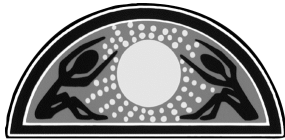




Learning from Good Practice: Implementing the Early Years Learning Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

June 2012

IKANBALA.



SNAICC
SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL
ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER
CHILD CARE

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1. Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care (ECEC) services operate across Australia to provide essential services to communities in urban, rural and remote areas.¹ Being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and managed they overcome many of the complex barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may experience in accessing ECEC services.² These services provide children and families with more than just daytime care, they are vital community development organisations that significantly enhance the lives of children and families through the provision of a wealth of programs to meet children's wellbeing, educational, developmental and cultural needs.

The majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services operate under the Budget Based Funded (BBF) system, which supports early childhood services where mainstream services are not available or viable.³ At present BBF services are not covered by the National Quality Framework (NQF), which is part of the major national policy reform agenda for education, skills and early childhood development in Australia. Consequentially they are also not currently assessed on their implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), an approved framework or learning curriculum under the NQF. Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services under the NQF will be considered at a later time, although as yet no date for this has been specified. This exclusion risks widening the existing gap in developmental outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other children by excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services from the national drive towards a standardised quality system.⁴

The Early Years Learning Framework contains a series of inter-related elements that are “fundamental to early childhood pedagogy and curriculum-decision making.”⁵ It highlights five key outcomes that holistically capture the “integrated and complex learning and development of all children”.⁶ Five key principles are also outlined that are intended to underpin educators practice and to support children to achieve the EYLF outcomes. Lastly, the Framework sets out eight key practices informed by sound pedagogical approaches to early childhood that educators can draw on to promote children's learning.

Despite being outside the scope of the NQF, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services around Australia are already delivering the five EYLF outcomes through actively implementing these Framework principles and practices. The introduction of the EYLF has assisted many services to refine and adapt their practices to produce good outcomes for children. However, all services interviewed through this research emphasise that the essential Framework philosophy that children's lives are characterised by *belonging, being and becoming* has been a key, guiding conviction underpinning the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services for decades.

This paper unpacks the results of a series of Australia-wide consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services and Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) to explore whether and how these ECEC services are already implementing the EYLF. The paper firstly examines the unique and defining strengths of services that emerged during the consultations. The second section considers in detail each EYLF outcome, principle and practice, to unpack how the services interviewed implement these through their programs and practices. The findings highlight that many services have been able to successfully engage with the Framework because it aligns with their existing practice and philosophies. In particular, the services interviewed demonstrate strength and innovative approaches in delivering key outcomes such as children's identity, wellbeing and connection with and contribution to their world. Furthermore, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed are based upon empowering and resilient partnerships with families and communities, a key EYLF principle.

The paper also examines the main challenges for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed in implementing the EYLF, and how they have attempted to overcome these. It unpacks the key supports that assist services to engage with the EYLF, before briefly discussing ongoing support that services feel they will need in the future. Finally, the paper proposes recommendations for future action that are needed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to thrive and to continue to provide improved outcomes for children.

Methodology

This paper uses a service analysis approach to identify and explore examples of good practice in promoting positive outcomes through early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, in particular through application of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The criteria used to select services to participate in the research required:

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled ECEC centre;
- Actively engaging with and implementing the EYLF
- Recognised as demonstrating good practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families; and
- A range of urban, regional and remote ECEC centre contexts across all Australian states and jurisdictions. Where possible two services were interviewed per state and jurisdiction (see Annex A for a map of service locations). Due to service demands in one case, and lack of services in two jurisdictions, this was not possible for ACT, Northern Territory and Queensland.

SNAICC drew on the expertise of Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) from around Australia, SNAICC National Executive and membership, and key ECEC sector representatives to identify services on the basis of the above criteria.

SNAICC interviewed a total of 14 ECEC services and seven IPSUs. Of these, six interviews were conducted in person and the remaining 15 over the telephone. Interviews averaged between one to two hours. Follow-up phone conversations took place with approximately one third of the services to gather any missing information. Relevant documents were collected and reviewed to supplement the information gathered during interviews.

Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured method utilising a list of discussion topics. This provided a guide for services to speak to without limiting or prescribing their answers. Discussion topics focused on service history, philosophy and outcomes; implementation of the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices; main challenges; and support needs. From the interview transcripts, good practice profiles were developed for each of the 14 services. The additional documents collected were used to inform the profiles. The profiles are available separately (see section 3).

The paper describes good practices in delivering outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children drawn from the discussions with ECEC organisations and IPSUs. The paper also draws on the available literature to connect the research to broader trends.

2. Services interviewed

The following 14 early childhood services were interviewed for this research process:

Western Australia

- Coolabaroo Neighbourhood Centre, Thornlie
- Jalygurr-Guwan MACS, Broome

New South Wales

- Yawarra Child Care Centre, Mt Druitt/Bidwill
- Birrelee MACS, Tamworth

Victoria

- Yappera Children's Services, Melbourne
- Gunai Lidj MACS, Morwell
- Lulla's MACS, Shepparton

Queensland

- Gundoo MACS, Cherbourg

Tasmania

- Aboriginal Children's Centre MACS, Risdon Cove
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association (TACCA), Launceston

South Australia

- Koonibba MACS, Koonibba
- Minya Bunhii, Ceduna

Australian Capital Territory

- Gudjahgahmiamia MACS, Wrecks Bay

Northern Territory

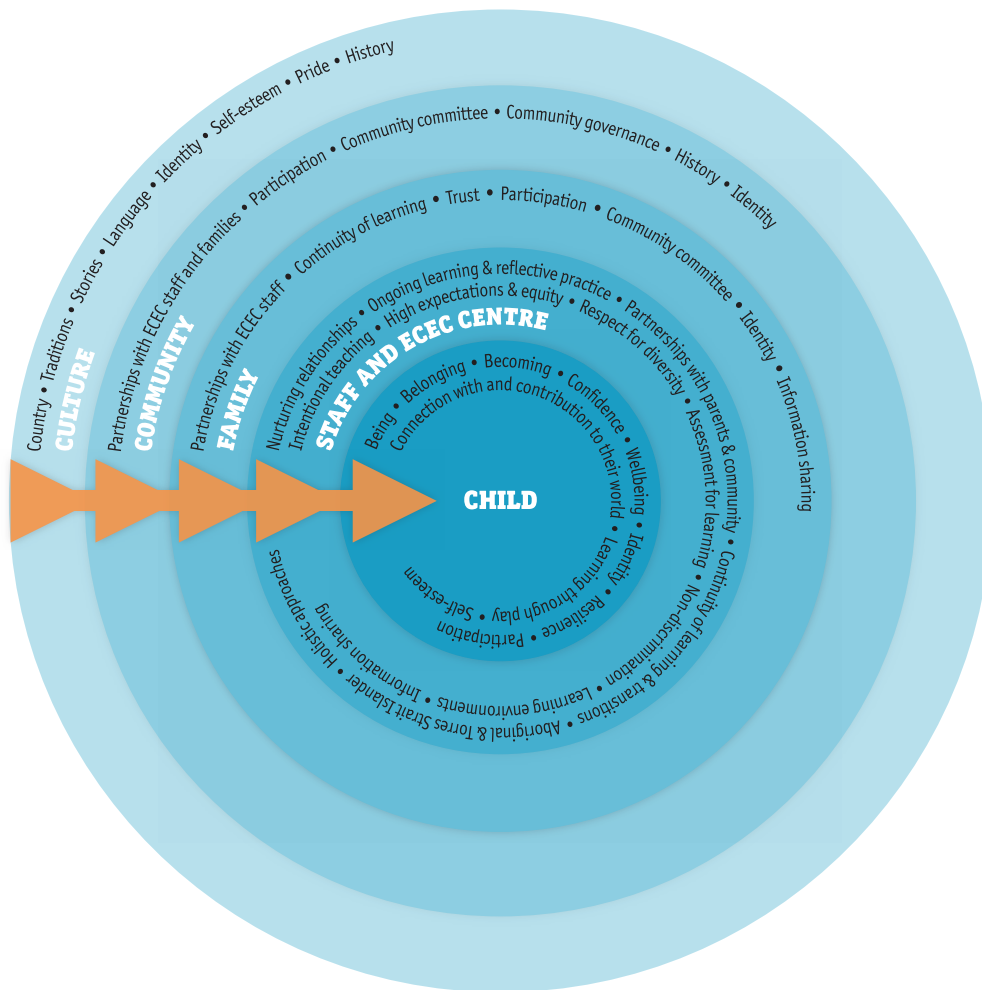
- Congress Child Care Centre (Ampe Kenhe Apmere), Alice Springs

A map of Australia detailing each service location is available as Annex A.

For each service, a 'Good Practice Profile' has been compiled. These profiles explore in detail the unique approaches each service has taken in implementing the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices. Whilst not contained within this final report, these profiles are available separately at www.snaicc.org.au or by contacting SNAICC (info@snaicc.org.au) or holly@snaicc.org.au).

3. Unique Qualities and Strengths of Services

The following diagram presents the unique and interconnected qualities and strengths of the services interviewed. These concepts are explored throughout the paper. Each circle contains a focus area and explanatory concepts that represent the unique elements the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed focus on to deliver care and education to children and families.



Services interviewed display a number of distinguishing features that enable them to provide high quality and culturally appropriate care that reflects the EYLF principles, practices and outcomes. The consultations identified that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed are in key positions to engage with the Framework because of their unique approach to providing early childhood care and development services. This section of the paper contains a snapshot of the core elements of their success, with sections 5, 6 and 7 detailing a more rigorous exploration of the particular service features and practices as they relate to the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices.

Summary of distinguishing service features

- Strong, historical base
- Community ownership and management
- Partnerships with parents, families and communities
- Overcome barriers to access
- Build strength and self-esteem through a focus on identity, being, belonging and becoming
- Focus on wellbeing

Services originate from a strong, historical community base

A distinctive feature of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed is a strong, historical base arising out of community need. Most services interviewed have been running for between fifteen to twenty-five years, and all arose from a desire within their community to create better educational care and development opportunities for pre-school aged children. The strength of this historical context cannot be underestimated. By growing from within the community, services are truly perceived by parents, families and their communities to be *part of* the community, as opposed to an externally introduced service.

Services carry a rich historical understanding of their community into every aspect of their care towards children, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff being vital “to lead that history as well” (Roslyn Von Senden, IPSU Queensland). In many cases staff and committee members were involved in the establishment of the service (see for example Lulla’s, Yappera, TACCA, Aboriginal Children’s Centre). This means that “the history carries on, it’s there and it’s actually not standing still, it’s moving forward” and helps services to imbue children with a sense of “who you are and where you come from” (Roslyn Von Senden, IPSU Queensland). Supporting children’s sense of identity & wellbeing in this way carries immeasurable benefits, as will be discussed below.

Community ownership

Parent and community boards or committees are a unique feature of these services, and bring many benefits. Parent and community committees enable services to stay closely in touch with the needs of the community and families, as one Director comments, there is “no point in having a wonderful name in the early childhood community if our own local Aboriginal

community doesn't think we're meeting their needs" (Birrelee). Having a parent or community committee ensures that a service is managed by the local community, and provides a forum through which parents can have a say in service decisions – such as fees or programming. Committee members are predominantly community members, and often have children or relatives attending the ECEC service. They therefore understand the dynamics, context, and needs of the community and families.

Community committees enable the service to be controlled and managed by the community, which are key features in ensuring that parents and families will access a service. As Hutchins et al note, "Indigenous communities all around Australia have very high expectations regarding their involvement and ownership of services and programs provided to improve and support their wellbeing. This relates to all levels of decision-making, policy development, processes and practices. Without this involvement there is no guarantee of participation."⁷ A comprehensive definition of community control for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services is that a service is:

- "An incorporated Aboriginal organisation
- Initiated by a local Aboriginal community
- Based in a local Aboriginal community
- Governed by an Aboriginal body which is elected by the local Aboriginal community
- Delivering a holistic and culturally appropriate health service to the Community which controls it."⁸

Whilst this definition comes from the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), it applies more broadly to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community service.⁹ Roslyn Von Senden, from IPSU Queensland comments that community control is key,

I always believe the best people to look after our children are our own people, so when you're looking at community control you have representation from all different clans (and) tribal groups that sit on a committee, who acknowledge the history, the different customs, culture, protocols. So if you've got it working from the top, it's something that filters then to the child care service... It's around...knowing your community, working holistically. I think Aboriginal people do that very well. It's something that's embedded from day one, it's about family, it's about community, it's about working together.

Services interviewed recognise the importance of good governance in organisational structures, with a belief, for example, that community committees need to follow certain principles to ensure that they are representative, accountable and democratic. With "a good organisation, good management practices, you can have something that's truly community building and is going to be great for the children and families and the wider community" (Jacqui Hunt-Smith, Yorganop IPSU).

Partnerships with parents, families and communities

All services demonstrated a unique focus on building partnerships with parents, extended family and the community. As Sharolyn Talbot from the South Australian IPSU (ARMSU) affirmed, “engagement with families and community is...the strong part that actually holds the service together.” This means that any decisions made regarding the service go back to the community, to the committee and to the families. This ensures again that decisions made actually do meet the needs of families and children. Partnerships with families and community helps to ensure that the service is based upon the values and cultures of the community, as Flaxman et al note that “Broadly, culturally competent services consult with and involve family, extended kin, Elders and community members in service delivery.”¹⁰

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed are uniquely placed to build strong, committed partnerships with communities and families as they are firmly viewed as integral aspects of the community. As part of the community, they are able to develop and maintain strong, trusting and respectful relationships with families. All services expressed in one way or another that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are instrumental in creating and maintaining partnerships with families (see for example Yappera). The literature affirms this, highlighting that “Indigenous staff are more likely to be able to embed their service in local culture and language, ensuring that community members may feel comfortable in the service and trust the carers.”¹¹

Overcoming barriers to access

From the consultations it is clear that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services overcome many barriers families may experience in accessing a service.¹² Several services expressed that because they were an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community service, parents and families were more likely to access them (Birrelee, Congress, Yappera, Koonibba).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may experience particular trust issues when placing their child in child care, due to historical negative associations with institutions (Koonibba).¹³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services can overcome this as they are perceived by members of their community to be non-threatening spaces that can be trusted (Congress, Birrelee).¹⁴

Many centres also provide a bus service, which is critical for parents who may not have easy access to transport (Aboriginal Children’s Centre, Minya Bunhii, Lulla’s, Birrelee, Coolabaroo, Congress).¹⁵ One Director illustrates how important this is for families, “just providing that support for the families so that they know that no matter what’s happening at home their children still can attend school.” (Yawarra).

A number of services also spoke of the importance of having lower fees to enable the most disadvantaged families to access the centre (Jalygurr, Yawarra, Birrelee, Congress).¹⁶

Building strength and self-esteem through a focus on identity, being, belonging and becoming

All services highlight that their core focus on fostering children's identity and sense of being, belonging and becoming has given them a unique strength and basis from which to implement the EYLF. One Director echoes the sentiments of many services interviewed in stating that, "To my mind the EYLF itself – the belonging, being and becoming, it's what we were trying to do anyway as educators." (Coolabaroo). Another Director extends on this, expressing that "it helps us articulate our cultural connection to everything. The outcomes and the principles are written in a way that we interpret it our way. Being, belonging and becoming is so us, that's what we're about" (Birrelee).

The literature recognises that a service's capacity to foster a child's cultural identity is critical. As one report highlights, "Whatever the culture specific to an Indigenous family, the ability of a child care service to recognise and incorporate cultural practice into the way the child and family is dealt with was identified as the most important aspect of child care for Indigenous children."¹⁷ Another article emphasises the importance of fostering culture to ensure that "every child feels culturally safe, with a sense of belonging and connection, and a feeling of being at 'home'."¹⁸ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed focus on belonging in a number of ways – through discussions with children, actively encouraging connections to family and community, incorporating traditional child-rearing practices, celebrating cultural, community and family practices, and connection to land.

In particular, the EYLF outcome that children develop a strong sense of identity is a fundamental tenet of all services interviewed, and one which underpins every aspect of their service delivery. This is discussed in detail in section 5.1.

Focus on wellbeing

It is generally recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services have been delivering a system of early childhood care that caters to children's wellbeing needs in a holistic and integrated fashion for decades (IPSU NSW & ACT). All centres interviewed provide some form of further services that cater to children's social, emotional, physical and cultural wellbeing. Furthermore, all services spoke of children's wellbeing as intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of their family and community. This is emphasised in the literature as being a significant aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services.¹⁹ Services interviewed illustrate how they provide support to families and communities through parenting and health services, cultural programs and information sharing. Rather than being seen as 'add ons', these are seen as integral components in their provision of care to children and families. Services interviewed expressed an underpinning philosophy that children's wellbeing needs to be interpreted in a wide sense, encompassing social, emotional and physical wellbeing.²⁰ As well as providing health, nutrition and parenting programs, services also concentrate on social and emotional wellbeing through their strong focus on fostering children's identity and self-esteem, and through nurturing and stable relationships between children and staff. This approach is illustrated in detail in section 5.3.

4. Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes

5.1 Children Have a Strong Sense of Identity

Introduction

This section explores how services interviewed support children to develop a strong sense of identity. The EYLF considers the development of children's identity as occurring within the context of their families and communities,²¹ which are also spoken about by the services interviewed as critical contexts within which to foster children's sense of identity.

The EYLF also frames identity development as occurring when, amongst other elements, children feel safe and secure, and develop autonomy, resilience, and knowledgeable and confident self-identities.²² The EYLF details a variety of ways that educators can support these outcomes, including through implementing learning approaches that understand and build on a child's family, community and cultural context. This is further developed by the EYLF Educator's Guide, which states "Culture is central to a child's individuality, identity and sense of belonging and success in lifelong learning".²³ This is a key theme echoed throughout the consultations, with services interviewed unanimously stressing that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children a strong cultural identity is the basis from which other forms of identity can grow.

The paper will therefore examine how the services interviewed foster identity. Different features will be examined that assist this:

- Embedding cultural identity through appropriate equipment, resources, discussions and storytelling;
- Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices into everyday practice;
- Fostering children's connection to nature and traditional uses of the land;
- Cultivating children's traditional language skills; and
- Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visitors in sharing culture, and taking children on excursions to enrich their cultural understanding and identity.

Two significant themes identified by a number of services consulted are also explored. These are that fostering a child's sense of cultural identity can play a vital role in building their self-esteem, and can also assist in reconnecting their family to culture and language.

Lastly, this section explores two factors identified as enablers in supporting children to develop a cultural identity. A strong community or parent board can help lead the direction of the service and ensure that it supports culture; and secondly employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff can assist in imparting culture through every aspect of the program.

a) Identity and community

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, developing a strong identity is concomitant with developing identity as a member of their community. All services interviewed focus on supporting children to feel that they belong in their community. This is often promoted through visual displays, for example at the Aboriginal Children's Centre photos and pictures displayed on the walls help foster children's identity within their community and history (see also Gudjahgahmiamia and Gundoo). The Director describes the photographs that are hung on the walls, "There's a whole board of Elders from over generations. There are pictures of Risdon Cove, Oyster Cove, children that used to come here, or political rallies done by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre that got us here. So when people walk in here they all feel welcome, they all feel connected...it's speaking to the whole community." The Director of Birrelee MACS feels that the key to fostering children's sense that they belong and have a strong community identity is that the service is about,

Aboriginal kids with Aboriginal kids and Aboriginal staff. I think that is one of the biggest assets and contributors to our success in this - it's community...it's not contrived...So I think we take for granted that community connection, and how powerful that cultural connection is when it comes to learning, self-esteem, identity and belonging.

Reflecting the community: Lulla's

Lulla's is an example of a service that represents two communities, the Yorta Yorta and the Bangerang. These groups are both represented and respected in the centre and discussions held with children on the importance of the two groups. When the centre was being constructed it was considered vital that the environment reflected these two groups, and so the outdoor space contains a play-sculpture of a platypus (a Bangerang animal) and a turtle (a Yorta Yorta animal) sandpit. The environment therefore reflects the culture and the stories of the area.

Services often represent a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups within a community and therefore respond to different group identities. This often includes incorporating more than one traditional language (Minya Bunhii, Congress).

b) Identity and family

Services also consider that a sense of identity and belonging within family is a key aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's holistic development. A number of services stress the importance of honouring and celebrating children's families to support their identity. For some services, such as Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo and Lulla's, family identity is supported through wall displays of family photos and trees – which helps children feel their families are valued. At Minya Bunhii staff and children have created visual 'webs of belonging', which explore the child's connections with extended family and the community. Minya Bunhii staff also foster children's sense of identity through incorporating an understanding of where each child is from - their family and cultural context - into how they provide care for that child. At Congress, staff feel that it is particularly important to support children in out of home care develop their family identity. Children in care often receive visits from family members whilst at Congress. The Director explains that during these visits she always takes a photo for the children,

...so they have a really good picture of where they fit in their family. So this might be my biological family but this is the family I live with, so they are all important to me...we take lots of photos of that so that they can have this big connection, so my family isn't just mum and dad and two kids, it's mum and dad in this family and then I've got my mum and dad there and I've got aunts and uncles on all sorts of fronts.

c) Identity and culture

Using culture to enrich and inform learning experiences

All services emphasise that incorporating culture is something they do on a daily, ongoing basis and that culture is built into all levels of activities and learning experiences. Centres visually display culture through many ways, including through using red, black and yellow, and green, white and blue colours in displays, and through pictures, posters and materials throughout the indoor and outdoor environments. For example, at Yawarra, a father who is an artist has donated his own traditional paintings to be displayed at the service. The Director describes how his son was so proud and excited by this that he then created his own paintings, which are now displayed alongside his father's. Minya Bunhii is an example of a centre that represents the local community's cultural heritage - displaying paintings around the outside walls of the play area that portray contemporary depictions of the culture and the natural local environment.

Services interviewed use puzzles, games, puppets, books and music to share cultures from the local area and other parts of Australia on an incidental basis. As the Director from Lulla's describes, "it's not a one off, it's everyday". At Lulla's activities relating to music usually incorporate clapsticks and didgeridoos, and these instruments are also available to children to explore and use independently. Many centres use culturally representative toys such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dolls. These materials and resources help create strong learning environments that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities. The Director of Birrelee describes how their environment sends out a powerful message that "if you're Aboriginal you so belong here". It says that the minute you walk in the door. Environment is really powerful and we really believe that."

As well as reflecting culture in the environment and learning resources, services discuss how culture informs their conversations and activities. At Birrelee educators hold regular discussions with children around, "what land we're on...who we are, where we come from." Birrelee also reflects culture through displaying the Aboriginal flag outside the service, as the Director feels that flags provide a powerful connection to identity and culture. Recognising this, the centre often focuses activities around the Aboriginal flag, talking about the meaning of the colours of the flag, and building on this through activities for children to create their own flags and artwork that reflects these colours. This helps children develop their sense of identity by aiding their connection to their history, the flag and the meanings behind it.

Reflecting culture on this deep level involves using it to engage children in learning experiences. Birrelee has worked collaboratively with Macquarie University to do this - designing numeracy and literacy resources that reflect the children's culture.

The Director describes how this engages children in topics they may not be interested in, “So the numeracy may not engage the child but that sense of connection and identity (within the resource) engages the child.” She emphasises “our learning experiences have to be culturally centred, and I think that’s why our kids struggle at school, because it becomes a secondary thing or an optional extra. Whereas here it’s our daily experience.”

