

reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION **ISSUE 4 2022**



Welcome to the fourth edition of Reflections for 2022. Reflections is Gowrie Australia's publication for showcasing exemplary work across six Lady Gowrie organisations and a celebration of our connections with children, families, colleagues and research associates.

Children's understanding of gender is influenced and reinforced at a young age through their interactions and experiences across all components of the ecological framework. Gender diversity is about acknowledging and respecting that there are many ways to identify outside of the binary of male and female and Gowrie Victoria are leading the way in challenging gender bias and stereotyping.

Educators' wellbeing is an ongoing topic of conversation (and concern). Gowrie Queensland share their thoughts and perspectives through a lens of taking pride in the care component of early childhood education and care.

In this edition:

Rainbow connection: Gender diversity takes pride of place at Gowrie

Balancing act: looking at educator wellbeing and its impacts on the children in our care



RAINBOW CONNECTION: GENDER DIVERSITY TAKES PRIDE OF PLACE AT GOWRIE

Penny Harrison, Writer & Content Editor, Gowrie Victoria

We've all done it. Asking a pregnant woman whether they're having a boy or a girl has become second nature in society. Gowrie Victoria Early Learning Manager Alistair Gibbs says this is just the start of gender bias for children.

Alistair, who is also a board member of the Social Justice and Early Childhood Foundation and a consultant who has supported services and educators with anti-bias education, says children are hardwired from an early age to gender stereotypes, through everything from toys and clothing to books and television shows, as well as by friends and family.

Building blocks of diversity

A recent Lego survey of almost 7000 parents and children across seven countries found that 71 per cent of boys were worried about being judged or made fun of for playing with toys gendered for girls, as opposed to 42 per cent of girls who worried about being judged for playing with toys typically associated with the opposite gender. (Lego: Ready for Girls campaign, 2021)

Another study by the University of Melbourne found evidence of children's awareness and ability to apply gender stereotypes in early childhood. However, there was also evidence of the malleability of these biases and stereotypes. The social and cultural environment plays a large role in defining the cues by which young children classify on the basis of gender. (King, T., et al., 2021)

When it comes to challenging gender bias in early childhood, Alistair says it's about honest conversations.

"We will often hear comments around gendered language, whether something is for boys or girls," Alistair says. "But our educators will challenge that. It's not about saying they're right or wrong. It's about asking why and considering how someone might feel."

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Alistair says it's important to explore these concepts when they come up in conversation, rather than shutting them down. "It's asking the powerful questions to understand their thinking," Alistair says. "And this is done through connection with empathy."

Alistair says discussions about feeling safe in who you are is part of Gowrie Victoria's framework and one that is examined in one-on-one situations and in larger group discussions. The key, he says, is to normalise the difference, rather than shine a spotlight on it. "Children explore identity naturally, through dress-ups, their play and through the books they're reading," he says. "And they feel safe doing that here."

Families with further questions about their child's exploration of identity also feel comfortable in approaching educators, who are able to provide support, resources and access to allied health professionals if required.

Being brave

Engaging in the tough conversations about gender stereotypes, gender diversity and same-sex relationships is a critical part of ensuring anti-bias principles are embedded in daily practice. "When these challenges arise, we don't back away," Alistair says. "We are here to support children in their journeys, and we need to be brave in these conversations because we can't give mixed messages to families and children."

This openness begins before enrolment, ensuring all families considering Gowrie Victoria are aware that the service will explore anti-bias principles, gender, sexuality, and consent.

"We have Pride flags front and centre in our services because it's about safety and we want diverse families to see that LGBTIQ awareness is visible and available," Alistair says.

Alistair says the four core goals of anti-bias principles – identity, diversity, justice and activism – are at the forefront of Gowrie Victoria's framework. "This is embedded through all of our programs because it needs to start in early childhood, to ensure this society we're creating is more socially just in the future. And at Gowrie, this is non-negotiable."

