

The *Cascades of Learning* Project

Introduction

The *Cascades of learning* project is the approach C&K are using to actively explore new opportunities for learning and to challenge existing practices to support the implementation of *Building waterfalls*. Rather than dictating how the curriculum is used, *Cascades of learning* embodies the *Building waterfalls* belief that we are all competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers; and active participants in building knowledge. The project has embraced a shift of culture to view all participants, from management through to teaching teams, children and families as active negotiators and participants in their own living and learning environments.

This presentation will outline the milestones of the project and how it is being implemented and the benefits that have been achieved so far. It will also give some real examples of *Cascades of learning* in action.

C&K's Curriculum Framework- *Building waterfalls*

After more than two years of extensive research, community consultation with leading early childhood practitioners, key stakeholders, parents and children, C&K in 2006 published Australia's first collaborative birth to school age curriculum, entitled *Building waterfalls: A living and learning curriculum framework*. *Building waterfalls* invites early childhood professionals, children and families to join together to 'fill learning with life' in a way that is meaningful to the here and now of children's lives. Accordingly, it is an open, participatory and reflective framework, allowing room for many points of view. Educators use their professional knowledge and expertise—supported by the framework's 16 shared understandings—as a guide to explore the many possibilities of each and every day.

As Queensland's oldest and largest community based early childhood association, we were able to draw on our 100 years of early childhood experience and practice. The 21st century has brought new knowledge and understandings which have influenced our thinking about children and learning. Research into brain development has contributed to our knowledge of children as competent and capable. In addition, a significant shift in the paradigm of early childhood education and care from a developmental to socio-cultural framework has necessitated that educators critically reflect on the living and learning environments that are best for babies, young children, their families.

Building waterfalls is different to other early childhood curriculums in that it was created *by and for* educators, parents and children. We have combined the philosophy of C&K, which is that children learn through exploring, investigating, problem solving and negotiating, as well as contemporary international early childhood research and practice.

We believe that children do not learn in isolation. It is a collaborative process. *Building waterfalls* acknowledges the important role adults - educators and parents - other children and the physical environment play in children's learning.

Building waterfalls acknowledges children as competent and capable learners, and the significant role adults play in optimising and enhancing children's living and learning experiences. Adults and children share responsibility for the learning process through interaction, negotiation and collaboration.

Accordingly, attempting to slot *Building waterfalls* into an existing knowledge base or framework is problematic. It requires openness to new ways of doing and thinking, and a willingness to step into unknown spaces. There is a crucial belief that all participants—child and adult alike—have a responsibility to embody the capabilities, dispositions, values and qualities of character captured in the

16 Shared Understandings of *Building waterfalls* – all of which start with the capable and competent learner.

International studies have proven that children learn and thrive in a warm, caring play based environment that includes parents in the learning process. For this reason we have intentionally used the term “curriculum framework” to reflect the learning possibilities and potentials inherent in each individual environment.

The inspiration for, and the name, *Building waterfalls* came from five-year-old Blake Shackley who attended a C&K affiliated centre in 2004. When Blake was asked what he liked best about coming to preschool, his answer was quick and certain: “Building waterfalls”.

The metaphor: building waterfalls, provides a powerful and symbolic provocation for our thinking and a reminder of the capabilities of children – their strength, optimism, spontaneity and possibility.

Our beliefs have been inspired by Indigenous educational philosophies that acknowledge “everywhere” as a learning place and everyone as having an educational role. Such an education process is described as nurturing the individual toward “happiness and healthiness ... a process of enlarging identity through relatedness ... whole-of-person, whole-of-life learning in relatedness and respect” (Townsend-Cross 2004, p 2).

Supported by contemporary international and national research *Building waterfalls* seeks to capture the essence of C&K through the ‘streams of beliefs’:

- Our rich relationships, partnerships and connections
- Our abundant natural environments, learning spaces, resources, experience and knowledge
- Our enduring quality, philosophy and values
- Our spirit of community
- Our heartfelt belief in the dignity of every human being

The Cascades of Learning Project

Cascades of Learning is the ‘fresh and original’ approach C&K is using to engender a culture of learning to support the implementation of *Building waterfalls* in their early education and care services throughout Queensland. Rather than dictating how the curriculum is used, *Cascades of Learning* embodies the *Building waterfalls* belief that we are all competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers; and active participants in building knowledge.

