



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

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

Good Practice Service Profiles

The following 14 Good Practice Profiles are an accompanying resource for the full report, entitled *Learning From Good Practice: Implementing the Early Years Learning Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, which is available on the SNAICC website.

SNAICC acknowledges the significant time and expertise that the services featured in this report have contributed. SNAICC greatly appreciates their support.

Table of Contents

Aboriginal Children’s Centre Good Practice Profile	1
Birreelee Good Practice Profile	9
Congress Good Practice Profile	20
Coolabaroo Good Practice Profile.....	29
Gudjahgahmiamia Good Practice Profile.....	37
Gunai Lidgee Good Practice Profile.....	45
Gundoo Good Practice Profile	55
Jalygurr Good Practice Profile	63
Koonibba Good Practice Profile	73
Lulla’s Good Practice Profile	81
Minya Bunhii Good Practice Profile.....	89
Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Centre Good Practice Profile.....	98
Yappera Good Practice Profile.....	107
Yawarra Child Care Centre Good Practice Profile.....	118

Aboriginal Children's Centre Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Alison Overeem

A. Who is the Aboriginal Children's Centre?

The Aboriginal Children's Centre (ACC) is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Risdon Cove, Tasmania. In the 1980s the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) established a playgroup for Aboriginal families in Hobart. The playgroup and attached family support program thrived, and so in 1989, with a strong foundation and established relationships between children, families and the service, the playgroup received funding to transition to a MACS service. The aim of the MACS was to be a multifunctional child and family support service that would build connections and strengthen culture and community, not merely to provide child care for working parents. In 2011 the service moved to a purpose-built, culturally designed centre on Aboriginal land at Risdon Cove, where they are co-located with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. The service has approximately 90 children enrolled in the long day care and out of school hours (OSHC) programs, and are looking to increase numbers now they have more space.

A1. Values and principles

Alison firmly believes that a fundamental principle underpinning the service is giving Aboriginal families choice in the service their children attend. It is not about segregating Aboriginal children from mainstream society, but "having a service that's community driven, community focused, community staffed. It's giving a message back to the community that 'hang on, we might have a little bit of control over our destiny'."

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

The Aboriginal Children's Centre aims to deliver a holistic, integrated approach that focuses on building children cultural and community connections, their capacity and self-esteem. Alison describes how these are the fundamental things an early childhood centre should focus on, as they will prepare children for school and later life.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Alison explains that although they are not yet required to implement the EYLF they have embraced it as it aligns with the centre's philosophy and practices, in particular because being, belonging and becoming are fundamental values to the service, and elements they have been focusing on since they began.

B2. Aboriginal Children's Centre and EYLF Outcomes

Culture and developing a strong sense of **identity** is an integral part of the centre and is seen as underpinning all development. Alison strongly believes that this is vital to support families' strength and capacity over the generations. Many adults who attended the centre as children now send their own children there, and Alison describes how these children are able to develop a strong sense of identity because their own parents were able to develop their cultural connections and identity, and can therefore pass this down to them.

Alison extols the value of the land and new centre at Risdon Cove in supporting children's **identity** and cultural connections. She describes how "our philosophy can change because of this building, because it's on Aboriginal land. It's on land that's been handed back to us." The building and outdoor area have been designed to appeal to the community, as Alison highlights "the whole building – it's a philosophy of what matters to Aboriginal people in Tassie." Inside the centre photos and pictures help foster children's identity within their community and within their history. The centre is designed to visually 'speak to' anyone in the community. Alison 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." This strong cultural and community connection supports



A mutton bird display in the taralangkana (oyster) 3-5 year old room.

children to feel that they **belong** at the centre and that it is theirs, and also helps to foster their sense of belonging within the wider community. Alison describes how the centre is "a true testament to how valued children are" to the community, and how this boost children's self-confidence, "When a visitor comes in, they are so proud to show people their centre!"

Staff ensure that culture is embedded in all the activities at the centre. Alison illustrates this point with the recent example of Easter celebrations. She, the centre cook and some of the educators were discussing how they could celebrate Easter at the centre 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 they used natural grasses to make mutton bird nests with the children and to talk about Easter through this cultural lens. Alison describes how this approach didn't detract from what children might have been experiencing at home in terms of Easter, but brought in cultural practices and a celebration of a significant time for the community.

Children's **identity** and their **communication skills** are fostered through a focus on incorporating palawa kani, the Tasmanian Aboriginal language, into the daily work of the service. The TAC runs a palawa kani language program, and so assists the MACS to implement this at the centre. Resources are also available for children in palawa kani. The outdoor play area is designed to reflect culture and the environment. The landscape was 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 that children would experience in Aboriginal communities on the islands. It also helps to connect children to seasonal cultural events, as Alison describes, "it's mutton bird season down here at the moment, that's a big thing in our community, so it's a big thing in our centre" with different activities and discussions focusing on this.

The centre has always maintained a strong focus on fostering children's **wellbeing** through the provision of a range of services. However, due to limited funding the multifunctional nature of the service and therefore their ability to respond to children's wellbeing through a **holistic** approach has significantly decreased. Additional services that focus on children's wellbeing have been sporadic, reflecting the funding available at the time. Given this, the service has focused on building on the resources of their parent body, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. The service now runs long day care, an out of school hours (OSHC) program, and through a partnership with the Department of Health they have funding for a child health nurse two and a half days a week. A speech therapy program operates through the Aboriginal Health Service, which is co-located with the Aboriginal Children's Centre at Risdon Cove. Family support and transition to school programs are provided as and when funding is available. A physical activity and nutrition program run by the TAC with the wider community is replicated at the Aboriginal Children's Centre. An in-house cook creates a menu and nutrition program for the children in collaboration with the Aboriginal Health Service. This also helps to ensure that children's **wellbeing** reflects the focus on community wellbeing, as Alison 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."

Children's **connection with their world** is fostered through the rich natural environment at the centre. Alison explains that,

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.

The building contains no blinds, curtains or awnings, so that from inside the children can only see nature. Instead of wooden seats to sit on in the play space, there are “great big boulders that you can sit on, have a yarn with your friends or see your cousin over in the next area, and you look down further and you see your aunt or Nan in the community room.” This helps children to feel **connected to nature and to their community**. Alison describes how this environment supports children to be **confident and involved learners**, enabling staff to teach



Children exploring the outdoor play environment

children not just about the environment, but “how to play, to learn, how to be inquisitive little learners”. The materials and toys used at the centre encourage children to use their imagination and to make each resource into what they want it to be, which is discussed in more detail below. This helps them to be involved learners by encouraging them to be active and creative participants in games and activities.

B3. Aboriginal Children’s Centre and EYLF Principles

Alison firmly believes that a unique characteristic of the centre is that its purpose is not just to work with children, it is to work and build **partnerships** with their whole family. Relationships with families are first and foremost built on trust, which is established over time through consistency of staff. Alison 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?

Parenting support includes weekly parent support groups, including a group for fathers, that are run in conjunction with the co-located TAC. Community cooking groups support families to learn about nutrition, and families are also able to borrow parenting resources when they need them.

Information sharing between staff and families is also seen as key to this **partnership**. Staff utilise communication books to ensure that daily information sharing takes place between staff and families. This is particularly important for children who utilise the centre’s bus service, as it can be challenging for staff to find opportunities to see their

parents. The communication books include information such as 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. Parents can then reciprocate with information such as what the child did on the weekend. Alison comments that this is an area they are always seeking to improve on, as not all parents can easily engage with written information. Alison describes how as Director she also ensures that she is always available to talk to families and to listen to any ideas or comments they may have.

The construction of the new centre was very much done in **partnership** with families. Alison describes how it actually gave them time to sit down and have valuable discussions with parents. Extensive discussions looked at what had worked over the last 20 years and what could be done better. Families' ideas and comments were then captured and incorporated into the design.

Alison feels that partnerships with families strengthen **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." Alison expresses that this community development approach has a myriad of benefits for children. It helps to build a stronger community and supports families' capacity to parent, and it helps to strengthen children's identity and connection. She states that "MACS centres aren't just services to the community, they're part of the community." The new building at Risdon Cove provides new opportunities through its expanded



A visit from the Elders Group

space, and so the service also 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 (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 connections between children and staff from the two services. Alison describes how these ongoing interactions are part of building and maintaining a sense of community for children and families.

Staff regularly use photos to help them **reflect on their practice** and to be **responsive to children**. Photographs are taken to highlight "what the children are learning...what the program is (and) what they're experiencing at the centre." Usually four or five photographs from each day are displayed on the walls of the centre for staff, families and children to view. Alison feels that photos are a key tool in supporting staff to be **reflective practitioners**, as through reviewing them they can reflect on what the children are learning and experiencing and how to expand on these in future

programming. Reflective practice also takes place informally through yarning, with all staff taking time where possible to discuss ideas and future directions.

B4. Aboriginal Children's Centre and EYLF Practices

Holistic practices at the Aboriginal Children's Centre mean viewing the development of the child in the context of community development and connection. Alison explains that their work is "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." These different strands incorporate children learning in a cultural environment, parents being supported to explore their own learning, and local staff being supported to build their capacity and skills so that they can work better with the children and the community, all of which contribute to improved outcomes for children.

The process of programming encourages staff to focus on **holistic approaches** and **intentional teaching**. In preparing a program, staff take into account the centre's cultural learning guidelines, focus outcomes and environmental and physical activity guidelines. Programming is based around age groupings, but also incorporates family group time, because as Alison explains "we are a family, we're a community." Family time involves at least three planned sessions a week, as well as other incidental opportunities, when all the children and staff are together for group play time and a shared lunch. All aspects of care are therefore factored into the program, including routines around meals and hygiene. Alison expresses that this is all part of the "messages we want to give the children about healthy eating practices, outdoor play (and) good physical activity". Following these guidelines, educators then incorporate their own ideas into the programs. All staff – including trainees - work collaboratively to develop fortnightly programs for each age group, and also for individual children. Programming ideas are often conceived out of informal discussions between staff, which Alison feels is valuable in providing a variety of ideas and perspectives to inform the activities and plans.

Alison believes that children **learn through play** that "challenges them...makes them inquisitive and makes them want to explore." Explaining that a common mistake is to "underestimate children's ability to learn through play", she illustrates how the role of educators is to support children by designing environments that challenge them and have **high expectations** of their capacities. This is as much about deciding what *not* to put into an environment as what to put in. Alison illustrates this with an example from when they first moved into the 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 create 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**.

Learning environments at the Aboriginal Children's Centre utilise natural materials, natural experiences and natural environments, and the building design reflects this philosophy. Alison feels that this is beneficial for children by "connecting children back to country and to nature" and encouraging them to be active and healthy. To support this there are no computers or televisions in any of the learning environments, something that parents encourage. Materials in the centre consist of timber, cane, natural materials and fibres, with very little plastic.



The outdoor environment and mutton bird hut

Alison explains how when they transitioned to using these natural materials they had expected it to take time for children to learn how to engage with the environment. They are now seeing the benefits in terms of children's expanded imaginations, problem solving skills and creativity. Alison illustrates this, describing 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. Alison feels that using natural materials is about creating learning environments that challenge children to explore what something *could* be, instead of what it *is*. She expresses how "it's about saying that there's so much out there in that natural environment to listen to, to see, to touch, to smell."

Alison describes the structure of the outdoor play space as being 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 bits of wood and rocks to climb over. Inspired by the philosophy of Claire Warden and the nature kindergartens in Scotland, they are exploring ways to allow children to experience nature in all weather. These experiences all contribute to helping children to feel **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." The centre has also established native Tasmanian bush tucker pods, which are unique learning environments for children to discover how to tend and care for plants, supporting them to **contribute to their world**. An on-site community garden provides children with a further opportunity to learn, "from growing something, tending it, looking after it, and eating it." This helps children to learn to care for and respect the environment and to understand that they are connected to and **belong** to the land. Alison emphasises, "It's 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."

Whilst funding is no longer available for the successful National Indigenous English Literacy Numeracy Strategy program, the centre does assist children and families to **transition** to school through informal programs and support. Utilising resources as they

become available, they are trying to build partnerships with schools, particularly those implementing the *Launching into Learning* program. The centre also 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. Alison 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.”

One way that **assessment for learning** is captured at the centre is through learning stories. Alison describes a group learning story they recently created that documented children **developing a strong sense of identity** and **being connected with their world**. The educators took the children on a cultural excursion to Kutalayna, a site of Aboriginal heritage. The children, community members and staff planted trees and talked about the importance of the site, and then this evolved into the children ‘hunting’ tara (kangaroo) across the land. Photographs were taken of this to share with families and to document the children’s learning and experiences.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Alison feels that whilst the EYLF was initially a little overwhelming for staff, breaking it down into components and understanding how they are already implementing the principles, practices and outcomes has made it more manageable.

A lack of financial and physical resources is always an obstacle to staff training and development. It is also challenging to find time to develop quality in-house resources, curriculum and to deliver training.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

The IPSU support has been valuable in supporting the service through training and resources.

Birrelee Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Louise Cave

A. Who is Birrelee?

Birrelee is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) in Tamworth, NSW. Originally established in the 1980s as a home-based, informal child care service run by local community women, a committed group of parents and families then decided to build on this and establish a formal child care service. The MACS was established in 1985 to provide a holistic, multifunctional approach to care, but due to almost no increase in funding over the last 24 years, they have struggled to consistently maintain the variety of services needed by the community. The service is licensed for 39 children a day, but generally take approximately 32 children as staff feel that the lower ratio means that they are able to provide better care for the children attending. Approximately 70% of the children and families using the service are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

A1. Values and principles

Birrelee's philosophy encompasses several guiding principles; that all children have the right to live in harmony, that every child should be treated as an individual and that every child has the right to a healthy life. The foundation of the service is that it promotes, fosters and enhances an Aboriginal perspective and culture as the basis of the curriculum. The service is community-based, affordable, not for profit, and promotes values of inclusion, access, equity and social justice in its daily practices. The importance of families is recognised and Birrelee strives to involve families in all aspects of their child's early childhood education experience. Staff are supported to be positive, strong and proud role models for the children.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Birrelee's outcomes are those that both staff and families feel are important for children in the community; that every child has the opportunity to develop to their full potential within an environment that is harmonious, caters to their holistic needs, fosters and promotes their Aboriginal culture and encourages them to develop as an individual.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Staff have engaged positively with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as they feel 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." Louise feels that the non-prescriptive, flexible nature of the EYLF has enabled them to unpack and interpret it in a way that supports their own objectives.

B2. Birrelee and EYLF Outcomes

With a 60 per cent Aboriginal staff team, Birrelee is able to focus on fostering children's **identity** through the cultural knowledge and the cultural capacity that the Aboriginal staff bring to the service. Louise describes that "everything we do is culturally centred".

She feels that key to fostering children's sense that they **belong** and supporting them to **develop strong identities** 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.

Staff incorporate culture into all program elements. Regular discussions are held with children around, "what land we're on...who we are, where we come from." Staff share information with children about themselves and their families, and encourage children to share the same. Dreaming stories are regularly told, and many of the books and music at the service reflect local culture. Louise describes how the **learning environment** (discussed in more detail below) also sends out a powerful message, "Our environment says '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." To support this strong cultural environment an Aboriginal flag hangs outside the centre. Louise explains that "the identity that comes with flags is just unbelievable... that connection to our flag is so powerful." Recognising this, regular activities around the Aboriginal flag explore the meaning of the colours, and encourage children to create their own flags and artwork that support their **identity** through exploring their connection to their history and the flag. Louise explains that this focus on cultural identity shows children how valued and rich their culture is, expressing how "our culture is so respected and honoured and there are so many positive things about our culture that are represented on a daily basis from 8.30am to 5.30pm. So it's not a weekly event, it is celebrated daily here." This strong and supportive environment also helps to foster children's personal **identity**, their self-esteem and their sense of **being** and **belonging** in a community.

Identity and **communication** are encouraged through teaching children the local Aboriginal lingo. Louise describes how children always respond very enthusiastically to activities using lingo because of "that cultural connection, that identity that language gives." The centre has also worked with Macquarie University to design numeracy and literacy resources that reflect the children's culture. Louise explains that this is key in engaging with children on topics they may not be interested in, "So the numeracy may not engage the child but that sense of connection and identity (in the resource) engages the child." She stresses that "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."

Children learn to **connect with and contribute to their world** by being supported to develop a sense of social responsibility as a member of a group and community. They are encouraged to share equipment and talk about the centre routines, including *why* they do these. For example, children learn that equipment is packed neatly away so that it stays tidy and in good condition for when they want to use it again. This helps new children learn the new routines from their peers as well as from staff.

Through a grant from their local bank Community Mutual, Birrelee was recently able to establish a garden which the children now tend to, helping to develop their sense of environmental awareness and **connection to their world**. Supporting this Birrelee incorporates nature and natural products into the environment and activities. To illustrate this Louise describes how the block area contains natural materials including sticks, shells and rocks. She believes that this teaches children that inexpensive things can be special, and the value of respecting the environment. She 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.” The children also learn about using only what they need – for example through thinking carefully about paper usage and recycling.

Many of Birrelee’s children come from low-socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds, and so to enable the provision of a high level of care in catering to children’s **wellbeing** the service operates at a lower child-to-staff ratio than normal. Louise explains that lower ratios mean better quality learning 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.”

Louise expresses that their “funding model definitely doesn’t reflect the work that we should be doing, and that we are doing.” Given the lack of funding, one of Birrelee’s key strengths is its approach to building relationships with other organisations that can help to meet children’s **wellbeing** needs. This is an ongoing process, as Louise explains “we’ve spent lots of years building those good relationships.” Depending on current community and family needs, Birrelee will engage with different services. Because health care continues to be a key community need, Birrelee has built up a strong relationship with NSW Community Health. Through this they access eye and ear screening, occupational therapy, four year old health checks and nutrition services. Birrelee also has a free wound clinic that is open to anyone, with support provided to educate people about wound care. By focusing on educating adults in this way, Birrelee ensures that children receive improved health care.

The service has also been part of a swine flu research project aimed at changing practices to prevent cross-infection. This incorporates an immunisation program, with a clinic regularly visiting the service to provide immunisations to the children *and* their families. A recent focus at the service has been on whooping cough and immunising adults with a young baby in their family. This mutually beneficial partnership has enabled Community Health to engage more directly with families by working within the community. Open day celebrations for health services and families are held to build these partnerships and to highlight the importance of health. A recent open day included a visit by Super Cuz (an Aboriginal superhero character) and a chance for children to “show off about all the stuff we knew.” These approaches help families, children and Birrelee work in partnership for children’s health and **wellbeing**.

Birrelee takes a **holistic** and proactive approach to addressing children’s **wellbeing**, which involves going beyond screening to look at improved overall health as a preventative measure. For example, Louise explains that “screening isn’t the best for reducing otitis media anymore, good health is. So (it’s) about learning to blow your nose, good hygiene, eating well, sleeping well.” Screening can also just reflect the child’s health on the particular day, and may not present a picture of overall health. Birrelee’s preventative health focus has therefore involved developing a nutrition program that provides children with their entire nutritional requirements for the day. Louise 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.” Furthermore, operating within a tight budget, the cook has to base recipes on the foods currently on special. Birrelee has therefore worked with their dietician to design inexpensive meals. Louise describes that a further benefit is that they can then share the recipes with families. Acknowledging that many families are also operating on tight budgets, all meals are designed to be under \$10 for a whole family. This has also meant that the centre and families are able to work together to foster healthy and nutritious eating for each child. For example, if a child liked a particular dish, the service can share that recipe with families, knowing that it can be made for the whole family for under \$10. Sustaining their work on healthy eating and nutrition, Birrelee regularly takes in dietician students who work with the children and conduct hands on cooking with them. This focus helps teach children about nutrition, but also supports their development in other learning areas,

...the kids are having those concrete experiences, grating the apples that go into their muffins, and they’re comparing the white flour and the brown flour, and measuring...(so) all that mathematical and literacy learning is happening as well...we’re focusing on good nutrition, so they’re part of making that themselves.

Staff then follow up on these activities with families. Louise describes their philosophy of working with families on nutrition as a strengths based, encouraging approach that involves sharing the different recipes and meals they have created, instead of telling

families what they should be feeding their children. A photographic diary showcases children cooking and different recipes. This has a dual purpose, it shows families “that these kids are really capable, but it also shows them they could do this at home.” Through this program staff have observed that children are starting to change their eating habits, as Louise explains, “the children are receiving that information and then they make those healthy food choices. So they’re in control of it.”

Birrelee aims to provide holistic care to all families who walk in the door by providing of a range of services that meet children’s **wellbeing** needs, as identified above. Louise explains that they need to be capable of responding to diverse 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”. The Aboriginal staff are key to providing this holistic care because they understand each child’s context. Louise explains that “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.” Louise illustrates this with a recent example of a new family who presented at the service with a variety of complex support needs. Birrelee supported the family to enrol the older children at the local school by working with the school principal. They then enrolled the younger children at the MACS, and assisted the family to fill out forms to access housing. All of this was done because the staff understand that catering for a child’s **wellbeing** necessitates providing holistic support to their entire family.

Developing children’s self-esteem and their abilities as **confident and involved learners** is a major focus at Birrelee. Louise describes 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.

She points out that displaying children as **confident** learners is a key focus they capture in their documentation. This helps to encourage staff to adopt a strengths based approach, and to show parents how capable their children are. At Birrelee staff believe that fostering children as confident learners is “not about children being taught, it’s about them engaging in their own learning as well.”

Louise firmly believes that **secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships** between educators and children, and supporting children to develop a culturally secure **identity** enables them to enjoy high self-esteem and confidence, in short “they know who they are and where they’re going”. She witnesses children’s improved confidence to tackle

new challenges and activities, illustrating that staff observe in children 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 teaching children to recognise their own names on flash cards illustrated this. After perceiving that one child hadn’t recognised her own name on the card, Louise worked with the child until she was able to write her name. Louise describes the child’s obvious pride in this achievement as she asked to take her writing home to show her family. Louise explains that whilst this clearly meets the outcome that children are **confident and involved learners**, this was only possible because the child had a strong sense of her own **identity** and **wellbeing**, “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.”

B3. Birrelee and EYLF Principles

Strong **partnerships** with the community help ensure that the most disadvantaged families can access the service. Louise cites a recent example of a vulnerable family who came to Birrelee for help because they “were told that this was a safe place to go.” She feels that this is due to the community’s trust in them as a local service with local staff.

Educators at Birrelee recognise that true **partnerships** with parents must be based on equality and respect. As Louise 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.” Louise emphasises that families can then choose to engage with the information or not, the key role of Birrelee staff is just to make sure that information is available if they want to make use of it. Families are also recognised for their expertise and knowledge – as Louise 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. They’re community experts, so we’re drawing on their knowledge all the time, and it’s a two-way thing, relationships just are, that’s what yarning is – two way.

This emphasis on information sharing comes from an understanding that the centre is “not separate from the community. Our work doesn’t just belong in these walls.” Louise states how they always ensure that families can access any resources they create, because this is where the real need is. As she describes, “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, the service recently created a DVD to teach children lingo. They ensured that they received sufficient funding to give each family a copy, because as Louise explains “There’s no point in keeping lingo here and it not being taught anywhere else.” The resource was 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.

This approach also means that staff prioritise writing in the daily diary - a key communication tool in their **partnership** with families. The daily diary is available for all parents to see when they come to Birrelee. Where children catch the bus to and from the centre, staff can send home photocopies of the diary or email parents an electronic copy. Louise highlights how through the diary staff focus on communicating positive messages to parents about “this is what your child achieved today, or this is what your child is emerging into or developing in, it helps families and supports their understanding of their own child as well.” Birrelee also ensures that all children can attend the service by providing a bus to support families who may not have transport.

Reflective practice has been a major focus at Birrelee over recent years, and staff are given opportunities to undertake this through formal and informal processes. A daily reflective journal focuses on the experiences of individual children and the group as a whole. This helps staff reflect on whether and how activities worked, learning and outcomes achieved. Staff are encouraged to document their input into children’s activities, as this provides them with evidence of their role as educators, how they carried out activities, what they were happy with and opportunities for change. Yarning and oral sharing are also valued as it is recognised that “some things can’t be documented.” Reflection through yarning is supported through a weekly staff meeting that provides further opportunities for self-reflection. Louise describes how,

...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.

Staff also maintain private journals, which they can choose to share if they wish. Louise explains that this creates the 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 have a yarn. So it was an option for people that didn’t necessarily want to talk about it in a staff meeting”. For example, Louise illustrates that one staff member was able to express her feelings on a recent community tragedy through a poem describing her emotions about the event and how she perceived the children might have experienced it. With her permission this is now displayed at the service for families to connect with, so that it may help them process their own feelings about the event. **Ongoing learning** is also encouraged through regular opportunities for professional development. Louise has developed strong relationships with the local TAFE and universities, which helps to develop “safe places for (local staff) to experience learning.”

B4. Birrelee and EYLF Practices

Being **responsive to children** and incorporating **intentional teaching practices** at Birrelee is about sharing “the curriculum-making with children. So it’s definitely a two-way street.” Louise provides a recent example of a child who wasn’t particularly verbal. Through an informal discussion with his mother, Louise discovered that the child was very interested in dinosaurs. Responding to this she then set up a learning environment

containing dinosaur activities and toys. Louise describes how the change in the child's behaviour was extremely positive,

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. So 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.

Louise provides evidence of their **responsiveness to children** and **respectful relationships** through a further example. Staff understand that football is a huge community activity and interest, Louise describes this as “understanding the cultures within our culture.” They therefore utilise and embrace this in how they engage with children. For example, one child is passionately interested in football and already a keen and capable player. Louise 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 6 on my dice, let's find it'. So you just take those opportunities and you value them.

Louise explains how this is all about **respecting** a child, “to truly respect someone and to truly respect their values and beliefs” is about valuing and respecting what they are interested in even if this isn't something you yourself are passionate about. This is also an example of how **learning through play** is a fundamental philosophy at Birrelee. Educators also regularly talk to families about the importance of play-based learning, demonstrating through photos *what* is actually happening in terms of children's development when they play. This then helps families continue on these intentional play-based activities at home.

Staff demonstrate **intentional teaching** methods by utilising existing group patterns and friendships to provide supporting environments in which children can learn, as Louise states, “everything is done in groups and communities.” Understanding that learning is contextual, educators work with children in their play environment rather than taking them out of it to focus on them individually. Therefore, if an educator wants to support a child with their construction skills, they will work with the child within their peer group so that the child has a supportive and natural environment. Educators also don't hold a “preconceived idea of what the outcome is going to be”, understanding that the *process* is more important. This means that learning experiences can be adapted to children's interests and are maximise the learning occurring during an activity. Louise explains that 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 always focus on *how* children learn, instead of concentrating only on what children should be learning.

A daily diary also supports **intentional teaching** by linking daily activities to EYLF outcomes, supporting educators to reflect on and plan for activities that will support children in these five critical areas.

Louise describes how Birrelee has worked on **learning environments** for several years. She describes that previously “the environment didn’t show respect for the children at all...it showed very little that respected anyone.” Staff started the process of redeveloping their learning environments with an action research project focusing on their environments. They also participated in training, collected resources, and built a relationship with Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre in Sydney to view what can be done with environments through time and dedication. Louise describes that this “wasn’t about imitating or recreating it, it was about the possibilities of what you wanted and how to achieve it.” Staff from Mia Mia also visited Birrelee to view the space and talk to staff about their ideas and plans. Birrelee then prioritised their outdoor space before turning to look at their indoor area. Birrelee now adopts 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.” Louise firmly believes that the care and love exhibited in an environment teaches children that they are also cared for and loved, and that they also need to care for the space. She describes how “Everything is placed beautifully and with care. So our textas aren’t kept in ice cream containers, they’re in a beautiful basket. Our paper isn’t just put on a shelf, it’s archived in a little paper draw.”

Louise explains that their focus on environment is an ongoing journey. Each month staff group together to buy ‘footy doubles’, and spend any winnings on improving their learning spaces. Louise feels that the environment can be a powerful motivation for staff. She explains how she recently refreshed many of their learning areas with materials bought from a local garage sale, including setting up a new literacy space. Louise describes how when the team arrived on Monday they were amazed by the environment and “instantly respected and loved the space.” This motivated the staff to think up new ideas for how to use the space, and prompted one educator in particular to adjust the foyer to make a welcoming space for families to sit and share. Louise 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 believes that creating a beautiful learning environment shows 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.”

To help foster children’s sense of **belonging** and safety at the service, at the beginning of each year staff specifically focus on **transitions**. By role modelling how to support new children transition to the centre or program, staff find that children then begin directing this themselves. As Louise 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." This shows their capabilities as **confident and involved learners** and **effective communicators**.

To further support children to **transition** through the program, for example from the nursery to the preschool room, staff ensure 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.

Transitions on to school are supported by the connections Birrelee has fostered with the local schools. Louise describes how the emphasis is on supporting "families (to) be in charge of that whole transition." They do this through inviting the principals and kindergarten teachers from the local schools to the centre to sit down with families. Sharing a cup of tea and cake makes this a more relaxed occasion for all parties. The family are able to talk to the teachers and principals with the support of the staff at Birrelee, and as Louise explains "basically it's then up to the family whether they want to participate in the orientation at that school...families can be in charge of where their kids go." Louise describes how it is crucial that schools send out the right message to families that their children and culture are welcome. Birrelee staff therefore engage in dialogue around this with schools, questioning them about what they do in terms of Aboriginal education, and how many Aboriginal teachers they have.

Once parents have made a decision about school, staff then support children and families through the transition. If needed they will attend the school with the child and family, and where a child attends a kindergarten program in the afternoon and Birrelee in the morning, the centre can assist with transport. Louise describes "we just support it as much as we can, as much as needed, and we back off once we're not needed." Behind their focus on transition to school is a philosophy of **high expectations of children and equity**. Louise explains how "we make sure that (our children) start school as capable as we can ensure it. And so if something little gets in the way we nut it out with schools pretty quickly...we try and engage with schools and let them know about children's certain behaviour at certain times of the day and how we've managed it, so the child's not labelled really early on. We share simple strategies." Birrelee staff play a crucial role in equalising the relationship between schools and families. As an early childhood professional Louise feels she is able to "communicate something that a family may feel insecure about sharing, but we do it in a group where we're all equal. So I'll share the situation and...the strategies that we've worked with." Louise feels that this encourages schools not to label children when they first meet them, 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 a 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."

