

# **Bringing culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles into dialogue**

## **Children learning to live together in diverse communities**

### **Final Report 2020**

**Chief Investigators:**

**Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Jamie Sisson, Robert Hattam and Anne Morrison**

**University of South Australia, School of Education, Pedagogies for Justice Research Group, Centre for Research in Social and Educational Inclusion**



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**University of  
South Australia**



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of South Australia**

Department for Education



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## Letter of Transmittal

Karen Weston, Executive Director Early Years and Child Development  
Trish Tranfa, Senior Project Officer Early Childhood  
Government of South Australia, Department for Education  
31 Flinders Street  
Adelaide SA 5000

20<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Dear Ms Weston and Ms Tranfa

On behalf of the research team I submit our Report for the project: *An investigation of how early childhood educator researchers enact Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in dialogue with Reggio Emilia principles as early learning practice with children from Aboriginal and culturally diverse backgrounds.*

This project emerged from and is aligned to Early Childhood and Aboriginal Education priorities in the Government of South Australian Department for Education. Equal alignment to policy drivers include: the National Quality Standards (NQS); the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); and the Framework for School Aged Care (FSAC).

This research discusses professional development and the preparation of educators for culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse learning contexts. It draws on data from a 10-month small-scale qualitative study conducted in six South Australian public preschools that involved 20 semi-structured interviews with Early Childhood Education directors and educators. ECE educators were involved in action research inquiry as professional development to examine how educator as researchers enact culturally responsive pedagogy in South Australian Early Learning settings engaging with Reggio Emilia education principles. How do educators develop and enact a child strength-based approach to curriculum that acknowledges mandated standards but begins with recognising and valuing the linguistic and cultural repertoire knowledge linked to learning? Specifically, a multi-sited action research project was convened and augmented by literature review, analysis of policy texts, and additional evidence about site structures and culture. The project provides an initial stage in the development of an Australian

theory for early childhood culturally responsive pedagogy that draws on the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project, international Studies of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies, Australian Indigenous Studies, New Pedagogy Studies, and new empirical work in educational settings. The findings reveal benefit and impact across all participating ECE sites from support of The South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project developed in South Australia and ‘Thinker in Residence’ Carla Rinaldi (2013). Our advanced case studies of an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy in South Australian early learning settings that were aligned to Reggio Emilia principles have the potential to inform site-based professional development responsive to social and cultural learning context of all children. Ongoing educator research learning and reflective practice matters. When learning is integrated to children’s rights, self-inquiry, prior knowledge, linguistic identities and strengths—children engaged in learning critical for successful transition. Where challenges were met, benefits including increased student relationships, belonging, engagement, motivation, child and family school involvement, and an appreciation of local knowledge as curriculum resource.

It has been a privilege to lead a team of eminent researchers in this project for the Department for Education. The research team thank all who participated including: ECE sites children, directors, educators, Aboriginal educators and community; the project sponsor reference group members, Karen Weston, Executive Director Early Years and Child Development, Trish Tranfa Senior Project Officer Early Childhood, Kate Ryan Partnership Group, Early Childhood Australia (SA Branch) and Anne Marie Hayes. I commend this report to you.

Yours sincerely



Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney

Chief Investigator Research Team, UniSA School of Education, Pedagogies for Justice research group, RESI



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## Acknowledgments

The research team extend their appreciation and gratitude to the many people who participated in this project:

- The Government of South Australia, Department for Education is committed to providing early childhood educators with opportunities to enhance their personal professional knowledge and practice through many different initiatives. ‘The South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project’ Reggio Emilia prototype initiative has led early childhood Educators Learning Together since 2014. This provided members with an opportunity to form small action research teams to investigate a project relevant to local pedagogical and curriculum challenges. The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of ‘The South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project’ in time, money, and staff for this project.

The authors thank:

- The eight teams of directors and talented early childhood educator researchers for participation and agreeing to share their research experiences with us.
- The early childhood sites and their community members, parents, Aboriginal leaders and Elders, and mainstream service providers.
- Project sponsor reference group members, Karen Weston (Executive Director Early Years and Child Development), Trish Tranfa (Senior Project Officer Early Childhood), Kate Ryan (Partnership Group), Early Childhood Australia (SA Branch) and Anne Marie Hayes.
- The project team of The South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project: Trish Tranfa and Reece Turtur.
- Associate Professor Victoria Whittington, University of South Australia as project mentor for her contribution, assistance and ongoing support throughout the project.

The design for this research was informed by an Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery grant by titled *Toward an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy* (Project ID: IN170100017) and conducted by Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney and Professor Robert Hattam.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| AEDC   | Australian Early Development Census                        |
| AFLS   | Assessment of Functional Living Skills                     |
| CALD   | Culturally and Linguistically Diverse                      |
| COAG   | Coalition of Australian Governments                        |
| CRP    | Culturally responsive pedagogy                             |
| DfE    | Department for Education (South Australia)                 |
| ECE    | Early Childhood Education                                  |
| EYLF   | Early Years Learning Framework                             |
| NAPLAN | National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy        |
| NQS    | National Quality Standard (Australia)                      |
| OECD   | Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development       |
| PD     | Professional Development                                   |
| PLC    | Professional Learning Community                            |
| SNAICC | Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care |

# Acknowledgement of Country<sup>1</sup>

## Kaurna

Pepe Adelaide tampendi, ngadlu Kaurna yertangga banbabanbalyarnendi (inbarendi). Kaurna meyunna yaitya mattanya Womma Tarndanyako. Parnako yailtya, parnuko tappa purruna, parnuko yerta ngadlu tampendi. Yellaka Kaurna meyunna itto yailtya, tappa purruna, yerta kuma burro martendi, burro warriappendi, burro tangka martulyaiendi.

## English

We acknowledge this paper was written on the traditional Country of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains and we pay respect to Elders past and present. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land. We acknowledge that they are of continuing importance to the Kaurna people living today.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Adelaide City Council  
<https://www.cityofadelaide.com.au/community/reconciliation/welcome-and-acknowledgement-of-country/>

# Executive summary

## Background

This project emerged from, and is aligned with, three policy priorities of the Government of South Australia's Department for Education: *Every Chance for Every Child*; *Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019-2029* and the *Early Learning Strategy*. The project is also a continuation of the *South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project*<sup>2</sup> which developed following the recommendations of Professor Carla Rinaldi who was the South Australian 'Thinker in Residence' 2012-2013. Furthermore, the project draws on the insights, conceptual resources, and methodologies of two recent research initiatives: *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018) and *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (Rigney & Hattam 2016-2019)

This project was designed specifically to bring into dialogue the Reggio Emilia education principles that have shown so much promise in early childhood settings across Australia, and an emerging Australian version of a culturally responsive pedagogy framework.

## Rationale

There is a strong consensus in the research literature regarding the cognitive, social and emotional benefits of early childhood education (ECE). Additionally, children who attend early childhood sites are more likely to successfully transition to school, remain engaged with school learning and improve their wellbeing into maturity. But despite the policy context and significant historical work conducted in South Australia on improving early learning, there is still much work to do to advance its benefits. This project brings into focus two inter-related rationales that we think map out significant problematics for policy and practice in this area: first, the Australian early childhood cohort is increasingly culturally diverse; and secondly, education systems are still struggling to improve the appalling outcomes for Aboriginal learners.<sup>3</sup> Both of these issues have specific implications for early childhood education.

## Superdiverse student cohorts

The Scanlon Foundation's recent surveys into the nature of Australia's cultural diversity showed:

28% of Australians are born overseas, with ranking first within the OECD for cultural diversity amongst nations with populations over 10 million;

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/departments/research-and-data/south-australian-collaborative-childhood-project>

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this report, we use the term *Aboriginal* to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The term *Indigenous* is used in reference to international First Nations peoples.

a sustained growth of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity in capital cities; nearly twenty per cent of Australians speak a language other than English; and twenty-one per cent of the local-born population have one or both parents born overseas; 85% of respondents agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia; 63% agree that accepting migrants from different countries makes Australia stronger (Markus 2016, pp. 1-6).

This demographic, social and cultural context is intensifying complex challenges for many educators. Put simply, educators are challenged to engage every child in successful learning given that a monocultural approach has a long history of failure. We argue that it is now reasonable to move from thinking about *multicultural* to *superdiverse* learner cohorts. Teaching in superdiverse multilingual early childhood sites is emerging as the new normal.

### *Appalling outcomes for Aboriginal learners*

Over two decades of research have shown that Aboriginal children are still not benefiting from inclusive early childhood education (SCRGSP 2016; Zubrick et al. 2006). Reforming preschool pedagogy and curriculum to enable engagement and success for Aboriginal children who are marginalised and failed by education systems is a necessary and urgent task (SNAICC 2019). As the national, non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC reports that more than ‘17 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included in the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 61.2 per cent of whom were “on track” (in the top 75 per cent) across all domains, compared to an average of 78.9 per cent of non-Indigenous children’ and, furthermore, ‘The proportion of Aboriginal and Islander children “on track” significantly decreases in all domains as remoteness increases’ (SNAICC 2019, p. 11).

Most Aboriginal students attend government schools (ABS 2015) in Australian cities and/or large regional centres (ABS 2006) and are included in the superdiversity mentioned previously. Furthermore, Aboriginal learners are themselves heterogeneous. It is not uncommon for an early childhood site to include Aboriginal children from several Aboriginal nations, each with their own language and complex array of cultural practices specific to their own Country. While difference and diversity are the ‘new normal’ in Australia, Aboriginal superdiversity has existed for over 60,000 years. Yet, despite Aboriginal superdiversity, state and national preschool and school data collection methods treat Aboriginality as a homogenous category. The lack of recognition of Aboriginal diversity hides the success in some language groups while leads to a lack of accountability at policy and service delivery levels.

### *A direction for policy and practice*

Referring to the EYLF, the Educator’s Guide (DEEWR 2010) argues that learning in early childhood programs should focus on ‘the development of a strong personal and cultural identity through a respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, home

languages, capabilities and behavioural practices’ (p. 22). Indeed, this study rejects a ‘culture of poverty’ thesis and we argue instead that the problem is not with the learner but arises due to a lack of sensitivity to the cultural differences in educational sites or classrooms when the vernacular knowledges and everyday experiences of some children are absent, misrepresented or muted in the curriculum.

The principles from the Reggio Emilia education project and our framework for culturally responsive pedagogy have both been developed out of critiques of deficit views of ‘disadvantage’. Both propose instead an assets-based approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than foregrounding the capabilities and knowledges that children do not bring to the learning site, educators start by working with the ‘funds of knowledge’ and capabilities that children actually do bring. There is an urgent need to provide ECE educators with high quality professional learning that enables them to redesign curriculum and pedagogy to respond positively to the funds of knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, including Aboriginal children.

## **Project aims**

This project aimed to examine how educators enact culturally responsive pedagogies in South Australian early learning settings engaging with Reggio Emilia education principles. Key questions for this study were:

How is ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’ understood in policy, theory and practice, and what can Australia learn from international comparisons?

How do policy texts both define the problem and the solutions for Aboriginal education?

How might culturally responsive pedagogy—both theory and practice—be further developed in early learning contexts?

How might culturally responsive approaches further develop the Reggio Emilia early childhood approach?

How do educators develop and enact a strength-based approach to curriculum that acknowledges mandated standards but begins with recognising and valuing the linguistic and cultural repertoires of children?

## **Participants**

*The University of South Australia research team* consisted of Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Lead Investigator), Professor Robert Hattam, Dr Jamie Huff Sisson and Dr Anne Morrison.

*Department for Education officers:* Karen Weston (Executive Director Early Years and Child Development), Trish Tranfa (Senior Project Officer Early Childhood), Kate Ryan (Partnership Group, Early Childhood Australia (SA Branch), Anne Marie Hayes (Executive

Director Partnerships Schools and Preschools) and Reece Turtur (Project Officer, Early Childhood). In addition, three regional managers/liaison staff participated in the research.

*Early learning sites:* Six sites participated in the research; four in metropolitan Adelaide and two in regional locations. A total of six site directors and ten teachers/educators were involved.

## **Methodology**

This study used a critical action research approach augmented with methods borrowed from educational ethnography and policy sociology. The research involved four interrelated phases: *Orientation*; *Analysis of key texts*; *Augmented action research* and *Analysis and theory building*.

During the orientation phase, the researchers gained research ethics approval, collected key resources and sought participation from early learning sites interested in building a professional learning community across the university-educator nexus.

In conducting an analysis of key texts, the researchers reviewed an archive of educational research in settler colonial countries for a genealogy, rationales, theories and descriptions of practice for culturally responsive pedagogy in early learning contexts. Also reviewed were key policy texts operating in Australia that inform decisions that educators make about their practice.

During the augmented action research phase, six early learning centres were invited to participate in a whole year action research cycle consisting of four stages: provocation, redesigning, doing, and reflecting. Regular ‘roundtable’ workshops were convened (two per term across terms 1-3) during which the participants developed their pedagogical approaches informed by collective readings about the Reggio Emilia education project and culturally responsive pedagogy research literature. Participants trialled these approaches through action research, collected data, analysed their findings and presented them at an end-of-year conference.

Finally, the researchers analysed and theorised three inter-connected sets of data: interviews with the site leaders about their sites in relations to advancing a culturally responsive and Reggio Emilia-informed practice; action research data collected by the participating educators; and interviews with the participants about their action research.

For this report, the data has been organised in the form of six site case studies. Each case has the following elements: a context statement about the site; an account of the action research presented as a ‘portrait’ compiled from the interviews and conference presentations; and a summary of the key learnings. The report concludes with our key findings, organised around five propositions which provide a frame for our recommendations as summarised below.



## Key findings and recommendations

### 1. The Reggio Emilia education principles provide a productive framework for improving and redesigning the practice of early childhood educators

Reggio Emilia education principles do provide a policy text that educators can work with to substantially redesign their teaching practices. However, as Rinaldi (2013) states, ‘It is impossible to replicate the Reggio Approach but it is possible to develop a local South Australian approach that has the traces of the Reggio Emilia principles’ (p. 13). The Reggio Emilia education principles cannot be acquired via a lock-step method requiring scripting or coaching. Instead, the principles are presented as a series of propositions that provide provocations to rethink pedagogy and practice. These provocations require translation into the unique local contexts of educators.

#### Recommendation 1

Continue to support a strong relationship between DfE and The Reggio Children Foundation. This would include continuing to sponsor educational exchanges with the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre; inviting key officers from the Foundation to work with South Australian educators and scholars; and supporting South Australian Representatives on the Centro Loris Malaguzzi Scientific Committee.

#### Recommendation 2

Continue to support high quality professional learning for early childhood educators that enables them to engage with and contextualise principles from the Reggio Emilia education project into their teaching practices. This could include the following strategies:

Construct a website from the case studies available from *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018) and this project.

Continue funding for a second phase of this pilot study.

Provide professional development for early childhood education policy officers.

Provide professional development for early childhood centre Directors.

### 2. A culturally responsive pedagogy framework provides a strong version of culture to complement Reggio Emilia-inspired settings

The Reggio Emilia education principles originated in Northern Italy through the Reggio Emilia education project, which catered for a culturally homogenous student cohort. Apart

for the notion of *100 Languages*, these education principles do not explicitly address cultural differences and are not designed to respond to superdiverse cohorts or to the specific learning contexts of Australian Aboriginal children. Culturally responsiveness requires teaching culture through culture and involves the recognition of ‘children as both experts in and learners of culture. As experts, children share their own cultures, while also learning from their peers and community members about other cultures’ (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2020, p. 120). The national data, which shows discrepancies between the achievement of Aboriginal children and their peers, warns us that educational policies can no longer afford to pretend that culture does not matter in education. Our approach to culturally responsive pedagogies provides a useful framework for educators to acknowledge the significance of culture and to engage with diverse cultures to enhance children’s active engagement in learning.

### **Recommendation 3**

Support with funding and management of a second phase of this pilot study to further develop a South Australian approach that is culturally responsive and inspired by the education principles from Reggio Emilia. A second phase could:

- expand the selection of early childhood settings (Aboriginal, bilingual, urban, rural, remote); work from what was learned from this project,
- include an early childhood management team that is knowledgeable in culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles,
- further refine the South Australian approach to early childhood education that is inspired by education principles from Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies,
- seek to understand the experiences of children, families, educators, leaders and communities within early childhood educational contexts.

Continuing and expanding a second phase of this research is critical to enacting and evaluating culturally responsive pedagogies for social justice.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Support the development of online materials from the case studies drafted in this report as resources for educators in all early childhood settings in South Australia. Such a resource has the potential to promote South Australian public education as a world leader in how early childhood policy and practice can respond to increasing cultural diversity and improve the learning achievements of Aboriginal learners.

### **3. A culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia-inspired approach has positive outcomes for children, families and educators**

This pilot study has demonstrated that engaging in a culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia inspired approach delivered positive outcomes for children, families and educators. The educators all reported that working with a culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia inspired approach did enable them to redesign their teaching practices in ways that improved their educative relationships with, and understanding of, the children in their care. Further outcomes for children included (but not limited to) improved literacy outcomes, increased attendance, increased participation and engagement in learning experiences, increased social awareness and development of social skills, and increased confidence in learning. Positive outcomes for families were demonstrated through increased support for and connection to the site as a reciprocal learning community. In particular, educators reported an increase in positive and supportive relationships with families, more meaningful connections to and respect for culture and diversity, and families showing increased confidence in conversations with educators.

#### **Recommendation 5**

Establish a working party to review this report with a view to refining a South Australian approach that reflects a culturally responsive framework and is inspired by the Reggio Emilia education principles that could then inform the next iteration of the DfE's early childhood policy and guidelines.

#### **Recommendation 6**

Review the case study material to elucidate the multitude of ways in which educators evaluate positive outcomes from their practices. Such a review has the potential to provide future policy development with a more practitioner-informed framework for determining what works in local contexts.

#### **4. Action research provides a modality of professional learning that supports substantial changes to the practice of early childhood educators**

The success of this pilot study was in part due to the modality of professional learning that we enacted, namely a whole-year action research methodology. Our action research design drew on decades of previous action research-driven projects informed by these principles:

Convening and sustaining a professional learning community in the form of ‘research roundtables’ (Ladwig & White 1996);

Taking seriously the pedagogical challenges of teachers;

Establishing conditions for promoting problematisation and critical reflection;

Inviting educators to read relevant research collaboratively with university researchers;

Focusing on improving theory and practice;

Fostering educator/site ownership;

Producing practitioner knowledge about what works in given contexts;

Systematically collecting and analysing evidence; and,

Commitment to build more socially just settings.

##### **Recommendation 7**

DfE provide opportunities for those officers responsible for professional learning across the system to be properly briefed about an action research approach. This project adopted a professional learning community (PLC) approach that included one site leader and 2-3 educators from each site but there are other modalities that can be further developed, including a whole-of-site approach.

##### **Recommendation 8**

Convene a working party of early childhood policy officers and ECE site leaders to work on devising a whole-of-site approach to professional learning through action research. This work could be developed in parallel to work on Recommendations 2 and 3. A second phase of this project could incorporate the added dimension of whole-of-site professional learning that grows out of learnings for a cross-site PLC.

**5. Providing policy coherence is an urgent challenge to advancing a South Australian approach to early childhood education that is inspired by the principles of Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies**

Educators and site leaders are now grappling with a regime of policy texts and policy demands that often contradict each other, and certainly present implementation challenges at the site level. Early childhood educators have to work across multiple curriculum documents, are often provided with decontextualised policy ideas that require careful translation into local contexts, and are mandated to evaluate ‘good practice’ with narrowly defined measurements that do not adequately account for the positive impacts of local practices.

**Recommendation 9**

DfE Officers review the coherence of the policy matrix that informs the work of early childhood site leaders and educators as a part of the process of developing the next iteration of policy.

**Recommendation 10**

There is a national consensus emerging on treaty-making in Australia that governments should productively negotiate at the level of local Aboriginal nations. Such a view is consistent with a key theme in this report; that sustainable and real reforms can only be constructed at the local level and hence demand a place-based and community development approach. Therefore, DfE commit to engage productively with the Buthera Agreement (Government of South Australia 2018) as a pilot study in policy development for improving early childhood learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

In the next section we outline the background and context of this study, including a brief account of the policy history. We introduce two significant local studies that have made this research possible. Two rationales for the research will be outlined.

## Introduction

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how great an educational idea or intervention is on paper; what really matters is how it manifests itself in the day-to-day lived reality of schools. (Sir Kevan Collins in Sharples, Albers & Fraser 2018, p. 2)

## Project aims

This project aimed to examine how educators enact culturally responsive pedagogy in South Australian early learning settings engaging with Reggio Emilia education principles. Specifically, we convened a multi-site action research project involving six early learning sites that was augmented by analysis of policy texts, and additional evidence about site planning, structures and culture.

The project provides an initial stage in the development of an Australian theory for early childhood culturally responsive pedagogy that draws on international and Australian Indigenous Studies, Reggio Emilia studies, New Pedagogy Studies, and new empirical work in educational settings.

In pursuing this aim, the project:

- Established and sustained a collaborative research community across a cluster of early learning settings to produce new professional and scholarly knowledge about culturally responsive early childhood pedagogies in settings inspired by Reggio Emilia education principles;

- Reviewed an archive of educational research in settler colonial countries for rationales, theories, and descriptions of practice, including culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles in early childhood settings;

- Analysed Australian federal and state policy texts in the area of Aboriginal education, particularly in the early years, to ascertain how problems are named and how solutions are proposed;

- Developed an augmented approach to action research that brings together data sets from classroom action research over one year in six early learning settings, with data about structures and site culture in these settings; and,

- Drafted case studies of Australian culturally responsive pedagogies in early learning settings engaging with Reggio Emilia education principles that have the potential to inform teacher education, site-based professional development and education, and Aboriginal policy in different Australian jurisdictions.

## Policy context

This research project aligns with several strategic State and Federal policy documents including:

Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia (EYLF) (COAG 2009b). ‘Five outcomes: children to have a strong: sense of identity, connection to their world, wellbeing, confidence as learners, and become effective communicators (p. 5).

The 2012 National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. ‘A national standard approach to the regulation and quality assessment of education and child care services’.

The 2019 South Australian Strategic Plan (Every Chance for Every Child). ‘High achievement, growth, challenge, engagement and equity are central to our culture’. ‘[Our workforce is] supported to work effectively and build our capability’ (Department for Education 2019, p. 4)

The 2019 Commonwealth of Australia Closing the Gap report. ‘To have 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year old’s enrolled in early childhood education’ (COAG 2009a, p. 10).

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Australian Education Declaration. ‘Quality and access to early years learning and development that meets the needs of all Australian families’ (Education Council 2019, p. 12).

The 2019-2029 South Australian Aboriginal Education Strategy. ‘Through building culturally responsiveness education services, ensure Aboriginal children feel safe, valued and supported for the unique knowledge and strengths they bring to education’ (Department for Education 2018, p. 5).

Of particular note here is the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), published by the Federal Government in 2009, which inaugurated a commitment to a national curriculum document that focuses specifically on children aged birth to five years. Some key ideas from the EYLF include:

Children have a strong sense of identity;

Children are connected with and contribute to their world;

Children have a strong sense of wellbeing;

Children are confident and involved learners; and

Children are effective communicators.

As well, the EYLF identifies the importance of a holistic approach to education that acknowledges the significance of children’s learning and wellbeing in all areas of their lives including physical, personal, social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive learning. The EYLF recognises play-based pedagogies as being significant to this endeavour and the role of the educator in making thoughtful intentional decisions concerning pedagogy and the learning environment. Importantly, as Grieshaber (2010, pp. 33-34) points out, the framework poses significant pedagogical challenges for educator compliance and requires ongoing and supportive professional learning to enact the aspirations of this document. This enactment challenge is compounded by differences in the qualifications among early childhood practitioners, including an adult education certificate, a diploma, a university bachelor’s

degree or higher. As Gieshaber (2010, p. 42) notes, ‘The mandatory nature of the [EYLF] intensifies the obligation to provide high quality professional learning opportunities, particularly for those less qualified educators who might be encountering intentional teaching, discipline based content, outcomes, equity or play-based learning for the first time’.

The EYLF sits alongside a range of other reforms that inform policy and practice of the South Australian Department for Education. A focus on inclusion, diversity, democracy and Aboriginal children in early childhood learning were central themes of South Australia’s 2012-2013 ‘Thinker in Residence’ Professor Carla Rinaldi in her report *Re-imagining childhood: The inspiration of the Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia* (2013). She specifically recommended, ‘enhancing the child’s wellbeing through the inspiration of Aboriginal cultures where the welcoming and wellbeing of children is the welcoming and wellbeing of all the human beings from 0-99 years of age’ (p. 13). This project is also a continuation of the *South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project* developed in South Australia from Carla Rinaldi’s (2013) visit that made recommendations in order to

- advocate for children’s rights as citizens from birth;

- assert South Australia as a leader of early childhood education and child development within Australia and the Asia Pacific; and

- actively contribute to the international body of early childhood research.

## Key local research

This project also draws on the insights, conceptual resources and methodologies of two recent and local research projects, *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018) and *Towards an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (Rigney & Hattam 2016-2019). The key findings and significance of each project is discussed below.

*An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018) provided case studies of early childhood educators redesigning their pedagogy through working with Reggio Emilia principles. The research explored how early childhood education was being re-imagined in response to Carla Rinaldi’s (2013) recommendations (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018). This research demonstrated how early childhood sites bring multiple perspectives from their unique contexts into dialogue with the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project to re-imagine early childhood cultural models to pedagogy that are contextually relevant. The individual case studies demonstrate how individual personal histories inform educators’ pedagogy and practices. Each case study provides an example of how educators and leaders engaged with the Reggio Emilia principles in different ways, thus influencing the subsequent experiences of children, parents/carers, educators and leaders. The findings shed light on the importance of contextual models of pedagogy that reflect the diverse



cultures within the learning community and called for ‘further research to explore how cultural perspectives, including local and Aboriginal perspectives, are brought into dialogue to reconceptualize pedagogy’ (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018, p. 111).

The findings from the cross-case analysis of this research highlighted the challenge of traditional and often dominant discourses that limit contextually relevant and innovative pedagogical change in early childhood education to maintain the status quo practices which just do not work well. The study found pedagogical fragmentation and leadership turnover to be symptomatic of standardised and hierarchical views of education. Parents were concerned about educational policies having more of a focus on NAPLAN performance and not enough focus on supporting children to develop a love of learning and being contributing members of their communities. Parents from this study reported that they purposefully sought preschool and primary school environments that demonstrated a greater focus on knowing children and families and valuing their perspectives as active members of the learning community (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018).

This report outlined the common values and beliefs that have proven to be useful in understanding educators’ pedagogical practices for social justice:

- Belief in the competence and capacity of children, educators and parents/carers,
- Importance of democracy in education,
- Understanding of knowledge as being socially constructed,
- Role of inquiry and research in professional learning and improving pedagogy and practice,
- Importance of making learning visible to informing future policy and practice.

Recommendations from this investigation include:

- Maintain and extend a collaborative intra and inter systems approach.
- Foster educational innovation, creativity and cultural responsiveness.
- Establish learning communities that embody a culture of dialogue at the site, organisation and state levels.
- Promote pedagogical leadership.
- Reconceptualise professional learning that fosters teacher as researcher.
- Reconceptualise early childhood education and care in South Australia by developing a local approach that brings together multiple perspectives.
- Continue and expand research that focuses on cultural perspectives.
- Create a culture that values an image of the competent and capable parent/carer and fosters an awareness of their role as protagonists in children’s learning.

*Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (Rigney & Hattam 2016-2019) was an Australian Research Council funded Indigenous Discovery project that brought together

classroom action research, policy analysis and ethnographically-informed data sets to examine how teachers enact culturally responsive pedagogy in Australian mainstream middle school classrooms. The primary focus was on the potential for culturally responsive pedagogies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people, although the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) were evident across all cultures.

Culturally responsive pedagogies for Indigenous students are accepted internationally as a hopeful strategy for improving academic achievement of First Peoples in settler colonial countries such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand (Bishop et al. 2007; Castagno & Brayboy 2008; Dick, Estell & McCarty 1994). In Australia, research into the experiences of Aboriginal students has too often focused on the problems, barriers and challenges teachers face and the need to improve teacher quality and pre-service teacher education. Despite these initiatives, little attention has previously been given to culturally responsive pedagogies in Australian public schools. *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* sought to examine this gap.

The researchers worked with teachers from seven large metropolitan public schools with substantial enrolments of Aboriginal middle years students. Teachers committed to a two-year professional learning project involving two action research cycles. Ultimately, five key provocations emerged from the project. Culturally responsive teachers:

- Provide high intellectual challenge,
- Strongly connect to students' life-worlds,
- Ensure that all students feel positive about their own cultural identity in classrooms,
- Offer opportunities for students to perform their learning for an audience,
- Open up options for multimodal literacies,
- Support an action or activist orientation.

To claim a strong version of a culturally responsive approach, teachers need to work with these five provocations as a constellation of practices, operating as an interacting set.

The findings of this project raised the following questions:

- If didactic, monologic and highly scripted pedagogies do not work then how do educators practice dialogic pedagogies?
- How do educators establish and sustain the classroom as a research centre and support their students to conduct their own challenging inquiries?
- How do educators support their students to develop their capacities as 'canny theorists of the cultures they inhabit' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 154)?
- How might we redesign curriculum and pedagogical practice to demand high intellectual challenge from students in ways that engage with young people's life-worlds and the concerns of their communities?

Is culturally competence in superdiverse classrooms viable? Is ‘not knowing’ or cultural humility a viable option instead?

What pedagogies can integrate life-worlds and subject discipline knowledges in ways that that don’t trivialise either?

How can teachers provide opportunities for students to take an active role in addressing the specific social issues they have identified and to critically reflect on the action taken”

Drawing on both *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* and *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, this project has been designed specifically to bring into dialogue the Reggio Emilia education principles that have shown so much promise in early childhood settings across Australia, and an emerging Australian version of a culturally responsive pedagogical framework.

## Project rationale

There is a strong consensus in the research literature regarding the cognitive, social and emotional benefits of early childhood education. Additionally, children who attend early childhood educational sites are more likely to successfully transition to school, remain engaged with school learning and improve their wellbeing into maturity. But despite the policy context and significant historical work conducted in South Australia on improving early learning, there is still much work to do to advance its benefits. This project brings into focus two inter-related rationales that we think map out significant problematics for policy and practice in this area: (i) the Australian early childhood cohort is increasingly culturally diverse; and (ii) education systems are still struggling to improve the appalling outcomes for Aboriginal learners. Both of these issues have specific implications for early childhood education.

