *What are the benefits of indoor/outdoor play?*

We looked into the National Quality Standard (NQS) and current research to help support us in how we could collect our data to begin our project. The NQS identified that outdoor and indoor spaces should be designed and

organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments (element 3.1.1).

From our research of indoor/outdoor play and by giving children the opportunity of choice, we recorded many positive outcomes from offering indoor/outdoor play, including:

- longer periods of uninterrupted play enabling children to engage in areas of interest and to extend their learning;
- more space for children to explore, engage and create;
- a reduction in stress and an increase in children's ability to focus indoors;
- more opportunities for building self-esteem;
- improvements in cognitive functions, social skills, leadership and collaboration;
- greater opportunities to develop physical skills and to assess risks in terms of limits, danger and consequences;
- opportunities for trans-disciplinary work with educators working collaboratively across class boundaries e.g. children reading about a park while sitting in the park.

From these discoveries we wanted to learn about what the children thought about the outdoor environment. We wanted to know, where they liked to play, what they thought they learnt when they were outside, and what it felt like when the door was open and they were given the choice to be outside or inside. Would they like the door to be open all the time?

We made up small survey sheets and individually interviewed some of our preschool children. The results told us that the children liked to play outside, and many of them commented on playing on particular objects such as the slide, sandpit, bikes and cubby house. A few children did say they liked to play inside, and some even said they liked to play inside and outside. When we asked the children how they felt when the door was open and they had a choice, we received answers like, 'Happy because I can be outside all the time.' 'Different.' 'Safe.' 'It feels good because I can build inside

and then go outside to build.' 'Sometimes cool and sometimes warm.' 'I feel happy because I can go inside and outside.' Astoundingly, all the preschool children said they would like the door open all the time. It was evident that the children appreciated having the choice and, overall, it made them feel happy.

When we asked the children what they learnt outside, many of them did not know how to answer this question. Those that did, focussed more on physical learning such as running and using the bikes. This confirmed for us that the children did not have a broad knowledge of all the learning possibilities that can happen outside, perhaps because they weren't given the opportunity to experience other possible learning opportunities?

Our next step was to ask educators to complete surveys to assess their view of the outdoor environment. Surveying the educators was important to find out what they thought their role was in the outdoor environment, what learning they thought might happen in the outdoors, what they saw as the benefits of outdoor play and what they felt were the barriers to longer periods of indoor/outdoor play.

Overall, the educators felt that their role in the outdoor environment was to provide a safe and enjoyable environment whilst supervising children in play. While this is of course important, we felt the educators weren't seeing how important they were in the environment, and what they could offer.

When looking at the benefits of the outdoor environment, our educators' focus was around physical play, gross motor skills, exercise, running and a bigger space. It was evident that the educators were seeing the outdoors as a place to 'let off steam', and a place focused only around physical learning. We could see a connection between the children's thoughts and the educators' thoughts. Educators identified barriers to having indoor/outdoor play as including the weather, programmed activities, sleep times, routines and the belief that two staff members is not always sufficient to manage inside and outside play at the same time.

With this new data collated we felt it would be good to create times in a day where each of our six rooms completed a time sample. Each room monitored one hour of indoor/outdoor play in the morning and in the afternoon to see where the children were playing, what activities they were being offered, and what they felt the disadvantages were. This would allow educators to look at the experience of indoor/outdoor play more deeply and give us the opportunity to gather more data. During this time we took photos to see where the children were playing and where engagement was happening.

The results of these time samples showed that the educators were offering a wide range of activities both inside and outside to cover all areas of learning. Educators identified the disadvantage of having a larger group of children in one area, thereby compromising supervision.

However, most educators felt that giving children the choice was beneficial and offered greater opportunities for play and learning. When we collated the time samples that were taken during the indoor/outdoor playtime the numbers showed that across all six rooms, children were predominantly evenly spread throughout this time. Looking over the photos it was also evident that the children seemed to be more engaged where educators were located in both environments, confirming for us the importance of the role of the educator.

With all this data collected we developed a plan to work within the whole service to improve and encourage the practice of indoor/outdoor play. We presented our findings at a Team Meeting where we unpacked our project and watched Ann Paleo's video *Thinking Big*, an investigation of how activities can be extended in both the indoor and outdoor spaces.