As a member of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Birrelee provides input into the wider dialogue on school transition, for example assisting schools to

change how they communicate with Aboriginal families during school orientations. Louise 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.”

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Because of their early engagement with the writers of the EYLF, Birrelee has found that the transition to the Framework has largely been a smooth process. Whilst staff initially found the structure of the EYLF inaccessible, they have been able to deconstruct the document to focus on what they feel is important. For example staff feel that outcomes should be presented last in the Framework as they believe a sole focus on outcomes is not sufficient to meet the holistic needs of the children in their care.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Utilising their strength in building relationships and their proactive approach to service development, Birrelee engaged with the EYLF writers during the early stages of its creation to explore how they could receive EYLF training. From this Birrelee was invited to share their experience of the EYLF with the writers, and as Louise explains “I was happy to share anything that we could do to help other people help us.” This enabled them to unpack the EYLF into a document that they could work with - literally taking the document apart; “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 “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 understand how the EYLF fits with and could support their practices, values and the outcomes they wanted to achieve.

Through the NSW Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) staff received training from EYLF author Leonie Arthur. They also engaged with other authors including Sandra Cheeseman and Marina Papic, to explore the EYLF and how it could be applied at Birrelee. As members of Community Child Care in NSW the service also receives useful weekly tips on how to use the EYLF and the National Quality Standard (NQS).

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Louise feels that documentation will always be a challenge requiring ongoing training and resources, “We’re always going to be looking for the answer of how to document well and how to document better. We’re always wanting to display children as more valuable than we do.” She explains that reflective practice also needs further attention through training and resource development. Reflective practice approaches needs to be culturally appropriate, and to focus on supporting staff to take action post-reflection, because teaching staff how to better reflect is only one aspect, staff and services also need to understand how to then act on this learning.

Congress Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Branch Manager Margaret Harrison

A. Who is Congress Child Care Centre?

Congress Child Care Centre or Ampe Kenhe Apmere is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Alice Springs. It was established in the early 1990s in response to a need for child care in the community, and initially operated out of a house within the community. After several years it received funding to become established as a MACS service, and was able to move into a new, larger building. It now operates under the auspices of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Inc (Congress Inc), and is licensed for 55 children aged from six months to school age.

A1. Values and principles

Congress' values are to deliver challenging, stimulating, developmentally and culturally relevant programs for all children attending the service. A holistic approach encompasses an educational plan guided by the principles, practices and outcomes within the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The program is flexible and responsive to the children's daily needs. Parents, carers and families are welcome at the centre and are encouraged to participate in their child's learning journey. They are also encouraged to ask staff questions, provide input into service practices and celebrate their child's achievements with staff throughout the year.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Congress' objectives for its children are that they feel safe, secure and proud of who they are. The service aims to foster children to be confident learners and to feel empowered to ask questions, explore and experiment whilst having fun within an environment that supports them to be children, as Margaret explains "to get dirty, play in the sandpit and all those sorts of things are really important for our children." The service also aims to provide all children with the opportunities they need to be able to reach their full potential.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Congress has been engaging with the EYLF for some time, and have been able to adapt it to their own context – for example through their own particular programming format (see below for more details). Many of the EYLF outcomes are already integral aspects of Congress' approach, for example the focus on children's identity, wellbeing, partnerships with family, holistic approaches and strong, play-based methods.

B2. Congress and EYLF Outcomes

Whilst English is their main working language, Congress supports children to develop a strong cultural identity through incorporating traditional languages into their everyday practices. Several staff speak languages from the area, and all staff are encouraged to use the language they are most comfortable with. Margaret comments that “we’ve got a fairly good coverage of people who live around Alice Springs in languages”, and this means that staff are able to talk to and teach children the language appropriate to their family. Margaret believes that incorporating traditional languages has many benefits for children. For example, staff recently found that a child having trouble settling in can be soothed by a staff member speaking Aranda (Arrernte) to her, and have now adopted this as the strategy to support the child to settle in each day.

Several staff members are talented Aboriginal painters, and often do traditional painting with the children. The centre also hosts visitors – including Elders - from the local community and the other branches of their parent body, who visit to run activities such as singing, dancing and storytelling. As Margaret describes, culture is an incidental part of the service, not delivered merely through a specific program or one-off events. She feels that the Aboriginal staff are key pillars in this because of their knowledge and respect for the different cultural ways.

Margaret strongly feels that a strong cultural identity is key to a sense of belonging. An essential aspect of the service philosophy is that children need to be brought up proud of being Aboriginal and of their culture. She describes how “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.” She recounts a conversation she heard between children recently, where the children were remarking “ ‘my dad’s a white fella, my mum’s a white fella, my dad’s a black fella’, that sort of conversation. And I said to this four year old, ‘if your mum’s a black fella and your dad’s a white fella then what are you?’ and she said, ‘I’m purple’.” Margaret believes that this child is able to strongly express her own individual identity because “she is really proud of who she is and her identity... and it doesn’t have to fit into a box... I’m happy with who I am and where I fit.” This sense of belonging and identity is a key objective Congress aims to reach for its children, believing that this will give them a strong basis from which to progress forward. Margaret comments that this is key to support children through any future challenges they may face, that “those differences don’t affect them too much because they are strong enough in who they are and where they’ve come from”.

Staff feel that for children a key aspect of identity is a sense of belonging within their family. This is particularly important for children in protective care, who often receive visits from their family members whilst at the centre. Margaret explains that during these 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...so 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.

The centre supports children to **connect with their culture and with their world** through a focus on nature. Staff often build campfires with the children, cook kangaroo tail outside and talk about hunting. They also use natural materials, such as gum nuts or seed pods, in different activities, as these are valuable materials that encourage children to be creative through open-ended play. One staff member often brings in bush tucker such as bush tomatoes and honey ants and to talk about and share with the children.

Margaret cites their relationship with their parent body Congress Inc as key in supporting children's **wellbeing** and the service outcomes, particularly with an improved relationship over the last few years and a shared commitment to early childhood education. The centre has been able to focus on providing integrated services through collaborating with the health branch targeted family support programs of Congress Inc. Margaret believes that this enables them to deliver holistic services that address children's social, emotional and health needs.

A key aspect of their strategy to work towards children's **wellbeing** is collaboration with Congress Inc healthy kids clinic, which conducts children's screening and health checks. The broader children's services program also works with families who have a member with a chronic disease. By working with this service the child care centre is able to support those children, and to "give them some normality" in their lives. They also receive support from the healthy kids clinic to care for children who demonstrate signs of failure to thrive. Through an additional focus on nutrition they are able to concentrate on improving the weight and nutrition of these children. Margaret describes their approach towards working with the healthy kids clinic, the children's services program and the paediatrics department at the hospital as "a medical education intervention."

Children's emotional **wellbeing** is a key concern at the centre. The family group setting helps create a more natural, calmer and nurturing environment. The centre has opened up their rooms to give children freedom over which environment they want to be in. With approximately 60% of their children having some involvement with child protection services, Margaret believes that it is vital to support children's autonomy and control over their environment (see below for more discussion on this).

The service is also committed to supporting the wellbeing of their children who are in protective care. They encourage and support families with children in care to visit their child at the centre (discussed in more detail below). This helps to prepare the children to transition back to living with their families. Congress also works with the child protection department to support children during transition times. Margaret emphasises that it is particularly important 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, but is key for the child's emotional wellbeing.

B3. Congress and EYLF Principles

Congress fosters strong **relationships** between staff and children by allocating children primary carers from amongst the staff, based on the child's needs, and existing staff-child family connections, whilst still taking into account community dynamics. Margaret explains that Aboriginal carers are naturally nurturing towards children, and this helps to create warm, positive relationships between children and staff.

The service is supported in its **partnerships** with families by receiving referrals from the targeted family support program within Congress Inc, which works with families who have been noted as having child protection issues but not yet managed by the child protection department. This enables the centre to work more effectively with families most in need. Families will often come to Congress 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 additional support to their parent body. They have also recently begun holding child and family services meetings to enable all the Congress Inc program managers to come together to discuss how they can best provide care to their families. As Margaret comments, "So we're actually providing a very integrated approach."

Margaret explains that their Aboriginal staff are essential to building relationships with parents, because they are part of the local community and they understand the culture. The service also supports partnerships with families through a family open day. Margaret comments that providing food at events is a useful way to encourage family members to attend. Congress also has an open door policy to encourage family members to regularly visit, which is particularly beneficial to support children in care to develop relationships with their families. Margaret feels that families feel comfortable to visit because they are an Aboriginal organisation and as an early childhood service provide a non-threatening setting. Families and children are supported through these visits through the attendance of certain staff members with whom they are comfortable and trust. An additional benefit in supporting families to drop by is being located next to the Aboriginal medical clinic. Margaret believes that these relationships with families of children in care are crucial as it can be challenging to involve family members who are not the primary carer in decision-making and input into the centre.

At Congress **high expectations of children** is about respecting children's capabilities and knowledge. Margaret illustrates this with a recent example of when the centre placed some rocks into their outdoor area. There was some initial adult resistance to this, as it was felt that the children could behave dangerously with the rocks. However, Margaret states that it was important to hold high expectations of their children. She describes how children "were shown how to use these rocks properly and work with them in a safe way and talk about what could happen when we throw them". Through staff

support and guidance children of all ages have demonstrated that they can play responsibly with the rocks, as Margaret describes, “they’ve built beautiful patterns with them and they actually nurtured them...It’s about supervision, it’s about high expectations and about children being able to use things in the right way.” She provides a further example of working with children to develop awareness about stairs, “You actually have the practice of going up the stairs and down the stairs and as long as you’re there to supervise and guide when needed then you’re actually skill building with those children.” She explains that high expectations of children is about not restricting what they can do based on age, but is about providing them with opportunities to be challenged, play and explore. She feels that a unique strength of Aboriginal child-rearing culture is that children are given freedom to explore and experiment, whilst knowing that staff are supervising and ready to provide support where needed.

A multicultural staff team – including staff from Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, China and India - helps children to understand and **respect diversity**. Margaret describes how staff will often share their cultures with the children and have discussions about different aspects of cultures.

Staff are encouraged to be **reflective practitioners** through a strong emphasis on sharing points of view and challenging each other to self-reflect within a supported environment. Staff also regularly debate whether a certain practice is culturally appropriate and fits with the cultural values of staff and the community. She describes how these discussions delve deeper than exploring the success of an activity, to examining how an educator’s practice and values affected a certain outcome or experience for a child. These discussions are held through informal conversations and regular staff meetings. The service has a strong focus on **ongoing learning** through supporting local Aboriginal staff to undertake their training, so that they can become mentors to future staff.

B4. Congress and EYLF Practices

Congress implements a **holistic approach** to caring for children by using a family group structure. Margaret explains that families were strongly in favour of this change because it is better aligned with their home and community environment and traditions. The centre approached this transition by firstly talking to staff and families, then on receiving a positive reaction from both they conducted research on the area, and participated in training on attachment theory and primary carers within family groupings. In designing an approach that would work best for their setting, the children are now free to roam throughout the centre, but all still have their own ‘homeroom’ to provide them with security and a base to attach to.

Margaret describes that a major benefit of this approach is that it has significantly reduced behavioural difficulties, which she attributes to reduced competition for toys between children of the same age in the one room. This has in turn reduced staff stress and room noise levels. Margaret also believes that it has prompted staff to more deeply reflect on how to meet the needs of each individual child, rather than an age group.

Margaret illustrates how this approach supports children to assist and nurture each other, describing how she recently witnessed a young child climbing a plank, with an older child standing holding the plank steady. She explains how the older child “was giving him a chance to actually explore slowly but he was there guiding him.”

Through the process of designing their approach to family grouping, staff also reviewed and reflected on their **learning environments**. They have designed environments that meet the learning needs of multiple ages in one setting, and have opened the centre up so children are free to play indoors or outdoors. Initially having all activities available in every room meant that some activities weren’t getting used. They therefore redesigned their approach to create specialised rooms within the centre. Margaret explains the new design,

So we have a room for creative arts, we have a room where we do scientific discovery and construction with some finer arts because that’s our bigger room. Our smallest room, our babies’ room, is for quieter activities - a withdrawal centre for children (for) finer cognitive work. So children if they want a quiet space can go off to the lizard room, if they want to be very creative they can go to the honey ants room and paint whenever they like and paste and build. We’ve developed the areas within the rooms to provide more extensive activities for the children with those interests so the children can move to where they want to go.

She comments further that whilst they have a standard way that each room is set up, they then 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 discussed how child care environments do not provide children with opportunities for breaks during the day. Their new **learning environment** therefore affords children opportunities for time out, as they can choose to remove themselves from environments whenever they wish and go outside or to a quiet space. Margaret believes that it is vital for children to have time when they can withdraw and be quiet, and also to have control over which environment they want to be in. 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.”

Margaret describes how implementing a **play-based learning** method is about being **responsive to children** and **intentional teaching**. The basis is a strengths based approach where program scaffold off a child’s strengths and interests. She comments that learning through play is an intentional process where “you actually build on the interests and the strengths of the children” by using play as the medium.

She provides a useful illustration to demonstrate this, “So 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 not have had exposure to tools such as scissors or pens, as it builds on their skills in other areas. She explains that a responsive, strengths based approach is about looking for the right way to teach that particular child, “sometimes they don’t know block building but if you gave them a pile of sticks I’m sure they could construct something out of them. So it’s about looking at what they are good at and gradually using that to introduce other means.”

Staff demonstrate an **intentional teaching** focus through their approach to programming. After trialling several processes under the EYLF the centre has now established a planning process that is specifically adapted to their context. One all-ages program is informed by their educational plan, and is hand written and added to daily so that it is a “working document”. Each centre area is focused on separately, reflecting key activity areas such as construction, science, fine arts, crafts, dramatic play, outdoor play and a section for free learning. In each of these areas staff record observations and notes – for example significant experiences they have observed during the day. Staff then discuss how they can extend on these experiences. Margaret cites a recent example of an activity where children were rolling tyres down a hill, and other children were running alongside to see if they could outrun the tyres. Educators extended on this experience by setting up activities with ramps, different surfaces and balls to let children experiment with varying speeds and textures. Another example Margaret provides reflects questions children were recently asking during meal times about what makes bodies strong. To extend on this staff put out resources and activities – such as puzzles – about the body, good and bad foods. Congress’ program is designed so that it can be flexible to accommodate these spontaneous activities and discussions. As Margaret explains, “a lot of it is developed through the children’s interest and it’s not set in concrete, sometimes you explore a lot of options.” For example, Margaret describes a brainstorming discussion she had with an educator recently exploring options around how they could build upon a child’s interest in cars, “So we can talk about the size of cars, classify colours of cars, you can do engine size, what part of the car the child is really interested in...so (the educator) then has a web of ideas when he is working with this child.”

Staff are also **responsive to children** in the way that they design **learning environments** (discussed above). For example, whilst a home corner is a permanent space, they recently altered the area to reflect an interest children were displaying in doctors and hospitals, by setting up a doctor’s surgery space.

Congress has focused on supporting children’s **transition** to school through a preschool readiness program, initiated in response to concerns about the large number of children not attending preschool. The centre works in collaboration with a nurse, psychologist and program workers to facilitate a holistic approach to children’s school preparation.

Children receive health checks to identify any additional health needs they may have. Parents are then supported to enrol their child in a preschool. Child and parental emotional needs are also focused on through this program, in particular to assist families who may have an understandable mistrust of institutions. Margaret cites how a useful approach in these situations has been to enrol the child at the child care centre first, in order to build the confidence of the child and parents. Once the family is ready, the child can then transition on to preschool. They have also supported children with behavioural problems through this program.

Assessment for learning is captured through learning stories and portfolios, which both relate children's development to the EYLF outcomes explored through particular experiences. Observing that families prefer to engage with visual rather than written material, staff ensure that learning stories and portfolios largely focus on visually representing the experience rather than large amounts of text.

Staff also regularly take photos to reflect different learning outcomes, and display these for families and children to see. To encourage staff to engage in deeper reflection, Margaret emphasises that the point is not to take a photo for the sake of taking a photo, "it's about what's the significance of this photo? What learning is happening? Why am I taking this photo? What's different in this photo that (the child) doesn't do any other day?" Margaret explains that they felt it important that the new documentation requirements didn't take educators out of the rooms and away from the children any more than was necessary. Whilst they did trial using computers in the rooms to document observations, they found that this still took staff attention away from children. Staff therefore now focus on capturing handwritten assessments within the rooms, often involving the children. This is based on the premise that "it's much easier for you to sit down with a child and write a story than for you to leave the room and do it on the computer." This approach has additional benefits for children's communication and literacy skills. As Margaret explains,

So with a four year old you can say, 'Tell me about what you've done and why you've done it' and you can write it down from their voice. So you are then involving the child in their program development. And you're developing literacy skills because you're exposing them to the written word...those squiggles on the paper actually mean something and it does relate to this photo that we're putting there too. So it's all about literacy learning too.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Margaret feels that a challenge with the EYLF has been understanding how to apply it within your own particular service context. For example, making the language of the EYLF accessible for parents has been a particular focus. As Margaret describes "You need to be able to put it in everyday words but (still) be able to relate it to the framework". Staff therefore find that they need to carefully balance relating their documentation to the framework, whilst still ensuring that it is appealing and accessible for parents.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Staff have received training on the EYLF from RRACSSU, local government and Child Australia. Whilst this has been beneficial for many staff, Margaret comments that it can also be challenging for some less experienced staff as each trainer has their own perspective and approach to EYLF implementation – which can sometimes flood staff with different approaches and methods. This has particularly been the case with approaches to programming and documentation. Margaret feels that “You need to be able to sort through and take what’s appropriate for your service.”

Yorganop IPSU and RRACSSU resources have been useful, especially on how to present the Framework and the three principles (being, belonging and becoming) to parents. Margaret has found that they have been able to adapt some of these resources by using their own photos, which helps them in relating these concepts to their parents.

Whilst not specifically EYLF related, staff have also found the Australian Government Department of Ageing and Disability *Get Up and Grow* series to be particularly helpful, particularly in working with parents. The series focuses on healthy eating and physical activity for young children, and has been helpful in communicating key wellbeing messages – like what children should be drinking. Margaret expresses that it has been useful to show parents the evidence base behind some of their approaches to health and nutrition at the centre – for example phasing out bottles by 12 months to avoid children drinking sweetened drinks.

As a pilot centre for the *Kid’s Matter* project, Margaret explains that staff have received valuable opportunities through the program to increase their knowledge on emotional development and children’s needs. Staff have also received useful training based around Robyn Dolby’s *Circles of Security*, which focuses on supporting children to develop strong relationships. Much of this has been in-house training delivered by members of other branches with Congress Inc. Margaret and another staff member have been involved in the Australian Childhood Foundation *Bringing up Great Kids* parenting program. After receiving training on this they have now been able to facilitate a session in Alice Springs. She feels that this is an effective program that is easily adapted to a diverse range of families. The service also has an agreement with a Melbourne based community health registered training organisation, and through this arrangement staff have been supported to complete their Certificate and Diploma through onsite training.

Coolabaroo Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Cheryl Brown

A. Who is Coolabaroo?

Coolabaroo Neighbourhood Centre is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Thornlie, Western Australia. The centre runs long day care, independent pre-primary and kindergarten programs, out of school hours care (OSHC) and a holiday program.

The MACS was originally established in 1986 by a group of health workers, students and community members who saw a need in the community for child care whilst parents were working or studying. Many grandparents in the community were caring for children during the daytime, but were themselves often suffering from poor health. The service was established under the auspice of Moorditch Gurlongga Association, and became incorporated in 1995.

Being attached to the Moorditch Gurlongga Association, the MACS also has links with a housing service run by the Association. This provides emergency relief, food vouchers and assistance with bills. This close connection helps Coolabaroo link any parents in need to housing support, and also enables parents receiving housing support through Moorditch Gurlongga Association to link up with the MACS.

A1. Values and principles

Coolabaroo's values and principles are that all children have the right to be accepted, loved and cared for in a safe, secure and supportive environment. The service aims to provide a positive and peaceful atmosphere in which tolerance and diversity are valued and where respect is shown for difference and a wide range of social backgrounds, abilities and experiences. Within this environment Coolabaroo staff aim to plan and provide programs that are stimulating and assist in developing individual children to their full potential, supporting all developmental stages, abilities and interests. Staff incorporate Noongar¹ language and culture as a main focus of the daily program.

The service also promotes a healthy and protective environment where healthy living is promoted through physical activity and nutritious meals. The service strives to meet the needs of the community and accommodate the different family values of Australia's diverse society. Staff are supported and encouraged to work as a positive and harmonious team, and are provided with opportunities for further education and professional development.

¹ The Noongar people are the traditional custodians of the south-west of Australia.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Coolabaroo aims to ensure that children can access an early childhood education and care service that will share and teach Australian Aboriginal culture, in particular Noongar language, history and culture, within an environment that is safe, secure and caring. Within this environment every child is encouraged to develop to their full potential. To support this the service focuses on providing programs that meet the individual and group needs of all children attending the service.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Coolabaroo has found the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to be reflective of and compatible with the outcomes, principles and practices they employ, as Cheryl states, “To my mind the EYLF itself – the belonging, being and becoming, it’s what we were trying to do anyway as educators.” They have found the main difference to be a different approach to planning and documentation. Although transitioning to this new process has been challenging at times, staff have found that it assists them to better express what they as educators are trying to achieve for children.

B2. Coolabaroo and EYLF Outcomes

Cheryl highlights that Coolabaroo places a strong emphasis on ensuring that children feel they **belong** at the service, stating that “belonging is important to everybody. You’ve got to belong somewhere.” Fostering a sense of **belonging** at Coolabaroo includes encouraging children to feel safe at the centre and that they can be who they want to be. From this position of safety and confidence, and with stable relationships with staff (for more on this see below) the children can then grow, as Cheryl emphasises, “the being and the becoming should follow on from that with the positive feedback they get here from coming here everyday.”

She explains that a **strong sense of identity** is critical in Noongar culture. However she also feels that some parents find this hard to impart to children, particularly if they weren’t able to develop this themselves as children. Coolabaroo therefore plays a key role in connecting children to their culture, and emphasis is placed on this everyday. Cheryl feels that fostering positive cultural identity is critical for Aboriginal children to enable them to be strong in themselves, as she indicates that unfortunately negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people are still prevalent in society, which can undermine children’s self-esteem and identity.

To help foster their sense of **belonging** and **identity** within their culture staff have taken the children on excursions to the local national park centre, which includes a program called ‘Nearer to Nature’. Through different cultural activities the children have been given the opportunity to learn about Noongar culture, hunting and gathering methods. Children are taught through play – for example being given the opportunity to dress up in possum cloaks and pretend to hunt. The children have also been on excursions to Kings Park, where they have gone on guided tours by local Noongar people to learn

about cultural sites and bush foods in the area. These activities also help children to **connect with and contribute to their world** by teaching them about their local community, their history, and the environment. Cheryl explains that whilst the centre wishes to have more visitors in to share culture, this often costs money. One way they have overcome this is by finding relatives who are able and willing to come into the centre to work with the children.

The service supports children to attend cultural events such as NAIDOC week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD), where they participate in dancing, singing and other cultural activities. Cheryl explains how the children usually know many of the community at these cultural events and excursions, which helps them to feel strong in their **identity** by celebrating with their community.

Children are supported to **connect with and contribute to their world** through a focus on nature both inside and outside the centre. The service has hosted visitors from a local animal farm who brought chickens, ducks, geese and other small birds and animals for the children to see and learn about. Connecting in with the Easter celebrations, the centre recently hosted an incubator with live chicken eggs. This provided children with a unique learning opportunity – they were able to learn about the process of chickens hatching through discussions with staff, and then through viewing the actual process happening within their own centre. The children are also taken on regular nature walks to talk about the environment, and to collect natural materials that are then brought back to the service to be used in art and other activities. Noticing at a recent NAIDOC event that the children showed a particular interest in a display of native animals, staff arranged for an animal keeper from the wildlife centre to visit Coolabaroo, bringing with him native animals including snakes and lizards. The wildlife keeper talked with the children about the native animals, and the children were then able to teach him the Aboriginal names for them, showing their **strong identity within their culture** and also their **communication skills**.

Coolabaroo focuses on children's **wellbeing** by encouraging Noongar culture, history and language as much as possible, and by fostering all children's – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - pride and confidence in who they are. Staff also strive to ensure that children feel that the service is a safe and secure place for them, believing that by providing this stability children "can develop to whatever they want to be later on." Forming attachments and **strong relationships** with staff is also critical "so they can feel that they are a valued person" (discussed in more detail below).

Recognising that children's **wellbeing** is intrinsically linked to parental wellbeing, skills and knowledge, the service runs an Aboriginal Early Years Support Service for parents of young children. This is usually attended by younger mothers. Whilst the service has tried to initiate a fathers group this has proved difficult due to shame issues. Activities are decided in collaboration with the participants, and include positive parenting, first aid, child protection, budgeting, sexual health, cooking and arts and crafts. A number of child care places are allocated for children whose parents are participating in the

program. Coolabaroo also focuses on children's **wellbeing** through a healthy nutrition program for morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea, recognising that not all children receive their full nutritional requirements at home.

Children are encouraged to become **confident and involved learners** through teaching methods that encourage them to direct play, allow for spontaneous learning experiences and respond to their interests (see more detailed examples of this below). Cheryl feels that independence and confidence are critical life skills for children to learn and important aspects of **being** and **becoming**.

Both **identity** and **effective communication skills** are fostered through an ongoing focus on teaching and using Noongar language in the service, as Cheryl explains "Noongar culture and language is a big part of our program, and part of our daily routine". Cheryl points out that children are often able to teach Noongar words that they have learnt at the centre to their parents and families, who may not speak the language themselves. This helps to develop children as **confident and involved learners** by giving them a role as teachers and learners of Noongar language. Teaching children language also helps them to feel connected to their culture, as Cheryl indicates, "by promoting the children's culture to themselves, which they might not learn at home, you know if mum and dad haven't had anybody that knows the language it's very hard for them to feel connected. That's a big thing." Unfortunately however, Cheryl does state that it is often quite difficult to find staff fluent in the language, and external teachers can be costly.

The service has also created their own games and books using basic Noongar words and corresponding pictures to help children learn literacy and language. To aid children's **effective communication** skills Coolabaroo is affiliated with the literacy program *Let's Read* run by the Smith Family. 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.

B3. Coolabaroo and EYLF Principles

Partnerships with parents and families are built through information-sharing on children's experiences at the centre. Photos of the children are displayed in each room, showing the different activities they have engaged in both in and out of the centre. These photos help children to talk with their families about what they've been doing, as Cheryl illustrates, "the kids love it... I heard one little fella going out the other day saying to his Pop 'this is me Pop' and he was telling him all about where they'd been." Photos can also be printed out at the centre and sent home for families to keep. Whilst the level of interaction with staff differs between families, Cheryl perceives that families feel confident to provide input if they wish to. She feels that the confidence families have in the centre is displayed in the high attendance rates recorded amongst children. The service supports parents by displaying a flexible attitude to child absences for cultural

and family reasons, understanding that this is part of culture. Coolabaroo also runs a bus service with home pick-ups and drop-offs to aid parents without transport.

The service is assisted in developing **partnerships** with families and the broader community through their Management Committee, which is made up of former Coolabaroo workers, parents, grandparents and interested community members. Having a Committee which includes members familiar with Coolabaroo's history and values assists the service to stay aligned with its philosophy and with changing community needs. Committee members also provide a breadth of knowledge with current members including a past Director of Coolabaroo, a Salvation Army worker and a representative from the local TAFE. The Moorditch Gurlongga Association Housing Manager also attends the monthly meetings, which helps to ensure that the two services work closely together and are able to respond to each other's needs.

Coolabaroo maintains **partnerships** with the local TAFE, which helps with ongoing staff professional development. This strong, established relationship means that TAFE lecturers often visit Coolabaroo to provide support to students who are working there. Within this enabling environment a number of Coolabaroo's staff are currently completing Certificate or Diploma level study.

Secure and respectful relationships are a strong focus at Coolabaroo. Cheryl describes that for the children who attend the MACS "it's like another little family", and she believes that this is because they focus on attachments and nurturing relationships. It is common for parents to have actually attended Coolabaroo as children themselves, and Cheryl believes that "because they've had a good experience here they've brought their children back". She also feels that the positive relationships children develop with staff enable them to view the educators as important support people in their lives. She recounts an experience that one of her educators described to her about meeting a child she used to teach at Coolabaroo, the child, now an adult, had said to the educator "you were the only one who believed I could (do well in life)". Cheryl states that it is crucial that children feel valued by the staff, "that's somebody that (the child has) got so they can think 'well she thinks I'm really good so I must be'." This is particularly important for children who may be growing up in disadvantaged situations where they are not otherwise able to receive this type of positive affirmation.

Coolabaroo also focuses on the **security** of children's relationships with staff. Cheryl 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." Most of the staff have worked at the centre for a number of years, which also helps aid the sense of stability for children and families.

Cheryl believes these **secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships** are epitomised by the positive reactions they receive from children when they are recognised outside in the community. Children also call the workers 'aunties' and 'uncles', which helps to

affirm the respectful nature of their relationships and to help children understand their place as **belonging** within the local Aboriginal community and culture. Cheryl comments, “That’s part of their culture, and we try to encourage that respect for their Elders and for their culture.” Many of the staff and children are also related, which also helps engender the sense that the children are ‘at home’, connected to the staff and that they **belong** at the service.