Put simply, this project identifies two inter-related issues for policy and practice for early childhood educators: a changing student cohort, and an ongoing demand for the improvement of Aboriginal learning outcomes.

### *Superdiverse student cohorts*

The Scanlon Foundation’s recent surveys into the nature of Australia’s cultural diversity (Markus 2016) showed:

28% of Australians are born overseas, which means that Australia ranks first within the OECD for cultural diversity amongst nations with populations over 10 million.

a sustained growth of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity in capital cities  
nearly twenty per cent of Australians speak a language other than English; and twenty-one per cent of the local-born population have one or both parents born overseas

85% of respondents agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia.

63% agree that accepting migrants from different countries makes Australia stronger. (pp. 1-6)

This demographic, social and cultural context is intensifying complex challenges for many educators. Put simply, how do educators engage all young people in successful learning given that a monocultural approach has a long history of failure. We argue that it is now reasonable to move on from thinking about *multicultural* to *superdiverse* cohorts in schools and early learning centres. Teaching in superdiverse and multilingual preschools is the new norm.

At a time of rapid social and demographic change in Australia, early years educators find themselves planning for children from increasingly diverse linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. The superdiverse and multilingual nature of public preschools complicates the learning environment, how children comprehend the curriculum, and how they form successful social relationships that foster learning in educational contexts. As such, educators need to acknowledge that children move between preschool settings and homes that are often lived according to differing values and beliefs about children, childrearing and education; and differing assumptions about cultural identity and academic achievement. This not-so-neat relationship between home and preschool learning is also characterised by complex differences between oral language at home and print literacies of preschool (Hill et al. 2002). These multilingual and culturally complex environments of the contemporary preschool offer new challenges to the work of educators and early childhood site leaders whose work is defined by specific mandated goals, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy.

### *Appalling outcomes for Aboriginal learners*

Over two decades of research have shown that Aboriginal children are still not benefiting from inclusive early childhood education (SCRGSP 2016; Zubrick et al. 2006). Reforming preschool pedagogy and curriculum to enable the engagement and success of Aboriginal children who are marginalised and failed by education systems is a necessary and urgent task (SNAICC 2019). As the national, non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC reported that more than ‘17 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included in the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 61.2 per cent of whom were “on track” (in the top 75 per cent) across all domains, compared to an average of 78.9 per cent of non-Indigenous children’ and that ‘the proportion of Aboriginal and Islander children “on track” significantly decreases in all domains as remoteness increases’ (SNAICC 2019, p. 11).

This situation is especially significant given the failure of government attempts over the past decade to ‘close the gap’ on Aboriginal disadvantage in education attainment (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019; Turnbull 2018). The appalling status quo of Aboriginal education disparities requires urgent curriculum and pedagogical change beyond monocultural ‘business as usual’ approaches. For more than thirty years there have been extensive inquiries and scholarly conversations on how to improve the educational

experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and particularly Aboriginal learners. This issue has been articulated in a number of key Australian policy texts. For instance, Australia is a signatory to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UN General Assembly 2007) that calls for a rights-based approach to Indigenous education and preparation for teaching Indigenous peoples. Domestically, the Council of Australian Government's *Closing the Gap* policy (COAG 2009a) targets Aboriginal disadvantage.

Most Aboriginal students attend government schools (ABS 2015) in Australian cities and/or large regional centres (ABS 2006), and are included in the superdiversity mentioned previously. Furthermore, Aboriginal learners are themselves heterogeneous. It is not uncommon for an early childhood site to include Aboriginal children from several Aboriginal nations, each with their own language and complex array of cultural practices specific to their own Country. While difference and diversity are the 'new normal' in Australia, Aboriginal superdiversity has existed for over 60,000 years. Yet, despite Aboriginal superdiversity, state and national preschool and school data collection methods treat Aboriginality as a homogenous category. The lack of recognition of Aboriginal diversity hides the success in some language groups while leads to a lack of accountability at policy and service delivery levels. Aboriginal children as multilingual, multiliterate learners are shaped by their cultural life-worlds and unique ways of knowing, doing and being (Martin 2017a, b). South Australia is home to a broad range of Aboriginal linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Aboriginal children may speak one or more local Aboriginal languages or creoles as the common daily vernacular, or a mixture of English and local vernacular, or English only. Despite Aboriginal superdiversity, state and national preschool and school data is collected as if Aboriginal children are a single homogenous group. The lack of recognition of Aboriginal diversity hides the success in some language groups, while also leading to a lack of accountability to at policy and service delivery level.

Mellor and Corrigan (2004, p. i) argue also that policy assumptions about Aboriginal homogeneity are problematic. More appropriate data categories in South Australia could include:

Category 1: Traditionally Oriented Communities, where the local Aboriginal vernacular is the common daily language.

Category 2: Rural Non-Traditional Communities, where the common daily vernacular is English, with a mixture of Indigenous words and Indigenous English.

Category 3: Urban Communities, where the common daily vernacular is English.

Category 4: Urban Dispersed Indigenous people, where the common daily vernacular is English. (pp. i-ii)

Aboriginal children are not homogenous and they bring to preschool rich and diverse languages, cultures and histories.

In Australia, there is rigorous and compelling evidence of and urgent need to redesign curriculum and pedagogical practices that assist early childhood educators to respond positively to Aboriginal children (SNAICC 2019) as a subset of the growing number of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Comber 2011; Hand & Wise 2006; Hartley 1995). Existing evidence strongly indicates that language development is one of the dimensions used to determine children's readiness for school and that children whose first language is not English are disadvantaged in an English-only learning environment (Dockett, Perry & Kearney 2010; Fogarty & Schwab 2013; Martin 2007a, b). In 2015 the AEDC data on language showed that 15.0 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering their first year of school had a language background other than English (SCRGSP 2016, p. 652).

### *A direction for policy and practice*

Referring to the EYLF, the Educator's Guide (DEEWR 2010) argues that learning in early childhood programs should focus on 'the development of a strong personal and cultural identity through a respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, home languages, capabilities and behavioural practices' (p. 22). Indeed, this study rejects a 'culture of poverty' thesis that:

explains difference in performance by invoking concepts such as cultural mismatch, cultural deprivation and cultural deficit that assume some form of nonalignment of cultural practices (including literacy) of the home and school. These mismatches and deficits are often rendered using 'medical or pathological' theories that assert that the students are [the problem]. (Hayes et al. 2017, p. 5)

We argue instead that the problem is not with the learner but arises due to a lack of sensitivity to the cultural differences in educational sites or classrooms when the vernacular knowledges and everyday experiences of some children are absent, misrepresented or muted in the curriculum.

The principles from the Reggio Emilia education project and our framework for culturally responsive pedagogy have both been developed out of critiques of deficit views of 'disadvantage'. Both propose instead an assets-based approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than foregrounding the capabilities and knowledges that children do not bring to the learning site, educators start by working with the 'funds of knowledge' and capabilities that children actually do bring. There is an urgent need to provide ECE educators with high quality professional learning that enables them to redesign curriculum and pedagogy to respond positively to the funds of knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, including Aboriginal children.

Current theories of early childhood education and care are in large part based on the work of Piaget (Gallagher & Reid 1981), Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1916). According to constructivist approaches to education, educators understand the importance of children taking an active participatory role to their learning and engage with the environment, materials and people to make sense of and construct meaning. Rinaldi (2002) further

suggests that emphasis is placed on seeing children as unique and capable humans with rights, rather than just needs. She identifies children's desire to relate to and communicate with other people as an important right.

Research in teacher practice by Lingard and colleagues (Lingard, Hayes & Mills 2003) and Hayes and colleagues (Hayes et al. 2006) show that effective teachers are one of the most important factors in contributing to student achievement. We further argue that teaching in superdiverse multilingual preschools requires responsive enactment and reflective decision making for positive outcomes, yet pedagogical redesign for practice rarely receives enough attention. Our research takes up what Nixon et al. (1997) call 'teaching as learning' to denote that if the learning of the educator is critical to successful learner outcomes then it is important that schools and preschools become learning organisations that pedagogically plan and recognise the social, cultural and contextual pressures on educator's work in contemporary times.

Culturally relevant pedagogy and sociocultural theory views learning as socially and culturally mediated. Culture matters; therefore, looking through the lens of the child requires teachers to implement curriculum and pedagogy that are culturally sensitive and relative to the child's experience. The image of the child developed by educators should integrate the child's experiences as a member of a community and culture, as well as their learning in educational sites and at home. Diversity and inclusion are fundamental to democracy. Ladson-Billings (1994) sees culturally relevant teaching as a 'pedagogy that empowers [learners] intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (pp. 17-18). Also, pedagogy—specifically cultural relevant pedagogy—entails relational, curricular and ideological dimensions. To effectively implement a culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy, educators must first believe that all children can succeed, maintain an affirming child-teacher relationship and see excellence as a complex standard that takes learner diversity and individual difference into account (Paris 2012). The pedagogical practices must not only be relevant to children's life-worlds and experiences but also be sustainable over time and withstand changes in early childhood policy.

In the next section we will summarise key national and international literature that has informed this project.

## Literature review

We take the position that the fields of ECE policy and practice especially in Anglophone, ‘post-colonial’ settler societies have always been highly contested. Theories of early childhood education have been influenced through the intersection of multiple and sometimes competing discourses such as those informed by educational scholars, developmental psychology, Aboriginal scholars, linguists, anthropologists and sociologists. We do not provide a complete review of this literature. Our attempt here is a modest summary of theory and research perspectives that inform contemporary early childhood pedagogies for social justice. In doing so, we begin by setting the context for the field of early childhood education and problematising the historical use of Euro-Western centric theories to inform early childhood policy and practice. To explain the conceptual tools for investigating ECE pedagogies which acknowledge cultural diversity, multiple perspective, and link home and preschool, we draw on three specific fields of educational research theories informing early childhood education, the Reggio Emilia education project, Indigenous Studies and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies.

### Theories informing early childhood policy and practice

Since the 19th century, the field of early childhood education has relied primarily on developmental psychology (Beatty, Cahan & Grant 2006). Child development theories derive from modernity’s beliefs that the world is predictable and ordered and thus it is the work of scientists to provide a clear account of human development that can account for all humans (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2007). Child development theories were welcomed as a means for the field to obtain professional status as they provided a unique knowledge base that was informed by scientific methods.

Child development theories, however, have been widely contested in the field of early childhood education. Child development theories and associated research have largely derived from what Pence and Marfo (2008) refer to as the Euro-Western minority world that accounts for only a small percentage of children, yet such theories are widely used around the world to inform policy in early childhood education. Pence and Marfo (2008) argue that ‘Globalization is the 21st century’s version of western colonization’ whereby judgements are made about all children based on typical patterns of development that derive from only 10% of the world’s population (p. 81). The privileging of Euro-Western views of child development has contributed to deficit views of diverse children (Kreig 2010; Pence & Marfo 2008) and has limited understandings of contemporary issues in early childhood education (Ryan & Grieshaber 2005). Researchers warn against colonising approaches to early childhood education and argue for the importance of acknowledging multiple perspectives to inform local approaches (Pence & Marfo 2008; Soto & Swadener 2002).

The reconceptualist movement in the 1980s focused on re-examining the use of psychology-based child development theories as primarily informing the field. It



challenged the belief that scientific truths about children can be discovered and applied to all children (Genishi et al. 2001). Most notably, gaining interest within the scholarship are critical perspectives drawing from the work of Paulo Freire and post-structural perspectives drawing from the work of Michel Foucault. This work has been useful in understanding contemporary issues in early childhood education around issues such as gender; (Blaise 2005; Mac Naughton 2005; Sisson & Iverson 2014), cultural diversity (Gallas 2010; Hamm & Boucher 2017; Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2020), ethnicity (Grace 2008) and religion (Giugni 2006) to name a few.

Despite critiques of child development theories and the increasing research evidence demonstrating the importance of multiple perspectives, early childhood education policies continue to be largely informed by child development theories. While Stephen (2012) suggests, ‘it seems premature to expect such recent and often demanding theory to be having an impact on every day practice’ (p. 232), the research presented in this report demonstrates the complexities of children’s lives in superdiverse times and the importance of engaging with contemporary theories and multiple perspectives to inform pedagogy and practice.

## **Reggio Emilia education principles**

The Reggio Emilia Education principles were developed following the devastation from WWII in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Within this small town the families and community members wanted to ensure a better future for their children; one that was built on a strong foundation of democratic principles. They viewed children’s centres as critical to developing citizens who would enact this vision. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project, described their goal in creating an amiable school:

Our goal is to build an amiable school, where children, teachers and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations and interests, it must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships among the three central protagonists, of assuring complete attention to the problems of educating and of activating participation and research. These are the most effective tools for all those concerned- children, teachers, and parents- to become more united and aware of each other’s contribution. They are the most effective tools to use in order to feel good about cooperating and to produce, in harmony, a higher level of results. (Malaguzzi 1993, p. 65)

The Reggio Emilia education principles have inspired educators around the world with a growing network across 13 countries, including Australia. In 2014, the Government of South Australia extended a commitment to the relationship with Reggio Children by becoming the only other government to be accepted as a member of The Foundation Reggio Children-Centro Loris Malaguzzi. This prestigious membership signified a commitment to ‘education, childhood and the promotion of the rights of the child’ (Fondazione Reggio Children-Centro Loris Malaguzzi 2018).

The final report, from the 2012-2013 South Australian Thinker in Residence, Professor Carla Rinaldi, *Re-imagining childhood: The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education*

*principles in South Australia* (2013), highlighted the Reggio Emilia education principles as a provocation for South Australians to re-imagine education within our context. These principles included:

The hundred languages

Participation

The pedagogy of listening

Learning as a process of individual and group construction

Educational research

Educational documentation

Progettazione

Organisation

Environment spaces and relations

Professional development

Assessment

The commitment toward democracy, social justice, and the rights of the child found within the Reggio Emilia principles connect well with the key ideas of culturally responsive approaches to diversity. We draw from Rinaldi's (2013) report and the work of other scholars to consider how the principles inform an understanding of the image of the child and educator, nature of knowledge, role of the environment and documentation. Our understanding and use of these principles are highlighted overleaf.

## **Guiding principles from the Reggio Emilia education project**

### ***Image of the child as competent with 100 languages***

The child is viewed as being powerful, competent, creative curious and is seen as being full of potential with ambitious desires (Malaguzzi 1994).

Educators reject 'deficit' views of the child and their prior knowledges. They view children as possessing a natural curiosity to be researchers of and within their worlds. Educators support children as protagonists in their learning and are valued as co-constructors of knowledge. They believe children are social beings who strive to connect home to preschool through their identities and interests. Educators invest in strong relationships that are critical to the co-construction of knowledge and connected to the 100 languages of children.

### ***Role of the educator as researcher and co-constructor of knowledge***

Educators are learners, teachers and researchers with children, colleagues and families.

Educators are collaborators, co-learners and co-teachers with children and other adults where reciprocal relationships are valued and fostered (Hewett 2001). Educators engage in research with children as they use pedagogical document to make learning visible and to inform practice. Hence, educators are researchers of learning and pedagogy. They are critically reflective and question what often goes unquestioned. They engage families, colleagues, experts, community and children in an ongoing process of deep listening and critical reflection through dialogue.

### ***Democratic learning as a process of individual and group construction***

The child possesses prior knowledge and is a constructor of new knowledge.

Educators believe knowledge is individually and socially constructed between adults and children. There are multiple forms of knowing and 100 languages which are highly valued. Educators recognise democracy as important towards valuing inclusion, multicultural knowledges and multiple perspectives. Educators who see themselves as inquirers accept uncertainty and doubt and see their own pedagogical journeys as important learning opportunities to co-construct new knowledge about education. These experiences are recognised as critical to learning and are valued as resources to developing knowledge.

## **Guiding principles from the Reggio Emilia education project (continued ...)**

### ***Role of the environment as an educator***

The environment is significant in supporting children's learning as an educator.

Environments that foster a range of experiences promote respectful interactions and communication, provide opportunities for independent exploration, and support and challenge children's learning and curiosity. Educators promote learning that is flexible and in a constant dialogue between architecture and pedagogy which include spaces where knowledge is co-constructed and teachers and learners are both. When the environment is reflective of the people who inhabit it, it creates a sense of belonging and value.

### ***Pedagogical documentation***

Documentation is used throughout the process of learning to make learning visible and to engage community in dialogue. It is not a show of the end result of learning but it is a vital tool within the process of learning between children and adults. It gives value to and makes explicit, visible and assessable the nature of the individual and group learning processes of both the children and adults. It is revisited and reconstructed and interpreted through a dialogical approach with community members through democratic practices.

### ***Progettazione***

Being responsive to children requires an emergent planning approach that happens as a result of observation, analysis and dialogue with the learning community.

Educators support learning through Progettazione that is the 'process of planning and designing the teaching and learning activities, the environment, the opportunities for participation and the professional development' (Rinaldi 2013, p. 35). Educators do not presume the need for a predetermined curriculum but engage with children in co-constructing the curriculum and learning environment. Educators welcome the uncomfortable space of not knowing as this is the space where new knowledge is constructed. Through this process educators build strong relationships with children that are valued as important to learning.

### ***Pedagogy of listening***

Listening is an essential component to learning to live together in diverse communities.

Educators who engage in a pedagogy of listening not only model respectful listening but they also help to create the conditions that are essential to living in democratic ways. A pedagogy of listening requires us to be open to and sensitive of multiple perspectives. Engaging in a pedagogy of listening comes from a sincere curiosity to understand another's perspective and an openness to be changed by new perspectives

## **Indigenist epistemologies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and perspectives**

This project focussed on diversity in early childhood settings across all cultures. However, Aboriginal peoples are the First Nations of Australia and the project foregrounds this reality. One of the commonalities across all sites was the desire to connect with Aboriginal children, families and communities.

The field of Indigenous Studies research in Australia points to strategies in three main areas that have shown to be effective mainly in primary and secondary schools for increasing engagement and success among Aboriginal students: (i) a school culture and leadership that engages and supports local Aboriginal students, their relational linguistic and cultural identities, knowledges and epistemologies (Martin 2007a, b, 2008; Price 2012; Rigney 2011a); (ii) school-wide strategies that improve teacher quality to work and maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes (Nakata 2007); and (iii) student focused strategies that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early leaving (Craven & Price 2009; Sarra 2007). Anti-racism pedagogy (Aveling 2012) and Indigenous Studies (Krakouer 2015; Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012; Rigney 2011a, b; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009), (Aveling 2012) also inform significant understandings of pedagogy for this project.

Indigenist epistemologies (Arbon 2008; Martin 2008; Rigney 2006) provide conceptual resources for advancing a ‘strong’ version of culturally responsive pedagogies that have been too often marginalized in Australian ECE policy work, compared to Native American Studies, Māori Studies. For our project, we draw upon Rigney’s (2006) Australian research into educational *Indigenist epistemologies* which foregrounds practices that empower students; reinforce the integrity of cultural knowledges; privilege Indigenous voices, knowledges and interests; and build community relationships. These studies provide a broader conceptual framework for advancing the research and for theorising culturally responsive pedagogy than has been the case to date, one that hopefully provides ways to connect up to a broader set of ECE debates. The following points summarise Indigenist epistemological perspectives and their connections to preschool education:

Diversity: in understanding Aboriginal Australians are not homogenous

Commitment: to whole of centre approach to learning that normalises and links home and preschool where teaching validate, builds and bridges prior cultural ways of knowing and literacies.

Integrity: through commitment to high standards transparent to preschool, the Department and families.

Responsive: to Indigenous knowledge and language structures, ontology and epistemology that are relational and see all things (human and non-human) as interconnected.

Relationships: that sees pedagogy and curriculum localised to place-based context in respectful and democratic collaboration with family and communities.

Voices: in their full diversity, be welcomed and included. Aboriginal families do not hold one social/moral/political Aboriginal position on child rearing or education of children.

Resistance: to ‘deficit’ discourses by understanding all children and their families are competent and capable. Recognising families grounded in experiences of the colonised are distinctive in calls for education of children to both maintain linguistic and cultural identities and the need for learn skills and wellbeing to enact self-determined societal transformation of inequality.

Creativity: Aboriginal education is not distinctive in terms of children studying local Aboriginal only cultures and literacies, rather both local and global knowledge and literacies taught collectively through science and arts rich inquiry for empowerment to reach societal and economic potential.

## **Approaches to cultural diversity in early childhood learning settings**

### ***Multicultural approach***

The multicultural approach to diversity grew from the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. This approach showed much promise as it embodied the fundamental values and beliefs of democracy such as promotion of human rights, equitable participation as valued citizens and sharing of power between diverse people (Boutte 1999; Fu 1993). Naïve views of multiculturalism however, have led to ‘tourist’ approaches that focus on surface level and tokenistic understandings of culture in early learning settings (Nxumalo & Adair 2019; Strickland, Keat & Marinak 2010), such as what people eat, how they dress and what and how they celebrate, often referred to as a ‘food, fashion and festival’ approach (Reid, Kagan & Scott-Little 2019). In Australia, this has been evidenced in routinised practices, such as engaging children in making dot paintings and boomerangs during NAIDOC week. While many teachers have good intentions of bringing different cultures into the preschool, they often see these cultures through their own Euro-western viewpoint.

Sisson (2019) suggests, ‘Eurocentric and western narratives have become so powerful that many people do not notice how they are bounded and constrained by them.’ The privileging of child development theories in early childhood education policy further perpetuates Euro-western knowledges as a dominant discourse. Dominant discourses or narratives are powerful in informing our identities, who we believe we can become, our actions, what we value and who’s knowledge counts (Sisson & Iverson 2014).

Allan and Hill (1995) suggest that multiculturalism in Australia did not take on a strong social justice dimension as it did in the United States, and it was not inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives. In Canada, St. Denis (2011) found that a multicultural approach served to further marginalise the nation’s First People by promoting stereotypical views.

### *Cultural competence approach*

Following a multicultural approach to diversity is the cultural competence approach. The concept of *cultural competence* arose in the human services sectors in the early 1980s, where it was considered critical to improving the services provided to increasingly multicultural populations (Morrison et al. 2019, p. 52). Cultural competence can be understood as ‘a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals that enable effective interactions in a cross-cultural framework’ (Cross et al. 1989, p. iv). The cultural competence approach is reflected in the EYLF as the preferred approach to cultural diversity in Australia. In the EYLF Educator’s Guide (DEEWR 2010), cultural competence is described as being,

about our will and actions to build understanding between people, to be respectful and open to different cultural perspectives, strengthen cultural security and work toward equality in opportunity. (DEEWR 2010, p. 21)

The EYLF approach to cultural competence focuses on a journey of learning toward building relationships with the core principles of trust, respect for diversity, equity, fairness and social justice.

Similar to the critiques of multiculturalism, frameworks that draw on a cultural competence approach have been critiqued as:

Failing to challenge the socio-political inequalities at structural, institutional and interpersonal levels (Azzopardi & McNeill 2016; Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin 2015; Ortega & Faller 2011)

Reinforcing stereotyped notions of culture without considering the superdiversity that exists within groups (Gorski 2016)

As Sinclair (2019) notes, ‘Cultural competence can be viewed as a list of dos and don’ts and a checklist of culturally appropriate practices that need to be mastered. The problem with this approach is that it does little more than perpetuate stereotypes and essentialize culture’ (p. 39). The use of the word ‘competence’ has also been highlighted as problematic as it is not possible to be fully competent in another person’s culture (Morrison et al. 2019). While the concepts of cultural safety and humility are offered as alternatives, for some commentators (for example, Carey 2015; Nakata 1995) these concepts suggest an image of victimhood rather than seeing people from diverse cultures as being active agents in their learning.

Cultural values, traditions, practices, objects and symbols are significant to children’s meaning-making of the world and thus to their cognitive development (Reid, Kagan & Scott-Little 2019) as well as to their developing identities (Sisson 2016). Scholars call to move beyond cultural competence frameworks, suggesting we need a deeper commitment to social justice that is lived through our pedagogies (Gipson 2015; Morrison et al. 2019).



### *Culturally responsive approaches*

Although the Prime Minister's 2019 *Closing the Gap* report on Indigenous Disadvantage shows improved numbers of children attending ECE, the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student success at school is widening rather than closing, even after a decade of investment in national testing for reading and writing achievement (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019). Yet globally there is growing body of evidence that culturally responsive pedagogies improve academic success for First Nations peoples (Bishop 2019; Castagno & Brayboy 2008). Theory and practice in Australia is only weakly developed and documented (Krakouer 2015; Morrison et al. 2019; Perso 2012), and has yet to seriously inform the curriculum and pedagogical reform. Despite this, culturally responsive pedagogies for Indigenous students are now accepted as a hopeful strategy for improving academic achievement of First Nations peoples in settler colonial countries such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (also known as culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching, among other related terms) is an approach to teaching and learning that uses 'the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively' (Gay 2002, p. 106). This orientation to pedagogy, curriculum and intentional learning has the potential to remediate some of the deficiencies of cultural competency approaches to cultural diversity in educational settings, especially in relation to social justice, democracy, and the distribution of power. CRP is broadly aligned with various theories and practices of multicultural teaching, equity pedagogy, sociocultural teaching, and social justice teaching (Sleeter 2011, 2012). For the purposes of this report, we use the term culturally responsive pedagogy to refer to those pedagogies that actively value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that children and students bring to the learning relationship.

For our project we referred to transnational work on developing culturally responsive approaches. Some important examples that inform our framework are the following approaches:

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995): CRP for African American children rests on the propositions that students experience academic success; develop cultural competence; and develop a critical consciousness.

Villegas and Lucas (2002): The culturally responsive teacher is socio-culturally conscious, uses affirming views of students; is capable of bringing educational change and making schools more responsive to all students; is capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction; knows about the lives of students; and uses knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what students already know.

Bishop's (Bishop et al. 2007; 2019) Kaupapa Māori: In what is called a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations, power is shared, culture counts, learning is interactive and dialogic, connectedness is fundamental to relations, and there is a common vision of excellence for Māori students.



Assembly of Alaska Native Educators (Alaska Native Knowledge Network 1998, 1999): Culturally responsive teaching promotes engagement with multiple worldviews, including learners' linguistic and cultural identities, as strengths. It challenges deficit views of the student or community. Learning is related to local community; instruction and assessment build on students' cultures; learning environments utilise local sites; families are involved as partners; and educators must be offered meaningful professional development in culturally responsive practice.

These different approaches provide an archive of conceptual resources for redesigning curriculum and pedagogy for approaches to link home and educational sites. From this body of knowledge, Rigney and Hattam (2017) identified five provocations toward an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy:

High intellectual challenge

Learning is strongly connected to children's life-worlds

Recognition of culture as an asset to learning

Critical reflection and/or taking an activist orientation

Providing students with opportunities to perform their learning to an audience and to experiment with multimodal literacies.

## **A framework for constructing responsive learning experiences**

Our framework for constructing culturally responsive learning experiences consists of a series of provocations that engage educators in some of the key ideas that, we argue, underpin culturally responsive practices.

### ***High intellectual challenge***

The child is viewed as a curious, agentic, competent learner that possesses cultural and linguistic intergenerational intelligences brought from home to preschool.

Educators are intentional in constructing positive, safe and challenging learning environments to provide children with opportunities to take risks that support their learning and development. Having an image of the child as competent and capable is critical to developing trusting relationships between children and educators. Educators do not simply see children as empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge already created but see them as knowledge producers and valued members of the learning community. Educators therefore engage children in co-constructing the curriculum through play-based and inquiry projects to support deep and meaningful learning. Such practices are paramount to children's learning and development in the areas of social, physical, emotional, intellectual and creativity. Educators recognise culture as strength for learning and reject 'deficit' views of the child. They challenge children to stretch their thinking and current strengths. Learning is strongly connected to children's life-worlds

The child learns best when the preschool setting incorporates, validates, builds and bridges culturally familiar prior knowledges and languages.

Educators recognise the rich diversity of the child's identity; cultural and linguistic capabilities brought from home as strengths that promote learning success, pride, belonging and safety. Educators become learners and ethnographers of children's life-worlds to connect these to the curriculum for improved achievement. They recognise the need to value the cultural backgrounds of learners in education by redesigning pedagogies that have high impact. They investigate and co-construct learning opportunities for children to celebrate and develop their cultural and linguistic literate identities and to understand and respect those of others. Educators value relationships with families to develop a cultural diversity knowledge base of all children. Educators believe all knowledge and its definition of 'achievement' are socially constructed. They are aware that dominant western ontological knowledge traditions and its modern relationships to 'nature' are intertwined by the legacies of colonialism. Educators recognise different philosophies and traditions of interconnectedness to the nonhuman world and nature that shape ethical identities of children. Many Aboriginal people have a strong connection to land (country) as a living being and a teacher. This view has educational significance for spiritual, cultural and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal learners. Educators understand the need to address the needs of the Aboriginal child as individual and as group collective identity. Educators recognise the child's citizenry rights to education from birth and view the nature and purpose of knowledge is for both integration, cultural and linguistic maintenance, and not assimilation.

### ***Recognition of culture as an asset to learning***

The child's attendance, participation and engagement are improved by teaching to their strengths rather than teaching to assumed 'deficits'.

Educators understand asset-based teaching uses strength-based pedagogical practice models that are proven to widen participation, improve engagement and influence learning in areas such as literacy and numeracy. They are intentional in familiarise themselves with each child's funds of knowledge, interests and strengths to draw connection to meaningful learning and assessment experiences. Educators redesign their pedagogies to shift beyond teaching that focuses on perceived gaps and weaknesses at the risk of neglecting student strengths and additional skills. They recognise that teaching to deficits rather than strengths is not only ineffective but destroys aspiration that leads to disengagement and despair.

### ***Critical reflection and/or taking a critical activist orientation***

The child is viewed as a powerful, creative, curious learner and researcher. Through inquiry learning processes, children observe, raise questions, dialogue with others, engage differing views and critique their own practices and behaviours.

