

## 2015 Lady Gowrie Qld. Early Childhood Awards Nomination

### Nomination for: Innovation in Pedagogy & Practice (Service)

#### *How does the nominated service demonstrate innovative practices in pedagogy?*

At Mitchelton Pre-Schooling Centre (MPC), the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (Qklg) provide the framework for our curriculum which encompasses the what, where, when, why and how of learning experiences. The flexibility and responsiveness of our learning environments engage each child in a program in which they can find their place. We recognise that each child brings their own unique predispositions to learning, and we actively consider, within our programming and documentation, the life-long skills and dispositions that we value. These include listening, exploring and investigating, creating, questioning, wondering, negotiating, compromising, sharing, respecting selves and others, risk taking, problem solving and resilience.

Importantly, we consider these skills and dispositions foundational to educators as well. Educators actively support, equip, challenge, extend and add complexity to children's learning and development through intentional teaching strategies such as noticing, listening, discussing, challenging, prompting, explaining, modeling and reflecting.

MPC has a culture of ongoing learning, reflecting on and challenging our practices. The 2012 publication, *Progressing Play*, written by two staff members, Leanne and Lisa, is based on pedagogical inquiry and practices implemented at MPC. This book has won wide acclaim within Australia and New Zealand for its practical and innovative pedagogical insights for early childhood educators.

MPC educators have been recognised for their innovative leadership and practices in play-based learning (NEITA Community Awards, 2005). In addition, pedagogical practices to support children with additional needs have been recognised by Downs Syndrome Qld and the Mitchelton Special School. The educators at MPC are highly regarded among the early childhood sector and have been invited to participate and share knowledge and their experience with other early childhood centres, Queensland Studies Authority, Early Childhood Conferences in Australia, New Zealand and Estonia, and other organisations within the sector.

#### *How has the nominated service utilised the environment to support education goals?*

We are committed to sustaining a professional environment based on respectful practice. We embed the ECA *Code of Ethics* into our relationships and practices. We actively seek to further our understanding and knowledge of young children and to continually seek improvements to

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our practices in concert with current research. MPC has a proud history of collaborative and shared pedagogical leadership among the staff team. Our centre has a strong commitment to supporting the professional growth of the staff team.

Professional development opportunities for individual members as well as the collective teaching team, coupled with numerous staff furthering their qualifications through University and TAFE courses have contributed to the growth of a rich community of learners.

At MPC, we are mindful that the NQS challenges us to consider how we can create opportunities for professional conversations, and share the collective knowledge of the team (Guide to the NQS, p. 168). While staff members have always engaged in varied and meaningful professional development opportunities and critical reflection individually and in small teams, we have intentionally taken action to improve opportunities for the whole staff team to engage in collaborative research. Underpinning this is a key commitment to raise awareness of the intellectual nature of early childhood educators' work. We detail two examples of this in practice below.

*How has the nominated service demonstrated leadership and collaboration with colleagues in identifying and facilitating change in practice?*

*How has the nominated service engaged in and facilitated reflective practice?*

*How has the nominated service engaged with children, families, colleagues and the broader community in regards to sharing the service journey?*

To address these questions, we wish to showcase two key research projects we have undertaken as a team. We were specifically invited to join as collaborators in the first project during 2014. The second project is an in-house action research project we have designed and embarked on as a whole team in 2015.

**Executive functioning research project: 2014**

During 2014 we were invited to join in the development of a pilot study, which investigates the integration of Perezhivanie (Vygotsky) with the development of children's executive functioning skills. This project was based on holistic theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the importance, and interconnection, of emotional and cognitive skills in children's learning. Professors Sue Walker (QUT), Marilyn Fleer, Linda Harrison (CSU) and Associate Professor Nikolai Veresov (Monash) led this research project. This project took over six months, during which time the staff team's primary role was to design, plan, implement, record and evaluate meaningful play-based strategies to support four key aspects of executive functioning skills: Inhibition; Working memory; Planning; and Shifting (cognitive flexibility).

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This research project was time consuming and fraught with difficulty on many levels. Nonetheless, we were excited to take part in such a project and looked for possibilities to enhance and integrate our learning into our daily practices. As a team, we capitalised on opportunities in staff meetings to share and critique ideas. While sharing our experiences with each other and the researchers, we strengthened our awareness and recognition of the commitment of each staff member to this project. As the project unfolded, we realised the enormous benefit this shared research focus offered our team. As ideas were conceptualized and new ideas introduced, individuals on the staff team connected in different ways. Importantly, the profile of some team members, especially teaching assistants, was raised significantly. This was particularly evidenced at the Gowrie Qld 2015 conference at which four members of staff presented two workshops to share understandings about this project to over 200 delegates. Two of these staff members had not presented in public before. The involvement in this research project increased their confidence, and they realised that they have an important story to tell; that their professional insights are valuable.

Further to this study, we have been asked to present the educational team's insights at follow up research meetings. In addition, we have also been invited to co-contribute to the publication of support materials to support educator's professional development and knowledge about executive functioning skills.

### **Action Research 2015**

As a result of collective critical reflection during 2014 and early 2015, we have committed to undertake an in-house Action Research project to investigate how we can enhance our participation with the local community. Lisa led a professional development session in January, introducing the principles of Action Research. The staff team then spent time investigating possibilities for research. As a result, four initial questions are being explored around the nature of engaging with community:

- Investigating indigenous plant species in our area to incorporate into our MPC landscapes;
- Furthering our knowledge of native stingless bees (we have 2 hives at MPC which will be split later this year);
- Building children's understandings of community services, beginning with the Ambulance station at the top of Kedron Avenue; and
- Investigating policies, regulations and other service's practices to foster the practice of going out (one-off excursions or more regular visits to local shops, services and natural spaces).

This project will encompass many and varied smaller projects. Staff members are working collaboratively to investigate and take actions.

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Time has been afforded during nominated whole staff professional development days during recess periods, as well as during monthly leadership meetings, for staff to share and build their understandings. We are encouraging children and families to join in our Action Research project as co-participants, leaders and experts. While this project has only been underway a short time, we are very excited to see the interest in the research growing among our community. We are sharing insights at the monthly staff meetings and leadership meetings. The leadership team promote and mentor each other through a research folder on the MPC shared e-library network as well as a document wallet to house paper materials and work plans.

Updates of this research are shared with families and the community through newsletters, the website and social media. In addition, professional networks have been extended through cross-collegial partnerships with University academics (Professor Margaret Sims, Associate Professor Nadine McCrae and Dr. Sue Elliott, UNE) and other early childhood teachers. We aim to seek opportunities to expand these networks and share our professional learning journey more broadly. As this research project expands, we will look for opportunities to share our knowledge and understanding with our local community as well as early childhood colleagues through conference presentations, journal and newspaper articles.

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