

CHILDREN IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES WHO NEEDS A FOREST?
NQS SPOTLIGHT: COMMUNITIES MEET THE MINISTER + MORE



1987 CELEBRATING 25 YEARS 2011

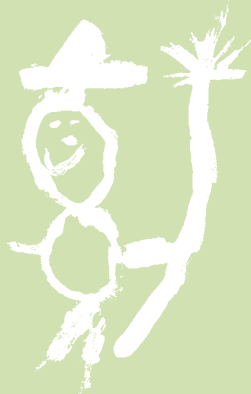
Rattler

COMMUNITY CHILD CARE CO-OPERATIVE (NSW) QUARTERLY JOURNAL 99 SPRING 2011

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editorial



As educators prepare for the introduction of the National Quality Framework in January 2012, 'community' and 'partnerships' have become more important than ever. It is only in partnership and with a strong sense of community that we will achieve our aspirations for excellent children's services programs made possible by more than 'just adequate' levels of funding.

This latest edition of *Rattler* takes up these issues with great enthusiasm and passion, exploring diverse perspectives and showcasing the fantastic work of our sector.

Fay Hadley and Katey De Gioia highlight collaborative partnerships with families and communities in an article entitled 'Come Together!' in our popular NQS Spotlight on page 18.

Stories from practitioners provide a rich illustration of this notion and you will enjoy reading how services in both rural and city locations are developing their communities in partnership with children, families, staff and local professionals.

Our Face2Face interview with our new Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, reveals the Minister's goal to get funding right for early childhood education. And as *Rattler* goes to press, the State Funding Review is well underway under the guidance of Professor Deborah Brennan.

Also in this edition, we tackle the debate around NQF assessors and qualifications on page 24. It's important to think critically about the role assessors play in the success of a new system. We need to be sure the debate is focused upon appropriate assessment of quality and compliance within children's services rather than establishing an assessor role that is inhibited by workforce pressure, funding issues and even public relations 'spin'.

Rattler thrives on putting forward interesting perspectives and diverse views.

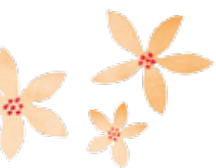
We trust this edition is successful in starting conversations, debate and encouraging new and different ways of thinking. After all, diversity and inclusion is key to a community that is sustainable and works toward the common goal of equity, social justice and excellent outcomes for children.

Leanne Gibbs, CEO
Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW)



On the cover

Our beautiful 'Communities' illustration (repeated above) is by artist Eleanor Davis. You can see more of her work at <http://doing-fine.com>



in this issue

Rattler 99
Spring 2011

THE LOWDOWN

Your guide to what's up, who's where, and how you can get involved.

GROWING UP IN COAL COUNTRY

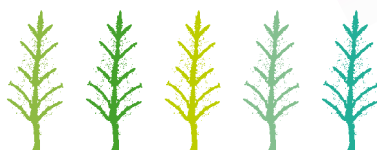
Mudgee Preschool questions how mining will reshape the region's early childhood education landscape.

4

WHO NEEDS A FOREST?

Can't see the wood for the trees? Which wood and what trees, asks outdoor early childhood teacher Janet Robertson.

6



10

CHILDREN IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Join Miriam Giugni as she reflects upon her visits to communities and children's services in occupied territories around the world.

14

COME TOGETHER!

NQS Spotlight: Area 6, Collaborative Partnerships with Family & Communities

18

VOX POP

Who should our NQS assessors be? Experts from the field address the question.

24

FACE2FACE

Meet the Minister... *Rattler* talks to Adrian Piccoli about his portfolio and the challenges ahead.

29

BOOKWORM

Ingrid Maack previews what's new on the shelves.

30



Visiting big sister at
Mudgee Preschool
PAGE 6



Julie Doye with
her 2010 chalk art

CHALK UP!

Artists will once again be 'chalking-up' the footpaths of Parramatta at this year's Chalk Urban Art Festival.

Sydney-based children's services are encouraged to visit this free event held in Church Street Parramatta from 6–9 October. This year there is even a mini chalk competition for the general public. For more information, visit www.chalkurbanart.com

Be our friend?



Rattler Magazine is now on Facebook. Please swing by and LIKE us, so we can keep you up-to-date between issues! Find us at:

www.facebook.com/RattlerMagazine

NGROO: New Indigenous links

Ngroo is a preschool project that offers a one-day workshop and ongoing mentoring program designed to teach preschool staff how to engage with their local Aboriginal community.

Ngroo means 'being included' in the Yorta Yorta language. The workshop provides training in cultural competence, identifying and removing barriers to Aboriginal enrolment, links to families, importantly, introductions through Elders.

The program began at Tregear Preschool when the staff increased enrolments from nine indigenous children in 2008 to 47 in 2011. A Community Services-funded pilot project across nine children's services in Blacktown followed. Ngroo has since attracted private funding of \$632,000 that will allow it to roll out over the next two years. Initially, it will target state Government preschools.

Program designer and Tregear Preschool director Jan Wright says one of the first children's services to complete the pilot program was Bunyip Mobile in Doonside, Sydney which as a result has increased Aboriginal attendance by 48 per cent.

The program includes training, mentoring and an ongoing support through the Ngroo Network. For more visit: <http://ngroo.org.au>



CONGRATULATIONS

Community Child Care congratulates Tonia Godhard on her appointment as the NSW representative on the Board of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). Announcing the appointment, Minister for Education Adrian Piccoli stated: 'Tonia is well known for her passionate commitment to quality early childhood education and care and I know she will represent us well'.

ACECQA is responsible for guiding the implementation of the NQF.

REVIEW: PIPE UP!

In August, Minister Piccoli announced that independent reviewer, Professor Deborah Brennan, would conduct the Review of NSW Government funding for NSW children's services.

Community Child Care welcomes the Review and urges services to be actively involved in the process.

We fought for this review and won it. Let's make sure it counts!

Submissions close 31 October:
www.det.nsw.edu.au/about-us/news-at-det/announcements

OUR NEW SITE!

Community Child Care has a new online presence. The website has improved functionality and a sleek new look. With the catchphrase *Inform, Influence and Inspire*, Community Child Care aims to inform and inspire the children's services sector, and influence government policy practices and programs. Swing by www.ccccnsw.org.au for a look.



what's on CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

CONFERENCE: INSPIRING CHILDREN'S CREATIVITY 0-12 YEARS

29 September, 2011

Illawarra Performing Arts
Centre, Wollongong.

More info: www.ics.org.au
or phone (02) 4283 9900

POWER OF PLAY (NATIONAL PLAYGROUP CONFERENCE)

12-14 October

Park Hyatt Melbourne, Victoria

More info:

www.playgroupaustralia.com.au
or phone (03) 5977 0244

UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY (AUSTRALIA-WIDE)

26 October 2011

Celebrating childhood across
the country...

For celebration ideas for your
children's service visit:

www.actchildrensweek.com.au

ECEEN & CCCNSW CONFERENCE

12-13 November 2011

More info: www.cccnsw.org.au

GROWING UP IN AUSTRALIA AND FOOTPRINTS IN TIME RESEARCH CONFERENCE

15-16 November 2011

Rydges on Swanston, Melbourne

More info: [www.aifs.gov.au/
growingup/conf/2011/contact.
php](http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/conf/2011/contact.php) or phone (03) 9347 7811

HONOURING THE CHILD, HONOURING EQUITY

18-19 November 2011

University of Melbourne, VIC

More info: Centre for Equity and
Innovation in Early Childhood
(03) 8344 7780



COMPETITION:

WIN A DRESS-UPS PACK VALUED AT \$530

Tell us how you focus on community at your children's service and WIN!

Thanks to Educational Experience, one lucky *Rattler* reader could WIN this *Community Helpers Dress-ups* pack.

The pack allows for child-led role play, can stimulate discussion on community, involve parents and their occupations, and is a wonderful way for children to explore the potential of 'becoming'.

The prize includes nine different professions including a pilot, postie, chef, nurse, doctor, fire fighter, police officer, construction worker and mechanic.

To WIN, simply send us an email!

Tell us in 100 words what you do at your children's service to foster collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

Send your entries by 4 November to laurasportelli@cccnsww.org.au

Meanwhile, congratulations to the children and staff at KU Maitland Mobile Preschool who won *Rattler's* music competition in Issue #98!

Thinking about your QIP yet?

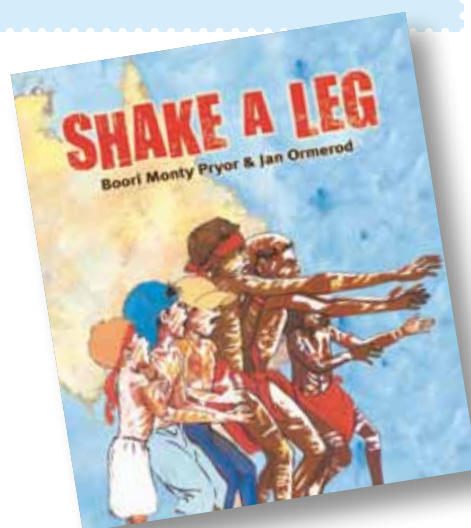
DEEWR has released a fact sheet on the National Quality Framework, which reveals that the first requirement of the assessment and rating process is for a service to develop a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Children's services selected for assessment and rating will receive advice that the assessment and rating process has started. This will include a request to submit the QIP and will provide advice about the process.

