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Smoke: Enablers and barriers for sustainable engagement with local Aboriginal communities

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Abstract

For many years, activists in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have called for the sector to engage closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. However, less is documented on how mainstream services might achieve authentic, sustained engagement at a local service level. This paper showcases educators who connect with local Aboriginal community members/Elders as a central plank of their ECEC practice. In sharing their account, we examine what engagement looks like and what makes it possible. We have used Indigenous methodologies and the Theory of Practice Architecture (TPA) as theoretical lenses for exploring the policy, and organisational arrangements that sustained their engagement practices. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the research.

Keywords

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, inclusion, community engagement

Introduction

> Smoke - ethereal, obfuscating, hard to capture. Across cultures, it is used to cleanse, claim, and establish belonging. Smoke reminds us of our human connection to a country susceptible to climate change and fire. Smoke can move between and connect us when we are far apart.

A smoking ceremony on Dharawal Country is at the heart of this paper about early childhood practice. Plumes of smoke encircle shared

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desires between Elders, community, educators, and researchers for better outcomes for children. The story here is one where building genuine relationships with local Aboriginal community members was going well. But like a puff of smoke, good practice can dissipate with leadership change, with burnout, staff turnover, and change in local demographics. This paper illuminates the organisational and policy architectures that sustains community engagement.

The Dharawal nation stretches from the coast to the lower Blue Mountains. It is predominantly open sclerophyll forest, rivers, and plains. This Country was colonised early. The intensity of physical and symbolic colonial violence in this region makes the lineages of Aboriginal people hard to trace, but the will to survive is strong. Aboriginal children growing up on this Country are awash in the smokes of trauma, resilience, reconnection, and pride. This is a lively place to engage with First Nations communities. All early childhood educators, Indigenous and non-indigenous, are challenged by our own individual and collective histories of colonisation and can benefit from relationships with Aboriginal Elders who have survived and who contribute to the flourishing of their culture, Country, and people.

First Nations people have made substantial gains in political power despite the colonial political structures designed to dispossess, dehumanise, and disempower them. There are now many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with western educational credentials and many work at the cultural interface of western and Indigenous knowledges (for a rich account of the cultural interface, see Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). The numbers are growing. Over 600 Aboriginal academics work in research and teaching positions in Australian Universities (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022, Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and employment, 2022), an estimated 15,000 First Nations students are enrolled in tertiary degrees at any one time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Indigenous content knowledge is increasingly mandated in university content across all subject areas (Bunda, 2022) including the traditional sciences like engineering (Charles Darwin University Newsroom, 2022). Nearly 45% of First Nations people have Certificate III qualifications or above. Nearly 97% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled in an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) program in the year before school (NIAA, 2023).

This paper offers a story of positive engagement between a preschool and its local Aboriginal communities to illuminate the practice architectures that enabled this engagement. We follow the norms of academic writing while also embracing the genre of yarning which is common to Aboriginal people when engaging with deep knowledge. This follows Indigenous protocols. We offer an account of who we are, where we come from and how we came to know about the issues presented. This helps us be better known and build relationships with our colleagues, and communities and with you 'the AJEC readers'. We have been careful about what knowledge is ours to share and what is best left unsaid by us. Where we cite literature, we will use whatever term - Indigenous, First Nations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander - was used by the authors. When we talk about our study participants, we use "Aboriginal" as they identified with this term. As we move through our story, we share the story of a specific family, as their experience helped us move to another level of understanding of how Indigenous knowledges can transform experience. This family has been deidentified and we use gender neutral pronouns – 'they' and 'their' to describe their experience. This family was keen to be engaged in the research that informs this paper and have given full permission for their deidentified story to be published. These permissions have also been received from the Aboriginal Elders who engaged with the staff, families and children in the early childhood setting. They wish to be fully named, so we have used their real names in the paper and acknowledgements.

