# Realising the Potential: Early Childhood Forum

## How Do I Lead and Improve Excellence in Early Childhood

## Session transcript

This podcast is one of a series of recordings made at Realising the Potential Early Childhood Forum, presented by the Department of Education and Training on Friday the 8th of June 2018 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Our breakout session on How Do I Lead and Improve Excellence in Early Learning will feature the following speakers:

* Professor Joce Nuttal, Director of the Teacher Education Research Concentration, in the Learning Sciences Institute Australia in the Faculty of Education and Arts at Australian Catholic University;
* Dr Dan Cloney, Research Fellow in Policy Research and Practice at the Australian Council for Educational Research;
* Andrew Hume, Chief Executive Officer at Gowrie Victoria; and
* Anthony Semann, Director at Semann and Slattery.

### Marie Howard

Hello. My name is Marie Howard. I am the State President of ECA in Victoria, and I’m going to be your facilitator for this session.

I’d first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we’re meeting today, the people of the Kulin nation. I’d also like to pay my respects to their elders past and present, and the elders from other communities who may be here today.

I’d like to welcome you to your first concurrent session entitled How do I Lead and Improve Excellence in Early Learning. Early childhood education is a topic dear to my heart. I’m really excited to have been asked to facilitate this session today.

The quality of early childhood education and care services is a key factor in delivering benefits for all children, particularly those from the disadvantaged backgrounds.

In this session today, we’re going to hear from four experts in early child education and care. They will share their thoughts on leading and improving excellence in early learning from their own unique experience. Before we start I’d like to reiterate what George said about social media. I’d encourage you to join the conversation and share your thoughts. They’re the hashtags up there. I don’t think I need to read them out.

So without wasting anymore time I’d like to introduce our fabulous speakers, and I’d like you to give a warm welcome. I’m going to talk about each of them, and then we’ll welcome Joce up to the stage.

So our first speaker will be Professor Joce Nuttal, Director of the Teacher Education Research Concentration in the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, Faculty of Education and Arts at the Australian Catholic University.

We have Dr Dan Cloney, Research Fellow, Policy Research and Practice from the Australian Council for Educational Research. Andrew Hume, the Chief Executive Officer of Gowrie Victoria, and Anthony Semann, Director of Semann and Slattery.

So can I invite Joce to start off, and she’ll be followed by Dan, Andrew and then Anthony, and then I’ll be back at the end of the session just to ask a few questions of the panel. Thank you. Welcome our speakers please. Joce.

### Joce Nuttal

Thanks Marie. Thanks Marie and thank you everyone for coming, choosing this breakout session. I’d like to add to Marie’s comments, my acknowledgement of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of this land, where teaching and learning has been happening for tens of thousands of years.

I want to share some of the thinking behind a project that I’m working on at the moment that’s funded by the Australian Research Council. The project has focused on the role of the designated educational leader under Regulation 118. If you are one of those people put your hand up. My people! Welcome, you’re doing really important work. I hope you find this session stimulating.

This introduction of a mandatory professional leader inside each early childhood centre or service is a really profound shift for our sector. Professional development was historically something that happened outside of our field. You went on a course, or you did some university study, or you came along to a day like today, that’s shifted. Now every service is required to have someone in-house, who is responsible for leading the learning of the other adults, so that they can better foster the learning of children. And this takes a bit of a head shift, because of course, we all did our teacher education, our TAFE education, in early childhood learning and development. And so, suddenly finding yourself responsible for leading the learning of other adults in the centre can take quite a bit of a shift in terms of your own identity, and your own practices.

We are working with this concept of learning rich leadership. And I want to spend a little bit of time unpacking what we mean by that. I think there’s still a widespread belief, we call it cognitivism, that learning that learning is something that happens in the head, it’s in the brain. Well it is, the brain of course is implicated in learning, but it’s not the only thing that’s implicated in learning.

In this project we’re thinking about learning in terms of practice change, and in particular of changes in professional practice. In other words, we consider that leaders have learned, and that their teams have learned, when practice changes. And ideally, those practice changes will lead to positive improvements and quality provision.

We’re not getting into, in this project, the debate about quality. We have a national consensus on quality, which is the National Quality Standard. And of course while any standards are open to contestation, that’s our marker going into this project.

When leadership practices change how do professional practices change in ways that influence the assessment of services against the National Quality Standard? So, why focus on leadership in early childhood?

And, why is there this policy focus on leadership and early childhood, not just in terms of the national law and regulations, but in terms of some very important professional development work that’s being funded by the Victorian Department at the moment?

