

'Reconceptualising Reception'.....practitioner inquiry into pedagogy and curriculum in the first year of school

The 'Reconceptualising Reception' project is an initiative developed by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services in 2008. Through the project practitioner inquiry, involving deep reflection, will lead to pedagogical change maximising opportunities for the continuity of learning and improved learning outcomes for all children in the first year of school.

Reconceptualisation would require concentrated critique, directly confronting the hidden political and moral agendas that underlie even the best of intentions. (Canella, 2002)

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of the school and the wider community. It is widely acknowledged that a positive start to school, including initial success across social and academic areas is a key factor in setting up cycles of achievement and promoting children's positive adjustment to school.

In the 'Reconceptualising Reception' project prior to school and school educators, working in collaborative networks, are using practitioner inquiry to investigate identified aspects of pedagogy and/or curriculum. Through deep reflection, supported by district and state office personnel, educators are exploring elements of pedagogical change to maximise opportunities for the continuity of learning and improved learning outcomes for children in the first year of school.

The project has been informed by a literature review and situational analysis undertaken by Professor Sue Dockett and Associate Professor Bob Perry, Charles Sturt University incorporating:

- Socio-political perspectives of early childhood education
- Views of children, childhood and children's learning
- Pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education
- Transition to school

The literature review, incorporating national and international literature, has provided a very useful analysis of up-to-date research in early childhood pedagogy and learning environments. It can be found at www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au

Historical Background

South Australia has a strong history in the provision of quality prior to school education and care facilities with kindergartens first being established in 1911. Currently education and care is provided for young children, birth to 8, in flexible ways through a range of facilities and settings including:

- Childcare
- Family day care
- Preschool
- Child Parent Centres (CPC) co-located on school sites
- Rural care
- Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting.
- Schools

Since 2001, the implementation of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) has provided a cohesive Birth – Year 12 framework, describing the curriculum entitlements of all learners. The framework is presented in 4 bands – Early Years, Primary Years, Middle Years and Senior Years. Together with the Learning Areas, the Essential Learnings aim to provide learners with the personal resources and flexibility to meet the demands of changing times.

The Early Years band encompasses Birth to the end of Year 2 and is described in 3 phases – Birth to Age 3, Age 3 to Age 5 and Reception to Year 2. While each phase has its distinct Learning Areas, the phases are connected through the Developmental Learning Outcomes. These integrate the Learning Areas and the Essential Learnings and provide different developmental pathways for young children

The Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), as its name implies has responsibility for both preschools and schools. Access to a Preschool program is available to all children in the year prior to beginning school. Provision is currently 12 ³/₄ hours per week, provided in a range of flexible options

depending on context. For example in some remote, rural areas, preschools with low enrolments may operate for only two full days per week, whereas in metropolitan areas children may attend for four half days as the preschool operates full time. At time of writing the Australian Government is proceeding with its plans to provide access to 'universal' preschool education. In order to gauge the impact of this initiative on the South Australian context, universal access of 15 hours is currently being trialled in nine disadvantaged sites.

Preschools and schools have a four term structure. Children generally move from the preschool to school at the beginning of each of term, after their fifth birthday. The first period at school is named Reception and depending on their birthday, children may remain as "Receptions" from 3 terms to 6 terms. Transition programs in varying forms operate between the preschools and schools. These provide opportunities for children and families to familiarise themselves with the new context and to meet staff. Part of this process is the sharing of information, between the two settings, about children's learning and development. With parents' permission, the Summative Report based on the Developmental Learning Outcomes which is provided to them may be shared with the school. This is intended to support continuity between the two settings and provides relevant information in order that the teacher may build on current skills, understandings and dispositions. Often preschools and schools have other processes which add to this report and provide a richer picture of the 5 year old child beginning school.

While our SACSA framework emphasises continuity and cohesion between the varying stages of learners' care and education, the early childhood landscape in South Australia is changing along with the changing nature of society, and families. Increased demands on families, often means that not for profit, community based care and preschool services increasingly compete with for profit providers. In response to changing times, societal needs and contemporary research relating to imperatives for optimum early development, DECS is establishing *Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting*. These new centres provide integrated care and education (birth - age 5) together with associated health and family support services. Models for these are intentionally flexible, depending on the needs of the local community.

