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WORKING PRODUCTIVELY *with* INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: MUNGULLAH BEST START PLAYGROUP

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■ Abstract

In this paper, we discuss and analyse the development of a resource documenting an Indigenous early childhood playgroup programme. The resource, known as the "Best Start DVD" was developed through a partnership between community and government support agencies to support engagement of parents as educators of their children. Through analysis of the development process and the product, we provide commentary on our learning regarding working successfully in partnerships with Indigenous communities. Additionally, we discuss what we learned about influences on Indigenous parents' engagement as educators of their children.

■ Introduction

The Best Start Playgroup is part of the Mungullah community located in Carnarvon, Western Australia, approximately 1500km north of Perth, the State capital. Carnarvon is a remote coastal town with a population of approximately 7000 of which 15% are Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). The main industries are pastoral, mining and fishing. The Mungullah Aboriginal community of around 150 residents is located on the outskirts of the town. The Best Start Playgroup is part of the State Health Department's Early Years Strategy (Department of Health, 2006) that provides services for young Aboriginal children with a view to improving their life opportunities. Preparation for school is a particular focus, and ownership and involvement of parents and the wider community are viewed as essential to the sustainability and success of the programme.

The focus and underlying approach to the Best Start Playgroup reflect research that informs quality early childhood practice for Aboriginal children (Butterworth & Candy, 1998; Cleary, 2005; Fasoli & Ford, 2001; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2001; Windisch et al., 2003). Issues encapsulated in this body of research are reiterated in the findings of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey *Improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal children and young people* (Zubrick et al., 2006, p. vii), in which it is stated that:

Re-engaging Aboriginal parents and caregivers as educators of their children in the first five years of life is critical if there is to be a strong relationship between home and school that can be utilised to develop common understandings, shared knowledge and mutual support in developing approaches to improving educational attainment. Aboriginal parents have always valued education. They want their children to succeed in mainstream education and have the same employment opportunities as other Australian children whilst retaining their cultural integrity.

It is evident from the research that there are clear priorities in working productively with Indigenous

communities. Key to the development of the resource we discuss in this paper are priorities in relation to Indigenous early childhood education, re-engaging parents as educators, improving achievement of educational standards and retaining cultural integrity. These have informed the approach to the development of the Best Start DVD and the remainder of this paper is structured around a discussion of each of these priorities.

Development of the DVD was funded by the Aboriginal Education and Training Council of Western Australia (AETC). The Council is accountable to the Minister for Education and Training and responsible for providing policy advice on issues related to Aboriginal education and training and a forum for Aboriginal members to determine issues and provide advice to the Minister on policy directions. Funding was provided by the AETC on the basis that the DVD would document and support further development of the Mungullah Best Start Playgroup as well as provide a resource to support the establishment of other similar playgroups in Aboriginal communities. Funding also was provided to support capacity-building in the Mungullah community during the production of the DVD.

■ Methodology

We approached the gathering of suitable content for the resource from a naturalistic stance. We provided a digital video camera and some basic training to the playgroup members and then invited them to film aspects of the programme that they thought were important. We gave no restrictions or requirements as to the amount or type of activities we were seeking, since authentic documentation of the programme was our aim. After a few months, we had received several hours of footage from the community. We viewed this footage in its entirety and selected vignettes that reflected the major themes arising from what the parents had filmed. Links with existing early childhood pedagogical theory were then derived from the instances filmed by playgroup participants.

The major segments of the DVD then arose from a deductive process of identifying themes and selecting appropriate relevant footage recorded by the community. To identify the themes we viewed approximately 15 hours of footage and grouped segments according to activity type. It became clear that there were sections of footage that depicted particular dimensions of the playgroup programme and these were used as central organisers in the development of the final product. Additional footage recorded by a film crew was taken only to enhance the quality of vision, not to alter content or set up contrived scenarios. Interviews conducted at this time were also recorded and used in the final resource. Interviews were conducted as conversations in which

the researcher and some of the parents talked about why families were involved in the playgroup, what benefits they thought might derive from having their children involved in the programme and what hopes and aspirations they had for their children.