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The authorial 'we' of this paper is as follows. *Jennifer* is of Norwegian/Irish heritage and grew up loving the bush and creeks in Indooroopilly, a suburb which retained its name in Yaggera language (meaning Valley of Leeches). She completed her early childhood teacher training on Dharawal Country and now lives and works on Gadigal Country. She continues to learn how to respect and engage with Aboriginal people and Country as a researcher, education practitioner, and friend. *Paula* grew up in what appeared to be a typical white English household with her maternal grandparents and mother in western Sydney. While it was known that her father was Aboriginal, this was not discussed at home. The only exception to this silence was that Paula's sister would sometimes teasingly say 'you're Aboriginal'. As Paula grew older, she has become a strong advocate for children to be able to make their culture visible and to share it. She has recently completed her Masters degree (Early Childhood). Paula is now slowly connecting with her Aboriginal family. *BJ* is a proud Wirajduri woman, born and raised on Gadigal Country in Sydney. Her family comes from the Kalare (or Lachlan) River region in Central West New South Wales. Her grandfather was born and raised on Erambie Aboriginal Mission just outside of Cowra. BJ's grandfather was a member of the stolen generations, forcibly removed from his family at 11 years old, though he was more fortunate than many and found his way home. BJ comes from a large family of Aboriginal political figures who have contributed to social change and Aboriginal equality and is carrying on this legacy through her work in the academy. *Megan*'s family moved to Australia from England around 100 years ago and settled in southern Sydney. She grew up on Dharawal Country - a name - Megan never heard as a child. Her education started in the high school sick bay when a fellow student explained the colours of the Aboriginal flag. Megan has been committed to learning ever since, with generous guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, friends, and family. Megan now lives and works on Dharug and Gundungarra Country.

Paula is an ECEC practitioner and benefits from long, stable relationships in her service. With over 15 years close collaboration, Jennifer, BJ and Megan are researchers based in a university from different disciplines - education, social work and critical policy studies. The four of us have been yarning and working together now for over three years. Paula and her ECEC colleagues have brought this group of researchers up to speed on many aspects of high-quality practice. This paper tells the story of one set of practices, but before this story, we scope out two ideas central to our discussion. The first is that ECEC should be culturally safe and responsive to children and families and the second is genuine participation and community engagement is achieved over time.

Culturally safe and responsive ECEC practice and service delivery

Early Years practice is guided by the Early Years Learning Framework. This document calls for cultural responsiveness and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to be embedded in curriculum. Specifically, it says:

> Educators who are culturally responsive, respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, doing and being and celebrate the benefits of diversity. They honour differences and take action in the face of unfairness or discrimination. Being culturally responsive includes a genuine commitment to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in all aspects of the curriculum. Being culturally responsive also includes respecting and working collaboratively with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Cultural responsiveness is evident in everyday practice when educators demonstrate an

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> ongoing commitment to developing their own cultural knowledge in a three-way process with children, families, and communities. (2022, p.23)

Culturally responsive service delivery takes the idea of culturally responsive practice further. It encourages services to support families to meet their everyday needs so they can participate in ECEC. Peak advocacy organisations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) argue that families require culturally responsive service delivery. They provide a comprehensive community endorsed overview of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and summarise evidence which shows that many families have complex needs due to housing instability, ill health, low income, under employment and intergenerational trauma. Sometimes families live in neighbourhoods where living conditions are poor, or in communities that are isolated, distressed, or transient (SNAICC & ECA, 2019).

Importantly, culturally responsive service delivery recognises that Australian educational institutions have long been places of discrimination, exclusion, and harm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. ECEC services that are not deemed culturally safe will not tend to be used by local Aboriginal families (Harrison et al., 2012; Webb, 2022). SNAICC and ECA (2019, p.8) state that 'the most effective means to increase ECEC participation and improve outcomes is through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service provision. Where this is not possible, genuine local participation and decision making is required'.

Genuine local participation and community engagement

Many educators want to build genuine relationships with their local First Nations communities. Community-engaged education has been shown to be transformational when educators can honour and leverage a community's expertise, funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and cultural wealth (Zipin et al., 2012). Such engagement secures a sense of belonging between children, families and communities with those working in services. However, 'communities' are not necessarily easily identified, and educators do not always know how to engage First Nations people effectively.

