The ConnectED Practitioner Research Project took place from June 2021 until May 2022.

The project was funded by Connect Child and Family Services' Board as an innovative proposal. At time of proposing this project, Connect's Early Childhood Centres were looking for an approach to meaningfully embed critical reflection within their practices. ACECQA* found that services that exceeded the National Quality Standards, among other indicators, had "An embedded culture of shared learning, critical reflection and commitment to continuous quality improvement that is seen across the team". It had been observed that Connect educators had strong skills in reflective practice but were finding critical reflection challenging. To engage in critical reflection, educators needed to be able understand "Critical theories" such postmodernism and reflexivity. Educators often need access to professional learning to develop these higher level skills.

Connect knew of Associate Professor Christine Woodrow (Western Sydney University) and Associate Professor Linda Newman's (University of Newcastle) work in the field of facilitating practitioner research in early childhood centres both within Australia and abroad. After early discussions, implementing a practitioner research model seemed an exciting and innovative approach to support Connect's Early Childhood Education teams.

Once funding was approved, research teams were chosen from each centre. The teams were given professional learning and were guided in the practitioner research model by Associate Professor Woodrow and Associate Professor Newman over six sessions which included a conference day and five leadership round tables. Professional learning included exploring professional identities, intentional teaching, literacy learning and the five literacy keys and critical reflection practice. Each team then used this learning to guide a research project in their centre. The teams were also supported by mentoring sessions with members of Connect's senior leadership team, which included Angela Gillespie and Ann-Marie Ellott.

The implementation of this project has had key impacts on Connect Child and Family Services. Utilising a practitioner research model has been a pivotal practice in how Connect's Early Childhood Centres embed not only critical reflection, but also Educational Leadership. We now view our educational leaders as Lead Practice Researchers. We have also been able to identify the dispositions that support our leaders to effectively guide their teams.

There were many challenges during projects including lockdowns and staffing impacts due to the Covid19 pandemic. Despite these challenges three teams were able to successfully complete their research projects.

"Literacy amongst the leaves" Lapstone Preschool - Rhonda Kasalo and Joanne Roe

"Reading to the crowd" Possum Early Childhood Centre - Danielle Grosse and Macaila Passmore

"Climb high with literacy" Possums Patch, Mount Victoria - Simone Chaffey and Jake Small

*The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

It's been a joy to take part in this project and watch our teams thrive under this approach. I look forward to seeing the impact of practitioner research on our centres in the years to come.

Angela Gillespie

Early Childhood Services Operations Manager

Connect Child and Family Services

LITERACY AMONGST THE LEAVES

Practitioner Action Research Paper by Joanne Roe & Rhonda Kasalo

Literacy amongst the leaves: mindful literacy in Early Childhood

Research Members: Joanne Roe & Rhonda Kasalo

Rationale

Our Preschool has been on a journey of change over the last two years. We have had a change in Leadership with a new Director and Educational Leader, as well as a merger with Connect Child and Family Service to support our governance. Change comes with reflection, starting with re-envisioning our philosophy, daily practices, and environment. We implemented changes that moved us from a very structured routine and curriculum, designed around 'school readiness' to a more responsive and inclusive rhythm which includes a flexible indoor/outdoor program that meets the needs of each child at their own stage of development. This co-constructed environment is based on sociocultural, Vygotskian theory of learning as a social process, emphasising the importance of social interactions and its fundamental role in the development of cognition, relationships, and an overall sense of wellbeing – a slow pedagogy.

The team has been embracing these changes and watching the wonderful engagement of the children and educators, until feedback was received from an allied health worker that questioned our "school readiness" curriculum. This lead us on a journey of how to better communicate and show the learning that was taking place in our environment through play and hands on investigation. We decided to focus on literacy for our research, leading us to the question "*How does the Lapstone Preschool daybook communicate children's literacy experiences?*", however, after analysing our baseline data we discovered that to support change in our practices and strengthen our documentation we first needed to build the capacity of our educators in this area. Our research question for this research project became **"How does professional development support educators to engage children in meaningful literacy experiences?"**

Research Aims

The aim of our research was to support educators to embed, document and be able to articulate the literacy learning that is occurring in our daily curriculum. To achieve this, we first needed to assess educator's understanding of the literacy learning that was occurring in our environment. Our team is confident in identifying, documenting, and discussing the numeracy learning that is occurring, however, the literacy experiences are often not documented in depth or at all. Our research will identify educator's understanding of literacy in the social context of the early childhood setting. Educator's understanding of a wide range of literacy concepts and terms, techniques to support children's literacy learning and the confidence to articulate how it is embedded throughout our curriculum to ensure our literacy-rich environment is visible.

Literature review

In establishing a literacy-rich environment that, as a team we could communicate to families and other stakeholders we referred to several articles and frameworks to guide our research. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) describes literacy as 'incorporating a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing' (Department of Education, Training and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009, p.38). It is not enough just to incorporate these experiences into our daily rhythms, we also need to acknowledge their importance in the children's developing literacy and utilise opportunities to scaffold and extend the children's knowledge. To be successful in highlighting emergent literacy as a social practice we utilised the Literacy Keys developed from a research study in Chile, to embed this into our curriculum (Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014).

Research shows the importance of introducing children to talking about and developing the concepts of print, understanding direction of print, letters, words, sounds and meaning of text, recounting stories which all contribute to literacy learning. Marie Clay's work highlighted the key role of concepts of print and book handling skills in early reading and writing and recognised a close relationship between the instructional scaffolds used by educators to promote young children's emerging reading, writing and oral language skills (Clay, 1991). Rhyming games and songs are important to assist in the development of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is an important foundation of reading and writing (emergent literacy) in languages such as English as it promotes awareness of letter-sound relationships (Fellowes & Oakley, 2010, pp. 172-173).

Educators provide opportunities for the children to actively participate in reading experiences by using techniques such as, asking open ended questioning, scaffolding and sustained shared thinking which encourage children to tell the story along with the educator. This engagement supports children to better comprehend and recall the story than if the educator just reads the book to the children without the opportunity for their voices and input (Arnold et al.,1994; Whitehurst et al., 1988 as cited in Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The educators use intentional teaching to further increase standards for the child's verbalisation over time, following the principles of the Zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). *"Clay extends the value of understanding where an individual child's zone of proximal development is so that educators take advantage of learning spaces to enhance a child's literacy learning"* (Clay, 1991, p 65).

Whilst educators in our preschool are aware of the benefits of literacy development in this social context, it is often difficult for them to communicate this to other stakeholders (including parents and allied health workers). For this reason, often literacy learning is not documented or documented in a more formal way such as the use of checklists. This is a common theme within early childhood research and one of the emerging themes in research conducted into why educators use commercially produced phonics programs in early childhood (Campbell, Torr & Cologon, 2014) was "to be able to provide visible evidence to parents that educators were preparing children for school". It was found that educators did not know how to communicate the literacy learning that was occurring within a play-based environment and that professional development was needed to support educators to better understand concepts such as phonics and phonemic awareness to be able to communicate these practices. This was also a conclusion in research conducted in Children's literacy play environments (Newman, 2016) and recommendations were made for further research into supporting educators to increase their professional development in this area.

