

Moort dandjoo kaadadjiny: Growing up Aboriginal kids strong in their culture and identity

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Abstract

Community Elders in Boorloo (Perth) identified early childhood education (ECE) as a priority area for Aboriginal children's research. This is due to a lower number of Aboriginal children attending ECE programs compared to non-Aboriginal children. Attending ECE programs sets children up for school success and is an indicator for positive life outcomes in later life. Therefore, we sought to co-design and implement a program that encourages Aboriginal children and families to attend ECE programs, known as Moort Dandjoo Kaadadjiny. Since 2021, 57 children have attended, and 27 participants yarned about their experience with the program. These yarns revealed the importance of building trust, being Aboriginal led, and holistic engagement in Aboriginal culture as essential in co-designing culturally safe ECE programs. This program serves as a foundation for developing culturally appropriate ECE programs for Aboriginal children and families to ensure Aboriginal kids grow up strong in their culture and identity.

Keywords

Early childhood education, Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal children, qualitative research, Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing

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Background

Engagement in early childhood education (ECE) programs is an important part of children achieving school readiness (Dockett et al., 2010). Currently, many Aboriginal children do not attend ECE programs. As a result, there is an Australian government target toward improving attendance (Closing the Gap, 2020). However, mainstream ECE programs fail to engage Aboriginal families largely due to being culturally inappropriate and unsafe. ECE programs that incorporate Aboriginal cultural values will contribute to increased engagement and attendance from Aboriginal children and families and perhaps an increase in a child's readiness for school (Dockett et al., 2010). The first step is in designing a culturally appropriate ECE program for Aboriginal children and families to attend.

School readiness and ECE

Current conceptualisations of school readiness centre on a three-part definition encompassing “children’s readiness for school, school’s readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008, p.1). However, while this three-part definition is a step forward, in practice children’s individual characteristics are still the focus of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009). Thus, there is still an expectation that an Aboriginal child “comes to school ‘school ready’” (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 1156). This shifts the responsibility of school readiness from the school being ready for children and community providing appropriate developmental opportunities, onto the family and the child. In addition, measures and assessments for school readiness reflect mainstream, middle class, white Australian culture and values (Jo Taylor, 2011). Not only is it culturally inappropriate to assess Aboriginal children using these tools, but it does not recognise the strengths that Aboriginal children bring to the

classroom (Jo Taylor, 2011) and blames the family when their child does not meet mainstream Australian notions of school readiness (Anderson et al., 2023).

This cultural incongruence poses a barrier for Aboriginal children attending ECE programs. Increasing Aboriginal children’s enrolment at ECE programs to 95% by 2025 has become a target of the national Closing the Gap campaign, which aimed to reduce the gap in life and health outcomes among Aboriginal Australians, compared to non-Indigenous Australians. In 2018, this target appeared to be on track with 85% of Aboriginal children enrolled in an ECE program in the year prior to starting full-time schooling (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). However, being enrolled in an ECE program does not equate to attendance. There is concern among the Aboriginal community in Boorloo (Perth in the local Noongar language), that mainstream ECE programs are incongruent with Aboriginal values, hindering Aboriginal children’s attendance.

Mainstream ECE programs are based on mainstream cultural values, which are often incongruent, racist or culturally inappropriate to people of the non-dominant culture (Morris et al., 2022). As a result, many Aboriginal families do not engage with, or disengage from, these programs. However, the presence of an Aboriginal educator significantly increases the attendance of Aboriginal children at ECE programs (Biddle, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for ECE to be culturally safe and diverse so as not to contribute to enduring assimilation pressures Aboriginal families face from mainstream services (Farrant et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2022). This will help ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

Aboriginal culture connected to positive life outcomes

Connection to one’s Aboriginal culture is inextricably linked to wellbeing and positive life outcomes. This is captured by Warlpiri Patu

Kurlangu Jaru (2011, 6) who states, “[O]ur own language and culture play the biggest role in growing our spirit... Young people can’t lead a good, healthy and happy life without this. Language and culture come first.” Data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey supports this. Aboriginal people who speak an Aboriginal language have “better physical and mental health; are more likely to be employed”, “are more likely to attend school”, “are more likely to gain a post-school qualification”, and “are less likely to engage in high-risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p.13). In addition, Biddle and Swee (2012) found that Aboriginal people who live on their own homelands or traditional Country reported a higher level of happiness than those who do not live on their lands. These findings show how Aboriginal culture contributes to positive life outcomes.

