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Bottling the good stuff: stories of successful pre-schooling in a multi-racial regional town.

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Introduction

Earlier this year we began an ethnographic study based at a multi-racial kindergarten in a regional town in South Australia. This project arose out of discussions with the department of education and children’s services (DECS) district director who had identified this kindergarten as exemplary in regards to student learning and community engagement. The director invited us to undertake some work into what makes this kindergarten successful while other educational sites in the town had been identified as facing some significant challenges around issues related to race, class and poor educational outcomes for certain identifiable groups of children. Another person had described the town as being “a racial powder keg just waiting to go off” and said that educational sites in the town were hotspots for community tensions. The district director’s vision was that the study may elicit some ideas on how to transfer what works at this site to other educational sites in the town. She said she wanted to ‘bottle the good stuff’. Subsequent to this discussion we began conversations at the kindergarten and it became clear that the staff were equally as interested in sharing their stories. We formally commenced what will be a five year ethnographic study in the second part of this year.

The site for the ethnographic study is a kindergarten of 61 children, approximately half of whom are Aboriginal. The teaching team is headed by a non-Indigenous
director, Auntie Lyn, and is made up of six regular teachers (three of whom are Aboriginal and three who are non-Indigenous) as well as a number of support staff who come to the kindergarten for a variety of reasons.

As ethnographers the work we do involves listening, observing and attempting to describe what we have seen and heard. We then interpret the findings before offering explanations. The process is lengthy and involves a considerable amount of discussion with participants. These discussions include negotiations around interpretations and explanations. The paper presented today represents preliminary thoughts on some themes arising from early observations.

In our conversations with the staff at the kindergarten (director and teachers) we have so far identified three broad themes that interlock to create a picture of what makes this kindergarten successful. These themes are:

1) Structural issues
2) Curriculum issues
3) Relationships

Some of the structural issues relate to governance and leadership styles (working as a whole), funding regimes (especially the tussle over responsibility for funding between state and commonwealth which consistently disadvantages kindergartens), staffing, and approaches to the maintenance of the kindergarten (eg bus with no driver or petrol, physical buildings, use of the land space).

Curriculum issues relate to engagement, participation and continuity, the kindergarten having few rules, children being able to learn at their own pace, learning that starts
where kids are at, learning that is contextual and incidental/opportunistic (eg the nit under microscope story).

In this paper we will focus on some of the issues relating to the third theme of relationships. It is with some reticence that we use the term ‘relationships’ because it has overtones of the ‘interpersonal’ as though what is at issue is reduced or located entirely within discrete individuals and what goes on between them. However, in this paper we use “relationships” to signify negotiations between individuals as well as negotiations of individuals and groups both within, and with, social and cultural contexts.

In particular we will address two aspects of relationships which have become significant in our conversations and observations: hospitality and yarnin’.

**Hospitality – the importance of invitation and the anticipation of visitation**

The staff at the kindergarten work actively to create a homely atmosphere that is not just about warmth and openness but the careful management of relationships so that the dignity of all is maintained. This homely atmosphere includes, in the first instance, hospitality. Families are *invited* to attend and welcomed when they arrive. This invitation can be either structural or personal. It is structural in terms of a general openness to pre-school children that marks the State administered kindergarten sector which provides both general and inclusive programs for all pre-school aged children. And it is personal in terms of the stories that circulate throughout the community about this particular kindergarten.
This form of hospitality is a hospitality of invitation. It has a long history at the kindergarten. Indeed we had heard stories before we commenced the fieldwork of an Aboriginal Early Childhood teacher who would stand at the fence and call out to Aboriginal mothers as they walked past and ask them to come and bring their children to the kindergarten. At that time, the kindergarten was very middle-class and very few aboriginal mothers were bringing their children. There was a general feeling of mistrust for institutions within the community, not least educational institutions.

However, this hospitality of invitation was not the only form of hospitality that is practiced. There is also strong evidence of a hospitality of visitation. That is, an openness to receive whoever, and whatever, comes into the kindergarten. It is this form of hospitality that marks the kindergarten and its staff as so different to many other educational sites.