Shelf reflection

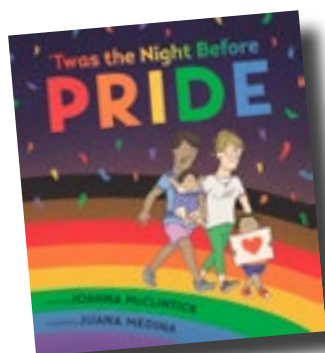
Books play a crucial role in developing a strong sense of identity and inclusion in early childhood. Alistair has put together an Anti-Bias Catalogue of books, showcasing more than 100 children's books that celebrate diversity. For each book in his library, Alistair has crafted a series of reflective questions to raise with children.

"These books are available, alongside any other book, for children to read," he says. "Often questions come up, or discussions arise organically, and it's really beautiful to see how they understand."

Some of Alistair's recommendations include:



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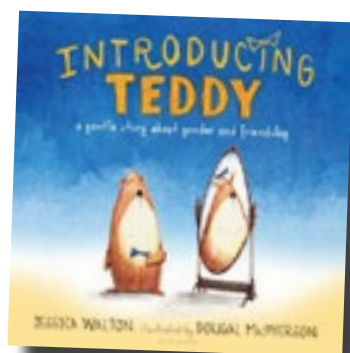
Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag (by Rob Sanders)

Topics the text explores

• Pride • Hope • Equality • Activism • LGBTQI+

Reflective questions for children

1. What did the Pride Flag stand for?
2. If you had a flag what would it look like? What message would your flag represent?
3. Why did Harvey want to make a difference? How did he do it?
4. What is Hope? What do you hope for?
5. What is Equality? How could you help?



Introducing Teddy (by Jessica Walton and Dougal MacPherson)

Topics the text explores

Friendship • Acceptance • Courage/Braveness • Transgender • Gender Role

Reflective questions for children

1. What do Errol and Thomas like to do together?
2. How does Thomas feel when Errol asks him what is wrong?
3. Thomas is brave when he opens up to Errol, what brave things do you do?
4. How does Errol react when Thomas says he is a girl Teddy?
5. If a friend told you something important, what could you do to help them?
6. Is Tilly still the same? Does she like to do the same things as Thomas?



Julian is a Mermaid (by Jessica Love)

Topics the text explores

• Culture • Gender Stereotypes • Identity

Reflective questions for children

1. Why do you think Julian loves mermaids?
2. What do you like to imagine being?
3. Julian is a boy, can boys be mermaids? Why?
4. How does Julian feel when Nana catches him being a mermaid?
5. How does Nana react? Why do you think she reacts this way?



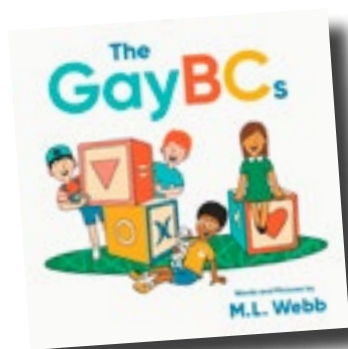
Promised Land (by Adam Reynolds and Chaz Harris)

Topics the text explores

• Gender Roles • Protect The Environment • LGBTQI Relationships • Love and Kindness • Family

Reflective questions for children

1. Jack helped his mother look after the farm – what things did he do to help?
2. What did Prince Leo admire about his mother? Is that usual for a queen?
3. Gideon put the Queen under a spell to make her do everything he wanted her to do? Is that right? Why?
4. Jack and Leo started to build a friendship by having adventures. What adventures do you like to have?
5. How do Jack and Leo feel about each other? How do you know this?
6. How would you feel if you saw Jack and Leo together? Why?



The Gay BCs (by ML Webb)

Topics the text explores

• Queer Knowledge • Literacy • Identity

Reflective questions for children

1. Pick a letter and let's explore! What do you know about the term.....?
2. What do you think it means to be?
3. What do you notice about the friends in the book?
4. What things do you do with your friends that you notice in the book?
5. Each letter has a picture. If you could draw something for what would it be?