Whilst all centres emphasise the importance of incorporating culture on an everyday basis, children are also encouraged to celebrate their cultural identity through participation in special events such as NAIDOC week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day. One service explains how the children usually know many of the community at these events, which helps them to feel strong in their identity by celebrating their culture with their community (Coolabaroo).

Dreaming stories

Sharing Dreaming Stories is a valuable, creative and fun way to share culture and connect children with local narratives and history. An example of this comes from Gudjahgahmiamia. To celebrate literacy day one of the community aunties visited the service to tell the children the local

Dreamtime Story about Mugadan and Jungaa (the lizard and the octopus). To make the story come alive she brought with her a collection of shells, an octopus, and some picture cards to recreate the story.

Embedding culture: Aboriginal Children’s Centre

The Director of the Aboriginal Children’s Centre describes their Easter celebration as an illustration how culture is embedded in all the activities they do. She, the cook and several educators were discussing how the centre could celebrate Easter whilst still incorporating culture, how to “give a message to our children about what’s important to our community at this time of year.” They decided that as it was also mutton bird season they would focus on this, and so used natural grasses to make mutton bird nests with the children and talked about Easter through this cultural lens. The Director describes how this approach didn’t detract from children’s home-based Easter celebrations, but brought in cultural practices and a celebration of a significant time for the community.

Supporting traditional sleeping practices: Koonibba

The Director from Koonibba highlights how children are allowed to sleep together on mats on the floor, and are allowed to choose to sleep next to their relatives as they would at home. She knows that most of their children would not be comfortable sleeping in a cot, as this is not consistent with how they sleep at home, and therefore this method ensures a connection with their home life and practices.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices

Many services discuss the importance of ensuring continuity of children’s experiences from home and the service through incorporating traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices at the centre. Both Lulla’s and Koonibba raise this issue in regards to sleeping habits and arrangements. A number of services also speak of the importance of replicating a family atmosphere within their program through close, nurturing relationships between children and staff; family grouping structures and supporting relatives to care for and teach each other (see also section 5.3). Furthermore, services emphasise the importance within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

culture of viewing children as independent, capable beings, which entails giving them freedom and autonomy and not restricting their activities by age (see also section 5.4). This supports children to develop confident, autonomous and resilient identities.

Connecting with traditional practices and nature

Many services speak of the value of developing children's sense of cultural identity by connecting them with nature and traditional land uses. Several services, such as Coolabaroo and Jalygurr, facilitate excursions to nearby Aboriginal heritage parks, where play-based learning methods bring culture alive by enabling children to learn about hunting, bush foods, stories and traditions in an engaging and interactive way. These activities can ground children in their histories and culture, and support the development of their own personal identities in relation to their traditional environments. Some services also provide activities in their own outdoor space where children can cook traditional foods such as kangaroo tails and have campfires (Congress, Lulla's, Minya Bunhii). By maintaining and in some cases reviving cultural connections to land children are taught to about their culture and to respect the environment.

Outdoor cultural space: Minya Bunhii

A section of Minya Bunhii's outdoor play space provides an accessible cultural **learning environment**. Visitors often come to the centre to work with the children in this area to cook traditional food such as kangaroo tails and damper. The centre has also had visits by local Aboriginal women to make cultural objects and musical instruments such as clapsticks, including using hot wire to burn patterns into the sticks.

Culture and language

Services support children's identity and communication skills by facilitating traditional language programs. Birrelee's Director describes the enthusiasm children display when learning lingo, and attributes this to "that cultural connection, that identity that language gives." Services focus on language through formal programs, visually reflecting the language at the centre through signs and pictures, and incidental daily use. Several services, such as Jalygurr and the Aboriginal Children's Centre use traditional names for each room.

Jalygurr's language program fosters children's connections with community Elders. Two Elders regularly visit to teach the children Yawuru through storytelling, reading and songs. Children at Minya Bunhii use traditional language in everyday conversations and focus words, and also benefit from visits to the local language centre, working with a language teacher and using computer language programs. Minya Bunhii has also developed their own books to help families and children learn about the local Aboriginal culture and to encourage the maintenance of local languages. TACCA fosters language development by connecting language to their focus theme, for example, if the monthly focus is on animals staff will then focus on palawa kani words for different animals throughout the month. Congress staff feel that speaking to children in traditional language helps them to settle and feel safe at the centre – particularly if this is a home language.

Music and tradition: Gunai Lidj

At Gunai Lidj children have been able to learn about music and tradition from one of the fathers. He brings in instruments and has taught the children about the didgeridoo and clapsticks, and who is allowed to play these. This has involved explaining to the children concepts such as which gender is traditionally allowed to play which instrument. The Director explains how some of the girls initially challenged this, but the father has been able to explain this to the children in a positive way that teaches them about culture and tradition.

Sharing culture through Elders and community visitors

Many services invite family and community members to share different skills and knowledge with children, such as dance, music, language, cooking, history, cultural games and artwork. One TACCA educator believes that learning from and interacting with community members helps foster children's connection with their world by supporting their sense of 'being' and 'belonging' as part of a community. At Gudjahgahmiamia a local community member visited the centre to do shell work with the children, as this is an important part of the local culture. The children worked with the community member to create art out of the shells from the local area, and these pieces are now displayed in the centre. A book was created to record this experience through photos, and this is now displayed on the children's bookshelf to remind them of the activity, and to share with parents and visitors. Several services run traditional dance and/or music programs (Yappera, Gunai Lidj, Lulla's). Lulla's

focuses on dance, music and singing as important and engaging ways to teach children about culture. They often receive visitors from the local Damanmu Bangerang Traditional Dance Group. This group is considered to be part of Lulla's', and several Lulla's children are group members and regularly perform within it. Newspaper clippings and photos of the dance group are displayed on the walls.

Visits outside the centre

Minya Bunhii in Ceduna is fortunate to have a local arts and culture centre where they can take the children to participate in cultural activities facilitated by Elders such as painting and Dreaming stories. Another service has taken children to meet an Aboriginal artist and view his paintings. This excursion was able to build upon the Dreaming Stories staff had been sharing with children (Gunai Lidj).

"It's about that exposure to all those things...their art, their music, their storytelling...that they can be proud of who they are regardless of whether they are pale skinned or dark skinned or pink skinned or whatever." (Congress)

e) Further benefits

Building self-esteem and personal identity

Several services speak of the connection between children's identity, self-esteem and confidence as learners (Birrelee, Coolabaroo, Yappera, Congress). Supporting children to develop a culturally secure identity leads to improved self-esteem and independence, fostering children who "know who they are and where they're going" (Birrelee). A number of services explain how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be brought up to be proud of being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and of their culture to have confidence in themselves. One Director explains that children are able to develop and express their own individual identity when they feel proud of who they are and don't feel that they have to fit into a category (Congress).

Supporting cultural reconnection

A number of services speak of the value of teaching children culture as a way of reconnecting their parents and family to culture. Staff observe that because parents haven't had the opportunity to learn about and experience culture, they find it difficult to pass this on to their children. Services can therefore play an invaluable role in reconnecting families to their culture. For example at Coolabaroo staff find that children are often able to teach Noongar words learnt at the centre to their parents and families, who may not speak the language themselves. The Aboriginal Children's Centre Director explains how important it is to foster community reconnection, stating that many adults who attended the centre as children now send their own children there. She explains that these children are able to develop a strong sense of identity because their parents could develop their cultural connections and identity and can therefore pass this down to them.

e) Enabling features

Community Boards as a mechanism to foster identity

All services have some form of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or parent board to provide oversight, support and accountability. Board members are usually Elders, community members, current or former staff and family members. Most Boards contain at least one member who was involved in originally establishing the service, and who therefore provides a unique link to the past and to the original service philosophy agreed upon by the community. Given this strong history, many services speak of their Board's immense value in guiding them to keep culture and identity at the forefront of all that they do. For example, at Yappera the all-Aboriginal Board supports the centre to ensure that their underpinning service philosophy – to deliver care within a Koori cultural framework – guides every aspect of service delivery. Yappera's Board also guides recruitment decisions to maintain an Aboriginal Director at the centre. They feel this to be particularly important as an all-Aboriginal staff team is not always possible. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boards also seem to be important where it is not possible to achieve an all-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff team, by ensuring that the direction and practice of the centre remains culturally relevant, appropriate and committed to fostering children's culture and identity.

The importance of staff for identity

Many services relate the value of having a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who can ensure that culture is captured into the everyday programs and centre environment, and that service practices are culturally relevant and appropriate. One Director illustrates this, describing how because staff are community

Staff guidance: Yappera

At Yappera the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff provide guidance for the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff throughout programming processes. The Director asserts that because the service has "a focus on children's development in the context of the family unit" it is also vital for the non-Aboriginal staff to be able to work with the Aboriginal staff for guidance and support when they are liaising with families. This may involve discussions with families "about the child's development, it may be strategies for toilet-training, it may be strategies for meal times, what's happening here, what's happening at home, and then seeing how they differ."

members, cultural identity is just “a part of who we are (and) it’s just everyday practice for us” (Gundoo).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring critical knowledge of and respect for the different ways of culture. They often also bring skills that they can share with the children, for example traditional painting (Congress) or knowledge of bush tucker and the local environment (Jalygurr, Minya Bunhii, Gudjahgahmiamia, Congress). Services speak of the importance of staff being able to share their knowledge of traditional languages.

This summary of service practice highlights a high capacity within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed to implement the EYLF outcome that children have a strong sense of identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and communities, the concept of identity is inherently linked to the concept of a cultural identity, and this therefore forms the basis from which to develop children’s sense of being, belonging and becoming. Through this their focus on children’s family, community and cultural identity encourages the growth of children’s self-identity, self-esteem and confidence.

5.2 Children are Connected With and Contribute to Their World

The second EYLF outcome focuses on children connecting with their world through their relationships with others, their connection to the environment, and their participation within their community. It discusses how children can be supported to feel a sense of belonging to a group, and develop a sense of fairness, social and environmental responsibility. The outcome also focuses on respect for diversity as a key component of children's connections and contributions to their world.

This section of the paper details diverse practices adopted by services to meet this outcome. With a strong focus within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures on relationships with family, community and nature, a key feature of the ECEC services interviewed is their support for children to be connected with and to contribute to their world on these three levels. The consultations reveal that for services an essential aspect of this outcome is to connect children up with the natural world, mentioned in the EYLF as important to enable children to learn environmental responsibility and respect. Services speak of different and creative ways that they engage children with nature, including through gardens, outdoor play, nature walks and interaction with animals.

Several services also mention unique ways that they connect with their community, linking with the EYLF theme of supporting children to develop a sense of belonging and being within their community. The EYLF focus on children learning about the rights and responsibilities concomitant with being a member of a group is also a strong feature of all services interviewed. Finally, services also discuss their commitment to encouraging children to develop respect for diversity and understandings of different cultures and ways of being.

Connection with nature – through gardens

A variety of services speak of the value of gardens in helping children build a strong connection to their world by developing, amongst other things, environmental responsibility, knowledge of growth cycles, plant care and bush tucker. The sense of belonging to land has particularly important cultural value for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Through growing vegetables, which are subsequently eaten, children learn that relationships with land are reciprocal - providing care so that the land can nourish in return (Aboriginal Children's Centre). The Director of the Aboriginal Children's Centre describes how presenting children with opportunities to work with nature is "about instilling in the children that they own this place. This is theirs...you use it and look after it, it's important enough to look after." Not all services can have their own garden, but Yappera has overcome this by connecting with a local community garden. Children now attend this once a week to learn about plant cycles and care. Other ways that services foster children's environmental responsibility include helping them to develop awareness of water conservation, an appreciation and care for nature (Koonibba), paper usage (Birreelee), and recycling (Yappera).

Connection with nature – outdoor play environment

Many services have developed their outdoor environments as key learning spaces to foster children's connection with the natural world. A number of services speak of the importance of the trees and plants in their outdoor areas to create a valuable environment to enable children to observe and interact with nature (Gunai Lidj, TACCA, Aboriginal Children's Centre).

Connection with nature – animals

Services consider that interaction with animals, in particular for children living in urban areas, teaches vital lessons such as compassion, nurturing and responsibility, and connects children to the natural world. Several centres create opportunities for children to interact with and learn about animals, often in response to children's own expressed interests. Some services have collaborated with local animal groups to bring native and non-native animals to the centre, or have taken children to visit zoos or wildlife parks (Coolabaroo). Coolabaroo fostered a unique learning experience for children by hosting an incubator with live eggs so the children could witness the chicks hatching. Other services use fish tanks to teach children about the routines and process of providing regular feeding and care to animals, and the joy in caring for them (Gudjahgahmiamia and Lulla's).

Connection with nature – nature walks

Many services facilitate regular walks to the bush, coast and local area (Minya Bunhii, Jalygurr, Gudjahgahmiamia, Gunai Lidj, Koonibba). These excursions provide valuable opportunities to teach children about the changing seasons, local plants, bush tucker available in certain seasons, and to gather natural materials for use in arts and other activities. Koonibba staff take the children on weekly nature walks through the community. These help connect children with the environment in which they live, and ground them in their community and history. Activities such as building wiltjas (bush shelters) encourage children to explore the practices of their ancestors, and to approach problem-solving as a group. Interaction with community members who participate in the walks supports children's links with their community and enables them to see their local natural environment as communal land for which they all have responsibility - for example taking bark only from the ground and not pulling it off trees. At Minya Bunhii children learn the traditional practices of hunting gulda (sleepy lizards), but do not actually catch the lizards, supporting them to develop an awareness of environmental sustainability.

A natural environment: Aboriginal Children's Centre

The Aboriginal Children's Centre has a purpose-built outdoor play environment designed from aerial photographs of the Furneaux Islands, which are a highly significant area for the Tasmanian Aboriginal population. Mounds in the playground are intended to replicate the mutton bird mounds of the islands, and a mutton bird shed sits in the play area. This learning environment helps to replicate the natural environment and cultural setting of the islands. Inside the centre none of the windows are covered by blinds or curtains, so that the windows present an uninterrupted view of nature. The setting is key to connecting children up to the land, as the Director explains, "We're connected to country every day. You walk in the building and the native hens are running at you, and the kids can hear the kookaburras, there's a little lake they can see out through the window...It's all bushland."

Other avenues of community connection

Several other examples demonstrate services' capacity to support children's community connections. Concerned that children's challenging experiences with the police was leading to negative associations, Gunai Lidgej initiated a program with their local community policing squad's Koori Unit. Visitors from the Unit now regularly visit to join the children in everyday activities. This is enabling the children to develop relationships of trust and positive experiences with the police. In a further example, after an initial successful visit, Minya Bunhii is building a relationship with the local aged care home to provide children with opportunities to visit Elders.

Social responsibility

An important element of children feeling connected and contributing to their world is fostering their sense of social responsibility and awareness of the impact of their actions on others. Services focus on this in a variety of ways. Some promote group responsibility by encouraging children to share equipment and by fostering daily routines around caring for equipment. Conversations supplement these routines to enable children to understand *why* they need to treat equipment with respect – so that it is available and ready for them all to use the next day. Birrelee staff find that role-modelling socially responsible behaviour themselves encourages children to adopt these routines and behaviours, and often means children can then share these centre routines with new children. Children are supported to develop individual responsibility for their own possessions through daily routines and dedicated areas within the centre for each child to place their things. Koonibba's Director highlights that it is important to have "a little area where each child can be responsible and know that this is where their belongings go. So there's that responsibility – they're your things, look after them." Through this practice children have developed independence – they can choose whether to wear shoes or not – and responsibility – if they don't wear shoes they know where to place them.

Respect for diversity

Respect for diversity is demonstrated by all services on a variety of levels, including cultural, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, family and individual diversity. All services display a capacity to value diversity and other cultures whilst still maintaining their primary focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Some services comment that it is particularly important to teach children about difference in a centre where they are predominantly from one culture (Yappera, Gudjahgahmiamia). Diverse dolls, toys, pictures, books and music are all used to create learning environments and experiences that expose children to diversity through play, and can then spark off discussion about difference. Services mention the importance of targeting experiences at an age-appropriate level, for example at Yappera babies and toddlers are exposed to diversity through culturally different dolls and toys, whilst programs for older children introduce more complex concepts using maps of the world, books and stories that represent different cultures. Providing children with opportunities to eat and discuss diverse foods can also teach them about the opportunities available through exploring difference (Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo, Yappera).

Discussions around difference, similarities and equity help children to be comfortable with difference and to respect other ways of being and doing. Modelling positive interaction that

respects difference is a key way to support children to develop this type of acceptance. Some services with high numbers of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have chosen to teach another language (Yawarra) which enables all children to feel that their culture and language is respected and valued. Other services mention the importance of celebrating the cultural events of all children at the service. TACCA consults with all parents to ensure that their cultural events, such as Ramadan, are celebrated. This supports the identity of children from diverse backgrounds, and is an engaging way to celebrate cultural difference with all children.

A number of services discuss the importance of the cultural diversity of their community. For Minya Bunhii, whilst their priority is to support the Aboriginal children in the community, their philosophy is that where possible the centre should also represent *all* children in the community as this aids unity both within and out of the centre. As one educator describes, “the wider community seems to know they belong (at Minya Bunhii), and we don’t lose anybody.” Many services emphasise the value of culturally diverse staff who can share their cultures with children on a daily basis (Jalygurr, Minya Bunhii, Congress, Yappera). Participation in community events such as the Broome’s Shinju Matsuri festival (Jalygurr) and Harmony Day (Lulla’s) are valuable opportunities for children to celebrate the diversity of their community.

Diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups is explored through discussions about varied cultural traditions such as bush tucker and traditional stories (Koonibba, Yappera, Minya Bunhii, Lulla’s, Gundoo). At Gundoo the community is predominantly Aboriginal, and so staff are exploring ways to introduce Torres Strait Islander culture through using pictures to explore the culture with children. They are also building relationships with a local Torres Strait Islander family to enable them to come in and share their songs and language at the centre. Recognising that their children may represent a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups many services explore children’s family backgrounds and histories through family mapping and discussions between families, staff and children (Yappera, Koonibba, Gundoo). The Director of Lulla’s recounts a conversation with the children that focused on “how different we all are but how we’re all the same. And the kids were like ‘wow we’re all Koori but we’ve all got different coloured hands!’” Several services mention the importance of valuing the diversity of family practices (Koonibba, Gudjahgahmiamia). Gudjahgahmiamia seeks information from families to ensure that the service practices reflect their culture. Gunai Lidj encourages respect for individual diversity by raising awareness that “everyone has got their own identity, (and) it’s important for their identity to be recognised.”

In summary, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services enable children to be connected with and contribute to their world in a variety of practical and innovative ways that link them with their community, nature and each other. Children’s connection nature is promoted through practical, hands-on activities that enable children to actively experience nature and interactions with animals. Children are encouraged to develop a sense of environmental responsibility and awareness through practices such as recycling. Development of social responsibility is supported through exploring rights and responsibilities as group members. Finally, children are encouraged to respect, understand and appreciate diversity through interactive activities and discussions that explore difference on individual and cultural levels.

5.3 Children Have a Strong Sense of Wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined within the EYLF as encompassing both physical and psychological elements. Physical health is characterised as encompassing, amongst other aspects, nutrition, health, personal hygiene and physical fitness. The EYLF also states that wellbeing improves children's confidence, resilience and agency, which are aided by warm, trusting relationships between educators and children, a key EYLF principle. The EYLF states that nurturing relationships and consistent emotional support is particularly key in this. The EYLF also focuses on holistic approaches within the provision of early childhood development, which involves viewing children's development as encompassing physical, personal, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and development. This EYLF element also recognises the connections between children, their families and communities as important aspects in a child's wellbeing.

All services interviewed echo this broad philosophy of wellbeing by defining it in broad terms as encompassing children's social, emotional, creative, cultural, physical and cognitive/intellectual development. Importantly, a unique feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services is that they believe that children's wellbeing cannot be viewed in isolation – being dependent on and intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of their family and community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood centres are key services to cater to this broader definition of wellbeing because they are viewed as *part* of the community. A unique strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services is that they are able to holistically respond to a range of diverse wellbeing needs, generally providing health, dental, nutritional and parenting programs and services. They also have a strong focus on meeting children's social and emotional wellbeing needs, an essential aspect of which is the strong, nurturing relationships between staff and children. Despite the obvious benefits of this holistic approach for children's wellbeing needs, many services suffer from funding challenges (discussed in the final section).

Capacity to holistically respond to a range of needs

A distinctive characteristic of the early childhood centres interviewed is that they are able to effectively and holistically respond to the diversity of needs of their children, families and communities through the provision of an array of services, echoing the original philosophy behind the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) model. The provision of holistic service delivery – viewing all of the child's needs as interconnected, and viewing the child in the context of their family and community – is an integral concept demonstrated by all of the services interviewed, despite funding challenges that now limit the multifunctional nature of their service delivery capabilities. This issue is discussed further below.

Responding to children's wellbeing requirements in this way is based on the premise that children best develop when they are healthy, socially and emotionally secure, and when their families are supported. Staff understand that catering for a child's wellbeing necessitates providing holistic support to their entire family (for specific examples see Birrelee and the

Aboriginal Children's Centre). More broadly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services understand that child wellbeing is best promoted in the context of community wellbeing and development (Birrelee, Aboriginal Children's Centre). As one Director commented, it's "about community development...it's all about those strands that need to go into early childhood services, the health strand, the education strand, the training and development strand." (Aboriginal Children's Centre).

Services interviewed display a unique approach to the provision of care and support to families and children with their strong commitment to providing holistic care to all families who walk in the door. At Birrelee the Director illustrates that this means that staff need to be able to respond to a diverse variety of situations, "on any given day any situation could walk in the door, and we have to respond to that as a community service. We never turn anyone away and we just try and do what we can given the (difficult financial) circumstances".

Centres attribute their ability to provide services in this way to several factors. Firstly, a unique feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services is that they seek to address children's care and development needs in a holistic fashion – and this fundamental concept forms the basis of most service philosophies (TACCA).

Several services comment that being a smaller centre they are often able to provide more personalised care and can enable staff to better understand the complex needs of children (Gunai Lidgee and Koonibba). At Birrelee a lower child to staff ratio means that staff are able to provide a more individualised, high level of care to each child. As the Director explains, lower ratios mean better outcomes for children,

Working with our community anything can happen on any given day...a child may need one to one (attention), or a family may need assistance that takes half your day. Whether it be just support or whether it's making phone calls or supporting families in decisions they have to make, or whether it's working with other agencies to connect them to the families so they aren't approaching agencies cold face.

As well as the *number* of staff, *who* staff are is a further crucial aspect in being able to provide the complex array of care services necessary. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are part of the local community are key to being able to provide this holistic care because they understand each child's context. Birrelee's Director expands on this,

...if we didn't have the Aboriginal staff here, we wouldn't have the strong community links, or the understanding from the community of the children's and families' issues. And that's why our service can respond so well and appropriately to different things that go on.

With limited funding increases to meet demand, many services focus on building strong partnerships with external organisations to be able to deliver the support their children and families need. Centres have built relationships with local health departments in order to access screening and dental care, and partnerships with early intervention services such as Noah's Ark

help services to deliver parenting support and early intervention programs. For Minya Bunhii and Koonibba knowledge-sharing on children's care and development takes place at local 'hub' meetings between all local ECEC services, where issues such as occupational therapy, speech therapy or children's developmental needs are discussed, and ideas and knowledge shared.