Other aspects of Aboriginal culture are also important. Salmon et al. (2019) found that social and community support are essential for Aboriginal children’s health and wellbeing, developing social relationships, and school readiness. Additionally, Aboriginal participation in cultural activities and community-led programs contributed to positive emotional health, a sense of identity and belonging, and reduced interaction with youth detention and the justice system (Salmon et al., 2019). Significantly, these results also apply to Aboriginal children removed from their family (Salmon et al., 2019). Considering that Aboriginal Australians have poorer health and mental health outcomes, lower school completion rates, and higher unemployment rates (Dudgeon et al., 2014) it is clear programs dedicated to building and maintaining Aboriginal cultural connections are crucial.

One way to address this is to incorporate Aboriginal cultural knowledges, values, and practices into ECE programs. As noted above, there is a gap in the number of Aboriginal children attending ECE programs and these

programs are typically not culturally appropriate. We cannot wait for ECE training providers to become culturally safe and incorporate values of the culturally diverse populations in Australia into their programs. There is a great need for culturally appropriate, Aboriginal-led ECE programs for Aboriginal children and families to attend.

Moort dandjoo kaadadjiny background

Moort Dandjoo Kaadadjiny (MDK; family together learning in Noongar language) is an Elder and community designed ECE program for Aboriginal children. The program is held in a separate building at a primary school in Boorloo. This school was chosen due to the high enrolment number of Aboriginal children and a preexisting relationship with the school principal. 3.8% of the residents in the suburb identify as Aboriginal (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Other community demographic information is not reported as many parents attending the program travel from out of the area and are not representative of the local community. The program was created to privilege Aboriginal worldviews, knowledges, and cultural values to provide a culturally safe learning environment for Aboriginal children and their families.

Since February 2021, MDK offers 2.5-h sessions twice per week during school terms. The program provides a range of cultural experiences for koolunga¹ and their families that attend. These include sharing Noongar language, cultural incursions and excursions by local Noongar businesses, family cultural days, and family camp trips on Country to ensure Aboriginal children and their families continue to connect to their culture. Additional personalised support, such as transportation, food or fuel vouchers, and specialist referral pathways are provided on an individual needs basis to assist in overcoming some of the barriers to attending MDK. The program is flexible whereby families can join at any time during the

school term and can attend one or both days when it suits their schedule. There is no cost to families attending the program.

Study aim

The aim was to co-design and implement a culturally safe ECE program that meets the needs and values of Aboriginal families and encourages attendance. While many barriers to attending ECE programs exist, our study specifically wanted to know what Aboriginal people find important in building a culturally appropriate program to address cultural misalignment as a barrier.

Method

Research framework and team

MDK is a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project (Wright et al., 2013). CBPR is “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2010, p.6). The program was co-designed with the research team, a community Elder group, and parents and community members who attend MDK. The community Elder group, Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort (NKNK; our children our heart in Noongar language), provides governance and oversight to the project (see Scrine et al., 2020). A sub-group of the Elders are involved in the design and day-to-day running of the program as well as provide valuable input into all decision-making processes and research questions (Farrant et al., 2019). Involvement of Elders honours their central role and status in Aboriginal culture as the Birdiya (bosses) (Farrant et al., 2019). Families and educators at MDK also provide feedback, iteratively, on expectations and program activities. Feedback is immediately incorporated into the program. CBPR allows for the

flexibility and responsiveness required to tailor MDK into a program that addresses community cultural and educational needs (Collins et al., 2018). The program start date was delayed until 2021 due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee, reference number 973.