Whilst Aboriginal culture is the main culture focused on at Coolabaroo, children are supported to have **respect for diversity** by a focus on incorporating the culture of all children at the service. Staff frequently encourage discussions with children around difference and equity, and involve children in activities and events representative of mainstream Australian society, as well as other cultures. Cheryl feels that respect is a critical value that educators should impart to children, essentially how to “interact with other people (and) respect other people’s values.”

High expectations and equity are promoted at Coolabaroo by a focus on supporting children to “feel that they can achieve and do what they want to do, and be confident in doing it”, which Cheryl considers a key aspect of early childhood education and care. She points out that this is particularly important for children who may come from challenging home lives and intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. She states that, “by coming here and feeling that this is a safe place, they can develop their potential and they might be able to better their lives ahead”. Cheryl feels that the confidence they instil in children helps them to cope with school and to feel that they are able to achieve anything they want. She also believes that it is crucial to “instil in them the importance of going to school and learning new things, learning how to read and write so you can do things. And that that’s better for you later on...when you’re older.”

B4. Coolabaroo and EYLF Practices

Perceiving that Noongar children are particularly ‘hands on’, Cheryl feels that a play-based learning approach is particularly important. At Coolabaroo this means a non-prescriptive approach to supporting children to explore their individuality and creative expression. Educators provide support without actually *doing* things for children, for example in art activities children are shown how to use materials but not what to create with them. This also helps ensure that children create their own work, and enables them to become **confident and involved learners**. A further aspect is that children choose the activities they want to do, as Cheryl explains, “they don’t have to do everything, it’s not ‘you will come and do this play activity now’.” She feels that this helps children to be confident and creative in influencing their **learning environments**, for example on a hot day recently she noticed that children had independently taken activities outside.

Photos taken of children in different activities are used to develop programs. This assists educators to ensure their **teaching is intentional**, by reflecting on previous activities and outcomes they can plan activities that expand on children’s learning. The whole team is encouraged to contribute to observations, and ensuring that all staff reflect on a deeper level about what outcomes they want to achieve.

Coolabaroo's planning processes reflects these philosophies of **intentional teaching** and **responsiveness to children**. Cheryl describes programs as child-based, instead of adult-based, and as representing 'webs' of themes rather than isolated activities. Educators start with a central theme or material, such as 'dinosaurs' or 'playdough' through which they want to teach specific things, and from this build a web of different experiences and activities for children. Flexibility within this allows for spontaneous learning and child directed experiences. To demonstrate this Cheryl illustrates a basic plan that might, for example, include play and learning based in the garden. During the time in the garden, the children may discover a butterfly or a snail. This then leads on to a different tangent based on this experience. Responding to the children's expressed interests, the educator might then find books or different resources on snails or butterflies, or the children could choose to construct these creatures out of dough. As Cheryl 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." Cheryl feels that this responsiveness to children encourages their participation in activities, "when it's something they're interested in, they become a bit more involved and concentrated because it's something they want to know."

Allowing children choice over activities and planning activities around their interests helps educators to be **responsive to children**. For example, noticing recently that children were particularly interested in animals, staff facilitated a session with children discussing the animals they might see at the local zoo, and a zoo excursion then arranged. Learning about and then viewing the animals aided children's **connect with their world**. From this, staff observed that children's interests evolved into a preoccupation with dinosaurs. Activities were then designed that included making and cooking dough to construct 'fossils' and dinosaur models. Dinosaur pictures and art were displayed around the centre walls. Excursions took place to the dinosaur exhibition at the museum and to Kings Park, a city park containing dinosaur statues, footprints and eggs. Cheryl illustrates that during these visits "they played and had fun but they were learning things whilst they were doing it." By tying in different learning activities, play and excursions around a central theme the centre helps to utilise children's interest and concentration and enables them to learn through fun and interactive activities.

Coolabaroo captures **assessment for learning** in a variety of ways, mainly focusing on visual means that can be shared with both families and children. Each room has a digital camera to capture moments throughout the day and to be taken on excursions. This helps with writing observations, as Cheryl points out it is often difficult for educators to write these whilst working with the children. Photos are therefore a useful prompt when writing up observations at the end of the day. All staff are encouraged to actively contribute to observations, as all perspectives are valued, which also helps to distribute the work more evenly amongst educators.

Learning stories are created using the daily photos. For example photos taken in the babies' room were included in a recent book made by the educator, showcasing the

different development groups and corresponding pictures of the children engaged in activities, such as building blocks. Children's scrapbooks are also constructed using photos and examples of the children's work. These are displayed on the walls and regularly sent home for parents to view.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Cheryl believes that staff have actually been implementing the principles, practices and outcomes well before the EYLF, "it's just getting to know why they're doing it." Staff have each adapted to the new framework at their own different pace. Cheryl has observed that staff who are more comfortable with the EYLF are often able to take on leadership roles and share their knowledge and enthusiasm with others.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Training in creating learning stories has proven useful in helping educators to document children's development and learning. Other training provided by the Yorganop Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) has also proven helpful, in particular because they targeted the training at the staff level. Cheryl points out that "people want the basics, and what they can use everyday." She explains that sometimes training contains very technical language, which some participants find difficult to engage with. The IPSU training is instead based on IPSU Support Officer's prior experience of what works in centres. It also takes into account the realities of limited funding, ensuring that activities they promote can be done cheaply and with available resources.

A recent workshop by Caroline Fewster delivered through the Professional Support Coordinator, provided valuable, practical ideas for cheap and simple resources to use with children and how to use these to implement the EYLF. For example this included ideas for art carriers to protect children's artwork when they carry it home – which helps them to feel that their art is valued and important.

Staff have found the Yorganop IPSU newsletters particularly helpful as they contain practical tips for how to implement the EYLF, but also provide insight into broader areas such as early childhood theorists and theories. Cheryl puts these into the staff room for staff to browse during lunch times.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Cheryl believes that training needs to focus on what staff are already doing on a practical level in their centres, and to recognise that often staff are already implementing a practice or philosophy – but they may not realise they are doing it. Training should therefore involve positive reinforcement to staff that they are doing the right thing, and a refresher of *why* they need to keep on doing it.

Gudjahgahmiamia Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Acting Director Leslie Morgan and educator Renee Lane

A. Who is Gudjahgahmiamia?

Gudjahgahmiamia, a traditional word meaning children's shelter, is a Multifunctional Children's Centre (MACS) built in 2009 to provide Aboriginal families in the Wreck Bay community and surrounding areas with a holistic approach to early childhood care and education. It provides long day care for 29 children aged from birth to six years old.

A1. Values and principles

Gudjahgahmiamia's philosophy is a commitment to excellence in children's learning, relationships and growth. Children are supported to develop lifelong skills through a culturally appropriate, safe and health environment. The centre strives to provide a play-based and child directed curriculum, with staff guidance to encourage authentic and relevant learning experiences.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

The objective of Gudjahgahmiamia is "to provide high quality affordable education that ensures the emotional well being, physical safety and security of children in a culturally appropriate environment which offers specific stimulating experiences in accordance with the individual developmental needs of the child."

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Gudjahgahmiamia began implementing the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in February 2011. Leslie and Renee feel that so far their transition to the EYLF has been smooth. Both educators feel that the EYLF is an improvement on the previous system, in that it gives them enough flexibility to adapt it to the particular context of their service. Leslie also points out that from the initial EYLF conferences they've attended, the message has been that the EYLF will be ever-evolving, and that the important thing is to be "on the ball" and to have started it so that as a service you can move with it as it keeps on improving. Renee confirms this, and also points out that whilst at this early stage they feel it's a good fit, they are still learning, and so understand that things may change over time.

B2. Gudjahgahmiamia and EYLF Outcomes

Gudjahgahmiamia believes that supporting children to **develop a strong identity** is about teaching them about their culture and traditions. They foster this through focusing on culture every day at the service. Pictures of the community are proudly displayed throughout the centre to help children develop their sense of identity as part

of the community group. Visitors from the local Wrecks Bay community frequently come in to the service to share their knowledge with children. For example, to celebrate literacy day recently one of the aunties from the community visited the service to tell the children the Dreamtime Story of the area, which is about Mugadan and Jungaa (the lizard and the octopus). To make the story come alive for the children she brought with her a collection of shells, an octopus, and some picture cards. A local community member, Uncle Tom, has also visited the centre to do shell work with the children, as shell work is an important part of the local culture. The children worked with Uncle Tom to create art out of the shells, and these pieces are now displayed in the centre. A book was then created to showcase this experience through photos, and display on the children's bookshelf to remind them of the activity, and to share with parents and visitors.

To support children's sense of **belonging** and their **identity** within their family, and to help them feel at home at the centre staff have set up a display of pictures of the children with their parents, and any brothers and sisters who may also attend the MACS. Leslie describes how this often prompts conversations with the children – even the younger children - as they use the pictures to describe their families to staff.

The centre is also in the process of developing a Dhurga language program to run with the children, which will foster the outcomes that children **develop a strong sense of identity** and become **effective communicators**. Staff also use language as part of everyday conversation with children, and display Dhurga words around the centre for children to become familiar with. Leslie comments how they work collaboratively with parents on this, and that “it's obvious that it's maintained at home because when we say those words they know exactly what it means.”

Community visitors help children to feel connected to their community. **Connection to place and to their world** is also encouraged through nature walks in the surrounding areas. On these walks children and staff have looked for and discussed the bush tucker – berries, seed pods and flowers - that are available at that time of year. They were also able to collect sticks, branches and flowers that were then used in art activities at the centre.

Leslie feels that the provision of support to parents is a unique strength of Gudjahgahmiamia, and part of their focus on **holistic** approaches. For example, the centre is promoting children's **wellbeing** through collaboration with Noah's Ark to implement the Wreck Bay Outreach program. Through this program an early childhood educator and speech pathologist regularly visit Gudjahgahmiamia to provide health and parenting support to children and families. Specifically the program focuses on building the capacity of Gudjahgahmiamia's educators to build children's conceptual understanding, fine motor and cognitive skills and behavioural management. It also aims to assist parents by developing their skills and confidence as the child's first teacher. The program incorporates home visits, a toy and educational equipment library, family

barbecues and the development of transition plans in collaboration with staff and families.

Gudjahgahmiamia also supports children's wellbeing through facilitating health, eye and ear screening and dental checks. In partnership with Noah's Ark they deliver a playgroup at the local health clinic. In conjunction with the 'mums and bubs' program discussed below the playgroup regularly hosts guest speakers to talk to parents about brain development and other relevant early childhood topics.

The MACS also runs several parenting programs. A 'managing challenging behaviour' program is currently being run in partnership with Noah's. This supports parents to assist and work with children who may have challenging behaviour. Parents attend sessions at the MACS with their child, and a worker from Noah's Ark and a program-trained staff member then observe and evaluate the interaction. Staff then use this information to work with parents to develop strategies to deal with difficult behaviour.

Gudjahgahmiamia also runs a 'mums and bubs' program in partnership with Noah's Ark and the Learning 4 Life partnership, to support the **wellbeing** of parents and children. Mothers attending the program receive emotional and wellbeing support as well as useful information on supporting their child's behaviour. This helps to foster their social connections and their ability to respond positively to behavioural challenges. Sessions have included basic first aid, a 'pamper me, pamper by baby' program, and a 'learn to swim' program which ran for three weeks. The mothers met at the MACS in the morning for a cup of tea or coffee, which helped to facilitate their social support networks. They then went to the pool with their children and Gudjahgahmiamia staff. Being a seaside community, Leslie believes that this program was particularly important to help children become safe and confident swimmers from a young age.

Gudjahgahmiamia supports children to become **confident and involved learners** by building activities on their interests (discussed in further detail below). By supporting children to initiate and direct activities, children are prompted to think about where they want the activity to go and what they can do to achieve this. As Leslie describes, "The staff ask open-ended questions to them...they give them that starting point, and children will just run with it". Staff also focus on ensuring that all children are given the opportunity to have input into this process, and also that children's suggestions are taken seriously – which helps children to feel valued and confident to contribute, as Leslie describes, children are supported to feel "that their opinion is valued, because they see it come to fruition." Leslie feels that this has benefits for children's **communication** skills. It encourages them 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."

Leslie describes how assisting children to **become effective communicators** is a daily focus at Gudjahgahmiamia, "There's a lot of communication happening all the time,

regardless of whether it's in a formal or non-formal situations." This also takes place through one on one interactions between staff and children and during group times.

B3. Gudjahgahmiamia and EYLF Principles

Existing within a close-knit community, **secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships** are a key characteristic of Gudjahgahmiamia. Leslie describes that because many of the staff and children are related care is very nurturing and warm. This replicates what children would experience within their families, which Leslie explains might look different to other services. Children refer to staff as 'aunty' and 'uncle', which encourages them to honour and maintain the respect and traditions that govern relationships in the community, and reflects the nurturing **relationships** between staff and children.

Gudjahgahmiamia focuses on **partnerships** with parents, families and the community as an integral part of their service. The centre regularly runs open days "so that parents and extended family can see that we are a vital service to our community." A Parent and Community Committee helps maintain the link to the community, and provides support in areas such as fundraising. Community members regularly drop in to the centre for informal visits and to share a cup of tea with the staff. The service also organises frequent occasions for the community to come into the centre, for example a morning tea for parents and extended family to celebrate Mothers Day.

Partnerships with parents have been strengthened by new opportunities that have arisen through exploring the EYLF with parents and families. Gudjahgahmiamia staff have been actively engaging with parents and families around the EYLF, opening up discussions around children's learning that previously were not happening. One initiative they have taken is the 'Parent Partnership'. The aim of this is to enable staff to 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 of the depth of understanding that educators have in regards to their children's development. Leslie 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."

Partnerships are also formed through parents and families being encouraged to share skills they may have (for example fishing or cooking) with the children. Staff also connect with parents, particularly at the beginning of the year, to find out more about their children, including what they do and don't like doing, and to familiarise parents with the program at Gudjahgahmiamia. As Leslie describes, these approaches to engaging with family "just opens more doors to assist the children and their families."

Leslie feels that staff play a key role in role-modelling positive behaviour and attitudes to children. Staff demonstrate **high expectations** of children through a philosophy that they are the future of the community, and must be supported to know that they can achieve anything they want to achieve.

Leslie describes how including **diversity** in a service is both about seeking information from families to ensure that the practices of a centre reflect the culture of the children and families who use it, and also exposing children to cultures other than their own. Children are encouraged to develop **respect for diversity** through the use of books, flash cards, pictures and music that showcase different cultures and groups of people. Staff also set up learning environments that expose children to diversity, for example by placing Chinese cooking utensils in the home corner, which can then be used as a conversation prompt. Staff also believe that children need to experience difference through exposure to a variety of people, and so try to facilitate this through external visitors to the centre. They also encourage children to try foods from different cultures through their daily menu.

The educators at Gudjahgahmiamia believe that the EYLF has helped staff to be more self-reflective regarding their own practice, specifically linking up practices and principles with outcomes. Leslie describes that “You can literally see why (you’re doing what you’re doing). It makes you think more about what you’re doing and why.” Staff use personal diaries to assist them in doing their own **reflections on practice**. These are used to reflect on the week and explore thoughts staff may have around programs, children and families using the service, and their own work as educators - whether activities worked and any issues or changes that needed to be addressed. Leslie describes how these thoughts then provide a good base upon which to design future programs. She feels that it is particularly important to capture this every few days as often staff are too busy during the day to reflect. A weekly group reflection for both rooms also assists staff to review activities and dynamics and plan for group learning that is connected to the EYLF outcomes. This is then displayed in the foyer for parents, families and visitors to view.

B4. Gudjahgahmiamia and EYLF Practices

Gudjahgahmiamia focuses on a **holistic** approach to early childhood care by viewing parent’s capacity, self-confidence and knowledge as key to children’s development. The centre has actively built partnerships with supporting organisations such as Noah’s Ark to implement programs that empower families and ensure that they can access a range of other services such as health and parenting programs, as discussed above.

Both educators feel that being **responsive to children** is about ensuring that programs are catered to the individual and group needs of children at their centre. This involves linking programs to ensure that they “engage every aspect of the child’s life”, which Renee indicates supports educators to “find out a lot more about the individual child.” Both educators view this recent shift in programming away from developmental programming and compartmentalised topics, as opening up new opportunities for

engaging with children by building on their interests and strengths, which will in turn ensure that they are **confident and involved** learners in their own education.

Leslie feels that **play** provides vital learning opportunities for children to become independent, confident, and to develop problem-solving skills and a sense of personal responsibility. She describes that during her training they were taught that play is children's 'work', but she believes that it is more essential than this, "I think that it's actually developing the child's overall sense of being, self-esteem, social skills, all that - just by playing."

To ensure that their programming incorporates an **intentional teaching** approach Leslie has developed a programming template for staff to use. This contains the programs, activities, EYLF learning objective and outcomes – and guidance on how to link these up. Activities and learning experiences are based on the children's interests, which can be gathered from observations and from information provided by parents. All staff and other people who support the program – such as workers from Noah's Ark - contribute to this. Leslie feels that this is invaluable, as each person has their own perspective on how things are working. Staff set out their plan within the format discussed above, and then use colouring and coding to indicate what outcomes need to be focused on for individual children. This approach to linking EYLF outcomes to activities means that information can be displayed in a simple yet clear way to help educators program more effectively and more **responsively** according to children's needs.

As mentioned above, staff display **intentional teaching** practices by building on children's interests from outside the centre and utilising these as the base for programming. Leslie describes how, being a coastal service, fishing is very popular in the community. Responding to children's interest in this, staff programmed art activities to allow children to create fish, and these were then hung up in a fishing net displayed in one of the rooms. An excursion to the beach gave children the chance to gather shells and other sea materials. Educators also focused on stories and pictures that related to the sea. These were used as starting points for children and staff to share personal stories about fishing and the sea. A fish tank was then added to the room so that children can now observe and learn to care for fish at the centre. Leslie feels that this process is beneficial for children by utilising their interest to encourage their engagement in and learning from a program. It also helps children to develop as **confident and involved learners**, she describes how the children "mightn't realise it but they're actually initiating the next step of the process by staff extending on their interest, and taking it that next step further."

Staff at Gudjahgahmiamia aim to create a "warm, welcoming, stimulating **learning environment** by choosing age appropriate resources based on the child's interests." They also believe that learning environments should encourage spontaneous play and experiences. This means that environments need to be adaptable to allow staff to make changes as they see fit. As well as facilitating children's learning experiences outside the centre (as discussed above) staff also set up learning environments within the centre

that allow children to explore the local environment. For example Leslie sometimes creates beach or marine environments using a blue tarp, beach sand, sea weed, shark eggs, shells and cuttlefish bones for the kids to explore and play with. Staff also regularly incorporate bush flora in art work, play dough or as displays. These learning environments and tools help to encourage children to use their imagination and sensory perception to explore different environments, textures and shapes.

Leslie describes how the recent focus on the sea, as discussed above, has prompted staff to develop a **learning environment** around this, with books on fish, art work and sea objects hanging from a net, shell displays for use in play, a fish tank, and other toys that relate to the sea. They are now exploring expanding this interest into other areas of the centre, for example placing shells and other sea materials into the block section so that children can use these in their counting and construction play.

Gudjahgahmiamia runs a transition to school 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. To help children adjust to the more structured school environment, a separate room has been set up to replicate a kindergarten classroom. Here the teacher works with the children on learning activities to prepare them for school. Leslie describes that the benefits 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 and new resources with her to prompt the children's interest and learning.

Staff capture **assessment for learning** through learning stories, which are displayed both in the foyer and around the rooms – including at eye level so that children can more easily engage with them. Staff also create learning stories that are specific to the five EYLF outcomes. These provide a brief description of the outcome, and then visually represent it through a photo. These outcome-based learning stories, also displayed, help staff to reflect on the outcomes they are aiming to achieve for children, but also help parents to understand their children's development at the centre.

Staff have also developed individual portfolios for each child. These utilise photos and written observations to showcase the child's learning over the year, as well as the child's artwork and more formal learning assessments. At the end of the year these are given to the parents, but a copy is also kept on file for educators to refer to the next year.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Leslie feels that tackling a new framework whilst coping with the demands of running a service has been a major challenge. She points out that for some staff it has been particularly difficult to get their head around the EYLF. For staff who have only been in the sector a few years, coping with a large change - and something they haven't done before - has been particularly daunting. A further challenge has been the EYLF requirement to provide an integrated, linked-up approach to programming. Leslie

highlights that it can also be challenging to limit observations and reflections to only one outcome as often they could potentially fit under any or all of the five outcomes, depending upon what is focused upon. This can make reflections long and time-consuming. To ensure that reflections are still focused, staff try to specifically focus in on which outcome is most relevant to a particular observation.

Leslie believes that key to overcoming these challenges has been providing support to staff, and reinforcing that this is an ongoing process with no right or wrong ways of doing it. She highlights that “it is a broad guideline, but it’s something that we can work with.” On a personal level, Leslie believes that her transition to the EYLF was easier as she was already implementing it in the centre she worked in prior to Gudjahgmiamia. Leslie’s prior experience no doubt also enabled her as a leader to assist the staff at Gudjahgmiamia to adapt to it. Renee feels that by incorporating all aspects of the EYLF into their programs they are able to understand the Framework much better and to think more deeply about their programs. She feels that whilst she is still not completely confident working within it, the more they engage with it the easier it becomes.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Staff at Gudjahgmiamia have not yet had any direct training on the EYLF, and so Leslie feels that it would be valuable to have training examining each outcome and discussing these in more depth. She stresses that having the EYLF document isn’t enough – it is important “to have someone sit with you and to go through it...what it entails and each outcome, because...it can be quite daunting.”

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Factsheets, in particular handouts that can be given to parents, would be useful, explains Leslie. These could take the form of a simple tip sheet, to enable parents to better understand the EYLF, the outcomes and the new way of programming.

Gunai Lidj Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Michelle Went

A. Who is Gunai Lidj?

Gunai Lidj Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS), operating in Morwell in Victoria, started in 1981 as a mothers and babies group, providing respite for Aboriginal families in the area. The service has remained in the original building, but as community demand increased they applied for government funding, and upon receiving this transitioned into a MACS.

The centre now offers long day care, before and after school care, holiday and respite care. Services such as the playgroup and mothers and babies group have now moved to other services in Morwell.

The centre is licensed for 28 children, but has funding for 25. Whilst currently running slightly under capacity, this fluctuates depending on the time of year. The under three year old program currently has a waiting list.

The service is run by Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation. Whilst the MACS staff oversee the day to day centre operations, any major decisions are taken in conjunction with the Site or Business managers at Ramahyuck. Ramahyuck is guided by its Board of Management, comprised approximately six community members.

A1. Values and principles

Gunai Lidj philosophy is described by the Director as follows, "we want to provide the children with the highest standard of education that we can provide, we want our environments to be safe and stimulating, and we also want our environments to respect children's individual needs and their dignity." Their philosophy has changed slightly over the last few years, and Michelle feels that it will continue to be reviewed in light of the larger changes under the EYLF. She describes how the push for the philosophy modifications has come from the staff, which she believes was a result of their participation in the initial trial for the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Gunai Lidj aims to ensure that all children in their care grow to be confident, independent, capable learners with high self-esteem levels. The service also aims to foster children's knowledge of and pride in their culture. Michelle describes that children need to feel "good inside of who they are and what they have to offer to people."

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Michelle feels that the EYLF is well suited to Gunai Lidgee, fitting with “what we believe in for the children here.” She comments that a positive feature of the document is that the simple language and lack of jargon make it accessible, stating “It’s not a demanding document. It doesn’t take extra time – you don’t have to go back and double read it to understand what (it’s) saying to you.” She feels that this is because the document reflects the principles and values integral to MACS. For example, the language used to describe the outcomes means that staff can easily adapt the outcomes into their planning.

Michelle feels that participating in the 2010 EYLF trial helped to prepare staff to implement it. During the trial they were supported by their Children’s Services Advisor from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and as their focus training area picked communication. Staff participated in communication training with the Advisor, which was felt to be invaluable. From this they moved into implementing the EYLF. Michelle emphasises that although Gunai Lidgee does not have to implement the EYLF for some time, engagement at this early stage is still invaluable, “If we can start making these changes in two years time or whatever time, it will be easier for us to transition into it. That’s my ideal goal.”

B2. Gunai Lidgee and EYLF Outcomes

Michelle describes that at Gunai Lidgee “identity is number one. It is so huge within our programme, and within the community that we work with.” Fostering children’s sense of **identity** and that they **belong** are therefore key service outcomes. Children’s **identity** is encouraged through a program focus on self-esteem and supporting children’s awareness of their own individual strengths.

Identity and **communication** skills are fostered through the Gunai Kurnai language program. A language teacher visits the service for three hours a week to teach language through engaging activities such as singing and cultural games. The centre also provides the opportunity for children to learn about and engage with their culture through incidental, everyday activities, for example through using culturally themed puzzles, books, puppets and CDs. Whilst these toys and games are available for children as and when they want to use them, educators also regularly focus on more structured cultural activities through using educational toys and activities such as puppet play. Culture is also visually represented through pictures and posters, which are often labelled in Gunai Kurnai. Staff use these posters and pictures to prompt discussions with children around culture and language. The service also participates in community celebrations and annual events such as NAIDOC. Michelle describes a special excursion last year to the Aboriginal art gallery, where the children met an Aboriginal painter. Staff had previously shared Koori stories with the children, which linked in with the stories represented in the paintings. Michelle believes that this was an invaluable opportunity for the children to learn about their stories, artwork and culture.

Community members also visit the centre to teach local culture, including through cooking and discussions. A father at the centre regularly visits to teach traditional music and the cultural practices of which gender is traditionally allowed to play which instrument. Michelle describes how some of the girls initially challenged this, but the father was able to explain this to the children in a positive way that helped them understand culture and tradition.

The centre has also fostered children's connections with their community and sense of being **connected with their world** through visits from the Koori Unit from the Morwell community policing squad. Michelle explains how this was initiated to replace negative perceptions and experiences children may have of the police with positive associations. The Koori officers regularly visit and join in with daily activities. Michelle believes that this has been very successful, commenting on how popular the officers are with the children and how this helps to build the children's trust in the police. She explains that whilst these visits aren't culturally focused, they are "helping their culture at the same time" by providing the children with positive Aboriginal role models.

Gunai Lidj fosters children's **connection with their world** through a focus on nature. Walks around the local neighbourhood help children learn about natural seasonal changes, for example exploring autumn and the different coloured leaves and bark. The walks often spark off conversations and different activities with the children – for example varied uses for natural materials. Michelle cites the example of one boy whose mother is an artist who paints on bark. She has come into the centre to teach the children about this, and so the boy had suggested that they do bark paintings. Their own outdoor space also provides opportunities to connect with and learn about nature, being a natural space with grass, plants and trees. Recently they have been observing the fruit trees produce fruit and now begin to lose their leaves, and observing the cycle of the agapanthus from flowers to seeds. This has sparked off discussions about children's experiences at the 'Mission' at Lake Tyers², as Michelle illustrates how children are able to connect up the process of growth they have been viewing at Gunai Lidj with "stories that they've been told by their families" about plants and nature.

Gunai Lidj focuses on children's **wellbeing** through a healthy eating policy and plan. Working with the Victorian Health Department Aboriginal Health section, they have reviewed their policies and the meals they provide. Through this collaboration they have also received the 'Tucker Talk Tips' – a series of resources on healthy eating and physical activity by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO). The service has shared these resources with their parents and families to help educate parents about healthy eating and nutrition, and often include similar information in their newsletter.

² Bung Yarnda or Lake Tyers Reserve, also known as the 'Mission'

To further ensure children's nutritional **wellbeing**, staff provide breakfast foods at morning tea, recognising that some children do not receive breakfast before coming to the centre. Meals and drinks are healthy, and Michelle explains that by providing lunch they have avoided the challenge of children bringing unhealthy food from home. Staff also believe that talking with children about food is key to encouraging them to adopt healthy habits. Staff share lunch with the children, role modelling healthy eating and encouraging children to try new things. As Michelle describes, "We don't force them to eat...we just sit with them and they'll try it."

Gunai Lidj firmly believes that children's **confidence and ability as involved learners** is developed through fostering a strong identity. They use strength cards such as the SNAICC 'Talking up Our Strengths' to promote discussions around self-esteem and identity. Within these discussions children are supported to become **effective communicators** by being encouraged to express (verbally and otherwise) how they feel when they are achieving and are proud of themselves. Communication is also promoted through a variety of different activities such as singing, sharing and reading stories, and by active staff engagement in all activities. Michelle has witnessed the growth in children that has occurred through this approach, including increased **confidence** and communication skills.

B3. Gunai Lidj and EYLF Principles

Michelle believes that fostering **secure, reciprocal and respectful relationships** has always been key at Gunai Lidj, as she comments, "the care base is already there". The small service size (approximately 25 children daily) aids this. Michelle feels strongly that this allows the centre to offer a more individualised program for each child and enables staff to get to know each child better (discussed further below).

Michelle explains how families and communities are integral supports in providing early childhood care and development services. Gunai Lidj staff therefore focus on fostering positive **partnerships** with the parents and families. The centre adopts an open-door approach, focusing on enabling parents to feel comfortable accessing the service at any time to discuss their concerns or to just "have a chat". Michelle describes that "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."

Michelle feels that staff demonstrate **high expectations and equity** towards children through their daily practice, in particular through encouraging children to try new activities. Part of believing in children's capabilities is about not holding them back based on their age, as Michelle 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." They also believe that activities should be offered to all children at the centre, for example allowing all children the opportunity to take part in cooking - with even the youngest "being given a bowl to

stir”. Michelle points out that this helps to push children to try new things and to be confident in their learning.

Diversity is recognised at Gunai Lidge through an awareness that “everyone has got their own identity, (and) it’s important for their identity to be recognised.” Having children from different countries at the centre has helped all children become aware of other cultures and differences in appearance, food and languages. This has prompted staff to explore diversity with children through the addition of books, posters and puzzles that showcase different people and cultures and can spark off discussions with the children.