"Early childhood teachers play a crucial role in being able to articulate the value of play-based literacy experiences, and by explaining that literacy development is not just knowing one subset of skills such as letters and sounds. Ongoing professional development and mentoring is pivotal in creating and continuing to provide a high-quality language and literacy environment for young children" (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

Methodology

This research was undertaken using a qualitative study representing the interpretivist paradigm, which relies on the researcher as the main tool in data collection and focusses on understanding the perspective of the participants in their natural setting (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, 2010, p. 22). Our research project is underpinned by the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky and Clay as both these theories focus on the interactive nature of the child's capabilities, experiences, and interactions. This is supported within our co-constructed curriculum.

Data Collection

Three collections tools were used to gather data for our research, a short survey, Likert scale and data collection tool. The short survey to establish educator's understanding of literacy in the early childhood environment and this was analysed based on the definitions in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF, p. 38, DEEWR, 2009). The Likert scale survey was used to gain baseline data on knowledge of educator's key literacy concepts (Literacy keys 1, 4 & 5, Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014). Finally, observations of educator's practices documented utilising a data collection tool adapted from "Doing Action Research in Early Childhood Studies (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008)

analysed using ECELLNS Scales, Item 25: Quality of Literacy and numeracy interactions which are used by educators to rate quality within their service (Literacy Connections Team, 2013).

Survey: *Educators Perceptions of Literacy*

Educators were initially asked to write their own definition of literacy, responses showed that the focus for the educators was writing and reading. It was interesting that the emphasis on social practice and drawing/art were mentioned less in the responses and that at no time dramatic play was mentioned even though play is a focus of our philosophy. The data showed that educators considered literacy to be taught in isolation (ie formalised group times) and as a separate curriculum sitting outside our play based philosophy. This prompted us to change our research question, focussing more on building the capacity of educators, supporting them to improve their practices and understanding of literacy concepts.

Likert Scale: Educator understanding of literacy concepts

An initial survey of educators was conducted to ascertain their understanding of literacy concepts and educational practices using a Likert scale based on three of the five Literacy Keys. Literacy Key 1 outlines literacy as a social practice, Literacy key 4 focusses on literacy concepts such as phonics and phonemic awareness and Literacy key number 5 reinforces the critical role of Educators in scaffolding children's literacy understandings (Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014). Analysis of this scale showed the varying knowledge of educators from limited to extensive.

Observations, data collection tool

This tool was used over a period of one week to assess educators focus on literacy learning, focussing on interactions: sustained shared thinking; intentional teaching; scaffolding; role modelling. Also, literacy concepts: book sharing, dramatic play, language development, drawing/writing, social context, environmental print, rhymes, phonics and phonemic awareness. An analysis of these observations also supported our change in research question. The findings from the Likert scale did not match the practices observed during the week of data collection and we identified that whilst educators may have knowledge of concepts of literacy learning, embedding these into practice was not always evident and therefore the documentation of literacy learning was not being communicated and professional development was needed to build educator's capacity in this area.

Change Plan

To support our educators in conceptualising their definition of literacy as well as their role in supporting the children's literacy development within a co-constructed democratic environment we chose to support educators with professional development. Research has shown that bespoke professional development supports, not only the individual educator but also builds the capacity of the team (*Let's Read Certified Services Initiatives: A pilot with Goodstart, Final Report, 2014*). This professional development included revisiting the role of educators in small group experiences, scaffolding, sustained shared thinking, role modelling and intentional teaching (DEEWR, p14-15, 2009). Literacy key number 5 also reinforces the critical role of Educators in scaffolding children's literacy understandings (Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014). To support the educator's focus on intentional teaching we introduced the concept of dialogic reading techniques, preparing books for dialogic reading to expand the adult-child interaction. This technique is used to develop oral language, comprehension and scaffold the children's emergent literacy and enjoyment of books (Hill, 2006, p.127).

A professional development presentation was delivered to educators at a staff meeting, along with handouts that supported educators to build their capacity in using open ended questioning and concepts of literacy (phonics, phonemic awareness, dialogical reading, sustained shared thinking, scaffolding). Educators were also introduced to literacy stations, these are small A-framed white boards and shelving, equipped with resources such as song cards, visuals, letter cards, white board markers, props, to facilitate literacy learning. These literacy stations were used in planned and unplanned group times.

Post Change data generation

A second round of data was then collected using the same data collection tools and comparisons made. It was an interesting comparison as some of the educators who had initially said that they had a good understanding of terms and concepts such as phonemic awareness, dialogic reading and sustained shared thinking, realised that after the professional development that their depth of understanding/knowledge was limited and they benefited greatly from the professional development and readings.

Ethical considerations

Educators were aware and kept up to date about the research project at staff meetings. The data collected was coded to protect the identity of participants ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. As Joanne and Rhonda are the

main researchers in this project, as well as the Preschool's positional leaders, we needed to be mindful of this dual role and our perceived position of power and ensure that fellow educators do not feel obliged or coerced to participate (Guideline 2.2.9, National Statement on Ethical conduct in Human Research (NSECHR, 2007, p.10). Full disclosure of the research will be provided, including the aim and methodology before the educators make an informed decision to participate (Guideline 1.4, NSECHR, n2007). Educators had the option to withdraw from the research, without prejudice, at any time.

Outcomes

- A presentation was developed, as a professional development support tool to increase educator's knowledge of literacy in the ECEC environment. This is a fluid document that can be updated and added to as needed. This will enable educators to refer to and guide their professional development.
- Literacy stations (stand which includes a white board, and display board), and questioning prompts, helps to support the deeper dive into literacy experiences. Children's voices are recorded using the white board (photo taken to share with families) and engagement in the literacy experience is extended. Educators can prepare books for dialogic reading, discussions and feel more confident in their intentional teaching practices having this prop.
- Our literacy group times are now combined with morning tea which facilitates greater participation for all children. Combining two social practices: eating together and reading a story. Children were able to attend at longer group times and their participation has been more relaxed and engaging.
- Educators' knowledge has increased in regard to literacy, and they are working collaboratively on projects with the children, the focus being on literacy as a social practice.
- Spontaneous reading of books with the children and storytelling using props has become deeper and more meaningful, building in dialogic reading, sustained shared thinking and intentional teaching strategies during the story telling interactions.
- There has been a conscious increase in literacy documentation in learning stories, our program, projects, drawing and art experiences. We have been capturing the children's voice in the group literacy times utilising the literacy stations, taking photos, and recording interactions.
- Recent feedback from stakeholders on entering our environment without knowledge of our research project initiative. "It is outstanding the amount of thought that is going into the inclusion of opportunities for literacy learning within the environment and in your documentation".