Utilising the support services of parent body

A number of services speak of their relationship with their parent body as key to their capacity to provide a range of services to meet children's wellbeing needs (Congress, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Coolabaroo, Gudjahgahmiamia). Parent or umbrella bodies are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that provide a variety of child, family and health services to the local community. This enables ECEC services to deliver integrated services to meet children's social, emotional and health wellbeing needs (Congress, Aboriginal Children's Centre). At Congress a strong relationship with the health and parenting intervention programs enables the child care service to facilitate health care and parenting support programs.

Health and dental

Part of the broad vision of MACS was to link parents and children with health services in an accessible, non-judgemental and safe environment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services continue to provide this support to communities. Centres consulted detailed a comprehensive list of health and dental services available to children, including eye and ear checks; weight and height screening; maternal health services; dental care; occupational therapy; immunisations; speech pathology and the provision of advice and information to parents and families. Many services enjoy regular visits from a child health nurse or other specialists, others provide care through scheduled interventions at certain times of the year. For some centres accessing on-site health services can be challenging, and so staff have organised buses to deliver children and families to local health and dental services (Koonibba). This is particularly important for services where parents may not have access to transport.

Some services go beyond treating children to treating family members, from the basis that healthier adults lead to healthier children. Birrelee provides a free wound clinic that is open to anyone in the community. By focusing on educating adults, Birrelee ensures that children can also receive improved health care. The MACS has also linked into a swine flu research project which has enabled them to provide immunisation services to children and their families, and a partnership with Community Health has supported all members of families with young babies to receive whooping cough vaccinations.

Many centres take an active preventative approach to children's health, focusing on educating parents and children. Birrelee's health model, for example, concentrates on improving *overall* health and holds discussions with children and parents around aspects of good health such as "learning to blow your nose, good hygiene, eating well (and) sleeping well." The Aboriginal Children's Centre's focus on health and nutrition reflects the focus that their parent body, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, is promoting within the wider Aboriginal community. As the Centre Director explains, "We're mirroring here what our health promotions program and our health services are trying to do with the adult population of the community." This helps to

ensure that children's health and wellbeing is considered within the context of the entire community and can therefore complement existing programs and be better targeted to need.

A valuable characteristic of these holistic approaches to health and wellbeing is the way that they engage with families as active partners in their children's health. Several centres hold health-themed open days. For example at Lulla's a dentist visit to the service was celebrated with all families and children, which helped the children to develop a positive association with going to the dentist. Birrelee also holds open day celebrations involving health services, families and children to build these partnerships and to highlight the importance of health.

Centres actively encourage children to take responsibility for their own health through hand-washing, nose-blowing and hygiene habits (see Gundoo, Koonibba, Birrelee). Strategies to encourage children to sustain their own health include the development of daily hygiene

Nutrition on a budget: Birrelee

Birrelee has taken a particularly innovative, comprehensive approach to children's nutrition. Operating within a tight budget has prompted the to work with a dietician to design nutritious meals based on the weekly food specials available. The Director describes that a further benefit is being able to then share these recipes with families. Acknowledging that many families also operate on tight budgets, all meals are designed to be under \$10 for a whole family. This has also meant that Birrelee and families are able to work together to foster healthy and nutritious eating for each child. Staff share with families recipes that their child particularly enjoyed, and also create a photo diary of different cooking sessions for families to view. The Director describes their philosophy of working with families on nutrition as a strengths based, encouraging approach that is about information sharing, rather than telling families what they should be feeding their children. Through this program staff have observed that children are starting to change their eating habits, as the Director explains, "the children are receiving that information and then they make those healthy food choices. So they're in control of it." Sustaining their work on healthy eating and nutrition, the centre now regularly takes in dietician students who are able to come in to do 'hands on' cooking with the children.

routines, displays on hygiene, and activities and discussions to encourage children to think about their health.

Nutrition

Almost all services mention nutrition as a key element in providing for children's wellbeing. A number of centres speak of the importance of focusing on healthy eating and providing children with nutritious meals, as not all children receive their full nutritional needs outside the centre (Minya Bunhii, Coolabaroo, Gunai Lidj). Understanding that a nutritious diet helps to promote overall health, Birrelee has developed a nutrition program that provides children with their entire nutritional requirements for the day. As the Director explains, "we consulted with a dietician and designed recipes with nutritionally rich food which would give the daily intake for the hours they are here. Which means if they have toast for tea, no drama, they have toast for tea." Another service works with their parent body's health clinic to provide specialised care for failure to thrive children through a nutrition focus. As the Director explains, this is about looking at "what sort of things we can do to improve these children's weight while they're in care here" (Congress).

Many centres have formed constructive partnerships to deliver nutrition programs for children and families. Koonibba has received accreditation under the South Australian *Start Right Eat*

Right program, and staff have received training in nutrition and food handling. The Director believes that parents feel pride that their centre has this accreditation, and this helps make it a centre of choice for families. Gunai Lidgee have worked with the Aboriginal Health section of their state health department to improve their nutritional program and engagement with families on this issue, including utilising the 'Tucker Talk Tips' – a series of resources on healthy eating and activity to prompt discussions and sessions on healthy eating and nutrition with parents.

Several centres mention strategies they use to encourage children to develop sustainable, healthy eating habits. At Gunai Lidgee staff share meals with the children to role model healthy eating, and use this time to discuss food choices with the children. At Jalygurr children are empowered to make choices about their own eating, with morning tea spread over several hours so children can learn to be aware of their own needs and to eat when they are hungry.

Engaging with parents is also a key aspect of developing children's healthy eating habits at the services consulted. Sharing information around children's food likes and dislikes, nutritious recipes and cooking on a budget are all strategies adopted by centres to help promote well-balanced diets for children at home. For example, at Jalygurr a whiteboard visible to all staff, children and parents displays the weekly menu, and includes a section for staff and parent comments and suggestions (see also Gundoo for a similar practice). Yawarra promotes information sharing through regular newsletter features on healthy eating advice and recipes.

Physical exercise and sun safety

Several services mention the importance of physical exercise programs for children's wellbeing. Outdoor environments provide opportunities for staff to design learning environments that encourage children to be physically active and take positive risks (Jalygurr, Aboriginal Children's Centre, TACCA, Gundoo), as well as developing their motor skills and spatial awareness. Some services have linked in with organised physical activity programs, such as the *Healthy Aussie Kids* program (Yappera) or *Kid Fit* (Gundoo). Other services specifically mention their accreditation under the Sun Smart program, and their approach to teaching children about the risks of sun exposure. Staff do this through role-modelling appropriate clothes to wear, sunscreen use and conversations with the children around the risks of sun burn and appropriate times of the day to be inside and outside (Jalygurr, TACCA).

Parental support

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services understand that children's wellbeing is intrinsically linked to parental wellbeing, skills and knowledge, and that healthy children are best supported by empowered, strong families. This understanding underpins the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services interact with parents and families – usually seeing themselves as community development organisations as well as early childhood services. All services interviewed provided some form of parenting support. Playgroups, such as the Locational Supported Playgroup hosted by TACCA, were identified as valuable opportunities for parents and children to interact in a supported and engaging atmosphere that helps to improve parents social support networks (Gudjahgahmiamia, TACCA).

Other support programs focus on the parent's emotional wellbeing, skills and knowledge, with many services running programs that incorporate sessions on topics such as first aid, positive parenting, child protection, budgeting, sexual health, learn to swim, cooking and nutrition and arts and crafts. Several services have materials such as parenting resources and toys that parents can borrow (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Gudjahgahmiamia).

Early childhood services are ideal locations for these types of programs, being able to readily provide child care for participating parents (see Coolabaroo), and generally being perceived by parents as non-threatening, trusted services (Congress). More intense or targeted forms of support are provided by some services in areas such as 'managing challenging behaviours', which provides parents with specialised support to develop strategies to cope with difficult behaviour (see Gudjahgahmiamia), and through parenting programs that incorporate home visits (see also Gudjahgahmiamia). Congress is able to work to support families who are at risk of experiencing child protection involvement by collaborating with the targeted family support program within their parent body. This enables the centre to work more easily with families most in need. Families will often come to the child care centre with their family support worker, which creates an easier access point for them. This is a two-way process, as the child care centre can also then refer families who may need more support to their parent body. One service identified the difficulties in providing parenting support services for fathers, citing complex shame issues as a barrier (Coolabaroo).

As well as the provision of parenting programs, services also support family wellbeing through assisting their reconnect with culture (as discussed in section 5.1). The flow-on effects of enabling children to learn about their culture carries on to their families as children are able to relate the traditions and language that they have learned at the centre to their families, who may not have had the opportunity to experience this during their own childhoods.

Social and emotional wellbeing

Early childhood centres interviewed convey the fundamental importance of social and emotional wellbeing and security. As mentioned in section 5.1, strong cultural identity is seen by services as vital to enable children to be resilient, secure and confident adults (see for example Yappera, Gunai Lidj). Many educators speak of the importance of fostering children's cultural identity and showing children how valued and rich their culture as a key method to build children's self-esteem and resilience (see for example Birrelee). Particularly essential to this is presenting children with positive messages about their culture. Coolabaroo's Director feels that fostering positive cultural identity is critical to enable Aboriginal children to be strong in themselves, as she indicates that unfortunately negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people are still prevalent in society,

Building on resilience: Jalygurr

Jalygurr's Coordinator expressed that children at the service display high levels of resilience, which she attributes to the fact that most children are strongly connected to country, culture and family through regular activities with their families such as camping and fishing, "going out bush so they're learning about their country". Educators are able to build on this at the centre by incorporating activities that affirm children's interests and cultural traditions – such as visits to the beach and bush.

which can undermine children's self-esteem and identity. Yappera's Director adds to this that pride in their culture is critical for children when they start school, stating that this assists children to begin at school "proud of their culture and who they are, and (to) have a strong sense of themselves in the context of their families as well."

Early childhood services and staff provide a vital role in fostering children's self-esteem and self-respect. Gundoo's Director explains how this is critical to develop children who are confident to tackle the challenges of school, "if they can build their self-esteem in the first five years by the time they get to school they are ready for anything". This is felt to be particularly important in situations where community disempowerment may impact negatively on children (Birrelee). One Director described how conversations about respecting the environment, respecting each other, and respecting oneself often go hand in hand. She explains how they emphasise to children that,

This is a shared space, and we respect each other, but you know what we respect ourselves. That's a big issue in our community when it comes to identity, that people just don't respect themselves enough to be able to participate in community. We want these kids to go to school so strong and deadly, and so confident about who they are and what they can do. (Birrelee)

Some services use particular resources such as strength cards to promote discussions with children around self-esteem and identity (Gunai Lidj). Many educators stress the importance of children feeling that their early childhood centre is a secure, stable and nurturing place. Staff at Coolabaroo strive to ensure that children feel that the service is a safe and secure place for them, based on the understanding that from this base children "can develop to whatever they want to be later on." For some children, challenging home lives can mean that the centre they attend plays a particularly important stabilising role in their lives, as explained by one Director, that "coming here is safe from eight to five. And we make sure that they're loved and cared for" (Lulla's). Congress works with their parent body to support children who have a family member with a chronic disease, to "give them some normality" in their lives through attending and support at child care.

Several services speak of the extra care and support they provide to children who are in out of home care (Minya Bunhii, Lulla's, Congress). At Lulla's this is particularly prominent, with five percent of all children having some level of involvement with child protection services. Staff have worked hard to establish a relationship and agreed intervention process with the Department of Human Services (DHS), to ensure that any intervention between DHS staff and children at Lulla's is done in a respectful way that causes the least stress for children and staff, and does not compromise the trust Lulla's has with its families. Congress also has a high proportion of children in care, and so actively encourages and supports families with children

in care to visit their child at the centre (where this is in the best interests of the child). This helps prepare children to transition back to living with their families. Congress also works with the child protection department to support children during transition times. The Director described how it is particularly important for emotional well being that children in care are able to bond and attach to their family before returning to live with them. She feels that sometimes this preparation is not supported strongly enough by the child protection services.

A number of services utilise a family grouping approach for all or part of their program, as a way to create a natural, family style environment (Aboriginal Children's Centre, TACCA, Jalygurr, Koonibba, Congress, Gundoo). As one service explains, this is important because "we're a family, we're a community" (Aboriginal Children's Centre). Two services have a permanent family group environment (TACCA, Congress, Koonibba), where rooms are not segregated by age, but instead children from six months to five years old learn, play and develop together. Other services incorporate family group time at specific times such as transitions or meal times (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Jalygurr, Minya Bunhii). All centres feel that this is a

unique strength of their service that brings many benefits for children such as improved communication and social skills, cooperation and social responsibility. For example, older children often take on roles of caring for and teaching younger ones, which reflects traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices and the dynamics of community life (Koonibba, TACCA, Gundoo, Congress). This approach can also be particularly valuable for children who don't have siblings, as it teaches them to interact with children of different ages (TACCA, Koonibba). It also gives children a chance to interact, play and learn from their siblings and relatives (Jalygurr, Gundoo, Koonibba, Minya Bunhii, Congress). Relatives can often help settle or calm upset children, which helps aid their sense of safety at the early childhood service

Family grouping: Congress

Congress implements a **holistic approach** to caring for children by using a family group structure within their service. This aligns with family wishes, as culturally a family group setting is better aligned with families' home and community environment and traditions. Consultations with staff and families produced a positive reaction to the proposed change, and so staff then conducted research on the area. Training on the theory of attachment and the idea of primary carers within the family groupings was also provided to staff. Children are now free to roam throughout the centre, but all still have their own 'homeroom' and primary carer to provide them with security and attachment.

A key benefit of this approach has been to curb children's behavioural issues, which the Director attributes to reduced competition for toys between children of the same age in the same room. This has reduced staff stress and room noise levels. The Director also believes that it has encouraged staff to reflect more deeply on how to meet the needs of each individual child, rather than an age group. She illustrates the benefits of this approach in supporting children to assist and nurture each other. She describes how she recently witnessed a young child climbing a plank, with an older child standing behind to hold the plank steady for him. She illustrates how the older child "was giving him a chance to actually explore slowly but he was there guiding him."

(Jalygurr, Koonibba, Minya Bunhii), and to assist with continuity between their home and the service environments.

Relationships with staff

All centres describe secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships between staff and children as a key aspect of care. The services interviewed describe their relationships using words such as warm, respectful and caring. Many educators talk about the respect they feel for children's interests, knowledge, capabilities, values and beliefs (Birrelee, Gudjahgahmiamia). This helps educators to best meet children's needs, for example - as one educator describes – through “valuing and respecting what they are interested in even if this isn't something you yourself are passionate about” (Birrelee).

Staff interviewed strongly feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services are particularly capable of fostering caring and nurturing relationships with children because “the care base is already there” (Gunai Lidj, also Congress and Gundoo). Centres often feel that they create a family-like environment for children *because* of their focus on attachment and relationships. One service fosters this through allocating children primary carers from amongst the staff. Carers and children are matched based on the child's needs and relationship with a staff member, whilst still taking into account community dynamics (Congress).

“One of the main things I tell the girls is that when our children come through the gates and into our centre we're the ones who have to make a difference in those little people's lives. And give them the best whilst they're here at Gundoo, because...when they're here it is up to us to make that difference in their lives.” (Director, Gundoo)

This care base is seen as vital in enabling children to develop positive self-esteem and high expectations of themselves. It is particularly important for children who may be growing up in disadvantaged situations where care and support may not be as consistent (Coolabaroo). One educator emphasises that by believing in children educators empower them to believe in and value themselves (Coolabaroo). At the centres consulted, strong relationships with children are also about educators being attuned to children, as an educator from TACCA describes,

As a carer you know the children...you know when they're happy, when they're sad, when they're really proud of what they've done. So it's nice to be able to write that down and show that you really understand what was happening in that context.

At many services children and staff are often related (Koonibba, Gudjahgahmiamia, Lulla's, Jalygurr, Coolabaroo, Gundoo). This helps replicate the nurturing environment children experience within their extended families (see Gudjahgahmiamia), and is felt by services to be a unique feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services. As described by Jalygurr's Director, the unique family-style atmosphere of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services supports children to “settle in a lot easier because they know the staff, they are related to them. It doesn't take them as long”. She points out that this also benefits parents, who “feel more comfortable leaving (their children) here because they know the staff that have been here for a long time, and they know that their cousins are here or someone else they know.”

Many educators explain that they can appreciate and observe the importance of their relationships with children through the children's reactions on seeing staff outside the centre (see Coolabaroo). Perceiving how warmly a child responds to their educator also helps to foster a parent's trust the quality of the relationship between their child and staff (see Koonibba).

Stability in staff rosters is important to ensure that children feel secure in their attachments with staff. Educators feel that this is also essential to help children feel that they are important to staff. For example, Coolabaroo's Director works hard to ensure that children have daily stability in the carers who look after and educate them, expressing "I think that's important for them, to feel that we're here. They're important to us as well. And that we're a stable presence, because at home it might not be stable." She explains that most of the staff have worked there for a number of years, which also helps aid the sense of stability for children and for families.

Many centres speak of how they have cared for several generations of families (Coolabaroo, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Koonibba) which staff feel is testament to the positive experiences parents had, in short that "because they've had a good experience here they've brought their children back" (Coolabaroo). At Koonibba children and adults who previously attended the service often visit, demonstrating their continued strong connection to the service and staff. This highlights Koonibba's success in enabling children's strong, positive relationships with staff.

Respect for older people is an important Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition, often evidenced by calling older people 'aunty' and 'uncle'. The majority of services maintain this by children referring to educators as 'aunty', 'uncle', 'nanna' or 'gaga' (Minya Bunhii, Yappera, Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo, Yawarra). As well as honouring and maintaining the traditions and respect governing community relationships, this helps children understand how they belong within their local community. Furthermore it reflects how the children view their carers as part of their extended family network (see for example Minya Bunhii) and is "something that they're familiar with, it makes them feel secure within the centre when they come in" (Yawarra).

Funding challenges and supporting children's wellbeing

With funding proving a large challenge for a number of centres, many services have found that their ability to respond to children's wellbeing through a holistic approach has significantly decreased, as one Director comments, "our funding model definitely doesn't reflect the work that we should be doing, and that we are doing." (Birrelee). Additional services that focus on children's wellbeing are often delivered through a sporadic fashion that relies on one-off funding, or on relationships with and the assistance of other organisations (Birrelee, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Koonibba, ARMSU, IPSU NSW & ACT, Yorganop IPSU).

In conclusion, the services interviewed holistically meet children's wellbeing needs through integrated service provision approaches. Furthermore, through viewing children's development as occurring within the wider context of the wellbeing of their family and community, they focus on programs that support the wellbeing of children, families and communities, recognising that the wellbeing of one is not possible without the wellbeing of the others.

5.4 Children are Confident and Involved Learners

The fourth EYLF outcome examines how children can be supported to explore, problem-solve and take responsibility for their own learning. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed demonstrated their capability to facilitate this outcome through their emphasis on children as autonomous and competent, and through their focus on identity, self-esteem and confidence. Many services adopt a strengths based philosophy of children's learning, focusing on building upon a child's strengths. Through enabling children to direct their own learning and by providing them with unstructured, open-ended learning opportunities, services are able to encourage children's confidence and active involvement in their learning. A guiding principle mentioned by services in encouraging this outcome is that staff hold high expectations of children and their capabilities, a significant EYLF principle that involves actively believing in children's abilities to succeed. A significant enabling factor in promoting this outcome is that children enjoy positive, encouraging relationships with staff, a further EYLF principle.

Aboriginal child-rearing practices

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services are particularly well placed to encourage children to be responsible and to learn through active experience, as a central tenet of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing philosophy is to see children as capable, independent learners. Staff at Minya Bunhii illustrate this principle well. The centre Director explains how in Aboriginal culture children are taught to take responsibility for themselves, "Aboriginal people tell children 'if you do that, you're going to get hurt. If you get hurt don't come to me because I've told you not to do that'. That's the way we teach children. But then there's a different way in the white community." Staff feel that this helps children to learn independence and confidence in their own actions. This Director of Congress also speaks of the unique strength of Aboriginal child-rearing culture in giving children freedom to explore and experiment, all the while knowing that staff are supervising them and ready to provide support where needed.

Strengths based approaches

The majority of services talk about the value of a strengths based approach to assist children to become confident and involved learners. A strengths based approach is portrayed by services as being one where educators focus on children's strengths, rather than their deficits, in all of their engagement with children. It is described by services as being an approach that looks at "not what the child can do and what the child can't do, but what they can *nearly* do" (Gunai Lidj) and as "thinking outside the box, instead of focusing on what children couldn't do...it's developing on what they are good at, and keep on developing on that. And if there are things that they aren't good at...it's looking more at their strengths." (Jalygurr).

Congress provides a useful illustration of this, where the Director explains that "if a child loves building in a sandpit but doesn't know how to use a pencil, for me I'd be saying well let's get sticks and draw because culturally that's what they've been doing at home. Then we can actually build up that interest in the sand and then we can add crayons and build on that." This

is particularly important for children who may lack experience who may lack experience in certain things – like using tools such as scissors or pens - as it builds on their skills in other areas. A strengths based approach is therefore about looking at the right way to teach a particular child (Congress, Birrelee), rather than expecting the child to learn through a certain, prescribed process.

One service describes how a strengths based approach is a more holistic way of looking at children's development, and that whilst developmental milestones are still important, staff need to recognise that children develop in diverse ways. For example where a child is delayed in walking, staff don't focus on making a child's "whole life at daycare revolve around getting up and walking. If they're not ready then you're just not going to" (TACCA). This approach encourages educators to personalise their approach to each child's development. As Yawarra's Director explains, the benefits of this approach include that "It makes you look deeper into each child. I think that you tend to know the child better at the end of their time at the centre than you did before." It can also enable educators to better support children with challenging behaviours as it encourages them to focus on activities that hold a child's concentration (Yappera).

A strengths based approach also honours the child's knowledge and experience, "realising that they've got a lot of information there and trying to build on that knowledge." (Yawarra). At Birrelee, staff were becoming increasingly concerned that one child wasn't particularly verbal. Through an informal discussion with his mother, the Director discovered the child's interest in dinosaurs and so set up a learning environment that contained many dinosaur activities and toys. The change in the child's behaviour was extremely positive: the Director describes how,

He then taught the group the names of all the dinosaurs, he knew the lot...so the kids were then choosing their favourite dinosaurs from the display...And he was in charge of all that. This was a child that didn't speak, he was in charge of giving a new group of friends all that knowledge. And it was such a powerful moment for him, but also for us – we understood him a lot more so we can care for him more effectively as well.

A strengths based approach underlies how children's development is captured in documentation. At Birrelee, staff strive at all times to display children as confident and capable learners in their observations, portfolios and learning stories. An educator from TACCA illustrates how this looks in practice, "in the past ...observations were a lot more about how a child was doing something, like holding a pen in his right hand with a certain grip" or "they're twelve months and not walking, what can we do to make them walk?" Now educators focus on "observing what children are thinking, not what they're doing". By assessing children's emotions and observing and engaging with them in different activities staff are better able to connect with children and build upon their interests to help them learn.

Children directing their own learning

A crucial aspect of children becoming confident and involved learners is for them to be given opportunities to direct their own learning, as the Director of Birrelee highlights, fostering

children as confident learners is “not about children being taught, it’s about them engaging in their own learning as well.” A key way to enable children to do this is for staff to scaffold learning off children’s interests, skills and knowledge. Staff at all services discuss a variety of ways to initiate these processes, including through discussions with children about activities they do outside the service, engaging with a key interest a child may have, or through unstructured, open-ended discussions (see for example Yappera). At Gudjahgahmiamia staff talk about prompting children to explore what direction they want an activity to go in, “The staff ask open-ended questions to them...they give them that starting point, and children will just run with it”. Staff play a key role in this process by enabling opportunities for *all* children to provide input, and by ensuring that their suggestions and knowledge are taken seriously. This in turn helps children feel confident and empowered to contribute their ideas to discussions, as the Director from Gudjahgahmiamia describes, children need to be supported to feel “that their opinion is valued, because they see it come to fruition.” This supports children to view themselves as active contributors, because “it’s not just the one person that’s having the say all the time or the teacher being the leader, it’s up to them to make those decisions as well.”