Michelle believes that staff have been able to build upon the strong care base at the centre to incorporate deeper reflections on how to bring about outcomes for children. This emphasis on **ongoing learning and reflective practice** is demonstrated in staff’s increased commitment to better engagement with children through strengthening and extending their own communication and participation in children’s activities. This includes a focus on “incidental activities such as singing and stories”. Michelle feels that the EYLF has encouraged staff to push themselves in their roles as educators;

We can all fall into being a little complacent – you do the same thing day in and day out - and you think ‘oh well, the children already know that so we don’t have to worry’. But you sit down on the mat and a child starts building blocks with you, and suddenly you’ve got four or five children there, and then all of a sudden you’re talking about colours and how a building falls down – so there’s a lot more conversation happening.

They have been increasingly focusing on **ongoing learning and reflective practice** in 2012. Michelle explains how staff have found the most useful way to reflect on their practice is through daily conversations. For example, she describes how recently staff from one program were finding that their environment did not reflect the needs of their children. As Director Michelle supported them through this by observing their room and taking notes. She then met with the staff to share 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 Michelle and the staff felt that the main problem was that the room dynamics weren’t allowing all children to participate, with several children tending to dominate activities. Staff decided to adopt strategies to decrease the noise levels in the room by taking out certain toys, and modifying the room into a softer, warmer environment more encouraging of calm play. They also updated the activities to provide age-appropriate challenges for the children. Michelle feels that for staff who are in the

rooms everyday it can be useful to have an outside perspective to enable them to reflect more deeply, and that supporting staff in this manner enables them to come up with solutions themselves.

B4. Gunai Lidge and EYLF Practices

Michelle feels strongly that having a small number of children allows the service to offer a more individualised, **holistic** program for each child. The children receive more attention from and time with the staff, and the staff know each child well. This allows the staff to view each child's development holistically within the context of their family and background.

Staff demonstrate **responsiveness to children** by incorporating 'focus children' into their planning - where one or several children are focused on for particular activities that reflect their developmental needs. Through using video cameras to record children's experiences staff can reflect on how to use data to best support children's learning. They focus on a strengths based approach, "So not what the child can do and what the child can't do, but what they can nearly do." Whilst some services identify focus children by name in their planning, Gunai Lidge have chosen not to do this. They feel that because the community is so close it is important to preserve families and children's confidentiality, and therefore identify focus children by numbers. Michelle states that this approach is also about looking at each child's development, and "designing programs for each child on their level"

Activities are also designed in **response to children's** interests and abilities so that the program is "child-based and centred". For example, if the children are doing an art activity and want to expand this, educators will provide the extra materials and support needed to allow children to direct their learning in this way. Being **responsive to children** also involves being aware of room dynamics to ensure that the needs of all children are being met. Michelle describes how they recently needed to make some adjustments to ensure that a more dominant child wasn't disrupting the others. Staff first reflected on what his interests were, and then put in place a strategy to ensure that the child could be engaged as soon as he entered the room to ensure that he didn't disrupt other children. Michelle describes that this approach is now working very successfully, but that part of being responsive to children is about being flexible in putting in place new strategies when they are needed.

Staff at Gunai Lidge believe that **play is learning**, and that whilst staff may have a structure of an activity, what children experience should be a flowing, self-directed and fun experience. As Michelle describes, "we don't say to children ok we're going to have a table here and it's for cutting, and everybody must cut." She feels that a play based approach reflects how children best develop, "Children need to learn and explore comfortably through play without being watched and pressurised. Otherwise they're not going to learn." **Learning environments** are set up that encourage this, "equipment is put out for the children to experiment with and take on in a free manner."

Intentional teaching is a method adopted by each staff member. All staff members who program have now worked to adapt their planning format to include the EYLF. Programming occurs fortnightly, and is initiated through a process of reflecting on the past plan - changes to be made or aspects to continue. The program encompasses the EYLF outcomes, Gunai Lidj's short and long term goals, daily focus experiences, and daily reflections and incidental experiences. This latter section enables educators to explain spontaneous changes that took place within the program based on children's interests on the day. A final 'special notes' section records special events that may be happening, or allows the programmer to relay a particular note to staff about how to set up an environment. Instead of focusing on singular, specific activities, staff concentrate on facilitating children's experiences that will lead to key EYLF outcomes and support the themes of 'being, belonging and becoming'

Michelle feels that the EYLF focus on intentional teaching has begun a shift at Gunai Lidj in how they think about **assessment for learning**. Whilst staff have always documented children's learning and development through checklists, observations and stories, the EYLF provides an opportunity to extend upon this. Staff use a video camera to capture learning experiences, either fielding this themselves, or having it running in a room during activities. At the end of the session staff then "take it away, load it up on the computer and there's their observations and incidental stories that they want to put into the portfolios." As well as being an effective and easy way to capture children's learning, Michelle feels that this assists staff to feel that documentation isn't purely a chore and more work, but instead has benefits for themselves and the children. Michelle explains how setting up individual child portfolios took some time, but are now underway and regularly updated during programming time. Staff create and maintain these collaboratively with the children. For example, a photo might be included of children engaging in a particular activity such as construction. Staff will then talk to the children about what was happening, and will record their conversations and thoughts. This helps to capture a multidimensional record of the experience.

Gunai Lidj has focused on assisting children with **transitions** by establishing and maintaining relationships with the local schools. Staff support families to fill in school enrolment forms, and collaborate with parents and the school regarding requests for additional financial assistance for families. Michelle firmly believes that a focus on developing children's self-esteem assists them in this transition – describing how "We had...children who left here and started school beautifully, very proud of who they are."

Through an increased focus on **intentional teaching** Michelle has seen staff re-evaluate their role in planning, reflecting on and executing their programs. She feels that staff's attitudes to the planning cycle have changed, "I think there was a sense of a new pride, of who they were, and 'wow, this is what I'm really offering to the children, and somebody has recognised it!' And...that's when it's all snowballed from there." She attributes the improvement in their programs to staff feeling that their work is valuable and valued. Michelle notes how,

It was nice to hear (staff) feel proud of who they were, of what they do...and that's why I think our programmes have been better for the children because they're (the staff) feeling better about themselves. Because when you are not interested you won't offer a quality programme, and if you don't feel that you're recognised sometimes you think 'oh well, I'll just do the same old ...same old'. But that changed dramatically last year and that was great to see.

Michelle believes that parents are able to see the positive changes that have come about as a result of the service modifying their planning methods, in particular that educators are more involved in their children's learning, and that this results in children going home 'happier and content'.

Michelle explains how **learning environments** are created based on how staff want to provide particular activities, and take into account the room dynamics. For example, staff have recently reviewed setting up their learning environments to lower room noise and to provide children with opportunities for quieter areas (see the example discussed above). One room now has a wooden frame draped with material so that children can choose to take themselves out of a noisier environment. The centre is also exploring how to provide children with self-directed activities, and are setting up new tables with specific activities that children can choose to do on their own if they wish. Michelle feels that this is important to allow children independent time and a break from staff and other children.

A nature table provides children with the opportunity to use their imagination to explore natural materials. Michelle explains that the table contains materials such as pinecones, small pieces of wood and shells displayed within cane baskets. This is an area for unstructured play and exploration, Michelle comments that "we haven't set it out in any way – it's for them to explore."

C. Challenges and overcoming these

The new system and methods of documentation have proven difficult and time consuming. In 2011 the centre explored using child portfolios to capture development over a longer period of time. However, the involved nature of documentation that portfolios require became too overwhelming and time-consuming, and they were therefore temporarily placed on hold. The centre is looking to reengage with these this year.

In addition to this, finding enough time has also been a challenge. Michelle explains, "It's getting the time to really sit down and get into the grittiness of it. You've had a long day at work – you don't want the staff to stay back for another two hours." She also points out that whilst the staff regularly have incidental conversations around engaging with the EYLF, in-depth training is needed. Whilst this kind of training on the EYLF is available, it is not easy to attend. She describes, "We've got such a small staff, with very little backup – so to do it we have to shut the whole building down to be able to go." This challenge is exacerbated when staff are away studying, which is something that is

very much supported by the centre. Whilst Michelle says that they are prepared to occasionally shut the centre down to enable all staff to attend training, it is not feasible or fair to families to do this too often. Their priority for the service is to run the centre, and to run it according to the community's needs.

Initial staff reluctance to the changes prompted by the EYLF has been a challenge at Gunai Lidj. Michelle has found that the best way to support staff come to terms with it, and to appreciate the value of the new system, is to "sit and talk about the reasons for it, and how we find that it meets our needs - what we've been looking for and planning for for the children." Michelle believes that this initial staff reluctance is more a "fear of the unknown" rather than true resistance to change. Adaptation to a new system can be a particular challenge for long-standing staff who may be particularly accustomed to certain practices and procedures. Michelle feels that key to supporting staff through the transition is making the change a positive experience for staff. She describes how she will usually support staff in the first half hour of their programming, so that they can talk about "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.

Building on making the EYLF a positive experience, Michelle has also found that it is valuable to allow staff to explore their own strengths and interests as a way of helping them to engage with the EYLF. She cites the example of supporting one staff member to capture children's learning through photographs, as a way both of documenting children's learning and outcomes and also enabling her to pursue her own interests.

Because the EYLF has been such a huge change for the centre, Michelle believes that a further useful strategy has been 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. Each staff member is supported with the resources they need to plan under the Framework – folders, stationary and the relevant EYLF books. Staff can then begin the cyclical planning process of observations, analysis of observations including identifying what children want out of the programs, and then developing a new program. Michelle 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."

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Being easily accessible by phone, Michelle cites the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) Victoria as a support. In 2011 staff also attended a meeting at the IPSU office to discuss the upcoming changes under the National Quality Framework. This was followed by a half-day discussion on next steps to adapt to the changes and how staff wanted to approach this.

Further training through the IPSU focused on the programming cycle, delivered through a facilitator from Lady Gowrie. The training enabled staff to reflect on what they personally felt quality programming looked like, and what changes they needed to make to offer quality programs for the children. She feels that staff engaged very well with this training, and independently pushed to look into it further. A key aspect in the success of the training was that staff were able to connect the concepts explored in the session with what they were already doing at the service – and this helped to them see how they could enhance their existing practices and skills.

The initial training staff received under the EYLF pilot program focused on communication. Michelle is very positive about this training, describing how it opened staff up to evaluating the way they communicated with children, and also enabled them to explore the communication mediums they provide to children.

Whilst staff at Gunai Lidj have not yet received a large amount of in-depth EYLF training, they have found that other training opportunities have indirectly assisted them with understanding how to implement it. One beneficial experience for staff was attending the Uniting Care 'Strong Foundations for Early Childhood' 2011 Conference. Michelle describes how this was a valuable opportunity for staff to each attend different sessions based on their interests, and to then share their experience and findings with other staff post-conference.

In terms of resources, Michelle describes how she has collated a range of information on the EYLF. Staff can then use this information folder when they are programming. They have also found resources on setting up learning environments to be useful.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Michelle believes that critical to successful engagement with the EYLF is continued training on all topics. In particular she feels that trainers need to understand the context and culture in which a service is working. Training needs to be up to date, relevant and inspiring. She also believes that providing opportunities for educators to share experiences and ideas with each other is a useful strategy. Michelle also feels that simple evaluation tools would be helpful. Some tools are already available, but these are generally quite complicated. Whilst evaluation tools shouldn't necessarily be easy, Michelle believes that they can be made more relevant and practical in terms of understanding how staff can enhance children's development.

Gundoo Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Jackie Topau

A. Who is Gundoo?

Gundoo is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Cherbourg, Queensland. The service was established by a group of women in 1990 who saw a need for child care in the community, particularly for working parents. The centre is under both budget based funding (BBF) and child care benefit (CCB) funding, and caters for children aged six weeks to six years old. In addition to long day care it also operates an out of school hours (OSHC) program and vacation care. The centre is licensed for 81 children within the CCB program, and up to 60 in the BBF. In response to long waiting lists and parent and community demand a sister service was established in 2011, which caters for 21 children. The centre still however has waiting lists.

A1. Values and principles

Gundoo has a strong philosophy that the first five years are critical, and that each staff member has a role in supporting children whilst they are at Gundoo. As Jackie describes, "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..."

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Gundoo aims to enable its children to grow up to be confident learners who are well prepared for school. They focus on the practical skills children will need to be able to excel at school, but also on their emotional development – that "their self-esteem is ready for any challenges that come along." As Jackie comments, "if they can build their self-esteem in the first five years by the time they get to school they are ready for anything. We're helping to build little leaders."

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Jackie feels that although some of the staff don't realise it, they are all actively implementing the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outcomes, principles and practices, in particular because their existing programming approach reflects and extends upon children's interests.

B2. Gundoo and EYLF Outcomes

Staff focus on fostering children's **sense of identity** through exploring their cultural identity. Jackie describes that because they are all community members, their cultural identity is just "a part of who we are (and) it's just everyday practice for us." A cultural area within the centre that contains cultural objects and resources such as musical instruments that the children can play with. They also regularly play traditional music, and where there are opportunities take the children to traditional dance performances and local corroborees. They follow these visits up with discussions within the centre. Jackie believes that this all helps the children to understand their history and "who they are". Staff are currently trying to establish regular visits from an Elder to come to the centre to teach the children and staff traditional language.

Staff have recently been reflecting on how they can promote culture on a deeper level within the centre. Cherbourg is made up of many different groups, and has a community motto of "many tribes one community". To explore this staff have decided to collaborate with parents to create activities for the children that explore the tribal areas that their families come from, and this will be displayed within the centre to support the children to understand this aspect of their **identity**.

They also work on supporting children to develop their **identity** through exploring the themes of **belonging, being and becoming**. Posters set out for staff, parents and children what the three themes mean at Gundoo, and from this staff, families and children have created different walls for each of the three themes. **Belonging** focuses on fostering children's sense of belonging within their family, group of friends, the centre, community and country, and is explored on the wall through photographs of children and their friends involved in different activities at the child care centre and within the community. The staff have also taken photos of the children with their families to demonstrate belonging within their family networks. **Being** is expressed as being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, proud and strong on an individual and group level, confident learners and communicators, and safe, healthy and active. Photos of children exploring different identities through play – such as dressing up – reflect what they could **become** and through discussions around this staff help to build children's confidence in their abilities and self-expectations.

Children are supported to **connect with and contribute to** their world through creating and caring for a herb and flower garden at the centre. They also concentrate on bringing nature into the indoor and outdoor areas within the centre. Staff try to reflect the local environment by facilitating discussions and activities on animals that can be found in the local bush. Jackie describes that this is about connecting children to their country. A science and nature table in the centre encourages children to explore different natural materials. For example, to expand on the children's gardening activities the table currently has a particular focus on seeds and the plant life cycle, which supports activities and discussions in this area.

Children's physical **wellbeing** is supported through a healthy meals program of morning and afternoon tea and lunch. Parents are very supportive of this program, and menus are displayed on the noticeboard and in the rooms so that they can see what their child is eating. The centre also receives visitors from Kid Fit, a children's physical activity, literacy and parent support program.

A child health nurse regularly visits to check children's health and growth, as well as checking for deficiencies such as iron. Jackie describes that "we look after our children in partnership with the families." If an educator has a concern about the child they will talk to the parents and the nurse, which means that all parties are aware of and working together to resolve any health concerns. The centre receives visits from the Deadly Ears program, who can refer children with additional needs on to the ENT specialist who visits the centre twice a year. Staff have also received training through this program, focusing on hearing loss and the effects this has on a child's development. This training incorporated practical activities and was felt by staff to be very beneficial. Jackie states that these workshops will continue to occur as needed.

Staff also concentrate on encouraging children to take responsibility for their own health and **wellbeing** by focusing on hygiene habits such as hand-washing and blowing their noses – which photos around the centre of showcasing particular children doing this and praising them for it. They focus on this particularly through transitional routines when children change activities or prepare for a meal.



A poster encourages healthy habits at Gundoo

A science area in the centre encourages children to be **confident and involved learners** by providing them with opportunities to explore different sensory experiences – for example differently textured materials and substances. This area also prompts children to conduct different self-guided experiments, for example a recent activity involved experimenting with water to test which objects float or sink, and how water movement effects this. Children were encouraged to conduct their own independent experiments in response to educator's questions. The children and staff then documented what happened so that they could see the results of their experiment. The babies are also encouraged to experiment through play. Recently an activity introduced the babies to musical instruments and singing, and then encouraged them to explore other objects in the centre that also make sounds.

Staff demonstrate their **high expectations** of children by encouraging them to have confidence to take on new challenges and accomplish things independently. The centre is currently focusing on bikes and scooters to encourage children's confidence, perseverance and physical coordination. This activity also reflects children's interest in the wider community, where bikes and repairing old bikes and scooters is currently very popular.

The centre focuses on building children's self-esteem and social/emotional **wellbeing** through a variety of ways. Jackie believes supporting children to build strong attachments is important, as through these relationships children learn how to talk to older people and to communicate their needs in a positive way. Staff concentrate on role-modelling positive behaviour and communication to enable children to become strong, **effective communicators** so that they have the confidence to talk to adults and peers.

Gundoo works with PACE to facilitate a teacher to regularly visit the centre to work on children's **communication** skills. The teacher conducts literacy and numeracy activities through music, and parents are encouraged to attend this.

B3. Gundoo and EYLF Principles

Relationships between staff and children are naturally strong and secure as staff are part of the children's community and are therefore known to them. Staff view themselves as vital secondary attachments for children, and believe that a stable, nurturing relationship with child care staff provides children with a base from which to grow into confident, secure and independent adults. Children call staff 'aunty' or 'uncle', which reflects the family-style nature of the service. Jackie also discussed the important role that staff play in the children's lives, "Cherbourg is a small community and we want to be role models for our younger generation that are coming up in this world. And if they can see us achieving things within our community that might make a difference in one young person's life who might say yes I want to go and do what they are doing."

Jackie feels that a defining aspect of Gundoo is the **partnerships** it has with the community. She describes this,

What makes it 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.

She speaks of the powerful role that the centre plays in supporting children to grow and develop, citing that "The only way that is going to happen is if we embrace our community through our younger children who use our service, and reaching out to parents and families, we all work together in partnership."

A community committee, established when the centre opened in 1990, governs the work of the service and helps them to maintain these strong **partnerships** with community and family. The committee is made up of parents, relatives, Elders and community members. They meet monthly, receive reports from the staff, and provide advice on how the centre is running. They are also involved with recruitment processes. Jackie believes that the committee provides the centre with a mandate to operate within the community. Committee members also bring their professional and personal

expertise from other parts of the community, which helps the MACS to remain connected to community dynamics and needs.

Stable and committed **partnerships** with parents are also vital. After a recent change of director, Jackie expresses that staff needed to focused on rebuilding parent's confidence in the service. She describes that part of rebuilding parent's trust in the centre was showing parents that staff were doing a great job, and this renewed trust then spread through word of mouth throughout the community, enabling new enrolments. As Jackie describes, staff are "proud to say now our centre is full and our parents are happy...we try and work with our parents."

The service also maintains **partnerships** with parents by encouraging their involvement in the centre. This happens both through annual celebrations such as NAIDOC week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAICD), and also on a weekly, less formal basis. They are working with Elders to facilitate visits to share storytelling, cultural knowledge and traditions with the children, but find that they have to be patient in establishing the routine of these visits as they need to be flexible to Elders' needs and time. **Partnerships** with parents are also fostered through displaying children's portfolios for parents to view, and staff are working on encouraging parents to write in these and share ideas and input into their child's learning program.

The service has also established **partnerships** with organisations within the broader ECEC sector such as their local TAFE, Noah's Ark (as discussed below) and health services (as discussed above).

The service encourages children to have **respect for diversity** through activities that focus on different cultures. For example, one educator recently decided to focus on China. She borrowed a range of resources from Noah's Ark and was able to create learning environments and activities that explored China and Chinese culture. She then extended on that to explore Chinese food with the children. As mentioned above, the centre is also looking to explore diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures by researching where each child's family comes from and which group they belong to.

They are also trying to incorporate Torres Strait Islander culture, as Cherbourg is predominantly an Aboriginal community. Staff currently use pictures to explore the culture with children, and are building relationships with a local Torres Strait Islander family to enable them to come in and share some of their songs and language with the children.

The centre fosters **ongoing learning and reflection** amongst staff through strong relationships with the local TAFE, who Jackie describes as one of the centre's biggest supports. TAFE teachers support staff through on the job training, and through pushing them to reflect deeper on their work. Jackie also explains that through their relationship with the TAFE the centre is able to receive targeted training based on staff needs.

A number of staff are currently completing their qualifications, from Certificate to Bachelor level. Jackie expresses that the benefits she can see for staff who are undertaking further study are immense – they have a deeper knowledge of and outlook on child development and are often able to be role models to the other staff. Jackie explains that the service and staff have a strong culture of encouraging each other in their endeavours in further study.

Staff are also encouraged to write daily reflections of how the program has worked for the children, and to add to the children's portfolios as often as possible. They also work with parents to include their input into these to present a more detailed picture of children's development.

B4. Gundoo and EYLF Practices

The new sister centre applies a **holistic** approach by running a family grouping setting. This was instigated in response to parent and community input, where it was felt that a family group setting would better reflect the children's home environments - as most of the children come from large families. This enables the older children to teach the younger children, as they would at home. It also helps to foster children's social skills, and staff have found that it has lowered behavioural and settling-in issues.

Jackie describes that **learning through play** at Gundoo means that staff are child-focused and create learning environments that are set up and resourced to reflect children's interests, so that children can explore this through play.

Because Cherbourg is a small town and staff are part of the community, Jackie comments that "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 at Gundoo." This helps them to be **responsive to children's** needs through an understanding of what is happening in their lives.

A themed wall within the centre, 'All about me at daycare' was created through discussions between staff and children to explore what each child likes doing at the MACS, who their friends are and what they like about being at the centre. This helps children to develop their own sense of personal **identity** at Gundoo, and is used by educators to then plan activities and experiences that are **responsive** to each child's needs and interests. Educators work to involve parents in these discussions, particularly for younger children who are less verbally expressive.

The centre displays an **intentional teaching** approach that is **responsive to children** by programming based on children's interests. Staff set out cards with pictorial representations of different activities and children can then choose between these. The cards are then displayed on the wall to show what activities will be happening that day. Educators link these activities up with the EYLF outcomes to ensure that they are

focusing on what they want children to learn out of each experience. The program also allows for spontaneous experiences that scaffold off children's interests that arise throughout the day. For example, a recent experience when a bird flew into the centre prompted children's interest in and discussion around birds. Educators channelled the children's interests as discussions and activities took place that focused on birds and then on eggs, which then led into a focus on Easter. Similar experiences have taken place based on things children have found in the garden – for example a caterpillar - that led into activities exploring the life cycle of caterpillars and butterflies.



Learning stories showcase children's confidence and wellbeing, and scaffolding on children's experiences through indoor environments.

Learning environments provide children with opportunities for open-ended, creative play by utilising natural materials such as leaves and seed pods. Exploring the children's recent interest in the sea, educators have created a sea environment using sand, natural beach materials and water. They have supplemented this with pictures of the sea and sea creatures, and discussions with the children around marine life and diversity.

The centre also works with Noah's Ark to encourage children's literacy. Through this they are able to borrow resources such as books, dress-up clothing, toys and puppets to enable them to plan for and set up different **learning environments**.

The service uses individual child portfolios to capture **learning for assessment** over the year, and have also created individual notebooks for each child. These are less formal and structured than the portfolios, and are used to that reflect the child's artwork and daily activities. Staff make observations throughout the day and then reflect on the learning that has happened within these and which EYLF outcomes they link to.

The notebooks also allow for parent contributions and notes.

Staff support children through **transitions** out of the centre by connecting children and parents with the local school, and by facilitating an end of year visit to the school for parents, children and staff. The local school has set up a cultural education unit and so staff regularly take the older children to visit this to learn about the history and stories of Cherbourg. This helps them to establish a sense of belonging at the school, and reaffirms their sense of belonging within their community.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Jackie feels that the main challenge with the EYLF has been enabling staff to see and feel confident that they are already implementing the vital elements.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Jackie describes the Yarning Circle training they received from the Queensland Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) as providing them with an opportunity to sit down and talk through the EYLF and what resulting changes they wanted to see 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.”

An EYLF-focused workshop delivered by trainer Sue England was cited by staff as being extremely beneficial, as it gave them enormous confidence in their methods. Jackie explains that it was quite a powerful experience for staff as “we didn’t know we were already doing it, and she came in and pointed out all of our strong points.”

The centre has also received training from their local TAFE, in the form of a series of sessions exploring topics such as programming, ethics codes, policies and procedures. These are ongoing and seek to build on topics staff are studying through their certificates or diplomas. Jackie explains that the most effective training methods are those that enable staff to provide their input and ideas so that they can own the change.

Staff have also received training under the Remote Indigenous Professional Development program. This has enabled two staff from Gundoo to go on to become Pedagogical Leaders who are now training staff from other services throughout the region. Jackie believes that having this leadership has been critical, “coming back to our community and showing these girls and building their confidence and showing them that yes they are really doing it.” She describes that this training has broadened their understanding of the EYLF, and has given them renewed confidence and pride in what they are doing.

As part of this program the centre received a Remote Indigenous Professional Development Package to support them to implement the EYLF. Some staff have felt this to be useful as it breaks down the language and themes into simpler concepts. However, some educators feel that it is too simplistic, and not as beneficial for qualified staff.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Jackie expresses that training needs to be ongoing and focus on up-skilling staff. She feels that regular training is particularly valuable to motivate staff and to provide new ideas for activities and strategies they can try in their centre.

Jalygurr Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Coordinator Heather Lee

A. Who is Jalygurr?

Jalygurr-Guwan (Jalygurr) was originally established by a group of Aboriginal mothers in Broome who created the Mirdi Marlu ('Little Kangaroos') playgroup. As more parents began to enter the workforce, the need for a child care service became clearer. In 1988 Jalygurr-Guwan became an incorporated body, with the name being drawn from two local languages, Yawuru and Bardi, and meaning 'Children of the Pearl'. In 1989 the service received funding to operate as a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) to provide access for disadvantaged and low-income families. Additional funding then provided for the establishment of a Regional Children's Mobile Service to deliver mobile children's services in Broome and surrounding Aboriginal communities. Jalygurr therefore runs a long day care, after-school and mobile playgroup service. In total the long day care has 31 children, and the after-school care program 19.

A1. Values and principles

Jalygurr aims to meet the broad and changing needs of the local community, through providing quality and culturally appropriate child care in a safe, supportive and caring environment. Children are respected as individuals, and the service strives to foster a sense of cultural pride and self-esteem for all children. Parent participation and feedback is valued, encouraged and supported, and the service also strives to establish processes to embed communication channels between relevant external organisations, parents and staff.

Staff at Jalygurr work as a team to reflect the service philosophy. The service has a strong history and commitment to building the capacity of local Aboriginal staff, providing support, training and assistance for all staff – including those who wish to gain their qualifications. Through this approach they aim to attract qualified, long-term and committed staff.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Jalygurr strives to ensure that children develop a strong sense of personal self-esteem and pride in their culture. Heather also feels that a key aspect reaching their stated outcomes is an understanding that "each child is different" and therefore need to be focused on as an individual. Heather explains that "Staff need to be aware of the individual development of children and where they're going to". For example, Heather points out that for older children a relevant outcome from their participation at Jalygurr is that they are ready to transition on to school, which incorporates linking children up with any additional support, such as speech pathology, that they may need.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Jalygurr is now actively implementing the EYLF into their programming. Heather feels that a strength of their service is that most of their qualified staff have been with the centre for some time. This means that they are able to better support and assist the service through the transition. She explains that whilst the EYLF isn't conceptually difficult, "there's a lot involved with it...a lot of reading and a lot of things you have to do". Heather also feels that the EYLF will be constantly evolving, and so at Jalygurr they need to choose what works for their service, staff and children, and then begin taking the necessary changes based on their needs and capacities.

B2. Jalygurr and EYLF Outcomes

Inclusion of culture and **identity** is strengthened at the centre as all but four of the staff are Aboriginal. The service always aims to have a high number of Aboriginal staff as Heather feels this helps to ensure that the centre provides a strong cultural program that helps to build up children's **identity**. Because the staff are from the local community, they are aware of the types of activities children may be doing on the weekends – such as fishing – which as Heather illustrates "links back into the EYLF with what children are interested in at home and...bringing it into the service." Heather illustrates other cultural activities the children participate in, such as excursions to the beach to collect shells, participate in sand play and talk about the sea and fishing. Heather also highlights that in strengthening children's identity they focus on gathering parent's input "to see what they do as a family, and then we can incorporate it into the planning." This is an ongoing process and one in which they are constantly trying to improve, Heather explains that they have developed and are starting to implement a plan to regularly bring families into the centre to share their skills, such as music, with the children.

Excursions outside the centre help children to **develop a strong sense of identity** and also to **connect with their world**. Children are taken on regular excursions to the Minyirr Park, an Aboriginal park with guides and activities to teach children about their cultural heritage and the environment. They also visit the local Gantheaume Point to view the pictures of the dinosaur footprints. Unstructured excursions are also facilitated, Heather describes recent excursions to the coast to show the children the tides. These are led by a local educator who understands the tidal system and patterns and can share her knowledge of these with the children.

Jalygurr focuses on fostering children's **wellbeing** through responding to different issues and needs as and when they arise. For example, following concerns from parents and staff that children were not eating properly Jalygurr has recently made nutrition a key focus. They have hired a cook with a nutrition background, and have also worked with a dietician from the local Boab Health Service to design a menu that reflects age-

appropriate intake for the different food groups. To engage with their parents on child nutrition the service has a whiteboard detailing what the children are eating each day, so that parents can view this when they come in. On the board there is space for both staff and parent comments, and Heather illustrates how parents usually provide comments about what their child does and doesn't like to eat. Parents are also encouraged to talk to the cook or to staff about meals if they prefer to do this verbally. Heather feels that the parents are "quite open to discussion of these kinds of things. They like to have a chat and talk to all the staff, there's strong communication between all the staff and parents". This approach helps to ensure that both staff and parents are working collaboratively for improved nutrition and health outcomes for the children. Acknowledging that many of the children eat a lot of rice and fish at home, the service also tries to incorporate these into the meals as much as possible to ensure that they are supporting families' diet practices and preferences. Children are also empowered to make choices about their own eating, as morning tea is spread over a few hours and so children can choose when they want to eat. This helps to teach them about responding to their bodies and eating when they are hungry, and Heather feels that this approach is working very well.