There is evidence from a lot of workplaces that leaders, that effective leaders make a huge difference. And if you’ve ever worked for an ineffective leader you’ll know what I’m talking about. But, we actually know very little about how this connection works in early childhood services.

So, our hypothesis in our study has three components. First of all, we’re predicting that effective leaders think about their centre or their service as a system. And I’m not talking here so much about system in the way that Sharon Lynn Kagan talked about it this morning in terms of the systems of infrastructure, but taking a systemic view of the early childhood centre. Some people describe this as being up on the balcony as well as being able to be down on the dance floor.

Our second hypothesis is that after decades of thinking about teacher education, thinking about initial programs that try to influence the knowledge and the skills, the beliefs and the attitudes of early childhood educators, what we need to actually focus on is practice. Practice that is embodied because it’s bodies that do practice.

And third, I want to touch on this, not so much as a hypothesis, but as something that is already evidenced in the English setting, which again Sharon touched on this morning. And I should acknowledge that our partners in this research are Professor Liz Wood at the University of Sheffield, so we’re able to make a comparison with the policy settings in England, and my good friend and colleague, Dr Linda Henderson, at Monash University.

What we’re seeing in England is that one of the dangers of a standards-driven, data-driven environment, is that educators, sometimes not always, simply become more compliant because of the stress and strain of meeting mandatory standards. And when that happens innovation tends to go out the door as standards come on in, and so our hypothesis is that effective leaders are thinking not just about practice change, but about innovations in practice.

I want to end by touching on two further concepts that are important in our study. These aren’t hypotheses, these are genuine targets for our enquiry - sustainability and appropriateness.

It’s easier - it’s not easy to lead - but it’s easier to lead in services that are already functioning well, everything is smooth, quality is at a high level. You can’t take your eye off it, but it’s easier to lead in those contexts.

But the reality for many ED leaders, and when you have engaged with over 100 educational leaders prior to this ARC work, across South Australia, Victoria and Queensland, what we’re finding is that the reality for many of them is that quality is variable, that they’re poorly paid, that they have limited non-contact time, and they’re dealing with teams that have really diverse qualifications and come from incredibly diverse cultural backgrounds. And those cultural backgrounds provide a richness, they also provide a challenge.

These realities are slow to change. And I did want to pick up Sharon’s point about support for educators as part of the infrastructure. And the silence in policy around pay and conditions for early childhood educators.

And the intensification of the work of many of you who have taken on the educational leader role and yet are still paid at the same level and have the same non-contact entitlement.

These realities are changing, slowly. But in the meantime we’re trying to understand what are the leadership practices and approaches that foster quality practice in spite of these limitations? The children can’t wait until everything settles down, they’re with us now, how can educational leaders be working with their teams to foster quality practice. So that’s the challenge that we’ve set for ourselves.

I’d love to hear from any of you who want to know more about the work. And I’m delighted now to hand over to Dan. Thank you.

### Dan Cloney

All righty. My name is Dan Cloney. I’ve put my contact details up here. My experience to date has been that we, as a sector, are not great at Twitter, so I always encourage people to sign up, have a conversation, make some noise. I really do want to hear from people, you know, positive or negative. You know, I want to spend a bit of time today telling you about the E for Kids Study. I want to tell you about where we’re going with that work, the work I’m doing to try and translate the research into tools that educators can use to track quality and to measure learning and development. And it’s all centred around this idea about how do we improve quality? How do we use research to improve practice?

And I’ve got to say my phone is in my pocket on silent, it’s vibrated five or six times, so I’m pleased to say I’ve got five or six new followers, so thank you folks.

Okay. So, I was fortunate enough to be a Research Fellow on the E for Kids Study. The intellectual impetus for that was the National Reform in Early Childhood. We did this longitudinal study over, you know, the best part of 10 years. It was Australia’s largest study that was focused on the relationship between the quality of every day early childhood education and care programs and kids learning and development.

The final report is available. I would strongly encourage you to go and download it. It condenses 10 years of work into something that is pretty accessible and pretty powerful I think. And just while I have that up there, I think it’s also a good time to just, you know, pay tribute to Collette Tayler who was the intellectual lead, the person who had the courage to bring together early childhood educators, education measurement people, economists, health folks, and do a study that, you know, sometimes told us challenging things about the level of quality, about the impact of every day programs were having on children’s learning and development.

And so that’s what I want to focus on here, is inside that study we said what we want to look at is, you know, what is the quality of everyday programs? But we want to take the perspective that to us quality means the things that we do that are directly causal, that cause children to grow in their learning, development, the knowledge, the skills, the understandings that they have. And so we used this measure, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which is a measure of process quality. And the tagline that goes along with, that I think explains its sort of approach is, this idea of teaching through interactions. That it is what educators do on the ground with children that drive growth in their learning and development. And there are lots of other things that we call quality that sit around that. They’re important. But if we’re interested in knowing what is that we do that causes learning and development then this is what we should pay attention to.