Fundamental to the learning relationship and development of a community of learners are the principles of justice and democracy as well as our commitment to the *shared understandings* – our beliefs that are inextricably woven throughout *Building waterfalls*. From this perspective, where there is space for initiative and inventiveness, adults and children share responsibility for the learning process through interaction and collaboration.

Participation in *Cascades of Learning* therefore requires:

- openness to change
- reflective practice
- listening to learn
- conversation and dialogue

- enquiry and research
- collaborative decision making
- a predisposition for embracing the unknown.

Through stories, shared dialogue, learning circles—both face-to-face and online—and critical self-reflection at all levels, participants in the project support one another as they ‘generate enthusiasm for discovering and sharing new skills and knowledge which they are then able to test in practice and refine.

The *Cascades of learning* project is unique in that it involves the whole organisation (see project outline below). The following underpinning beliefs have guided the development of this approach:

- respect and trust
- democratic and participatory
- competent and capable early childhood education and care professionals
- possibility and innovation
- learning as a collaborative act
- critically reflective practice
- engagement and connectedness
- multiple perspectives.

Each participant in the project:

- views children and adults as competent and capable,
- views learning as a collaborative endeavour,
- engages in listening, dialogue and critically-reflective practices,
- works in partnership with families and communities, and
- engages in the possibility of change.

In doing this, we are asking that all participants, from C&K management through to teaching teams, children and families reflect on:

- being a collaborator, rather than a transmitter of knowledge
- being a negotiator, rather than a rule maker
- being a listener, rather than an organiser
- possibilities, rather than prescriptions
- curiosity and wonder, rather than conformity and certainty
- openness to new ideas and innovation, rather than efficiency and standardisation and;
- being a learner, a thinker and researcher.

Cascades of Learning is therefore both a personal and professional journey. Participants are reassured that starting the journey is more important than where you are on the journey. Opportunities to share stories through dialogue and conversation are at the crux of the project. This has been achieved through the implementation of learning circles in all regions across Queensland during monthly Professional Network Meetings. Additional opportunities have been created at the team level within services themselves and through online learning circles which bring together participants from all regions in to the one forum.

To facilitate the sharing of stories we have developed *Cascades* – the newsletter for Building waterfalls. Consisting entirely of stories from early education and care professionals this tri- yearly publication has been designed to encourage reflective practice and celebrate the journeys of educators as they participate in critical reflection and dialogue with peers, children and families.

The CASCADES of learning project outline.

A series of small waterfalls

Engendering a learning culture in C&K services to support the implementation of *Building waterfalls – a living and learning curriculum framework.*

C&K MANAGEMENT

<p>As curriculum leaders Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers</p>
<p>Support Early Childhood Education & Care Consultants (ECECC's) in the implementation of the curriculum project & generation of a culture of learning. Facilitate the development of resources to support a culture of learning in collaboration with ECECC's. Leadership through workshops, conference presentations and articles in journals Contribute to a collaborative learning culture. Inspire curiosity, reflective practice and exploration. Develop trusting relationships.</p>	<p>Participation in monthly learning circles and email discussion groups. Critical reflection. Conversation and dialogue. Reflective diaries. Research and professional reading.</p>

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE CONSULTANTS

<p>As curriculum leaders Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers</p>
<p>Facilitation of professional network meetings and learning circles in response to context. Negotiation and implementation of a workshop program in consultation with early education and care teaching teams. Leadership through presentations, workshops and conference presentations. Participation in the development of resources to support a culture of learning. Inspire curiosity, reflective practice and exploration. Develop trusting relationships.</p>	<p>Participation in monthly learning circles and email discussion groups. Critical reflection. Conversation and dialogue. Reflective diaries. Research and professional reading.</p>

C&K CENTRE DIRECTORS

<p>As curriculum leaders Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers</p>
<p>Foster a culture of learning within the service. Facilitation of learning circles within the service. Supporting the change process within the service. Inspire curiosity, reflective practice and exploration. Develop trusting relationships.</p>	<p>Participation in Professional Network Meetings and learning circles. Participation in workshops and conferences. Critical reflection. Conversation and dialogue. Reflective diaries. Research and professional reading. Participation in email discussion groups.</p>

EDUCATION & CARE TEAMS

<p>As curriculum leaders Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers</p>
<p>Implementing a negotiated curriculum with and alongside children and families. Empowering parents. Engaging in innovative practice. Inspire curiosity, reflective practice and exploration. Facilitate the exchange of ideas. Model curiosity and a desire to know and find out.</p>	<p>Participation in team learning circles, workshops and conferences Consider possibilities and alternatives. Conversation and dialogue Reflective diaries Documenting children’s learning Professional reading Email discussion groups</p>