Open-ended learning and problem-solving through play

Many educators express a philosophy that children learn best through play (Birrelee, Yappera, Yawarra, Congress, TACCA), as play-based learning “challenges (children)...makes them inquisitive and makes them want to explore” (TACCA). Interactive, play-based activities are also felt by many services to be a key way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn (Coolabaroo, Minya Bunhii). As one Director emphasises, children’s ability to learn through play must not be underestimated (Aboriginal Children’s Centre). It is the role of educators to facilitate this through ongoing support and through the provision of unstructured, open-ended learning opportunities that encourage children to independently and confidently investigate, imaginatively design and direct their own play (TACCA, Gudjahgahmiamia). Whilst staff may have an idea of the structure of what they want to do, what children experience should be a flowing, self-directed and fun experience (Gunai Lidj). Play has many benefits for children, as one educator explains, “I think that it’s actually developing the child’s overall sense of being, self-esteem, social skills, all that - just by playing” (Gudjahgahmiamia).

Play-based learning also creates the most natural environment in which children can develop, as the Director of Gunai Lidj comments, “Children need to learn and explore comfortably through play without being watched and pressurised. Otherwise they’re not going to learn.” Some educators also feel that in the early years it is particularly important to allow children to develop through play, as this enables them to develop the skills and knowledge that they will then take on to the formal, structured environment of school (Minya Bunhii). Allowing children to direct their learning through play also helps to ensure that it will be based on their interest, which increases their concentration and engagement in an activity (Jalygurr, Birrelee, Congress). Staff at Minya Bunhii speak of the importance of educators role-modelling positive behaviour that children can then act out themselves through play.

Staff interviewed speak of the value in setting up learning environment and materials that encourage investigative, play-based learning. Staff stress the importance of providing support

to children without actually doing things for them (see for example Gudjahgmiamia). One service describes how within art activities this translates into showing children how to use materials and tools, but not what to create with them (Coolabaroo). This also helps children to feel proud of their work, as it is their own creation (Birrelee, Coolabaroo). A further illustration of this comes from Jalygurr, where staff have created a collage table with arts and crafts materials that children can visit as and when they choose, to create whatever they like. Educators provide the materials, and ensure that the space is engaging and appealing to children, but then leave the children to create their own artwork by following their imagination and interests. Jalygurr's Coordinator feels that this reflects that "staff aren't really choosing what they want them to do, the children are choosing what they want to do and the staff are just there to guide them." Other services take a similar approach by providing children with materials and a little guidance in order to encourage them to take on investigative roles. For example, following a recent focus on 'construction' at TACCA, children were given tools to play with and explore. Noticing that the children were really expressing an interest in and able to coordinate the new tools very well, the staff came up with the idea of taking apart a recently donated old television. This activity allowed children to develop their confidence as active participants in their learning because they had initiated the activity and were in control of it.

A variety of services use natural resources to encourage children to use their imagination to make each resource into what they want it to be (see for example Koonibba, Jalygurr). This encourages them to be active and creative participants in games and activities. The Director of the Aboriginal Children's Centre explains how an outdoor play space rich in natural, open-ended materials teaches children not just about the environment, but "how to play, to learn, how to be inquisitive little learners". The Director also discusses how staff need to design environments that challenge children to be confident and involved learners, and place high expectations in their capacities. This is as much about deciding what *not* to put into an environment as what to put in. She illustrates this with an example from when they first moved into their new centre. Educators initially worried that the outdoor environment didn't contain enough to stimulate the children. They quickly realised however that the children knew exactly what to do, "the kids are over there working out what that gravel bit is for...working out if you hop in the dinghy that sits in the playground it takes you over to the islands and then you can go mutton-birding." Learning through play at the centre is about giving children opportunities to make up their own games, make up their own challenges and work together to explore how to use a space and materials. This creates an environment where children, not adults, are directing the learning, which enables them to become confident and involved learners.

Activities that focus on problem-solving are also discussed as valuable ways to support children's development as confident and involved learners. An example of this comes from TACCA, where educators recently designed an activity using toy car tracks and varied surfaces to engage children to independently explore different senses and textures, and encourage their spatial awareness. This included using varied gradients and surfaces such as ice trays to allow the children to explore slipperiness and sand to allow them to explore depth and texture. Educators then asked the children questions such as "which one will float?" or "which one will be fastest?" to encourage their curiosity and experimentation skills (see also Gundoo). At Lulla's

a similar problem-solving approach is used with babies. Educators focus on promoting ‘two ways’ learning – a method that facilitates children’s problem-solving by encouraging them to find more than one way to tackle a problem.

High expectations of children

Children are supported to be confident and involved learners when educators display high expectations of them, both in their interactions with them and in how they design activities and experiences to facilitate their development. Many services discuss the importance of supporting children to develop expectations of and confidence in themselves and what they can personally achieve (Yawarra, Coolabaroo, Gudjahgahmiamia). At Gudjahgahmiamia this was expressed through a philosophy that their children are the future of the community, and that it is crucial to support them to grow into strong, confident community members.

Supporting children to develop high expectations of themselves is emphasised as particularly important for children who may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as building children’s self-esteem and confidence can enable them to break out of intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (Yawarra). As described by one Director, “by coming here and feeling that this is a safe place, (children) can develop their potential and they might be able to better their lives ahead” (Coolabaroo). Empowering children in this way supports them to transition to school confident in their identity, their knowledge and capabilities (Coolabaroo).

Several services discuss how supporting children to have high expectations of themselves entails working alongside their families to imbue children with a sense that they can achieve anything they put their mind to (Yappera, Birrelee). One method to achieve this is by staff presenting children as strong, capable and confident learners throughout all their interactions with parents. Portfolios and other documents that parents view can be particularly helpful in doing this, as they focus on children’s strengths in showcasing their development (TACCA). For example, at Birrelee a photo diary of cooking sessions shows parents how capable children are and encourages them to build on their children’s strengths at home. Photos are also valuable tools to talk with parents about how children can learn through play, which can then support families to continue on these intentional play-based activities at home (Birrelee).

Many services demonstrate how their philosophy of high expectations of children leads them to regularly encourage children to try new activities and experiences (Koonibba, Congress, Yappera, Birrelee). Key to this is responding to each child’s capabilities as an individual. Having high expectations of children is about respecting their capabilities and knowledge, and not holding them back based on their age (Gunai Lidj, Congress). As one Director describes “We’re not going to say ‘no they can’t do it because they’re too young’. So we try to eliminate the word no out of everything. And so if it’s safe then certainly they will get the opportunity to do it.” (Gunai Lidj). A number of services mention how they demonstrate their high expectations of their children through working with them to learn about safe play, for example with stairs, water, fire or climbing (Lulla’s, Gunai Lidj, Congress, Koonibba). As the Director of Congress describes, “It’s about supervision, it’s about high expectations and about children being able to use things in the right way.” Gunai Lidj also believe that activities should be offered to all

children at the centre, and so for example when cooking activities are happening all children are involved – with even the youngest “being given a bowl to stir”. The Director feels that this helps to push children to try new things and to be confident in their learning.

Relationships with staff

Positive, supportive relationships with staff (see section 5.3) are also seen as vital to enable children to develop confidence, self-esteem and engagement as involved learners (Birrelee). Staff view stable relationships as providing a base from which children can feel confident to tackle new challenges and learning experiences. The Director at Birrelee describes how the essence of children’s confidence is embodied in an attitude that, “‘I’ve never tried that before, but I know that you love me and if get it wrong you’re just going to say to me let’s try it again, so I’m just going to have a go’.” A recent activity at Birrelee teaching children to recognise their own names on flash cards illustrates this. After perceiving that one child hadn’t recognised her own name on a card, the Director worked with the child to encourage her to write her name. Through this one-on-one interaction the child was able to learn how to write her own name. She describes the child’s obvious pride in this achievement as she asked to take her writing home to show her family. The Director explains this child was able to do this because she has a strong sense of her own identity and comes from a position of wellbeing, essentially that “She knows who she is, she knows how she connects in this group and community, and she felt it was safe to try something new.” (Birrelee). All services expressed that a key to developing confident, engaged children is encouraging them to try new activities.

Three additional factors are important in this approach. Children must be supported by staff to build positive experiences out of the frustration they feel when they can’t do something (Yappera). Staff can also support children through facilitating discussions about how it’s ok to make mistakes, but ‘it’s just about having a go’ (Koonibba). Furthermore, staff must mediate the balance between encouraging and gently pushing children, without pushing them into things they may not be interested in or capable of. As discussed above, this may often involve a staff member working with a particular child more intensely to give them the confidence to try something new (Yappera, Birrelee). Yappera’s Director explains that “it’s that ongoing praise for children that gives them the confidence that they need. And that’s what we really promote when attracting staff working with Yappera, and the current staff working here - that children are all capable and competent learners.”

The EYLF outcome that children become confident and involved learners is approached by the services interviewed in a number of different ways. Building on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander philosophy of viewing children as capable and independent learners, services generally adopt a strengths based approach that expands on children’s interests and strengths to encourage their growth and development. Additionally staff consistently demonstrate high expectations of their children’s capabilities – a significant EYLF principle - which is key to bolstering children’s confidence to explore, investigate and direct their own learning.

5.5 Children are Effective Communicators

Communication within the EYLF, which is the focus of EYLF outcome five, encompasses children's literacy, numeracy and ability to communicate with others through a range of verbal and non-verbal methods. The importance of home language use is emphasised as a key element underpinning children's sense of identity and conceptual development. The EYLF also highlights the need for educators to build on the experiences children have with language, literacy and communication within their family and community context.

The fifth outcome appeared to be a hard one for services to articulate, as all services feel that it is something they focus on everyday throughout their interactions with children. Services describe that communication cuts across all interactions, activities and learning experiences, and as such is captured across all discussions of the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices. The following therefore is merely a summary of some of the particular points services make about supporting children to become effective communicators.

Services talk of the diverse ways in which they support children to be effective communicators including through formal and informal group discussions, one-on-one interactions, singing, books, story telling and role-modelling positive communication. They also mention the importance of using children's traditional language to support their communication development.

Staff engagement with children

Yappera describes how working within the Abecedarian approach assists staff to concentrate on language, listening and communication skills and to also think about *how* to best communicate with children – for example getting down to children's eye level to engage with them more thoroughly. Other services speak of the importance of quality interactions between staff and children during activities, with staff using play to prompt children to talk about what they are creating or doing (Koonibba, Gunai Lidj). A number of educators describe the benefits of this more intensive engagement as being increased concentration and engagement by children, growing confidence and communication skills (Koonibba, Gunai Lidj).

Group discussions

Many services mention the value of group discussions to promote children's effective group communication skills (Gudjahgahmiamia, Gunai Lidj, TACCA). Several educators speak of how they use group discussions as a time to encourage children to explore themes and ideas, including sharing their thoughts, knowledge and experiences. Group discussions also provide an excellent forum through which children can share their interests and what they would like to do at the centre (Yappera, Gudjahgahmiamia). All services illustrate how in some form or another they incorporate story telling, books, singing and discussions when they are expanding an activity on from children's interests (TACCA, Gudjahgahmiamia, Yappera).

Supporting children to interact with others

A number of centres describe strategies they use to support children learn positive methods of communication and engagement. Staff at Jalygurr support children through “positive interactions and guidance” to become effective communicators, for example redirecting children to adopt more constructive forms of communication with each other. Another service talks about the value of staff role-modelling effective communication to support children’s emotional and social development (Yawarra), essentially “the way you interact with the children (and) encourage the children to interact with each other.” One particular focus at Yawarra is encouraging children “to voice to other children how they’re thinking or feeling, so in telling them ‘don’t do that, I don’t like it’, trying to encourage them to relate *why* they don’t like it, so it’s not always the staff intervening in things.” This helps children to learn how to articulate how they’re feeling, and also to understand how their actions impact on others. At Gunai Lidj discussions focusing on self-esteem (as discussed above in section 5.3) support children to become effective communicators by encouraging them to verbalise or otherwise communicate how they feel when they are achieving.

Staff describe that when children have confidence in their communication skills the quality of child peer interactions increases (Birrelee, Jalygurr). At Birrelee staff have found that children now often role-model the behaviour of staff in supporting new children commencing in the rooms, “there are moments where the regular children who have been here for a while share that information and they themselves help other children become safe and secure and supported. It’s not all coming from adults, it’s actually coming from the community of children here as well.” Another service has witnessed how the children who attend a separate kindergarten in the morning are often observed sharing their experiences at kindergarten with the long day care children about their experiences at kindergarten – often playing at being teachers through introducing new activities (Jalygurr).

Literacy through partnerships: Coolabaroo

Coolabaroo have partnered with the Smith Family to run the literacy program *Let’s Read* at the centre. Staff have attended *Let’s Read* training, and now deliver the program at the MACS. The initiative provides the centre with books, and Coolabaroo then runs family information sessions on literacy and how families can participate in activities that support children’s literacy, before giving the books out to the children. They are also on the local *Lets Read* Steering Committee, but find that time constraints can sometimes limit their participation in this.

Books and story telling

All services mention a focus on books, story telling and literacy. Story telling is usually described as an interactive process where children are encouraged to engage with the story through asking questions and actively reading with the educator (Koonibba). Some services have fostered partnerships with literacy organisations (see the example from Coolabaroo). Yawarra chooses to celebrate literacy through incorporating it into fun activities. For example they recently held a family fun day, working in conjunction with other local organisations to promote literacy development within the centre. A free family barbecue was held, and additional activities facilitated for the children.

This helped to involve parents in the centre, and to support them to understand the value of literacy and the role they can and do play in their child’s development.

Some services also create their own resources such as books and games to support their children's literacy and numeracy skills – based on the premise that resources that reflect the local context will be more meaningful for children (Birrelee, Minya Bunhii, Koonibba, Coolabaroo). For more detail on this see the discussion of Minya Bunhii's home grown books contained in section 5.1. Staff at Yawarra are now utilising technology to support children's communication. As the Director explains, staff and children regularly collaborate to use the internet to explore topics of interests, and they then create books to reflect and record these learning projects. Through this the children are also learning how to bind and create books.

The vast majority of services also support children to become effective communicators in languages other than English through traditional language use and programs. These are discussed in detail in section 5.1 and as such will not be expanded upon here.

Communication can therefore be seen to be a fundamental focus of the services interviewed, at the heart of all their activities and incidental learning experiences. As well as encouraging literacy skills through reading and story telling, services also focus on supporting children to develop positive models of interaction and communication with each other. Group discussions provide useful forums to enable children to develop confidence to express themselves to their peers and to adults. Finally, the use of children's traditional language enables them to develop language skills both in English and their home language, as well as supporting them to connect to culture.

5. Partnerships with Families and Communities

A critical EYLF principle is that children's learning and development outcomes are most likely to be achieved when services foster partnerships between families, communities and support organisations. The EYLF recognises families as children's first teachers, and states that partnerships are based on, amongst other elements, understanding, trust, communication and shared decision-making. Partnerships also involve educators, support professionals and families working together to maximise a child's learning opportunities both in and out of the centre.

Successful partnerships between early childhood staff and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families recognise that the concept of family in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is broader than traditional interpretations based on the nuclear family structure. All services consulted speak passionately of the value of working in partnership with families as the most effective way to educate children: as one Director states, "it's a partnership between the educator and families...the educator can't do it on their own." Services also see the provision of family support as an integral aspect of supporting children's wellbeing.

A connection to community is also at the heart of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services featured in this paper, based on the premise that the community is a further integral support in providing early childhood care and development services (Gunai Lidj). Services consulted spoke of both their role as community development organisations, and the key ways they engage with the community – through outreach, hosting community visitors at the centre, and through partnerships with broader organisations. They also discussed the fundamental role of their parent and community boards as key mechanisms through which they engage with families and the community.

This section of the paper therefore explores how services define their partnerships with families and communities. Services generally describe a holistic view in which family is intrinsically connected to community, with much overlap between the two. As such it is not always possible to distinguish an approach that engages with only family or community.

Partnerships with parents and family

All services are unified in their emphasis on the role of trust in their partnerships with families. Further governing principles that emerged through the consultations are that positive partnerships are founded on respect, non-discrimination and valuing families knowledge. Services also speak of the importance of applying a strengths based approach, incorporating regular information sharing (verbal and non-verbal) and utilising strategies that build families' capacity to support their children.

Relationships built on trust

All services mention that trust is a vital factor in establishing and sustaining their partnerships with families. With shame being a factor present in many communities, it is vital that families feel that the service is a safe, non-judgmental, supportive and culturally appropriate space. The Director of the Aboriginal Children's Centre describes that relationships with families are first and foremost built on trust, which is established over time through consistency of staff. She illustrates the unique nature of these relationships,

Those connections have been built over generations, and that's what makes this place special, it's the fact that somebody can drop their child off here and the same person who was running it when they were here is still here. At the moment there's three staff working here in different capacities that were children here. How do you document that? How do you say my community values me as a child, and now my community is valuing me as an adult?

Staff are related to families or have community connections

Most staff at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services are part of the local community, and in many cases are related to children. All services consulted perceive this to be a positive factor for their partnerships with families, as being related to staff can help overcome shame factors families may feel, for example around issues such as difficulty in paying fees (Lulla's).

Relationships founded on trust: Lulla's

Lulla's staff have built up detailed knowledge of their community and families, and maintain this through conversations with families, centre open days and home visits. The relationships between staff and families helps to ensure that families don't feel shame when they need additional support. The service regularly checks in with families, particularly when children haven't attended for some time. The Director states that children's absence is often caused by embarrassment at having not paid fees, or parents being "shamed with different issues". She feels that in these situations communication and joint problem-solving to explore workable solutions for parents and the centre is key – with the object in mind being that children's attendance is always more important than fees. This can often involve staff working with families on issues such as budgeting, which is only possible because families know and trust staff. When Lulla's occasionally receives additional money staff will often deliver food baskets to families. As the Director describes, "Sometimes you don't need to say anything, just being able to help in any way...you just do it."

Employing staff who are part of the local community also aids accessibility for families, as Minya Bunhii's Director explains, "We're local Aboriginal people, we're born and bred here, so we know the community. So that makes it easy for us to be able to go out in the community." Utilising their close connections with community, Minya Bunhii staff visit families to talk about enrolling their children in preschool. The Director describes that maintaining these links between staff and the community is an ongoing feature of the service's work, as she states "it's (about) a lot of communication out there in the community too, and promoting our service."

Local staff are able to bring their knowledge of a child's family, culture and community into how they support them at the centre. As one educator explains, when educators live and work in the child's community "they often know why a child's behaviour has

changed, or what's happening in a family's life." (Yappera), and they can have "a much better understanding of each child, and of the families that they come from...their family life and what's happening in their homes." (Yawarra). Another Director comments that because staff are part of the community, "we all know some of the things that are happening in the community on the weekend or the night before. It's a good thing that we know so we can work around that child and make sure their needs are being met whilst they're here" (Gundoo). This helps to ensure that the service can be responsive to children's individual needs.

Furthermore services feel that when parents trust staff - as people they know and are familiar with - they are more likely to enrol their child and feel comfortable leaving them in care (Minya Bunhii). Coolabaroo in particular attributes their high attendance rates to trust. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families leaving a child in child care can be a particularly challenging issue due to past negative experiences with child protection and other institutions (Koonibba). This trust is therefore vital, as Lulla's Director explains, families feel "comfortable with leaving their children here eight hours a day, five days a week, because there's that connection with the aunties." The Director feels that even parents with young babies are comfortable leaving their child at the centre, because they know that they will be loved and nurtured (Lulla's).

These strong community links can also ensure that the most disadvantaged families can access a service (Birrelee). One Director cites a recent example of a vulnerable family who came to the centre for help because they "were told that this was a safe place to go", and attributes this to the community's trust in them as a local service with local staff. Because the services understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture they are also able to provide the flexibility that families need, for example supporting families through retaining program spaces when children need to be absent for cultural or family reasons (Coolabaroo, Birrelee).

Appropriate (non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) staffing

Several centres speak of the need for careful selection and staff training to ensure that new staff understand "what we do here at the centre, and that not only are you looking after the kids but you have that involvement with the families, so being aware of the confidentiality issues as well" (Lulla's). This is felt to be particularly important when staff are not related to the local community.

Respect

True partnerships with families are based on equality and respect. This entails educators taking active steps to equalise potential power differences between themselves as early childhood professionals and families. It also involves educators recognising and respecting families' knowledge and capacity. As Birrelee's Director explains, "we understand that we have been trained and we're qualified in (early childhood education), that's why we have that knowledge. That doesn't make us the experts. So what we do is, as we're learning about things, we just share it with families." Part of respecting families choices and knowledge is then leaving them to decide whether they want to take on the information or not (Birrelee).

Recognising the role of families as the first teachers is a critical aspect of respect. Several services discuss the valuable expertise and knowledge their families bring (Birrelee, Gunai Lidj). As Birrelee's Director describes, "they are community experts – they share stuff with us all the time. Whether it's because of who they are and who their mob is, or because of the position they have in the community or their workplace...so we're drawing on their knowledge all the time, and it's a two-way thing, relationships just are, that's what yarnning is – two way." Another Director comments "Our parents are a fantastic resource for us. (They) very easily communicate with us, let us know anything we need to know concerning their children, any concerns they might have about the service." (Gunai Lidj).

Non-discrimination

A number of services specifically describe their philosophy of non-discrimination towards families. One service illustrates how whilst community politics can sometimes be challenging, they make it very clear that all families and children are welcome at the centre, preserving both a consistent and safe environment for children and stable relationships with families. Many services discuss the value of an 'open door' policy (Lulla's, Koonibba, Congress), and a number speak of the easy relationships they have with families, where family members frequently drop in for a cup of tea and a chat with the staff (Gudjahgahmiamia, Koonibba, Lulla's, Gunai Lidj, Congress). This is described by one service as being particularly beneficial to support children in out of home care to develop or redevelop relationships with their family (Congress).

Engaging on a strengths basis

Many educators discuss how engaging with families through a strengths based approach to their child's development has assisted them to foster positive relationships and more open communication channels (TACCA, Yawarra, Birrelee). Educators at TACCA explain that with a strengths based documentation approach, families are now informed about what their child appeared to be feeling and experiencing during an activity, which one educator perceives is something families are far more likely to connect with and appreciate. She further elaborates that this also gives families "the trust of knowing that you care enough about their child to know when they're feeling these emotions". Another TACCA educator affirms this, "it sounds more personal, not so clinical. There are some relationships there!" This also helps families to better understand their child's development.

Information sharing

All services raise the importance of families and staff openly sharing information through informal interactions or built-in processes. Staff comment that the level of engagement differs between families, and many services explain that this is an area they are constantly seeking to improve. However services generally show confidence that their families feel comfortable providing input due to the strong relationships of trust between families and staff (Coolabaroo).

Alternatives to written communication

A number of services explain that by ensuring that families are given opportunities to verbally interact with staff, families with low literacy levels are able to be involved and provide input into the centre (Yawarra, Aboriginal Children's Centre). One Director discusses how she

prioritises being available for families to talk to, as a way to overcome the barriers some families may experience in accessing written material (Aboriginal Children's Centre).