Colonial policy was dominated by physically and discursively violent efforts at assimilating Indigenous people. Most were forbidden to retain their family/Country connections and languages. The colonial regime drew power from defining Aboriginality and there have been at least 67 definitions in 700 pieces of legislation (Carlson, 2016). These overt attempts to sever communities from each other and country have ongoing effects on Indigenous people. The legacies of this violence is apparent in the challenges of current community engagement policies. Several Indigenous education academics offer critiques of 'community engagement' policies from Indigenous academics offer some insights for the way forward.

Firstly, they argue for complex understandings about the 'who' of community. Shay and Lampert (2022) state that many Indigenous people regard the concept of community as western but take up the concept to mobilise politically at local or national levels. Secondly, we must consider that western policy has used the concept of engagement to control and assimilate Indigenous people (Walden, 2016). Accordingly, many Aboriginal people are skeptical about the value attached to their contributions in engagement initiatives. Lowe et al.'s (2019) systematic review of factors influencing school and Indigenous community engagement found no clear link between engagement and improved student outcomes. They found many teachers are not skilled in the meaningful relational strategies which enable collaborative problem identification and shared

leadership. The review concluded that community engagement that supports student outcomes requires resourcing, leadership and beliefs that value the knowledges held by Aboriginal people and structured by those meaningful relational strategies.

Many early childhood educators are strongly committed to working towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in daily practice but are often uncertain as to how to proceed. Educators say their knowledge is limited, and they are worried about making mistakes and causing offence. Many are particularly unsure about how to build relationships with local Elders and community members. Acknowledgement of Country can be conceived of as a suite of practices that support services to deepen their connections (Townley et al., 2023). Indigenous educational researcher Michelle Locke suggests a good starting point for educators is knowing the Country on which a service operates (2022). The idea of 'knowing Country' here far exceeds knowing one's place on an Aboriginal map, "It's not about where you live, it's about where you're connected to. It's essential… it should underpin everything" (Locke, 2022, p. 5).

This paper contributes to this emerging literature through a systematic analysis of the practice architectures that made authentic engagement with local knowledge holders possible in one service. We argue that deep connections with local Aboriginal Elders and families were built over a substantial amount of time and that those families and Elders were engaged in shared problem definition and leadership. Importantly, the service was ready for this work. They could support families' needs **before** they embarked on developing connections to community. This support requires supportive organisational structures, systematic skill development, **deep, strong** interagency networks and structures so services can be flexible and responsive. We now turn to the theory and methodologies that inform our story of engagement.

Theoretical underpinnings

Our methods are informed by Indigenist methodologies (Martin, 2017; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014) and the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Gibbs et al., 2022). Both approaches assert that research should be driven by the concerns of the people research is about, and that research design needs to align to those people's beliefs about what it is to be human (ontologies). We have taken up Eve Tuck's call to actively recognise and work against deficit discourses and trauma stories about Indigenous people (Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014). To this end, we have decentred a focus on what children and families have, can do or need. Instead, we have made ECEC practices, services, policy, and systems the focus of analysis. We applied insights from Karen Martin's 'knock before you enter' approach (Martin, 2008) and Indigenist research principles (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). It is important to note here that this paper is not elaborating on Indigenous knowledge or on research approaches to such knowledge. Our analysis is focussed on the structures, discourses, material and relational resources (practice architectures) that enable services to engage with Indigenous communities.

The Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) is a 'theoretical, methodological/analytical and transformational resource for examining local practices with the intention to change education and professional practice (Mahon et al., 2017 in Gibbs et al., 2022, p. 5)'. It explores the cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political resources which converge in local sites to make certain practices possible and present barriers to other types of practices. Practices are manifestations of these political forces and arrangements and visible as an assemblage of sayings, doings or relatings' (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 7/8). TPA is grounded in the belief that historical, discursive, and material conditions shape what practices are possible within any given site. In this sense sites are

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ecological niches. Any educational practice taking place in that niche is inevitably 'layered, dense, porous and nuanced' because of the specificity of those conditions (Edwards-Groves, 2018, p. 121).