Once the service feels that they are making gains in nutritional wellbeing, Heather explains that they will then be able to focus on other concerns, such as the upkeep and appearance of the building.

Jalygurr has recently submitted to become a Sun Smart centre, and is actively working to teach children about the risks of sun exposure. They do this through staff role modelling of appropriate clothes to wear and sunscreen use, and through conversations with the children around the risks of sun burn, and appropriate times of the day to be inside and outside. Jalygurr is also increasingly focusing on their outdoor play-space, developing an environment that encourages children to be physically active and therefore experience better physical **wellbeing**. Staff have set up climbing equipment, an obstacle course, and the service is also in the process of building a footpath for bike riding. These activities also contribute to children's motor skills and to them becoming **confident, active learners**.

Heather perceives that children at Jalygurr display high levels of resilience. She attributes this 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". Heather illustrates how through extending on these experiences within the service staff are able to foster children to become **confident and involved learners**. Children also learn to direct their own learning through opportunities to participate in non-structured activities. For example, a permanent collage table with arts and crafts materials in one of the rooms allows children the opportunity to access and participate in art activities if and when they want to, which encourages them to be independent in their learning. As Heather describes, "So it's not like there's a painting area set up and they just have to do painting, they have a choice." She 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.”

Communication and identity are strengthened through a focus on Yawuru, the local Aboriginal language. The service has Elders who visit the service to work on Yawuru with the children, including telling stories, reading books and singing songs in language. Jalygurr also ensures that Yawuru language is represented visually throughout the centre so that it is something children see everyday, including in the names of all of the different rooms. Heather feels that this is something they will continue to build on as she feels there is more they could do in this area.

Helping children to **become effective communicators** is an everyday focus at Jalygurr. Staff concentrate on regularly interacting with children through discussions, singing, and reading books. Staff support children through “positive interactions and guidance”, for example redirecting children to more positive forms of communication. Reading is strongly encouraged at Jalygurr, and Heather illustrates how children will often read books to each other. Some of the children attend kindergarten in the morning, and staff observe them often telling the long day care children about their experiences at kindergarten – often playing at being teachers to the other children.

B3. Jalygurr and EYLF Principles

The community nature of the service means that a strong emphasis is placed on **secure relationships** between staff and children. Many of the workers know or are related to the families using the service. As Heather describes, “that’s a value too... it’s a real family feel and that’s what you have to keep at a service like this”. She feels that this also helps the service maintain a relaxed, laid-back feel. The children usually call the older women ‘nanny’, ‘aunty’ or ‘gaga’, which demonstrates the respect and trust that the children feel towards the staff. Heather describes the benefits of this family atmosphere, illustrating how children at Jalygurr “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 obviously also benefits parents, who also “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.”

Partnerships with parents are encouraged through strong, trusting relationships between parents and staff. Heather views incidental discussions with parents as vital to developing these relationships, and in enabling staff to learn more about the children. She describes these everyday conversations with parents as “simple discussions about how they’ve been or what’s been happening. And I just tell the girls just to write that down because that’s all part of the programming and parent’s input.” Information gathered from these discussions includes topics such as the child’s interests, what they did on the weekend, whether they’ve been sick or if they’re teething. Heather feels that this assists the service in ensuring continuity of the child’s experiences at home and at the centre. Discussions are also two-way, with staff updating parents on how their child has gone that day at the centre. New parents are encouraged to come in for an

orientation to get to know the staff and to share information on their child and their routines. This is particularly important in the babies room, which Heather describes “has to be quite flexible” to suit feeding and sleep routines.

Heather feels that two additional factors that help to support families to access Jalygurr are the low fees, which in many cases are half the amount of other services in town. The service also provides a bus that collects children from the local kindergartens in the afternoon and brings them to Jalygurr. This is an integral service for families who work or study, or otherwise would not be able to transport their children to Jalygurr in the middle of the day.

Partnerships with the community and families are fostered through Jalygurr’s outreach-style mobile 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 long cooler season it generally 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 the local Male oval, and provides free activities for babies up to five years of age, with older children occasionally also joining in. The mobile 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 also given out 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. Heather describes how they took all of the Jalygurr children out to this activity, which she feels generated “a real community feel” whilst still promoting important messages about child health and welfare. Heather 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 Heather 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.”

The service is also preparing to run a fun day to raise their profile in the community. Heather is planning that this will involve Mamabulanjin Aboriginal Corporation (a local multifunctional Aboriginal service which provides housing, essential services and an Aboriginal resource centre) and KAMSC and BRAMS. In 2011 they participated in the annual Shinju Matsuri festival, with parents, staff and children all decorating a float and then participating in the town parade. This exposure resulted in increased enrolments over the next few months to the point that the centre then reached full capacity, and so Heather explains that they will make this an annual event for the centre.

Partnerships with the community are also maintained through the Board of Directors – a group of six local people with a connection to the centre. Heather describes how she works closely with the Board to make decisions, meeting formally once a fortnight. Many of the Board have children at the service, which helps to keep Jalygurr in touch

with the needs of parents and families using the service. Jalygurr also benefits from the Board's expertise, many of the parents work in different areas such as mental health, child protection and Indigenous Affairs, and so this helps to facilitate Jalygurr's links with organisations within these sectors. They also provide assistance with funding ideas and processes, which is vital for Jalygurr as a not-for-profit organisation. The Board have also all been connected to Jalygurr for some time, and are able to provide support and advice to staff on "how we can improve in different areas," such as better connecting with families through activities such as barbecues for the families to get to know the staff.

Jalygurr also maintains a **partnership** with the local TAFE, which helps them to foster the principle of **ongoing learning**. They recently hosted eight early childhood students from different communities in Western Australia, who came to view the setting and to learn about conducting mobile playgroups. This strong partnership also means that TAFE lecturers are able to provide regular support to staff, such as EYLF training.

Jalygurr has both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, and **respect for diversity** is fostered through all staff being able to share their cultures with the children, and through participation in events such as the Shinju Matsuri festival described above, which celebrates the different cultures of Broome.

Staff undertake **ongoing learning** by regularly participating in available professional development courses on topics such as child protection, language development and child health. The service often arranges follow-up presentations at the centre to build on this learning where needed. Professional development also responds to the needs of children at the service, recently several staff completed a course in Makaton to better interact with and support the needs of one of their children who has a hearing impairment. They have now brought this back into the service and are teaching children Makaton through displays and pictures around the rooms. A monthly staff meeting also helps staff become **reflective practitioners**, giving them the chance to share "how their planning is going and how they are guiding the children, what they're setting up, if it's flowing, if they're having any trouble and how we can improve on that." A further aspect of ongoing learning at Jalygurr is an understanding that practices have to adapt to the requirements of the centre and staff. Heather explains how she views the current planning process using daily journals, "we might be able to use these for a year and then change the way we want to plan – change it to how we want to do it. It's just a guide. As long as you've got all the outcomes and the principles, and you're doing that and can show that, it's good."

B4. Jalygurr and EYLF Practices

Jalygurr caters to children's **holistic** development through a focus on creating a family-style environment. The program operates on a family grouping structure in the morning, children then break up into their own age groups for the bulk of the day and then join each other again at pick-up time. Many of the children have siblings and relatives in the service, and so staff feel that it is important for them to have time to interact, play, and

learn from each other. A further benefit is that a family grouping situation at drop-off and pick-up times 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.

Jalygurr staff display **responsiveness to children** through an understanding that they need to be flexible to accommodate children's individual needs and routines. Heather feels that although most children do adapt within a few months to the routines of the centre, they still tend to sleep and eat at different times, corresponding to their home patterns, and so the centre needs to be flexible to this too.

Heather describes how the service **responds to individual children** through a strengths based approach focusing on,

...the individual development of children and where they're going to. All children develop at a different level, and have things that they like doing more than another child, so if there's something that they're not really good at you try and encourage that in the plan, or do it as a group so you don't just individualise the child.

Heather feels that this approach has great benefits for children, expressing that,

...it's 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.

An understanding that children **learn through play** is the basis for this approach. Heather explains that the way they interpret this at Jalygurr is that activities are not overly structured, "it's letting the children learn themselves with some guidance...if you're constantly giving children things that adults want to do, it's not helping them because they might not be wanting to do it because it's not an interest that they have." The role of staff in this is to support children, through guidance and facilitation, to be active participants in their own learning.

Intentional teaching methods are reflected in the centre's style of programming. The program is displayed on the wall for parents, staff and children to see. It contains six permanent learning areas including aspects such as an art corner, a block corner and a home corner, and different activities are then set up around these themes. Staff write in a daily journal to document the children's interests and their experiences from the day and then link these to EYLF principles and practices. This is then extended on the next day to build on children's experiences and learning. Plans are also created for individual children, to ensure that "everything's getting met for the children." Incorporated into these are extensions from previous days, intentional teaching experiences planned for the day, and relevant community, cultural or family events that the child may be

involved in. Space is then provided within the program template for staff reflection, and questions from families and children that require following up.

All plans are evaluated once a week, with educators exploring key questions such as how they responded to children's ideas or how the children shared aspects of their culture at the service. This helps them to be **reflective practitioners**. Heather feels that fundamental to this process is that,

...there's no wrong way of doing it, as long as you're writing about the children and you're not just changing to a whole different activity the next day, as long as...you've got the same kind of thing, and you're adding things or taking things away that don't work, you get a flow happening.

Feedback from parents is incorporated into the programs. For example, if a parent describes an activity that their child enjoyed doing on the weekend this can be included in their portfolio, and it can also be incorporated into the program as an activity to extend upon their experience. Experiences from excursions are also built upon back at the centre, for example after a recent beach excursion educators led the children in discussions about the shells they had collected, as well as using these to develop shell mobiles which were then hung up at the centre. Heather feels that this approach has real benefits for children, highlighting that "there's kind of a flow and a link and it all blends into one, and you can see that the children are developing and their interests are being met, and they're being included."

Learning environments are built around the children's interests. For example, staff recently perceived that children were seeking active, outdoor activities, and so developed outdoor play areas that incorporated climbing equipment, sand and water play. To allow children to spend as much time outside as possible and to have choice over the activities they do outside, staff have also set up age-appropriate activities such as arts and crafts for the older children and specific spaces for babies to play with books and toys. The service is also focusing on including as many natural resources as possible. This includes setting up learning environments inside the centre that mirror outside environments. This can be achieved for example through bringing plants and rocks into the centre and incorporating these into the learning environments. Heather describes how this also helps children to **be connected with their world**. She points out that "a lot of people think you need resources to have a service running, whereas a lot of these kids would use a stick or something and pretend that they're fishing." This helps

An active outdoor environment



children to use their imagination to create play instead of relying on the environment and toys.

Aboriginal staff at the centre support the non-Aboriginal staff to be **culturally competent**. This is done both through incidental interactions and also through staff meetings, where culture and differences in cultures is discussed.

Jalygurr believes in providing assistance to children and families through **transitions** to kindergarten and school, particularly for children with additional needs. Heather illustrates that for one child who has a developmental delay they use a communication book to facilitate communication between the kindergarten he attends in the morning, Jalygurr staff and the child's parents. Jalygurr and the local kindergartens have also facilitated staff visits between the services, to help staff understand each other's programs and to ensure consistency in their provision of care to children. Heather firmly believes that developing these links is vital and an area in which many services fail, especially for children who may be finding the transition difficult. Staff also communicate with parents about how their children are developing at kindergarten, and this then helps Jalygurr staff to continue some of the activities children are participating in at their kindergarten, ensuring **continuity of learning**.

Staff are increasingly focusing on learning stories – both individual and group - as a tool to capture and **assess children's learning** as linked to the five EYLF outcomes. These can capture learning experiences children have at the service or outside with their families, and integrate the child's voice into the story. Learning stories incorporate both a description of the activity and the learning, follow-up experiences, educator evaluations and feedback or comments from children and families. Staff have also developed an easy to complete learning story template for parents to take home and complete as a way of getting parents more involved in their children's learning, which staff will trial using shortly. These learning stories are then also used to incorporate children's experiences into programming to ensure that it is expanding on their interests and prior learning. Each child also has their own individual portfolio, which is a record of their learning and experiences over the year.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Staff have found that the EYLF language can sometimes be inaccessible, and the sheer volume of information to read overwhelming. Heather also explains that some staff are concerned that they are not implementing the EYLF correctly, including particular aspects like learning stories. A high turnover of coordinators over the past few years has meant that planning processes are not sufficiently embedded within the service, "no-one has ever had anything solid that staff can follow", which has also contributed to a challenging transition for staff.

An additional challenge is that staff have little time to program, and so many staff are finding that they are not able to meet the increased documentation requirements

within their limited programming time. Heather endeavours to overcome this by providing staff with three hours of programming time a week, and also encourages them to update the daily journals during quieter times during the day.

Heather feels that overcoming these challenges requires building staff confidence to plan, and an understanding that “there’s no wrong way of doing it”. Heather explains that as long as they are focused on developing activities in line with children’s interests and then extending on these, as discussed above, it will just take “practice, time and getting used to doing it.” To build staff confidence she has emphasised that the transition will take time, and that the EYLF is an opportunity for them to “start fresh, all help each other and actually get something happening...that we all like.” Heather firmly believes that cooperation and the involvement of all staff is also key, so that programming is not limited to qualified staff only. She believes that this will help staff who may go on to pursue their qualifications, “because eventually...if they’re doing their qualifications they’re going to have to learn how to plan, and the EYLF is just in everything that you’re doing now.”

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

The service enjoys a firm relationship with the Yorganop Indigenous Professional Development Unit (IPSU), maintaining regular email contact. As Heather describes “anytime I need them they’re happy to help out.” A recent IPSU workshop on planning and programming was considered very beneficial for staff. Staff find the regular IPSU resources useful in provide insights into topics such as setting up rooms and environments. Heather also regularly collects the EYLF Professional Learning Program resources, such as the newsletter, and makes these available to staff.

A recent visit to Broome Daycare gave staff new ideas for EYLF programming. Prompted by this Jalygurr is now using Childscapes programming resources, which they have found particularly helpful. This guideline-style resource has helped them establish a program that “works for everyone in the service”. The resources have also helped to overcome the overabundance of information within the EYLF (discussed above) by condensing it into a manageable format. The information on the EYLF is also contained in the booklet that they plan in, which, as Heather describes, “is an easier way and better than going to the (EYLF document) and going what does this mean, where did I see that?”

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Heather explains that challenges staff have found with previous EYLF training include that it has contained too much information, jargon and had an overly technical focus, which can be “quite daunting if you’re not used to it.” Heather perceives that creating learning environments is a particular challenge for which training is needed. She also comments that simple training helping staff link practices to EYLF outcomes and principles would be beneficial. Ongoing practical resources with tips for setting up and implementing activities, such as those provided by Yorganop IPSU and the EYLF Professional Learning Program, will also be of benefit.

Koonibba Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Laurel Glastonbury

A. Who is Koonibba?

Koonibba is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operating in Koonibba in remote South Australia. Established in 1989, Koonibba was licensed as a child care centre in 1991. The service is licensed for six children under two years of age, and 12 children over two years. When family demand increases these limits, they split the program up into two daily sessions to ensure that all children in the community can attend.

A1. Values and principles

Koonibba's principles are to provide a flexible, efficient, friendly and non-judgmental service that seeks to care for all children at the centre. Koonibba seeks to offer a program that reflects the values of the diverse family and cultural backgrounds of the community. Within the service philosophy parents are recognised as the prime carers and educators of their children, and family support and involvement is considered key to the centre's everyday operations. Parental participation in all activities at the centre is therefore greatly valued.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Koonibba's objectives for children are to facilitate their development in the foundational areas for learning, by exposing them to a variety of positive experiences to increase their knowledge, cognitive abilities and skills. Children are supported to grow strong and confident in their culture, with cultural identity seen as a key ingredient underpinning all development. The service also seeks to provide a bridge between children's home and future school environments to ensure that they are as prepared as possible for school and future learning.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Laurel feels that the framework does provide sufficient guidance, but also allows different services to adapt it to their own unique context. She feels that key to successfully implementing the EYLF is taking from it the relevant information to suits each particular service. She describes, "you've got to have flexibility. It can't be the rules all the way", and to adapt it into each unique community she believes will require services to "shuffle a few things around" within the framework. For example at Koonibba this entails adapting the EYLF to Aboriginal child-rearing practices, such as different sleeping arrangements (discussed below).

B2. Koonibba and EYLF Outcomes

Koonibba's ethos very much reflects the central theme of **belonging** outlined in the EYLF. Laurel emphasises that she always reinforces to the children that "that this is your place. This child care (service) is yours." The children are supported to feel that the child care centre is home, and the staff are their family. They can explore the entire centre – even the staff office – and this helps them feel a grounded sense of belonging at the service – and that they can trust the staff. Laurel comments that this is part of children's learning and development. She believes that the sense of belonging children feel at Koonibba stays with them after they leave the service, providing an example of a child who at age nine revisited the MACS and still asserted his pride in his community's child care service, stating that "I reckon we've got the deadliest child care." Laurel believes that this is because children feel welcome at the service. She states that "You want them to be happy, you want them to feel welcome and to trust you."

The service works collaboratively with parents and their children to help develop children's **identity** through creating individual child profiles that showcase their family and their background. Parents are encouraged to come into the service to work with staff to document their family details – who their family are and where they come from. Staff can assist any parents who don't feel comfortable writing the profiles, but an emphasis is placed on ensuring that the profile captures parents' and child's words. Staff are able to be more **responsive to children** through learning about them on this level. This information can then be used to enrich activities that build on children's identity.

Koonibba also focuses on fostering children's **identity** through supporting them to explore their own Aboriginal identity as well as other Aboriginal cultures and customs. Using colourful, appealing resources staff talk to children about different Aboriginal groups from around Australia, and share the traditional stories of the groups. Laurel feels that this enables children to develop an understanding that "not every group is the same" and **respect for diversity**. They also use a calendar-style resource exploring the bush foods eaten in different parts of Australia throughout the year, and this often sparks off discussions with the children about what they are eating at the moment, and what other Aboriginal groups around Australia may be eating. This helps children to **connect with their world** by opening them up to conversations and activities about seasons and plant cycles. Staff and children are also currently in the process of creating their own resource focusing on their own area, traditions and native foods.

Koonibba staff take the children on weekly nature walks through the community. These foster children's **connection with their world** and their sense of **identity** through exploring the local bush materials and traditional uses for them. Laurel describes how the walks encourage children to be **confident and involved learners** by developing their creativity and problem-solving skills, for example by building their own wiltjas (bush shelters). They also provide an opportunity to build on outdoor activities children may do in the community at the weekends. Family members are encouraged to attend, with one child's grandmother currently attending and making damper with the children.

Staff also foster children's **connection with their world** through encouraging them to develop practices that foster their social responsibility as group members. A daily pre-lunch routine helps children learn many valuable lessons in regards to hygiene and social responsibility. The children now know that "before they sit down at the table for lunch, wash your hands and paper goes in the bin" and responsibility regarding water usage. Learning hygiene routines such as hand washing also helps to contribute to children's **wellbeing**. This routine also teaches children responsibility for their personal possessions, for example if they don't want to wear their shoes at the centre this is their choice, but they know that they must put them in the shoe box. Laurel highlights that part of this is that they have always had "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."

Koonibba staff support children's **wellbeing** through identifying when they have health needs, and connecting parents up to services. This can either happen through outreach to the centre by the Ceduna Koonibba Aboriginal Health Service (CKAHS), or by Koonibba MACS facilitating children's visits to services in Ceduna. Koonibba has had a long-standing relationship with CKAHS, originally enjoying weekly health visits from the service. However due to changing circumstances these visits have now been dramatically decreased. Laurel is now not sure whether the regular health screening and checks that they used to receive will continue. She feels that it can now be quite challenging to access the Health Service when children require care. Many parents do not have their own transport to access health services in Ceduna. Koonibba MACS therefore plays a vital role in this, but themselves have to operate within a limited budget. They recently hired a bus and with the assistance of their Board picked up and drove all of the children and their parents in to see the dentist in Ceduna. It was not possible however to hire a bus for the follow-up visits, and so many children were not able to attend these.

Meals are prepared and cooked on-site by the cook, and children's **wellbeing** is fostered through healthy eating and nutrition. Staff have received nutrition and hygiene training, and have developed appropriate policies under the Start Right Eat Right program, which fosters healthy eating and good nutrition practices in South Australian child care centres. The centre has now been able to adopt a food hygiene and nutrition policy. Laurel believes that parents are very proud that their centre has this accreditation, and that this helps make it a centre of choice for families. The service also focuses on wellbeing through ongoing involvement with a local 'hub' meeting of ECEC services in the area, where issues, ideas and knowledge are shared.

Children are taught environmental awareness and are supported to **connect with and contribute to their world** through regular nature walks outside the centre. The centre is located in a small rural community, and the natural environment is easily accessible. Staff routinely facilitate excursions for children to play in and learn about nature, and this connection is then strengthened back at the centre as they use the natural

materials they have gathered in their artwork and play activities. The children also learn environmental awareness, for example through activities to gather bark for painting children are taught that “we can pick it (bark) up off the ground but don’t pull it off the tree.”

Children’s **connections to their world** is fostered through strong linkages with the community, often regular visits to the service by older children and adults who previously attended the MACS. Laurel feels that these visits aid the community atmosphere that is intrinsically part of Koonibba.

Children are supported to become **confident and involved learners** by being allowed to explore the entire centre and to engage with what the staff are doing. As discussed above, this is considered to be part of the children’s learning and key to helping them develop confidence and initiative as they learn about and explore their environments. Laurel describes this in practice, “They’re in here, they’re out there, as long as that (external) door is shut, they can go anywhere they like. And they roam anywhere they like, and they ask questions to you, and they’re looking at the computer and you’re showing them things. So it’s all learning.” These frequent conversations between children and staff also support children to become **effective communicators**. Koonibba also focuses on this outcome through fostering children’s local language skills. The service contains many colourful and engaging books in local Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff also use local language with the children on a daily basis, with a focus on building up a vocabulary of basic words that can be used in everyday situations. The centre also has a strong focus on reading and storytelling.

B3. Koonibba and EYLF Principles

Laurel firmly believes that **secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships** between staff and children are a key, unique characteristic of Koonibba. An enabling factor in fostering these relationships is that staff are members of the children’s community. The children always greet staff warmly when they see them outside of the service and Laurel perceives that this helps children feel secure within the service, and adds to the parents’ trust in the staff. Young adults who attended Koonibba when they were children return to visit the centre, and Laurel feels this demonstrates Koonibba’s success in ensuring that children enjoy strong, positive relationships with staff, which contributes to their strong sense of **belonging**.

Laurel illustrates the warm and caring nature of children’s **relationships** with staff through a description of story-time. Staff find that if children are made to sit in a circle where they can be easily distracted, story time becomes focused on keeping the children still. Instead, they are allowed to sit close beside the educators and actively read with them, which also fosters their **communication** skills. The small number of children at the service also helps to support this intimate, family-style environment.

Laurel feels that when the children have this strong sense of **belonging** at the service, it helps foster trust and **partnerships** between the centre and families. She highlights that

there are additional barriers to overcome for Aboriginal families to be comfortable putting their children into care and to trust staff, and so “if you know that your parents have that confidence in the way that your service operates and the care for their children, then it makes for a good day. And they’re (the parents and children) happy when they come in.” With an open door policy and positive relationships between staff and families, family members are comfortable to drop into the service at any time to discuss concerns they may have or just to have a chat with staff. Laurel describes how their parents don’t just drop children at the door, they actively come into the body of the centre to have a look around and talk to staff.

Partnerships are also fostered between the service, families and community by the governing Community Council, which comprises members of the local Koonibba community. The Council regularly meets to discuss any service changes or major decisions, development of or amendment to policies and parent handbooks. Laurel feels that the relationship between the Community Council and the service - built on trust and respect - is a positive factor for staff. This relationship helps staff to feel that the Council trusts what they are doing, and also ensures the service remains strongly in touch with the needs and dynamics of the community. Whilst community politics can sometimes be challenging, Laurel ensures that these do not affect the service by operating an ‘open door policy’ where all are welcome. This therefore preserves a consistent and safe environment for children and a stable relationship with parents.

Staff demonstrate **high expectations** of children through a philosophy of encouraging children to test their comfort zones in all that they do – for example trying new foods and changing their eating habits. Laurel emphasises that alongside this it is also important to talk to children about how it is fine to make mistakes because “it’s just about having a go.”

Laurel considers that the framework has provided opportunities for staff’s **ongoing learning and self-reflection**, stating that it “makes everybody look at how they engage children. And how you hold a child’s attention...it makes you look at and evaluate yourself, how you do things.” She feels that reflective practice amongst Koonibba staff involves considering where each child is at and their current capabilities, so that activities can be targeted at an appropriate level in order to challenge children without setting them up to fail. Meetings are held at the end of each week to enable staff to reflect on the past program, what has worked, and what may need improving. Staff also use this as an opportunity to reflect on how they are meeting children’s holistic needs, for example their dietary requirements and successful approaches in this area.

B4. Koonibba and EYLF Practices

Koonibba incorporates a **holistic** family grouping system where children of all ages play together. They chose to do this after observing that when the children were split up into age groups they were often quite unsettled. Laurel feels that this family group structure more appropriately reflects the dynamics of community life – that children of all ages play and learn together. This arrangement helps to foster children’s **holistic**

development by teaching them social and communication skills, cooperation, social responsibility, and how to interact with different ages in a natural setting that mimics what they experience at home and in the community.

Koonibba focuses on strengthening children's sense of **belonging** by ensuring that staff are **responsive to children** in a culturally appropriate way. Laurel describes how the Aboriginal Resource and Management Support Unit (ARMSU) 'I belong' poster has particularly assisted them with this. The poster helps to prompt staff to look at how they are responsive to children's needs and culture by following Aboriginal child-rearing principles, such as respecting the role of extended family members as carers, speaking the local language or Aboriginal English, and building a child's confidence and self-esteem through a focus on cultural activities – in particular through connecting the child with their family's particular culture, not just the Aboriginal culture of the area.

Koonibba has a strong emphasis on staff engagement with children during all activities. This method strongly relates to the EYLF practice of **responsiveness to children**. Laurel comments that the effects of staff engagement are obvious, having witnessed that when staff actively engage in an activity with a child the child's focus on and learning from the activity increases dramatically. This also helps children to **become effective communicators** by encouraging them to describe what they are doing.

Staff also ensure that they engage with children as individuals, paying attention to each child's unique strengths and learning style. As Laurel states, this is premised on the idea that "not all little kids are the same. They don't all learn at the same pace." Koonibba incorporates the method of focus children within their programming to ensure that they meet each child's developmental needs. This **responsiveness to children** is fostered in all activities – for example staff recognise that some children need extra support whilst eating meals and so where needed will sit alongside the children and assist them to eat.

The centre incorporates a strengths based approach, building on children's interests and **intentionally designing teaching** activities around these. All staff meet on Fridays to program for the coming week. Photos and observations are used to record children engaging in activities, and staff can then reflect on these to design future programs that expand on and reflect children's interests and strengths, and plan for their ongoing development. Staff find that through using a purposeful teaching approach – intentionally engaging with children around an activity they are doing – children remain better focused and engaged with an activity and will therefore both learn from and enjoy it more.

Koonibba incorporates a wide understanding of **learning environments**, taking children on excursions into the local bush to provide them with opportunities to interact with nature – including bush walks to gather plants other materials to use in later activities such as bark painting or collage. By including natural materials in play activities children are encouraged to be creative and innovative. As discussed above, the entire centre is viewed as a learning environment that children are allowed and encouraged to explore.

Laurel feels that this gives children choice over which environment they wish to engage with – for example if they want quiet time away from the other children they can play within the office.

Laurel feels strongly that an important objective of Koonibba is to prepare children for school. She describes how participation in an early childhood centre makes a child's **transition** to school much easier, and therefore aids the teacher immeasurably. She emphasises the importance of the early years for fundamental learning and development, stressing "if kids don't have those experiences at home like some children do, then it's going to be hard for them." Laurel feels that a particularly important aspect of their role is to prepare children for the structured and timetabled environment of school, although balancing this with the early childhood play-based curriculum can at times be challenging. Koonibba MACS works collaboratively with the local Koonibba Aboriginal School. Children attend the school's Child Parent Centre in the mornings and are then collected by Koonibba staff to attend the MACS in the afternoon. This helps to bridge the gap between long day care and school, by helping children become familiar and comfortable with school whilst still attending the familiar child care environment. The Child Parent Centre and Koonibba MACS also attend events together in Ceduna, including the annual Child Protection March and regular events at a Ceduna-based Aboriginal long day care centre, Minya Bunhii. Staff, parents and children at Koonibba MACS also attend the annual Expo Day at the local school to learn about the school and meet the staff.

Koonibba also ensures **continuity** of children's experiences from home into the service, by incorporating traditional Aboriginal child-rearing practices into their practices. A particular example Laurel highlights is that children are allowed to sleep together on mats on the floor, and can 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.

Assessment of learning is often captured through photographs. Laurel emphasises that these need to be unposed and to capture children engaged in real activities. These photographs are then related back to the EYLF outcomes, with a caption to describe this. This method provides a useful way of capturing children's development, their interests and their emotions at the time. The individual child portfolios discussed above are also used to record children's development, learning and work, and are a valuable resource to share with parents.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Laurel believes that one major challenge with the introduction of the EYLF has been the speed at which it superseded the previous framework (the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework - SACSA). She feels that although SACSA seemed quite comprehensive and effective it was replaced very suddenly. Laurel feels that an approach that phased the EYLF in over time - helping services understand what

they were already doing, and how to connect their current practice to the EYLF - would have made a smoother transition for staff.