Educators construct opportunities for child-led inquiry and play-based reflective learning that encourages active, agentic and thoughtful child engagement in the creative

processes to make sense of their world. They scaffold active learning processes including, measuring, experimenting, predicting, analysing and critiquing. Educators involve children in problem-posing and provocation setting, including planning and enacting investigations to propose explanations and solutions. Educators engage children's critical literacies, share power in all learning environments and engage children in social justice work. They promote critical reflection, giving feedback and dialogue to facilitate children to explore sharing, solidarity, democracy, compromise, and fairness. These capabilities in later life lead to collaborations for greater reconciliation, and decolonisation of Anlgophone settler societies. Educators aspire for children to be life-long learners and therefore support children's explorations through play and inquiry-based projects.

### ***Providing children with opportunities to perform their learning to an audience and to experiment with multimodal literacies***

The child is viewed as a contributor to the learning community who has rights and a desire for communicating daily in an increasingly multimodal world.

Educators value children's learning as important contributions to the co-construction of knowledge as a community. Performing learning to an audience provides an opportunity to learn from and with others as an extension of learning that seeks multiple perspective taking and celebration of diverse expressions of knowledge. It is a way of making learning visible that is authentic to the strengthens of the learner. Educators consider multiple ways of communicating learning and have move beyond thinking about literacy solely as a written linguistic accomplishment.

### **Context and culture matter**

Across this body of literature is a view of all learners as culturally centred. This informs the field's assumptions about the nature of childhood, family practice, literacy, pedagogy, curriculum, social, physical and cognitive development. Equally literacy and its systems are viewed as culturally specific practices and ways of knowing with various kinds of literacies privileged and valued in different cultural learning environments. To enact a culturally responsive pedagogy demands high expectations of children as learners in knowledges. Moreover, CRP is realised by the educator when validating and normalising multiple literate identities through a shift in teaching practice, curriculum, teacher subjectivity and school–community relations.

Despite the absence of access to early childhood education or household wealth, poor and diverse families are rich with funds of linguistic and cultural knowledges that are unrecognised and or under-utilised in educational sectors (Moll et al. 1992) including ECE. While the importance of linking home to preschool is recognised, this approach argues for cultural integration with English literacy and preservation of relational linguistic and cultural identities, not assimilation.

To date, the primary focus of CRP has been on school-aged students. CRP originated in the context of the civil rights movement in the USA (Pirbhai-Illich, Pete & Martin 2017, p. 4), which drew attention to the inequities experienced by students of colour in educational institutions, and the need for teachers honour and utilise the diverse ways of knowing, thinking and communicating to enhance the learning experiences of *all* students in the classroom (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff 2017, p. 5). During the mid-1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995) advanced CRP as a rejection of deficit discourses, based on her own research of successful cross-cultural teachers coupled with educational and anthropological scholarship that had emerged throughout the preceding decade (see, for example, Au & Jordan 1981; Cazden & Leggett 1976; Erickson 1987). While Ladson-Billings' focus was on the educational experiences of African American students, CRP has been successful with other minoritised student populations, including Indigenous, immigrant and refugee students.

When compared with the superdiversity apparent in many contemporary learning settings, most of the earlier empirical research on CRP has been conducted in relatively culturally homogenous primary or secondary school classrooms. Referring to the North American context, Henry (2017, p. 14) notes that most research on CRP has taken place in homogenously African American or Latino learning settings (see also Morrison, Robbins & Rose 2008). However, like many other Western schooling settings, Australian classrooms are becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. This is hardly surprising given that, according to the 2016 national census, nearly half (49%) of all Australians reported that they were either born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas (ABS 2017). Furthermore, 2016 census data shows that more than one in five Australians speak a language other than English at home (ABS 2017), meaning that many children attending early learning settings will be monolingual in a language other than English, or will be emergent speakers of two or more languages.

The cultural diversity evident in metropolitan and some regional school classrooms is replicated in many Australian early learning settings, yet to date there has been relatively little Australian or overseas research on the merits of CRP with preschool aged children. Chen, Nimmo and Fraser (2009) note that while 'children begin to construct an understanding of human differences and similarities during their earliest years', early childhood educators are challenged to respond to the diversity of the children in their care and to their families (p. 101). Drawing on earlier literature, they identify four 'anti-bias' goals that promote cultural democracy and empowerment in early learning settings:

1. to nurture the construction of a knowledgeable, confident identity as an individual and as a member of multiple cultural groups
2. to promote comfortable, empathetic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds
3. to foster each child's ability to critically think about bias and injustice

4. to cultivate each child's ability to stand up for herself or himself, and for others, in the face of bias and injustice. (p. 101)

Ultimately, early childhood educators 'have opportunities to positively or negatively impact their students' perceptions and cultural identities' (Gunn, Brice & Peterson 2014, p. 175). The findings of Durden and colleagues in examining Reggio Emilia inspired educational practice and CRP in ECE setting in the United States argue that 'in order for teachers to maintain a culturally relevant early childhood program, they must have a conscious awareness of their own multiple identities—ethnic, linguistic, cultural, gender, and socio-economic in relation to the identities of the children they teach' (Durden, Escalante & Blich 2015, p. 228).

Although literature that explicitly refers to culturally responsive pedagogy in early learning settings is rather limited, many of the foundational and/or antecedent principles of CRP have been researched and discussed in such settings. For example, the notion of 'funds of knowledge' has been advanced by Moll and colleagues (1992) to refer to 'those historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills' (p. 133) that are embedded in families, households and communities, and which can be valuable learning resources in classrooms. Culturally responsive teachers who draw on students' funds of knowledge building meaningful connections between school and the life-worlds of students, their families and communities (Morrison et al. 2019, p. 22). Several commentators have extended the concept of 'funds of knowledge' to formal or informal early learning settings (see, for example, Anderson et al. 2017; Hedges, Cullen & Jordan 2011; Massing, Kirova & Hennig 2013; Riojas-Cortez 2001).

The themes of race and racism, discrimination and social justice that underpin culturally responsive pedagogy are also evident in the early learning literature. Boutte, Lopez-Robertson and Powers-Costello (2011) note that 'that young children are not color blind and ... they think about and experience racism in their daily lives' (p. 335). According to Hawkins (2014), 'by the time children reach preschool age they are already proficient in the ways they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses and have developed negative attitudes and prejudices towards particular groups' (p. 723). For these reasons, 'the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference' (Hawkins 2014, p. 727). Boutte and colleagues (2011) note that 'it may take some time for early childhood educators to develop a comfort zone with discussing difficult issues like race, but it is worth the investment' (p. 341). Educators and teacher educators need to develop a 'critical cultural consciousness', which 'entails honest self-reflection that challenges one's assumptions regarding race, privilege, power, and cultural norm' (Farago, Sanders & Gaias 2015, p. 54).

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, historical and contemporary experiences of colonisation and forced assimilation impact on their engagement with early childhood programs (Fasoli et al. 2018; SNAICC & Early Childhood Australia 2019). Grace and Trudgett (2012) refer to a 'growing body of research [that] emphasises the importance of understanding the potential incongruence between the culture of an early

childhood education setting and the cultures of Indigenous groups’ (p. 11). They frame their discussion via three themes: ‘undermining of family, undermining of culture, and general racism’ (p. 11). Miller (2017) frames her discussion of Australian early childhood education around the colonialism, whiteness and racism, and calls for a ‘Decolonising pedagogy counters the ways colonialism is always retold and recycled in Australian early childhood education, from western constructions of education and care, to policy development, and the talk and actions of educators working with community, families and children in early years settings’ (p. 34). Malin, Cambell and Agius (1996) draw attention to child-rearing practices that are often misunderstood by non-Aboriginal people, who may view such practices through a deficit lens. Martin (1999) notes that early childhood services ‘must accept, understand, respect, and reflect the cultures of Aboriginal people if they are to be ‘culturally safe’’ (p. 6).

Culturally responsive early childhood educators consult with local communities and Elders to minimise potential incongruence. The employment of local Aboriginal staff (Kellard & Paddon 2016, p. 63) and/or the authentic involvement of community in the management of services (SNAICC & Early Childhood Australia 2019, p. 4) are key factors in Aboriginal family access to early learning sites. In reference to Aboriginal early childhood education, Martin (2007a) emphasises the importance of relatedness: ‘programmes based on relatedness would respect the autonomy of each person, especially the children, but would equally respect their inter-relatedness’ (p. 19). The importance of relatedness and relationships in culturally responsive schools (rather than early learning settings) is noted in other First Nations settler-colonial contexts, for example in New Zealand (Bishop, Ladwig & Berryman 2014; Joyce 2017), United States (Holmes & González 2017; Lee & Quijada Cerecer 2010) and Canada (Lewthwaite et al. 2013).

## Summary

This brief literature review has highlighted some of the significant themes underpinning (1) the Reggio Emilia education principles, (2) approaches to diversity in early learning settings, and (3) culturally responsive pedagogies in early learning settings. It should be noted that very little literature *explicitly* linking the Reggio Emilia educational principles with CRP was identified during the compilation of this review. Exceptions include Burgess and Evans (2017), Durden, Escalante and Blitch (2015), Hesterman (2017) and Smith-Gilma (2016). Nevertheless, there *is* literature that links the Reggio Emilia educational principles with the issues of diversity and social justice that are foundational to culturally responsive pedagogies. For example, work that links Reggio Emilia inspired education with First Nations pedagogies include Hayes (2018), who reports on a project that brought Reggio Emilia-inspired and emergent learning approaches into early childhood programs in a British Columbian First Nations community and Hughes’ (2007) report of a Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood program in a First Nations Alaskan community.

## Methodology

We required a methodology that was capable of handling these questions: In other settler colonial countries, how is ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’ understood in policy, theory and practice, and what can Australia learn from international comparisons? How do policy texts both define the problem and the solutions for Aboriginal education? How might culturally responsive pedagogy, both theory and practice, be further developed in early learning contexts? How might a culturally responsive framework complement the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project? Broadly speaking, this study used a critical action research approach that is augmented with methods borrowed from educational ethnography and policy sociology. Collaborative and participatory action research has growing influence internationally and in Australian educational research, contributing to educator capacity-building and professional renewal in local settings (Hattam et al. 2009; Somekh 2006). Action research has a long history in educational research (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2014), with its own internationally referred journals,<sup>4</sup> and significant handbooks (Noffke & Somekh 2009). Such methodologies enable the systematic examination of the re-designing of curriculum and pedagogic practice by teachers/educators. Action research has been a significant methodology for the School of Education at the University of South Australia, and during the past decade or so has been significant in the following projects:

The *Graduate Certificate in Education* program invited teachers to read relevant research literature collaboratively with university researchers; focus on improving theory and practice; teacher/school ownership; systemic examination involving collection and analysis of evidence/data; producing practitioner knowledge about what works in given contexts; promoting problematisation; and commitment to build more socially just settings.

*Re-designing Pedagogies in the North (RpiN)* project: An ARC funded Linkage Project that investigated the efforts to develop new forms of curriculum and pedagogy in the middle years of schooling (Hattam et al. 2009).

*FutureSACE Literacy Project*: collaboration with the FutureSACE Office to develop innovative practice in the new SACE around the teaching and learning of literacy for students who have been identified as have problems through the Year 9 NAPLAN tests (Cormack et al. 2010).

*School of Education Aspirations Project (SEAP)*: In collaboration with the Northern Area Regional office this project facilitated action research driven professional development projects that take up the challenge to provide learning experiences (curriculum) that are intellectually demanding, along with appropriate pedagogy that supports students to be successful.

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<sup>4</sup> *Educational Action Research, International Journal of Action Research, The Journal of Teacher Action Research, Action Research, Action Learning and Action Research.*



*Strengthening Universal Access Programs Preschool Project:* In collaboration with Gowrie SA, this project engaged preschool educators in an educator research model to explore democratic early childhood pedagogical practices (Whittington, McInnes & Sisson 2014)

*Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.* An ARC-funded Discovery project designed around an augmented form of action research that brings together classroom action research, analyses of policy and ethnographically data sets to examine how teachers enact culturally responsive pedagogy in Australian mainstream middle school classrooms.

This study borrows and develop further various elements from RpiN project (Hattam et al. 2009) including:

Convening and sustaining a professional learning community in the form of ‘research roundtables’ (Ladwig & White 1996);

Taking seriously the pedagogical challenges of teachers

Establishing conditions for promoting problematisation and critical reflection;

Inviting educators to read relevant research collaboratively with university researchers;

Focusing on improving theory and practice;

Fostering educator/site ownership;

Producing practitioner knowledge about what works in given contexts;

Systematically collecting and analysing evidence; and,

Commitment to build more social just settings.

Our approach also borrows from Māori scholar Linda Smith’s (2012) ‘decolonising methodologies’ for researching the concerns of Indigenous peoples. As such, our methodology is defined by the following strategies: (i) empowering Aboriginal participants while unsettling deficit and victim constructions of Aboriginal peoples; (ii) drawing upon Indigenous knowledges and their sustainability while highlighting their subjugation; (iii) working ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ Aboriginal peoples to privilege their voices rather than speak for them; (iv) engaging in a ‘negotiated approach’ where reflexivity is required that is sensitive to a politics of knowledge.

The research involves four linked and overlapping phases: *Orientation*; *Analysis of key texts*; *Augmented action research*; and *Analysis and Theory building*, which are elaborated below.

### ***Phase 1: Orientation (2018)***

The orientation phase established some of the key resources and planning in place for building a professional learning community across the university-educator nexus. We appointed a Research Assistant (0.2 FTE). Subsequently, we applied successfully for research ethics approval from UniSA and Government of South Australia Department for



Education. Six early learning centres were selected using the following criteria: (i) large (>100) public educational sites with early years cohort (years 0-6); (ii) substantial numbers of Aboriginal children (iii) active Aboriginal community engagement; (iv) improving Aboriginal learning identified in the Site Improvement Plan; (v) strong connection with local Elders; (vi) willingness to commit to a 1-year professional learning project. Three Aboriginal Elders who are active in these early learning centres were invited to be involved in the Roundtables.

Each director was invited to provide recommendations for two educators to participate in the research on the basis of their commitment to improving learning for Aboriginal children. Educators and parents of Aboriginal children from each of the Centres were invited to attend regular Research Workshops (twice per term, plus an annual conference). The focus was the development of pedagogical approaches that are informed by collective readings of the Reggio Emilia education project and culturally responsive pedagogy research literature, and engaging with these approaches through action research. Project participants were:

| Site    | Educators and staff  | Leadership             |
|---------|--|------------------------|
| 1       | Megan, Lisa  | Director 1             |
| 2       | Anna, Evan   | Director 2             |
| 3       | Carol  | Director 3             |
| 4       | Angela   | Director 4             |
| 5       | Elly, Naomi, Susie   | Director 5             |
| 6       | Beth   | Director 6             |
| Liaison | Aboriginal Family Engagement Officer<br>Aboriginal Community Education Manager<br>Cluster Aboriginal Community Education Officer | Early Childhood Leader |

Regular research team meetings were convened by every two months to plan, discuss and evaluate the research as it progresses. During the orientation phase, the researchers developed and collated a set of discussion papers and resources including literature reviews that articulate of the Reggio Emilia education project and culturally responsive pedagogies; protocols for workshops Research Roundtables; action research protocols for educators; and protocols for researching school structures and culture. These materials informed the fieldwork phase and a beginning for the theory building that provided a basis for drafting papers for scholarly journals.

## Phase 2: Analysis of key texts (2019)

This project builds on, and is informed by, Sisson, Whittington, and Shin's (2018) *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia*. To quote from the conclusion:

Findings presented within the case summaries provided illustrations of how five early childhood sites reimagined their pedagogy and the transformative impact this change had to the experiences of children, families, teachers and leaders within these sites. These illustrations provided insight into how sites brought a range of different perspectives into dialogue to re-imagine educational worlds in ways that reflected the shared values and beliefs of their local communities. They also highlighted the significance of creating communities of learners who engaged in deep critical reflection and transformative action to re-imagine their figured worlds in democratic ways. The Reggio Emilia principles provided an impetus for such critical reflection. While findings highlighted the unique qualities and processes of re-imagining early childhood education which occurred within sites, they also illuminated common values and beliefs that were seen across sites. They included, the belief in the competence and capacity of children, educators and parents/carers, the importance of democracy in education, the understanding of knowledge as being socially constructed, the role of inquiry and research, and the importance of making learning visible to informing future policy and practice. (p. 106)

Sisson, Whittington and Shin's project has distilled the following set of principles from the Reggio Emilia education project which informs this project: (i) the image of the child as powerful, competent, creative curious, who is full of potential and ambitious desires (Malaguzzi 1994; Rinaldi 1993); (ii) the role of the educator as co-learners and co-teachers with children and other adults; (iii) the nature of knowledge as socially constructed with adults and children; (iv) that the environment is significant in educational endeavours; (v) the importance of documentation throughout the process of learning to make learning visible and to engage community in dialogue.; and (vi) *progettazione* or the process of planning and designing the teaching and learning activities, the environment, the opportunities for participation and the professional development.

The researchers reviewed an archive of educational research into CRP in settler colonial countries (Morrison et al. 2019) for a genealogy, rationales, theories, and descriptions of practice, for culturally responsive pedagogy. From this archive, we have identified these themes that we believe are foundational to culturally responsive practice: high intellectual challenge; learning strongly connected to children's life-worlds; recognition of cultural difference as asset to learning; taking an action/activist orientation; and providing students with opportunities to perform their learning to an audience, and to experiment with multimodal literacies.

The researchers also analysed key Australian policy texts that inform decisions that educators make about their practice. These policy texts include: the *Early Years Learning Framework*, the *Melbourne Declaration* (MCEETYA 2008), the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL 2011), and the pedagogy frameworks used in different

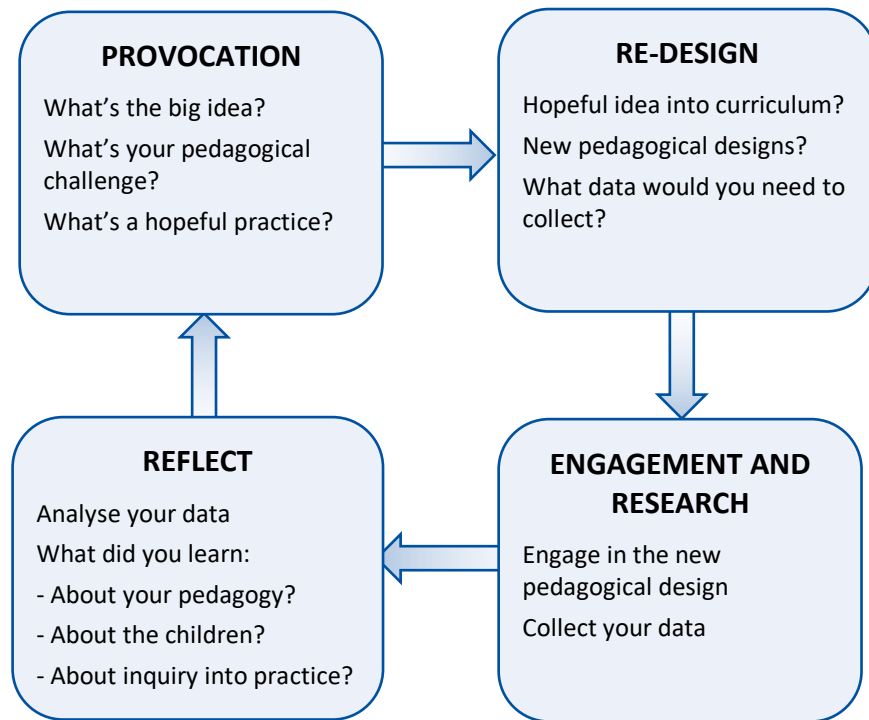
jurisdictions, including ‘Productive Pedagogy’ (QLD), ‘Quality Teaching, Successful Students’ (NSW), and ‘Teaching for Effective Learning’ (SA). Some of these policy texts also provide exemplars of practice. We are especially interested in the affordances which these texts and their exemplars provide for developing pedagogy inspired by the principles from Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies. Our analyses have also informed the action research phase.

### ***Phase 3: Action research***

As a preamble to the action research, early in 2019, the researchers interviewed the participating site leaders in order to gain an understanding of how each site is structured, its school plans for improving learning for Aboriginal students, how professional development works, what data is collected to monitor children’s learning, links to the Aboriginal community, and how each site understands the challenges of such a project (Burgess 1988). We also collected site policy documents such as site improvement plans and whole site agreements on teaching practice as well as pedagogical documentation.

During 2019, the researchers established and sustained a collaborative research community for the participating educators to produce new professional and scholarly knowledge about culturally responsive pedagogical practice imbued with Reggio Emilia principles. Our model of action research is characterised by these features: focused on improving practice; owned by educators/the sites; involves systematic examination involving collection and analysis of evidence/data; producing your own knowledge about what works in your context; is collaborative and professional community building ; focuses on problem-posing as a preamble to problem solving; and is committed to making the situation more socially just.

Our model of action research has been designed to work over a whole year and has four phases, one per term: provocation, redesigning, engagement/ research, and reflecting.



Each of these phases in the 2019 action research cycle is elaborated overleaf.

|  |
|--|
| <b>Term 1: Provocation</b>   |
| Workshop 1: Wednesday 13 February 9.00-4.30  |
| Workshop 2: Monday 25 March 9.00-12.30   |
| Think out aloud about the challenges of your site  |
| Foreground your site's strategic plans   |
| Work on a hopeful idea that could improve things, referring to the principles of the Reggio Emilia education project and our CRP framework |
| Identify a pedagogical challenge of focus for redesigning in Term 3  |
| <b>Term 2: Re-design</b>   |
| Workshop 3: Friday 17 May 12.30-4.00   |
| Workshop 4: Monday 17 June 9.00-12.30  |
| Work on re-designing some curriculum and/or pedagogy that will be enacted in Term 3  |
| Design an action research plan in parallel   |
| Refine a 'good' research aim/question  |
| Work out what data to collect and how to collect it  |
| Negotiate resources required   |
| <b>Term 3: Teach &amp; research</b>  |
| Workshop 5: Tuesday 6 August 12.30-4.00  |
| Workshop 6: Thursday 12 September 9.00-12.30   |
| Refine the designs   |
| Carry out your action research plan  |
| Engage and enact in pedagogical redesign   |
| Collect the data   |
| Report back on what is happening and beginning to share aspects of your data.  |
| Begin to think about presenting the findings using the project template as a scaffold  |
| <b>Term 4: Reflect</b>   |
| Conference: Friday 1 November 9.00-4.30  |
| Present a summary of your research to an audience (PowerPoint presentation)  |
| Share your findings with a view to developing some insights across the various projects  |
| Evaluate your hunches about what might improve things  |
| Workshop what's next, for curriculum and pedagogy development, and further action research   |

The whole-day conference provided the participating sites with an opportunity to describe their action research and report on what was learned about the children at their sites, their own pedagogy and the action research process itself. Each site presented their findings via a PowerPoint presentation. These presentations were also video-recorded in order to provide a documented record and potential resource for subsequent professional learning opportunities. After the conference, the participating educators were interviewed and the transcripts were analysed and edited into case study accounts.

#### *Phase 4: Analysis and theory building*

Phase 4 of this project entailed the collection and analysis of inter-connected sets of data: face-to-face entry and exit interviews with the site leaders in relation to advancing site practices informed by the principles from Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies, face-to-face interviews with educator teams about their action research, action research data collected by the participating educators and the PowerPoint presentations and notes prepared by the sites for the end-of-year conference. For details of the interview protocols, refer to the appendices.

Our analysis was framed by the following questions:

What was identified as the pedagogical challenge for this site?

How does this challenge relate to the site context and specific character of the child cohort?

What specific aspects of culturally responsive and Reggio Emilia education principles did this site select to inform their action research?

What did these educators try to do differently?

What did they learn about the children?

What did they learn about their pedagogy?

What did they learn about the collaborative action research process?

How did they ascertain that children's experiences and learning had improved or not?

As well, our analysis of the various action research projects also involved the drafting of *portraits* that provide a story of the projects for each site in a format that captures the voices of the participants. In effect, these portraits are edited versions of text from the site leader and educator interview transcripts and details from their conference PowerPoint presentations. These portraits offer a glimpse into 'a 'scheme of interpretation' (Garfinkel 1967, p. 36) through which these action research projects are made recognisable and intelligible. Site practices—and specifically action research—arise out of a site-based and local problematisation and in response to locally diagnosed problems and are sustained as an 'ongoing practical accomplishment' (Freebody & Freiberg 2011, p. 80), constituted out of the 'practical reasoning' or 'practical theorising' (p.80) at the local site level.

The use of portraits for the purposes of sharing data from action research case studies draws on various previous examples (Santoro, Kamler & Reid 2001; Smyth et al. 2004; Smyth & McInerney 2013).

Against the 'normal' textual strategy of the educational sociologist—one that splices small bits of 'others' voice from our interview 'data' into our authorial monologue as evidence of the 'reality' of our argument and then to tell the reader how to interpret that bit of text—the portrait provides much longer narrative fragments from our informants that are too extensive to limit inside of an authorial monologue. (Smyth et al. 2014, p. 70)

Theory building occurred through the duration of the project, but with more intensity towards the end of 2019. As outlined earlier, one of the research aims was to advance theorisations of culturally responsive pedagogy in early learning settings inspired by Reggio Emilia principles, and approaches to teacher action research. Using dialectical theory building—processes that allow ‘data’ and ‘theory’ to mutually inform one another (Lather 1986)—the researchers juxtaposed the analyses of texts, the action research accounts, and the data sets collected to augment the action research to develop theorisations of a uniquely Australian version of culturally responsive pedagogy for the early years, imbued with Reggio Emilia education principles. The data leads to reconstruction of theoretical categories/models. At this point, various theoretical approaches that the researchers bring to this project come together and have interdisciplinary bearing in enhancing the theory building process.

## Case studies

The six case studies have been formatted to provide:

descriptions of what happened in each site as a consequence of taking up the provocations of a culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia approach; and,

reflections from participants about what was learned about their children, their own practice, and about the efficacy of an action research approach to professional learning.

We hope that the portraits stimulate multiple readings of what happened, and also what we can learn from these case studies. As noted in our literature review, there is a serious lack of practitioner case studies in the published archive that address the question of what a culturally responsive approach to pedagogy in early childhood settings looks like, as well as few educator accounts of their attempts to redesign their curriculum and pedagogies towards more culturally responsive approaches. We therefore hope that the portraits will provide professional development resources for other early childhood educators who are committed to redesigning their own practices in response to the existential demands of both superdiverse student cohorts and the specific learning needs of Aboriginal students. We argue that these two rationales cannot be treated separately but must be treated in an integrated way as educators work on redesigning their practices. Put simply, Aboriginal children are an important subset of the complex cultural diversity evident in our early childhood centres. We note though that, historically, the cultural resources that Aboriginal children bring to early learning settings has been either mostly ignored or understood in 'deficit' terms to the detriment of both Aboriginal children and other children in any site.

### Centre One

#### *Context and project description*

Centre One is a metropolitan site serving a socio-economically disadvantaged community. In recent years, the centre has co-located with a school and enrolments have increased to a total of 60 children. Attendance is above the state average. Of the 2019 cohort, 23% of children identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 50% speak English as a second language, several children have been diagnosed with disability or are undergoing diagnosis, and several children have been diagnosed with significant speech and language difficulties. Two bilingual educators were employed in 2018/2019 to support children whose first language is Arabic, Vietnamese or Mandarin. Overall, 12 children were receiving preschool support for special rights. Staffing include: Staff includes one Director, two full-time teachers, one education care worker, five part-time education care worker workers, one occasional care officer, and one bilingual support officer to provide support for children with additional needs. Parent programs offered in 2019 range from once-off sessions on children and learning through to a six-week course. In 2018, 78 families attended the centre's community programs, where 62% of families attending were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. The centre was chosen in 2018 as one of four sites in



South Australia to be members of *Project Quattro* to explore the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project, an initiative of the South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project.

|   |
|---|
| <b>Centre One philosophy Statement</b>  |
| <p>Recognise the traditional lands of the Kaurna people</p> <p>Learning growth through positive relationships, participation valued for healthy sense of wellbeing</p> <p>Children, families and educators as co-constructors of knowledge together</p> <p>Value reconciliation and celebration rights, identity, culture, uniqueness and differences</p> <p>Child valued as a strong, competent and courageous researcher of the world</p>   |
| <b>Quality Improvement Plan goals</b>   |
| <p>To increase children's ability to engage in a sustained conversation (Focus: oral language and vocabulary)</p> <p>To increase all children's capacity to engage successfully with others and the learning program (Focus: Professional learning in the Reggio Emilia and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy project and the Trauma Aware Schools Initiative)</p>   |
| <b>Action research question</b>   |
| <p>How can our book-based planning and teaching processes connect to our children's life-worlds in order to strengthen vocabulary development and deepen understanding?</p>   |
| <b>Focus of pedagogical change</b>  |
| <p>Action research design and pedagogical changes the teacher engaged in included:</p> <p><i>Pedagogical documentation:</i> Throughout the project to make visible how children planned, carried out, reflected and completed their work.</p> <p><i>Provocation:</i> The use of book <i>Summer Rain</i> for provocation for child led inquiry and learning through play, as this multicultural text connects to children's life-worlds, linguistic and cultural repertoires. Linking home to preschool by connecting home oral communication to print literacies and phonemic awareness. In playful ways and in small groups focus on key target words, creep, jump, crawl, dive, stretch, dancing, splatter, Fish, Brolga, Turtle.</p> <p><i>Project Work:</i> Engage in small group project work tied to literacy and EYLF. Introduce literacy scaffolded to improve children's ability to process complex sentences which describe and express their ideas. Learning experiences planned with deeper focus on CRP principles. When enacting the focus words children are provided the opportunity to learn about each other's culture and experiences relating to focus words.</p> |
| <b>Data collected by the teachers</b>   |
| <p>Journal and personal reflections</p> <p>Notes from educator conversations at staff meetings</p>  |

### *Centre One: Focus of key ideas:*

#### **Culturally responsive pedagogies**

- ✓ High intellectual challenge
- ✓ Strongly connected to children's life-worlds
- Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- Critical thinking, action, activist orientation
- Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

#### **Reggio Emilia principles**

- Competent child and 100 languages
- The pedagogy of listening
- Participation and democracy
- ✓ Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation., educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- Environment, space and relations

To support these pedagogical changes to occur, texts were reviewed for their relevance and connection to children's life-worlds. In curriculum meetings, three new Culturally Responsive Pedagogies additions were added to the educator's literacy book-based planning assessment criteria to activate prior knowledge toward print literacy:

How might families define and connect to these focus words through their ways of knowing?

How can we document and strengthen cultural and linguist demonstrations of these targeted words?