“Here there’s a welcoming attitude. The parents love to come in and get involved. They are made to feel welcome. At no other kindy I’ve worked at do I see parents come in and have a chat or a cup of coffee. But here they do. At other places parents only come at pick up and drop off time and they barely speak to staff but here everyone knows each other and they chat. Some parents will pop in just to say hi or have a cuppa even when they have no other reason.” (Sharon, Staff member)

“We have a sense of whole community. We see [the children’s] brothers and sisters and we say hello. Saying hello is important.” (Auntie Georgie, Staff member)

Many of the families who come with their children are Aboriginal, but also, many families show signs of struggling with mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, family violence and poverty. Indeed, the staff at this kindergarten are active in
embracing whoever comes regardless of the state they come in and what they come with.

“We have good families. They are troubled families but they are good families.” (Auntie Georgie, Staff member)

We heard the story of one mother who telephoned the kindergarten in some distress because she had been trying to enrol her child into one of the other kindergartens in the town and had been told that there ‘were no spaces available’. The mother was worried she would be unable to enrol her child anywhere. When Auntie Lyn spoke to her it quickly became apparent that she was struggling with more than trying to locate a place for her child. Auntie Lyn invited her to the kindergarten for a yarn. While talking she told Auntie Lyn she had schizophrenia and was struggling with a variety of issues. The child was enrolled and the family embraced.

“When you enrol a child, you actually enrol a family” (Auntie Lyn)

After telling this mother there were no spaces for her child and she should look elsewhere the other kindergarten subsequently enrolled other children. For Auntie Lyn this repeated a pattern with which she had become familiar – parents who come with problems, that is ‘problem parents’, are better avoided and moved on. However, middleclass decorum requires a legitimate reason for moving people on. In this story the reason given was no more space but ‘problem parents’ are viewed as best avoided because they take time, emotional labour and different kinds of resources to those the centres are accustomed to providing. This is a form of hospitality which is conditional. It is a form of hospitality that requires the guest meet a set of predefined standards. It is a hospitality determined through hegemonic cultural norms that circumscribes who or what is permissible, who or what is welcome. It is an exclusive
and exclusionary form of hospitality that never places the hosts at risk of becoming hostage to those who cross the threshold of their kindergarten.

However, the issue of ‘problem parents’ is not as simple as the easily applied solutions tend to suggest. There are commonalities to who comes to occupy the subject position of ‘problem parent’. ‘Problem parents’ are often aboriginal and/or poor and/or dealing with a range of complex health and family issues. They often suffer from issues associated with dislocation in a variety of forms. As people with complex issues they enter the kindergarten and are able to locate themselves within a community. The hospitality to these families extends beyond their immediate connection with the kindergarten, that is, the relationships that are developed at the site are deep and extend beyond the time that a particular child attends the kindergarten. The hospitality that is practiced is not a temporary or fleeting offer with an expiry date but is long-term and heavily invested in.

“People even call from other town/cities to touch base with the kindy staff and update them on their lives or ask for advice or assistance. The kindy often know the life circumstances of large numbers of extended family members connected to the kindy. These relationships are maintained despite families changing shape and moving physical location.” (field journal)

As Auntie Sally told us, the staff at the kindergarten ‘worry about them (the children and the families) long after they’ve moved on from the kindy’. The responsibilities of the hospitality practiced at this kindergarten are responsibilities which are not bounded by time or physical location – they are responsibilities of connections to people and communities.
One of the ways that hospitality is established and maintained is through the rich cultural practice of yarnin’.

Yarnin’– the importance of knowing/telling/hearing stories

“We say yarnin’. Professionals say its building community capacity”

(Auntie Lyn, director of kindergarten)

In our conversations it became apparent that the staff at the kindergarten value the practice of yarnin’. Yarnin’ is an Aboriginal English term that indicates informal but meaningful conversation. It is about sitting together and sharing stories, histories, advice, laughter, tears, and implies both active speaking and active listening. It is more than telling or retelling stories (personal stories, family stories, community stories) it is a transactional activity that involves negotiation and trust. It is democratic insofar as the stories are offered but there is no compulsion to accept or act on what is spoken. However, through yarnin’ relationships, and indeed communities, are built and reinforced. Yarnin’ in a space in which thoughts and ideas can be shared and tested without shame. In this paper ‘shame’ is used with both its Standard Australian English meanings and its Aboriginal English meanings, that is, it refers to feelings of disracle, being ashamed, embarrassment, and, humiliation, but also concepts of individual and collective dignity, community and family identity, ‘fractured relationships’ and ‘broken connections’.