Laurel explains that throughout the transition it is critical not to get overwhelmed by the EYLF. She comments that the Framework does provide sufficient guidance, but also allows services to adapt it to their own unique context. Key to this is being able to take the relevant information from the EYLF that will suit a particular service. To adapt it into each unique community will require services to “shuffle a few things around.” For example adapting the EYLF to Aboriginal child-rearing practices.

Laurel believes that the sharing and support that services in the Koonibba/Ceduna region (two Aboriginal and two mainstream services) provide each other has been invaluable. She comments that the managers and staff of these services share this view, that “the more we get together and share information...everyone will get a clearer picture.” She stresses that key to this is not getting fixated on the detail and the programming side of the framework, but instead focusing on the broader outcomes and working out how to incorporate these into what’s already happening, whilst picking up relevant information along the way.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Staff at Koonibba have received training in developing individual learning plans for children, and will soon receive EYLF specific training at the upcoming Aboriginal services meeting, part of the four meetings organised a year by the South Australian Indigenous Professional Support Unit for all Aboriginal early childhood services in the state.

Koonibba also participates in four hub meetings a term, which involve all early childhood services in the Ceduna/Koonibba region. Laurel highlights how this is a great opportunity for services to get together to share information and discuss a variety of topics. She believes that this is a particular feature of remote services, that “you learn how to relate and share”.

Two staff from Koonibba also visited the Lady Gowrie centre in Adelaide in November 2011. This experience was a useful exercise in exploring some of the similar challenges that services face. Laurel does however believe that part of the staff’s worry around the EYLF is that they haven’t received enough training on it yet. Koonibba is very remote, and so the logistics of getting to training sessions can be very difficult. The cost of training for a small service can also be prohibitive.

Lulla's Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Miranda Borlini

A. Who is Lulla's?

Lulla's Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) operates in Shepparton, Victoria. It was formed in 2009 when two Aboriginal early childhood services, Batdja Preschool and Lidge MACS, joined together. The original Lidge MACS was established in the early 1980s in response to community recognition of the significant disadvantage facing Aboriginal children due to their lack of attendance in early years programs. The Batdja preschool started in 1992 to support Aboriginal children to make positive and smooth transitions to primary school. It was later recognised by both organisations that by joining the MACS and the preschool children and the community could benefit even further, and so after many years of planning by the Batdja and Lidge Committees of Management, a new building was established and Lulla's MACS was formed.

Lulla's is now licensed for 25 kindergarten and 46 day care spaces. Whilst the centre's first priority is to serve the Aboriginal community, where possible it also provides spaces to non-Aboriginal children in the community. Lulla's also has a priority list for children in protective care. The service runs long day care, kindergarten, health and parenting support.

A1. Values and principles

Lulla's guiding philosophy is that every Aboriginal child in the area should have the opportunity to participate in a range of early learning education and care programs that reinforces their cultural identity and builds their self-esteem and confidence to provide a foundation for lifelong learning.

Lulla's holds high expectations of their staff, and promote that staff in turn hold high expectations of children and what they can achieve with appropriate support and guidance.

The service works with staff to ensure that the whole team shares a common goal. Lulla's also has a strong philosophy of supporting local staff development, and support many staff through ongoing professional development and training at Certificate, Diploma and Bachelor level.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Lulla's seeks to provide an integrated approach to care and education that focuses on a high quality, culturally relevant early childhood program. Recognising that care needs to be holistic Lulla's seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of children through the

provision of additional specialist programs such as cultural programs, parenting support, maternal health, speech therapy and counselling.

Children's development is seen as intrinsically connected to the health and happiness of their families and communities. The service therefore strives to work with families and the community to increase access to the service and facilitate connections and friendships amongst their families.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Lulla's has been working with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) since early 2011. They have found the initial change to be a positive one, and have been able to align the EYLF into their vision. Staff have found that the EYLF covers the main areas they feel are important, and supports them to continue with culture as their basis.

B2. Lulla's and EYLF Outcomes

Children's **identity** is fostered through a strong emphasis on cultural identity. Miranda feels this is particularly crucial as some children do not have the opportunity to experience this at home. Cultural identity is supported through displaying culture in each room – for example through using red, black and yellow colours in different displays, and artwork, photos, books and toys that represent Aboriginal culture. Whilst the centre celebrates particular events such as NAIDOC week, culture is incorporated into daily activities, as Miranda points out, "it's not a one off, it's everyday." For example, activities relating to music will usually incorporate clapsticks and didgeridoos, and these instruments are available to children in the centre to explore and use independently. Aboriginal child-rearing practices such as sleeping habits are also promoted, which helps parents to feel supported in their parenting practices and enables children to experience continuity between the home and service environments. Children's **identity** within their families is strengthened through activities around family trees – with large, visually appealing displays that include family photos in the centre rooms.

Cultural **identity** is also fostered through a focus on traditional dance and music. Some years ago a local Aboriginal dance group was initiated within Lulla's and has now grown into a professional dance group that performs publicly, the Damanmu Bangerang Traditional Dance Group. The group now often visits the centre to teach traditional dance to the children, and is considered to be a part of the centre, with some Lulla's children now members of the group and regularly performing with it. Newspaper clippings and photos of the dance group are displayed on the walls. Both girls and boys dancing is catered for, and the children also learn traditional music and singing.

The two community groups, the Yorta Yorta and the Bangerang, are also represented and respected in the centre and discussions held with children on the importance of these two groups. When the centre was under construction 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.

Artwork at the centre representing the Yorta Yorta turtle

Lulla's contributes to children's

wellbeing by ensuring that the service is a safe, loving environment. Particular emphasis is placed on this in recognition of the fact that some of the children have quite challenging home lives. As Miranda describes, "coming here is safe from eight am to five pm. And we make sure that they're loved and cared for".

Roughly five percent of children and families at Lulla's have some involvement with child protection services, so caring for the **wellbeing** of these children is very important to the service. Lulla's has worked to establish a relationship and agreed 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 amount of stress to children and staff, and does not compromise the trust Lulla's has with its families.

Historically Lulla's has contributed to children's **wellbeing** through a strong health focus. Regular immunisation through the Shepparton City Council, and weekly maternal health services from Rumbalara, (the local Aboriginal Co-operative) are delivered through the service as this was perceived by the community to be a serious need for children in the area. The service also arranges dental visits at the centre for the children. To promote the importance of children's oral health to parents, the staff opened up the centre to families during a recent dental visit day. Miranda comments that this highlighted to families and children the significance of the day – with an article even being run in the local newspaper. Lulla's also assists children's wellbeing through partnering with Scope, an early childhood intervention service. Scope works with Lulla's to deliver a range of services such as occupational therapy and speech pathology, as well as transition to school programs for children who require extra support.

Children are supported to become **effective communicators** both in English and in Bangerang and Yorta Yorta. A community Elder frequently visits the centre to read the children books she has written that detail local stories. The Elder talks and sings in her traditional language to the children. Staff reinforce children's learning by incorporating

traditional words into centre activities. This also helps to strengthen their **identity** as **being** and **belonging** within the Bangerang or Yorta Yorta groups.

The outdoor environment is used to help children to **connect with and contribute to their world** – incorporating a vegetable garden so that children can experience gardening and caring for plants. Staff also plan activities that will help children connect up to nature, such as bringing tents into the centre to simulate camping outdoors. The service has a fish tank in one of the rooms, and staff are looking into getting a turtle to help children learn about caring for pets.

In the Babies room children are encouraged to become **strong and confident learners** by a focus on ‘providing two ways’ – an approach which facilitates children’s problem-solving by encouraging them to find more than one way to tackle or solve something. Activities for older children include opportunities for them to participate in play through



drama and creative expression, which Miranda explains helps to develop the children’s confidence and to direct activities in a free-flowing way. Activities such as water and ice play help children gain a wide range of sensory experiences and encourage them to experiment with texture and physical substances. For example the children recently conducted a series of experiments

involving freezing toys in ice and observing the process of melting.

B3. Lulla’s and EYLF Principles

Staff **relationships** with children strongly reflect the nurturing, affectionate and community-focused nature of the service. Miranda feels that this is because the staff are often related to the children and they are members of their community. She also feels that the dynamic is more family-centered because the centre is a not-for-profit organisation. The children refer to the staff as ‘aunty’ or ‘nanna’, which helps to teach them about respecting their elders, and places them within a community structure, which also helps to foster their **identity**.

Family support through strong **partnerships** is a distinct aspect of Lulla’s, and is seen as an integral aspect of supporting children’s wellbeing. In the past Lulla’s focused strongly on children’s health, and found that this was a positive way to encourage parent interaction with the service – for example inviting families to information sessions on children’s health, inviting parents to be part of the Board and to assist with food preparation. Miranda feels that now the relationships are much stronger they are able to focus conversations with parents on the educational aspects of care. The service is developing a home-based kit to assist parents to run educational and fun activities at home with their children. Parents will be given initial support at the centre in how to use

the kits, and can then take them home. Information sharing is also an important aspect of assisting parents to support their children's development. Miranda considers it to be essential that they inform parents about the educational program and what staff are trying to achieve through it. She is planning to run parent information sessions on the EYLF and the Abecedarian approach that they are currently trialling at Lulla's. She believes that this will help firstly explain to parents that the centre is educating, not babysitting, their children, and will also help them to see how they too can conduct easy learning activities at home.

Some families struggle to manage finances and pay the service fees, so staff often assist families with budgeting. Miranda feels that shame is still a large factor for many of their families, but a strength in overcoming this is that the staff are either related to members of the community, or at least have a solid understanding of and appreciation for the approach that Lulla's takes. She illustrates how new staff must be supported to 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." This detailed knowledge of community and the families is considered critical, and is also built up through one-on-one interaction with families, open days at the centre and home visits. The service regularly checks in with families, particularly when children haven't attended for some time. Miranda 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 finding workable solutions for both parents and the centre is key – with the reasoning being that children's attendance is always more important than fees.

Stable, non-judgmental relationships with parents are also vital in gaining their trust. Miranda illustrates how families feel "comfortable with leaving their children here eight hours a day, five days a week, because there's that connection with the aunties." She describes how even parents of young babies are comfortable leaving their children at the centre when they have to return to work, because they know that their baby will be loved and nurtured.

The strong **partnerships** and relationships that Lulla's has with families help to ensure that parents don't feel shame when they need additional support. For example, access to the service is also facilitated through the provision of a bus service that can pick up and drop off children, which is particularly important for families who don't have their own vehicles. This has also helped staff to develop deeper relationships with parents by interacting with them each day at pick-up and drop-off times. When the service occasionally receives additional money staff will often deliver food baskets to families. Miranda explains that, "Sometimes you don't need to say anything, just being able to help in any way...you just do it."

Partnerships with families are also encouraged through an open door policy at the centre, and the centre being seen as a community facility, "It's a family centre, that's what we wanted it to be" describes Miranda. Families are able to drop by Lulla's to use

the computers, phones, or just to come in to say hello. Parents are encouraged to assist with activities such as play groups and making lunches.

Miranda also believes that “it’s very important to be a part of the wider community”, explaining that their Community Board helps to facilitate these **partnerships**. Being comprised of parents, Elders and other community members, the Board plays an important advocacy role for the service within the community, including to other services such as Rumbalara. The Board hold high respect for the staff, as Miranda describes “The Board have high expectations of all the staff, as I do, of their day to day work. They’re here to work, and to care and nurture our children and make sure that they’re safe.” This partnership between the Board and staff helps provide a guiding oversight of Lulla’s and additional support for staff.

Staff demonstrate **high expectations** of children through fostering their independence and confidence to try new, challenging activities. Staff regularly conduct activities that encourage and support children to be responsible, such as cooking and construction with real tools. Staff also conduct activities using water, ice and camp fires to teach children about fire and water safety.

Respect for diversity is encouraged at Lulla’s through teaching children about different cultures. Harmony Day is an annual celebration, in 2011 the emphasis was on Maori culture, with Maori singing and food for the children to experience. Parents have reported back to staff that they feel it is important that their children learn about different cultures, and staff have responded to this. As Miranda illustrates, “So we celebrate everyone’s culture, but every day there’s something here for the kids to do with their cultural identity.” Diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is also discussed, Miranda 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!’ ”

Lulla’s encourages staff to be **reflective practitioners** by creating and maintaining journals to document and reflect on children’s progress. They also conduct regular staff meetings. A particular emphasis is placed on team communication to encourage incidental, everyday reflections and sharing. Part of Lulla’s philosophy involves strongly supporting its educators to gain further **professional development and ongoing learning**. Staff who wish to complete Certificate, Diploma or Bachelor level study are supported, and currently six staff are undertaking their Diplomas.

B4. Lulla's and EYLF Practices

Holistic practices are encouraged through a dual focus on health and education, and the service endeavours to ensure that it is responsive to current needs in this area. Several years ago health was a major focus at Lulla's, but whilst this continues to be important the focus has now somewhat shifted to educational outcomes, as it is understood that children's health outcomes have improved. Improved nutrition is fostered through **partnerships** with families – who often come to the centre to assist with making lunches. Providing nutritious meals is particularly important for children who may not receive this at home.

Staff focus on **responsiveness to children** by allowing for plenty of one-on-one time with each child, reflecting the Abecedarian approach they are implementing. Children's input is valued and projects, events and activities are regularly planned around children's interests.

Miranda expresses that at Lulla's **learning through play** is about providing children with supported environments and opportunities to explore and express themselves in a natural context. Through play children learn about responsibility, teamwork and creativity. Activities such as the ice and water activities detailed above help children to learn how to explore and conduct their own learning.

Lulla's programming approach utilises **intentional teaching** by enabling educators to connect up curriculum areas such as identity and wellbeing to learning/developmental outcomes through planned activities. Scope is then given for **ongoing learning and reflective practice** to allow educators to reflect and evaluate each activity.

Lulla's has recently reviewed their **learning environments** to make them more natural and less plastic-focused. This has included incorporating a vegetable garden into the outdoor play area, natural materials such as a wooden canoe, and a stronger focus on using recycled materials – such as tyres - in activities. Staff understand that learning environments need to cater to the child's developmental stage, and must be sensitive to their social, emotional and physical needs. Learning environments need to provide opportunities for different types of activities, such as quiet play. Staff have a role to ensure that learning environments are organised, accessible and welcome.

Whilst the majority of staff at Lulla's are Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal staff are offered **cultural competence** training when they commence work. Staff are also supported to learn about the wider community and the two local Aboriginal groups through Lulla's connections with the Bangerang Cultural Centre and Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation. Staff at Lulla's, in particular older staff, are also always available to help new staff understand the local community and culture.

Miranda also believes a further strength in providing a holistic service is the amalgamated service model of hosting birth to age six programs within the one building. She believes this assists children to **transition** through the programs, and also helps

them with transitioning on to school. In conjunction with SCOPE they are running a transition to school program to support families and children with a disability to be prepared for school, and to link them up with any additional support they may require. SCOPE officers currently visit Lulla's one day a week to work with staff, children and families. The MACS also works with the Manega Annex at the local primary school – a separate school annex for Koori children.

Lulla's is increasingly focusing on **assessment for learning** through the creation of learning stories and individual portfolios. The service is further focusing on documenting children's development through photographs, and using these to explore the deeper cognitive development that is taking place for each child.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Developing staff confidence and knowledge to implement the EYLF has been the main challenge at Lulla's. Even staff who may have more confidence in implementing the EYLF, may feel challenged by having to display it in front of external people such as assessors. Miranda feels that time and ongoing professional development will help to overcome these challenges.

They have also found that staff leaders have emerged from within their team, who are able to help guide the others. In particular Miranda perceives that staff who are studying for their diplomas are developing more confidence and are able to 'step up' to the EYLF. She feels that encouraging staff professional development is key – "I've got a group of young ones... that really want to step up, and this is their future – Lulla's – and that's what we want, that's what the Board wants. And if they want to go on and do their Bachelor we'll support them to do that."

Finding enough time to program has always been a challenge, but has increased with the new requirements of the EYLF. These time challenges are exacerbated when staff are absent. Lulla's is considering options of paying staff overtime to conduct programming, or having an extra staff member on-site to relieve staff so that they can program during the day.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Lulla's has found resources from SNAICC and Free Kindergarten Australia (FKA) particularly helpful. Staff have also received training from FKA, both in Melbourne and also in-house. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria) has been supportive in offering training that comes up.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Miranda feels that training exploring programming under the EYLF would be helpful, as well as factsheets around different aspects of the EYLF. She also feels that staff exchanges with other services would also be useful.

Minya Bunhii Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Mavis Miller, Assistant Director Ursula Montgomerie and Preschool Literacy Teacher Jenny Whittle

A. Who is Minya Bunhii?

Minya Bunhii is an integrated long day care centre and preschool. The long day care program has 69 children enrolled, with a license for 50 children a day. The preschool has 28 children enrolled, and daily attendance numbers average approximately 17 children. Demand for places is consistently high, with a current waiting list for the long day care.

The preschool has been operating for over 30 years, originally starting as a community crèche. After some years this was taken over by the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD), and turned into a preschool. The long day care centre was established in 2000 in response to a community survey that identified a need for local child care for parents returning to work or study.

A1. Values and principles

Minya Bunhii's philosophy is to promote the interests of children through respecting all children as individuals. Parents and extended families are recognised as the primary educators, and Aboriginal lifestyles and child rearing practices supported.

Minya Bunhii's workforce philosophy is to employ staff who have an understanding and awareness of Aboriginal culture and heritage, and quality care and education principles. Service quality is maintained through appropriate staff development, resources and programs.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Minya Bunhii aims to provide affordable and accessible quality childcare, preschool and related services. Their priority is to target Aboriginal children but with consideration to the wider community where possible. Specifically, the service's objectives are to provide a culturally appropriate program for Aboriginal children that assists children to:

- Maintain and celebrate their cultural traditions
- Develop and retain pride in their cultural heritage
- Build self-esteem and confidence
- Develop to their full potential

B. Service's experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Minya Bunhii has been implementing the EYLF since 2011. Mavis describes how initially it felt like a large change for the service, "You get settled with one thing – SACSA (South

Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework) – and now there’s this whole new thing. But we’re still learning and going to training. And trying to make changes...So we’re learning and taking it on.” Staff feel that whilst some terminology may be new, most EYLF practices and principles are things they have been implementing for some time, and therefore incorporating these hasn’t been challenging.

B2. Minya Bunhii and EYLF Outcomes

Fostering a **strong sense of identity** has always been central at Minya Bunhii, and Mavis believes that the EYLF focus on identity and **belonging** provides further support for the service to focus on this. Staff 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 to that child. In collaboration with each child they are creating visual ‘webs of belonging’ which explore each child’s connections with extended family and help to establish their sense of belonging to their family and community. These will be displayed in the centre and shared with families.

Incidentally fostering children’s **identity**, the cultural heritage of the local community is captured in bright, appealing paintings around the outside walls of the play area. These display contemporary depictions of the culture and natural environment of the area (see photo further down).

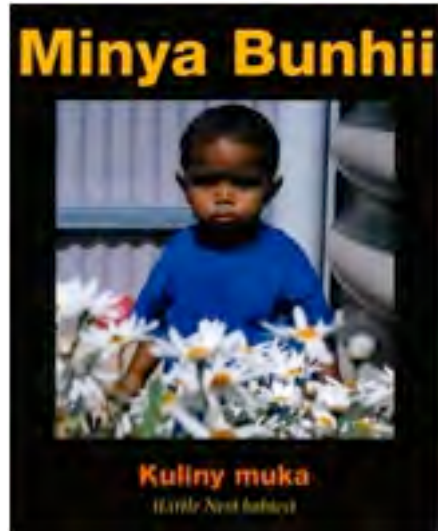
Minya Bunhii’s firm commitment to fostering children’s **identity** and sense of **belonging** is promoted both by their bringing culture into the centre, and by taking the children out into the community. During specific cultural celebrations – such as family week, NAIDOC and reconciliation week – the staff and children go on excursions to visit the community, which also helps to raise Minya Bunhii’s profile. Regular visits to the Ceduna arts and culture centre allow the children to participate in cultural activities such as painting and stories about the Dreaming, which are facilitated by an Elder.

A section of the play space provides a cultural **learning environment**. Visitors often come to the centre to cook traditional food such as kangaroo tails and damper with the children. The centre has also hosted 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.

Children are encouraged to become **effective communicators** in English and in one or more of the four local Aboriginal languages. Local words are used at the centre through conversations, focus words and songs. Jenny points out that “we use the language that the children use.” The children at Minya Bunhii regularly attend the Ceduna language centre, where a worker talks to the children in one of the local languages and where they can use specially designed computer language programs. This also supports them to become familiar with new technology.

Minya Bunhii has also developed their own books in both English and Kokatha (a local Aboriginal language) to teach children the local Aboriginal culture and to encourage the

maintenance of local languages (these are also available for sale and so profile Minya Bunhii and the local Aboriginal culture more widely). The books help strengthen children's **identity** and sense of **belonging**, and fosters their **communication** skills in English and in their local Aboriginal language. The books display photographs of Minya Bunhii children involved in various activities focused around different themes. One book, "Minya Bunhii Kuliny Muka" (little Nest Babies) uses pictures to show children aged from birth to toddlers demonstrating essential skills. Minya Bunhii also runs the South Australian Early Years Literacy Program, which targets three year old children in preschool programs to help boost early years literacy.



The cover of a Minya Bunhii's book:
Kuliny Muka

Children are supported to be **connected with and contribute to their world** through the visits out into the community discussed above. After an initial successful visit, the service is also building a relationship with the local aged care home to enable the children to frequently visit the home and Elders. Staff feel that these visits are mutually beneficial and a positive experience for both children and the Elders.

Minya Bunhii supports children to be **connected to their world** and to their cultural **identity** through regular outdoor cooking of traditional foods such as kangaroo. A natural outdoor play space, with many large trees and plants, also supports children's **connection with their world**. Excursions into nature provide the children with opportunities to search for bush tucker such as wulga (bush tomatoes) and burrah (quandongs), and to learn about hunting for and how to eat gulda (sleepy lizards) – although they don't actually catch these. Excursions to the nearby beach teach the children about the marine environment and fishing, an important activity in Ceduna. As well as supporting the children to connect with the natural world these activities also support the development of their **identity**.

To support children's overall **wellbeing** Minya Bunhii hosts regular child health checks, including weigh-ins, height, skin and general health screening. Specialist speech and occupational therapy visits are arranged for children requiring additional support. The service also has a dedicated cook, who ensures that the children receive a daily nutritious lunch. Mavis explains that this is particularly important as not all children necessarily receive their full nutritional requirements outside the centre.

Staff believe that Aboriginal culture promotes children to be independent, **confident and involved learners**. Children are taught to take responsibility for themselves. Mavis illustrates this, "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 enables children to learn independence and to take responsibility for their actions.

B3. Minya Bunhii and EYLF Principles

Jenny feels that the **relationships** staff have with children at Minya Bunhii are based on trust and care. She perceives that the children feel they belong at the centre with the staff, describing that this is visible in the way the children seek out the staff when they are upset. The children address the staff as 'Nana' or 'Aunty', in accordance with the Aboriginal tradition of showing respect to Elders, and reflecting how the children feel the staff are part of their family and care network.

Minya Bunhii receives several Guardian of Minister (GoM) children, and the educators point out that staff pay extra attention to these children. Jenny believes the effects of this are clear, "the Guardian of Minister children who've come from babies through to child care, they're really at home, they flourish and you can see them grow, it's lovely." Staff also put extra effort into the portfolios of GoM children, recognising that these will be valuable resources later on to help these children establish their identity.

Partnerships with parents and the community are fostered through the Community Management Committee, which is comprised of parents and community members who oversee all major decisions of the centre.

Mavis believes that the close **partnerships** the staff have with the community help make the service more accessible for families. As she points out, "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." Staff conduct regular home visits, and using their own bus are able to travel around the neighbourhood talking to families and encouraging them to enrol their children at the preschool if they haven't already. Mavis points out that whilst child care is always full, lower attendance at preschool requires follow-up with parents to encourage participation. Their relationship with and knowledge of the community – as well as the trust that parents feel towards staff - is therefore invaluable. Trust is key – and is enabled by staff being local people. Maintaining these links between staff and the community is an ongoing feature of Minya Bunhii's work, as Mavis expresses "it's (about) a lot of communication out there in the community too, and promoting our service."

Staff feel that the way they engage in their **partnerships** with the community at Minya Bunhii is unique – including understanding that there are different ways to engage with family both inside and outside of the centre. Minya Bunhii has regular family visitors in to share culture with the children, including specific days for relatives such as fathers or grandmothers to visit, and an end of year party which is always popular with families. However staff also understand that they can't always expect the community to come to them. Jenny discusses an example of a mainstream service she recently talked to who described how families didn't turn up to NAIDOC week celebrations at the centre. For Minya Bunhii staff the flaw in this was obvious – sometimes a service must go out to the

community instead of always expecting the community to come to them. The bus is particularly helpful in facilitating these connections in the community.

The staff are also very representative of and engaged with the community beyond their work at the service. The Director Mavis sits on committees both within the Aboriginal community and the wider community, and other staff also have close connections with the community outside of their work at Minya Bunhii. Staff feel that this helps them to better engage and have stronger relationships with the community.

Minya Bunhii also maintains **partnerships** with other Aboriginal children's services in the area, including a MACS in neighbouring Koonibba. As Mavis describes "We...go out to Koonibba when they have stuff happening out there, we go out and support them. And they (the kids)...love it." Minya Bunhii also fosters partnerships with Aboriginal services and families in other areas of South Australia. Children whose parents are visiting from places such as Port Lincoln, Port Augusta, Whyalla and even Adelaide frequently enrol in the centre for a few days at a time, and so the service maintains connections with other ECEC services in these areas.

Respect for diversity is a strong feature of Minya Bunhii, which has a diverse range of children representative of the whole community. Whilst it gives priority to Aboriginal children, the service has always been open to all children in the community. Jenny describes how this aids a sense of community unity at Minya Bunhii, and increases children's access, "the wider community seems to know they belong (at Minya Bunhii), and we don't lose anybody." Ursula comments that they have fought to retain a philosophy of non-discrimination, only accepting the management of the local out of school hours care (OSHC) service on the condition that the service be offered to all children, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. She believes that this was critical for Minya Bunhii to be able to offer a sustained service for their families so that children moving from the service to school were able to retain their links with Minya Bunhii. The cultures of both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal staff are valued and respected at the centre, and staff are encouraged to share their culture with children.

Staff demonstrate their **high expectations of children** through their patience in working to support children's confidence. Mavis explains how some children take longer than others to become confident at Minya Bunhii, in some cases taking up to a year to settle in. She feels that key to supporting children is that the Aboriginal staff "are local people, so they know the community, and what's happening with families". This means that they can support each child as an individual and work to meet their unique needs. Minya Bunhii supports the equity of each and every child, as Mavis explains, "if a child is hungry, we'll feed the child. If a child hasn't got shoes, it doesn't really matter. The most important thing is having the child here at the centre."

Staff meetings and regular communication between the team help staff to **reflect on their practice** in meeting the needs of all children. Observations of individual children are recorded in a profile, which in turn encourages educators to reflect on each child's

development and interests, and the areas in which they may need further support. This information then feeds into the programming.

B4. Minya Bunhii and EYLF Practices

Ursula feels that the family-style nature of the service – with siblings and relations supporting each other - assists Minya Bunhii to provide a **holistic** environment that caters for children’s developmental, as well as social and emotional needs. By integrating an Aboriginal understanding of the extended family, links between children’s home lives and the centre are maintained. For example, children are allowed to sleep close together in family groups that reflect a broader understanding of siblings and cousins, as they would at home.

Staff demonstrate **responsiveness to children** through building activities upon their interests and upon significant themes in their lives. For example, observing recently that one girl often talked about fishing and sharks, staff facilitated an excursion to the beach to look at different boats, sea creatures and fish, and to talk about fishing and eating fish. They then expanded on this activity back at the centre, by using the natural materials they had gathered to create activities and learning environments around this theme. The girl’s grandfather is a fisherman and so this also helped her to feel that her family’s practices were valued at and connected to the centre.

Through the process of compiling individual child profiles, staff can stay up to date on a child’s attendance, closely follow their development, and therefore be more **responsive** to them. In developing a profile staff may realise that they haven’t seen a child in some time, or may be reminded of further activities they could provide to assist a child in their development. Observations and photos serve as a useful reminder of activities a child has particularly engaged with or shown obvious enjoyment in. Minya Bunhii programs always allow time for spontaneous activities based on children’s interests.

Staff ensure that they incorporate each child’s voice into observations and learning stories. They are trialling various methods to work with parents to capture children’s reflections on activities, so that staff can best **respond** to each child’s interests, learning and developmental needs. Programming also allows space for spontaneous activities that are based on the children’s interests and wishes, and these are then reflected on and used to inform future programming.

Learning through play is a fundamental practice at Minya Bunhii, particularly because - as Mavis explains - staff feel that Aboriginal children best learn through hands-on activities. Staff find that through role-modelling positive behaviour themselves, children are then able to take this on board and explore it themselves through play. Staff design **learning environments** such as home corners that allow children to act out these behaviours and activities for themselves. Mavis describes that play-based learning is particularly important in the early years to allow children to develop the skills and knowledge that they will then take on to the formal, structured environment of school.

Staff program once a week, incorporating children's ideas for activities and themes. They also review the children's profiles to ensure that they are building on each child's strengths and interests and extending upon their learning. Staff then incorporate the EYLF outcomes, practices and principles into their program so that activities provide for children's holistic development. Through this comprehensive approach to programming staff ensure that an **intentional teaching** approach underpins all weekly plans.