This approach to research aligns with those that assert that the recipients of services and practitioners must be involved in defining the problems in their local physical, discursive, and historical contexts. TPA researchers work dialogically with research participants (educators, practitioners, families and children) to better understand educational practices, their effects, as well as their antecedents. This challenges the idea that expert knowledge is both generated and validated in research and this should inform educational practice. TPA approaches assert that knowledge produced far away, in a different context, can never be simply implemented or reproduced at a local level. This type of expert knowledge fails to account for the divergent ideas, resources and power relations that comprise the activities we think of as educational practices.

Research practices

The research team adhered to the protocols for ethical research related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people[1]. We collected and generated data with the service through close contact for nearly two years. Data is comprised of

- local demographic and resource mapping
- key policy and organisational document reviews
- interviews from educators and key stakeholders (*n* = 9)
- practice and pedagogy observations
- formal yarning meetings with local Elders (*n* = 2)
- families' accounts of their everyday life and service experiences (n = 9)
- dialogic workshops (*n* = 3)

Our analytic process involved coding our data as pedagogical practices, family engagement practices, trauma informed practices, professional learning and so on. Then we worked these practices into higher order coding that supported analysis of the underlying arrangements cultural-discursive, material-economic, socio-political. Then we ran dialogic workshops with educators to review potential findings. Participants provided clarification, explanations and/or alternative interpretations, and collectively generated deeper insights about the practices observed or described, their origins and purposes, and significance. This dialogic structure disrupts the traditional power dynamics of an interview and supports collaborative co-creation of knowledge (Gibbs et al., 2022). This critical dialogue enabled critical analysis of taken-for-granted practices and narratives, illuminated arenas where educators could exercise agency, generated further data, and created momentum for innovation and change (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Three dialogic workshops were conducted in 2022–2023 over an eight-month period. These was complemented by vibrant intellectual chat that took place in the interstitial spaces of the preschool - the foyer, the kitchen, and the car park.

We will now turn to our findings about the practice architectures that made deep sustained engagement with local Elders possible. The findings section is structured by three key narrative moves that follow events at the centre– first connections, providing culturally responsive education and care, and working with Aboriginal knowledges. In each of these moves we will flag the resources that enabled deep engagement before turning to the subsequent move. The practice architectures that support sustained engagement are then discussed as interconnected discursive, material, and political arrangements.

Findings

First connections

There is rarely a single point of first connection between people. There are rumours that circulate in and between neighbourhoods, there are

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always distant relatives who were in the know once you ask. In the official narrative of the preschool's first engagement with local Elders, they reported 'we first made contact a few years back with the local Aboriginal Land Council to connect for culturally safe guidance of Dharawal perspectives and knowledge'. However, our yarns revealed that a few of the current staff once worked with an Aboriginal playgroup that used the preschool space before running out of funding. This experience provided the preschool team with basic awareness of local Aboriginal community and layered onto previous experiences they had with Aboriginal people. This awareness nuanced educators' understandings of publicly available information about the land and its Aboriginal histories and the key local organisations.

In the early stage, communication with local Elders was intermittent. The local Aboriginal Land Council referred the preschool to Elders working in local public schools via the men's shed. Uncle Larry picked up the invitation to engage with the preschool and advised that *"culture starts at home"*. The preschool team began looking at their engagement with families with renewed vigor. When COVID-19 hit about a year later the practice of talking with children about their culture at home was reinforced. The educational program was delivered online and had to draw on materials children had in their homes. The team gently inquired about what people had in their cupboards and put together food and craft packages delivered to people's homes. At this time meeting with local Elders in person was impossible, but the team emailed Uncle Larry regularly to 'check in', to offer assistance, and let him know about their latest efforts to talk to children about culture. The engagement narrative picks up speed when COVID-19 lockdowns eased, and the preschool opened for face-to-face contact. A new child - from a local Aboriginal family – enrolled. Sometimes this boy's Pop, Uncle Eddie, would come along with his Nan and mum to pick him up. After many chats, the preschool team realised Uncle Eddie was part of the men's shed with Uncle Larry. As Uncle Eddie got to know the team and how they like to have a laugh, he opened up and shared more about his family and culture. He was humble but it became apparent he was a community leader with substantial involvement with the Lands Council and many local Aboriginal initiatives. Kerry, the preschool's concierge, let Uncle Eddie know that Paula, author of this paper, is of Aboriginal descent 'although with no knowledge of my mob or where I am from'. A new partnership emerged.

