

# Educators as authors

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO

Educators need to hook their readers in with learning stories.

Over the past decade numerous curriculum documents have been written across Australia to support the provision of educational programs for children in childcare. 'The practice of relationships' in New South Wales is one example. Remarkably, up until 2009, each state and territory has independently implemented programs only as guided by their state recommendations, none of which have ever been measured as part of service compliance or quality standards. Covering varying age groups, the conceptual underpinnings, terminology and framework structures have significantly differed across jurisdictions. These inconsistencies have contributed to mounting evidence over the years that Australia spends significantly less of its capital on early childhood education than any other first-world country. The 2006 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), titled, 'Starting strong II' released condemning evidence that further confirmed this to be the case.

It is no surprise then that something had to change, and changed it has. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is critical to the government's objectives of improving universal access for children to attend high-quality educational programs and is focal to what the Council of Australian Governments called the Reform Agenda. Not only was it established to address national inconsistency, the new curriculum framework has taken a strong stance on children's rights and openly acknowledged what we in early childhood have known for decades; that children are very capable of making their own decisions.

Despite being long overdue, the EYLF, a highly professional document validating children as strong and capable learners, has not been well received by all. One possible explanation is the extensive use of 'technical' language, which can be difficult to grapple with. The other, can be attributed to our

theoretical roots, that many of us still hold close to our hearts.

Based on traditional philosophers, our knowledge of children has been heavily grounded in developmental perspectives that have perpetuated practices in early childhood more reflective of 'structured teaching'. Focused specifically on supporting the acquisition of milestones across developmental domains, commonplace practices for many of us have predominantly consisted of implementing pre-planned experiences based on previously written observations.

Often 'deficit' in nature, such observations sought to capture the progress of particular skills or the achievement of milestones, which when analysed, helped to justify the adult intervention or 'follow up' required to aid the observed child progress in their development. Unfortunately, traditional methods, or the 'only write what you see' approach often omitted emotions and overlooked the contextual information that added value to our understanding of the 'whole child'. The EYLF does not offer such prescriptive recommendations; it encourages educators to reflect on their observations, engage in respectful discussions with families and use multiple methods to assess children's learning.

Based on my work with numerous services over the years, I will offer some strategies, which, in my experience, have not only proven very successful, but also manageable.

The first strategy is about validating your position, and the second is about reinventing yourself. Validating your position is all about mindset. When reflecting on your everyday experiences with children consider what practices have changed. Is there really a need to 'throw the baby out with the bath water'? In no way has the EYLF suggested educators scrap everything and start from scratch, although this seems

to be the common belief. On the contrary, the EYLF now validates the core of our everyday practice and simply makes recommendations about improving our documentation strategies in a way that better showcases children's achievements and acknowledges the decisions we make to support their learning; thus, it really is about changing your mindset.



*Kat Wieczorek-Ghisso speaking at the Early Years Exhibition and Conference in New South Wales.*

Changing your mindset is about understanding what underpins your role as an early childhood educator, regardless of qualifications and/or experience. It is far more than providing resources and implementing routines. The fact is, we engage in multiple tasks in our daily work with children, some of which we take for granted. In my view, we are:

1. observers of learning
2. participators in learning
3. active listeners of learning
4. storytellers of learning
5. assessors of learning
6. supporters of learning.

The first three you are already familiar with, so reinventing yourself really starts at number four and trickles all the way down to six. Being a storyteller is something you may not have referred to yourself as before; however, much like a documentary, when writing about children you are capturing their life story at a particular moment in time.

As the author, you have been given the privilege of giving a voice to children's learning, hence tell the story well. That may sound like a daunting experience; however this can be made easier when you adopt the 'good book syndrome'. Think back to a book you have read recently that you couldn't put down, the one that kept you reading page after page, cover to cover. Why couldn't you put it down? You couldn't put it down because the author did such an incredible job at drawing you into the plot using descriptive and analytical language; the author elicited excitement and pulled at your heartstrings, included detail that you pictured in your mind and made you curious to find out what happens next.

I have implemented this concept, and have made reference to the 'good book syndrome' regularly, recommending transparency in writing. What I mean is writing about children's learning in such a way that the reader can picture the experience in their mind and be excited about what they are reading. Doing that may take some practice, so here are some tips to get you started.

- Give the story a title, for example, 'Making cakes in the sandpit'.
- Identify yourself as the author, for example, 'Michelle's reflection'.

### Set the scene:

- Where are the children playing?
  - What time of the day is it?
  - Who are they playing with?
  - What are they playing with?
  - Write in the first person: 'I sat back for a while and observed the children at play in the sandpit'.
  - Be reflective: 'I thought about how the children would solve the problem...'
  - Write in detail about what is going on in children's play:
  - How are they playing with the resources?
  - Include children's feelings; if they are excited, say so.
  - What role did you play in this learning?
  - What could support this learning further?

Now, the above may sound like a lengthy process, however, when you tell the story well, it creates a window which captures the 'big picture' and has the potential to make reference to learning across many areas of development, and is consistent with what the EYLF refers to as 'Holistic Approaches'. The framework offers further examples in their 'Educators Guide' as well as in the regularly published newsletters as part of the National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program. All of these support a multidimensional approach to documentation.

The current changing early childhood landscape in Australia brings with it more opportunities than risks and thus we must be brave, embrace the professional validation we are finally receiving, take control of the reins and write stories about children we are proud of.

Katarzyna Wieczorek-Ghisso is an Early Childhood specialist and University Lecturer.