

reflections

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50th
EDITION



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Award Winning Playspaces

Early Years Workforce Strategy

'Advancing Practice Award' for
Buninyong Preschool

Outstanding Educator –
Amy Douglas

Forging Partnerships in Indigenous
Communities



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Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the 50th edition of *Reflections* – a significant milestone for Gowrie Australia. Since inception, more than ten years ago, *Reflections* has positioned itself as a key resource for the early childhood education and care sector. The publication aims to bring a range of issues to the fore, to articulate examples of best practice by sharing both research and practice, and generally to provide useful information to the sector in support of the important role of providing quality education and care for young children.

In this issue, Dr Susan Irvine reminds us of the importance of valuing play and promoting it as a right for all children. Her article takes readers back to examine historical perspectives and moves to some of the more contemporary perspectives of play, making strong linkages to 'Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework' for Australia.

The National Quality Framework is underpinned by a sophisticated, qualified and experienced workforce and the article by Suzanne Northcott, from DEEWR Early Childhood Workforce Branch, outlines some of the current initiatives by the Australian Government to support the development of this workforce. All Australian governments are committed to work together to address the immediate priorities for the early childhood education and care sector of promoting the building and maintenance of a skilled and capable workforce.

The importance of developing and maintaining true partnerships with families is integral to the development and provision of an appropriate and relevant learning program for all children. The article by Associate Professor Bev Flückiger describes a partnership involving a community kindergarten in remote far north Queensland and local Indigenous families. Together, they designed and implemented a literacy program that operates within a respectful and culturally appropriate context. The benefits of the program include improved attendance and participation in kindergarten which has impacted positively on the children's literacy development. The quality of the program resulted in it being recognised as a '2012 Deadly Award' winner for its contribution to Indigenous education.

While showcasing awards, this edition also features the recipients of the Kidsafe 'National Playspace Design Awards' and the 'HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards'. The use of natural play materials and a commitment and

understanding of cultural recognition are featured strongly in the Kidsafe Awards. The HESTA Awards share two very distinct examples of practice – Amy Douglas' commitment to a Primary Caregiving model for infants and toddlers, and Buninyong Preschool's support for Aboriginal and low income families' access to a quality preschool program as a means of building school readiness and positive dispositions to learning.

Finally, over the summer season, many states have yet again experienced disasters in several forms – floods in Queensland and northern New South Wales, bushfires in Tasmania and Victoria. As has been the case at times of disaster, yet again Australians have rallied and responded positively to support each other. The early childhood education and care sector is no exception – evidenced by the generosity shown to one small country school which was decimated by fire in January. The Dunalley (Tasmania) school reopened one week after the commencement of the first school term in temporary buildings built by the Department of Education in record time, and fitted and equipped with the essential tools to support children's learning – much of which had been donated by other education and care services, schools, individuals, organisations and retailers from across the country. This is an outstanding demonstration of support and a true commitment to children, families and the community by a sector which doesn't always have consensus on some matters but, when called upon for support, does not hesitate to ensure children are not disadvantaged.

Until next time,

Ros Cornish
on behalf of Gowrie Australia

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Still Valuing Play

Author:

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School of Early Childhood, QUT



Play has had a prominent position in early childhood education and care (ECEC) for over 200 years. As educators, we tend to talk about young children learning through play as a matter of fact. In our first national *Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), play is promoted as the right of all children, an integral part of being a child and as the prime context for learning in the early years. The word 'play' appears 68 times (Ortliip, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011), and there are frequent deliberate connections made between play and learning. This includes use of the term "play-based learning" (DEEWR, 2009: 46).

While the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) defines its use of the term 'play', there are differing perspectives on what constitutes play, the relationship between play and learning, and the educator's role in play. In this context, it might be interesting to go a little deeper, and to look at some different perspectives on play and learning.

Some historical perspectives

To begin, it's worth taking a short stroll back through history to consider some early contributions to our understanding of play. French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), promoted a romantic view of childhood that established play as an important part of young children's development and learning. He argued that childhood was a unique, important and time-limited period of life that should be protected by adults and enjoyed by children:

Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts. Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips and when the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these innocents of the joys that pass so quickly... (Rousseau, 1761/2008: 36-37).

Marking a significant shift in educational thinking, Rousseau argued against early formal instruction by adults. Rather, he believed that learning would happen naturally if children were allowed freedom to play, to follow their interests and to engage with their natural environment.

The work of German educator, Friedrich Froebel (1746-1827), also comes to mind. Like Rousseau, Froebel promoted play as the best way for children to learn, making the connection between children's play and later learning and wellbeing:

... Play at this time is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance. Cultivate it and foster it...; protect and guard it... The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life (Froebel, 1826/1974: 55).

Froebel's idea of 'kindergarten' was underpinned by images of happy children singing, dancing, gardening and engaging in self-directed play with educational toys. But, while Froebel talked about children learning through play, his approach was quite teacher-directed and different to Rousseau's idea of free play.

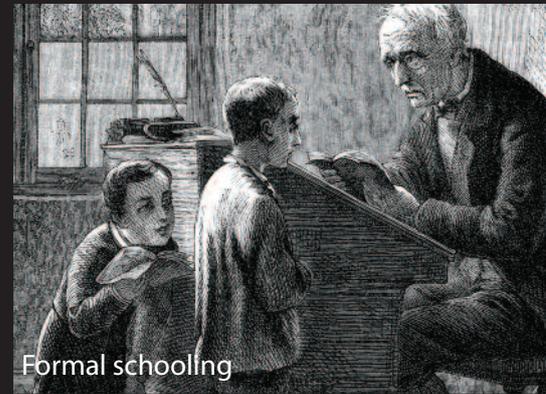
The ideas of other theorists continue to influence current thinking about play and learning in ECEC. Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget, one of the major architects of developmental theory in ECEC, argued that play needed to be appropriate to the child's current stage of development. The remarkable Maria Montessori devised a range of toys and activities to improve outcomes for "developmentally delayed children" (Follari, 2011: 221) and was so impressed by the results that she advocated universal access to her educational program. Then of course, there is the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who emphasised the social and cultural nature of children's play and learning. Each of these philosophers and theorists held particular views on play and learning, but there are some shared themes. They recognised:

- childhood as a unique and special time of life, separate and different to adulthood;
- the need for a thoughtfully planned learning environment that enabled active engagement with real materials;
- the integrated nature of learning in the early years; and
- children as active learners playing a part in their own learning.