A QIP template will be made available, however services can choose to develop their own plan provided it includes the required information and addresses all seven quality areas of the National Quality Standard (NQS).

Providers will have six weeks to submit the QIP to the Regulatory Authority. To view and print the fact sheet visit:

www.bitly.com/NQF_Assessment



Shake a leg

An indigenous picture book, *Shake a leg*, is the winner of the 2011 Prime Minister's Literary Award.

Written by Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod, the book is about sharing culture and the power of food, story and dance. It's about three boys who meet an Aboriginal pizza chef who speaks Italian and can make a 'deadly' pizza. For more, visit: http://bit.ly/shake_a_leg



Top: Child-size shovels and a patch of dirt give Mudgee Preschool children learning opportunities.

Left: Dress-ups and role-play combine while exploring the outdoor environment.

Right: The preschool has a menagerie of animals including these phasmids (stick insects).





Growing up in coal country

On the brink of a mining boom, the town of Mudgee is questioning how its fossil fuel-driven future will reshape the early childhood education landscape. **Ingrid Maack** visits Mudgee Preschool—one of the biggest early education and care services in NSW.

When I grow up I want to be a miner', reads the text on a child's artwork featuring a smiling stick figure with a miner's lamp and a bag full of coal. The artwork hangs on the wall of a gallery in an exhibition, themed 'Belonging, Being and Becoming', organised by staff and children at Mudgee Preschool.

When *Rattler* visits Mudgee Preschool, this theme is echoed in the children's play, as children gather in the playground's dirt patch littered with child-sized shovels and begin to dig.

'Look at the way the dirt crumbles'... 'Why is this rock shiny do you think? ... 'What have you found there?' asks an educator. 'I'm digging for coal' says a little boy.

It is a vivid reminder that many of these children are the children of miners and that Mudgee is a town with a rich mining history and indeed, a rich mining future.

The town of Mudgee, a Wiradjuri term meaning 'Nest in the hills', lies in the fertile valley of the Cudgegong River in the state's Central West. Riding the crest of a food and wine-led tourism boom (olive-growing, vineyards, sheep farms and a thriving hospitality industry), the region is set to grow further due to an expansion of its coalmines, with anticipated population growth of 23–25 per cent over the next 3–5 years*.

Consisting of two services (Perry Street and South Mudgee campuses), Mudgee Preschool is currently the only community-based service in the town. There are also three private long day care centres and a council-run family day care scheme—all of which are currently running at or close to capacity.

'New people are coming into town all the time and I get enquiries at the preschool daily for places. It is the same story across Mudgee—all services are feeling the pressure,' explains preschool director, Rosie Gibbs.

So what does this mean for the 80-place preschool (one of the largest in the state) that already has more than 200 children on its waiting list?

'People say there needs to be another preschool in Mudgee. The region has been identified under the PIRP program as not having enough places.'

But bigger is not necessarily better, according to this director who is working with other agencies within the Mudgee Child and Family Network, CareWest and Council to assess how Mudgee will respond to projected population growth from mining activity.

Mudgee may well need another preschool but Rosie and the preschool's Board of Management are reluctant to add a third service to the Mudgee Preschool banner.

'Because we are so big, it's difficult for us to grow further... The risk for us is that we would lose quality and what we feel makes Mudgee Preschool special.'

'What makes us special is that we are well connected with our families, our children and the community. To become bigger would potentially dilute this.'

The preschool's recent art exhibition entitled 'Belonging, Being and Becoming', widely attended by parents and members of the community, is surely the perfect example of those all-important connections.

'Last year an exhibition was held at a local winery, owned by one of the parents. This year, it is being held in a nearby art gallery, allowing every child to go on a walking excursion to see their photos, mosaics, clay work and drawings of families and friends on display.'

Rattler was fortunate to join hands with children on one of these outings and walk alongside parents, grandparents and educators to experience 'Belonging, Being and Becoming' firsthand.

Centrally located and housed within an old bowling club, the beautifully-



Details from children's artworks



HOW BIG IS BIG, ANYWAY?

LARGE SERVICES IN NSW

Since 1 January this year the *Children's Services Regulation 2004* has not prescribed a maximum number of licenced places for early education and care services.

The number of children who can attend a service at any one time depends on a number of factors, including the amount of indoor and outdoor space at the service. The new draft national Regulations also do not specify a maximum number of children.

In addition to Mudgee Preschool (80 children), there are currently three Sydney services and two regional services with approvals for over 92 children per day. The largest of these is approved for 104 children.

converted Perry Street campus was opened in 1956. The service was expanded in 1990 when the South Mudgee Campus opened its doors in the town's Masonic Lodge which has been modified to include a playground, sandpit and child-sized toilets.

Up until last year, the South Mudgee Campus catered mostly for three year olds, with children typically starting at the 'little preschool' (South Mudgee with one unit) before moving up to the 'big preschool' (Perry Street with 3 units). But this changed due to the town's rapid population growth and the need to ensure all four year olds have access.

'Initially, there was some resistance from families when their four year old child was allocated a spot at South Mudgee, (which does not have the abundant green space of Perry Street) but parents soon realised that although different, it is still a great service.

'We deliberately changed the name and signs from South Mudgee Preschool

to Mudgee Preschool (South Mudgee Campus) to highlight the strong link between the two services,' she says.

While the campuses are located four kilometers apart, resources and relief staff are shared. Children from the South Mudgee campus regularly visit to play in the larger playground and meet their future schoolmates.

South Mudgee also provides a more intimate setting for those children with special needs who, as Rosie explains, might be overwhelmed by the size and the numbers at Perry Street.

The preschool is particularly committed to the inclusion of children with special needs in a town where there is currently no dedicated early childhood intervention service.

Rosie says children with disabilities and their families are seriously disadvantaged in Mudgee.

'Some families have the means and resources to look for services and can afford to travel to other regional centres, but most don't.'

For many families, Mudgee Preschool is the only place they are getting any form of early intervention.

There are currently 12 special needs children with diagnoses who require additional support and for whom the preschool receives limited funding.

'There are, of course, others who do



Top left: Teacher Maree Parker showcases childrens' artwork at the 'Belonging, Being, Becoming' exhibition. **Above:** Educator Gail Shalliker is one of the preschool's team of 25 staff.

Bottom left: Investigating sound: Emily Lahey and children use audio equipment.

Bottom right: Children enjoy spring sunshine at the South Mudgee campus.

not have a diagnosis yet and who do not receive funding, but receive lots of support,' explains Rosie.

Following a visit from a teacher from the Hearing Support Team, educators now use an audio system to amplify their voices during group time.

'The teacher told us that we could assume that at any one time there would be up to 30 per cent of children suffering from conductive hearing loss (otitis media, glue ear), which would affect their behaviour, speech and language and general health and wellbeing.

'After a trial, our teachers decided that not only did the children benefit from the sound system, but they did too. One

of our assistants is hearing impaired and it has made a big difference to her!'

Supporting children with special needs is a particular passion for British-born and South African-bred Rosie, who worked in a preschool in a small mining community near Kimberley in South Africa for two years before emigrating to Australia and working as an early intervention teacher with a small group of children in Gulgong, NSW.

'Having left South Africa just before the end of apartheid, it was liberating for me to come into a country where the concepts of multiculturalism and anti-bias were embedded in the curriculum, were explicit and were (more or less) practiced.'

With the help of the preschool's Board of Management, Rosie has also succeeded in having a third support person (usually a special needs worker, of which there are five) allocated to each class, alongside a teacher and an assistant.

The preschool has 25 dedicated staff (23 of whom work part-time), allowing the team to enjoy a healthy work-life balance and to voluntarily pursue further study ahead of the new NQF requirements—with 11 staff currently studying through TAFE or university.

Having such a diverse team has also added layer upon layer of richness, as staff bring a range of experience, skills and interests to the job.

A few educators are keen gardeners and have formed a gardening committee and open garden event. Another plays the guitar beautifully and takes her class to the nursing home to sing. A few love animals and ensure we have a revolving menagerie of budgerigars, goldfish, hermit crabs, stick insects, chooks and

rabbits. And our administration manager is also a qualified masseuse who helps to relieve headaches and aching backs with massage and pressure point touch!'

Rosie and her team have embraced preparing for the National Quality Framework (NQF) as an opportunity for continuous improvement.

Through discussions with staff (identifying areas of interest) and her own reading of the EYLF and NQF, Rosie has identified three areas that could be improved, changed or developed.