The final product includes the following chapters each several minutes in length:

1. The importance of play
2. Playing outdoors
3. Going to school
4. Making cubbies
5. Health and hygiene
6. Playdough
7. Outings

Details of how we developed each of these segments and made connections to learning outcomes are outlined later in the paper.

■ Making the links: Indigenous early childhood education

The importance of the early years in education, especially for children in disadvantaged social groups, cannot be underestimated. It is documented internationally that high quality programmes for children prior to starting school yield significant, beneficial, long-term outcomes for those children (MCEETYA, 2001; Zubrick et al., 2006). Education systems are in a unique position to effect change in life outcomes for Indigenous people. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1998, p. 157) noted the potential of early childhood education to influence life outcomes of Aboriginal people stating that:

An encouraging and supportive introduction to school is an imperative for all Aboriginal children. Preschool programs which act as a 'bridge' to full participation in formal schooling have been identified as an important way of increasing the chances of educational success ... the major advantage of preschool education is its potential to foster in Aboriginal children the emergence of educational and other skills that will enhance the probability of their success in subsequent stages of schooling.

By engaging in play-based programmes in the early years, children are able to practice important skills, which form the basis of life-long learning (Wood & Attfield, 2005). When children play, they learn how to operate with others independently and cooperatively, achieve goals, master difficult tasks through practice, develop their imagination and creativity, describe and communicate ideas, negotiate meanings, represent their thoughts and explore relationships. As educators and joint developers of this resource, we felt it was crucial for ongoing impact and relevance, for us to

articulate the types of learning children could engage in through the various forms of structured and unstructured play featured in the footage.

To accomplish this, an accompanying facilitator's guide to the DVD was developed. The guide explains pedagogical and theoretical interpretations of some of the play episodes documented in the various segments of the programme. Written in plain language, it is intended that the guide be accessible to a wide audience for training and development purposes. In the printed guide, included inside the DVD cover, we also provide some suggestions for ways in which further ideas might be generated in a group or training environment. We felt that raising awareness of the educational impact of play experiences might encourage parents to value play as an important dimension of children's learning, which enhances their transition to more formal learning at school.

■ Re-engaging parents as educators

Partnerships between schools and communities are crucial to educational success for students. In particular, many Indigenous students and their families have been subject to a "deficit model" of parent engagement, whereby schooling has attempted to provide a compensatory role for lack of desirable parent involvement at the school level. The *Partners for success* programme in Queensland noted in the implementation plan that:

The failure of past initiatives to substantially improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is in large measure a failure of schools to work in partnership with communities, to acknowledge the critical role played by parents in their children's education, and to respond in both sensitive and practical ways to the cultural and social contexts of diverse communities (Education Queensland, 2000, p. 19).

Hence, the Best Start project documented on DVD provides a resource to assist in bridging the gap between schools and Indigenous communities by giving parents a "voice" about their aspirations for their children's schooling.

Zubrick et al. (2006, p. 9) highlighted the need for schools to "engage carers and communities to break the cycle of the transfer of educational disadvantage between generations". In particular, they recommended that education systems should, "set strategic directions to address the disengagement and alienation from schools of carers of Aboriginal children in order to improve their involvement in their child's educational progress and their capacity to support their child's schooling" (Zubrick et al., 2006, p. 9). In this context, re-engagement

is important because traditional approaches to education of children have been altered as a result of the progressive colonisation of Australia (Cleary, 2005; Zubrick et al., 2006). In more recent years social policy has, for some Indigenous people, resulted in welfare dependence and the perception that their children will receive all their education from the institution of the school (Cleary, 2005). In addition, many Aboriginal parents have negative perceptions of school as a result of their own experiences (Bourke et al. 2000; Zubrick et al., 2006). Re-engagement of parents and caregivers is, therefore, essential to breaking the cycle of dependence on the institution of the school as the only valid source of education.