Many services use photos as a non-verbal, appealing tool to engage with families (Congress, and also see TACCA's initiative discussed below). As Yappera's Director comments, "We find some of our parents don't read a lot of the information they take home, so we find a very good communication tool is to have a whole big wall full of photos, so a parent when they collect their child each day can go 'oh, ok, this is what my child is doing in the kindergarten.'" It also assists children to talk with their families about what they've been doing (Coolabaroo). As well as appealing to families with low literacy levels, this also allows families with limited time to connect with what their child is doing at the centre.

Open days

Many services hold open days or parent evenings to invite families in to the service to share children's work and achievements, information on various topics, and to celebrate particular events such as literacy day or health visits. Open days can be useful forums to link up families with other services – such as health and literacy programs (Jalygurr, Birrelee, Lulla's). Some services choose to hold specific celebratory days for particular family members, such as fathers, mothers and grandmothers (Minya Bunhii, Gudjahgahmiamia). At Yappera regular information nights are held for the families of each age group. Information is shared verbally by staff, and visual presentations and handouts also provide information on different child care theories and theorists, on the state and national early childhood frameworks, program design and activities, educational outcomes and the importance of the early years in a child's development.

Regular verbal communication

A number of services illustrate a commitment to and an appreciation for the importance of regularly talking to families face to face (Yawarra, Yappera, Jalygurr). These incidental discussions are vital to develop strong relationships with families and provide opportunities to get their input.

Information gathered from families during informal conversations includes children's strengths, their family and home life, their interests and any particular information relating to their health or routines. Staff can then note this information down to be utilised in programming (Jalygurr). These conversations enable staff to deepen their

understanding of each individual child, better incorporate their strengths and interests into the program (Yawarra), provide improved support to children, and ensure that children experience continuity between home and the service (Jalygurr). These conversations also enable staff to update parents on their child's experiences at the centre that day or week.

Consultations for a new service: Aboriginal Children's Centre

The construction of the new Aboriginal Children's Centre in 2011 was done in partnership with families. The Director describes how it gave them time to sit down and have valuable discussions with parents about what had worked over the last 20 years and what could be done better. Ideas and comments were then captured and incorporated into the design to ensure that the centre comprehensively reflected what the parents and community wanted for their children.

Sharing written information – such as through daily communication diaries

Daily diaries are used by several services as a useful tool to share information between staff and families (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Birrelee). This can be particularly important for children who utilise a centre's bus service, as it can be challenging for staff to find opportunities to see these families face to face. Daily diaries or communication books can include information on what the child ate and when they slept, and also about their engagement with the program – what activities they did, what they learned, and what they enjoyed doing (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Birrelee). Families can then reciprocate with information such as weekend activities the child participated in. One Director explains that she also emails scans of the diary to families who prefer to receive copies electronically (Birrelee).

TACCA has focused on gaining families involvement in and contribution to the centre through the addition of a 'family input' section on their programming plans to enable families to contribute ideas and input for programs. Through this they are gradually witnessing families getting more and more involved. One educator comments that this is particularly important for Aboriginal families as family is such a strong cultural focus in children's development. Staff have found that a successful way to involve families is to ask them to bring in photos of their children engaged in different activities at home. The centre focuses on initially engaging with families who they feel will be more receptive to this type of sharing, finding that this then encourages other families who may be less involved in the centre. One educator describes how seeing family's photos displayed on the wall prompts others to think "they're up on the wall, well we'll bring in a photo from home, we'll show what we did".

Regular information sharing can also be a valuable opportunity to update parents on their child's participation at the centre and particular achievements they have experienced. Whilst parents generally receive their child's portfolio at the end of the year, sharing a child's work more regularly is an important way to engage parents in day-to-day activities and development. As Yawarra's Director comments, "So even though they get their portfolios at the end (this is) just something little to go 'wow look at this, we're so excited today about them doing this!' And it gives the parents something to talk to the kids about as well when they go home."

Communication through transition times

A focus on communication – both informally and through orientations – at the beginning of the year or when children transition into the centre or a new program provides additional support to all parties. By families initially providing detailed information on their child, staff can ensure that they respond appropriately to help each child settle in and design programs that meet their needs and interests. It is also an opportune time to familiarise families with the centre's program (see for example Gudjahgahmiamia). More formal orientations for new parents enable families, children and staff to get to know each other, and provide families with an easy way to share important information on their child and their routines. This is particularly important for babies who may have specific care needs, feeding and sleep routines (Jalygurr).

Services discuss the importance of communication with families to support children and their families through challenging times, such as when a child is having trouble settling in to the

centre. This can obviously be a very stressful experience for both parent and child. One strategy to combat this is for educators to write a note for parents highlighting a positive experience their child had during the day, for example that they engaged well with an activity (Yappera).

Information-sharing to build parent's capacity to support their children

Building families' capacity to parent through support and information sharing is highlighted by a number of services (see Lulla's, Birrelee, Yappera). Services describe how this reflects the philosophy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centres that they are "not separate from the community. Our work doesn't just belong in these walls" (Birrelee). Whilst parenting programs are discussed under section 5.3, there are several specific initiatives relevant to enlarge on here. The majority of services mention that they regularly distribute newsletters and other useful information to families. A number of services also display easily accessible reading material, for example at Yappera materials such as the *Koori Mail* or *Vibe* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific publications) are available for families to browse.

At Lulla's staff feel it is valuable to share information on the goals and details of their educational program. Staff recently opened up discussions with parents around the EYLF and the Abecedarian approach they are trialling at the centre. This type of information sharing assists families to understand how they can conduct learning activities at home.

Lulla's is also developing a home-based kit to assist families to run educational and fun activities at home with their children. Before taking the kits home families will be given initial support at Lulla's to use them.

Birrelee focuses on providing parents with practical resources they can use with their children. Staff ensure that families can access any resources the service creates. The Director explains "Families need to know the value of what mathematical learning children are developing when they play that game, or what literacy and language development is occurring when you share a book." For example, Birrelee

recently created a DVD to support children to learn lingo. They ensured that they received sufficient funding to give each family a copy, because as the Director explains "There's no point in keeping lingo here and it not being taught anywhere else." The resource is designed as a simple, encouraging and fun tool for families to share and learn together, with time to hear, speak and then repeat the words.

Parent partnerships: Gudjahgahmiamia

Gudjahgahmiamia have taken an innovative approach to gathering information from parents, called the 'Parent Partnership'. The aim of this is to determine how staff can better focus on achieving the EYLF outcomes for each child. Parents are given information sheets to fill in, with the five EYLF outcomes listed and then broken down into different components. The parents comment on how they feel their child is developing under the different components, and the educators do the same. This initiative has provided an opportunity for parents to gain a deeper appreciation for the depth of understanding that educators have about their children's development. One educator describes how this can help to inform parents about how the educators work with their child, and that "It's like a validation for them - we know what we're doing. We're not just baby-sitting, we're educating their children."

Transport and low fees

Two additional factors are relevant to building partnerships with families and communities. A large number of services speak of the value of running a bus service to support families who might not otherwise be able to access the centre (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Congress, Minya Bunhii, Lulla's, Birrelee, Yawarra, Coolabaroo). Yawarra's Director illustrates how important this is, "just providing that support for the families so that they know that no matter what's happening at home their children still can attend school." Whilst this can mean that parents don't regularly visit the centre, it can also present new opportunities for staff to develop deeper understandings of children and their families (Lulla's, Yawarra). One Director explains "It gives you quite a unique insight into family life as well. You get to see and learn things about families that you wouldn't normally learn from parents who drop their children at the centre." (Yawarra). Buses can also be used to collect children from kindergarten in the middle of the day, which would be challenging for most parents who work or study (Jalygurr). Some services comment that a bus service also helps to improve attendance (Yawarra).

The lowered fees that the services consulted are able to provide is also considered to be an integral factor in ensuring families can access a culturally supportive early childhood service (Jalygurr, Yawarra, Birrelee, Congress).

Partnerships with community

As well as working in partnership with their community, many services see their role as being proactively engaged in the development of their local community. One Director feels that partnerships with families strengthens partnerships with the community, explaining that, "I don't think we've ever thought this place is about strengthening just children, this place is about building a stronger community." She feels that this community development approach has myriad benefits for children, helping to build a stronger community and parents who can support their development, and helping to strengthen children's identity and connection. She describes that "MACS centres aren't just services to the community, they're part of the community" (Aboriginal Children's Centre).

"What makes (Gundoo) unique is (that) it is a community centre, run by community people. I think we all work well together. We support each other and we try and go that one step further to make a difference in our community as well as for our little children. It is that...community base and community connection." (Director, Gundoo)

Community outreach

Outreach into the community is a vital way of building partnerships with families, communities and increasing the profile of the service. Many services speak of the importance of getting out into the community (Minya Bunhii, Jalygurr) as a key way to engage with families. All services discuss the value of celebrations such as NAIDOC week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day as excellent opportunities to engage with the wider community. In Broome Jalygurr found that after participating in the local Shinju Matsuri festival, a large annual community event, enrolments increased to the point that they now operate at full capacity.

The benefits of employing local staff can mean that staff are representative of and engaged with the community beyond their work at the service. Directors and staff members often have

professional or community associations – such as Board positions – beyond their role at the early childhood centre (Minya Bunhii, Birrelee). This enables staff to build and maintain strong relationships with the broader community. A number of services also foster relationships with other early childhood services – both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream (Minya Bunhii, Koonibba, Aboriginal Children’s Centre). One service relates how their relationships with services across the state meant that when families are visiting their area they are able to enrol their children in the centre for short periods of time (Minya Bunhii).

Community visits to the centre

A unique characteristic of services interviewed is the way they incorporate family and community into their everyday activities. Many centres enjoy visits from community members with particular skills and knowledge, such as arts, cooking, music, dancing, story telling, traditional language or other aspects of culture (see for example Yappera, Yawarra, Gudjahgahmiamia, TACCA). Some services are co-located with larger organisations and so community engagement in the centre happens on a daily basis.

Community space: Aboriginal Children’s Centre

In Tasmania the new Aboriginal Children’s Centre building at Risdon Cove provides renewed opportunities through its expanded space, and so the service enjoys regular visits by Elders from the Tasmanian Aboriginal community who will often come to talk to or have lunch with the children. A community room can also be utilised for community meetings and youth groups. For the recent annual Putalina or Oyster Cove festival, the children were able to be involved with all the preparations and music rehearsals that took place on site. A local playgroup also regularly visits the Children’s Centre, strengthening children’s and staff connections between the two services. The centre Director describes how these ongoing interactions are part of building a sense of community for children and families.

Mobile outreach service: Jalygurr

At Jalygurr partnerships with the community and families are fostered a mobile outreach service. The mobile service was conceived out of a strong partnership with the Department for Communities, and after a successful trial in 2011 it will continue to run in 2012. Operating over the three-month cooler season it reaches about ten children and families a week who wouldn’t normally access mainstream services. The mobile service also works with and supports the Burdekin Youth and Drop-in centre. The service usually meets on a local oval, and provides free activities for babies up to five years of age, with older children occasionally also joining in. The service regularly partners with other organisations such as Broome Regional Aboriginal Medicals Service (BRAMS), Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council (KAMSC) and Save the Children to run different activities. Free resources are often provided as a useful way to draw families in. Big events such as ‘child protection week’ draw more people with engaging activities for children such as jumping castles and face-painting. The Director describes how they took the Jalygurr children to this activity, which she feels generated “a real community feel” whilst still promoting important messages about child health and welfare. She views this type of engagement as key to engaging the community with the service. Jalygurr is planning to run a stall at this years ‘child protection week’, as the Director feels that “having us out there in the community people then do realise that we are a service specially for Indigenous families, and it’s for low-income families as well.”

Partnerships with other organisations

A large number of services demonstrate strong partnerships with organisations in the wider community. Whilst this is discussed more extensively in section 5.3, there are several additional points. A number of services mention that their partnerships with local TAFE and training organisations help them to support their staff undertake further training and professional development (Gundoo, Coolabaroo, Birrelee, Jalygurr, Congress). Benefits of these partnerships include local lecturers supporting staff on-site service training (Jalygurr, Coolabaroo, Congress, Gundoo), and centres hosting student placements (Jalygurr).

A further example comes from Yawarra. The service enjoys well-established relationships with a number of community organisations, which the Director explains enables them to “evolve the type of service that we’re offering to families, and what we do within the community.” They are also part of the successful tender for the Blacktown Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, and will be running the Children’s Service section. The Director feels that because they already have established, trusting relationships with families, and will be taking Yawarra’s name to the new centre, families will have greater trust and feel more positive about accessing the many services offered by the Child and Family Centre. She believes that this will enable families to more easily access a holistic range of care services for their children, describing how “at the moment they’ve got to go and find everything that they need, whereas a lot of what they need will be there.” Yawarra has two new trainees from the local Aboriginal community who are completing their Certificates, and will work at the Child and Family Centre. The Children’s Services section will carry over the Yawarra identity, which will help build trust between families, the community and the service.

Community Management Committees

This section builds on the earlier discussion on community committees (section 5.1) through examining the specific aspects relating to these committees and partnerships with parents, family and community. Community management committees²⁴ are identified as unique, integral structures to facilitate partnerships between services, families and communities. All services espouse the value of their committee in supporting their work, and generally speak of strong, trusting relationships between the committee and service (see Koonibba, Yappera). Community management committees generally oversee all major service decisions, and provide support in areas such as fundraising, policy development or modification, recruitment, development of parent handbooks and information, and strategies for engagement with parents. They are a fundamental mechanism in ensuring that a community ECEC services is truly managed by the local community (Birrelee).

Services strongly feel that their committee provided a vital support in enabling them to stay true to their mandate to provide a service that responds effectively to the needs of their families and community (Yawarra, Birrelee). As well as ensuring a service retains its commitment to its history and philosophy, community committees also help to keep services in touch with changing community needs (Coolabaroo). Committee members will often have children, grandchildren or relatives at the centre, which ensures that they have a solid understanding of the centre (Jalygurr). Yawarra’s Director explains that families “know what

their children want and need from a service. So (the committee) gives you a good insight into what they see as important for their children, rather than just what we think they should have.” Birrelee’s Director explains that their Committee is an embodiment of their philosophy that the community is the top priority, explaining that as staff “we all work for them”. At Yappera it is felt that having a committee made up of parents, grandparents or other family members who are both actively involved and invested in the service *and* in the local community, the service is able to better respond to community needs. Committee members are also often likely to have strong historical connections with the centre – with a number of Board members having been involved with Yappera for over 10, and in some cases up to 20, years. Board members are therefore invaluable partners in ensuring that Yappera remains connected to its history and long-term objectives, and retains a strong connection with the community.

Committees also provide a forum through which parents can provide ideas and feedback, and help to ensure accountability in implementing feedback (Yawarra). This is illustrated by Yawarra, where the committee recently made a decision that was implemented by the service to no longer provide meals in order to lower fees and therefore increase service accessibility.

Services view committees as vital to building parents’ trust to access the service, by providing a transparent and strong link to the community – essentially staff felt that parents were more likely to view an ECEC centre with a Board as being *part* of their community, rather than an externally introduced organisation (see for example Yawarra).

Many services find that their committees are able to support linkages with relevant services in the wider community through professional or personal connections committee members may have (Yappera, Coolabaroo, Gundoo). Jalygurr’s parent committee, for example, includes representatives working in areas such as mental health, child protection and Indigenous Affairs. Services governed by a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cooperative can provide an even more direct link to additional services. At Coolabaroo, for example, the umbrella body is a local Aboriginal organisation that delivers a variety of community services, including housing. The Association Housing Manager also attends the monthly Coolabaroo committee meetings, and this enables the two services to coordinate their work to meet the needs of their families.

Promoting the service within the wider community

Committees have great capacity to advocate for and raise awareness of the service in the wider community, helping to promote it to potential families and to external organisations and government (Lulla’s, Yappera). Committees play a further vital role in maintaining staff confidence, direction and morale. The Lulla’s Director describes how their Board have great respect for the staff and the role they play “to care and nurture our children and make sure that they’re safe.” Koonibba’s Director describes how the relationship between the Community Council and the service - built on trust and respect - is a positive factor for staff as the Council’s trust in them gives them confidence.

6. Early Years Learning Framework Practices

7.1 Intentional Teaching and Responsiveness to Children

Intentional teaching and responsiveness to children are two pedagogical approaches outlined in the EYLF as critical to achieving outcomes for children. As the EYLF outlines, an intentional teaching approach involves educators developing purposeful programs and learning experiences that respond to children's needs, strengths and interests. The introduction of the EYLF has prompted some services to modify their programming approach and realign teaching and learning processes to respond to children's interests and strengths rather than a set curriculum. All services describe strong intentional teaching in their curriculum decision-making and programming methods. This section looks at how services discuss their programming methods, how they consider the social context within which learning takes place, and how programs, activities, and experiences respond to and are based on children's interests.

Programming

Services interviewed display strong intentional teaching methods in their approach to planning and programming. Most services involve all staff – including trainees – in observations and programming, understanding that each staff member brings certain valuable strengths and perspectives (Yappera, TACCA, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Coolabaroo, Gudjahgahmiamia). Services also consider this process useful to encourage staff to reflect on activity objectives and their roles as educators. Group and individual child planning is generally done on a weekly or fortnightly basis. A number of centres have developed their own programming templates to do this (Gudjahgahmiamia, TACCA). Planning processes predominantly adopt cyclical programming methods based on observations, child and family input, documentation, programming, implementation and back to observations (see TACCA), which aids continuity of experience and learning for children. All services comment that their programs create learning opportunities based on children's interests, with space allowed for flexible and extended learning opportunities in response to how the activity is progressing on the day.

During the planning phase staff also conduct reflections on the previous program to identify opportunities to extend on learning and where amendments are required (see Gunai Lidj). Many services note that reviewing children's profiles and photos from the previous weeks can also ensure that educators build on each child's strengths and interests and extend upon their learning (Minya Bunhii, Koonibba, Coolabaroo). Other services discuss different guidelines – such as cultural or physical activity - that they refer to in planning (Aboriginal Children's Centre). A number of services mention that they have incorporated the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices into their plans, and that this assists them to program for activities that will better support children's development (Yappera, TACCA, Minya Bunhii).

Services view their programs as holistic plans for children's care and development. As the Director of Aboriginal Children's Centre explains, all aspects of care are factored into their program as this are part of "what messages we want to give the children about healthy eating practices, outdoor play (and) good physical activity". Jalygurr integrates a planning segment on relevant community, cultural or family events that a child may be involved in, space for staff reflection, and comments from families and children that require follow-up.

A number of services detail that an intentional teaching approach to planning involves looking for learning opportunities in each activity, rather than just having activity-driven programming or "doing things for the sake of doing things" (TACCA, Yappera, Congress). One educator extols the benefits for children of this type of programming, "Having a really clear idea of where you want your program to go and what learning you want to happen, you can see the change in kids on the floor." She further illustrates that when educators focus on *teaching*, rather than just on activities, children's concentration and involvement grows enormously (TACCA, see also Koonibba). One service also mentioned the value of including input from other people who support their program – such as workers from Noah's Ark (Gudjahgahmiamia).

Several services discuss employing the method of 'focus children' to ensure that each child's individual learning needs are met (Gunai Lidi, Minya Bunhii, Gudjahgahmiamia, Jalygurr, Koonibba). This entails focusing on up to several children within each planning cycle to develop particular activities to meet their specific developmental level and needs.

Understanding that learning occurs within social contexts

Services demonstrate a comprehensive understanding that learning occurs in social contexts. For some services, this involves an understanding that programs need to "engage every aspect of the child's life" (Gudjahgahmiamia). At Birrelee, for example, staff demonstrate intentional teaching methods by utilising existing group patterns and friendships to provide supporting environments in which children can learn. As the Director states, "everything is done in groups and communities." Learning is understood to be contextual, which involves working with the child within their play environment rather than taking them out of it to focus on them individually. Therefore, if an educator wants to focus on supporting a child with their construction skills, they will work with the child within their peer group to ensure that they have a supportive and natural environment. The educator will also ensure that they don't have a "preconceived idea of what the outcome is going to be", understanding that the process is more important than the outcome. This means that learning experiences can be adapted to children's interests and are able to maximise the learning during that activity. As the Director explains, it doesn't matter "if at the end of the day it didn't end up being about construction, it ended up being about his mathematical thinking, the way he likes to organise and match, classify and sort...it was about his interest in those things, which led us off in a completely other way."

This approach ensures that staff are always responsive to *how* children learn, not concentrating solely only on what they *should* be learning. Gunai Lidi's Director explains how responsiveness to children involves being aware of room dynamics to ensure that the needs of all children are

being met. The Director describes how they recently needed to make adjustments to a room to ensure that a more dominant child wasn't disrupting the others. Staff first reflected on the child's interests, and then designed a strategy to minimise disruption to other children by ensuring that he could be occupied as he entered the room. This is working successfully, but the Director explains that being responsive to children is about initiating new strategies as needed.

Programming based on children's interests

Focusing on children's interests within programming is very much about employing a strengths based approach – essentially understanding that children learn best when they are interested and engaged in an activity. One Director explains this as taking the learning to where children's strengths and interests are, "And you tend to find the things that they're not very good at get focused on within these strengths...you don't need sit down and teach them this is red, this is blue, it will come once they're participating in things that they're interested in and they want to spend time on" (Yawarra). This involves "observing what children are thinking, not what they're doing" (TACCA). By assessing children's emotions and engaging with them in different activities staff are better able to connect with children and build upon their interests to help them learn (Birreelee, Koonibba, TACCA).

Services explain that to embed this process it is important to incorporate children's interests and input into the program as it is being written. This involves sharing "the curriculum-making with children. So it's definitely a two-way street." (Birreelee). Family input is also an important part of programming. Many services utilise informal discussions with parents and more structured methods to ensure that their input is recorded (Minya Bunhij, TACCA, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Yappera). For example, at TACCA, staff regularly ask families to bring in photos of different home-based activities, and this helps them to extend on these activities to reinforce children's home learning and interests.

Service programming methods: Coolabaroo and Yawarra

Coolabaroo's programs are child-based and represented through 'webs' of themes rather than specific activities. Educators start with a central theme through which they want to teach certain things, and then from this build a web of different experiences and activities for the children. Flexibility within this allows for spontaneous learning and child-directed experiences. For example garden-based play and learning might uncover different plants or creatures that can then be explored through follow-up activities such as art or stories. The Director highlights, "it just flows on from what the children are interested in...(there's) a bit more involvement from the kids – you don't just sit down and the teacher decides what we're doing." She outlines the benefits for children, "when it's something they're interested in, they become a bit more involved and concentrated because it's something they want to know."

Yawarra's staff demonstrate intentional teaching and responsiveness to children by following the emergent curriculum principle; building their learning program around children's interests and strengths whilst still incorporating "teacher led experiences and ideas, and things that we think they need to learn about." A process of *post-programming* reflects emergent curriculum principles. This involves building off strengths of previous activities and plans when designing new ones, and then setting up a learning environment to facilitate this. Staff allow the children's interests and abilities to direct the flow of activities, reflecting on these at the end of each day and then recording the program.

This approach can also occur during a program cycle by spontaneously scaffolding activities off children's interests (see Yappera). Many services describe this as a process where children's interests prompt an initial activity, and discussions with children during and after this then informs the next stage of the learning experience. This could include further activities such as excursions, art, play dough, construction, singing or music, group discussions, reading and story telling, and visitors to the centre (Gundoo, Coolabaroo, TACCA, Minya Bunhii).

