



**Lisa Burman**  
Consulting in Pedagogical Change

# Times of Transition

November 2013



## Highlights of a Year

### **Carla Rinaldi Thinker in Residence – “Reimagining Childhood”**

An incredible honour to be invited to be a Partner in Carla’s Residency. Provocative, energizing, inspiring...the superlatives flow!

### **The Hundred Languages of Children Exhibition**

Connected to Carla’s Residency, South Australia hosted the exhibition in the State Library – over 3500 visitors!

### **NZ Study Tour**

In July, I hosted this inaugural tour of some of NZ’s exemplary Early Childhood sites. An amazing group of educators from SA and a powerful learning experience for us all. Look out for the October 2014 tour!



## New Beginnings

As summer approaches in Australia, we are preparing for the end of another school year. The end of the year always seems to sneak up on me quickly these days and I find it hard to believe we are here already! Maybe it’s an indication of how busy my year has been or just about getting older? I certainly recall my Mum and Nanna talking about how time flies as you get older, but of course I thought they were crazy then!

As we end one year, saying goodbye to many wonderful experiences and opportunities (and some not so wonderful I’m sure!), we also prepare ourselves for new beginnings. I’ve always loved this time of the year, even though it can be extremely hectic and you feel pulled in so many directions. I get excited thinking about the possibilities for the new year. I reflect on the past twelve months, celebrating the achievements and also honestly critiquing what could be improved. And best of all, I know I have the opportunity to start afresh in just a couple of months! ...cont.

## Website Revamp

The website for Lisa Burman Consultants is currently undergoing a facelift and revamp! Look out for some new features in January, including access to articles and a special section for those participating in conferences.



## Reflecting on My Year

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must  
be lived forwards.”

*Søren Kierkegaard*

Reflecting on the past 12 months is an affirming and humbling experience for me. I am overwhelmed by the interest in the workshops and twilight sessions I offered in Adelaide over the year. They all booked out so quickly and many of you returned for follow up sessions or participated in the full twilight series of 8 after-school sessions. It's such a credit to you to give of your time to enrich your professional life. The most popular workshop days remain “Playful

Learning” and “I Am a Writer – Introduction to Bookmaking”. I think I've repeated each of these days six or seven times this year alone. Thank you so much for your interest and support!

The Early Childhood Twilight Series was very popular and so will be repeated next year. I'm exploring the possibility of offering sessions in two geographic locations to help more educators easily access the professional learning opportunities

you are searching for. Some of the Twilight Sessions will be repeats of the most popular sessions from this year, but I hope to add a couple of new workshops also. The challenge as always is time, as my consulting is completely booked for 2014, which leaves little room to plan, prepare and facilitate extra sessions. I will only do so if I feel I can continue to offer the high quality you deserve and expect.

## Exciting News!

I am THRILLED to announce that Lisa Burman Consultants is expanding (only in the best of ways)! Due to the demand for professional learning opportunities, I have decided to gather together a small team of highly professional and well-regarded educators who will be able to offer more workshops and twilight sessions over the year. As any collaboration, we will be working hard to ensure there is continuity of values, philosophy and also in the ways we work with educators, that is, using processes that engage thinking, encourage interaction and above all respect your ideas and your unique context.

A BIG WELCOME to **Amanda Bartram**, **Dannielle Gibson**, **Marilyn Hayward** and **Angela Kernahan**! I'm so pleased you have accepted my invitation to join *Lisa Burman Consultants* and very proud that you are part of my team. Many of you will know Amanda, Dannielle, Marilyn and Angela from your involvement in EChO events or from my workshops – I share a lot of their work during these days! More information from each of these Consultants coming soon...



# Times of Transition

It is timely at the end of the Australian school year to think about those times of transition we all experience in life. Moving house... changing roles in the workplace... moving to a different city... changing relationship status... These are the BIG times of transition for us as adults. Beginning childcare, kindergarten or school is obviously one of the BIG transition times in the lives of children.



*(I will use 'schools' to represent all prior-to-school and primary school settings for efficiency in this article, unless specifically stated otherwise.)*

It is important to remember that there are many smaller transitions that we make every day. From home to work...from answering emails to meeting with parents...from being an educator to being a parent...Children too make many smaller transitions each day and we all understand that for some children these smaller transitions can be as difficult to manage as their BIG life transitions.