The Elders began popping into the preschool regularly, keen to share their stories. The educators were delighted that children were learning directly from local knowledge holders. The team learnt the value of "what we like to call '*Uncle time*' - it's a bit like '*Island time*' where there's no rush and you just go with the flow". These interactions didn't run on a schedule. The Elders would pop in spontaneously to yarn, bring a small gift or share a dance. The preschool team always stopped to talk so the Elders felt valued.

Some of these conversations were dense with cultural knowledge. The Elders were involved in the creative design for a renovation at the local hospital. They would tell educators about their design processes and elements. Every aspect of their design had a spiritual connection that honoured the land and local communities. The palliative care ward was themed on the lyrebird– which they described as "the bird that speaks many languages and symbolic of modern multicultural Campbelltown". The Elders always drew attention to the importance of representing all cultures. They presented the preschool with a lyrebird painting by Uncle Larry which now hangs at the entrance to the preschool. These stories and interactions not only modelled how educators might put principles of respect and representation into action, but also broadened the preschool team's understanding about the land itself. When the Elders talked about informally about their own

lives, the educators grew to understand the continuing effects of colonisation and injustices towards Aboriginal peoples.

In this story of connection, long, wide, and deep professional and personal networks in the broader community have been essential. Because of its previous history, the preschool was known as a service that was acceptable to Aboriginal families. The interactions between educators and Uncle Larry during Covid refreshed this standing in the community. This 'first connections' narrative provides glimpses of the practice architectures that were in place to enable a deepening connection between Elder and educators. The cultural and discursive resources that authorised and encouraged early engagement practices can be found in policy statements that call on educational organisations to engage with Aboriginal communities and Elders: the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwee) Education Declaration; the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2018 standards. In ECEC, there is the joint statement from SNAICC and ECA (2019), the requirement of the National Quality Standard (NQS) for ECEC services and educators to understand, and help children learn about, the history, culture, and contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the EYLF calls for culturally responsive practice. These high-level policy documents guide organisations to consider what they need to provide to enable this action, and encourage practitioners to advocate within their organisations but holding them accountable to policy.

Enacting these policy imperatives requires a workforce empowered by decent pay and conditions. The preschool was part of a large not-for-profit organisation with pay, conditions that that exceed sector norms and with central office support for pedagogy, inclusion and administration. There were specific practice architectures that support engagements with Aboriginal communities. These have evolved over time, including over 10 years of investment in Reconciliation Actions Plans. The organisation has a manager of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs, designated First Nations positions and a corresponding enterprise agreement. The organisation is now guided by an external Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory committee and have engaged external researchers to better understand the knowledge needs of all their staff. These knowledge and capacity building architectures encourage educators in services to meet their policy obligations and social justice aspirations. Importantly, these economic investments assert the importance of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge holders. This challenges the political arrangements which subjugate Indigenous knowledge to western knowledge. These organisational structures and resources are critical. They support but do not replace the will, action, and the time needed at the frontline of service delivery to develop sustainable relationships with communities.

Culturally responsive education and care

The preschool itself, is well known for its inclusive education. The preschool team have participated in sustained on-site training in trauma informed, attachment and specific approaches for neurodiverse needs. Importantly, the preschool team was well informed about and networked to their local service system. Without an understanding of the local 'service friendly' map, they would have been less able to support the daily needs of their families. Without this knowledge, the starting point would have been learning about the local service system and its dynamics through networking with those who understand local servicing.

When an Aboriginal family with particularly high and complex needs was relocated to the area, the team were able to provide wraparound support and inclusive pedagogy. At that time, this family was comprised of a single parent with three young children under five and no connections to kin or local friendship networks. The family had poor experiences with ECEC

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services and Darby, 4 years old, had been 'asked to leave' several services. Darby was very physically active, they communicated through behaviour and appeared to have receptive but not expressive language skills and difficulty self-regulating. The preschool and research team did not shock easily but were unprepared for the intensity and frequency of Darby's outbursts. These were distressing for children, staff, and researchers. The first step the preschool team took was to establish and consistently implement routine evidence-based responses when Darby had disruptive outbursts. When Darby was calm, Darby was reintroduced to the group. The group of preschoolers were encouraged to understand each other's strengths and skills. Educators emphasised that some children could sit, some could wait, some could climb and some could sing. This laid the foundation for Darby and other children with disruptive behaviours. to be seen as a desirable friend, playmate, and co-learner with their own unique skills and strengths.