Which languages help children explore connections to the meaning of these target words.

Question and reflections through Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogical documentation promoted stronger engagement in the pedagogy of listening and collaborative learning.

### *Centre One portrait excerpts: Director*

#### **Director reflections**

I have been a year of educator practice stretch, challenge and a year of thinking, and planning. Our two educators involved would bring back to our site from the professional leaning community to complement our

existing pedagogy and curriculum. The team discuss this to enact principles in our planning. The benefit of this project to our site is to enact site-specific professional learning for all career stages educators focused on our challenges. It has been a year of reflection, dialogue and action on our current practice, why we do it, does it improve learning, and ensuring alignment to our values and philosophy. Redesigning pedagogy is hard but rewarding. We used the Reggio Emilia education principles and CRP to build on our already focus on literacy and learning improvement that is a priority for the Department. We have a super diverse cohort of children. Literacy and learning improvement in this area is a challenge for some of our families and children. Cultural and context matters here. So having the culturally responsive and Reggio lens on that process has pushed us pedagogically even further to advance our base priority for literacy.

**Impact on educator confidence and pedagogical redesign**

The project did impact the team's confidence and pedagogical redesign. Adding culturally responsive pedagogies to our toolkit when we're thinking about children literacy gave us another frame to respond directly to our local diverse and complex context. So that was a big aha moment when we thought, we've been searching for CRP. Because we knew we have established a really strong image of the child over many years of researching the Reggio Emilia principles, but what to build the next step for us to reflect on our local context and culture using CRP principles. Through this project we have built on to our skills of documentation of learning toward improving challenges of practice for literacy success of our children.

**Valuing life worlds is important to connecting to learning literacy**

The focus on seeing the competent child and linking to culturally literate identities to connect to learning worked. Yes, definitely worked at our site. Our teacher led action research teachers had us rethinking and reconsidering our team's image of the child and of our families. It focused the use of information we always gather from families but perhaps do not always act on. This helped us to have some sense of accountability on what we are going to do with the information gifted us about the child and their learning needs? So using the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy in dialogue with the principles from Reggio Emilia education project ideas to frame practice and planning resulted I think in a much richer learning experience for all of the children. We tried a multi-age approach in our Action research project on a group including some Aboriginal children and a diverse range of other cultural backgrounds, some 3 years old children and others in occasional care program.

**Impact on children**

Our action research findings showed great impact for the engagement, participation, vocabulary development, confidence and dispositions of our children in the research group. But we also saw that other children were interested and wanted to share and be part of the experience too. So it had a ripple effect.

**Valuing life worlds**

We strive for child strength-based approach in everything we do so the CRP principles helped us to go that step further in responding directly to what children were bringing to us and linking this to educationally rich dialogic learning improvement. So preschools and kindergartens have been good at listening to children's interests and learning including what they enjoy at home with their family and building that into our learning program. But I think the CRP principles are that next level of understanding and acknowledging the local whole child, and what impact their culture, identity and language has on learning. This helped teachers plan for how they would respond. So it's that next level I think of equal engagement and participation in literacy through the recognition of linguistic and cultural prior knowledges.

**Some staff miss out on PD**

The project involved two staff: one fulltime teacher; and the other a fulltime early childhood worker. Often professional development is focused only for teachers, but we work in a way where all staff are considered a teacher as learner and teacher as researcher. So we value what each of our educators bring to the team. The action research and professional learning community valued all as educator researchers of their own practice.

**Impact of PD designing to investigate localised pedagogical challenges**

Another challenge is integrating and enacting training from staff professional development. This project made a real difference in allowing us to investigate our localised pedagogical challenges at our site. This type of PD approach was sustained and ongoing over the year. Our two educators constantly checking back in with their wider professional learning community from other sites. The other educator researchers in the project assisted our team members in local implementation. Sharing pedagogical challenges and honing our skills for success with dialogue across other sites in collaboration with the university research gave a level of accountability for professional learning over the year. This is very different from PD in just one day and then trying implement it with no follow-up and no space for evidence-based data for reflection toward improving our own pedagogy. So we really appreciated that style of professional learning using action research tailored specifically to improve our own pedagogies.

**Whole centre approach to pedagogy**

I'm now really keen to think about a whole centre approach using this model; how we share and include everyone in our team in evidence-based practice skill improvement. I am thinking administration staff, our social workers, our community development coordinators the lens of understanding and acknowledging and valuing the life-worlds of our families and our children needs to be consistent across a whole centre. This is a challenge to sustain any professional learning. There are always competing priorities. Like all our site improvement projects were very intentional to connect our findings to our centre priorities, to our quality improvement plan. Quality, context and culture through

localised PD on our practice is important. Some of CRP strategies that gave us a new lens to strengthen what we were already doing. The challenge for other educational communities and sites is that this is not an add on or separate work but actually it's our core business in superdiverse times.

As single educator using strengths-based pedagogies is not enough. We need leadership and a whole-of-centre approach to CRP and Reggio Emilia inspired pedagogies to build and sustain literacy success. A competent child needs a competent teacher, who needs a competent centre with ongoing and supportive professional development. I think it's really important for our early childhood colleagues, our fellow directors and the project officers in state office to keep in mind when they're producing resources for sites that help these processes to include culture and context that is respectful of localising pedagogy to meet and be responsive to the children families in your centre. Both Reggio Emilia education principles and CRP supported us to do that. So it needs to be a site-wide approach.

**Educators need time to reflect and plan**

The project gave our involved educators a real sense of pedagogical leadership by receiving ongoing professional learning with ongoing time to reflect on their own practice and implement data driven changes and then reflect on how that was progressing. We need TRT release resources in terms of funding for release time, to value the thinking and the planning time that's needed for such rich pedagogies to impact children's learning.

**The value of localised professional learning communities**

Peer-to-peer educators working alongside each other across several sites in Adelaide similar to the diversity demographic of ours helped us to unpack some of the challenges we and they are facing at their site. Like us their context and challenges are very localised complexities that need resources to sustain this approach. I think, we have our new preschool quality improvement format and process and improvement journey that the Department are rolling out at the moment. So next year we'll be using a new way of documenting learnt in this project for our improvement to challenges of practice and, and goals.

**Site philosophy and leadership**

In my view it starts with site culture and your site philosophy as core to build on this work. Everybody on your team needs PD time so as a leader you need to give time and prioritise time for your team to think about what skill they each bring as educators to the centre. As a leader the need to prioritise for educators time to plan, listen and reflect on the views of the children their community and families to see what they bring to views of child rearing, aspirations and prior knowledges in the form of culturally literate identities. So the aim of our centres is to create places of high intellectual challenge learning and a learning

community and that community involves children, families, educators, and community members. So listening to each of those groups within your community and from that experience of listening you would be able to create a philosophy that reflects what you value and what you believe about learning and about childhood. Starting with your philosophy and thinking about how your philosophy is lived every day I think is a key piece of advice. The other piece of advice when we started this project we were quite overwhelmed with trying to think strategically about how we had a level of coherence with this new and growing understanding of culturally responsive pedagogies, with what we were already doing and the journey we were already on in responding to some of the challenges that we'd identified in our quality improvement processes. Thinking strategically about how you use CRP principles as a lens to strengthen what you're already doing, is important. So that it becomes part of what you do every day, it becomes part of your conversations and your planning meetings, part of your conversations with any reference groups you have within your education community, it's forefront in your mind when you're thinking about learning and planning for learning. And that, that includes your educators and your families and your children. So trying to achieve a level of coherence is tricky, but really important if you want to sustain momentum and sustain a really deep level of engagement with the principles for everybody.

I think it is because we work in a superdiverse and complex community, so we have multiple and many and varied languages, cultures and literate identities here. We can be responsive in the way that we plan for the experiences each child and family will have when they enter our doors. I don't think we can be competent in understanding the intricacies of every language, every culture of every family group we have in centre. The project helped us understand that we are striving for a level of responsiveness to build learning events co-designed with children for all children to bring their voice and culture to. We think this is authentic, respectful and meaningful. We see responsiveness very different to trying to be 100 per cent competent. Kids engaged with this approach. Listening to children and their families and being learners ourselves of the prior knowledge they bring moves us toward a culturally responsive way of working with children and families positions for equal power. So that we're learning with and from each other, we're co-constructing learning and aspiration with high family connections rather than educators doing that separately. I don't think it can be separated.

*Centre One portrait excerpts: Teachers (Megan and Lisa)*

**Teacher reflections**

I'd been on a trip to Reggio Emilia with the Site Director and another colleague who no longer works with us on a study tour in 2017, and prior to that we had been to some workshops. And then after that we became part of [The South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project]. There was 16 or so sites, including the museum and hospital that were part of a project, and that was for a whole year. And then we became one of the four prototypes which is Project Quattro. At

my previous employment, we had done a fair bit on cultures and diversity but it was a lot of unpacking on ourselves, reflecting on white privilege. Definitely it made recognise the importance of our role and also to hear some real-life struggles through that learning. And we've also done some work with Jack Buckskin [aKurna and Narungga cultural educator] for a day session. He gave us a bit of an overview on Kurna land and a bit about families and how family trees and different groups are together. Kinships. He touched a lot on the land, and what land means, and the importance of the language in your land. And if you actually travel to someone else's, like another mob's, then the protocols that are there about having to have someone see you through that land. And he touched on Storylines and the Dreaming and the pillars of Aboriginal society or Aboriginal culture. But it was a lot in one day and it's almost like we could do that all again.

Megan: Whereas this project has really been great for learning about what our role is as teachers I suppose, with children and families. Of course, relationships are core, but I love the whole 'high intellectual challenge' and 'connecting to the life of children's worlds'. That hasn't really ever come through from my other training I don't think.

**The action research**

We examined our vocabulary. So that was part of our oral language goals for our site. And that was part of our quality improvement plan, so it was really important for us to link our quality improvement plan in. One of the strategies we had begun [to focus on was] improving children's ability to process and produce complex sentences which describe and express their ideas. This was the development of a book-based planning tool which we had begun using to support children's vocabulary and concept development through the use of a consistent text [story book]. The importance of oral language skills as a foundation for literacy is widely acknowledged.

Likewise, communication and language is inextricably linked to a child's identity and wellbeing. We believed that a focus on this area of communication would support children's learning across all learning outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework. So we had already started book-based planning, intentional teaching way of being with the children with a book that we chose earlier in the year and we felt some kind of unease about the book that we had chosen. And then when this project came along and we viewed all the [CRP] principles, I think that was a bit of a light bulb for us that we could actually change this way of doing our book-based learning but with the lens like on culturally responsive pedagogies and connecting to children's life-worlds. With our developing understanding of culturally responsive pedagogies, we thought about how we could strengthen what we had already begun with this new lens ... and our action research project provided a great opportunity to think critically and dive deeper into this learning space.

So the aim was to adapt one part of our intentional teaching, but from this it's also trickled in to lots of different areas. As a new site, we've been constantly thinking about our environment and what that also shares and shows families and people. And our resources that we have here because we did a big declutter when we moved. We've constantly been talking about what do our resources really show and connect to the children and the families.

And our processes with our new Aboriginal families and our three-year olds' families, and what we can do. This hasn't happened yet; we're still wondering and questioning how we can change some of those processes to make them more culturally responsive. [This was] one of the other' niggles' we identified in the early stages of brainstorming for this action research earlier this year. [We wanted to explore] how are we responding to the rights of our 3 year olds and our multi-age group of learners in an integrated program of both kindergarten and occasional care.

It was important for us as we began this action research to ensure a level of coherence with the improvement goals we had already identified as a team. So we looked at our oral language improvement goal and reflected on how we could strengthen what we had already started, with our developing knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy.

So all the children start at kindy at the same time of the year, but for our three-year olds or occasional care [children,] they can start throughout the year. And so we thought, why not take that opportunity when a three year old starts to welcome the family in, but then make sure we've got some guidelines of when we re-check in with these families too? So it sounds maybe small but I think it's important in building that relationship. And then we can learn more about that family and that child, which will connect to their life-worlds.

So we were due to change [our focus book] no matter what, but we thought, when we pick a book this time let's find something, let's use a book that's either illustrated by or the author is Aboriginal, and then also find a book that could maybe give us a little bit more connection to where we live. The previous book was [about] a man who lived under a tree. It was *Mr. Magee* and essentially, they're fun stories, but Mr. Magee lived under a tree and he drank cups of tea, even the landscape which he lived in—like the word *steeple*—was English, very English. So, we chose *Summer Rain* by Ros Moriarty, illustrated by Indigenous design studio Balarinji.

We used photos and videos and then we connected that learning with a page in the book and put them together. So, we re-imagined it, using the text but using our children to demonstrate their understanding of words in it. Every page in the text then had a corresponding picture of a child at kindergarten. [For example] 'The turtles crawl', then we might have Ruth crawling in the photo next to it.



When we'd ask families about the word 'crawl', they relate it straight back to babies crawling and in the book we wanted to deepen the understanding, well it's not just babies that crawl, so there's other creatures, other ways of exploring that word. So, it was 'turtles crawl and lizards creep'. And it was such a joyous way to learn, you know, [the children] using their bodies. We're always learning with our bodies, but maybe it was more about us recognising or acknowledging that it is one way we can learn, naming it. Particularly with our book-based planning, that intention – that small part of our intentional teaching, the using our bodies, was just so much fun for the children, and also for them to experience that word but also to share that word.

We thought about the importance of them performing it to an audience other than the teachers and that was a really great way to do that with those action words. They performed it to the rest of the kindergarten through the video, but also to all the families on a large screen at their end of term celebration. And once we showed the book with just the five children in it on the large screen, that was when the children said 'I want to be in that book too', so that learning did go out and more children became different pages of the books, more words than we chose to focus on for the vocab learning.

We just concentrated in the project on the five children, it very easily spread to the whole group. So there were about four or five versions of our book that we made because we kept adding new photos and then, by the end of the term, we shared that with all the families and the children and it had noises as well, it had video, photo, sound.

We had Aboriginal twins, and for our focus group of children, we picked the one that was more reluctant to talk with other children just so we could hear her voice. So, I think that was really special for her. Over the whole term she became more confident in talking within that. I think her growth as well. I think that definitely added to us hearing her voice or for her being willing to speak out in the group. And her watching herself on the large screen lots, that was really powerful to see her, because in a big group she wouldn't necessarily, still now. Put her hand up and want to share, which is fine as well, but you could see her joy and delight that she was on the screen and her friends were like. 'Wow, look at you'. It had an effect on her wellbeing I think and socially.

One of our three-year olds in our occasional care program [a Māori child], his grandmother just happened to be visiting for New Zealand, and we had some photos of him on the floor of the occasional care room and I think he was leaping. And our occasional care educator said Grandma was just so delighted, and also the child was so delighted to be able to show his Grandma something that he was a part of for kindy. So that was a really nice.

Lastly one of the boys, an Aboriginal boy and his brother, who started just towards half way through the term, we involved him and he supported his brother. So, it was great also for those two in particular because we didn't see them much in term two, to have them

involved in this project. And to be able to share the learning and send documentation home for the family—to show ‘this is a project and your child’s part of it’. I think his mum felt really proud and we tried to send home photos of learning but this being a particular series of photos in the book was a bit special as well.

[Amongst all of the children], we definitely heard the vocab that we’d chosen spread into different areas of learning. So, a group of children were using Connex to make robots and they’d be like ‘Look, the robot is crawling, the robot is creeping’ so that was powerful to see that word transfer into a new context. And also just in their physical play. If it was a sunny day, you know the lizard would be lying on the rock or creeping down in our play space or you know the geckos were stretching over the play equipment so yeah they were using that language within their spontaneous play.

And the photos, the visuals of the book and of a child doing the action on the floor with some painter’s tape with zig zags, they made an impact on lots of the children wanting to learn about each word and how to move their bodies.

**Has the project changed the educators?**

Megan: Yes, yes for sure. I mean I’m about to go on maternity leave but it’s a given, I’m so excited to keep going. I can see the importance and the value in the culturally responsive pedagogies and I just want it to be part of everything we do here.

Lisa: We just need to connect to the life of the learners first. I think that’s in my head the whole time, how do we connect more with the life-worlds of our children over lots of things.

We’ve always had good relationships with our families. And we have—we called them the green forms—that we [give] the families at the beginning of the year to tell us about their children. And we use those when we write learning stories, but I think we can even maybe look at those again and add something else into that, so that we’re touching base, I don’t want to say at a deeper level but maybe a slightly different level.

And when we are in our planning processes of new projects or new learning experiences for children we wouldn’t have necessarily spoken to the families about ‘we’re doing this research on bugs’ because the children are really interested in these insects. But now, that connecting to home lives, we can see how just asking one question [is important]. You know we’ve always been quite conscious about who’s culture’s operating at any one time, but I think we’re probably more in tune with that as well.

Each year when we start, we do have a bit of a struggle when we introduce to children about the land that we’re learning on, and who lived here first and our history, and this could really help us dive deeper in that. I think now if we connect to our families, and particularly Aboriginal families, we want to explore this more with children. It’s just at a

deeper level perhaps, it's just that it's constantly now in our heads as educators, in what we do or what we're going to do. I mean we're coming towards the end of term four. It's actually exciting for what we do now, but [also] the possibilities for next year I think.

I think with that for Aboriginal families, particularly after doing Jack Buckskin's [session], for me anyway [it gave me] that permission to ask more questions about the language [group] that you belong to and, I guess, just not being afraid. I think Jack made it really clear 'just ask, ask politely'. Like it's not the first thing you ask, you build your relationship a little bit first but of course you know they're questions that you can ask the families.

I think just the early workshops we had, when Irabinna was speaking about the language map, how many language groups there are, and just tapping into that awareness I think was really powerful. Information I feel like I should have [already] known. We had previously seen the language map, but I think the way that he explained it—from diverse to super diverse—he's clearly a very skilled teacher and lecturer. So I think for me I really soaked up what he was telling us, all our readings and I really enjoyed the workshops and the learning that we had prior to starting our project. Brings back that [saying], 'every confident child deserves a confident teacher'.

#### Future plans

We feel like we're still a work in progress and we do need time to think and reflect, but I certainly don't see this sitting by itself just saying, 'We've done that, and we've finished now'. I think this is, 'We did a little bit of that, now we want to do a lot more'. The project was just a small snippet to see how we went. I want to be part of this journey, so I'm excited to see what happens next year. And you know, it was so great to have two of us being involved in this project,

My husband is Aboriginal, I think he would be so excited to hear all this because I don't think he had many responsive teachers through his schooling. He always is really interested when I say I've gone to my workshop days and we've done this reading and that, and I think that he's really happy that I'm learning more. I think he feels good that the kids that come to our kindy—he always asks how many Aboriginal kids have you got now and he's interested to know about them and who they are.

#### Opportunities and challenges

It was great because the group wasn't all Aboriginal children, but to send home a book that was illustrated by Aboriginal people, I think was a great opportunity. The children borrowed it and they brought it back but then they reborrowed it. And the Aboriginal twin girls were saying that they had to take home two. And then the Maori family have four children and they had their eldest daughter reading it to the whole family, and yeah the great opportunities for those families to have that book and know that that's what was happening in their child's learning. We do always value culture but this was an opportunity to show how maybe.

And we even gave information to the five families about what culturally responsive pedagogy was. I think that they wanted to support us in it, like they were really happy. It was very valuable in explaining exactly what we were doing.

You know I think it's important, it's great that we can get opportunities like this, and I know we wouldn't have ever done anything this deep without being in a project working together, we were empowered to do it, being accountable as well helps. And I think we were so grateful to have all of the educators, like all of you and Rob and Irabinna and Jamie, that was amazing. All of you in one room it's fairly inspiring, but it was also really valuable to see the other sites and I so enjoyed the end-of-year conference presentation, it was so interesting to see everybody's project and where they went, all so different.

And for early childhood I think that's really important to remember we're working with the youngest children and to keep teachers in early childhood developing and growing as themselves as an educator. It was such rich learning, I think, such rich learning for us.

### ***Centre One: Key findings***

| <b>What we learned about pedagogy</b>  |
|--|
| <p>The importance of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Connecting print literacy to the lives of learners</li><li>Establishing connections and building positive relationships with children and families to capture their cultural identities and prior knowledges from home</li></ul>   |
| <b>What we learned about children and families</b>   |
| <p>The importance of positioning families as competent partners in the teaching and learning process</p> <p>Children can successfully learn and demonstrate their understanding of new vocabulary through many languages</p> <p>Avoid pre-planning too much before consultation and inviting participation from our families</p> <p>Reciprocal conversations enable greater connection with families than forms or questionnaires</p> <p>Listen to the 100 languages of our families</p>   |
| <b>Future plans</b>  |
| <p>Prioritise the language of movement</p> <p>Continue to ask whose culture is operating at the time?</p> <p>Think about our environment, our resources and ourselves as participants in the learning process.</p> <p>Develop centre-wide approaches to story book-based literacy using CRP and the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project.</p> <p>Embed the CRP framework and the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project throughout the site.</p> <p>Give ourselves time to think and be in dialogue together</p> |

## Centre Two

Centre Two is a metropolitan site serving a community experiencing socio-economic challenges. Co-located with a school, the centre is a kindergarten and reception combined. Children are assigned to a home group space with an educator. The total enrollment is 120 children aged three to six years. Attendance rates are well above the state average and enrolments have increased over time, with significant spikes over the past five years. The 2018 AEDC data for this site showed children at risk and vulnerable developmentally in the areas of social (12%), emotional (15%), and language and cognitive skills (15%). The centre specialises in small group child-initiated learning that is supported through scaffolded risk taking. Pedagogies for learning are hands-on, active and based on the individual needs and interests of each child using the site's nature-based award-winning outdoor space. The Reggio-inspired centre has introduced a culturally inclusive 'Nunga Way' approach for Aboriginal children.

The group that was the focus of the action research comprised of 27 children (14 reception and 13 kindergarten age). Cultural diversity included five Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, five children with at least one parent born in another country, and two bilingual children. The group included children with complex needs such as Sensory Processing Disorder, hearing loss, Type 1 diabetes, and speech and language delays.

| <b>Centre Two: Philosophy Statement</b>  |
|--|
| Recognise the traditional lands of the Kaurna people<br>Children as competent learners who come with wealth of knowledge<br>Child centered inquiry, solidarity, small group creativity, discovery, risk-taking through play<br>Inspired by Reggio Emilia education principles and 'The Nunga Way' theories<br>Educator research-inspired classroom practice from researching alongside children<br>Values: Belonging, diversity, discovery, wellbeing, success |
| <b>Action research question</b>  |
| How can working in small groups support all children to have their voice heard?  |
| <b>Focus of pedagogical change</b>   |
| Children hearing everybody's voice at times<br>Facilitating greater democratic and inclusive small group cooperation and interaction<br>Using iPad recordings to capture how children communicate in small groups, especially children of diverse backgrounds who may prefer different modalities and multimodal approaches  |
| <b>Data collected by the teachers</b>  |
| Reflection journal<br>Notes from educator conversations at staff meetings<br>Audio recordings  |

Video recordings  
Photos  
Pedagogical documentation  
Children's artefacts

### *Centre Two: Focus of key ideas*

#### **Culturally responsive pedagogies**

- High intellectual challenge
- ✓ Strongly connected to children's life-worlds
- Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- ✓ Critical thinking, action, activist orientation
- ✓ Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

#### **Reggio Emilia principles**

- Competent child
- 100 languages
- ✓ The pedagogy of listening
- ✓ Participation and democracy
- ✓ Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation., educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- Environment, space and relations

### *Centre Two portrait excerpts: Director*

#### **Synergies with other projects**

Well this project was a perfect project to lead and extend from our full year before. We contextualised this to our local conditions, as our site was a project Quattro site for the terrific Reggio Emilia South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project as a site for Project Quattro we learnt to develop localised practices through ongoing professional learning. We like this form of professional development and to build our documentation skills our practice. We have already shared these with others. Ongoing support works best for us. One off professional development doesn't work.

So this CRP Reggio project just, perfectly carried on from [project Quattro]. It allowed us that time to think about the culture responsive pedagogy principles in relation to the Reggio Emilia principles, it was that time to look at them both and see how they fit together for our site. We wanted to continue our focus from what we learnt from project Quattro, which was about looking at democracy and small groups and getting children's voices, watching group processes for greater inclusion of children's voices. And so, it was just a beautiful opportunity to say to our educators Anna and Evan, okay we already know our focus question was about drawing on the life-worlds of students to include children's voice for engagement, achievement and democracy. It was then a matter of looking at what group would be appropriate.

CRP in dialogue with Reggio has given us another pedagogical model for small group work to achieve our QIP. We saw improvement in engagement at the site amongst all our children especially Aboriginal and CALD students but that did, of course, involve families. Evan has been amazing in connecting with our Aboriginal families to know where our children come from and what they bring to our site. So, that's something that we will definitely bring in more and more. Capturing the life-worlds is a complex task for educators because some of our children don't know [their cultural heritage]. Some our families don't know. But with Evan asking the question, a couple of the families have gone away and made a point of finding out.

**Engagement and attendance**

We saw further engagement from the kids, once you used these CRP principles that complemented and built on what we learnt from the Quattro. Our attendance has been really good before the project but we noticed that they're a more engaged. In one of our groups, we're definitely are seeing more interaction, more participation from the children, which is great, and I think it has—it's made others in the Early Learning Group think about how they can do that, because we had a really interesting discussion one night about the kindergarten children not speaking up.

**Potential for a whole-school approach**

A couple of the educators not involved in the protect said they would like to use CRP/Reggio principles but next year. They're just learning and they're just watching and taking it all in, and we challenged them on that. I don't think it is acceptable that we just say yeah, that's okay if they sit back and watch. So, that changed thinking, which was good. It should and can be a whole of site approach.

**Increased confidence of  
children and educators**

Giving children time to reflect ... You know, I think it was interesting that by the end of the action research project, one of the children who was the dominant voice and was taking up way too much air time, he and the other children started to realise it. And through it all, Evan and Anna got more strategies and confidence to challenge that and say, well you know, it's not okay. So, as the site leader, I'm walking through observing the learning experience, I'd hear them saying things about air time, someone else's turn, and look, I was talking then, who is being heard and who hasn't had a turn. So it has been really good pedagogically for both educator confidence and for children.

The educators became confident in the way they allowed the children to demonstrate their competence and capableness: demonstrating a skill on the swing, or getting the children who are really good at making dams and rivers in the sandpit. Targeting children who seem to be leaders and get them to reflect on allowing others' voice. That seemed to make a huge difference for children and staff. My colleagues are already confident with diversity. They are amazing. Anna is new and was a student here in her final prac. I was so glad to get her here at this site and in this project. This is only her second year of teaching, she's learning all the time. She doesn't let it overwhelm her. She's very, very calm, but definitely, this will really impact on her, I know. She has excelled in the project even though she is new. I've seen just that understanding of getting children working smaller groups. Her and Evan both have the confidence to do that, as we move forward.

You know, small group pedagogies are really, really complicated work, and they seem to grow in confidence. It definitely has given Evan confidence that he needed. He has really enjoyed the project, I know.

**Staff mobility and ratios**

Some of the complications I have is issues of staff moving on, and then, how do you keep your entire staff up to speed on the groupwork pedagogy? I am confident we will be stable [in the future]. We might have one staff member going. Running at the same time as CRP Reggio we were involved in this other project. We had two other educators going to pedagogical documentation workshops. They looked at the sandpit play and were getting everyone to do videos, recordings, learning stories, just notes about what children were doing in the sandpit. And so, that came down to a very small group focus too that draws from CRP Reggio. I think, between [the two different professional development projects] and the culture



responsive pedagogy group, we just know that this is the way forward. We are pretty lucky that our ratios are good, like we have reception and kindy children, but we maintain a 1:10 ratio. Provided that is maintained we can sustain what we have learnt from our localised professional learning action research. We have a had change of site leadership but we can show this is how it works best.

**The value of professional learning**

We purposefully put ourselves out to be part of research professional development projects like this, so that we can grow our approach focused on building the capability of staff to meet department-mandated priorities. We need a whole school site approach as there is pedagogical difference between transition from here to other sites. Our entire staff would be interested in engaging in professional learning that focused on building emotional and behavioural control around the child. Right, so, how do we do this? How do we build their self-control without, you know, punishments, rewards, consequences, etcetera. This is what I want. Not training, I hate that word.

**Action research can be challenging for some but rewarding**

The input and action research not too overwhelming. You know, I was a little bit worried at the start with the readings, and Evan was the first one to say it, I can't do this. And then I said, I'll vet readings and let you know what parts to read, or whether don't bother reading it at all. He really did engage with the Alaskan CRP principles because it was very practical. The professional dialogue with researchers and other sites. And then, just the ongoing talks and the input that was sort of brief, and then time for thinking, and time for sharing, time to go back and do. It actually was a really good one.

The action research gave us the opportunity to really focus and apply what we learnt to our local internal challenges. So, we plan together. We do allow time at staff meetings to share. So, Anna and Evan were keeping people up-to-date on what was happening in the project, and then with the other project that was happening too so to include all staff so that you've integrated it across site.

**Value of a professional learning community model**

I think it would be fantastic to keep what pedagogies we learnt, keep it going, and work with more sites, because you know, I don't know if that's possible, but it actually, I think it was a very good model, because there's so much, there is a lot of professional learning out there, but it's not all as deep. You know, going to a one-off session about cultural competence, which we don't like at

all, isn't going to cut it. I think it's about those deeply ingrained attitudes of deficit of the child and things that just need to be challenged. Cultural competency? I don't understand how you can possibly be competent in someone else's culture.

*Centre Two portrait excerpts: Teachers (Anna and Evan)*

**Prior career and PD**

Evan: I've been working in the Early Learning Group for six years, and most of that time has been full time as a co-educator.

Anna: My time here hasn't actually been that long. This is my first here. So I did my final year uni placement the year before in the Early Learning Group. This year's my first year actually in a home group.

Evan: I can't remember any PD around Reggio Emilia or CRP outside the Early Learning Group. I can't remember any specific training outside the Early Learning Group at all. We always work with diversity and that's always been a part of cultural diversity and other types of diversity as well. It's always been a part of the site.

Anna: I've been to something, a couple of things run by Echo because they were doing the Reimagining Childhood [project]. We had a few teachers that went over to Reggio. That's all that I can remember off the top of my head. It's already pretty embedded in the Early Learning Group. I think this [project] would be the first culturally responsive [PD].