Procedure

Early 2021, a flyer for the MDK program was posted in community sites such as the local library, the grocery store, local health services and community Facebook pages. Word of mouth was also used to encourage community members to attend the program. On the first visit, parents and carers are informed of the research nature of the program, some demographic information is collected, and they provide informed consent to participate in yarns and for their child/ren to attend the program.

Program participants. Table 1 shows the number of program participants and those who participated in a yarn. A total of 57 children attended MDK. Per child, attendance ranges from one visit to 61 visits. The program sees between two and 26 children per term. Official attendance rates were low during term two of 2022, due to staffing issues and poor recording of attendance. Occasionally, a school aged sibling ($n = 10$) attended a session.

The program is open to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and carers of Aboriginal kids and their siblings or foster siblings. Children attend the program with either their parent, aunty, grandparent, and/or carer. For brevity, the term parents will be used to include aunts and grandparents. However, grandparents are separated in table one. The majority of parents and carers that attended the program were female. While many families live local to the program, some report travelling up to 50 minutes each way

Table 1. Number of program participants and yarn participants.

Program participants ^a	N (Aboriginal)
Children aged <1 – 5 years	57 (55)
Parents ^b	27 (23)
Grandparents	4 (4)
Carers	5 (1)
Elders	3 (3)
Early childhood educators	5 (5)
Total program participants	101 (91)
Yarning participants ^c	N (Aboriginal)
Parents	13 (9)
Carers	3 (1)
Grandparents	2 (2)
Elders	3 (3)
Early childhood educators/Service providers	6 (5)
Total yarning participants	27 (20)

^aParticipants attended the program at least once.

^bMajority of parents were women, four fathers attended.

^cProgram participants who also participated in a yarning session.

to attend. No other participant demographics were collected.

Yarning and yarn participants. Yarning is an Aboriginal communication style used to share information and knowledge between two or more people (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Lin et al., 2016). Yarns are participant led, allowing participants to control the conversation and share information they think is relevant, rather than be directed by the researcher. This suited the CBPR approach used in the study. Broadly, participants were asked to yarn about their experience accessing MDK and provide feedback and suggestions to improve the program. Yarning has been used successfully in qualitative research by Aboriginal researchers and has proved to be a rigorous form of data collection (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kilcullen et al., 2017). Authors LJ and TW led the yarns.

There were 17 group yarns and 21 individual yarns. The majority of yarns were with Aboriginal participants, however, some participants were non-Aboriginal. This was

intentional. Project Elders asked that interviews be inclusive of all who access the program, especially as some Aboriginal children are raised by their non-Aboriginal parent or carer. Of the service providers and educators, two were service providers, one non-Aboriginal speech pathologist and one Aboriginal Noongar language teacher and four Aboriginal early childhood educators. All yarning participants were female, except for two fathers.

Yarns occurred between June 2021 and June 2023. As the program spans multiple years, some participants were part of multiple yarns. Yarns occurred either in person during the MDK program or over the phone at a time that suited the participant. Some yarns were planned while others were opportunistic in nature. As a result, recorded yarns ranged in length from 2 minutes to 1 hour 18 minutes. Yarns were transcribed then analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method frequently used in Aboriginal research (Braun & Clark, 2006; Whyman et al., 2022).

Results

Yarns about MDK with participants were broad. Unprompted, participants identified three key aspects of the program that made it culturally appropriate and safe. These aspects are (1) “it’s all about building trust”, (2) being Aboriginal led, and (3) holistic engagement in Aboriginal culture. Table two outlines theme and subthemes.

“It’s all about building trust”

As participants yarned about their experience at MDK, it became clear that success of the program was “all about building trust” and how this builds the foundation for providing support to other parents, the link between creating a sense of community, and fostering safe environments for cultural learning. The essence of building trust and developing relationships as vital for the program was captured in this yarn between a staff member and an Elder,

Elder: it was getting used to the new staff and trying to form a relationship with new staff. And then...she got a permanent job, so, which was good for her but not good for us. We need somebody permanent. Like when you started, [you] was going to be there all the time and we were able to form a relationship with you...but then the other girl came in and she was only there a short time...