The class looks at three aspects of interactions. And it does this because it takes the theoretical perspective that not all practice causes all outcomes. We do specific things that foster children’s social and emotional skills, their ability to regulate their emotion, to understand what rules and things are going on in the classroom, or in the group, or in the program. And there are somethings, and I’m going to talk about instructional support, that’s going to be the focus because I’ve got 10 minutes and that’s where I’ve been doing my work.

Instructional support gets at the kind of interactions that support children’s oral language development, pre-academic skills, cognitive skills, and really the focus, and I won’t go through all of this, is that the measure of instructional support is about how does the language we use support children’s learning? Right? And, there are classical educational concepts in here around the use of feedback, scaffolding, introduction of concepts, the stimulation of language, self and parallel talk, there’s stuff in there that I think you will agree that is what we do. And so this measure, fit’s very well the Australian sector with what we think of as quality, and it has that added benefit of being, you know, something that is causing children’s learning development and something we should be very interested in.

My colleagues say never put complex graphs and statistical output in slides. I can’t help myself, I’m sorry. But this is kind of the state of play in Australia that came out of the E for Kids Study. And what I want you to take out of this is two messages.

One is that this measure of instructional support that we think supports children’s early oral language, their cognitive skills, it’s low in most settings in Australia. And there’s an equity issue. What this slide shows, it breaks down neighbourhoods that services are operating in by groups of SES, from low to high. And hopefully I’ve drawn a little line to show that trajectory.

The boxes represent, you know, what is average qualities, the middle 50% of observations we made in our study. And what we see is that in the least affluent neighbourhoods, the lowest instructional support quality is happening. But across the board, there’s a little salmon coloured dotted line, horizontal line between two and three on the scale, that’s the transition point from low to moderate quality on this measure. And so it’s true to say that in Australia most centres, most programs, are offering on the low end of instructional support. This is a really good reason for us to focus on this as a point of change. This is where we focus our quality improvement efforts on. And I’ve added one more line here. This comes out of some US research that says, you know, we want to see programs operating above this point where this red line is, before we would start to see significant effects on kids learning and development. So if we want to know that our sector is having positive effects on kids oral language development, cognitive skills, that’s where we need to get it to.

So I’m going to leave the findings of the E for Kids Study there, because I’m almost certain that when I check the Google stats later on, that final report’s going to have had about 400 downloads. And I want to spend two minutes and 4 seconds telling you about, okay, so what next?

And this is sort of the work I’m doing now with some of my colleagues. And we’re focusing on how do you take research, instruments that require a lot of training, a lot of skill, that are very costly to run in the field, how do you take these research tools and turn them into the kind of tools that everyone in the sector can use to monitor and improve their own practice?

And so what I’m focusing on, is can we describe a continuum of instructional quality? What does it look like from low to high?

And can we describe the points along that continuum with really explicit examples of behaviours, so that educators, groups of educators, communities of practice, can get together and collect some evidence about what they’re doing? Right? And the technical term for it is virtual equating, but what they would do is they would say look, here’s some video evidence of the kinds of things I’m doing. We can use that to locate ourselves on this continuum. And if you can do that then the benefit is of course, that you can see what are the behaviours immediately above that location. What are the things that I would set myself as a target to do if I wanted to just incrementally step along that quality continuum.

I think that’s important, because sometimes we say, gees quality’s important, we should do quality. And maybe it’s not an aspirational target, it’s something that’s way off in the future that’s impossible for us to really achieve.

I’ve put up another technical, over the top slide, so I’m sorry for this again. The only thing I want you to take out of this, is this is some preliminary work on what the continuum looks like if we use the class measure. We don’t have to use the class measure, these things I think are pretty universal. But what I’ve done is I’ve highlighted a level, you know, I’ve tried to paint from low to high the continuum here. And I’ve painted a level around classrooms that we would say are just below the average. And what I’ve done is I’ve taken the descriptions we get from the class, and said well what do classrooms there actually look like. And the only thing I want you take away from this is at this level the educator rarely provides opportunities for students to be creative or generate their own ideas and products. Doing this thing, doing concept development, is hard. And in classrooms operating around the average, around the mean, we rarely, rarely see it. Telling educators to operate at a much, much higher level to always do it is too much. We need to focus on incremental and continuous quality improvement.