Implications for policy and pedagogical practice

The research project has allowed us, as a team, to be able to reflect on our practice and curriculum better critically. Whilst we came into this project initially a little frustrated that families and allied health workers did not understand how literacy was embedded into our daily program. It is now evident that we were not communicating literacy effectively, nor did all educators have the deep level of understanding of how literacy can be embedded throughout our environment or how to document this.

As the leadership team, we now have the research tools needed to analyse and critically reflect on everyday practices, routines, and policies to make informed evidence-based changes. We are better able to provide professional development opportunities and information to our educators to support their continual development and engagement in current early childhood practices and research.

Throughout this research project we found that information that we shared with families was sometimes disjointed. We have created a visual of how our environment setup is used to support all EYLF Learning Outcomes for all Children throughout the day, including literacy. Feedback from families has been that they now have a better understanding of learning through play, and how educators are intentional in their interactions using the environment as the third teacher (Edwards, 1993). ***We are now making literacy visible amongst the leaves.***

Our confidence, as a team to make informed decisions about our pedagogy and mindful practices within the preschool environment has led to us taking on projects within the centre to support families including providing speech screeners in situ strengthening relationships with allied health workers and responding to family's needs. We are also discussing with our allied health workers to present bespoke professional development – supporting our team's learning journey. This provides opportunities for us to communicate our practices and curriculum to a wider audience which supports advocacy for our Early Childhood philosophy.

We are excited for our next research project to involve other members of our team such as "Inclusion I the Lapstone Preschool environment" and "Bush Kindy: what it looks like at Lapstone Preschool".

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Reading to the Crowd

"In what ways do dialogic reading strategies impact on children's engagement with picture books?"

Action practitioner researchers: Macaila Passmore and Danielle Grosse

Introduction and Rationale

The focus of this research project has been to embed literacy and reading practices that engage children in enjoyment and learning through sharing storybooks, sustained shared thinking and intentional teaching strategies. Our research project developed after team child feedback and team critical reflection on behaviours that were observed during large teacher led group experience. Our children were saying that they did not want to attend group times. This resulted in educators offering children alterative experiences such as routine tasks like wiping tables while group time was running for the remaining children.

As a team we were regularly discussing what was happening in our cohort. We reflected on possible reasons that children had become disengaged with larger group times, possible strategies to re-establish engagement as well as what this looks like for individual children. Educators critically reflected at team meetings, and we found that a lack of child engagement in teacher led group times was consistent across all days of the week. This helped us to definitively decide what we wanted to conduct our research project on and resulted in our focus on engagement. We wanted to create a love of learning through the enjoyment of reading and discussion of stories with others.

Through professional development we learned about a research informed recommendation that a child should be read to 3 times per day for 15 minutes at a time (Adam and Barratt-Pugh, 2020). Upon reflection, we noted that many of the children in our setting do not engage in enough story reading to meet this recommendation and we hypothesised that by implementing dialogic reading strategies, sustained shared thinking and intentional teaching practices that our children experience would move closer to the recommendation.

"In what ways do dialogic reading strategies impact on children's engagement with picture books?"

Aims:

Our aims for the research project were:

- To embed intentional teaching practice of dialogic reading for story sharing
- To embed the intentional teaching practice of sustained shared thinking into the curriculum
- To investigate how intentional teaching strategies (dialogic reading, sustained shared thinking) impact literacy learning outcomes for children

- To increase the frequency and quality of intentional book sharing experiences for children
- To improve literacy learning outcomes for children by increasing engagement with picture books

Literature Review

The research project that we have undertaken at Possum is centred around measuring children's engagement with shared picture books and the impact that intentional teaching strategies have on both engagement and language outcomes. After reviewing the research literature on sustained shared thinking and dialogic reading strategies we discovered that when educators engage in these intentional teaching strategies with children during reading interactions that there are long lasting positive effects on language outcomes that can be achieved. Following is a review of some of the research that has been relevant in determining the direction of our research project.

The article "Sustained Shared Thinking in Early Childhood Pedagogical Practice" by Linda Newman highlights the fact that services that were considered to be high quality practiced 'sustained shared thinking 'as defined by Siraj-Blatchford as where "two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc". Dialogic reading strategies are an example of a language focused interaction with children where the aim is to engage in sustained shared thinking with a small group of children about a story rather than simply 'reading' a book to them. Children are encouraged to ask questions, make comments, relate their own real-life experiences and to predict what happens next in the text. The educator intentionally encourages children to share their ideas about the story and clarifies concepts and extends vocabulary during the interaction which provides an opportunity for learning to be scaffolded and extended.

Zevenbergen and Whitehurst in their research article "Dialogic Reading: A Shared Picture Book Reading Intervention for Preschoolers" describe the way in which many studies have shown that preschool aged children's experiences, in particular the frequency of shared picture book reading in the home has a direct effect on their development of language. It has also been discovered that the amount of time that children listened to stories between the ages of one and three years of age correlated with their language skills at five years of age and their comprehension skills at the age of seven. There is an established relationship between the amount of parent-child shared story reading at the age of five and their reading, spelling and IQ scores at the age of thirteen. (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003).

We found this research, particularly the significant gains in literacy skills that can be made up until the age of thirteen when children of preschool age engage in sharing stories with adults, to be compelling. Upon reflection of our literacy practices, in the light of this research, we made a discovery. While our curriculum allowed for many spontaneous story reading opportunities with children, our program was lacking in planned, intentional literacy experiences for children. This discovery motivated us to use the opportunity presented by the Connect-ED research project to investigate our literacy practices with children further and to learn about the ways in which we could use what we learnt to improve these practices to potentially increase our children's language skills well into the future.

This research also led to our discovery of the set of intentional strategies known as dialogic reading strategies which are first described in Whitehurst et.al (1988). These strategies then became the focus of our research project as we developed professional learning based on our findings for our educators and employed them as part of our change in literacy practice. Dialogic reading strategies are based on the premise that a shared picture book experience between an adult and child, involving the intentional scaffolding and extension of children's learning, facilitates greater learning development than when a child is simply 'read to'. It is the conversational nature of the experience where children are supported to say more than they would naturally that leads to positive language outcomes (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003).

The acronym CROWD (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003) which is associated with dialogic reading strategies was developed to assist adults to remember the types of questions and prompts that are required in a sustained, shared picture book experience between themselves and a child. C stands for completion prompts which are fill in the blanks questions. R is for recall prompts which require the child to remember specific aspects of the book while O is for open ended prompts which allow the child to give an extended response. Wh prompts are what, where and why questions. The last letter of the acronym is D which stands for distancing prompts which allow the child to relate their real-life experiences to the story.

Studies conducted by Zevenbergen and Whitehurst on the effectiveness of dialogic reading for children from both high, middle and lower socio economic groups have found that these

strategies have an overall positive impact on the literacy skills of children. Significantly however, these studies have also revealed that children from low socio economic backgrounds have less access to home literacy experiences than their peers from more affluent homes. This disparity results in children from lower socio economic backgrounds going to school with lower literacy skill levels. It is, therefore, important that children from low socio-economic backgrounds who are accessing early childhood education programs are provided with high quality story sharing experiences with educators and peers in order to increase their literacy skills before school.