My Family Doesn't Look Like Your Family (by Tienielle Stoltenkamp and Go Suga)

Topics the text explores

• Family • Diversity • Belonging

Reflective questions for children

1. What does your family look like?
2. What stories does your family share?
3. What does your family do together?
4. How do you help your family?
5. How do you show your family you care for them?



Do Princesses Wear Hiking Boots? (by Carmela LaVigna Coyle, Mike Gordon and Carl Gordon)

Topics the text explores

• Gender Roles • Family Relationships • Dreams • Self-Acceptance

Reflective questions for children

1. What questions did the Princess ask her mother?
2. Are they all things that girls should do?
3. Can girls do all of the things that the Princess is asking?
4. What things do you think a Princess can do?
5. What is your favourite activity from the Princesses list?



Jerome By Heart (Thomas Scotto and Olivier Tallec)

Topics the text explores

• Love • Friendship • Family

Reflective questions for children

1. How does Raphael feel about Jerome? Why does he feel this way? Is feeling this way ok?
2. How does Jerome treat Raphael?
3. Why do you think Raphael and Jerome get on so well?
4. Why do you think Raphael's mum and dad don't notice or talk about it?
5. Mum and Dad think of ways that Jerome and Raphael should be? Why do you think this is?
6. What can Jerome and Raphael do? How do they stand up for themselves?

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Sequins, stories and acceptance

The Storytime sessions were the brainchild of Education Leader Sam Fernandez, who wanted to celebrate inclusion and equity.

After the success of the first session, the team at The Harbour decided to grasp the opportunity and develop a program for Miss Jay to explore the concept of self with the children. Sam says families also embraced the program and often attended the Storytime sessions with babies and other siblings.

When Miss Jay first appeared for Storytime at The Harbour during Pride Month, wearing a flamboyant purple and orange dress, complete with sequins and ruffles, the children were enraptured.

“I do love the dancing!”

“I LOVE HER DRESS!”

“I like singing with Miss Jay.”

“Miss Jay made me excited.”

“I love EVERYTHING”

After six Storytime sessions with Miss Jay the children’s comments started to change.

“I love that she shared with us.”

“Miss Jay is always honest with us.”

“I didn’t know we could wear what we wanted.”

Since the sessions, Sam says staff at The Harbour have noticed the children exploring their own sense of identity. “One boy, in particular, told us he’d always wanted to

wear a pink dress,” Sam says. “There was one in the dress-ups and he now wears it all the time, because Miss Jay said he could.”

The children were quick to support this exploration and Sam attributed their acceptance and understanding to an innate sense of fairness. “Everyone is different, and the children found with Miss Jay that it’s OK to ask questions, it’s just a matter of asking respectfully,” Sam says.

Sam says the idea is to take the power out of people’s fears. “It’s normalising something that is normal,” she says. “It’s having that clear, strong message that we’re inclusive as a whole. The way we approach our programming is in same vein – we steer clear of any out-dated gendered language, such as ‘good girl’ or ‘good boy’.”

Sam says the program, which has also had a strong impact on the educator team, has highlighted Gowrie Victoria’s true philosophy of inclusion. “We’re not just saying we welcome everyone; we’re actively making that part of our program.”

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BALANCING ACT: LOOKING AT EDUCATOR WELLBEING AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE CHILDREN IN OUR CARE

Melissa Lee, Early Childhood Wellbeing Advisor, Lady Gowrie Qld

A child's right to high quality education and care relies not only on access to a qualified, experienced and skilled workforce, but also educators who are well. Recent studies indicate, however, something which we have long suspected; that experience in the early childhood sector often compromises educator wellbeing (Cumming, 2017, Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014, as cited in Cumming, Wong, & Logan, 2021).