Evan: I had to do an upgrade, I'm not sure what the term is, but three or four years ago there was a Department-wide upgrading of early years co-educators, SSO staff and everyone had to have a minimum of a Certificate Three at that stage. The Department paid for that, and part of the qualification was cultural competency and they talked about diversity a fair bit. It was a module of the course—I estimate maybe about fifteen percent possibly of the time that was spent was on cultural competency and I'd have to refer back to what was actually included. I've not got a lot of memory of what I learned from it, but what I do remember was being alerted to the importance of being sensitive to the existence of other people's cultural values and the caution that's necessary to be respectful. That's about all I remember about it. I don't think it was necessarily focussed on Aboriginal cultures, but I think that's what I assumed. I think lots of the information indicated that was the areas that needed improving, although I think the focus was across human

culture in general. But there was some focus on the improvements that's needed towards Aboriginal cultures.

Anna: As part of my degree at Flinders University I didn't do cultural competency, but we had Aboriginal Education. It went for a semester. There was a school partnership day though in term three where Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was one of the focuses, which I think was probably half a day.

**Centre context**

Evan: The whole site in general [including the Early Learning Group] is broken up into communities. So we try and educate the children that this is not just an organisational community, this is actually a human community, and their behaviour affects their community.

Anna: So [in the Early Learning Group] there's five home groups, so each child has a home group, but there's large portions of the day where everybody is outside sharing the outdoor space. So we've got a group of kids that we're their 'go to' and they come to us for group times and I've got responsibility to report and assess on those kids. But we also interact with all the kids from the other groups when they're outside.

**Action research focus**

Evan: For the project, I guess we focused on the distribution of voices heard during our group times, our community group times. Does it seem fair? Why we were hearing the voices that we were and why we weren't hearing the voices that we weren't, and what was causing that.

Anna: What we could do to flip it—what we could do to make the people who we were hearing all the time listen, recognise that the people who weren't talking still had really valuable ideas, and for the people who felt like they didn't want to or couldn't talk, to feel like they could, or like they could be heard, even if it wasn't talking.

So, we reduced the group size significantly. We had two of us [educators] and six kids and normally we have two of us and twenty-one. And then we worked with that small group in fifteen-minute bursts weekly, for six or seven weeks. We did an audio recording of conversation and then we did a video recording of someone teaching us a monkey bar trick out at the playground and played that back [to the children].

Evan: The talkers, they recognised it. I don't think that the experience of them recognising their dominance, that will not be enough on its own for them to change. They don't have the presence of mind to, or the ability to alter that on their own I don't think. We haven't seen that yet.

Anna: They have started, Jay did, a couple of times they've said some things that have stuck with me. Like where everyone was talking and one of the kids that talked a lot said, 'Oh maybe Anna could ask people who to talk'. I mean that's not him saying 'Hey Nina do you have an idea'? but it is him recognising ... And then the other day when we were writing a letter to Simon, and we were talking about what do we want to put in because we were asking questions about growing sea monkeys and Jay said 'Why don't we go around in a circle so everyone can say their question'? It hadn't happened before.

Evan: It is an indicator that he's thinking differently.

Anna: And when I did his Statement of Learning, because there's a section that asks for children's voice and we say what do you want to see in your classroom next year, he said 'I don't want everyone to talk over each other'. He's the one that talks over everyone but interesting that he's actually recognised that that's what happens. We had one Aboriginal child [in the group of children we were focussing on].

Evan: Some interactions that we had with her, I think because it was a reduced numbers group, I felt I had some time to refer to her skills that's she's learned through her family environment. I think because of the time that is liberated, because of the small number of children we have, you have more time to dedicate to individuals. I think I became more aware of Millie's willingness and her ability to look after younger people because of that. Recognising what she's picked up through her family culture.

I think having more time allows us to [interact] more deeply with each child and to feed back to each child what we notice about them. More time to notice and more time to talk individually with children as well. And I'm not sure how that feeds into the child's own sense of identity and wellbeing, but when you're giving a compliment to a child, it's going to feed their wellbeing isn't it? When you notice something about them. She certainly seemed happy.

Anna: She also said, because the first question we asked them was what is learning or how do we learn or something like that, and she said, 'We learn by watching'. And we do, I mean she has chances to watch because they spend lots of time playing. But we do lots of hands on kind of stuff. So when Nina taught us how to draw a bird and we watched the video back, Millie was the first one that had a go at it and did it absolutely perfectly. So that highlighted for me that maybe she needs more time watching someone do [an activity].

Anna: [In relation to the non-Aboriginal children] Franklin never used to share at sharing time, didn't share items, didn't share ideas, theories., he didn't participate in a group. He used to hate it, he used to say 'Nah'.

Evan: I mean he would share individually, in the unstructured playtime he would communicate with us and share things with adults or with other children. But in a community group time he would choose not to participate at all previously.

Anna: Now [since the small group work] he got upset because he wanted to share and he will stand up now with the microphone and say 'I made a hamburger, comments and questions'. He would never have done that before we did this, ever. We also put him as the person who could teach. He was the one who taught us about the monkey bars.

Evan: The small group gave him the confidence to teach the other kids something. And having the opportunity to demonstrate what he's learned and with actions. It's given him the confidence to share verbally.

Anna: The other day we had all twenty of them maybe, and people were talking and Franklin was there with his hand up. We don't make them put their hand up, and I said to him 'You don't have to put your hand up Franklin, you can just talk', and he went 'Oh but [someone else is] talking'. I said, 'That's alright, I'll help you'. And then when [the other person] finished I said, 'Go now Franklin'. I think him putting his hand up is his way of saying, 'I need help, I want to say something but I need help to', and I don't think he would have done that before either.

Evan: The small group definitely helped him to participate at that time, and the experience in the small group appears to have helped him to participate more in the larger community as a result. There's been a definite change. Who knows what else has happened in his private life that's helped him to grow as well, but you

can't predict what else has happened or account for that, but the indication is that he's become more confident.

**Growth and agency as an educator team**

Evan: I think it's made me more conscious of the value that Anna and I can bring as a team. If we communicate daily, I think as a result of the research project I've started to come into the team environment to speak to Anna daily in the morning, whereas previously my responsibilities have been outdoors.

I think what it's done for me personally is it's helped me to see us, to see our, the potential of what we can do in group time has altered. And I see that my own responsibility to communicate differently, communicate daily [has changed]. It's difficult to define it actually.

Anna: And I think the process of action research came naturally to us because we would do it all the time and there were certain kids who were tricky, that we would talk about all the time. But I think we've gotten better at the timing of it. Before, when Evan wasn't coming in first thing in the morning, we'd catch each other up at group time, while we were doing the roll. I think maybe we're better at timing the times that we talk. We plan it and we watch and then we talk about it and then we ... I think we've got better at that process.

And I think with this one we can be much more articulate and clearer about what we've done and what difference it made. Whereas when we were doing it before and they were just conversations and we didn't actually record anything or have all the time that we had for this [project] to actually talk about it.

**Project impact**

Evan: Yeah that's almost like each day becomes part of our action research, rather than seeing the term unfold day-by-day, maybe I'm now seeing each day as a refinement of an ongoing research project ... our whole term, our whole year is a research project. Previously we were being researchers and observers and data gatherers, but I think we've been maybe a little bit more intentional about each day as part of a bigger picture. [Researching] is part of our site pedagogy I think, to be observers and researchers, observing children's behaviour and observing themselves. To reflect upon outcomes and alter our approaches and our behaviours as educators to alter the outcome for children. That's always been part of what the Early Learning Group has done.

**Independent agency as a team, as well as being part of a larger team**

But I think what may have changed is that instead of being part of a larger team of ten individuals in the site, I think we now see ourselves as a separate entity, or I think it's increased my awareness of our separation from the rest of the team, as a separate community. And we have separate children, so what we alter and what we change day-to-day and how we behave differently with individuals is important separately from the whole Early Learning Group, the whole team.

**Being responsive at the local level**

There's no point in the other educators changing what they do because they don't have the children that we do and they don't have to respond and change to the children that we've got in our group. Our action research cycle within our own community is separate from the other communities in the Early Learning Group. And what we find, how the children respond to our own action research cycle, then we can then share that with the other educators in relation to the children in our group, which we have more knowledge of.

**Encouraging other languages**

Anna: There was one point where we were wondering about one particular learner, Jay, and you thought maybe we could talk to his mum about using his culture to help him be more concise or to say more quality things that take up less time. His grandmother is Palestinian and I'm not sure if his mother was born in Palestine or if she was born in Australia. His dad's Scottish heritage and his mother definitely identifies as Palestinian, but also Australian.

You know lots of questionnaires go out about what's your culture and what's your [background], but this was culture for a different purpose. This was culture for helping him to define how he speaks and what he says.

Evan: So Arabic is the language that his grandmother would speak and Jay did come to me actually separately. I'm not sure if that was before the research project or during the research project. He did actually come to me independently from all of his friendship group one morning to tell me that he'd found out what he would say and he actually did introduce himself that morning with *Marhaba*, which was the word that he'd been taught. So, he had found some place in our community to be confident to share that, and that's almost certainly as a result of languages being included. Even if it's just one word.

**Future plans**

Evan: [We are definitely going to do more] filming.

Anna: [In the past] I played with it a little bit, but not to the extent that we did with for this.

Evan: [The project] definitely has reinforced [our existing practice] actually. I would say that it is a bolstering of what we already did. I'd like to think that the video and audio could continue to help people to be heard, it could also help to silence everybody else because there's two things there isn't there? Rather than us physically silencing everybody by being dominant as adults, the screen does the job for us. Because as soon as the screen goes on with audio, everyone goes ... That's what the screen does, it's the magic of television.

Anna: I think we've got more ways of interrupting or challenging the dominant people and the dominant cultures. I think, because we noticed that we were letting it happen and we'd had conversations about how frustrated we were that they wouldn't stop talking. But I think now we've also been role modelling more about inviting other people to talk who haven't talked. And I think before we were interrupting on a content level. Like if we were talking about, I don't know, sorting in Maths or something and they were off track, then we would interrupt and bring them back on track. But we weren't necessarily interrupting with, 'Do you think you've spoken for too long', or 'You're facing that way, but everybody else is here'. We were doing that a bit, but I don't think we were doing it enough. For me, that would be one of the changes, that I would feel much more confident now to say 'Oi, I think you need to ask somebody else what they think'.

Evan: [The other day] Luke was trying to express something and another student was talking over the top of him and I was mindful enough to say 'Stop', as we all have always done. But Luke actually beat me to it three or four times.

I think children are encouraged not to interrupt when other people are talking, as generally in our society and culture you're not supposed to interrupt, 'I'm talking right now'. That's part of our culture isn't it? I think when someone's having a monologue, others probably feel some fear because they have been told not to interrupt. So where is the boundary of what's acceptable for me to have as, a my time to speak? And when my time to speak turns into a monologue, is it okay to interrupt then, because now you're being greedy? And I think maybe by us [modelling] that more, I felt that Luke had been empowered to say, 'That's not okay to interrupt me', by us demonstrating how long it's okay to talk.



**Cultural responsiveness  
versus cultural  
competence**

Anna: I think one of the things that I've walked away is knowing that I don't need to know everything about everyone's culture. I think the five principles actually been really [useful] and you don't need to know the ins and outs of the culture. I think I'm probably more accepting of that now than I was before. I like learning about people and their cultures and their stories and I was frustrated that I couldn't learn as much as I wanted to learn. Whereas now I recognise that I don't need to.

Evan: And knowing how to respectfully and effectively engage with the people to learn. It's okay to not know, it's perfectly okay to not know and be ignorant as long as we know how to approach that family and ask. And it is okay to ask, actually it's a huge compliment to people when you do ask.

## *Centre Two: Key findings*

### **What we learned about pedagogy**

Video Pedagogical documentation powerful to both visible learning for children and teachers. Working in small groups alone is not enough to change the group dynamics within discussions.

Multimedia literacies and multimodal pedagogies are powerful visual tools to support children to reflect on whose voices were allowed to participate while making cooperation and democratic participation visible in small group work.

Educators co-teaching in teams using video to examine and plan small group work with Reggio Emilia education principles and CRP principles highly impacted ability to review and draw conclusions about teacher pedagogical strengths and weaknesses as a team.

Small groups work allows educators to observe children's non-verbal communication.

Video captured group dynamics of exclusions and inclusion with a focus on improving respect and inclusion of all voices.

Three children suggested from the beginning that learning can happen through watching and playing, and throughout the research were highly observant of what other children said and did.

### **What we learned about children and families**

Ensuring all are heard without the expectation of it always being verbal. Some cultures and individuals' learners are more non-verbal.

All children are not alike. Some are analytical, some visual, others auditory. Each participates in small groups in unique and similar ways.

Making sure as educators we hear and respond to non-verbal communication.

Use more video recording/sound recording as a way of ensuring all 'voices' are heard.

Start the year exploring with children ‘what is learning’ and ‘who we can learn from’. Making learning explicit

Educators role modelling how to invite others into the discussion.

Knowing children’s interests and strengths and referring to these in order to encourage them to share.

#### **What we learned about educational research**

This project has enhanced and built on existing teacher pedagogical practices and educator beliefs that some children learn best through different modalities and multimodal approaches

The significance of engagement in sustained shared pedagogical thinking with other colleagues within the site and across other sites

#### **Future plans**

Continue with a site-based approach to CRP

Continue with educator research models of professional learning

Continue to ask questions and engage in educator inquiry to improve pedagogy

Ensuring all are heard, without the expectation of it always being verbal

Making sure we hear and respond to non-verbal communication

Use more video recording/sound recording as a way of ensuring all ‘voices’ are heard

Minimise large group gatherings

Start the year exploring with children ‘what is learning’ and ‘who we can learn from’

Educators role modelling how to invite others into the discussion

Know children’s interests and strengths and refer to these in order to encourage them to share

## **Centre Three**

This metropolitan centre has 100% Aboriginal enrolment. The centre is located in a high disadvantage area with most Aboriginal families facing financial, social, housing and/or health issues and racism daily. Families regularly travel regionally or interstate to their homelands to meet wellbeing, belonging and community obligations. In 2019, there were enrolments with intakes of children increasing. Ages range between three and five. In terms of speech and language, approximately one fifth of the enrolment are at age-appropriate levels, several children are pre-verbal and 31 require speech and vocabulary support. Staffing includes the director, three teachers, two education care workers, an occupational health therapist and a speech pathologist. A Department of Human Services family practitioner and a Community Development coordinator are in partnership with the centre. Due to significant spikes in enrolments and demand, waiting list times have soared over the past three years. The child cohort encompasses a large diversity of Aboriginal Nations and language groups including Warlpiri, Anmatyerre, Arrernte, Luritja (NT); Wiradjuri (NSW); Banjima (WA); Kurna, Narungga, Ngarrindjeri, Adnyamathanha, Anangu ‘Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara’, Peramangk, Ngadjuri (SA). Several varieties of Aboriginal English impact on vocabulary acquisition, phonemic awareness and communication. In 2019, the

director and an educator, who were also participants in this research, visited Reggio Emilia, Italy for a study tour.

### **Centre Three philosophy statement**

We believe that the Kaurna people hold rich history and knowledge  
 Play important for the wellbeing of children to learn and grow in the context of their family, community and culture  
 Child's right to feel a sense of connection, belonging and safety  
 Relationships are the key to growing and learning

### **Quality Improvement Plan goals**

To increase children's ability to engage in a sustained conversation

### **Action research question**

How do CRP and the principles from Reggio Emilia education project improve literacy/orality skills and engagement levels of children through embodied artistic learning?

### **Focus of pedagogical change**

*Phase one—Pedagogical documentation:* Pedagogical documentation was used for the first time across the entire project to capture child-centered learning.

*Phase two—Provocation:* Three oral Aboriginal Dreaming stories (Thukeri, Tiddalick the frog; How the birds got their colour), and their story book equivalents, were used for provocation to enact child-led inquiry and small group learning through play. These Aboriginal multilingual texts connect to children's life-worlds, and their linguistic and cultural repertoires. 'Thukeri' is a Ngarrindjeri Nation story. 'Tiddalick the frog' a story with reach to Adnyamathanha and 'Pitjantjatjara Nations. 'How the birds got their colour' reaches to eastern Aboriginal Nations. Children initiated inquiry from stories.

Children showed large interest in Dreaming stories from their language groups. With family input the focus on oral language to print literacy occurred by linking home culturally literate identities to preschool. Vocabulary that was targeted included Aboriginal words and their English translations: Kaurna (Niina Marni: hello, Gawi-wardli: toilet, Marra; hand, Nukkota: goodbye), Pitjantjatjara (Palya: Tiddalick; frog, good, Wiya: no, Uwa; yes, Palya: good) Ngarrindjeri (Nukkin: hello, Mimini; girl, Korn: boy, Thukeri; fish,)

*Phase three—Project Work:* Engaged in small group project work tied to literacy and the EYLF. Introduced bilingual literacy scaffolded to improve children's phonemic awareness in syllable splitting, knowledge of rhymes and chants, being able to hear and produce sounds in isolation (words subdivide into sounds). Learning experiences planned with deeper focus on the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project

and CRP principles. Play and small group learning provided children opportunity to learn about each other's oral culture and traditions

#### **Data collected by the teacher**

Jottings and personal reflections

Notes from educator conversations at staff meetings

To support these pedagogical changes extensive engagement with families was enacted to capture oral stories and techniques to establish key Aboriginal target words and their translation. These words and their cultural and oral meanings were embedded in literacy planning and assessment measures as they connect to children's life-worlds. In 2019 the centre changed the learning environment to reflect philosophies inspired by the Reggio Emilia education project (natural items, trusting children with more resource and in serving food, calming music, aroma diffusers). The pedagogy and curriculum were changed to reflect more nature play inquiry and discovery that complemented existing Aboriginal cultural outdoor play.

#### ***Centre Three: Focus of key ideas***

##### **Culturally responsive pedagogies**

High intellectual challenge

- ✓ Strongly connected to children's life world
- ✓ Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- Critical thinking, action, activist orientation
- ✓ Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

##### **Reggio Emilia principles**

- ✓ Competent child and 100 languages
- ✓ The pedagogy of listening
- ✓ Participation and democracy
- Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation., educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- ✓ Environment, space and relations

### *Centre Three portrait excerpts: Director*

#### **Site challenges**

There was lots of building upgrades of the kindy and relocation challenges during our participation in the project, but you could definitely see the positive outcomes at the end of it. Our preschool had to move into childcare building. And it was, you know, different philosophies, different baby management—you know, different kids together in one room, so just managing all that was a big challenge in itself. We learnt altogether. So, our kids are in a different environment, it took a while to calm them down and get them familiar to the environment, so we couldn't really do anything over that time. But as soon as we got back into our old building environment and we participated in the learning experiences, you could just see, instantly that it engaged and calmed them.

#### **Project impact**

It definitely works, we were just hoping that we'd have a bit more time to do it, so that's why we're continuing it now.

#### **Bringing the whole site on board**

Carol [educator] and myself, reflecting on our growth as educators, and we're so grateful to be in the project and having learnt what we learnt throughout this year has been so fantastic that we want to get more staff on board at our whole site. But it's been really hard to get everyone together, timewise, in the one spot, or on the one day, because not everyone is full-time, and things like that, and then implementation of it. Our staff are so burnt out in Term 3, it was so hard with the childcare. Putting something else on them was really, difficult. We kept colleagues up to date on the project. In Term 4, we're kind of like, here, have a go, but I think we need more training with the staff. Next year, we're hoping to put it as part of our staff meetings as professional development as a real cross site focus and to go through our CRP/Reggio action research projects and everything that we've done, and make a plan with everyone on board, now that we have that knowledge.

At our site we already do a lot of Reggio and CRP philosophy we just weren't identifying as such. Now we can say our practice is informed by innovative theory so that was really interesting too. And I think, getting other staff onboard with what we have learnt will help the journey as well, I think.

Building our skills and bringing theory to inform our practice for myself and Carol learning is so powerful now. We're so inspired and excited to pass it onto staff, our council and Aboriginal families and community.

#### **Diversity across Aboriginal cultures**

Carol took on [the CRP principle to capture children's linguistic and cultural repertoire] and she was doing little bits before, but as we brought the project to the site she engaged. She surveyed parents and had yarns with them about what language they use at home. Our Aboriginal families are diverse in culture, language and lived experience. Some want

to be seen as an Aboriginal collective and at times as individuals. Kindy is a place where our children learn about their culture and about others and how to relate with people who are different to themselves.

Carol looked at what words they use at home. She took this on. And she's downloaded apps and everything, so it's been so good. We inspired her a and I'm just blown away about the response with her. She built that relationship with Annette [child] just because of using those simple words and things like that, and yeah, it's been really powerful.

**Improved educator confidence**

I have seen practice changes in our staff. Carol's a lot more confident, because she's been doing the Assessment of Functional Living Skills (AFLS) alongside of this too, which has intertwined them both, so it's not completely different projects. So, it's similar, but she has got a lot more in herself and more confident to demonstrate to others. On a scale I've seen her growth in pedagogical change from the project to—like, from 2 to 10, like in confidence, and that's going to be really good for staff to be able to scaffold off her and she can mentor them in it, I think.

**Benefits of action research**

I actually, really enjoyed action research component and the steps of it. So, like unpacking theory and applying to our practice fully, actually helped us. Because in the past we tried to research our practice, but now we have actually done action research successfully to address our site-specific pedagogical challenges. Getting and analysing the data reshaping our skills and actually seeing those improvements now gives us self-belief we can do it on a daily basis. Those steps have been useful for us and we've learnt how to do it more as well, you know. And Carol really understands that I don't want to downgrade AFLS, but with the two projects, she's just like—she's really understood the action research process by doing this CRP project, and she can implement it to all other site research projects AFLS. Real action, real research, real improvement.

**Supporting complex needs**

Our challenge at our site is new children arriving who are pre-verbal, and lots of them need support. One kid changes the dynamics of the whole group—you know, things like that—so, that's what we're kind of getting to know those new kids to assist their learning needs. So, we've got five [new] this term, all needing extra support, so we're applying for funding for them. But this CRP project fits with our oral literacy and written literacy improvement goals.

Our baseline data in a most all Aboriginal context like ours is so different to everywhere else and all others involved in the project. I explain to people that, yes, it is a challenging site to work at, and we use the Berry Street education model for trauma informed practices and things like that. Out of 50 kids, we have 30 of them that need extra support, and that's

massive. We have lots of three-year olds. Our site is so busy simply with self-regulation support and the wellbeing of kids that we're doing that first, that is core business, and that's burning out staff as well, because we don't have one or two children, we have about 31 who need all that support. So, that was the, kind of our baseline challenge.

**Minimising staff mobility**

Another challenge for us we have had stable staff, for the last couple of years, but one of the lead educators, she's gone and done a director's position. That's her career leadership path, so I supported her. She's stepping in for 9 weeks and hasn't been here this last term, which is a bit of a change. And then we've had to try and get regular relievers, because you know, new people all the time, setting children off, as well, and the relationship, so we have two excellent relievers. We are fortunate to have Carol who is an Aboriginal educator. We just needed to keep her as a teacher, she's so valuable. And she learnt all the CRP and Reggio strategies that we use with the families and stuff like that. So, she has, I've seen her grow a lot this year, being part of these projects. And you know, I chose her to go to Italy Reggio Emilia to view how the pedagogy works and she really took that on and came back with some fantastic ideas.

Well the biggest thing that me and Carol reflected on this whole project was we don't get like schools 8 days release, closure dates, but as a preschool we only get 4. It would be good to have a whole day, kind of on CRP to sustain our practice. A challenge is getting pedagogical consistency with staff is difficult because we have .8 staff, most of them are full-time, but one's .8, and on Fridays not everyone is there. I'd also like to get the children's centre staff onboard. I know two of them are now DHS, but they're still under children's centre, so it will be good to get them onboard. To sustain our practice we require support like a closure day, or some funding to close or to release some teachers to do some PD. It's about getting everyone onboard and being in the same pedagogical space in our views of the competent child and our focus on improvement.

**Engaging with families**

We want CRP across the site. We are striving to maintain our involvement from the Aboriginal community families and parents in the preschool. We are lucky we have so many parent voices, and they all come in and yarn and lead projects and stuff, but not all of them are kindy parents. So, some of them are playgroup parents, some of them are school parents, things like that. But one goal that I want the staff to work on is, we do listen to parents and get their voice in ILPs, talk to them on a daily basis about the kids' life-worlds and strengths, but just getting parents more involved and connected to child learning. This is more than merely welcoming or celebrating culture of children.

I'm confident we have built a good space of belonging and identity for families and children. Learning only comes from a welcoming place of identities. Because they do come in and they're not scared of us or anything like that. Our working parents find it difficult to come and spend a day at kindy with their child.

**Changing the learning environment**

Carol, she is a leader, but she doesn't think she is, so needs more confidence in herself. And yeah, the things that she brought back from Reggio in Italy and implemented in the kindy, like just simple observations and documentation has improved our staff practice and kindy. Because our site is a small environment, there's not enough storage, so it tends to get cluttered a lot. Yeah, just the space itself, we kind of made it a bit more neutral, no bright colours now, we covered up all the yellow walls with some hessian materials and stuff, so the colours in the room. The environment really affects learning. It's also about, like the senses for children including smell, touch, play and stuff, so we have diffusers out now, and that's calming, and music, as well. Yeah, the kids are just in awe of it, and it's so good to see them so calm but engaged. And we put water in it, and they see it bounce and stuff, and they're so into it. So, they love that. So, that's our little meditation. We use sound bowls, we've only just introduced them this term, and they just draw from Reggio principles we set about de-cluttering. There was lots of stuff on the walls that didn't really need to be there.

Our kids are very sensory and visual, and we've got lots of three-year olds. So, you know, group times are sometimes difficult to do, because we have so many three-year olds, so we split into little groups throughout the day, instead of one big one, and things like that. But we're constantly, critically reflecting on, like what we do every week, and improvements. Like, that didn't actually work this week, so let's try this and do something different

Inspired by Reggio we as a team got rid of the learning portfolios and moved to more of a community of learning approach, which that's a massive thing we picked up from Reggio. They have community of learning not individual learners, you know, small group work where all learn to understand each other and help each other. As part of pedagogical documentation we have now observation sheet that we've implemented. All children now all got little shoe boxes that the children pick what's special to them to keep in it, and then if it gets full, they have to take something home to put something else in, kind of thing. So, that's just kicking off now, but that was something that Carol did on her own, and it's going well.

**Environment as a teacher**

Just brought more nature play which Aboriginal children love in relation to their Dreaming, and we've also done more nature at the [co-located] school which makes transition smoother, because we've got a good relationship with the Aboriginal primary school on site, so we go over there and go to the bush garden more. So, we've actually, we book that in twice a week that they just kind of have a day over there, which is fantastic. And some kids, after probably like two hours, they're saying, oh, I'm bored, let's go back to kindy, and I got the staff to reflect, well why do you think that. And they're doing little surveys



about what else we could do with the kids in there, and taking buckets, and the kids were having all these ideas to do in there, so that's been really good too.

Environment as a teacher helped us utilising our space in our Aboriginal play area. Since this project, reflect on everything and make sure all we do has to be culture centred child driven, that is culture responsive. Carol's really good at doing that too.

We had a book in the sandpit, which a staff member laminated and put out, because they were interested in cooking, and it was all just like cupcakes and things like that that. But then Carol was like, hey, no, let's change this book. So, it got put away and then brought out and put culturally responsive kinds of stuff in there and cooked with, so, there's recipes in there from an actual bush cookbook and stuff like that. So, little things like that that we've done, so it'll be good to incorporate it throughout.

**CRP as a framework for literacy**

And in the QIP [Quality Improvement Plan] that we're doing at the moment, our main focus is language and literacy but CRP is a massive lens through which we plan our co-constructed children's learning experiences, but it's not something extra, it has to be incorporated into everything, so that's what we're working on now too.

We want to improve literacy, and we want culture intertwined into everything. Thank you [to the project team] for being so helpful and letting us be involved in it, because it's been a real privilege to work with you and everyone else. We're definitely going to continue this. We're so excited about continuing it, because we tried to implement things to improve engagement and it just wasn't working. But during this project we saw such a difference in engagement and learning achievement over this project weeks that we're just so excited about possibilities of spreading it out over the whole year next year and getting more of the staff involved.

***Centre Three portrait excerpts: Teacher (Carol)***

**Prior engagement with the Reggio Emilia education project**

Well this is my first year out from university. Prior to the project I didn't really have any knowledge on Reggio Emilia approaches except for little learnt in University. In April this year [part-way through this research project] I was selected to go on a Study Tour of Reggio Emilia Italy, to study the classrooms and talk to teachers, pedagogistas and ateliers. My action research benefited from this study tour. The trip was really inspiring. We were so excited to come back and change the [site] environment and professionally develop the other educators. We have changed our preschool environment to embed Reggio Emilia education principles.

**PD in relation to  
Aboriginal education**

I couldn't really pinpoint a Professional Learning day where it was just on Aboriginal children and families. Being Aboriginal and a teacher, I kind of already have that confidence and that knowledge. I'm a familiar face for children and families at the centre. My identity as both community member and teacher allows easy relationship building and getting children and families involved.

**Action research project**

We have a lot of pre-verbal children. For my action research, I focused on improving oral and literacy skills through embodied artistic learning. Intentionally looked at the classroom setting and environment and what I was doing to target learning outcomes. Before the project, I think as a first-year teacher I was kind of just setting up play or doing whatever, but going through the project, putting on a researcher's hat to examine my own practice and seeing the benefits on the child's learning. It made me think and act intentionally about play environments and linking this to learning through culture. I have learnt now to set up the environment targeting the children's interests. I now ask how am I connecting them to their culture? The action research has given me confidence to be a positive leader and a positive teacher to other staff. Being first year out, young and only 23, I felt they're 'would not take me seriously' or respect my opinion. Leading pedagogy changes to teachers who've been doing it for 10 years, I didn't want to step on anyone's toes or anything.

It was a challenge. Like our Director is so supportive and the kindy's really supportive. Everyone's really supportive of it, but getting them on the same wavelength and trying to teach what we learned at the PD days was really hard for me to sit in a staff meeting and talk in front of everyone and be like, 'Oh we did this, this and this'.

At staff meetings we'd give them updates and sit down at programming and talk about what I've learned at the PD day, so then see what we're doing differently. To an extent they were on board with what was happening and interested in asking questions. But I think it was mostly myself and our Director who were implementing it. But I think that's something that we would do differently next time. It wasn't their fault, it was more us, taking it on our backs, doing it ourselves. But next time I would delegate roles a bit better maybe.

