

# Nunga Kids Cafe

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## INTRODUCTION

Nunga Kids Cafe is the name of an intersectoral community development food project that involves year 6 and 7 Aboriginal children in Port Lincoln. Using the kitchen and dining facilities of a local neighbourhood house, the children are given an experience of food preparation, healthy eating and hospitality work by cooking and serving a meal for their parents and relatives. This paper describes how the project evolved, talks about the positive experiences for both the children, and the community and talks about the possible future of this project.

## BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Health workers interested in primary health care at a community level are frequently challenged with the question on how to support families and children in making healthy food and lifestyle choices. Over the years as health workers in Port Lincoln we have used several approaches. School health screening has enabled every Aboriginal child to be assessed against specific criteria but hasn't focused on the principles espoused in the Ottawa Charter for health promotion. Nutrition education in the classroom provides a 'feel good' experience for the presenter and the student but can miss that vital link with the family which is the primary place of care and nurturing for most children. Cooking sessions for parents at two schools have also been held. While these have provided a positive and practical focus on healthy eating choices we have found that only a small number of parents attended on a consistent basis. With the development of the Nunga Kids Cafe we believe that we are using an approach that enhances health and well-being at many levels.

## AN INTERSECTORAL APPROACH

This intersectoral project involves collaboration between four organisations in Port Lincoln: Port Lincoln Community Health Services, Port Lincoln Primary School, Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health services and Community House Port Lincoln.

A key component of this project is that it utilises the skills and gifts of a number of different people in different organisations. The Aboriginal Health Worker (Jeremy Coaby), employed by Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health Services, has lived and worked in the community for over 10 years and is well known by local families. The dietitian/teacher (Michael Manders), employed by Port Lincoln Health Services, has also been a 'local' for over ten years and has worked with Jeremy on a number of activities. The importance of a close working relationship between an Aboriginal health worker and a Caucasian health worker on this Aboriginal health project has been a crucial ingredient. It has enabled us to appreciate our differences, to recognise the skills and gifts that we both bring to the project and to demonstrate to the children that meaningful and productive working relationships can occur between people irrespective of their differing backgrounds.

The Port Lincoln Primary School has been particularly supportive in encouraging innovative approaches to learning. The school has provided an Aboriginal Education Teacher (Kerry Porter) to support the children in their learning at the neighbourhood house. The Aboriginal education teacher has also played a key role in liaising with classroom teachers and supporting the children in writing invitations to their parents to attend the lunch.

## THE VENUE

The venue, Community House Port Lincoln, has proven to be a most valuable asset. The Community House was formed seven years ago with a primary health care advancement grant that focused on food supply in rural areas. The grant enabled the establishment of a neighbourhood house that has kitchen and dining facilities as well as an outside eating area, a recycling shop and a vegetable garden. The choice of location of the Community House was also an important consideration in its planning as it situated in an area of Port Lincoln where a number of Aboriginal families live. Over the years the Community House has continued to grow to be an ideal venue for food projects. The kitchen is well appointed with adequate space for eight children and two adults to cook. The cupboards are clearly labelled which make finding equipment and ingredients easy and the dining area is welcoming and homely and can cater for up to twenty people. A playground next door to the Community House has been advantageous. It has enabled the children to punctuate their busy time in food preparation with important times of play. The Community House is also a venue where a variety of adults call in to be involved in social, recreational or educational activities. A big advantage of this is that it has enabled the children to see and interact with adults that they would not usually see in their daily lives at school. Other venues where local people attend and feel comfortable (eg sporting club) would also provide the out of school experience for children which seems to enhance their learning by placing them in an environment where adults gather to socialise and learn.

## THE PROGRAM

The program for each group of students lasts for a school term. The school selects a group of seven students from its year 6/7 classes and the students meet once a fortnight at the Community House. The program is designed to gradually increase the children's experience and confidence in working in an out of school environment where a number of new and different adults gather.

The first gathering at community house is an orientation session. The children have a good look at the various activities that are happening, they spend time in the kitchen familiarising themselves with cupboards and equipment, they talk about kitchen safety issues and have a practise at setting the tables.

At the second session the children cook a simple two-course meal for themselves. At this session we place particular importance on teamwork and support for each other in trying new experiences in learning

At the three other sessions the children cook a main course and dessert for their parents, relatives, themselves and a guest speaker. This often amounts to twenty people. The children participate in the cooking and serving of the meal, table attendance and washing and putting away the dishes.

## READING THE RECIPES

Prior to food preparation and cooking we gather as a large group to read the recipes. Experience in cooking with school students has shown us that some children struggle with the literacy and numeracy aspects of reading recipes. To help with this we have been careful to choose recipe books that are set out with each step clearly stated and illustrated. The cookbooks we have used are: "Kids in the kitchen Cookbook" (WA Dept. of Health), Family Circle Beginners Cookbook and "Tastes Good Is Good" a recipe book published by the Northern Territory Department of Health which includes popular recipes from a number of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Prior to gathering in the kitchen to cook we sit down as a group to read the recipes. Each child is encouraged to have a try at reading and the group is asked to encourage and support each other. We have found that the small group provides a safer environment than the classroom in which to have a try and students are willing to have a go. Another advantage is the immediate practical experience between reading and doing. Ingredients, cooking terms and measurements come to life with the actual experience of cooking

Each student is given a recipe folder to take home at the end of the term. Each folder contains copies of the recipes used as well as a variety of work sheets which are food based and challenge the children to further advance their word skills

## COOKING

The children are divided into two teams for cooking and serving the meal. Each team is responsible for collecting the ingredients and utensils. Hygiene and safety issues are reinforced at each session. The food preparation methods are demonstrated by the adult in each team and each of the children have a go. Throughout the cooking session team work rather than individual action is encouraged. Each team chooses a server and a waiter for the session and is responsible for setting the tables with cutlery prior to the arrival of the parents and relatives. Even though cleaning and washing is the least preferred task of the day everyone is asked to participate in this. This allows each child to experience briefly the broad range of tasks required when working in the hospitality industry.