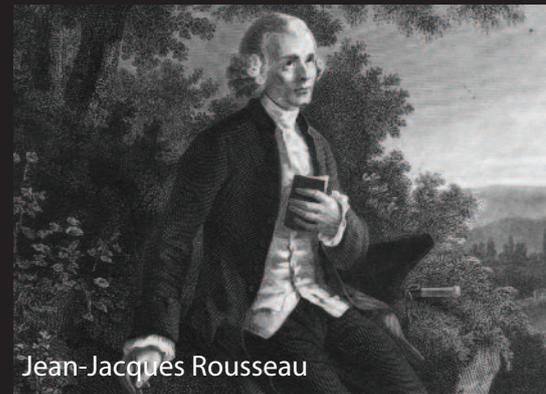
Incidentally, contemporary research suggests (respectfully) that all of these theorists actually underestimated young children's capacity to explore, play and learn.

Some contemporary perspectives

Over recent years, there has been an international policy spotlight on ECEC as the foundation for lifelong learning, social cohesion and national productivity (COAG, 2009; OECD, 2006). Within this context, child care, kindergarten and family day care are being positioned as part of the Australian education system. These services clearly make a significant contribution to children's early learning, their transition to school and achievement in school. However, as with all mergers, there is a need to consider how the different sectors, that is, ECEC services and schools, come to work together.



Formal schooling



Jean-Jacques Rousseau



Children at play



Montessori equipment





A perceived danger is that too narrow or singular focus on learning in the early years could lead to a downwards push from schools – what some refer to as the “schoolification of ECEC” (OECD, 2006: 62). Many were worried when the Australian Government decided to develop a national early years curriculum framework. How would this reflect contemporary early childhood theories and practice? How would it recognise and support play as a context for learning?

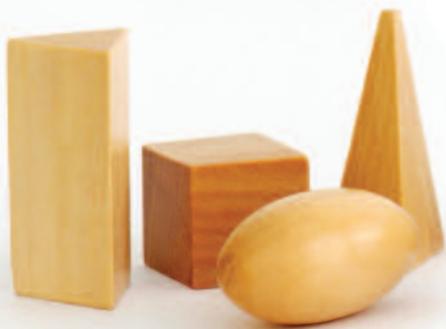
Personally, I think the EYLF has responded very well to these challenges, building on our historical foundations to offer some new ways of thinking about play and learning. For example, the EYLF introduces the term ‘play-based learning’ (DEEWR, 2009: 46), distinguishing between more traditional notions of ‘free play’ and play as a planned context for learning. To clarify, free play is generally seen to be extended time for pretend play that is mostly child-initiated. It is freely chosen, personally driven and intrinsically motivated (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). The role of the educator in free play is more about providing the environment and resources to facilitate play and learning. In the past this was often construed as to “support but not to disturb” (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006: 48).

While there is no suggestion that free play is no longer needed or important, the idea of play-based learning places greater emphasis on the educators’ role and how they extend and challenge children’s thinking and play. A fairly recent landmark study in the United Kingdom has provided impetus for this new way of thinking about play in ECEC. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) was a longitudinal study that sought to identify the characteristics of high quality preschool programs, looking at how these contributed to children’s learning and successful transition to school. Findings placed emphasis on the role of educators in promoting effective learning. Critical factors included the quality of adult-child verbal interaction during play, engagement in sustained shared thinking, and achieving a balance between child and adult-initiated play experiences.

“Findings placed emphasis on the role of educators in promoting effective learning.”

Play-based learning and intentional teaching

Picking up on these findings, the EYLF promotes the role of educators supporting play-based learning through intentional teaching. Now I want to debunk a few myths about what intentional teaching looks like in ECEC. I visited a service recently to find that they were interpreting this as importing school-like activities with quite narrow learning outcomes. Play-based learning and intentional teaching were seen to be two quite different and unrelated things. The children would engage in their own play and then be called to the mat or a table to be ‘taught’ something. There were some dubious links made to children’s perceived interests and/or the EYLF learning outcomes, however these activities were almost



totally teacher-directed. This is neither play-based learning nor effective teaching. According to the EYLF, intentional teaching can be both pre-planned and spontaneous and doesn't have to be teacher controlled. It is about noticing what children are doing, recognising learning or the potential for learning and responding in an appropriate way. It is about educators drawing on their specialised knowledge, their understanding of individual children and the curriculum, to be both proactive and responsive to children's interests and explorations. I think John Bennett, one of the writers of the OECD 'Starting Strong' reports, sums it up well:

Effective pedagogy includes the provision of enriched learning and play environments, freely chosen activities by children, and responsive accompaniment of children by educators who guide, inform, model and instruct, but who do not dominate the child's thinking (Bennett, 2005: 18).

Now, I would argue that our current, prior to school curriculum supports these approaches to play and learning. However, I am concerned about what happens next for these children and what I perceive to be diminishing play-based learning opportunities in school. There are often much sharper distinctions between work, play and learning in school. In some schools, work and learning is seen to happen in the classroom and play is relegated to mid morning and lunch breaks. While 'play' is mentioned frequently in the EYLF, it doesn't appear at all in the Australian School Curriculum, not even in the Foundation Year. In the broader community, many continue to view school as the starting point for 'real learning' and, drawing on their own experiences of school, expect teaching to take the form of direct instruction. But does this mean there is no place for play-based learning in school? I haven't found any evidence to support this view.