We also know how important workplace culture is in influencing our own feelings of belonging, inclusion and motivation at work, so it makes sense that our emotional state would also have significant impact on those around us, namely, the children in our care.

Contemporary research indicates that when educators are well, they can be more responsive, thoughtful and respectful as they interact and build relationships with every child. (Cassidy D., et al. 2017)

Well educators are also better positioned to meet the emotional needs of children, supporting them in self-regulation and developing resilience. (Livingstone, 2020)

When educators have a strong sense of wellbeing they are better positioned to:

- be emotionally available and responsive to every child
- develop rich, respectful relationships with every child
- encourage children to explore their environment and facilitate engagement in play and learning
- develop a deeper understanding of each child, promoting their ability to plan extensions for their individual learning and development
- support children to develop confidence in their ability to express themselves, problem solve, regulate their emotions, engage in new experiences, and practice resilience in their play and learning. (Livingstone, 2020)

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Equally though, when educators don't have a strong sense of wellbeing, their emotional state can have severe negative consequences for children. In addition to the obvious negative impacts on educators themselves, evidence suggests that when educator stress becomes too much it can interfere with positive educator-child relationships and effective social-emotional teaching (McMullen et al., 2020, as cited in Cumming, Wong, & Logan, 2021).

Studies show:

- Educators in ECEC settings who reported higher levels of personal stress perceived children as displaying more anger and aggression.
- Educators' job-related emotional exhaustion was related to their perceptions of greater anxiety and withdrawal in children, and emotional exhaustion was associated with their perceptions of lower social competence in children.
- Educators with higher psychological load were more likely to react punitively to children's negative emotions, while educators who used more coping strategies (e.g., asking for support from others) were more likely to offer positive support when children expressed negative emotions. (Smith & Lawrence, 2019)

Fake it 'til we make it?

Admittedly, the work of educators is highly complex emotional work, which often involves the need for educators to manage their own emotions as they respond

to children, families, colleagues and a dynamic array of circumstances which can vary each week. Recent studies in the field, such as The Early Childhood Educators' Well-being Project (ECEWP) conducted in 2021, and prior PhD studies conducted at Macquarie University, have revealed some interesting results.

While most study participants reported strong feelings of self-efficacy, with many references to the 'emotional rewards' of their work (McDonald et al., 2018, as cited Cumming, Wong, & Logan, 2021), educators also noted, "the pressure to put on a happy face at work" (Jones, 2019).

75% of contributors in the ECEWP study identified with the description of "needing to be nice no matter how I really feel", subjugating their needs to prioritise those of children and families (Jovanovic, 2013, as cited in Cumming, Wong, & Logan, 2021). Similarly, through participant interviews and monthly reflective journal entries Catherine Jones at Macquarie University revealed that educators are "constantly required to suppress feelings such as sadness, anger and anxiety, frustration and irritation" (Jones, 2019).

It's an interesting paradigm, because we are strong advocates for children and families knowing that all emotions are valid and part of being human. We know that children learn about emotional regulation partly from observing adults model how this is done in healthy, socially appropriate ways. So by "adults" do we mean other adults? Does it only apply to us in orchestrated, role-play scenarios at group time when we aren't actually



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displaying or experiencing any of the real and difficult body responses that occur when we are legitimately sad/ worried/ frustrated?

As a whole though, the early childhood sector tends to be associated with feelings of happiness and joy, and not just for children. People often perceive early childhood educators to be kind, compassionate, happy and flexible in their approach.

Certainly in regards to flexibility, our field involves many situations where we are constantly adapting. We are, on a daily basis, responsive to our ever-changing environment, and in the past two years in particular we have showcased to other sectors just how professionally agile we can be.

However, it may be because of the nature of our work that we willingly offer to shoulder additional loads, with little regard to our own current state of wellbeing. This then has detrimental effects on the sector as a whole, with feelings of general fatigue now beginning to arise after a sustained period of carrying, supporting and accommodating throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

Where to from here?