Yarnin’ at the kindergarten happens in different ways, at different times and between different people. Some of it is structured and planned but most of it happens as a matter of course throughout the day. It occurs amongst the staff group, between staff and families, amongst families, between the staff and children, and, amongst the
children. Yarnin’ functions to inform others of one another’s stories, to teach selves and others, and to reduce shame. Auntie Lyn told us that the staff ‘know each others stories’. They see this as equally as important as knowing the stories of the families and the specific stories of the children at the kindergarten. Time and again the staff emphasised to us that knowing the stories and the histories of children, families and their communities is crucial to being able to meet the educational needs of those children and their families.

“I understand my children – I know their stories and their backgrounds” (Auntie Lyn)

“we know the stories of the families” (Aunty Georgie)

Knowing each other’s stories was emphasised as important because of the way it enabled the building of a deep understanding and trust amongst the staff group. Indeed, on our observations, we noticed that the depth of connection amongst the staff group meant that there was an implicit understanding and anticipation of one another’s needs (emotional as well as professional). The staff make a conscious commitment to connect and re-connect, with each other and everyone else associated to the kindergarten through storying their lives.

“Auntie Kate came to work late and not feeling well. Auntie Lyn greeted her with an extended hug.” (Field journal)

“On another occasion Auntie Kate came to work with a headache. Auntie Georgie sat and yarned with her and used pressure points on her hands to try and relieve the pain” (field journal)

Yarnin’ assists the group in remaining strong. Through yarnin’ the knowledge and wisdom of the elders in the community is shared and utilised. The younger women
speak to the nannas who listen closely before speaking themselves and the younger women listen in turn.

“A mum with tiny baby in arms came in looking distressed. Went into corner to chat with Auntie Lyn and Auntie Georgie. Got hugs and a long chat. Left looking happier.” (Field journal)

At the kindergarten there is an explicit understanding that silence is linked to shame. Yarnin’ breaks the cycle of silence and shame through acknowledging that difficult issues need to be confronted and solutions worked out in supportive networks. As Auntie Lyn told us ‘we take the shame away’ and that ‘parents deserve the truth. If there’s issues there we deal with them’. The staff told us that families appreciate their honesty even on traumatic occasions when mandatory reports have to be made. Auntie Lyn said that she makes a practice of having a yarn with the relevant family so that they understand why it has been necessary to seek additional support. Doing this allows the kindergarten staff to continue supporting the family beyond the report. Indeed, one of the fathers commented to Auntie Lyn after a yarn of this nature that ‘communication is the key’.

Staff at the kindergarten work hard to ensure there is no shame attached to any personal, community or family situation. Even very difficult issues are approached openly and with honesty and good spirit. Families are never embarrassed or humiliated by the staff irrespective of what situation is occurring and needs to be dealt with. For instance, Auntie Lyn told of the time she spoke to one dad who collected his children regularly in the family car but who also sometimes drank too much. She approached him and said ‘if I think you’ve maybe had a few too many drinks do you
mind if I drive you and the kids home?’ and dad was fine with that. She approached
this issue matter of factly, she did not cast aspersions on his parenting skills or his
commitment to his children, she approached the situation from a care and safety
perspective. She did not embarrass the father with her knowledge of his drinking
habits and was not judgemental about his choices. She treated him with respect. There
was no shame in the yarning’. This commitment to ‘no shame yarning’ is practiced in
all manner of situations at the kindergarten. Staff told us of the kindy’s approach to
nits as a way of exemplifying this practice.