I do have another slide where I was going to talk about measuring children’s learning and development but I’m out of time. So I’m just going to grab a little patch and say I do think we should be getting really interested in measuring kids executive functioning, emotional regulation, social and emotional skills, and their early cognitive abilities. But I won’t get into that today. You can send me an email. Send me a Tweet if you want to talk about it. I’ll be around as well.

And what I’m going to do is pass over to Andrew. So thank you very much.

### Andrew Hume

I’m Andrew Hume from Gowrie. There’s also the Gowrie team at Broadmeadows who we’re going to spend a bit of time talking about today. I’m going to be talking a lot about we today, because we’re going to tell a story about some of the work that we’ve done at a service in Broadmeadows. And some of the work that we’ve been doing there, where we were involved in a cracking piece of research called the Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study. DET are going to release that in the next couple of weeks. It’s a mouthful, so for the rest of this 10 minutes going to be referred to as VAEL.

What I’m going to try to do is build on what Joce and Dan have already spoken about. And I’m going to talk about leadership in terms of the conditions that leaders can create that support practice change and better practice.

So the we - the we includes us at Broadmeadows obviously. The we includes University of Melbourne who are leading the study, and a special nod to our expert coach Nicole Pilsworth in that, but it also refers to our school partners, the Broadmeadows Valley Primary School.

So a quick little story about Broadmeadows. Two, and sorry to the Broadmeadows team, I think you’re going to be up there for four-five minutes, and I didn’t know it was going to be this big but there you go, you’re now famous.

Two years ago Gowrie went to Broadmeadows and took over the operation of the long day care service, collocated with the school. And we went there for one primary reason. And that was to demonstrate high quality in a complex community at a reasonable price.

It is a complex community, Broadmeadows. It’s C for one. The levels of vulnerability on AEDC whether you look at one or two domains are about double the state average. And of course the community, with some of those characteristics, also has a remarkable sense of, and skills of, resilience. We’ve learnt a tremendous amount from this community over the last couple of years.

Occupancy was about 30 or 40% when we started. To cut a long, long story short, we’ve just received our exceeding rating and occupancy is at about 90%. Being part of the VAEL research was a really key part in that change. So, a little bit about VAEL.

It’s DET funded as I said, led by University of Melbourne, and we are one of the participants as are Mooney Valley City Council and Mission Australia. Well Dan talked about E for Kids, I describe VAEL as the so what from E for Kids.

So E for Kids showed those really fairly low levels of instructional support on average. The aim of VAEL was to develop a professional learning model that had a sustained impact on educator professional practice. If it was a picture, which it is, it looks like this.

So, back to where Joce started, there are lots of moving parts in the system of a service that contribute to practice change. In the bullseye there is what we’re trying to shift, what we’re trying to improve.

And just to pick up Dan’s point, the measurement tool that was used for this was class. Well, there are a number of measurement tools. The primary measurement tool was class, which is really focused on the interaction between educators and children.

What I’ve got time to talk about today is just a couple of the outer rings. Maintaining threshold conditions and Leadership and service management. Think about these as like the ecosystem that wraps around the pedagogs.

Two aspects are highlighted in VAEL as being particularly important, so I want to zero in onto those, and I’m going to try and bring them a bit to life from the Gowrie perspective. One is the stability of leadership and staff, and the other is by-in from all levels of leadership.

So, stability of leadership and staff intuitively confirms what we know. If you have stability it gives you consistency of relationships with children, families and communities, consistency in expectations and ways of working. It reduces the risk of losing what we call context expertise, people who know the community. It begs the question of course, from a leadership perspective, what can you do to contribute to that? Many things.

And what I want to talk about today is at Gowrie what we call values based recruitment. So values based recruitment is about choosing people to join the team where you’ve got a core set of aligned values. And when we’re talking about values, just go deep, think really deep. Values are the stuff that you don’t budge on, you don’t trade, no matter what the pressure is. When you’re seeing something, or participating in something, when you tear up, when you start to get goose bumps, that’s the sort of stuff we’re talking about, where you really start, that’s the sign you might be rubbing up against one of these deeply held values. So that’s what we go looking for.

One of ours at Gowrie is demonstrating the flexibility to grow and learn. So that’s a value that we recruit for, demonstrating the flexibility to grow and learn. Every single role in the organisation we’re looking for that. And in interviews we delve into people’s relationship with failure. And there’s not too many of us that can authentically say I love failure. But for people who hold demonstrating the flexibility to grow and learn as a core value, I can tell you three things about them now.

They will readily acknowledge their role in the failure. They will have analysed how it actually happened. And most importantly, and this is the really big distinguisher, they will have already done something different in other circumstances as a result of that learning.