A review of ECEC across OECD countries identified two different perspectives on curriculum: those countries who advocated a play-based approach to learning until around 7 years; and those who advocated a more formal approach, based on fostering academic knowledge and skills from the outset (Bennett, 2005). It is interesting to note that on international comparison, the countries that continue to do best on educational indicators (cf. OECD, 2012) tend to be those who advocate play-based learning approaches and a later start to formal learning. Beginning formal academic work too early has been found to detract from children's enjoyment of learning and school, impact on their motivation to learn and

diminish learning dispositions (Walsh et al., 2006). Yet here in Australia, we seem to be following countries such as the United Kingdom, where children enter formal school at a young age (around 4 years), teachers plan and assess learning against tightly prescribed outcomes, and school results are published in a national league table. This context puts both children and teachers under pressure to reach externally imposed learning goals. In some circumstances, this pressure seems to be reducing, if not negating, the opportunity for play-based learning, even in non-compulsory Prep¹.

While only single snapshots, let me share a few recent personal anecdotes:

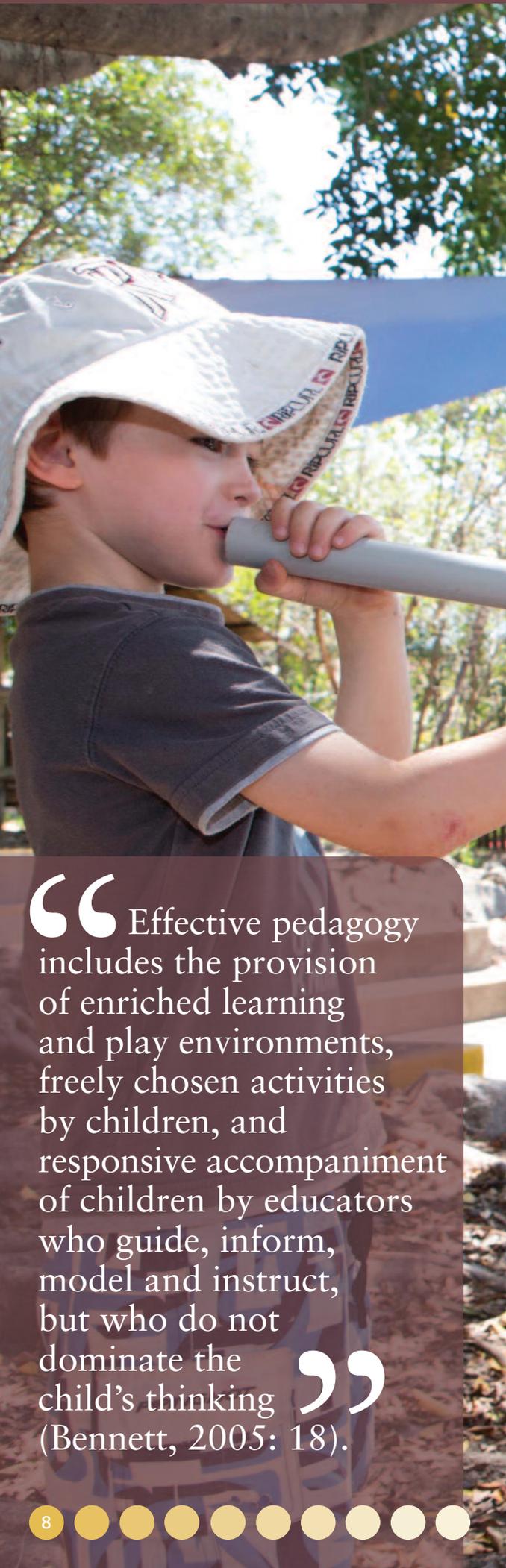
- A talented and dedicated colleague told me recently that her school had abandoned their Prep perceptual motor program (a program to strengthen children's balance, coordination, gross and fine motor skills) because they simply couldn't fit it into their curriculum.
- A parent, also a teacher, showed me the laminated alphabet board that she was given at her Prep interview to help her to work with her son over the Christmas holidays.
- A parent told me she recently attended a Prep information session and queried why all of the printed information had Year 1 at the top. Apologising for the oversight, the teacher explained that everything they were doing now was previously done in Year 1.

In many Queensland schools, units of work extend over 5 weeks and children are tested against the achievement benchmarks in the Australian Curriculum, from the beginning of the year, even in Prep. The result is that many teachers are resorting to a greater level of direct and formal instruction and there is reduced opportunity for play-based learning. There simply isn't time. Instead, time is taken up by teaching content, undertaking standardised assessments and hitting targets - disregarding the evidence that indicates that 'how' we teach is equally, if not more important, than 'what' we teach.

Some concluding comments

I value play-based learning as a context for lifelong learning, relevant in ECEC, school and many other adult contexts. While I think that children have the right to play, I don't harbour romantic or universal notions of children's play. I recognise that play happens in a social and cultural context and is not always natural, fair and fun for all players (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). I also recognise that simply providing opportunity for play does not guarantee meaningful learning, cognitive growth, social awareness or emotional wellbeing. Drawing on the EYLF, I see play

¹ In Queensland the Preparatory (Prep) Year targets children aged 3 ½ to 4 ½ years and is equivalent to Kindergarten in some other states.



“ Effective pedagogy includes the provision of enriched learning and play environments, freely chosen activities by children, and responsive accompaniment of children by educators who guide, inform, model and instruct, but who do not dominate the child’s thinking ”
(Bennett, 2005: 18).

as a valuable and highly effective context for learning, when children are actively engaged and educators are purposeful in their conversations and interactions with children. Finally, I believe when educators plan, resource and take part in play, they are teaching and showing children, and parents, that play is important.

(Adapted from an address given by Dr Irvine at the Gowrie (Qld) AGM on 22 Nov 2012)

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AWARD WINNING PLAYSPACES WITHIN EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

Author:
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Playground Advisory Unit, Kidsafe NSW

Once again Kidsafe has found best practice playspaces where community involvement, input from allied professionals, and consultation with children, have resulted in spaces that inspire children and encourage them to engage in healthy play. Over 55 entries were received from across Australia, demonstrating what can be achieved in children's services, schools and public playspaces.

