

# reflections

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## CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN SOCIAL SETTINGS: INSIGHTS FROM EDUCATOR RESEARCH

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### Introduction

The early childhood community of South Australia was honoured to have Carla Rinaldi as the Adelaide Thinker in Residence in 2012-2013. A result of this residency was the *Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia report* (Rinaldi 2013). From the recommendations in this report came *The Rights of Children Birth -3 Project*, facilitated by the South Australian Department for Education. Along with several other early childhood services, Gowrie SA was fortunate to participate from 2017-2019. The research was conducted in all 6 of our integrated infant and toddler rooms.

Educators had questions about their practice and were exploring the tension between positioning children as capable and competent to learn within the social setting and how often they, as educators, interrupted children's

play and ideas with their own initiatives. After much deliberation and critical thinking our research question became 'How do children learn from one another?'

This paper shares the learning and growth of educators, the impact the project had on learning outcomes for children, and the ongoing effects we anticipate the research will have on our educator's thinking and practice.

### How do children learn from one another?

A significant part of our research involved videoing children's interactions with their peers and critically reviewing the footage to better understand how these interactions supported the learning of both individual children and the group. Video analysis, undertaken by a group of educators, in a collaborative process, sought to understand from multiple perspectives what was



occurring for the children. This included thinking about how children can lead their own learning initiatives and how each child can contribute to the group's learning, regardless of their age.

The following video transcript and comment provides insight into the research educators engaged in throughout the *Rights of Children Birth -3* project.

This documented interaction involved three children: Ena, (1 yr 10 mths), Tom (1 yr 3 mths), and Quinn (1yr 11 mths) \*. When it took place, an educator was close by, providing the time and space needed for the children to problem solve and to be a part of the social group.

*Ena and Quinn share an enduring interest in caring for baby dolls. They have spent numerous days dressing, feeding and patting their babies to sleep and their babies have been on adventures with them. One day Ena and Quinn are gifted an opportunity to build on this learning with Tom, a real baby.*

*Ena and Quinn settle on the mat and silently decide that Tom needs to have shoes on. Tom's posture and gaze show he is open to this decision, but it soon becomes clear that fitting shoes onto someone else's feet is far from easy. This in no way deters Ena. Tom and Quinn watch as she tries again and again.*

*Tom has an idea, seeing and understanding Ena's struggle. In a spirit of togetherness and collaboration he reaches to lift his own foot up for Ena. Maybe this will make it easier.*

*Quinn then picks up Tom's shoe in readiness, however, Ena gently leans over and retrieves the shoe saying, "Baby's shoe back, baby, baby Tom". Quinn is not deterred by this minor setback. Quinn then decides she will take her own shoes off in the spirit of the play. This captures Ena's attention. She picks up one of Quinn's shoes, prepares the strap for Quinn and hands it back.*

*Ena comments, "Nice shoe! Give it back".*

*With smooth movements Quinn slides her shoes on, gives them a reassuring pat and celebrates with "Done shoes".*

*Ena acknowledges this with a smile.*

This interaction challenges some developmental views about very young children's ability to engage in complex play. It reveals how 3 children were able to sustain a shared interest for an extended period of time. Despite their varying ages and abilities, Ena, Quinn and Tom were able and prepared to actively participate, offering up their prior knowledge and experience to contribute to the play and to support each other's learning.

## Re-imagining teaching and learning

Through our research, Gowrie SA educators have re-considered how children participate in learning environments and how individual learner identities contribute to the learning community.

'We have been working on finding the balance in our practice, when to find space for children to research and investigate and when to participate and scaffold the learning and relationships. We are critically thinking about what the younger children teach others and their participation in the learning. From a children's rights perspective we think more about the active participation children have within the group and the learning and contribution children bring to the group learning and research. From this thinking we can plan richer and more meaningful programs, developing an emergent curriculum with the child's voice driving our thinking.' (Educator)

By considering children as possessing rights from birth, Gowrie SA educators are approaching teaching and learning with children as a collaborative partnership with children and families rather than a more authoritarian approach based on adult power. We have been prompted to be more deeply analytical of individual children's contributions within and towards group learning. This has had implications for the documentation process and the depth of children's learning that emerges.

Before this research, primary caregivers would write the majority of documentation for their primary care group. Post-research, all educators now contribute to documenting all children's learning. This change has enabled us to capture multiple perspectives about each child and has led to a richer understanding of the whole child.

Reflection on video footage has shown that every decision educators make impacts on outcomes for children. Educators have had to slow down, observe the intentions of children and think carefully about when it is appropriate to scaffold or intervene. By considering their actions carefully, they have been ensuring they have a positive impact on learning outcomes for children.

Educators feel 'this research has changed the educators' thoughts and practices around the planning and writing of documentation. It has also changed how we see the children, both as part of the group and as an individual within the group, as both equally important aspects of the learning environment. Our communication has changed in how we share our stories with each other to ensure we are all aware of the group's interests and/or the questions children are asking, this allows for the continuance of collaborative thinking within the team'.

Gowrie SA has introduced initiatives that continue to support teams to come together monthly to collaborate on documentation of children's learning; constructing shared understandings of children learning in and as a group. These collaborations support us to embed our new understanding of children's rights and child voice into our practices in a systematic way; sustaining learning and changes arising from our research and providing richer outcomes for children.

\* Permission was granted by families to use children's names and to share their story and images.

## References

- Rinaldi, C. 2013, Re-imagining Childhood: The inspiration or Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia, Government of South Australia, Department of Premier and Cabinet.



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