In 1981, in South Australia, a Reception year was introduced with the intention of providing children with a transitional learning context as they move from prior to school learning approaches to the more formal approaches of the compulsory years of schooling deemed to be more appropriate for older children. Historically, junior primary schools operating from Reception to Year 2, provided families and children with their first school experience. While SA still has some of these they are gradually being amalgamated with primary schools. In many instances this has resulted in the loss of distinct early childhood leadership positions and associated understandings regarding pedagogy and practice for young learners.

In the light of these changes it remains imperative that the 'Guiding principles for our work with young children' remain visible in our work. These guiding principles were developed with input from early years educators from sites, district offices, state office and delegates at one of the nationally significant 'Our Children, the Future' Conferences. They provide a guide for all early childhood educators in their work with young children (Birth to Age 8)

1. Children have rights, entitlements to a voice of their own and have intrinsic value in themselves as well as in being members of society.
2. Children's families', communities and cultural and social experiences are central to their development and learning.
3. Respectful connections with families foster partnerships to promote children's health, learning and wellbeing.
4. Recent research indicates that children's early social and emotional experiences critically influence early brain development and function with enduring consequences.
5. Connections between thought and language are securely laid down in the early years. Children's capacities to learn are enhanced by thoughtful language-based interactions.
6. Warm responsive relationships are critical for a child's current wellbeing and ongoing harmonious development and contribute to later nurturing relationships and successful outcomes for individuals and society.
7. Children's development is holistic and integrated and involves different pathways and occurs at different rates.

8. Outcomes for children are maximised when persistent delays and interruptions to their learning and development are identified early and appropriate interventions are in place.
9. Children are active learners, constructing their knowledge, meanings and understandings through interactions in their physical and social worlds.
10. Play is fundamental to children's learning providing opportunities for children to express their ideas and feelings and engage in explorations, imagination, experimentation and manipulation.
11. Fostering positive and robust dispositions, such as autonomy, responsibility, interdependence, optimism, resilience and the enjoyment of learning, contributes to children's success as learners.

Contemporary Context

Philosophies and approaches to children, childhood and learning are reflected in the range of early childhood services and programs available to children and their families. These change over time reflecting contemporary research and social, political and economic agendas. The current worldwide focus on early childhood education is influenced by neuroscience, developmental psychology and economics. These factors impact on the nature of early childhood education provided and the type of experiences regarded as important for young children while also creating a number of tensions.

Early childhood educators have long resisted the push-down of academic curriculum and the notion that the value of early childhood education is located in its role of preparing children for later stages of education (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002)

choosing instead to promote the value of children's learning through play, interaction and developmentally appropriate practice. (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997)

The SACSA framework is based on constructivist theories of learning underpinned by the conviction that children enter early childhood settings as active, experienced and competent learners. The social constructivist approaches within the SACSA framework recognize children as co-constructors of meaning and knowledge, based on neo-Piagetian research and the work of Vygotsky.

Professional conversations with educators, in recent times, have highlighted the need for reconceptualising the early years of school. A project, conducted in 2006, 'What counts in early learning?' provided a forum for extended professional conversations and inquiry, over time, for preschool and school - based educators. The project highlighted significant aspects of pedagogy, relationships and use of space that supported the continuity of learning, preschool to school. It also highlighted factors that seemed to increasingly impede the continuity of learning. Growing anecdotal evidence describing increasing formal approaches to teaching and learning in the first year of school was validated by the situational analysis undertaken by Dockett and Perry, (2007). Educators identified that pedagogy in the Reception year has become increasingly structured and compartmentalised which is limiting to the holistic and integrated way young children learn.

The 'Reconceptualising Reception' project supports educators to closely examine their practice in response to these combined factors.

Significant curriculum reform and improvement in outcomes for children occur as practitioners critically reflect on aspects of pedagogy, share research and act always in the best interest of children in their care. (SACSA, 2001)

The 'Reconceptualising Reception' project includes the perspectives, expectations and experiences of children, families and educators. The project has strong links with current review work on the SACSA Framework and also has connections with work being undertaken by the Early Learning and Curriculum team relating to the DECS Observation Scales resource (wellbeing, involvement, relationships and learning environment).