The next step was to provide wraparound support to the family. Both the preschool director and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs manager from the broader organisation met with the family and helped remove waitlist barriers to paediatric and allied health services. Together they argued that the paediatric specialist team should come to the service to observe Darby in a familiar social setting. This required a change in practice by the assessment team. The request was successful, primarily because the preschool was known locally for its exemplary inclusive practices. After observing, the specialist team said they had never seen such extreme externalised behaviours. Their assessment helped the family get a range of services and validated the preschool team's use of trauma informed practices. The assessment reinforced that the preschool team were moving in the right direction for Darby's development, learning and wellbeing.

Effective inclusion practice requires adequate supports. The cultural discursive supports for these inclusion and wraparound arrangements are mandated in international obligations such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability, and in national legislation such as the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards for Education. The NQF, EYLF and ACECQA (2023) require ECEC services to build inclusion for all children, including those with disability. The organisation had a deep commitment to inclusive education articulated in its strategic plans over many years.

Effective inclusion of children with complex needs requires high numbers of educators to children. The preschool had a substantial number of children with high support needs at the preschool and funded extra educators through the NSW state-based Disability Inclusion Program (DIP) which did not cap the numbers of subsidies available. However, DIP funding is set at a level which supports the casual employment of educators at the lowest level of qualification. The preschool's high numbers of children with additional support needs (sometimes up to fifty percent) meant they could pool funds to employ Diploma qualified educators and partially fund a family coordinator position.

Material-economic arrangements also included the building which had enough separate indoor and outdoor spaces to allow educators to move children into unused spaces when required. No special design features reduced noise and congestion which often trigger children with neurodiverse conditions or trauma experience, nevertheless, the size and layout of the building allowed these environmental factors to be managed. The staff levels and provision of a dedicated staff room allowed time off the floor for training or time out when the socio-emotional demands were high.

At the local level, all members of staff were valued as important team members, regardless of credentials or employment status (permanent or casual). All staff including DIP funded casual

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staff were encouraged to participate in professional learning. Rostering was organised so this was possible. The preschool team became highly cohesive and skilled in managing disruptive behaviour, with all team members receiving in-situ professional learning tailored to the service's specific needs. Advocacy about and close attention to staff conditions was a feature of the center-based social-political arrangements.

Working with Aboriginal knowledges

The preschool team worked with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander manager to hold a small gathering for Aboriginal families and Elders in the school holidays. This event marked a deeper turn in their inclusion practices. Aboriginal families attended with their older children along with a handful of the preschool team. Darby, their siblings, parent and recently reconnected grandmother all came. Uncle Ivan, whose intergenerational custodial responsibilities to Dharawal land had never been interrupted, yarned with Paula and had a laugh as he meticulously gathered leaves and sticks from the eucalypts at the front of the preschool. He continued to walk around until he found the right spot to begin. He purposefully placed leaves and sticks into his coolamon. As he began to burn the leaves a distinct cracking could be heard. Thick smoke emerged, and Uncle Ivan began to move around as another Elder delivered a Welcome to Country. Uncle Ivan's face, as he meaningfully circled each and every person with smoke, was earnest. Minimal words were spoken from anyone during ceremony. Children embraced smoke respectfully as they watched adult movements. As families sat immersed in Uncle Larry's teachings and yarning, Uncle Ivan moved around the playground. The children followed, enjoying being part of the Ceremony and enveloped in the smoke. They were excited to help Uncle Ivan dig a hole to bury the ashes, sealing the cleansing process. This ceremony happened when Uncle Ivan knew the children and the challenges they faced. It felt strong, the children knew who he was, and he knew who they were.