Sharon: everything here is open. For example we talk about nits. No shame. Kids get
a treatment. They talk about it and it’s okay.
Auntie Georgie: it started because one of our grannies who is blind and old and
looking after a number of kids. One of the kids got nits but granny couldn’t see to do
the treatment. Lyn noticed and so we said to granny do you mind if we give them (the
kid) a treatment. She was so relieved and said oh that would be lovely thanks. So we
did and other families saw us doing the treatment and asked if we could do their kid
too. And so we did. And no one is shamed. No one felt embarrassed or had to hide the
fact that there were nits. It was a fact and it was being treated. End of story. That’s
how we do things here.

Many educational sites put up barriers that stop children succeeding. Children become
identified as ‘problem children’ without questions ever being asked about why they
behave in the ways they do. Auntie Lyn and Auntie Georgie said that they often feel
frustrated when children who have been successful at kindergarten transition to school
and are swiftly labelled ‘problem children’ or ‘failures’. They see that knowing the
child’s story and the families’ background is important in being able to tailor a learning environment to suit the child and the community from which they come. We were told the story of one child who was repeatedly being ‘excluded’ from school after having been successful in the kindergarten. Auntie Lyn was asked to investigate the cycle of behaviour and consequence by his frustrated mother. Auntie Lyn asked the school ‘Do you know Luke’s story?’ Not all educational sites understand the significance of knowing the stories of the children, their families and communities. In the busy-ness of their days they tend to live in the eternal now so they are constantly dealing with immediate. So in Luke’s situation the school is identifying behaviour that is inappropriate or unsafe and that in the overcrowded day quickly dealing with such behaviour becomes the paramount priority. Finding time for a yarn where the ‘bigger picture’ can emerge is often difficult and once a cycle of misbehaviour and punishment has begun so too has a cycle of mistrust and shame. Into this context stories about complex lives and personal circumstances can be (mis)read by educational sites as excuses for inappropriate behaviour rather than as root causes.

Often situations involving complex families and their children are treated like individualised instances of inappropriateness rather than as symptomatic of structural challenges. It is this individualised approach then creates shame as it locates inappropriateness in the choices of individuals who ‘should know better’ and who ought to be punished for their bad decision-making. Yarnin’ however, breaks the cycle of individualised shame and problem because it flattens out the power structures where we share stories – put them ‘out there’ to be shared, talked about/through and to negotiate solutions collectively rather than look for excuses or ways to blame people. For instance, the staff recounted a story about a time they had observed
children gathering leaves from a tree in the garden and then performing elaborate procedures with found objects such as a length of discarded hosepipe. The staff sat with the children and asked them to explain what they were doing. The children explained that they were ‘mullin’ the yarndie’, that is, preparing marijuana for smoking through a bong. The children were imitating, through play, tasks performed by adults in their lives\(^1\). Auntie Lyn had taken a photograph of the children playing ‘mullin’ the yarndie’ which she took with her on a home visit. Over a cuppa she showed the photograph to the mother of the children and they had a yarn about what happened. Auntie Lyn said that the yarmin’ was without shame - she did not go to accuse the mother of being negligent or of behaving inappropriately but to share with her a story about her children. Through yarmin’ they were able to share ideas about how families can manage boundaries around adult choices and behaviours that are positive for children to imitate. It was also a time to share pride in the observational skills, technological abilities, and resourcefulness of these children – factors that in other contexts may have been overshadowed by the ‘inappropriateness’ of their chosen play.

**Conclusion**

What is the good stuff that makes this kindergarten successful in a context where other educational sites are not? What is it that needs to be bottled? What can be bottled?

When we began the project we were a little concerned because we thought that perhaps we’d find out that the ‘good stuff’ was about individual people or individual combinations of people – in which case you cannot bottle people! Stories that

\(^1\) The staff asked the children ‘who can smoke yarndie? Can kids smoke yarndie?’ the children responded with scorn saying ‘nooooo, only grown ups can’.
circulated about the kindergarten in the community attributed much of the success to Auntie Lyn and her influence. While we argue that Auntie Lyn and her team are important we argue that is more than just people (even specific people) it is also about choices they make and actions they take. Therefore we argue ways of interacting, ways of building relationships, approaches to curriculum and ways of negotiating structural issues are things that can be ‘bottled’. With specific reference to this paper, we argue that practicing both a hospitality of invitation and a hospitality of visitation, and practicing yarnin’, are identifiable practices that can be bottled and shared amongst educational sites.
way in which family is configured in indigenous communities which enables the staff
to be aunties and uncles – family is big

V: most previous directors have been fairly superficial in connecting with community

Vicky talking about mim: good heart, good listener, carer. Good with our community
and all people – she likes to meet their needs.