Our educational leader created an inspiration wall in the staff room which all educators were given the opportunity to add to with articles, ideas they found, or things that worked well in their own outdoor environment. We also added 'outdoor environments' to our program to allow educators to think and extend further within the program.

To make the outdoors a more exciting place of play we started to add more permanent structures such as mud kitchens, fairy gardens, more gardens and wooden logs. Preschool educators started to role model setting up learning areas in the outdoor space, and creating small pockets of play, rather than having one large area for physical play. Having these small pockets of play would help to create smaller groups of children and more engagement - a similar setup to how we create small group experiences indoors. In doing this, we made sure activities, such as puzzles and lego, that were considered as indoor activities only, were available outside.

Weekly nature walks in and around the surrounding areas were introduced to further extend our preschool children's learning in the outdoor environment and to give the children an opportunity to discover different natural environments, including different risk taking scenarios. In addition, a permanent mud patch has been built in the over-threes' yard so that children can explore mud on a daily basis.

After three months of making these changes we wanted to see if the educators' views had changed, and what the children had learnt from the changes. We again surveyed the educators and introduced the term 'co-learner'. Did they think being a co-learner in the outdoor environment was as valuable as supervision? We heard responses like, 'Yes, if we work together in our environments then supervision will happen naturally.' We could see a shift already!

We wanted to know if educators' views on the indoor/outdoor environment had changed and responses included,



'Yes, all rooms are doing inside/outside play.' 'The children get to go where they want to.' 'Yes, I have seen a lot more activities and learning opportunities happening outside.' and *'Yes, we now have small pockets of play, usually child-led. More natural resources are used indoors and out.'*

We were also seeing a language change in these surveys, with less focus around supervision and physical play, and more focus on learning and engagement. We wanted to graph and compare the use of the words 'supervision', 'physical', 'learning' and 'engagement' in the pre- and post-surveys, and show educators the shift in focus.

In the pre-surveys, the word 'supervision' was mentioned **33** times, 'physical' **36** times, 'learning' **18** times and 'engage' **6** times. Post-surveys highlighted changes in thinking with 'supervision' mentioned **12** times, 'physical' **3** times, 'learning' **27** times and 'engage' **15** times.

We also listed the perceived barriers the educators had mentioned in the pre-surveys and asked if they felt these were barriers to practising indoor/outdoor play still existed. Responses included, *'We can use the wet weather as a play experience, and utilise the verandah area to cater for wet weather.'* *'We can work around routines and work with the rooms next door to combine educators to cater for our routines.'* *'We can do programmed activities in both environments.'* It was evident that the educators were now looking at how to overcome these barriers.

In the post-surveys for the children we asked them what does indoor/outdoor play mean to you? We received answers like, *'You can play inside if you want to or outside if you want to.'* All the children surveyed now had an understanding of what inside/outside play was. We also asked the children where they liked to play when inside / outside play was offered. Responses included, *'I like doing both.'* *'I like going outside.'* *'I like both, some in and some out.'* Their answers showed us how beneficial inside/outside play was for them, and how much they appreciated the opportunity to choose.

Over and above the changes noted across the whole service, we have observed several positive changes in the preschool room. *'Can we do inside/outside play?'* is the question we now hear instead of *'Can we go outside?'*

We can see that the children are now familiar with this term and recognise that they have choices. Children's behaviour has changed and is easier to manage and noise level has dropped, enabling educators and children to engage in more meaningful conversations. The children have more opportunity to follow their interests and become engaged in them for longer. Our programmed activities have become

richer with the involvement of smaller groups. We have also found ourselves bringing the indoor environment into the outdoors more. Overall, the outcome of the project has been beneficial for the children, educators, service, and in particular, our preschool room.

As part of the project, we organised a presentation and we decided to present our findings in a circular formation. This represented our journey within our service, a continuous cycle of improvement that we hope to continue. We feel that this is a subject we would like to continue to focus on in our Quality Improvement Plan, ensuring continuous improvements of our practices and outcomes for children. We want to keep the momentum going by continually adding to the inspiration wall and researching indoor/outdoor practice. We also want to involve families to see what they have noticed and to enquire about what they would like to see more of.

Our journey of discovery continues.



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