

COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

# Jarjums Connections: Connecting Aboriginal Culture With Yoga in Early Childhood Education and Care Services—A Partnership Story

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## ABSTRACT

**Issue Addressed:** There remains a wide health disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Effective health promotion programs and partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services are vital to improving Aboriginal health outcomes, closing the gap of inequality and working towards reconciliation.

**Discussion:** The Jarjums Connections program promotes Aboriginal culture through storytelling, yoga-inspired movements and mindfulness, in Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECECS). The program was developed in collaboration between the Aboriginal Health Unit and the Health Promotion Unit in Sydney Local Health District (SLHD) and is based on Aboriginal significant animals of SLHD. The principles of yoga and its philosophies merging with Aboriginal culture have been complementary, and this synergy was harnessed to develop the program. The program has had positive feedback to date and shows promise.

**Conclusion:** The accomplishments and lessons learned so far from the program can inform future practice and scale-up of the program. As it moves towards a digital platform, it has the potential to be adapted and tailored to suit other Aboriginal Nations, LHDs and ECECS across the state and beyond.

**So What?** Rolling the program out digitally would be a low-cost and equitable way to embed Aboriginal cultural learning into mainstream education and potentially positively affect the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children more broadly.

## 1 | Background

There remains a wide health disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians [1]. Effective health promotion

programs and partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services are vital to improving Aboriginal health outcomes, closing the gap of inequality and working towards reconciliation [2–5].

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Jarjums Connections is a train-the-trainer program that promotes Aboriginal culture using yoga-inspired movements and mindfulness activities for educators, children and their families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECECS). The program supplements and culturally enriches the state-wide Munch & Move program and has been developed by Aboriginal Health and Health Promotion Staff under the guidance of both the Aboriginal Health Unit (AHU) and Health Promotion Unit (HPU) at Sydney Local Health District (SLHD).

The development and implementation of Jarjums Connections is a partnership story that demonstrates what can be achieved by bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff together and reveals promising potential for how this program can respectfully weave Aboriginal culture into a mainstream education setting for young children. This paper describes the development of this project as well as the documented achievements and lessons learned along the way, to inform future practice of health promotion programs of this kind.

## 2 | Evolution of the Program

### 2.1 | Inception

The seed for the Jarjums Connections program was conceived in 2019 based on feedback from educators during regular fieldwork for the Munch & Move program [6]. Educators from ECECS saw the potential benefit yoga can have on children's physical, emotional and mental well-being attending their ECECS and expressed that it would supplement and enhance Munch & Move's practice of Fundamental Movement Skills.

The Munch & Move program is a key state-wide program in New South Wales (NSW) that aims to influence and improve the healthy eating and active living environments of ECECS through professional development and support for early childhood educators (ECE). The program was launched in NSW in 2008 and has continued to see improvements in program adoption in ECECS in NSW, including services with a high proportion of Aboriginal children [6].

The majority of Australian children aged 2–4 years (83%) are not meeting the recommendations for physical activity each day [7]. The physical, social, psychological and cognitive benefits of participating in the recommended physical activity for children have been well documented [8–10]. Furthermore, mental health struggles, for some, begin in childhood, with approximately 13.6% of Australian children aged 4–11 experiencing a mental health illness [11]. Children who are struggling with their mental health are at greater risk of long-term mental illness and have poorer education and relationship outcomes, compared with children who have mental health challenges addressed and identified early [12].

Literature suggests that yoga can simultaneously treat physical as well as psychosocial issues as it addresses both mind and body [13, 14]. The physical, social and mental benefits of yoga are apparent, and research in this area continues to emerge [13, 14]. Research indicates that yoga may reduce anxiety; improve

mental health; improve focus, concentration and emotional balance; as well as boost cardiorespiratory fitness and physical functioning [13, 14].

The vision and concept to connect Aboriginal culture with yoga-inspired movements emerged further during the COVID-19 pandemic when a lot of fieldwork ceased and regular health services shut down. An Aboriginal staff member in SLHD presented the Healthy Children Initiative (HCI) team with a novel 6-week Aboriginal children's yoga pilot program being run in remote Western Australia called 'Wellness Walkabout Program' [14] and expressed interest in designing something tailored for the district.