The Practitioner Research Project

The intent of the project is to build on the pedagogy in the first year of school so that it best matches the characteristics of young children's learning as they make the transition to school from earlier prior to school experiences.

Project principles

The development and facilitation of the project has been guided by a set of collaboratively developed principles which include

- Sustainable pedagogical change
- Collaborative professional networks
- Data collection throughout the project using the DECS Observation Scales
- Practitioner documentation using journals
- Ethical inclusion of children's voice
- Active leadership participation
- Early Childhood Initiatives Coordinator (district based) actively involved

Project participants

Fifty one Expressions of Interest were received incorporating 105 sites including private childcare, Area Schools(R-12 enrolment), an Aboriginal school, remote schools and preschools along with metropolitan sites. Thirteen networks (twelve DECS and one Catholic Education) incorporating thirty two sites and involving 71 educators have been funded to participate in the project. The funding supports release for focused professional learning, data collection processes and dedicated time for reflective dialogue within networks.

Network inquiry questions

Each of the networks is researching an inquiry research question of particular interest and consequence to their local context. These collaborative inquiries are leading to changes in pedagogical understandings enabling educators to make changes in everyday practice to maximize opportunities for the continuity of learning and improved learning outcomes for all children in the first year of school. There is a focus on children's engagement and wellbeing through a range of aspects of practice such as:

- Building reciprocal relationships with families
- Strengthening professional collaborations between educators within networks
- Continuity of learning
- Active learning environments

Initial inquiry questions (based on 'niggles' or 'wonderings') from networks include:

- How could a shared (for Kindergarten and Reception) play-based program impact on student wellbeing?
- How do we re-think transition/orientation through wellbeing and involvement?
- How can children's stories, experiences, knowledge and dispositions inform and influence curriculum?
- How can we best use the child as protagonist to construct and drive the play inquiry so that it is meaningful for children?
- What happens to children's wellbeing/social functioning/dispositions to learn when they begin school?

Network and site support

Officers from the Early Learning and Curriculum team along with district based personnel are supporting the networks. At these network meetings professional discussions have led to the refining of inquiry questions and to the identification of relevant types of data (evidence or information) to be collected. Data collection methods include surveys, interviews and other artefacts including drawings, photos or video footage. In addition, one or more of the DECS Observation Scales are being used by educators to examine their pedagogy and relationships with children with the aim of increased engagement of children.

Support for the networks has included:

- Site based meetings

- Network meetings incorporating professional learning for using the DECS Observation Scales and practitioner research methodology
- Provocation and input from the academic project colleagues

Professional learning

Opportunities for educators to engage in facilitated professional learning have included:

- An initial project day highlighting the literature review and situational analysis
- Practitioner inquiry methodology
- The DECS Observation Scales
- Network meetings for collaborative, reflective dialogue
- A seminar on curriculum quality in the early years presented by Professors Christine Pascal, Tony Bertram and Philip Gammage, all from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood in the UK.

Progress and evaluation

Despite clear criteria and a rigorous selection process a number of significant variables have been evident in the project thus far. Educators' capacity to engage in practitioner research has varied widely depending on previous opportunities and experiences and it is apparent that as a method of supporting professional growth and reflective practice it is not familiar to many practitioners. The capacity to work effectively as a network across sites and programs (prior to school and school) also varies.

A number of achievements are evident, however, including:

- a stronger focus on 'taking notice'
- observing in each others centres
- inclusion of children's voice
- inclusion of parent's perspectives, expectations and aspirations
- data collections around transition leading to some changed understandings and practices

Many sites have been unsettled as they have begun to unravel some taken for granted practices and have increasingly found themselves with more questions, dilemmas and unexpected challenges.

The project is being evaluated by Dockett and Perry with the evaluation process including individual surveys completed at the initial project day, some visits to sites and the completion of a survey at the celebration day later in the year.

It is anticipated that the final report will include:

- the professional learning model
- the collaboration with and support provided by district and state office personnel
- significant learning for educators
- change in educator pedagogy
- change in curriculum quality using the DECS Observation Scales
- children's voice
- parent perspectives

Reconceptualization would require new images, potentially images and actions that are controversial, that are disturbingly revolutionary.
(Canella, 2002)

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