**Outcomes**

I think their learning and their wellbeing changed dramatically, and it was really obvious. We intentionally picked kids [to focus on] who we thought their wellbeing was a bit up and down, two kids [in particular]. They were communicating more, and it also gave the children who are pre-verbal, which is lots of our kids, I think it was like 33 on speech support. It gave them a voice. You know, sometimes they might feel left out, they might not be communicating with other groups of people. But when we're seeing them in a group and we're doing the

props or things, the packs that we made, they were able to have a voice and that changed their wellbeing as well.

And it made other kids look at them differently as well. Like, they can be involved. We can talk to them; we can play with them. Well we searched high low online for the props. We looked at websites and we just picked all the little colourful birds from different websites. For one story we just get stuff from the bush gardens, like bark for a bow, like sticks for people, or sticks for a fishing rod.

Prior to the project, we weren't using props to the extent we have now. We'd have a station set out, you know, might be insects and we'd have a book on insects or something, but we weren't really present with the children in that space., we just kind of let them go. But we noticed a difference when we'd actually sit with them because obviously our question was about their oral language, because our concern was the 33 kids on the speech support. So, because that was our question, we thought, let's sit down, let's bring the book to life and see how it goes.

It was 100% successful, yep. We're definitely got to keep doing it.

I think as a first year teacher I know that I have a lot to learn and now I see myself as a researcher and I was able to reflect on my practice and also embed new practices that I've learned from working with you guys, like being in a room with such well respected professors and educators and other sites, I learnt so much. So, it's changed that in such a positive way how I see myself as a teacher and the teacher that I want to be as well. I think it's definitely the project's had such a good impact. Well as I mentioned earlier, I'm close with a lot of the families and children that we have in our care because I'm Aboriginal and I'm at all their community events and all that kind of thing. So, I am a familiar face for them. But in saying that, the project helped me to understand how I can involve them more and how I can give them a voice and how beneficial that is to their child's learning. I was having casual discussions with them in the morning, you know, at the start of the year it was kind of like 'Oh we can send surveys home, we can do this'. But I know the parents, I know that's not going to work. We're not going to send a sheet home and it's going to come back. It's about casual yarning in the morning and making them feel comfortable and safe in the environment first.

**Future practice**

The project will definitely have a positive impact on my future practice as I now see myself and consider myself a researcher. I feel like any problems or issues or barriers or challenges that occur in the site that I'm at, whether it's this one or a different one next year, I'm able to put my researcher hat on, get to the bottom of it and make sure our practice and our environment and everything in the kindy is a place where they feel safe and comfortable to learn and be connected to their culture. The opportunities that arose were amazing for me. As I said,

I'm first year teacher out, doing this with my director, getting to go to Reggio, getting to see you guys twice a term and learn from the best essentially. It was huge for me, like huge for me in my first year and having Carla Rinaldi visit our site and she actually recognized us when we went to Reggio. I said 'Hi', she goes 'Oh hello'. Gave me a hug and she's like 'Yeah I visited your site'. The challenges that arose were first of all being in the childcare [centre]. So, term three just feels like a complete write off, it just seemed impossible. It was really hard. But other challenges that arose were definitely being a first-year teacher and [also] being the Aboriginal Family Literacy Strategy teacher. Having two projects to do for this whole year. So, I kind of intertwined them so I didn't have to do it twice. 'Cos the focus for that project is oral language as well. Obviously, it's a different question and collecting the same sort of data. So, I intertwined them, so I didn't have to double up. For that project, I did similar things like collect data. So, it was more about reading. Collecting data. So, I just used all the same data. But how much children are reading, how much are [people] reading to them and what are we doing to increase their literacy skills. It was a huge, huge thing to have on my plate in my first year. So, I'm still trying to find my feet as a teacher. Doing all the ILPs [Individual Learning Plans] and all the normal teaching jobs plus these two projects was really hard.

**Increased confidence**

I think I've got a lot more confident in my teaching and in myself. I feel like out we've nailed it this year; we could do it even better next year. So, I feel a lot more confidence. But yeah, a really good experience. I'm loving being part of this project. I was so happy when our Director picked me, and I think I've learned so much. I still have so much to learn, but I'm going to keep going and do this again next year.

**Centre Three: Key findings**

**What we learned about pedagogy**

Changing and use of the environment as an educator according to the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project (calming music, diffusers, play areas) promotes learning  
Children's interest in print Dreaming stories increases when accompanied with props.  
Focusing on children's life-worlds and prior knowledges increases success in connecting home oral languages to print literacy

**What we learned about children and families**

Children could recall story event  
Language orality increased  
Increase in engagement and dialogue with other children  
Increase in sense of belonging  
Increased communication by pre-verbal children with peers and educators

Increase family engagement in learning activities based on their personal knowledges of Dreaming stories

#### **What we learned about educational research**

How to conduct action research on our teaching increase our confidence and improves our teaching for quality

#### **Future plans**

Work towards whole-of-site staff involvement

Ensure that culture is entwined throughout all learning experiences

Adopt an ‘educator as researcher outlook’ to investigate any pedagogical challenges that arise

## **Centre Four**

This site serves a rural, community which is experiencing economic challenges. The centre is located two hours from metropolitan Adelaide, with a total of 36 children enrolled and above state average in attendance. The centre has high transience levels, with families moving in and out of the area due to a various factors such as employment, housing availability and family circumstances. Children are diverse across a range of parameters, including socio-economic circumstances, gender and ethnicity. A significant proportion of the children have long-standing family connections to the area. Across the year, 10 children accessed Preschool Support Funding to support their engagement and participation in the preschool setting. Staffing has been consistent over the past four years and includes the director, three part-time staff sharing one teacher position, two ECE educators and one support worker children with additional needs. The centre is located on the Aboriginal traditional lands of the Narungga Nation. In 2018 State Government signed the Buthera Agreement (Government of South Australia 2018) to support, through state departments, Narungga social, educational and economic engagement.

#### **Centre Four Quality Improvement Plan goals**

Embed ‘inquiry based’ pedagogy and learning across the site for deeper engagement for learning improvement

#### **Action research question**

How does our Beach Kindy learning enhance children’s curiosity communication and collaboration?

The focus of the action research was to help deepen children’s understanding and connections with their local surroundings as they recall and share their prior knowledge of Narungga land and familiar community landmarks. In doing so the educator also endeavored to:

- Enhance children’s curiosity and motivation for their own decisions making through educator provocations

- Engage in deep listening to document children's thinking and voice to share with peers and families
- Broadening children's wondering of their natural environment
- Strengthen children's optimism and persistence to investigate their learning further.

### Focus of pedagogical change

Intentionally providing provocations for children to communicate their knowledge and connections with local landmarks within the community including the beach.

- Introduce scientific tools and vocabulary for children to use as they discover, investigate and explore their ideas and thinking.
- Initiate conversations with individual children and families for insight into their own connections within their community, including the beach.
- Question and reflect on own pedagogy in relation to engaging in the pedagogy of listening and collaboration in learning.

To support these pedagogical changes to occur, the teacher sought engagement with families prior to and after Beach Kindy visits. She also created opportunities small and large group discussion with children that were recorded and later critically analyzed by the teaching team. This critical analysis provided opportunity for multiple perspectives to inform further planning of intentional teaching moments and for the teacher to obtain feedback on her engagement in a pedagogy of listening and co-constructive practices with children.

### Data collected by the teacher

Jottings and personal reflections  
Notes from educator conversations at staff meetings  
Photographs and audio recordings of intentional teaching moments.  
Families written comments and perspectives about children's learning at Beach Kindy  
Photographic and audio recordings of children's engagement and learning  
Pedagogical documentation

## Centre Four: Focus of key ideas

### Culturally responsive pedagogies

- ✓ High intellectual challenge
  - ✓ Strongly connected to children's life-worlds
  - ✓ Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- Critical thinking, action, activist orientation

Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

### Reggio Emilia principles

- ✓ Competent child and 100 languages
- ✓ The pedagogy of listening
- Participation and democracy
- Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation., educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- ✓ Environment, space and relations

### *Centre Four portrait excerpts: Director*

#### Professional biography

I've always worked in preschools since I graduated from uni. I worked one year in a preschool in Adelaide and then the next year I did Distance Education for remote isolated preschool children. I applied [for the Director role here] and I've been here ever since, this is my fifth year.

#### Prior engagement with the Reggio Emilia education project

A few years ago, I was really fortunate to go to Reggio Emilia with some other directors from our partnership. That really supported my learning in the area and I was able to bring back, lots of ideas to work within our own context, so we knew it wasn't about just trying to copy or replicate exactly what happened over [in Reggio Emilia], but looking at that from – their philosophies around how they work with families and what opportunities they have for the way they actually work with the children, so I guess relationships is probably one of the biggest things that influences us and that connection with family.

#### Local Aboriginal context

Families either don't know or don't have many connections. So, whilst we're not too far geographically from Point Pearce, not very many of our Aboriginal children enrolled are actually Narungga children, so they've come from other places, normally within the state, but other places of the state. And quite often if we try and chat about that, it's just, 'Oh, up there somewhere,' or 'Over there,' or 'We don't really know,' or 'Oh, it's just grandma's stuff, not our stuff.' And we've sort of gone, 'Okay, let's not dig any deeper.' But I think build that relationship with families and then show that we're interested. If they are receptive to that, then perhaps we can still learn more together. And it might just be that they've said they don't know, and we've gone, 'Okay,' and dropped it. Whereas the importance of can we find out together? Do you want to know? Can we talk to someone else in your family? It's been a little bit of

a hurdle for us because we do lots of Narungga language and we talk about being on the Narungga land, but the children that tend to connect with that the most aren't necessarily our Aboriginal children at all, they're other children. So, finding out what's meaningful for our local Aboriginal children and what would be meaningful to them if that's not Narungga, then what? What can we do to support them better?

**Implications of the  
Buthera Agreement**

It's hard to know at the moment [if we are enacting the Buthera Agreement], information is still being provided to us through the department. And just knowing that there's the agreement and that we are on the right track with what we're doing so far is probably the main thing. Keep doing what we're doing in terms of the Narungga language and supporting children with that. But I'm hoping perhaps in the future we'll be [provided with more resources and training]. We're just lacking some resources and some knowledge and some trainings in terms of specifics to Narungga. So, we've got some access to limited language, but we do use what we have, but we can't just go and find out other ways of other words and things like that. Finding out who the right people are as well that can support us with that who would be happy to come in and talk to us at preschool and spend some time with the children or share some culture, some of their knowledge with us or if there's local dreaming stories we can connect with. It's finding out that information. Some groups have so much available and other groups don't. So yeah, it'll be, I guess it's just good that we know there's an agreement and we know that it's a commitment that there will be some of those [resources]. The information will keep coming. It's just good to know that there is that agreement and commitment to further it, I suppose, from the education perspective.

**The value of  
collaborative critical  
reflection**

[Our site culture of critical reflection has] probably not significantly [changed] because that's something that we have had a big focus on the last couple of years so that critical reflection as a staff team and our staff meetings every fortnight and all our staff members are there. It was that dedicated time together and that's something that we have, [initiated] probably from Reggio but also through the STEM stuff. [That] was when we made that shift into making sure that we're doing that collaborative, critical reflection and not trying to do too many things individually. It's always about getting others' perspectives. So, I guess that it's just strengthened our practice in it. So, it was really easy for Angela to come in and share all of that with us enough to give feedback because that's something that we're already really valuing as a staff team.

Particularly the actual research part of it [has supported change in our practice]. So when Angela had her videos and our voice recordings and things like that, a lot of that pedagogical shift has come from reflecting on that data and going, you know what, I actually am talking a lot more, you're hearing more of the teacher voice than the child's voice. And that's something that we've talked about. But it has a lot more impact when



you hear it in yourself. You're not hypothetically just in general or talking about someone else and you're actually hearing your own voice recordings of you engaging with the children and then you get, ah, is that what I sound like? So I think just being very self-aware about the way we do engage with children and yeah, just reflecting on our practice and it's everyone is always improving but going back and thinking, okay, this is what I, this is what happened this morning, how can I do it differently tomorrow? And just continuing to be really reflective on our practice is something that's really supportive us with.

Angela was quite proactive she asked us if we were willing to listen to voice recordings of her when she was either engaged with a group of children or at Beach Kindy. And so, you know, that was quite brave of her to say this is a voice recording of me. Can you please listen and give me some feedback as I think that reinforces the trust, we have with each other. And so, we did, we listened, and we gave her some feedback about what we thought was working really well, and then we all just did a little, what if, or could you try, or would this work? Kind of just a bit of a niggles that maybe this might work. She not only listened to her own voice recordings and got her own professional reflections, but then we all had input as well into that. And that makes us think about our own practices as well. I heard Angela say this and I'm like, 'I know I say that.' So, it led all of us to reflect on our own interactions.

Ideally we would have liked to send two staff members together to the days in Adelaide 'cause we do know that's when we get more impacts. But Angela was great at bringing back for each staff meeting every fortnight she would share something from the project. We did some of the readings as well altogether at staff time, even though we weren't all going to the day. We all participated in some of the readings. I did some discussion around those and how they might be relevant to our sites. And then supporting Angela through the project. She brought everything to us, each staff meeting, and we critically reflected together and put in our ideas and made. Other suggestions from different perspectives which she said she found really beneficial. So whilst Angela was the only one that got to go to most of the days, we sort of all felt like we knew and we were involved with everything that was going on, so we didn't feel like we were missing out too much.

Ideally we would have liked to send two staff members together to the days in Adelaide 'cause we do know that's when we get more impacts. But Angela was great at bringing back for each staff meeting every fortnight she would share something from the project. We did some of the readings as well altogether at staff time, even though we weren't all going to the day. We all participated in some of the readings. I did some discussion around those and how they might be relevant to our sites. And then supporting Angela through the project. She brought everything to us, each staff meeting, and we critically reflected together and put in our ideas and made. Other suggestions from different perspectives which she said she found really beneficial. So whilst Angela was the only one that got to

go to most of the days, we sort of all felt like we knew and we were involved with everything that was going on, so we didn't feel like we were missing out too much.

**Valuing the researcher support**

It was just, yeah, really good opportunity. And it was great to work with UniSA. We weren't sure what to expect, but it was good to have that support along the way as people who obviously know what they're doing to then support us, who, perhaps, doesn't know what we're doing as much in terms of the research. It made it a lot easier. I think [the approach] was good because we were able to find a way that made it work for us. [We researched] Beach Kindy, something that's been embedded for two or three years here. It wasn't doing anything different. It was just, let's see how we can make this part of our curriculum even better. So yeah, it was really great that we could just fit in with what we were already doing and not do something different or special or set up anything crazy. It was just part of our normal practice with just research skills added to support us along the way. We did enjoy some of the articles and research that was provided as a part of the project.

When you have to go and source your own things, sometimes it is a bit trickier or you don't find necessarily what you're looking for. But if things were provided and someone sent this out and said this is a relevant reading or things like that, you are a lot more likely to engage with it. If any other relevant articles or research or something called practical examples of what's worked well in different settings and then that could be adapted to our context. That's always good information to have that you don't have to go searching to far on your own. If there was any sort of parent type information to help us explain what we mean by culturally responsive pedagogy in a family friendly way, something like that that we can use. So, when we say we're talking about culture, we don't just mean your ancestors came from Greece kind of things. I think that's sometimes a bit of a barrier as well. As soon as you mentioned culture, people go, 'Oh, I'm Aussie,' and you're like, 'No, no, that's not what we mean.' But I guess that sometimes can be the way we present it.

**Impact on the children**

The children that were Angela's four or five focus children, we all noticed a huge growth in them just in those five weeks when she was doing her action research. It was around that connection with each other and with community and their communication. And because we all do know the children so well and we're all always discussing the research, we did have our eyes a bit more targeted on their growth and development in those specific areas. We were able to see really big change in their connections with each other. They were all children that were perhaps a bit more individual in their learning and we were able to see that. That's okay too, but to see that evolve- they became a lot more connected as a group, not only at the beach, but those children then connected back at kindy a lot more often, which is something that they weren't doing before. They weren't children that were necessarily in similar friendship groups at kindy, but we noticed they were seeking each other out and

just building on that connection with each other. We noticed, some really big changes there in those focus children particularly.

**Impact on the centre's engagement with families**

[This project] really reinforced lots of the things that we have been trying to do over the last few years. We already meet individually with families and try and connect with what's meaningful to them. But I guess it's encouraged us to be a lot more proactive in going deeper with families about some of those things. I guess wanting to make more of a connection and find out a little bit more and how they could be involved in different ways.

So Angela had a really good response when she was speaking with the families of her focus children and they were really interested to know more about her project and wanted to share more information about their family because they knew it was being used. So, I think that will help us in the future. If we can communicate to families that this information that you're giving us helps us support your children's learning, they might be more willing to go that little bit extra and share that little bit more with us rather than just thinking we were just being nosy or asking just cause we've got nothing better to do. Families knowing why or what we're using that information for actually makes them a lot more interested and engaged with what we're doing.

Quite often some of those families were ones that didn't necessarily go above and beyond to return any information, or they didn't stop around for a chat at the end of the day and they avoided family meetings where possible. So, finding out that when they felt genuinely connected to something at kindy that really supported their engagement is great going forward. Knowing how to connect with some of those families that perhaps will be similar in the future.

*Centre Four portrait excerpts: Teacher (Angela)*

**Professional biography**

I've been at this current site for five years. Earlier, I was director at another regional site for 10 years from 2000 to 2009. And I went out of my way to build relationships and connections with my peers in school and local children's Centre. I was part of a leadership type connection with community leaders and a few Elders.

**The action research**

For my action research, I mainly focused on my pedagogy of listening, using audio recordings and listening to the children's viewpoints, and being the listener rather than the teacher. And providing the provocations and the wonderings. And then the children coming to me and talking about it and expressing their ideas and viewpoints. Then trying to build on their wonderings or their theories or their questions. It was enhancing their curiosity, building their language and their ability to be a narrator. To use their oral language to describe and express, and

their vocabulary, to extend. And then to be collaborative with the other children so that they weren't necessarily spending time individually, but we were doing things collaboratively with other children.

Predominantly, I have children that were receiving preschool support, primarily for speech and language and their communication skills. But I also had a very knowledgeable local Aboriginal child who was one of my focus children.

**Families' varied connections to their cultural heritage**

Lots of our Indigenous families are just sort of embracing the fact that they're Indigenous. So, they identify on their enrolment form as being Indigenous, but quite often when you have a conversation with them, they say, 'Oh yeah, we are'. And you say, 'Well, how are you connected?' 'Oh, I don't know.' Or, 'It's on my partner's side'. And I think maybe until they've actually come into our center, and it's been a focus of my conversations over the year, is probably the fact that they may not even have thought about it.

**Beach Kindy**

I introduced a program of Beach Kindy. I had my focus children that were part of a bigger extended group. I had a group of 10 children. But once we got to the beach, it was more like focusing on the conversations and the interactions and the relationships with the children who I had identified for support. And being a facilitator, if the children came up with an idea, 'Can we go and explore over there?' then I would talk to them about, 'Well, yes, what do you think would be over there? How do you think you might like to explore? What does explore mean?' And then we would all communicate with each other, and then go.

**Impact on focus child**

I think the main thing that happened for my Aboriginal child, [one of the focus children] was her confidence to be a participating group member increased. She's quite confident in her own learning and her own decision making. But she certainly developed a lot more confidence to be a group participant. And she enjoys conversations, but she was able to present to the large group and use the microphone and be quite expressive in lots of her describing. And I think the main area where I felt that she really showed a lot of strength was her resilience and her persistence. Her self-help skills and her independence to carry through and be a bit more forthright that she could do it and she could have a go, and I think that's held her in good stead. I think it's part of that higher intellectual challenge. But it was certainly a physical challenge too. And also, the conversations that I probably had with her mom and her family about some of those things that we would really like to see her being stretched to. She can do it if she's given that encouragement. And I think her mom certainly supported it. She's able and she's capable to do these things, she just needs that little bit of encouragement. And a little bit of direction. Her dynamics where she would probably take the easy option or opt out, or physically it was too energetic for her. Where we were saying,

‘Well, yes, you can walk.’ And she loved beach kindy, so her mom was sort of discussing it with her at home and then saying, ‘Well, maybe we can take the car today, and we don’t need to walk to kindy, because you are going to go walk to the beach.’

All my focus children, they certainly showed a lot more confidence and willingness and excitement to come to me and tell me about things, and to be able to talk about them with the group, and to speak using the microphone to describe what they were doing. So, I felt that they came out of their shell a lot more than they possibly would have if I hadn’t had that involvement and that intervention with them.

**The action research has reinforced existing practice**

I think probably the action research has reinforced my practice rather than changed it. But I can see myself more as like a co-constructor. So, the children have got a lot more of that direction and initiative, and I’ve got less of the instructional framework of ... I’m more at ease and excited to go with them [using an emergent inquiry approach]. You know, being a listener, being quiet, having those moments of silence where nobody says anything, because the children are thinking. And then letting them have conversations amongst themselves. And it can go on a completely different tangent. That’s exciting because we can go down that path rather than have a perceived direction of what you want to achieve. Like the thematic approach, I guess, says you start with an idea, and then you go here, here, here. Whereas this is a different sort of approach. More of a facilitator approach.

**Benefits of deep listening**

We have incidental culturally diverse families that will come with their child, and I think I’m more respectful, to listen and to hear what they want to say. I’ve quite often been an inquirer, but I’ve certainly not necessarily been as much of a listener. So, I think my relationships with families will be more empathetic and more respectful of their parenting and their approach, rather than me being a knower of information as a result of this project.

**Team support**

Looking back, I think the main thing was how supportive my staff team was, and how they approached my professional development opportunity. They asked me at the beginning, ‘How do you think we could help you, Angela?’ So, each fortnight, when we got together with our staff team, and there’s usually six or seven of us in the staff team, I had a 20-minute, 30-minute time slot on the agenda. So that’s when I tussled up all my ideas about what my question was going to be, and how it was going to fit in with the center, what other staff thought about it. I asked them to give me some reflection on my approaches and my pedagogy with the children. So, I asked them if they would be prepared to listen to some of my audio recordings and give me some written feedback about my approach, or how I was coming across with involving the children.

I think the fact that I was only attending myself made me more of the communicator, because I needed to be able to bring back to the staff team what we had been doing [in the workshops] and be able to express the ideas or the directions or ask them to. It was certainly a staff team approach, even though they physically weren't in Adelaide, sitting around the table. We were having similar conversations each fortnight back at our own site. There were always questions asked. And they were looking at my documentation, and we were talking about who was going to go and who was going to participate, and which children I could support. Yeah, every little step along the way. They were all on board. Yep. Every one of them.

I think it has sort of probably reinforced what we were trying to do as a staff team anyway, as far as our site learning plan goes. Because we were trying to make a focus about wondering times and our communication with each other and sharing our interactions with children through our group time situations so that each staff member has time to do that. So, it connected with that.

**Future practice**

I think in terms of my future practice it's more probably reflecting on how I approach things and what questions I might ask. Whether I come across sort of a little bit too knowledgeable. I've just had some chats with some of our families that are coming into our center next year. So, some of the questions that I've asked have been more about getting to know them and what they're bringing to the kindy and how they see their child. The research project opens some of those viewpoints. The understanding of the action research is probably something that I will utilise. The readings, the pre-readings and the networking and the discussion.

***Centre Four: Key findings***

**What we learned about pedagogy**

- Being an ethnographer to learn from the children
- Co-constructing the curriculum with children- Setting up the learning experience and letting the children bring their cultural knowledge and diversity to the experience
- Providing a challenging and stimulating environment for children to work together and be involved with supporting peers
- Pedagogy of listening to acknowledging and embracing child voice
- Being in the moment with the child to establishing connections and building positive relationships with children and families
- Collaborative opportunities to explore and question the curiosities of the natural world
- Challenging, reflecting on and evaluating approaches to teaching and learning

**What we learned about children and families**

Children initiate positive and trusting relationships with educators and peers through their curiosity and opportunity to practice and revisit their experiences.

Continuity and familiarity of Beach Kindy enabled families to consider and respect children's choices and decision making as they initiate and seek to communicate with others.

Families were welcomed and open to share conversations about their child and how they were feeling about their day and opportunity to listen and consider their home perspective.

Children showed and expressed increased independence and curiosity as they prepared themselves for Beach Kindy and discussed predictions and possibilities that might happen.

Children broadened their relationships and communication with peers as they noticed and shared their discoveries and experiences together.

Opportunities noticed for leadership and increasing collaboration as children co-operated together as a group, mindful of others capabilities and preferences.

**What we learned about educational research**

Research is curiosity, it's about not knowing, and it is about being comfortable about not knowing.

It provides opportunity to reflect on, fine tune or validate your practice.

Current research and professional reading needs to be accompanied by focused discussion and questioning.

Opportunity for differing perspectives to be heard in a broader context

The action research model increased our confidence to initiate and pursue action research in the future.

**Future plans**

Continue to reflect on, plan for and embed culturally responsive pedagogies as a part of everyday practice

Continue to engage with families and community and building educator confidence to do so

Build deeper community connections

Build stronger individualised relationships with each family, including Narungga families

Collaborate with local sites interested in exploring culturally responsive pedagogies

**Centre Five**

Centre Five serves a metropolitan community in which many families are experiencing high poverty. The centre serves families from diverse backgrounds including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. In 2018, approximately 60% of children came from culturally diverse families and approximately 45% of children spoke languages other than English at home (including Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic, Bangala, Dari, Farsi, Mandarin, Bosnian,

Vietnamese, Italian and Spanish). More than 20 different cultural groups are represented at the site. A total of 94 children are enrolled in two groups, and each group has two sessions per week. Staffing includes three teachers, two early childhood workers and two or three support educators. The site has large indoor and outdoor spaces. Many of the children and their families have complex needs around language, trauma, and special rights. According to the AEDC, areas of vulnerability include: Physical 11.2%, Social 12.2%, Communication 10.2%. Accessing adequate support for children who speak a language other than English and for emergent bilingual children is an ongoing challenge. The site is keen to engage more closely with the local Aboriginal communities but is unsure how to engage with and involve an Elder or community leader on-site.

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| <b>Centre Five philosophy statement</b>  |
| Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships<br>Quality teaching and learning<br>High expectations and equity   |
| <b>Quality Improvement Plan goals</b>  |
| Areas of focus that potentially connect with the project:<br>Quality Area 5 – Relationships with children<br>Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities   |
| <b>Pedagogical challenge</b>   |
| A large number of children engage in running for long periods throughout the day. This running attracts other children to join in. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How to re-direct the children whilst honouring their interest and need to run?</li><li>• How to understand why they run? And why don't other physical types of movement fulfil that need?</li><li>• How to broaden the children's engagement in experiences to support their learning and to provide challenge?</li></ul> |
| <b>Action research question</b>  |
| How can changing the learning environment increase children's engagement in a range of experiences?  |
| <b>Process</b>   |
| Identify key runners<br>Collect data (time samples, running records, videos)<br>Interview children and parents<br>Reflect on emerging themes<br>Introduce new activities based on the findings<br>Collect further data and analyse to identify and confirm changes in running behavior   |



**Focus of pedagogical change**

Changing the daily routine  
 Implementing further strategies for children to be active, be more physically challenged and meet sensory needs  
 Engaging with families for information about children's preferred out-of-class activities  
 Using children's life-worlds as a vehicle for their learning  
 Hooking children into deeper learning by using elements of their lives that excite them  
 Celebrating and valuing the children's knowledge of screen-time characters  
 Setting children up for success by encouraging them to share their vast knowledge while challenging them to use this knowledge to engage in aspects of the curriculum they would normally avoid

**Data collected by the teachers**

Time sampling  
 Interviews with focus children  
 Interviews with the parents of focus children  
     Video  
     Records of child behavior (running)

*Centre Five: Focus of key ideas***Culturally responsive pedagogies**

- High intellectual challenge
- ✓ Strongly connected to children's life-worlds
- ✓ Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- Critical thinking, action, activist orientation
- Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

**Reggio Emilia principles**

- Competent child and 100 languages
- The pedagogy of listening
- ✓ Participation and democracy
- ✓ Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation, educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- Environment, space and relations

*Centre Five portrait excerpts: Director*

**Importance of all staff  
being 'on board'**

[Staff changes] make it difficult to keep progressing. It makes that continuity really, really difficult for anything because it is just constantly changing and you are having to go back to the beginning and start again and get people on board ... So last year was the first year where everybody was on board [with the Reggio Emilia education principles] and it was fantastic so obviously [a key teacher] was here and we had two new contract staff that were young teachers just out but were really inspired and keen to give it a go and then just loved it

**Lack of time**

Some of it is the challenge of time, which is just unfortunately around the expectations of the Department. Maybe my expectations—but it's not just mine—it's actually the staff expectations around doing the best that we can for children and families. And that means you do have to put in the extra hours and the teachers are really committed to the children and family. So time becomes an issue.

**Complex needs**

We've got a really complex cohort of children and families. [We have some] diversity and then there's the special needs. There's the children who are undiagnosed that we're meeting for the first time and going, 'Oh my goodness. We can't understand what they're saying because they've got a severe speech delay'. So there's all that complexity.

**Focus on literacy and  
numeracy**

There is this huge push down on us in kindergartens on literacy and the numeracy. I'm feeling this pressure that children must have syllables, they must have rhyming, they must have alliteration under their belt before they get to school.

**The pedagogical  
challenge**

We had a group of boys that did nothing but run around screaming when outside. [Our continued engagement with the Reggio Emilia principles] informed how we change the environment in response to the children and through the routines and all of those things. It was trial and error around what is it that we need to change. So, for example, taking children up to oval, where they've actually got more space to try things, bringing up different resources up there. But what we found was that when we took them up there, we'd come back to kindy and they'd still run. [Through the action research we discovered that] it was that dramatic play that was the driver. The children were re-enacting internet games.

**Impact of the project on  
educators**

[The research project] was a great opportunity and ...at the end of the conference we were talking about how powerful it is to have that connection with the university. We were all

saying how much we really enjoyed it ... And I think that the beauty of this project was that it wasn't an add on, it was actually about our work, and yet we were learning something new and obviously having the input of the team from the university was amazing. All of [the researchers] are really positive. The teachers went to everything, even though we had a change of teachers. I think that was really important because a lot of what we did around the action research was new for some of the team and some of the strategies. So it meant that we just went with it.