These findings are echoed by Adam and Barratt-Pugh (2020) in their article "Book sharing with young children: A study of book sharing in four Australian long day care centres". It was found that children who were at the greatest risk for educational disadvantage had the least amount of opportunity to engage in high quality book sharing experiences. Adam and Barratt-Pugh view this as a risk to these children achieving equitable learning outcomes when compared to children from higher socio economic backgrounds. They again highlight the importance of adults reading and sharing books with young children and state that regular "book sharing significantly impacts on the development of important literacy skills including children's oral language development and early reading skills" (Adam, Barratt-Pugh). Their research also demonstrates that these literacy gains continue over the long term.

Another significant finding about the frequency and length of book sharing sessions with children are the impact that both of these factors have on literacy outcomes. The suggestion that forty five minutes a day made up of three fifteen minute book sharing sessions should be aimed for (Dickinson et.al 2001) caused us to reflect on our current literacy practices. We determined that even when these sessions were broken up between the home and early learning environment that most of our children would not be exposed to this length or frequency of intentional, high quality reading sessions in any given day. Dickinson's research conducted in the United States in 2003 found that forty per cent of preschools did not include story sharing in their daily curriculum which suggests that literacy outcomes for children could improved with the increase of high quality dialogic reading experiences. Our research focused on the effect that the introduction of these types of interactions on a more frequent basis would have on literacy outcomes for children.

Methodology:

Our approach to our research project is grounded in a sociocultural understanding of children's literacy learning. The theorist Vygotsky states that literacy learning is not an isolated cognitive process but rather a form of 'apprenticeship' where learning takes places during interactions with adults and peers. Learning to read and write is a social process

rather than an individual skill. The observation of positive and enduring literacy learning outcomes that result for children that are read to using dialogic strategies is proof that having a conversation about a story with adults and peers rather than simply being 'read' to is most effective.

The first step of our research project was for our team to come to a decision on what engagement looks like for individual children. We decided that engagement can't be measured by body language and eye contact alone and instead focused on engagement observed as the children asking questions, answering questions or make comments on the story.

Method:
We engaged 6 educators in the Possum classroom scoring items 25- *Quality of literacy and numeracy interactions* and 26- *Exploring processes of reading and writing* of the "Early Childhood Environment Language, Literacy and Numeracy Scale" for our setting. We received varied results with educators scoring between 2 and 6 out of a possible 7 when assessing the items. Based on the ratings given by the educators showing huge differences the data could only be used as background data and was not reported.

Our next step was to create a method for measuring children's engagement. We designed a "literacy engagement data collection tool" based on the acronym CROWD (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003) which we learnt about during professional reading prior to commencement of the project. The Literacy Engagement Data Collection Tool included all the different ways we could record and reflect on engagement based on the use of dialogic reading strategies. The data collection tool enabled us to measure the frequency with which educators used CROWD prompts to scaffold children's use of language and engagement prompts to measure the children's interest in the story. The literacy data collection tool was used to observe educators over a one week period for both base line and change data. Using the Literacy Engagement Data Collection Tool we observed 6 sessions of picture book sharing in base line data collection.

Findings

Baseline Data:

Educators were observed over a week long period when sharing pictures books with groups of children during the afternoon group time each day. Using the literacy engagement data collection tool:

- Observation revealed that all educators were introducing the story for each book sharing session but little to no context was given for the story. Educators introduced the story to children by giving the title of the book, author and discussing the cover. There was no evidence that the story was chosen based on children's interests.
- Educators use mostly WH questions to prompt thinking. For example, "What kind of animal can you see?"
- We observed minimal evidence of recall and completion prompts being used
- Educators finished reading the book at each session, children were not prompted to discuss further questions once the story was completed
- Children did not ask many questions during the story but did make many comments on the story and illustrations.
- There was no evidence of children using the story during play.
- A new book was selected by educators for each session (no repetition of stories to create familiarity)

Educator Observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline
Completion	7
Recall	14
Open ended	8
Wh questions	42
Distance	3
Encouraging children	12
Repeat and expand	6
Encouraging children to predict	15
Educator comments	12

Engagement Observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline
Completion	7
Recall	17
Open ended	6
Wh questions	35
Distance	6
Children asking questions	12
Making comments	28
Using text in play	0

Summary of base line findings

We discovered that the majority of questions that educators asked were who, what or why questions that elicited a one- or two-word response from children. Very few distancing prompts were used by educators (3) which limited opportunities for children to engage in discussion of prior knowledge that related to the picture book. An example of a distancing prompt would be "what do you like to do when you go to the beach?" Of the 71 questions that children asked during these book sharing sessions the majority were also who, what or why questions.

Change plan overview:

Based on the findings from the base line data we were able to plan and implement strategies and practices for change to occur:

- We decided to make the groups of children smaller. Two educators took a group each
- Give children the choice to nominate which group time they would like to attend We provided a board that the children were able to write or stick their names in the session they would like to attend
- At our team meeting we developed some professional development on dialogic reading for the team. We discussed our base line data findings and then watched Christopher Lonigan: "Implementing dialogic reading" and Storytime skill builders. A handout on dialogic reading and the CROWD prompts was provided to all educators

- Encourage small spontaneous story sharing during play in individual, small or large group experiences
- A change of routine was needed to enable flexibility and flow during play. We took out the group time that happened before the children's lunch to extend the length of play in the middle of the day

Educator Observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline
Completion	12
Recall	7
Open ended	27
Wh questions	73
Distance	15
Encouraging children	14
Repeat and expand	17
Encouraging children to predict	12
Educator comments	21

Engagement Observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline
Completion	9
Recall	13
Open ended	28
Wh questions	34
Distance	17
Children asking questions	21
Making comments	73
Using text in play	0

Summary of change data findings

We observed that the number of CROWD prompts used by educators more than doubled from 64 to 134 during collection of change plan data. While who, what, why questions were still the most frequently used by educators at 73 however there were 27 open ended prompts used compared to 6 when the baseline data was collected. Distancing prompts used by educators and children also more than doubled in frequency during the

implementation of the change plan which provided opportunities for discussion of the picture book between educators and children. The low number of recall prompts used could

possibly be because of the lack of repetition of stories. This is something that we would like to continue to research into 2022.