'These are Cultural Competence, Information and Technology and Environment and Sustainable Practices. All staff have chosen one of these areas of interest to work on as part of a team, identifying what we do well, what we could do better and developing a plan of action to share with others.'

And what of Mudgee's mining rich future?... Well, Rosie was recently invited by Mudgee's mayor to share her vision for early childhood education for the region. In her submission, she wrote about a multi-purpose early childhood hub including a preschool/long day care centre, an early intervention centre, a base for a mobile preschool unit to cater for children in outlying areas, as well as offices and therapy or meeting rooms.

'If the Mid-Western Regional Council provided some land, the mines that are driving the growth of the region funded the building, and the relevant departments contributed some funding for staff and operating costs ... then I believe anything is possible.'

**Coal Mining in the Mid-Western Region: A snapshot of Activities and Issues. (January 2011, Mid-Western Regional Council).*

LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC SHOWS/WORKSHOPS THE AMIGO SHOW

Would you like your children to experience the music of Latin America?

Latin American musician Raul Bassa is offering music shows/workshops for preschool children. The workshops cover music from different parts of Latin America played on a wide variety of traditional instruments – pan pipes, bamboo flutes, bongo drums.



'It was fantastic. The children loved every moment. Even the staff couldn't help dancing to the music with the children. A great multicultural experience for everyone.'
Cardiff Community Child Care Centre, September 1995



For bookings and enquiries phone (02) 4751 5768



WHO NEEDS A Forest?



Playing outside? Can't see the wood for the trees? Which wood and what trees is the question, writes outdoor early childhood teacher Janet Robertson, as she explores the possibilities of outdoor learning environments.

So what is the wood we are striving to see and which trees were they? We would all agree that playing outside is important for children. The question is, what kind of playing and what kind of outside?

Unacknowledged values, traditional playground surfaces, equipment and resources, colour the way we view play. If the playing outside we revere is simply a run about to 'let off steam' and to allow the use of 'outside voices,' while staff have a tea break, then the situation is dire. If the outdoor curriculum is based around the notion of 'free play,' things remain bleak, for nothing is free. In a typical early childhood play space there might be five children dominating a quarter of the playground space while playing on five bikes. This is a curriculum choice, privileging space and equipment over other kinds of learning and play. So nothing is free, there is always a cost.

It seems to me it all comes down to our choices. Our choice of curriculum, equipment and values, will always leave other alternatives unchosen. Knowing you have made a choice and articulating it gives rigour and transparency to your program.

An example might help, and a question is always a good place to start. Why do early childhood staff think bikes are important in playgrounds? Would it be heresy to suggest they are not

that useful? At a time when theories of social construction of knowledge are at last gaining sway, why do we persist with such an individualistic piece of equipment when it is interdependence we should be scaffolding?

If you chose to not have bikes, could you justify what you have replaced them with, and why? On the other hand, if you chose to keep bikes, are you able to articulate why? Because choice is how we exercise conscious thought over the curriculum choices we can make.

It is wonderful that the recognition of natural playscapes for children is becoming part of the conversation about what is good for children. Much has been written about the nature school/ forest school phenomenon, and indeed I have visited many in Scandinavia and Europe. However, here in Australia we need to reframe the idea. Do you need a forest? And whose forest would it be? I think we can have natural experiences for children without the 'forest'; it's the values and ideas we need to examine.

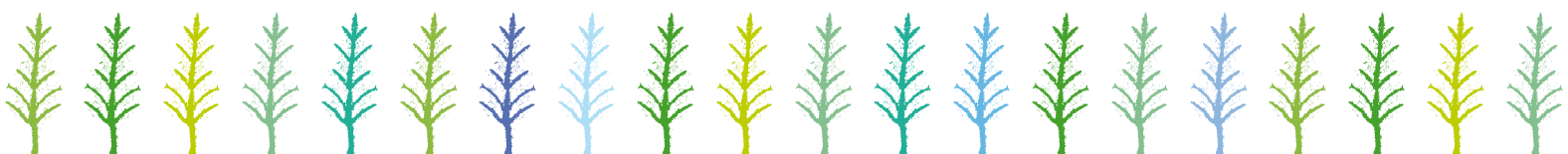
Allowing children to experience and be within nature is, I believe, vital. The irony does not escape me that many early childhood settings in Australia have little land, into which children are crowded into 'super safe' spaces, cluttered with gaudy plastic equipment and few natural elements, if at all. The image of a rubber-pour cell without a ceiling or roof comes to mind, as does de Botton

(2010) when he notes the loss of nature's place in our lives, where he describes nature as 'bleeding to death' (p. 165). When I visit early childhood programs and their playgrounds it is rare to see a thriving aesthetic natural play space. More often I see natural elements marginalised, unloved and half dead.

However, the idea that children should naturally be with nature is problematic. What kind of nature and naturally are we talking about here? Some children's idea of playing naturally can be dreadful, think of children bullying others. Playing with nature can also be horrid; ripping leaves off trees, heedlessly snapping seedlings in half, torturing ants, scaring and chasing birds. If we allow this then we teach children that abusing nature is fine, creating a value of human supremacy over other species.

If, on the other hand, we decide that respect is the value we hold, then the natural elements in the environment are respected, not abused. This is as simple as not allowing children to pick the flowers, unless of course you are harvesting them together. Children may of course smell the flowers, admire, draw and gently touch them as well as tend to their needs. This curriculum value honours and makes more magical the ephemerality of 'flower-ness'.

When the maurya shrubs at Mia-Mia Child & Family Study Centre drop their petals in a shower of perfumed slivers



'Most natural spaces are fragile and require us to treasure them, rather than plunder them in our desire to allow children natural experiences. The value of "living lightly on the earth" is one which children learn when they know [their] surroundings.

of moon-white-ness, the children with heads bent and murmuring voices, gather, collect and admire this occasional bounty. This celebration of this ephemeral and delicate treasure is all the more miraculous as it only happens after rain. Learning to wait, to discover and watch events unfold is important for us all, in a world more characterised by an 'instant noodles' curriculum (Lee, 2011).

Most natural spaces are fragile and require us to treasure them, rather than plunder them in our desire to allow children natural experiences. The value of 'living lightly on the earth' (Fien, 2003) and 'an ethic of deep care' (Stewart, 2006) is one which we and children learn when they and we know our surroundings. If this is simply a rule 'not to play in garden beds' (because the plants get squashed and die), then this knowing leads to respect. To play in the natural landscape, either in a formal playground, or in the other spaces, care is still required to touch the earth lightly. Simply allowing children to romp through bush, woods or forest, sand dunes, grasslands or scrub, wreaking havoc because it is natural, is unethical.

In playgrounds, natural spaces and elements can withstand some wear and tear, but will not thrive unless care is taken to shelter and manage their needs. The lawn at Mia-Mia was beginning to deteriorate after about a year, and I suggested we only use it in the afternoons, thereby halving its wear. Other staff were doubtful, and claimed children needed to run and move. I agreed but said they would soon be doing it on dirt if we did not take action. We all agreed we liked the grass, as opposed to the possibility of dirt. We tried the compromise of half-day use, changing the morning program to include more settled and complex experiences in non-grassed spaces such as the sandpit, climbing spaces and

paved areas. Seventeen years on, we still have turf, which children roll, relax, run and scamper upon in the afternoon. We respected and valued the turf for the qualities it gave the program, and the children.

Developing a natural play space is not a cheap, quick-fix solution, trees and gardens take time to grow. But without imagining what might be possible, it is impossible to begin. The question of money always comes up when we talk about playgrounds. This only goes to illustrate how marginalised the outdoors is as an educational space. No one would question the need to re-paint a shabby wall, or replace stained carpet or broken lighting inside, but balk at the cost of a few trees and general outdoor maintenance. I believe the outdoors is as important as the indoors and therefore entitled to the same budget as indoors.

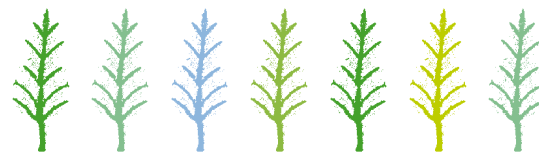
One solution would be to know the annual budget for the indoors (maintenance, cleaning and new equipment), and give the outdoors the same amount. After all, the children spend as much time out as they do in. Knowing where the money goes, valuing the program wherever it occurs means we can make informed judgements about how and what to maintain, clean and buy.

Aside from the cost, there is then the question of who will create the curriculum outside. Who will write, dream, fashion and co-construct the program there. In our case we decided that an outdoor teacher was the solution, a position I currently hold. In addition, the other adults in the program need to be responsible for tending this fragile and spectacular space. Leaving it to a 'handyperson' or another is not respectful. Everyone is a guardian of this land, and so it should be groomed daily and cared for (just as they do inside). Furthermore, adults who work with young children need to know how to grow plants, care for natural spaces and be a responsible outdoor citizen.

The problem can be that many who work with young children are themselves strangers to the outside and all it entails. Therefore, they unknowingly perpetuate the nature abuse I see on my travels.