One mum left her 2 year old in her pusher and left the kindy for over an hour or so.
Toddler welcomed and joined in with kindy activities and had great fun.

M: Parents deserve the truth. If there’s issues we’ll deal with them

M: How do you share stories and still preserve the dignity of the family?
M: I understand my children – their lives. The only stories I don’t tell are those I’m
asked not to.
M: Have to hear the story rather than defend yourself. (said about the mum who complained about the unattended water left outside. Found out that she had a child who had died, while also having the child with autism)

M: Have to know those stories to be sensitive to their truths even though they may not be yours

M: Viewed as tricky parents but you’ve got to work past that

Mim had an incident with a parent who came to see her in a threatening manner. She ended up meeting with both parents and they “sat and yarnd” and the father said see “communication is the key”.

Knowing the stories of the families is because it’s ‘more than just data’ (M)

M: You have to have relationships the whole way round.

Addy: We worry [about what happens to their kids when they leave kindy and beyond]

They’ve invested in the relationships.

Work through issues.

Addy (about work with previous director): Voice wasn’t always heard
M: We speak openly and honestly

Mim (about Vicki): she found her voice. Normally she hides… so proud of her …

element of no fear.

Veronica (previous director) had alienated the staff

Addy: Didn’t know if we could trust her … she was always in her office with the door
closed … She would make an appearance when parents were here … had a profile

Didn’t interact with Vicki and Addy

Director was destructive to the indigenous community

Addy: I was a nobody

Director wouldn’t want to know certain (nunga) people.

M: Parents appreciate the truth more than the pain of finding out later

M: Share lots of stories – not just the dilemmas but the good stuff

M: Confront those things

Being open to hear stories – openness comes with challenges because people feel free
and comfortable to tell very intimate details about their lives and their families to the
staff. Sharing stories becomes important amongst the staff group because it allows for
a debriefing
Knowing stories allows the kindy to best create a good environment that meets the needs of the children (they feel frustrated when the children go to school and the same environments are not created – and the children suffer in a variety of ways)

Understanding how stories shape relationships (eg mistrust of systems)

Will share many of the families’ stories except those been asked not to reveal (but this does not mean mandatory reporting is neglected)

One of the stories of the kindy is that they are always open about doing reporting. This is never hidden from the relevant families – they don’t have to imagine who made the report – staff sit them down for a yarn about why they made the report – most families accept this and the report rarely impinges on further relationship between them

Kindy ensure there is no shame attached to any personal, community or family situation. Even very difficult issues are approached openly and with honesty and good spirit. Families are never embarrassed or humiliated by the staff irrespective of what situation is occurring and needs to be dealt with. Eg drink driving situation when mim said to the dad ‘if I think you’ve maybe had a few too many drinks do you mind if I drive you and the kids home?’ and dad was fine with that. Eg nit treatments at the kindy
Follow up quote about ‘to speak a true word…

Theme 2: Nukkin Race

M: I’m white

V: yes, you’re white thru and thru

(all laugh together)

V: Nah, you’re not. You’re Nunga too!’

DECS poster on wall:
Priority Areas for Aboriginal Education

Educational equality for Aboriginal children and students will be achieved by matching high expectations with excellent teaching and learning practice.

DECS will measure success and ensure accountability in the following areas:

- Aboriginal involvement in decision making
- Early childhood
- Literacy & Numeracy
- Attendance & Retention
- Aboriginal Languages
- Culturally inclusive Curriculum
- Aboriginal Employment

Make the difference

Spirit disappears when measure against white system.

‘Nunga Time’ and ‘Nunga Ways’ – guide many of the decisions and ways of doing things at the kindy
Mim (about Vicki): she found her voice. Normally she hides… so proud of her … element of no fear.