CHILDREN

<p>As curriculum leaders Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together.</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers.</p>
<p>Are actively involved in shaping the learning environment. Participate in negotiating a meaningful curriculum. (p101 BW) Plan and design projects (p101BW) Brainstorm, plan, organise and set goals (p109 BW) Share interests and plan collaboratively (p109 BW)</p>	<p>Reflect, evaluate and revisit (p121 BW) Be active participants in discussions about their portfolios and the selection of items to be included (p101 BW) Contribute to the documentation of the curriculum (p109 BW)</p>

FAMILIES

<p>As arbiters of quality Shared understanding – we are active participants in building knowledge together</p>	<p>As curriculum learners, thinkers, reflectors and researchers BW Shared Understanding – We are competent and capable enquirers, thinkers, researchers, communicators and decision makers</p>
<p>Have opportunities to participate in a negotiated curriculum. Contribute to a sense of community within the service. Reflect on the importance of the early years in laying the foundations for success in life and learning (p4 BW) Respect educators for their knowledge and capacities as teachers of young children (p6 BW) Contribute to the development and evaluation of the service’s philosophy, goals, policies and program (p102 BW)</p>	<p>Contribute to children’s portfolios and projects. Share information, reflect upon and revisit experiences (p50 BW) Encourage children to think about possibilities by posing questions: I wonder if...? Do you think...? Could you...? (p116 BW)</p>

Waves of Change

When you encounter stories from the project (in person, through our newsletter, *Cascades* or through our online learning circles) you begin to sense the critical self-reflection, questioning, experimentation—and sometimes uncertainty—experienced by each participant. All stories are valued: they are neither 'right' nor 'wrong'. Each one provides a new insight into the myriad ways that we see, think and do—and contributes to our knowledge about children, teaching and learning.

Change does not always come easily and to date the early childhood field has been wary of new theories about learning. Added to this, our knowledge of children's competence is complicated by societal, political and economic influences which at times conflict with our beliefs. Furthermore, change affects each of us individually and personally. It requires individual ownership, responsibility and understanding, before we can demonstrate commitment and leadership.

Sample reflections from the field

'I remember thinking: "these children are different from all the children I have had in the past" Perhaps—but more likely no! Children have always been powerful and capable. I think that now I hold less power, and in doing so have made them powerful!'
—Helen Dawson (Co-director, Narnia Kindergarten, Rockhampton)

'If we openly acknowledge that children of today face possibilities, adventures and challenges we have yet to perceive, how can we journey with them if we are afraid to take risks with our own learning and teaching?
'Isn't that reason enough for us as educators to try the road less traveled for a change?'
—Sharon Noall (C&K early childhood education and care consultant)

Loris Malaguzzi tells us that worthwhile projects are difficult, involve a whole organisation and should continue to change (Dahlberg, et al., 1999). Our project is far from complete and, encompasses the whole organisation and the communities in which our services sit. We are actively exploring new opportunities for learning and engaging in dialogue to challenge existing practices. C&K has embraced a shift of culture to view its personnel, children, families and communities as active negotiators and participants in their own living and learning environments.

Milestones of the *Cascades of learning* project:

- June to July 2007 *Building waterfalls* given to all services at introduction workshops across the state.
- September 2006 to December 2006- *Cascades of Learning* project designed. Input from C&K management, children, educators, parents and C&K early childhood education and care consultants (ECECC).
- November 2006 – monthly learning circles commence for ECECCs via teleconference. All C&K Management and ECECC's encouraged to keep individual reflective diaries.
- December 2006 – BLOG established on C&K website.
- January 2007 – ECECC in-service program (Brisbane based and regional) and C&K Management/ Branch Director in-service program (Brisbane based and regional), focus on change management and leadership
- February to March 2007 – Kindergarten Management Seminars throughout Queensland – presentation of *Cascades of learning* project by Jan Cullen (General manager- Early Education and Care) to all C&K services including parents. All teaching teams encouraged to keep individual or team reflective diaries.
- February 2007- Brisbane based workshop program about *Building waterfalls* commences.