Reflecting children's interests is a useful strategy to engage with individual children (Birrelee, Gudjahgahmiamia). By building on a child's strengths and interests educators can support their development in an engaging, meaningful way. At Birrelee, staff understand that football is a huge community interest. The Director describes this as "understanding the cultures within our culture." Staff utilise and embrace this in how they engage with children. For example, one child is passionately interested in football and already a keen player. The Director explains that whilst he is talented at football, "we can't get him to concentrate on other things. So we use the football – we made up this makeshift goal and we had to count how many times he could get it in. So we got 'one, two, three, four – hang on there's a four on my dice, let's find it. Ok let's do it again. This time there's a six on my dice, let's find it'. So you just take those opportunities and you value them."

Services interviewed demonstrate a strong ability to incorporate intentional teaching methods within their programming formats. These have changed somewhat with the introduction of the EYLF, but services interviewed have engaged with this in creating an array of programming approaches and templates. These enable them to construct activities and experiences that scaffold off children's interests and strengths.

Scaffolding: TACCA and Gudjahgahmiamia

Staff at TACCA realised that a number of children were interested in construction and recalling various activities at home helping parents to paint rooms, build a dolls house and renovate a kitchen. This prompted staff to design a month long program focus on 'construction'. Educators initiated an excursion to a hardware store and activities focusing on building, constructing and deconstructing things using real building materials such as timber and recycled materials. Staff and children sung songs about building to encourage children's communication, discussed different building roles in the such as road workers or designers, and had a community member visit the centre to talk about construction.

At Gudjahgahmiamia fishing is a popular community activity, and so staff recently planned for art activities around this. Children created and hung fish in a fishing net displayed in one of the rooms. A beach excursion gave children the chance to gather shells and other sea materials. Educators focused on stories and pictures that related to the sea, which provided a starting point for children and staff to share personal stories on the theme. A fish tank was brought in for children to observe and learn to care for fish. The Director feels that this process benefitted children by utilising their interest to encourage their engagement in and learning from a program.

7.2 Learning Environments

Learning environments are the sixth EYLF practice, and a key component in delivering early childhood education. The EYLF sets out that learning environments should reflect, enrich and respond to the lives and identities of children and families at a service, as well as incorporating and encouraging their input into the design. Outdoor learning environments are mentioned as providing unique opportunities for open-ended and creative play that utilises natural materials. The EYLF discusses how resources should reflect natural forms and materials, provoke children's creativity and abstract thinking, and also encourage them to develop environmental awareness.

Services interviewed discuss how learning environments are powerful tools to stimulate children's creativity, imagination, problem-solving and physical activity. Many services speak passionately about the value of using natural materials and incorporating nature into their outdoor and indoor environments. Furthermore, services communicate that learning environments need to be non-static and constantly evolving to respond to the interests and needs of individual children, and to the dynamics of a group as a whole.

Using natural materials and settings

Many services speak of the importance of designing learning environments that either mimic natural outdoor environments (Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo, Jalygurr), or utilise natural materials to encourage creative play. A number mentioned using natural objects such as shells, wood, stones, pine cones or gum nuts to prompt children to explore the materials and incorporate them into free, unstructured play (Gundoo, Gunai Lidi, Birrelee, Yappera, Koonibba, Gudjahgahmiamia, Congress). These materials can also be used in more structured play such as art, construction or playdough (Gudjahgahmiamia, Koonibba) – for example several services mention collecting bark to use in bark painting (Gunai Lidi, Koonibba). Learning environments therefore also link up with fostering children's sense of cultural identity and traditional uses of land (see section 5.1).

A number of services set up natural environments within the centre (Jalygurr, Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo). For example Gudjahgahmiamia often develops spaces that recreate the local beach habitat, using sand and marine flotsam. This encourages children to use their imaginations and sensory perception to explore different environments, textures and shapes.

Using such materials and environments has many benefits for children. One Director describes how they help in "connecting children back to country and to nature" because "there's so much out there in that natural environment to listen to, to see, to touch, to smell." (Aboriginal Children's Centre). They support children to develop rich imaginations, problem-solving skills and creativity. As Jalygurr's Coordinator indicates, "a lot of people think you need resources to have a service running, whereas a lot of these kids would use a stick...and pretend that they're

fishing.” This teaches children to use their imagination to create play, instead of relying on the environment and toys. Another Director illustrates how she recently observed a young girl collecting ‘pickles’ for the kitchen – acorns from a tree – where before she would have been using plastic kitchen toys. These examples demonstrate how using natural materials challenges children to explore what something *could* be, instead of what it *is*.

Such environments and materials can also teach children that inexpensive possessions can be special and need to be looked after. As Birrelee’s Director describes how “We have very precious rocks that we found that we washed, and they didn’t cost us anything...They’re put in a beautiful wooden basket, and the way these rocks are treated you’d think we paid a million dollars for them. So it’s about respect.”

Outdoor learning environments

Outdoor learning environments are described by many services as spaces in which to encourage children’s physical activity, problem-solving and investigative skills (Aboriginal Children’s Centre, Jalygurr, Minya Bunhii). The Director of the Aboriginal Children’s Centre describes their outdoor space as a learning environment in itself. Children can experience different textures through gravel and sand surfaces, stone steps provide a climbing frame, and challenges are provided in the form of wood and rocks to climb over. Inspired by the philosophy of Claire Warden and the Scottish nature kindergartens, staff are exploring ways to allow children to experience nature in all weather. These experiences contribute to children feeling **connected to their world** by being “Out on country, learning from each other, learning about nature’s lessons, about the trees, the leaves, the bush, the country, the bush tucker.” Outdoor learning environments can therefore be important spaces to reflect the local culture and environment (Lulla’s, Minya Bunhii), for example at Minya Bunhii a separate area of the play space provides a unique cultural environment in which children can learn about traditional foods and crafts (as discussed in section 5.1).

Deconstructing barriers within learning environments

A number of staff also comment that they have tried to deconstruct barriers within their learning environments – such as the divide between outdoor and indoor learning spaces. Through this they seek to give children choice over where they want to play - responding to their learning needs and interests (Jalygurr, Yawarra). For example at Yawarra, staff find that “A lot of our children do prefer to be outside for most of the time, so it’s just trying to work out

An open environment: Koonibba

Koonibba is unique in viewing their entire space as a learning environment - children are allowed and encouraged to explore the entire service. The Director feels that this is about giving children choice over which learning environment they wish to engage with – for example if they want quiet time away from the other children they can choose to play with the toys in the office.

ways that we can provide for all their areas of development while they’re outside. Trying to set up the room, make new ways to link the inside and outside play, so that if they want to be outside they can, and we’re not telling them constantly ok you need to be inside now, or you have to be outside now. So we’re trying to find ways to make our program work so that the children have the choice of what area works for them.”

Some centres create their learning environments to take into account the room dynamics (Gunai Lidj, Congress). For example, at Gunai Lidj staff have recently reviewed how to set up their learning environments to lower room noise levels and to provide children with choices of quieter areas. One room now has a wooden frame draped with material so that children can choose to take themselves out of a noisier environment to a calmer space. The centre is also setting up new tables to allow children to participate in self-directed activities, as staff feel that this is important to allow children time on their own and a break from staff and other children.

Learning environments that reflect children's interests

All services describe how their learning environments are created to reflect children's interests. At TACCA staff focus on providing different learning opportunities and environments for children within the one space. Educators focus on what they want to facilitate through an environment, and reflect on the variety of experiences that the children could get out of the activity.

Space for quiet time: Congress

Congress has paid particular attention to designing their learning environments to accommodate their family group setting. To meet the challenge of multiple ages in one setting, they have designed environments that cater to any age group, and have opened the centre up so children are free to play indoors or outdoors. Initially they found that by having all activities available in all rooms some activities weren't getting used, as the Director explains "because there wasn't enough of them in every room and there wasn't a good space". They therefore redesigned their approach to create specialised rooms within the centre. They therefore redesigned their approach to create specialised rooms within the centre, including rooms for creative arts, a scientific discovery and construction, finer arts, and a room for quieter activities and finer cognitive work. Whilst they have a standard way that each room is set up, educators explore what they need to add, take away or change to enhance the children's experience in this area according to their interest. Following staff training on brain development and trauma, staff adjusted the environment to afford children with opportunities for time out during the day. Children are free to go outside, or to go to a quiet space. The Director believes that this is vital for children, to have time when they can withdraw and be quiet, and also to have control over their environment and where they want to be. She comments that "I think that's another one of the reasons why some of the behaviour issues have disappeared too, so that children who want to be by themselves can actually find...a quiet space right away."

A further important element discussed by services is that environments need to be designed to allow modification throughout the day (Yappera, Gudjahgahmiamia). For example, if children are observed to be less engaged in an activity then the educators "need to reflect and look at what has happened, what they need to do differently...to be able to vary their environment to engage their children." (Yappera). Learning environments are also set up to reflect an ongoing activity children may be engaged in over days or a week. For example at TACCA, during a recent focus on construction the indoor environment was adapted so that the 'home corner' was changed to a 'workshop' with relevant tools and dress ups such as helmets, ear muffs and high visibility vests. Construction-themed books and puzzles were included, and the outdoor area updated to include construction materials such as witches hats.

Modifying learning environments: Birrelee

Over the last several years Birrelee has had a concerted focus on their learning environment. The Director describes how previously “the environment didn’t show respect for the children at all...it showed very little that respected anyone.” Staff began this redevelopment process with an action research project focusing on their centre, including a visit to and guidance from Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre in Sydney to build their knowledge about environments. The Director describes that this “wasn’t about imitating or recreating it, it was about the possibilities of what you wanted and how to achieve it.” Birrelee now follows the philosophy that the environment is like a third teacher, that “If you plan your environment really well it teaches - it takes on an educator’s role.” The Director firmly believes that the care and love that is exhibited in an environment shows children that they are also cared for and loved, and that they also need to demonstrate this towards the space. She describes how “Everything is placed beautifully and with care.”

The Director explains that their environment focus is an ongoing journey. She feels that the environment can be a powerful motivation for staff, explaining how she recently refreshed many of their learning areas and that this had a positive, motivating effect on staff. This stimulated the staff to think up new ideas for the space, and inspired one educator to adjust the entrance area to create a welcoming space for families to sit and share. The Director states how “that just shows how powerful a message an environment can send, and (the educator) understood that and so created that in her work area.” She describes how creating a beautiful learning environment is about showing children “the respect we have for them when we respect their play space. And the children then take on that respect. They then pack it away, and they then respect themselves. So it’s this whole cycle.”

For some services, the EYLF has prompted a new approach and method of constructing learning environments. For others, learning environments have been a focus of engagement for some time. All services demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the need for learning environments to be based on children’s interests, and to reflect the dynamics of a room and group. Educators also speak of the value of learning environments in engaging children’s sensory, motor skills, creative and cognitive areas of development. A number of services emphasise their use of natural materials and cost-effective ways to create imaginative and engaging learning environments.

7.3 Assessment for Learning

The EYLF sets out that assessment for learning is a cyclical process that entails gathering and analysing information about children's abilities, knowledge and understandings, with the five EYLF outcomes serving as key reference points. Assessment can be done in a variety of ways. Whilst much of the documentation focus is new under the EYLF, services interviewed display a capacity to adapt their approaches to focus on the EYLF practice of assessment for learning through processes of information gathering, analysis and presentation. All services demonstrate their competence in engaging with various tools such as learning stories, individual child portfolios and photos to capture children's learning. The methods discussed below help services to better communicate a child's progress and development to their parents, which in turn enables educators and parents to develop strategies for parents to assist their child outside the service, thus enabling continuity of learning and partnerships with parents (Yappera, Gudjahgahmiamia, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Coolabaroo, TACCA). These methods are also vital in informing the next planning process.

Learning stories

A vast number of services mention using learning stories to capture children's experiences and development (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Gudjahgahmiamia, Gundoo, Coolabaroo, Jalygurr, Congress, Lulla's, Yappera). Group or individual learning stories incorporate photos and a description of an activity and the corresponding learning experience, which can be created from daily notes and observations. They can also include follow-up experiences, educator evaluations and comments from children and families (Jalygurr). Many services feel that they are a useful and engaging tool to share with parents and families (Gudjahgahmiamia, Congress, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Coolabaroo, Yappera), and are often displayed about the centre – including at eye level so that children can also view them (Gudjahgahmiamia).

Capturing reflections throughout the day: TACCA

TACCA has a particular strategy for making observations, keeping a large notebook in the main room to document educator's thoughts about children's learning. Having this easily accessible means that observations can be recorded as they happen and can then feed into programming and children's portfolios each day. These observations are shared with families on a daily basis. Because staff do not feel pressure to record a comment about every child every day, the focus is on the value of the observations rather than the quantity, and can provide a balanced view of the day. As one educator describes, it's about capturing "particular moments of the day that really stood out to each carer. It gives the whole team's view on a day...not just one person writing down what they think."

Several services create specific learning stories linking to key EYLF and development outcomes (Gudjahgahmiamia, Coolabaroo, Congress, Jalygurr). At Coolabaroo photos taken in the babies' room were included in a recent book developed by an educator, showcasing the different development groups and corresponding pictures of the children engaged in activities that support these. Gudjahgahmiamia staff create learning stories that are specific to the five EYLF

outcomes. These provide a brief description of the outcome and a visual representation through a photo. These outcome-based learning stories help staff reflect on the outcomes they aim to achieve for children, but also help parents to understand their child's development in the context of the EYLF outcomes. Learning stories often incorporate the children's voice, and several services have instigated initiatives to work with parents to capture this (Jalygurr, Minya Bunhii, Congress). For example, at Jalygurr staff have developed a simple learning story template for parents to take home and complete as a way of getting them more involved in their child's learning.

Portfolios

Individual child portfolios are mentioned by the majority of services (Jalygurr, Gundoo, Lulla's, Gunai Lidgee, Gudjahgahmiamia, Koonibba, Congress, Minya Bunhii, Yawarra, Yappera, TACCA). Services describe how these are a record of each child's learning and experiences over the year, and are updated regularly to include, amongst other things, photos, observations, artwork, learning stories and assessments. These are given to parents at the end of the year. They are sometimes created in collaboration with children (Gunai Lidgee, Gundoo, Congress) through staff capturing a child's comments about what is happening within a particular photo. This helps to document a multidimensional record of the experience (Gunai Lidgee, Congress).

Photos

Photos are increasingly used by services as easy, visual, depictions of a learning experience (Yappera, Minya Bunhii, Lulla's, Congress, Koonibba, Gunai Lidgee, Coolabaroo). Finding time to record observations can be challenging, and so photos provide a quick way to capture an experience without documenting large amounts of information (Minya Bunhii, Coolabaroo). They provide a unique insight into an experience, as one TACCA educator describes, they "tell a story. You can see (they are) evidence of a child doing something." Photos help capture children's facial expressions, concentration and interest in an activity, which can be difficult to do through written observations alone (TACCA, Koonibba). They therefore assist educators and parents to learn more from about the links between a child's engagement with an activity and their development, for example a photo and caption of what the child said during a particular activity provides evidence of their speech and communication development (Minya Bunhii).

Services explain that photos need to be unposed and to capture children engaged in real activities (TACCA, Koonibba). Staff at Gunai Lidgee record entire activities using a video camera, and can then write up their observations from these. Photos and videos act as a useful prompt when staff are writing up observations and learning stories (Coolabaroo).

A variety of tools for capturing children's assessment are described by services, including learning stories, portfolios and photos. Critically, some services note that the EYLF has induced them to try new assessment methods, and many services display innovative and creative ways of doing this. The importance of finding appealing and accessible ways to share children's learning with parents is also highlighted as an important aspect of this practice.

7.4 Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice

Under the fifth EYLF principle of ongoing learning and reflective practice, the EYLF sets out that educators must become 'co-learners' with children, and that a vital part of this ongoing learning is reflective practice. This involves educators critically analysing their practice and values within a reflective cycle, out of which new ideas are then generated.

Services interviewed present a strong appreciation of the value of self-reflective practice, with all services viewing this as an informative and necessary process to "look back at themselves as teachers, at their strengths and what they were already doing, and what they would have to change." (Yappera). Services articulate that this then leads to improved intentional teaching practices through encouraging staff to develop a deeper understanding of their roles as educators.

The services interviewed employ a diverse array of methods in doing this, including incorporating self-reflection into programming formats, templates and personal or group journals. Services display a particular focus on oral communication and yarning. Yarning is seen to be a valuable method as it can happen incidentally throughout the day, and doesn't require strong literacy skills. A number of services also speak of a culture of continuing professional development, including through ongoing learning and training opportunities, and supporting staff to undertake professional qualifications.

Reflection within programming processes

All services include some form of reflection within their programming process. A number of services hold regular discussions to reflect on the previous week's program, often based on reviews of daily notes, observations and children's portfolios (see for example TACCA, Minya Bunhii, Yappera). One Director emphasises that much staff reflection is incidental and takes place while observing children, designing and adapting activities. She describes how "I don't think a day goes by when staff aren't reflecting, because you can clearly see without writing down what is working within your program. In order to develop a new program each week you need to be able to reflect on what worked well, and what didn't in the week prior." (Yappera). One service finds an additional benefit of reviewing children's portfolios is that staff stay up to date on a child's attendance or can be reminded of further activities to assist a child in their development (Minya Bunhii).

A number of services explain that their programming template includes a section for staff reflections on a day or specific activity (Gunai Lidj, Jalygurr, Lulla's, TACCA, Yawarra, Gudjahgahmiamia, Coolabaroo). Reflective practice also incorporates considerations of whether a program needs to change and why (Yawarra, Yappera, TACCA), and whether a certain practice or activity is culturally appropriate and fits with staff's values (Congress). One Director comments that she focuses on developing staff awareness that "if we are making changes to the program there needs to be a reason for it" (Yawarra). Previous programming

formats often required a program to be changed based on the length of time it had been running (see for example Yappera), but now educators look at why a particular activity isn't working, and how it could be adapted to renew children's interest (Yawarra). This avoids staff setting up activities without considering why they are doing this. Congress' Director explains that these types of discussions seek to go deeper than exploring whether an activity worked or not, they are about how a staff member's practice and values as an educator affects a certain outcome or experience for a child.

Journals – personal and shared

Several services discuss using personal journals (Yappera, Birrelee, Gudjahghmiamia). These provide unstructured, confidential and open-ended opportunities for educators to record their thoughts and reflections on programs, activities, practice, children and families, and their own work as educators - whether activities worked and any issues or changes that need to be addressed. These then help educators when designing future programs (Gudjahghmiamia). One Director explains that personal diaries create space for people to reflect in ways that suit their own personal needs, "some people want to write things down, some people just want to

Reflecting on room dynamics and environment:

Gunai Lidj

Gunai Lidj's Director described a recent situation where staff in one of the rooms were finding that their environment was not reflecting the needs of their room. She supported them through this by observing the room herself one afternoon and taking notes. She then met with staff from that room so that they could all share their thoughts and ideas. She describes how "when we reflect we'll look at what we're doing, what we're offering, what we're not offering, and we'll look at the dynamics of the children and the room, and we'll look at their development and where we think they're at at that particular stage. And then from there what strategies can we put into place so that it works for staff and for children." In this recent case, both the Director and the staff felt that the main problem was that the dynamics of the room weren't allowing all children to participate, but instead several more confident children were tending to dominate activities. Strategies staff decided to adopt were to decrease the noise levels in the room by taking out certain toys and making the room into a softer, warmer environment that was more encouraging of calm play. They also updated the activities to provide more age-appropriate challenges for the children. The Director feels that for staff who are in the rooms everyday it can be useful to have an outside perspective to enable them to reflect in this way, and that supporting staff in this manner enables them to come up with solutions themselves.

have a yarn. So it was an option for people that didn't necessarily want to talk about it in a staff meeting" (Birrelee).

At a number of services staff collaborate to create daily or weekly reflections through journals or notes (Gudjahghmiamia, Birrelee, Jalygurr). These are often displayed for all staff, children and families to view (Gudjahghmiamia), and focus on capturing group and individual experiences. Such group reflections encourage staff to review activities, group dynamics and outcomes over a programming period (such as a day, week or fortnight). One Director speaks of how she encourages her staff to specifically document how they perceived their role as educators within in each activity – as this then provides them with material to reflect on – including how they carried out activities, what they were happy with and what they would change (Birrelee). Many services discuss how photos are a useful tool to support staff self-reflection, as

through reviewing them they can explore what the children are learning and experiencing and how to expand on these in future programming (Aboriginal Children's Centre, Minya Bunhii).

Yarning and oral sharing

Staff speak of the value of informal and incidental yarning in reflecting on activities, practices, and future ideas (Aboriginal Children's Centre, TACCA, Yappera, Birrelee, Minya Bunhii, Congress). As one Director explains, yarning and oral sharing is particularly important as "some things can't be documented." (Birrelee). Regular staff meetings are standard practice at most services (Birrelee, Minya Bunhii, Yappera, Jalygurr, Koonibba, Congress). These provide an opportunity to review all aspects of service delivery from programs to dietary and health aspects (Koonibba). One Director describes their approach to staff meetings, "if we have a meeting and people are just wanting to share we have someone that takes those minutes and writes it all down. So even though that person (sharing) may not have the literacy skills or want to write it down it's still documented somewhere. For their own journey as well" (Birrelee).

Ongoing professional development and learning

Several services are trialling different teaching approaches such as Montessori and the Abecedarian approach (Yappera, Lulla's). Services provide staff with professional development opportunities wherever possible, covering topics such as child protection, health and nutrition, assessment tools, and language, cognitive and social development (Congress, Birrelee, Jalygurr, Lulla's, Koonibba, TACCA). As mentioned in section 5.3 a number of services have strong relationships with a local TAFE, which supports staff through opportunities for professional development and further study. Several services relate the need to ensure that staff receive professional development that corresponds with the particular needs of their children (Jalygurr, TACCA, Congress). For example at Jalygurr several staff recently completed a Makaton course to better support the needs of a child with a hearing impairment. They have now brought this knowledge back to the service and are teaching children Makaton through displays and pictures around the rooms. Another service mentions arranging follow-up presentations at their centre to extend on professional development topics (Jalygurr). TACCA is increasingly focusing on conducting staff training evaluations to encourage staff to reflect more deeply on learning from and implementing the lessons learned. One educator highlights that with little time to program, the many ideas generated during training can slip away and so it is crucial to concretely capture them post-training.

Services interviewed encourage their staff to engage in reflective practice through varied means. Many services emphasise the importance of oral sharing – which can take place on an informal, ongoing basis. A number of services describe processes such as staff meetings, weekly reflections and personal journals. An emphasis is displayed by all services on finding reflective methods that reflect staff needs, capacities and communication methods. A further element mentioned is the importance of supporting staff to participate in professional development and to gain their qualifications. This demonstrates how vital services consider their staff to be and their commitment to their development and retention.

7.5 Continuity of Learning and Transitions

Ensuring continuity of learning between children's experiences at home, within their community and at the early childhood centre is vital in enabling them to feel secure and confident, and is the seventh EYLF practice. It is discussed by services in three distinct ways, continuity; between programs at a centre, by incorporating home practices and experiences into the centre; and by supporting parents to extend on children's centre-based learning at home. Supporting children through transitions is also an essential aspect of this EYLF practice. The EYLF discusses how children can be supported through transitions by educators partnering with parents to support children to negotiate and understand identity through transition periods. The services interviewed discuss how they support children through three main transitions; facilitating new children to transition smoothly into the centre; supporting children through their daily transitions into and out of the centre; and supporting them to transition away from the centre to school.