Recently, a large group of TAFE





Diploma students visited Mia-Mia. As part of the discussion about the outdoors, they were asked if anyone was a gardener, had green thumbs or knew how to grow things. No-one out of a group of 60 put their hand up. I honestly don't know what the solution is, except if you find folk with green fingers, hang onto them, or teach garden care to everyone, and make it their responsibility.

The marginalisation I mentioned earlier is due to a number of factors, but one really impacts on how we esteem playgrounds. It seems to me the early childhood profession has allowed the idea that the outdoors as a 'good run around' to be the sum total of the curriculum. Physical development, or more minimally phrased, gross motor, has reduced the possibilities inherent outdoors. I beg to differ and am an advocate for the child who walks through the door into the outside.

They don't leave their thoughts, ideas, creativity or language skills inside when they dash to look at the moon, or stop spellbound by a flock of cockatoos. The indoor curriculum is where I think a lot of staff believe children 'really' learn the 'important' stuff. When the outdoor curriculum is rich, complex topics such as designing a flag, writing rules for games, making homes for snails so they won't eat the peas, counting stars, imagining what's inside clouds, botanical drawing, and discussing infinity while sawing log blocks, it becomes easy to value both indoor and outdoor as equals in the curriculum stakes.

Whether we live in urban Melbourne, Roxby Downs, the Blue Mountains or the Sunshine Coast, it is possible to give children natural spaces in which to play. The trick is not to replicate some ideal of a playground. A natural play space should echo the local environment. So a play space in Roxby Downs will look very different from one in suburban Melbourne. The same EYLF outcomes are obtainable wherever you are; the space in which it will occur should look different. That's what *belonging, being and becoming* mean. By localising your play spaces, not only are you respecting the local flora and fauna (including humans) you are belonging to a place, learning to know your surroundings,

and treading lightly on the earth.

Returning to the trees and the wood, playing outside respectfully, in an ethical play-scape, which enables children to play and think within the wonder of nature, should be our aim. Learning to listen to the voice of the land, hearing and seeing how it can assist you in teaching children, and yourselves, to belong, be and become is one we need to embrace.

Let me plant a seed: is it too futuristic to think that every Australian early childhood centre find funding to be able to assign a teacher to the outdoor environment? I hope not.

Janet Robertson is currently an outdoor teacher at Mia-Mia Child & Family Study Centre, Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University. Her professional interests include the educational project of Reggio Emilia and its challenges to early education in Australia, the cultural understandings of quality and reconceptualising the outdoor learning space.



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FINDING 'NATURE' IN YOUR SERVICE

Not all children's services are blessed with abundant outdoor space but nature can be found almost anywhere, says Deb Watson from NSW Early Childhood Environmental Educational Network (ECEEN).

Oh to dream... that Australian early childhood outdoor environments are richly diverse and locally natural, and where staff, children and families tend the environment with care and respect. In the seed she has sown in her article, Janet Robertson offers us a wonderful gift for the future —a hope that in every early childhood centre there

be a teacher dedicated to the outdoor environment. May the seed grow fruitful!

So, how do you find the 'nature' in your space?

ECEEN has some tools to help you in this journey. Consider the following:

Collaborate

Embrace your strengths and those of your team. Together, ask what is our shared vision for this community? What would it look, sound and feel like if it is to become a centre of excellence?

Put on your green glasses

Even in the most challenging environments there is 'nature', so seek out spider webs to admire, clouds up high, and notice the sound of wind. Bring in pot plants, reeds for play and food to eat. Mulch up a no-dig garden and start gathering bits of nature in your space. Collect these on your walk to work, the local park, the streets around, and suggest others become gatherers too.

Create partnerships

Seek out the green-thumbed people in your community. We can all connect to local council bush carers, community gardens or Permaculture Australia (www.permaculturegarden.com.au).

Find opportunities to share the wonders of nature with children. For Sydney-based services, for example, there's the Dandy Lions @ Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney (<http://bit.ly/dandylions>) or the BushCare KidCare program at the Lane Cove Bushland and Conservation Society (www.lanecovebushland.org.au).

For more information on the NSW Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (ECEEN), visit: www.eceen.org.au.

Deb Watson, Area Manager Early Childhood Education at KU Children's Services and ECEEN representative, has also worked for local and state governments and is passionate about supporting sustainability in early childhood services.

Children in occupied territories

Join **Miriam Giugni** as she reflects upon her visit to communities and children's services in occupied territories around the world. Miriam explores issues of social justice for indigenous people in Palestine, Ireland and Scandinavia and asks: Is Australia 'occupied territory'?

In 2008 I was fortunate enough to be the Inaugural recipient of the McArthur/ECA Leadership Development Award. My self-initiated leadership task was to investigate the extent to which curriculum and learning frameworks, and quality frameworks and regulatory systems, attended to equity and social justice. This question became particularly significant for me during my doctoral studies, which were focussed on equity and social justice in everyday early childhood practice. The second significant context for my question was based on my experience of playing a part in the development of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) under the leadership of Professor Jennifer Sumsion and Associate Professor Linda Harrison in the Charles Sturt University-led consortium.

In the development of the EYLF, the consortium had the fruitful opportunity to debate and discuss many points of view. I was encouraged to vocalise my world views, theories and philosophies at every point in these discussions. This was an unusual event because in my experience, issues of equity and social justice, and the particular theoretical frameworks I draw upon to shape my practice, had appeared to be sidelined in early childhood discourse.

I also had the opportunity to listen to a diverse range of world views, theories and philosophies in new ways that broadened my repertoire of early childhood education. This process occurred in what Martin (2008) called a 'post apology Australia'.

Rethinking leadership as activism

I had heard the stories of early childhood educators who had travelled abroad to learn about what happened in places outside Australia. I had always found these stories and the ensuing questions fruitful and inspiring. In this tradition, I organised a number of visits to children's centres in a number of different countries including, England, Ireland and parts of Scandinavia (Norway and Sweden).

On my way to these places I was fortunate enough to stop first in India on my way to the *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* (RECE) conference in Palestine. My experience in Palestine shifted the focus of my questions. In Palestine, I visited refugee camps where education took on a different form. In terms of learning frameworks, it was the political frameworks that shaped the Israeli–Palestinian tensions that informed curriculum for these particular children. Quality seemed somewhere far off in the distance as gunshots

echoed and the smouldering remains of someone's home stung my eyes.

My questions became an exploration of what might be considered 'occupied territories' owing to the most recent histories of land sovereignty. The questions began to focus on 'what do we want for our children?' (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 2007, p. 77–78) and 'how do we want this and future generations to remember us?' (Martin, 2005, p.39). My questions were situated in my mind as an early childhood educator practising in a 'post apology Australia' (Martin, 2008).

I considered colonial and postcolonial tensions that produced each of these places—the politics that the place produced and the kinds of 'becomings' that the place and people produced collectively. This point reminds us that 'becoming' should not be solely considered as a romantic way to re-label child development but instead a political process contingent upon politics, place, history, culture and conflict (Haraway, 2008).

What follows is a collection of photos that I took. These photos are tiny glimpses of the places I visited. I chose these images because as I walked around these neighbourhoods I was wondering about what the everyday experiences of children were and how, if and to what extent these elements of the neighbourhood played a part in curriculum.





1 Wall Café in the West Bank, Palestine

This café is located across the road from one part of the wall that separates two communities in the West Bank in Palestine. The political graffiti on the wall includes messages from children as well as adults. The absurdity of living in a place that is circulated by a wall to keep people enclosed is captured by the ironic naming of the café—The Wall Lounge. The wall and the café are two places that are an everyday part of the lives of children and families.

2 Fast food in Stockholm, Sweden

The aromas of McDonald's drift their way around the world. On a walk to the Vassa Museum in Stockholm, I encountered this restaurant and this tram advertisement. The restaurant and the tram illustrate that not only ideas travel the globe, such as the rich collaborations between Stockholm University and the schools of Reggio Emilia, but also the cultural experiences of fast food that have circumnavigated the globe from the USA. Stockholm was littered with US brands, restaurants and cultures to the delight of some and disgust of others.

Swedish children eat McDonald's too... This is a reminder that our images of people and places can become stereotyped when we limit our explorations of children and childhood to what we find in a children's centre. Searching the neighbourhoods in which children live and children's centres are located offers a broader dimension to our understandings of what we might need to consider in our pedagogical practice and curriculum decisions.

3 Public transport in Helsinki, Finland

Getting on a train in Helsinki required all kinds of decisions. These signs said a lot about the society I was visiting. They illustrate aspects of society such as the place of children and dogs and the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol. This collection points toward a complex kind of habitation that the Finns live. Added to this complexity, are the languages the train timetable is expressed in: Finnish, Swedish and English. One of the other prominent languages you hear frequently in Helsinki is Russian and sometimes Estonian.