Educator observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline	Change Data
Completion	7	12
Recall	14	7
Open ended	8	27
Wh questions	42	73
Distance	3	15
Encouraging children	12	14
Repeat and expand	6	17
Encouraging children to predict	15	12
Educator comments	12	21

Engagement observations

CROWD/ Engagement Prompts	Baseline	Change Data
Completion	7	9
Recall	17	13
Open ended	6	28
Wh questions	35	34
Distance	6	17
Children asking questions	12	21
Making comments	28	73
Using the text in play	0	0

Outcomes

At the conclusion of our research project we reflected on what we had discovered about children's learning and the ways that these discoveries could impact our pedagogy and practice across our whole curriculum. We found it significant that the repeated reading of the same story allowed children to become more familiar with the text which resulted in an increase in their engagement and led to an increase in positive literacy outcomes. Upon reflection, we were able to apply this finding to all other areas of children's learning and the decision was made to alter the layout of our classroom to facilitate opportunities for children to revisit resources and areas of interest as often as they chose to in order to consolidate their thinking and skills. The space in our classroom was made more open and free flowing as a result of the removal of a number of tables as well as the relocation of learning areas. Prior to the research project being conducted the classroom was extensively 'set up' each day by educators. Although the experiences offered were based on children's interests they could vary quite significantly from day to day. Due to our findings around the

need for children to consolidate their skills through repetition the team decided that it was important that the environment remain as consistent as possible to allow this to happen.

The incorporation of loose parts was integral to this change in practice as they provide open ended learning opportunities for children as well as the possibility of revisiting experiences as often as a child wishes. A designated cosy reading area is available with a range of picture books available on the bookshelf. The Possum library is quite extensive, and these books are rotated according to children's needs and interests. We have observed an increase in the frequency of children requesting stories be read with them.

The role of the educator as intentional teacher is integral to this change in practice. For the change in our environment to be effective in creating positive learning outcomes in all learning areas it is vital that high quality adult interactions that provide opportunities for children to engage in sustained shared thinking become embedded in our practice. As a result, we are observing that children are becoming more engaged in their play, asking for resources that they require and are revisiting their interests. Educators feel more empowered to make spontaneous curriculum decisions because of the professional knowledge they have gained during the completion of the research project.

The rhythm of our day at Possum is now more relaxed and free flowing. This has enabled more opportunities for spontaneous small group learning opportunities that are initiated by the children. The removal of two educator lead large groups times has resulted in a noticeable increase in children's engagement in our morning "Yarning Circle", now the only large group time that occurs in our day. The decision to remove large group times was made in consultation with the children. We found that the vast majority to children told us that they did not enjoy the frequency or size of large groups. Educators were not finding these groups effective at facilitating children's learning as their lack of engagement often lead to children exhibiting challenging behaviours at these times.

The professional development opportunities around dialogic reading strategies that the research project has enabled for our team of educators have been an important part of ensuring that the changes we put in place have been purposeful and that all members of the team have had an opportunity to contribute their input and ideas. Professional learning sessions has also given educators the chance to ask questions, clarify their understandings around the effectiveness of intentional teaching strategies in their everyday practice with children and to feel included in the change process. Educators feel positively about the changes to curriculum and practice that we have put into action and our critical reflection process around these are ongoing.

Discussion

Upon reflection, we have observed that the use of dialogic reading strategies has increased but has not yet become an embedded strategy that is practiced consistently when sharing picture books with children. Some possible explanations for this are that educators need more professional development to become familiar with these techniques as well as more support such as modelling of dialogic reading to feel competent enough to use these skills in everyday practice.

Educators have had the opportunity to reflect on what children's engagement looks like. Prior to conducting the research project, a common belief was that a child was engaged if their body was still, their eyes were directed towards the educator and that they were not speaking. After the completion of the project educators understood that these physical indicators were not a good gauge of children's engagement in a learning experience and that other indicators such as being able to recall the plot of a story, asking questions and making comments were a far more accurate indicator of a child's engagement. Prior to the research project none of the educators were familiar with dialogic reading strategies or the recommendation that children should engage in three fifteen-minute reading sessions per day to achieve positive literacy learning outcomes.

Challenges

There were some challenges faced when carrying out our research project. Much of the time allocated to Macaila as Educational Leader was used for research which resulted in some other aspects of the role not being completed. Additionally, there were educators who were absent due to time needed to isolate with Covid-19 which effected Macaila and Danielle's availability to complete our project due to being required on the floor. Absenteeism of educators also resulted in inconsistencies in staffing which meant that it became more challenging to embed dialogic reading as a practice. The pandemic also resulted in disruptions to the round table learning and planning sessions. These sessions were unavoidably moved online which made opportunities for face-to-face problem solving impossible. Both Danielle and Macaila found it more difficult to engage fully in online sessions as compared to face-to-face learning.

While collecting data it became evident that educators were aware of being observed and this changed their story reading behaviours. This may have been because of discomfort about being observed or because of a perceived need to 'perform' for the researcher. This led us to question the validity of some of our baseline data.

Successes

The project provided Danielle and Macaila with pedagogical knowledge that formed a basis for the changes in practice that we have implemented with our team. At the conclusion of the project we saw an increase in the use of dialogic reading strategies which increased the engagement of children with picture books. Children are displaying confidence in their abilities and we believe that this is due to the changes we have made to our environment as well as increase in the responsiveness of educators to children's interests and needs.

Implications for policy and pedagogical practice

- The research project has assisted Connect to define the role of the Educational Leader and to create a detailed job description outlining this definition. The role will now involve more research and innovation to contribute to continuous improvement. The use of educator journals as a critical reflection tool has been made obsolete with the focus shifting towards research. At the time of writing this report, we currently run only 1 planned large group time at the beginning of the day. All other group experiences and book sharing are spontaneous and based on children's learning interests.
- Change of classroom set up by removing excess tables that were set up with teacher led experience, change of location for learning areas based on the need for additional space in those areas and introduced more authentic and open-ended resources. This has allowed autonomy for children and encourages children to revisit interests and practice skills.

Where to next?

Danielle and Macaila plan to conduct a practitioner research project around educator's documentation of children's learning. This is the next area of pedagogy that requires critical reflection within our service.

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Climbing High with Literacy

Research team members:

Jake Small and Simone Chaffey

Possum's Patch – Mt Victoria

"How are the children engaging with the literacy resources within the outside environment?"

Introduction/Rationale:

The focus of our research project was to build further upon interactions with literacy learning through engagement of resources in the outdoor learning environment. With new families visiting the centre and discussions from different team members across Connect Early Childhood Education Centres, the backyard area is one of the biggest promotion points of Possum's Patch – where the children will often spend a lot of time learning, resting and exploring when attending day care.

As part of centre practice, the team follows the planning cycle of observe, question, plan, act and reflect. The reflection process is done with methods including in centre conversations, written reflections in the program and discussions at staff meetings – including questions about how the learning environment can be changed and what resources could be added or removed.

With this in mind, the team recognised how important it was to ensure that literacy based learning was supported in the outdoor environments as much as indoors – in line with the National Quality Standards (NQS) and we decided to use this opportunity to explore the impact of changing the outdoor environment to promote further literacy learning and use different reflective tools to assess staff practice and documentation.