We know that prolonged depletion in our level of educator wellbeing is not good for us in the long-term, and we know it's not good for the children in our care. But what's the solution when we're also feeling jaded from hearing the same self-care messages being promoted over and over again? We might all know about eating well and the importance of exercise in managing stress levels, about getting enough sleep, monitoring alcohol intake, and practicing mindfulness. We're trying. We're also human and making more time to do more things to take better care of our time-poor, already too-full selves can feel unachievable.

But while we might feel like our world is overflowing, in actual fact, it might really only be one or two buckets. If

we stand back and look, some of our buckets are probably near-on empty. Things aren't going to get better if we keep dashing around madly trying to top up the empty buckets with what they need, while also scrambling to pick up the bits that are gushing out of other buckets and trying to put them back in.

The buckets aren't the same as they used to be. But they don't have holes, just a few additional things inside that the world has added for us to now consider. We need to adapt if we're going to thrive again.

Adapt the way we apply our sector-specific skillsets

In reference to the aforementioned qualities of compassion and nurturing, Yarrow Andrew, an Australian researcher in the field of emotional wellbeing for early childhood educators, suggests that we use our adept 'emotional resources' –in the form of empathy, insight and resilience—for our own benefit, as well as for children. Andrew suggests that if educators became more skilled at how they used their 'emotional capital' it would allow them to "improve [their] wellbeing through reflexivity, rather than simply exploiting its exchange value within the wider systems of early childhood education and care" (Andrew, as cited in Cumming, 2017).

This recognises again, that we have a very particular, specialised skillset in working in early childhood, and that we are very, very good at being emotionally in tune with children. If we tapped into that same skillset to start being more attune with our own emotional needs, we'd all benefit. These are skills we already have, more so than professionals in other sectors. We just need to apply them to ourselves as well as to the children.

Adapt our expectations; of ourselves and of others

The expectations which educators had intrinsically placed on themselves came across quite strongly in the study findings. Not only had these standards been adopted by large numbers of educators, but the beliefs, such as the



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need for emotional suppression, were also contributing to a significant decline in educator wellbeing. If we truly claim to hold authenticity in our learning and working environments with high regard and integrity, perhaps we consider reframing our thoughts around perceived 'negative' emotions of educators. Rather than battling to try and suppress these, focus could be given to managing them in ways which model acceptance and resilience to children.

'Professional' educator qualities such as calmness, connection and respect (rather than simply maintaining a positive external facade) are both essential to the role and central to achieving safe and productive learning relationships and environments. They are also the qualities that we want children to see when the pressure is on.

Something I have been hearing frequently as I liaise with educators in recent years is that they feel that whole groups, rather than a few individual children, are needing social and emotional support as they navigate their day. Teaching teams are relooking at the types of scaffolding they put in place, and rethinking the timeframes that this is provided for. They are changing their expectation of what a 'typical' year looks and feels like and learning to let some things go. Often these are things they felt were important, or that they associated with a sense of accomplishment; project-work or extended periods of collaborative planning with the children, structured group work or larger-scale initiatives that succeeded with the ongoing involvement of families. Relinquishing these things can be difficult, and it can generate a sense of decrease in the program's worth.

But by no means does this suggest accepting mediocrity. Rather than looking at this change as a loss, perhaps we can look through the lens of responding to a shift in our societal needs. Our programs aren't missing anything, we're simply placing more emphasis on certain aspects as required.

Perhaps it's time to get back to our core business: children, and reflect on what it means for them to Belong, Be and Become, post-pandemic. To take pride in the care component of early childhood education and care. To revisit Circle of Security (Attachment theory) and think deeply about how we support not only the children on both sides of the circle, but ourselves in our role as the hands. To reconnect with what we know to be our default behaviours when we hear our shark music.

Let's promote and value being actively responsive to the needs of not just the children, but the people in our environments, because not just what we do, but also how we feel as educators can be critical to a child's development and wellbeing.

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