Starting kindy or school is one of the significant times in anyone's life. Families take days off to take children to school, photos are taken and shared for years, hair is cut and new shoes bought all ready for the big day. Many teachers all over the world have a restless night sleep the night before the children

arrive! How can we support children and families to make this big transition more smoothly? How can we better understand this time of transition from the perspective of the child? Many schools offer a number of visits that build up over a couple of weeks. Whilst these are often called "Transition Visits", they are really "Orientation Visits". They are an important strategy for helping children and families to successfully manage their transition to school, but they are not the complete picture of transition. They serve to orientate the child and family with the space and with some of the people they will be learning with in the future. To understand transition, however, we need to see it as a much longer process that involves all key stakeholders.

Dr Julie Turner-Cobb from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath has undertaken interesting research

that measured levels of the hormones cortisol and adrenaline (often called the 'stress hormones') of children beginning formal schooling (Foundation /Reception). The study found that children's levels of cortisol and adrenaline were at very high levels up to 4 months prior to



**Children's levels of cortisol and adrenaline were at very high levels up to 4 months prior to starting school.**

starting school: much earlier than they had predicted. They also discovered that for some children, the stress hormones remained high for much longer period after they started school.

What happens to our body when we have high levels of cortisol and adrenaline? We go into “fight or flight” mode. Our body is on high alert in case it needs to respond quickly to the new, unfamiliar and stressful environment it finds itself in. The ability to think deeply or to become deeply involved in a task is inhibited as the body remains in a state of ‘hyper-vigilance’.

***“When cortisol and adrenaline are flowing, the ability to act instantly is enhanced and the ability to think deeply is simultaneously inhibited.”***

*National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005*

No wonder children spent their first weeks in school ‘flitting’ from activity to activity and teachers complain about their ‘short attention spans’! Their bodies are not allowing them to settle, to get intensely involved or to think deeply. I don’t believe this is only the domain of young children either – at the beginning of every school year, teachers would see similar patterns with children of all ages endeavouring to navigate their new learning context, new relationships and unfamiliar expectations from their teacher. When children’s stress is short lived or relieved by an adult, there are no long-term negative effects. That’s good news for us in education – we *can* do something about it. However, it is when their stress is prolonged

or not relieved by an adult that toxic stress results in the prolonged release of cortisol and adrenaline.

***“(This) results in brain architecture that promotes impulsive, defensive action and diminishes the child’s access to higher-level thought processes.”***

*Gunnar, 2003*

So, what CAN we do to relieve children’s stress as they begin school? I think there is quite a lot actually! Just two of the ideas that can help are to think about times of transition from the lenses of:

1. Continuity of learning
2. Attachment theory

### **Continuity of Learning**

Too often a child is expected to MAKE the transition to school. The responsibility is placed on the child: the emphasis is on “*Is the child ready for school?*” I think the more important and more helpful question to ask is “*Is the school ready for the child?*” When the emphasis is placed on the school it shifts the view of the child from one of need and deficit to one who comes to school with a wealth of knowledge, competencies and learning strategies to build upon.

This applies to all ages – whenever we hear “*Whatever did they learn in Year 3?*” it reflects the empty, deficit view of the child. Instead, let’s ask ourselves, “How can I ensure each child can *continue to see him/herself* as a competent learner as s/he starts the year with me?”

In regards to the start of formal schooling (Foundation/Reception/Kindergarten/Prep), I believe we still have a long way to go in creating the environments and conditions for children to *continue their competent learning* from prior-to-school settings and home. I have been excited and encouraged by many of the Reception educators in Adelaide whom I have had the privilege to work with – those who have committed to creating spaces that look a whole lot more like a Kindy (preschool) and that embrace pedagogy that is playful, active and co-constructed. I want the child who begins formal schooling to be able to enter their classroom/learning space, take a deep breath and think, “Oh, it’s okay, I can be a strong learner here just like I was at Kindy.”

If we create these kinds of playful learning environments, imagine then how it *is* possible for us to relieve some of the stress children are experiencing as they begin school. It’s possible to believe that their cortisol and adrenaline levels will lower at a faster rate, better preparing them to become deeply involved in their learning. Not to mention their wellbeing and that of their parents! If children are happy then their parents will be happy and their own stress hormones will lower, in turn influencing the child to feel more secure and relaxed in their new environment.