A multi-disciplinary panel of experts from Kidsafe, children's services, education, engineering, injury prevention, design and local government judged entries. The judging criteria included quality, safety, fun factor and evidence that the design process had engaged children and the community. The judges commented on the outstanding quality of the 2012 entries and reported that the high standard of playspaces developed right around the nation was very impressive.

The three successful entries for the category of Children's Services are as follows:

WINNER
Bubup Wilam Centre for Early Learning, Thomastown, Victoria

Entered by:
Urban Initiatives Pty Ltd

A key element of this purpose built Aboriginal Child and Family Centre (with licensed education and care service) was the large amount of community consultation conducted with the Aboriginal Community, the City of Whittlesea Council and the Board of the Centre.

As a result, the playspace incorporates a 'yarning circle', a fire pit for events and gatherings, and paving in the colours of the Aboriginal flag. The indigenous language group names are inlaid into the entrance path in geographical order reflecting their location in Victoria. Indigenous bush tucker plants have been used throughout the landscape and a diverse range of natural play elements are available to the children, including a creek and water pump (fed from water tanks), sand pits, digging patch, and timber post maze. Unfortunately, due to extreme weather conditions, the planting has suffered, however, the children and staff of the centre are nurturing and re-establishing the garden beds. This has added to their experience of involvement with the care of the natural elements and the outdoor learning environment.

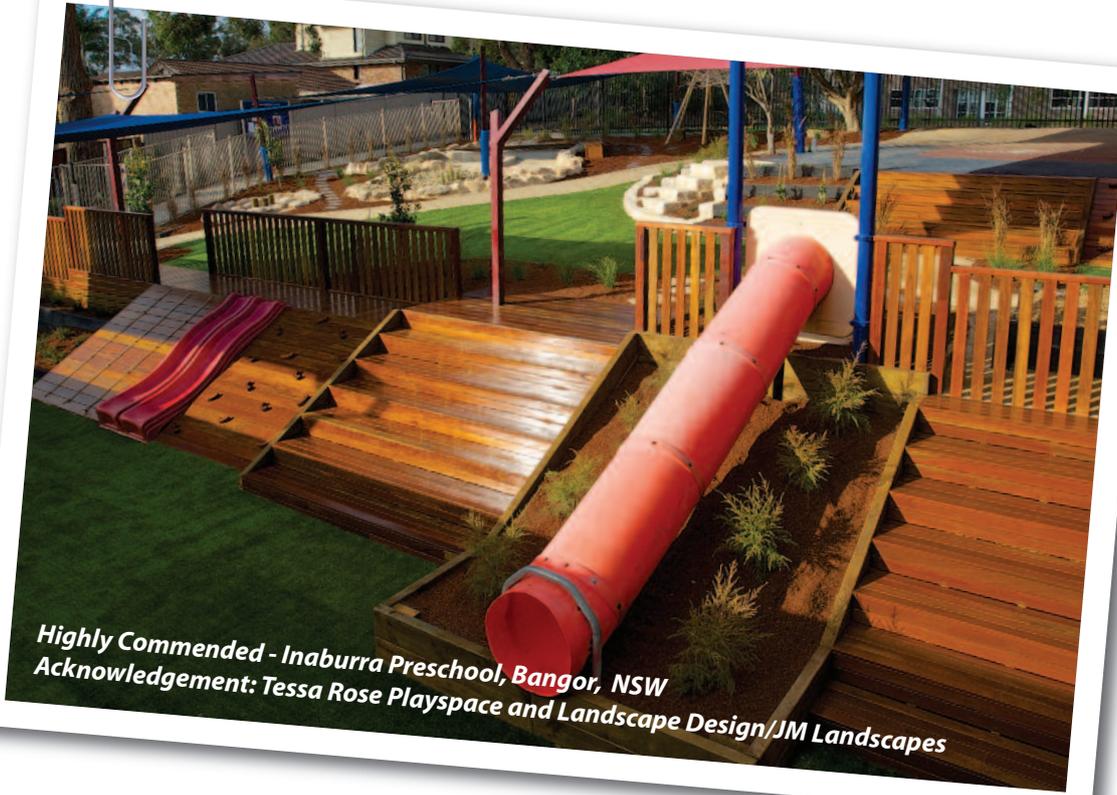


WINNER



What the judges said....

- The strong references to the local indigenous community in this multipurpose playspace reflect a commitment to cultural recognition and understanding;
- The use of open ended, natural materials is commended;
- This playspace offers leadership to others engaged in journeys of reconciliation with indigenous communities.



Highly Commended - Inaburra Preschool, Bangor, NSW
Acknowledgement: Tessa Rose Playspace and Landscape Design/JM Landscapes

HIGHLY COMMENDED

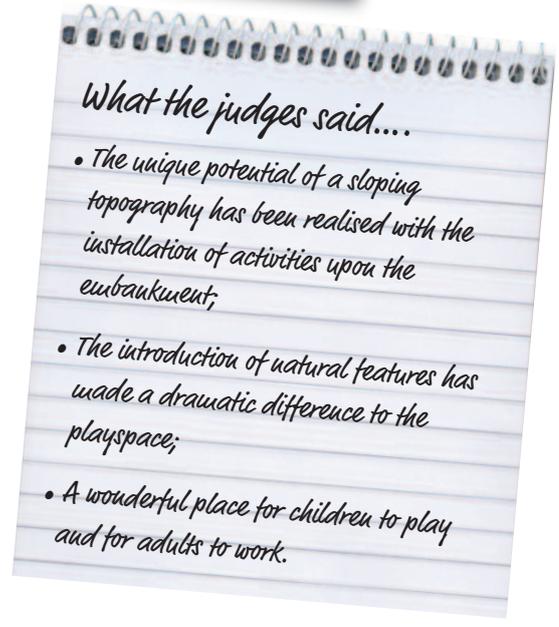
Inaburra Preschool, Bangor, NSW
Entered by: Inaburra Preschool

Inaburra Preschool embarked on a journey to transform their playground to a haven of natural play elements and fun.