Aims/Outcomes:

The aims and desired outcomes for the project included:

- To reflect on the outdoor learning environment and identify changes/additions of resources to enhance literacy-based learning
- To explore new reflective tools in the assessment of the learning environment set ups and staff practice

Literature:

The research project centred on learning environment set ups in the outdoors and articles in relation to this topic highlighted how there is of huge benefit to the learning that goes on. As mentioned by Claire Warden in ECA "The Spoke" blog article "The values we lay in outdoor play" children thrive and minds, bodies develop best when they have free access to stimulating outdoor environments in learning through play.

An article from early education news site "The Sector" entitled "The Big Storm" by early childhood educator Samantha (Sam) Newberry discussed how through educator practice she recorded children's voices in conversations about how a big storm came about and the children observed what was happening with her. The writing of their voices with a marker on the window added to literacy based learning in that a spontaneous visual display was created for the children to record and refer to in their learning

Our centre's philosophy makes mention of how we are influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach – which involves changing the environment around current skill levels and interests of the children i.e. "The environment is the third teacher."

Literacy learning has been noted by many theorists to have many elements involved with Literacy based learning – including the importance of capturing children's voices and providing the resources to assist with that learning.
This includes:
- Maria Montessori (1870-1952) who believed in setting up a productive environment where children could develop their literacy skills without even knowing it – allowing the children to be "Self-constructivist" learners. (Mooney, 2000, p.23)
- Jean Piaget (*1896-1980) [Psychological*] who suggested "Children construct meaning by interacting with their surroundings. The way that a child interacts with an environment is what creates learning – understanding concepts by engaging."
- Lev Vygotsky (1896-1943) [Socio-Cultural] who makes mention about "When children play they constantly use language. Social interactions involving language that children experience during play helps construct their literacy knowledge" (Tsao, 2008)

Professional development and the mentioned research through the project highlighted how literacy based learning is more than just the reading of books and stories – it is something that happens anywhere in early childhood play.

This revelation influenced how our project would continue – by keeping track of how literacy resources were used to influence this learning in play and reflecting on current educator practice and environment set up.

Methods/Methodology:

The process of reflecting on documentation in outdoor literacy based learning involved the creation of a colour coded data sheet listing different types of documentation recorded from April to August 2021.
To assess the learning environment set up, the centre educators engaged in a survey using the ECELLNS scale with a focus on:
- Scale Item 24 – Literacy and Numeracy interactions in dramatic play
- Scale Item 25 – Quality of Literacy and Numeracy interactions

To record the engagement of play with literacy resources in the outdoor environment, the team used a format called "Tool for observing children's current engagement with literacy resources." This was adapted from a reflection format created initially by Connect CFS's Hazelwood ECC team and we used this tool to record a tally of what resources ("Indicators of engagement") were observed in play:

Observed by:		Date Observed:	
Indicators of Engagement	Tally		Comments
Asking questions about items displayed in the yard, including signs/paintings			*(B/G; Age; individual or small group; morning or afternoon)*
Acknowledgement of their work. E.g. Craft, construction, sand play			
Stories read by educators or children			
Asking to view/read/ make signs			
Respectful interactions with displays e.g. "Looking with your eyes"			
Noticing letters and symbols			
Telling stories – i.e. role play, creative thinking			
EYLF Outcomes observed			
NQS Elements observed			
Time Sample took place: *(& for how long i.e. 5 mins)*	No. children present		Ages present during sample
Other comments:			

The reflective tool was created with the following mandatory framework items to refer to during observation process:

- Literacy key #5 – Educators have a critical role scaffolding children's literacy understandings
- EYLF Outcome #5 – Children are effective communicators
- NQS – Element 1.1.1 - Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators
- NQS - Element 1.2.2 - Educators respond to children's ideas and play and extend children's learning through open-ended questions, interactions and feedback
- NQS - Element 3.2.1 - Outdoor and indoor spaces are organised and adapted to support every child's participation and to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments
- Educator Practices – Holistic approaches, learning environments and learning through play

Baseline Data:

Summary of Observations dated 29th October – 2nd November 2021

Indicators of Engagement	Observed Tally (Total out of 6 observations)	Comments
Asking questions about items displayed in the yard, including signs/paintings	0/6	Observed ages involved: 2 years [x 1], 3 years [x 3], 5 years [x 1] - Girls – 1 (Age: 1 year) - Group interactions x3 (Preschool age)
Acknowledgement of their work. E.g. Craft, construction, sand play	3/6	- Most of the observed play was spontaneous - 1 observed interaction centred around interests (Dinosaurs)
Stories read by educators or children	2/6	- 1 observation recorded picture story book being read - 1 recorded request of child-led interest (Dinosaurs)
Asking to view/read/ make signs	1/6	- Interaction recorded involved viewing visual IPad animation based on child-led interest (Dinosaurs)
Respectful interactions with displays e.g. "Looking with your eyes"	3/6	- Solitary play [x1] - Associative play [x4] - Parallel play [x1]
Noticing letters and symbols	2/6	- Props included spontaneous addition of compass and child-led request of song animation (Dinosaur)
Telling stories – i.e. role play, creative thinking	5/6	- Observed topics include cause and affect play, child-led interests (Dinosaurs), role play: robots, mud kitchen cooking, cars on the highway
EYLF Outcomes Observed	2.1 [3/6], 4.1 [2/6], 4.2 [2/6], 5.1 [5/6], 5.4 [3/6], 5.5 [1/6]	
NQS Elements Observed	1.1.1 {5/6], 1.1.2 [2/6], 3.2.1 [3/6]	
Average Times of Observations Gathered	1 – 5 mins [x 2] 5 – 10 mins [x2] 15+ mins [x2]	

Analysis of baseline data noted that while interest based learning and creative play was happening (i.e. role play) with multiple peers and the mandatory framework items were being observed – there was an absence of engagement with visual resources including displays, stories/books and symbols in play. This included a lack of open-ended questioning/feedback between peer to peer play and educator interactions. The above summary makes note of this through comments and low tally counts in categories related to literacy based resources.

There was also a fair amount of spontaneous play among groups observed in the preschool age group with minimal observing of the 0-3 years group engaging in literacy based learning/interactions. In these interactions there was mostly associative play occurring between the children involved.