So bringing people together with a core aligned set of values is something that’s really important for us.

So let’s move onto the buy-in at all levels of the organisation, having touched on that aspect of service leadership and management, so buy-in. VAEL talks about a whole range of things. I’ll try to group them together. Prioritising the practice change, and think back to what Joce was talking about, the realities of running a service and everything you have to do. So you need to priorities the practice change. For us at Broadmeadows, that meant that the VAEL work was the single practice priority for an entire year. That meant Broadmeadows didn’t participate in a whole range of initiatives that we had going across the organisation.

VAEL also tells us that it’s about committing to the necessary resources needed to make the change, that’s time and that’s dollars. And I feel like a lot of the time we try to get away from that but, you know, there’s an old saying that hope is not a strategy. And trying to make this level of change without investing the right time and dollars doesn’t work, and VAEL’s a fantastic example of illustrating how much and how intentional you need to do it.

And you need to hard-bake it. If we’re talking about sustainability you need to lock it into rosters with clear expectation about how that time’s used.

Last one on buy-in to talk about is, and this is a tricky one to discuss when we’re talking about all this stuff about measurement, but you’ve got to buy-in to the learning and improvement, not just the absolute result, and particularly not the start point. And that was really clearly understood right across our organisation, that it’s not about where we start, our job’s to improve.

When you think about it, and you think about our context, that’s actually only fair, so remember we were growing from like 30% on occupancy up to about 90%. So you’ve got a new team, and a growing team, that have got content expertise but limited context expertise.

You’ve got enrolments that are growing, so the amount of time and effort that is understandably and completely appropriately put into some of the earlier domains in the class models that Dan was talking about, around the social and emotional support, completely makes sense.

Right. The results, well as Nicole reminds me constantly, the class results, because there’s a whole number of different results and ways of measuring that are included in the report. So, this is - put all this together. So what can you achieve, stable team with aligned values; organisational buy-in; and a really disciplined measuring system. So the class samples for individuals and they’re amalgamated at room level, were taken on a quarterly basis. On a quarterly basis the team came together with the researchers to share and understand the information.

Here’s the actual results, this is under threes. Under threes has two of the class domains not three. The stuff on the right, so this is the quarterly result, the stuff on the right, this is under threes, this is the hard stuff, this is the instructional support. So it started at about average. In the course of a year, I mean it’s a fantastic result and it’s knocking on the door of rolling into that really high performing instructional support in a year in that context.

These are the results for the over threes, with all three domains there. Improvement across all three domains, really high starting point on the first two, and a similar trajectory on the instructional support.

Out of time, but this is the really most important thing. The measure are great, and they’re an indicator of success. The magic, the more important piece is what the team did with the information, what they did with the data. So this wasn’t about here’s your results. Teams took the data, pulled it apart across all of those domains that Dan told you about, all those different factors, took that and intentionally said right, what are we going to do differently? And, what do we want to be moving next time, back to this really solid incremental approach that Dan’s talking about around practice change.

So when we talk about measurement, and when you have a look at VAEL, don’t forget that piece. It’s not just about measuring it’s what you do with it.

Right, definitely out of time. I’m going to hand over to Anthony. And as he’s walking up, the only thing I would just say, VAEL comes out in the next couple of weeks. It sits really beautifully with E for Kids, and Every Toddler Talking. Go and have a look at it, it’s some really rich information.

Thank you very much.

### Anthony Semann

Thanks mate. Hi everyone. How are you? That’s one person who responded. Come on. Always has, always will be Aboriginal land, to elders and Aboriginal people in this room thank you for allowing me to be a visitor. I promise I will encounter everyone with tenderness and kindness.

My paper chase course, Bases of Relationships, encounter dialogue and collegiality. The idea that relational leadership should have an impact on quality practice is what I want to explore in my time today.

Quality is, and has often been, constructed through process and structural components like ratios, group sizes, and the quality and quantity of interactions. And these should remain the cornerstone of our debates around quality.

However, in this presentation I want to bring further attention to the idea that leadership operates as a relational space, our space of encounter, a space of dialogue, a space of collegiality, and a space of solidarity. These are all critical to the experience of leading and being led. Because without attention given to leadership as a relational experience, it omits one of the most important aspects of quality, that is the experience of educators. And to reiterate the obvious, perhaps that’s already been restated and will continue to be restated throughout the day. Quality matters to young children, but also to everybody who encounters early childhood. We must continue to interrogate and analyse.