In order to ensure the design would benefit children with additional needs a group of occupational therapists were consulted during the planning process. As a result, a tunnel slide was retained and reused, acknowledging its value for children with particular sensory needs.

The children's play environment was designed and constructed to encourage risk taking, open-ended interactions and to develop a connection with nature. Natural elements such as textured pathways (bark chip, stone set, sandstone, and decomposed granite) and flowing water through the sandpit allow children to enjoy a wide variety of sensory experiences. Children are invited to climb along the rocks in the dry creek bed, feel the bark under their feet as they climb trees, or hide in the tepee. Vegetable gardens provide valuable sensory experiences as the children dig, plant, water, smell, taste and harvest a variety of herbs and vegetables.

Where previously the playspace was used mostly for children to run around, it is now a place where as much learning occurs as indoors. Perhaps the most encouraging thing for educators is watching the way the children have taken ownership of their new environment and their involvement in assisting with care of the plants and the playspace.



What the judges said....

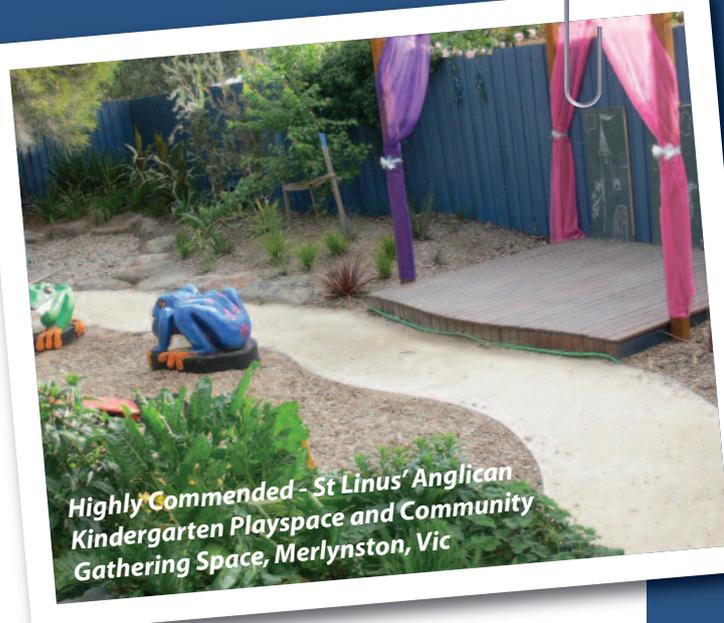
- The unique potential of a sloping topography has been realised with the installation of activities upon the embankment;*
- The introduction of natural features has made a dramatic difference to the playspace;*
- A wonderful place for children to play and for adults to work.*

HIGHLY COMMENDED

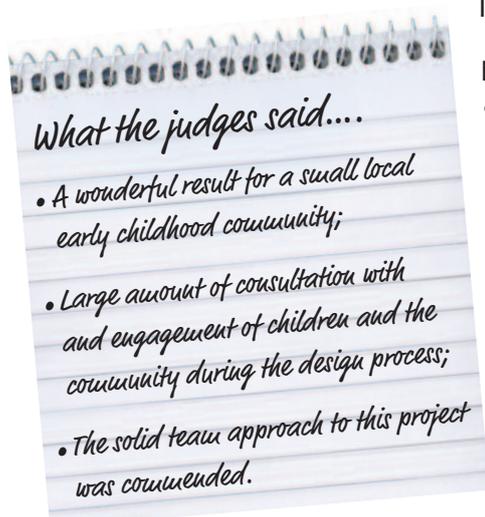
St Linus' Anglican Kindergarten Playspace and Community Gathering Space, Merlynston, Victoria
Entered by: St Linus' Anglican Kindergarten

St Linus Anglican Kindergarten identified their outdoor learning environment as needing an update. Consultation with the kindergarten community highlighted the need and desire for sustainable use of materials and the provision of 'natural' play opportunities.

Merlynston Creek is a significant natural feature within the local area and therefore considered an important theme for the playspace design. The use of landscape materials reflected the creek and indigenous plants. Two colourful chainsaw carved frogs highlight the local fauna.



Highly Commended - St Linus' Anglican Kindergarten Playspace and Community Gathering Space, Merlynston, Vic



Natural play in the form of a digging pit, plants, a waterpump and an open area for moveable equipment were key elements of this design. Rocks were used for seating. Pebbles were used in the water play area for colour and play value. A low level stage was created to hang canvas walls and garlands and to allow children to sit, draw on blackboards or play games. The large pot plants provide indigenous bush tucker plants, veggies and flowers. It was also felt important to provide a traditional play item, such as a swing, to encourage timid children to engage with the outdoor environment.

The project is a resounding success. Children are learning to take turns using the water pump to care for plants, they are building tunnels in the digging pit and harvesting veggies from the garden. The stage is a place for imaginary play and the garden a place for the children to make their own space and eat their lunch while talking about their discoveries.

Each of these entries present unique, original approaches to playspace design within education and care services. The strong themes of the successful entries include a commitment to consultation with children and the community during the design process, inclusion of natural play features, and provision of appropriate challenge for children during play. These themes are aligned with recognised best practice within education and care services.

The successful entries for the remaining categories of Schools, Public Playspaces and Innovative Design Elements present many great ideas that can be incorporated into playspace designs.

The full results of the Kidsafe 2012 National Playspace Design Awards program are available at: <http://www.kidsafensw.org/playground-safety/design-awards/>

If you have plans to update your outdoor learning environment and would like to discuss your ideas, all states are encouraged to contact Kidsafe NSW on 02 9845 0890.