Staff: So... that relationship, building rapport and having those relationships is very crucial for the program...

Elder: yes, I think that’s really vital.

Trust formed between those who attend MDK created connections and the foundation to provide support to each other. Parents and carers offer, “the reason why I come is because of the aunties and my connections to the people...I’m coming for the connection for me ... and the kids”, I like “the yarn sharing because you get so much information out of that. People come in

and talk about if they’ve got problems with their children or something in the community. There’s always support”.

This creates an environment where attendees say, “I feel more comfortable... it’s been a while since I’ve been in a supportive group” and “[child’s name] felt comfortable and I felt comfortable”. Many parents described MDK as a “safe place” and as being “culturally safe”.

The level of connection between parents, Elders, and staff demonstrates a deep level of trust that has been created. A non-Aboriginal carer states that “the acceptance for me to be able to ask stupid questions. And not feel you know, judged or outsider or anything um, yeah that’s been very beneficial for me.” A non-Aboriginal mum adds that attending MDK has “helped me with [my Aboriginal child] first being Aboriginal and me being wadjella [non-Aboriginal] and not knowing, I don’t know Noongar. I don’t know what there is for him. I don’t know, and it’s helped a lot.” This reiterates the impact trust and connection has on providing support among attending parents, carers, and Elders.

Attendees describe the program as having “a good community feel”. People come together to share “not just food and talk and culture, but everything... It’s much deeper and we don’t even live near each other, but we’re travelling to meet... that is really why we come”. One mum states, “I get more excited than [my daughter] does for playgroup... to see the other mums and [program staff].”

The social connection and support provided by this community group was talked about the most. Its importance was stated by a service provider. She offers, “one of the benefits of these sort of group [is]... That link and support, parents doing that with one another, it’s so important.”

Another benefit that extends from the connections and relationships formed among the group was identified. One Aboriginal carer states, “when you’re feeling comfortable, the kids are comfortable too. And they’re feeling

proud to learn their culture and language.” Children benefit from the relationships formed among the adults that attend MDK. These relationships foster safe environments for cultural development and learning for both the adults and the children that attend.

Aboriginal led

A program that was completely Aboriginal led and run, with Aboriginal people in control, such as community Elders, research staff, and play-group educators, was seen as critical to the success of the program.

Aboriginal staff. Having an Aboriginal led and run program was seen as a main factor for the success of the program. Participants expressed,

Speaker 1: We think having all aboriginal staff is important.

Speaker 2: Yeah, I think it’s very important that our people are involved.

This was also captured by an educator who stated, “culturally, having Aboriginal educators, having Aboriginal Elders, having the research and project officer, [Aboriginal community member], all in one ... it was a culturally safe place”.

The significance of programs run and led by Aboriginal people is that it may help Close the Gap in Aboriginal children attending such programs. An Elder states, “programs have been the same for years... and Aboriginal people don’t use them... our families especially, they don’t like going to centres where there’s no Aboriginal staff”. These participants identified that a program staffed by Aboriginal people creates an environment that is culturally safe where Aboriginal people are more comfortable to attend.

In addition to this, participants identified that Aboriginal people in these types of roles can have other benefits. An Aboriginal carer says, “the fact that we have Aboriginal people... it’s role modelling and showing [others] that you

can achieve so much. And you can help your people and help yourself... I think that’s a big thing.” Aboriginal people working in these positions can be seen as role models for their community.

Presence of community elders. Elders were seen as central to the program for all parents and carers. Their knowledge of culture and family connections brings the program together. An Aboriginal staff member summarises the value Elders bring to the program, “having you [Aunty Oriel] and Aunty Doris, or Elders, and Aunty Roma there has been so crucial and important for [the families’] belonging and their children”.