## GUEST SPEAKER AND PARENTS

A central component of this program is the attendance of a guest speaker and the parents. The guest speaker is invited as an elder of The Aboriginal Community in Port Lincoln and joins the group for lunch along with the parents. The guest speaker is asked to share some of their story and offer some words of encouragement and learning to the children. This provides recognition and support for the learning that the children are experiencing. Another advantage of having a guest speaker is that it allows other non-Aboriginal people who are visiting community to house to hear and meet people that they would not normally communicate with hence enabling a spirit of reconciliation to be sown in an encounter over a shared meal.

The attendance of the parents has many advantages. It gives the children a sense of pride and recognition in what they are doing. The parents are enjoying a meal cooked by their children, which is healthy and enjoyable. The shared lunch demonstrates the value of eating and talking together as a way of improving communication within families and across community members. We are finding that the parents are attending regularly and we are seeing a variety of different people.

## A POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

In understanding why this program seems to be providing a positive learning experience, it was interesting to explore characteristics of Aboriginal children as learners and to see how it relates to this program. In searching the Internet it was fortunate to find an article that explored literature which discussed the way Aboriginal children learn mathematics<sup>1</sup>. It seems that in particular the work of Rhonda Craven<sup>2</sup> has provided some insights. In Aboriginal societies learning occurs more frequently through observation and imitation than verbalisation. Information is taken in more easily through hands and through movement. Many Aboriginal students are co-operative learners. Students whose learning pattern is more co-operative than competitive will learn better in small groups, which allow for collaborative work with peers. In Aboriginal societies cultural learning occurs in the specific context to which the learning relates. By contextualising learning students discover that education is meaningful and relevant to their own lives. Aboriginal cultures are more person oriented than information oriented. Teachers are assessed on the basis of how they relate to children as people rather than by their qualifications. Students who feel a personal connection with the teacher will be more co-operative, interested in learning, willing to take risks and attempt new tasks.

## WHY THIS PROGRAM WORKS WELL

A number of features indicate that the approach used in the Nunga Kids Cafe is providing many positive outcomes. As mentioned above, the learning process used in this program is one that fits in closely with traditional ways in which Aboriginal children have learned. This is supported by the positive response we have seen by the children and their willingness to take risks and show initiative. The program is being talked about in the Aboriginal community at social gatherings indicating that it has a broad acceptance. Parents and family members are regularly attending the lunch and some have stated that they come for their children. The children are getting encouragement and hearing stories and words of wisdom from elders in the community. We have noticed that the children are gaining confidence in their interaction with a variety of adults that they would not normally talk with. This has also been observed by teachers at the school who are noticing that the children are approaching their classroom tasks and their teachers with greater confidence. People who call into the Community House are seeing a greater presence of Aboriginal people there. They are having an opportunity to hear the stories of Aboriginal Elders in Port Lincoln and hence gain a better understanding of the issues and challenges faced in the past. The children are gaining recognition and pride in their school environment through the formal recognition of success at the presentation of certificates at the school assembly.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In using a community development approach to this food project our plans are to gradually increase its scope. Lincoln Gardens Primary School has expressed an interest to run the program next year. This will be facilitated by Jeremy Coaby (Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health Service) and the Aboriginal Education Assistant at the school, Jason Bilney. Plans are in place to include two children to participate in the shopping done prior to the day of cooking. This will obviously support learning around food purchasing, label reading and budgeting. We would like to find other people in the Port Lincoln Aboriginal Community who have an interest in cooking and would like to join the group hence enhancing relationships between Aboriginal children and their elders. Port Lincoln Primary School is also looking at providing a more structured approach to nutrition education in small groups for children in years 4/5 using resources that have been shown to engage Aboriginal students.

In a broader sense community development projects that have as their common ground shared cooking and eating, have great potential to enhance the physical, social and emotional well-being of their participants. Food projects provide a non-threatening way of engaging people and the sharing of a meal shows acceptance, welcoming and nurturing. Food throughout history has been used in celebrations and as a means to enhance discussion around common issues. Shared cooking increases an individual's skills and confidence and offers the potential to provide a positive learning experience. The successful outcomes of small-scale community development food projects suggest that they are worth trying on a larger scale. Perhaps there are three essential ingredients. Collaboration with local community people in the planning and evolution of such projects. Courage on behalf of local community workers and organisations to have a go at such an approach to see where it may lead. Commitment on behalf of community workers and funding agencies to enable enough years for community development to meaningfully take place so that long term outcomes can be seen.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Robinson J. & Nicol R(1998). Building Bridges Between Aboriginal and Western Mathematics: Creating an Effective Mathematics Learning Environment<<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/graded/Jred2.html>
- 2 Craven R. (Ed)(1996) Teaching the Teachers. Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre Service Teacher Education. Sydney Australia. University of NSW Press

## PRESENTERS

**Michael Manders** has been a practising dietitian for the past 20 years. He currently shares his working time between dietetics and school teaching. During the past few years his emphasis has been on community development. He has a particular interest in the relationship between community health practice and education. The opportunity to work closely with Jeremy Coaby, an Aboriginal Health Worker, has enabled Michael to develop stronger links with the broader Aboriginal community.

**Jeremy Coaby** has worked for Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health Services for the past ten years as a trained health worker. His interest in healthy eating and personal fitness provides a role model for young Indigenous people. He is committed to improving the health and well-being of the Aboriginal community not only through his work, but through broader community activities. Jeremy has welcomed and supported the development of a close working relationship with Michael Manders over a two-year period.