- February 2007- C&K *Induction and Welcome to C&K* days modified to include information about the *Cascades of Learning* project for all staff working at C&K.
- March 2007 outside facilitator engaged to model learning circle approach at ECECC monthly learning circle teleconference.
- March 2007 – monthly Professional Network Meetings for all education and care teaching teams commence in all regions of Queensland. Participants plan for own professional learning needs according to context. Learning circle philosophy adopted (see *sharing the journey* below)
- March 2007- Professional development offered in every region of Queensland as one day workshops to C&K services.
- April 2007- First regional online learning circle commences. Other online learning circles have followed.
- May 2007 – C&K Centenary Conference *Waves of Change*
- May 2007 – Curriculum co-ordinator presents at the World Forum on Early Education and Care in Kuala Lumpur.
- May 2007 – first edition of *Cascades* available
- August 2007- *Building waterfalls* related articles on the C&K intranet, in four sections- waves of change, inspiration, supporting documents and sharing the journey.
- September 2007- C&K position descriptions for all staff modified to reflect the *Cascades of Learning* project.
- December 2007- C&K affiliation papers for Affiliated kindergartens modified to reflect the *Cascades of Learning* project for 2008.
- January 2008 Portfolio trial commences from January to September 2008 at 55 services with over 2500 children in the trial.

Through a shared vision C&K has empowered each individual within the organisation to identify individual and organisational strengths and possibilities through engagement in critical reflection. This has involved testing assumptions and hypothesising on new ways of knowing and doing.

At a front line level, our services are better equipped to meet the individual needs of the community which they serve. They do this through active negotiation, sharing information with stakeholders and letting go of traditional power structures to enable community engagement and capacity building.

C&K staff at all levels are actively in the community educating government bodies and other service providers to affect positive change based on 'what is best for children'.

Longer-term benefits of the *Cascades of Learning* project

The long term benefits we are starting to identify from the *Cascades of Learning* project include:

- Engaged and enthusiastic teaching teams.
- A participative and democratic approach to learning and decision making.
- A shared vision for the future in the best interests of children.
- A culture of learning that permeates all levels of the organisation.
- Contemporary services which reflect best practice in the provision of early education and care.
- Early education and care services which contribute to proactive and resilient children and families.
- Community engagement and capacity building.
- Growth through innovation.
- A culture of continual improvement that anticipates and adapts easily to change.
- Influence early childhood and care provision beyond the organisation.

Cascades of learning in action – sharing the journey

Brisbane Western Suburbs ECECC: Tess Simpson

The professional progress that is emerging in the Western Region as a result of the new curriculum is amazing! I would like to share a reflection with you from a teacher in our region following a recent professional network meeting:

“It may be slow and it may be small but I for one am just blown away that all the teachers that were there yesterday are actually TALKING and THINKING about curriculum. I was energised by the discussion and thank you AGAIN for bringing this to us.....” Anne Marlay, Graceville Community Kindergarten & Preschool.

Far North Queensland ECECC – Will Jones and Els Heijnes...

In the FNQ region, everyone is very hungry for the professional debate and ‘pearls of wisdom’ through the Learning Circles. Our challenge in these beginning days is to reflect on why ‘Storying’ is such an appropriate tool and foundation for an Early Childhood Curriculum. Els and I are hoping that these reflections form the basis of an articulate and equally authentic resource tool for implementing *Building waterfalls*.....
Shalom

Central Queensland ECECC – Ali Evans

The *Building waterfalls* journey is being well embraced by staff within the Central Queensland region. Many staff are engaging in critical reflection both individually and as a team. As an ECECC it has been fantastic to visit services and share *Building waterfalls* journeys with staff. I feel that each time I read and share the document and reflect, I am discovering more and more....more possibilities, more discoveries, more ways to learn with and alongside children, staff, parents and colleagues.

The Cape and Gulf ECECC – Kellie Dwyer

Due to distance we are unable to hold Professional Network Meetings in the normal sense - ours usually consist of the two or three teachers and assistants in the area. In the Cooktown area we try to include the staff from the Child Care Centre and Prep teachers as well. This year we plan to make more use of the learning circles in other regions so we can feel more connected. We need to improve the way we connect, share and support this year and hopefully the learning circles and teleconferences will aid that.

Ipswich and Brisbane Valley ECECC – Tui Benson

In Ipswich, there are fourteen different services and fourteen different approaches. The discussions are wonderful and very worthwhile. I believe every centre is on journey of discovery and setting sail to catch the wind. Further a field, Nanango, Yarraman, Blackbutt, Jandowae and Millmerran teachers will travel to Regional meetings at least an hour from their centre. The commitment to *Building waterfalls* is clear when I visit and children ask me to look at their “books” (portfolios) and show me their stories displayed on the walls. Last but not least the Brisbane Valley services - real community spirit and a sincere commitment to moving forward with the curriculum. I am very lucky to work with wonderful, passionate early childhood professionals.