The responses from individual educators using the ECELLNS scale survey ranged from 3, 4 and 5 out of the scale of 1 (Inadequate) to 7 (Excellent) in terms of the centre environment set up and practice for literacy and numeracy learning – indicating a mixed response.
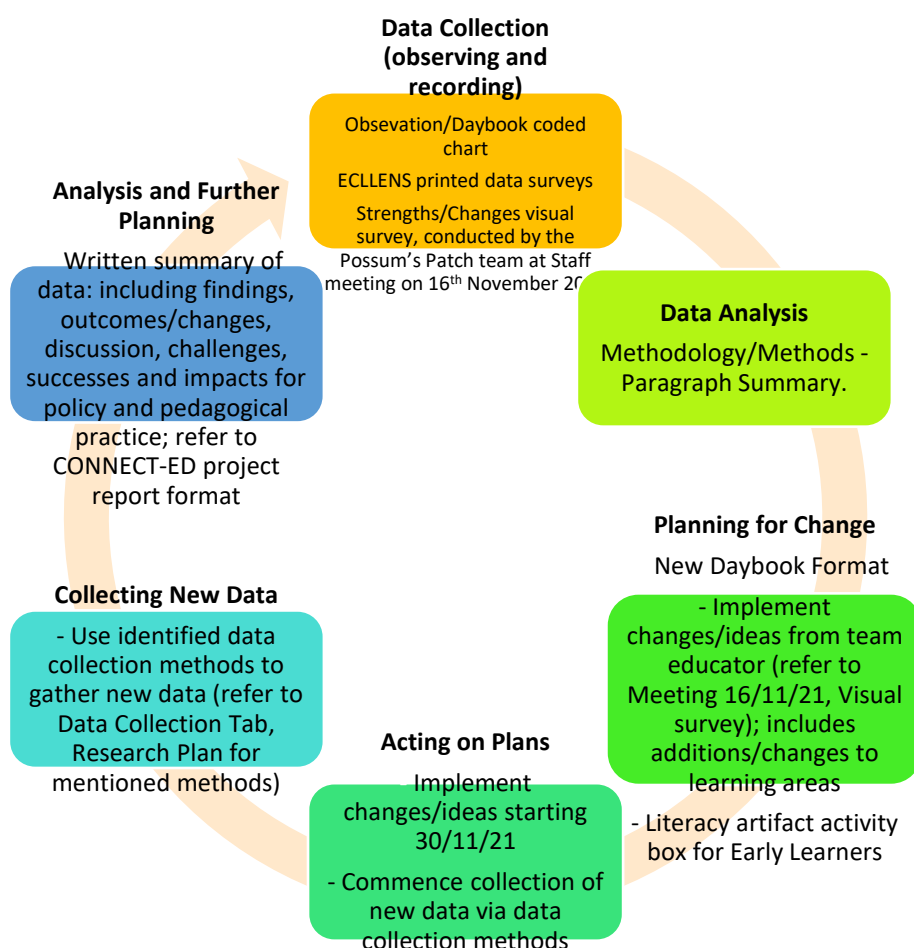
Change Plan (Action Research Cycle):

Based on our analysis of the baseline data we decided to make changes to the indoor and outdoor learning environments including additions visual word displays, posters, printed books (such as cookbooks in home corner play areas) and the creation of a literacy play based activity box to cater for the 0 – 3 years Early Learner age group (which included soft cover books, puzzles, activity walker toys and instruments – the latter of which was based upon the interests of a child).
These materials were intended to gauge interest in literacy learning and build upon creative thinking in play and interactions between children – with room for educator engagement.

Ideas for changing the learning environments were gathered via a staff meeting in November – where educators listed our strengths in the current set ups and added ideas for resources to be added to existing areas. During discussions the idea of displaying a new daybook entry format was suggested, which sorted different types of play categories including "Children's Voices". This was proposed to make it easier to identify what developmental learning was being captured in documentation.

In addition to the continued use of the data tally analysis tool in 6 further observations, a new Action Research Cycle visual for our project was created to help the team keep on track with the change plan.

Data Collection (observing and recording)
Obsevation/Daybook coded chart
ECLLENS printed data surveys
Strengths/Changes visual survey, conducted by the Possum's Patch team at Staff meeting on 16th November 20

Analysis and Further Planning
Written summary of data: including findings, outcomes/changes, discussion, challenges, successes and impacts for policy and pedagogical practice; refer to CONNECT-ED project report format

Data Analysis
Methodology/Methods - Paragraph Summary.

Collecting New Data
- Use identified data collection methods to gather new data (refer to Data Collection Tab, Research Plan for mentioned methods)

Planning for Change
New Daybook Format
- Implement changes/ideas from team educator (refer to Meeting 16/11/21, Visual survey); includes additions/changes to learning areas
- Literacy artifact activity box for Early Learners

Acting on Plans
Implement changes/ideas starting 30/11/21
- Commence collection of new data via data collection methods

Change Data:

Summary of Observations dated 16ᵗʰ November – 15ᵗʰ December 2021

Indicators of Engagement	Observed Tally (Total out of 6 observations)*	Comments
Asking questions about items displayed in the yard, including signs/paintings	6/6	Observed ages involved: - 1 year [x1] - 2 years [x4] - 3 years [x10] - 4 years [x1] - 5 years [x1]
Acknowledgement of their work. E.g. Craft, construction, sand play	4/6	- Explored Dinosaur interest observation/artwork scrapbook - Interactions based on child-led environment set ups, boxes and Lego construction play
Stories read by educators or children	5/6	- Child-led shared reading of Dinosaur interest observation/artwork scrapbook - Role play interactions with Dinosaur dress ups, baby dolls in home corner, mimicking animal sounds from visual display on walker toy - Reading of cook books in home corner role play – Literacy resource engagement
Asking to view/read/ make signs	3/6	- Child-led shared reading of Dinosaur interest observation/artwork scrapbook - Reading of cook books in home corner role play – Literacy resource engagement - Engagement with visual resource based learning: images on walker toy - Child request of taking photos of own artwork using IPad
Respectful interactions with displays e.g. "Looking with your eyes"	6/6	- Pro-social, associative, cooperative play
Noticing letters and symbols	4/6	- Role play interactions with Dinosaur dress ups, baby dolls in home corner, mimicking animal sounds from visual display on walker toy - Reading of cook books in home corner role play – Literacy resource engagement - Child-led shared reading of Dinosaur interest observation/artwork scrapbook
Telling stories – i.e. role play, creative thinking	6/6	- Role play interactions with Dinosaur dress ups, baby dolls/home corner play home corner, mimicking animal sounds from visual display on walker toy - Reading of cook books in home corner role play –

		Literacy resource engagement
		- Children's voice recorded during IPad photo taking describing own individual artwork
EYLF Outcomes Observed	1.2 [x5], 1.3 [x1], 1.4 [x2], 2.1 [x1], 2.3 [x1], 2.4 [x1], 3.1 [x3], 4.1 [x6], 4.2 [x5], 4.3 [x1], 4.4 [x6], 5.1 [x6], 5.2 [x1], 5.4 [x3]	
NQS Elements Observed	1.1.1 [5/6], 1.1.2 [5/6], 1.1.3 [2/6], 1.2.1 [1/6], 1.2.2 [2/6], 1.2.3 [3/6], 3.1.1 [1/6], 3.2.1 [4/6], 3.2.2 [5/6], 5.2.1 [1/6]	
Average Times of Observations Gathered	1 – 5 mins [x2] 5 – 10 mins [x1] 15+ mins [x3]	

*– 4 observations recorded indoors, veranda area due to wet weather

Summary of Change Data Findings:

The new data collected showed an increase in the observed tally of indicators of engagement with literacy based resources, among an age group of 1 – 5 years.
All categories recorded an increase in counting the number of occasions where resources were involved in play – with the sections of "Asking about questions of displays", "Respectful interactions with displays" and "Telling Stories" all recording a 6/6 tally – meaning that all recorded observations displayed these aspects of literacy learning.