In the local market, you can find forest berries and moose products, but also Saami people selling their artefacts and sharing their stories and histories. Saami (previously known as Laplanders) are the arctic Indigenous peoples of Finland, Norway, Sweden and some parts of Russia. [The Saami have experienced generations of oppression but today have their own independence day, flag and parliament.]

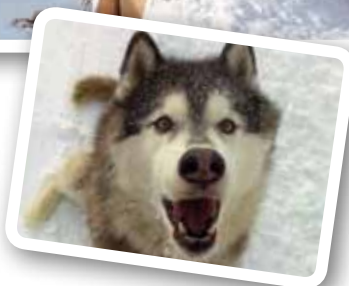




4 A Barnehage (children's centre) in Oslo, Norway

National Saami Day at the Barnhage (Children's Centre) located in Oslo. I met an early childhood teacher on my first visit to Oslo as part of my trip. Ida invited me back for a celebration of National Saami day in February. It received little attention from the mainstream media in Norway, although the national minister for Saami Affairs attended.

This Saami Barnhage operates in North Saami language and Norwegian. The staff are trilingual as they also speak English. Dogs are part of the children's centre community. On country, Saami people still live with reindeer and dogs. This cohabitation is part of how the Saami people live with the land. To them, reindeer and dogs are sacred. People, reindeer and dogs need each other to live in and with the snow.



5 Political art in Belfast, Northern Ireland

The culture of political art in Northern Ireland is everywhere you go. Public spaces, children's parks, schools, children's centres, shopping centres and people's homes are inscribed with stories about the triumphs and losses of the Irish and English peoples.

Belfast is also a community that has divided two communities by walls. These walls still stand, although passing between them, for most people, is different now in a time of 'peace'.



6 Street action in London, England

The grandeurs of Westminster Abbey and the parliament buildings are hypnotic. In the middle of the square across the road is another community sending different kind of messages to passers-by. After spending time in Palestine considering the lives of children there, my expectations of the lives of children in London differed to what I found. The power of some world governments to make a difference in people's lives felt overwhelming as I listened to stories of devastation. The significance of rights became centred in a new way for me. It was not possible for me to think about being an early childhood teacher in Australia without considering the rights of Indigenous peoples and the rights of children, and the rights of refugees.

7 Gadigal Country, Redfern, Sydney, Australia

Returning home and visiting 'The Block' in Redfern confirmed that my question about equity and social justice was a necessary one. It confirmed that the world is full of occupied territories where unjust ways of stealing land, stealing culture and attempting to abolish some communities seems to be able to continue. The flaw in these practices is that Indigenous peoples and first peoples are strong resilient peoples who keep surviving; no government has successfully eradicated the Indigenous peoples they have stolen land from.

So, what I brought back from my trip was not limited to my questions about curriculum, regulatory and quality frameworks and systems, but instead a political lens with which to reconsider Australia as kind of 'occupied territory' in which early childhood education



is practised as if we were always predominantly Euro-centric rather than acknowledging Aboriginal histories that preceded invasion.

What if Australia was mandated to change perspectives and live by the principles of the various Aboriginal world views that were alive and well before invasion? I do not mean to imply that various Aboriginal world views do not exist now—in fact they are alive and well, powerful and strong—but they often operate in, around, under, colonial political regimes. What can we learn from Indigenous world views? How can we begin to change the way we live if we draw from principles from Aboriginal world views?

This raises a number of implications about including an 'Aboriginal perspective' in our everyday work or including Aboriginal children. What knowledges do we draw upon to include an Aboriginal perspective or Aboriginal children? How do we know it's culturally appropriate? Where did we learn this information? How much time are we willing to rethink through such questions? What might the implications be if we do?

Questions for everyday political activism in early childhood

- ◆ What does it mean to live in a post-apology Australia (Martin, 2008)?
- ◆ How do we live equitably and socially just lives both inside and outside the centres in which we work?
- ◆ Who and what is significant in children's lives?
- ◆ How do we live together?
- ◆ What are the complexities of living equitably and ethically together?
- ◆ How might theories help us

conceptualise living equitably and ethically together?

Dr Miriam Giugni is an early childhood teacher and activist. She is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Canberra and works as an educational consultant nationally and internationally. She played a leadership role in the development of the EYLF and is active in the Social Justice In Early Childhood group (www.socialjusticeinearlychildhood.org).

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Building collaborative partnerships with families and communities is the sixth quality area of the National Quality Standard (NQS). Families are regarded as a critical resource for educators and are ‘the primary influence in their children’s lives’ (DEEWR, 2010, p. 103). Dr Fay Hadley and Dr Katey De Gioia from the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, explore why partnerships with families and communities really matter.

Throughout 2011 and 2012, *Rattler* turns the spotlight on the seven Quality Areas of the new National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care.

The National Quality Standard includes seven areas of quality for early childhood education and care services:

1. Educational program and practice;
2. Children’s health and safety;
3. Physical environment;
4. Staffing arrangements, including improved staff-to-child ratios and qualifications;
5. Relationships with children;

6

Collaborative partnerships with families and communities;

7. Leadership and service management.

WHAT IS THE QUALITY AREA?

- 6.1 Respectful supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.
- 6.2 Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected.
- 6.3 The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children’s learning and wellbeing.
- 6.4 The service participates in the community.

Come together!



This focus on the families’ influence on their children’s education is also emphasised in The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), whereby families are positioned as ‘children’s first and most influential educators’ (p.7). While the notion of building partnerships with families and the community is not new to early childhood (see Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), the way this can be developed is certainly being rethought (see Moss, 2009). In this article we will share some of our thoughts in relation to working in partnership with families and communities.

Building respectful and supportive partnerships

Partnerships take time to establish. They are about trust and an equal balance in the relationship with each party bringing and sharing strengths. The importance of building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships is a core principle in the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). The time we invest in developing and maintaining partnerships with families allows us to create an environment whereby children can feel a sense of belonging and educators can provide an appropriate program for children to be and become.

The leadership or management team of the setting has a responsibility to ensure the service’s information; forms, policies and resources reflect diverse families and the community they are situated within. Regardless of ethnicity, culture or family structure, we know that no two families operate in exactly the same way. The manner in which educators approach the initial



phone call, the enrolment and orientation process will determine the messages communicated to families as to how we believe they should be involved in our program. To encourage this partnership, the physical environment and the policies and procedures we adopt need to be taken into consideration. For example, does the enrolment form state mother/father details or parent 1/parent 2/other? This detail impacts on how some of our families will feel invited and visible in the program. Is our entry space reflective of the diversity of family types in the community? Are there written/translated messages as well as visual documentation which shows how families can belong and contribute to the service? Is there room for developing a partnership notice board over the year with photos and explanations of families being involved in a variety of ways such as reading or cooking with children, sharing something cultural from home or talking together about child rearing issues such as toileting.

Establishing the initial relationship with families is only the first step to building respectful and reciprocal partnerships. Establishing ongoing processes that allows families to contribute to and feel included in the program assists to build this partnership. The conversations we have with families once they are settled in the service reflect the culture of inclusion. Inviting families to contribute in different ways can help create and maintain the relationship over a period of time. For instance, displaying documentation of children's learning, sharing portfolios and observations with families, creating times to discuss their child's

‘Perhaps identifying a key educator to act as the liaison between the setting and the community would allow for these partnerships to flourish and be sustained over time.’

individual learning and progress and inviting families to spend time in the setting are opportunities for families to feel included and valued.

Sometimes we can be unaware of how we communicate with families through the messages we deliver. For instance, a family member receiving a phone call from the setting usually fills them with dread. Think about the last time you rang or emailed a family member throughout the day to share something positive about their child.

Working with families in their parenting role

Personal attitudes to child-rearing practices and conversations educators have with each other can give a clear indication of whether there is a culture of understanding about approaches to parenting or not. One area that can create tension between families and educators are child-rearing practices; such as guiding behaviour (discipline), toilet training, sleeping and feeding practices (Hand & Wise, 2006). Consider carefully the types of



conversations that might be occurring in your setting, do they reflect some of these thoughts?

- 'They are too old for a dummy/bottle';
- 'I can't believe that they won't let them have a day sleep';
- 'They are too young to be toilet trained';
- 'They are spoiling their child'; and/or
- 'They are too tough on them'.

Differences in practices can create tensions for educators. For instance, Hughes and Mac Naughton's (2002) study highlighted the tension that occurred between educators and families when they were communicating different viewpoints on particular practices. Sometimes these tensions occur as there is a lack of understanding as to why family members have made certain decisions or it can be about our own attitudes and beliefs around what is familiar to us. It is important as a staff team to reflect on and discuss child-rearing practices, our own beliefs and what previous learning and current literature provides for us. Educators should be able to engage in conversations that are free from bias and allow family members to contribute meaningfully. This does not mean that there has to always be agreement but that the educators understand the approach the family implements in the home and where possible offers continuity in the setting or negotiates together in the best interests of the child (De Gioia, 2009; Gonzalez-Mena, 2007).