Aboriginal culture and yogic philosophy have similar ideologies that align themselves in multiple ways, which is why it was believed that the two would complement each other well for this program. Yoga and its philosophy connect body, mind, and spirit; Aboriginal cultures connect body, land and spirit. Their views are similarly aligned on the sustainability of life and reciprocity, deep listening or meditation, connection to the earth, responsibility, love and healing, decolonising our minds and our practice, the practice of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing and non-hoarding [15]. Yoga also ties in well with the eight Aboriginal ways of learning pedagogy framework, which includes: story sharing, learning maps, non-verbal, symbols and Images: land Links, non-linear, deconstruct/reconstruct and community links [15, 16].

Bainbridge et al. [17] assert in their rapid literature review that social and emotional well-being is a missing link in health programs for Indigenous Australians, and state that culturally sensitive strengths-based approaches show potential for success.

### 2.2 | Development

The Jarjums Connections program continued to take form in 2020 as monthly meetings with a new advisory and working group were established. This group was made up of staff from the AHU, staff from the HPU, as well as an external children's yoga expert. The program was designed, developed and established through this close and multidisciplinary collaboration. Aboriginal staff leadership was pivotal in ensuring the Aboriginal cultural context, content and fidelity were informed, safe, authentic and accurate. Time was invested in building a strong relationship and trust between individuals and teams.

Murrup-Stewart et al.'s [18] systematic review stresses that to ensure that health and well-being programs are culturally safe and relevant, we must better engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and value participant experience. Moreover, Bainbridge [17] stresses that for Aboriginal health programs to be successful, they must include 'Indigenous engagement, partnerships and leadership; service integration; incorporating and accounting for the social determinants of health; workforce development; program adaptation; multi-level program components; targeted issues; accounting for holistic views of health and well-being; brief interventions and short-term education components; and consistent and reliable service delivery'. This is why the strategies in Wilson et al. [5] framework for health

professionals to work effectively with Aboriginal people were considered throughout the program's development and partnership. The framework describes the approach, skills, and attitude recommended to enable respect for one another.

Jarjums Connections' structure, story book, educator guide, lessons and supporting resources were also developed in close collaboration within this working group and were finalised in 2021. The program is tailored for SLHD ECECS (extending out to the Eora Nation) and designed based on Aboriginal Significant Animals of the District, using Barani as the preferred First Nations language of the Eora: The Wurriga (Goanna), the Gawura (Whale) and The Burra (Eel).

The program supports the ECECS Reconciliation Action Plan and complements and culturally enriches Munch & Move active play materials. The program's resource kit includes a storybook, an educator guide, SLHD Aboriginal health logo flag, bespoke wooden clapsticks (designed by an Aboriginal craftsman Brian Freeman, a Wiradjuri Man from Brungle, NSW), SLHD Aboriginal health logo sun mats, river stones, trauma-informed care booklet for services and Aboriginal children and families. Furthermore, electronic program resources were created (which can be accessed via QR codes within the educator guide) to include videos, songs and meditations, voiced and performed by Aboriginal staff and members of the local community. The estimated cost absorbed by SLHD for each resource kit is \$150 per service.

### 2.3 | Pilot

In 2022, a small pilot, involving three ECECS, was carried out to test the program allowing for feedback and edits for the final version. Three ECECS in SLHD accepted the invitation to participate in the pilot (including one community-based Aboriginal preschool which caters to Aboriginal and low-income families). The services were trained in a workshop by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal project staff and then implemented the program at their ECECS.

The feedback from the services after the pilot was positive and their suggestions informed the final version of the resources and program. At 10-week post-training workshop, all participating educators ( $n=8$ ) from the three services took part in both an email survey and a semi-structured telephone interview. All educators agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program, intend to continue it, that it adds to their well-being curriculum, and that they are confident to use the resources. All educators were enthusiastic about the program and reported that it was received well by the children and parents and that it appeared to be making an impact. Some comments from parents were that their children were practising the poses at home, using the Aboriginal names for the animals.