Jenny feels that a particular strength of Minya Bunhii is their **learning environment**, although the EYLF focus on both outdoor and indoor learning environments has prompted them to examine how they can improve their outside environment to increase children's time

outside. Their extensive outside environment allows for many varied play opportunities, including physically active play such as climbing, and comfortable spaces for more static outdoor activities. Mavis describes that their learning environments reflect children's interests – including incorporating



The large outdoor play space with the brightly painted cultural murals mentioned above

activities and materials that children bring from home. As described above, a separate area of the play space provides a unique cultural learning environment in which children can learn about traditional foods and crafts.

Cultural competence has always been a key feature of Minya Bunhii, and, as mentioned previously, the staff's ability to easily share and talk about their respective cultures contributes to this. Non-Aboriginal staff also receive initial cultural competence training.

Minya Bunhii is collocated in the same building as the preschool, which aids **transitions**. Staged visits to a new program allow children to gradually get to know new staff and a new room. Staff also feel that the integrated nature of their service – catering for a broad range of ages – allows them to ensure smooth transitions and **continuity of children's learning** through the programs. With the kindergarten located next door, staff from both services can collaborate to assist children's transitions out of day care and preschool. In previous years Minya Bunhii has also fostered a formal transition to kindergarten program, but due to high numbers do not have staff capacity to do this. Staff perceive that for many children the connections and friendships they make at Minya Bunhii are carried on and support them when they transition to school.

Minya Bunhii also run transition programs with the Ceduna preschool and local school. Facilitated visits to the school allow children from the oldest program to become

familiar and build connections with the teachers and environment. Any siblings or relatives children have at the school are brought into these visits to help support the child's experience of and preparation for school.

Individual child profiles enable staff to capture **assessment for learning**. These demonstrate daily learning activities and link these to EYLF outcomes. Staff capture photos of children for each outcome as an easier, visual alternative to large amounts of descriptive text. Staff find that they can explore children's development in a variety of areas through photos. For example, a photo and caption of a child's words about a particular activity provides evidence of their speech and communication development.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Jenny and Mavis describe that although staff know they are implementing intentional teaching as an integral part of their service, they often don't know how to demonstrate this through documentation, or to demonstrate outcomes leading from it. One way they are trying to overcome this is by depicting outcomes through photos.

Staff feel that it is also challenging to engage parents in the new documentation formats. They have attempted to incorporate the child's voice into portfolios as a more effective way of capturing children's experiences. They have instigated several initiatives to encourage parents to assist them with this – including having parents contribute to the portfolio by writing down what children may say about their time at the centre. However, this has proven to be a challenge as written communication is often not the families preferred communication means. This reflects a challenge of how to engage in a written format with parents more broadly. Mavis articulates this, “how do we communicate to mum and dad, or nan or pop, aunty or uncle? Because they see a piece of paper with something written on it and it throws them.” Staff find that again using photos has helped, as parents engage and respond well to these.

Staff feel that the nature of child development and attendance creates challenges in evidencing their development under the EYLF. Staff recently devised a process to focus on particular children each week, but with children regularly absent during their ‘focus week’, implementing this activity was challenging. Staff also feel that the rate of children's development is greater than the rate at which it can be documented. As Jenny explains, “you have intentional teaching, so you think we'll have a focus on (child), next time she comes, because we'd taken photos to show that she wasn't holding her scissors properly. And by the time we get round to doing it again, she'll have...mastered that.” These challenges make programming under the EYLF difficult. To overcome this staff plan activities as normal, including space within the plan for spontaneous activities based on children's interests, and then fill in the remaining program retrospectively.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Staff have found the resource *Respect, Reflect, Relate* useful to assist them to assess their responsiveness to children. They have also found various SNAICC resources such as

Through Young Black Eyes and Strong Families helpful in assisting to incorporate culture into the centre.

Mavis believes that even more than training what staff need is consolidated time to understand the EYLF and to implement it at the centre. Ursula highlights how opportunities to learn from and share ideas with other Indigenous services – both from Australia and overseas - are invaluable. She describes an early childhood conference she attended some years ago as a great learning opportunity, “(it) was great to talk to other services from around the nation, but also to get how things were working in different cultures...how you could adapt what they were doing, and make it your own.” She cites listening to centres from New Zealand describe their approach to involving extended family in the centre through music and singing as a particularly useful exercise. Jenny comments that she felt a visit by Minya Bunhii staff to a children’s centre in Murray Bridge was a beneficial professional development experience. In particular, Jenny found that the most beneficial exchange of ideas came about through discussions with staff who were also employed under the three year old literacy program for preschools, and who were also delivering the program to Aboriginal children.

Ursula finds the EYLF Professional Learning Program Facebook page to be a useful tool, with the accessible language enabling easy sharing of ideas. She highlights that she feels comfortable asking questions in the forums, and how the forum administrators usually post a briefing to expand on the issue. Also, whilst the program may appear to cater for mainstream services, Ursula feels that the conversations or posts bring out more practical, realistic ideas that are adaptable for different contexts. However she notes that not everyone has easy access to the internet or is familiar with Facebook.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Jenny comments that the most beneficial training involves practical sessions that help staff understand how to connect the EYLF with what they currently do in their service – in short *how* to really implement the Framework. The educators also feel that sharing sessions, as opposed to training, are more useful – hearing about “real stuff to see how other people are coping” (Jenny). They suggest a format where a facilitator provides a basic outline, and then services have an opportunity to share their practices, what is working and what is not. Jenny 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.” Ursula describes that this could be similar to the format of the South Australian IPSU (Aboriginal Resource and Management Support Unit) meetings, “that’s a great time where you share – you’ll meet with other directors and it’ll come up – this isn’t working, or we’re doing this in our centre that’s really working.” Jenny states that this sharing of ideas and resources, such as payroll templates, helps all centres to “streamline what they’re doing (to find) better and faster ways”. Training also needs to take into account a service’s time and resources – one-off activities focusing on individual children are not sustainable. For example initiatives such as learning stories can be onerous, Jenny describes “you spent half your life keeping records instead of working, and I’d rather work with children.”

Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Centre Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with two educators Bonnie Gibbons, Educator in charge and Michelle Mallett, Assistant Director

A. Who is the Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Centre?

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association (TACCA) is a licensed child care centre operating in Launceston, Tasmania. It is licensed for 30 children and provides a variety of services (as detailed below).

A1. Values and principles

TACCA strives to treat all children as individuals and with respect, allowing them to participate in a wide range of holistic developmental opportunities. Partnerships with parents, based on trust and respect - are considered vital to this, and parental input into the service is highly valued. TACCA aims to ensure that children are cared for and educated by well-trained staff in a culturally rich, challenging and safe environment. Education and learning at TACCA is founded on an approach that focuses on the strengths of each individual child. Children are encouraged to learn about Aboriginal culture, and to develop their identity within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

TACCA provides an age and stage-appropriate program based on observation and responsiveness to children, that develops the social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language areas of the whole child. Underpinning the program is a strong emphasis on Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Staff feel that the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a positive framework, that “really celebrates what children are.” Bonnie explains how TACCA has adopted a flexible approach to the EYLF, finding that their engagement with it to date has been constantly “evolving and adapting”. They view implementation of the EYLF as a process rather than an end goal.

Staff have found that the EYLF has given them confidence as educators, and has enabled them to unite together to work more strongly as a team in programming for the children. For TACCA the EYLF has provided opportunities to rethink their own service principles. Bonnie describes it as a two-way process thinking about whether the

framework fits their principles and vice versa - strengthening the existing service principles but also working out how they might be improved and expanded.

B2. TACCA and EYLF Outcomes

TACCA helps to foster children's **identity** by maintaining strong links with the local Aboriginal community. The centre frequently hosts visitors from the local Aboriginal community who come in to teach the children Aboriginal stories, artwork, games and history, often bringing with them different natural materials such as shells, bones and plants to use with the children. Bonnie discusses the recent visit by an Elder – one of the children's grandmothers – who came into the centre to work with kelp with the children. This helps to foster the children's sense of identity by connecting them to their cultural heritage and to their



Kelp work

community. Bonnie highlights how the children really enjoy this – “it’s someone new for them to look at and learn from, and it’s really exciting for them.” The centre also actively celebrates Aboriginal events and celebrations such as NAIDOC and National Aboriginal and Islander Children’s Day (NAICD). Bonnie feels that celebrating and teaching the children about culture is very important to their parents and families. Learning from and interaction with community members also helps to foster their **connection with and contribution to their world by** supporting their sense of ‘being’ and ‘belonging’ as part of a community.

Children’s **identity** and their **communication** skills are also encouraged through a focus on teaching them palawa kani, the Tasmanian Aboriginal language. Whilst it can be difficult to find language facilitators, TACCA has been able to teach the children language through different activities such as storytelling. They will often connect this up to their focus theme. Bonnie illustrates this, describing how, for example, if the centre was going to focus on animals they would then choose palawa kani words for different animals to focus on for the month.

Children are often taken on excursions outside the centre, in particular where this links in with a learning theme. This helps to facilitate their **connection with and contribution to their world**. The service van is key in taking them to these excursions. Children are also helped to connect with the natural world by the use of natural materials in their activities (discussed above) and by the nature-inspired play space that is available to them at the centre (described below).

The centre fosters healthy eating through its Nutrition Policy and Guidelines, which are made accessible for all parents. Children’s **wellbeing** and a **holistic approach** to their development is also fostered through a program of additional services, including child health nurse screening, health checks and advice to parents; hearing vision and

developmental screenings for all children; referrals to and from Early Special Education; parenting advice and information; Families as First Teachers-Indigenous Parenting Support Services (IPSS) which provides parents and caregivers with skills training on early childhood development and parenting, and a Locational Supported Playgroup that meets three times a week. The service also meets Sun Smart Accreditation standards, which helps to educate children to be sun safe.

Children are encouraged to **become confident and involved learners** through a programming approach that utilises children's interests to develop activities and ongoing themes. Activities are often designed to challenge children to take on investigative roles. For example, following a recent focus on 'construction', children were given tools to play with and explore. On 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, an activity which children engaged with very positively.



Television investigation

To engage children to independently explore different senses and textures, and to encourage their spatial awareness educators recently designed an activity using toy car tracks and different surfaces. This included using different gradients and surfaces for the car 'tracks', for example ice trays to let the children explore slipperiness and sand to let them explore depth and texture. Educators then questioned children around issues such as "which one will float?" or "which one will be fastest?" and so forth to encourage their curiosity and experimentation skills. This is also an example of the **intentional teaching** strategies employed at TACCA, and the way that **learning environments** are designed to develop different skills using **play-based** methods.

B3. TACCA and EYLF Principles

Staff implement the EYLF principle of **ongoing learning and reflective practice** with an understanding that being an educator involves constant learning and reflection. As Bonnie points out, "You have to keep learning...you're always learning just like the kids are." Staff frequently revisit the EYLF to explore new ways of implementing the outcomes and to continue to think more deeply about what outcomes they want to promote and how. This process of reflection ensures that designing programs doesn't become a 'box-ticking' exercise. The EYLF has empowered educators at TACCA to be more confident in their work, and to reflect more deeply on their role as educators helping children to develop in the most critical years of their lives as 'teachers' instead of 'babysitters'.

A further part of **ongoing learning and reflective practice** for staff at TACCA is the increasing practice of conducting internal evaluations of training staff have attended, in order to encourage staff to reflect more deeply on how they can learn from and implement the lessons learned. Michelle 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 after training.

Programming at TACCA intrinsically involves **reflective practice**. Observations are noted of children's activities, discussions and play, and educators then provide their own interpretation of the child's learning experience. This then feeds into planning activities, which are then later evaluated to assess their effectiveness and to gauge children's interest. This also allows educators to be **responsive to children** by building on prior learning and play.

Partnerships with families have always been important at TACCA, but are currently an increasing focus, with an emphasis on getting families involved in and contributing to the centre. TACCA now has a 'family input' section on their programming plans, which helps families to contribute ideas and input for programs at the centre. Bonnie describes how they are gradually witnessing families getting more and more involved. She believes 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. Bonnie describes how seeing other families photos displayed on the wall prompts families to think "they're up on the wall, well we'll bring in a photo from home, we'll show what we did".

Staff also feel that their method of strengths-based observations and programming helps them to better connect with parents. Whilst observations previously focused on *how* a child performed an activity (see below for more discussion on this), now parents are informed about what their child appeared to be feeling and experiencing during an activity, which Bonnie feels is something parents are far more likely to connect with and appreciate. Bonnie believes that this also gives parents "the trust of knowing that you care enough about their child to know when they're feeling these emotions". Michelle affirms this, emphasising that "it sounds more personal, not so clinical. There are some relationships there!"

Partnerships with families are also developed through the Playgroup that runs out of the centre on a weekly basis. For many children who attend the centre every day Bonnie feels it is really important for them to be able to share the centre with their parents. She believes that having this extra, supportive service also helps to make the centre a service of choice for parents. Parent's attendance at the playgroup is supported through the provision of a van that can be used to pick them up and drop them off.

As well as providing children with a strong grounding in their own Aboriginal culture, the service shows **respect for diversity** by educating children on other cultures. All of the cultures of children at the service are celebrated, utilising the input of parents and

families' to incorporate these into the centre. Significant events such as Christmas, Easter and Ramadan are also celebrated.

B4. TACCA and EYLF Practices

A unique strength of TACCA in providing a **holistic** approach to children's development is their system of family grouping. Rooms are not segregated by age, but instead children from 6 months to 5 year olds learn, play and develop together. Bonnie describes the benefits of this approach, with the older children caring for and teaching the younger ones. She feels that is especially valuable for children who don't have siblings – assisting them to learn to interact with children of different ages.

Part of TACCA's **holistic** approach also comes in how they approach children's development. Whilst Michelle appreciates that it is still important to be aware of developmental milestones, they recognise that children develop in different ways. For example where a child is delayed in their walking, they 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". She feels that their methods are a more holistic, individualised way of looking at a child's development. Staff focus on children's strengths, Michelle illustrates this by commenting that "if they're happy and you can see progress, then that's what's important - that there is progress."

TACCA's philosophy is that working with children should build upon a strengths based approach, which is integral to being **responsive to children**. As Bonnie highlights, "It's not 'can they do this, can they do that?', it's what can they do, and appreciating what every child can do even if it's not as much as another child." This approach underlies how they document children's learning, Michelle points out how "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?". Observations had to be exact and entirely objective. According to Michelle, current practice at TACCA is now to look instead at "what their interests are, what their abilities are, and building that way". She feels that this method is about "observing what children are thinking, not what they're doing" and that 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. Michelle sees that a strength of this is that it builds on the close relationship staff have with children. She describes how,

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.

The introduction of the EYLF came at a timely period for TACCA, prompting a shift in programming methods that staff had been considering for some time. Bonnie explains that the EYLF gave them the reason they needed to make the change. This shift took the

form of a more cyclical method of programming based on observations, documentation, programming, implementation and back to observations. Staff now focus on **intentional teaching** – analysing why they are setting up particular activities and what is important to document. This cyclic form of programming – building upon children’s learning experiences in a considered program – has assisted staff to ensure **continuity of learning** for children. Different activities, environments and input from parents will often be focused around a central theme which has been prompted by the children, such as construction (discussed below). As mentioned above, staff regularly ask parents to bring in photos of different activities that they do at home, and this helps them to build activities that can reinforce children’s home learning. Observations are reflected on during programming time and as part of **intentional teaching** they are expanded upon to develop the future programs. Bonnie highlights how this means that staff look for learning opportunities in each activity, rather than just having programming be driven by activities or “doing things for the sake of doing things”. They have found that the EYLF outcomes have assisted them to do this, providing guidance in thinking about children’s development and connecting this to intentional activities.

Bonnie describes the benefits for children that arise out 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 illustrates how when educators focus on *teaching*, rather than just on activities or “playing and making a mess” so to speak, children’s concentration and involvement in activities grows enormously. Staff are able to witness children actively learning through their play. As Bonnie points out, this is enormously positive feedback for staff, they can see that “that’s because of us, we did that. It feels good when you can see that it’s working.” This method of thinking deeply about programming therefore gives staff great confidence as educators. Staff now proudly display their programming in the room, demonstrating how they care about their program and the children. Their method of programming is also enabling them to work more effectively as a team, with input from all staff as opposed to an individual effort.

One example of **intentional teaching** and **continuity of learning** is the recent focus on ‘construction’ within the centre. The initial prompt was one child’s increasing interest in building activities. Staff then realised that this was something quite a few children were sharing – for example other children recalled activities at home where they helped parents with painting rooms, building a dolls house and renovating a kitchen. To expand on this interest staff therefore decided to focus the monthly group plan on building and construction. An excursion for the children was facilitated to a local hardware store, and a variety of activities were initiated within the centre that focused on building,



Planning and constructing

constructing and deconstructing things. Real building materials such as timber and recycled materials were brought into the centre. Songs were sung which focused on the theme of building, which encouraged children's **communication**. Discussions were held with the children around different building roles in the community such as road workers or designers, and a visit was planned for a community member to come into the centre to talk to the children about construction, which helped children to **connect with their world**. The **learning environments** were also adapted to reflect the theme, as discussed below.

Staff at TACCA focus on creating **learning environments** that are appealing and targeted to the abilities and interests of the children. They particularly focus on providing different areas within the one space in order to create different learning opportunities and environments for children. Sometimes this might be an activity that is slightly outside the norm – such as taking apart a television as discussed above. Bonnie feels however that this pushes them as educators to explore more deeply what they want to facilitate through the environment, and to imagine all the different things that the children could get out of the activity. TACCA's outdoor environment is particularly nature-focused – with a variety of trees and plants allowing children to play outside in a safe, natural environment.

Learning environments are adapted to suit the program focus. For example, with the 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. Books and puzzles were included about building and tools, and the outdoor area was updated to include construction tools such as witches hats, some of which were loaned from the Launceston City Council.

Assessment for learning at TACCA focuses on capturing children's strengths. Bonnie feels that this positive focus means that it is much easier to open up conversations with families about children's development. A large notebook that is kept in the main room is used to document educator's thoughts about children's learning. Having this easily accessible means that these observations can be recorded as they happen and can then feed into programming and children's portfolios at the end of the 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 Bonnie 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, it's not just one person writing down what they think."

Staff feel that photos provide a valuable way to capture children's development. Michelle emphasises how photos "tell a story. You can see (they are) evidence of a child doing something." She describes a series of photos



Experimenting with scales and cooking

an educator took of a boy experimenting with kitchen scales. The pictures capture how “he’s upside down, putting things in, and you can see what an experience that was...” Both educators comment that merely describing this experience in an observation wouldn’t capture the expression on the child’s face, his concentration and interest in the activity. This would lessen the amount that educators could learn from the child’s engagement with the activity.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Bonnie feels that adjusting to the EYLF has been easier for staff who already program, as they are able to engage with the EYLF on a deeper level and better understand what the different concepts mean.

Initially the biggest challenge was working out where to start, with many staff feeling overwhelmed by the breadth of the document. It has taken time to build up staff knowledge and confidence to fully engage with the whole framework. Bonnie highlights that “It’s just about gradual steps, we’ve still got a long way to go, in our documentation and things like that. But it’s just something you have to learn over time, and with more training.” Staff leadership was a big factor in overcoming these initial challenges. As staff received training their confidence to make the necessary changes grew. Added motivation came in the form of hearing about practices at other centres, “You hear about other centres doing these great things, and you think ‘we should do that!’ You don’t want to be left behind, you want to be up with what everyone’s thinking” describes Bonnie.

The more onerous documentation responsibilities have also proven to be a challenge, particularly given the limited time educators are allocated off-floor to program. Bonnie feels that for some staff the thought that they are not doing it correctly, or are being judged by people, can be quite overwhelming. Michelle adds to this that for some it can be confronting to know that people – in particular the children’s parents - will read things they have written.

Bonnie feels that this will get easier with time as all staff become more skilled at and comfortable with programming within the EYLF. They have also decided that this documentation aspect will be a focus area for 2012. Each staff member will be allocated a certain number of portfolios that they are then responsible for. This will help the process stay on track and it will assist people to ensure “that they are doing what they’re meant to be doing and having that input, making the time on the floor when it’s quiet.” They are also exploring getting a laptop that can be placed in the main room so that staff can write down observations and work on documentation as it happens.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

TACCA have found the support from their IPSU very helpful as they feel the project officers have great depth of knowledge. A particularly useful method employed by the IPSU officer has been asking TACCA 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 educators to develop a cyclical form of programming, rather than a plan based off singular learning experiences.

They have also received training from the IPSU on working within a strengths based approach. 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 noted what the child was achieving, the pride that he was evidently feeling in accomplishing this for himself, and the different skills he was learning.

A visit to view other centres who had been engaging with the EYLF for some time provided a valuable opportunity to view implementation of the EYLF in practice. Staff found that they were able to take ideas from the different services, and combine these with their own ideas to assist in implementing the EYLF. A useful aspect of these visits was seeing that other centres were – like TACCA - finding that they had to trial different methods of implementing the EYLF before finding a way forward that worked within their context.

A whole day event with Maggie Dent as a guest speaker was found to be particularly helpful, with a key valuable feature being the calibre and enthusiasm of the speaker. Bonnie feels that this was a particularly motivational workshop for staff. Whilst it didn't specifically focus on the EYLF, many of the learnings were relevant for the framework.

Two educators have also had the opportunity to attend a documentation workshop, which was found to be useful in assisting with learning stories and providing examples of how to create these.

Staff have found the EYLF Educators guide helpful, in particular with the examples of how different services are implementing the EYLF. Bonnie also comments that the Early Childhood Australia newsletters are also useful, as is their online forum, which she uses to discover the opinions and ideas of other educators.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Bonnie and Michelle feel that training needs will become apparent as staff continue to work with the EYLF. Training will need to be adapted to suit the needs of current children at the centre. As Michelle illustrates, five years ago several children with autism were attending the centre, and so staff therefore found it critical to receive training in autism. The arrival of new staff may mean that refresher courses need to be run. Furthermore, training that reflects staff interests enables them to feel that their own strengths and interests are respected at the centre. Michelle describes how training can be an inspiring experience, and can provide a wealth of new ideas. Furthermore Bonnie believes that with TACCA's current focus on learning environments – how to set up and how to use a space – training in this area would be helpful.

Yappera Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Stacey Brown

A. Who is Yappera?

Yappera Children's Services (Yappera) is a Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS) in Thornbury, Melbourne. The centre began operating in 1980, in response to a concern by the community that Aboriginal children were entering formal schooling with preventable health problems, and that the schools, not being culturally appropriate, did not support children's self-esteem. The service's philosophy was, and remains, that services for the Aboriginal community need to be provided through a holistic approach encompassing health, nutrition, parenting, cultural programs and early childhood development. Today Yappera has between 70-80 children enrolled in long day care, kindergarten and preschool programs annually. Part-time placements are offered to enable more children to be able to attend the MACS, but there are still waiting lists to use the long day care service.

A1. Values and principles

Yappera's underlying purpose is to "provide children from birth to school age with high quality pre-school, child-care, and out of school hours care programs in a Koori cultural relevant Children's Centre." Yappera's comprehensive values encompass specific guiding principles:

- For children the principles are that the service will provide a warm and caring environment; programs will be developed within a Koori cultural framework; children will be encouraged to value their Koori culture; and programs will be flexible to meet each child's individual needs.
- For parents/guardians/carers the principles are that the centre will work with family to bridge the child's home environment and Yappera; the centre will provide support and guidance to family; and family will be encouraged to share their ideas and to feel that they belong as equal members at Yappera.
- For the community the principles are that the centre will be a part of the community by the inclusion of community groups to share culture; and the community will be considered to be part of the child's extended family.
- For staff the principles are that employment of Koori staff will be encouraged; the employment of non-Koori staff will be encouraged where staff embrace the service's philosophy; staff are supported to attend to the unique needs, including cultural, of each child; staff will show respect and interest in all children; and that an environment where staff feel valued and that they belong will be fostered.

Yappera also has eight practical organisational values: passion for children, respect for culture and diversity, excellence and accountability, responsiveness, innovation and

collaboration, leadership, work/life balance and engagement of diverse, skilled, qualified and talented staff team. Stacey sums up Yappera's philosophy:

Within our philosophy and our values is a very strong belief that children learn best through their family, through their community, through those strong connections, but also with a health focus as well – which is why we link maternal and child health programs to Yappera. So if children are healthy and happy they learn better.

All educators at Yappera are guided by this philosophy. Whilst each brings their own teaching style, when they do their room programming they all have to align their programs with the philosophy of Yappera. This is particularly important for new staff who are still learning about the guiding principles, philosophy and history of Yappera.

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

Yappera's vision is that "All Aboriginal children have the opportunity to reach their potential through access to the highest quality care and enrichment in a rich cultural setting which strengthens their identity."

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

In 2009 Yappera participated in a trial of the Victorian Early Years Learning Framework. Stacey feels that this prepared staff well for the EYLF transition as it enabled them to think about a new way of designing programs and conceptualising service curriculum. She explains that after some initial misgivings around the EYLF, "once we looked at it, we realised this is what we actually do anyway." The experience of being able to connect the theory of the EYLF to practice currently happening in the service – and therefore demystifying the document - seems to have been a strong enabling factor in supporting the transition for staff and the service.

B2. Yappera and EYLF outcomes

Stacey perceives that staff at Yappera feel that the EYLF aligns strongly with their existing outcomes, and more generally with the outcomes that MACS aim to achieve, including "the links with families, linking services to families, and the child's learning in the perspective of the community". She explains that:

It just took the staff time to wrap their heads around those outcomes...and...for them to be able to link what they wanted to do with the outcomes. And be able to communicate that with families.

For Yappera fostering children's **identity** has always formed an integral part of the service's ethos. Stacey explains that they feel that children learn through their identity and their community, and therefore a critical guiding principle is to reflect the children's culture, family and community within the program.

The all-Aboriginal Board of Management supports Yappera to ensure that identity and culture remain at the forefront of their work. The Board feels that it is very important to have an all-Aboriginal Board and Director so that the leadership guiding the service is Aboriginal. It is often difficult to achieve an all-Aboriginal staff team, and so it is key to have a Director who can provide guidance to non-Aboriginal staff to ensure that Yappera's direction and practice – particularly in the areas of programming and relationships with family - remains culturally appropriate and committed to fostering children's culture and **identity**.

Stacey also believes that employing Aboriginal staff who can enhance the cultural program is critical to foster children's **identity**. In particular she feels that it is important to have diverse staff who bring different knowledge, cultures and beliefs. The Aboriginal staff also provide guidance for non-Aboriginal staff to ensure that service practices are culturally relevant and appropriate. Non-Aboriginal educators usually program alongside an Aboriginal educator, and can seek out the Director for further assistance. Stacey asserts that because Yappera has "a focus on children's development in the context of the family unit" it is also vital for non-Aboriginal staff to receive guidance and support from Aboriginal staff when liaising with families – for example "about the child's development...strategies for toilet-training...strategies for meal times, what's happening here, what's happening at home, and then seeing how they differ."

Yappera sources members of the local community to contribute to their cultural program, and so parents or family members regularly visit to run traditional arts and crafts, storytelling or damper-making activities with the children. A Koori dancer visits weekly to deliver a traditional dance and music program. Staff also utilise relevant resources relevant to the Aboriginal culture of the area to support the cultural program.

Stacey feels that their cultural program – delivered for all ages – supports children to develop their **identity** and become culturally resilient. This assists children to begin school "proud of their culture and who they are, and (to) have a strong sense of themselves in the context of their families..."

Staff have previously struggled with rigid traditional programming methods and the limitations this placed on focusing on children's identity in plans. The previous system concentrated on measurable indicators of children's daily learning, whereas the EYLF has put identity at the centre. Stacey feels that one reason for Yappera's success in implementing the EYLF is that the EYLF outcomes don't challenge the service's fundamental values – in particular the development of a strong identity.

Yappera supports children to be **connected with and contribute to their world** through a strong focus on nature and natural resources. They recently linked up with Sprout Garden, a community garden project. Children attend the garden weekly to learn about tending to plants and plant growth cycles. The two year old program are currently focusing on recycling and using recycled materials, which teaches them about

environmental responsibility and creative resource use. A focus on natural art resources such as leaves and pebbles prompts children to use their imagination and to be creative and innovative learners. Outdoor sensory experiences are also provided through nature walks and outdoor play.

As a MACS service Yappera has a unique and committed focus on supporting children's **wellbeing** through holistic service delivery. Yappera receives regular visits from specialised health professionals from the Aboriginal Health Service and the local Council, helping to ensure that all children receive their immunizations, and have regular hearing, eye and dental checks. Yappera also focuses on physical activity and nutrition, including through participation in the Healthy Aussie Kids program. Early childhood intervention and parenting programs meet the complex needs of children attending the service and assist parents to better support their children.

Yappera focuses on developing its children as **confident and involved learners** through ensuring that activities are based on their interests (discussed below), and through a strong commitment to encouraging children to tackle new activities and challenges (also discussed below). Interactive storytelling and group discussions prompts children to explore themes and ideas and to communicate these to the group (discussed below).

Children's development as **effective communicators** is fostered on an ongoing basis. Whilst much of this is through incidental interaction through activities, regular group time also enables more structured communication opportunities between children, and between educators and children. During group time children are encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences, for example about weekend or holiday activities. Storytelling also provides an opportunity for interactive communication, with teachers reading aloud and children encouraged to actively join in and engage. A focus on the Abecedarian approach also supports staff to concentrate on language, listening and communication skills and to think about *how* to best communicate with children – for example placing themselves at children's eye level to better engage with them.

B3. Yappera and EYLF principles

Children at Yappera refer to staff as 'aunty'. Referring to staff in this way helps establish the **relationship** between staff and children within an Aboriginal cultural framework and reinforces to the children their place within the local Aboriginal community.

Strong **partnerships** are fostered between families and Yappera staff, which have only been strengthened with the EYLF emphasis on families. Yappera's philosophy has always been that the best way to educate children is to involve their families and embrace the culture: "it's a partnership between the educator and families...the educator can't do it on their own." However, in the past families have been less engaged – partially because educators often didn't have a clear sense of how to involve them, and families didn't always understand the importance of their involvement. Educators at Yappera consider that the EYLF has pushed them in this area, believing that the only way to implement the Framework is through strong relationships with families. Stacey believes that as well

as offering educators direction on including families, this new shift has also “changed the thinking in the families”. Families and staff now interact to create programs for children that are holistic and fit within the context of the child’s history and family. Staff and families also freely share information. Stacey explains how communication occurs informally as and when it needs to, for example when children are having trouble settling in. Because this can be stressful for parents, educators will often write a note for them highlighting a positive experience their child had during the day, such as positive engagement with an activity.