The preschool team presented each of the Elders with a personalised book documenting their visits to the preschool and how they had guided and inspired the preschool's thinking and practices. The team wanted to show their sincere appreciation and respect for the Elders who had become part of the preschool family. There was an overall enjoyable and relaxed feeling to the day. Interactions were unforced and people who had never met were connecting. The children played and laughed together.

After the school holidays, there was an obvious change in Darby. The intensity and frequency of outbursts had dramatically reduced. Darby was using more verbal communication and interacting more easily with friends. It was a huge transformation. Why? And how? It was not until a few days later the preschool team had an epiphany - was it the Smoking Ceremony? They wondered if this change in Darby was an effect of Uncle Ivan's spiritual customary practice. The educators could see that something deep had happened but could not explain it from the western frameworks that typically guide ECEC. Paula remembers thinking at the time, "You just had to see it to believe it. I honestly believe the Darby's new sense of belonging to their Aboriginal community has made a huge impact on their whole family". Darby's last day of preschool was emotional. It was as though Darby's parent was thinking it was the last time they would ever see us. However, all families including the Aboriginal families are considered as part of 'this preschool family' and will continue to be supported and invited back for these gatherings. As the preschool and research teams talked through the event and the change in Darby's behaviour, we all agreed there was more going on in the event than we could account for.

We were all struck by the power of the eucalypt smoke. In the hands of the traditional custodians, the smoke dissipated the deep

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isolation of Darby's family and strengthened their sense of belonging and shared care. This was the culmination of sustained activities of everyone at the gathering. The smoke and its story wafted through the networks of relationships built over years and aimed at securing wellbeing for these young Australians.

This event marked a shift in the socio-political arrangements at the preschool. Knowledge and how it is used is highly political. While key cultural/discursive resources such as the EYLF call for practice to be informed by multiple knowledges, those put into practice in mainstream settings are often, if not always, generated via western epistemologies (ways of knowing) and ontologies (ways of being). In the smoking ceremony, the educators engaged respectfully with Indigenous knowledge and its procedural (ontological) underpinning – that not all knowledge is open to everyone. In our case study honoring Indigenous ontologies meant educators did not fully understand how or why the event had the impact it did on Darby and their family. The educators accepted their understanding was partial.

Despite calls for educators to work with 'multiple knowledges', disruptions to the hierarchy of knowledge that privileges western knowledge can be uncomfortable. Educators must still assess their practice and be sure it is in the best interests of the child. In this case study, the educators had confidence in the educational guidance they received from the Elders because it was built over years of respectful interpersonal encounters and the standing of the Elders in the local community. After the event, educators continued with their autism and trauma-informed approaches and celebrated the Indigenous practices as key to the children's wellbeing.

There are strong Indigenous accounts of the groundwork necessary to find out about and incorporate Indigenous knowledges into practice (see for example, Muller, 2020 for a detailed account from social work and Shay et al., 2022 for a detailed account from education). Graham (2014, p.2) notes that relationality is the foundation of traditional Law and is an elaborate, complex and refined system of social, moral, spiritual and community obligations. These obligations and the knowledge that underpins them are not open to everyone, but knowledge is gained through experience, relationships and positionality. The protocols of Indigenous knowledge sharing are well beyond the remit of this paper and need to be understood locally. However, it is important to flag that these protocols and knowledge itself are inseparable. It is critical to follow Indigenous knowledge holders' protocols about what knowledge can be shared and in what contexts. This diverges from western ideas of knowledge. Creating space for Indigenous knowledge to inform ECEC practice requires not only knowledge but also a shift in the politics of knowledge production and consumption.

Furthermore, the question of how to seek and engage with Indigenous knowledge is tangible and material as well as political. Over time, the preschool team learnt of significant health and financial issues facing First Nation's families and in particular the Elders. Paula noted at the time:

> "the Uncles do not get paid for their community work but are in high demand from schools and community organisations. Their calendar is busier than mine. They are older with their own lives and, in spite of trouble making ends meet, they do not get housing or special supports from the Government, like many people assume. I am outraged by this. But they just take it in their stride and go the extra yard anyway. We make sure the Uncles never leave empty handed, it's our way of showing respect and appreciation of their time."

If the education sector and governments are committed to sustainable community engagement, then questions of adequate renumeration for knowledge holders must be considered.