So for the experience of the other can only ever be understood and articulated through a personal story, a story of the actor. And in this instance it’s the story of the child, the child who is at the centre of everything that we do. However, the challenge remains. How do we bring to the service the story of the protagonist, the young child, the person who is often quiet, silent in this story of quality? Because if we reduce the voice of the child we might actually get to a place where we say well the research doesn’t matter, because we haven’t heard the voice of the child. But I don’t think it does, I think it does matter that we continue to tell the story even though much of the research to date has silenced the child.

I want to explore with you today the idea that Peter Moss aptly names the Space of Encounter. And it’s this space of encounter I want to talk to you about today. The space of encounter of those who are leading and those who are being led, and this means all of us in this room. I understand that this demarcation is sometimes quite clumsy, but today I don’t want to talk about management, I want to talk about leadership, because management structures don’t always talk about encounter where leadership does.

Management can often be transactional, so to speak of leadership today is to speak of relationship, a relationship which makes the labour of early childhood people one which is emotionally pleasurable. We flourish in environments. They give us pleasure. They gratify our mind and our soul as early childhood teachers. These are visceral environments, environments that linger in our heart and soul after we leave our workplaces. See the work of the leader, I’m going argue, is the work of a place maker. The place maker is the person who understands what is important to people, what is important to educators as they journey towards what we know as quality.

We can get from point A to point B as we work towards quality. But what I’m interested in is what happens between point A and point B for the people who are doing the hard work, examining what it’s like for those who work tirelessly towards the ambitious goals of quality that the research so strongly speaks of. See the impact of leadership should never be measured about what happens onsite when the leader is there, but rather what’s happening in your centres today while you’re not there. That is the test of everyone’s leadership.

See the encounter between the individuals delivering education is the mark that’s left behind after we leave that space. It is the way in which our actions, the way in which our words, including the unspoken has had on the other. And I don’t want to be reductive when I talk about these ideas around quality. These are merely just suggestions that I’m going to offer to you all this morning. Do with them what you will, but I hope they have an impact on quality.

So I’m going to raise four points with you today. They include every moment matters, articulation matters when it comes to quality, reflexivity matters, and the nexus matters.

So I’ll start with the first one, that is every moment matters. Leader DNA, that which is defined as the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of someone, especially with regard to the unchangeable, is the mark we all leave on each other. It is the encounter between those being led and those who are leading, and that’s the problem. That is the fundamental problem. We might choose to lead people towards quality however they may not want to be led, or they may choose not to follow.

As leaders in early childhood we must come to appreciate that everything we do, everything we say, everything we touch, the things we choose not to do when it comes to quality, is our leader DNA. We must come to appreciate that to have influence is to make everything matter, make every encounter matter between leaders and followers. Great leadership can leave individuals or groups excited to take on a challenge and to tackle it head-on, to rise to the occasions, to move beyond their wildest ambitions to the journey of quality.

Conversely, leadership can leave individuals deflated. When beset by a challenge in trying to achieve quality, to lack one’s pride in themselves, and to reduce everything to a transition, a timetable of events within our classrooms. For if the leaders desire deeply to create change then they have to collaborate with everyone who they work to. This includes their leadership presence, that is are you seen or unseen in your place. Your influence, do you make a difference or are you indifferent towards people. And your leadership values, those which are actions suggest to others matters to you. Leadership is an everyday moment, it’s an everyday act, it happens between people, and the astute leader understands that your DNA is contagious and that you must act in particular ways.

Articulation matters, to speak of leadership that makes a difference is to speak of the quality of leaders and what they understand of quality, understanding the challenging terrain of trying to define leadership is never an option to opt out of the discussion and debate about what leadership is. It is to sit alongside people you work with and grapple with the question what is quality?

I often wonder what happens when a leader cannot speak of quality, when they are unable to articulate to others like their colleagues about what matters to them, when they demonstrate an inability to remain abreast of what the research says matters. The impactful leader is one who sees the power in relational dialogue, one who doesn’t just give ideas to people, one who doesn’t just give practices to people, but one who invests in cultivating ideas along people, one who delivers hope to the group, one who understands what matters to them, their colleagues, families and children.

I see great leadership practices across this country, but in my 20 years at Semann and Slattery I’ve seen things that aren’t so great. And I often wonder why does that happen. And the difference I can see in some situations is those who can articulate what makes a difference, and those who cannot. They lead through innovation. They attempt to resist imitation, but they always work towards innovation. They understand the context in which they work in.

The nexus matters, to speak of quality but not to enact it is window dressing. It matters little to children what you say in your staff meetings. It matters little to children the language you use in your philosophy statement. It matters little to children the articulated goals in your quality improvement plan.