Best Start Playgroup is a programme that engages parents as the first educators of their children by encouraging ownership and involvement by parents, caregivers and the wider community in its ongoing development and implementation (Department of Health, 2006). The playgroup was initially coordinated by a non-Aboriginal woman whose role was to establish the playgroup and to train an Indigenous parent to be a point of liaison between the coordinator and the local families. Additionally, the trainee was to learn the skills necessary to play an active role in developing and implementing a culturally appropriate playgroup programme. The role of the coordinator was to provide initial advice and guidance about a variety of suitable experiences for supporting young children's learning and development. These then informed the strategies adopted by the parents whose children attended the playgroup. In this way, the parents and caregivers were empowered to take ownership of the playgroup. This approach enabled the activities in the playgroup to be based on empirical evidence regarding child development and learning as well as cultural and contextual input provided by community members.

Therefore, the programme was set up to take advantage of the known benefits of preschool programmes with a culturally inclusive model for child, parent and community engagement. The MCEETYA Taskforce for Indigenous Education discussion paper (2001, p. 43) notes that "Indigenous education initiatives work best when they ensure that Indigenous communities are responsible partners in development, design and delivery of programmes and services". Accordingly, the Best Start Playgroup was well placed to develop an engaging and successful programme for young Indigenous children who have been shown previously to be marginalised in mainstream early childhood programmes and upon entry to school (MCEETYA, 2001). Further support for community involvement and participation in early childhood programmes comes from Zubrick et al. (2006, p. xxxiv) who note, "many Aboriginal children feel they have to sacrifice or compromise their own culture in order to survive or be successful in western education. Embedding Indigenous knowledge into education ... Aboriginal children will be supported to retain their

unique identity and culture and develop to their full potential”.

The Best Start Playgroup based at Mungullah community in Carnarvon, Western Australia, has embraced many of those components that the research has shown, will make substantial long-term difference to the life outcomes of children. It seemed important, then, to document this programme as an exemplary model of re-engaging parents to provide a quality, culturally determined early childhood programme. By documenting this work in an audio-visual resource, we envisaged at least two different target audiences. The first would be Aboriginal communities who might be considering the development of a similar programme. The second would be non-Indigenous early childhood teachers, who would benefit from having insight into the experiences of children prior to school as well as their parents' hopes and aspirations for them. In developing empathy and awareness of children and their communities, teachers can better prepare and deliver programmes that cater for Indigenous children at school. As noted by MCEETYA (2001, p. 11), “educators need to have a better pedagogical understanding of children’s diversity of experience and cultural capital to ensure that early childhood services and schooling better reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian society”.

Documenting the aspirations of Indigenous parents for their children assists in counteracting recent discourse, endorsed at the highest levels of government, that homogenise Aboriginal parents as disconnected from, and uninterested in, their children’s educational outcomes (Johns, 2006). We include here the following extract from an interview with a parent on the Best Start DVD. When asked, “What do you hope for your child’s future?” One young mother replied, “I want him to go to university one day and become a doctor or a lawyer so he can come back here and help his people” (AETC, 2006). Windisch, Jenvey and Drysdale’s (2003) study in Victoria, documented the views of Indigenous parents, who valued early experiences and play as being fundamental to cultural transmission as well as later school learning.

Improving achievement of educational standards for Indigenous students

Statistics from the Aboriginal Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al., 2006) indicate considerable cause for concern regarding the long-term health and well-being of our Indigenous population. With regard to this, the report makes several recommendations that identify early childhood and early school learning for Aboriginal children as the crucial time for improving long-term educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. We argue that fundamental to this change is the development of culturally inclusive approaches to school readiness, attendance and school-community partnerships.

Capacity-building

Lodder (2003) has identified a set of principles to guide capacity-building work with Indigenous communities. These principles were used to inform the way in which personnel from the range of agencies and organisations involved in supporting the making of the Mungullah Best Start DVD worked with the Mungullah community. In summary, these principles are:

- build on community strengths and assets;
- maximise local participation and sustainability through capacity-building and action learning processes;
- value cultural strengths;
- be responsive to community needs, capacities and timeframes;
- integrate new initiatives with existing programmes;
- forge real partnerships;
- ensure skills-transfer strategies are built in;
- provide flexible funding arrangements; and
- assess weaknesses and risks and provide support commensurate with those risks. (Lodder, 2003, p. 18).

