

The *AGECS Fellowship Programme for Leadership and Change* was launched at the AGM in 2014. The Fellowship Programme is open to AGECS members. This is the report from **Kerryn Kneebone** which was first published in *AUDAX 92*, 2016

Nature Program Study Tour – Kerryn Kneebone

In 2015 I had the opportunity to visit several nature-based early year's programs in Scotland. This opportunity was the result of receiving a Fellowship grant from AGECS. This experience enabled me to observe and engage with nature programs in Scotland and reflect on some of the early year's practice that we have in Australia. It has been an opportunity to extend my knowledge and evolve my understanding of nature play experiences.

While on the study tour in Scotland visiting a number of nature play early years programs I spent time at a Nature program in Dunblane. Dunblane Nature Kindergarten provided education to children aged 6 months up to school as well as an afterschool program for local school aged children. This service had only become a nature based kindergarten 1 year before my visit. The Director and educators had spent a lot time and effort working on the core philosophy of the service which was evident in my visit.



Dunblane Nature Kindergarten A case study

1. The indoor environment is a beautiful, calm and uncluttered natural space with many open ended opportunities.
2. The naturalistic outdoor garden space offers children a large range of open ended natural resources and opportunities to manipulate and use in so many ways.
3. Children regularly access the local community and 'wild' natural spaces within their area for prolonged periods. Children went on daily walks to the local creek. From



- babies to preschool aged children. This would occur in the rain, when it was very cold and on warmer days.
4. There is genuine caring, consultative and respectful atmosphere between management, staff, parents and children.
5. All educators and children wore plastic protective pants. Babies were encouraged to crawl on the ground in dirt and puddles. All children were provided with the opportunity to explore through senses and to explore play in an uninterrupted and unrushed manner.
6. Children of all ages played with large sticks. Freely moving around the yard with tools such as carts, large sticks, bricks, and rocks then using them in a variety of play.
7. There were lots of opportunity for "risky" play



Highlights of the service

- What amazed me was the calm and gentle way all the staff interacted with the children. We did not hear any elevated voices; in fact we did not hear the adult voices, only gentle murmur of the sound of children playing.
- Children were fully engaged in their chosen opportunities - often linked to sensory experiences of water, sand, and mud.
- Educators were responsive to children – they provided children with time to explore and encouraged children to make choices around risky play. Educators had a sound understanding of each child's skills and ability and as a result guided children based on their needs. Educators supported children's play ideas and waited to be invited into play experiences. Educators and children sat and had lunch together. Educators cooked the food on an open fire. Educators ate meals outdoors.



What can we learn from Dunblane Nature Kindergarten?

1. We can work with families, children, management and educators to create a philosophy that is embedded in practice that drives the decisions made daily in the program.
2. Educators working with children need to be sensitive to their verbal and nonverbal cues and respond to children's needs through nurturing interactions and environments. It is important to know children skills and abilities and engage with children at an individual level.
3. We need to create environments that are calm, relaxed and unrushed.
4. Set up a philosophy to support children's play using benefit verses risk to guide our decision making. It is important to empower children to know their own capabilities and for them to then be responsible to make safety decisions under the guidance of educators. Genuinely engage children in making choices. It is essential that adults are to share decision making with children, and trust that children are competent decision makers.
5. Provide opportunities for children and educators to connect with their community. Regularly visit local reserves and parks to experience nature in the wider community