Veronica (previous director) had alienated the staff

Addy: Didn’t know if we could trust her … she was always in her office with the door closed … She would make an appearance when parents were here … had a profile

Didn’t interact with Vicki and Addy

Director was destructive to the indigenous community

Addy: I was a nobody

Director wouldn’t want to know certain (nunga) people.

Addy: She could never be an Aunty. She never was and never will be. … Mim was Aunty from the word go. … Mim slotted in – she was the same as us. You can tell.

Addy: Something about her [previous director] could never make her an Aunty

Addy: Can’t train another one up like Aunty Mim

Veronica (previous director) never trusted Aunty Vicki and vice-versa.

M: She could blame her community and alleviate blame on herself. … She hid behind her community and blamed her Nunga staff and let them live in a world of silence.

Addy: What did we know
Barbara: Why did you stay?

Addy: I needed a job. Aunty Vicki was here. We did more with the kids than she ever did.

No way they could have left their community in the hands of Veronica.

Addy: Parents appreciate what we do.

M: Our kids deserve the best … Kitchen was atrocious … Said to Aunty Vicki – first thing is to clean up the yard because it’s representative of a Nunga community. …

She said “thank you so much” because that is what they wanted.

Not about Nunga community – about leadership.

M: How do you get rid of the whiteness? … Change the lens … I removed barriers and learned.

When talking to a child Mim said she said “what if we just had all red fruit? … We’re all different colours and that’s what makes the world beautiful.”

“leave your Aboriginality at the gate” – 2 former directors.
Mim: one of the things that frustrates me is when people say in meetings ‘there’s no racism in my school’. Of course there is. It’s how you manage it. I want to talk to you about this more one day because I think it’s also tied in with leadership styles. You’ll see that at some of the other sites where the leaders act and speak like beaurecras. It really doesn’t work’

Mim: we sit in meetings with staff from XX school in MB who say ‘there’s no racism in our place’. But we know different – there is. They just won’t acknowledge it.

‘Nunga Ways’ – Mim treats these like policy that guide her decision making. Be creative about DECS rules.

M: we have to balance our pride with feeling like the monkeys in the zoo – ‘let’s go look at the Nunga kids at the kindy’!

Aunty Vicky had a story about how DECS ‘doesn’t look after their kids’

Year 5 Indigenenous kid didn’t get along with classroom teacher. AEW overheard teacher implying to the child that he should kill himself. AEW went through correct procedeure for complaints because she wanted to ‘assist both the kid and the teacher’. But the department made the AEW feel at fault for not doing an alternative grievance
procedeu. Kid put in the same class the following year despite parent request that this not occur. The child was withdrawn from school to attend a private school at some distance away.

M: there is such a white head set in the department around Aboriginal education – people say the right things but they don’t’ DO the right thing. Here, we practice what we preach.

Kindy under mim has included a focus on Ngurrendjiri culture and language but used to have it as a subject now they integrate it whenever possible esp language. Nukkin (look) ‘cross your legs’ ‘sit on your bottom’ ‘listen’

M: why aren’t AEWs in kindies yet?

V: I don’t understand the different funding schemes for kindies and schools

M: I don’t think we could achieve what we have without indigenous staff but what are DECS doing for the next layer after Aunty Vicky and Aunty Addy? Nothing. Nothing. (shakes head in angry disbelief)

V: there’s no succession planning. No one to continue the work.
V: white people don’t think I’m the teacher

M: they think Aboriginal people are just the assistants

V: we run a very inclusive centre not a white centre

V: 15 years ago MB Sth was very upper middle class kindy – cleaners, gardners, 2 fulltime staff, only one aboriginal child. It was very, very structured. We never laughed in this place. We never met with parents – only the director was allowed to met them.

Aunty Vicky used to wave at Aboriginal families who would walk past the fence and she’d invite them to send their kids to kindy

Over the years the kindy became lower income, more indigenous kids, pre-school support for kids with extra needs, stream of short term directors

V: one director hadn’t met an Aboriginal person before. She was brought in to fix the problem (low enrolments)
much more the observational stage of the process from our perspective and where things are interpreted this is done so from the participants’ point of view rather than emerging through an engagement with theory which is the next stage of the ethnographic process. As such, this paper represents a work in progress.