I think everyone was really excited about [this project]. In the beginning we did need to get our head around what exactly is culturally responsive pedagogy? And I think that took a little while until we got our head [around]. That's why in the presentation we talked about how [one specific reading] really challenged us to think about our middle-class assumptions and expectations around what does it mean to parent and what does that mean for children.

#### **Value of reflection time**

It's thinking time and I guess having the release time I was in with them for part of the time, where they were able to interrogate the data together and work out, what are we going to present and also looking at what does this mean? What's the next steps? It was that reflection time and I think that's what suffers [when overloaded]. I know that's what suffers with me. I did it during school holidays because I'm on the run the whole time. I'm working stupid hours. I work 55, 60 hours a week. And that's just getting stuff done. So the reflection sometimes happens by myself where I think back about, okay, we've just had staff meeting, staff has said this, where can we go here? So I think that's hard. I'm lucky that I have reflective staff.

#### **Importance of deep critical reflection and interrogating the data**

I think we'll see more of the changes next year because I feel that there was obviously the learning that we did at the early sessions, and then Term Three was the action research project, which we really did until week three of Term Four. I think it was when they actually had that opportunity, so I gave them a couple of release days to prepare their conference presentation. I think that that's when I really had that opportunity to really look at the data. We talked about the data obviously as it was happening and we responded to the data, but I think it was when they sat down, did the PowerPoint and we really interrogated the data, that's when it kind of all went, Oh wow. And also those recommendations around what would we do, what would we keep doing? So I think we're really going to see that moving forward.

### ***Centre Five portrait excerpts: Teachers (Elly, Susie and Naomi)***

#### **The pedagogical challenge**

So, we had two early learning groups and we had large groups of children running and it wasn't really settling. It's normal for children to run at the beginning of the year but we

still had massive groups in both sessions that would run and run and run and no matter what we tried to support them, it just kept happening. And it was all that they were doing. We could see that they had their reasons, their needs to run but it was the fact that they weren't moving on, they weren't doing really anything else. We wanted to give them some different and new experiences and build their repertoire of play because it was more or less their only form of interaction with each other.

What happened? We did a lot of investigating, a lot of forensic investigating and trying to work out what was driving the children to want to do this. Were they seeking connection? Was it their play? It took a lot of delving into and trying a lot of different ways of capturing data to actually work out what was going on.

**Investigating the  
challenge**

So, we videotaped the children and then we interviewed them and showed them the tapes. If we hadn't gone down the line of questioning that we did, we probably wouldn't have worked it out. Without the project, we don't think we would have allowed ourselves to spend so much time actually reflecting and formulating the questions and really gathering a collection of focus children. We had seven focus children. One child was an Aboriginal child, some others were Australian-born and very much strong in their home culture. We would have still done it, but it just sort of put into play the systems that we could use to focus ourselves, rather than it being more, not ad hoc observation, but it probably wouldn't have been as targeted. And it was a whole staff approach to the problem—everybody.

So we interviewed one child and he was watching the video [that we had made of the children running] and he was saying 'Oh I'm playing *Hello Neighbour*, I'm playing *Hello Neighbour*'. And we asked, 'What's that? I've never heard of that'. And he's like 'Oh it's this game and you know there's a knife and there's blood', and all this stuff which was quite horrifying to hear. And then we came back and shared this, 'Look this is what this child has said. What is *Hello Neighbour*?' and we had no clue, so we literally Googled it. And the child couldn't articulate if it was a game or a show, he just said it was something he'd seen, so then we ended up in the office Googling. And then we watched the little YouTube snippet we're like, 'Oh this is what he means' so it was kind of like ding, ding, ding [mental bell ringing].

And we questioned the rest of the children. Then suddenly we noticed all the children saying they were either playing something they'd seen on TV or a game or YouTube. And I think we just became more attuned to the different language of games and shows, so you'd pick it up, you'd hear little tiny pieces of it throughout their play and realise, okay they're playing *PJ Mask*, or *Hello Neighbour*. And we would have never known before because the words had no meaning to us. So one of the early videos we made of the running, the child was repeating it [*Hello Neighbour*] but we didn't make that connection, because we'd never heard of it. We all sat down and watched the videos.

So, once we understood, we then used the children's interest as a vehicle for their other learning, so to extend what they were engaging in, and in a range of different settings. With the *PJ Mask* group especially, we did a lot of different things but one of the things we did was to actually sit down and watch it together. And we'd ask them, we'd pause it, and focus on a character and we'd ask them to tell us all about it. We said, 'You actually have to teach us because we don't know', and some of the children that before wouldn't really engage, we couldn't get them to stop talking, because they were experts in that area.

**Action research  
outcomes**

We were sort of more attuned to what they were doing through their play so you could discuss with them what characters were in their game and where the setting was and so you were more attuned to what they were doing and you could support them in developing a more extended play scenario. They've definitely engaged in new learning in different experiences that they weren't doing really independently even with encouragement or involvement. And we've definitely noticed particularly a few of them have become really engaged in their learning, more quiet tabletop sort of experiences but as well as their running.

One of the children, his engagement just absolutely skyrocketed. He was a child who really didn't come inside at all and if he did it would be a little bit of block play, a little bit of kind of flit from different construction experiences and then straight back outside. But, yeah, probably since we started the project, he has been engaging in a range of tabletop experiences. We think his whole demeanour has really changed. It's given him a little bit of a understanding of kindy, it's not just this weird foreign thing that he's come to. He was actually a child that was at occasional care for a full year before he came to kindergarten. So he was very familiar with the space, and very familiar with a lot of the other children who came with him, but in terms of his engagement and the variety of experiences that he engaged with, it wasn't huge. It was very, very limited and he's social but in a different way. He was very young. And he was a child who spent a lot of time on screens whether it was television, from the information we could gather. But, you know, when we started to value what he knew and what he was interested in and kind of connect that to experiences here, his interest in different experiences and different areas of the kindy really improved. And his confidence, like just his overall sense of wellbeing and the way he is as a learner has changed. He's a lot more confident and a lot happier and more open.

**Connecting to children's  
life-worlds**

Teacher 1: I definitely feel like I've kind of evolved in my practice after this project, which is awesome, but I think the main thing for me is actually taking the time to learn about the children's life-worlds. And being a new educator coming in as well it was really empowering for me to sit down with the children and one of the parents and actually have a good chat about their life. We see them two days a week for seven hours or whatever it is, and you know they have a whole life out there that we don't know about or we get

limited information on. It does centre things a bit more, like really opened I think opportunity for parents to share more with us. We were valuing it too.

Teacher 2: We have the parent interviews and I found that really eye-opening. And hearing about what this child does at home and what he engages in and then coming back in the room and seeing that happening. But I think it's kind of a good reflective tool. For me, I think that will be a big takeaway practice that I will use in my future teaching.

**Teacher as researcher**

Teacher 3: I think one of the opportunities was actually having that space and time away to actually be able to put your academic cap on rather than your teacher cap, rather than your routines. And go back to the way of thinking I guess that we did at university and you do along the way to actually draw back to that and then apply it.

I think most staff were on board, apart from the data collection. Everyone was on board conceptually, absolutely. But we wanted to collect a lot of data and we weren't able to just do that ourselves, so I think that was uncomfortable for some people, even in coping with the competing demands of whatever else they had to do in their day. We would probably do two or three videos on a daily basis anyway, but this was like ten-minute blocks four times a day. And then sometimes something really interesting would happen and then you'd video that as well. We've got some really great data and we can tell you what percentage of the day the children were running; it's very scientific. We've got lots of quantitative data to back this up.

But it is just one of the most important things that you need to do. Because otherwise you can just have your idea. You know—but *how* do you know? Well it's skewed, it's biased. So we did qualitative and quantitative[research]. We wanted to do that and when we sat down and did ridiculous amounts of data analysis on the quantitative data, every child's percentage of running time has decreased apart from one and every child's percentage of time inside has increased apart from one. I don't know how statistically significant it is. We worked pretty hard in the data collection.

I think it was an amazing opportunity just to kind of step out of the teaching hat and put on the researcher one for a little bit and I think it's really influenced us here and everyone else's practice. So, yeah, it was great being able to see other sites and what they're doing and what sort of issues that they have too. It was really interesting to see. That's always the best part for teachers, talking to people.

## Key findings

|   |
|---|
| <b>What we learned about pedagogy</b>   |
| <p>The importance of a shared pedagogical understanding amongst the whole team</p> <p>Being open-minded and creative in incorporating children's interests can act as a hook to deeper learning with high intellectual challenge</p> <p>The importance of looking in depth at children's interests and the influence on their learning, play and development.</p>             |
| <b>What we learned about children and families</b>  |
| <p>Allow time to schedule meetings to get to know our children and families on a deeper level at the start of the year</p> <p>Ask more specific questions to families about a child's life-worlds</p>   |
| <b>What we learned about educational research</b>   |
| <p>Taking time away from the centre to reflect on pedagogical practice (educator as researcher) is valuable and productive.</p>   |
| <b>Future plans</b>   |
| <p>Revisit culturally responsive pedagogies as a whole-site team bringing everyone onboard</p> <p>Seek support from a local Elder so that the site can engage more deeply with Aboriginal communities</p> <p>Find out more about the life-worlds of children at the very start of the year, and incorporate these life-worlds and interests into the intentional learning</p> |

## Centre Six

This Centre Six serves a rural location where some families are struggling financially. The centre is located two hours from metropolitan Adelaide, with a total of 66 children enrolled and an average attendance pattern. In 2019, diversity included four Aboriginal children, a South African child and 20 children with additional needs. There is a slow but increasing number of other cultures who do not have English as their first language. The site has two groups of children attending on consecutive days. Staffing includes the Director, two teachers, two ECE educators and a support worker to provide support for the children with additional needs. 2018-2019 saw a continuity of educators from 2017 with only one change to the teaching team. Previously, the site pedagogy reflected a traditional school-like academic focus with structured lessons and scheduled content. At that time, the site had received a 'working towards' rating on the National Quality Standards. Since a change in leadership, the site is currently engaging in child-initiated play-based curriculum and has received 'exceeding' rating on the National quality Standards. The EYLF is the basis of all assessment and reporting. The centre is located on the traditional lands of the Narungga Nation. In 2018, the State Government signed the Buthera Agreement (Government of

South Australia 2018) to support, through state departments, Narungga social, educational and economic engagement.

### **Centre Six philosophy statement**

Children (All children have strengths and are capable and competent learners; Listen to all voices, ideas and theories; Children as individual learners; Encouraging children to develop learner habits and dispositions; Children are educators to teach others; Encourage different inclusive friendships)

Learning (Inspired by Reggio Emilia principles; Strengthening informed risk-taking; Play-based learning; Pedagogical documentation of child's strengths and learning to plan for improvement; Teaching a growth mindset by allowing children to learn through failure – not 'rescuing' children.

Educators (Educators learners and researchers through current professional development; Building successful transitions; Reflect on our practice for improvement)

### **Quality Improvement Plan goals**

Improvement Priority 1: Children's Learning—Numeracy and Literacy Indicator charts. Continue to use the Reggio Emilia project/inquiry approach to follow children's interests and extend their learning.

Improvement Priority 2: Educator Practice—Consistency as team to use documentation, observation using intentional teaching approaches (Reggio Emilia and CRP) in the planning cycle to document children's growth in learning goals.

### **Action research question**

When a provocation is presented/connected to children's lives how do they collaborate and work together to promote communication and engagement?

### **Focus of pedagogical change**

Engage in co-constructing a project with a small group of children to build connections with their families. Previously, teachers would observe children's interest and then plan teacher-directed projects. The teacher worked with three Aboriginal children over four weeks to plan for a special event for their younger siblings, mums and grandmothers.

### **Data collected by the teachers**

This site had limited involvement in the project due to competing workload demands. While the site committed to changing an aspect of their pedagogy, they did not attend workshops focused on data collection and analysis. Although the research team offered to provide additional individual support, the site expressed that other workload demands were a priority and declined the offer. Evidence of the changed pedagogy included:

- Photos of children planning the special event, a teddy bear picnic
- Photos of the children preparing food and setting up the environment for the teddy bear picnic
- Photos of a grandmother's engagement and sharing her culture with the other children



## Centre Six: Focus of key ideas

### Culturally responsive pedagogies

- ✓ High intellectual challenge
- ✓ Strongly connected to children's life-world
- Recognition of culture as asset. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic and literate identity
- ✓ Critical thinking, action, activist orientation
- Perform learning to external audiences/experiment with multimodal literacies

### Reggio Emilia principles

- ✓ Competent child and 100 languages
- The pedagogy of listening
- Participation and democracy
- ✓ Learning as a process of individual and group construction
- Pedagogical documentation., educational research, professional development
- Progettazione
- ✓ Environment, space and relations

## Centre Six portrait excerpts: Director

### Professional biography

I was initially a school-teacher. I worked at a school and they sort of came and tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'We think you'd be really good, why don't you apply for the director of the preschool?' So, I ended up applying for it, even though I hadn't really had any experience in early childhood apart from teaching in reception and year 1, year 2 classrooms, I won the position. That was my first site leader role. So, I was there and then I won the position [where I am currently]. I've been a site leader for nearly nine years.

### Engaging with the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project

When I moved to this preschool, there wasn't much awareness or understanding of the Reggio Emilia approaches. In 2015, I went with [another preschool director] to Reggio Emilia on a study tour with the department. I'd already done a few bits of learning myself around the Reggio principles and had been implementing that approach at a previous site. So, when I came to this site, it was a bit of a start from the beginning with the staff because they didn't have any understanding of that.

**Earlier site context**

There were some challenges when I came in the first year, it was a really tough year because the previous director and staff were really, really structured and really not child-led and had no family engagement. That was really a bad example of preschool. Like 'Sit down, we're having maths now children,' and they would all have to sit down and do it whether they wanted to or not. And so, when I came in, there were families that, because they'd had children here in that past director's time, that's what they expected and that's what they thought kindy was because they had nothing to compare it to. So, when I brought in a lot of the child-led learning and the play-based learning, it was really, really tough. There were lots of complaints. Lots and lots of unhappy families saying, 'This isn't what my other child had.' And so, the preschool had been assessed under NQS just before I came in, so when the other director was still here and they did really badly and they got working towards and it was mainly in that educational program and practice area and the engagement with families. So, in my first year that I was here, I actually had to pull out that report and take it to governing council and say, 'This is what the report's saying. This isn't me. This isn't the department. This is the National Quality Standards, and these are their recommendations, and this is why we're changing.' And so, the first year and a half probably was really tough but now families are onboard and they think it's fabulous and they'll recommend the kindy, The site culture has changed it went from being really, really structured and not aligning to the early years learning framework. I guess because this is my fourth year here now, everyone came on board, but it was sort of a slow journey to really change the pedagogy. But now we definitely do say that we are Reggio influenced and inspired and we do really include the Reggio Emilia principles into our site. But for some educators it's still a learning journey for them.

**Challenging behaviours**

At this site the number of children we have is one of the key challenges and the number of children with challenging behaviours. ECWs see [the challenging behaviours] as a hindrance to actually doing stuff with other kids. [The ECWs] are onboard [with the Reggio Emilia principles] but you can see when push comes to shove, they revert back to what they've always done or what they've always known. [Some] have been here for 20 odd years and because it's a different way of working and a different way of listening to children and including families [it is difficult for them to change]. We talk about project-based inquiry and letting kids learn through following their interest but also providing provocations. One of the excuses that comes up all the time is 'We can't put that out because so and so will just wreck that.' So, I guess that's probably one of our main challenges for educators here to say, 'Well, we can do it but we just need to be creative about how we set it up or where we put it or when we do it or that sort of thing.' It's just being able to keep challenging their thinking about, 'Yep, that might've been how we used to do it but let's think about it this way'.

**Language as an intermediate challenge**

In the past we've had some children from Indian backgrounds that have spoken no English [that can be a challenge]. Next year we've got a little Vietnamese boy who speaks no English and his parents speak very little English.

**Attendance**

We have an issue with Aboriginal children's attendance because we're sort of close to [the area] which is the main hub for Aboriginal families and they might go down there for a week or 2 or 3 and then come back for a week or they might even be down there for a bit longer and then come back. There's a lot of movement. The attendance for the Aboriginal learners at our site, the ones that are based here and have less ties with the [Aboriginal] community have better attendance, but the children that have got the stronger traditional ties with the Aboriginal community, their attendance is not as good. It doesn't really create a problem [in terms of children accessing a preschool program] because we talk to the preschool [other] and they quite happily just let them attend while they're there and then they come back to us. [The issue is that it] means we don't form as strong a relationship with the families. The kids seem to be able to cope really well. They're really resilient and they can come in and then go away for a few weeks and then come back. We don't seem to form those strong connections with the families as much.

**Consistent approach for engaging with all families**

[Engaging with diverse families] is not much different to what we do with the rest of our families I would say. We really try and build those strong relationships. Prior to the children starting preschool we have a pre-entry family chat. They come in for half an hour. We ask [families] to tell us all about their child's interests and strengths and their hopes and dreams for their child at kindy and things that they might be worried about. So, we've got a questionnaire that we go through and we spend half an hour, but we do that with every family. But we find the families of Aboriginal learners or the culturally and Linguistically diverse families, they all come onboard and come in for those meetings. We pretty much get 100% families come in for those and if they don't come in, we chase them up some other way. We've done that for a couple of years now and we just found that it builds the relationship with the families so much quicker than not having them. They feel more comfortable coming and saying, 'Oh, actually I'm not sure about this,' or 'Can you explain this?' or – yeah, so we found that the relationship that we build is really good right from the start. We offer learning interviews in term 1 and term 3 but that's really an optional choice. They book a time and it's a 10 minute – it's a bit like a parent teacher interview, really. And in those interviews in term 1 probably 50% of our Aboriginal families would've come in for an interview.

**Individual learning goals**

[Prior to the project] we hadn't done anything specifically for [diverse children] because it's the same as what we would do for all the children really. All the children have individual learning goals. So, with our

Aboriginal learners and the non-English speaking children, they may have more of a literacy focus. Usually that goes across for most children. And because our intentional learning experiences are based on children's learning goals and they're very open ended and children can enter at any level to participate in those. We find that they all engage and participate in those anyway. It's educators being intentional, but it's not structured explicit learning for instance. So, it's not like we stand up the front and we teach kids how to do it but it's an intentional learning experience that we'll set up and invite children. Any [child] can [join] but we may have kids in mind; that this is why we're putting it out, but anyone can join in.

**Encouraging multiple languages**

Even before the Buthera agreement came in, we did a lot of Narungga language things. So, especially in our morning meeting time we teach them how to say 'hello' in Narungga and the names for all the different types of weather and things like that in Narungga. But we also encourage lots of different languages. At the start of the year, we sing a good morning song that's got lots of different ways to say hello and then now if you came and sat in a morning meeting when we're calling the roll, there are six different responses from children of saying hello in different languages. They're not from that country or from that culture but they're learning the different ways. I think that's something [the children have] taken home because they'll come back and they'll say a completely new one that we haven't even done or learnt at kindy and they've learnt it at home with their family so they could come in a say hello in a different language. So, I guess [establishing a] culture of not everyone speaks the same way and [being open to different languages].

We've got a Narungga dictionary [that we use as a resource] and then we've got lots of pictures with the animal and the name but there are also a couple people in our Regional Office that speak Narungga language. So, we're able to access them as well.

**Engaging with Aboriginal families**

We use our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer. She's one of our parents this year but we do use her to connect with families that we think may need some support or might just need someone to talk to. She sort of links with them and then lets us know what we could do or what they think. She's in the Regional Office and she supports all of the schools and preschools in our partnership. Less though with preschools. They tend to come in and say, 'If you want anything, I'm here.' But we've been a bit proactive in saying, 'Are you able to work with us as well,' and they're like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah. We can.'

**Limited PD due to distance from Adelaide**

Specifically, for Aboriginal and culturally diverse children, [we have not had prior professional development] not really. There's not a lot that we can do. This year we have been doing an e-course—online modules about playful literacies which really is, well, it's for all children but particularly our Aboriginal learners and —through their oral language. So, it's

a lot about oral language and learning their literacy through play. We've been doing that with the reception teachers from all the schools in our partnership. There's not a lot and I guess we haven't really been to the Aboriginal conference in Adelaide or anything like that because it always clashes with something. It just seems like we can't come down and quite often when there are workshops offered, they're always offered in Adelaide and it might be from 4 until 6, something like that. They're sort of never really full day things and it might just be an afternoon spot. And then to get there by 4, our staff would have to leave work early or we'd have to cover them and then you're driving for 2 hours to attend 2 hours to then drive home again 2 hours. So yeah, there's not—we haven't been to a lot.

[Our challenge with] being a country site puts a bit of stress and demand on us. It still takes us two hours to drive down and two-hour drive back, which is a full day for someone attending. And then also because we have to get a TRT for a full day to release someone and being in Adelaide, like traveling down to Adelaide, we could only send one person. Whereas other sites I'd noticed had a couple of people, or a small team being able to attend.

**Workload a challenge for deeper participation in the project**

Day-to-day pressures of actual at-work activities, plus Beth [the teacher] has a young family. It's also outside of community practice as well that puts that pressure on. And being a bigger site and Beth's our full-time teacher. She's responsible for statements of learning and having interviews every term with all families. We have 70 children and they come in two groups, so it's not like a reception class where you just have the same kids all week because they come 15 hours a week and you get two groups of children. She's responsible for two groups of children. And then I'm the other part-time teacher. So, I'm responsible for 17 of them. And then I have another part-time teacher, so she's responsible for 17 or 18 of them. So yeah, we have to split them. And because Beth's the core teacher for those two groups of kids, she is responsible for it. So, I guess that would be typical for most preschools if they're large sites and you're a full-time teacher, that's what you'd be doing. So, she's responsible for 35 kids, which is way more than even a reception class teacher would have to do. And preschool teachers get less NIT than school teachers. So, she's not getting the same amount of NIT time, that non-instruction time to do things in the office, she's really pretty much most of the time out with the kids teaching the kids. There's that pressure to do our assessing and reporting and pedagogical documentation at kindy and then the project on top of that. I keep saying if the system asked a reception teacher to write 35 reports every term then we would hear about it, but preschool people just get on and do it.

At the end of every term we either have a written statement of learning or a family interview, so that takes up quite a lot of time. But then during the term it's all that other pedagogical documentation that we're doing as well for the kids. So, learning stories or observation notes on the outcomes. So, it's ongoing, it's all the time. The other staff don't do the end of the term statement of learning stuff. That's just the teachers do that.

**Synergies between CRP and principles inspired by the Reggio Emilia project**

I'd say probably a little bit [of the site culture has changed from the project]. Beth was able to share some of the learning that she got through the workshops in our staff planning meetings. But really, I guess we're sort of past it, even though [we were not] calling it CRP, we'd been part of the Reggio Emilia project ever since I've been at this site, which is four years now, and before that I was implementing the principles Reggio Emilia at my previous kindy. So, I was part of one of the [groups that went] over to Reggio back in 2015. We've already been doing a lot of the principles that are the CRP principles anyway because they're very similar to the Reggio principles.

**Deeper engagement with Aboriginal diversity**

I guess probably the main change or improvement for Aboriginal families would be getting to know them a bit deeper. Not just are there Aboriginal kids, but actually finding out their background, like which Aboriginal group do they belong to or where they come from or who they identify with and actually finding out more about that. Previously we've just sort of almost grouped them like 'Yep, they're Aboriginal kids.' But that's as far as we've gone into actually their background and their culture more deeply. So that's been a good change and we found this year, our families of Aboriginal learners have been really excited and happy to share all of their cultural background and where their ancestors are from and where their traditional families from, and where they were born, Beth has had a lot of those conversations with those families and then they were happy for us to write a poster. [For example, Amy's poster said], Amy's family is from so-and-so and Amy was born in ... So, they were really happy for that to be put on a nice poster and put up on display so that families are aware of their cultural backgrounds.

**Greater engagement with Aboriginal families**

I think [it] definitely changed their relationships with the teachers. [For instance] one of the Aboriginal grandmothers wanted to come in and bring in her puppet to tell the story of the Rainbow Serpent. And then she was getting the kids to do some Aboriginal artwork that went with the story. She's really keen to come in more often. So just even asking about her culture and where she was from. She was really excited to come in and share more about that.

For one family I definitely think [the changes we made from the project] did make a difference and they were really excited about it. Sophie didn't attend much most of that time, but it was really heartening and encouraging that on the day when they had planned their special picnic for the end of their project, the family actually rang and they were really apologetic that they couldn't come and they really wanted to come, but she was actually in hospital then, that's actually the first time that they'd rung to let us know she wasn't going to be attending. That's huge for that family because usually they just don't rock up. They wanted to tell us that they wanted to be here, but they just couldn't because she was

in hospital. So that was a huge thing for them. And since then I've found, especially Sophie's dad, he used to just come in really quietly, not say anything much or mumble a few words and then leave. But now he's been really chatty and sharing lots of things about his family with me. So, I think that was a good step for just making them feel more included and valued.

Not much else that I'd say has changed [in our practice] really because of the project. But our conversations with, especially our Aboriginal learners' families have become much more meaningful. We've got up the map of Australia with all the Aboriginal groups, so that's up and we've got our poster about the families, cultures and backgrounds and we have just recently brought out the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Australian flag. So, we never had those before. And the Aboriginal families have noticed and commented and said, 'Oh it's nice to see the flag up.' So, I guess that's one change in the environment, but no, probably not much else.

**Deeper knowledge of CRP**

A benefit of the project was helping us to be able to talk about CRP. When we had our partnership review at the end of last term one, of the other execs who was there was saying about how people just throw out the term culturally responsive practices. It was really good that the other director and I could say, 'Well actually we've had educators involved in this action research that you've been doing at UniSA'. And they were really impressed, and they said, 'Oh thank you'. Because some people just throw out the term, 'Yep, we're doing culturally responsive practices.' But they were really excited that we could actually articulate what we're doing and how that fits. That was really good. Definitely yes.

**Future practice**

One thing [that arose] is the opportunities that children have to actually initiate and follow through on a project that's a bit bigger. So, while we follow children's interests at kindy, we haven't really done a project with the children actually get them to identify a special event that they could plan for siblings and things. We've considered that we should probably do more of that in the future because we don't have a playgroup, we haven't got space for a playgroup. So we don't actually see younger siblings until they start kindy. We thought probably getting children to plan things for siblings and inviting them in is a good link in forming relationships with those younger children in the family. So that's probably something that we're now considering how we can do that in the future. And the other children who weren't involved in Beth's project were really interested, they're like, 'Oh, we want to plan something for our [siblings]'. So, we said, 'Well we can do that, but they were really keen to have their families involved in the same way. So that's something that we'll definitely explore next year I think as a result of this project.'

**Co-constructing learning with children**

[We engaged with] the teacher as facilitator and the co-learner along with children, high expectations, and also just the child-led inquiry and learning. We do a lot of inquiry learning and project learning with the children. But usually it's educators have identified something that the kids have been focused on or interested in and then they sort of take it that way. We haven't ever just given [the children] a blank slate and started from scratch. The environment as a third teacher is a big one that we're really intentional about. And the family engagement is a really big one for us so that's something that we've focused on for a few years here now.

***Centre Six portrait excerpts: Teacher (Beth)***

The teacher from this site did not respond to requests for an interview.

***Centre Six key findings***

This particular site did not engage in the action research project; however, the teacher shared her learning from engaging with children in co-constructing projects in a power point presentation she sent to be presented at the conference following the research project conclusion.

**What we learned about pedagogy**

The children were more engaged when they had a purpose for their learning  
When children had ownership of their learning, they were more engaged and exited about the preschool day.  
When children had ownership of their learning, they participated in more engaged communication with each other.

**What we learned about children and families**

Working with small groups of children on short term common projects encourages collaboration and communication.

**What we learned about educational research**

Educational research wasn't an unfamiliar concept as we were involved in a different project in 2018 where we had to identify a challenge of pedagogy, research and implement new thinking.

**Future plans**

Investigate the CRP framework more deeply  
Director PD around CRP  
Embed CRP in the QIP  
Encourage local schools to consider Reggio Emilia inspired practices in the lower years



## Discussion and recommendations

After analysis of the case studies and careful reading of the literature, five propositions emerged that represent our key findings. We discuss each of these propositions in turn and have incorporated our recommendations in the discussion.

### **1. The Reggio Emilia education principles provide a productive framework for improving and redesigning the practice of early childhood educators**

The history of education is littered with failed policy proposals. Specifically, we refer to the various attempts by policy texts to change educational practices. But there is no unproblematic implementation of curriculum policy by educators. Our research demonstrated that the Reggio Emilia education principles did provide a policy text that educators can work with to substantially redesign their teaching practices in ways that have positive outcomes for children, families and educators. Importantly, the Reggio Emilia education principles were not presented as a ‘script’ or ‘recipe’ which requires rigid application. Expecting teachers to adopt some ‘authentic’ version of the Reggio Emilia approach is discouraged by educational scholars from Reggio Emilia. As Rinaldi (2013) states:

It is impossible to replicate the Reggio Approach, but it is possible to develop a local South Australian approach that has traces of the Reggio Emilia principles. (p. 13)

In acknowledging the significance of the unique contexts of each site, we presented the Reggio Emilia education principles as a set of provocations to encourage educators to rethink and redesign their pedagogical practices. These provocations required the participating educators to translate these into practices that could work in their unique contexts.

As noted in the case studies, all of the sites had, to one degree or another, been engaging with the Reggio Emilia education principles to inform their site policy and practices. These included:

Visiting Reggio Emilia in Italy;

Familiarity with Professor Carla Rinaldi’s report: *Re-imagining childhood: The inspiration of the Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia* (2013);

Attending ‘re-imagining early childhood’ conferences

Participating in the South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project with two sites selected as ongoing prototypes in ‘Project Quattro’ to develop a local approach.

Translating Reggio Emilia education principles into local site practices, such as:

Practicing documentation by educators as part of research-inspired classroom practice and researching alongside children.