Early Years Workforce Strategy

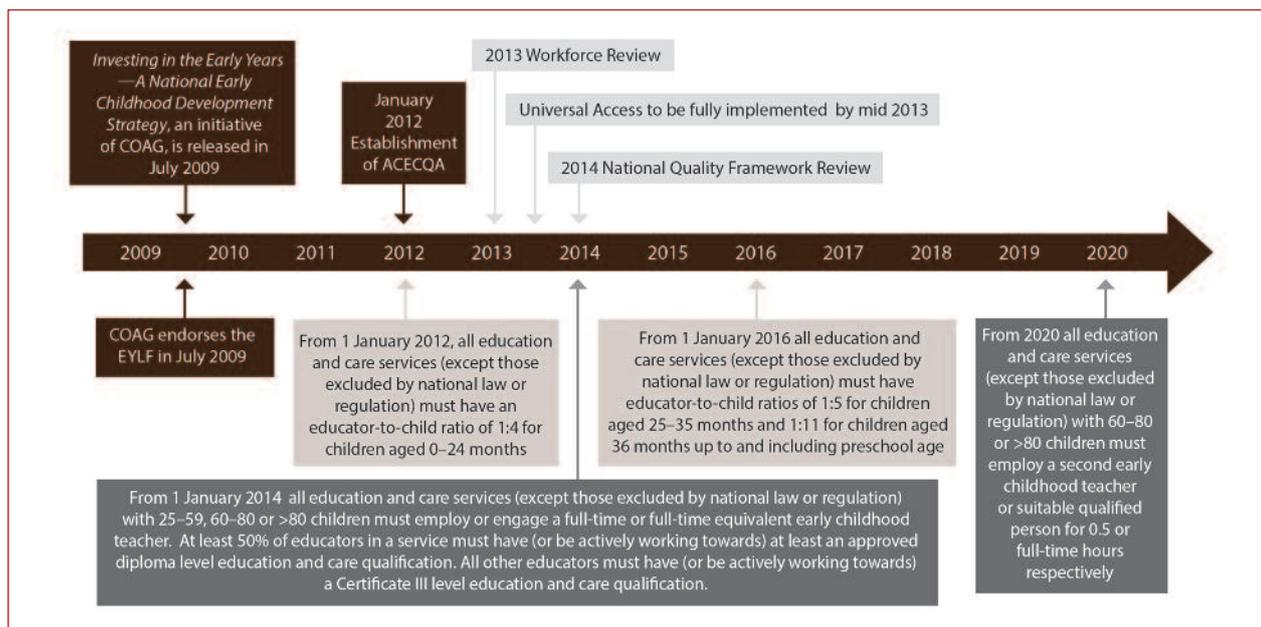
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Workplace Relations



It is an exciting time to be part of the early childhood sector with a number of ambitious reforms aimed at enhancing the quality and use of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services across Australia. With 1.3 million children using early childhood services in 2012, reforms such as the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF), the National Partnership for Early Childhood Education (commonly referred to as Universal Access), the National Partnership for Indigenous Early Childhood Development, and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) are pivotal to providing Australia's children with the best start in life.

The reform process, which is being phased in over several years to allow the sector and workforce time to successfully adjust, is creating greater demand for early childhood educators and teachers across all service types. Throughout Australia, all state and territory governments are committed to helping the ECEC workforce meet demand for and enhance the quality of education and care.

The diagram below illustrates the timelines for reform between 2009 and 2020:



The NQF is backed by significant Australian Government investment of \$23.1 billion, which includes funding for families, services and the workforce. It commenced on 1 January 2012 and introduced uniform ratios for educators (1:4 educators to babies between 0 and 24 months). Additional ratios and qualification requirements will come into force between now and 2020.

To support the NQF, the Australian Government has worked in collaboration with states and territories to develop the national Early Years Workforce Strategy for early childhood education and care. The Strategy was released on 10 September 2012 by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (made up of relevant Ministers from the Commonwealth and all states and territories) and is available on the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) website at the following address: <http://deewr.gov.au/early-years-workforce-strategy>

The Strategy demonstrates a commitment by all Australian governments to work in collaboration with the early childhood sector in order to address the immediate priorities for the ECEC workforce, aiming to deliver a sustainable, highly qualified and professional workforce that is flexible and responsive to the needs of children and families. The Strategy aims to ensure that workforce members have the skills to work with other early childhood development professionals, including health and family services, in order to promote a holistic and integrated way of working.

A focus on the workforce

The Strategy provides the first commitment by all governments to an agreed vision and long-term framework for the ECEC workforce. It will assist in building a highly skilled and capable workforce, therefore fostering high-quality services and improved outcomes for children. Priorities in the Strategy are:

- supporting a professional early childhood education and care workforce;
- ensuring a growing workforce to continue to meet community demand;
- aiding early childhood educators to gain the qualifications and skills the workforce needs to continue to provide high quality care;
- fostering the creation of a responsive workforce, one which can address the needs of all children; and
- facilitating collaboration amongst members of the broader early childhood development workforce including early childhood educators and teachers.

Responsibility for developing a sustainable ECEC workforce is shared between service providers, early childhood educators, peak bodies for the sector (which include unions, the Australian, state, territory and local governments), training providers and families and communities. Through working in collaboration with one another, these stakeholders can drive change and contribute to workforce development for the sector.

To ensure that the priorities of the Strategy are achieved, all governments agreed to develop Implementation Plans outlining the available funding and programs for the ECEC workforce. These plans reference a number of initiatives which tackle jurisdiction-specific workforce issues. Over time the plans will be updated in order to include changes or updates to current initiatives, or programs and initiatives which may be developed in the future. The plans are available on the DEEWR website.

Key Australian Government initiatives

The Australian Government already has several significant programs in place to help educators to acquire and up-skill their qualifications, including:

- Providing support for over 8000 people per year, including existing early childhood educators, to gain a vocational education and training qualification in early childhood. Funding has been provided to remove the regulated course fees for Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in Children's Services, delivered by TAFE institutes, or other recognised government training providers.
- Committing \$9.2 million in funding over four years for the Recognition of Prior Learning initiative (RPL) aimed at improving the quality and uptake of RPL assessments for early childhood professionals. In recognition of the additional barriers that early childhood educators located in rural and remote areas face in accessing RPL, the initiative will provide additional assistance to existing early childhood educators in inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote locations wishing to obtain or upgrade their qualifications.
- Funding the HECS-HELP Benefit which reduces the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt of early childhood teachers working in areas of high need, such as regional and remote areas, Indigenous communities and areas of high disadvantage, based on postcode location.