The EYLF identifies 'families are children's first and most influential teachers' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12). However, this does not diminish the role of the educator but rather the notion

'Are there written/translated messages as well as visual documentation which shows how families can belong and contribute to the service? Is there room for developing a partnership noticeboard?'

of partnership is strengthened as each partner brings their strengths to the conversation. Educators can rely on their theoretical and practical knowledge to support families in making decisions which best meet their children's needs. For instance, we know that in the year prior to starting school some families become concerned that there are specific tasks their children should be doing (such as stencil work or sitting for long periods of time in large groups), however as educators, we know the value of the program we offer to families which underpins their learning. It is the role of the educator to articulate how these authentic experiences are valuable. For example: providing information on the value of social and emotional maturity for children and processes in the setting for developing this; through routines on arrival and departure, children being responsible for their belongings and learning how to get along with others through small group experiences.

Connecting with the service's community of families

As stated in the EYLF, principle 4: 'when early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for their children, they are able to foster children's motivation to learn and to reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). Providing opportunities for families to participate and engage with the educators and other families is an important aspect of building partnerships. Services can create trusting spaces (physical as well as being available) so that families feel comfortable to share and discuss their needs with educators. Research has illustrated the benefits of both formal and informal get-togethers where families and educators get to mix and talk (Hayden, De Gioia, & Hadley, 2005). These opportunities allow families to establish connections as well as create less formal spaces for families to chat to the educators. In a recent NSW Families research project (Hadley, 2007) 80 per cent of the families interviewed indicated they wanted to attend social events at the setting as they provided an avenue to make connections with other families as well as see their child in an environment with other children.

Organising events both at the setting and in the community provides connections and links beyond the setting. Some settings may hold an annual picnic day, participate in a community fair, or attend a community event, such as NAIDOC week. These different ways of connecting with the community help to build partnerships both with families and the community and ensure the children in the service are provided with a program that acknowledges cultures, identities and the broader issues of the society they are citizens of.

Finding time to organise these events can be a challenge. Some services have found that utilising the skills of family and staff members can alleviate this issue. For instance, calling for people to volunteer (a staff and family working party) to organise and coordinate the event(s). Often this requires the educators to ask families to be involved or it can be an expectation that is built into the culture of the setting about participating in these events. Other ideas could be to create a roster or list of jobs where people opt out (not in) so that all families over a period of time contribute.

Partnerships with other organisations and service providers

Ongoing partnerships with local community organisations are a critical part of the role of an educator and have a twofold impact:

- ◆ Local organisations become familiar with the setting and the services it provides to families and can refer families they come into contact with.

>> *Continued on page 23*

Case study



Partnering with parents: Panyuni ba kra

At Playful Beginnings Early Learning Centre in Liverpool—where 80 per cent of enrolled families are Aboriginal—a health and lifestyle program has helped to engage parents in both the curriculum and the community. Designed by parents together with educators, the program aims to educate families on health and nutrition, support culture and strengthen ties with the wider indigenous community.

Panyuni ba kra is Bunganditj dialect for “play, learn, share”, explain licensees and early childhood teachers Brooke Joy and Michelle Jacquelin-Furr.

Program activities include Aboriginal dancing, yoga, traditional Indigenous games, ‘deadly’ fruit and vegetable juices, bush foods, boomerang throwing and excursions to Taronga Zoo.

‘A lot of our parents are overweight or have heart problems or diabetes...We wanted to get them moving and empower them to make positive health and lifestyle choices,’ Brooke Joy said.

Workshops began with a community walkabout to the local creek to learn about bush foods. The walks also included visits to local Aboriginal health services, providing families with a non-threatening introduction to community facilities.

The Panyuni ba kra program was funded by the federal Government’s PaCE (Parental and Community Engagement) program. For more information, visit www.deewr.gov.au/pace

A parent’s perspective

Daliah Nwaogazi, a Torres Strait Islander mother in Yagoona, Sydney shares her thoughts on cultural inclusion. Her son attends Playful Beginnings Early Learning Centre.

‘The minute you step into the foyer of the centre you feel proud to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Cultural pride

oozes from the walls to the floors. You can see the women behind this centre are proud black women and are passionate about ensuring that those who enter experience a true indigenous cultural experience.

The importance of family, oral history is promoted with pictures of loved ones plastered on the walls so that the children are always close to those they love. The eucalyptus branches that hang from the ceiling, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dolls, instruments, artefacts, paintings, murals and books show children that our culture, as rich and diverse as it is, is something to be proud of.

Elders, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, nanas and pops are all encouraged to participate and share their life stories with the children. Yarn ups can be done by the humpy out the back or under the man-made tree inside.

All of it reinforces that our culture is one that has respect for the land, sea and animals that walk the lands. Identity is so important and as a child of mixed heritage I know the obstacles and barriers you can face in everyday life as a person knowing who they are but not knowing how to fully embrace it. I’m proud and honoured that my son is fortunate to be enrolled in a centre that I believe should be modelled around the state.’

(From an article first published in the *Indigenous Times*.)



L to R: Michelle Jacquelin-Furr (Bunganditj nation), Uncle Stephen Williams, Brooke Joy (Bunganditj nation)



Nutrition know-how: A mother and daughter take part in the Panyuni ba kra program.

Case study



A sense of community in the Shire

Cronulla Preschool, a community-based service in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, builds its preschool community by facilitating parent workshops and hosting a series of open days including a grandparent and special friends day

Each year Director Tracey Popple puts up a roster at the preschool's family BBQ and get parents to volunteer 30 minutes of their time to supervise activities such as face-painting or helping with the BBQ.

'It's a great way to get parents involved. Hot on the heels of that event I recruit a parent social committee. I then step back and let them manage the committee—they own it, they organise it, they do it!

'It's not about fundraising or making a profit—it's about socialising,' Ms Popple says.

The preschool also hosts an annual grandparents or special friends day where they invite extended family and friends to visit the service.

'This usually means [the grandparent or friend] brings the children so the parents get a morning off!

'We have morning tea together, the children perform songs and then they read the children's journals full of special learning stories, work samples, photographs, and other observations and reflections about their time at the preschool.

'We include special friends so children without grandparents don't miss out. We get great attendance and everyone enjoys being included in the preschool community.'

Ms Popple has also formed close links into the wider community by facilitating parenting workshops and by networking with Area Health and a local child and family interagency.

'Parents say it's hard to get babysitting for evening events so now I run parenting programs during the day. They can drop the children at the preschool and then gather in a local meeting room offsite (in Cronulla Mall). We've had a Triple P Parenting workshop, a psychologist come to talk about behaviour management and one of our mums is a nutritionist who presented healthy lunchbox ideas.

'Last year we had four mums starting small businesses. One mum makes jewellery, another does massage, so we had a pampering evening at the preschool for those mums to showcase their products. I supplied supper and put on a trivia quiz all about the preschool. It cost \$10 to attend, which we donated to a local women's refuge. I got two representatives from the refuge to come and speak.

Domestic violence is a topic that is difficult to broach but really important for women to know about.'

A non-teaching director, Ms Popple also ensures she personally knows all the parents' names.

'I sit down and memorise them each year. If you greet a parent by name it instantly puts them at ease and makes them feel welcome.

'I also make sure I am accessible. I am always at the front door when families arrive and go. They don't have to come looking for me—I'm just there.'



Photos from the annual grandparents or special friends day at Cronulla Preschool.





>> From page 21

- ◆ Educators have up-to-date information about key organisations that can provide families with advice, support and further services; for example, allied and health services, counselling services, dentists and local schools.

These partnerships enable the educator to refer families to key agencies which can offer support and services beyond which are the role of the setting. As we know, successful partnerships take time and this is also the case with local community organisations. Valuing time given to developing and maintaining these partnerships is critical. Perhaps identifying a key educator to act as the liaison between the setting and the community would allow for these partnerships to flourish and for an ongoing exchange of information which enables the partnership to be sustained over time. For example, linking with schools allows a two-way flow of information— understanding of curricula in each setting and goals for children, sharing of ideas and expertise and an understanding of expectations can be discussed. This information can then be shared with families through a variety of means; notices, general conversation, meetings and via setting newsletters.

Conclusion:

We know that building real partnerships with families and the community is crucial to the quality of the program we implement for the children who attend the setting. We also know that developing these connections and relationships is not always easy. It requires us to move out of our comfort zone and rethink the ways we currently connect with families. It may be useful at a staff meeting to consider some of the ideas provided and how they are being or could be implemented more effectively in your early childhood setting.

Dr Fay Hadley is a lecturer in early childhood at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. She is interested in and has conducted research on parent partnerships and community connections.

Dr Katey De Gioia is a lecturer at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. She researches in the areas of community and family issues focusing on transition to school and cultural diversity.

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Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations

In a recent NSW Families research project (Hadley, 2007) 80 per cent of the families interviewed indicated they wanted to attend social events at the setting as they provided an avenue to make connections with other families as well as see their child in an environment with other children.