These principles informed the goals underlying the initiative to develop the Best Start DVD, which, along with actual production of the DVD, aimed to provide an opportunity for members of the Mungullah community to:

- showcase their existing skills and expertise in educating young children as well as develop new knowledge and skills; and
- develop skills in using vision production technology and computer software and hardware.

In this way, the initiative was intended to develop social capital in the community, applying Lodder’s (2003) principles to develop and enhance “networks of social relationships characterised by norms of social trust and reciprocity” (Stone, 2003, p. 13). Stone (2003) has observed that social capital can be a resource for collective action and that “children can benefit by living in communities that have high levels of social capital, even if they are not themselves directly involved in the civic life of their community” (p. 13).

Much of the impetus for the Best Start DVD project arose from the initial identification of social capital already existing among the members of the Mungullah community. We initially saw the Best Start Playgroup as a potential model for other similar Aboriginal communities, but quickly became aware that this initiative had become successful because of the social capital already developed within the community. We wanted to work with community members to document this social capital through the playgroup as

well as strengthen relationships within the community and across to the broader community as a means of further capacity-building.

Retaining cultural integrity

To achieve the goal of capacity-building, it was important to retain cultural integrity when working with the Mungullah community. Throughout the project, the lead on decision-making was taken by the Mungullah community and we offered assistance, advice and support in the context of the principles identified by Lodder (2003). Lee worked with community elders and members of the playgroup first to help them identify that their practices met all the criteria for good practice in early childhood education and then to suggest that the experiences of the parents involved in the playgroup may provide a useful resource for other parents in the Mungullah community and similar communities. This first step arose from Lee's involvement with professional learning in the community and was initiated on the basis of relationships of trust, which Lee had built with community members as well as staff from the Departments of Health and Community Development who had been working with the Mungullah community for some time prior to initiation of the project.

Initiation of the project in this way was an important first step, as it provided a basis for success that was founded in already-existing relationships and built on the Mungullah community's strengths. Importantly, the resources in the Mungullah community were augmented through the project with the involvement of the community in planning and decision-making. Ultimately, each step of the project was only undertaken with the endorsement of community members.

This process of decision-making led to a recursive approach throughout the project, as processes during the making of the DVD and decisions were revisited a number of times to ensure that community members were supportive, but, equally importantly, to ensure that the activity surrounding the making of the DVD, matched the rhythms of life in the Mungullah community. Overall, this resulted in continued support and engagement of the community during the entire course of the project, but led to a significant overrun in the project timeline, for which the authors are most grateful to the AETC for their support.

Developing specific skills

The funding proposal endorsed by the AETC included an element of community capacity-building as an integral part of the project. As production of the DVD involved a location shoot in the community and various parts Carnarvon relevant to the activities of the Mungullah Play Group, it was considered that young people in the community may benefit from

opportunities to work alongside the camera and sound operators. Production of the DVD was undertaken by WestOne Services, a service unit of the Western Australia Department of Education and Training that creates teaching and learning resources for schools and technical and further education (TAFE) colleges. Part of this organisation's charter is to work with educators and the community in an educative way and, as such, WestOne was well-placed to provide advice on DVD production throughout the project.

An initial activity involved community members capturing vision using a digital video camera. This was done to provide a basis for the script for the DVD and footage that could be incorporated with the broadcast-quality vision captured by WestOne's crew. To support this, WestOne's manager of vision products provided advice to community members on camera operation, technical advice on establishing lighting and locations that would translate well on television and how to capture narrative on film. WestOne Services is located in Perth, so this advice was provided in writing, and communicated to the community via the Health Department's local Best Start Coordinator.

Although it appeared unwieldy, this process was essential to the success of this aspect of the project. It enabled WestOne staff to begin to establish their credibility with members of the Mungullah community and to develop relationships of trust via links already established with staff from the Health Department and Department of Community Development. The advice provided enhanced community members' capacity to capture relevant, high-quality vision that shaped the script for the DVD and was edited into the final version of the resource. It also paved the way for WestOne's crew to do the on-location shoot with the community and whet the appetite for community members' involvement.