Continuity between programs at the service

Continuity between programs within a service helps children feel secure and confident in their learning and interactions within that space. For example, at Yappera an emphasis on staff aligning their teaching styles helps children to experience continuity between the programs, so, as the Director describes, "You all end up with the same teaching style and the outcomes for the children end up being the same across the board, right from babies. So it's actually allowed the children to transition easier through the programs..." The cyclical form of programming discussed by many services (see 7.1 on Intentional Teaching) also helps staff to build upon children's learning throughout the year (see for example TACCA).

Continuity between the home environment and the centre

Ensuring continuity between home practices and the early childhood centre is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who may have particular traditional child-rearing practices. For example, a number of services speak of the importance of replicating children's home environment and experience in sleeping arrangements, as discussed in section 5.1. This helps them to feel secure and connected to their home life and practices. The family group setting adopted by a number of services (see section 5.3) also recreates an environment similar to what children experience at home. Several services (Yawarra, Jalygurr, Congress) explain that this meant that relatives are able to support each other. For example one Director explains that in families the older children help raise the younger children, and so at the centre staff "keep this tradition happening within the centre" by supporting older children to teach the younger ones, or helping older relatives settle in younger children (Yawarra).

Continuity between the centre and home learning

Centres also speak about working with parents to implement children's centre-based learning at home. This is done in a variety of ways, for example providing resources that will assist

parents to carry out learning activities, and talking to them about the centre program, activities, goals and practices (Yappera, Lulla's, Birrelee).

Transitions to support children at the beginning of the year or when entering the service

A number of services speak of particular strategies they employ at the beginning of the year or when a new child enters the service, to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible (Yappera, Birrelee, Jalygurr). Several services mention that at the beginning of each year educators focus attention on activities, discussions and stories on identity and connection, to support children to figure out where they belong within a new program and within the service as a whole (Birrelee, Yappera). For example at Yappera staff help children deal with the complex emotions that may arise during transitions. As the Director explains, "Now that we're at the beginning of the year a lot of it is about identity and connection for the children, so they're trying to find their place in programs, in particular our new children." Staff work with children to help them understand transitions, to find their identity and connection within the new program, and to manage their feelings and emotions as they do this. They do this by focusing on "stories such as helping, sharing, sad and happy and things like that." At Birrelee staff encourage peer-support amongst children by role-modelling how to welcome and support new children into the centre, and encouraging children to then do this themselves. As the Director explains, "there are moments where the regular children who have been here for a while share that information and they themselves help other children become safe and secure and supported. It's not all coming from adults it's actually coming from the community of children here as well."

Daily transitions at the centre

At Yappera staff review children's portfolios and family history from the previous room to get to know the child and ensure that they are ready to cater to their interests and needs as soon as they enter the new program. Staff at Birrelee support children to transition through the centre, for example from the nursery to the preschool room, by making sure that "there's a bit of that child in that new space" – something that the child can recognise as theirs and therefore helps them to feel that they belong in the new room. A number of services speak of the value of family group time in aiding transitions (see section 5.3). At Jalygurr family group time occurs at drop-off and pick-up times. This assists children – particularly younger children - to settle in and leave the centre, as their siblings and cousins are able to support them through the transition.

Transitions to school

Transitions to school or kindergarten are both a challenging and exciting time for children and their families. Many services support children and families through this time through formal transition to school programs, or through the provision of informal support as needed (Yawarra, Gundoo, Koonibba, Minya Bunhii, Birrelee, Jalygurr, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Gudjahgahmiamia, Gunai Lidi, Lulla's, Congress).

A number of services highlight that building positive relationships with schools and kindergartens is key in successful transition to school programs (Yawarra, Birrelee, Koonibba, Jalygurr, Aboriginal Children's Centre, Gudjahgahmiamia, Minya Bunhii).

Yawarra focuses on linking up families of children who will be attending the same school, "so that they're aware of which other children from the service will be attending the school with them, or what children in the past that their child may know is attending that school as well." This helps to ensure that the child and family have pre-existing support networks upon the child entering school.

Supporting parents to fill out enrolment forms (Yawarra, Gunai Lidj, Birrelee) and attending meetings between families and the school helps families communicate their child's needs to schools (Yawarra, Jalygurr, Gunai Lidj, Birrelee).

Graduation Ceremony: Aboriginal Children's Centre

The Aboriginal Children's Centre supports children and families through the transition time through an annual graduation concert for all children, staff, families and community members. The concert marks an important transition for children who are moving on to kindergarten or leaving the OSHC program. The concert showcases what the children have been participating in and learning about throughout the year through performances by the children that focus on "land, language and country". Each child is made to feel special as they receive their graduation certificate from an Elder. The Director describes how this significant event is the "pride of the community every year...a graduation ceremony for your community...and celebrating childhood in such a massive way." In essence it is "a celebration of...culturally strong children setting off into the world."

Preparing for the classroom: Gudjahgahmiamia

Gudjahgahmiamia runs a program in conjunction with Noah's Ark to ensure that children experience continuity of learning and transitions. Once a week a teacher from the local school visits Gudjahgahmiamia to spend a morning with the oldest children. A separate room set up to replicate a kindergarten classroom helps children adjust to a more structured school environment. The teacher works with the children on learning activities to prepare them for school. The Director describes that the benefit of this environment are that the children are able to work without distraction from the younger children, commenting that "it's just a bit more personalised". The teacher and her assistant also bring different resources with them to prompt the children's interest and learning.

As one Director explains, having familiar early childhood staff at initial school meetings empowers families to feel "confident in expressing what their child needs at school." (Yawarra). At Jalygurr staff support a child with a developmental delay by using a communication book to facilitate communication between the kindergarten he attends in the morning, Jalygurr staff and the child's parents.

Several services work collaboratively with other organisations to meet additional needs children may have when transitioning to school (Lulla's, Congress). Congress' preschool readiness program, implemented in response to concerns of large numbers of children not attending preschool, focuses on a holistic response that also supports child and parental needs.

Staff have found that enrolling a child in the child care centre and building child and parent confidence assists in overcoming family's understandable mistrust of institutions. Once the

family is ready, the child transitions to preschool.

Family support and school connections:

Birrelee

At Birrelee staff focus on empowering families through transition times. They invite local school principals and kindergarten teachers to Birrelee to talk with families over tea and cake, and then if needed staff attend the school orientation with the child and family. Staff also assist with transport for children who attend a kindergarten program in the afternoon and Birrelee in the morning. The Director describes, "we just support it as much as we can, as much as needed, and we back off once we're not needed." She believes that staff play an important role in ensuring that school staff and parents are on an equal footing and that parents are comfortable to raise any issues they wish. Staff also talk with school staff about strategies to manage children's behaviour. The Director feels that this encourages teachers not to label children on their first day of school, but instead to adopt the methods that Birrelee staff know works with a particular child. She explains how this conversation is about saying to schools that supporting this child appropriately "may mean that you have to change some of your practices, but if you really want this kid to engage in learning, here are the things you're going to have to do."

Birrelee is also a member of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. This enables their participation in wider conversations on school transition, for example Birrelee has supported schools to change how they communicate with Aboriginal families during the orientation phase. The Director describes how "one of the schools has put lots of Aboriginal artwork on their flyers, they've got red, black and yellow, they've got pictures of Aboriginal students and families on their flyers. So families can identify with it straightaway, but more importantly the kids see that they belong there straightaway."

Opportunities for early childhood, school and kindergarten staff to visit each other's services supports understanding of each other's programs and aids consistent care and education between the different environments (Jalygurr). Several services incorporate kindergarten activities within their own programs (Gudjahgahmiamia, Jalygurr) to help children's continuity of learning between the two services. Minya Bunhii and Gundoo take their oldest children to visit the local school to become familiar and build connections with the teachers and environment. At Minya Bunhii relatives at the school are involved in these visits to help support the child's experience of and preparation for school. Staff also feel that for many children the connections and friendships they make at Minya Bunhii are carried on through and support them when they graduate on to school. Several services speak of the importance of preparing children for both the academic challenges of school, and the different environment (Gudjahgahmiamia, Koonibba).

The services interviewed understand that their work has an impact beyond their walls and contact hours. To enable children to successfully continue their learning and development after they leave the centre services display a commitment to supporting children through school transitions. Relationships with schools, formal and informal school preparation processes are important strategies to assist children and families through the transition.

8. Service Reflections

8.1 Challenges

Services detail a number of challenges they experience as they work towards implementing the EYLF. These range from challenges with the technical language within the document, barriers to accessing staff training, and new requirements within the Framework such as documentation and programming. The following is a summary of the main challenges experienced.

- Inaccessible technical language
- Format of document
- Understanding reasoning behind aspects of the document
- Demonstrating implementation through documentation
- Increased documentation workload
- Challenges in capturing children's individual development due to the pace of child development and regularity of attendance
- Targeting observations to one particular outcome
- Ensuring all outcomes are reflected in documentation
- New programming format and requirements
- Challenging both for long-term staff who may find adaptation difficult, and newer staff who are recently trained
- Barriers to accessing training such as staff time, money, and travelling to training (latter applies to remote services)
- Speed with which the EYLF superseded the previous state-based frameworks
- Communicating the new format to families

Services also describe a variety of strategies they have taken to overcome these challenges, which may provide useful learning for other centres.

Managing workload and documentation

Some of the strategies services have adopted relate to managing the increased workload and documentation requirements, such as spreading the workload amongst all staff – including trainees, and utilising simpler methods of observations and notes that can be written up during the day (see the TACCA example in section 7.3). Photographs are being embraced by a large number of services as quick, easy and informative tools to use in writing up observations, learning stories, portfolios or when engaging with parents. Some services have found it helpful to set up computers within the rooms so that staff can quickly type up notes. Providing staff with additional off-floor time to complete documentation is another approach discussed.

Staff support and leadership

Many services discuss the value in staff supporting each other to implement the EYLF through open communication and sharing ideas. Yappera's Director feels that the way staff have shared information and resources with each other has contributed to their smooth EYLF transition. Staff have actively developed EYLF templates and shared these amongst the team. The Director describes how the EYLF has given one staff member in particular an opportunity to pursue her interest in programming methodology, and so she has researched different templates, charts and resources that link to the EYLF, and distributed these to staff.

A further critical factor identified is staff leadership - having staff members who are more confident with the EYLF and are able to share their enthusiasm and knowledge with others (TACCA, Coolabaroo, Yappera). One Director states that it is enormously helpful to have staff at the service who really embrace the EYLF and advocate for it. She explains that,

I couldn't do it on my own as a manager, you had to have staff that were willing to step up outside of their role and take a real leadership role in the environment and be able to assist their staff, and have the patience to be able to explain to staff. So we were lucky here to have that. (Yappera)

Supporting staff to program

As the programming format under the EYLF marks a change from previous approaches, a number of Directors explain that staff have needed extra support to adjust. An approach taken by one Director is to work with staff for the first half hour of their programming time. This enables them to share "where they want to head, what they want to look at, how they're feeling things have gone over the past two weeks." After this initial support she then leaves staff to complete their planning, so that whilst they can still seek out support from her they are working towards independent planning (Gunai Lidj). She also ensures that staff have all of the resources they need to plan, including folders, stationary and relevant EYLF books and guides.

Ensuring a positive transition for staff

A number of services explain that key to securing staff engagement is helping them to understand the benefits and making the change a positive experience (Gunai Lidj, Yawarra, Jalygurr). As the benefits become clearer

Staff leadership: Yawarra

One Director describes how enabling staff to take a lead in different areas of the Framework involved a step-by-step approach. Initially, staff met with the IPSU officer "and talked about what they were comfortable with implementing and what they still wanted to learn more about. And from that each staff member picked a particular outcome and has really been focusing on getting to know that outcome really well." The Director feels that this approach has been very successful, as it has empowered staff to become leaders in a particular area. Educators have been able to share their knowledge with each other, as the Director explains "And then they're the person to go to, so if you're having trouble with area two, then you can go to that person, and say 'well I really don't understand this bit, can you help me?' It's giving them more of role in it, so it's not always coming back to me for the answers." Once staff are confident in one area they are then able to move their focus to another area. By breaking the EYLF up into smaller pieces the Director feels that it has been less overwhelming for the educators, "they're not trying to learn it all at once."

Unpacking the EYLF: Birrelee

Birrelee unpacked the EYLF into a document that they could work with. This involved literally taking the document apart, as the Director explained “we took the staples out of the booklet...and we spread it out the way we understood it and read it, because it doesn’t read like a book.” She describes how “So we then thought, what are the principles, what is being, belonging and becoming? How do we identify with that? Is it culturally appropriate? Do we want to change it so it is culturally appropriate?” This helped them as a service to understand how the EYLF fit with and could support their practices, values and the outcomes they wanted to achieve.

staff confidence will also grow – which will help encourage further engagement. As the Director of Yawarra notes, “it’s good because it will always challenge them, and will always give them some ways to improve. So even though they’re implementing it, it’s always something that can be worked on.” At Jalygurr the Director has motivated staff by emphasising that the EYLF is an opportunity for them to “start fresh, all help each other and actually get something happening...that we all like.” At Gunai Lidj these processes were

opportunities for staff to “sit and talk about the reasons for (the EYLF), and how we find that it meets our needs - what we’ve been looking for and planning for for the children.” Part of this is empowering staff to take ownership of the EYLF. One Director describes her vision of how each staff member can take on the EYLF, “If we give each staff member some empowerment in their room, they’ll embrace this better. That’s my goal.” She believes that all staff need to be involved and to understand what is happening in their room in terms of children’s development (Gunai Lidj).

Another key way to support staff has been through focusing on using the EYLF as an opportunity for them to explore their own strengths and interests. For example, some staff are finding the new focus on capturing learning through photographs to be an engaging and interesting new challenge (Gunai Lidj, TACCA).

Taking small steps to build confidence

All services illustrate in one way or another that key to engaging with the EYLF has been to take small steps to allow staff to build up their confidence and knowledge, and to deconstruct the document to identify a targeted initial area of focus (see TACCA, Gudjahgahmiamia, Koonibba).

With many services acknowledging that they are already actually implementing the EYLF, a number of services identify that it is critical to focus on building on what’s already happening within the centre (Koonibba, Coolabaroo, Gundoo, Minya Bunhii, TACCA).

“And in our work...we are trying to counter that fear of starting, and of over-thinking it. We are saying: ‘Okay, let’s go back to the very beginning and look at the Vision’. We say: ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming are three really good concepts for you to think about. If you do nothing more than really engage with the idea of how children attending this service Belong to this group, - and to their family and community; and how they Be who they are in this moment, right now; and, who do we want them to become?’. That’s a strong basis for educators and services to start their programming, and for them to start their connection into the EYLF.”

(Christine Dimovich, Yorganop IPSU)

Some services have initiated a graduated implementation amongst staff, with only a small number of staff initially being involved in planning under the new framework. This enabled them to “feel confident in what they were doing” and to then provide support to other staff, so that now all staff are planning under the EYLF. (Gunai Lidj).

8.2 Useful supports

This section explores the training, resources and supports staff have found helpful in assisting them to implement the EYLF. In particular, the Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) are described as a valuable source of support; providing training, informative resources and informal support. Centres also explain that being able to visit other ECEC centres to talk to staff and to see EYLF implementation in action has been a great opportunity to receive new ideas and inspiration. Furthermore, training on a variety of topics has assisted staff to grapple with some of the changes under the EYLF, such as different documentation and programming styles.

VEYLF and EYLF trials and engaging with EYLF writers

Two services were involved in a trial of the Victorian Early Years Learning Framework (Yappera, Gunai Lidj) and feel that this prepared them well to understand and implement the EYLF. This indicates that time is a key factor in a service’s capacity to implement a new framework. Through a proactive approach to service development, and by utilising their strengths in relationship building, Birrelee engaged with the writers of the EYLF to receive training and guidance on implementing it. They felt that this was an extremely valuable exercise, and assisted them to deconstruct the EYLF and adapt it to their own service context.

Indigenous Professional Support Units

Services in all states cited the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) as a major source of support, with great depth of knowledge and accessibility (see in particular Jalygurr and Yappera). Services in South Australia felt that the quarterly Aboriginal services meetings hosted by the South Australian IPSU for all Aboriginal early childhood services were particularly helpful (Minya Bunhii, Koonibba).

Collaboration and visits with other ECEC services

Several services also mention collaborating with other early childhood services to share knowledge, practices and to discuss a variety of topics (Koonibba, Minya Bunhii). One educator based at a remote service states that a particular feature of rural services is that “you learn how to relate and share” (Koonibba). Another educator recalls a conference she attended that provided a forum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and indigenous services overseas. She explains that this provided an invaluable opportunity to learn from and share ideas with other services, “(it) was great to talk to other services from around the nation, but also to get how things were working in different cultures. So how you could adapt what they were doing and make it your own.” She cites learning about how she found listening to centres from New Zealand describe their approach to involving extended family into the centre through music and singing as a particularly useful exercise (Minya Bunhii).

A number of centres participated in visits to other early learning centres (Jalygurr, TACCA, Birrelee, Minya Bunhii, Koonibba, Yawarra). By talking to staff and viewing other centres staff were able to gain unique insights on a variety of topics, including programming (TACCA), learning environments (Birrelee), literacy (Minya Bunhii), and just as a chance to explore another services practices more generally (Koonibba, TACCA). Services comment that whilst these visits weren't about then replicating what they saw (Birrelee), they enabled educators to take ideas from the different services, and combine these with their own ideas, for example in implementing the EYLF (TACCA). Another service discusses how they have partnered in a 'sister service' arrangement with a mainstream, community-based early childhood service in the local area. They are currently planning to conduct 'staff swaps' between the two services so that staff can view practice at different services. The Director feels that this will be beneficial for staff "to see the different ways – that people are doing it this way and it's not the only way that it can be done." (Yawarra).

"It was great to talk to other services from around the nation...so you could adapt what they were doing and make it your own" (Minya Bunhii).

Training

All services detail that they have received useful training on various topics, whether related directly or indirectly to the EYLF. These are summarised below:

- Documentation, including practical examples of learning stories and how to create these (TACCA, Coolabaroo)
- Ethics codes, policies and procedures (Gundoo)
- Working within a strengths based approach. For example one particular workshop focused around a series of photos of a child eating. Discussions revolved around how educators could perceive this – through a deficit approach that might note that the child was creating a mess and that they weren't capable of feeding themselves - or through a strengths based approach that explored what the child was achieving, the pride that he was evidently feeling in accomplishing this for himself, and the different skills he was learning (TACCA).
- Programming and planning (Jalygurr, TACCA, Gunai Lidi, Gundoo). Educators at one service relay that a particularly useful method employed by the training officer involved asking staff reflective questions to challenge them to think about the EYLF, to better understand children's thinking, and what to look for when thinking about how children learn. This has assisted them to develop a cyclical form of programming (TACCA). Gunai Lidi also received training on this, with educators reflecting that it enabled them to evaluate what they personally felt quality programming looked like, and what changes they needed to make to offer quality programs for the children.
- Developing individual learning plans for children (Koonibba)
- Using resources to implement the EYLF. Staff at Coolabaroo found a workshop delivered by Caroline Fewster particularly useful on this topic. This provided valuable, practical ideas for cheap and simple resources to use with children and how to use these to implement EYLF principles, practices and outcomes - for example designing art carriers for children to protect their artwork when they carry it home – which helps them to feel that their art is valued and important.

- Changes under the National Quality Framework - including what services need to do to adapt to the changes and how staff can do this (Yappera).
- Communication - including an opportunity for staff to evaluate the way they communicate with children, and also how support children to develop communication skills (Gunai Lidj).
- Training in the Remote Indigenous Professional Development program (Gundoo). Two staff from Gundoo have been trained as Pedagogical Leaders and are now training staff from other services throughout the region. The Director believes that this leadership has been critical through staff “coming back to our community...showing these girls and building their confidence and showing them that yes they are really doing it”. She describes that this training broadened their understanding of the EYLF, and has given them renewed confidence and pride in what they are doing.

Training needs to build on staff confidence and support them to feel that their work is valuable (Yappera).

General information on training

Educators identify a number of beneficial training methods or processes. These are summarised below:

- One-on-one staff mentoring to evaluate individual practice (Yawarra, Yappera), and to ensure a relationship between the trainer and staff (Yappera). This helped to ensure that discussions take place at each staff’s level and are responsive to their needs.
- Opportunities to allow staff to explore concepts and share ideas with each other in a relaxed, informal manner (Gundoo, Gunai Lidj). An illustration of this is the Yarning Circle training Gundoo received from the Queensland IPSU. The Director describes that this provided them with an opportunity to sit down and talk through the EYLF and what changes they wanted to see as a result in their centre and community. She felt that this was a particularly useful method as it allowed “everyone to open up and become more relaxed with one another.”

Sharing sessions: Minya Bunhii

Educators at Minya Bunhii emphasise that sharing sessions are more useful than formal training, as one educator points out, it would be good to hear about “real stuff to see how other people are coping.” A potential format could be a facilitator to provide a basic outline, and then an opportunity for services to share what they’re doing, what’s working and what isn’t. One educator from the centre highlights the value in this, “If we had opportunities to bring us altogether, it’s the best learning tool there is. With someone to facilitate it in the know.”

“People want the basics, and what they can use everyday” (Coolabaroo).

Peter Demopoulos, Professional Support Officer from IPSU Queensland, describes how these are a great way of “introducing the terminology, starting to talk up the new world and expectations within that world, and building up some belief that this

stuff is actually happening”, which helps to provide positive affirmation for the staff that they are already implementing many of the practices.

- High calibre and enthusiastic trainers who can inspire staff (TACCA, Gunai Lidj). Regular training is felt by services to be a particularly valuable way to motivate staff and to provide new ideas for things they can try in their centre (Gundoo). For example staff at TACCA described a whole day workshop with Maggie Dent as a guest speaker to be particularly helpful because staff found her to be a highly motivational speaker.
- Training that builds on staff’s confidence, provides them with positive reinforcement (Coolabaroo) and supports them to feel that their work is valuable (Yappera, Gundoo).
- Training that recognises that staff are often already implementing a certain practice or principle, and therefore utilises staff knowledge as a strength. Training often needs to be more of a refresher of *why* staff need to keep on doing a particular practice (Coolabaroo).
- Trainers need to understand the context and culture in which a service is working (Gunai Lidj).
- Training that is up to date and relevant (Gunai Lidj).
- Practical training that allows staff to see how they can and already are implementing the EYLF at their service (Gunai Lidj, Gundoo, Coolabaroo, Minya Bunhii) and therefore does not create excessive amounts of additional work (Yappera). Training should therefore provide staff with practical techniques and tools (Yappera), as one Director points out “people want the basics, and what they can use everyday.” (Coolabaroo).
- Training that is jargon free and therefore accessible to all staff (Coolabaroo). Sessions should also not contain too much information, as this can be daunting for staff (Jalygurr).

Staff at ARMSU (IPSU SA) explain that training needs to take many forms, including structured professional development workshops, informal and incidental sharing between services, and on-site direct, practical support. They find that often what ECEC staff respond to best and most want is one-on-one interaction within their centre – as this supports them with practical ideas and guidance on how to actually implement the elements of the EYLF within their own service context. Sharolyn Talbot, ARMSU Coordinator, describes the empowering effect this has on staff in enabling them to realise that they are already implementing many of the EYLF practices and principles. A critical aspect of this is that the IPSU staff are known to the ECEC workers. Network SA Executive Officer Maureen McGuire describes that this is about “building relationships so that Sharolyn and all our staff are known to the people in the services. And therefore it’s ok to ask her a question, or to have her sit down with you on the floor with the kids, and just yarn for a bit.”