For parents, Elders provide an important link in sharing cultural knowledge to the next generation. The presence of Elders was considered “very special” because the “Elders are able to instil their knowledge and their stories from their childhood and all of that, they’re able to instil that into our generation and the generation after us, it’s, so that hopefully they’ll be carried through”. This was echoed by many parents who expressed that Elders have “Knowledge that they can pass down” and that they share “what they know about our culture”. For non-Aboriginal parents, the Elders offer something they themselves cannot. One non-Aboriginal parent sums this up best,

it’s important for [the kids] to... have the Elders there. Because the Elders, that’s where the stories come from. That’s where the culture comes from and passing it down to the kids ... there’s lots I can’t tell [my son] unless I know from the Elders teaching me.

Elders present at MDK is also meaningful to the koolunga that attend. One Aboriginal carer says her kids “always talk about Aunty Doris and she’s always on our dinner table yarns... they adore her completely and utterly... And on their birthday list; Aunty Doris was on their birthday list.” Her children also ask about Aunty Doris, “Why doesn’t she come for dinner yet?”.

The opportunity for koolunga to engage with Elders is especially important to Aboriginal children in care. One non-Aboriginal carer said, "I love [my child's] ability to meet Elders. I found that very valuable." An Elder reflects on this particular child's attendance saying that "that little girl foster child she wouldn't get that otherwise you know ... having us Elders there."

Elders reflect on their involvement in the program. One Elder says "I enjoy coming. I enjoy being here with the families... it's good to see the kids grow." A second Elder contributes, "I really enjoyed the little darlings when they come in". The Elders get as much out of the program as the families do.

Engaging in aboriginal culture

The opportunity for participants to connect with their culture is another main focus for the program. Program attendees regularly enjoy cultural incursions and excursions. Some of the activities include weaving, making tapping sticks, learning about Aboriginal symbols, cultural protocol, Dreaming stories, and learning some Noongar language.

Passing on culture to koolunga. Parents talked about how learning about their culture connects them to their ancestors, their histories, and is a means for ensuring future generations have access to their culture. One educator valued "the kids learning about all these things and about how our ancestors and our generations before us lived and what they did to survive and the tools they use and what dance meant to them." For non-Aboriginal parents, the main reason for coming to MDK is for their child to learn about their culture. One non-Aboriginal parent says, it's "to teach [my daughter] about her culture... Because I can't teach it, because I'm not Indigenous... when she's older, she'll know how to teach her kids, when she has kids." Another parent echoes this. For her, bringing her child to MDK is "for him to be able to carry [culture]

through to his children as well. But also, for him to know where he came from."

Engaging in culture is something the koolunga enjoy. One Aboriginal carer says this is one of the main reasons that she comes. Her girls "generally have day care on that day but they tell me that they want to come to playgroup because they love the language and the songs." In another yarn, this Aboriginal carer reveals that "the girls are going home and they're teaching all the older brothers and sisters everything ... they're teaching them like, mainly all the animals and stuff... and the big kids are like wanting to know." Learning about culture is extended to teaching other koolunga in the family that do not attend MDK.

A non-Aboriginal carer also describes taking the language lessons home and how her child has continued to learn Noongar and built confidence in her use of the language,

We use words around the house. [I've] got words up in every room that's appropriate, so in [Aboriginal child's] room I've got like, you're tired and goodnight. And we've got twinkle, twinkle little star ... she can count in Noongar...I've noticed that she is more confident in her language. Like her first word for magpie now isn't magpie, ...there are some words where [Noongar's] her preferred word.

Parents learning about their culture to pass on to koolunga. Cultural activities and language lessons are not only beneficial for the koolunga who attend. Parents, Elders, and educators also find these aspects of the program worthwhile. Some parents talked about how they did not have to opportunity to learn much about their culture for various reasons and how this program bridges that gap in cultural knowledge.

One Aboriginal mum says she enjoys "her [daughter] learning language, I suppose. I personally missed out on that as a child." Another Aboriginal mum supports this saying,

"when I was younger, my parents moved over to [city], so we lost touch with our family, our

culture... I didn't know any Noongar words when we came back to Perth, much about our culture, anything like that. So, I like coming. We're learning a lot.