It is the nexus between theory and practice that actually makes a difference. It is realising that the words we use have to come into practice. Without impact our words are merely marketing to children and families.

The relational leader understands that we have to bring our words into life. Now this is very hard sometimes because we have to understand the contexts in which we work in. The nexus is hard because quality is hard to understand. But the relational leader understands that to make a difference they have to have important encounters with their staff. They have to support pedagogical transformation. They have to bring about a culture of accountability but a culture of transformation as they lure families and children to what is a sight of hope.

Reflexivity matters, and this is my last point. To be reflective and reflexive is to turn the mirror on yourself. It is to do what Nikolas Rose calls make your narrative stutter. The relational need leader sees the project of leadership as being always under construction, and the ultimate aim is to improve yourself not to improve others, because it is easier to point to others than to point to yourself.

The reflexive leader always asks hard questions about themselves, that is how might I shift who I am to deliver better outcomes for others. Be warned, we all have an ego.

To see oneself as superior of others is to speak only of ego. To see oneself as better than another centre speaks only of ego. See the ego traps us as we say things like, you know, we’re doing good work here but the others down the road are not. It can present itself in more astute ways like what we do here others should also do the same. The ego, the central downfall of many a good leader.

The humble leader sees the most powerful leadership style as being one which is about leadership presence, one that concerns oneself in the things that really matter, things that actually are lived alongside the people we work with. The relational leader always asks thoughtful questions, questions that allow us to work on shaky grounds when it comes to delivering quality.

So in summary, I want to go back to my question. How do I lead and improve excellence in early learning? Well the best way is to sum it up in this. Be humble, be present with people, concern yourself with things that really matter, and see yourself live in leadership alongside others, for a leader without followers is just a person who’s chosen to take a walk in the park by themselves.

Thank you very much.

### Marie Howard

Thank you to all our speakers. So can we just give them another round of applause as we welcome them back to the stage? So you guys come up, Dan?

We do have some microphones and I think we have time for some questions from the floor, otherwise I have some questions that I have prepared earlier. So, we might start with that unless there’s some people with a burning question.

I’ll ask you the first question Dan.

### Dan Cloney

No. That’s great.

### Marie Howard

Give Anthony a break because he’s just finished his speech.

Dan, you talked a little bit about how we can measure quality, and I think there is a question around, a broader question, about should we be measuring quality in children’s learning and development. So, what are your views around that?

### Dan Cloney

Yeah. I think that’s a good question. I think it was brought up in the plenary this morning as well, that there is a tension around, you know, should we be doing this kind of measurement? And I think a lot of it comes from the old way of doing measurement. You know, ages and stages, setting benchmarks, saying four year olds should be able to do this kind of thing. I think the measurement we should be doing is, instead of focused on growth, saying okay, if we’re going to be a serious, impactful, well respected sector, then we should be able to demonstrate that we’re continually improving in quality.

And when we do that, that kids, young children are getting a real benefit in a range of developmental domains that we think are important. That’s how we’re going to drag in serious investment, serious respect, lift our esteem. And, you know, I think it’s a reasonable thing to expect to say that, you know, if kids come in and spend a year in our programs, or two years, or three years, or four years, or five years, that we have some idea about the learning progression they should go on. And we should be able to say, yeah, we contributed to that. And if we can’t then it’s very hard for us to say, you know, we are this very important sector that we, you know, know that we are.

### Marie Howard

Thank you. Joce emphasised the importance of practice change. Can you give us some examples Joce of leadership practices that you are exploring in your project?

### Joce Nuttal

Thanks Marie. There are a couple of examples I can briefly describe, more principles rather than specific practices.

The first one relates to a response I often get when I start working with centres, when I say what is it that you’re trying to achieve here in your professional learning? And, I often get the answer, teamwork. People want to emphasise and develop relationships with each other, with children, with families. But particularly with each other, because there’s an assumption that if you get the relationships right amongst the team then other things will follow. And so I often respond by saying that’s great. That’s good that you have good relationships with your colleagues, but what are they for? And that’s often quite a confronting question because it takes so much work to get the relationships right, you don’t have time to think about what you’re getting the relationships right for.

And so, thinking about focusing on practice, and I think Andrew’s given a really nice illustration of that at Broadmeadows, the way that the team were able to focus on practices, and how they wanted to enhance the quality of their practices. I’m betting that one of the consequences of that was really enhanced feelings of teamwork and relationships with each other, because working together to achieve a common goal, and succeeding in that, is an intensly positive experience in terms of relationships.