Practice architectures for genuine sustainable engagement

National policies have significant effects on the way local contexts of ECE attend to justice and

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equality issues. In a cross-country comparison of national ECEC curriculum policy frameworks, Xu et al. (2023). argue national level policy can restrict or enable the development of locally responsive practice. In Australia there is a raft of key policy which encourages educational organisations to engage with Aboriginal communities and Elders: the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwee) Education Declaration; the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2018) standards, SNAICC and ECA (2019), the requirement of the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the EYLF. These high-level policies create imperatives for boards to invest in creating the organisational structures and resources that support sustainable engagement with communities.

Like other not-for-profit organisations, the organisation had structured their approach through Reconciliation Actions Plans which offered them early guidance about ongoing organisational learning and relationship building. They eventually established an external Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory committee to guide strategy. The organisation had an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, ran various designated programs, and had designated First Nations positions including a manager and a corresponding enterprise agreement. They commission and rely on research to understand the Indigenous knowledge held in the organisation and how best to meet the knowledge needs of all their staff. The impact of these knowledge and capacity building architectures are significant. They assert institutional support for Indigenous knowledge and knowledge holders. They ensure that efforts in local sites are well supported and sustainable.

At the centre level, the team was highly experienced in working with families who experience economic and related adversities. They worked closely with families to understand their strengths and needs. They were materially and discursively resourced to do this complex work. They had a comfortable staff room and time off the floor for programming and planning. They had multiple play spaces where they group children and/or could host community gatherings. They were adept at applying for Inclusion support funding and supported by external and internal inclusion and pedagogical supports. They continually advocated for contracts for inclusion support staff so these staff had secure employment and could participate in training. Staff retention was critical, key educators at the centre had worked in the region for decades. Over the years, they had funded time to develop solid sustainable networks with allied health and child protection services. This was key to their capacity to meet the needs of families.

The team seized opportunities to engage in research that would support them to develop their practice through new skills and reflexive practices. They chose to participate in research that brought expertise into the service so knowledge could be calibrated with real world experience. They often argued ferociously for the value of their existing practices and enjoyed having their practice challenged, validated, and developed.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that a range of resources are necessary to promote sustained engagement with Aboriginal communities. These range across political/discursive, material and political/relational resources. Policy supports are important sources of information that can support educators to advocate for change. There is a wealth of publicly available resources for early childhood educators to build their general knowledge of First Nations people. Further, services can seek additional material resourcing that is available in state and federal inclusion or community grant funding.

This case study suggests that 'the order of things' is important and staff teams must commit to building the skills and resources required if families have complex needs. Professional networks in local communities are essential. Resources that enable educators to

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build local connections, to reach out and get to know their local community are required for these professional networks. Expressed here as 'Uncle time', building trust and sustainable relationships take time and availability, which requires adequate staff-to-child ratios as well as job security for educators.

Finally, we have found that a Theory of Practice Architectures approach is a helpful lens for the sector, services, and educators. It supports rigorous thinking about how best to develop policy, professional structures and practices informed by the everyday realities of people who are poorly- served by societal structures and institutions. It can open a space that values and acts on the knowledge held in disadvantaged communities and recognises that all people are experts in their own lives. This approach was complementary to the research principles of Indigenous methodologies which honour First Nations ways of being, doing and relating.

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Nagangbi njirgang miigaybulalwala yuwinjbulalwala gudjagawulawala ngayagang buwindja nguumbun malada njin yuwinjbulalwala, njin miigaybulalwala, nga ni ngura ni nguragulli, nhay ngura, Eloura, Wodi Wodi, Dharawal gamangura. Hello to you all, women, men, and children, I remember with love the old men, old women, from my country, this country, Eloura, Wodi Wodi, and Dharawal speaking Country. We wish to acknowledge the wisdom and generosity of Elders Uncle Ivan Wellington, Uncle Larry Hill and Uncle Eddie Burge. This paper would not have been possible without the exceptional leadership of Director Jacklyn Staudinger and her amazing team or without the Engaging Families in Education research team Anna Jones, Marianne Fenech, Christine Woodrow and Frances Press.

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