Learning Noongar language and culture was not just for the parents' own knowledge, but to pass on to their koolunga. An Aboriginal carer says, "a lot of that stuff I didn't know, either. Yeah, some of it I didn't. So I found that really interesting, just learning myself, so then I can learn my kids." A non-Aboriginal carer agrees, "there's a lot more Indigenous stuff done at this one, ..., so it's great to get that knowledge as well, so that I can teach him."

For parents to teach their children about their culture, they must first have the opportunity to learn it themselves. These quotes describe MDK as a place of learning culture in a culturally safe, culturally appropriate way to ensure culture is passed on to future generations of Aboriginal koolunga.

A place for connecting family and kin. Family and kinship are central to Aboriginal culture. The MDK program is a way some participants connect with their family or find family connections. An Aboriginal carer describes, "Aunty Doris knows a lot of people that I know and family that I know, so I just look forward to seeing her and having that connection with her". For others, coming to MDK means some Aboriginal children in Out of Home Care (OOHC) can connect with their family. One non-Aboriginal carer says of her child, he "can get to know his family, because at the moment, he hasn't any other family contact. So, it's nice for him to get to know them and build a relationship with them" at MDK. Other extended family connections are also made. Within the group, there is a value on families being together. Being able to share MDK with the whole family and for families to meet each other was something participants really loved. People enjoyed "catching up with cousins and aunties, extended family that we might not have seen as well if we

hadn't come to that day" and "being able to bring the other kids up and show them and have them here with [child's name]". Others supported this with, "I love the family camps and days as well, so that my other kids can be involved, I find that very valuable" and "it brought families together".

Family and cultural days enhancing connection to family, country, culture, and identity. Connecting to Country is linked to learning culture, and this is facilitated through the family days and cultural days. Here, attendees are able to connect to significant Noongar sites and learn about their history. Participants enjoy these days saying, "I like being on country like the excursion as well, that was really good." Some aspects of these days people found valuable include,

We went out and heard the stories of Point Walter and all the names and...it's probably the thing I learnt a lot in that day... I learnt about the trees that are intertwined because they disobeyed the elders and the name for Joondalup and yeah, I really enjoyed that.

One Elder adds, "it's good for [koolunga] to have an Aboriginal man to talk to them about, you know, the world and everything". Learning about cultural sites, their Noongar names and associated cultural stories, from a respected Elder, is demonstrating the passing on of important cultural knowledge in a culturally appropriate way. It also highlights that learning about Aboriginal culture does not occur in isolation of others aspects of culture. This is emphasised by a service provider stating, "you can't have culture without language, and you can't have language without culture. They actually go together." In addition, being connected to one's culture and learning language is linked to Aboriginal identity. This was highlighted in a dialogue between two participants,

Speaker 1: we connect to that culture through language... that language is quite important.

Speaker 2: yea for cultural identity.

The holistic nature of the program is best summarised here, “projects like this are really important. [Be]cause we’re instilling culture, connection to country, [and] identity.”

Discussion

This study aimed to co-design and implement a culturally safe ECE program that meets the needs and values of Aboriginal families. Participants described how building trust between those who attend, having Elders and Aboriginal staff members, and providing the opportunity for koolunga to engage with their Aboriginal culture leads to a culturally safe program that families want to attend. As all aspects of the program are co-designed, MDK asserts Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) and how this leads to program success. MDK could serve as a foundation for how Western Australia, and Australia more broadly, develop culturally appropriate ECE programs.

Building trust and relationships among the attendees was considered important in developing a sense of community. Participants described how the sense of community at MDK provided social support. In addition, as a collectivist culture, Aboriginal communities are important in raising children. Koolunga at MDK are part of a community surrounded by their culture and aunties that provide love and support. This cannot be understated. In Aboriginal culture, belonging to a community is central to a sense of identity (Gee et al., 2014). For Aboriginal koolunga growing up in a city with some in OOHC, a program that has a sense of community at its core is essential in growing up koolunga strong in their culture and identity. Fostering a sense of community should be a strong focus for all cultural programs seeking to engage Aboriginal families.