Communication between staff and parents is also reinforced through regular newsletters and parent information nights. Through these events information is shared verbally and in handouts on different early childhood theories and theorists, on the state and national early childhood frameworks, on program planning and activities, educational outcomes and the importance of the early years for children’s development. Stacey illustrates, “So any information that we find that will be relevant or help a parent, or something that we think that they might be interested in, we make available and then there are display boards through the whole centre so that parents can see them.” Yappera also provides relevant reading material for parents such as the *Koori Mail* or *Vibe* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific publications) on a notice board in the foyer.

Stacey describes that they have found photos an effective way to communicate and build **partnerships** with their parents:

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.’

This also allows parents who might have limited time connect with what their child is doing each day and how they are developing.

A further key pillar in partnerships with parents, grandparents and other family members is their involvement on the Board of Management. Their close connections mean that they are not just “Board who are coming in once a month” – but are actively involved and invested in the service. The involvement of a Board who are connected to and part of the community also makes Yappera unique in their ability to respond to children and families’ needs. Stacey comments that “The board are moving towards making sure that every family member who enrolls their child, has to be an active member of the organisation.” They are doing this through encouraging parents to attend the AGM, through the parent nights discussed above and through the distribution of Annual Reports. A list of the Board members, Yappera’s community control philosophy, governance model, history and other relevant policies and procedures are also available in the foyer for all family members to read.

Partnerships with organisations within the broader Aboriginal community are also fostered through the Board of Management, several members of which work at other Aboriginal organisations. The current Chairperson works at the neighbouring Aboriginal Advancement League, which supports close relationship between the two organisations. With many Board member's involvement at Yappera dating back over 10 years and in some cases up to 20, Board members are invaluable in ensuring the service remains connected to its history and long-term objectives, and to the community.

Staff hold **high expectations** of children through their philosophy that with positive influence children can achieve anything. Working collaboratively with families educators teach children that they are capable and competent of participating in all program activities. Encouraging children to try different activities, and supporting them through their frustrations when they can't do something is seen as key. This is balanced with an awareness that children should not be pushed into things they are not interested in. This may often involve an educator working more intensely with a particular child to give them the confidence to try something new. Stacey 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."

Respect for diversity is encouraged at Yappera through educating the children on other cultures, recognising that they come from culturally diverse communities. Stacey believes that critical to this is embracing the non-Aboriginal staff as valuable team members. She explains that teaching children about diversity is particularly important in any service where the children predominantly belong to one culture. In the younger programs at Yappera respect for diversity is encouraged by exposing children to different cultures by using diverse dolls or animals. More sophisticated tools are used in the older programs, such as world maps, culturally diverse books, stories and pictures, "to foster that understanding of what other people look like." For example the kindergarten program is currently exploring flags and linking these to pictures of people from around the world. One educator is also having discussions with children around diverse food. These activities and discussions also help children to feel **connected with their world**.

Yappera promotes an environment of **ongoing learning and reflective practice** through the exploration of different teaching approaches, such as Montessori and the Abecedarian approach. Staff are also increasingly focusing on regular self-reflection, to "look back at themselves as teachers, at their strengths and what they were already doing, and what they would have to change." This leads to improved **intentional teaching** practices through encouraging a deeper understanding of their roles as educators. Regular staff meetings provide the opportunity for educators to reflect on strengths and areas for improvement, but much staff reflection is incidental and takes place in the course of observing children, designing and adapting activities. As Stacey describes, "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." The process of **reflective practice** also takes place at the management level, with monthly board reflections Yappera's services and how they deliver these. Regular family input is also encouraged through tools such as surveys.

B4. Yappera and EYLF Practices

Yappera provides a **holistic** variety of services including visits from specialised health professionals, the Healthy Aussie Kids program, drama and cultural programs, and nutrition, early childhood intervention and parenting programs. Stacey highlights that Yappera's multifunctional focus – that services are integrated and responsive to families – is key. She highlights that, "The fact that we developed services according to the needs of our families makes us unique". Children's learning is viewed within the context of the community and their family. Yappera's Aboriginal staff provide vital support in this area. Because they live in the same community as the children, they have a detailed understanding of each child's family context. Stacey feels that this is a defining feature of Aboriginal children's services, citing how for example "if a child's behaviour has changed significantly...often the Aboriginal staff member knows what's happening in the family and what may be contributing to that behaviour."

This makes Yappera a service of choice for families. Stacey cites an example of two children who had to leave Yappera recently as their families moved from the area. One week after leaving Yappera, in which the children were enrolled at new centres, both families had contacted Stacey to ask to re-enrol their children. Stacey comments that despite the inconvenience of having to travel further, the parents prioritised sending their children to Yappera as it provides "an environment...the parent feels is safe for their child, culturally safe too. It really reinforces we're doing the right thing."

In providing **holistic** services Stacey comments that flexibility is key - programs need to be able to vary and adapt annually according to the needs of the children and families enrolled. Some years a different need for a particular child or children may be identified and so Yappera would link up with a particular service to respond to this. This means that Yappera is more than a child care and kindergarten, it is able to respond to and meet the variety of needs that families may have.

The connection the educators have with the children and families is also unique strength of Yappera. Through living and working in the child's community educators "often know why a child's behaviour has changed, or what's happening in a family's life." This helps to ensure that the service is well connected with families, and is **responsive to children's** individual and unique needs.

A further aspect of being **responsive to children** is understanding that children best learn through exploring their interests, and therefore basing programs on these. Staff create a new program each week that contains a number of base activities. From observing children engaged in the program staff then scaffold onto the activities according to children's interests. For example, in the 4-5 year old program the teacher

began exploring stories on the solar system, which sparked the children's interest. The teacher then expanded on this into paper mache activities based around the solar system. A further activity started with the children singing a song about different parts of the Australia. Perceiving their keen interest in this, the teacher then set up a map of Australia and discussions took place around where different Australian animals live, where different clan groups are from, and different areas where the children's families are from – which also helps them to construct their sense of **identity**.

Stacey discusses how whilst they strive to implement the practice of **learning through play** at Yappera, and to maintain an awareness that this is how children best learn, up until quite recently educators were taught to work within a curriculum-based (rather than play-based) framework. Stacey illustrates that for “teachers who’ve been working here for 10 years, when they started here it was like right, they have to read, and trace their letters, and write their names.” Therefore the shift to the EYLF practice of ‘learning through play’ has taken some adjustment, including for parents. Educators have found that the best approach is to implement “structured or **intentional teaching activities** that we incorporate using a **play based** perspective.” For example, educators understand that the beginning of the year is a time for renewed attention on identity and connection as children figure out where and how they belong within a new program and the service as a whole. As Stacey 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.” As part of being **responsive to children** and their emotions at this time, staff intentionally focus on assisting children to 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.”

Stacey highlights that all of their programs demonstrate **intentional teaching** and a connection to the EYLF outcomes. All staff are involved in collecting observations and contributing to program planning. Weekly plans program for learning opportunities based on children's interests, with staff members providing recommendations within the program for flexible and extended learning opportunities that can be implemented depending on how the activity is going on the day.

Each program concentrates on their own age-specific program plan. The kindergarten program, for example, has the five outcomes displayed in the room with a corresponding statement on what they will do to link to each outcome - for example activities that can link in to identity or communication. Other programs – such as those for the younger children and babies - represent this visually. However, whilst each takes a different approach, all educators are now programming under this method and Stacey believes that whilst the change hasn't been easy, Yappera has successfully transitioned because they it hasn't required a deviation from their original outcomes.

Staff also employ an **intentional teaching** approach when incorporating culture into the service, for example in designing their educational program they plan visits from

community members who can teach the children specific skills such as traditional dance (discussed above). The centre is also exploring the Abecedarian approach – in particular the learning games – within their programs, and are finding that this links with the EYLF focus on **intentional teaching** through play-based activities. One educator is a trained Montessori teacher and is also incorporating aspects of the Montessori approach into their program. This method also employs a strong intentional teaching approach, and so staff are finding that this program is blending well with the Framework.

Stacey feels that the EYLF adequately encompasses the practices important to Yappera. She describes in particular how the EYLF focus on of **cultural competence** – linking all aspects of the service to children’s culture - is and has always been critical at Yappera – “really delving in and making sure that you’re reflecting the children’s culture and the family...within your program.” This focus helps them to implement **holistic** programs – so that whilst cultural competence is a specific focus at Yappera, they also ensure that culture holistically underpins all aspects of children’s development.

The EYLF practices of **continuity of learning and transitions** are implemented at Yappera through the shift to align all educator’s teaching styles. The team of 22 staff have each brought their own unique teaching style to Yappera. Stacey highlights how they have been encouraged by the Framework to align their programs:

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...

For example, where previously one program may have been play-based, and another more structured, transitioning between programs could be challenging for children. As Stacey explains, “So you’ve now got one framework that promotes a flexible learning environment right across the board...” The introduction of child portfolios and family histories also assists with this **transition**. Now when a child moves to a different program the new educators can familiarise themselves with that child’s history and therefore be better prepared to receive them.

The EYLF has enabled staff to think differently about **assessment for learning** and how to record children’s development. In particular staff are now encouraged to focus on children’s strengths rather than deficits. Whilst also looking at areas they can further support children, “educators are now developing programs based on the strengths of children” and on their interests, because as Stacey states “that’s how children learn best”. This has also enabled educators to better support children with challenging behaviours by focusing on activities that hold a child’s concentration. Stacey describes how working to change staff perceptions occurs through increasing their understanding of strengths based approaches and how these are framed in the EYLF. The EYLF has also assisted educators to communicate these outcomes to parents, through encouraging educators to keep portfolios containing learning stories, observations, and information on the developmental areas being focused on for each child. This in turn enables

educators and parents to develop strategies for how parents can assist their child outside the service, thus assisting **continuity of learning** and **partnerships** with parents.

To show evidence of children's development, staff take photos and then incorporate these into learning stories – often contained in large sketchbooks that are easily accessible for parents. They find this is a particularly effective method of demonstrating children's outcomes. Finding time to record observations can be particularly challenging, and so assistants make the observations throughout the day, and then feed these on to the educators, which helps to ensure regular recording of observations.

Learning environments are built around children's interests and are designed according to the weekly plan. Flexibility in designing environments is key to respond both to children's changing interests. 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." A number of different table and floor activities are created on any given day, and children can pick the activity they wish to do. This means that a learning environment may stay set up for some time if children are consistently demonstrating interest in and engaging with it. For example children at Yappera have recently displayed a keen interest in construction blocks, and so this learning environment is set up almost daily. If the children have been involved in more elaborate construction staff will often leave this set up overnight so that the children can return the next day to expand on their play.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Initially Yappera staff felt the EYLF to be a further burdensome requirement to comply with. Stacey believes that new, recently graduated staff who had trained with the EYLF as part of their curriculum found adaptation to the EYLF easier, whereas long-term staff who had learned and trained under a traditional outcomes/educational curriculum-based program understandably had some difficulty transitioning and required greater support. Stacey describes that for these staff the realisation that "there was no wrong way to program anymore, and that you could be far more flexible" was important.

Enabling families to understand the EYLF has also been challenging – in particular increasing their awareness that whilst the outcomes for children are the same the programming looks different. Under the old system programming was done in a largely sequential theme-based way, and parents expected to be able to see specifically what their children were doing on a certain day (for example through weekly timetables).

Whilst it was a long process to transition to the EYLF, Stacey emphasises that one significant enabling factor was having staff who really embraced the EYLF and advocated for it. She states that as a manager this is too big a task to do alone, so it is vital to have staff who can act as leaders within the service. Commenting on this, she says,

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.

Stacey feels that staff who had participated in the trial and evaluation of the Victorian EYLF (VEYLF) were particularly well equipped to take on this leadership role within the service. Their familiarisation with the VEYLF certainly helped prepare them to understand and implement the EYLF. She believes that it has taken about three years for the EYLF to become embedded in practice to the level that staff are now confident working within it. Having this time has been essential in enabling them to understand how they can implement the EYLF within their service. Stacey also feels that the way staff have shared information and resources with each other has support the EYLF transition. Staff have been actively developing templates for the EYLF, and sharing these amongst the team. She describes how the EYLF has given one staff member in particular an opportunity to pursue her interest in methodology in early childhood services, and so she has actively been researching different templates, charts and resources that link to the EYLF, and then distributing these to staff.

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Yappera received training from Gowrie Victoria to assist them in EYLF preparation. Initially this was met with some staff reluctance as it was seen to create additional work burdens – in particular with documenting self-reflections. However once staff understood that this could just be a brief personal journal entry, they approached the training more positively. Stacey reflects that it was a constructive and valuable experience. A key aspect was having a mentor (trainer) who took the time to build relationships with all the staff involved. The mentor became an important person for staff, as someone separate from the Director who staff could talk to about “what works with the EYLF, what doesn’t, what challenges they’ve had.” Stacey explains as well that it was “validation for (the staff) of what they were doing”, and this helped staff feel that their work was valuable and that they appropriately implementing the EYLF. The mentor also supported staff with techniques to overcome challenges and assist the transition. Stacey believes that this kind of professional development was key for Yappera’s EYLF transition. She feels that one-on-one mentoring is invaluable, and can be as simple as “someone who knows the framework supporting a staff member who doesn’t.”

Staff have found a resource, *‘Foundations for Success – guidelines for an early learning program in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’* (Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts) particularly helpful as it focuses on designing and running early childhood services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Stacey feels that staff will require ongoing professional development to build on and expand their familiarisation with the EYLF. Key to this is a manager who is in touch with and can respond to the varied needs of staff. Stacey feels that there is still a need for culturally appropriate, practical resources to assist in implementing the EYLF.

Yawarra Child Care Centre Good Practice Profile

Based on a discussion with Director Karen Minter

A. Who is Yawarra?

Yawarra Child Care Centre operates in Mt Druitt, New South Wales. The service was established in 1977 by a group of Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers who were concerned about their children not having suitable venues for play. Responding to this, they organised a playgroup in the backyard of one of their homes. As the numbers of families attending grew, the families applied for government funding to provide a service venue. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs then granted funding for the group to establish a child care service. This became known as Yawarra Child Care Centre, now operating as a community based, not-for-profit long day care and preschool service. The centre is licensed for up to 30 two to six year old children daily. Currently 53% of the children attending are Aboriginal.

A1. Values and principles

Yawarra prides itself on constantly striving to provide high quality care and education for its children. Following a philosophy that every child is unique, curious and eager to explore the world around them, staff endeavour to provide an environment where children are free to test, predict and grow strong in culture without fear of failure.

An integral part of Yawarra's philosophy is that the centre **belongs** to the community, and is therefore a centre *for* the community. Belonging is integral at Yawarra, and incorporates belonging to "culture, groups and community". Yawarra's concept of belonging also encompasses belonging within relationships. Relationships are a key service strength, as Karen describes, it's about "acknowledging relationships within the community as well...(in the staff team) we've got a mother and daughter team, we've got sisters. And with the children as well there's siblings, cousins, so (belonging) is very much linked to community and relationships."

To foster this sense of **belonging** and to focus on local capacity building Karen considers it vital that staff are local people, that "they all have lived and grown up in the area. So we try and employ local staff wherever possible, and we provide them with the training as well. So building the capacity of the people within the community, as well as the children's capacity."

A2. Delivery objectives/outcomes

One of the primary outcomes Yawarra encourages for its children is a strong cultural identity – both for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. Yawarra also aims to provide the children with a strong educational base, and a firm belief in who they are and what they can do, as Karen describes, "Making them realise that whatever they put

their minds to they can achieve.” Through focusing on cultural identity, education and self-esteem they aim to provide children with the strongest possible start to support and encourage them to reach their full potential.

B. Experience of the Early Years Learning Framework

B1. General information on implementation

Yawarra staff have been implementing the EYLF since 2011. They feel that the Framework matches with their service well, particularly with its strong focus on belonging and identity. Karen explains that the way the EYLF structure allows for the learning styles of Aboriginal children, stating “a lot of our children prefer to be outside and being active, and it tends to link and include that type of learning within the Framework.”

Karen believes that the transition to implement the EYLF has not proven too challenging for the service as “staff have just found that they can easily see how each of the outcomes can relate to what they’re already doing with their children. So it’s not like they’re trying to learn something totally new either. It already fits with what they’re doing”. They have also found that the EYLF has given them extra guidance in achieving the outcomes they were already working towards.

B2. Yawarra and EYLF Outcomes

Fostering a **strong cultural identity** is a critical outcome focused on at Yawarra. With the majority of staff being Aboriginal, staff have strong capacity and knowledge to incorporate culture into the program on a daily basis, and to support children’s participation in special cultural events such as NAIDOC. Culture is not seen as a special focus but as an integral part of what Yawarra provides to children. This includes ensuring that the centre visually represents and reflects culture. For example, a father who is an artist has donated his own traditional paintings to be displayed at the centre. Karen describes how his son was so proud and excited about this that he has also created his own paintings, and these are now displayed alongside his father’s. Staff incorporate traditional language when talking to and working with the children, which also helps them to become **effective communicators**.

Whilst the service does not provide cooked meals, children’s nutritional **wellbeing** is still considered vital. Unhealthy foods are discouraged and staff work with families to help them to understand healthy eating principles, often focusing on nutrition and meals in the newsletter. Staff conduct healthy cooking sessions with the children, and send the recipes home with the children so that they can cook these meals with their families.

Karen believes that building activities on children’s interests empowers them to take the initiative in their own development, helping them become **confident and involved learners**. Staff encourage children to share their knowledge and experiences with each other. Karen illustrates this through a recent example concerning a boy who has a great interest in dinosaurs. Through participation in activities based on his interest his

confidence grew, and soon he was observed teaching the other children about dinosaurs. With the advent of camera use to capture moments throughout the day, the children are becoming confident in articulating when they want something recorded, as Karen describes, “they’ll come and tell us now ‘you need to take a photo of this’, so something that they’re proud of and they want recorded (in their portfolio) as well.” This helps children take pride in their activities and achievements and feel confident expressing this to staff.

Part of Yawarra’s approach to **holistic** care is fostering children’s social and emotional development by enabling them to become **effective communicators**. Karen explains that much of this is done through role-modelling effective communication, “the way you interact with the children (and) encourage the children to interact with each other.” She also points out that “We’re really big on trying to get the 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 express *why* they don’t like it, so it’s not always the staff intervening in things.” This helps children learn to articulate how they’re feeling, and to understand how their actions impact on others.

Yawarra focuses on **communication** and literacy through incorporating it into fun activities. 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 activities provided for the children. Through involving parents in this way they supported them to understand the value of literacy and the role they can and do play in their child’s development.

B3. Yawarra and EYLF Principles

As discussed above, **secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships** are a large focus at Yawarra. In response to a request by community Elders, children refer to staff as relatives such as ‘aunty’ – in accordance with the tradition of the community. As well as teaching the children respect for older people, this is also “something that they’re familiar with, it makes them feel secure within the centre when they come in” and therefore supports them to feel that they **belong** at the centre and that the centre is “a part of their family.”

Staff have a strong focus on **partnerships** and communication with parents. They aim to engage with all parents during the week, by talking to them “about the positive things that their child has achieved during the day...trying to focus on their child’s strengths and what they’re really good at”. Karen believes that by focusing on positive and encouraging messages in conversations, parents tend to open up to and engage with staff more. Staff also use these discussions as an opportunity to receive family input on what they feel their child is good at, their home life and interests, so that staff can better understand each individual child and incorporate their strengths and interests into the program. This emphasis on verbal communication and information sharing ensures that parents with low literacy levels can also be involved and provide their input.

Staff also provide parents with evidence of their child's work and positive stories from their day. Even though the parents receive the child's full portfolio at the end of the year, Karen feels that this regular sharing is also important, "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."

An ongoing staff focus is to ensure that their **partnerships** with families provide real opportunities for families to provide input into the service and the program. Staff regularly encourage families to share their skills and knowledge at the centre. Partnerships with parents are also fostered through the five member Parent Committee, which oversees all major service decisions. Karen believes that the Committee helps Yawarra remain true to its mandate to provide a service that responds to the children and families of the area. She feels 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." Furthermore she feels that because the service is community-run parents view it as part of their community rather than externally operated, and are therefore more likely to access it. The Committee also helps to ensure that parents' input is valued and taken on board. For example, discussions recently arose concerning fees at the centre. The parents decided that to lower fees and make the service more accessible for families, it should no longer provide meals. This decision was then carried out in accordance with the parents' and community's wishes.

Karen feels that a unique aspect of Yawarra is that they also work in **partnership** with parents to ensure that their children regularly attend by providing a morning and afternoon bus service. This has greatly improved attendance, and as Karen describes, "a lot of these children wouldn't have the opportunity to attend an early childhood setting without that bus. And 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." Two staff members travel on the bus, and this ensures that staff and parents still have regular contact and are able to build solid relationships. Karen explains that "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." This helps educators connect with children more deeply and cater for their needs based on their understanding of their family and home context.

Karen feels that a further unique aspect of Yawarra is the **partnerships** they have with organisations in the community, and that this enables them to constantly "evolve the type of service that we're offering to families, and what we do within the community." For example they are currently working closely with another community-based organisation to run a weekly playgroup at Yawarra. They are also part of the successful tender for the Blacktown Aboriginal Children and Family Centre, and will be running the Children's Service section. Karen feels that because they already have established,

trusting relationships with families, and will be taking Yawarra's name and identity to the new centre, families will feel more trusting and positive about accessing the many new services offered. She believes that this will make it easier for families to access a holistic range of care 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 taken on two new trainees who are members of the local Aboriginal community, and are completing their Certificate three. They will then go on to work at the Children and Family Centre.

Karen emphasises that a large part of their focus at Yawarra is "providing children with a strong belief of who they are and what they can do." Staff demonstrate **high expectations** of children by supporting and encouraging them to know that they can achieve whatever they put their minds to, which Karen believes is particularly important for children who may come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Building children's self-esteem and self-expectations is about enabling them to break out of cycles of disadvantage, "because we've found a lot of our families, they're probably the third generation family growing up in this area with unemployment and low literacy levels and things like that. So trying to make the children realise that it doesn't always need to be like that."

Whilst the majority of children attending Yawarra are Aboriginal, it also has a number of Samoan children. The centre demonstrates and encourages children to have **respect for diversity** through celebrating other cultures, including Samoan. A Samoan staff member teaches the children Samoan language and culture. Other staff have also learnt Samoan words to use with all of the children, to ensure that all children feel "confident and involved in the centre as well."

Karen considers that staff are increasingly incorporating **reflective practice** into their programming, and are developing an increased awareness that "if we are making changes to the program there needs to be a reason for it." She describes how this symbolises a shift from previous practice, where programs were usually run for a set length of time and then updated. She feels that,

Now they're more looking at 'well ok why isn't that particular activity working, and how could we make it better, or what could we add to it to get the children's interest back to that area?' So I think they're looking more at what they're providing for the children. It's not just 'we're having playdough out just because'.

B4. Yawarra and EYLF Practices

Yawarra believes that a culturally appropriate and **holistic** approach to care involves ensuring that siblings and cousins spend time together. For example, educators will arrange beds so that relatives can sleep close to each other, replicating what would happen within their homes. Karen also explains that in many families the older children help raise the younger ones, and so they "keep this tradition happening within the

centre” by supporting older children to teach the younger ones or settle them when they are upset.

Yawarra 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.” Programming is now more about *post*-programming. This involves taking into account what has worked with previous activities in designing new plans, and then setting up a learning environment to facilitate this. Staff allow the children’s interests and abilities to direct the flow of activities. At the end of the day staff then reflect on the activities, and then record the program based on this. Staff also apply a strengths based approach to children’s development in all programming. As Karen explains, this

...very much focuses on ‘ok they’re very good at this, or they’re interested in this, so that’s where we need to take the learning’. 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.

Karen feels that this teaching style is very much supported by the EYLF. She emphasises that a benefits of this approach is that it encourages educators to “focus on each child’s strengths. 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.” 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.” This respect for children’s knowledge also demonstrates educator’s **high expectations and equity** in how they treat children. Furthermore, the strengths based approach enhances the emphasis on family support and strong community connections that are a defining feature of Yawarra, as Karen explains “it just gives you 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.”

Staff are also now utilising technology to better **respond to children**. As Karen describes, staff and children regularly collaborate to use the internet to research topics of interests, and then create books to reflect and record these learning projects. Through this the children are also learning how to bind and create books.

As discussed above, staff expand upon children’s interests to inform activity design, helping to ensure **continuity of learning**. Staff often focus on small projects with individual children. Karen describes a recent example that stemmed from a visit by the local fire brigade. One boy was particularly interested in the fire engine, and so staff provided materials for the child to make his own fire engine. This is now an ongoing project, and one that the child revisits every few days. He is also using pictures of the

fire engine to expand his own creation, and these keep him enthused and motivated about the project.

Supporting children to initiate and complete their own projects also helps build their **confidence** and participation as **involved learners**. Karen explains that inviting visitors in to the centre, such as the fire brigade, is also a helpful way of teaching the children about topics the staff may not necessarily have knowledge about, and a valuable way to inspire children to develop projects. This type of learning is also part of Yawarra's philosophy that children **learn through play**, which involves staff facilitating activities for children to experience through hands-on endeavours that they can direct themselves.

Creating challenging and stimulating **learning environments** has been a recent focus at Yawarra. Karen describes that they are focusing on providing children with a choice of indoor and outdoor environments in which to play in. She explains that,

A lot of our children do prefer to be outside for most of the time, so it's just trying to work out 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.

Part of this is breaking down the concepts of specific 'outside and inside' activities and instead focusing on creating play environments that respond to children's learning needs and interests. As Karen explains, "So if we've set up an area...and our children really want something else in that area then it will be provided for." Whilst the centre has set learning areas that generally don't change, what is set up within each learning area "depends on the children's interests and abilities". In this way staff can create appealing and engaging learning environments that cater to children's current needs.

Yawarra supports children to **transition** to school through firm relationships with the local schools and through the provision of in-depth support to families and children. They also link 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 the child and family to develop pre-existing support networks before the child enters school. Staff also assist parents who need support to fill out enrolment forms, and if a child has additional needs Karen will often attend meetings with the family and the school. She believes that this empowers families to feel "confident in expressing what their child needs at school." Karen views relationships with the school as a key aspect of this process.

Assessment of children's development is captured through daily observations that record what children's experiences. These are then written up into individual child

portfolios, which focus on showcasing the child's strengths and are also used to inform the next program.

C. Challenges and overcoming these

Karen perceives that the main challenge staff have experienced with the EYLF is finding the time to document all that is required, "trying to find that balance between the doing and the recording". Whilst staff have weekly programming time, this is often not enough to conduct both planning and daily reflections. Staff aim to have the daily reflections finished by the end of each day so that parents can view them when they collect their child, but this isn't always possible. Karen feels that part of the challenge is that reflections under the EYLF need to be more detailed, "telling a story" as opposed to just what the child did. Karen illustrates this, "So you're not just saying 'they played with playdough today', there's more emphasis on what they did with the playdough, and how did they do it. So it goes into a lot more detail, so it is more time-consuming." She observes that the staff have varying levels of confidence "with using the EYLF and linking it to their observations. So they all have different strengths at the moment, and areas that they feel they need to work on."

To overcome this Karen explains that they are working on recording observations as they're working in the rooms with the children - "making new opportunities for time." To aid this a computer has been set up in the children's room so that staff can easily record observations and notes throughout the day. Karen points out how this has had unintended benefits of increasing communication between staff and children, "you'll often find when you're sitting there typing up what's been happening the children will come over as well and ask about 'What are you writing about, how come you're writing about that? Why did you put that picture in?' So it generates conversation within itself." This also encourages children to reflect on past activities.

Karen feels that through this process staff have found strength in working more effectively together, and "giving each other better ideas, and just guidance on where to take it next." Open and supportive communication between staff has also been valuable in overcoming these challenges, as Karen describes, "they'll say 'so we've done this and this, so what else can we do?' Or if they're having trouble linking it to an outcome, someone might suggest 'have a look at area two, I think it fits in there'."

Whilst staff are able to see how they're implementing the EYLF, they are now having to focus on finding a balance between the different areas. Karen explains this, "Because some areas tend to be reflected all the time, for example 'children are competent and involved learners'...There's always something from that outcome that you can find to relate. So just trying to find the balance with some of the other areas as well. Trying to find the ones that are most relevant."

She feels that the more staff work on the EYLF the more confident they will become with it, and is optimistic that it will assist them, "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."

D. Support

D1. Training, resources and support that has been useful

Karen cites their biggest support as the NSW Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU). In 2011 an IPSU officer visited the centre for a day to help staff examine how they conduct their practices. Karen explains how staff,

...sat down 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.

She 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 Karen 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 have then been able to move on to focus on another area. By breaking the EYLF up into smaller pieces in this way Karen feels that it has been less overwhelming for the educators, "they're not trying to learn it all at once."

In terms of resources used, Karen subscribes to the regular EYLF Professional Learning Program newsletters and tips, and compiles all of these into a folder that staff can access. She comments that staff have found these to be the most useful resources available. Karen comments that whilst she has personally found the online version of the Professional Learning Program to be helpful, it is often difficult for staff to find the time to engage with this.

Yawarra have also 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. Karen 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."

D2. Training, resources and support still needed

Karen feels that the main need with future training is that it is ongoing and adaptable to the new ways that the EYLF is used, as she perceives that "the document will constantly evolve and people will find new ways of interpreting and implementing it. So I think it's something that you need to look at new ways to implement and not just go 'we're doing it this way now and that's the way it's staying'." Training will therefore need to be responsive to staff needs as and when they arise.