Jarjums Connections was officially launched in NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week in 2022, and at the end of the year, it was recognised for its ingenuity and strong partnership and won an SLHD Innovation and Excellence Award in the category of Health Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

### 2.4 | Roll out

At the end of 2022 and then in 2023, the program began to roll out district-wide. The team ran three workshops with 60 educators from 38 ECECS attending. In order to maintain and strengthen the Aboriginal cultural accuracy and ownership of the program, further advice and leadership were provided by the Aboriginal staff. An Aboriginal Impact Statement was completed for the program, together with a call for renewed Aboriginal staff membership of the project working group to guide the second phase of implementation. The direct involvement of Aboriginal staff in the delivery has been paramount to ensure program cultural integrity, safety, and fidelity.

In December 2023, Jarjums Connections won an SLHD Pitch Grant to create a more sustainable implementation model and enhance reach. This extension will reduce the workload and the number of staff required by transforming components of the program to be online.

In 2024, the online materials from grant funding have been developed and produced, and the program has continued to be rolled out district-wide, with the team running three final face-to-face workshops over the year with 133 educators attending from 90 ECECS. Post-workshop feedback ( $n=71$ ) as well as post-program implementation feedback ( $n=33$ ) showed that educators have a better understanding of and confidence to teach Aboriginal cultural content and mindfulness movements after the workshop, and also changed how they embed Aboriginal culture at their centre.

In 2025, the program will launch the new and adapted online model and will begin dissemination into other local health districts and beyond.

## 3 | Discussion

Jarjums Connections has the potential to make a meaningful and positive impact on Aboriginal cultural awareness, knowledge and attitudes, as well as children's well-being in ECECS. To date, the program feedback has been positive and promising. Although similar programs have been trialled in other cultural contexts, this is the first of its kind in NSW.

The physical, social and mental benefits of yoga are apparent, and research in this area continues to emerge [14]. The principles and philosophies of yoga and Aboriginal culture are compatible, and embedding local Aboriginal culture into mainstream education also has the potential to positively impact mainstream and Aboriginal relationships more broadly. Establishing an Aboriginal movement program in ECECS could enhance cross-cultural appreciation and respect, reduce the cultural gap that exists presently, and motivate understanding between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal cultures, as well as enhance and broaden the current curriculum [19].

Jarjums Connections aligns with recommendations from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's 'Building a Culturally Responsive Australian Teaching Workforce Report' [20], which highlights that cultural safety in

schools relies on teachers' cultural responsiveness, which can improve outcomes for First Nations and benefits all students. It also urges educators to build respectful, collaborative relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The time invested into forming strong and trusting relationships across teams was a key enabler to the program's success to date and will be essential in the continuation and dissemination of the program. The HPU was guided by and learned alongside the AHU to understand Aboriginal culture in the local context. The HPU was open to confronting any barriers mentioned by the Aboriginal staff in program development and delivery, as well as hearing and responding to any concerns expressed, to maintain strong relationships and mutual understanding. Power and ownership were shared across teams, and decisions were made mutually. This has been central to achieving the success to date.

Taylor and Thompson [21] argue that integral to functional relationships across non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal teams is 'clarity around roles and responsibilities and a commitment to the services offered through the partnership' as well as 'sharing power...to traverse historically linked imbalances'. Meeting to re-clarify partnership, leadership, and roles in the program was essential to progressing forward and will need to continue to be addressed and revisited throughout the program.

McCalman et al. [22] assert that health promotion can contribute to health equity and social justice, and the Close the Gap report [23] emphasises a greater focus on the partnership between governments and Aboriginal people, highlighting that the centre of this new way of working is 'local action, and a determination to make a difference and to achieve change'. Jarjums Connections is an excellent example of this in action.

The accomplishments and lessons learned so far from this partnership can inform future practice and scale-up of the program. As Jarjums Connections moves towards a digital platform, it has the potential to be adapted and tailored to suit other Aboriginal Nations, LHDs and ECECS across the state and beyond. Other Aboriginal Nations can use the program with their local language, locally sourced resources and significant Aboriginal animals, while also learning about SLHD's animals and culture.

Murtha et al. [24] warn of the tensions between fidelity and being responsive to the needs of each context, and that while regarded as best practice, tailoring for specific population groups 'requires additional and sustained resourcing which is not always feasible'. These concerns should be kept in mind when disseminating.

Rolling the program out digitally state-wide and beyond would be a low-cost and equitable way to embed Aboriginal cultural learning into mainstream education and potentially positively affect the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children more broadly.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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