

Learning From Down Under

Ideas for training staff

by Margie Carter

For three weeks this past summer my colleague and co-author, Deb Curtis, and I had the opportunity to work in Australia and visit programs in Hobart, Sydney, and Perth. I wish there was space here to acknowledge all the remarkable generosity and good will offered us by numerous individuals and programs. We felt truly honored and learned a great deal during our time with them.

Most of our Australian counterparts told us they feel isolated and eager to learn from other countries; perhaps this contributes to their enthusiasm for professional development. On the whole, we found teachers and directors very thoughtful and inquisitive, as were the university faculty responsible for teacher education. Reflecting on what we saw and heard there, here are some training ideas as we consider putting into practice inspiration from Oz.

Honoring children

Every culture has its own beliefs and practices with children, at home, in schools, and out in the community. Apart from how people talk about children, I find it useful to watch interactions between adults and children in these different places. Thinking in terms of the values underlying different responses helps me keep a mindset of curiosity,

rather than assuming things should look like what I already know or hold as my values.

In Australia I was struck by the number of examples I witnessed of adults delighting in and respecting children. This was evident in the market where I saw children helping to choose vegetables to be purchased, and on the beaches and in the parks where children's eagerness to demonstrate their creativity or competency was responded to with encouragement. In early childhood programs we visited, interactions with children, documentation of children's conversations, and curriculum projects all revealed a belief in children as having important ideas worthy of attention and engagement. As in any country, there are surely examples to the contrary, but how lovely to find so many impressive representations of how people can show they honor the lives of children. Some of the specific examples we witnessed could be re-interpreted for settings elsewhere.

Strategy: Let children be hosts and interviewers with visitors

Consider how you encourage children to be involved with visitors who might come to your program. Whether they

are prospective families, staff, or other professionals wanting to see your program in action, visitors present an opportunity for children to engage with the wider community, to make broader connections, and offer what they know to those less familiar with your center.

On a number of occasions children came to speak with us as we toured classrooms in Australia. Australian children asked things like, "Would you like to see what we've been doing with our favorite stories?" "Have you had your tea or do you want to sit with us while we have tea?" "May I ask what you think of George W. Bush?" Questions like this last one spurred us to later inquire of the teacher whether there had been some preparation or prompting in anticipation of our visit. "Oh, no," we were told. "The children know that visitors come to learn about what we are doing and thinking and they have

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For further expansion of the ideas in this article, see *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments*, *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching*, and *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Program*, all published by Redleaf Press. Visit the website of Margie Carter and Deb Curtis at www.ecetrainers.com for more information about their work and resources.



been told it is up to them whether they want to ignore visitors or interact with you." One program had self-appointed *host* roles for the children, but mostly the engagement with us seemed to come from a spontaneous interest in offering something to a visitor. I see this as an expression of knowing they will be taken seriously and their ideas respected — something clearly part of their everyday experience.

What messages do the children in your program receive about what is expected of them when visitors come? Is this reflective of the values and beliefs your program holds about children? Are there ways you could invite regular visitors to your classrooms so that the children are more connected with and visibly respected by the wider community?

At the Bold Park School in Perth, children have regular visits from community elders; and there is a wide range of documentation showing what the children found most interesting, the understandings they gleaned, and how they connected this to their own lives. Primary teacher Pat Rogan in New York City plans a great deal of her integrated curriculum around visitors to the classroom, described well in her book and video, *Classroom Interviews*. To me, this communicates a great belief in the value of children building relationships with those outside school and a trust in children's ability to meet learning outcomes through their own inquiry.

Strategy:

Invite others to write letters to children

Before leaving home, Deb solicited ideas from her preschoolers about what they wanted Australians to know about Americans, and she often shared these to open our keynotes and seminars. It was very heartening to see the thoughtful responses to what was

said, even when the children's comments were viewed as humorous or naive. Some of our Aussie colleagues even wrote letters for Deb to take home to her preschoolers, engaging with their ideas, offering responses, and further questions.

How could we begin to solicit engaging letters from others to the children in our programs, demonstrating to them that their ideas are sought out and valued? I'm reminded of the times I've shared something about children when dining with friends and how an opportunity was missed for them to put their delight or questions in writing to the children. Whether formally or informally, how can we build in more opportunities for children to receive letters from others who've heard about their ideas, projects, or questions? What a simple, direct way for them to experience honor and respect!

Involving Parents

Our first meeting with folks from Bold Park School was a breakfast with parents. During our conversation we learned how eager they were to be part of the ongoing learning of the school, how they exchange journals with the teachers around the children's "wonder questions," and have attended workshops with early childhood professionals. Indeed, a number of them joined the Bold Park teachers at our daylong seminar.

Strategy:

Invite parents to attend workshops with teachers

If we seek to have families as partners in our work with children, how can we get beyond the old notion of "parent education"? Inviting them to participate with the teachers in analyzing documentation for developmental themes and curriculum planning, or offering them scholarships to join teachers at

early childhood conferences, communicates that "we can learn about this together."

What would need to change in your program to create opportunities for collaborative learning like this between families and teachers?