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DEBATE:

As the sector readies itself for the National Quality Framework, questions are being asked about the qualifications of the new system's assessors. *Rattler* asks opinion leaders and practitioners the following: NQF assessors need a background in assessment, not in education and care.

DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE?

The responses certainly send a clear message to the Department. As *Rattler* went to press, we were informed by the Department of Education and Communities (DECS) that John Mason is due to make an announcement soon!

BACKGROUND: CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

During the trial of the NQS assessment process, a team of two assessors, made up of one National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) validator and one state/territory regulatory officer, conducted assessments. Assessors had relevant experience in the service type they were assessing and at least one of them was required to have the equivalent qualifications to the highest level required for that service type under the National Quality Standard.

The required experience and qualifications of assessors under the new National System, which commences from 1 January 2012, are yet to be agreed.

(Source: The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations www.deewr.gov.au)



'A lack of confidence in assessors could undermine the whole assessment and rating process.'

**Denise Taylor,
CEO of the National Childcare
Accreditation Council (NCAC):**

'When asked to describe the 'ideal assessor' most education and care services describe a person who is open-minded, approachable, reassuring and respectful. Someone with the ability to ask questions without making people feel they are being interrogated. These qualities would be desirable in any competent assessor, no matter what their background and experience.

Services also want reassurance that this 'ideal assessor' has firsthand experience in an education and care setting and understands what they are observing. Service operators and educators are likely to be resentful and

uncooperative if they believe they are being misunderstood by the assessor. A lack of confidence in the ability of the assessors can quickly undermine confidence in the validity of the whole assessment and rating process.

The outcomes based focus of the National Quality Standard (NQS) acknowledges that each education and care service is unique. Rather than ticking off a list of items, the NQS assessor must make a series of professional judgements about whether the service's practices meet the NQS.

To make these kinds of professional judgements, and ensure the credibility of the assessment and rating process, the 'ideal assessor' must combine their assessment expertise and people skills with a sound knowledge of emerging theories and current best practice. Assessors can be trained in the 'how to' of assessment, but they need to have a background in education and care in order to understand and professionally assess the quality of education and care services.'

What makes an ideal NQF assessor?



‘Some people argue a TAFE qualification or equivalent is enough—it’s not!’

Prue Warrilow,
CEO, Families at Work:

‘I feel strongly that NQS assessors should have a relevant early childhood education or middle childhood education degree if they are to be effective assessors. They are going into services to work in ‘partnership’ with educators—to help services improve quality outcomes for children and families. What qualified director/coordinator or pedagogical leader would give credibility to an external assessor who does not have a relevant qualification?’

Some people argue that TAFE or an equivalent qualification is enough, but that’s vocational training—it doesn’t allow for the same theoretical understanding of the different educational or pedagogical approaches to working with children.

I know there is some research at the Commonwealth level on the topic that is particularly influential. It has been written by Australian academic, Collette Taylor. I understand her research argues that any degree—is adequate...but I don’t know how a degree in engineering or economics, for example, would allow you to have a theoretical conversation around a philosophical approach in a children’s service?’

I have been searching for the COAG research but I suspect Collette’s research has not been publicly released. If this research is being used to support a decision then why isn’t it a publicly available document?’



‘I don’t believe assessors necessarily need to be qualified in early childhood education.’

Rowan Russell
has been on management boards of community-based preschools for the past 14 years (Lalor Park Preschool and Noah’s Park Preschool in Quaker’s Hill). He is a lead auditor under RABQSA and trains people in OH&S Management systems.

‘I don’t believe assessors necessarily need to be qualified in early childhood education. A person with auditing experience and qualifications (not necessarily a degree) who has been involved with the administration or management of a preschool should be able to do an assessment.

If you exclude people, who might not have an early childhood degree but who might, for example, have worked in preschool administration for 10 years and have helped directors prepare for accreditation or licensing, then you are losing good people who could be involved in the assessment process.

From my point of view, a qualification (degree) doesn’t always mean you are good at it. Ideally, I believe they need to have an assessment team of two people—one with an assessment/auditing background and one with an early childhood degree/experience. This would include TAFE trained people.

I don’t like services to be disadvantaged because they are visited by an assessor who [allows] their personal opinion influence their assessment and say: ‘oh, well that’s not the way I’d do it at my centre’. In an audit you make findings against a set of criteria and gut feeling or emotion should not come into it!’



‘How can people without this qualification make informed, professional judgments?’

Pam Cahir,
CEO of Early Childhood Australia (ECA):

‘ECA’s position was set out in its response in 2009 to the Regulatory Impact Statement for Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Reforms. This position is that the assessors for the new National Quality Standards Rating System need both rigorous assessor training and an early childhood degree qualification. It is not one or the other—it is both.

Being an assessor is a complex and specialised task that needs rigorous specialist training. At the same time it is ECA’s very strong view that assessors need early childhood degree qualifications. It is not possible for people without this qualification and assessor preparation to make informed, professional judgments about a service’s progress in the Quality Standards Rating Framework.

ECA also understands, however, that it may take time to get to this place. Knowing this, ECA has taken the position that assessor training is an essential qualification for an NQS assessor and that, in selecting assessors, preference should be given to people with early childhood degree qualifications. In addition, ECA believes that the goal must be that all NQS assessors will have early childhood degree qualifications by 2020. In saying this, ECA also believes that the requirements for skills and experience and/or relevant qualifications for OSHC sector would need to be explored with the OSHC sector.’

DEBATE:

What makes an ideal NQS assessor?



'Assessors need a working knowledge of the Family Day Care sector.'

Anita Jovanovski,
CEO of NSW Family Day Care
Association (NSWFDCA):

'NSW Family Day Care Association feels it is vital that assessors have a working knowledge of the family day care sector and who are able to interpret the Regulations and National Quality Standards to reflect the diversity of the many educators who work in family day care. An assessor with a background in education and care and who has some previous experience in the family day care sector will be able to see immediately the finer details that only someone with that background could understand.'

NSW Family Day Care feels that ACEQA (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority) will need to make a commitment to ensure those assessors who come with an assessment background but no education and care knowledge, will be trained and supported to gain specialist family day care assessor skills.



'The argument that assessors with no experience in the sector would be more objective is flawed.'

Ginie Udy,
CEO of SDN Children's Services:

'To properly assess the level of quality and care provided by an early education and care service, it is essential that NQS assessors have experience in the sector. Furthermore, assessors should be at least as qualified as the most senior person in the service they are assessing. The priority should be to ensure that the most suitably qualified people are employed. Experience working in early education and care should be a requirement because it is essential and relevant to the role.'

The argument that assessors with no experience in the sector would be more objective is flawed. It assumes that assessors with a background in the sector would be biased or more lenient when carrying out the assessment. Based on what? If anything, my experience tells me that they would be more likely to be uncompromising when it comes to quality care.

An experienced early education professional will be better placed to determine the difference between long standing professional practice and hastily manufactured practice.

These reforms were hard fought and hard won, and if we want to see the quality of care and education raised across Australia, we have to remain committed to better standards. This includes employing those most qualified to do the job. High quality will only be achieved if the people enforcing the NQF are experienced early childhood professionals.'



'The dilemma is that we don't have enough early childhood teachers to become assessors.'

Sylvia Turner,
director Tigger's Honeypot
Childcare Centre at the University
of NSW, Sydney:

'The dilemma is that we don't have enough qualified early childhood teachers to become assessors.'

Also, how do we make the process less subjective? I guess the problem is that because we are early childhood professionals, our grounding is often in a particular philosophy and it can be difficult for some people to set this aside.

Maybe they need to do personality checks in order to find the right people—people who can be objective assessors. I think it is going to be tricky whatever decision is made. However, having assessors who are respected by the profession is key.'



It is clear from the number of respondents to the survey that this is an issue children's services have passionate views about...



'The credibility of the system will be undermined and the vision for Australia's children put at risk!'

Ros Cornish,
CEO of Lady Gowrie Tasmania:

'Assessors without an early childhood educator and care qualification would not only be unable to fulfil the assessment role but their capacity to support the service on their continual improvement journey would be limited.

Whilst some aspects of the NQS could be assessed by an individual without an education and care qualifications, the areas relating to relationships, partnerships and importantly pedagogy demand a sound knowledge, skills and experience in this area. Qualifications are essential and it is also vital that assessors possess the appropriate attributes and engage in ongoing professional learning relevant to the role.

Assessors without a relevant early childhood qualification means the credibility of the system will be undermined and the vision for Australia's children put at risk!'



'Imagine the outcry if anyone other than teachers marked the HSC. It just would not happen.'

Debra Clarke,
CEO of UTS Child Care Inc:

'I cannot believe we are having this debate...What other education sector would allow anything other than a degree qualified educator to assess quality? It's vital that the ECEC sector fights to ensure that NQS assessors hold a background in education and care. I understand there are a number of issues affecting this; namely cost, workforce planning issues, and a piece of research. Firstly, I would call for the research—which apparently calls into question whether educators are needed—be publicly released. My fear is it's being misinterpreted!