The other thing that we try to emphasise in our work with leaders, and I stress that the project’s at the beginning, and this is hypothetical but it is based on a lot of pilot work, and that is the tendency to focus on people rather than practices, as if somehow they are separate things. People in practices develop together. The development of practice isn’t separate from the person and their relationship with themselves, their relationships with each other. And so in our work we ask educational leaders to take their eye off intensely individual and personalised approaches like coaching, mentoring, we know that those things work, but we also know that they’re very difficult to sustain in a sector that has a lot of turnover.

And so if we focus on practices then the work of the leader is about creating cultures. Creating cultures that can endure after the leader leaves, or where there is staff turnover, because it’s a focus on practice for quality rather than a focus on us all getting along with each other.

### Andrew Hume

Can I just add something to that, because there’s heaps of information in this VAEL Study? And one of the things in the VAEL Study, it talks very strongly about the approach you are taking to practice change. It might be around the particular intervention that you are choosing. The importance of everyone within the service being trained on that so that there is a common language and a common approach, is emphasised really strongly, and those results goes to what you were talking about.

### Joce Nuttal

It’s what I would call the common object.

### Andrew Hume

Exactly, that’s what I would call the common object.

### Marie Howard

So while you’ve got the floor Andrew, I’ll ask you a question.

### Andrew Hume

Oh, we all sat in the right order then Marie.

### Marie Howard

Yeah. I was interested, a lot of organisations, everyone has values and, you know, we often join not-for-profits because we like their values. It’s often hard to live the values or instil them in your practice or in your staff mentality etcetera. So, I was interested in the value that you said about being flexible. Can you just repeat that one again for me?

### Andrew Hume

Demonstrating the flexibility to grow and learn?

### Marie Howard

Yeah. So, I think the audience might be interested to know what the others are. Where could they find out, on your website, or - - -

### Andrew Hume

Okay. Good question. I guess because values are sort of for your organisation, the response that your question sort of brings for me is, it’s not about choosing a value and instilling it, it’s about finding out what your values are. Because if you think about values like we are, that they are so deep that you don’t budge on them, you can’t instil one of those.

So the first job is actually to go and find out what your values are. Now, people make professions out of this sort of stuff, but if you want a start point, you know, there are no life hacks, but if you want a start point, a quick and dirty way of starting to think about this, ask yourself the question, why don’t people fit in around here? A practical way to get into that question is to go, all right, no-one leaves an organisation because they’re deliriously happy. So, let’s think about the last three people that left here, your organisation, your service, and go looking for themes there. And that’s often a better way to start the conversation than what is it that we stand for? Because when you start from the what is it we stand for rather than where was there a disconnect, you’ll be drawn towards values that are completely okay, you know, integrity, respect, honesty, things like that. And there’s nothing wrong with those, but when we’re talking about values we’re taking them as a given. You know, because the opposite of them is I don’t know, lie, cheat, defame. So take them as a given, so you’re looking for something else. You’ve got to find a different way to go and find it. But prompting why don’t people work out around here is not a bad start.

### Marie Howard

Thank you. And, Anthony I do have a question for you.

So, the question we’ve got for you is how might we navigate different pedagogical approaches in services?

### Anthony Semann

Yeah. I think there’s always an implicit assumption that the person you work with has travelled your journey, has heard what you’ve heard, has read what you’ve read, has watched that inspiring TED talk. And I think we need to move beyond that. You know, like, I don’t think anyone goes to work and goes today my goal is to really piss off four people. It’s just not. It’s not how - well I’ve never worked those ones. You know, like my experience is people have really good intent. And there are tensions in the pedagogical practices, but we make an assumption on the surface level of that’s not okay, and that is. And most people work from a truth statement, that is what they’re doing is good for children. And that may not align with the person that you are working with.

And as we say with children, you’ve got to look behind it, you’ve got to go beyond what’s apparent. What we tend to do is shut down and become instructional, that we must be doing this, you should be doing this, and then we throw the evidence at them. I mean that’s a quick way to end up in a staffroom by yourself, is when you start to lecture people. And so my approach would be, is you sit there with a person, you begin to understand where they’re coming from. And actually while you’ve taken your position, so what makes you think that colouring book will kill a child’s creativity? Where have you come to? Because maybe they haven’t heard the academic at a four year degree who says there are more creative ways. That person may have had a really good intent of sharing joy from their childhood with that child. So to me, the key is to have a conversation. Don’t judge. Don’t tell. But actually be really democratic, because people only change for people that they think like them. You don’t change for a monster because then you leave, and you say I’m out of here. So that would be my response, is be patient and engage in really lovely dialogue with someone.

### Marie Howard

Thank you, can you thank our panel for their discussion today everybody? Thanks.