## Continued...



“I’m referring to the pedagogies that help children continue to see themselves as strong successful learners...and help their new teachers see how competent they are.”



“When cortisol and adrenaline are flowing, the ability to act instantly is enhanced and the ability to think deeply is simultaneously inhibited.”  
*National Scientific Council  
on the Developing Child,  
2005*

Continuity of learning means so many things, but in this case, I’m referring to the pedagogies that help children continue to see themselves as strong successful learners, and the pedagogies that help their new teachers see how competent they are. These are the pedagogical practices that create a familiarity for children and families, so important because familiarity supports feelings of security.

They are also the pedagogies that provide unhurried TIME – time to form new relationships; time to watch and listen to children; time to enjoy learning without feeling rushed by another. Beginning each day with playful, self-directed learning experiences allows for this unhurried time, where children and families are able to transition into their day (without a jolt of a bell or lining up!) and gives teachers time to spend the extra 5 minutes with the child who wants some comforting or the parents who are looking for some reassurance. Why wouldn’t you want to start your day in this gentle way?

### Attachment Theory

The second lens that can help us understand times of transition from the perspective of the child is Attachment Theory. We often associate this with babies, but I believe it is also a helpful lens for reflecting on how we manage some of life’s transition times no matter what age we

are.

Secure attachment refers to the bond (usually between parent and child) where the child feels safe and protected consistently. It is important for the development of healthy future relationships and emotional wellbeing. In a very simple explanation, a baby forms her initial secure-attachment to her parent, which gives her the security and confidence to move out on her own once she starts crawling. If you are a parent, you might remember that when your child first became mobile, she often crawled or walked a little way, looking over her shoulder to make sure you were still there, and then back to you again. This is what happens when a child HAS a secure attachment. She is building the understanding that you will always be there for her. No matter how far she crawls, you are always there. Eventually this becomes, no matter how long I am away from you at Nanna’s or childcare, you will always come back to me.

We can apply the lens of secure attachment to starting school. The teachers’ first job is to actively form these secure attachments with each child. I think this needs to be the focus of the beginning weeks with every age group. It sets the foundation of emotional wellbeing and security for the rest of the year. As a Reception teacher for many years, I remember in the first few weeks how, at recess and lunch times

the children would only play near our classroom– almost in the doorway. Now I understand why. At that time they were forming secure attachments with me (and I had left them to go on duty or to the staff room!) so their next attachment was to the place – staying close to the classroom gave them security that I would return to them. I was associated with the space in a similar way that children use transitional objects like Teddy Bears (not enough space here to talk about the significance of transitional objects! Perhaps this will be a future article?)

### Strategies for Secure Attachment

Some practical ideas to consider from the attachment theory perspective, particularly for Primary Schools:

- The curriculum in the first few weeks **IS** about continuity of learning, building relationships, forming secure attachments and social emotional wellbeing. Avoid the pressure to start too many academic goals too early.
- Start each day (and even end it!) with playful self-directed learning experiences so you can spend time building secure attachments with each child.
- Be mindful of how scary it can be for a child when you leave at recess or lunch. Make sure you tell children where you are going and when you will return and then be punctual – being 5

minutes late can feel like an eternity to a child who has lost his only secure relationship at school.

- Roster yard duties for Foundation teachers to be near their classrooms and other playing areas used by the children. Also roster specialist teachers in these areas – these are the next group of adults who need to form secure attachments with children.
- Explain attachment theory to all staff. It is important for all our colleagues to understand it's importance for their own children and also so they see yard duty not as 'policing' but as opportunities for form relationships.
- Instead of children leaving their place of security in the first few weeks, have specialist teachers come to them in their place of familiarity. Then introduce them to a new space once a bond has been formed between adult and child.
- Research about transitional objects (think "Linus' blanket" from Charlie Brown) and think about how you can use them to support children in times of transition. Small beany bears for self comforting and also to link classroom-music room-home; special river stone in the pocket that comes back and forth with the child between home and school and can be rubbed quietly when the child needs reminding that his parents will return at the end of the day...)