The inclusion of cultural activities, Noongar language lessons, and the presence of Elders provides a holistic environment for koolunga and families to learn about their culture. For many parents and non-Aboriginal carers, this is extremely valuable as they would otherwise not have

access to some of these parts of their culture. Furthermore, MDK provides a place for all koolunga, especially those in OOHC, to learn about their culture and develop their sense of Aboriginality. This is supported by Gapany et al. (2022) who found that embedding Aboriginal knowledge and language into ECE programs is important for building strong Aboriginal identities. Extending the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge, culture, and language into schools would equally be valuable, especially given its link to positive life outcomes (Biddle & Swee, 2012; Salmon et al., 2019). The inclusion of such aspects in the program strongly reflects Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing, and helps protect against the assimilation of Aboriginal kids when entering the education system. In this sense, MDK ensures the continuity of Aboriginal culture into the future.

Based on participant yarns, aspects of the program provide koolunga and families connection to the different domains of SEWB. Connection to family, kin, and community through bringing together Elders and other Aboriginal parents, carers, and koolunga to the program; Connection to mind and emotions through the social support provided by the MDK community; Connection to culture and spirituality through cultural activities and yarns about Dreaming stories; connection to Country through trips on Country; and, Connection to the body through the health information sessions and referral to appropriate health professionals. It was not an initial expected outcome of the program to influence wellbeing and was therefore not measured. However, as the program provides connections to all domains of SEWB, it could improve the SEWB of koolunga and families. We recommend research into how the program can impact SEWB as a next step.

MDK is a culturally safe and culturally rich ECE program. Aboriginal koolunga and families are part of a community where they learn and participate in their Aboriginal culture, learn some Noongar language, and build relationships with community Elders and other community members. As a program we see (1) koolunga learning their culture and language

demonstrating readiness to learn at school, (2) the program based at a primary school demonstrating the school's commitment to learn to be ready for Aboriginal children, and (3) families and communities provided developmental opportunity to their koolunga. These three factors partially make up school readiness (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). While measuring school readiness was not a primary aim for the program and we acknowledge that the term school readiness is problematic when used to assess Aboriginal children, these three aspects of the MDK program combined create the environment for koolunga to get ready for school. Future research should explore this further.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, because this program was co-designed by community and Elders living in Boorloo it cannot be directly applied in another Aboriginal community. Success of the program in other locations would be contingent upon consultation and co-design with the local Aboriginal community. Secondly, participants were not explicitly asked about components of MDK that make it culturally safe and encourage attendance. Participants yarned about their experiences of the program more broadly. Therefore, there may be other aspects of the program that contribute to making it culturally safe for Aboriginal families that have not been identified. Thirdly, while attendees valued the program, there were periods of lower attendance, particularly during periods of staff turnover and when COVID-19 concerns were high. There was a settling-in period with new staff learning their responsibilities, such as building rapport with families and recording attendance. In instances where the incoming staff member was unknown to the community, family feedback and attendance reduced. We suggest employing an Aboriginal person who is known to the community will contribute to a smoother transition. Lastly, the focus of this paper was to explore aspects of the program that made it culturally appropriate and

safe. Discussing attendance and whether the program promoted school readiness was beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

ECE programs co-designed with Aboriginal cultural knowledges, values, and practices at their core provide cultural safety and a positive, culturally appropriate learning environment which meet the needs of Aboriginal families. Aboriginal children that attend ECE programs such as MDK are more likely to be school ready and culturally grounded. Being strong in one's culture and identity sets children up for success at school and for later life. Therefore, it is essential that ECE programs embed Aboriginal culture and values to ensure children enter the education system in a culturally appropriate way and that Aboriginal children grow up strong in their culture and identity.

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Note

1. The term koolunga will be used to refer to the children that attend MDK. Koolunga is the Noongar word for children.

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