Varying Approaches to Documentation

I was struck by the number of different ways in which teachers displayed documentation in the Australian programs we visited. Most had an emphasis on making "working documents" visible, rather than trying to create a finished product for display. Documentation took the form of small and large notebooks, sketches, handwritten notes, computer generated text, and photos. The standard was focused less on graphic design and more on interactive elements. The informal look of many documentation journals seemed to invite dialogue and questioning, rather than a gob smacked reaction to the aesthetic presentation of some documentation. ("Gob smacked" became one of our favorite Aussie slang terms for this awe-inspired feeling.)

Strategy:

Open up documentation options for teachers

With today's educational emphasis on assessment and learning outcomes, how can our staff training on documentation keep the focus on the process as much as the final product? I'm convinced that using documentation as an interactive tool, with staff, families, and the children, has the potential to contribute to everyone's development, meeting our learning outcomes far more effectively than just checking to see that the documentation is *in place*. I've been experimenting with training strategies that expand the interpretation teachers have of why and how documentation

should be done. This is tricky if their agency has a particular format required for documentation; but once teachers get excited about the possibilities for using their documentation, transferring what is learned into required portfolios and assessment documents becomes an easier process.

To convey this idea of *multi-use* documentation, have teachers take one set of observation notes and photos and analyze them for several different purposes. In *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching*, we offer a way to do this with examples of three kinds of questions to find “the child’s story,” “the learning story,” and “the teacher’s story.” Encourage teachers to put their documentation in some kind of format to share with the children and a different way to make it visible with their families. Challenge them to document how the documentation story itself is responded to and make that a visible part of ongoing documentation displays.

While you might want a particular visual design format for documentation that is to be displayed as a long-term feature of the program, this can initially inhibit teachers first learning to gather documentation. I think it’s more important to stress the close watching, and the gathering of dialog and photographs that can be brought to team meetings for discussion and planning. Sharing documentation with the children and their families is an important way to get them involved in this meaning making and planning of possible next explorations.

Key to opening up documentation options for teachers is having at hand the tools they need to gather documentation and make it visible. Have available several kinds of note pads, sticky notes, and pens. Digital cameras are worth the investment of one

for every classroom, along with laptop computers. A workstation can be set up where a printer and scanner can be shared. It’s important to not only invest in this increasingly affordable technology, but in the training and maintenance needed to make these tools easily used by teachers. If you have the space, you can further invest in a workstation and tools for creating larger display boards; but, at the very least, have large scrapbooks, three ring binders, and plastic sleeves for the teachers to choose from in making documentation visible.

Planning Outdoor Spaces

Deb and I wish we had visited Australia before writing our newest book, *Designs for Living and Learning*, so that we could have included photographs of their stunning outdoor play spaces. Our favorites were developed around natural landscaping for large motor activity, social gatherings and dramatic play, sensory exploration, and scientific exploration. There was an abundance of loose parts, but with ample storage and clear teacher responsibilities so that things didn’t become cluttered or chaotic.

Strategy: Each one bring one

When we arrived at the Mia Mia Center in Sydney, several teachers were unpacking new treasures they had brought from their travels to Tasmania, adding these to the play yard and classrooms. This made me think it would be wise for all programs to allocate a certain amount of petty cash for teachers to spend at garden and landscaping stores, museum and gift shops, and hardware stores. Start this plan with a group field trip to one of these places so that you can generate some agreement in the overall direction to take with your outdoor play area.

Strategy: Hold staff meetings outside

After touring the Earlwood Children’s Centre in Sydney, we met during the nap hour with staff under a tarp on the play yard. This was easy to do because the yard included a number of comfy wicker and bamboo pieces of furniture we could gather together for an impromptu meeting. At the Lady Gowrie Centre in Sydney we chatted outside with teachers over particular pieces of classroom documentation that had caught our eye.

If teachers are to approach outdoor play environments as creatively as they do indoor classrooms, they will need encouragement and resources to explore the possibilities. Rather than begging off with excuses about weather, inadequate space, and safety concerns, teachers can be offered ongoing opportunities to be in your outdoor space together to address these issues. Find ways to hold staff meetings outside, to send staff on scavenger hunts for certain elements in your play yard, and have landscape architects explore new options with you.

Organizing Social Justice Groups

We were pleased to be invited to an evening meeting of an ad hoc group of Australian early childhood teachers, administrators, parents, university faculty, and students who work across various settings in behalf of social justice issues that impact children, families, and programs in their communities. We learned of their efforts on behalf of refugee children, gay and lesbian families, “Sorry and Healing Days” to address the historical treatment of aboriginal peoples, peace initiatives, and support for programs greatly under-resourced. Particularly heartening to us was the way children’s perspectives, dialogues, and stories were central to

the evening's discussion, rather than mere adult ideological positions.

What are we as early childhood educators doing in our own communities to come together on behalf of social justice issues? Rather than confining ourselves to our particular interests or concerns, could we be doing more to cross over these boundaries, learn from each other and form alliances? The Early Childhood Equity Alliance (www.rootsforchange.org) seeks to offer resources toward this end, but it's up to us to make it happen in our own communities. Thanks to time spent with Australian early childhood colleagues, I have new energy to think globally and act locally.



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