Secondly, the issue around cost should not be allowed to influence this debate. Just as services are required to meet new qualification requirements under the NQF, so too should assessors need to meet minimum education standards—and that includes a background in early childhood education.

It is vital that those who will be making an assessment understand early childhood pedagogy. If there are concerns about workforce planning issues—that the regulators will not have a pool of staff who hold early childhood qualifications in place—then this needs to be phased in over time, just as services have been afforded the opportunity to attract and retain more trained staff.

This will be less of an issue in NSW than other states where I have been told anecdotally that current assessors come from a variety of backgrounds, including dog-catchers! While I don't doubt that these individuals are highly skilled in

assessment, how can they truly assess and rate early childhood curriculum? Imagine the public outcry if it were announced that anything other than teachers were engaged to mark the HSC. It just would not happen.'

SURVEY

WHAT YOU SAID

Community Child Care Cooperative (NSW) surveyed the sector to see what skills and qualifications you believe assessors should have. A simple three-question survey was distributed in August via *Shortside*, Community Child Care's online newsletter. Almost 800 people completed the survey.

An overwhelming 96.6 per cent of respondents believe the NQS assessors need qualifications in the early childhood education and care. It is clear from the number of respondent to the survey that this is an issue children's services have passionate views about.

The main reasons for the strong belief that assessors should have qualifications included:

- So assessors have respect and credibility;
- So assessors are competent;
- To ensure credibility and intent of the NQF is upheld;
- Because qualifications are important for all;
- Because assessors need a high level of understanding;
- Because it is assessment best practice;
- So assessment is not just about compliance;
- Because education and care is a specialist field; and
- To ensure the sector has credibility.

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Meet the Minister...*Rattler* talks to NSW Minister for Education, **Adrian Piccoli**, about his portfolio, the reform agenda and the challenges ahead.

>> What is your vision for early education and care in NSW?

We believe that placing early childhood education and care in the Department of Education and Communities is the right thing to do. Now that all phases of learning—from the earliest years through to post-school—are in the same portfolio, we have an opportunity to ensure coherent provisions that will work better for parents, children and students.

>> Are you concerned NSW spends less on children's services than any other state?

I know that successive Labor Governments have failed to fund preschools sufficiently, so that in NSW we now have the most expensive preschools in Australia. I also know we have a complicated funding model which is in need of review.

>> What case will you put to Treasury to try to change this?

We need to make sure we make the best and most equitable use of the funds that are available and also develop a sound way forward for future funding. As a result, I've asked my Department to undertake a review of NSW Government funding of the early childhood education and care sector, including the Preschool Resource Allocation Model. The terms of reference, process and timing for the review are being developed and I will be seeking input from the sector.

>> How will you ensure time and space for early education and care policy issues?

I know that the Department of Education and Communities is very large and it is critical that early childhood education has its own recognised high level presence and separate status.

We have therefore established a new Directorate of Early Childhood Education and Care within the Office of Education. All the functions that were in Children's Services in Community Services, plus those that primarily involved funding or regulating children's services either at Ashfield or in regions, have all transferred to this Directorate in the Department of Education and Communities.

The new Directorate is headed by John Mason as Executive Director, who reports directly to Leslie Loble, the Chief Executive of the Office of Education. This will ensure a clear focus on early childhood education and care in the Department.

>> Are you concerned about the disparity in funding of and fees charged by those preschools delivered by your Department vs those administered by your Department?

My first priority has been to ensure that the Department's role as a provider of preschools is kept completely separate from the policy, regulation and funding of early childhood services roles, to ensure there is no conflict of interest.

The DEC preschools therefore remain in the Public Schools Division of the Department, reporting through a Deputy Director General and are completely separate from the Office of Education and the Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate.

>> How committed is the State Government to the National Quality Framework (NQF)?

I can tell you that we are committed to the NQF and that the Premier has written to Minister Kate Ellis confirming our Government's agreement to the Implementation Plan for the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care.

A number of people have asked if we will be rolling back the 1:4 ratio in NSW. With the best interests of children in mind, our answer is: No. We also believe the 1:5 ratio is appropriate for 2 to 3 year-olds. It is already in place in several states and we think that with proper planning and phase-in, services in NSW should be able to implement this by the COAG deadline of 2016.

However, I know many in the early childhood sector are concerned about the implementation process, and we are too. We are strongly committed to the reforms but we also want to make sure that implementing them doesn't place an excessive burden on families or providers.

The proposed new Assessment and Rating Instrument has major challenges and it's important that we get that part of the NQA right. We are also concerned that the cost of quality early childhood education and care doesn't become unaffordable for families.

The Premier has raised the need to resolve these issues in his letter to Minister Ellis and I can assure you I will be putting them on the agenda at the MCEECDYA and making sure our voice is heard.

>> You have two children. Are you happy with the quality of early education and care they receive?

I know personally how important quality early childhood education and care is. I have a three year old and a six month old and I am fortunate to be able to experience first-hand what a quality service is all about at the Dorothy Wade Centre in Griffith.



'I know that successive Labor Governments have failed to fund preschools sufficiently, so in NSW we now have the most expensive preschools in Australia.'

In *Rattler's* literary roundup, Ingrid Maack previews what's new on the shelves...

Flood

By Jackie French and Bruce Whatley

Published by Scholastic Australia

Cost: \$16.99

Based on the recent Queensland floods, this is a story about community, hope and courage. Told from the perspective of a cattle dog separated from its family, *Flood* helps children to understand the effects of a natural disaster.



There are many heroes in this story but perhaps the most poignant is the little tugboat on the Brisbane river which pushes a fallen concrete boardwalk out to sea, staving off further disaster.

The tugboat is a hero that children can relate to. This picture book is about heroes and the strength of the Australian spirit during times of adversity. As the story says: 'Strangers offered shelter, they offered hands and home ... It was town of mud and friendship.'

While *Flood* was inspired by the 2011 floods, its message is timeless. Indeed early childhood services could use *Flood* to facilitate discussion among children, educators and parents about any natural disaster (fire, flood or cyclone).

Family Forest

By Kim Kane and Lucia Masciullo

Published by Hardie Grant

Cost \$24.95

'While some kids have a family tree...We have a family forest!' says the protagonist of this picture book. This boy, whose name we do not learn, proceeds to introduce readers to his little half-sister, whole-sister, big half-brother and his step-parents.

This story is told with wit and in a way that allows young children to understand blended



or 'fusion' families and other social changes. This child calls his biological mother Jane and explains that Jane and her partner aren't married but 'they live together'.

I particularly liked the amusing image of the half-sister (cut in half), the step-mother (shaped like steps) and mum's partner (dance partner).

Family Forest is certain to be enjoyed by children and adults from all kinds of families. While there are various picture books written about divorce and blended or 'fusion' families, few are written for an Australian audience. *Family Forest* is not only Australian, it was short-listed by the Children's Book Council for Picture Book of the Year 2011—it gets my vote!

The Runaway Hug

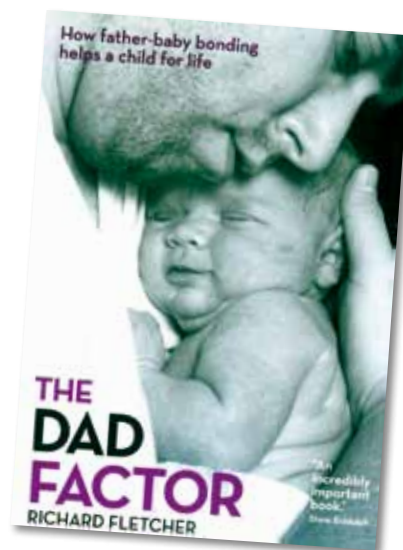
By Nick Bland and Freya Blackwood

Published by Scholastic Australia

Cost: \$24.99

The Runaway Hug is a picture book that offers a touching exploration of family and domestic life. In this household coffee cups sit in corners, clothes spill out of drawers and the baby sits on the kitchen floor helping itself to a jar of peanut butter. It is a house full of chaos, children and cuddles.

Great for reading aloud, *The Runaway Hug* follows a little girl called Lucy, who sets out to secure a hug from each member of



her busy and boisterous family. As usual, Freya Blackwood's pencil and watercolour illustrations are beautiful. This is sure to be a bedtime or rest-time favourite.

The Dad Factor

By Richard Fletcher

Published by Finch publishing

Cost: \$29.95

The father's role in a baby's development has typically been under-researched and often under-valued. In his new book, *The Dad Factor*, Dr Richard Fletcher highlights recent scientific evidence on the critical role dads play in a child's cognitive, physical and emotional development.

Fathers tend to be less verbal and encourage more risk-taking. Rough and tumble play, for example, helps toddlers learn to manage emotions and to grow up strong and physically confident.

The Dad Factor is clearly written with interesting case studies, beautiful photography and handy summary points at the end of each chapter. This is a great book to hand onto expectant fathers in the community and is food for thought for educators in the female-dominated realm of early childhood.

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