We found that all recorded observations were able to identify all mandatory framework items involving educator practice, NQS elements and EYLF outcomes. Not only were all these items present, the data also showed that elements from all 5 EYLF outcomes could be identified in learning interactions – as well as additional elements from NQS Quality Areas 1, 3 and 5.

Impacts of the new resource additions and changes to both practice and environment set ups, were noted in the "Other Comments" section including extension of current interests, an increased observing of the use of verbal expressive language, child-led ideas, associative and cooperative pro-social play, as well as further play in areas including home corner, veranda and the outdoor gazebo. The addition of the activity box for the 0-3 year's age group included a walker toy with visual displays and sensory play items – this was observed to have a peer from the Early Learners group engage in play with it.

 A follow up analysis of the centre environment and staff practice was conducted once more on 15th February 2022 with a new survey with the ECELLNS scale. Item numbers 24 and 25 mentioned previously were once again surveyed by the team and the responses on this occasion were rated high on the scale with scores of 6 – 7 out of 7, meaning the educators regarded the environment set up and personal practice around an excellent rating.

"Before" and "After" Data Comparison

Indicators of Engagement	Observed Tally - Baseline Data	Observed Tally – Change Data
Asking questions about items displayed in the yard, including signs/paintings	0/6	6/6
Acknowledgement of their work. E.g. Craft, construction, sand play	3/6	4/6
Stories read by educators or children	2/6	5/6
Asking to view/read/ make signs	1/6	3/6
Respectful interactions with displays e.g. "Looking with your eyes"	3/6	6/6
Noticing letters and symbols	2/6	4/6
Telling stories – i.e. role play, creative thinking	5/6	6/6
EYLF Outcomes Observed	5.1 [x5], 2.1 [x3], 5.4 [x3]	1.2 [x5], 1.3 [x1], 1.4 [x2], 2.1 [x1], 2.3 [x1], 2.4 [x1], 3.1 [x3], 4.1 [x6], 4.2 [x5], 4.3 [x1], 4.4 [x6], 5.1 [x6], 5.2 [x1], 5.4 [x3]
NQS Elements Observed	1.1.1 {x2], 1.1.2 [x2], 3.2.1 [x 4]	1.1.1 [5/6], 1.1.2 [5/6], 1.1.3 [2/6], 1.2.1 [1/6], 1.2.2 [2/6], 1.2.3 [3/6], 3.1.1 [1/6], 3.2.1 [4/6], 3.2.2 [5/6], 5.2.1 [1/6]
Average Times of Observations Gathered	1 – 5 mins [x 2] 5 – 10 mins [x2] 15+ mins [x2]	1 – 5 mins [x2] 5 – 10 mins [x1] 15+ mins [x3]

Outcomes:

After we had concluded the project we revisited the desired outcomes made prior to the baseline data collection and observed the following:
- An Increased usage of visual literacy resources in the outdoor environment, making the set ups more inviting to the children.
- Increased number of child to child and educator to child interactions in play areas including home corner, veranda and the outdoor gazebo, which involved associative play, cooperative play and creative play.
- Empowerment of child-led interactions and ideas for educator engagement,
- Empowerment of children using information and communication technologies in learning and exploring.

- Promoting of further reflection among educators with individual practice and as a team – including use of new reflection tools including the research cycle, the literacy resource tally and ECELLNS scale.

Discussion:

The changes identified in the centre/team practice surprised us due to the strong impacts – while the team and I knew this project was a great way to promote change and reflection, the ideas shared and the empowerment of both child learning interactions and team practice was amazing to witness – this was also attributed to the use of the visual reflection tools provided by our research project practitioners during professional development sessions – such as the action research cycle.

The project provided insight to how literacy learning in early childhood is achieved and promoted in different ways and has confirmed that it does not consist of only through reading and writing based activities as other people outside of the profession may believe.

The findings of this project demonstrate the usefulness of an action plan and the practice of both our organisation and centre philosophy (Reggio Emilia approach). The findings in the research were aligned with the Cognitive, psychological findings of theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky – specifically the areas of constructing meaning by interacting with surroundings and the use of language, roles, objects and direction via interactions.

The post change findings also showed more documented evidence of how the ECELLNS scale items 24 and 25 – as well as literacy key #5 were being implemented into practice and using the ideas mentioned in those scale items and using Literacy key #5 in reflected practice also assisted in implementing changes with the centre action research plan.

What was also worthy of note was that this new survey was also conducted by 2 new team members who had begun working with Possum's Patch starting 2022, suggesting that this change in practice and the centre learning environment had become well embedded into the culture of the centre.

Challenges in the Project:

The ability to play and implement further change for the outdoor learning environment was often hindered due to the increase in wet weather periods via La Nina summer season – as a result the children and staff were limited to further inside days when the action change plan was being implemented.

This challenge that was presented to the team however was overcome by methods such as changing the inside learning environments and resources and making use of additional areas such as the back veranda and implementing planned/spontaneous experiences to that area for the children to enjoy.

Successes:

At the time of writing these findings (23/01/2022) - in addition to the above-mentioned positive changes and outcomes met in implementation of this project, the centre director has commented on how innovative ideas are continuing to be implemented by the team in both experience ideas and documentation of the program (such as the Preschool program about a storm that happened during Tuesday 11th January 2022).

A discussion with the centre director after the November 2021 staff meeting involved how it would be of huge benefit to engage in further research projects as a continuing method of reflection in practice and the impacts of additional change in the centre/learning environments.

Implications for Policy and Pedagogical Practice:

The above-mentioned successes highlight that both team practice and reflection can be changed as we move forward – most notably the empowerment of the team in sharing in ideas and reflections through research projects and use of reflection tools. The team feels that the use of both these reflecting tools and action research projects can also be of benefit to build further on strengths and incorporate them and further team reflection into the centre Quality Improvement plan (QIP).

Based on the findings of this project, we feel that the use of the reflection tools including the ECELLNS scale can be used to help guide the establishment of policy making – with emphasis on staff practice and learning environment set ups. The action research also empowered the team and organisation in additional ways, the growing/strengthening of leadership-based roles and has the potential to pave the way for positive change in the profession

Action research projects can create agents of change and can play an active and exciting role in the promotion of methods to build further on our sector, thus benefiting children's learning/development – while also highlighting the important and powerful role the early childhood sector plays in these crucial years in the lives of children in both our country and around the world.

Where to Next for Possum's Patch:

In the coming months of 2022, our centre is due for Assessment and Rating. A display folder for this project has been created to present in celebration of our achievement. As previously mentioned, the Centre Director is keen for the team to engage in further research projects as method of both team reflection and identifying opportunities for professional development and practice improvements.

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