The next stage of this capacity-building aspect of the project was to identify young adults in the community who would be involved in filming and sound production. Identification of these people was done via the local contacts with the community and Lee, the academic advisor on one of her visits to Mungullah. As with all aspects of the project, this arrangement was relatively fluid, but it did result in two community members being closely involved in working with the WestOne camera operator and sound operator during the two-day shoot in Carnarvon in August 2005. During this shoot, a number of activities were undertaken:

- broadcast quality sound and vision were captured to complete the filming brief agreed with the community;
- community members were involved in discussions on key messages to be communicated in the final product;
- community members were involved in scripting the vision for the final product and were interviewed on camera to provide sound and vision; and

- community members received training and advice on skills associated with camera work and audio recording from the WestOne crew, and were involved in filming of vision for the final product.

Footage captured during the location shoot in August 2005, and by the community in the months prior, was used in production of the final DVD *Best Start*.

■ Lessons learned in production of the DVD

From discussion of the original idea to the launch of the final product by the Western Australia Minister for Education and Training in May 2006, production of the DVD took 18 months, 8 months longer than originally scheduled. This overrun of the timeline was partly due to the availability of key personnel at various stages during the project, particularly when it came to scheduling times for people to work together. In part, these complexities were exacerbated by working across the 1500km divide between Perth and Carnarvon. In the main, however, the overrun of the timeline was due to the application of Lodder's principles for working with Indigenous communities that underpinned the culturally inclusive and capacity-building approach taken throughout the project. To have attempted to hurry the project along to meet the imperatives of a timeline determined by a government institution would have resulted in a loss of trust and, ultimately, would have endangered the progress and completion of the project.

Successful completion of the DVD validates Lodder's principals in a practical setting and provides an indication that these can be successfully applied when working with Indigenous communities in Western Australia. While this is a satisfying finding to be able to report, the initiative described here had a more practical focus. The major outcome of the work was the documenting of the *Best Start Playgroup* in the DVD. This provides tangible evidence of the community's already-existing capacity, but an unexpected outcome of providing the Mungullah parents with an opportunity to tell their stories was the bringing to light of the community members' individual and collective capacities and aspirations far beyond the context of the *Best Start Playgroup*. What would strike any viewer of the DVD with even a small knowledge of good practice in early childhood education is that, while the context of the activities and interactions documented in the DVD is unique to the Mungullah community, the practices and applications are valid in any context. This is a DVD about good practice in early childhood education involving parents in their children's education. More than this, though, the making of the DVD provided an opportunity for the parents of the Mungullah community to articulate their aspirations for their children. Not surprisingly, these are the same aspirations that any parent would hold

for their children: to be doctors, lawyers; to contribute to their community; to have greater opportunity than the parents themselves had as children. We are of the opinion, however, that without the DVD having been made, these aspirations would not have been articulated.

So, while the DVD provides a valuable learning tool, and the process of making of the DVD provided genuine and highly-valued opportunities for young members of the community to learn and develop skills, it is this opportunity to express aspirations that are shared by all Australians that is the most poignant and long-lasting impression left on the authors of this paper by the community members with whom we worked over a period of 18 months. We attempted to work with the members of the community in a way that actively valued their culture and, based on feedback from community members at the end of the project, recognise that we achieved a good degree of success. In doing so, we validated Lodder's principles for working with Indigenous communities and contributed a little to the store of knowledge that will support future such initiatives. More than this, however, we were able to make inroads into breaking down the barriers of prejudice that would hold that members of communities like the Mungullah Community in Carnarvon, Western Australia may have different aspirations for their children. Yes, we are culturally different and it is optimal to be able to reciprocally recognise, cherish and acknowledge our differences when working together, but what we learned most was not so much about differences, more about commonalities.

As a final comment, it is worth noting that, in providing evaluative feedback at the end of the project, members of the Mungullah community uniformly expressed their satisfaction with the process and the outcome of the project. Some concern was raised, however, about the overrun in the project timeline, with the community commenting that the process had been lengthy, perhaps too long. This feedback from the community indicates how much we have to learn and provides the basis for a note of caution: while we have successfully validated principles for working with Indigenous communities, these need to be further researched, analysed and modified as we learn more from and with each other, lest they become a set of rules by which we stereotype and, therefore, constrain other similar communities when undertaking similar projects.

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