The Australian Government Implementation Plan will be released in early 2013.

More information on the Early Years Workforce Strategy and current workforce initiatives listed can be found on the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website.

Louise Simpson and Buninyong Preschool

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Children who attend early childhood educational programs show better performance and progress in their early school years in both intellectual and social domains (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011: 60).



In October 2012 Buninyong Preschool won the 'Advancing Practice Award' at the HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards in Perth. The preschool was nominated for providing Aboriginal and low income families with access to a free, high quality preschool program in the year before starting school. The award recognised the preschool for its promotion of positive outcomes for vulnerable children, and the award judges commended the preschool for taking a proactive approach to tackling real social issues.

The preschool is located in Dubbo, in Central Western NSW and operates on the grounds of Buninyong Public School. According to Preschool Director, Louise Simpson, prior to the establishment of Buninyong Preschool only about one third of local children had access to early childhood education before starting school. This, she says, was primarily due to cost barriers.

With the aid of government funding Buninyong Preschool provides a quality program for up to 25

eligible children per day. Since it commenced in 2010, enrolments have doubled, and the service, which was initially operating 2 days per week, is now offered daily, and has a waiting list. The majority of children attending are from Aboriginal backgrounds.

The benefits for the children who have participated in the program have been significant in terms of a positive start to their schooling. Louise reports that the children who have attended the preschool have demonstrated greater self-confidence when they start school, and feel more secure about being away from their families. These children have also had the opportunity to develop important school readiness skills, including positive dispositions for learning. The preschool also plays an important role in promoting links between families and primary school educators, so that they can begin to build partnerships that will help support both children and families during the transition to the formal school setting. This, ultimately, has positive long-term results for children's attendance at school and for their future success at school.



Buninyong Preschool's early childhood education program focuses on building children's and families' strengths, and responds to their specific needs or vulnerabilities. The preschool offers high staff-child ratios, with four educators working with up to 25 children in each session. The program employs a four year trained Early Childhood Teacher, a Diploma qualified educator and an education and care qualified Aboriginal Education Officer, who has recently attained her Certificate III. A fourth staff member is employed through the Supporting Children with Additional Needs (SCAN) funding scheme.

An important aspect of the preschool's educational program is its emphasis on the use of intentional teaching strategies that build children's self-confidence, resilience and emotional competencies. Using programs such as 'You Can Do It!', 'KidsMatter', and 'PALS Social Skills Program', educators work with individual children and their families to help children to feel that they belong, and to help them to develop skills and confidence to build and negotiate relationships with others.

Early hurdles for the Buninyong Preschool included sharing a space with the after school care program. The preschool now has its own facility on the school grounds and the Advancing Practice Award \$10,000 development grant will be used to further landscape the preschool's outdoor play areas.

Another early difficulty involved engaging with families within the community. For some families cost was not the only barrier to accessing early childhood education, there were issues related to the cultural relevance and safety of the programs on offer. Initially, the Schools as Community Centre (SACC) facilitator was instrumental in linking families using other SACC services with the preschool.

To help ensure the cultural safety of the program, the preschool employs an Aboriginal Education Officer, Jodie Wright. Jodie is a local Wiradjuri woman who knows many families in the community and has built strong collaborative relationships with the families using the preschool. Her knowledge of the community, and her relationships with local families, has enabled the preschool to promote families' sense of belonging to the service, and to provide a curriculum that is respectful of, and responsive to, families' cultural

needs. For example, at times some families need to be away from Dubbo to spend time with extended family members. As this can mean that children may be away from the preschool for extended periods of time, the service ensures that these children's enrolments are kept open for when they return.

Louise also praises the "amazing job" that the preschool's teacher, Jemima Quilty does, often in challenging circumstances. Jemima, who accompanied Louise to accept the 'Advancing Practice Award' in Perth last year, works closely with all staff and families to develop and implement a high quality, culturally relevant program for all of the children attending the preschool.

The preschool's innovative approach to working with children and families facing multiple challenges or disadvantage, involves the provision of integrated services. Through links with local health and early intervention agencies, the preschool assists families to access a range of early intervention and health services including referrals for health and development assessments, early intervention, occupational and speech therapy, immunisation programs and dental, hearing and vision screenings. All of these services are delivered using a coordinated approach that reduces the barriers that families living in complex circumstances often face in obtaining the support their children need. Through this 'hub service' model, Buninyong Preschool is able to provide families with access to early education, health and intervention, thereby increasing opportunities for many children to begin school with a strong foundation of health and wellbeing.

Buninyong Preschool hopes to expand in the future by seeking funding to extend the premises, and the service will continue to engage with families, the local Aboriginal community and the school community to sustain the program's relevance to the interests and needs of local children and their families.

References:

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AMY DOUGLAS, an Outstanding Educator!

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Every second year there is an opportunity to recognise the achievement of outstanding Early Childhood Education and Care professionals for the work they do across the sector. HESTA, the industry super fund for health and community services, together with Early Childhood Australia, celebrate the contributions of educators in two award categories, 'Advancing Practice' and 'Outstanding Educator'. Amy Douglas, from South Australia, was the 2012 recipient of the 'Outstanding Educator' award. Amy was chosen from over 600 nominees Australia wide.

I was fortunate to meet with Amy, and interview her, after she received her award. Amy was modest about her practices. She explained that she had no idea that she had been nominated until she was notified that she was one of the five finalists! She was told that the new team leader in her room had nominated her for the award. "It was so nice," she said.

Amy was delighted that this new colleague had noticed her practices and recognised her passion for educating and caring for children. "I've always carried my own philosophy of working with children and Primary Caregiving, so the biggest thing for me was that I was recognised and appreciated for all the work that I do," she said. "And it showed me that the things I think are important are also important to everyone else".