- Training that takes into account the limited funding some services may experience, ensuring that activities discussed can be done cheaply and with available resources (Coolabaroo, Minya Bunhii). Training also needs to take into account the limited time that staff may have – for example one-off activities that focus on individual children are simply not sustainable (Minya Bunhii).

Resources used

The following is a list of resources services mentioned as useful to aid their understanding of and transition to the EYLF. Further information on these resources can be found in Annex B: Resource Matrix.

- EYLF Professional Learning Program newsletters and tips
- EYLF Professional Learning Program (online)
- EYLF Professional Learning Program Facebook page
- *EYLF Educators Guide*
- *Remote Indigenous Professional Development Package*
- Early Childhood Australia newsletters and online forum
- Yorganop IPSU newsletters
- Childscapes programming resources and templates
- *Foundations for Success – guidelines for an early learning program in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities* (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Queensland)
- *Respect, Reflect, Relate* (Department for Education and Child Development, South Australia)
- *Through Young Black Eyes* and other SNAICC resources

Techniques in using resources

A number of Directors explain that they regularly print out various newsletters, tips and relevant information to share with staff (Yawarra, Coolabaroo, Gunai Lidj, Jalygurr). These are often compiled into a folder for future use – in particular whilst staff are programming, or are put out in the lunchroom for staff to browse.

8.3 Support still needed

This section examines the training and resources that services indicate will be needed as ongoing support to enable them to continue and improve their implementation of the EYLF.

Training

Training needs are identified in the following areas:

- Documentation - to enable services to better understand how to document and display children's strengths (Birrelee)
- Creating learning environments (TACCA, Jalygurr)
- Programming under the EYLF (Lulla's)
- Linking EYLF practices and principles to outcomes (Jalygurr)
- Reflective practice – with an emphasis on supporting staff to take action post-reflection and to act on the learning (Birrelee).
- Training that reflects staff interests (TACCA)
- Staff exchanges with other services (Lulla's)

Furthermore, a number of services explain that EYLF training needs to be ongoing and flexible to reflect needs as they become apparent (Gunai Lidj, Gundoo, TACCA, Yappera, Yorganop IPSU). This is particularly important as services modify the EYLF to suit their needs over time (Yawarra). Staff also need to be able to access training that meets the changing and diverse needs of the children in the centre, for example for children with additional needs (TACCA).

"The document will constantly evolve and people will find new ways of interpreting and implementing it. So I think...you need to look at new ways to implement (it) and not just go 'we're doing it this way now and that's the way it's staying'." (Yawarra)

Resources

Services identify several resource needs:

- Simple factsheets on different aspects of the EYLF (Lulla's) and to help explain the EYLF to parents (in particular outcomes and the new programming format) (Gudjahgahmiamia)
- Simple evaluation tools to enable staff to understand how they can better record and enhance children's development (Gunai Lidj)
- Resources to support staff to implement the EYLF in a culturally appropriate manner (Yappera)
- Practical resources with tips for setting up and implementing activities, such as those provided by Yorganop IPSU and the EYLF Professional Learning Program (Jalygurr).

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research highlights that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care (ECEC) services interviewed are implementing the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and play an important role in improving the early childhood outcomes for the children in their care. In many Framework elements they lead the way in providing authentic and valuable examples of good practice. In particular the holistic, culturally empowering and comprehensive approach towards children's development demonstrated by the services interviewed already incorporates key Framework outcomes, principles and practices.

A unique aspect of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services interviewed is that they view children's wellbeing in a broad, holistic sense that takes into account the context of family and community wellbeing. Wellbeing is defined as encompassing physical, social, emotional and cultural aspects. Programs to meet these needs work within a cultural perspective and incorporate the community's current and historical context. In order to ensure improved wellbeing and development outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, services require ongoing and stable support. However whilst the services interviewed were identified and profiled because they are implementing the EYLF effectively, others may not have sufficient support to be implementing it to the same extent. Funding, workforce development and infrastructure support is required for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to realise the strengths displayed by the services interviewed. Current funding levels are not sufficient to do this.²⁵ Therefore acknowledging the funding challenges identified by services interviewed as a barrier to the provision of holistic care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC recommends:

Increased, stable and multi-year funding planned and budgeted to allow services to operate as multifunctional services equipped to respond to the diverse wellbeing needs of their children and families. SNAICC recommends that the Government review support to all existing services to ensure sufficient funding and support to provide quality integrated services.

(Recommendation 1)

The findings emerging from the report indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC organisations are integral parts of their community and have a strong belief in their role in community development. They build sustainable partnerships with the community, a key EYLF component, through mechanisms such as a community or parent board. They are community owned and managed, which helps to build the community's trust in them and ensures that they are responsive to community needs. They work in partnership with families through relationships based on trust, respect, open communication and a commitment to empowering and supporting families through a strengths based approach. Being viewed as part of and controlled by the community is a key factor that emerged in this research for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to implement the EYLF effectively and achieve outcomes for children. Recognising this, SNAICC recommends that:

DEEWR consider prioritising community controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC service models in the setup of any new ECEC centres aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in future, in recognition of the unique position that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services hold in delivering culturally appropriate, accessible, holistic and empowering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

(Recommendation 2)

One of the profound findings from the report was the importance that the services attributed to educators' deep understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and recent history – and critically – the implications of this for how educators support each child's development. Services speak of a child's strong cultural identity as being the foundation from which other forms of identity can develop. They discuss how they support children to develop a strong cultural identity through embedding all they do within culture; so that culture influences and forms the basis of the discussions, stories, learning environments, activities, resources, relationships within and philosophy of the service. The consultations powerfully demonstrate how fostering children's cultural identity can assist in reconnecting their families – many of whom may have become separated from culture – to their heritage, community and traditions, and the ensuing positive benefits this brings for both the child and their family. Services also conveyed the positive and myriad effects culture has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's self-esteem and confidence for learning.

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's experience of the world around them is extensively defined and informed by historical factors, both pre-colonisation (the cultural lens and context) and post-colonisation (including dispossession, family separation and/or disadvantage). A deep understanding of the context in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children develop is therefore critical for educators to be able to provide the best possible support to each child, to design learning experiences that respond to that child's understanding of their world, and to effectively foster the five EYLF outcomes for a child. For example, enabling a child to develop connections with their world is only possible when an educator understands the world that the child experiences and is developing within.

SNAICC makes the following recommendations to ensure that the importance of culture is appropriately recognised and embedded at the national policy level, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children receive culturally competent, and informed care and development experiences. These recommendations also provide all children with opportunities to learn about and understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

In 2014 Government to evaluate the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, including in relation to the adequacy of its recognition and promotion of - (a) culturally competent care and (b) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in policy and program development and implementation- as essential elements for improved early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This should be done with a view to a proposal for a future COAG agreement required to support the Closing the Gap agenda for early childhood.

(Recommendation 3)

The Professional Support Coordinators (PSCs) ensure that their trainings on the EYLF, generally and specifically for services that serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, incorporate sufficient focus on the unique context, needs and approaches for implementing the EYLF for outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This could draw on good practice principles and examples from this paper.

(Recommendation 4)

Government contracts with service providers require that all educators employed must have undertaken a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence program within their studies or professional development course. Where educators have not undertaken such a course, Government should provide a funding pool to support new educators complete an appropriate course before commencing employment at the service. Position descriptions should also include the required knowledge, skills and attitudes for culturally competent practice.

(Recommendation 5)

Government provide incentives for early childhood education courses (certificate, diploma and degree level) with a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence component. This could take the form of profiling high quality cultural competence courses; assisting training providers to link to government job-seeker programs; fee reductions or waivers for courses; or sending out alerts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to inform them of new recruits.

(Recommendation 6)

Services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and/or children who are culturally and linguistically diverse must develop a cultural competence plan demonstrating how they will implement each aspect of the National Quality Standards (NQS) and EYLF for those children. This plan should be a living document that is regularly reflected on by all staff and forms part of staff and organisational performance evaluations.

(Recommendation 7)

Services explained in diverse ways throughout the research that the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is a vital part of their approach. Such staff play a key role in helping to foster and maintain partnerships with the community and parents, and support non-

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to strengthen their cultural competence and engagement with children and families. Not least of all, they can ensure that children's cultural, wellbeing, learning and identity needs are richly and seamlessly met. This is recognised in the National Early Childhood Development strategy, which states that developing the workforce "to reflect the composition of the local community — especially where there are high numbers of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families—is an important strategy for addressing workforce shortages and reducing cultural barriers to access."²⁶ Acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to ensure that services are culturally appropriate, and their role in facilitating partnerships with families and communities, SNAICC recommends:

The development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workforce plan,²⁷ with proper resourcing and implementation of targeted strategies within the plan to support the recruitment, training and retainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC educators. In particular, funding for ongoing professional development programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators is recommended, as well as partnerships between Government, educational institutes and ECEC services for the effective implementation of innovative programs to increase the pool of students and graduates.
(Recommendation 8)

A further finding of the consultations was the persistent challenge of recruiting and retaining educators in some areas, particularly remote.²⁸ Services speak of the importance of long-term local educators in maintaining families' trust, and for their deep knowledge and understanding of the children, families and community. The development of a qualified local workforce is therefore critical for long-term staff sustainability, and the provision of a high quality service targeted to the local context.²⁹ SNAICC recommends that:

Government contracts with service providers require the service to establish and implement programs to expand and strengthen the local workforce, including strategies for recruitment, training, professional development and retainment of local educators. This could take the form of a recruitment policy jointly developed between the government contract contact and the service, with mutually agreed responsibilities, resourcing, and goals. It could also involve mentoring arrangements to support local educators through informal, on-the-job capacity building and support. Complementing this, Government to implement incentives for successful service programs that demonstrate long-term retainment of local staff and innovative strategies to invest in their professional development and training.
(Recommendation 9)

Government to commission research into effective models to build the capacity of the local workforce through innovative approaches to training and professional development, such as the examples outlined in the Productivity Commissions ECEC workforce report.³⁰
(Recommendation 10)

Government to fund and resource an incentives scheme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workers who remain in a service for one year or more, in an area classified as 'Remote' (4) or 'Very Remote' (5) on the Australian Standard Geographical Classification - Remoteness Structure (ASGC-RA).

(Recommendation 11)

Where it is not possible to employ local staff, facilitating the non-local educator to build a relationship with children, parents and the community is critical to the development and maintenance of strong, trusting partnerships, and for the educator to gain an in-depth understanding of a child's context.³¹ Additional support can also have added benefits for the retention of educators.³² SNAICC recommends that:

In the circumstance where an educator is employed from outside a community, the service provider contracts require that the service have in place a six month plan for building a relationship between the new service employee, the children, parents and community. This is to include a one week orientation before the educator commences employment. It could also include assigning the educator a local 'mentor' to assist them to learn about culture and the community.

(Recommendation 12)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed act as valuable examples to other early childhood centres by providing ideas and suggestions for implementing the EYLF to produce improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. More broadly they display leadership in the area of integrated service delivery and culturally competent early childhood education and care, and demonstrate many valuable learnings in creating partnerships with families, communities and other services to promote children's and families wellbeing and development. Acknowledging this, SNAICC recommends:

Ongoing support, facilitated through each state Indigenous Professional Support Coordinator Unit (IPSU) and Professional Support Coordinator (PSC), to facilitate learning through profiling good practice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services.

Possible initiatives include:

- *Staff exchange programs;*
- *Visits between centres to view good practice in action;*
- *State-wide meetings of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to share ideas and support for good practice;*
- *Promotion of local partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream ECEC services; and*
- *Wide promotion, distribution and use of this report and accompanying Good Practice Fact Sheets.*

(Recommendation 13)

DEEWR is also well placed to promote and support local partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream ECEC services through its management and oversight relationships.

(Recommendation 14)

Capitalising on the strong examples of practice in this paper, SNAICC, the IPSUs and DEEWR could initiate a process to share the accompanying fact sheets with all ECEC services across Australia and invite them to share their own practices. The additional good practices could be compiled and an updated version of the fact sheets developed and circulated.

(Recommendation 15)

This could provide an effective way to support services to reflect on the practices they have developed that are proving to be effective in implementing the EYLF outcomes, principles and practices in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. This could support further reflection, learning and exchange on strengthening practice on a broader scale.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services interviewed demonstrate and embody in everyday practice a deep understanding of and respect for local culture which supports and enhances genuine learning for the child, and the development of a strong identity. Learning is linked to and takes place in the context of a child's culture - the land and environment, animals, stories, family and community. It is evident that good practice in early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children needs to utilise culture as a base, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services may therefore look different to mainstream services in their philosophies, approaches and practices. In this regard, SNAICC recommends:

Appropriate cultural competence training be provided for all Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) assessors to ensure that they understand the unique characteristics, values, approaches and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services, as well as for other ECEC services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

(Recommendation 16)

The National Quality Standards (NQS) now form the benchmark for high quality early childhood care and development in Australia. Despite this, the NQS contain little on the importance of cultural competence within ECEC settings. Whilst it mentions that curriculum decision-making must contribute to, amongst other things, the development of a child's identity, and the program must be built off elements such as a child's culture, it does not provide a definition of cultural competence nor standards that services must reach to effectively realise it. SNAICC recommends that:

ACECQA consult with relevant stakeholders to develop comprehensive cultural competence guidelines for ECEC services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as per the recommendation from the Early Childhood Development Workforce Productivity Report.³³ ACECQA should also further review the NQS to identify where they need strengthening to properly reflect this issue and to identify appropriate amendments.

(Recommendation 17)

As evidenced in this report, the Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) have and continue to play a vital role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to implement the EYLF. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services have particular support needs, and require culturally appropriate resources. Acknowledging this, SNAICC recommends that:

DEEWR commits to continued, enhanced and stable funding to Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) to create and implement context specific resources and training to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services understand and implement the EYLF. In addition, resources are required to ensure national coordination of ISPU services so that resources and expertise can be efficiently developed and shared.

(Recommendation 18)

Whilst strong and positive evidence demonstrates the correlation between attendance at an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled ECEC service and improved child outcomes in health, wellbeing and development, this tends to be largely anecdotal. Without devaluing the significance of such evidence, it is clear that the sector would benefit from long-term, evidence-based research, as the COAG National Early Childhood Development Strategy recognises, “Further longitudinal research and robust evaluation is needed to know with confidence what programs and service delivery approaches represent the best investments for children in the Australian context.”³⁴ Further rigorous, evidence-based research is particularly needed to unpack what works to bring about improved early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Recognising this, SNAICC recommends that:

Government commission and resource a project to monitor and evaluate the longer-term impacts for children attending Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services. SNAICC and the IPSUs would be well placed to work with a research institute to conduct this.

(Recommendation 19)

Government support is provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to develop their own impact monitoring system to enable them to document their long-term impact and effectiveness.

(Recommendation 20)

Lastly, the consultations identified that a number of services have children enrolled who currently have some form of involvement with child protection services. The role of the ECEC services in this regard are varied and significant – providing support to families; facilitating relationship maintenance or rebuilding between families and children in care; and ensuring that children in out of home care still receive access to culturally appropriate support and education at a time of significant change and dislocation. Services appeared to be providing this multifaceted support with little formal recognition or resourcing. As such the provision of this support relies on a service having the capacity to connect with child protection services themselves. SNAICC recommends that:

Government to link ECEC services with local child protection services, in order to ensure collaboration between both services on the development and implementation of a child's cultural support plan, shared decision-making, information-sharing, and the establishment of sustainable and productive partnerships.

(Recommendation 21)

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the diverse ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services successfully build upon their defining strengths to effectively implement the outcomes, principles and practices articulated in the EYLF. Their distinctive qualities, approaches and commitment to embedding all that they do within cultural, family and community frameworks means that they are uniquely placed to achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Tapping into and enabling this capacity however requires specific support attuned to their specific context. It is imperative in the next phase that such support is available to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services to realise their potential as holistic, culturally appropriate and high quality providers of early childhood education and care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

¹ These include a variety of different service types, including long day care, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), playgroups, kindergartens, preschools, out of school hours (OSHC) care and mobile services.

² These include a lack of transport; prohibitive fees; unmet family support needs; fear of racism or negative judgements; negative associations with institutions; and staffing issues, including a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. For more see Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). (2012). *Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: Learning from Good Practice*. Melbourne, 5-6; Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). (2010). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*. Melbourne.

³ For more information on the BBF program see

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Programs/ChildCareforServices/Pages/NonMainstreamServices.aspx>.

⁴ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra, 364.

⁵ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2010). *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, 9.

⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁷ Hutchins et al. (2007). 'Indigenous Early Learning and Care'. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 25.

⁸ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), viewed 21 November 2011, <http://www.naccho.org.au/definitions/communitycont.html>.

⁹ See Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). 2012. *Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: Learning from Good Practice*. Melbourne, 10.

¹⁰ Flaxman et al. (2009). 'Indigenous families and children: coordination and provision of services'. National Evaluation Consortium. Occasional Paper No. 23, 33.

¹¹ Sims et al. (2008). "Indigenous child carers leading the way". *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 4; Kitson, R. & Bowes, J. (2010). 'Incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing in early education for Indigenous children'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol. 35 (4), 85.

¹² For a discussion of these barriers see SNAICC. (2012). *Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: Learning from Good Practice*. Melbourne, 13.

¹³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. (2007). *Social Justice Report 2006*, 35, cited by SNAICC. (2010). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*. Policy paper. Melbourne, 7; and Trudgett, M. & Grace, R. 'Engaging with early childhood education and care services: The perspectives of Indigenous Australian mothers and their young children'. *Kulumun Indigenous Online Journal*. Vol. 1, 17.

¹⁴ See SNAICC. (2012). *Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: Learning from Good Practice*. Melbourne, 13.

¹⁵ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 355; Hutchins et al. (2007). "Indigenous Early Learning and Care". Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 8; and SNAICC. (2010). *Towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services*. Policy Paper. Melbourne, 8.

¹⁶ See Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, 266.

¹⁷ Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). (2006). *Towards an Indigenous Child Care Services Plan: A summary of the findings from consultations with Indigenous communities 2006-06*. Commonwealth of Australia, 9

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- ¹⁸ Hutchins et al. (2007). 'Indigenous Early Learning and Care'. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 9.
- ¹⁹ See Sims. (2011). Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school'. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government. Resource sheet no. 7; Sims et al. (2008). 'Indigenous child carers leading the way'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33 (1), 5.
- ²⁰ See Hutchins et al. (2007). 'Indigenous Early Learning and Care'. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 35.
- ²¹ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2010). *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, 20.
- ²² Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2010). *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, 21-23.
- ²³ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2010). *Educators Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, 42
- ²⁴ Whilst terminology can differ, this report refers to such Boards or Committees as 'committees'.
- ²⁵ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 352; Bond, D (2000) Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services National Report. Melbourne.
- ²⁶ Council of Australian Governments (COAG). (2009). *Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. Canberra, 20.
- ²⁷ Consistent with Recommendation 15.4 in Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra, 364.
- ²⁸ See also Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 357-359.
- ²⁹ Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. Canberra, 20.
- ³⁰ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 362.
- ³¹ See Farmer, R. and Fasoli, L. (2010). *You're in New Country; Advice for Non-Indigenous Early Childhood Mentors, Trainers and Teachers*. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) in partnership with Charles Sturt University.
- ³² Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 361.
- ³³ Productivity Commission. (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce Report*. Australian Government, 369.
- ³⁴ Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. Canberra, 12.

Annex A - Map of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services and Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) consulted



Annex B – Resource Matrix

Organisation	Name of Resource(s) and/or Training	Details of Resource(s) and/or Training	Link
Aboriginal Resource and Management Support Unit (ARMSU), South Australia IPSU	Various resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Australia based • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific • Resource sheets that are designed to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services to become familiar with and use the EYLF (free) • Resources also available for purchase 	http://www.ipsusa.org.au/freeResources.html
QLD IPSU	Various resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queensland based • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific • Resource sheets designed to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services on a variety of topics, including implementing the EYLF (free) • Newsletters contain information on focus issues such as leadership. • Resources also available for purchase 	http://www.ipsu.com.au/fact_sheets.htm
Yorganop, IPSU WA	Various resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific • Variety of free resource and information sheets • Resources also available for purchase • Twenty-four resource sheets on the EYLF to support ATSI early childhood workers implement the EYLF (free) • Monthly newsletters with additional tips 	http://www.ipsuwa.org.au/

RRACCSU, IPSU NT	Various resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NT based • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific • Variety of free downloadable resources, including on the EYLF • Resources also available for purchase • Have developed the NQS Indigenous Resource Package to support educators in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services across the NT to implement the NQS and EYLF. 	http://rracssucentral.batc helor.edu.au/index.php
Department of Education & Children's Services (DECS), South Australia	<i>Respect, Reflect, Relate</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream but has been supplied to all services, mainstream and non-mainstream. • Free • An early years assessment tool for learning and development using observation scales • To assist organisations to critique and inform their practice through self-reflection and inquiry 	http://www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Resources/resource/?reFlag=
Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) formally Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) Queensland	<i>Foundations for Success – guidelines for an early learning program in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides educators with a framework for planning, implementing and reflecting on a quality early learning program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 3 ½ to 4 ½ years of age. 	http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/indigenous/projects/foundations.html

Early Childhood Australia and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)	National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (NQS PLP) (formerly known as EYLF PLP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National • Mainstream • Free • Includes the NQS PLP newsletters, e-learning videos, online forum, Facebook page and YouTube site. • Includes NQS PLP e-newsletter, information about NQS, EYLF professional learning workshops, NQF PLP interactive online forum, e-learning videos, training videos, articles, research chapters and other resources about implementing the EYLF. 	http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp/
Early Childhood Australia (ECA)	Various resources and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National with state-based branches • Mainstream • Resources available for purchase and downloadable for free • Resource theme: Being, Belonging & Becoming includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Links to the EYLF - Information for parents - Links to evidence about high quality early childhood practice; - Links and books to support educators to understand the EYLF; and - Links to ECA publications that have been specifically written to support practitioners to work with successfully with the EYLF. • <i>Research in Practice Series</i> (pay-basis) focusing on practical aspects of early childhood education. The first two EYLF specific resources in this series are: The EYLF: Getting Started; and EYLF: Building Confident Learners 	<p><u>Main website:</u> http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/</p> <p><u>Resource theme:</u> http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/resources_themes/eylf_early_years_learning_framework.html</p> <p><u>Research in Practice series:</u> http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/research_in_practice_series/about_rips.html</p>

Gowrie	Various resources and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National (available in all states) • Mainstream • Resources and training on a pay basis • Provide training - including customised training on EYLF and NQF. • Various resources, including a number on the EYLF 	See state and territory specific websites. For example Victoria (http://www.gowrievictoria.org.au/Training/EarlyYearsLearningFramework/tabid/119/language/enAU/Default.aspx) and NSW (http://www.gowrie.com.au/child-care-training/training-overview.html)
Children's Services Central	Various resources and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW based • Mainstream • Provide training, e-learning and resources, including on the EYLF • Fee basis but with some free downloadable resources available • EYLF e-tips weekly email service providing guidance, support and resources. 	http://www.cscentral.org.au/
Childscapes	Various resources and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National • Provide training and resources on a fee basis • Training topics include: learning stories, learning environments, programming under the EYLF and natural outdoor play. • Support program and resource available for purchase: 'Making Discoveries Programming System' to guide educators to program under the EYLF through an interactive planning journal. 	http://childscapes.com.au/EYLF-and-FSAC-Documentation.php

Global Kids Oz	Various resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National • Mainstream • Includes various online resources on the EYLF that provide activities and suggestions to assist educators to support multicultural education using the principles laid out in the new ELYF Framework 	http://www.globalkidsoz.com.au/elyf_how_to_guide.php
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