Enacting democratic practices such as supporting all children to have their voices heard, working on inclusive small group cooperation and interaction

Scaffolding learning that is place-based such as Beach Kindy

Listening deeply to children and their families and incorporating this new learning with intentionality in the curriculum and pedagogy

Involving children in making decisions about their learning experiences and valuing children's play and inquiry as important learning processes where children can be powerful learners

Enacting pedagogies in which educators and children are learning from each other

Engaging with families to help ascertain family life-world experiences, literate practices, and cultural knowledge that might become a productive theme for site learning

Translating Reggio Emilia education principles into local site policy aspirations, such as:

Children, families and educators as co-constructors of knowledge

Children valued as strong, competent and courageous researchers of the world

Competent child and 100 languages

The pedagogy of listening

Environment as teacher

Importantly, engagement with the Reggio Emilia education principles across all six settings strongly aligned with DfE policy, and national priorities as indicated by the National Quality Standards (NQS). For instance, in terms of local policy priorities, each of the sites indicated how they aligned the Reggio Emilia education principles with demands for improving literacy and numeracy. A close reading of the case studies also demonstrates how educators and site leaders drawn on the Reggio Emilia education principles to improve: phonemic awareness, oral language, written language, vocabulary, communicating in small groups, and performing literacy learning to an audience.

One site leader explains how adopting the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project assisted the site in raising their NQS rating from 'working towards' to 'exceeding'. Significantly, all case studies reported that changing pedagogy had improved children's engagement, which is often understood to be *the* precursor for improving learning.

Each site, however, was in a different place within their professional learning journey. While all sites had been engaging with the Reggio Emilia education principles, they were at different points in their understanding of what these principles mean and how they can inspire their own practice. For example, at some sites, teachers listened to children's

interests but interpreted those interests and planned the subsequent learning experiences without children's involvement. Such practices demonstrate only surface-level understanding of democracy and co-construction. At the other end of the spectrum, some sites had been exploring the Reggio Emilia educational principles for many years and had obtained intensive support through the South Australian Collaborative Childhood project and associated professional learning opportunities. These sites had well developed processes for engaging children in co-constructing the curriculum. In such sites, educators felt more secure in their roles as co-learner and co-educator with children. Rather than the teacher making all the plans ahead of time, they were confident in involving children in the planning process. This did not mean that teachers relinquished their planning responsibilities to children, rather it was a process of co-construction where adults and children brought their perspectives together to create a curriculum that authentically reflected the individuals in a democratic learning community. Other sites were starting to explore what engaging with children as authentic co-constructors of knowledge can look like in their practice. The learning community and professional support provided through the project was important in helping these sites redesign their practices as co-constructors of learning and increasing active participation of children in decision making.

The project also identified a number of challenges that require ongoing work and professional learning, including the following: improving attendance of Aboriginal children; families not knowing their culture; responding to the diversity of languages using an assets-based approach; responding through redesigning curriculum and pedagogy to behavioural issues and complex needs; and pedagogical discontinuity between preschool and school.

As well, all six centres had engaged their programs and practices with the Reggio Emilia principles to situate early learning as a community process. All sites recognised real risks in replicating this approach rather than re-interpreting it to reflect their own cultural complexities and had been committed to doing so through previous professional learning communities. American psychologist Howard Gardner's research shows the importance of culture and the need to contextualise learning to place in the educational experiences of children. For example:

The Reggio Approach in other parts of the world, outside Reggio Emilia only makes sense if we are capable of re-inventing it, if we are capable of understanding the context we work in, the values in which each culture believes, and then compare these with what Reggio has been capable of creating in its own specific context and with its own resources. (Gardner, quoted in Rinaldi 2013, p. 11)

The culture of children in the small town of Reggio Emilia, located in northern Italy, is far removed from South Australian early childhood context—culturally, politically and geographically. The project has been designed to bring Reggio Emilia education principles into dialogue with culturally responsive pedagogy in localised Australian settings with a view to improving learning outcomes for *all* children, and especially those from minority backgrounds.

### **Recommendation 1**

Continue to support a strong relationship between DfE and The Reggio Children Foundation. This would include continuing to sponsor educational exchanges with the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre; inviting key officers from the Foundation to work with South Australian educators and scholars; and supporting South Australian Representatives on the Centro Loris Malaguzzi Scientific Committee.

### **Recommendation 2**

Continue to support high quality professional learning for early childhood educators that enables them to engage with and contextualise principles from the Reggio Emilia education project into their teaching practices. This could include the following strategies:

Construct a website from the case studies available from *An Investigation of the Re-imagining of Early Childhood Education in South Australia* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2018) and this project

Continue funding for a second phase of this pilot study

Provide professional development for early childhood education policy officers

Provide professional development for early childhood centre Directors

## **2. A culturally responsive pedagogy framework provides a strong version of culture to complement the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project.**

The Reggio Emilia education principles were designed to cater for a culturally homogenous student cohort. Apart for the notion of *100 languages*, the education principles from the Reggio Emilia education project do not explicitly address cultural differences and are not designed to be responsive to superdiverse cohorts, nor to the specific learning needs of Australian Aboriginal children. Culturally responsiveness requires teaching *culture through culture* (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2020) and involves the recognition of ‘children as both experts in and learners of culture. As experts, children share their own cultures while also learning from their peers and community members about other cultures’ (Sisson, Whittington & Shin 2020, p. 120). It is important, however, to recognise that no system, educational or otherwise, can be considered acultural. Sisson, Whittington and Shin (2020) suggest:

It is important to acknowledge the risk of one cultural model overpowering another. This imbalance may be particularly challenging if one model is recognised and promoted by policymakers ... the tension between cultural models illustrates that more efforts are needed to develop a way forward ... Continued critical reflection and dialogue concerning

culturally responsive pedagogies, as embedded throughout the curriculum, will continue to be important to re-imagining pedagogies that are local and resisting mono-cultural and 'tourist' educational approaches. (p. 123)

The national data, which shows discrepancies between the achievement of Aboriginal children and their peers, warns us that educational policies can no longer afford to pretend that culture does not matter in education. Our approach to culturally responsive pedagogies provides a useful framework for educators to acknowledge the significance of culture and to engage with diverse cultures to enhance children's active engagement in learning. Five of the six sites with Aboriginal enrolment were confident in using the culturally responsive pedagogy framework to enact respectful, reciprocal and relational pedagogy. Through strong emphasis on adult-child relationships, the educators improved their practices to engage Aboriginal children in meaningful activities connected to the ancestral and contemporary relatedness of their cultural identities. In almost all educators' interviews, this was viewed as a particular strength of this approach necessary for changing practice to achieve differentiated learning which is responsive to Aboriginal children. This reinforced the children's sense of 'who they are' and their local connection to 'country' where they belong.

In working with the sites, we presented the Reggio Emilia guiding principles as a set of provocations to prompt educators to rethink and redesign their practices. These provocations required the participating educators to translate the principles into practices that could work in their unique contexts.

As noted in the case studies, the culturally responsive pedagogies approach was mostly a new set of ideas for sites and educators. To quote for one site leader, CRP: 'gave us a new lens to strengthen what we were already doing. The challenge ... is that this is not an add on, or separate work, but actually it's our core business in superdiverse times'. And from a site educator: 'the [CRP] principles, I think that was a bit of a light bulb for us that we could actually change this way of doing our [story] book-based learning but with the lens on culturally responsive pedagogies and connecting to children's life worlds'.

Having said that, most of the participants noted how our CRP framework enabled them to work out how they could actually put into practice within their sites their existing commitments to work more skilfully with culturally diverse cohorts and also to improve engagement and outcomes for their Aboriginal children. In the words of one site leader:

The CRP principles helped us to go that step further in responding directly to what children were bringing to us and linking this to educationally rich dialogic learning improvement'...[we] have been good at listening to children's interests and learning including what they enjoy at home with their family and building that into our learning program. But I think the CRP principles are that next level of understanding and acknowledging the local whole child, and what impact their culture, identity and language has on learning. This helped teachers plan for how they would respond. So it's that next level I think of equal engagement and participation in literacy through the recognition of linguistic and cultural prior knowledges.

As noted in the case studies, all sites worked on the local enactment of culturally responsive pedagogies. By way of examples:

The notion of ‘High intellectual challenge’ was taken up by some sites and reaffirmed as a key purpose of teaching, and also as a way to think past deficit views of some children and their families.

The theme ‘Strongly connected to children’s life worlds’ was the most influential of the CRP provocations. Adoption was demonstrated in various practices including: renewed interest in deep listening to children and families; pushing beyond listening to working on co-construction of learning experiences; renewed interest in framing learning in response to the local spaces; renewed effort to connect with families; a focus on researching home language, vocabulary and cultural practices as key to site for learning; thinking about what texts actually connect to children’s lives (such as Aboriginal Dreaming stories connected explicitly to families); changing the nature of the daily conversations with families

Engagement with this theme enabled powerful diagnosis of behaviour that was inhibiting learning; informed [story] book-based literacy approaches; and shifted deficit thinking (i.e. what capacities and knowledge children do not bring to school that inhibits my teaching) to a more strengths-based approach (i.e. what knowledges and literate practices do children bring to school that I can work with).

Working with the theme ‘Recognition of cultural difference as an asset to learning. Children to feel positive about their cultural, linguistic, literate identity’. Three sites focused on this theme to further advance a strengths-based approach. Children experience such efforts as affirmations of their own cultural and linguistic identities.

‘Perform learning to external audiences/experimenting with multimodal literacies’. A few sites took this provocation in various ways, including scaffolding children to share their ideas in small groups, or through the use of video and to quote: ‘We thought about the importance of them performing it to an audience other than the teachers and that was a really great way to do that with those action words. They performed it to the rest of the kindergarten through the video, but also to all the families on a large screen at their end of term celebration’.

Culturally responsive pedagogical principles were also translated into site policy aspirations and future plans, for example:

Incorporating CRP principles in the next version of the site improvement plan

Incorporating CRP ideas into future plans for whole site professional learning; continuing to ask ‘whose culture is operating’ at any specific time; embedding CRP principles into ‘normal’ everyday practices

Exploring with children ‘what is learning’ and ‘who we can learn from’.

Working on knowing more about children’s interests and strengths and referring to these in order to encourage them to share.

Continuing to work with our families to find out some deeper community connections that can then inform practice.

Continuing to think about how practices can engage Aboriginal children in meaningful activities connected to ancestral and contemporary relatedness of their cultural identities and hence also reinforcing the children's sense of 'who they are' and local connection to the 'country' where they belong.

As for all attempts at innovation for curriculum and pedagogy, there are always challenges in the local enactment. Action research, by definition, provides a research-oriented process for working on local challenges, and the case studies outline how our participating educators and site leaders worked through these challenges. We think that the above list provides a map of some of the challenges that emerged for educators committed to the agenda outlined by this project, namely to respond to superdiversity and improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal children. The findings inform Recommendations 3 and 4.

### **Recommendation 3**

Support with funding and management of a second phase of this pilot study to further develop a South Australian approach that is culturally responsive and inspired by the education principles from Reggio Emilia. A second phase could:

- expand the selection of early childhood settings (Aboriginal, bilingual, urban, rural, remote); work from what was learned from this project,
- include an early childhood management team that is knowledgeable in culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles,
- further refine the South Australian approach to early childhood education that is inspired by education principles from Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies,
- seek to understand the experiences of children, families, educators, leaders and communities within early childhood educational contexts.

Continuing and expanding a second phase of this research is critical to enacting and evaluating culturally responsive pedagogies for social justice.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Support the development of online materials from the case studies drafted in this report as resources for educators in all early childhood settings in South Australia. Such a resource has the potential to promote South Australian public education as a world leader in how early childhood policy and practice can respond to increasing cultural diversity and improve the learning achievements of Aboriginal learners.

### **3. A culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia inspired approach has positive outcomes for children, families and educators.**

This pilot study demonstrated that employing a culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia inspired approach delivered positive outcomes for children, families and educators and enabled educators to redesign their practices in ways that improved their educative relationships with, and understandings of, children. We have deliberately focused on the changes to the *quality* of the educative encounter as narrated by our participants, and from our own observations.

All of the sites noticed that the project sponsored the planning of curriculum and pedagogy that resulted in a much richer learning experiences for children. As a consequence, children generally were more engaged, with more productive interactions, participation and increased confidence, and a willingness to share. Children's involvement levels were higher and interest in learning was sustained over a longer period of time as reported by educators. As well, many children were noticed initiating positive and trusting relationships with educators and peers through their curiosity and opportunity to practice and revisit their experiences. Opportunities were also noticed in which children were showing leadership and increasing collaboration when co-operating together as a group and being mindful of others' capabilities and preferences. There were many stories of the positive impact on individual children, and one example is cited here:

One of the children, his engagement just absolutely skyrocketed. He was a child who really didn't come inside at all and if he did it would be a little bit of block play, a little bit of kind of flit from different construction experiences and then straight back outside ... We think his whole demeanour has really changed.

In some sites there were improvements in literacy:

Including vocabulary development as children were heard using vocabulary worlds across a range of learning areas, including through spontaneous play.

Improving oral language such as children's confidence in story telling and leading groups.



Improving capability to process and produce complex sentences which describe and express their ideas.

Connecting print literacy to the lives of learners, such as working with how families define English words; what connections do families make to the focus literacy words; and how children use their own languages to help them explore and build connection to the meanings of English words.

Perhaps the most important impact for children though was the changing nature of the educative relationship between educators and children. It is perhaps trite to state the obvious here, that good teaching is always about the relationships. But by shifting their practices as informed by culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia principles, the educators did report changes in their educative relationships with children.

Each of the sites narrated a process of moving away from approaches that obviously had not worked well. One participant discussed this in terms of moving beyond one-size-fits-all behavioural approaches to pedagogy. Another site framed up the challenge in more existential ways, arguing that they were looking for ‘ways of interrupting or challenging the dominant people and the dominant cultures.’ Here, the challenge was to find ways of interrupting the ways that some children dominate the activities on offer in their site, to the detriment of other children.

Across the case studies it is possible to discern an alternative approach being narrated by educators, with local variations of course. Importantly, there was a consensus that a key impact on the participating educators was increased confidence in redesigning their pedagogy towards this alternative which was often described in terms of co-constructing learning experiences with children and in dialogue with families. To quote from participants:

But I can see myself more as a co-constructor. So, the children have got a lot more of that direction and initiative, and I’ve got less of the instructional framework of ... I’m more at ease and excited to go with them [using an emergent inquiry approach].

[Co-constructing is about] building learning events with children and for all children to bring their voice and culture to these tasks. The educators became confident in the way they allowed the children to demonstrate their ‘competence’ and ‘capabilities’

Listening to children and their families and being learners ourselves of the ... knowledge they bring moves us toward a culturally responsive way of working with children ... So that we’re learning with and from each other, we’re co-constructing learning and aspiration with [strong] family connections rather than educators doing that separately. I don’t think it can be separated.

The participating teachers noted that working with a CRP framework pushed them towards being much more conscious of cultural difference and, importantly, much more attuned to working with the literate and cultural knowledges children bring from their families and communities. To quote one educator: ‘You know, we’ve always been quite conscious about who’s culture’s operating at any one time, but I think we’re probably more in tune with that

as well'. When engaged in becoming better co-constructors, the case studies reported that educators experienced the following impacts:

Being an ethnographer in order to learn from the children

Enacting a pedagogy of listening to acknowledge and embrace children's voices

Increasing confidence in articulating their pedagogy and evidence for change

Focusing on seeing the competent child having culturally literate identities to connect to site learning

Engaging in pedagogical documentation to inform planning and to make learning visible.

Operationalising the abstract but vital idea of democracy in terms of working with small groups to promote greater inclusion of children's voices.

Increased confidence in co-constructive planning with children and families rather than relying on teacher directed pre-planned curriculum.

Thinking about the learning environment, resources and selves as participants in the learning process.

Using multimedia literacies and multimodal pedagogies to support children to reflect on how to make cooperation and democratic participation visible in small group work.

Many of the participating educators and sites noted how they were changing the nature of the relationships they had with families when working to connect learning to children's life-worlds and especially connecting to children's linguistic and cultural repertoires. By way of some examples:

Engaging families in the planning process enabling educators to connect the learning experiences with the life-worlds of children.

Positioning families as competent partners in the teaching and learning process, deepening connections and strengthened relationships with children and families.

Capturing oral stories and techniques to establish key Aboriginal target words and their translations.

Changing strategies from long detailed questionnaires to more informal conversation with families gave more opportunity to share;

Developing relationships with families with more empathy and respect for their parenting, rather than positioning educators as the knower of information.

**Recommendation 5**

Establish a working party to review this report with a view to refining a South Australian approach that reflects a culturally responsive framework and is inspired by the Reggio Emilia education principles that could then inform the next iteration of the DfE's early childhood policy and guidelines.

**Recommendation 6**

Review the case study material to elucidate the multitude of ways in which educators evaluate positive outcomes from their practices. Such a review has the potential to provide future policy development with a more practitioner-informed framework for determining what works in local contexts.

**4. Action research provides a modality of professional learning that supports substantial changes to the practice of early childhood educators**

As noted above, the success of this pilot study, was in part due to the modality of professional learning that we enacted, namely a whole-year action research methodology. Our action research design drew on decades of previous action research driven projects and was informed by these principles:

Convening and sustaining a professional learning community in the form of 'research roundtables' (Ladwig & White 1996);

Taking seriously the pedagogical challenges of teachers

Establishing conditions for promoting problematisation and critical reflection;

Inviting educators to read relevant research collaboratively with university researchers;

Focusing on improving theory and practice;

Fostering educator/site ownership;

Producing practitioner knowledge about what works in given contexts;

Systematically collecting and analysing evidence; and,

Commitment to building more social just settings.

When asked to reflect on this methodology, the participating educators unanimously affirmed this style of professional learning. Importantly, our action research approach assumes that educators benefit from support to enable them to redesign their own practices and this process requires strong practitioner buy-in. Our approach established a productive

dialogue between the university researchers, our provocations from a culturally responsive/Reggio Emilia inspired approach, and the existential challenges the participating educators were working with in their own unique contexts.

A whole-year action research approach that was facilitated through convening an across-site professional learning community was understood in the following ways:

Other modalities of professional learning, such as ‘one off professional development, were understood to not work well. One reason given is that such approaches do not get to undermine deeply ingrained attitudes of deficit in relation to some children, families and communities. This is very different from PD presented in one day and then being expected to implement the ideas with no follow-up and no space for reflection toward improving pedagogy.

Rethinking what it means to conduct productive action research. In the past, participants had tried to research their practice, but the version used in this project is designed to actually address site-specific pedagogical challenges. ‘Getting and analysing our own data and actually seeing those improvements now gives us self-belief we can do it on a daily basis’. ‘Real action, real research, real improvement’.

This approach provided a continuity with *Project Quattro*, that also provided a process for developing localised practices through ongoing professional learning. ‘We like this form of professional development’ because it ‘made a real difference in allowing us to investigate our localised pedagogical challenges’ and learning can be sustained over a whole year.

The approach facilitated the opportunity to really focus and apply what was learnt in workshops to the local internal challenges, rather than attempting to implement a one-size fits all ‘solution’. Participants appreciated the style of professional learning tailored to specifically improving their own pedagogies.

The action research model supported a learning process that enabled sites to grow their approach, building the capability of their staff to meet Department-mandated priorities.

Prioritising time for educators to plan, listen and reflect on the views of the children, their communities and families, to see what they bring to in terms of child rearing practices, aspirations and prior knowledges.

Some of the key practices noted as powerful included the following:

To be observers and researchers of children’s behaviour and observing their own practices.

Unpacking theory and applying that to local practice problems actually helped open up options for hopeful solutions and especially the input from the University researchers, who also facilitated focused discussion and questioning.

Being supported to reflect upon outcomes and alter our approaches and our behaviours as educators to alter the outcome for children.

Engaging in sustained and shared thinking about pedagogy with other colleagues within the site and across other sites.

Actually taking the time to learn about children's life-worlds as integral to good pedagogy.

Rethinking how to conduct parent interviews. 'And hearing about what this child does at home and what he engages in and then coming back in the room and seeing that happening'.

Challenging how we think about our middle-class assumptions and expectations around what does it mean to parent and what does that mean for children.

Keeping a reflective journal helped participants to be accountable to the learning goals and the learning growth for each of our children in this project.

Videotaping children and then engaging them in making sense of the video material.

Valuing the professional dialogue with researchers and other sites; time for thinking, time for sharing, time to go back and do something different.

Having access to resources such as TRT time that enable educators to participate in cross-site professional learning communities

One of the key challenges noted was how to sustain what was have learnt from localised professional learning and action research, and to continue to develop the changes that have been positive in this project. On this theme, many of the site leaders mentioned the struggle to devise a whole-of-school professional learning program that could scale up the action research model used in this project. This project worked intensively with two or three educators from each site, and on the basis of their success, site directors were keen for their learning to be taken up by the whole site.

#### **Recommendation 7**

DfE provide opportunities for those officers responsible for professional learning across the system to be properly briefed about an action research approach. This project adopted a professional learning community (PLC) approach that included one site leader and 2-3 educators from each site but there are other modalities that can be further developed, including a whole-of-site approach.

### **Recommendation 8**

Convene a working party of early childhood policy officers and ECE site leaders to work on devising a whole-of-site approach to professional learning through action research. This work could be developed in parallel to work on Recommendations 2 and 3. A second phase of this project could incorporate the added dimension of whole-of-site professional learning that grows out of learnings for a cross-site PLC.

## **5. Providing policy coherence is an urgent challenge to advancing a South Australian approach to early childhood education that is inspired by the principles of Reggio Emilia and culturally responsive pedagogies**

Educators and site leaders are now grappling with a regime of policy texts and demands, that often contradict each other, and certainly present implementation challenges at the site level. Early childhood educators have to work across multiple curriculum documents, are often provided with decontextualised policy ideas that require careful translation into their contexts, and are mandated to evaluate ‘good practice’ with narrowly-defined metrics that do not adequately account for the positive impacts of local practices.

A few quotes from site leaders bring some of these issues into view. One site leader discusses the significance of local context: ‘We’ve got a really complex cohort of children and families.’ Given each site has its own unique complex cohort of children then:

I think it’s really important for our early childhood colleagues, our fellow Directors and the project officers in State office to keep in mind when they’re producing resources for sites that help these processes to include culture and context that is respectful of localising pedagogy to meet and be responsive to the children families in your centre. Both Reggio Emilia education principles and CRP supported us to do that. So it needs to be a site-wide approach.

What this project also brings into view is the importance of site-based professional learning. Professional learning has been a site responsibility for decades and there is now a serious tension that plays out in this space between the demands to meet Departmental-mandated priorities, whilst also acknowledging the unique contextual features of every site. This is a challenge to sustain productive professional learning that can actually bring about pedagogical redesigns that deliver positive changes to learning outcomes. This tension is often experienced at site level as a struggle over competing priorities.

### **Recommendation 9**

DfE Officers review the coherence of the policy matrix that informs the work of early childhood site leaders and educators as a part of the process of developing the next iteration of policy.

**Recommendation 10**

There is a national consensus emerging on treaty-making in Australia that governments should productively negotiate at the level of local Aboriginal nations. Such a view is consistent with a key theme in this report; that sustainable and real reforms can only be constructed at the local level and hence demand a place-based and community development approach. Therefore, DfE commit to engage productively with the Buthera Agreement (Government of South Australia 2018) as a pilot study in policy development for improving early childhood learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

## Conclusion

The research reported here has been driven by the policy concerns of the South Australian Department for Education regarding early childhood education and a continuation of the *South Australian Collaborative Childhood Project*, which developed from the recommendations of Professor Carla Rinaldi who was the South Australian ‘Thinker in Residence’ 2012-2013. As well, this research responds to two interconnected elements: first, there is a huge discrepancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student success at school, by any measure, which is an urgent international problem; and secondly, although unevenly distributed, many Australian early childhood sites are increasingly superdiverse, yet Australian educational policy has predominantly been characterised by monocultural and monolingual conceptualisations of language and literacy in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The new thinking that is reported here recognises that ‘context’ and ‘culture’ are not background factors that can either be statistically manipulated nor put to one side completely. Mandated systems policy, and local ECE centres ‘policy and practice are in fact shot through with assumptions about ‘culture’. More to the point, every child who attends ECE centres brings with them cultural knowledge and experiences. Their sense of self is fundamentally imprinted by the cultural practices of their own families and communities. The trouble arises when there is a dissonance between the cultural assumptions of ECE centres and the culture children bring with them through the gates. As noted in the case studies, the participating educators understood this problem and have reported how they have gone about responding. Whilst this is a small study, and we need to be careful about any generalisable claims, the case studies do demonstrate that when early childhood educators attempt to work with a culturally responsive approach inspired by the Reggio Emilia education principles, there are various forms of positive impact on children, families and educators.

Put simply, when ECE centres enact learner-centred, place-based and whole child approaches that involve strong versions of listening and responding to children’s voices, a more engaging and rigorous learning experience is more likely to develop. Importantly for this report, this shift in practice does keep Aboriginal children engaged in learning. CRP and the principles from the Reggio Emilia education project have provided educators with a framework for differentiation to address learner differences that potentially addresses the disparity in achievement for Aboriginal and CALD children, when compared with their peers. Culturally responsive pedagogies have the potential to provide educators with capacities and confidence to design effective pedagogies that are driven by children’s strengths rather than deficits. Importantly also, the positive impact demonstrated in this study was enabled by the adoption of an action research modality of professional development that provided a space for educators to redesign complex practices in a supportive professional learning community.





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## About the authors

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One of Australia's most respected Aboriginal educationalists, Professor Rigney belongs to the Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Nations of South Australia. He is an expert on Aboriginal and minority education of the Pacific. He is also a Scientific Committee member for the Foundation Reggio Children Centro Loris Malaguzzi. He led several Australian Research Council funded and other competitive grants including: *Indigenist Research Epistemologies a Historical Journey of Conviction, Contradiction and Transformation*; *Addressing the Gap between Policy and Implementation: Strategies for Improving Educational Outcomes of Indigenous Students*; and *Towards an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy*.

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**Anne Morrison** has been casually employed as a research assistant in the School of Education, University of South Australia, since completing her doctoral studies in 2008. She has worked on numerous projects covering diverse themes including Citizen science, Religion studies, University outreach, and Indigenous knowledges. She currently provides research support to Professors Rigney and Hattam on an Australian Research Council project entitled *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*.



## Appendices

### Indicative interview questions

#### *Site leaders - initial interview*

1. Please give a short biography of how you became a site leader.
2. Please describe how the Reggio Emilia approach influences your site and your educators.
3. How do you understand the key challenges for educators at your site?
4. What challenges, if any, do the Aboriginal and CALD learners present at your site?
5. How does the site work with Aboriginal and CALD parents?
6. What strategies has the site put in place to improve the learning experiences of Aboriginal and CALD children?
7. What evidence do you have that these strategies are working or not?
8. In what ways have you worked on site culture to improve the learning experiences for Aboriginal and CALD children?
9. How does the site use professional development to improve the learning experience for Aboriginal and CALD children?
10. Has the site culture changed during the past few years – if so in what ways?
11. What do you think are the features of a ‘good’ learning environment for Aboriginal and CALD children?

#### *Site leaders - post action research*

1. The site has been involved in this CRP/RE action research project for 1 year now. What are your reflections on the project outcomes in terms of:
  - Site culture to improve the learning experiences of Aboriginal and CALD children?
  - Classroom practice to improve the learning experiences of Aboriginal and CALD children?
  - Site engagement with Aboriginal and CALD parents and Community?
  - The learning environment and experiences of Aboriginal and CALD children?
  - Site engagement with Aboriginal Elders?
2. This project aimed to integrate principles from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach in order to improve the learning experiences of

Aboriginal and CALD children. What opportunities and challenges arose as a result of this project?

3. If you were to continue the action research project, what would you do differently? What would you suggest that the researchers do differently?
4. Going forward, might this learning be incorporated into whole site professional learning?
5. What are the implications for site planning?
6. What does the project mean for educational leadership at the site?
7. What further resources would help you enact culturally responsive pedagogies at this site?

### ***Educators - post action research***

1. Please give us a short biography of how you became an early learning educator.
2. Please describe how the Reggio Emilia approach influences you as an educator.
3. Prior to this project, what professional development had you received in terms of the Reggio Emilia approach?
4. Prior to this project, what professional development had you received in terms of working with Aboriginal and CALD children?
5. What aspect(s) of your practice did you examine as part of the project?
6. What (if anything) happened for the Aboriginal and CALD children as consequence of your action research?
7. What (if anything) happened for *all* of the children as consequence of your action research?
8. Has your participation in this project changed you as an educator?
9. Has the project changed the way you relate to your colleagues?
10. Has the project changed the way you relate to Aboriginal and CALD parents?
11. How might this project impact on your future practice?
12. What are the implications for the site as a result of the project?
13. How did the site support your action research?
14. This project aimed to integrate principles from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach in order to improve the learning experiences of Aboriginal and CALD children. What opportunities and challenges arose from this integration?
15. If you were to continue the action research project, what would you do differently? What would you suggest that the researchers do differently?



## Action Research Planning Template: Redesigning pedagogy, curriculum and practice

| Term 1                      | Term 2  | Term 3                                 | Term 4             |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--------------------|
| Provocation and orientation | Curriculum projects and design of action research | Doing some action research (3-5 weeks) | What did we learn? |

### Informed Questions

#### Topic or issue of significance

Describe a topic or issue of interest and significance to you and your context.

What are your challenges?

Why is this important to children's learning?

#### Multiple perspectives and/or hopeful ideas

Explore multiple perspectives pertaining to this topic.

What does the current Reggio and/or CRP literature say about this topic or issue?

What are the perspectives of your colleagues, families, community, children, specialists?

### Research questions

Based on your topic of interest or issues and understandings gained from multiple perspectives, describe the aspect of your pedagogy you will focus on.

What will be the focus of your research?

What questions do you have?

## Planning for Action Research

### Data collection and analysis

Describe the methods you will use to explore your research question(s)

| What methods will you use?   | What data sources will you use?   | What will you be looking for?  |
|--|---|--|
| e.g. Observations<br>Participant observations<br>Interviews<br>Documentation | e.g. Reflective journal<br>Video, audio, photographs<br>Interview transcripts<br>Time event sampling<br>Running records<br>Children's work samples/<br>artefacts<br>Pedagogical documentation<br>Check list<br>questionnaires | e.g. Uniqueness<br>Patterns<br>Frequency<br>Evidence of learning<br>Evidence of change |
|  |   |  |

### Timeline, roles and responsibilities

If you are working in teams, discuss the roles and responsibilities associated with this research.

|  | Data collection | Data analysis | Reflection |
|--|-----------------|---------------|------------|
| Who will be involved and what action will they take? |                 |               |            |
| When will this take place?                           |                 |               |            |
| Where will this happen?                              |                 |               |            |