Amy flew to Perth for the awards ceremony and received a trophy to recognise her achievement, a \$5,000 ME Bank EveryDay Transaction Account and \$5,000 towards further education.

The South Australian educator had no idea that the following story of a moment which she thought was a simple, everyday interaction, would inspire her colleague to nominate her for the highly esteemed HESTA award for 'Outstanding Educator'.

Amy didn't know if the camera would come back in one piece or twenty when she handed it to a child in her babies' room. She gave the child a digital camera to take photos "...and that came from a moment in the room," Amy said. "It was so lovely to share with his family and recognise all the things that he'd got out of it. He's still enjoying the digital camera, he's in the toddler room now and his parents often comment on him taking photos."

“ In early childhood,
in middle childhood
and throughout life,
relationships are crucial
to a sense of belonging
(DEEWR, 2009: 7). ”



Educators' and co-ordinators' interactions with children convey to them that they are valued as competent and capable individuals... They also use their everyday interactions with children during play, routines and ongoing projects to stimulate children's thinking and to enrich their learning (ACECQA, 2011: 124).

Amy's passion, which led her to winning the award, is securely focused on Primary Caregiving.

Primary Caregiving is not just optimal for children; it is also optimal for parents who are entrusting their child's care to a stranger. Parents who have confidence in educators are more likely to build working partnerships with educators. (Harman-Smith, 2011: 4-5).

Amy, based at Margaret Ives Community Children's Centre in Adelaide's eastern suburbs, also attributed her success with Primary Caregiving, and the recognition that she has achieved through the HESTA award, to the generous support of her colleagues. "I've had a lot of help from people who have been in the field a lot longer than I have," she said. "I've worked alongside some very passionate child care educators. The two staff members I started working with at Margaret Ives were very passionate about Primary Caregiving. They were very influential in my journey. Support from the centre is amazing as well, and we have so much support from the Director. All the training made available to us is great."

For further information on the early childhood HESTA awards, please visit: <http://www.earlychildhoodawards.com.au/>

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Forging Partnerships with Parents in Indigenous Communities

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The community kindergarten at Napranum in remote far north Queensland has forged a strong partnership with local Indigenous families to support young children's engagement in reading activities.

Educators in early childhood settings recognise the importance of forging strong and successful partnerships with parents and community in order to support children's learning. In Indigenous communities, where English may be a family's second or third language, engaging parents as partners is crucial for supporting children's literacy learning, as well as to ensure children attend and participate in early education. In Napranum, a remote Indigenous community on the western side of Cape York in far north Queensland, a very successful partnership has been established.

The partnership at Napranum has evolved through the development and implementation of a community literacy program called PaL (Parents and Learning). Designed by the parents and the preschool teacher/director, using literature that supports the beliefs and values of the community, the program consists of a series of kits, each with a book and accompanying literacy activity for parents to undertake with their children. Parents are trained as tutors to visit homes and deliver the kits, and to explain the literacy activities and their connection to school learning.

The partnership operates in a space where everyone listens to each other respectfully, and the cultural knowledge and experiences of the parents and community, along with the knowledge and experiences of the educators, are given equal importance. The co-constructed space (not a physical location) in which PaL operates, is best described as an inter-cultural space. Taylor (2003, 45) has described an intercultural space as:

...the meeting of two distinct cultures through processes and interactions which retain the distinctive integrity and difference of both cultures and which may involve a blending of elements of both cultures but never the domination of one over another.

In 2001 the director of Napranum preschool, like leaders in schools and centres in many indigenous communities, struggled to get parents involved in their children's learning. Regular meetings and organised activities for parents at the preschool were not well attended. Despite what could be perceived as disinterest on the part of the parents, the director had a strong belief that the parents cared about their children and wanted them to do well at school.

Establishing trust was the first and most important thing that the director felt she needed to do, and this meant taking the time to build relationships with parents through personal connections and links to the community. She engaged initially with the indigenous staff at the preschool and through them made connections with parents and the wider community. The current director agrees, "So long as you know someone, or so long as you make that connection, that personal connection, everything's going to work out fine. [To establish trust] ... you need to become aware of the community, about cultural things, about language differences ... You've got to have respect for their culture and their community in the first place, and then you've got to be able to *demonstrate* that you've got respect for their culture and community."

The genuine respect the preschool director had for parents and the community influenced her approach. Taking an influential local community member with her, she knocked on doors and engaged parents in conversations about early literacy learning. She described her approach as, "It's not about telling somebody how to do something. It's about saying how we're going to do this together. It should always be from the approach of, this is where we are, these are some of things we'd like to do, so how are we going to get there as a team."

When several mothers expressed interest in assisting their children's literacy development, the director seized the opportunity to investigate existing early literacy programs with them. She gained funding from the local Rio Tinto mine to fly with a mother to Melbourne to investigate the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPPY). The Napranum mothers found this, and other existing early literacy programs, unsuitable for their children. So the director set about engaging parents to work with her in order to develop the PaL program.

One of the parents, who was instrumental in developing PaL explained, "PaL is a success because we knew the Hippy Program wouldn't work [within our community] ... I said our children are not going to understand that ... we need to do our own. And we did it our way, you know."

Another remarked, "We made the game. We took it, tested [it] with our kids. We're sitting there and writing things down and saying, *Oh, we should change it this way, this way and that. And then we went back [to the preschool] and said, Okay. This is the game. This is how you're going to play the game because this is how the kids played it.*"

PaL today is run by a board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and employs a program manager, coordinator, and local community tutors. The partnership at Napranum, characterised by shared responsibility and leadership in an intercultural space, appears to have had an empowering effect resulting in power to, rather than power over, these parents. Early results indicate that children's involvement in the reading activities with their parents is making a difference to their literacy development, attendance and participation at kindergarten.

Note: PaL won a 2012 Deadly Award for its contribution to Indigenous education

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National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE



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W: <http://wcfssydney2013.org.au>

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