Rockhampton ECECC – Lucy Vanheck

Our *Building waterfalls* journey has been an interesting one! We had initially anticipated the road to be a lot smoother and were surprised to find so many pot holes along the way.

The road signs begun leaping out at us.

‘Give way’ - to a negotiated curriculum, not simply a tokenistic approach but truly seeing children as competent and capable in negotiating their own learning.

‘Keep Left’ – don’t be distracted by turning back to old practices.

‘Stop’ – being in control of children’s portfolios, give them true ownership.

‘Round about’ – join a learning circle, be prepared to allow others to challenge our thinking and practices.

Parent Comments

“Everything we do is connected. What she does at home can be incorporated into what she does at kindy, they are not separate entities. We all work together and build the foundations.”

“It seems a little more transparent and interactive than I had expected. I’m impressed as a parent, with the whole kindy experience and quality of teaching.”

“Learning about what Paige does at the centre has helped me with ways to help Paige’s learning at home.”

“I have discovered things Nikki can do, or enjoys, that I was unaware of. Experiences that children are exposed to at kindy can be quite different to activities undertaken at home. The portfolio illustrates this.”

Memorial Park Kindergarten

Co-director Sue Clarke shares her thoughts about how the early childhood educators at Memorial Park Kindergarten reflect upon their journey as a team.

After attending a session at our regional conference with Di Roberts and Sharon Noall, my assistant and I had been challenging our thoughts about children’s ownership of the curriculum. This was particularly highlighted as our colleagues and ourselves prepared for end-of-year Christmas celebrations.

Mott Park Kindergarten

Libby Forbes co-director, *shares a story that was a learning experience for her about being comfortable with not having all of the answers.*

This was a great lesson for me. I don't always have to have the answers or be totally organised. By handing the reins over to a parent I was able to gain knowledge from others and have a curriculum that was truly collaborative between families, children and early childhood educators.

Burrarah Kindergarten

Tania Armstrong director, shares her reflections of how she is viewing children differently and changing her practices as she journeys along with Building waterfalls.

The entire *Building waterfalls* curriculum has challenged me to review everyday ordinary practices and to reassess them, putting aside my "mum" view and also my "teacher-in-charge" view, allowing me to venture into collaborative partnerships with the children.

Gin Gin Kindergarten and South Kolan Kindergarten

Joanne Marsh director, reflects upon her own learning with portfolios.

I recently revisited an article written by former C&K early childhood education and care consultant Lucy Vanheck called *Portfolios - thoughts for starters*. I was worried my portfolios were looking untidy and unprofessional because I handwrite stories, but she says: "I believe we need to prepare more entries alongside the child during the program." This made me realise handwriting is not a sin. I felt relieved – it was a concern of mine for a while that educators at other centres seem to be spending a long time on photos and computer entries. I do most of the portfolio work in program time and do not feel as if it is bogging me down.

Practical Examples of the Cascades of Learning project in Action

The best way to illustrate examples of the *Cascades of Learning* project is through reading some of the stories in the Cascades magazine, which is provided to you today. This magazine gives examples of how children, educators (including C&K ECECCs) and families challenging their thinking and practices.

Conclusion

As a team we are all on board the bus! We are enjoying our journey and offer regular support to one another, through monthly Professional Network Meetings and other opportunities. Our level of trust in one another has also grown during our journey. Initially we all lacked the confidence to share our documentation, portfolios and reflections with one another in risk of feeling inadequate of not 'doing it right'. We have learnt to embrace the quote in *Building waterfalls* that *'Every context will be different – no service will look the same, but instead reflect, with individuality and uniqueness, the community in which it is embedded'* (C&K 2006, p 7)

"In a curriculum that is truly interactive and founded upon trust, mutual respect and reciprocity, children and educators together create and share opportunities for learning and living. In this model the educator is a co-participant and co-creator – engaging, listening, knowing and not knowing, learning and de-learning – with and alongside children." (Moore in C&K 2006, p 7)

References:

Townsend-Cross, M. (2004), 'Indigenous Australian perspectives in early childhood education', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol 29, No 4, pp.1-6, December.

C&K (2006), 'Building waterfalls – a living and learning curriculum framework', Brisbane.